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# **SyRI: profiling citizens in a welfare state**

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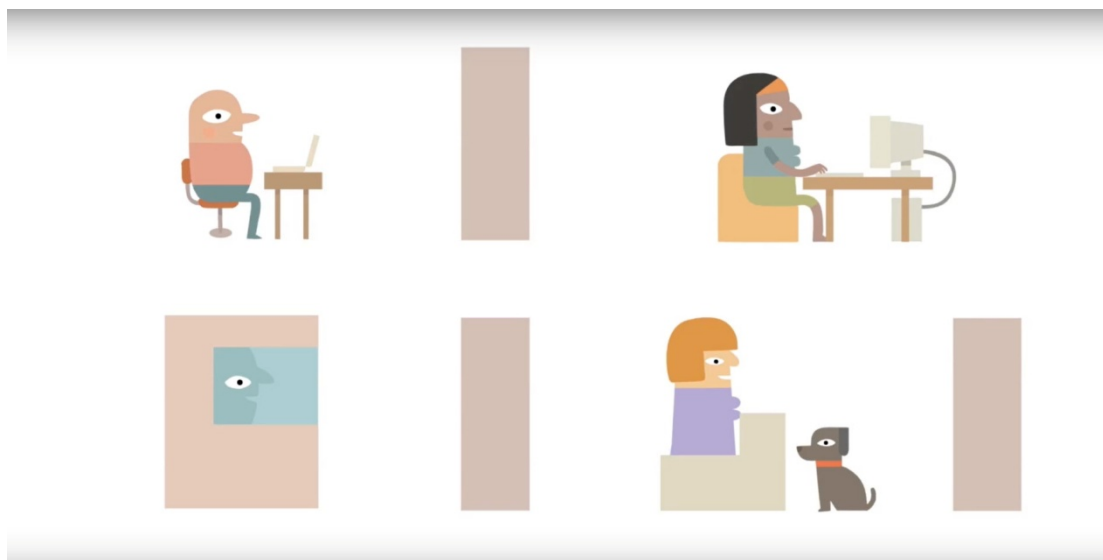
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# About me

- Journalist and researcher
- NGOs on privacy and civil rights
- Digital technology in the social domain
- Topics: digital health records, biometrics, profiling

# SyRI – a short introduction



# SyRI's goals (1)

- **S**ystem **R**isk Indication, adopted in 2014
- Produces **risk notifications** by data analysis
- Flagging citizens with a **heightened risk** of not complying with a broad collection of social security laws
- High-risk citizens end up in a **Registry of Risk Notifications** for two years
- Very **broad** and **vague** purpose definition

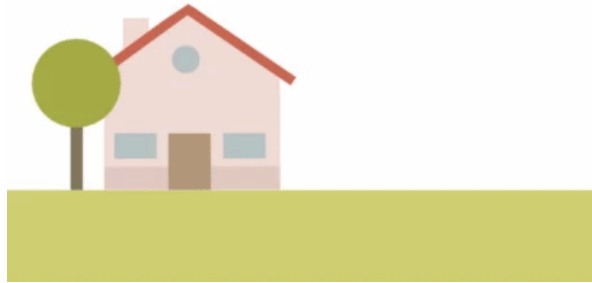


## SyRI's goals (2)

*“The prevention and combating of the unlawful use of public funds and provisions in the field of social security and income-related schemes, the prevention and combating of tax and premium fraud and non-compliance with labor laws”*

# SyRI's sources

- *Labor data*
- *Fines and penalties*
- *Tax data*
- *Data on property goods*
- *Trade data*
- *Housing data*
- *Identification data*
- *Permits and exemptions*



- *Integration data*
- *Compliance data*
- *Education data*
- *Pension data*
- *Reintegration data*
- *Debt data*
- *Data on benefits*
- *Surcharges and subsidies*

Highest government advisory council:

*"The list is so broad that it is hard to imagine a type of personal data that is not covered in it".*



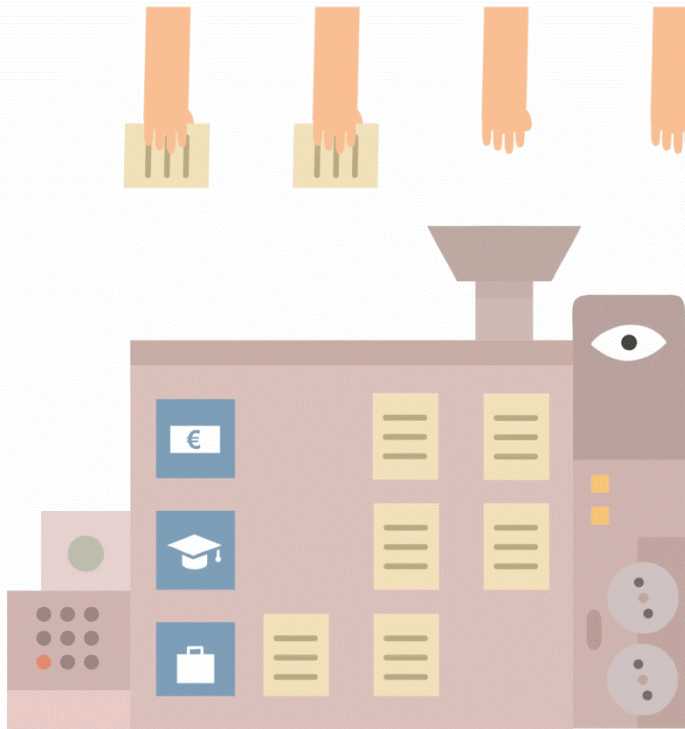
# SyRI's sources (2)

- Five public authorities: Tax Service, Unemployment Service, Social Security Bank, Labor Inspection, Immigration and Naturalisation Service, local municipality
- **De-siloeing** of government databases
- Data received and stored for **specific purposes** (verification)
- Centralised and **combined for a broad purpose** (risk indication)



# SyRI's methods

- Freedom of Information Law request



- Which data out of the 17 categories are used?
- Which combinations are made?
- What defines someone as a risk?
- According to what knowledge/logic?



