Disinformation on Donbas is only a Google autocomplete away

An investigation to demonstrate how French speaking Belgians were hinted at searching for dubious sources when looking up the word "Donbass" in the Google search bar.

CROSSOVER

CHECK FIRST

OpenFacto

apache
|inhoud heerst

Executive summary

Crossover found that Google autocomplete predictions displayed almost systematically the name of a Pro-Kremlin outlet when French speaking Belgians were looking up the word "Donbass" on Google Search. Other predictions for the same search term showed the names of known Pro-Kremlin individuals.

On 24 February, Vladimir Putin declared a "special military operation" in Ukraine. All eyes on Ukraine, Europe watched how Russia started to invade the country. New terms began to be pronounced by journalists, terms a lot of people have never heard of before: Khrakiv, Azov, denazify, Boutcha, Donbass...

What is the reflex when someone hears a word he doesn't know anything about? To Google it. According to Google Trends data, Belgian users' interest dramatically increased for the term "Donbass", causing Google searches for this word to skyrocket.
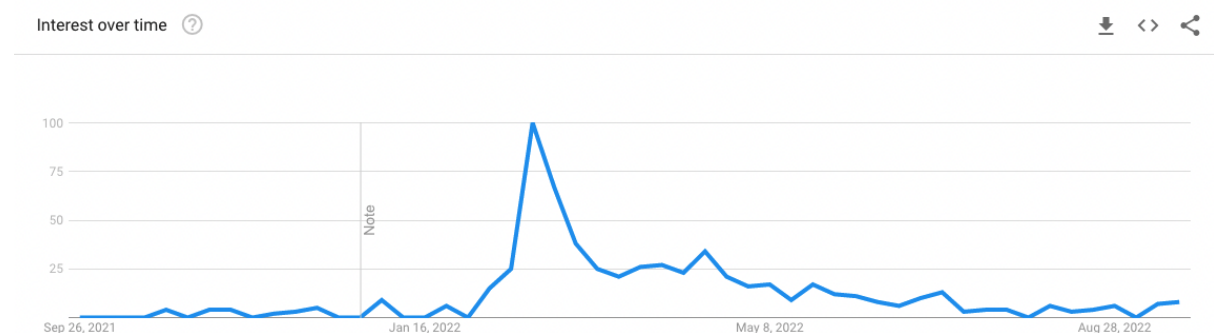
When a user types a word in the Google search box, the search prediction feature will try to guess what the user has in mind by predicting the rest of the query, using an algorithm. When typing, a prediction box shows up, populated with Google's guesses for possible search queries. This system is called Google Autocomplete Prediction.

Between February and August 2022, when Belgian users were querying information about Donbass, **Google Autocomplete Prediction would complete their search with dubious terms**.

Our research has proven that the search "Donbass"' was associated with "Insider", "Anne Laure Bonnel", "Insider Christelle" among other predictions. By showing "Insider" to its users, Google might have led them to *Donbass Insider*, a pro-Kremlin propaganda outlet accused of spreading disinformation on the war in Ukraine and particularly on the conflict in Donbas. Sometimes, its associated social media channels, like Youtube or Odysee, where they produce the same type of content appeared in the predictions.

Google also predicted "Anne Laure Bonnel", which refers to a "*French journalist who gained visibility after she presented a pro-Russian analysis of the Donbass conflict, including some misleading information.*" according to ISD.

Lastly, the prediction "Christelle" leads to Christelle Néant, founder of *Donbass Insider* who can count on a network of followers to spread her content and Kremlin-friendly rhetoric.

Google was contacted and invited to provide an explanation following CrossOver's findings but didn't comment on the fact that the company might have exposed citizens to Pro-Kremlin outlets in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Key findings

- During 6 months, Google's prediction algorithm predicted a pro-kremlin outlet, *Donbass Insider*, to Belgian users looking for information about Donbass;

- Not only it predicted *Donbass Insider* website, but also its social media channel where they are or were actively posting content about the situation in Donbas;

- Aside from Donbass Insider, Google search prediction oriented users among dubious content or sources on the situation in Donbas, such as Anne Laure Bonnel or Christelle Néant;

- Christelle Néant worked as a reporter for the pro-Russian news agency DONI in 2016, then founded Donbass Insider;

- She seems to have been in contact with French fighters established in Donbass, fighting for the pro-Russian forces;

- Christelle Néant has been active for several years in the media landscape, thus participating in the occupation of the media space by Russian propaganda by using her skills as a former community manager. She can also count on a wide network of followers to spread her content and Kremlin-friendly rhetoric.

Is Google's search prediction algorithm pushing a pro-kremlin outlet?

