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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN FRANCE

By Nicolas Hénin, EU DisinfoLab

EU DISINFO LAB



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INTRODUCTION

- France has not been spared by the waves of disinformation that have affected Europe recently on the pandemic, the war in Ukraine or climate change.
- The disinformation actors move from one subject to another quickly as crises unfold. The Yellow Vests crisis has been foundational in the polarisation.
- Civil society shows a degree of informational resilience, as demonstrated, for example, by the marginal impact of the Macron leaks. France has a dense network of fact-checkers and many media literacy initiatives. Moreover, it has put in place several laws to tailor the response against disinformation. However, these initiatives may seem uncoordinated, making the doctrine a bit confusing.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

These are three emblematic disinformation cases that permeated France's public opinion to this day.

MACRON LEAKS

- A few hours before the blackout that forbade the candidates to express themselves, and just before the second round of the 2017 presidential election that saw Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen compete, more than [20,000 emails](#), hacked from the campaign team of the centre-right candidate, were leaked on a 4Chan forum.
- They were very quickly amplified by [pro-Trump and pro-Russian](#) social media accounts, and by Wikileaks.
- A peculiarity of this hack and leak operation was the introduction of a few forged emails, with scandalous content, into the mass of emails containing banal exchanges.

CHARLIE HEBDO IMPERSONATIONS

- In July 2022, pro-Kremlin Telegram accounts disseminated several fake covers of the French satirical weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo, ridiculing Ukrainian President Zelensky, Emmanuel Macron, and Boris Johnson.
- The images, which contain forged content and spoof the media's title, have also circulated in Spanish, Polish and Italian.
- [France 24 Observers](#) noted that fake media covers related to the war in Ukraine have also impersonated German (Stern and Titanic), Spanish (El Jueves), and American (Vogue) media, recalling the modus operandi of the [Doppelganger](#) operation.

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE ON BFM TV

- Suspicions of interference have been raised against a [journalist in charge of the nightly programmes on the news channel BFM TV](#), for broadcasting reports "outside the normal editorial workflow".
- He was broadcasting short (half a minute) reports on contentious international relations issues, which aired at around 2am and had extremely low viewer ratings. The videos were immediately extracted and disseminated by propagator accounts, notably on Twitter.
- He allegedly spread messages in favour of [Morocco and the Sudanese strongman "Hemetti"](#), or [denigrating Qatar](#).

NARRATIVES

The section illustrates the most recurrent narratives in the French disinformation landscape.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- While the pandemic has become an endemic disease, the disinformation it generates in France remains at high levels.
- Many of the narratives related to this crisis are anti-vaccine and conspiratorial (e.g., underestimating the death toll or considering the health crisis a secret project for world depopulation).
- Covid-19 disinformation strongly relies on anti-system discourse. For instance, several media figures from the Yellow vests movement have become pandemic disinformation spreaders.

UKRAINE INVASION

- Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine has started, fact-checkers have debunked many hoaxes. A few pro-Ukrainian ones were reported, especially at the beginning of the war, but the vast majority are pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian.
- A crucial element of Russian propaganda consists of Nazism accusations against Ukrainians. Denialism of war crimes, notably in Boutcha, has been recurrent, doubting the event's reality, scale, or perpetrators.
- During the war, a surprising amount of anti-vaxxers have been actively spreading pro-Russian disinformation.

ECONOMIC AND ENERGY CRISES

- These narratives are intimately linked to the war in Ukraine as the economic and energy crises result from the sanctions brought by the conflict.
- One of the principal hoaxes is the claim that the Russian economy continues to thrive while Western economies sink into the abyss, so as to erode support for popular support towards Ukraine.
- Many of these narratives are meant to promote institutional distrust, e.g., claims that France is poorly managed, experiencing worse inflation and social inequality than other European countries.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL POLARISATION

- In 2022, France held two major elections that confirmed Emmanuel Macron as president, and renewed the parliament, which has now a substantial far-right minority.
- Fact-checkers devoted significant resources to verify candidates' claims during election campaigns. Most of the debunks were on distorted or exaggerated statements rather than outright untruths.
- Conspiratorial "stop the steal" rhetoric was aimed at undermining confidence in the integrity of the vote that took place, but remained confined to the edges of the political spectrum.

COMMUNITY

The main actors countering disinformation in France are described hereafter.

AFP FACTUEL

- Since its launch in 2017, the digital investigation unit of [Agence France Presse](#) (AFP) has grown to become the world's largest network of expert verification journalists.
- To date, AFP has more than 140 fact-checkers in five continents, covering over 30 countries and 24 languages. They are in constant interaction with other journalists in the AFP network.
- As an example, in 2022, more than 1,236 fact-checks (unbiased, didactic, and sourced investigations, including photos, videos, and multiple sources to provide context to content that goes viral) were published, in all languages, on the war in Ukraine alone.

