

ELECTIONS 2022

The French information ecosystem put to the test

A report by the Online Election
Integrity Watch Group

Contributing organisations



Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD)

ASD is an initiative housed at the German Marshall Fund that strives to secure democracy from autocratic interference by developing collective, comprehensive strategies to defend against foreign state actors' efforts to undermine democratic debate and institutions. ASD works to publicly document and expose the efforts of these actors and developed a public dashboard to track the topics promoted on social media by domestic and foreign actors during the French elections.



Check First

Check First is a software solutions and training company specialising in the fight against online disinformation. It was founded in 2020, and works with fact-checkers, researchers, media literacy actors and European and Francophonie institutions.



GEODE

Géopolitique de la Datasphère (Geopolitics of the Datasphere, GEODE) is a multidisciplinary research and training centre within the Institut Français de Géopolitique (French Institute of Geopolitics) at Université Paris 8, dedicated to studying the strategic issues involved in the digital revolution. Its interdisciplinary approach working within the humanities and social sciences is open to contributions from data science and computer science, and seeks to use the resources of the datasphere for the purposes of geopolitical analysis and to stimulate strategic thinking on defence and security issues.



Institut des systèmes complexes

Created in 2005, the Institut des Systèmes Complexes (Institute of Complex Systems, ISC-PIF) is a CNRS services and research unit dedicated to the interinstitutional and interdisciplinary development of research on complex systems. It is a research group, a project incubator, a shared resource centre, a conference centre and an academic co-working space: a scientific 'third place' that provides researchers with a dynamic research environment and innovative tools based on big data and high-performance computing. The institute runs the Politoscope.



Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)

Founded in the United Kingdom in 2006, ISD is now the leading global 'think and do' tank with a focus on the rising tide of extremism, disinformation and polarisation in the digital age. It opened a French branch in 2020, and combines digital research and expertise on extremist movements and information manipulation to track threats to democracy and develop real-world responses.



Reset

Reset Tech is an initiative run by the global philanthropic foundation Luminate that empowers civil society to address the challenges posed by technology to democracy. Reset Tech supports and works alongside research organisations and runs projects with a focus on the online circulation of harmful content, with the aim of developing regulatory recommendations better tailored to the evolving threats of the digital age.



Tracking Exposed

Tracking Exposed is a European digital rights NGO specialising in algorithm analysis. For over five years, the team has been developing open-source software and innovative methodologies to examine the most influential recommendation systems, including those used by YouTube, Facebook, Amazon, Pornhub and TikTok. The group's investigations are regularly covered in the international press.

Study leads



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Executive summary

On 10 and 24 April 2022, French voters went to the polls to elect the President of the Republic for the next five years. On 12 and 19 June they returned to the ballot box to elect their representatives to the National Assembly. Campaigning in the run-up to these two major elections was disrupted by a unique set of domestic and geopolitical circumstances, with the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine both taking the focus away from discussion of the candidates' policies. The presidential election was also characterised by the further collapse of the traditional parties – the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party, PS) and Les Républicains (the Republicans, LR) – an uneasy alliance between the left-wing candidates, the rise of two far-right candidates, and Emmanuel Macron's heavily criticised late entry into the campaign, followed by clear discontent with his leadership among part of the country.

The legislative elections in June were presented as a 'third round', particularly by the left, with many hoping that the alliance that formed after the second round of the presidential election between the Green Party, the PS and La France Insoumise (France Unbowed, LFI), whose candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon received almost 22% of the votes in the first round), under the name of the Nouvelle Union Populaire, Écologique et Sociales (New Popular, Environmental and Social Alliance, NUPES), would act as a counterweight to the power held by Macron following his re-election. This was seen at the ballot box: the significant success of NUPES (131 seats), the historic breakthrough of the right-wing Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN) (which went from 8 to 89 seats) and the decline of LR (61 seats) took Macron's party (245 seats) by surprise. The extraordinary failure of the French government to win an absolute majority in the National Assembly has plunged the country into an institutional and political crisis: France has become largely ungovernable due to the rise of opposition parties and their candidates from the extremes of the political spectrum.

The information system put to the test

These turbulent democratic events were fertile ground for the kinds of online influence operations by domestic and foreign actors that had been seen during the 2017 French presidential election, the 2016 Brexit referendum, the 2016 (and, to a lesser extent, 2020) US elections and the 2021 German federal elections. We therefore gathered a group of researchers from civil society to conduct real-time monitoring of content circulating online. This group brought together a range of experts to monitor the emergence and circulation of disinformation in the media and on social networks, of hate speech linked to political parties and candidates, and political ads related to the election included in the Meta library. It also measured the algorithmic amplification of the candidates on the major online platforms. Inspired by the [Election Integrity Partnership in the United States](#),¹ and in the wake of the [Les Lumières à l'ère numérique report](#) submitted to the President of the Republic in January 2022², his group sought to

1 See: <https://www.eipartnership.net/>

2 Commission Bronner, *Les lumières à l'ère numérique*, available at: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/283201.pdf>

alert the public authorities, media and citizens to online information manipulation campaigns that might undermine the fairness of the election.

We observed a great deal of troubling content and behaviour online. Much of this sought to undermine the legitimacy of the outcome, for example by questioning the validity of the opinion polls conducted during the campaign or of the vote count after each round of the presidential election. We also observed online mobilisation strategies that violated the online platforms' terms of use, such as astroturfing campaigns and examples of coordinated inauthentic behaviour led by the far right, or were on the fringes of the French Electoral Code, such as the ads for various parties observed online. These narratives and strategies are embedded in the contemporary political landscape. They are constantly evolving, will change with future regulations and will always require special focus during major democratic events.

This content did not have the anticipated effect

In 2022, however, the attempts at destabilisation we analysed had a limited impact. This is a positive finding for the democratic process in France, but calls for great caution in the future.

We propose four main hypotheses to explain the relative resistance of the French information ecosystem during the 2022 presidential and legislative elections. First, the war in Ukraine led to a redeployment of the resources of Russia, one of the main actors of foreign interference in the West. The ban on the Russian state-controlled media Sputnik and Russia Today (RT) from the major online platforms³, and their focus on narratives to justify the war in Ukraine, weakened the ability of these outlets to influence people in France and diverted their attention from the French presidential campaign.

Second, government action on disinformation may have encouraged online platforms to be more vigilant, and discouraged malicious actors from taking part in online influence operations. During these elections, France held the presidency of the Council of the European Union at the decisive moment of finalising the Digital Services Act (DSA): the EU legislation setting out the responsibility of online platforms with regard to illegal and problematic content. This made it a sensitive topic for the major online platforms set to be regulated by the legislation in future. The French government also launched the Service de Vigilance et de Protection Contre les Ingérences Numériques Étrangères (Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference Agency, Viginum) in the run-up to the presidential election, while France's media regulator, the Autorité de Régulation de la Communication Audiovisuelle et Numérique (Audiovisual and Digital Communications Regulatory Authority, Arcom) raised awareness among candidates, political parties, the media and social networks of their shared accountability for disinformation. This demonstrated a determination on the part of French institutions to tackle this issue.

Certain specific features of the way in which French elections are conducted and regulated also make it more difficult to spread disinformation on a massive scale, and support a certain political ethics. Several elements contributed to making it more difficult for narratives that challenged the legitimacy of

3 ASD, 08/04/2022, *Implementation and Impact of the RT and Sputnik Ban on French Election Ecosystems*, available from: <https://securingsdemocracy.gmfus.org/implementation-and-impact-of-the-rt-and-sputnik-ban-on-french-online-ecosystems/>

the election to succeed. These included the fact that various political figures lent their support to the candidates who were highest in the opinion polls in order to obtain the necessary parrainages (signatures) to run in the election, even if they were opposed politically; the lack of remote voting; France's extensive network of polling stations; and the regulation of political advertising during the campaign.

Finally, the large-scale circulation of disinformation was limited by the relatively centralised nature of the French media space, in which the traditional media still largely control the agenda, and have a shared view of the importance of respect for institutions. This respect for institutions was also evident across the spectrum of presidential candidates, none of whom questioned the validity of the election results, despite expressing dissatisfaction with them. The sole notable exception was Manuel Bompard, a candidate for LFI in the legislative elections who called into question the way in which votes for NUPES were counted for the overseas territories and accused the interior minister of manipulation⁴. As we will explore below, however, the centralised nature of the French media has itself been criticised by far-left and far-right movements, raising questions about its sustainability.

Undermining institutions: a tangible threat for the foreseeable future

The numerous attempts to challenge the legitimacy of the democratic process or the opinion polls did not therefore have the anticipated effect. We must, however, recognise the threat that they pose for the future. The narratives of the traditional and centrist candidates seem to be on the way out (as demonstrated by their difficulty gaining traction online, compared to the high visibility of extremist views), while communities opposed to institutions and mainstream politics are being established and developed. Their rise on social media is undeniable, and reflects a widespread distrust in government and in institutional narratives.

Our report concludes by proposing a number of technical recommendations designed to safeguard the French online information ecosystem. While these will undoubtedly restrict the ability of malicious actors to destabilise the institutional processes on which democracy is based, they will not prevent anti-system narratives from gaining ground, and are no substitute for the necessary political and ideological debates that lie ahead.

⁴ See the article at: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/legislatives/resultats-des-legislatives-2022-manuel-bompard-remet-en-cause-les-resultats-et-alerte-a-la-nouvelle-manipulation-de-gerald-darmanin_5195083.html

I.

The purpose of monitoring election- related manipulation

I. The purpose of monitoring election-related manipulation

1. Elections and online manipulation

The internet and social media have revolutionised the ways in which people access information and methods of communication, which are essential tools in any political contest and vital to the democratic process. As universally accessible search engines optimised by sharing and interaction functionality that far outstrips that of the traditional media, providing unlimited free access to increasingly innovative modes of communication, and acting as a megaphone for all their potential users, online platforms represent a huge opportunity for both citizens and political representatives to participate in democracy and to have their voices heard.

In theory, these platforms should facilitate increased oversight of the integrity of the electoral process during campaigning, as the candidates' arguments are constantly being scrutinised. They are, however, equally capable of undermining it. Several examples of foreign interference in the democratic process have been uncovered in recent years. The 2016 Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump that same year, and the 'Macron Leaks' email hack ahead of the 2017 French presidential election were all affected by foreign and domestic information manipulation operations that targeted citizens in a bid to influence a democratic event. This has inspired the development of new influence strategies, with the most recent German federal elections, for example, seeing massive disinformation and smear campaigns against Green Party candidates by supporters of the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD).

The rise of information manipulation calls for the development of appropriate responses, and civil society is organising in response to this new threat. In the United States, for example, Stanford, the University of Washington, Graphika and the Atlantic Council's DFRLab joined forces to identify and analyse spin campaigns during the 2020 US presidential election, and in Canada, McGill University and the University of Toronto partnered on a project during the 2021 federal election. These monitoring operations are needed to alert the public authorities and social media platforms themselves to any operations that might undermine the integrity of the electoral process. They also provide insight into specific local aspects that are often less obvious and clear to the analytics teams at the big online platforms. Finally, they can help predict future trends and the form that threats to institutions may take beyond an election.

In the case of the Canadian Election Misinformation Project, for example, a large amount of misinformation and disinformation content was observed without having an impact on the integrity of the electoral process. This group has however highlighted the growing influence and organisation of the Canadian

conspirasphere and its ability to saturate the media space on social networks, based on narratives largely imported from the United States, making internet users in Quebec still relatively resilient to the anti-system stance⁵. These observations may provide some insight into the more recent phenomenon of the 'Freedom Convoy'.

2. The background to the presidential election in France

A. Growing distrust in political representatives and democratic institutions

In France, Emmanuel Macron's first term in office was characterised by a number of crises that divided the country. First came the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) protests, which began in November 2018. Large numbers of demonstrators took part in a series of crippling protests throughout the country, and shut down Paris on a regular basis for months (according to the official figures, 282,000 demonstrators flooded into the capital on the first weekend of 17 November).⁶ Second, the pension reforms announced in late 2018 and early 2019 were met with an outcry from trade unions, and major strikes, including transport strikes, ground Paris to a halt for several weeks.⁷ Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic and its recurrent waves contributed to the development of 'anti-system' communities thoroughly distrustful of institutions and politicians.

This climate represented fertile ground for the spread of disinformation and polarising narratives around the election. At the beginning of the campaign, French voters were split down very stark lines, with both online and offline communities committed to ideologies intensified by many months of tension.

In general, however, France's presidential elections are increasingly characterised by a certain political apathy, coupled with a growing distrust in its representatives. This has been reflected in a constant increase in the abstention rate for over a decade, and a decline in viewers for the final television debate between the two rounds of voting. There is still a high degree of trust in democratic institutions, with the 2019 Cevipof political trust survey finding that "attachment to democracy has remained clear and strong over the past decade. Voting is considered to be the most effective way for citizens to express their opinion."⁸ In January 2022, however, Cevipof's most recent survey found that trust in democratic institutions had sharply declined (-8 points), as a result of the successive crises occurring during Emmanuel Macron's term in office.⁹

Meanwhile, several media outlets have alerted the public to the relative, but nevertheless troubling, rise of rhetoric about electoral fraud in France¹⁰: a trend confirmed by an April poll which found that "114% of

5 Canadian Election Misinformation Project, March 2022, *Mis- and Disinformation During the 2021 Canadian Federal Election*.

6 Public Sénat, "La crise des Gilets jaunes en dix dates".

7 Le Monde, 9 December 2019, "Grève contre la réforme des retraites: chaos urbain dans les transports de Paris".

8 Cevipof, January 2019, *Baromètre de la confiance politique*, p. 8.

9 Cevipof, January 2022, *En qu(o)i les français ont-ils confiance aujourd'hui?*

10 France TV Info, 1 April 2022, "L'élection qui serait truquée, cette petite musique du complotisme électoral".

French people believe that the election could be rigged¹¹, which also found that “14% of French people think that Emmanuel Macron would not have been re-elected if the election had not been rigged.”¹²

Finally, Cevipof’s January 2022 survey also found that a majority of French people surveyed used negative adjectives – weariness (40%), distrust (37%) and gloom (25%) – to describe their current state of mind. Distrust, in particular, had gained ground (+14 points compared to May 2021).

The distrust felt by many in France comes on the back of a rightward shift in public debate, which is increasingly focused on divisive subjects such as immigration, insecurity, the application of state secularism, rejection of European policy, and national sovereignty. In particular, Islam and identitarian ideas¹³, that were previously relatively fringe topics but have been successfully put on the political and media agenda¹⁴, by the French far right are becoming a fixture of debates in both the traditional media and on social networks.

B. The rise of anti-system narratives online

This prevailing climate of distrust is particularly palpable among certain online communities that have formed around their rejection of media and political institutions in the wake of recent crises, in particular around the Gilets Jaunes movement and protests against COVID restrictions.¹⁵

A recent study by ISD to map the digital landscape in the run-up to the presidential elections provides insight into the prevalence of anti-system rhetoric online, by focusing on models of community mobilisation around divisive content or disinformation.

The study focuses on a specific period of the presidential election campaign (January 2022), which preceded the Russian invasion of Ukraine and was still largely dominated by debates about the handling of the pandemic and the vaccine pass. Although this contextual bias must be considered in the description of the communities observed, this study demonstrates the extent to which discussions relating to the election campaign centred on the pandemic before switching their focus to Ukraine.

The period of study also illustrates the growing complexity of certain political and social demands in France, as well as the similarities and differences between the actors behind them. It offers an interesting perspective on how these might develop beyond the election, and the new political landscape that will be drawn.

11 TF1, 18/04/2022, «Présidentielle 2022 : 14 % des Français estiment que l'élection pourrait être truquée»

12 Kantar, 12 May 2022, *Les effets des fake news sur les élections*.

13 ISD, 9 February 2022, *La conquête numérique des identitaires: un effort de mobilisation multi-plateformes*.

14 CERLIS, 26 January 2022, *L'élection présidentielle 2022 vue par Cyril Hanouna. La pré-campagne*.

15 Institut Montaigne and ISD, July 2020, *Information Manipulations Around Covid 19: France Under Attack*.

16 For more information about the methodology used please refer to page X of the full report, available from:

Map of the network observed
by ISD, produced by CASM
Technology LLP



ISD identified five distinct communities active on the topics of COVID restrictions and the presidential election on Facebook and Twitter.¹⁶ These are described below based on their observed characteristics over this period:

- ▶ **A mainstream ecosystem: ‘COVID consensus activists’** (in purple) – This community was distinguished by its adherence to mainstream opinion on the COVID-19 pandemic and ways to contain it. It consisted of actors who were largely in favour of strict COVID restrictions and strongly mobilised against online disinformation and the conspirasphere in this specific context. This sometimes resulted in them unintentionally and counterproductively amplifying certain sources of disinformation in an attempt to attack them.
- ▶ **Three anti-system communities**, united by their shared opposition to COVID restrictions and the government in power, but differing in their broader political stance.
 - **‘Anti-lockdown leftists’** (in green): so called because they consisted of accounts opposed to the government’s COVID policy and tended to identify politically with the far left.
 - **‘COVID opposition opportunists’** (in blue): who appeared to be sympathetic to the discourse of sovereigntist political figures typically from the far right, or of their influencers and supporters on social media. These online activists appear to have seized on opposition to the COVID restrictions as an opportunity to distinguish themselves from their competitors on the institutional far right.
 - **‘Anti-system protesters’** (in black): a community of actors firmly and systematically opposed to the government in power, beyond the context of the pandemic, characterised by its inclusion of individuals of all political stripes, including individuals from the Gilets Jaunes movement.
- ▶ **‘Éric Zemmour’s supporters’** (in orange): a relatively separate community at this point in the campaign, consisting of actors supporting Zemmour’s candidacy. Over the period covered by the study (January 2022), this ecosystem shared content on traditional far-right topics (immigration and security) but also amplified some content critical of the COVID restrictions, often produced by the anti-system community dominated by figures from the French sovereigntist far right.

Key takeaways:

- ▶ The three anti-system groups and pro-Zemmour group were characterised by their low levels of engagement with the content shared by the ‘COVID consensus activists’: only 2% or less of the accounts in these four groups interacted with content from the main ecosystem. These communities thus functioned relatively independently within the information space, drawing primarily on fringe content and rarely on mainstream content.¹⁷
- ▶ The ‘COVID consensus activists’, on the other hand, interacted relatively frequently with content from a number of the other communities, mainly with a view to exposing its problematic nature: 38% of the outbound links from this group during the study period, for example, were to content produced by the ‘anti-system protesters’ and ‘COVID opposition opportunists’, a group influenced by sovereigntist figures on the far fringes of the French political landscape but very active online.¹⁸

These findings reveal the problems of putting divisive discourses on the agenda via digital and media amplification, and highlight the risks of contributing to the widespread dissemination of fringe ideas while trying to attack them.

This study thus establishes the background of strong distrust in the government and institutional actors on which the French presidential campaign took place. The fault lines created by anti-system and anti-elite discourses have compounded the more traditional left-right divide, and played a key role in the online discussions of certain fringe and extremist communities regarding the presidential election. They are also reflected in the evolution of the online information ecosystem.

C. Anti-system narratives in the media

Problematic narratives are mushrooming online, both upstream and downstream of their large-scale dissemination on social media.

Since the 2000s, radical and extremist actors and conspiracy theorists have built an entire constellation of websites, forums and blogs producing online content. These interpret current affairs through an often conspiratorial lens, claiming to ‘reinform’ the people. They present themselves as alternative media, setting themselves apart from the traditional media that they believe is out to manipulate the people.

These websites have a large following: in 2021, the 100 biggest French-language conspiracy theory websites had over 60 million monthly visits, as many as the mainstream outlets Libération, Le Point, France Bleu and Europe 1 combined.¹⁹ Some of the most influential French websites in the conspirasphere include Le Salon Beige (founded in 2004), Fdesouche (2006), Égalité et Réconciliation (2007), Boulevard

¹⁷ On this point, see also the study from the Institut Montaigne, May 2019, *Media Polarization «à la française»? Mapping the French and American Ecosystems*

¹⁸ On this point, see the recent observations made by Julien Giry from the Université de Tours on the failure of the online mobilisation of the conspirasphere to have an electoral impact, cited in this article: <http://www.slate.fr/story/229475/mouvement-anti-restrictions-complotistes-antivax-echec-lalanne-philippot-wonner-rohaut-legislatives>

¹⁹ *Libération*, 18 October 2021, ““Désinfosphère”: Internet dans le facho business”.

Voltaire (2012) and Planetes360 (2016).²⁰ During the month of the presidential election (April 2022), these five sites racked up over 12.2 million views.²¹

They therefore have a significant influence in an electoral context, especially as this ‘conspirasphere’ often has close links to far-right individuals and websites. Their creators include well-known conspiratorial and/or far-right figures such as Alain Soral (Égalité et Réconciliation), Robert Ménard (Boulevard Voltaire) and former members of Bruno Mégret’s Mouvement National Républicain (National Republican Movement,

During the month of the presidential election (April 2022), these five sites racked up over 12.2 million views.

MNR) and Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National (National Front), such as Pierre Sautarel (Fdesouche). During the 2022 presidential election, most of these websites openly supported Éric Zemmour or Marine Le Pen.

These websites are very important vectors of content and play a central role in spreading biased narratives online. With their proudly proclaimed editorial stance and a clear ideological vision, they had a large community of readers even prior to the advent of social media. Since the rise of the big online platforms, they have provided the content that is spread via thousands of communities and hundreds of thousands of accounts clustered around the main conspiratorial reference points.