Between 26 February 2022 and 2 August 2022, Belgian internet users querying information on the situation in the Ukrainian Donbas region by typing "Donbass" on Google search bar would see the autocomplete predictions recommend interesting completions. Among them, names kept coming back and forth such as "Insider", "Insider Christelle", "Insider Odyssee" or "Anne Laure Bonnel". What is hiding behind those predictions suggested to millions of users, daily?
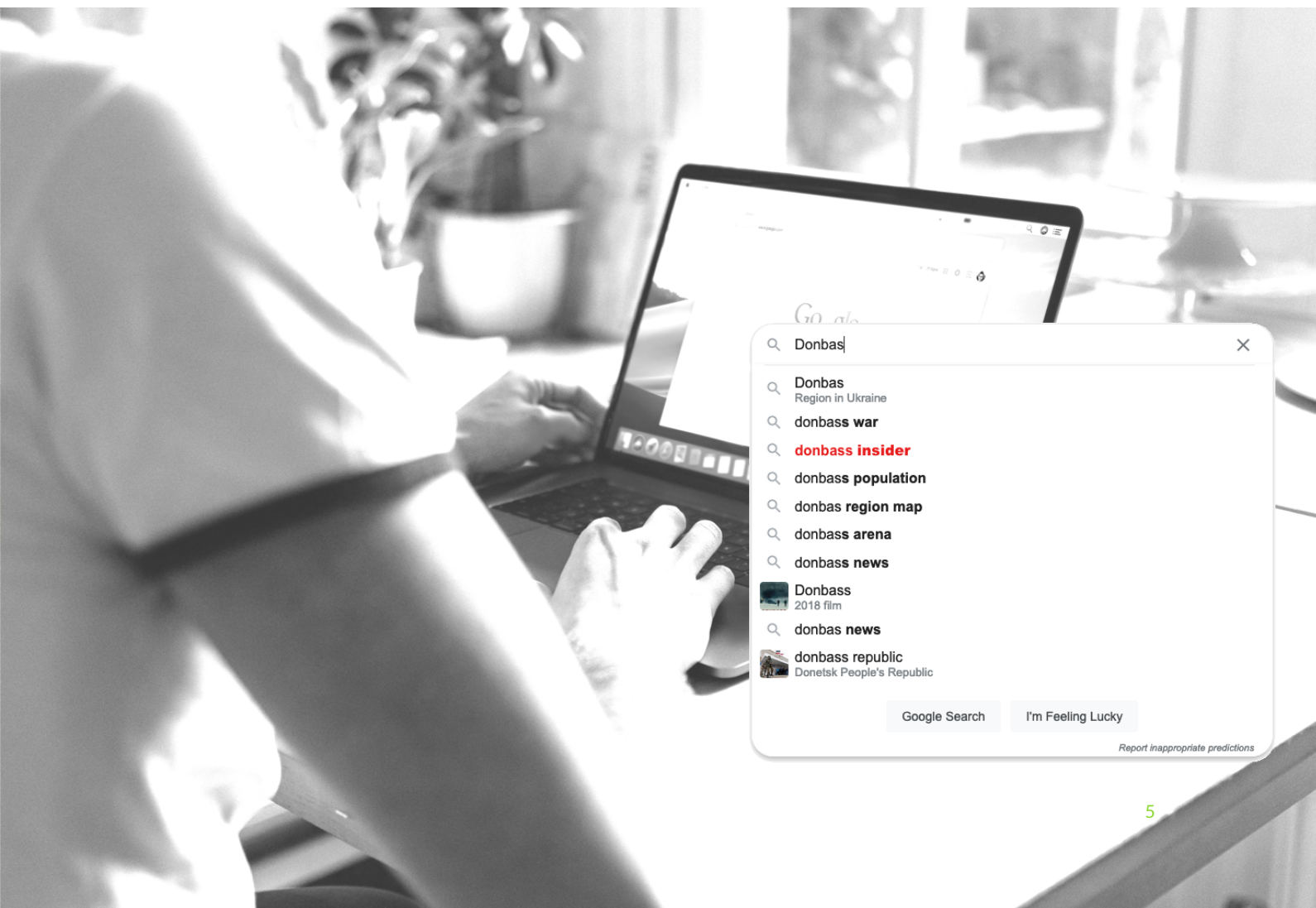
The Google search prediction algorithm

When looking up information on a topic, the first thought is to 'just Google it', i.e. to type words in the Google search bar expecting an accurate answer or information.

Belgian internet users don't escape this trend: 86% of the desktop searches in the country in 2021 were typed either on Google.com or Google.be ; Google.com has 98.3 millions visits per month in Belgium.

A user doesn't even need to type a complete expression in the search bar before prediction algorithms already autocomplete the user's intent. This, as described by Google, is called "Google autocomplete predictions".

Google defines this function as an "*automated system [that] generate[s] predictions that help[s] people save time by allowing them to quickly complete the search they already intended to do.*" How can it guess what a user is looking for? From what we can learn from external research and analysis[1], Google predictions depend amongst others factors on:

- The language and location of the Internet user;
- The search term and its search volume (how many times it was searched on the internet)
- The search term mention volume on the internet inc general (How many times the keyword is mentioned on the web, must be crawlable by Google's spider) and on some social media platforms in particular;
- How many times the keyword is mentioned in anchor text links;
- Whether a user is connected to its Google account or not, have an history with the Google Services or not;
- The general trend of the keyword;

According to Google's own documentation, "*Autocomplete predictions **reflect real searches** that have been done on Google. To determine what predictions to show, our systems look for common queries that match what someone starts to enter into the search box [...]*"[2] (emphasis our own). The "most relevant" query on Google Search will thus be listed first, then the second "most relevant", etc. This could lead us to conclude that Google's system takes into account "real searches". In other words, the more users are suggested to search for "Donbass Insider", the more real

---

[1] https://keywordtool.io/blog/google-autocomplete/
[2] https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/7368877?hl=en#zippy=%2Cwhere-autocomplete-predictions-come-from

searches are registered and the more relevant this search becomes, exposing possibly a flaw in Google's autocomplete predictions.

The CrossOver project has been monitoring recommendation algorithms on big platforms, including Google autocomplete predictions, since January 2022. After having compiled a list of keywords, CrossOver's systems have been monitoring how they evolve on platforms in order to potentially help to identify disinformation associated with these topics.

When the conflict in Ukraine started, searches about Donbas, a region of Ukraine that has been a source of conflict between Ukraine and Russia since 2014, quickly arose. As the chart below shows, Belgian users have increasingly looked up information on that topic on Google search.

Figure 1 : Google Trends search interest for the keyword "Donbass" in Belgium. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term.
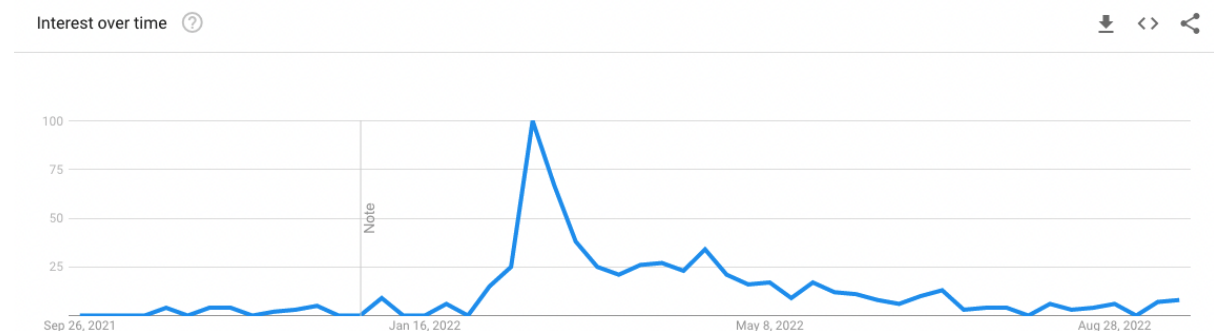
The editorial committee of CrossOver decided to add the word "Donbass"[3] to its monitoring to simulate Belgian users typing this query in the Google Search bar. Predicted searches were collected from Google search twice a day from multiple locations in Belgium[4].

It turned out that Google would regularly autocomplete the query "Donbass" with the term "insider", resulting in the expression "Donbass Insider". What does "Donbass Insider" refer to?

---

[3] Spelling for "Donbas" in English and Flemish is different in French ("Donbass"). This difference was taken into account when adding keywords to the monitoring list.
[4] https://crossover.social/methodology/

The case of Donbass Insider and its outlets

DONBASS INSIDER

What is Donbass insider?