ARCOM

- The "Autorité de régulation de la communication audiovisuelle et numérique" ([Arcom](#)) is the French independent public authority resulting from the merger in 2022 of the "Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel" (CSA) and the "Haute Autorité pour la diffusion des œuvres et la protection des droits sur internet" (Hadopi).
- It is responsible for the allocation of broadcasting licences, the respect of authors' rights and for the implementation of several recent laws, at least in their online part. Those laws include the law against the manipulation of information, the law aiming at fighting against hateful content on the Internet, the law reinforcing the respect of the principles of the Republic, and the law against violence against women.
- It has been approached to be the interlocutor for online platforms for the application of the Digital Services Act (DSA) in France.

CDJM

- The Council for Journalistic Ethics and Mediation ([CDJM](#)) mediates between journalists, media, news agencies and the public on all matters related to journalistic ethics, including factual accuracy.
- Its members are divided into three colleges, equally represented in the governing bodies: journalists, media and the public.
- Any citizen can apply to CDJM, which makes decisions independently political or economic powers.

ENTRE LES LIGNES

- [Entre les lignes](#) is an information and media literacy association (IML) founded in 2010 by a journalist from Agence France-Presse and a former journalist from Reuters.
- The association relies on a network of over 200 volunteer journalists to run workshops in France and abroad.
- Each year, the NGO carries out several hundred interventions involving thousands of young people.

FONDATION DESCARTES

- The [Fondation Descartes](#) is an independent and multidisciplinary research institute dedicated to issues related to information and public debate in the age of the Internet and social networks.
- It has an internal team that develops and conducts research to better understand the processes of production, dissemination, and reception of information.

IFCN

Apart from AFP Factuel, mentioned above, the members of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in France are:

- 20 Minutes Fake off, a subsidiary of the free daily newspaper 20 Minutes;
- Check News/Libération, related to the centre-left daily newspaper Libération;
- France 24 Observers, attached to the overseas public television channel France 24;
- Franceinfo.fr, linked to the state-owned radio consortium Radio France;
- Les Décodeurs/Le Monde, attached to the leading daily newspaper Le Monde;
- Les Surligneurs, an NGO specialised in law-related correction;
- Les Vérificateurs/LCI-TF1, affiliated with the private TV channel TF1 and its news subsidiary.

VIGINUM

- [Viginum](#) is the technical and operational state service responsible for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference.
- This department, created in July 2021, is attached to the General Secretariat for Defence and National Security (SGDSN).
- Viginum's missions are to detect and characterise any phenomenon of suspicious propagation of misleading or hostile content on digital platforms involving foreign actors intending to harm France and its interests.
- Viginum has an ethical and scientific committee, and its mandate is strictly regulated by law.

POLICY

- The [29 July 1881 law on the freedom of the press](#) defines the rights and responsibilities of the media in France. It imposes a legal framework on all publications, public posting, hawking and street vending. It has since been extended to include offences, defamation, and racist statements.
- This law already envisions false news (Article 27), but it is rarely applied for fear of hindering freedom of expression. The “false news” that is generally prosecuted relates to the stock market law (Article L. 465-1 of the Monetary and Financial Code) and the integrity of a vote (Article L. 97 of the Electoral Code).
- [Law No. 2004-575 of 21 June 2004](#) on the confidence in the digital economy defines the responsibilities of hosts of online public information services, particularly the conditions under which they can be condemned for failing to remove illegal content.
- [Law No. 2010-1 of 4 January 2010](#) on the protection of the secrecy of journalists’ sources determines that “the secrecy of sources may only be directly or indirectly infringed if there is an overriding public interest in doing so, and if the measures envisaged are strictly necessary and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued”.
- [Law No. 2018-1202 of 22 December 2018](#) on the manipulation of information aims to better protect democracy against false information that could distort the integrity of a vote. It applies to platforms with more than 5 million unique visitors per month or receiving 100 euros excluding tax per advertising campaign, for each publication containing information related to a debate of general interest. During the three months preceding a national election, summary legal action is possible to rapidly interrupt the broadcasting of a publication. The necessary conditions are that the false news is obvious, massively and artificially disseminated, and likely to disturb the public order or the integrity of an election. The interim relief judge has 48 hours to rule on the nature of the information and possibly order its removal. The law provides for a duty of cooperation from platforms.
- Other laws worth mentioning are [Law No. 2010-1 of 4 January 2010](#) on the protection of the secrecy of journalists’ sources, and [Law No. 2022-401 of 21 March 2022](#) aimed at improving the protection of whistle-blowers.

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