A recent study²² by [GEODE](#) (discussed in detail in Section II.1) found that these websites have developed a formidable machine for disseminating their content online:

- ▶ first, they produce radical, extremist, conspiratorial narratives and discourses, questioning for example the integrity of the French electoral process or propagating identitarian ideas such as the ‘Great Replacement’;
- ▶ second, they actively republish content produced by ideologically allied sites, by including links to them in their respective articles. This helps to increase the community of readers and has an amplifying effect online;
- ▶ and finally, some of this content is further amplified by being shared on social media by influential radical, extremist or conspiratorial figures.

20 See the analyses by Conspiracy Watch at: <https://www.conspiracywatch.info/>

21 See the analyses by Conspiracy Watch at: <https://www.similarweb.com/>

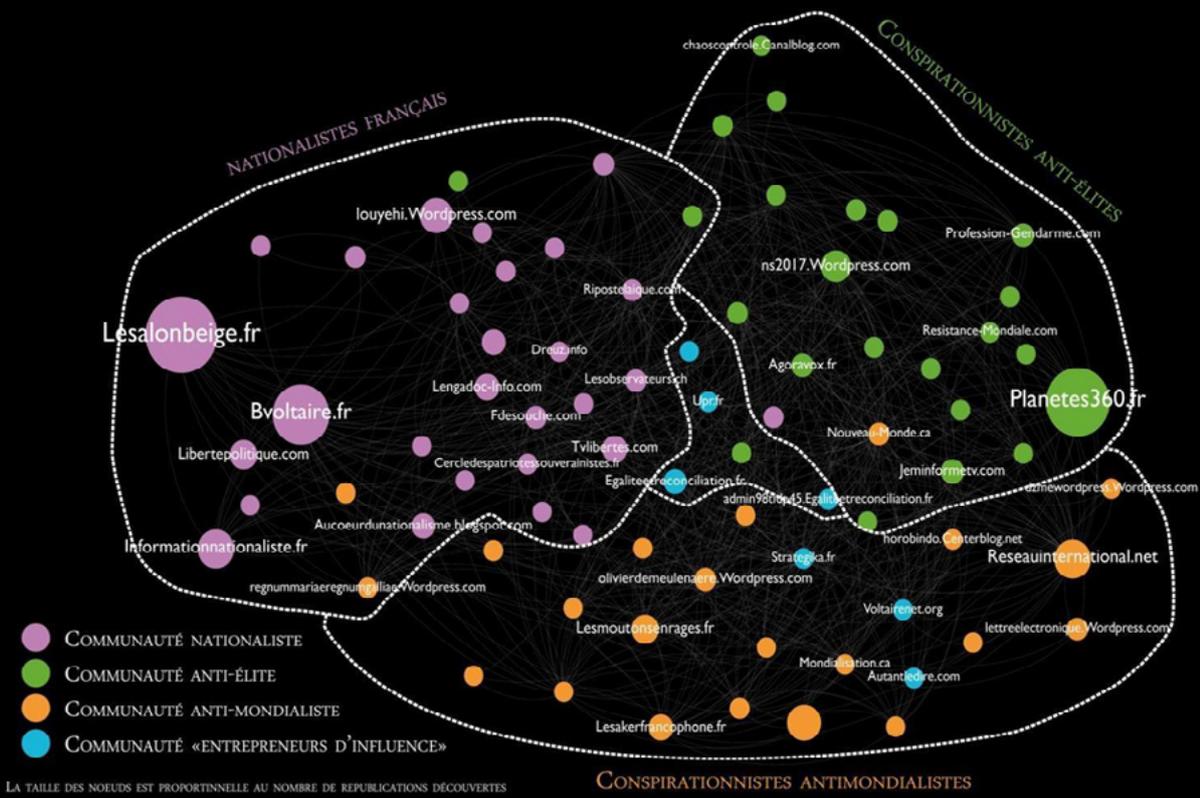
22 GEODE, April 2022, *Slow Burn: la lente montée en puissance des narratifs conspirationnistes en contexte électoral*

23 For a detailed explanation of the methodology used, see the [GEODE report](#) page 9.

24 See at: <https://ripostelaique.com/de-la-manif-des-militaires-a-zemmour-meme-diagnostic-meme-combat.html>; <https://libertepolitique.com/Actualite/Decryptage/Marion-Marechal-dernier-recours-d-une-union-des-patriotes>

The figure below shows the websites that on at least two occasions republished French-language articles about the presidential election from the anti-system websites Planete360, Le Salon Beige or Boulevard Voltaire. The size of each node is proportional to the number of re-publications identified.²³ This figure shows a structure composed of four major communities. Analysis of these communities reveals both ideological differences within the network of conspiratorial websites, and the role played by some of them in distributing content.

CARTOGRAPHIE GÉNÉRALE DU RÉSEAU DE CIRCULATION DE NARRATIVES CONSPIRATONNISTES AUTOUR DU PREMIER TOUR DE L'ÉLECTION PRÉSIDENTIELLE DE 2022



Overview map of the network of circulating conspiratorial narratives in relation to the first round of the 2022 presidential election (purple: French nationalist community; green: anti-elite community; orange: anti-globalisation community; blue: 'influence entrepreneurs')

Description of the communities

Community no. 1 (purple) encompasses websites primarily from two nationalist ideological strands: ultraconservative Catholics, and secular and royalist identitarians. These two groups discussed the possibility of gathering the 'sovereignist camp' around Marine Le Pen or Éric Zemmour for the first round of the election, with the majority switching to the Le Pen camp for the second round. Some conservatives and identitarians did however support one of the two candidates or the idea of an alliance between them in order to carry greater political weight; there was no fixed position on these subjects.²⁴ A large majority of these websites do however share a desire to see the far right in power.

Community no. 2 (green) revolves around Planetes360.fr. These websites are strongly anti-elitist and virulently opposed to Emmanuel Macron, with content that is strongly influenced by conspiracy theories about the ‘COVID dictatorship’, the ‘Great Reset’, ‘World War III’ and the collateral damage supposedly caused by the COVID-19 vaccines. These sources are more eclectic, open to both radical far-left views and those of the far right close to Marine Le Pen. This meant that the study was unable to identify clear support for any one presidential candidate. They did however share an anti-system perspective, and a greater tendency to speculate about electoral fraud and the mechanisms used by the system to maintain an elite in power was also apparent within this community.

Community no. 3 (orange) consists of French-language anti-globalisation websites. These websites are more international in scope, bringing together well-known Quebecois disinformation platforms such as www.mondialisation.ca and www.nouveau-monde.ca. This perspective is reflected in their topics of interest and a greater focus on a conspiratorial view of world affairs and geopolitics, which explains their less direct coverage of French electoral issues. Most of these websites thus approached the topic of the election via an anti-Western view of the war in Ukraine, with references to the economic impact of anti-Russian sanctions on France and Europe, or to the supposed submission of their leaders to the interests of the United States.²⁶ Finally, their anti-Western discourse turned them into mouthpieces for the Russian view of the invasion of Ukraine.

Community no. 4 (blue) consists of a handful of websites located in the centre of the graph. This means that these websites are linked to many others, making them key players in this conspiratorial universe. They include the websites of François Asselineau’s Union Populaire Républicaine, Alain Soral’s Égalité et Réconciliation and Thierry Meyssan’s Réseau Voltaire: three of the leading ‘influence entrepreneurs’²⁷ in the French conspirasphere. None of these websites endorsed a candidate, instead proclaiming the leadership of their own political approach: Asselineau through his party,²⁸ Meyssan as an intellectual reference point for far-left anti-globalist circles,²⁹ and Soral by promoting a far-right perspective that he claims is unique.³⁰ Their content is more hybrid and thus feeds into the other communities. Despite their central role, however, none of them have been able to establish themselves as the recognised spokesperson for the sphere as a whole, which continues to draw on a range of reference points.

25 See at: <https://www.agoravox.fr/actualites/politique/article/bloc-populaire-ressuscitant-la-241213>; <https://www.agoravox.fr/actualites/politique/article/melenchon-fait-elire-macron-241175>

26 See at: <https://reseauinternational.net/charles-gave-sanctions-economiques-la-russie-peut-tenir-deux-ans-la-france-deux-mois/>; <https://olivierdemeulenaere.wordpress.com/2022/04/27/quelques-realites-economiques-passees-sous-silence/>; <https://lesaker-francophone.fr/laffaire-des-caricatures-publiees-par-lambassade-de-russie-en-france>

27 Influence entrepreneurs are a group of actors who benefit symbolically or financially by contributing to the public debate through promoting ideological and intellectual materials that claim a ‘sui generis’ political authority and stance.

28 See at: <https://asselineau2022.fr/>

29 See at: <https://www.conspiracywatch.info/reseau-voltaire>

30 See at: <https://egaliteetreconciliation.fr/Pour-un-debat-Soral-Zemmour-56932.html>

3. The need for the Online Election Integrity Watch Group

France has introduced a number of new measures to secure the integrity of the electoral process in response to this type of threat.³¹ They include the 2018 ‘Fake News’ Law, the Disinformation Observatory launched by Arcom, the Bronner Commission on Information Manipulation and the Viginum agency, which was created following the work of the “Honfleur” task force to focus on identifying influence campaigns and attempted foreign interference.

More and more civil society and media organisations are taking an interest in this issue and are collaborating either formally or informally. This has democratised the use of fact-checking techniques and helped to increase the visibility of their findings. There is still however a need for coordination between these various parties in order for this research ecosystem to work effectively: in order to optimise communication, debate methodologies, compare findings and pool work and recommendations.

Understanding attempts to manipulate elections requires a range of expertise in order to cover all the issues involved, from online advertising and the origin and circulation of narratives in the media to coordinated action on social networks and algorithmic amplification. We therefore decided to join forces in an initiative that would function as a discussion and working group designed to anticipate actions that might undermine the integrity of the electoral process, in order to better understand them collectively. The group is part of a programme developed by [Reset](#) to monitor online threats to electoral integrity.

The group’s objectives were to:

- ▶ **pool and optimise existing monitoring work, by comparing different angles of observation and methodologies;**
- ▶ **alert online platforms to potential actions that might undermine the integrity of the electoral process;**
- ▶ **initiate a joint debate about the massive circulation of content that might pose a threat to society;**
- ▶ **raise awareness of its findings among the general public and make them accessible to all;**
- ▶ **and strive to ensure that the public authorities are more attentive to these phenomena and to make digital platforms more accountable, particularly in light of the upcoming application of the EU’s DSA.**

31 See the following section.

The group consists of the following member organisations:

- ▶ [Alliance for Securing Democracy](#)
- ▶ [Check First](#)
- ▶ [Fondation Descartes](#)
- ▶ [Institut des systèmes complexes](#)
- ▶ [Institut français de géopolitique \(GÉODE\)](#)
- ▶ [Institut pour le dialogue stratégique \(ISD France\)](#)
- ▶ [Observatoire du conspirationnisme](#)
- ▶ [Predicta Lab](#)
- ▶ [Reset](#)
- ▶ [Tracking Exposed](#)

II.

The relative resilience of the French information ecosystem in 2022

II. The relative resilience of the French information ecosystem in 2022

While several online mobilisations designed to challenge or influence the 24 April result took place during the presidential campaign³², they appear to have had a limited impact. Compared to the ‘Macron Leaks’ email hack in the run-up to the 2017 election, or the [coordinated campaigns](#) against Green Party candidates seen during the most recent German federal elections,³³ we did not observe any major coordinated, targeted campaigns around the French election, other than [a few examples of foreign cyber-attacks](#) in retaliation for the war in Ukraine,³⁴ and hate speech directed against candidates or [members of the new government](#) after the results were declared.³⁵

Prior to any analysis of the relative resistance of the French information ecosystem, it is important to emphasise the unique context in which the country’s presidential election took place: one in which the debate was largely monopolised by the handling of a pandemic and by war at the gates of Europe. We draw five main takeaways from this French election:

- 1. The war in Ukraine diverted Russia’s attention, and the ban on its state-controlled media weakened its arsenal of influence.**
- 2. The French electoral system provides a form of resistance.**
- 3. Institutional pressure made stakeholders more accountable.**
- 4. The traditional media still largely dictate the media agenda in France.**
- 5. The network of fact-checkers and research institutions contributes to a certain self-monitoring of the information space.**

32 See Section III regarding the Watch Group’s findings.

33 See the RESET report on the German elections, and the case study presented in the ISD report aimed at French civil society, *Désinformation en période électorale: Comment la société civile peut-elle répondre ?*

34 Numerama, 5 May 2022, “Des hackers russes ont attaqué le site de campagne de Macron pendant la présidentielle”.

35 Challenges, 22 May 2022, “Pap Ndiaye, mais pourquoi tant de haine?”; see also France Inter, 23 May 2022, “La bataille sans merci pour modifier les fiches de Pap NDiaye et Damien Abad”.

1. The change of priority for French-language Russian media

Compared to the 2017 presidential election, it is perhaps the – likely temporary – collapse of Russia’s ability to cause trouble that was the most significant aspect in 2022.

The main reason for this was of course the war in Ukraine, which changed Moscow’s strategic priorities. In the French-language information sphere, the content produced by RT and Sputnik shifted towards narratives designed to justify the invasion, such as the ‘denazification’ of Ukraine, the violation of a supposed agreement not to expand NATO to Russia’s borders and accusations of Russophobia in the mainstream media.

Many European countries also took strong action against the Russian information apparatus. As a result, we observed a sharp decline in RT’s election-related publications in 2022 compared to 2017. For the period between the two rounds of voting, its output fell from around 190 in 2017 to 13 in 2022.³⁶ The banning of RT and Sputnik in the European Union (on 2 March 2022) also had an impact on the volume of content published on their websites in France and on the change of strategy of the Twitter account run by the Russian embassy in France.³⁷ This impact remained limited, however, with Russian information operations redeployed to other platforms (notably Telegram) and other territories, in particular Francophone Africa.

Figure taken from a [joint ISD and ASD study of the impact of the RT and Sputnik ban](#)³⁸

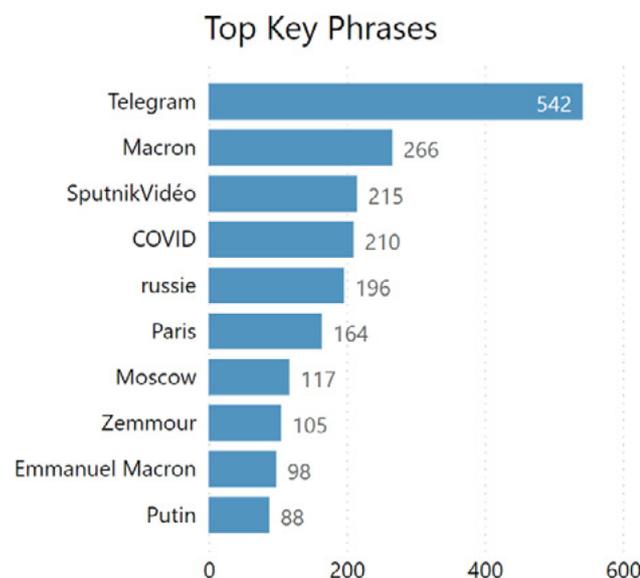


Figure 10. Top key phrases used by the RT France and Sputnik France Twitter accounts from January 1 to February 28, 2022. Source: ASD’s Hamilton 2.0 dashboard.

³⁶ Data obtained by searching for published articles containing the term ‘élection’ in the search engine of [francais.rt.com](#) for the period between the two rounds of 2017 and 2022.

³⁷ Libération, 11 April 2022, “Comment le compte Twitter de l’Ambassade de Russie en France est venu un troll”; see also RTS, 8 June 2022, “La Tweet Diplomacy de plus en plus tendance.”

³⁸ ISD, 11 April 2022, *Implementation and Impact of the RT and Sputnik Ban on French Online Ecosystems*.

It would therefore be a mistake to assume that Russia's capacity for influence has been permanently diminished, as shown by the alleged massacre in Gossi in Mali. On 22 April, the French Ministry of the Armed Forces released a video showing Wagner Group mercenaries burying civilians not far from a base that the French army had left a few days earlier. In staging this mass grave, the Russian mercenaries were clearly attempting to damage the image of the French army, to tarnish the record of the redeployed Operation Barkhane, and potentially to influence the French political debate a few days before the second round of the presidential election.

More broadly, in future Mali could become the main 'rear base' for Russian information operations aimed at the French-speaking world, as Europe and France take a more stringent approach against disinformation and develop tools such as Viginum.³⁹ Dès lors, le massacre de Gossi pourrait bien préfigurer une nouvelle forme de délocalisation de la production de manœuvres informationnelles destinées tout autant à soutenir la junte locale qu'à discréditer Paris via sa politique africaine.

It should also be noted that some attempts to manipulate information were observed, even if these were nothing in comparison to those that took place in 2017. On 22 April, a narrative began to circulate via both Russian and French-speaking sources claiming that "Macron left 50 French officers to die in Mariupol". It initially appeared to originate from the Turkish nationalist party Vatan, whose chairman spoke⁴⁰ in a video on the morning of 22 April, following which a statement⁴¹ appeared on its official website. This text, however, claimed that it had derived the "information from the Russian state" (without giving further details). Russian state media reported the information to the Russian-speaking public without mentioning this source. The statement concluded with an implicit call to vote for Marine Le Pen "to save the independence, dignity and pride of the French people". The dissemination of this narrative was accelerated on 23 April by social media (both Western⁴² and Russian⁴³) and French-language websites⁴⁴ known for being mouthpieces for Russia.

In addition to this, accounts of French-speaking internet users on the Russian social network VKontakte (VK) spread another narrative about the "final overseas results" leaked to the Belgian press which supposedly put Marine Le Pen well ahead⁴⁵. Cyber-attacks targeting the website of Macron's party La République En Marche! (The Republic on the Move, LREM) were reportedly carried out by the pro-Russian hacker group Killnet, in parallel with an operation by the Kiber Front Z, a group of Russian activists brought together by the war in Ukraine, to spam the Instagram page used by Macron for

39 Attached to the Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, Viginum is the French agency responsible for combating digital interference operations, specifically against information manipulation. The agency came into operation on 15 October 2021.

40 See at: <https://www.ahaber.com.tr/video/dunya-videolari/dogu-perincek-macron-50-subayi-secime-feda-etti>

41 See at: <https://vatanpartisi.org.tr/genel-merkez/basin-aciklamalari/ozgur-bursali-macron-50-den-fazla-fransiz-subayini-olum-terk-etti-31715>

42 See at: <https://twitter.com/Danielkalombo/status/1517829726873739266>

43 See at: <https://t.me/boriskarpovblog/710>

44 See at: <https://reseauinternational.net/macron-a-laisse-mourir-50-officiers-francais-a-marioupol/?print=print>

45 See at: https://vk.com/wall438395472_11141

campaign communications.⁴⁶ None of these operations, however, appear to have been of sufficient scale to be reported in the French media live, or to have had any impact on the election, and the narratives were quickly abandoned by the French conspiracy theory websites that had spread them.

In addition to external factors and the diversionary role that may have been played by the specific context of the war in Ukraine, we hypothesise that structural factors such as the French electoral framework may have increased the resistance of the electoral process to information manipulation.

2. The increased resistance of the information space due to the French electoral system

A. The general principles of presidential and legislative elections in France

The objective of this section is not to provide a detailed overview of all the legislation governing French elections, but rather to identify the specific features of what is a highly regulated space compared to other countries, particularly in comparison to the United States. We will outline the main principles of how presidential and legislative elections are run in France before turning to why the country's electoral system provides a form of resistance.

France's presidential elections are held using a first-past-the-post system with two rounds. In the first round, citizens vote for one of ten or so candidates, and the two candidates with the most votes then face off in a second round two weeks later (unless one candidate wins over 50% of the votes in the first round, in which case the run-off does not take place).

The legislative elections are held to elect the 577 members of the National Assembly, one of the two chambers of the French Parliament. Each member represents a constituency, i.e. a piece of French territory, meaning that voters elect their local representatives to the National Assembly. There are 558 deputies for mainland France, 8 for New Caledonia and the overseas territories, and 11 for French residents overseas.

B. The impact of the electoral system on the information space

We would argue that the French electoral system partly limits the circulation of disinformation. There are several reasons for this: first, the high number of polling stations throughout the country and the lack of remote voting during the presidential election are strong safeguards against narratives of electoral fraud; second, the powers of the various regulatory authorities strengthen the fair representation of the candidates; and third, restrictions on campaign budgets and the ban on political advertising reduce opportunities for funding targeted disinformation campaigns.

⁴⁶ See at: <https://www.numerama.com/cyberguerre/950355-des-hackers-russes-ont-attaque-le-site-de-campagne-de-macron-pendant-la-presidentielle.html>

Polling stations and remote voting

In order to protect the right to vote and the integrity of the electoral process, all French citizens are automatically registered when they reach voting age. The secrecy of the ballot and voting in person – or via a designated proxy – at a polling station is enshrined in the system, and postal voting is not therefore possible, with the exception of French overseas residents for the legislative elections, or for the elections for the representatives of French citizens abroad, which can be done online under certain conditions.

During elections, France is covered by a dense network of polling stations. In practice, no polling station covers more than 800 to 1000 voters, with a total of 69,682 in France during the presidential election. This high number requires the active participation of citizens in the democratic process. For example, votes are counted in the presence of the candidates' representatives, without interruption. Counting is done by the tellers, individuals nominated in various ways by the candidates, and under the supervision of polling station officers,⁴⁷ and electors can be present.

The fact that all citizens have access to a local polling station run by their neighbours and are able to be present at the vote count makes the narrative of rigged elections less credible, and the lack of remote voting also largely protects elections from potential cyber-attacks.

