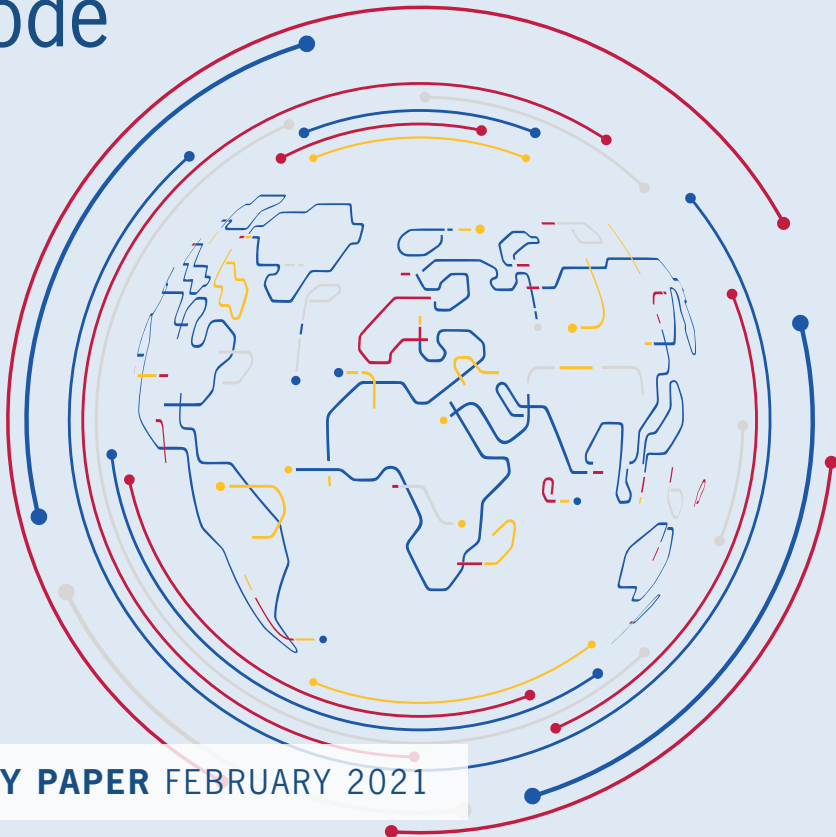


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# State-backed Information Manipulation: The French Node



**POLICY PAPER** FEBRUARY 2021

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# State-backed Information Manipulation: The French Node

POLICY PAPER – FEBRUARY 2021

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*There is no desire more natural  
than the desire for knowledge*

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# SUMMARY

Online information manipulation operations, defined as the transmission of deceiving messages that serve a purpose of the sender, continue to be a growing concern to democracies around the world. The public tends to learn of information operations during their peaks in activity<sup>1</sup> such as crises, protests, or elections. Research has shown that some information operations against various democracies have been growing and forming for up to a decade before they were identified and suspended on social media platforms<sup>2</sup>. In some cases, this long game of information manipulation attempts by state-backed inauthentic accounts has been found to relate to higher degrees of polarization in conversations online<sup>3</sup>, where people's attitudes and opinions diverge toward extremes.

The aim of this research is to establish a lay of the land, by identifying how France has fit into the wider strategies of state-backed information manipulation networks that have been identified and taken down by Twitter since October 2018. We have conducted a broad analysis of all 211 million tweets that Twitter has identified and released as part of their information operation (IO) reporting<sup>4</sup> from 19 countries or groups (see Table 1). France-related content was a small portion of most operations, with the highest percentage of France-related content being 8.6% (amounting to 96,839 tweets) in one Iranian operation, and no more than 1.2% of any entire operation (amounting to 120,706 tweets).

We have conducted further qualitative case studies on five operations that contained over 20,000 France-related tweets and were deemed to be noteworthy by Institut Montaigne experts: Iran, the Internet Research Agency (Russia), Venezuela, Serbia, and Turkey. Noteworthy countries, such as China, were not found to be targeting France in their operations on Twitter, though this finding should not be generalized to other influence methods<sup>5</sup>. Our analysis showed that these countries engaged in community building content before going political, and published tweets that were framed as news headlines to increase the trustworthiness of their messages. We argue that future research should account for these types of apolitical audience building.

1 Conger, K. (2020, June 11). Twitter Removes Chinese Disinformation Campaign. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/technology/twitter-chinese-misinformation.html>

2 Philip Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Lioutsou, John Kelly and Camille François, "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018", Computational Propaganda Research Project, October 2019: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/12/IRA-Report.pdf>

3 J. Gallacher and M. Heerdink, "Measuring the Effect of Russian Internet Research Agency Information Operations in Online Conversations", Defence Strategic Communications, no. 6, Spring 2019: <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/jd-gallacher-m-w-heerdink-measuring-effect-russian-internet-research-agency-information-operations>

4 Twitter Transparency Reports, "Information Operations", 2020: <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/information-operations.html>

5 See: [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438720300065?casa\\_token=AFy7uHf4mBcAAAAA:XI6f6DBRT4LjCUT90-80iZ4vB8Cx5RDvP8ySielBKSPW8Jt58\\_RQVjPJ1S4Qvxh8\\_AzlgqBabg](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438720300065?casa_token=AFy7uHf4mBcAAAAA:XI6f6DBRT4LjCUT90-80iZ4vB8Cx5RDvP8ySielBKSPW8Jt58_RQVjPJ1S4Qvxh8_AzlgqBabg) and <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/technology/russia-troll-farm-election.html>

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1 France found to be a small part of recently-discovered information operations on Twitter

This study set out to understand if France was targeted by recently discovered information operations on Twitter and found that, at most, tweets mentioning French terms and themes comprised no more than 1.2% of any entire operation. That small figure still resulted in over 387,000 tweets that mentioned French themes and terms across 19 information operations, which put out a total of 211 million tweets between 2010 and 2020. When mentioning France, state-backed information operations tended to focus on the following French themes within their wider efforts: French terror attacks, elections, bilateral news and events, and protests.

### 2 Tweets framed as news headlines and France utilized as a topic to increase accounts' trustworthiness and build community

Two key tactics appeared to capture how French themes were mentioned in the wider strategies of the case studies above. **The first tactic was publishing tweets that read like news headlines, possibly to increase the credibility of inauthentic accounts in the operations** (this tactic was used by Iran, the IRA, and Venezuela). **The second tactic was to mention France in uncontroversial, positive, and viral content to appear authentic** (this tactic was used by Serbia and the IRA).

Creating accounts to share disinformation and content that reads as an authoritative news headline is a tactic that has been most notably attributed to the IRA's attempts to infiltrate US political conversation, but Iran and Venezuela also appeared to be using it and using French news as part of their repertoire. Iran and the IRA, as the more prominent employers of this tactic, used it to different ends. Iran, on the one hand, published news-like tweets to promote their own objectives, such as positive and negative bilateral relationships between France and countries they were known to be targeting (such as Saudi Arabia and Israel). The IRA, on the other hand, published

breaking news headlines about several international topics, including French terrorist attacks and elections, for the purpose of fabricating authentic credibility in the US social media conversation through fabricated local American news outlets.