Donbass Insider describes itself on its website as "*a news and analytics website which was launched in September 2018, in order to provide information and insights in several languages mainly about the situation in Donbass, Ukraine and Russia, but also about connected conflicts like Syria and Libya.*

[Their] website was created by people working as journalists and translators for years. After having worked for a news agency, [they] thought it was necessary to create a new platform, where authors from different agencies, blogs, and information websites can collaborate together to spread information."

It was founded in 2016 by Christelle Néant (see later description) and publishes articles in French, English and Russian on its website. Donbass Insider also produces or have produced content for Odysee and YouTube, Telegram, Facebook and other outlets. It is now considered as a pro-Kremlin propaganda outlet on several topics. They are accused of spreading disinformation on the war in Ukraine and particularly on the conflict in Donbas.

In short, a Belgian user typing "Donbass" in the Google search bar was presented with a search suggestion pointing to a dubious source of information: *Donbass Insider*. This is problematic as the sole query "Donbass" does not express any intent from the user about the type of information it expects from the search engine. Alarmingly, pro-Kremlin narratives are put on the users radar in the context of the war in Ukraine.

How, and to what extent was *Donbass Insider* recommended to Belgian Google search users?

During our monitoring of the keyword "Donbass", the user simulation system started to retrieve interesting data. "*Insider*" was the most frequent auto-completion when searching for "Donbass" when the system is configured to search in the French language. However, when a user searches for the same term but the search language is set to Dutch, "*insider*" would only appear in Brussels.

In the French-speaking part of Belgium, over 1,477 searches on "Donbass" during the investigation period (26/02/2022 - 22/08/2022) were performed by the CrossOver monitoring system, Google predictions suggested "*Insider*" 1475 times (almost 100%). Meanwhile, searches in Dutch returned the prediction "*Insider*" only 105 times out of 1477 (roughly 7%).

We tried to understand the extent to which the word '*Insider*' was recommended in the country. "*Insider*" reached the top predictions starting April in each Belgian province. This monitoring was possible as CrossOver uses a network of monitoring devices spread across the entire country.

As the following graph shows, "*Insider*" remained the most predicted word associated with "*Donbass*" during 4 months wherever a user may be located in Belgium.
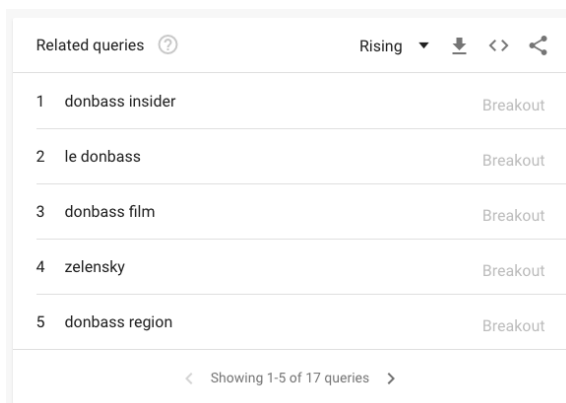
Figure 2 : Daily "Insider" prediction position from 1 to 8 in the Belgium provinces.
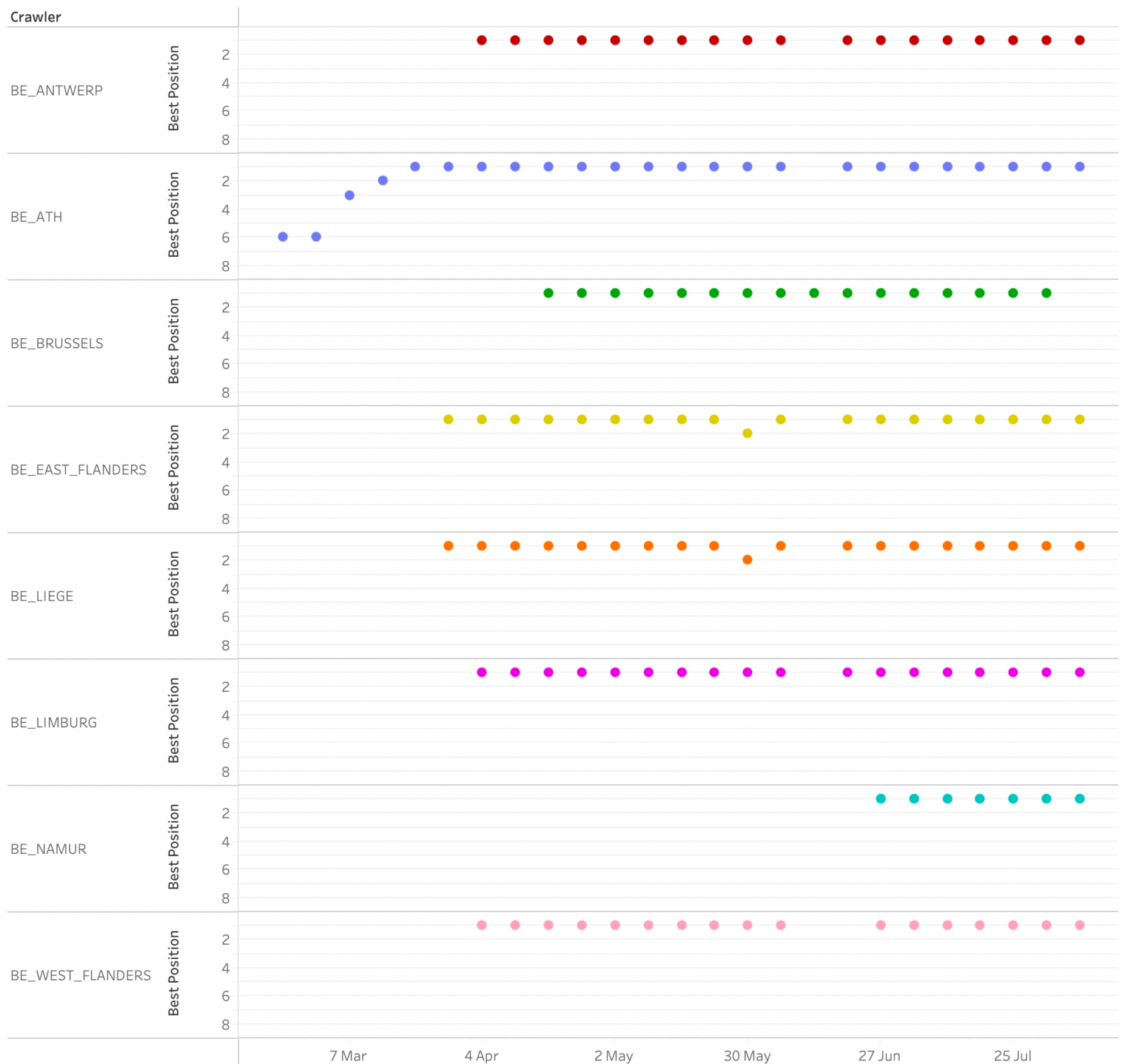
In order to establish a correlation in between our findings and other ways to monitor Google searches, we used Google Trends[5] to check if the association *"donbass/insider"* could be related to the keyword *"donbass"*. Data retrieved on Google Trends allows us to come to similar conclusions than what was found in the CrossOver dashboard. Google Trends shows two interesting phenomena:

- starting at the end of February 2022, more and more people are looking for the word *Donbass* (in French)[6] on Google search;
- these queries become increasingly associated with the word "insider" month after month.

