Information Manipulations Around Covid-19: France Under Attack

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About ISD
The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent nonprofit organisation dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising global tide of hate, extremism and polarisation. We draw on fifteen years of experience to combine sector-leading expertise in global extremist movements with advanced digital analysis of disinformation and weaponised hate to deliver innovative, tailor-made policy and operational responses to these threats. Our team offers policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world and empowers youth and community influencers through our extensive and pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.
There is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge

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On 10th June, the European Commission published its Communication on disinformation related to the Covid-19 crisis, urging platforms to do more to combat fake content online. Indeed, as Covid-19 was spreading around the world, it was accompanied by a multiplicity of rumors, disinformation and misinformation pieces as well as conspiracy theories that fed public debates everywhere.

France was not immune to this phenomenon: here as well, the Covid-19 pandemic entered, in different shapes and forms, French discussion groups and communities. Institut Montaigne and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue decided to look at the circulation of different narratives and pieces of disinformation in French discussion groups during the pandemic, and analyze the porosity between discussion topics in France: Does a disinformation piece on migrants travel to anti-technology and nationalist discussions? Does a message promoting China’s response to the crisis travel to discussions linked to the Yellow Vest movement - the French protest movement that started in October 2018? With the help of Linkfluence, a French media monitoring and digital analysis startup, 37 messages related to Covid-19 were selected, and their circulation within six thematic communities from 1st December 2019 to 30th April 2020 was then analyzed.

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. In this sense, this paper highlights the fragilities of French public spaces online: groups that are interested in messages that defend authoritarian regimes and weaken Europe, and that share disinformation on the French government’s response are possible entry points for foreign and domestic actors wishing to influence French politics.

Despite the actions being taken by social media platforms, governments and supra-national organizations, disinformation remains visible online. This has led the European Commission to ask platforms to take significant action against disinformation, leaving foreign influence messages based on worldviews (that are neither false nor illegal) online. As the recent decision by the French Constitutional Council, the highest French legal authority, to revoke France’s hate speech law’s central section shows there is a need for action.

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1 The hate speech law’s 1st article forced platforms to delete “manifestly illegal” hate speech signaled by users within 24 hours of notice. The law also asked to remove terrorist content and child pornography within one hour following an administrative order from police.
METHODOLOGY

How we identified messages

Our selection of messages is based on existing studies led by fact-checking organizations (such as Le Monde, Agence France Presse, the World Health Organization or the EUvsDisinfo platform from the European External Action Service) as well as research in the field of information manipulation (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, EUvsDisinfo, First Draft). In total, 37 messages were selected and grouped by theme. For each message, keywords were identified and then searched for in online discussions on Twitter and public Facebook pages. The list of messages is non-exhaustive; it seeks to include the main narratives surrounding the Covid-19 crisis.

How we identified discussion groups in which these messages circulate

With the help of Linkfluence, a French media monitoring and digital analysis startup, 30,000 online posts and articles were found mentioning these 37 messages. Linkfluence then looked at the actors who shared these pieces of information. Six groups of influencers 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). In other words, Linkfluence would start by identifying influencers identifying themselves as “nationalists” or “anti-technology” before pooling together highly visible users sharing posts from these influencers, as well as articles from sources often quoted by them. In this way, Linkfluence created a list of influencers and highly visible accounts that serve as a sample for the communities below.

The communities below are not exhaustive and do not give a full picture of the French public debates. They were selected because they were the most visible communities relaying information on the messages identified.

The 6 discussion communities are the ones that present themselves as:

- Nationalists: using keywords such as “patriot”, “nationalist”, “Rassemblement National”;

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2 The list of 37 messages can be found in Appendix 1.
3 Rassemblement National is a French far-right party led by Marine Le Pen.
COVID-19: A CONVENIENT PRETEXT FOR AUTHORITARIANS AND ANTI-EUROPEANS

Pro-authoritarian narratives are very successful in nationalist and Yellow Vest communities

We find occurrences of messages defending or promoting China, Russia or other authoritarian regimes, in general in a number of thematic communities that take part in French public debates over Covid-19. These messages are representative of worldviews and are not necessarily disinformation content. For example, they include the argument that China saved Europe by exporting masks, that Russia played a key role in slowing the spread of the virus in Italy, or that only authoritarian states will be able to protect their populations from the coronavirus and future pandemics.