The institutional regulation of French presidential campaigns

French presidential campaigns are highly regulated, with several agencies involved in ensuring fairness:

- ▶ speaking time and airtime are controlled by Arcom, which has replaced the CSA;
- ▶ **the Commission Nationale de Contrôle de la Campagne Électorale (National Electoral Commission)** ensures that the candidates are treated equally by the authorities (on official billboards, ensuring manifestos are sent out, etc.)⁴⁸;
- ▶ the Commission des Sondages (Polling Commission) ensures that published opinion polls about voting intentions for the various candidates comply with its methodological requirements;
- ▶ and finally, the Commission Nationale des Comptes de Campagne et des Financements Politiques (National Campaign Accounts and Political Funding Committee, CNCCFP) controls campaign spending and the funding of political parties.

47 Vie Publique, "Tout savoir sur le fonctionnement du bureau de vote", website consulted 10 May 2022.

48 Vie publique, "Comment se déroule la campagne électorale pour l'élection présidentielle?", website consulted 10 May 2022.

The visibility of candidates during the French presidential election

The French electoral campaign is divided into three phases, with specific rules on airtime and speaking time:

- ▶ before the official list of candidates is published by the Constitutional Council, the media must respect the rule of fair coverage, i.e. they must offer speaking time (when a candidate or one of their declared supporters speaks directly) and airtime (when a candidate is mentioned) proportional to the representativeness of the candidates;
- ▶ from the publication of the official list of candidates up to the day before the official election campaign begins (two Mondays before the first round of the election), the media must respect the same principle, but comparable programming conditions (schedule and audience) also apply;
- ▶ and two Mondays before the first round of the election and until the second round, the official election campaign begins and the media must apply the principle of equal coverage, giving candidates equal speaking time and airtime⁴⁹.

These multiple regulatory agencies, and in particular Arcom's mandate to monitor the visibility of candidates in the media and the potential circulation of disinformation (see the following section), has resulted in monitoring of the information ecosystem that may have limited the emergence of false narratives in the debates.

Online advertising and campaign budgets in France

In France, political advertising is regulated by different laws depending on the media type. Broadly, article L52-1 of the French Electoral Code states that “during the six months prior to the first day of the month of an election and until the date on which this election is held, the use for electioneering purposes of any commercial advertising in the press or using any means of audiovisual communication is prohibited.”⁵⁰.

In addition, article L49 of the Electoral Code prohibits the following from midnight on the eve of the election:

1° Distributing or having distributed ballot papers, circulars or other documents;

2° Disseminating or having disseminated to the public by any means of electronic communication any message of an electioneering nature;

3° Mass-calling voters, using an automated system or otherwise, in order to encourage them to vote for a candidate;

4° Holding an election rally.

49 Vie publique, “Les règles de la campagne électorale audiovisuelle et sur Internet pour l'élection présidentielle”, website consulted on 10 May 2022; see also the Arcom page “Pluralisme politique” at: <https://www.csa.fr/web/index.php/Protoger/Garantie-des-droits-et-libertes/Protoger-le-pluralisme-politique>

50 Legifrance, *Code électoral, section V: Propagande*

Finally, article 10 of the Act of 19 July 1977 prohibits publishing, disseminating or commenting on opinion polls or results before the final polling stations have closed. Failure to comply with this is punishable by a fine of €75,000. This ban, which also applies online, does not however apply to the dissemination of opinion polls conducted before the reserve period, provided that “the date of first publication or dissemination, the media outlet that published or disseminated them and the organisation that conducted them are clearly stated.”

Electoral campaign budgets are also capped: first-round candidates are restricted to a budget of €16.851 million, and second-round candidates have a spending ceiling of €22.509 million.⁵¹ In connection with the aforementioned Electoral Code, spending on advertising is prohibited. By way of comparison, France Info and France 2 reported that, in the United States, Joe Biden and Donald Trump had each spent \$1.3 billion in 2020.⁵²

3. Institutional pressure increased stakeholder accountability

The French institutional context in 2022 was very different to that of 2017. The debates about disinformation that followed Donald Trump’s election in 2016 resulted in a series of regulations that have significantly changed the role of the country’s audiovisual regulator, previously the CSA and now Arcom, in the oversight of media and information spaces. These are detailed in the box below.⁵³

An overview of French legislation regulating the circulation of content since 2018

- ▶ The Act to Combat Information Manipulation, promulgated on 22 December 2018, was introduced to address the deliberate, artificial and massive dissemination of fake news to the public via online communication services. During the three months prior to the first day of the month of an election, an urgent applications judge may, at the request of the public prosecutor, any candidate, any political party or group, or any interested person, request the removal of false content that is spread in a deliberate, massive and artificial manner. The judge has 48 hours from the submission of the request to make a decision. In addition to this, the Act requires the CSA (now Arcom) to produce a report of the effectiveness of the measures taken to combat disinformation by online platforms, who must provide a button for reporting disinformation and cooperate with the public authorities.

51 Public Sénat, *Présidentielle 2022 : quelles sont les règles de financement de la campagne ?*

52 France Info, 02/11/2020, «Présidentielle américaine : le coût de la campagne 2020 atteint un record historique»

53 Certaines des analyses ci-dessous sont extraites de la note de l’Institut Montaigne, *Quinquennat Macron, le grand décryptage : numérique et nouvelles technologies*, disponible sur ce lien : <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/ressources/pdfs/publications/quinquennat-macron-le-gd-decryptage-numerique.pdf>

- ▶ The [Act to Combat Hateful Content Online](#), promulgated on 24 June 2020, proposed the introduction of a mechanism for the timely notification and removal of hateful content in order to combat online hate speech. Many of the provisions of the Act have been struck down by France's Constitutional Council and criticised by the European Commission. The measures implemented include the creation of an Observatory for Online Hate Speech, under the authority of the CSA (now Arcom), which provides it with administrative support.
- ▶ The [Act to Strengthen Respect for the Principles of the Republic](#), promulgated on 24 August 2021, establishes an obligation of means for online platforms in the fight against unlawful content. It requires the CSA (now Arcom) to determine the frequency and manner in which online platforms must report on the measures they have implemented. The online platforms must also carry out an assessment of the systemic risks that their services pose to society, in conjunction with the CSA, and finally must appoint a single point of contact for enquiries from the CSA.

This Act pre-empts the EU's DSA, on which an [agreement was reached](#) between the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament on 23 April 2022.⁵⁴ This legislation marks an important step in content regulation: it requires online platforms to take further action to combat unlawful content, including by assessing the risks their services pose to society, implementing measures to limit these risks and evaluating the effectiveness of their actions.

In addition to this, following on from the "Honfleur" hate speech task force set up following the murder of French teacher Samuel Paty in October 2022, the French government created the Viginum agency. In operation since October 2021, Viginum's mission is to monitor attempts to manipulate information from abroad.

During Emmanuel Macron's first term in office the French government thus made clear its determination to regulate the digital space, including at the European level, by playing a leading role in negotiations on the DSA. As France was President of the Council of the European Union during the April elections, at a decisive moment for the finalisation of this legislation, it was in the government's interest to secure a political agreement within the EU's trilogue on the DSA before the second round of the presidential election: both to strengthen Emmanuel Macron's record with his voters, and to ensure that, if he was defeated in the election, his successor could not easily reverse France's position in Brussels.

Actions taken by the online platforms

The online platforms were therefore particularly aware of the need for the French elections to run smoothly. As a result of national legislative developments, for several years Arcom has been developing links with representatives from social media companies, who are required to submit annual reports to the regulator on the actions they are taking to combat the circulation of disinformation. Arcom was able to discuss with them the actions they were taking during the election to combat disinformation, and [published a list](#)⁵⁵ of such measures:

⁵⁴ Council of the European Union, press release, "Digital Services Act: Council and European Parliament provisional agreement for making the internet a safer space for European citizens."

⁵⁵ ARCOM, « Mesures prises par les plateformes relatives à la période électorale »

- ▶ **Google** supported the ‘Objectif Désinfox’ initiative led by Agence France-Presse (AFP) and continued to develop its tools for protecting the personal data of highly visible users, while the Google Safety Engineering Center monitored the circulation of unlawful and problematic online content.
- ▶ **TikTok** also worked with AFP to fact-check the videos circulating on its platform, informing users when a video they were watching contained false information and reminding them when they tried to share the video.
- ▶ **Meta** created an Internal Operations Monitoring Centre and worked with fact-checkers to quickly identify false content on the platform and to inform users who read, shared or had shared the content of this. Meta also ran media literacy campaigns to raise awareness about disinformation, and put stickers online to encourage people to vote.
- ▶ **Twitter** created sidebars encouraging people to go and vote, put labels on certain government or state media accounts, removed false content and alerted users with banners about misleading content “that could lead to confusion regarding laws, regulations or institutions related to the electoral process, or contain false or misleading information undermining confidence in the election or its outcome.”⁵⁶ Twitter also has a ban on political advertising.

Finally, the government’s action on disinformation also resulted in the creation of Viginum on 13 July 2021, nine months before the April election. This new agency, which is set to have a staff of 65 by the end of 2022, will focus solely on attempted foreign interference and information operations originating from foreign states with the potential to harm France and its interests.

This strong action by French institutions on disinformation, and the focus of the online platforms on France as President of the Council of the European Union during the final DSA negotiations at the European level, undoubtedly made it more difficult to circulate content that might undermine the integrity of the electoral process.

In addition to the institutional pressure described above, the structure of the French ecosystem may have also played a role, with the ability of France’s traditional media to control the media agenda making it more difficult for problematic narratives to circulate in highly visible spaces. We will discuss this further in the following section.

4. The traditional media retain relative control over the media agenda

The French presidential campaign has highlighted the role of the traditional media in the workings of democracy. In France, the media space reflects its political counterpart: it is structured by traditional media outlets (such as Libération, Le Figaro, Le Monde and Les Echos) that play a central role in public discussion of politics but represent a limited, very institutional view of French society and are opposed

⁵⁶ Twitter, *Les #Présidentielles2022 se passent sur Twitter*

by anti-institutional media outlets (such as Fdesouche, Égalité et Réconciliation and Fawkes News) that have growing visibility but are still unable to significantly influence the main media agenda.⁵⁷ This is despite the wide distribution of their content, which is difficult to regulate, via websites and social networks.⁵⁸

The tensions between these two media groups are reflected in the professional practices of journalists. CNews, a 24-hour TV channel, has for example been the subject of numerous debates about the ethics of its journalists and the handling of comments made on air, some of them from the press freedom and journalism NGO Reporters Without Borders.⁵⁹ The role played by a number of media outlets in giving outsized exposure to Éric Zemmour's candidacy and to identitarian narratives has also been raised on several occasions.⁶⁰

Yet despite the growing influence of 24-hour news channels promoting divisive content, the French media ecosystem remains balanced, and public news channels clearly retain a dominant role in shaping political debate and forming opinions, as judged by the viewing figures for France Inter and France 2.⁶¹

Similarly, the political sphere increasingly revolves around the opposition between the institutional and the insurgent. French institutions and their representatives are criticised for their centralised nature and for being out of touch with the people, while opposing actors from the far left and far right proclaim an anti-system stance and criticise French and European institutions. Unlike in the media, however, these political actors generate much more attention via social networks⁶² – with the exception of some 24-hour TV channels, but also due to the involvement and support of their communities in these digital spaces that facilitate the increased influence of fringe voices.

The distrust generated by the highly centralised nature of the French media is a source of vulnerability. Russian state media, for example, were able to get a foot in the French media landscape by exploiting this gap. By espousing sometimes right-wing, sometimes left-wing, but always anti-system views, RT France and Sputnik France had built up a significant audience, particularly on social media. In February 2022, for example, just before EU sanctions were imposed on the Russian channels, RT France had as many Facebook followers as CNews and France Inter.⁶³ The sanctions have ended the success of RT and Sputnik, but the niche these channels leave behind remains vulnerable to new attempts at autocratic interference.

57 On this, see the report by the Institut Montaigne and the Sciences Po and MIT media labs, May 2019, Polarization "à la française"? Comparing the French and American Ecosystems.

58 See the ISD and GEODE studies in Section I.2. B and C of this report.

59 Le Monde, 14 April 2022, "Reporters sans frontières saisit le Conseil d'Etat contre l'inaction de l'Arcom envers CNews"; CNews also received two warnings from Arcom for comments made on air in November 2021.

60 See Section II. 1. D. of this report.

61 France Inter, 13 January 2022, "France Inter, 1ere radio de France".

62 As of 9 May 2022, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's channel had 765,000 subscribers and Éric Zemmour's had 460,000, compared to Macron's 259,000.

63 See the ASD's dashboard at: <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/top-5-takeaways-from-the-french-election-dashboard/>

The 2022 presidential election has clearly shown the way in which this institutional/insurgent tension shapes French politics. It was particularly apparent in media and political commentary headlines between the two rounds of the election, which presented the narrative of a conflict between “two Frances” opposed in every way⁶⁴.

Profile	Page Name	Category	Interactions	Subscribers	Comments	Shares	Subs Gained	Subs % Change	Link
	L'Obs	News Site	122,623	1,887,652	51,531	26,476	29,579	1.59%	Link
	CNEWS	Tv Channel	166,763	1,713,545	129,132	54,082	165,560	10.70%	Link
	RT France	Broadcasting Media Production	103,709	1,646,157	48,200	23,210	73,605	4.68%	Link
	France Inter	Media News Company	101,329	1,622,547	18,855	30,892	64,265	4.12%	Link
	Mediapart	Media News Company	108,582	1,520,606	33,126	114,268	73,990	5.11%	Link
	Le Point	News Site	21,338	1,207,837	9,912	3,753	30,587	2.60%	Link

Figure taken from the ASD [dashboard](#)

In the information space, the centralised nature of the media has its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, the influence of the traditional media over the media agenda, and their relatively shared values regarding the functioning of institutions, gives them relative control over the circulation of disinformation in visible spaces such as the headlines of national online, print, radio and television media outlets. However, their limited ability to represent citizens outside the networks of the traditional institutions contributes to a disconnect between the issues raised by candidates and the issues that are important to citizens, opening the door to possible interference.

The media system has thus been criticised for its inability to represent the concerns of the French people, [for example on environmental issues](#)⁶⁵. It is true that the election campaign took place in a unique media moment, centred around the handling of the pandemic on the one hand and the war in Ukraine on the other, which necessarily had [an impact on media coverage of the candidates](#)⁶⁶. It is also true that, on the background of a focus away from the debates of the presidential election, Macron officially announced his candidacy at a late stage, on 3 March 2022, further postponing the official campaign. (His subsequent refusal to debate with the other candidates was [criticised](#) by his opponents,⁶⁷ who criticised him for pursuing an “opportunistic” campaign strategy designed to take advantage of his position as leader in a time of conflict and to position himself as an “automatic renewal candidate”). The fact is, however, that French citizens seem to have felt that their interests were not represented by either the candidates or the media.

64 These include, among many: Le Figaro, 20 April 2022, “Macron-Le Pen: ces deux France que tout oppose”; Fondation Jean Jaurès, 21 April 2022, “Macron-Le Pen: deux France face à face”; Le Temps, 10 April 2022, “Deux France on rendez-vous le 24 avril”.

65 Huffington Post, 16 April 2022, “Présidentielle: le désarroi des jeunes face à une élection ‘au niveau zéro sur le climat’”.

66 INA, 5 April 2022, “Etude INA, Voici l’effet de la guerre en Ukraine sur la couverture de l’élection présidentielle.”

67 See the collective opinion piece published in Libération, 15 March 2022, “Campagne présidentielle: #PasDeDébatPasDeMandat”, which provoked a strong reaction on social media.

5. A more established network of fact-checkers and research institutions

Since 2017, many organisations have either developed online monitoring capacity or lent their expertise to institutions that are increasingly interested in the problems of information manipulation at both the national and international level. In 2022, research organisations, think tanks and academic groups were thus involved in monitoring the circulation of problematic content online.

The media have also stepped up in response to this threat. In 2017, the Cross Check initiative helped connect media outlets to warn journalists about the circulation of disinformation, and in 2022 many media outlets – France Info, Le Monde, Le Figaro and Libération, to name but a few – now have their own fact-checking departments. AFP has also launched the Objectif Désinfo coalition, which collaborates with numerous online platforms to warn their users about the circulation of disinformation. Fact-checking services have also been strengthened in response to the numerous conspiracy theories that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Quantifying the impact of these actors on the circulation of disinformation is difficult. We hypothesise, however, that they have increased self-monitoring among the media, making it more difficult for disinformation to be picked up by high-profile media outlets or by the candidates themselves.

III.

Observations during the 2022 election

III. Observations during the 2022 election

Despite seeing a certain level of resistance, partly due to contextual factors and the relative self-regulation of the information ecosystem during the last two elections, we observed a large amount of problematic content, representing a significant, sustained threat to trust in institutions, electoral integrity and social cohesion.

In this section we provide an overview of this content and of the communities involved in its dissemination. We identify the distortions we observed, drawing in particular on the complementary work by GEODE and ISD to map websites and social media platforms respectively. We also discuss the issues associated with the visibility of candidates in search results on online platforms, drawing on the work of Tracking Exposed, and provide examples of Facebook ads identified as political by Check First's 22Vlalapub tool.

Our observations included online attempts to challenge the democratic process and the legitimacy of opinion polls. While such rhetoric did not have the scale and impact seen in the US, for example, it circulated and gained traction in digital spaces in particular, and could eventually be reflected in electoral behaviour. The spread of these trends and the use of conspiracy theories to explain current affairs was observed across a wide range of websites and online platforms.

The outsized mobilisation of fringe and radical political voices, facilitated by the way in which social media rewards engagement, and their outsized representation in the media in general, is also a concern, especially in the context of the collapse of the traditional political parties. This imbalance suggests that the normalisation of extreme views will accelerate in future elections.

During the 2022 elections, several studies demonstrated the persistence of highly toxic content and its prevalence among the communities supporting candidates on the extremes of the political spectrum. This phenomenon saps pluralist democratic debate and again calls into question the effectiveness of policies for moderating and taking down problematic content used by online platforms, whose opaque policies and practices stoke the rhetoric of censorship and increase distrust in institutions.

Finally, the digitisation of politics and the problems associated with online advertising raise questions. We therefore felt it was essential to include an analysis highlighting inconsistencies in the categorisation of online political ads, in the context of the challenges of transposing France's stringent electoral regulations to the digital sphere.

We hope that deciphering these trends and the forms they are taking will provide greater insight into the influence of antidemocratic rhetoric on the electoral process, and the reasons for the success and failure of the tactics employed, with a view to predicting future threats and informing related regulatory policies.

1. Disinformation about voting and the discourse of electoral fraud

The following analysis is based on ISD's study of social media. It echoes GEODE's findings with regard to media outlets, blogs and information websites categorised as far-right, and in the conspiratorial spheres detailed in the next section.

ISD France is the French branch of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an independent non-profit think tank dedicated to protecting human rights and combating polarisation, extremism and disinformation around the world.

ISD observes and develops responses to these threats, which are intensifying in the digital age. Its work combines anthropological research, digital analysis, expertise in extremist movements and an interest in digital regulation with education resources and programming for different audiences, in partnership with organisations from civil society, academia, the business sector and public institutions. ISD's research shapes recommendations for intervening in these various sectors in order to strengthen our collective response to future threats to democracy.

A. The relatively successful importation of the 'Dominion' theory into France

Among some of the conspiracy groups ISD observed on various online platforms, it found elements of the disinformation that had been central to the rhetoric used by pro-Trump circles in the United States to discredit Joe Biden being recycled in order to cast doubt on the French presidential election.

On Twitter, for example, a flurry of tweets in mid-March falsely claimed that the French government had made a secret deal with the Dominion corporation to count votes in France and rig the results in favour of the incumbent president. Dominion was central to the electoral fraud conspiracy theory in the US, and the obsession of certain conspiracy communities with electronic voting machines in France follows on from the allegations of voter fraud in the American election.

While these narratives clearly did not have the reach or go as viral as they had in the US, partly due to the lack of remote voting in France, the word 'Dominion' was still mentioned 45,000 times in two days on Twitter, which is comparable in terms of scale to a passing but relatively prominent controversy in certain ultra-engaged communities on this platform.

Having been relatively successful in drawing inspiration from the Trumpist playbook and its rhetoric of electoral fraud, the French conspirasphere received support after the second round of the presidential election from Wendy Rogers, a Republican senator from Arizona close to Donald Trump, who made the accusation that Emmanuel Macron “stole the election” and encouraged French “patriots” to “dig deeper” to prove the fraud.



Twitter, Telegram and Facebook posts accusing the French government of making a deal with the Dominion corporation

B. The idea of the election being illegitimate or rigged: moves to challenge the outcome

Conspiracy theories fuelled by legitimate criticism of the parrainage system

The parrainage system (which requires candidates to collect at least 50 signatures, or parrainages, from elected officials in order to stand for election) generated a great deal of discussion not only in the traditional media but also online, including in communities linked to the spread of electoral disinformation, as many candidates struggled to collect the required number of signatures by the approaching deadline.

In pro-Zemmour communities in particular, the fact that the incumbent president was the first to secure all the required signatures even before officially announcing his candidacy was interpreted as proof that the election was rigged and a foregone conclusion.

