
COVID 19 Disinformation: Trends, Strategies, and Narratives in Italy, France, and Spain

Briefing N° 2

EU DisinfoLab



EU DisinfoLab's methodology is based on the monitoring of independently fact-checked dis- and misinformation from France, Italy, and Spain, which is then categorised using [First Draft's disinformation classification framework](#). We observed the time period between 9-22 April. From this, we were able to draw out trends from the content, such as the strategies, platforms, and narratives used to disinform.

Narratives and strategies are rooted in local contexts

- Disinformation items and narratives are increasingly more adapted to the local context. In this way, COVID-19 disinformation has followed a trend of firstly focusing on the health crisis itself to concentrating on how the pandemic interacts with pre-existing political and societal issues in the respective countries.
- The impersonation or misrepresentation of communications from authoritative sources (media, health professionals, and authorities) are key strategies used to disinform.
- There was a reduction in the number of the disinformation items originating from private messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger). This partly may be the impact of [WhatsApp's recent policy change](#).
- Decontextualised images and videos as well as parody were successful mediums for spreading disinformation.
- YouTube is a key platform used to spread conspiracy theories.

The alternative information ecosystem and political activists increasingly engaged in disinformation

- Actors from the alternative information ecosystem (conspiracy theory websites & social media accounts, alternative media, alternative doctors, etc.) have a greater role in the spread of COVID-19 disinformation and are managing to reach a wider audience.
- The politicisation of the crisis has meant that there has been more involvement of politicians and political activists in the spread of misinformation and disinformation to sway public opinion in their favour.
- "Coronavirus news" themed Facebook groups and pages, as well as Twitter accounts, were a place where disinformation greatly circulated. These pages are often anonymous, and without using open source intelligence techniques, it is difficult to attribute these accounts and pages to a source.

Online platforms made changes in their moderation policies regarding COVID-19 disinformation and conspiracy theories

Following the diffusion of 5G-COVID-19 conspiracy theories at the end of March, which have led to physical harm, including the destruction of telecommunication towers, the online platforms have made some updates on their content moderation policies. Please consult [our blogpost](#) that keeps track of the platforms' policy updates.

- On 06/04, YouTube [announced](#) it would ban conspiracy theory videos falsely linking the coronavirus to 5G.

- As of 16/04, Facebook will now inform users [if they have retroactively engaged with COVID-19 mis/disinformation on the platform](#).
- Starting on 11/05, [Twitter has introduced a new policy to label tweets that contain COVID-19-related misinformation](#). The new labels will link to a page curated by Twitter or to an “external trusted source” that can provide information about the claims made in the tweet, according to Twitter.

Additionally, we assessed the major platforms' content moderation policies on COVID-19 conspiracies. [Please read our case study here](#). Here are a few key takeaways:

- Despite content removals, there is still a high velocity of the content across platforms.
- Yet, content moderation policies and processes are not consistent across platforms
- The lack of harmonised moderation policies and definitions makes it possible for the content to persist online, even when the original piece has been taken down.

COVID-19 conspiracy theories are adapted to the local context

We released [a blog post](#) where we shed light on COVID-19 conspiracy theories and compare the trends in Italy, France, and Spain. We identified three major narratives drawn from our analysis of the disinformation ecosystems in the respective countries:

- The origins of the virus;
- The cures and medical treatments for the virus;
- The instrumental use of the virus to push secret agendas.

Between 9-22 April, conspiracy theories were particularly prevalent in Italy and France and increasingly adapted to suit the local context, often communicating a message that the virus is being instrumentalised to push secret agendas.

- Multiple conspiracy theories built on the idea that the COVID-19 is a hoax to impose authoritarian measures (#filmyourhospital).
- In France, the Luc Montagnier's false claim (French doctor and former laureate of the Nobel prize of Medicine in 2008) that the "COVID-19 originated from work on an AIDS vaccine that went wrong," was particularly "successful".
- In Italy, anti-vaxxer conspiracies gained traction by fusing with COVID-19. Anti-vaxxer, conspiratorial discourse centred on denying the existence of the virus and/or criticising the government's "mass vaccination plan to control the population".



False cures and health fears have decreased but are still prevalent

Although there was a reduction in comparison to the previous period, disinformation falling into this category tended to communicate false health advice, cures, and information relating to COVID-19.