In between spikes of tweeting activity around the key French themes found in this study, Serbian and IRA inauthentic accounts tweeted about uncontroversial and positive content such as French sports and tourism. This content included images of beautiful French towns and nature, as well as content about the 2015 French Open. This observation correlates with other evidence of state-backed groups and media outlets who post uncontroversial and viral content with the intention of building their online communities. While developing their online personas, IRA inauthentic accounts were also found to be retweeting trending hashtags and tweeting about exercise<sup>6</sup>. Serbian accounts were also found to be publishing many tweets about French food and scenery in this present research. These Russian and Serbian examples underscore the general importance of **paying attention to the community building practices of state-backed accounts. This period appears to be a prerequisite for launching state-backed information manipulation operations and a phase of the operations during which French topics came into play.**

### 3 France-related content used mainly to target internal populations

Information operations have been found to target mostly their own (internal) populations, although a small portion of tweets were destined to foreign (external) populations. **French themes were sometimes discussed in French and English, potentially targeting French populations, but a high proportion of French themes were discussed in other languages (Russian, Spanish, Serbian, Turkish).** External targeting (sending tweets in English or French to reach French or English-speaking audiences) was found to cover terrorist attacks, elections, bilateral news and events, and protests. The smaller proportion of French content (22.6% of tweets in the case studies) underscores the fact **that the French language remains a barrier to entry for foreign operations.** The presence of French themed content that is in the native languages of the countries in which many of these information operations originated also brings to question how much these countries wished to influence

6 C. Kriel & A. Pavliuc, "Reverse engineering Russian Internet Research Agency tactics through network analysis", Defence Strategic Communications, no. 6, Spring 2019: <https://stratcomcoe.org/ckriel-apavliuc-reverse-engineering-russian-internet-research-agency-tactics-through-network>

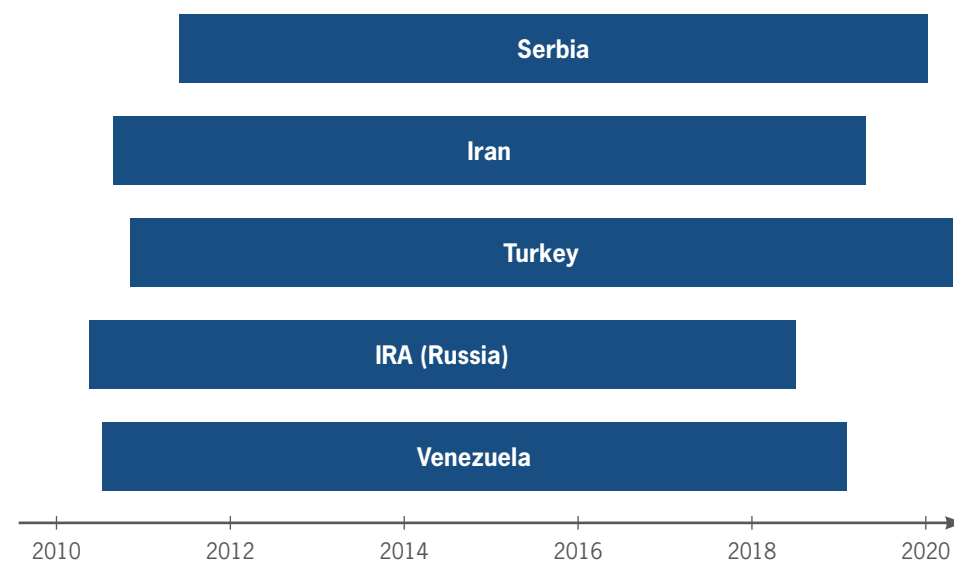
French people regarding their own news and events, or whether they were possibly targeting French people who are fluent and connected online in English.

Studying tweets that mentioned French themes in languages other than French or English was outside the scope of this study, but tweets which mention French themes in other languages may provide insights on if and how information operations change their narratives about international themes in local and international languages. To facilitate further multi-language research on how French themes were mentioned in these information operations, the IDs of the tweets from the above case studies have been consolidated and are available on this report's publication page.

## CASE STUDIES

Case studies were conducted on five countries that each contained more than 20,000 tweets using French keywords in their operations. Each case study gives an overview of the findings for each country, then details the general background information on the entire operation and explains what our research was able to conclude. Each country was found to target France through different tactics, and with varying levels of French and English language targeting.

**Timespan of tweeting activity towards France by Iran, Serbia, Venezuela, the IRA (Russia), and Turkey. All end dates correspond to when Twitter identified and took down the operations.**



## 1 Methods

This study cast a wide net, and analyzed over 211 million tweets that have been identified by Twitter (by their proprietary attribution methodology) to have originated from “state-backed information operations”<sup>7</sup>. The tweets came from 19 countries or state-backed groups, and have been found to be working to influence both their own populations, as well as international ones<sup>8</sup>. To establish how France fitted into these operations, we started with a detailed list of key terms regarding 52 politically relevant events (see Appendix) that occurred in France over the last decade (ie. *Gilets Jaunes* protests, 2017 presidential election), as well as a set of general key terms related to France (ie. city and politician names). We ran our keyword search over the 211 million tweets from 19 information operations, which resulted in a total of 387,039 tweets that pertained to France from all 19 countries.

After drilling down to this subset of France-related tweets, we selected five of the seven countries that tweeted France-related tweets over 20,000 times for case studies. We ran a topic analysis on the French information operations of those five countries in both French and English and organized the main topics into a monthly timeline. We then outlined the main events that appeared to be discussed in the topics (ie. a topic made up of the terms “election, Macron, French” occurring in April 2017 was tagged as a French Election topic). Following this, we recorded the relationships between each country and the main topics they tweeted about (ie. Iran & French Election, Iran & Paris Attacks at Bataclan). Main types of topics were summarized, related to the countries who tweeted about them, and positioned within wider literature on the information manipulation strategies of the five countries.

**Table 1: Number of France-related tweets from each country or state-backed group Twitter has released data on. Countries that are highlighted grey are case studies in this report**

Country/group information operation	Number of tweets containing France-related keywords	Percentage of entire operations
Iran	120,706	1.22 <sup>9</sup>
Venezuela	69,700	0.66
Serbia	52,579	0.12
Turkey	28,617	0.07
Saudi Arabia <sup>10</sup>	23,601	0.45
Internet Research Agency (Russia)	23,120	0.26
Egypt	22,419	0.28
Saudi Arabia + Egypt + UAE	14,878	0.04
China	12,721	0.08
Russia	7,717	0.21
UAE	6,710	0.51
Honduras	2,125	0.18
Ecuador	1,065	0.15
Indonesia	564	0.02
Egypt UAE	308	0.14
Spain	117	0.21
Ghana + Nigeria	49	0.12
Catalonia	32	0.31
Bangladesh	11	0.04

<sup>7</sup> Twitter Blog, “Empowering further research of potential information operations”, 31 January 2019: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/further\\_research\\_information\\_operations.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/further_research_information_operations.html)  
<sup>8</sup> Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, “The Global Disinformation Order – 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation”, Computational Propaganda Research Project, September 2019: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Twitter released data on some of these operations in multiple batches. The October 2018 Iranian data release contained 8.6% France-related tweets.