“The Russian army will start to send medical aid on Sunday in Italy to help the country fight the coronavirus pandemic thanks to a demand from President Vladimir Poutine 🇷🇺 🇹🇮.”
Post from a public Facebook page with 870,000 followers

These messages have had a strong echo in communities that often share information from influencers and sources that present themselves as nationalists, anti-Islam or belonging to the Yellow Vests movement. This is particularly true of the messages that praise Russia, which represent 15%, 12% and 10% of messages in each community respectively. These narratives are less present, but noticeable, in communities that tend to present themselves as naturalists (which include actors that are against vaccinations): the messages that praise Russia represent 7% of the messages in this group; the ones that promote the Chinese system represent 2% of all messages in this group.

If this analysis raises the question of a foreign presence in these discussions, our analysis should not be interpreted as proof of such a presence in French debates. Rather, we argue that, because these communities have an interest in authoritarian arguments, they are a possible entry point for foreign actors who wish to heighten tensions in France.

A word of caution

The figures below 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 content, articles that debunk them are often present in the corpus.

Anti-Islam: using keywords such as “anti-Islam”, racial slurs, or insulting Islam and Muslims;

The Yellow Vests movement: using keywords such as “Yellow Vests” or including a profile picture referring to the movement;

Anti-technology: using keywords such as “anti-technology”, “anti-5G”, “Linky meters”;

Naturalists: using keywords such as “anti-vaccine”, “homeopathie”, “natural”, sharing information against processed food products and pharmaceutical companies;

Anti-capitalists: using keywords such as “anti-capitalism”, “alter-globalization” (“altermondialisme”), “far left”, “France Insoumise”, “French Communist Party”.

4 The Yellow Vests is a French protest movement that started in October 2018. Read Institut Montaigne’s article on the movement here: https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/yellow-vest-protesters-tip-french-social-crisis
5 The Linky meters, which measure and share information on electrical consumption in French households, were the source of intense debates online.
6 France insoumise is a French far-left party led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon.
Pro-Russia narratives are more present than pro-China narratives

Overall, pro-Russia narratives are more present than pro-China narratives. This can partly be explained by Russia’s more aggressive interventions in political discussions abroad, as argued by French researchers Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer. However, it should be noted that the gap seems to be decreasing between the two countries. In its 10th June communication, the European Commission officially named China as an actor spreading falsehoods online, based on the work conducted by the European External Action Service (EEAS). Similarly, the Alliance for Securing Democracy has reported on the creation of disinformation content by Chinese actors in its Hamilton Weekly Report: June 6-12, 2020.

Overall, to date, it seems that Chinese actors spread disinformation mostly in English. Foreign languages are often a barrier to international disinformation campaigns. During the 2017 French presidential election, one of the reasons for the relative failure of campaigns emerging from the American alt-right and Russia was that neither were competent enough in French to successfully enter French communities.

Nationalist, anti-capitalist and anti-Islam communities are the most sensitive to anti-European narratives

The communities that share information on Russia and China do not systematically share anti-European messages. The communities that are the most sensitive to critical narratives towards Europe are communities gathered around nationalist, anti-Islam and anti-capitalist interests. These messages also caught attention, but to a lesser extent, in the Yellow Vests community.

“#Italy must be getting the #EU exit paperwork ready as soon as the #coronavirus pandemic ends. Europe is a complete fiasco, a bureaucratic dictatorship as much useless as it is costly. No one helped them, Chinese were more generous! #Italexit #Frexit”
Post from a Twitter user with 24,000 followers

Overall, anti-capitalist and anti-Islam communities seem to be more interested in anti-European than in pro-authoritarian messages. The anti-capitalist community, which is very interested in anti-European messages, relays significantly less information regarding the way China or Russia handled the crisis compared to the other groups.

It is worth noting that the anti-technology community is the most immune to both anti-European and pro-authoritarian narratives. The naturalist community remains sensitive to messages defending or promoting Russia, but not the rest.