Figure 3 : Screenshot of "related queries" (source: Google Trends)

At the beginning of August, Google Trends listed "Donbass insider" as a *"rising related query"*. According to Google, *"rising searches are terms that were searched for with the keyword you entered (or overall searches, if no keyword was entered), which had the most significant growth in volume in the requested time period. For each rising search term, you see a percentage of the term's growth compared to the previous time period."*[7]

The query "Donbass Insider" is labelled as "Breakout" and not associated with percentage. It supposes, as Google explains, that *"If you see 'Breakout' instead of a percentage, it means that the search term grew by more than 5000%"*[8] probably because those queries were new and had few (if any) prior searches. It means that there has been a *"tremendous increase in the search frequency"* for that term.

Related queries also have a score attached to them, detailed in the table below. *"The ratings are on a relative scale. 100 is the most frequently searched query, 50 is a query searched half as often, etc."*[9] The numbers below show that "Donbass insider" has a good score, generating almost half of the total of search requests as *"Donbass Ukraine"*.

---

[5] https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=BE

[6] "Donbass" is how French speakers spell the keyword and "Donbas" is the Dutch spelling. It seems like that there is way less interest over the topic in the Flemish part of the country.

[7] https://support.google.com/trends/answer/4355000?hl=en&ref_topic=4365530

[8] idem

[9] https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=Donbass&geo=BE

Figure 4 : Top related queries (source: Google Trends)

TOP RELATED QUERIES	Scoring
donbass ukraine	100
ukraine	100
donbass insider	43
guerre donbass	43
le donbass	38
russie	33
ukraine russie	22

Not only in Belgium?

In order to understand if Belgium was an isolated case, the CrossOver team ran a simple test over some other European countries to see if the query "Donbass" was also associated with "Insider" by Google autocomplete predictions elsewhere. Using VPNs, with the computer and browser language set to English, the results are significant: when typing "*Donbass*" in the search bar of Google in the United Kingdom, Germany or Portugal, the prediction algorithm seems very likely to recommend "*insider*" after.

Figure 5 : Screenshots of Google Search in the United Kingdom, Portugal, Germany and Belgium predicting "Donbass Insider" when typing "Donbas"
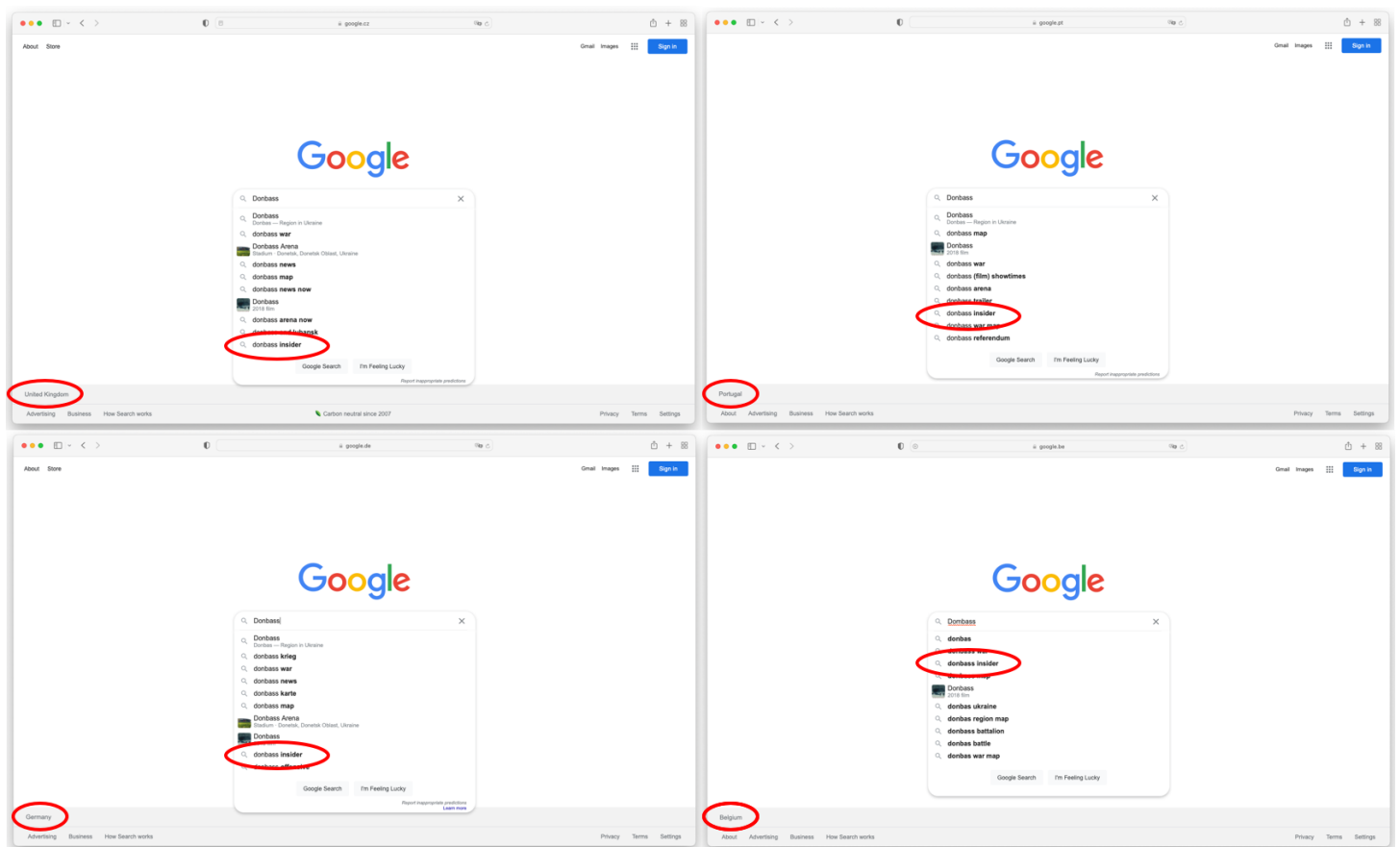
Predictions associated to "Donbass" auto-completed with Insider

