



Drowning in Disinformation

**UNCOVERING FAR-RIGHT
NETWORKS OF DECEPTION
AHEAD OF THE EU ELECTIONS**

Fadi Quran
Avaaz
[@fadiquran](#)

**Defending the story of
Democracy**

*“A compelling narrative fosters an illusion
of inevitability.”*

Daniel Kahneman, Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs, Princeton
Nobel Laureate

Outline:

- From the Elves to War Room
- Over 760 Million Views of Disinfo – How these networks were uncovered
- Sophisticated Disinformation at Scale
 - Disinformation content to Disinfo tactics2.0
 - WhatsApp
- The tip of the Iceberg
- How do we defeat disinformation?

CAN
FACEBOOK
SAVE THE WORLD
FROM FAKE NEWS?



MARK, NICK, CHERYL:
CORRECT THE RECORD

Our democracies are drowning in fake news, but there's a simple and legitimate solution: Correct the Record! Every time a user sees false information that has been corrected by an independent third party fact-checker, send them that correction! Facebook already does this for a small number of people affected, why not everyone? It's the single biggest thing Facebook could do to disrupt disinformation and give truth a fighting chance!

AVAAZ

**EUROPE IS BEING BURNED DOWN WITH LIES.
IT'S TIME THE COMMISSION BRINGS OUT THE FIRE TRUCKS!**



**FACEBOOK & CO CAN TAME THE FLAMES BY
ISSUING CORRECTIONS
FOR DISINFORMATION.**

Europeans vote in just months, and there's only one solution powerful enough to fight back against viral disinformation threatening free and fair elections in May: **Social media platforms must work with independent fact-checkers and issue corrections to ALL users who have been shown disinformation with significant reach.** The false news should not be deleted, but more information provided, to protect both our democracies and freedom of speech. The Commission and Member States must call on platforms to do this, or face immediate legislation.

AVAAZ

DROWNING IN DISINFORMATION



EU COMMISSION: THROW DEMOCRACY A LIFELINE **REGULATE SOCIAL MEDIA**

Content spread by organised disinformation networks was viewed over 760 million times in the three months leading up to the EU elections. And that's just what we know about. Across the continent, citizens are being targeted with toxic lies. Commissioners, you must save Europe from the scourge of disinformation. **Regulate social media. Ensure they correct the record. Don't miss this chance.**

From the Elves to the War Room:

- Network Detection
- Fake-Watch.eu
- WhatsApp Watch
- The A-Team





762,604,407

VIEWS OF DISINFORMATION *

fakewatch ✓

powered by **AVAZ**

Methodology:

Focus on 6 European Countries:

- Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Poland and Spain.

Diverse Team of Experts:

- Investigative journalists, reporters, researchers, elves and data analysts monitored disinformation operations across the continent, focusing on identifying fake news and hate speech.

20k Elves

Software to find trends and interactions:

Crowdtangle...etc

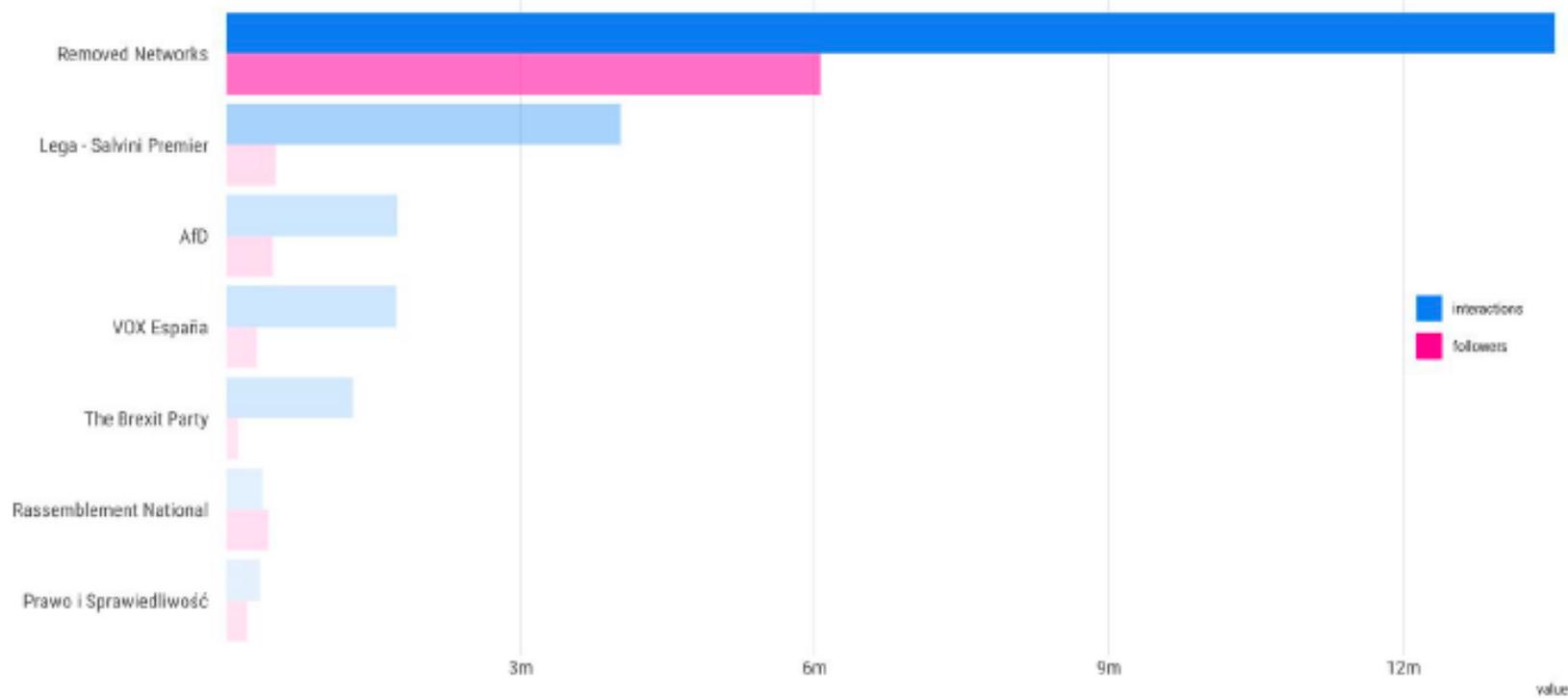


THE FULL SCOPE OF AVAAZ'S INVESTIGATION

Country	Networks	Pages & Groups	Profiles	Followers	Interactions past 3 months
Spain	3	31	10	1,694,718	9,766,599
Italy	14	113	49	18,260,000	23,090,000
Poland	3	197	40	8,041,442	16,666,287
UK	3	46	19	1,347,997	11,826,130
France	3	44	6	1,748,674	3,889,682
Germany	11	119	204	898,918	2,203,344
TOTAL	37	550	328	31,991,749	67,442,042

Table 1.2 - Total number of suspect networks, pages, groups and profiles flagged to Facebook as part of the Avaaz investigation

Removed networks of disinformation had more interactions and followers than all of Europe's major far-right parties



Sophisticated disinformation at scale
Disinfo Tactics 2.0

Abnormal coordination and sharing of alternative outlets:

Donald Tusk Stasi member?!
Poland: 27 pages – 1.9 Million Followers
Shared within 1 min

Spain: 17 Pages – 1.4 Million Followers
Duplicate accounts sharing
Shared within 1 min



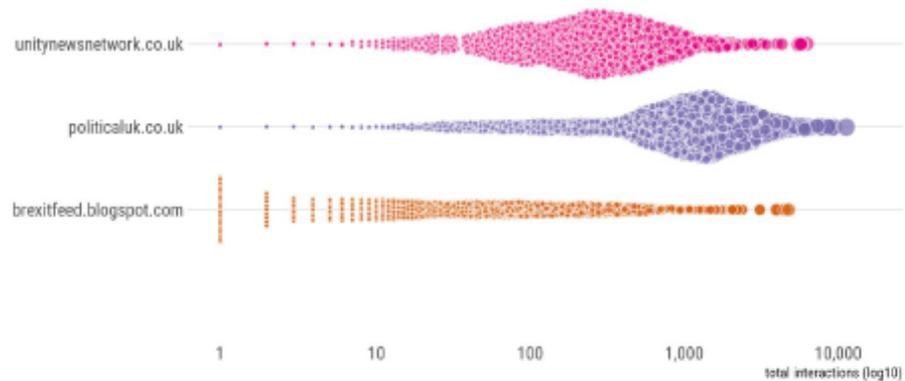
We identified three "alternative media" networks engaging in what Avaaz reported as containing elements of spam behavior to boost three websites: [Political UK](#)²², [UK Unity News Network](#)²³ and [The Daily Brexit](#)²⁴. Together, these networks have had 1.17 million followers.

As part of our analysis we mapped 709 Facebook Pages in the UK and collected 190,745 posts they sent between February 3 and May 7, 2019. We observed that these "alternative media" all appeared in the top 20 most shared websites in the UK, sometimes above The Guardian and BBC UK, despite being low-authority sites according to independent rankers²⁵, with one of these outlets, "The Daily Brexit," having an ahref domain rating (a metric commonly used to detect spam links) of 0.4 in a scale from 0 to 100.

Together, these networks had nearly 5 million interactions in the past three months.