9 Original tweet in French: “#Italie doit certainement préparer les papiers de sortie de l’UE dès la fin de l’épidémie de #Coronavirus. L’Europe est un fiasco intégral, une dictature bureaucratique aussi inutile que ruineuse. Personne ne les a aidés, les Chinois ont été plus généreux! #Italexit #Frexit”
5G AND FRENCH BUSINESS AND POLITICS CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE THE MOST PRESENT

5G messages are the most present in anti-technology and naturalist communities, but also in the Yellow Vests and anti-capitalist ones

Amongst the conspiracy theories concerning the virus, the one claiming that 5G favors the spread of Covid-19 is the most represented in our discussion communities. The 5G topic received a lot of attention worldwide. In France, the topic was discussed after attacks occurred on 5G masts in the United Kingdom, as reported by The Guardian at the beginning of April. Therefore, a significant part of the French messages caught by Linkfluence relay information on the UK situation. Specific to France, the 17th April CNews interview of French virologist Luc Montagnier, who stated that 5G frequencies may have contributed to the spread of the virus, has fueled debates.

Overall, several theories and types of content related to 5G circulated from 1st December 2019 to 30th April 2020:

- the idea that the 60 GHz frequency used by 5G technologies modifies oxygen and further weakens people with diseases;
- the idea, based on Ukrainian and Russian studies, that 5G weakens human immune systems;
- world maps showing the correlation between countries that have started 5G experiments and countries that were hit by coronavirus;
- the idea that the government is taking advantage of the Covid-19 crisis to move faster on 5G development.

These messages were mostly visible in the community that identifies as anti-Islam (it represents 37% of all messages posted by the community), and the ones that identify as nationalist (25%) or belonging to the Yellow Vests movement (24%). Comparatively, neither the anti-technology community nor the naturalist community seems interested in the debate, which represent 2% and 9% of all messages in each discussion group respectively.

The communities that are the most interested in the messages around 5G identify themselves as being anti-technology (66% of all messages) or naturalist (42%). The theory has also sparked interest in other groups, such as the Yellow Vests (20%) and anti-capitalist (16%) communities.

"CORONAVIRUS + VACCINES + CHEMTRAILS + 5G = DEPOPULATION" 11
Post from a public Facebook page with 11,000 followers

Anti-Islam, nationalist and Yellow Vest communities are most interested in disinformation about the French government; anti-capitalists in theories against pharmaceuticals companies

The message ranked in second place in terms of quantity of articles and posts generated in our corpus concerns the former Health Minister Agnès Buzyn and her actions to delegitimize Professor Didier Raoult, who promotes the use of Hydroxychloroquine as a cure to Covid-19 in France. Two main narratives emerged:

- the idea that Agnès Buzyn and her husband Yves Lévy, former chair of the national health research center Inserm, had interests in preventing Hydroxychloroquine from reaching the market;
- the idea that Agnès Buzyn forbade the sale of Hydroxychloroquine.

“Covid-19 is best described by the disease called : Covid-5G Hypertoxicity Syndrome” 10
Post from a public Facebook page with 6,000 followers

In 2018 Didier Raoult highlighted the existence of an old dispute with the Health Minister’s husband, CEO of Inserm (public research organization in France), Yves Lévy, concerning the IHU model. Macron-ian conflicts of interest at the heart of the #chloroquinegate?” 12
Post from a Twitter account with 56,000 followers

10 Original tweet in French: “COVID-19 se décrit mieux par le nouveau nom de maladie suivant: Syndrome d’hypertoxicité COVID-5G”
11 Original tweet in French: “LE CORONAVIRUS + LES VACCINATIONS + LES CHEMTRAILS + LA 5G = LA DEPOPULATION”
12 Original tweet in French: “En 2018 Didier Raoult fait état d’un conflit ancien avec le mari de la ministre, par ailleurs PDG de l’Inserm, Yves Lévy, sur le modèle des IHU. Les conflits d’intérêt de la macronie au cœur du #chloroquinegate?”
The community that identifies as anti-capitalist stands in the middle, with 15% of all messages related to the disinformation concerning Agnès Buzyn. However, they are the most interested in messages that concern the government in general, including disinformation about staff working in French nursing homes leaving, which together represent 13% of their messages. They are also the community that has shared messages arguing that pharmaceutical companies are taking advantage of the crisis to sell more vaccines.