During 5 months of monitoring, a Belgian user typing "*Donbass*" in Google search bar would see "*insider*" associated with it. Moreover, the search prediction algorithm associated other terms to "*Donbass insider*", even if the query was only "*Donbass*". Not only was the name — associated to the website — of Donbass Insider predicted, but also its media outlets like its Youtube channel or Odysee page. In a nutshell, when a Belgian user would type "*Donbass*" in its Google search configured in French, he would be suggested:

- *Donbass* **insider youtube** (24% over the study period)
- *Donbass* **insider odyssee** (7% over the study period)
- *Donbass* **insider odysee** (2% over the study period)
- *Donbass* **insider avis** (2% over the study period)

"Donbass Insider YouTube" as an autocomplete prediction

In Google search predictions when typing the word "Donbass", the expression "*Insider Youtube*" also regularly appeared. It refers to the Youtube channel of the media outlet, on which they were quite prolific before turning to other platforms enforcing less content moderation. At the beginning of September their Youtube channel had almost 40 000 subscribers. According to data retrieved from the CrossOver dashboard, this Search prediction started to appear on 22 March 2022 in Hainaut, the same month when their Youtube channel gained 22 000 followers, their biggest progression since at least a year (based on data from SocialBlade). The prediction "Insider Youtube" then disappeared and came back in mid-April. From mid-June, as it remained in most of the predictions associated with "*Donbass*".

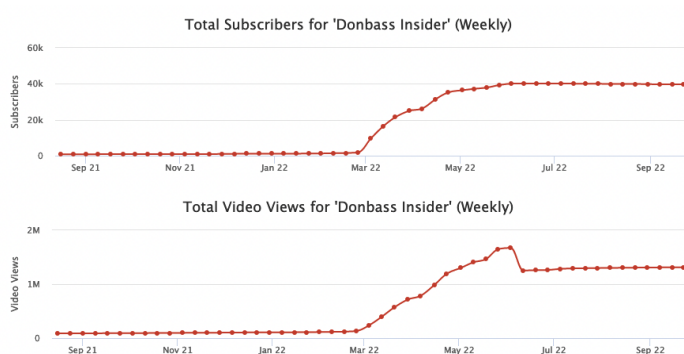Figure 7 : SocialBlade stats for the Donbass-Insider Youtube channel

According to a video they published on their YouTube channel, Donbass Insider publicised their decision to stop posting on YouTube from 2 July to join "Rumble" and "Odysee", alternatives video platforms enforcing less content moderation.

"Donbass Insider Odyssee (or Odysee)" as an autocomplete prediction

According to Crossover dashboard, the "*insider Odysee*" prediction associated to the query "Donbass" started to appear at the end of May (27-05-2022) (same day, all locations, searches in French) but disappeared the next day. It also comes back in June , being predicted again but most of the time with less success than the "Youtube" suggest. From there on it stops appearing everywhere on a daily basis before totally disappearing from the predictions on 11th July, and not being predicted anymore since. Analysing CrossOver data, it seems that Google prediction interest switched platforms from YouTube to Odysee before *Donbass Insiders*'s official announcement in July.

On Odysee, Donbass Insider was publishing the same videos as on Youtube until 23 May ("*L'armée ukrainienne bombarde la périphérie de Donetsk*"). Their next publications were published solely on Odysee which had become their main video publication outlet. Keeping in mind that Odysee is considered by the The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), the academic research arm of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) as "The new Youtube for far-right"

Other noteworthy predictions associated with "Donbass"

This section lists other predictions made by Google's autocomplete system when typing "Donbass" in the search bar. Associated to their media outlets, two names caught our attention in the prediction:

- *Donbass* **anne laure bonnel** (64% over the study period)
- *Donbass* **insider christelle** (1% over the study period)

"Donbass Anne Laure Bonnel"

Anne Laure Bonnel is a "*French journalist who gained visibility after she presented a pro-Russian analysis of the Donbass conflict, including some misleading information.*" according to ISD.

At the beginning of data collection, "Anne Laure Bonnel" was regularly predicted after typing "Donbass" in the Google search bar but by the end of June her name started to disappear from the predictions.

Her popularity coincides with the war in Ukraine, as Le Monde reports: on 30 May her Twitter account was followed by more than 72,000 people - the figure was only 26,000 at the beginning of the war, 3 months earlier. "*In 2015, she produced a documentary on the Donbass region, shot exclusively from the Russian side of the border and, in fact, criticised by several journalists on the spot*" says Le Monde; this documentary is, according to YouTube the 6th most viewed video on her channel, with 14,720 views at the time of writing.

An evolution in the predictions happened in the beginning of March. Google autocomplete predictions started to suggest "insider anne laure bonnel" when typing "Donbass" in the search bar. Her name stayed on top of predictions when typing "donbass" for a while, meaning an increasing interest of the public in her name compared to the website itself ('Donbass Anne Laure Bonnel' was more offered as an autocomplete prediction as compared to "Donbass Insider Anne Laure Bonnel". This happened even if Anne-Laure Bonnel has no known connection with Donbass Insider.

Request for comment sent to Google

Since our research was focused on the Google autocomplete predictions algorithm we reached Google's Press Service for comment on several issues. Following is an exact transcript of the conversation between CrossOver and Google. Names were removed for privacy.

From : **CrossOver**
Date : **8 Sept. 2022**

Dear Sir, dear Madam,

My name is ▮▮▮▮*, I am a journalist and I work for the* CrossOver *project, within which we monitor content recommendation algorithms, including Google search prediction algorithm. We display in a* dashboard Google autocomplete suggestions *after performing a search on a specific keyword. We created a user simulation system, with a network of computers spread out across Belgium at volunteer homes to analyze data.*

Since the end of May, the dashboard shows that if a Belgian user would type « Donbas » in Google Search Bar, he would be very likely to be recommended « Donbass Insider » in the autocomplete suggestions, often associated with « Donbass insider Odysee » or « Donbass insider YouTube ». Donbass Insider refers to a pro-Kremlin outlet spreading dubious information on the war in Ukraine.