<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia was excluded to include the Russian IRA dataset as one of the five case studies, as Russia has been found to be involved in the Macron email leaks (see Russian IRA case study).

## 2 Key findings from case studies

Case studies were conducted on information operations that originated in Iran, the IRA (Russia), Venezuela, Serbia, and Turkey. The main French themes, and some specific events, these countries covered were:

- **Terrorist Attacks** in France (covered by all countries)
  - Charlie Hebdo (2015), Paris/Bataclan (2015), Louvre/Machete (2017), Strasbourg Christmas Market (2018)
- **French Elections**, and #MacronLeaks (covered by Iran, the IRA, and Venezuela)
  - The 2017 Presidential election, the past 2012 Presidential election
- **Bilateral Meetings, Visits, Conferences** between French and international politicians (covered by Serbia and Iran)
  - A meeting between Putin and Macron (2017), Netanyahu's visit to France (2018), economic discussions between France and Serbia before the Osaka Summit (2019), Macron's visit to Serbia (2019)
- **Bilateral News** between France and other countries (covered by Iran)
  - France's decision to accept 24,000 refugees (2015), France's attendance of an International Summit Against Extremist Violence (2015)
- **Protests** (covered by Iran and Venezuela)
  - Pro-Palestine protests in Paris (2015), Yellow Vests protests (2018, 2019)

The following is a summary of each of the five country case studies, and how they targeted French themes:

### Iran

The Iranian information operation was backed by the Iranian government and appeared to target France on its own as well as in tandem with other countries that it has been previously found to promote strategic narratives against. These countries included Israel and Saudi Arabia, where Iran tweeted news about bilateral events occurring between them, and France. Tweets containing French keywords made up 8.6% of the first dataset Twitter released on Iranian information operations in 2018. In this dataset, tweets towards French themes were framed as news headlines, and some stories were shared thousands of times.

### The Internet Research Agency (Russia)

The IRA appeared to cover French events (terrorist attacks, French elections) from an American perspective, in English. A known tactic of the IRA was to create and develop fake local news accounts to embed themselves in local American conversations, so they could later activate those connections and during the 2016 US presidential election. The IRA appeared to publish tweets about French and international news from an American perspective as part of this strategy. Most France-related tweets were published in English over French and included American hashtags and points of view.

### Venezuela

The Venezuelan information operation was primarily concerned with promoting President Nicholas Maduro. The small amount of English and French language content that mentioned France covered terrorist attacks which appeared to be re-posts of news headlines and shared through highly automated methods. This behaviour fits into a wider Venezuelan strategy of automating the promotion of pro-regime content.

### Serbia

Serbian content largely focused on French-Serbian relations, with evidence of coordinated retweeting. A tweet by the French ambassador to Serbia regarding their relations was retweeted over 50 times, and a tweet from the Serbian Prime Minister regarding French relations was retweeted over 1,000 times. Both examples fit well into the strategies of the entire Serbian information operation, which was to promote positive views of Serbia's President and ruling political party.

### Turkey

The main intention of the entire Turkish operation was to support positive narratives of President Erdoğan. Most tweets regarding French keywords were in Turkish, which brings into question if Turkey was aiming to reach only Turkish speakers in their own country, or potentially also in France, with their tweets. One example of content after the Charlie Hebdo attack was sympathetic to mosques and kebab shops that were attacked in its aftermath.





## DETAILED CASE STUDIES

In the following analyses, we provide examples of tweets. Because the accounts have been deleted, they are no longer available on Twitter. We do provide the tweet IDs so they can be used in future research on the full datasets, using the dataset available on this policy paper's webpage.

### Iran

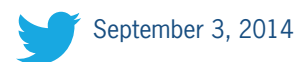
Num. Tweets in Iranian information operation (IO)	Num. mentioning France, %	% of French sub-IO in French	% of French sub-IO in English	% of French sub-IO in other top languages	Time spanned mentioning France
9,859,431	120,706 (1.2%)	80.1%	4.1%	Farsi: 2.5%	October 12, 2010 – April 20, 2019
<b>Main themes</b>	Bilateral news, Bilateral events, Elections, Protests, Attacks				

#### The entire Iranian operation of 9 million tweets

In 2018, as part of its first takedown and release of data from statebacked information operations, Twitter released 770 accounts that “potentially”<sup>11</sup> originated in Iran. In January 2019 and June 2019 they released a further 2,617<sup>12</sup> and 4,779 accounts that they deemed to be “associated with – or directly backed by – the Iranian government”<sup>13</sup>. The accounts Twitter released in June 2019 were broken down into three groups:

- The first group tended to tweet content about global news, “often with an angle that benefited the diplomatic and geostrategic views of the Iranian state”.
- The second group published tweets that were specifically related to discussions around Israel.

11 Twitter Blog, “Enabling further research of information operations on Twitter”, 17 October 2018: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2018/enabling-further-research-of-information-operations-on-twitter.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/enabling-further-research-of-information-operations-on-twitter.html)  
 12 Twitter Blog, “Empowering further research of potential information operations”, 31 January 2019: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/further\\_research\\_information\\_operations.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/further_research_information_operations.html)  
 13 Twitter Blog, “Information operations on Twitter: principles, process, and disclosure”, 13 June 2019: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/information-ops-on-twitter.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information-ops-on-twitter.html)



September 3, 2014  
 Dialogue of fools, between Hollande and the Saudi Crown Prince  
<http://t.co/Okjawhgijb>  
<http://t.co/ktifw9vijk>

*(Translated from French)*  
 Post about Saudi Crown Prince's visit to France in 2014. 96 similar tweets found in dataset.

- The third group targeted “political and social issues in Iran and globally” through the deployment of “false personas” who posed as journalists and news outlets.

Research has been conducted both specifically on the first 770 accounts released<sup>14</sup>, as well as on broader Iranian cross-platform influence efforts<sup>15</sup>. Overall, it appears that Iranian operations use social media to push forward Iran’s own geopolitical narratives and viewpoints, and they do so partly through the development of hundreds of linked accounts and websites that appear to be organically connected “independent news outlets”<sup>16</sup>. Key narratives that Iran opposes in their social media activity include the power of Sunni Arabs, “perceived Western neocolonialism”<sup>17</sup>, and any positive commentary regarding the United States. Their operations started as early as 2010, and 8.6% of data from the operation that was released in 2018 contained France-related keywords.