Other conspiracy theories and disinformation are less present

Amongst the remaining disinformation messages, the most prevalent in the discussion communities are the ones concerning migrants (the idea that migrants are spreading the virus), French Muslim and African populations (the idea that they have special quarantine rules), and, in general, foreigners (the idea that they regularly attack police officers). Such xenophobic messages were mostly found, although in smaller proportions than previous messages, in the communities presenting themselves as being nationalist, anti-Islam or belonging to the Yellow Vests movement.

"Incredible: some muslims health workers refuse to wash hands with alcoholic-based solutions! They are crazy #COVID-19 #lockdownday7"  
Post from a Twitter account with 6,500 followers

The messages presenting cures to Covid-19, including dangerous information, such as the suggestion that bleach or cocaine are remedies, and fake cures, such as the use of heat, zinc or blue cheese as protection from the virus, were mostly present, although in very small proportions, in the naturalist community. This is similar to what was observed by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in the 27th March briefing on disinformation related to the Covid-19.

The messages accusing the United States of having created the virus, involving Bill Gates, or presenting Covid-19 as a conspiracy against Donald Trump, were mostly absent from French online discussions on Twitter and Facebook. This sits in stark contrast to online discussions in other contexts. For example, in the US, conspiracy theories blaming Bill Gates and other “global elites” for the spread of coronavirus are prevalent in fringe discussions monitored by ISD. While these anti-elite narratives are longstanding, the extent to which coronavirus has dominated these discussions marks a notable shift.

Some pieces of disinformation are not present on French social networks but remain highly visible in the French media

There are several hypotheses to explain why the conspiracy theory accusing Bill Gates of having created the virus are mostly absent from French social media. The first is that conspiracy theories are very often adapted to a local context. This would help explain why messages specific to France, such as the one concerning the Lévy/Buzyn couple, were more successful. The second is that social media companies have taken action to remove disinformation content, making it difficult to evaluate the reach of pieces of disinformation when they appear. Unfortunately, civil society and governments still have too little information regarding which content is removed and why, and to date this cannot be verified.

Other disinformation, such as fake cures or dangerous information regarding the virus (including the idea that bleach is a remedy) were largely absent from Twitter and Facebook. It could be that this disinformation spread mostly on messaging services such as WhatsApp or Telegram. This may be specific to 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.

Overall, 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 disinformation narratives, media organizations can play a significant role in making them more visible. More than ever, disinformation content has been amplified in France. French television media, with audiences reaching 6 million viewers, have been covering the spread of disinformation, such as the concerning or outright dangerous fake cures to Covid-19. Similarly, our study shows that the only occurrences of messages such those spread by the Chinese Ambassador in French, arguing that French staff in nursing homes left, or that Institut Pasteur created the virus, came mostly from fact checkers and dedicated articles in traditional media that circulated on social media.
OFFICIAL REACTIONS TO THE “INFODEMIC”

Public authorities’ reaction: Government, European Union and International organizations

Faced with the growth of disinformation on social media, public authorities and governments have taken action to make authoritative information more visible. To them, the question of how to react to problematic content circulating online is difficult: taking action against misinformation risks limiting freedom of expression, yet allowing false information or hostile narratives to circulate online may pose a threat to national or citizens’ security. Caught between the two, public authorities have attempted to find a middle ground by increasing access to verified information.

In mid-April, the French government added a subsection to their dedicated coronavirus information webpage, compiling selected news outlets that were conducting fact checks. This initiative however caused a backlash due to its infringement of freedom of the press and of their independence from public authorities, bringing to light another challenge when trying to intervene on issues related to freedom of expression. Shortly after, the page was deleted. The French Health Ministry also set up a task force to promote authoritative content, in contact with a diverse network of experts that work with the Ministry.

International organizations also reacted. The WHO stood out on February 2020 by shedding light on a neologism created in 2003 for the SARS “infodemic”. On a concrete level, the UN and the WHO organized a thorough response to the spread of misinformation through enhancing access to authoritative information. A “myth busters” page was created, key partnerships with platforms such as WhatsApp or Rakuten Viber were put in place, and webinars on disinformation organized in order to increase the reach of verified information.

Platforms

Major technology companies have introduced a series of responses to the Covid-19 ‘infodemic’ from March to May 2020. These platforms have been forced to mobilize at speed, trialling policies and enforcement approaches that can meet such a challenge, while balancing the need to prevent the spread of viral disinformation with the protection of free expression. ISD conducted an assessment of the approaches employed to date by Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Google and YouTube, including specific services and policies introduced in recent months and, where possible, the accompanying rationale from companies themselves.