We would like to request a comment from Google on these questions:

1. *Do you have any policies covering the recommendation of a pro-Kremlin outlet (Donbass-Insider),* identified as a disinformation spreader *through autocomplete prediction when users across Europe would type "Donbass"?*
2. *What are the criterias that enable a higher rank in Google autocomplete prediction for a given search term?*
3. *Is Google autocomplete recommending Donbass Insider because of their extra production on the topic of the war? Or because of massive views? Or for other reasons?*
4. *Can you provide us with the total users across EU that have been redirected to the "donbass insider" search while searching for "Donbass" over the last 6 months after clicking on the "Donbass insider" prediction?*
5. *Can you provide the total users across EU having visited for the first time the Donbass-insider website, Youtube or Odysee channels after a click on a Google search prediction?*
6. *Do you think that recommending Donbass insider to people simply typing "donbass" could push people towards pro-kremlin narratives?*
7. *Do you plan to avoid such situations from happening again in the future, and if yes, how?*

Thanks a lot for taking the time to answer my questions,
I remain fully available to discuss that topic,

Yours sincerely

From : **Communications Lead Google Belgium and Luxembourg**

Date : **21 Sept. 2022**

Hey ▮▮▮▮

Sharing some information on how Autocomplete works so you have the nitty-gritty of the feature.

Best,

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Autocomplete is a feature within Google Search designed to make it faster to complete searches that you're beginning to type. Autocomplete makes predictions of what people might type next, and these are based on real searches that happen on Google. Google will show common and trending searches that other people have done, relevant to the characters you're typing. More on how Autocomplete predictions work is available in this blog post*, and more on how predictions are generated is available* here*.*

- *Predictions, as explained, are meant to be helpful ways for you to more quickly finish completing something you were about to type. But like anything, predictions aren't perfect. There's the potential to show unexpected or shocking predictions. It's also possible that people might take predictions as assertions of facts or opinions. We also recognize that some queries are less likely to lead to reliable content.*
- *We have systems designed to prevent potentially unhelpful and policy-violating predictions from appearing. While our automated systems typically work very well, they don't catch everything.*
- *When issues arise, we look to resolve them by improving our automated systems. This allows us to better deal with both a particular issue that's been detected and improve for related queries and other searches overall. More on our approach is available* here*.*

On this very last point, indeed, Google indicates clearly that they "*believe that society works best when people have access to a wide variety of web pages from many sources. That's why we do not remove web pages from Search results, except in very limited circumstances*" . As an answer to the question 'Why problematic content may appear', Google states:

"*Since Search encompasses trillions of pages across the web, occasionally results may contain content that some find objectionable or offensive. This may especially happen if the language used in a search query matches closely with the language that appears within problematic content. It might also happen in situations where fairly little useful or reliable content has been published that aligns with a particular topic. Such problematic content does not reflect Google's own opinions. However, our belief in open access to information means that we do not remove such content except in accordance with the specific policies or legal obligations.*"

If a user is confronted with content that seems problematic, he can report it. Google indicates to users that they will "*analyse your feedback, but we don't automatically remove reported predictions.*"

Inside Donbass Insider: Christelle Néant

The name of "Christelle" started to appear on Google search predictions in April, according to Crossover's data. Christelle Néant is the founder and one of the voices of Donbass Insider.

Who is Christelle Néant?

Christelle Néant is a French journalist working for Donbass Insider. She leads gonzo-style interviews in a very personal style, in which she tells stories using a first person narrative.

She describes her personal background in an interview led by Laurent B.[10] in 2016. Christelle Néant explains that while she worked as a webmaster and community manager, she started to "*follow events in the Maidan using Russian media*"[11]. She compared Russian and occidental perspectives[12] on the Ghouta chemical attack in Syria on which the Russian media version appeared "*less hysterical, more reliable*"[13] to her.

The invasion of Crimea and the events of the Euromaidan contributed to confirm her interest in working on those topics from the pro-Russian side.

Figure 8 : Christelle Néant

Christelle Néant left Belgium for Donbass in 2015. She left her colleagues working in a large company in Luxembourg, who she regularly "re-informed", in her own words[14] With skills in community management and permaculture, she started to work as a reporter for the pro-Russian news agency DONI in 2016[15]. She was not unknown to the microcosm of disinformation close to the Kremlin since she had already participated for many months as a small hand in the translation of pro-russian articles[16].

From then on, she has been regularly invited on the Russia Today channel as an independent journalist[17]. According to Streetpress[18], she is considered a prominent French-speaking pro-Kremlin journalist in Donbass.

---

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoj7b1lAQL8
[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoj7b1lAQL8&t=38s
[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoj7b1lAQL8&t=59s
[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoj7b1lAQL8&t=63s
[14] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoj7b1lAQL8&t=1059s
[15] https://christelleneant.wordpress.com/biographie/
[16] https://youtu.be/eoj7b1lAQL8?t=788
[17]https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2022/06/08/guerre-en-ukraine-les-influenceurs-prorusses-en-ordre-de-bataille_6129421_4408996.html
[18] https://www.streetpress.com/sujet/1472465929-donetskleaks-implication-extreme-droite-francaise-ukraine

In 2018, she created the website "Donbass Insider", a trilingual site composed of former DONI members, and whose editorial line is aligned with Moscow's policy[19]. She worked closely with Laurent Brayard, a French-speaking pioneer of the DONI agency[20].

Christelle Néant's Activities

In the same year 2018 the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, located within the internationally recognised borders of Ukraine, held self-organised elections to elect a head of the "republic" and members of its "parliament". A majority of the world's nations do not recognise the sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic, while international institutions such as the OSCE ODIHR considered "elections" there as illegitimate and did not send international election observers.

However, Christelle Néant participated as an "international observer" to the general elections of "Donetsk People's Republic. Among other observers are Belgians:

- **Jan Penris**: Member of the Belgian Parliament 2014-2019. Member of the far-right party Vlaams Belang.
- **Kris Roman**: former member of the far-right Vlaams Belang and founder of the fringe Euro-Rus association. Kris Roman travelled in the summer of 2016 to Donbass together with former FN-figure Hubert Fayard, initiator of the self proclaimed 'embassy of Donetsk People's Republic' in Marseille. Kris Roman sees himself as the representative of the Donetsk People Republic and opened in 2019 an "embassy" in the East Flanders region Dendermonde.

On Donbass Insider, she explains how she became a Russian citizen[21]. Her commitment on the field for the Republic of Donetsk and her daily use of social networks has allowed her to weave a very important network of contacts, where French-speaking fighters in Donbass, far-right activists or even yellow vests meet each other.