#### The French sub-operation of 120,000 tweets

**Iran was the only country in this analysis to target all five distinct narratives, which were bilateral news, bilateral events, elections, protests, and terrorist attacks. Most of the coverage was in French, and was about bilateral news and events.** Examples of this theme included the Saudi Crown Prince’s 2014 visit to France, the publishing of an article about institutional racism in France in 2014, the publishing of an article about French, Saudi, and Korean nuclear capabilities in 2015, and France’s bombing of Syrian targets in 2015. Other themes covered by Iran included coverage of the Macron Leaks, the 2017 French election, and the Paris attacks in late 2015.



February 10, 2015  
 @francetvinfo the scandalous secret of the President of France  
<http://t.co/uhyqaprwk>

*Post to account with 10 followers about a rumor that Qatar funded Sarkozy's divorce. 2,596 similar tweets sent by two accounts.*

14 DFRLab, “#TrollTracker: Twitter Troll Farm Archives, Part four: Expanding on key conclusions from the Russian and Iranian troll farm”, 17 October 2018: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-twiters-troll-farm-archives-d1b4df880ec6>  
 15 Emerson Brooking and Suzanne Kianpour, “Iranian Digital Influence Efforts: Guerilla Broadcasting for the twenty-first century”, Atlantic Council, February 2020: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranian-digital-influence-efforts-guerrilla-broadcasting-for-the-twenty-first-century/>  
 16 *Ibid.*, p. 16.  
 17 Emerson Brooking and Suzanne Kianpour, “Iranian Digital Influence Efforts: Guerilla Broadcasting for the twenty-first century”, Atlantic Council, February 2020, p. 2: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranian-digital-influence-efforts-guerrilla-broadcasting-for-the-twenty-first-century/>



May 6, 2017

#MacronLeaks:  
thousands of Macron  
emails leak on the web  
<https://t.co/jaal3nkrwj>  
<https://t.co/Og9pzzgif4>

(Translated from French)  
Post about Macron Leaks  
in 2017.



November 17, 2015

@victorial\_13 Nabilla and  
institutional racism in France  
<http://t.co/1feqsvafk9>

(Originally published in  
French)

Post about letter regarding  
French racism shared  
3,826 times by two users  
(towards different people).

put out by Iran which targeted France appeared to be mimicking real news outlets and people. These goals were largely approached by publishing a high number of the same posts with article links (sometimes in the 1000s for one post), and receiving very low engagement, likely due to the inhuman nature of their posting behaviour.

Much of the content described above appeared to be formatted as news article headlines, with an associated link. This publishing behaviour fits with the finding that Iran often published narratives “under the guise of local media reports”<sup>18</sup>, of which there were at least 100 accounts<sup>19</sup> that followed this pattern. In 2014 and 2015, around the time that 9 different narratives were identified in relation to French keywords, the Atlantic Council concluded<sup>20</sup> that a botnet (connected group of automated accounts) had been bombarding French journalists with innocuous links, and that Macron was the most mentioned Western politician figure or theme in the dataset. Further top narratives regarded Saudi Arabia, Israel, Syria, and Turkey. Iranian narratives regarding France sometimes covered France alone, and sometimes covered bilateral news and events between France and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Syria, and Israel (by covering pro-Palestine protests in Paris). This mix of content indicates that **France was a country that Iran focused on in its messaging efforts, both individually and in relation to other countries on the world stage.**

Overall, France appeared to be incorporated into Iranian narratives both on its own, and alongside other countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. The content

18 Ibid.

19 DFRLab, “#TrollTracker: Twitter Troll Farm Archives, Part four: Expanding on key conclusions from the Russian and Iranian troll farm”, 17 October 2018: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-twiters-troll-farm-archives-d1b4df880ec6>

20 Emerson Brooking and Suzanne Kianpour, “Iranian Digital Influence Efforts: Guerilla Broadcasting for the twenty-first century”, Atlantic Council, February 2020: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranian-digital-influence-efforts-guerilla-broadcasting-for-the-twenty-first-century/>

## The Internet Research Agency (Russia)

Num. Tweets in IRA IO	Num. mentioning France, %	% of French sub-IO in French	% of French sub-IO in English	% of French sub-IO in other top languages	Time spanned mentioning France
9,041,308	23,120 (0.26%)	4.1%	46%	Russian: 44%	May 8, 2010 – May 12, 2018
<b>Main themes</b>		Attacks, Elections			

The Internet Research Agency (IRA) is a Russian state-backed organization that was indicted by Robert Mueller<sup>21</sup> in 2019 for attempting to influence the 2016 US election. The IRA did so by creating personas on Twitter and other social media platforms who behaved as Americans and local American news outlets. The central aim of the operation was to “polarize US voters”<sup>22</sup> along existing societal fissures<sup>23</sup>. These fissures included the divide between pro-Clinton and pro-Trump supporters, and between groups who support and oppose the Black Lives Matter movement. They also encouraged “extreme right-wing voters to be more confrontational”<sup>24</sup>. One Russian information operation that did target France was the “Macron Leaks”<sup>25</sup>, where the Kremlin hacked and released data from Macron’s 2017 presidential campaign and promoted the content on social media. However, this data was not included in Twitter’s information operation archives.

In October 2018, Twitter published their first data release of information operations<sup>26</sup>, which included the IRA dataset of 3,841 accounts that had been active since 2009. Their operation spanned multiple platforms: “Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and

21 US Department of Justice, “Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election, Volume I”, Robert Mueller, March 2019: <https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf>

22 Philip Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Lioutsiou, John Kelly and Camille François, “The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018”, Computational Propaganda Research Project, October 2019, p. 3: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/12/IRA-Report.pdf>

23 C. Kriel and A. Pavliuc, “Reverse engineering Russian Internet Research Agency tactics through network analysis”, Defence Strategic Communications, no. 6, Spring 2019: <https://stratcomcoe.org/ckriel-apavliuc-reverse-engineering-russian-internet-research-agency-tactics-through-network>


24 Philip Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Lioutsiou, John Kelly and Camille François, “The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018”, Computational Propaganda Research Project, October 2019, p. 3: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/12/IRA-Report.pdf>

25 Vilmer, J.-B. J. (2019). The “Macron Leaks” Operation: A Post-Mortem (p. 58). Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-macron-leaks-operation-a-post-mortem/reports/report/the-macron-leaks-operation-a-post-mortem/>

26 Twitter Blog, “Enabling further research of information operations on Twitter”, 17 October 2018: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2018/enabling-further-research-of-information-operations-on-twitter.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/enabling-further-research-of-information-operations-on-twitter.html)

YouTube<sup>27</sup>, as well as Reddit<sup>28</sup>. Peaks in activity on Twitter corresponded to key dates in the 2016 US election cycle, but the largest peak was after the downing of Flight MH17 by Russia over Ukrainian territory. Most US election-related tweets were in English in order to reach the target audience of Americans. Tweets regarding MH17 were mostly in Russian and used hashtags which implied that Kyiv was guilty of the downing, rather than Moscow.

