



Executive Summary

In times of a pandemic, what harm can social media posts actually cause? During Covid-19, it seems they can actually do quite a lot. From messages arguing that bleach can cure Covid-19 to ones that show the weaknesses of the West in dealing with the crisis, some of the information circulating on social media

has been problematic to governments and sanitary organizations.

Whilst more efforts are needed on the part of platforms to deal with illegal and dangerous information, and to reduce amplification mechanisms, public authorities also need to raise their awareness of the interest online communities have in hostile narratives.

Methodology

With the help of Linkfluence, a French media monitoring and web analysis startup, 37 messages related to Covid-19 were selected and grouped by theme. Their circulation within 6 thematic communities from December 1 2019 to April 30 2020 was then analyzed.

How we identified messages

Our selection of messages is based on existing studies led by fact-checking organizations as well as research in the field of information manipulation. For each message, keywords were identified and then searched for in online discussions on Twitter and on Facebook's public pages.

How we identified discussion groups in which these messages circulate

30,000 online posts and articles in the public domain were found mentioning these messages. 6 groups of influencers sharing the information were created, based on both explicit information (a declarative statement in the description of a Twitter account) and implicit information (online practices, particularly sharing certain types of sources).

A word of caution

The results below and in our study indicate a community's interest, not belief, in the debate surrounding a message: this study looks at the presence of messages in French online communities. When following disinformation pieces, articles that debunk them are often present in the corpus.

Narratives and disinformation do not circulate evenly online

Our mapping shows that **the sharing of information and disinformation is always political**: information, whether true or false, only circulates in communities that are interested in it. Consequently, actors can take advantage of events such as the Covid-19 crisis to draft messages that meet these interests and serve political goals. More than a creator of disinformation, the pandemic has catalyzed information creation on specific topics.

The influencers that gather around themes associated with the far-right are **the most sensitive to messages that both promote authoritative regimes and show Europe's weaknesses**. In parallel, these influencers were the most interested in most pieces of disinformation and conspiracy theories we looked at (concerning 5G or the fact that Agnès Buzyn, former Health Minister, and her husband, Yves Lévy, former chair of the national health research center Inserm, plotted to wreck Professor Raoult's work on chloroquine).

The influencers that gather around themes associated with the far-left are **relatively immune to overt pro-authoritarian narratives. They will be more interested in reading about Europe's weaknesses**. They are also more interested in pieces of disinformation and conspiracy theories that concern corporations and include an economic dimension.

Finally, our study shows that the influencers that gather around technology and health issues are **relatively impermeable to narratives that do not concern them directly**. The messages that interest these influencers are tailored to their themes (non-medical cures, 5G...).

France was relatively immune to international conspiracy theories

Messages such as the ones accusing Bill Gates of having created the coronavirus were largely absent from the discussions we looked at in France, though they were successful in the United States.

Our study suggests that, as of today, language remains a safety net concerning foreign disinformation. This is coherent with previous findings by the French IRSEM on the "#Macron leaks" operation, which showed that extremist groups in Russia and the United States posted English content in French discussion groups, hindering their circulation. Overall, despite the European Union bringing to light information manipulation operations coming from China during the Covid-19 crisis, we found fewer occurrences of French messages promoting China, compared to messages promoting Russia. It is possible that China-related actors still mainly operate in English.

Fact checking: a challenge for traditional media

Fake cures or dangerous information regarding the virus (including, for example, the idea that bleach is a remedy) were largely absent from Twitter and Facebook. It could be that this information spread mostly on messaging services such as Whatsapp or Telegram. This may be a particularity in the French context, as ISD has identified significant sharing of fake cures in English on social media, notably the harmful assertion that colloidal silver can help “resolve” coronavirus.

The absence of such messages on social media raises the difficult question of the media’s role in covering disinformation. By warning against the circulation of a piece of disinformation, media organizations can play a significant role in making it visible. This can be illustrated through the 5G misinformation, whereby an interview of French virologist Luc Montagnier on April 17 by a French media, during which Mr. Montagnier stated that 5G frequencies may have contributed to the spread of the virus, has generated active debates online.

In a world of online influence and manipulations, governments, researchers and platforms are part of the solution

Most government initiatives in France and from social media platforms have focused on sharing reliable information on the virus. This is a necessary step, however it is not a sufficient response to foreign interference. In parallel to encouraging platforms to take more action and delete illegal and dangerous content, public authorities also need to raise their awareness of the interest online communities have in hostile narratives.

Three dimensions are therefore crucial to ensuring that democratic societies develop their understanding of the challenges ahead, and learn to live in a world of online influence and manipulations:

- 1) Governments** need to recognize this challenge as a priority area, by continuing to make accessible and feature reliable information on issues of public health, pushing and supporting authoritative institutions to get their message out in the most transparent, accessible and compelling ways for everyone in the digital era, and in coordination with the press and civil society when relevant. However, there is also a need to create new regulation to open up channels of communication between platforms and governments, to incentivize companies to share information, and to require more transparency from platforms, including through audit mechanisms.
- 2) Researchers** need to have access to more data from online platforms to understand the fragilities of public debates and the extent to which they are exploited by foreign actors. The real-time reporting on disinformation and polarization campaigns, their

actors, and their tactics to target specific vulnerable groups, to disrupt democratic processes and information mechanisms, and to sow discord and distrust in public institutions, is essential to helping governments understand the scope of the challenge and to make communication infrastructures a priority in State-level relations.

- 3) Online intermediary platforms** must be responsible for prioritising authoritative information and sources, deplatforming malign ones, and down-ranking and clearly labelling misinformation. New regulation should lead them to undertake robust and transparent research that informs the design of products and effective moderation systems that balance privacy, safety and freedom of expression.