This rhetoric was particularly prevalent among supporters of the far-right candidates, with some contributing to spinning it, for example when Marine Le Pen suspended her campaign to garner support from mayors and raise awareness among the public about the problems with the parrainage system, claiming that “millions of voters will be disenfranchised” and “certain politicians are putting pressure on our democracy to steal this election from France”, “if we don't get the signatures, this election will be worthless”.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Marine Le Pen's appeal to French mayors on YouTube, see the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIQqLyyDRVY>

Florian Philippot, who has become an online amplifier for the institutional far right, and a rallying point and mouthpiece for the anti-lockdown movement, had condemned the injustice and manipulation of the system, and sowed the seeds of the electoral fraud discourse, alongside similar rhetoric within Éric Zemmour's opposing camp, among which it subsequently had a much greater impact.



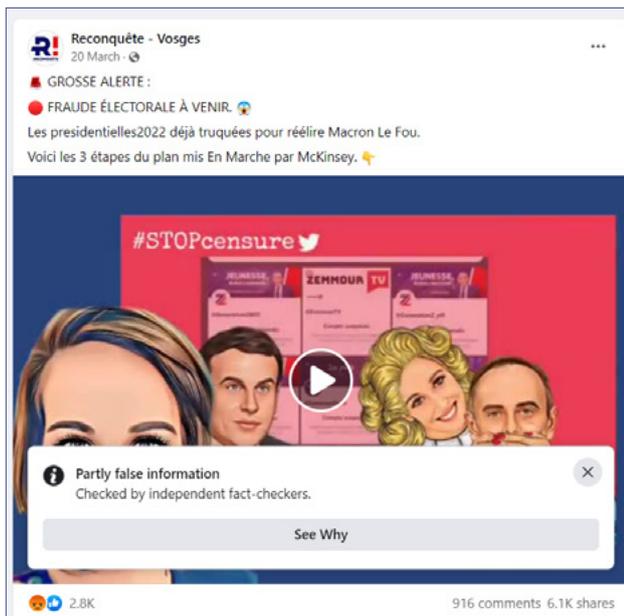
Screenshots of Facebook posts attacking the parrainage system

Establishing the idea of sustained electoral fraud by making the previous election seem illegitimate

Within French conspiracy theory and anti-system communities, one of the main tactics for casting doubt on the integrity of the presidential election was to reuse elements of disinformation from previous elections in order to generate a general sense that electoral manipulation was the norm in a democracy, that previous elections had been affected and that these elections would also inevitably be tainted by electoral fraud. Several months before the vote, ISD researchers observed the sharing of a video entitled “élection présidentielle truquée” (“rigged presidential election”) on the alternative video hosting platform Odysee. The video, broadcast from an influential channel (90,000 followers) was based on old YouTube content from conspirasphere influencer Kris Papillon, dating back to the 2017 election. The altered content was designed to call into question the legitimacy of the incumbent president to govern and therefore to stand for re-election, on the grounds of alleged irregularities during his first campaign.

The rhetoric of vote stealing exacerbating the narrative of electoral fraud

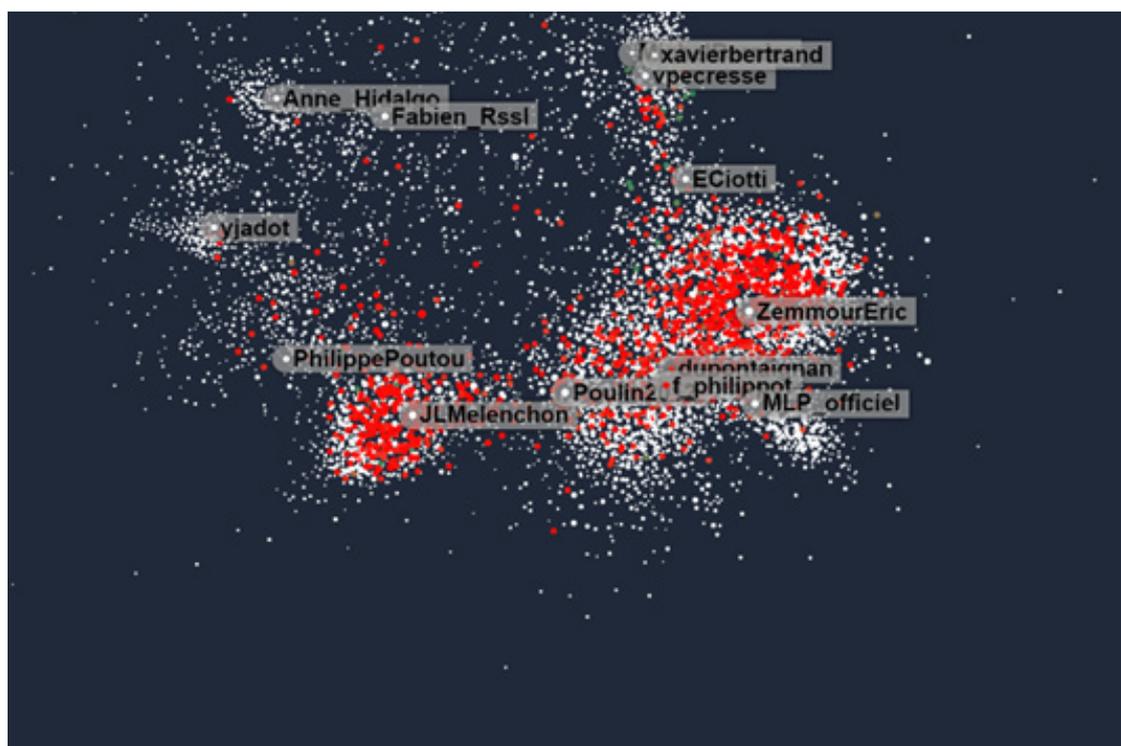
These narratives of electoral fraud also formed part of a broader anti-system rhetoric highly critical of the government, as embodied by the incumbent president. Certain political affairs were thus used to fuel the anti-Macron agenda on social media prior to the first round of the presidential election. One of the main examples of this was the activity around #McKinseygate, which generated theories that the close relationship between the American company's consultants and the government put them at the heart of an electoral fraud scheme.



Facebook post from the conspiracy media outlet Epoch Times Paris

Screenshot of a Facebook post by Zemmour's Reconquête (Reconquest) movement claiming that McKinsey was central to an electoral fraud plot to ensure Emmanuel Macron's re-election

Online discussions about the #PasDeDébatPasDeMandat opinion piece, centring on the question of Emmanuel Macron's record and his failure to participate in the first-round debates, were quickly seized on and amplified on social media, in particular on Twitter, by actors on the opposing end of the ideological spectrum to its original authors in the left-wing newspaper Libération, as evidence for the idea that the lack of a debate would invalidate the election by making it illegitimate. Between 9 March and 7 April, the hashtag was used 100,000 times, with a peak on 17 March 2022 (32,385).



Screenshot from the Politoscope developed by David Chavalarias and the team at the CNRS Institut des Systèmes Complexes.

It is also interesting to note that, following the publication of this opinion piece (on 15 March 2022), it was primarily amplified on Twitter by accounts and networks centred mainly on the campaign communities of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Éric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen.

Certain narratives also circulated on online platforms around the idea that Macron's lack of popularity and the numerous crises that had occurred during his first term in office should prevent him from reaching the second round, adding to widespread suspicion online. Certain French conspiracy and extremist communities on social media thus stated that opinion polls predicting a win by the incumbent must have been manipulated, and claimed that Macron could only win on the back of electoral fraud (see figures below).



Examples of posts supporting the idea that Emmanuel Macron's victory would be a sign of electoral fraud

This climate of distrust was exploited in Éric Zemmour's rhetoric and was notable in his use of terms such as "seizing" or "stealing" the election on the [programme](#) that went out on TF1 on 14 March, "La France face à la guerre". Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, meanwhile, used the term "rigged election" [in an interview](#) while condemning "a lack of fair coverage of the candidates" during the campaign.⁶⁹

These various observations by ISD on social media are consistent with a recent Ifop survey (conducted before the first round of the presidential election) which found that 14% of French people – i.e. more than one in seven – believed that the election results could be rigged. This proportion [was reportedly higher](#) among supporters of Marine Le Pen (30%), Éric Zemmour (29%) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, but also among people who stated that they "primarily consumed information on the internet" (24%).⁷⁰

69 RTL, 9 March 2022, "Nicolas Dupont-Aignan dénonce 'une élection truquée de A à Z'".

70 Le Figaro, 19 April 2022, "Pour 14% des français l'élection serait ou pourrait être truquée".

C. Undermining and exploiting opinion polls

From accusations of manipulated polls to manipulating polls

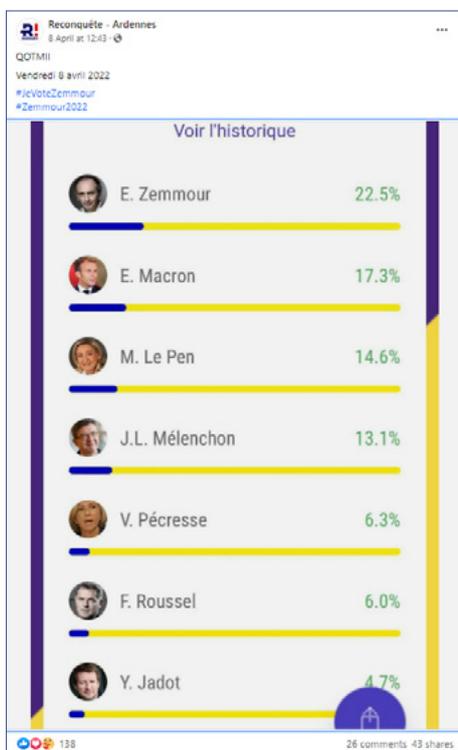
In some cases, opinion polls exploring the popularity of candidates or voting intentions were used to drive the rhetoric of electoral fraud, or to re-energise an electorate discouraged by seeing their candidate low in the polls. In particular, ISD researchers noted the resurgence of narratives linking Emmanuel Macron’s stepson Sébastien Auzière to poll manipulation, drawing on disinformation content dating back to 2018.⁷¹

Fake polls were also circulated in certain online communities, particularly among groups endorsing Éric Zemmour. A study by the artificial intelligence company QotMii exploring the “electoral potential” of the candidates, which predicted that Zemmour would beat Macron in the first round, was shared

by the official accounts of Reconquête staff, and by Zemmour’s official account. The study was misrepresented by Reconquête as a traditional poll, despite the fact that it was actually based on the prominence of the candidates in discussions on social media (see image below). Zemmour, meanwhile, claimed that artificial intelligence was better than opinion polling at predicting results, citing the fact that the same company had successfully predicted Donald Trump’s victory in 2016 (see image below). An opinion poll falsely attributed to the Swiss daily newspaper Le Temps, stating that 21% of voters intended to support Zemmour, was also circulated on social media.⁷²

This communications operation was designed to re-energise a flagging base rather than to support the rhetoric of electoral fraud. However, by undermining poll predictions, the misrepresentation of this study and its potential confusion with an official poll and, to some extent, Zemmour’s statements about the legitimacy of the results of the 2020 US presidential election, may have contributed to fuelling questions about the integrity of the electoral process.

A number of activist accounts openly endorsing Zemmour thus took things further, claiming on social media that the polls were manipulated



71 France TV Info, 01/02/2022, « Désintox. Non, Sébastien Auzière, le fils de Brigitte Macron, n’est pas directeur d’études pour l’institut de sondages Ipsos-Sopra Steria »

72 AFP Factuel, 6 April 2022, “Non, Le Temps n’a pas réalisé un sondage prêtant 21 % d’intentions de vote à Eric Zemmour au 1er tour”.

Examples of content from Zemmour campaign staff about the opinion polls

and part of a broader “Machiavellian plot” to prevent their candidate from reaching the second round through electoral fraud (see images below).



Examples of content questioning the opinion polls

The idea of the opinion polls being manipulated as cover for a planned electoral fraud was also taken up in several Gilets Jaunes, anti-system and conspiracy communities, which also recirculated fake polls claiming that only 12% of voters intended to vote for Macron (see images below).



Posts claiming that the Emmanuel Macron camp was circulating fake opinion polls

ISD also observed the use of astroturfing techniques to further the rhetoric of manipulation and undermine the legitimacy of opinion polls⁷³. Between 20 and 21 March, the hashtags #VoteCache (#HiddenVote) and #LesVraisSondages (#TheRealPolls) were used in connection with the idea that the polls did not reflect the alleged mass mobilisation and zeal seen at Zemmour’s rallies. They were shared by the candidate’s campaign teams and supporters, and were used a total of 88,820 and 68,529 times respectively on Twitter during this period.



Examples of content using astroturfing techniques

ASD also found certain foreign actors taking up this narrative. In late March 2022, for example, the Qatari media outlet AJ+ Français dedicated an episode of its YouTube series “Rien ne va +” to opinion polls. In a light-hearted, mocking tone, this video, entitled “Comment manipulent-ils les sondages?” (“How opinion polls are manipulated”), poked fun at what it claimed to be the excessive importance placed on “a marketing trick”. While the video was careful not to link the issue of polls to the reliability of the election result, it is troubling to see a media outlet funded by an authoritarian state, and aimed in particular at a young immigrant audience, presenting opinion polls as being routinely manipulated.

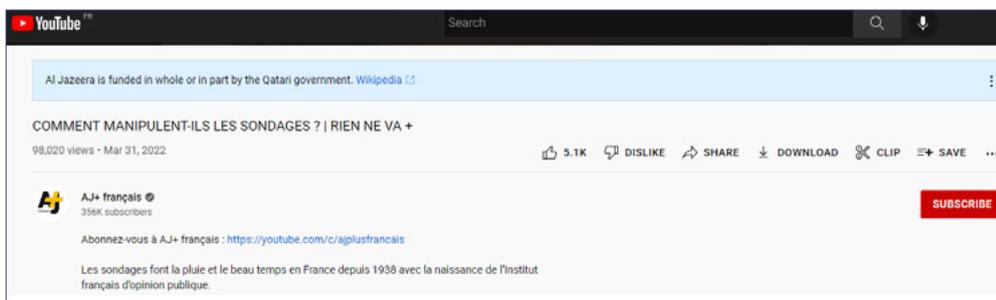


Image taken from ASD research

⁷³ Astroturfing consists of an organised campaign by numerous internet users to publish similar content at the same time and on the same platforms in order to make a topic trend. This strategy makes a coordinated action look spontaneous.

The power of the discourse of electoral fraud: drawing on existing crises and legitimate policy debates

Newsguard's French Election Misinformation Tracker lists other election-related myths: that the war in Ukraine was a useful "pretext" for Macron to retain power; about an alleged risk of massive fraud; and myths about polls, with fabricated images and all kinds of fake polls circulating online.

ISD's study of the rhetoric of electoral fraud in relation to the French presidential election – from which the observations in this section are taken – reveals the intersection between these ideas and opposition to the government's COVID policy.

COVID and electoral fraud

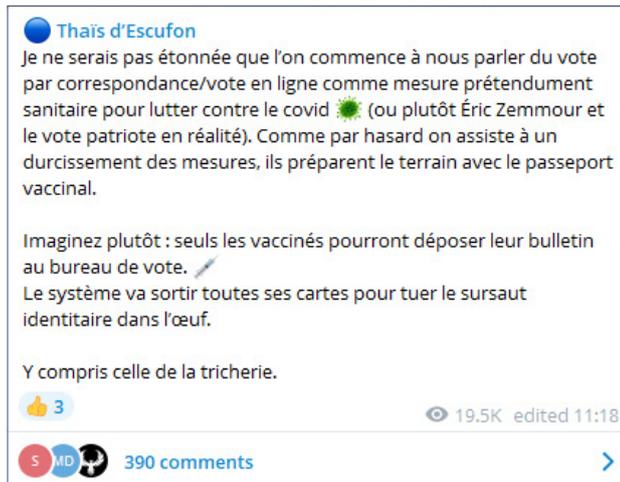
Prior to the announcement of the lifting of most of the COVID restrictions in early March, which made the topic much less significant, ISD analysts had identified efforts to spread messages suggesting that the government would use the pandemic as a cover to implement electoral fraud strategies in order to ensure Emmanuel Macron's re-election. These narratives served to generate distrust in the electoral process.

Back in 2021, Florian Philippot, who played an important role in amplifying disinformation in relation to the pandemic, claimed for example that the COVID pass could be used to force unvaccinated people to vote by post and thus facilitate electoral fraud.



Screenshot of a Facebook post by Florian Philippot about the COVID pass

Using similar arguments, in December 2021 identitarian activist Thaïs d'Escufon claimed in a post on her Telegram channel that the French government was almost certainly planning to use the COVID pass measures to force unvaccinated people to vote remotely or online and thus to manipulate the election result to prevent the far-right identitarian party from coming to power.



Telegram post by Thaïs d'Escufon about postal voting and the pandemic

Finally, posts on several online platforms attacked the addition of a QR code for information purposes on French voting cards, drawing a parallel with the QR code on the COVID pass to suggest this was a strategy for electoral fraud.



Posts about adding a QR code to voting cards

The situation in Ukraine was also exploited to further the idea of the election being rigged. A fake screenshot falsely claiming that Ukrainian President Zelensky was calling on people to vote for Macron, produced by manipulating a tweet from BFMTV, was widely shared on social media before being fact-checked by *AFP Factuel*⁷⁴.



Fabricated image fact-checked by Newsguard and AFP

74 AFP Factuel, 7 March 2022, "Attention à ce faux appel du président ukrainien à voter pour Emmanuel Macron".

D. Citizen election monitoring initiatives

Distrust in the incumbent government and disinformation about possible electoral fraud in favour of Emmanuel Macron resulted in some conspiracy theory and anti-system communities attempting to develop offline initiatives for “citizen presidential election monitoring”, which they claimed were designed to prevent vote manipulation. These initiatives encouraged citizens to attend vote counts and to take pictures of the presidential election results declared by each polling station in order to identify any inconsistencies with the official results. The online platforms of these groups also often offered channels for reporting incidents that individuals considered to be a violation of French electoral law. ISD analysts have identified these efforts as being led mainly by three movements:

- ▶ Contrôle Citoyen de l’Election (Citizen Election Monitoring, CCE)
- ▶ Association de Vérification des Elections par les Citoyens (Citizens’ Election Verification Organisation, AVEC)
- ▶ Protection des Citoyens et Respect de la Constitution (Protecting Citizens and Respecting the Constitution, ReCiProC)

All three initiatives were created or promoted by actors who appear to have been previously involved in the Gilets Jaunes movement and more recently in protests against the COVID pass and vaccination. One of the main promoters of [Contrôle Citoyen de l’Élection](#) was Germain Gaiffe, a close associate of the antisemitic comedian Dieudonné who is also involved in the political party Conseil National de la Libération (National Liberation Council). This political movement was created by former Gilet Jaune Christophe Chalencçon, who was convicted of “inciting an armed revolt against the authority of the state”, and who also endorsed Contrôle Citoyen de l’Election with a dedicated [webpage](#) on his website.

Similarly, the ReCiProC initiative was launched by the organisation Bon Sens (Common Sense), which [consists of](#) individuals involved in the French-language conspirasphere, such as conspiracy theorist Silvano Trotta, who repeatedly reshared ReCiProC content on his Telegram channel. The identity and background of the people behind AVEC is less clear, but on Twitter, for example, ISD found an account from an individual who claimed to be one of the founders of AVEC supporting the idea that Joe Biden won the 2020 US election due to massive electoral fraud. Similarly, the sharing by AVEC’s Twitter account of a link to the French-language QAnon website “Qactus” suggests at the very least that some members of the organisation are close to conspiracy circles (see screenshots below).



Screenshots of content produced by the organisation AVEC

also reused by conspiracy theorist Silvano Trotta to suggest a “fraud” that was “kicking off”. In both cases, these claims, which can be considered false, were investigated by the AFP Factual fact-checking team (see [here](#) and [here](#)). One of AVEC’s tweets also referred to “anomalies” regarding the results of the first round in relation to voting machines and retweeted a message referring to a “voting machine scandal” and suggesting fraud in relation to this.

In another [tweet](#), AVEC stated “pre-torn ballot papers were sent to voters! Why? To make the votes invalid”, echoing unproven allegations of electoral fraud that circulated before the first and second rounds of the presidential election in certain political camps (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Finally, it reshared a link to an article on a website endorsing QAnon ideas, promoting an appeal for the results of the election to be annulled, supported by figures linked to COVID-sceptic conspiracy movements.

While the organisation stated that it had not collected evidence of large-scale electoral fraud during the presidential election and raised a number of legitimate questions, it also shared and amplified in a sometimes highly ambiguous manner content and discourse on the theme of fraud, which was then taken up by other actors in support of the idea that electoral fraud had indeed taken place.



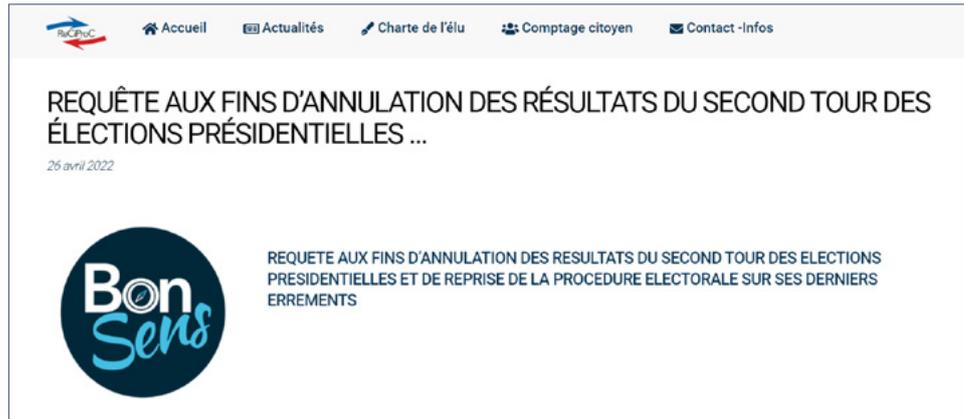
AVEC tweets about the “voting machine scandal”



Bon Sens, meanwhile, which runs the website of the ReCiProC initiative, launched an [appeal](#) for the results of the presidential election to be annulled on the basis of a technical problem on the TV channel France 2, which the organisation, along with many other conspiracy theory actors, claimed was [evidence of clear fraud](#) affecting the results of the second round.