This cross-platform operation had its greatest success in terms of reach through “organic posting”<sup>29</sup> where content gained popularity through sharing, rather than through paid advertisements. This organic content reached “tens of millions of users in the United States”<sup>30</sup>. A research question that is currently open for researchers to answer is whether engagement with manipulative information from foreign adversaries has an effect on the behaviours and opinions of those who are exposed to it. One piece of research that has attempted to answer this question through inquiry into the IRA on Reddit found that conversation on posts after an IRA account had posted commentary contained a higher degree of polarized conversation<sup>31</sup>. Interestingly, activity by the IRA did not cease after the US election<sup>32</sup>, nor did it cease after the IRA was publicly identified for its attempts. Recently, researchers and journalists have found that the IRA and Russia have been outsourcing their information operation activity to other countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria<sup>33</sup>. This opens the possibility of false flag operations, where one country or group mimics the tactics of another to avoid detection and attribution.

 November 14, 2015  
France vows to punish ISIS for Paris attacks #StLouis

*Post about terrorist attack in France with local American hashtag.*


A key hallmark of the entire IRA operation was its attention to persona testing and development<sup>34</sup>, where clusters of inauthentic accounts tested out different persona strategies. One successful strategy included sharing polarizing content in relation to race and the American election. Many accounts posted pro-Trump related hashtags, while others tweeted hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #OscarsSoWhite (about the Academy Awards celebrating predominantly white actors). Another strategy, which appears to be where France-related tweets and events fit into the IRA operation, was to create Twitter accounts and websites for fictitious local American news outlets. These fake outlets, such as @todaypittsburgh, tweeted in English about local, national, and international news events, including the 2017 French election and terrorist attacks that occurred in France while the network was still active.

### The French sub-operation of 23,000 tweets

 May 4, 2017  
Obama backs Macron in last-minute intervention in French election  
<https://t.co/fea1xeuzhp>  
<https://t.co/tof8xhyzwf>

*Post about 2017 French election, from an American perspective.*

When it came to how the IRA discussed France in the Twitter dataset, it appeared that the main themes covered were the 2017 French election and terrorist attacks. There was little activity in French, and tweets which were in English about these themes were written from an American perspective. One such tweet about the November 2015 Paris attacks read like a news headline, but included the hashtag #StLouis, presumably to inject the tweet into local conversation around the attacks. Other tweets followed the similar formula of reading like news headlines of

 November 14, 2015  
Abbott calls Paris attacks 'an assault to all of humanity' #Texas

*Post about terrorist attack in France with local American hashtag, similar tweets published 1,243 times between November 13-30, 2015.*

French themes from an American perspective. Another tweet stated that Obama backed Macron in an “intervention” in the French election and contained two links. These tweets that read like news headlines, some of which were reshared over 1,000 times with different local American hashtags, indicate that the **IRA was publishing content on international and French breaking news and events to build their credibility as real news sources, despite being fake.**

34 C. Kriel and A. Pavliuc, “Reverse engineering Russian Internet Research Agency tactics through network analysis”, Defence Strategic Communications, no. 6, Spring 2019: <https://stratcomcoe.org/ckriel-apavliuc-reverse-engineering-russian-internet-research-agency-tactics-through-network>

27 Philip Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Lioutsou, John Kelly and Camille François, “The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018”, Computational Propaganda Research Project, October 2019, p. 3: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/12/IRA-Report.pdf>

28 Tech Crunch, “Reddit has banned 944 accounts linked to the IRA Russian troll farm”, 11 April 2018: <https://techcrunch.com/2018/04/11/reddit-bans-944-accounts-linked-to-russian-internet-research-agency/>

29 Philip Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Lioutsou, John Kelly and Camille François, “The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018”, Computational Propaganda Research Project, October 2019, p. 3: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/12/IRA-Report.pdf>

30 *Ibid.*

31 J. Gallacher and M. Heerdink, “Measuring the effect of Russian Internet Research Agency information operations in online conversations”, Defence Strategic Communications, no. 6, Spring 2019: <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/jd-gallacher-m-w-heerdink-measuring-effect-russian-internet-research-agency-information-operations>

32 Philip Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Lioutsou, John Kelly and Camille François, “The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018”, Computational Propaganda Research Project, October 2019: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/12/IRA-Report.pdf>

33 Cyberscoop, “Russian IRA troll farm outsourced new operation to Ghana, Nigeria”, 12 March 2020: <https://www.cyberscoop.com/russia-ira-troll-farm-disinformation-outsourced/>

Of the four significant English-language spikes in the dataset (over 500 tweets in one day), three were about the election and attacks from an American perspective, and one was about the 2015 French Open. This latter innocuous event underscores the IRA's tactics of tweeting about uncontroversial content to gain traction for their accounts and appear more authentic.

## Venezuela

Num. Tweets in Venezuelan IO	Num. mentioning France, %	% of French sub-IO in French	% of French sub-IO in English	% of French sub-IO in other top languages	Time spanned mentioning France
10,516,223	69,700 (0.66%)	2.3% <sup>35</sup>	12.5% <sup>36</sup>	Spanish: 76.5% <sup>37</sup>	June 16, 2010 – January 17, 2019
<b>Main themes</b>	Attacks, Protests, Elections				

### The entire Venezuelan operation of 11 million tweets

In January and June 2019, Twitter released two batches of related accounts (1,993 accounts in total) whose information operation activities were found to have originated in Venezuela. A subset of these accounts were found to be a “foreign campaign of spammy content focused on divisive political themes”<sup>38</sup> whose behaviour was similar to “potential Russian IRA accounts”. A second subset of accounts appeared to be targeting Twitter users within Venezuela with further spammy content. A third subset, which was released in June 2019, appeared to contain tweets from accounts that were engaging in external information manipulation outside of Venezuela and was operated by “a commercial entity”<sup>39</sup>.

35 Twitter Blog, “Empowering further research of potential information operations”, 31 January 2019: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/further\\_research\\_information\\_operations.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/further_research_information_operations.html)

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 Twitter Blog, “Empowering further research of potential information operations”, 31 January 2019 : [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/further\\_research\\_information\\_operations.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/further_research_information_operations.html)

39 Twitter Blog, “Information operations on Twitter: principles, process, and disclosure”, 13 June 2019: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2019/information-ops-on-twitter.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information-ops-on-twitter.html)

The DFRLab at the Atlantic Council conducted an analysis<sup>40</sup> on the January 2019 data release and found that much of the internally targeted content in the information operation was focused on positive messaging of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela, and on hijacking conversation on social media that was in opposition to President Nicholas Maduro. The DFRLab found that there was a correlation between pro- and anti-Maduro protests and the creation of new Twitter inauthentic accounts<sup>41</sup>, meaning the people running the operation were in tune with, and acting in response to, the political unrest in Venezuela. The operation contained automated inauthentic accounts that promoted content about Maduro, which included the use of an app that automatically shared content about the Venezuelan President.