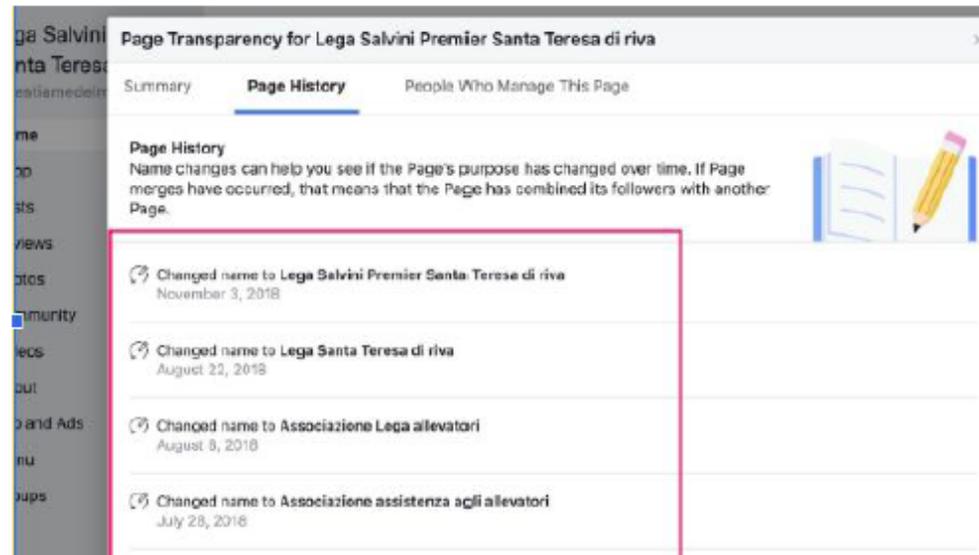
Distribution of interactions for posts linking to suspicious domains

19,714 posts: each circle is one post sized according to total interactions



Bait and
switch:

The page below began as an agricultural breeders' association of the Messina province and eventually became a League-supporting local chapter. The change was made one word at a time, gradually, and any automatic checks carried out by Facebook were likely not triggered because of the ambiguity of the word "League":



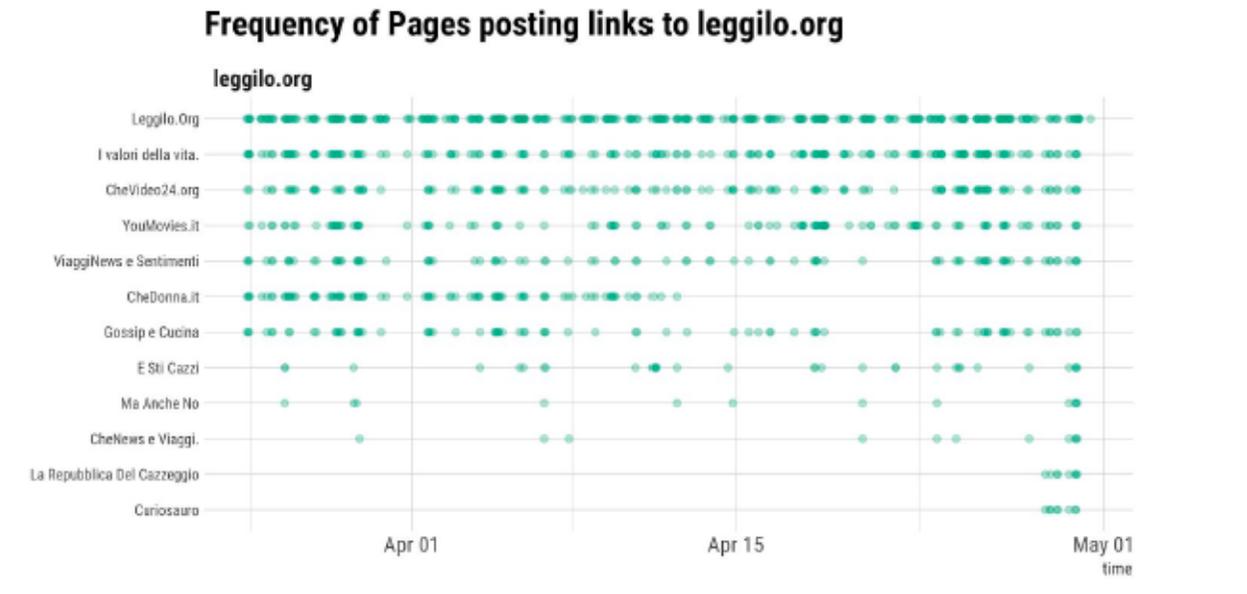
The screenshot shows the 'Page Transparency' section for the Facebook page 'Lega Salvini Premier Santa Teresa di riva'. The 'Page History' tab is selected, showing a list of name changes over time. The changes are as follows:

Date	Change Description
November 3, 2018	Changed name to Lega Salvini Premier Santa Teresa di riva
August 22, 2018	Changed name to Lega Santa Teresa di riva
August 8, 2018	Changed name to Associazione Lega allevatori
July 28, 2018	Changed name to Associazione assistenza agli allevatori

Content and suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior

Another example of a page taken down for violations of Facebook's rules is "I Valori Della Vita" ("The value of life"), with more than 1.5 million followers. Our research showed that the page, which looks like a generic lifestyle page, is actually part of a bigger network, whose pages share, in a coordinated manner, content from the well-known far-right news site Leggilo.org.

The following table shows the frequency and coordinated posting among these pages:



Using fake and duplicate accounts:

Fake Profiles

An example of a fake profile is a League-supporting page managed by a person using the name "Bernardo Paguro." As shown in the screenshots below, the admin account for this page appears to have been removed or suspended by Facebook after Avaaz reported it, but the page itself is currently still active.



For example, the first network was managed by Javier Grau, who presents himself as the creator and coordinator of the Unidad Nacional Española movement (see image below). He appears in numerous videos posted on the UNE page, acting as solo spokesman, and had a Facebook [group](#) and two different Facebook profiles (removed by Facebook following our investigation [here](#) and [here](#)⁴⁵).



Caption: A post showing Javier Grau as creator and coordinator of Unidad Nacional Española.

Migrating to WhatsApp + Inter-platform Behavior:

Vicki Donda activista y simpatizante del movimiento feminista de podemos y PSOE 😬
Buen augurio le pronostico a España como dejen entrar más sanguijuelas sociales a las instituciones.
Tremendas lonchas 🤪



**9.6
MILLION**

**SPANISH VOTERS
HAVE LIKELY SEEN
DISINFORMATION
OR HATEFUL CONTENT
ON WHATSAPP**

From
Networks to
Narratives of
Manipulation



Solution: Correct the Record

The screenshot shows a Facebook interface. On the left is a navigation menu with options like News Feed, Messenger, Watch, Marketplace, and various shortcuts. The main content area features a post from a user named 'Siong?' with the text 'What's on your mind, Siong?'. Below the text is a fact-check notification: 'It seems like you've been recently shown factually incorrect information. Here's more information, provided by independent fact-checkers at Maldito Bulo.' This notification is accompanied by a warning icon and a close button. Below the notification is a photograph of several blister packs of white, oval-shaped pills. Underneath the photo, the text reads: 'Payments for medication are set according to the income of users -- not based on religion or nationality. Foreign nationals in Spain also pay tax, such as Personal Income Tax and indirect taxes like VAT.' Below this text is a 'Fact-checked information' section with a link to 'MALDITO BULO' and a headline: 'No, Muslims and immigrants don't get free medicines just because they are Muslims and immigrants'. On the right side of the page, there are several widgets: 'Add to your story', a list of recent stories from users like 'Super Sonic B.boys', 'Aryan Salim', and 'Laudemir Guedes Fragoso', a birthday notification for 'Samanta Rossy', and a 'Your Page' widget for 'DSFront' showing 277 likes and 20+ notifications. At the bottom right, there is a 'Recent posts' section showing a post from '21 March at 15:01'.

5 Legislative Principles

CORRECT THE RECORD

BAN FAKE ACCOUNTS AND UNLABELED BOTS

LABEL PAID CONTENT AND DISCLOSE TARGETING

DETOX THE ALGORITHM

TRANSPARENCY

Polls show European Citizens support Regulation and Support Correct the Record

- Between **81% and 92%** in each country agree that companies like Facebook should work with independent fact-checkers to **offer verified corrections** to everyone exposed to false or misleading content
- **78%** or more in each country say that this measure **would improve their image of social media companies**
- **76%** or more in each country think **social media platforms should be regulated.**

Vulnerable Citizens



Thank You

- Disinformation networks removed by Facebook as a result of this investigation posted content viewed an estimated half a billion (533M) times over the last three months. This means that, on average, these networks produced content that was seen almost 6 million times per day.
- In total, Avaaz reported over 500 suspect pages and groups to Facebook, which were followed by nearly 32 million people and generated over 67 million “interactions” (comments, likes, shares) in the last three months alone.
- Facebook has already taken down 77 of the pages and groups reported, accounting for about 20% of all interactions across the reported networks.
- Together, the pages removed had almost three times more followers (5.9 million) than the pages of the main European far-right and anti-EU parties, League, AfD, VOX, Brexit Party, Rassemblement National and PiS, combined (2 million).