Such measures included:

» Covid-19 information hubs that share verified updates from sources like the World Health Organization (WHO), Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and national health ministries, including guidance tailored by geography;

» Partnerships with independent fact-checking networks such as Poynter IFCN to verify or debunk claims around the pandemic;

» Labelling, downranking and/or removing content flagged as false or misleading by experts;

» Official health alerts prompted by ‘coronavirus’ and related search terms;

» Prohibiting ads that aim to profit from the pandemic, including inflated prices for Personal Protective Equipment and unproven remedies, diagnostic tests or cures;

» Updated moderation policies to cover broadened definitions of ‘harm’, including content that contradicts public health guidance, creates panic based on fake claims, impersonates government officials, circulates unverified advice, and/or promotes scapegoating of certain groups;

14 This dilemma has led to the decision from the French Conseil Constitutionnel given on June 18th 2020 concerning the law against hateful content on the Internet (also known as Loi Avia), to revoke its 1st article, which forced platforms to delete “manifestly illegal” hate speech signaled by users within 24 hours of notice, and asked to remove terrorist content and child pornography within one hour following an administrative order from police.

15 https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-first-100-days/
Free advertising credits for government and multilateral public health bodies, to increase the visibility of key guidance and updates.

In order to evaluate the impact of these measures, evidence was compiled from ISD’s own research and a wide range of civil society, academic and trusted media sources. Although it is not specific to France, the collected evidence indicates that overall these efforts have failed to stem the tide of disinformation, weaponized hate, profiteering, conspiracy theories and other harmful behaviors surrounding the pandemic.

The assessment found a continual disconnect between the formulation and intent of new policies, and their comprehensive enforcement on and across platforms. False and misleading content around Covid-19 is still widely circulated, despite being flagged by experts. Extremists from across the ideological spectrum are hijacking Covid-19 content to spread their message, from the far-right to Islamist terrorist groups. Automated and inauthentic accounts are promoting Covid-19 disinformation and the related policy agendas of foreign states. Both Google and Facebook continue to host advertisements banned under their new Covid-19 guidelines.

Social media platforms are faced with an unprecedented challenge to which no-one has a clear answer. However, whilst disinformation cannot be fully removed from online spaces, more can be done to address the issue, including the increase of transparency to foster joint efforts between platforms, governments and civil society. It should be noted that without better access to data and insight on companies’ decisionmaking systems, both human- and machine-led, it is not possible to determine with certainty why some areas of policy appear more effective or better enforced than others. The examples of disinformation used in the assessment were exposed despite minimal data access. Despite the reliance of these conclusions on some element of extrapolation and inference, these cases likely represent a very small proportion of the true scale of the problem on these platforms.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 information crisis is not merely a reminder about the need for ongoing vigilance on disinformation and foreign interference, nor is it specific to health misinformation. It’s a sign that we must urgently build policy frameworks that control and mitigate the risks the Internet is posing to our information ecosystem and democratic societies.

Overall, our study finds that:

- The influencers that gather around far-right themes (“nationalists” or “anti-Islam”) are the most sensitive to messages that both promote authoritative regimes and show Europe’s weaknesses. We suggest that those are clearly identified targets for foreign actors. In parallel, these communities were the most interested in the pieces of disinformation and conspiracy theories we looked at. Interestingly, the community centered on the Yellow Vest movement, which started as a non-partisan social protest, also falls into this category.

- The influencers that gather around themes associated with far-left themes (“anti-capitalists”) 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 impermeable to narratives that do not concern them directly. The messages that interest these communities are tailored to their themes.

Information, whether true or false, mostly circulates in communities that are interested in it. This has consequences for the way public actors and platforms consider content moderation. The fact that actors can take advantage of events such as the Covid-19 crisis to craft messages that meet these interests and serve political goals is a concern for governments. This is legitimate, and actions must be taken to reinforce the West’s position in the information contest. But these actions must go beyond content itself, since deleting content fails to address the interest French and Western citizens have in such narratives. They should focus on fundamentally rethinking the relationship between regulators and platforms to better understand the fragilities of public debates, and fully consider communication infrastructures and security in geopolitical strategies.