---

[19]Using Moscow's exact terms and rhetorical expressions (denazification, special military operation…). See for instance:
https://www.donbass-insider.com/fr/2022/02/24/lancement-de-operation-de-demilitarisation-et-denazification-de-ukraine-par-la-russie/
[20]https://ms.detector.media/trendi/post/30271/2022-09-17-your-man-in-donbas-for-two-hundred-euros-who-is-laurent-brayard/
[21]https://www.donbass-insider.com/fr/2021/04/28/chroniques-dune-francaise-dans-le-donbass-comment-je-suis-devenue-russe/

Her Network

A mapping of his friendships operated by OpenFacto in the summer of 2019 (444 contacts at the time) on the social network Vkontakte, the equivalent of Facebook in Russia, highlighted several names of French fighters established in Donbass, fighting for the pro-Russian forces:

- **Sébastien H.**, researcher, close to the extreme right-wing movement, french antisemite.
- **Serguei M.**, who joined the militia of the Donetsk People's Republic in 2014, and who joined, once returned, the security group of the yellow vests demonstrations in France.
- **Philippe K.**, who served as a combatant during several chaotic times in a pro-Russian foreign battalion.
- **Erwan C.** : a military veteran of the nationalists' fights who, according to Streetpress, "has intensified his efforts to "reinform" French public opinion"

We also found her own mentors:

- **Graham P.**, British pro-Russian journalist
- **Laurent B.**, from DONI.

Donbass Insider's circles of influence

To try to measure the influence in other spheres and thus the potential of spreading their message outside this sphere of usual followers, it is useful to look at Christelle Néant's and Donbass Insider's publicly available posts on conventional social networks.
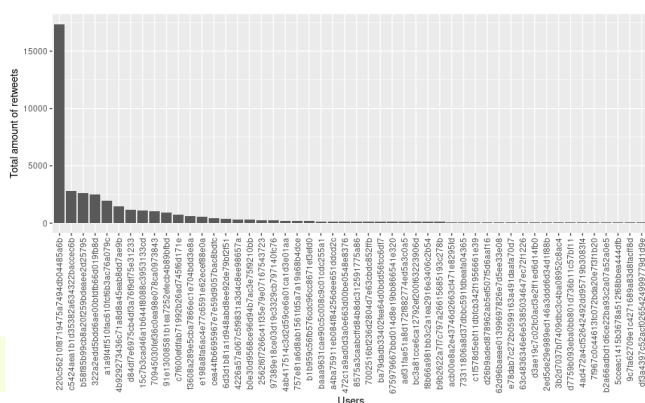
A search on Twitter[22] for links pointing to the *Donbass Insider* website returns only 13,850 tweets, which is relatively few since the site's creation dates back in 2018.

Most of the tweets are promotional tweets from the Donbass Insider account itself, the account of Laurent B. or the account of Christelle Néant.

Figure 9 : Total tweets per user including a link to Donbass-Insider website.

[22] Twitter account handles were anonymised

In terms of likes and retweets, which could be used as another indicator of the success of these publications, we find more or less the same active accounts. Two French "political" accounts are among the aficionados of Christelle Néant's articles: the UPR candidate, François Asselineau, and the former senator Yves Pozzo Di Borgo, described as "*a conspiratorial ex-senator in the service of Russian propaganda*"[23] by Conspiracy watch. Finally, the account of the Russian embassy in France is also an important relay on the publications of Christelle Néant.
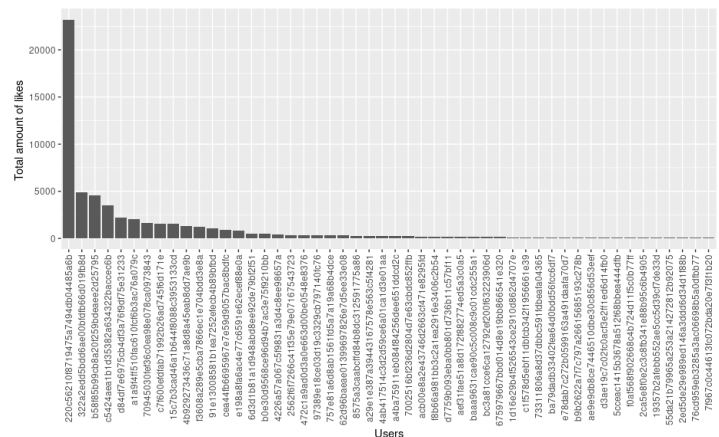

Figure 10 : Total tweets interacting with Donbass-Insider.

User	Nb of tweets	Nb of RT	Nb of likes
220c56210f8719475a7494db04485a6b	1638	17359	23215
70945030fef36c0ea98e078ca0973843	520	1043	1611
7002516bf236d2804d7e63cbdc852ffb	147	135	224
757e81a6d8ab1561fd5a7a19a68b4dce	119	202	304
f3608a289e5cba7866ec1e704bdd3e8a	100	608	1222
c7f600efdfab71992b26ad745f6d171e	99	771	1571
b0e30d9568ce96d94b7ac3e75f9210bb	84	329	473
b58f85b99cb8a20f259bdeaee2d25795	73	2604	4534
c5424aea1b1d35382a634322baccec6b	56	2823	3494
b9b2622a7f7c797a26615685193c278b	53	103	115
e78dab7c272b0599163a491daafa70d7	49	82	117
4226a57a067c5f9831a3d4c8ee98657a	48	335	424
ba79dadb33402fea64d0bdd56fcc6df7	41	122	123
62d96baeae01399697826e7d5ee33e08	33	91	303
4ab417514c3d2d59ce6a01ca1d3e01aa	28	212	277

A summary of the 15 most enthusiastic accounts, totalling a large number of publications, likes and retweets, shows that they are essentially based on a known base, accounts close to Christelle Néant and *Donbass Insider*.

Figure 11 : Total tweets per user interacting with Donbass-Insider.

[23]https://www.conspiracywatch.info/yves-pozzo-di-borgo-un-ex-senateur-complotiste-au-service-de-la-propagande-russe.html

Using data obtained through the CrowdTangle application, it is also possible to measure the impact of the publications of *Donbass Insider* links on Facebook since the creation of this site, representing about 20.500 posts by 848 different pages.