This appeal was [highlighted](#) on the website Reciproc.org even though ReCiProC acknowledged that it had not succeeded in recruiting enough volunteers to gather adequate data to properly verify the results of the presidential election.

Conversely, while the CCE group included notorious conspiracy theorists, some of whom had shared content in the run-up to the election suggesting that the 2017 presidential election had been rigged, it is important to note that this initiative did not contribute to disinformation regarding the results. One of the active members of the group, in charge of data collection, ultimately stated in a YouTube livestream that the findings of the organisation’s monitoring work were consistent with the official results.



Screenshot of the appeal made by Bon Sens

E. Disinformation on the day of the election

Voting machine fraud

Before and during the first round of the presidential election, multiple posts were seen on various social media platforms including Facebook, Telegram and Odysee claiming that the voting machines had been prepped for the elections and condemning the potential fraud that could be generated by electronic voting in France. This narrative was quick to spread, particularly in relation to a list circulated after the first round of all the communes using these machines, which was shared by anti-system and conspiracy actors such as the blogger Étienne Chouard (see image below). Following both the first and second rounds, some actors also falsely claimed that Emmanuel Macron had come out on top in all of the communes using electronic voting machines, in order to undermine the legitimacy of the results. These false claims were investigated by several French fact-checking services, and Julien Pain, journalist and editor-in-chief of the programme “Vrai ou Fake” on France Info, investigated and debunked the rumours of electoral fraud in the communes using these machines.

While none of the candidates publicly challenged the results, a discourse on the fringes of the rhetoric of electoral fraud was observed on the day of the election on Facebook and Telegram, with some narratives pointing to individuals who had been removed from the electoral roll. These argued that the abstention rate had been manipulated, on the basis of long queues at various polling stations, while others condemned the failure to post the results in some French cities (see image below).



Content about the declared number of votes for Marine Le Pen



far-right and conspiracy communities on Facebook in support of Le Pen (see image below). It also led to rumours that the party had demanded a recount after the second round, a claim that was investigated and debunked by AFP.



This was not the first time that a technical error of this kind had occurred in relation to the media. A similar situation happened with a German television programme that was broadcast live two days before the 2021 federal election, which used fake results as a test and was exploited by conspiracy communities.



In France, too, this technical problem was used as the basis for an appeal by several groups of conspiracy and anti-system figures who – unsuccessfully and with limited media coverage – challenged the election results in the Constitutional Court on the grounds of electoral fraud (see images below).



Screenshots about appeals made to the Constitutional Court

F. A genuine but minor impact thus far

While levels of distrust in the electoral process may have appeared high, the system remained strong. However, the narratives of electoral fraud taken up and shared by sovereigntist politicians with a significant online following, such as Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, Florian Philippot and François Asselineau, may have tended to accelerate the relative but growing generalisation of such discourse among the general public. They could, therefore, have a real impact in the long run.



Screenshot of Florian Philippot's interview with VA+

At present, it is important to note that while these politicians often toyed with the rhetoric of distrust in democratic institutions during the campaign, neither Dupont-Aignan nor Asselineau ultimately questioned the outcome of the election. Philippot made an even bigger U-turn, by condemning those who continued to contest the result of the run-off in an interview with VA+ (see image below)..

The more institutional politicians associated with anti-system rhetoric behaved responsibly when the results were published. Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who came second and third respectively, immediately recognised the results after they were published, in contrast to the 2017 election when Mélenchon took several hours to officially acknowledge his defeat.⁷⁷

The growing influence of such rhetoric on French-language virtual spaces did not enable this discourse of electoral fraud to be turned into concrete action. Despite a handful of calls to do so by extremist, anti-system and conspiracy communities observed by ISD analysts in the weeks leading up to the two rounds of the presidential election, very few occupations of polling stations in France were reported. The brief, very small occupation of a polling station in Toulouse was a rare exception. Similarly, the social media accounts of the citizen monitoring initiatives attracted a limited number of followers, and the action on the ground for which these initiatives were calling appears to have been relatively insignificant.

In France, the narrative of electoral fraud was not supported by figures that might have given new impetus to this discourse and turned it into concrete political action, as was the case for example following Joe Biden's victory in the United States. Marine Le Pen immediately refused to toy with this antidemocratic register by clearly conceding defeat, and RN quickly denied rumours that the party was going to request a recount on the grounds of suspected electoral fraud.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Huffington Post, 23 April 2017, "Résultats présidentielle 2017: Jean-Luc Mélenchon refuse de reconnaître sa défaite".

⁷⁸ FP Factuel, 28 April 2022, "Non, le Rassemblement National n'a pas fait recompter les votes après le second tour de la présidentielle".

2. The rise and spread of conspiracy narratives on websites

It is difficult to understand the emergence of the online conspiracy narratives discussed above without taking a closer look at the various websites whose content generated a reaction designed to disrupt the electoral process. The following section draws on GEODE's work on the far-right media space.

Comparing the GEODE and ISD analyses of various online spaces shows how social networks can sometimes amplify narratives that developed from publications on 'reinformation' websites. Upstream and downstream of accusations of pure electoral fraud, conspiracy theory aggregators and websites helped prepare the ground for electoral distrust by widely sharing narratives about the illegitimacy of the election based on criticism of the parrainage system, Macron's failure to participate in the first-round debates, and the government's use of consultancy firms.

Géopolitique de la Datasphère (Geopolitics of the Datasphere, GEODE) is a social sciences and humanities research and training centre at Université Paris 8, dedicated to studying the strategic issues of the digital revolution. Its interdisciplinary approach working within the humanities and social sciences is open to contributions from data science and computer science, and seeks to use the resources of the datasphere for the purposes of geopolitical analysis. It also makes it possible to study the datasphere as a geopolitical object in its own right, in order to stimulate strategic thinking on defence and security issues.

A. Lexicometric analysis of French conspiracy websites

The team at GEODE has developed a methodology to identify and analyse narratives produced on websites and to track their spread online⁷⁹. This work has focused on two types of websites:

- ▶ far-right disinformation websites in France;
- ▶ and websites of foreign media outlets known for their information influence strategies, in particular from Russia, China and Turkey.

These websites are known to be actively involved in spreading false information and narratives designed to destabilise the electoral process in a number of Western countries.

For the French websites, GEODE has produced a lexicometric analysis of the content published by the three main far-right sites with conspiratorial tendencies: Boulevard Voltaire, Salon Beige and Planetes360. Analysis of these websites reveals a strong shared focus on candidates from the right and far right of the

79 For a detailed explanation of the methodology used, see the [GEODE report](#) page 9

political spectrum, and a directly or indirectly critical stance on the incumbent government’s policy. The narratives propagated by each of these websites differed on certain topics, however, revealing a certain plurality within the French conspirasphere.

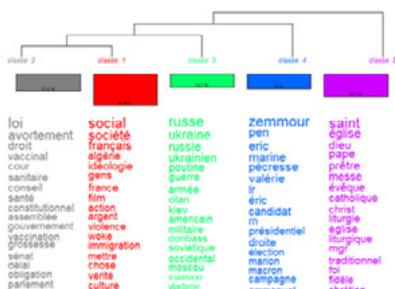


Figure 1: Lexicometric analysis of Salon Beige

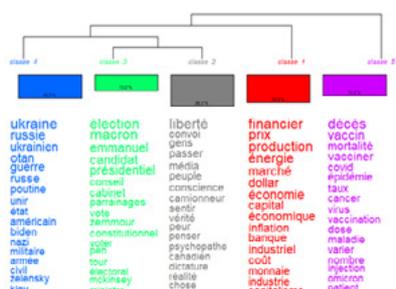


Figure 2: Lexicometric analysis of Planetes360

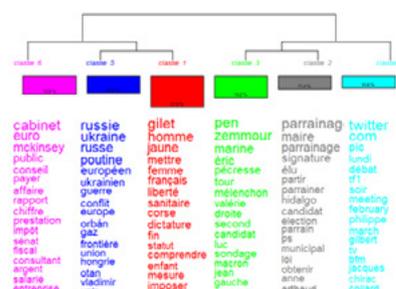


Figure 3: Lexicometric analysis of Boulevard Voltaire

B. Shared criticism of Emmanuel Macron's style of government

Much of the content on these three websites focused on direct criticism of Emmanuel Macron’s policies or style of government. This included numerous articles attacking the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mandatory COVID pass and then vaccine pass, and the Gilets Jaunes protests. A particular focus was also seen on the use of consultancy firms by the government⁸⁰, some of which do not pay taxes in France (McKinsey was pointed at).

All three websites also tended to favour the far-right presidential candidates, as demonstrated by the number of times they mentioned Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour, typically in conjunction with criticism of the way in which “the system” was trying to obstruct their candidacies. This included the topic of the parrainage system, for example, described as “antidemocratic”,⁸¹ and opinion polls, presented as tools of the “system” to manipulate opinion against Zemmour⁸².

Finally, the war in Ukraine was an omnipresent topic across all three websites. The corresponding articles were clearly oriented towards pro-Russian narratives designed to justify the invasion, including arguments pointing to connections between Ukrainians and Nazis and to NATO’s ‘encirclement’ of Russia as the cause of the war.⁸³

80 See at: <https://www.bvoltage.fr/le-scandale-mckinsey-nest-que-la-partie-emergee-de-liceberg-macroniste/>; See at: <https://planetes360.fr/en-france-la-republique-est-elle-prisonniere-de-mckinsey/>

81 See at: <https://www.bvoltage.fr/livre-les-parrainages-ou-comment-les-peuples-se-donnent-des-maitres-de-christophe-boutin-et-frederic-rouvillois>; See at: <https://planetes360.fr/en-panne-de-parrainages-ces-candidats-agitent-le-peril-democratique/>

82 See at: <https://www.bvoltage.fr/zemmour-plus-haut-que-les-sondages-ne-le-disent/>

83 See at: <https://planetes360.fr/guerre-en-ukraine-distinguer-ceux-qui-lont-declenchee-de-ceux-qui-lont-rendue-inevitable/>; See at: <https://www.bvoltage.fr/tribune-sous-pretexte-de-guerre-en-ukraine-va-t-on-une-nouvelle-fois-voler-aux-francais-lelection-presidentielle/>; See at: <https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/le-president-ukrainien-zelensky-a-menti-les-russes-nont-pas-detruit-le-memorial-juif-de-babi-yar/>

C. Diversity within the far-right conspiracy information sphere

While all three websites discuss the various crises dividing France, Salon Beige (Figure 1) tends to approach them from a religious perspective. This website is primarily aimed at a Catholic, highly conservative readership engaged in a culture war, and hosts content critical of the ‘violence’ of French society, of immigration through the ‘Great Replacement’ theory⁸⁴ and of the rise of ‘woke culture’. Salon Beige is also the only website to focus on societal issues, and is strongly critical of France’s recent Abortion Act, which extends the right to abortion under certain conditions. In brief, it believes that society has lost its way as a result of ‘the system’, in particular political elites, and claims that salvation will come from a return to Christian values.

Planetes360, meanwhile, (Figure 2) has a clear anti-globalisation stance, less apparent on the other two websites. During the study period it had a less obvious focus on the far-right candidates, concentrating its articles on attacks on Emmanuel Macron and on the global financial system more generally. In particular, it took up the conspiratorial discourse of the ‘Great Reset’,⁸⁵ a theory that claims a globalised elite is out to economically enslave people. These narratives presented Macron either as a key player or as the puppet of globalist interests.⁸⁶ This anti-globalisation conspiratorial frame of reference also influenced the content questioning the effectiveness of vaccines against COVID-19,⁸⁷ with the pandemic seen as a way for Emmanuel Macron to exploit fears in order to impose a dictatorship.⁸⁸ Planetes360 thus highlighted the ‘Convoi de la Liberté’, a French protest movement against the vaccine pass inspired by Canada’s Freedom Convoy.

Finally, Boulevard Voltaire (Figure 3) propagates a nationalist and identitarian discourse without explicitly using religious and/or anti-globalisation arguments. Unlike Planetes360 and Salon Beige, it does not explicitly promote conspiracy theories. It is however a platform used to amplify the ideas of far-right political and media figures.⁸⁹

84 See at: <https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/grand-remplacement-le-sujet-de-lelection-presidentielle/>; See at: <https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/marion-marechal-aux-journalistes-est-ce-que-vous-avez-lu-le-livre-de-renaud-camus-sur-le-grand-remplacement/>

85 The phrase comes from a book published in the summer of 2020 by economists Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret, two prominent members of the World Economic Forum in Davos. In this essay, written at the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, the authors argue that the pandemic is an opportunity for the world to bring about profound societal change.

86 See at: <https://planetes360.fr/une-mafia-apatriote-a-mis-la-main-sur-notre-pays-mckinsey-present-dans-65-pays-dirige-en-sous-main-autant-de-nation/>

87 See at: <https://planetes360.fr/les-vaccins-augmentent-ils-le-risque-de-contamination-et-de-mort-par-covid-19-confirmation-un-an-plus-tard/>

88 See at: <https://planetes360.fr/video-comment-sorganisent-les-territoires-doutre-mer-contre-la-dictature-macron/>

89 See at: <https://www.bvoltaire.fr/tribune-pour-lunion/> ; <https://www.bvoltaire.fr/zemmour-plus-haut-que-les-sondages-ne-le-disent/>

3. The influence strategy of foreign media in France put to the test

The following section is primarily based on GEODE's study of the presence of foreign media in France (see the description of GEODE in the previous section), along with a [joint study by ASD and ISD of the impact of the EU's Russian media ban on the French information ecosystem](#).⁹⁰

For several years, foreign media actors have been producing French-language news content in order to export and disseminate the worldview of their country of origin's government to the French-language information space. Russian media outlets are perhaps the most notorious ones exerting information influence by spreading false information.

The ban on Russian state media in the European Union, as a result of the war in Ukraine, weakened their influence and relegated them to the sidelines of the campaign. This does not mean, however, that RT and Sputnik, Russia's main channels of influence, did not cover the French presidential campaign, especially before their ban.

A. A change in the strategic priorities of the major Russian actors

A joint analysis by ASD and ISD of the impact of the ban on these media outlets⁹¹ shows how, despite patchy enforcement, the volume of content posted by the two outlets dropped considerably, along with interactions with the content posted by their social media accounts. The sharp decline in the output and reach of Russian state media on social networks coincided with a significant increase, particularly on Twitter, of posts and engagement with social media accounts affiliated to the Russian Embassy in France.

90 ASD et ISD, 08/04/2022, Implementation and impact of the RT and Sputnik Ban on French online ecosystems

91 Ibid.

	RT France @rtenfrancais	Retweets 20.8K	Likes 42.3K	Tweets 599	Followers 178.4K	Following 90
	Sputnik France @sputnik_fr	Retweets 18.2K	Likes 32.6K	Tweets 2,199	Followers 96.7K	Following 217

Metrics of activity and engagement of the RT France and Sputnik France Twitter accounts from February 1 to February 28, 2022. Source: Metrics from ASD's Hamilton 2.0 dashboard.

	RT France @rtenfrancais	Retweets 10.6K	Likes 28.2K	Tweets 370	Followers 178.4K	Following 90
	Sputnik France @sputnik_fr	Retweets 5,863	Likes 11.5K	Tweets 433	Followers 96.7K	Following 217

Metrics of activity and engagement of the RT France and Sputnik France Twitter accounts from March 1 to March 31, 2022. Source: Metrics from ASD's Hamilton 2.0 dashboard.

Figure taken from a joint ISD and ASD study of the impact of the RT and Sputnik ban⁹²

Despite the problems accessing Russian media, the GEODE team was able to use a VPN to bypass the ban on RT in the EU and to retrieve articles published between January and March 2022 for lexicometric analysis.⁹³ It was thus able to determine that the content published by RT in the context of the presidential

election reflected the general strategy adopted by this media outlet for several years: to exploit divisive issues in French society in order to reveal its flaws and amplify controversy, while protecting Russian interests.

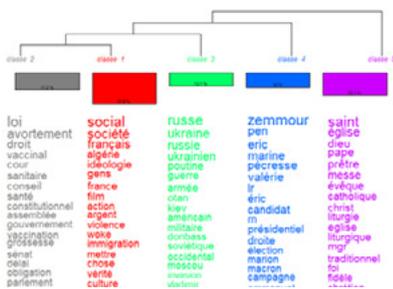


Figure 5: Lexicometric analysis of RT France

This dendrogram reveals three distinct topics: coverage of right- and left-wing candidates, issues specific to French politics, and the war in Ukraine.

The first topic, focusing on the candidates, reveals a significant contrast between the coverage of right- and left-wing candidates. Right-wing and far-right candidates were promoted favourably (Class 1)⁹⁴. with the parrainage system also discussed and presented as being unfair to candidates 'outside the system',⁹⁵. and coverage of the left-wing candidates was much more

negative, with articles strongly emphasising internal divisions among the left and the many different candidates (Class 4).⁹⁶

92 Ibid.

93 Le traitement de l'élection par les sites francophones chinois et turcs était trop minime pour que nos mots-clefs permettent la constitution d'un corpus suffisamment fiable pour l'analyse.

94 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/97406-trocadero-eric-zemmour-appelle-nouvelle-fois-union-des-droites>

95 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/95987-presidentielle-il-a-deux-poids-deux-mesures-dans-cette-course-parrainages-alexis-poulin>

96 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/95293-christiane-taubira-remporte-primaire-populaire-divise-la-gauche-presidentielle>

The second topic, which dominated the corpus, related to divisive issues in French society. The main focus was violence, in relation to both issues of insecurity⁹⁷ (police and police officers) and to characterise the impact of Macron's politics (such as social violence and authoritarian drift).⁹⁸ The presence of Gérald Darmanin, France's interior minister, reveals RT's strategy of amplifying divisions within society over a divisive personality. The articles linked to his name related to the controversy over the way he addressed journalist Apolline de Malherbe in an interview,⁹⁹ to conflicts between ministers, and to the accusations of rape made against him.¹⁰⁰ There was also content criticising the handling of the pandemic (vaccine pass, COVID pass and COVID), focusing on the anti-COVID pass protests and alleged repression of them.¹⁰¹ RT thus published content that fuelled the narratives of far-right websites and exacerbated internal divisions in society.

The third topic in the corpus concerned the war in Ukraine, described as an 'operation',¹⁰² and the Russian military presence in Mali. This clearly reflected RT's role as a mouthpiece for Russian interests, with Western responses to the invasion (sanctions and NATO support) presented as hypocritical,¹⁰³ and the withdrawal of French troops from Mali presented as a failure of French foreign policy.¹⁰⁴

Finally, on social media, ISD observed calls to migrate to alternative online spaces such as VK, creating a risk of audiences moving to more extreme online spaces with limited content moderation. These calls did not, however, result in a mass exodus, unlike those from other European branches of RT (RT DE and RT Spanish).

The ban on RT and Sputnik in France did however undeniably stoke conspiracy theories and anti-system rhetoric in the wake of the protests against COVID restrictions. It is perhaps no coincidence that these stories were identified in the ASD dashboard as being the focus of RT and Sputnik's messaging prior to the war and their subsequent ban in the EU.¹⁰⁵

97 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/97420-barricades-incendies-ont-emaille-nuit-violences-sevran> ; <https://francais.rt.com/france/95990-tanguy-david-militant-d-eric-zemmour-affirme-avoir-ete-agresse-deux-fois-deux-jours>

98 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/97187-maltraitance-sociale-boulet-deni-opposition-ereinte-programme-emmanuel-macron> ; <https://francais.rt.com/france/97041-ebornement-jerome-rodrigues-policier-sanctionne-exclusion-cinq-jours>

99 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/95561-calmez-vous-madame-passe-d-armes-musclee-entre-gerald-darmanin-et-apolline-de-malherbe>

100 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/94679-vers-non-lieu-pour-gerald-darmanin-accuse-viol>

101 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/france/95930-manifestations-contre-pass-vaccinal-dans-plusieurs-villes-france-continu> ; <https://francais.rt.com/france/95765-convoi-liberte-forces-ordre-mettent-fin-rassemblement-devant-tour-eiffel>

102 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/international/97366-operation-ukraine-russie-denombre-1351-tues-parmi-militaires-russes>

103 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/international/97424-moscou-juge-alarmants-propos-biden-affirmant-poutine-peut-pas-rester-pouvoir> ; <https://francais.rt.com/international/96924-pour-kemi-seba-ukraine-a-ete-instrumentalisee-depuis-trop-dannees-par-oligarchie-occidentale>

104 See at: <https://francais.rt.com/international/95958-pas-besoin-france-manifestation-mali-celebrant-depart-soldats-francais> ; <https://francais.rt.com/opinions/95888-mirage-africain-emmanuel-macron-frederic-de-natal>

105 See at: <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/french-election/>



Tweet from Zhang Heqing, Chinese Cultural Advisor in Pakistan

B. Chinese disinterest and limited Turkish influence

Chinese state media activity with relation to the French presidential election was also limited. Chinese publications on the topic tended to be factual, and represented a very small proportion of the articles published on such websites. This can be explained by the fact that China’s information strategy is not based on interfering in or disrupting democratic elections, but on projecting a positive image of China and its diplomatic relations. Thus, despite France’s Chinese ambassador being particularly outspoken on social media, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s call for Taiwan to be part of China in the National Assembly in November 2021 was mainly shared by Chinese channels outside France, and between January and May 2022, Mélenchon was only mentioned twice by French-language Chinese state media.