Previous research by this present author<sup>42</sup> found that the portion of the Venezuelan information operation that targeted foreign audiences was mainly engaging hashtags about America and the 2016 US election, but roughly one year after the election, in 2017. Popular hashtags used in this cluster of accounts were #maga and #fakenews, and the accounts were freshly created in 2016 and 2017 for tweeting this content. These types of hashtags were also used by the Russian IRA operation between 2015 and 2017. Interestingly, popular hashtags in the Venezuelan operation that were often used in tandem were #RT and #Noticias, and were often shared with content from the Spanish-language arm of RT (Russia Today), Actualidad RT, as well as Sputnik News.

On February 5, 2019, Twitter clarified<sup>43</sup> that they had initially mis-attributed 228 inauthentic accounts to the IRA, and that the accounts were Venezuelan. A number of these misattributed accounts were included in the second data release in June 2019. This underscores two important points:

- First, country-attribution of inauthentic activity contains imperfections due to a number of factors, including ‘false flags’ (where one group mimics the tactics of another in order to avoid attribution).
- Second, it underscores previous findings that Venezuela had been focusing on similar topics to the IRA<sup>44</sup>, including positive hashtag use towards Donald Trump after the 2016 US election.

40 DFRLab, “#TrollTracker: Venezuelan Government-linked Influence Campaign on Twitter, State-backed influence operation promoted Maduro regime”, 13 March 2019: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-venezuelan-government-linked-influence-campaign-on-twitter-63a8fe7a62e0>

41 *Ibid.*

42 Towards Data Science, “DisInfoVis: How to Understand Networks of Disinformation Through Visualization”, 25 September 2020: <https://towardsdatascience.com/disinfovis-how-to-understand-networks-of-disinformation-through-visualization-b4cb0afa0a71>

43 Twitter thread by Yoel Roth, 5 February 2019: <https://twitter.com/yoyoel/status/1092587833020182528>

44 The Startup, “Watch six decade-long disinformation operations unfold in six minutes”, 26 January 2020: <https://medium.com/swlh/watch-six-decade-long-disinformation-operations-unfold-in-six-minutes-5f69a7e75fb3>

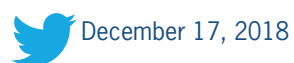


With the shared IRA and Venezuelan tactics of news-like tweeting behaviour, high automation, and content aimed towards the election of Donald Trump, it is unsurprising that Twitter misidentified Venezuelan accounts as belonging to the IRA operation. These shared tactics, alongside aforementioned reporting that Russia outsources its information operation efforts to other countries<sup>45</sup>, makes research into collaboration between state information manipulation efforts worth investigating further.

### The French sub-operation of 70,000 tweets

Most tweets mentioning French-related keywords were published in Spanish (76%). In the tweets that were published in French or English, themes that contained French keywords were namely terrorist attacks, protests occurring in France (such as the Yellow Vests protests), and elections. Tweets towards these topics tended to follow a similar pattern: of the tweets qualitatively analyzed, many contained similar neutral tones in a similar fashion as news headlines would, as well as a link and a hashtag. Two examples of English-language tweeting were about the Louvre attack in 2018, and the Strasbourg Christmas Market attack in late 2018.

The former contained two links and the hashtag #louvre. The latter started with the term “Breaking”, further indicating that these tweets were posting content that read as a headline.



December 17, 2018

Breaking: Father of suspected Strasbourg terrorist admits son supported ISIS  
<https://t.co/7lgvtszpw6>

*Tweet regarding Strasbourg attack in 2018, resembles a copy and pasted headline*

Other than the high rates of sharing Spanish-language RT and Sputnik articles, there is little explanation of which part of Venezuela’s operation the sharing of international news-like headlines fits into play. It is possible that the Venezuelan operation was copying another IRA tactic of publishing news-like content *en masse* in order to make accounts appear more authentic. Due to the high level of automation used in the entire operation, there is a possibility that part of the Venezuelan operation was automating a process of copy-pasting news headlines and links to publish as original links (as opposed to retweets).



February 3, 2017

Man attacks a French soldier with a machete near #louvre  
<https://t.co/o5zf7z7nbo>  
<https://t.co/beawbgglqo>

*Tweet regarding Louvre attack in 2017, resembles a copy and pasted headline.*

<sup>45</sup> Cyberscoop, “Russian IRA troll farm outsourced new operation to Ghana, Nigeria”, 12 March 2020: <https://www.cyberscoop.com/russia-ira-troll-farm-disinformation-outsourced/>

## Serbia

Num. Tweets in Serbian IO	Num. mentioning France, %	% of French sub-IO in French	% of French sub-IO in English	% of French sub-IO in other top languages	Time spanned mentioning France
43,067,074	52,579 (0.12%)	21%	15%	Serbian: 24%	June 28, 2011 – January 29, 2020
<b>Main themes</b>	Bilateral events, Elections, Attacks				

### The entire Serbian operation of 43 million tweets

In April 2020, Twitter released a takedown of 43 million tweets published by “8,558 accounts working to promote Serbia’s ruling party and its leader”<sup>46</sup>. According to The Guardian<sup>47</sup>, the accounts were operating in support of Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia’s current President and member of the Serbian Progressive Party. The accounts split their methods of support towards Vučić by both amplifying tweets and news coverage that was positive towards him and his policies, and by attacking any of his political opponents.

The operation contained accounts which were created as early as 2009, but the bulk of their activity occurred between 2018-2019, after President Vučić came into power in 2017. The Stanford Internet Observatory found that, after 2017, most of the accounts were engaging in spam-like content, resharing tweets that were supportive of Vučić and dogpiling onto conversations on Twitter which were in opposition to him. In 2018-2020, Serbians and political groups in opposition to Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party organized and held “1 of 5 Million” protests, after Vučić commented that he “would not fulfill a single demand... even if there were five million of you”<sup>48</sup>. This was the primary opposition movement that accounts in the takedown tweeted against.

According to Stanford’s analysis, tweets which showed Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party in a positive light were amplified through a strategy of retweeting, mentioning, and replying to content from Vučić himself (@avucic), several websites that are

<sup>46</sup> Twitter thread by Twitter Safety, 2 April 2020: <https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1245682439969792005>

<sup>47</sup> The Guardian, “Twitter deletes 20,000 fake accounts linked to Saudi, Serbian and Egyptian governments”, 3 April 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/02/twitter-accounts-deleted-linked-saudi-arabia-serbia-egypt-governments>

<sup>48</sup> Stanford Internet Observatory, “Analysis of April 2020 Twitter takedowns linked to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Honduras, Serbia, and Indonesia”, 2 April 2020: <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/april-2020-twitter-takedown>

positive towards Vučić, as well as members of the Serbian Progressive Party, including Prime Minister Ana Brnabić (@SerbianPM). This activity towards just 10 such Twitter accounts accounted for over 33.6 million tweets, or 78% of the entire operation.