# “Calculating behaviour”

- Strictly **confidential**
- “Anticipating fraudsters”
- Transparency on risk indicators leads to ‘**calculating behaviour**’



# Neighborhood trawl net

- Analyzing every citizen in a postal code area
- **‘Neighborhood trawl net’**
- Multiple risk-indicators combined in a model, covering all laws and misconducts named in the SyRI law text
- Exclusively used in poor neighborhoods

# Our problems with SyRI

- Sued the State in March 2018
- Broad coalition of several NGO's and two Dutch writers
- Goal 1: Delete SyRI from law
- Goal 2: Change the discourse on this topic



# *A carte blanche in a black box*

- *Carte blanche*: free roaming through 17 categories, personal data is *fair game*
- *Black box*: No transparency whatsoever
- Paradox of Transparency
- Recipe for distrust



# Recipe for distrust

*"If you are no longer assessed on the basis of violating a known norm, but based on secret risk profiles, the fear of repercussions is present in every contact with the government."*

Author and co-claimant in the SyRI  
case Maxim Februari



# The public debate on SyRI

- SyRI used in two districts in Rotterdam
- 25.000 citizens analyzed
- Public meeting in community centre
- Inhabitants: “Treated like criminals”
- Protest sparked media attention

# The public debate on SyRI (2)

*Deeply offended is Mahjob Boukiou (71). The Rotterdammer has been living in the Netherlands for almost half a century. Fifty years in which he worked hard: as a carpenter at Blijdorp Zoo, as the father for his three children. They all have a job, he says proudly. And now this. With a swinging arm, he points to the apartment blocks in his Hillesluis neighborhood. "They live there, the criminals. I'm one too. Apparently I have worked for nothing all those years."*





# Other developments

- Weeks later, Rotterdam stopped the SyRI investigation because of a conflict with the Ministry about using police and medical data
- The Volkskrant revealed SyRI hasn't caught a single fraudster yet since its adoption
- UN Special Rapporteur condemns SyRI in letter to court: “digital equivalent of inspectors knocking on every door”

# Big Brother Award

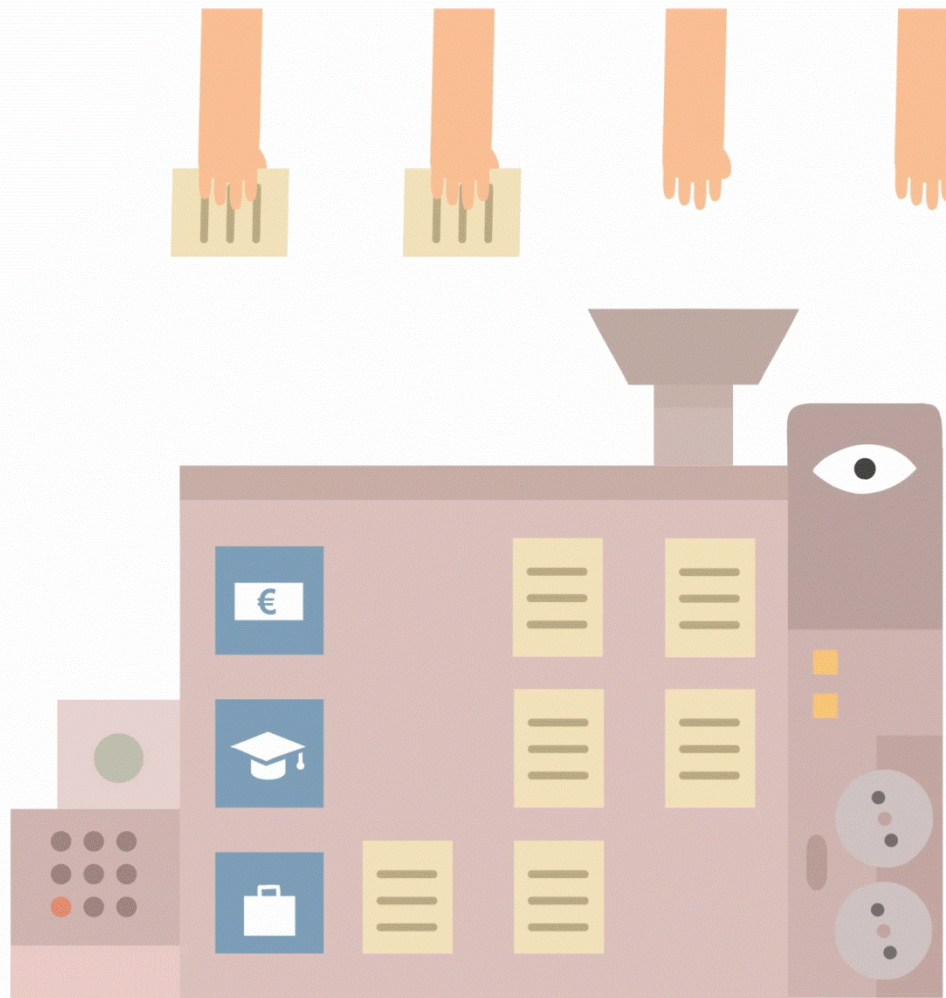


# Future expectations

- Court session Oct 29th, verdict on February, 5th
- Stakes are high
- Long run: high chances for appeal from both sides
- Time is right (Dutch Tax Service scandal)
- Debate is shifting from “If you have nothing to hide...” to “What is the government hiding from us?”



# Thank you!



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