On Twitter, however, the joint ASD/ISD study found that Chinese state media and the Chinese embassy in France helped fill the void left by Russian state media by taking up Kremlin talking points and amplifying content shared by Russian diplomatic accounts. Although this narrative overlap between Russia and China in relation to the war in Ukraine has been observed worldwide,¹⁰⁶ the Chinese embassy in France nevertheless stood out by sharing some particularly mendacious Russian narratives, notably in relation to the war crimes committed in Bucha.



Tweet from the Russian ambassador to France about the massacre in Bucha

106 ASD, 15 March 2022, “China’s State Media and Government Officials are Backing Russia on Ukraine”, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/chinas-state-media-and-government-officials-are-backing-russia-on-ukraine-war/>

Finally, French-speaking Turkish media – notably the website TRT – published very little content about the French elections, but instead discussed French society in the broadest sense, typically accusing French society, institutions or leaders of Islamophobia. While the issue of Islam was a recurring theme throughout the campaign, it was generally approached from a security and migration perspective (border controls and crime) by the main French media outlets and the candidates. Turkish media narratives were therefore limited in scope to Muslim communities and some left-wing circles, and did not penetrate the French information sphere enough to have a significant impact.

C. The example of AJ+

ASD's research singled out for attention AJ+ Français, a media outlet specialising in short format videos aimed at young people, particularly from a migrant background. Part of Al Jazeera, the state-owned broadcaster funded by Qatar, AJ+ Français has an audience comparable to that of RT France prior to its March 2022 ban, with over 146,000 followers on Twitter and nearly 2 million Facebook followers.¹⁰⁷

During the presidential campaign, AJ+ Français's editorial line focused on antiracist and pro-minority struggles, with a large amount of its content criticising the two far-right candidates. Its content regarding international relations centred on consistently pro-Palestinian coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and frequent condemnation of the evils of colonisation in Africa.

Advocacy on behalf of oppressed groups, both nationally and internationally, has contributed to AJ+ Français's success, particularly among young people from communities that are frequently discriminated against in France.



Screenshots from the ASD study

¹⁰⁷ ASD, 5 takeaways from the 2022 french presidential elections, Avril 2022

These observations echo previous GEODE analyses of the use of AJ+ as a propaganda tool by Qatar.¹⁰⁸ It is troubling to see a channel funded by an authoritarian regime with privileged access to a particular target audience broadcasting content during an election period that questions the voting system or the reliability of opinion polls. These findings are particularly alarming given the sharp rise of the abstention rate among 18–24-year-olds (69% in the first round of the legislative elections).¹⁰⁹

4. The mobilisation of the far right online: the potentially distorting effect of social media

The French presidential election was characterised by high levels of mobilisation among certain online communities. Éric Zemmour in particular surrounded himself with supporters who were very active because they were particularly comfortable using social media. In this section we discuss the political context that has shaped the far right in recent years, before setting out the strategies it deployed online.

A. Cultivating an online audience among identitarians prior to the elections: a rear base shifting the debate to the right

An [ISD study](#)¹¹⁰ carried out over a six-month period in 2021 provides an analysis of the digital strategy used by French identitarians. These insights give us a sense of the dynamics already at play within the far-right activist ecosystem prior to the election.

The study was based on quantitative and qualitative data from observations of three social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram), and two case studies of identitarian mobilisation on Telegram over the course of a six-month period.

Originating in France in 2003 under the name *Bloc Identitaire*, *Les Identitaires* (The Identitarians) are an ethno-nationalist-inspired far-right political group that is opposed to multicultural society and advocates concepts such as remigration, i.e. the forced return of non-white and non-Christian populations to their country of origin. The influence of the identitarian movement on French society and the potential threat posed by the movement and its ideas are a growing concern for public authorities and civil society.

The identitarian movement, which has spread across Europe, is notably characterised by intimidation operations against immigrant populations or those perceived to be such, publicised on the internet and social media. While legal action is being taken against various identitarian groups, the spread of identitarian ideology on social media and its wider penetration in the public sphere are increasingly apparent but remain difficult to quantify. Identitarian influencers such as Thaïs d'Escufon, former spokesperson for the Génération Identitaire (Generation Identitarian) movement, have amassed a considerable following on social media platforms (from TikTok to Instagram) and have made themselves known to a wider public by taking part in popular television programmes such as *Touche pas à mon poste!* on C8.

108 INA, December 2020, [AJ+ derrière la modernité, le média d'influence du Qatar](#)

109 Le Point, 16 June 2022, [boîte à idées contre l'abstention des jeunes](#)

110 ISD, February 2022, [La conquête numérique des identitaires: un effort de mobilisation multi-plateformes](#)

An increased online presence supported by a multi-channel communication strategy

During the period of the study, ISD observed an increase in the activity of identitarian figures online, particularly on Twitter and Instagram. Between 15 May and 15 November 2021,

the volume of tweets produced by the actors studied increased by more than 15% over the previous six months.

On Instagram, the number of posts by identitarians increased by 50% in September over previous months.

This increased activity came on the background of the new political and electoral year, but was also fuelled by rumours that Éric Zemmour would be standing as a candidate in the presidential election.

On Instagram, the number of posts by identitarians increased by 50% in September over previous months.

Over 50% of the 23 identitarian Telegram channels studied promoted Zemmour's campaign.

On Telegram in particular, identitarian channels actively promoted Zemmour's campaign and led coordinated actions designed to amplify his messages and spread identitarian ideas in the public sphere. Over 50% of the 23 identitarian Telegram channels studied promoted

Zemmour's campaign. Identitarian channels were used to encourage their subscribers to actively participate in political rallies or opinion polls to increase the visibility of Zemmour's candidacy.

Diversifying content and audiences in order to generate conflict

These identitarian actors addressed a range of topics, but always from an 'anti' stance and in pursuit of conflict. Opposition to immigration, Islam and multiculturalism were the dominant themes of the content samples analysed on Facebook and Instagram, and among the most prevalent on Twitter. Attacks on political opponents (from various parties, including LREM), LFI and LR emerged as another major theme across all of the platforms studied, accounting for between 8% and 26% of the content analysed.

ISD also identified some femonationalist content,¹¹¹ highlighting the key role played by female influencers and groups in spreading identitarian ideas on social media. The presence of this content forms part of an ideological strategy of co-opting feminist discourse to spread anti-immigration and anti-Islam ideas and to attract female followers in order to expand the movement's audience and activist base. It does however clash with the anti-woke or

¹¹¹ The term femonationalism was originally proposed by academic Sara R. Farris, who defines it as "the attempts by European right-wing parties, among others, to co-opt feminist ideals into anti-immigrant and anti-Islam campaigns" ("Femonationalism and the 'Regular' Army of Labor Called Migrant Women", *History of the Present* Vol. 2, no. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 184-199).

manosphere rhetoric¹¹² that is also sometimes part of identitarian discourse, highlighting the tensions over gender issues within the movement.

Across the four online platforms studied, examples of opposition to COVID restrictions, anti-vaxx attitudes and conspiratorial ideas about the handling of the pandemic were identified, underlining the convergence between the identitarian movement and COVID-19 disinformation. This dynamic continued to be observed throughout much of the campaign, until the focus of political debate switched to the war in Ukraine.

Identitarians monopolise engagement and have little competition on social media

On Facebook and Instagram, a limited number of pages and accounts (6 and 11 respectively), generated over 85% of all interactions (reactions, shares and comments) during the study period, highlighting the decisive influence of a small number of entities and individuals playing the role of identitarian ‘super-spreaders’ on these platforms.

On Facebook and Instagram, a limited number of pages and accounts (6 and 11 respectively), generated over 85% of all interactions (reactions, shares and comments) during the study period.

Finally, the study highlighted the low level of reciprocal activity (counter-discourse) fuelled by identitarian posts. This suggests an echo chamber effect, potentially amplified by the recommendation systems used by the online platforms. This imbalance seems paradoxical given that the cultivation of identitarians online is fuelled

by rhetoric with an openly polarising objective. However, it should be understood in the context of the imbalance between the mobilisation and visibility of Zemmour’s supporters online, which may have given the impression of a mass support movement for his candidacy, and his party’s poor results at the ballot box.

¹¹² The manosphere is a group of movements united by their expression of overt or extreme misogyny. They include the Incel, Men Go Their Own Way (MGTOW) and Men's Rights Activists (MRA) movements.

B. The strategy used by Éric Zemmour's supporters

Éric Zemmour has been a prominent figure in the media for a number of years. On social media, however, he has developed a considerable presence and influence over the last twelve months – so much so that the French and even international press has described this rise in visibility as the “Zemmour phenomenon”.¹¹³

According to the France Inter and Visibrain social media survey of the 2022 presidential candidates, in December 2021 Éric Zemmour was the most mentioned candidate in comments on five online platforms – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok – ahead of President Macron. Over 5.3 million posts referring to Éric Zemmour were published on these platforms in one month, and 34% of posts about the presidential elections mentioned him.

Éric Zemmour was supported by a highly organised network of online activists. On social media, Visibrain found that his supporters rallied around numerous hashtags, the most used being #Zemmour2022, #ZemmourPresident and #ZemmourPourTous (“#ZemmourForAll”). In late December, Visibrain also noted the rise of #Zozz. This activity by supporters accounted for 13% of posts referring to Éric Zemmour.

A study published in April 2022 by Hope Not Hate, a British antifascist and antiracist organisation, also analysed Éric Zemmour’s rise on social media. This report examined his presence on four social media platforms – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram – and described the tactics used by Éric Zemmour to expand his reach and amplify his message more successfully than his rivals. It noted that:

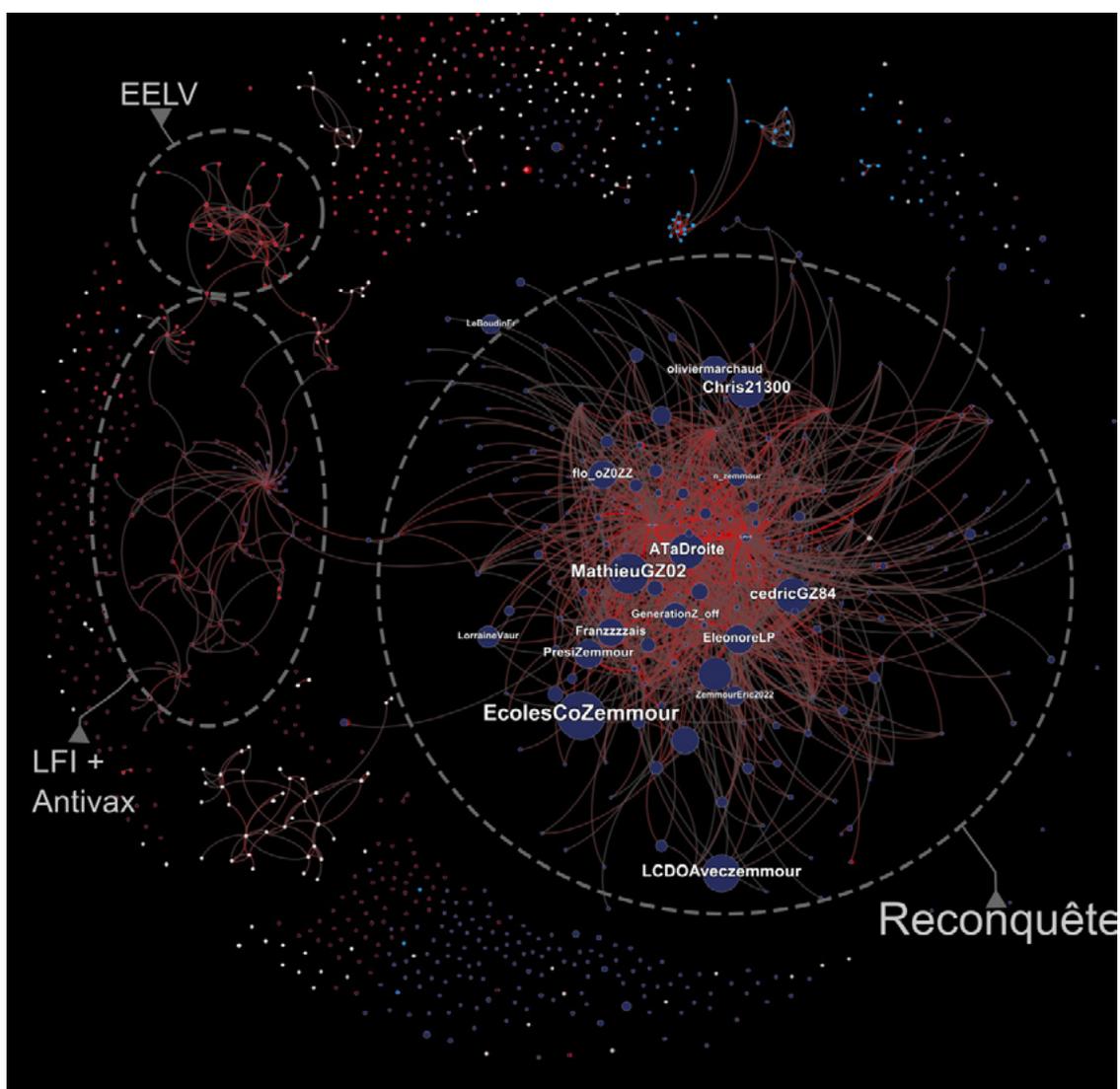
- ▶ Éric Zemmour launched his official YouTube channel in April 2021. Although the channel was barely a year old and had published just over 100 videos, it had accumulated 448,000 subscribers, almost double that of Emmanuel Macron, and almost eight times more than Marine Le Pen;
- ▶ according to Hope Not Hate’s analysis of 100 French far-right Telegram channels, Éric Zemmour was also much more successful than Le Pen in sharing his Twitter and YouTube content on Telegram;
- ▶ on Facebook, Éric Zemmour’s interaction rate with followers was significantly higher than that of his opponents, and he published the highest number of posts during the period of the study, despite having fewer followers than Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron;
- ▶ and finally, on YouTube, Éric Zemmour had more views and subscribers than Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron, clocking up over 50 million views across fewer videos than the other two candidates.

113 L'Express, 13 October 2021, “Le nouveau Trump français: le phénomène Eric Zemmour observé de l'étranger”.

Examples of coordinated behaviour

In the context of its observations of the French presidential and legislative elections, ISD identified inauthentic behaviour in the sharing of 12 petitions created by the group “Les amis d’Éric Zemmour” on Twitter between 26 January 2021 and 5 June 2022. Only two of these petitions openly stated an affiliation with Éric Zemmour’s campaign.

A high level of coordination was also observed in the run-up to the elections in relation to five petitions created in March/April. On 24 April, for example, on the night of the second round, the petition calling for a “right-wing alliance” to contest the legislative elections was shared in 610 original posts (excluding retweets), with 394 posts (65%) using exactly the same wording. In his book *Toxic Data: comment les réseaux sociaux manipulent nos opinions*, David Chavalarias shows that, across all the political communities, the community supporting Éric Zemmour was the one that most frequently used astroturfing techniques.



Astroturfing practices in 2022 (examples of accounts that repost the same message at the same time). Illustration taken from David Chavalarias' book *Toxic Data*.¹¹⁴

114 David Chavalarias, 2022. *Toxic Data: Comment les réseaux sociaux manipulent nos opinions*, Flammarion. Data source: CNRS, Institut des Systèmes Complexes de Paris Île-de-France, Politoscope project, Multivac platform.

The image above shows the mapping of political community accounts that took part in astroturfing campaigns in 2020-2021, consisting of amplifying a message by having several people post it as if it were original content each time. The size of the nodes is proportional to the number of campaigns in which the corresponding account took part. It shows that Zemmour's online campaign made extensive use of astroturfing, with a dense network of astroturfers, some of whom were involved in over 1300 campaigns over 2020-2021. This may have contributed to the sudden increase in his profile in late 2021 (Chapter 10 of Toxic Data).

A very similar sharing pattern was observed across all of the petitions, with 4 of the 12 petitions initially shared by Samuel Lafont, the digital strategy director for Zemmour's campaign (45,700 followers on Twitter). ISD's analysis found that the accounts supporting these operations were highly concentrated, i.e. that a very small number of accounts were responsible for the majority of tweets containing at least one petition. Of 27,876 original messages (for 11 of the 12 petitions analysed, i.e. those around the presidential election between January and April), 21.5% of them (5,992) were sent from just four accounts (including Samuel Lafont's account, and @ZemmourEricFR - an account affiliated to Reconquête).

Of 27,876 original messages (for 11 of the 12 petitions analysed, i.e. those around the presidential election between January and April), 21.5% of them (5,992) were sent from just four accounts

The final petition, also amplified by coordinated inauthentic behaviour, was more recent and rooted in the context of the events surrounding the UEFA Champions League final at the Stade de France in Paris.

ISD also uncovered signs of coordinating inauthentic behaviour in the sharing pattern of these petitions on Facebook, demonstrating the cross-platform nature of the strategy for sharing these petitions.

The contribution of the media to the Zemmour phenomenon

The traditional media indirectly contributed to amplifying Zemmour's candidacy by giving him more exposure than allowed by the Arcom rules on speaking time in the media. According to the regulator's latest report, Zemmour had outsized exposure compared to the other candidates on CNews, RTL, Sud Radio, BFMTV, LCI and BFM Business, but also on France Inter, France 5 and Radio Classique¹¹⁵.

On 8 February 2022, Arcom also took the TV channel C8 to task after finding that the channel had given Reconquête more outsized exposure than any other channel. Presenter Cyril Hanouna had announced that he wanted to "cover the whole spectrum of what is on offer to the French people (...) and give everyone a say" during the campaign.¹¹⁶ In a recent study of his television programmes, Claire Sécaïl, an associate researcher at the CNRS's Centre de Recherche sur les Liens Sociaux (Centre for Research into Social Ties, CERLIS) found that Hanouna had indeed embraced the electoral debate, devoting 17% of his programmes to it.

¹¹⁵ Arcom, 31 March 2022, "Respect du principe d'équité des temps de parole et d'antenne pour la période du 1er janvier au 7 mars 2022: interventions".

¹¹⁶ Le un hebdo, 6 April 2022, "Le poison de l'extrême droite".

The study also found that Hanouna had “importantly imposed a reductive view of the options available to voters at an early stage by giving outsized coverage to the far-right candidates compared to an incumbent president who was leading in the polls.” According to the study, “from September to December 2021, this political far right (Reconquête, Rassemblement National, Les Patriotes and Debout la France) took up 52.9% of the political airtime on *Touche pas à mon poste* (TPMP, Hanouna’s main TV show), primarily benefiting Éric Zemmour, who alone accounted for 44.7% of the programme’s political airtime, ahead of Emmanuel Macron (22.5%) and Marine Le Pen (7.5%), with the other political groups scrapping for the remaining crumbs.”¹¹⁷

A winning strategy on social media

Éric Zemmour’s popularity with the media was partly due to his ability to generate controversy and produce polarising content, which was then amplified by social media algorithms. Éric Zemmour claimed the increase in his online presence was the result of organic growth among his followers and the popularity of his messaging. However, his supporters used several techniques to expand their presence on social media, generally by breaking or circumventing the rules of these platforms. [An investigation by *France Inter*](#) for example, found that Zemmour’s activists used astroturfing techniques to increase his visibility. This work confirms the [revelations](#) from the newspaper *Le Monde* in early February about the practices used by Zemmour’s activists to artificially inflate their candidate’s presence on Twitter. In an interview with AFP, the campaign’s digital manager, Samuel Lafont, denied using bots and said he “did everything manually”.

The social media team’s strategy was effective in creating an impression of widespread support that did not necessarily reflect the reality on the ground. As a result, the campaign not only effectively increased the size of Zemmour’s audience, but also contributed to the spread of far-right ideas in France.

With 7% of votes in the presidential election (4th position) and 4% in the legislative elections at the national level but 23% in Zemmour’s constituency (3rd position), Reconquête won far less than the 20% vote share that was predicted by its leader and forecast for a time by the media. However, this mobilisation strategy, which benefited greatly from the synergy between social media and CNews, has proven to be a winning strategy in the medium to long term. Despite being created just six months before the presidential election, the new party achieved a better result than the two main traditional parties (the PS and LR) combined, while managing to rally support in a similar political niche to the one already well established by the RN.

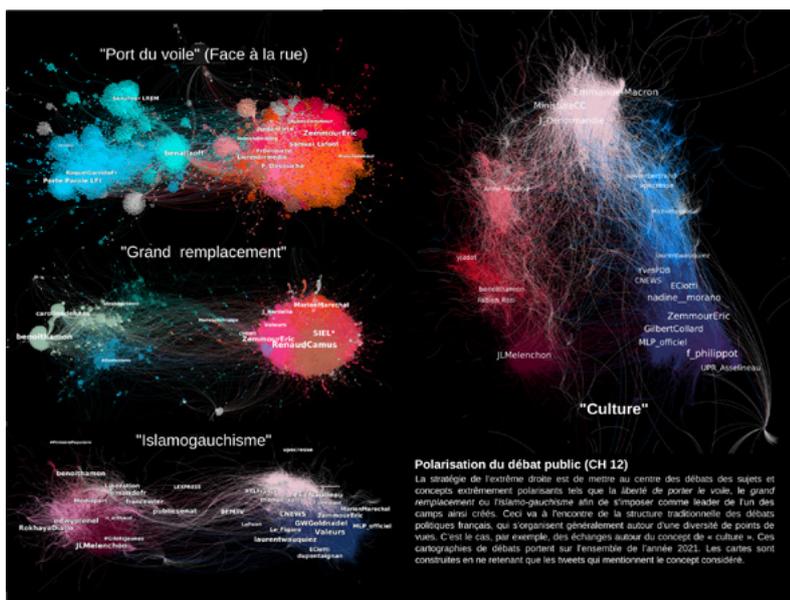
117 Le un hebdo, 06/04/2022, «Le poison de l’extrême droite»

C. The strong mobilisation of far-right activist accounts and their responsibility for normalising polarising rhetoric

A recent [study](#) by LICRA and HateAid analysed the toxicity of comments and posts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in the run-up to the 2022 French elections, between January 2020 and October 2021.¹¹⁸ The study was based on the *Perspective API tool*,¹¹⁹ which defines toxicity as “a rude, disrespectful or unreasonable comment that is likely to make someone leave a discussion.”