Most of these pages are French-speaking and are directly Donbass related, but there are also many pages directly linked to support for Russia (61 different pages), or Vladimir Putin (9), support for the Yellow Vests movement (41), Asselineau's UPR party (8) or against Emmanuel Macron (8). French-speaking Africa is also part of the target of these groups with at least 19 different pages broadcasting these publications.
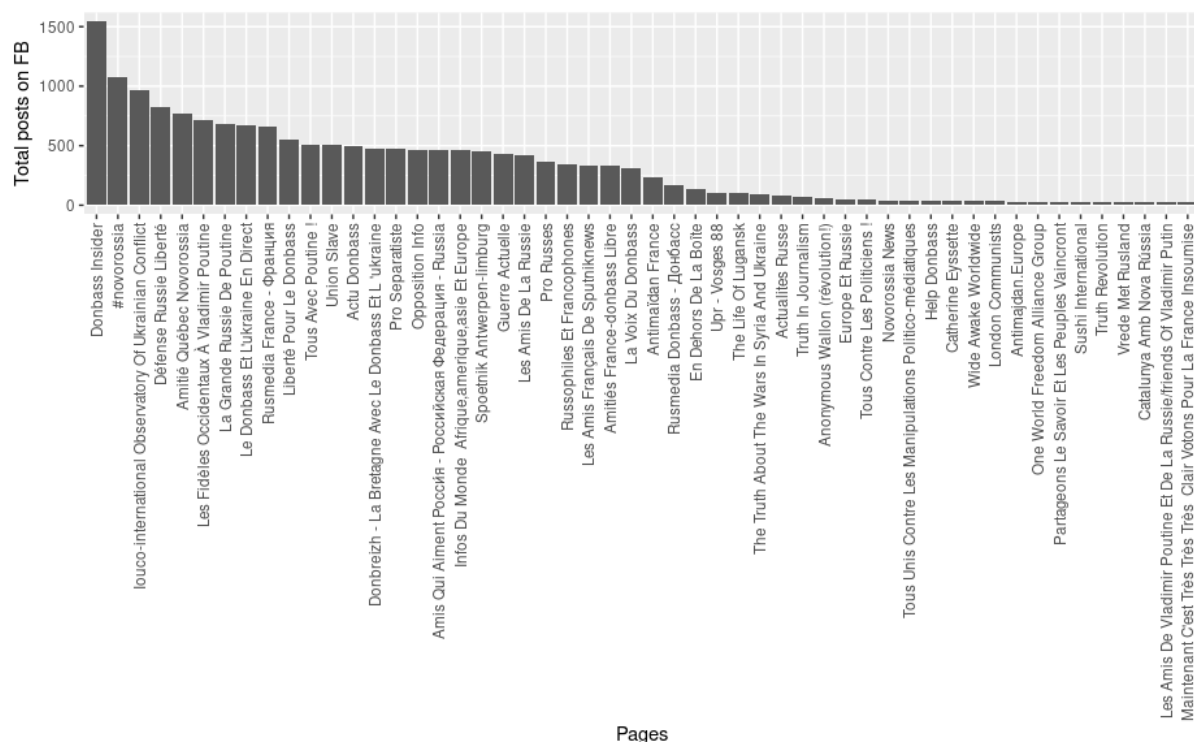

Figure 12 : Total link to Donbass-Insider shared by pages and public groups on Facebook

The Donbass Insider Facebook page remains the biggest provider of posts on Facebook including links to the Donbass Insider website, ensuring its own promotion. However, these links are reposted by a strong group of associated pages covering the same aforementioned topics.

Christelle Néant has now been active for several years in the media landscape, thus participating in the occupation of the media space by Russian propaganda by using her skills as a former community manager. She is indeed really active on a vast majority of platforms, traditional (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube...) or less confidential (Odysee...).

User	Nb of posts	Nb of Interactions	Nb of Likes
#novorossia	1081	3039	1396
Actu Donbass	497	3623	1767
Amitiés France-donbass Libre	335	3379	1533
Défense Russie Liberté	820	4027	1662
Donbass Insider	1542	96840	25692
Europe Et Russie	50	1746	908
Guerre Actuelle	427	1259	897
Iouco-international Observatory Of Ukrainian Conflict	963	4258	2021
La Grande Russie De Poutine	680	5051	2801
Le Donbass Et L'ukraine En Direct	674	6515	3169
Les Amis De La Russie	419	3558	1712
Les Amis De Vladimir Poutine Et De La Russie/friend...	23	1452	1001
Les Fidèles Occidentaux À Vladimir Poutine	715	3290	1369
Liberté Pour Le Donbass	554	2326	963
Novorossia News	41	3045	1415
Pro Separatiste	471	1204	807
Rusmedia France - Франция	664	2172	971
Russophiles Et Francophones	343	2589	1056
The Life Of Lugansk	98	1025	576
Tous Avec Poutine !	510	5803	3079

Figure 13 : Total interactions with Donbass-Insider shared by pages and public groups on Facebook

Even if her audience appears to be quite limited on mainstream platforms, she can count on a network of followers to spread her content and Kremlin-friendly rhetoric.

Conclusion

During 5 months, between 26 February and 2 August 2022 millions of French speaking Belgian (and probably European) Google users typing the word "Donbass" in the Google Search bar would see the term "Insider" appearing extremely frequently as an autocomplete prediction.

This autocomplete prediction refers to *Donbass Insider*, a pro-kremlin media outlet accused of spreading disinformation on the situation in Donbass. Other dubious names were predicted by Google when typing *Donbass* such as "Anne Laure Bonnel" or "Christelle", which might refer to Christelle Néant, the founder of *Donbass Insider*. As Google's team was interrogated on that topic, they provided no satisfying explanation as for why this was the case.

Pro-Kremlin outlet *Donbass Insider* used qualified dissemination techniques to promote its content. Using the skills of former community manager Christelle Néant, and a network of relaying accounts, *Donbass Insider*'s content could be spread efficiently.

However, an open question remains: which role Google autocomplete predictions played in this spread? As demonstrated above, the term "insider" appeared in the Google search bar 99,86% of the time when performing the search from a computer and browser set in the French language from Belgium, and even further countries. This may have pointed more users to *Donbass Insider* content, exposing more people to Pro-Kremlin narratives at a time of conflict in between Russia and Ukraine.

Notes

- All data used for this investigation is available on Github.

- The data used for the part on Google Search is based on CrossOver dashboard data which is based on a specific methodology.
  - The CrossOver monitoring system enables us to believe that most of the French speaking Belgian users, searching on Google for "Donbass" have been impacted by this prediction. However, Google predictions are based on many different factors for each user. It is possible that some of these users had less or never the "Insider" or related predictions than the data collected by the CrossOver project.

We observe and analyse the algorithms of social networks against disinformation

🌐 **crossover.social**   🐦 **@eucrossover**