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16 This is argued by Laura Rosenberger, Director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy.
These unprecedented times have exposed that the information playing field is not level, and force us to find new analytical resources and response mechanisms. 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. Overall, a lot of progress has already been made across these sectors, with increased investment in multi-stakeholders’ efforts to reverse the dynamic and “fix the internet” either through regulatory, technological, advocacy or educational approaches. Examples include the EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech, the EU Code of practice on disinformation, the French and German laws on content, or the UK online harms white paper.

However, policy approaches remain fragmented and lack harmonization at the supra-national level, between sectors or even between ministries and departments within governments. Most importantly, most of these approaches have focused on removing content from platforms, and finding legitimate criteria to do so. Our study shows that many narratives that can be used to weaken Western democracies would not be considered illegal, or in contravention of a platform’s terms of service. Pro-authoritarian and anti-European narratives are successful because Western citizens are interested in them. They are a challenge that France and other democracies have to face, and will continue to face.

It is not our ambition to share a comprehensive list of recommendations. Instead, we will highlight three key dimensions to ensure that democratic societies continue to develop their understanding of the challenges ahead, to successfully navigate 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.
APPENDIX 1

THE 37 MESSAGES OBSERVED IN THIS STUDY

Pro-authoritarian narratives

Promoting Russia
1) Unlike Russia, Western Democracies provide coronavirus assistance to gain political benefits
2) Russian aid played a key role in slowing spread of covid-19 in Italy

Russia as a victim
3) Western backed anti-government forces use the Covid-19 crisis to destabilize Russia
4) Poland did not let the Russian planes delivering aid to Italy cross its air space

Promoting China
5) China’s political system prevails over the EU in the fight against Covid-19
6) China is saving Europe by exporting masks

China as a victim
7) Covid-19 was created by the USA to weaken China

Authoritarian interpretations
8) Coronavirus pandemic is exaggerated in order to turn countries into fascist hygiene dictatorships
9) Under the guise of force majeure Germany and EU became autocratic

Anti-Europe narratives

Weakness of the European Union
10) Italy has been left alone by the EU member states in the face of the pandemic
11) EU has failed Greece, Spain (economically) and now Italy (coronavirus)
12) The EU only cares for profits and money

The end of the European project
13) The coronavirus leads to the end of the EU

Anti-liberal messages
14) Only authoritarian states and closed societies will be able to protect their populations from the coronavirus and from future pandemics
15) Coronavirus exposes the weaknesses of European humanism
16) The global liberal world has collapsed

French conspiracy theories

Chloroquine - Buzin/Lévy
17) The couple Buzyn/Lévy wrecked Pr. Raoult’s work and is against the use of chloroquine / Agnès Buzyn has forbidden the free sale of chloroquine in the middle of a pandemic
Government and business

France and the government

18) France spends fifty times more for the defence sector than for health
19) Empty hospitals in France show that the government is lying about the gravity of coronavirus
20) The state validated a medical protocol using Plaquenil
21) Staff in nursing homes vacated their job during the crisis

Pharmaceutical companies

22) Pharmaceutical and food industries are using the panic to sell vaccines and push towards consumption

5G

5G

23) Correlation between 5G deployment and the pandemic

Health

Chinese bioweapon

24) Covid-19 is a Chinese bioweapon

Dangerous information

25) Bleach, alcohol, cocaine can cure coronavirus
26) Washing hands is useless

Fake cures

27) Zinc, heat, tea, roquefort, kill coronavirus

Others (found in very small proportions)

Xenophobia

28) Migrants are spreading the virus
29) Muslim and African populations have specific quarantine rules
30) Foreigners do not abide by the lock down rules and are attacking law enforcement agencies

Institut Pasteur (a French medical foundation)

31) The coronavirus was created by the Institut Pasteur

Responsibility of the United States

32) The coronavirus creator is American and has been arrested
33) Covid-19 brings attention to secret US laboratories in the border of China and Russia
34) The US created the virus back in 2015

Anti-elites, including Bill Gates

35) Bill Gates is behind the coronavirus
36) The rich have a cure

Conspiracies against Trump

37) Covid-19 is a deep state plot against Trump
APPENDIX 2

THE MESSAGES IN FRENCH THEMATIC COMMUNITIES

The tables below show the percentages of messages posted by the six communities that belong to the various themes identified. The tables should be read, for example, “of all the messages in our corpus posted by the French nationalist community, 2% promote China’s handling of the crisis”. The percentages can add up to more than 100% over the two tables (for example, the sum of all percentages over the two tables for the French nationalist community is 105%). This is because one message can belong to two categories (for example, one message can include keywords that are related to the promotion of Russia and to Europe’s weaknesses).