### The French sub-operation of 52,000 tweets

The main content themes regarding France in the Serbian information operation were bilateral events, as well as banal content about French tourism. These were primarily French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Serbia in 2019 and economic discussions between French and Serbian counterparts ahead of the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit. Both bilateral events appeared to be covered in order to boost Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party through retweeting of prominent figures who discussed the events in a positive light. **This coordinated behaviour appears to situate the Serbian information operation's tactics in regards to France under the category of "Cheerleading for Vučić and his party, SNS"<sup>49</sup>, which was listed as a primary political aim of the operation by the Stanford Internet Observatory.**

Two tweets which received high amounts of engagement within the dataset are noteworthy because they fit into the theme of discussing bilateral events between France and Serbia, and because they were both tweeted in French.

Particularly, a first tweet from the Serbian Prime Minister in regard to economic discussions ahead of the Osaka Summit was tweeted in French. **The use of French language by a Serbian politician indicates an interest in engaging with French-speaking populations (presumably French citizens), and the high amount of engagement with this tweet in the dataset indicates an interest in increasing visibility of positive French-Serbian cooperation to French citizens.**

It is less surprising that the second noteworthy tweet from the French Ambassador to Serbia was written in French. Its engagement in the dataset further indicates interest in promoting positive FrenchSerbian relations.



June 19, 2019

RT @SerbianPM: Met with French Prime Minister @EPhilippePM in Paris today. We discussed political, economic and military cooperation.

*(Translated from French)*  
Tweet from Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, retweeted 1,051 times.



September 4, 2019

RT @FalconiJL: after the visit of chairman Macron to Belgrade in July, great honor to have delivered my credentials to s.e.â today

*(Translated from French)*  
Tweet from French Ambassador to Serbia, Jean-Louis Falconi, retweeted 55 times.

The visit of Macron to Belgrade was a significant event in French-Serbian relations, as it was the first visit to Serbia by a French leader since President Jacques Chirac's visit in 2001. Around the time of the visit, it was reported that Macron "pledged to relaunch talks to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo"<sup>50</sup>, and that the two leaders discussed economic agreements between their two countries. The meeting was described as being full of "warm gestures"<sup>51</sup>, and that Vučić was "effusive in his welcome" of Macron. This positivity of the event itself would have been the type of content that an information operation that is in favour of Vučić would have wanted to promote.

Outside of political commentary by the Serbian information operation, it was also noteworthy that between peaks in activity, they posted banal content about French tourism. Monthly topics in the Serbian operation included term combinations such as "French, toast, Marseille, garden", "French, toast, Paris" and "old, French, houses, Strasbourg". This type of activity occurred between 2015-2019 when the operation was shut down.

49 Daniel Busch, « "Fighting Like a Lion for Serbia" : An Analysis of Government-Linked Influence Operations in Serbia », Stanford Internet Observatory, April 2020, p. 9: [https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/serbia\\_march\\_twitter.pdf](https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/serbia_march_twitter.pdf)

50 Euronews, "Macron pledges to relaunch talks between Kosovo and Serbia during visit to Belgrade", 16 July 2019: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/07/15/kosovo-high-on-the-agenda-for-macron-during-official-visit-to-serbia>  
51 Oxford Analytica, "Serbia may overestimate gains from Macron visit", Expert Briefings, July 2019: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/OXAN-DB245459/full/html>

## Turkey

Num. Tweets in Turkish IO	Num. mentioning France, %	% of French sub-IO in French	% of French sub-IO in English	% of French sub-IO in other top languages	Time spanned mentioning France
37,128,536	28,617 (0.07%)	5.7%	2.8%	Turkish: 89%	October 14, 2010 – March 13, 2020
<b>Main themes</b>		Attacks			

### The entire Turkish operation of 37 million tweets

In June 2020, Twitter released data from 7,340 accounts that “primarily targeted domestic accounts in Turkey”<sup>52</sup>. They stated that the key political narratives communicated in the dataset were towards content which was “favorable to the AK Parti, and demonstrated strong support for President Erdoğan”<sup>53</sup>. Twitter also stated that “technical signals” indicated that the operation was “associated with the youth wing of the party” and contained a “centralized network” with “a significant number of compromised accounts” that were hacked and incorporated into the operation, some of which were originally in opposition to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan before being taken over.

The Stanford Internet Observatory received the dataset in advance of its release, and conducted an in-depth analysis<sup>54</sup> into the content of the operation, including the countries whose foreign affairs they targeted. The clear primary goal of the operation was to promote positive content regarding President Erdoğan, who assumed office in 2014. Posts in support of him included the hashtag #PresidentErdoğan, and spiked after the 2015 Istanbul suicide bombing, and after Erdoğan extended a state of emergency in Turkey after an attempted coup in 2016. They were published by accounts that were created around the same time and received little to no engagement. The dataset contained tweets regarding the foreign affairs of Libya, Qatar, and particularly Syria. Much of the conversation about Syria regarded refugees, including Erdoğan's 2019 announcement that Syrian refugees would have a path towards Turkish citizenship. One group criticized others who stated that Syrians should go back to Syria, stating that instead Erdoğan's opposition should go to Syria. Another group “expressed anti-refugee sentiment” and mocked accounts who published pro-refugee content.

<sup>52</sup> Twitter Blog, “Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we've removed”, 12 June 2020: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Stanford Internet Observatory, “Political Retweet Rings and Compromised Accounts: A Twitter Influence Operation Linked to the Youth Wing of Turkey's Ruling Party”, 11 June 2020: [https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/20200611\\_turkey\\_report.pdf](https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/20200611_turkey_report.pdf)

Stanford also categorized the operation into several tactics deployed by the accounts. First and foremost, they observed high amounts of coordination through tweet timing and content, user handle format and creation, and networked retweeting. A high number of accounts appeared to be created in large batches, sometimes naming themselves after the same fictitious person (with usernames such as @1Besparmak, @merBesparmak2, and @merBesparmak3). Such accounts with similar names were also found to be tweeting similar content and hashtags within minutes of each other. Overall, these tactics confirm the inauthenticity of the operation, and can question how advanced Turkey's strategies are in the information manipulation space on Twitter.

### The French sub-operation of 29,000 tweets

The majority of the 29,000 tweets that contained French keywords were published in Turkish (25,000 tweets). These figures fit with Twitter's finding that the majority of the operation's goal was to influence internal turkish-speaking populations. **The Turkish population in France is over 450,000<sup>55</sup> (figure from 2018), and further research into the Turkish language tweets in the France-related sub-network could confirm the target population of those tweets.**

Of the small number of tweets that were published in French and English, the majority appeared to cover the theme of terrorist attacks. The very small spikes (fewer than 100 tweets in a day) that did occur in the English language subset were regarding the Charlie Hebdo attack and the November 2015 Paris attack. One example of such tweets was a retweet of a political cartoonist who stated that his prediction of kebab shops being bombed, and mosques being attacked after the Charlie Hebdo attack had come to fruition. In contrast to this sentiment, a small amount of English language tweets also expressed condolences to those who perished in the November 2015 Paris attacks.