This study identified 50 representative accounts of political parties, associated accounts and individuals endorsing these parties and analysed all of their posts and comments.

It found that [across all of the social networks analysed](#), RN and other far-right accounts generated the most toxic content. On Facebook, pages associated with RN accounted for 45.1% of highly toxic posts, i.e. those containing serious insults, threats and/or hate speech, despite making up just 12.3% of the total number of posts analysed.¹²⁰ A significant proportion of hateful posts also came from accounts associated with the Gilets Jaunes (5.97% of the most toxic content, but only 2.52% of all posts).



Taken from *Toxic Data* by David Chavalarias, Institut des Systèmes Complexes (top left: “Islamic veil” (Face à la rue); middle left: “Great Replacement”; bottom left: “Islamogauchisme”; right: “Culture”)

The topic of immigration galvanises audiences

Most of the popular topics on the three platforms studied by the HateAid/LICRA study were low in toxicity, with the exception of immigration. This topic clearly stood out as increasing both toxicity and engagement, with the average number of engagements per post or tweet on immigration-related content three times higher than on economic issues.

These findings reflect the mapping by the Institut des Systèmes Complexes of the far right’s social media strategy, which consists of focusing debate on highly polarising subjects and concepts, such as the freedom to wear the veil, the ‘Great Replacement’ and ‘Islamogauchisme’, in order to lead the battle for visibility.

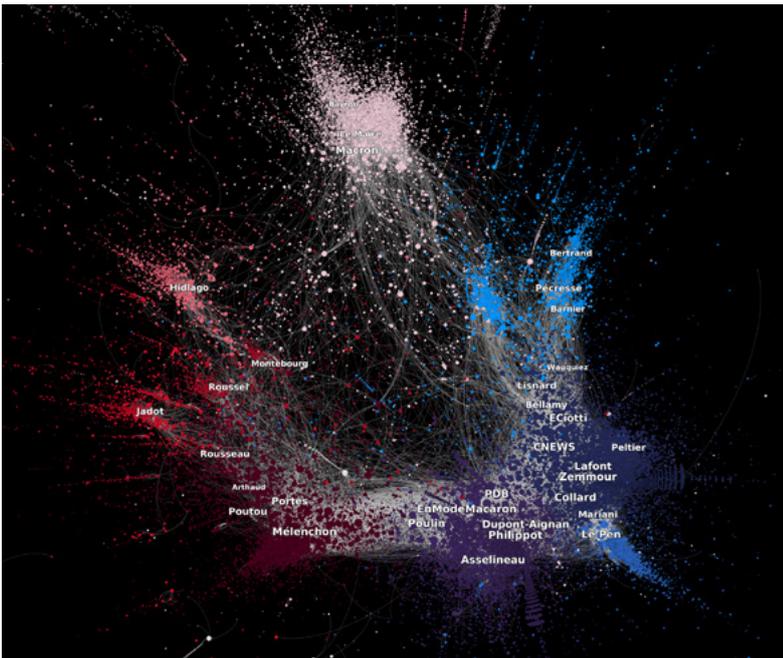
118 LICRA and HateAid, 2022, “Months before the election, Facebook gives a free pass to far-right hate”.

119 See the methodology at: <https://www.perspectiveapi.com>

120 France 24, 13 April 2022, “Les partisans de l’extrême droite sont de loin les plus violents”.

Online platforms give visibility to fringe views and facilitate engagement with them

The visibility of fringe views online raises questions about the type of content highlighted by the algorithmic recommendations used by social media platforms.¹²¹ This is due in particular to online engagement by those with fringe views, who are heavier users of online platforms. In relation to comments, for example, the HateAid and LICRA study discussed above found that **those most radically committed to fringe views were also the most active, with 49.5% of the Facebook comments they analysed coming from accounts linked to the far right.**



Taken from Toxic Data, published by David Chavalarias, Institut des Systèmes Complexes

17.03% were linked to LFI and 14.97% came from accounts associated with LREM.

On both Facebook and Twitter, toxic content also systematically generated more engagement than more moderate rhetoric and nuanced debate. These observations are consistent with the research literature.¹²² Online platform algorithms, which define the success of a post based on the engagement it generates, thus tend to promote this type of content.

These observations are also illustrated in the work of David Chavalarias and the Politoscope.

The figure above shows mapping of the political Twittersphere from autumn 2021 to early 2022 (1 October 2021 – 16 January 2022). The communities formed around Florian Philippot (29.39%) and Éric Zemmour (20.15%) dominated the landscape. These two far-right communities were almost non-existent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many LR supporters migrated to Zemmour's community, along with some RN supporters. Macron's community was isolated, and the RN community narrow. The left-wing communities struggled to stay afloat (Chapter 12, Toxic Data).

121 See Matthew Hindman, Nathaniel Lubin and Trevor David, The Atlantic, 10 February 2022, "Facebook Has a Superuser-Supremacy Problem".

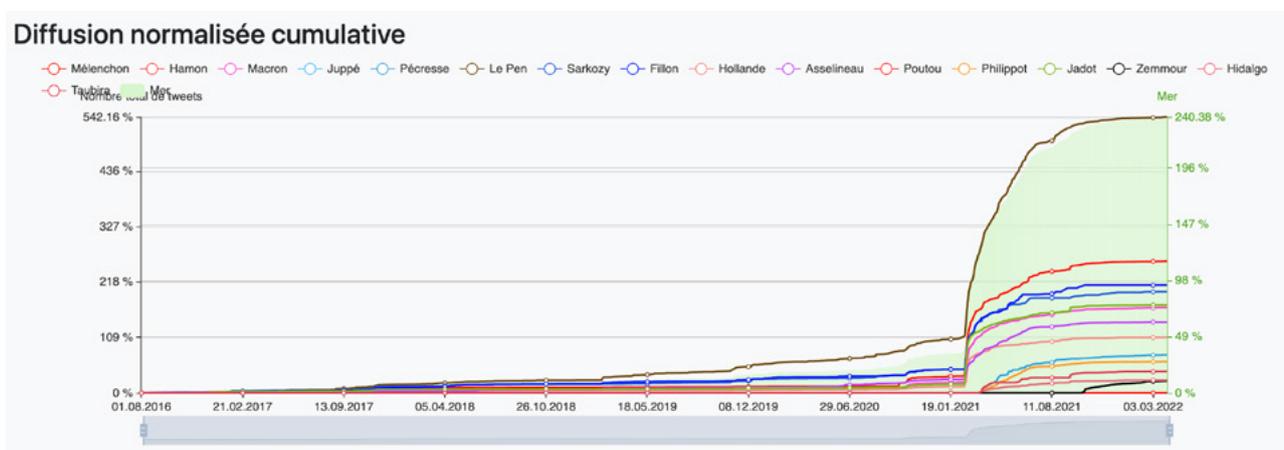
122 Luke Munn, 30/07/2020, *Angry by design: toxic communication and technical architecture*

Sapping the debate by putting divisive concepts on the agenda in order to increase visibility

The work of the Institut des Systèmes Complexes, via its Twittersphere analysis tool, the [Politoscope](#), shows the dominant influence of politicians in increasing the visibility of conspiratorial, xenophobic and polarising terms, and putting them on the agenda.

For example, an analysis of the concepts of ‘Islamism’, ‘Great Replacement’ and ‘merdias’ or ‘journalopes’ (offensive derogatory slang for media and journalists), which have long been confined to the fringes of the debate, demonstrates the strong involvement and growing mobilisation of extreme right-wing figures on social media. These tactics may be facilitated by the business model of the online platforms which rewards engagement, and can be successful, especially when they are picked up by the traditional media or sometimes by opposition figures who further increase their visibility and legitimacy.

While the concept of ‘Islamism’ dates back some 15 years, a qualitative analysis based on data from the [Politoscope](#)¹²³ reveals that, between 2017 and 2020, this pejorative expression was mostly used by supporters of the far right to discredit opponents on the left, primarily LFI activists, and to convince the public of the existence of internal enemies, allied with the forces of radical Islam. Until late 2020, the far right had failed to impose this collective belief of an ‘Islamist’ enemy within, but the term began to gain popularity when it was used by members of the government.

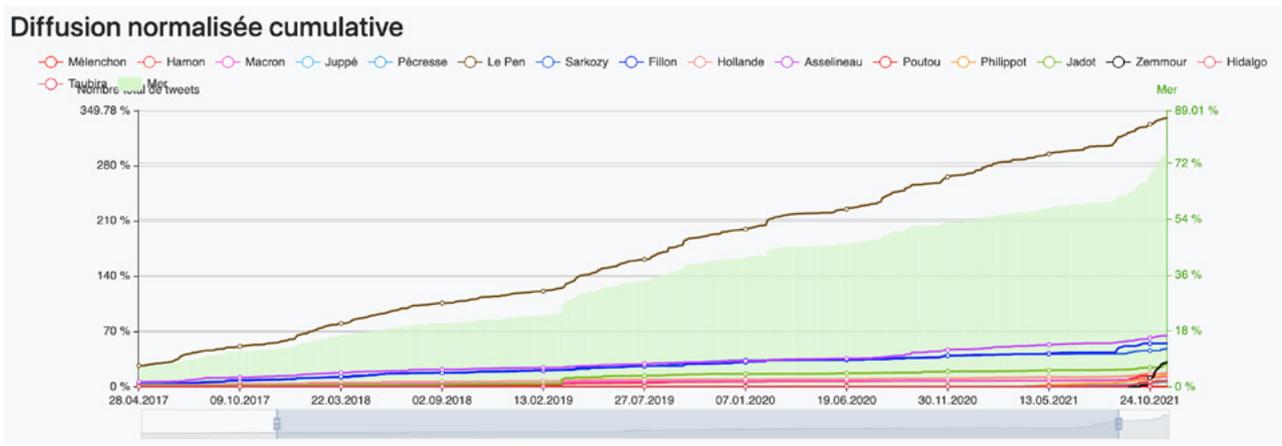


Cumulative distribution showing activist tweets including the term ‘Islamism’ between 1 August 2016 and 3 January 2022. Figure taken from the [Politoscope](#).¹²⁴

123 David Chavalarias, 21 February 2021, “‘Islamogauchisme’: le piège de l’alt right se referme sur la Macronie”, or see Chapter 13 of Toxic Data.

124 David Chavalarias, 2022. Toxic Data: Comment les réseaux manipulent nos opinions, Flammarion. Data source: CNRS, [Institut des Systèmes Complexes de Paris Île-de-France](#), [Politoscope project](#), [Multivac platform](#).

Similarly, the ‘Great Replacement’ theory,¹²⁵ initially proposed in 2011 by far-right writer Renaud Camus, has long remained a relatively fringe idea. It was thrust into the spotlight in March 2019 with the attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, when a far-right terrorist who shot dead 51 people at two mosques in the city justified his actions with a lengthy online manifesto bearing the name of this theory. It then circulated quietly before being endorsed as a campaign theme by Éric Zemmour, whose increasing mentions of it are shown in the graph below.



Cumulative distribution showing activist tweets including the term ‘Great Replacement’ between 1 August 2016 and 3 January 2022. Figure taken from the Politoscope.¹²⁶

The derogatory terms ‘merdia’ and ‘journalopes’ are used by disinformation actors to discredit ‘mainstream’ media outlets that do not support their ideas. Public figures subject to legal proceedings have also used these terms in order to deflect attention from their trials by claiming victimisation.



Cumulative distribution showing activist tweets including the terms ‘merdias’ or ‘journalope’ between 1 August 2016 and 3 January 2022. Figure taken from the Politoscope.¹²⁷

The Politoscope analyses found that in the run-up to the first round of the presidential election, and from the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Reconquête and Patriotes/Debout La France communities shifted into high gear on this theme, with the terms mentioned as many times in a few weeks as in the

125 This theory claims the French people are being replaced by a foreign, Muslim population in a process that will result in a demographic decline in the West, with a kind of ‘white genocide’, and the gradual eradication of Western culture. The conspiratorial version of the theory even suggests that globalised elites are encouraging an Arab-Muslim ‘colonisation’ of Europe in order to provide themselves with cheap labour.

126 Chavalarias, Ibid.

The Politoscope analyses found that in the run-up to the first round of the presidential election, and from the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Reconquête and Patriotes/Debout La France communities shifted into high gear on this theme, with the terms mentioned as many times in a few weeks as in the preceding five years, in a bid to challenge both media coverage of the Russian invasion and the idea that Zemmour's campaign was running out of steam.

D. Does social media have a distorting effect?

These strategies provide an interesting case study for investigating the impact of social media on voting attitudes. The advent of social media has raised numerous questions about its impact on democracies, including in relation to political polarisation, trust in institutions, the rise of populism and the creation of filter bubbles or echo chambers. The research literature offers a mixed picture of these effects. For example, a literature review from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, [*Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review*](#), inds conflicting results regarding the effects of social media on echo chambers and filter bubble, drawing from studies analysing the impact of social media on these phenomena.

One unresolved question is the extent to which the circulation of messages online has an impact offline, particularly in an electoral context. The French election campaign, and especially Éric Zemmour's campaign, provide an interesting example. While the polls put Zemmour on track to win 14.5% of the vote between 11 and 14 February 2022¹²⁸, 12.5% between 4 and 7 March¹²⁹, and 9.5% between 1 and 4 April¹³⁰ he ultimately did less well than predicted, receiving 7.07% of the vote in the first round of the election.

This was despite the fact that, as outlined above, during the campaign the communities supporting Zemmour were the most active. This may corroborate the idea of social media having a distorting effect, as analysed by sociologist Christopher A. Bail, director of the Polarization Lab at Duke University.¹³¹ Bail has observed that only the most engaged citizens participate online, contributing to an amplified image of American polarisation on social media.

In France, the mobilisation by Zemmour's supporters was impressive: the party attracted media and public attention in record time and made a mark on the political landscape. It is questionable, however, whether its strategy had the desired effect, as its attempts to capture the online conversational agenda do not appear to have changed opinions. Several limitations should however be highlighted: first, opinion polls are obviously not always accurate, and also failed to accurately predict the vote share won by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Valérie Pécresse; second, it is difficult to estimate the possible vote transfers that may have taken place between Zemmour and Marine Le Pen at the time of the vote; and third, the war in Ukraine had a negative impact on Zemmour's campaign, as shown by his drop in the polls in March 2022.

128 Harris Interactive, 2022, Baromètre d'intentions de vote pour l'élection présidentielle de 2022, vague 33

129 Harris Interactive, 2022, Baromètre d'intentions de vote pour l'élection présidentielle de 2022, vague 36

130 Harris Interactive, 2022, Baromètre d'intentions de vote pour l'élection présidentielle de 2022, vague 40

131 Chris Bail, 2021, *Breaking the Social Media Prism*

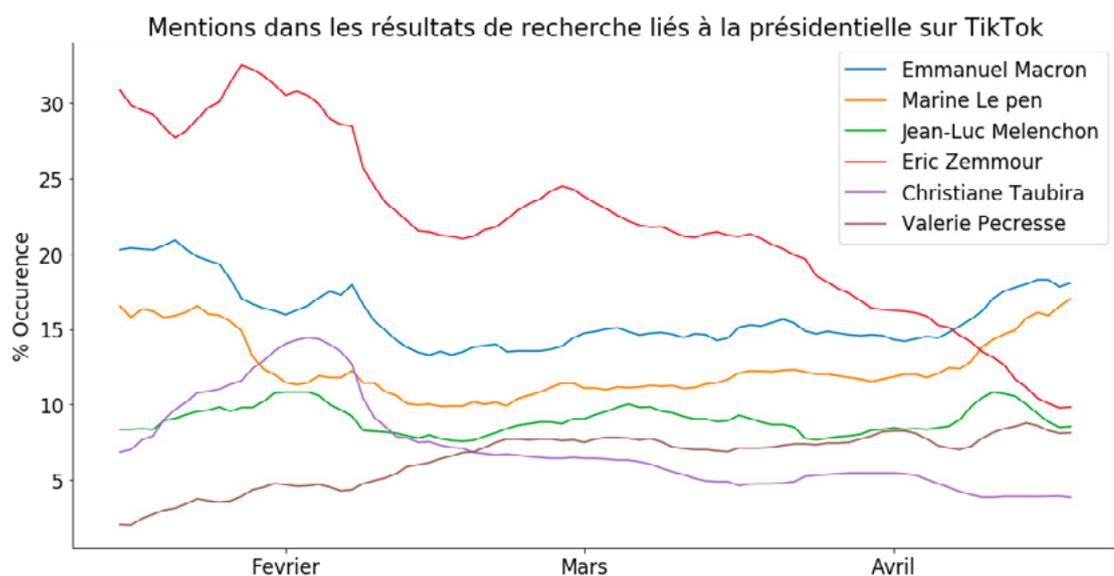
5. Differences in the representation of candidates in online platform search results

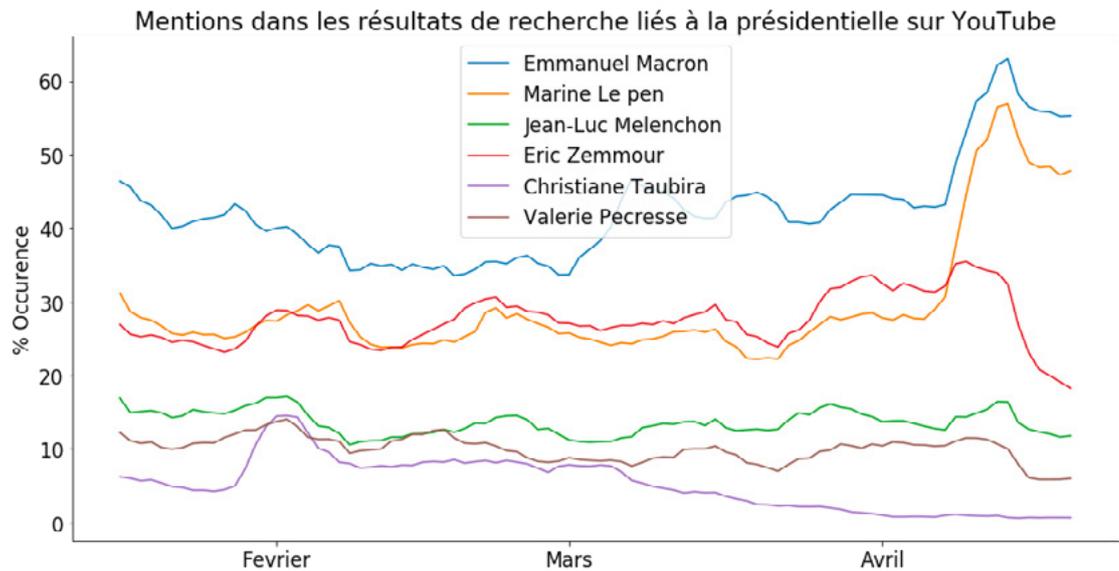
This section is based on the work of Tracking Exposed, a European NGO that specialises in analysing algorithms, in particular social media recommendation systems. The team used its [open-source infrastructure](#) to quantitatively analyse the content recommended by the YouTube and TikTok search algorithms on campaign-related topics in order to detect possible bias. Further methodological details regarding the graphs and estimated views below can be found in [the report](#) by Tracking Exposed.

Search algorithms play an important role in the discovery of content on social media, and the YouTube search algorithm in particular is one of the most used on the web. The search function is the only interface that allows a user to access content on a specific topic.

As with recommendation algorithms, there is no single objective benchmark for ranking search results. Semantic similarity is of course a factor, but so is the likelihood that the video will generate engagement. The online platform's interests are built into the design of the algorithm, which may result in certain content being favoured over others.

To measure the visibility of the various candidates, Tracking Exposed tested these algorithms on a daily basis and recorded the results of ten generic searches (including “élections présidentielles”, “programmes présidentielles” and “candidats 2022”), during the four months prior to the April election. It then counted the number of times the different candidates were mentioned in the videos, resulting in the graphs shown below.





The first notable trend is that [Éric Zemmour](#) also achieved high visibility in the recommendation algorithms, in particular on TikTok, where he monopolised up to 30% of search results at the beginning of the campaign. Zemmour’s controversial comments tended to generate higher engagement, and thus be favoured by the algorithm. However, this trend cannot solely be explained by this known algorithmic amplification effect.

There is a feedback loop between social media and the rest of the media ecosystem, which mutually feed off one another, and Zemmour’s outsized representation is consistent with [Arcom's observations](#) regarding his media coverage on television and radio.¹³² YouTube in particular chose to highlight traditional media sources on political topics, and these were largely responsible for the controversial figure’s high visibility on the platform.