- **Home remedies for COVID-19 were popular in Spain and Italy** (e.g. garlic, onion, lemon and ginger drink; drinking or spraying seawater down the throat; vitamin D).
- **Imposter content was predominant in France:** These items concerned false cures and health advice (e.g. how to wear a mask) supposedly from **authoritative sources**, such as the WHO and the Johns Hopkins University.
- **False information about possible cures:** Numerous disinformation related to the cure in France (mostly misrepresenting the efficiency of chloroquine, two of them from Dr Didier Raoult). False information emerged in Spain on clinical trials with chlorine dioxide (CDS) allegedly initiated by the American Institute of Health.
- **"COVID-19 is a thrombosis" found popularity in Spain and Italy.** This suits the claims of virus deniers' who affirm that COVID-19 is the wrong cause of death; people are not dying from the virus, but rather from thrombosis that goes untreated.



COVID-19 disinformation is used to sow political polarisation

Following a blame-game scheme, many disinformation items were linked to COVID-19 debates such as economic recovery and personal privacy. Other items criticised the government's measures or "irresponsible" behaviour.

- **Decontextualized/satirical quotes were particularly used to spread disinformation** attacking the French government's COVID-19 response (e.g. a video of a media interview from the French Health Minister was cut to suggest that he had absurdly said that "the lockdown increases the spread of the virus"). **WhatsApp's policy to limit the forwarding of messages was politicised in Spain** via accusations of censorship from the government and fact-checkers.
- In Italy, **anti-EU and anti-German sentiments were stoked through disinformation regarding the ESM** (i.e. what is the ESM, when was it ratified and by whom, what are the conditions to activate it, and is Italy going to).
- Another narrative **communicated the "privilege" of establishment and/or the "irresponsible behaviour" of politicians.** This came in the form of **misleading or fabricated content**, such as the claim that "52 deputies" from the Spanish Vox party went to work in the Congress (the figure was less). In Italy, Prime Minister Conte reportedly had a private hospital built in his home at the expense of citizens, according to one disinformation item. Old pictures from last summer were used to falsely claim that "President Macron went on holidays during lockdown".

Identity polarisation remains a strong disinformation narrative

While anti-migration, religion, and identity disinformation tended to be limited for France during this period, there was one narrative that is worth mentioning:

- Two videos were falsely presented as depicting African migrants being beaten in China because of the COVID-19. Despite this type of racial abuse in China [being real](#), these **decontextualised videos** were spread in France and French-speaking Africa as an attempt to amplify tensions between communities.

In Spain and Italy, identity polarisation disinformation reflected both current debates and cultural differences embedded within society.

- As Ramadan began, **decontextualised images and videos** emerged in Spain reportedly showing Muslims conjugating on the streets/rooftops. These items accused the community of breaking the lockdown and authorities of favouring the celebration of Ramadan, while celebrations of Christian Holy Week were prevented.
- In Italy, **some items connected the pandemic to xenophobic and anti-migratory sentiments**. Some items were **decontextualised images** of migrants gathering and not using masks, accusing them of not abiding by the lockdown and social distancing.



Uncertainty on the lockdown and the consequences of the restrictions benefit disinformation actors

Benefitting from the uncertainty felt by society, this disinformation generally focused on communicating false information/measures about the easing of the lockdown and its consequences, which – for the most part – portrayed the government negatively.

- Some actors **exaggerated the economic consequences of the lockdown** (price increases and bankruptcy of restaurants) in France to attack the government's policy.
- In Spain, **alarming messages communicating false measures to contain the virus** (fumigation with military planes, government plans to "expropriate" properties, and misleading surveillance measures) were spread.
- Easing the lockdown**: In France, misleading descriptions of measures from abroad about schools reopenings were used to criticise by contrast the government's decisions. Likewise, false deconfinement plans also circulated in Spain (**manipulated or imposter documents** explaining official plans for deconfinement), as well as France. Some **imposter documents** were diffused via WhatsApp in Italy, which gave false information on the end of the quarantine and the reopening of businesses.





ICYMI

- Our [COVID-19 Resource Hub](#), which has dedicated sections on investigative research, fact-checking, tools, and the societal impacts of the infodemic.
- [The Few Faces of Disinformation](#): from lucrative, political, issue-based, to foreign influence, our latest blog-post reflects on the many different shapes and forms disinformation comes in.
- [Combating the disinfodemic: Working for truth in the time of COVID-19](#) – We have contributed to two UNESCO policy briefs that offer critical insights into the fast-growing COVID-19-related disinformation that is impeding access to trustworthy sources and reliable information.
- Oxford Internet Institute's Computational Propaganda Project has started [a weekly briefing](#) on the spread of COVID-19 misinformation on online platforms.