Table 1: Pro-authoritarian and anti-European narratives in French thematic communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro-authoritarian narratives</th>
<th>French nationalist</th>
<th>Anti-Islam</th>
<th>Yellow Vests</th>
<th>Anti-technology</th>
<th>Naturalist</th>
<th>Anti-capitalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Russia</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia as a victim</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting China</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China as a victim</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian interpretations</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-Europe narratives</th>
<th>French nationalist</th>
<th>Anti-Islam</th>
<th>Yellow Vests</th>
<th>Anti-technology</th>
<th>Naturalist</th>
<th>Anti-capitalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe’s weaknesses</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The end of the European project</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-liberal messages</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Read “of all the messages in our corpus posted by the French nationalist community, 2% promote China’s handling of the crisis”.

Table 2: Disinformation and conspiracy theories in French thematic communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>French nationalist</th>
<th>Anti-Islam</th>
<th>Yellow Vests</th>
<th>Anti-technology</th>
<th>Naturalist</th>
<th>Anti-capitalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French conspiracy theories</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government and business</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceuti-cal companies</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5G</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese bioweapon</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous information</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake cures</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (found in very small proportions)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xenophobia</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institut Pasteur</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility of the United States</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-elites, including Bill Gates</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conspiracies against Trump</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Read “of all the messages in our corpus posted by the French nationalist community, 2% were disinformation on France and the government”.

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### Table 3: A comparison of the circulation of messages in French communities, ratios

The table shows the spread of each disinformation message through various communities. Here, compared to the former tables, the community that shared a particular message in the highest percentage becomes a reference (100%). For the same message, ratios are made in comparison to that highest percentage. The table thus offers an overview of which group engages more with particular topics, in comparison to other communities. For example, in the former tables, messages promoting Russia represent 15% of messages shared by influencers claiming to be French nationalists. In this table, because 15% is the highest percentage for that particular message, it becomes the reference (100%). Other percentages for that particular message are calculated compared to that reference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influenceurs claiming to be...</th>
<th>French nationalist</th>
<th>Anti-Islam</th>
<th>Yellow Vests</th>
<th>Anti-technology</th>
<th>Naturalist</th>
<th>Anti-capitalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-authoritarian narratives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Russia</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia as a victim</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting China</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China as a victim</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian interpretations</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French conspiracy theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloroquine and the Buzyn-Lévy conspiracy</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Europe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe’s weaknesses</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The end of the European project</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-liberal messages</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix 2: The Messages in French Thematic Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencers claiming to be...</th>
<th>Government and business</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Others (found in very small proportions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>France and the government</td>
<td>Pharmaceuti-cal companies</td>
<td>Chinese bioweapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The opinions expressed in this policy paper are not necessarily those of the above-mentioned persons or of the institutions that they represent.

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• Résidences Seniors : une alternative à développer (décembre 2015)
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ALLIANZ
ALVAREZ & MARSAL FRANCE
AMAZON WEB SERVICES
AMBER CAPITAL
AMUNDI
ARCHERY STRATEGY CONSULTING
ARCHIMED
ARDAN
ASTORC
ASTRAZENECA
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AVRIL
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Information Manipulations Around Covid-19: France Under Attack

The Covid-19 sanitary crisis was accompanied by a multiplicity of rumors, disinformation and misinformation pieces as well as conspiracy theories online. However, have these messages circulated evenly across the web? To answer this question, Institut Montaigne and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue investigated the circulation of different narratives and pieces of disinformation in French discussion groups, based on data collected by Linkfluence.

The Covid-19 crisis was utilized by various actors to serve pre-existing interests: the successful messages in a given community are those that meet its interests. Whilst language and context remain barriers to entry for the massive circulation of international pieces of disinformation, the interests of French extremist communities in pro-authoritarian and anti-Europe messages brings to light France’s vulnerabilities towards foreign interference in public debates.