The controversial candidate’s campaign team also set up the “Zemmour pour tous” website to enable internet users to find his videos on specific subjects. These seemingly innocuous searches [were however found to have shaped the video suggestions](#) presented to users on YouTube.¹³³

The search results on TikTok were much more volatile, as shown by the examples of Christiane Taubira and [Éric Zemmour](#), whose prominence in the search results collapsed after a strong start to the campaign. This is consistent with the generic behaviour of the platform, where the popularity of topics and creators is often meteoric and short-lived.

The other key finding from this analysis is that TikTok, which has long denied hosting political content, is without doubt a place of expression and debate during elections. An analysis limited to a dozen hashtags directly related to the 2022 presidential campaign found that they had over a billion views between them, which represents a lower limit of total views of campaign-related content on the platform.

132 Arcom, 31 March 2022, “Respect du principe d’équité des temps de parole et d’antenne”.

133 BFMTV, 16 December 2021, ““Zemmour pour tous” : le moteur de recherche d’Éric Zemmour façonne aussi votre compte Youtube”.

A qualitative analysis of the data provides further insight into the interpretation of these raw trends. While Macron appears to have dominated the campaign on YouTube, his strong presence in these search results must be viewed in context: most of the content about him referred to his role as president rather than as a candidate, notably in content about the war in Ukraine, and the videos about him more directly related to the campaign were often critical of his record.

Conversely, although Jean-Luc Mélenchon was less often included in the search results, the far-left candidate appeared to have better control over his image in these spaces, with several of the most viewed videos that included “Mélenchon” in their title posted by his official channel. Among the other candidates, only Zemmour’s channel managed to do the same.

6. Political ads more or less officially related to candidates

The following section is based on data collected by Check First and the 22vlalapub tool from the Meta Ad Library API. A more comprehensive study including data from Google and Snapchat is forthcoming.

22vlalapub is a tool for tracking ads on Meta for the candidates standing in the 2022 French presidential election. These consisted of ads published from candidates' personal accounts or those of their parties and ads including the candidate's surname or the name of their party. A list of keywords associated with recurring campaign themes was also analysed. The analysis covered the period from 28 February 2022 to 6 May 2022.¹³⁴

As a reminder, in France, article L52-1 of the French Electoral Code states that “during the six months prior to the first day of the month of an election and until the date on which this election is held, the use for electioneering purposes of any commercial advertising in the press or using any means of audiovisual communication is prohibited.”

Meta defines political ads on the basis of four criteria¹³⁵ :

- ▶ “made by, on behalf of or about a candidate for public office, a political figure, a political party, a political action committee or advocates for the outcome of an election to public office; or
- ▶ about any election, referendum or ballot initiative, including ‘go out and vote’ or election campaigns; or
- ▶ about social issues in any place where the ad is being published; or
- ▶ regulated as political advertising.”

Meta distinguishes between the funders and publishers of an ad campaign: funders are the entities billed by Meta for the campaign, while publishers are the pages from which the ad campaign is run.

134 Data collection was not possible on the day of 30 March 2022 and this date is not represented in the study.

135 Meta Business Help Center, “About ads about social issues, elections or politics”.

A. Online advertising and compliance with the law: campaigns that raise questions



Several parties ran or funded ads that raised questions about compliance with the ban on political advertising covering the six months prior to the campaign, and the tightening of the ban during the reserve period.

Zemmour’s party, Reconquête, began running political ads on 12 March 2022. These ads raise questions as they did not directly promote their candidate, but rather invited people to join the party, claiming that “100,000 French people have already joined Reconquête. Join the party.”

During the period from 17 to 22 March, the Reconquête Facebook page was the biggest publisher of sponsored political content on Meta associated with Zemmour’s candidacy. The first ad campaign ended on 24 March, and resumed a week later using the same narrative. It ran 14 ads, with this number gradually decreasing until the campaign ended on 8 April, two days before the first round – and the beginning of the reserve period.

Reconquête was asked about these ad campaigns back in December 2021, but in an interview with *France Inter*¹³⁶, Christophe Pichon and

Christian Naux, lawyers specialising in electoral law from the Cornet-Vincent-Segurel law firm, argued that the French Electoral Code is specific to ads used for electioneering purposes. Pichon argued that “Whereas here, it’s talking about joining the party, so it’s not electioneering but promoting the party. [...] We’re not saying ‘vote for Éric Zemmour, but join the party’.”



In relation to RN, meanwhile, on 1 March, when 22v1alalapub was launched, four adverts were active on the party’s page. The campaign stopped on 10 April, the date of the first round of voting, and resumed the following day until the day prior to the second round of the presidential election. The narrative called for people to support the party by making a financial donation, stating that it is “tax deductible”.

LREM appeared as the funder of adverts on the page “La France aux urnes”, rather than as a publisher of political advertising. Several ad campaigns on this page encouraged people to go and vote, and in particular to vote by proxy if they were away from their polling station on

136 France Inter, 23 December 2021, “La diffusion de publicités sur Facebook par le parti d’Eric Zemmour est-elle autorisée?”

the day of the election. This approach raises questions given that individuals voting by proxy were more likely to be sympathetic to Emmanuel Macron’s platform.¹³⁷

The page “La France aux urnes” openly described itself as “run by La République En Marche! to promote voting in elections”. The data collected as of 9 May show that LREM spent over €200,000 on political ads between 6 February and 6 May 2022 and was the political party that spent the most on political ads on Meta during the study period.

B. A few examples of pages funding political ads

In this section we present a few of the pages funding political ads that drew Check First’s attention during this campaign.

Amplify en France

Amplify en France was one of the most intriguing ad publishers in this presidential campaign. The total amount of its expenses listed by Meta was €66,263, the largest total on Meta’s list between 1 March 2022 and the second round of the presidential election. The page was created on 29 March 2022 and presents itself as a current affairs website. However, the page’s Facebook profile links to a website with limited content, which appears to have been deactivated as of 2 June 2022.

The Amplify en France page featured 24 publications, 8 of which mentioned Marine Le Pen. These were the ones that gathered the most impressions (between 600-700,000 impressions per ad compared to an average of 40-45,000 impressions for the others). Its Facebook page regularly shared news articles and posts, several times a day, since its creation, but it last published a post on 25 April 2022.



Mondafrique

The advertiser Mondafrique, which presents itself as a geopolitical news website, funded 58 adverts during the presidential campaign, many of which featured content that was critical or even negative towards the incumbent president.



Ichthus

Ichthus presents itself as a Catholic organisation and promoted videos that were generally unfavourable to Macron and rehashed talking points used by Marine Le Pen or Éric Zemmour, without quoting them directly.

¹³⁷ Le Monde, 2 April 2022, “Sur Facebook, la République en marche et ses publicités un peu trop bien ciblées”.

Fondation du Pont-Neuf

The Fondation du Pont-Neuf describes itself as “a private research centre that seeks to further study and scientific contributions to various fields of government and political activity, inspired by conservative thinking”. The ads published on behalf of this advertiser were predominantly favourable to Éric Zemmour.

Affiches parisiennes

Les Affiches Parisiennes is a newspaper of record with a news section on its website. During the election campaign, most of the ads bought promoted articles quoting Emmanuel Macron, mostly in a favourable light.

C. The challenges with categorising political content

In the context of the most recent US elections, many studies have highlighted the problem of how political ads are handled by the various online platforms.¹³⁸ Due to these issues, some social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok and Twitch have chosen to ban political advertising and are sometimes accused of hiding behind this to ignore or deny the fact that sponsored content of a political nature continues to be published on their platforms without taking responsibility for it. Others, such as Meta, YouTube and Snapchat, continue to allow political ads but have had to change their policies on this type of content based on the context.

The criteria used by Meta to categorise content are not always clear. Sponsored content from certain media outlets (Libération and Mediapart) is for example almost always categorised as political, but this is not the case for others (Le Monde, Le Parisien, L'Obs and L'Express).

Mediapart regularly appeared among the biggest funders and publishers of political ads. Of all the ads listed in 22vlalapub.fr during the entire analysis period, Mediapart accounted for 14% of the content. The categorisation of political content is not solely an issue for the online platforms, since the Commission nationale de contrôle de la campagne électorale (National Commission for Oversight of the Electoral Campaign, CNCCEP) has flagged up Mediapart content that may be in breach of article L49 of the Electoral Code prohibiting political advertising.¹³⁹

To a lesser extent, Libération appeared to be one of the biggest publishers of political ads about the candidates, running 119 adverts (5% of the content observed), across all candidates and topics combined. The newspaper received similar treatment to Mediapart, with content categorised as political that was not always relevant to the current campaign.

The media were not the only organisations whose content raised questions. NGOs, humanitarian organisations and think tanks, for example, represented a significant share of the content categorised by Meta as political. Oxfam France published 214 political ads over the study period, ahead of the Institut Montaigne, a French think tank (147 ads). Other NGOs with content categorised as political were Greenpeace France (101 ads), Care (100), UNHCR France (95) and Amnesty International France (78).

138 NPR, 9 December 2021, “Researchers explain why they believe Facebook mishandles political ads”.

139 See the following tweet from the CNCCEP: <https://twitter.com/cnccep/status/1512831049751011336>

In 2020, a study by the CSA identified inconsistencies in Facebook's categorisation of political ads¹⁴⁰ and France's Ambassador for Digital Affairs developed an experimental tool to check whether online political ads complied with the law.¹⁴¹

The promotion of political ads online seems to be less of an issue in France probably due to the country's much more stringent regulations during election campaigns.¹⁴² But the lack of consistency in the definition and application of rules regarding political ads across the different platforms and French legislation, as well as the lack of visibility regarding how these are applied and overseen, needs to be addressed.

140 CSA, November 2020, Political Advertising on Social Media: study of the Facebook Ads Library for social, electoral and political content.

141 See the experimental tool developed by the French Ambassador for Digital Affairs's team:
<https://disinfo.quaidorsay.fr/political-ads/>

142 Le Monde, 6 November 2019, "Tout comprendre aux publicités politiques sur les réseaux sociaux".

Conclusion and recommendations

France's presidential and legislative elections provided fertile ground for the deployment of online influence strategies, both domestic and international, and for the massive spread of disinformation. Many problematic examples were observed in 2022, without having the expected impact. This report has tried to understand the reasons for this. In the first section we outlined our hypotheses as to why the French information ecosystem might have been relatively resistant in 2022: the war in Ukraine, institutional pressure, the French electoral system, the centralised nature of the media and action by research organisations may all have had an impact on online discussions about these elections.

Our findings in the second part of the report, however, point to troubling developments. The undermining of the legitimacy of opinion polls or, even more worryingly, the vote count, was supported by highly structured communities. These understand how to make themselves visible and attract new audiences through coordination and amplification strategies, and how to use polarising rhetoric to generate engagement. While in 2017 destabilisation came from foreign actors, in 2022 these strategies were internalised and operated by highly active domestic actors.

In some cases, the Watch Group's observations also raise questions about the effectiveness of the current regulations (and raise issues regarding the upcoming application of the DSA). This is notably the case in relation to the information ecosystem parallel to the traditional media, which consists of highly prolific and poorly regulated 'reinformation' websites and Telegram channels. Finally, it looked at problems with online political advertising, which point more broadly to the challenging but essential question of applying the regulations for ensuring electoral integrity to the digital space.

The context in which political information circulates is constantly changing. Influence and manipulation strategies are also set to change. The use of increasingly powerful text generation technologies, combined with fake accounts operated by bots, will make it more difficult to distinguish non-human accounts; the use of quizzes to help people decide which candidate to vote for,¹⁴³ and edit wars over Wikipedia pages, will also provide new opportunities for manipulation.

A great deal of caution is therefore required in the future. The fact that France was not seriously impacted in 2022 does not mean that the threat has disappeared, and the limited impact of the attempted manipulations in France should not mean that less attention can be paid to these issues, especially at a crucial time that is the implementation of the DSA. Governments and online platforms will need to take action in order to ensure this legislation is effectively applied.

143 See this Twitter thread on the quiz run by the Zemmour campaign – <https://twitter.com/MathisHammel/status/1512490147635474434> – and this article on the debate about the French app Elyze: https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2022/01/18/donnees-personnelles-biais-politiques-bugs-les-questions-que-pose-l-application-elyze-le-tinder-de-la-presidentiel-le_6110019_4408996.html

The Watch Group focused on the challenges posed by the online information ecosystem. We therefore conclude our report with recommendations for protecting future elections from potential forms of manipulation that might undermine voting integrity. Much has already been written about online regulation, with the recent report from the Bronner Commission, *Les Lumières à l'ère numérique*¹⁴⁴, setting out 30 recommendations for doing so. We will therefore present three ideas that we believe should be priorities in the light of the 2022 French elections.

These proposals are of a technical nature, designed to regulate an information space that is changing rapidly due to recent developments in information and communication technology. It is important to stress that these solutions will not resolve the political challenges that face Western democracies. These go beyond the internet and social media and require a profound overhaul of the arguments of the 'traditional' parties and engaging, new political ideas that respect the existing institutions.

1. Draw on the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act's transparency requirements regarding high-risk systems in order to audit online platforms' recommendation algorithms

This report has demonstrated the many problems associated with algorithmic amplification online. While media regulation makes it possible to ensure candidates are given relatively fair visibility during the election period, the situation is very different on social media, where they are by no means represented fairly (it would be unrealistic to try and achieve this).

Given the growing influence of online platforms on election campaigns, we must continue to demand greater transparency about their role in the circulation of campaign-related content. This is currently not sufficiently the case, as social media companies do not provide any data to measure the role of their algorithms in disseminating content.

The DSA states that "several stakeholders, in particular civil society and academics, pointed out the need for algorithmic accountability and transparency audits, especially with regard to how information is prioritized and targeted." The Act already requires platforms to evaluate the systemic risks that manipulation of their services may pose to electoral processes (article 26).

We want to emphasise the notion of accountability and stress the importance of regular audits, conducted by independent external bodies. In order to achieve this, we suggest building on the proposed requirements of the AI Act that apply to high-risk systems. These include, for example, having an algorithm quality management system, drawing up technical documentation, keeping records of changes made to the algorithm, and providing access to the tests carried out on the training data to ensure their quality. These algorithms must be subject to independent external audits based on this information.

144 Le rapport est disponible sur le lien suivant : <https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/283201.pdf>

2. Support the development of research capabilities to study private messaging groups and continue to demand better access to data

The last few years have seen the emergence of new online platforms that claim to support greater freedom of expression, including Odysee, Gab, Parler and [Gettr](#)¹⁴⁵. Instant messaging platforms that offer massive broadcasting functionality, such as Telegram, merit the attention of the research community, and pressure from regulators when such content is public.

We are seeing a trend for fringe communities to leave the major social networks and migrate to platforms that are less used by the general public, but on which they can communicate more freely. This migration is both positive and negative: positive because it takes problematic conversations away from spaces that are highly visible to individuals who are not members of these communities; but also negative, since it makes it more difficult to regulate content outside the large online platforms.

The circulation of problematic content on small, well-identified platforms makes it necessary to develop appropriate research capabilities and tools. France's Observatory for Online Hate Speech could dedicate one of its annual meetings to the question of sharing methodologies among civil society organisations. It might encourage a civil society organisation to produce a report of the existing methodologies, which should then be circulated within the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) in order to kickstart the discussions needed at the European level.

These actions must be accompanied by specific requests for access to data for research purposes. Work has begun in this area, for example on [defining a code of conduct](#) pour for regulating access to data in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).¹⁴⁶ Demands for access to data must continue in line with the [European Commission's proposed regulations on political advertising](#)¹⁴⁷. Among others, data concerning the visibility given to political ads should be made available, along with information about targeting (particularly since online platforms have committed to providing this information in the latest version of the [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#)).

145 ISD, 17 March 2022, "Gettr's Failure to Launch in France and Germany".

146 European Digital Media Observatory, 31 May 2022, Report of the European Digital Media Observatory's Working Group on Platform-to-Researcher Data Access.

147 See the Commission's proposals, currently being discussed by the Parliament, at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6118

3. Prepare for the implementation of articles 26 and 27 of the DSA by requiring online platforms to assess the risks their systems pose to society, and the effectiveness of measures taken to mitigate those risks

Articles 26 and 27 of the DSA require online platforms to assess the risks to society posed by their services, to take steps to mitigate those risks and to evaluate the effectiveness of such measures. This evaluation mechanism is essential for improving the consideration of the issues associated with the circulation of non-illegal content.

French law currently requires online platforms to provide an annual report setting out the actions they are taking to combat disinformation. We suggest that Arcom anticipates the introduction of the DSA by asking online platforms specific questions about how they are assessing, and addressing, the risks that their services may pose to society. The assessment of the effectiveness of the measures taken to mitigate these risks should be subject to audit by independent external bodies.

The risks to which online platforms should pay particular attention might be communicated to companies with the involvement of the academic sector. It would be the responsibility of the platforms to show that these risks, identified from the research literature, are unproven. To this end, and while respecting data confidentiality and user privacy, online platforms can and should provide researchers with data on the structure of networks and communications, so that these risks can also be assessed independently. Online platforms might also generate synthetic networks that can be accessed by the research community, developed by artificial intelligence on the basis of real data.

Glossary

Anti-system: We use this term to mean individuals, groups, political parties or narratives critical of the dominant political institutions of the existing system (political and social, but also health, financial, economic and capitalist institutions).

Astroturfing: Manual or algorithmic propaganda techniques used for promotional purposes, in either a commercial or political context, to increase the visibility of content or an idea, with the aim of passing off a coordinated strategy as spontaneous behaviour or popular opinion online.

Conspiracy theory: We use the definition proposed by US political scientist Joseph Uscinski, who defines a conspiracy theory as “an explanation of past, ongoing, or future events or circumstances that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons [...] acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good.”

Coordinated behaviour: A set of online entities (individual accounts, groups or pages) working together towards a shared goal or purpose that may be, but is not necessarily, managed by the same actor(s).

Coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB): A term used by Facebook to define groups of pages, groups or accounts collaborating in secret to mislead users about their identity or activities. According to the platform’s definition, the activity must involve a group of several affiliated social media entities (individual accounts, channels, groups or pages) that exhibit a set of inauthentic identity and behavioural characteristics, managed as a whole by an actor or set of actors.

Disinformation and misinformation: We define disinformation as creating or spreading false information with the intention of causing harm. Those who spread disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or societal motives. Misinformation is defined as unintentionally spreading of false information.

Far right: In this report we refer to the definitions previously established by Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde and British academic Elisabeth Carter, who define the far right as an ideology with several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, antidemocratic ideas, advocacy of a strong state, and authoritarianism.

Far left: There is no commonly accepted definition of the far left. Along with Mudde and political scientist Luke March, we define far-left ideology as advocating anticapitalist, antiimperialist, radically egalitarian and antifascist views, usually from an internationalist perspective.

Great Replacement: A theory conceptualised by Renaud Camus, notably in his 2011 book *Le Grand Remplacement*, according to which “one people – from the immigrant population of Africa and the Maghreb – will replace another, the native French population.”¹⁴⁸

148 Fondation Jean-Jaurès, “Le ‘grand remplacement’ est-il un concept complotiste?”.

Hate speech: the Council of Europe defines this as “all forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance”.

Inauthentic behaviour: A set of behaviours suggesting that an online entity may be operating under a false or misleading identity. This may include a mismatch between geographic location and subject matter; poor use of language (such as spelling and grammatical errors); little or no evidence of human activity in photos; profile photos or interactions; use of stock photos for profile photos; unexplained sudden dramatic changes in the volume of posts, subject matter or language, or both; and repetitive posting or sharing patterns. The signs used to detect possible inauthentic behaviour are constantly evolving based on the changing tactics of actors who use these approaches to deceive the online public.

Identitarian content: According to the definition proposed by Jean-Yves Camus, identitarian content disseminates one or more of the following themes: “the rejection of multicultural society; a sense of being part of an activist community; opposition to non-European immigration; ethnopluralism; a rejection of a citizenship-based form of nationalism in favour of one based on ‘physical homelands’; and attachment to an ethnic Europe and not to anti-European sovereigntism.”¹⁴⁹

Identitarian movement: ISD defines this as a pan-European ethno-nationalist movement that focuses on the preservation of European ethno-cultural identity by drawing inspiration from the New Right. This movement has historically consisted of various organisations, including Les Identitaires, Bloc Identitaire, Jeunesses identitaires, Une autre jeunesse and Génération identitaire.¹⁵⁰ The identitarian movement now consists of a broader constellation of groups, networks and individuals who “define identity at three levels: regional or local identity, French national identity and European civilisational identity, to which should be added the sense of belonging to a community of activists.”¹⁵¹

Polarising content: Content that has the intentional or unintentional effect of polarising attitudes or beliefs, which is the psychological phenomenon whereby a difference of opinion becomes more extreme as the opposing parties present evidence to support their respective points of view.

Recommendation algorithm: A computer program that suggests certain content online from among all possible content, often based on what it knows about the user.

Toxic content: The use of this term in the HateAid and LICRA study is based on the Perspective API tool¹⁵² which defines toxicity as “a rude, disrespectful or unreasonable comment that is likely to make someone leave a discussion.”

149 Fondation Jean-Jaurès, “Le mouvement identitaire ou la construction d’un mythe des origines européennes”.

150 Marion Jacquet-Vaillant, 7 May 2021, An Identitarian Europe? Successes and Limits of the Diffusion of the French Identitarian Movement.

151 Jean-Yves Camus, 20 October 2010, “L’idée identitaire va faire son chemin”, <https://www.iris-france.org/45118-lide-identitaire-va-faire-son-chemin/>

152 See the following link: <https://www.perspectiveapi.com>