January 9, 2015

RT @LatuffCartoons:  
As predicted: kebab shop bombed, mosques attacked in France after #charliehebdo killings  
<http://t.co/9suvtmzx3n>

*Tweet from a political cartoonist, reshared 35 times*

<sup>55</sup> Daily Sabah, “Turkish citizens live in 170 of the world's 193 countries: study”, 2 July 2018: [https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2018/07/02/turkish-citizens-live-in-170-of-the-worlds-193-countries-study?gallery\\_image=undefined#big](https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2018/07/02/turkish-citizens-live-in-170-of-the-worlds-193-countries-study?gallery_image=undefined#big)

## IV

## LIMITATIONS

This study only incorporated historical Twitter data. As this present author's previous research has shown, the datasets are sometimes incomplete<sup>56</sup>. The data that Twitter has released paints an interesting picture of information operations by country or state-backed groups, but two limitations must be addressed.

- Firstly, historical data is inherently out of date. This means that France could be targeted by other actors now without Twitter having taken the operation down. Twitter addresses this limitation by releasing further datasets in operations as they discover and shut them down.
- Secondly, the possibility that components of these operations are still active persist and may therefore be using different strategies to avoid detection.

The fact that this study, and many like it, only focused on Twitter data will continue to be a limitation until other social media platforms improve their data-sharing policies. Different countries or state-backed groups may be operating on multiple platforms and focusing on different narratives on those platforms. Future exploration of information operations should incorporate the study of narratives on multiple social media platforms, and on state-backed media platforms who operate in French or cover French events. In regard to the latter, this study found evidence of inauthentic accounts engaging with foreign state backed media of other countries (eg. Venezuela retweeting Spanish-language RT). The re-sharing of state-backed news sources of other countries in state-backed information operations allows for the integration of key narratives of multiple countries who may have the intention of changing public perceptions of France both internally and externally.

China was a country that was notably not active in mentioning French themes in the information operations that have been disclosed by Twitter to date. The operations that have been released on Twitter thus far primarily focused on internal events – mainly the 2019 Hong Kong protests<sup>57</sup>. There is also the possibility that countries

such as China are using more overt soft-power methods of influencing countries such as France through their own state-backed media outlets and public figures. Such state-backed information sharing would not fall within the remit of Twitter's information operation policies.

<sup>56</sup> C. Kriel and A. Pavliuc, "Reverse engineering Russian Internet Research Agency tactics through network analysis", Defence Strategic Communications, no. 6, Spring 2019: <https://stratcomcoe.org/ckriel-apavliuc-reverse-engineering-russian-internet-research-agency-tactics-through-network>

<sup>57</sup> The Startup, "Watch six decade-long disinformation operations unfold in six minutes", 26 January 2020: <https://medium.com/swlh/watch-six-decade-long-disinformation-operations-unfold-in-six-minutes-5f69a7e75fb3>



## CONCLUSION

In summary, this study drilled down from 211 million tweets from 19 state-backed information operations to five case studies of information operations that were found to mention France. These tweets were categorized into themes of covering French terrorist attacks, elections, bilateral news and events, and protests. Although France was not the target of any information operation, insights on how these operations incorporated French themes into their broader strategies helps us understand them in more depth. We found that multiple operations framed their tweets as news headlines, and utilized the aforementioned French topics in those tweets to increase their own trustworthiness and apparent credibility. We also found that France-related content was used mainly to target internal populations, often in their own country's languages. This lay of the land presented a broad view of how French topics were organized into broader international information operations, and further research on different platforms and tactics will continue uncovering deeper knowledge on if and how information operations target France.

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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.**

## APPENDIX:

KEYWORDS USED TO LOCATE  
FRANCE-RELATED TWEETS

Year	Name	Keywords
	General	Hollande, Sarkozy, Macron, France, French, le Français, Marseille, Bordeaux, Lyon, Nantes, Toulouse, Lille, Montpellier, Avignon, Nîmes, Rennes, Reims, Le Havre, Grenoble, Rouen, Cannes, Amiens, Annecy, La Rochelle, Caen, Limoges, Poitiers, Troyes, Arles, Colmar, Toulon, Calais, Carcassonne, Mulhouse, Antibes, Saint-Tropez, Biarritz, Étretat, Sète, Collioure, Perpignan, Dunkirk
2012	Attacks in Toulouse	Toulouse, Montauban, école juive Ozar Hatorah, Montaudran, Côte Pavée, attaque, Terroriste, tu tues mes frères, Imad Ibn Ziaten, Abel Chennouf, Mohamed Legouad, Loïc Liber, Jonathan Sandler, Gabriel, Arié, Myriam Monsonégo, Mohammed Merah, Jund al-Kilafah
2012	Presidential Elections	Présidentielle, premier tour, deuxième tour, débat, suffrage, élection, Elysée, Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande, Eva Joly, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Philippe Poutou
2012	Clash between youth and police forces in Amiens	Violence, émeute, Amiens, août, Amiens-Nord, jeunes, policiers, blessés, Gilles Demailly
2012 – 2013	Cahuzac Affair	non-déclaré, jamais eu de compte à l'étranger, Jérôme Cahuzac, Ministre du Budget
2013	Operation Serval	Serval, militaire, armée, nord
2013 – now	Manif pour Tous	Manif pour Tous, Champ de Mars, Tour Eiffel, Paris, marche, Manifestation, mariage, homosexuel, mariage pour tous, famille, enfants, papa, maman, Frigide Barjot, Ludovine de La Rochère, Tugdual Derville, Béatrice Bourges
2013	Horse meat in Lasagnas	France, Belgique, cheval, viande, lasagne, agroalimentaire, Spagnhero, Benoit Hamon, Union européenne, Jacques Poujol, Johannes Fasen, Patrice Monguillon
2013	Clément Méric Affair	Paris, Caumartin, affrontement, bagarre, Clément Méric, Jeunesses nationalistes révolutionnaires, Troisième Voie, Esteban Morillo, Samuel Dufour, Action antifasciste Paris-Banlieue, Steve Domas
2013	Leonarda Affair	Sortie scolaire, enseignant, collégienne
2014	Dieudonné	Le Mur, Spectacle, anti-sémite, liberté, requête, décision, interdiction, Manuel Valls, Conseil d'Etat, Dieudonné
2014 – 2016	Notre-Dame-des-Landes	Notre-Dame-des-Landes, Nantes, violences, manifestations

Year	Name	Keywords
2014	Mayor Elections	Gauche, parti socialiste, défaite, échec, Manuel Valls, Jean-Marc Ayrault, François Hollande
2014	European Elections	Front National, eurodéputé, échec, victoire, Parlement, Marine Le Pen, François Hollande
2014	Regionalisation – Law	Région, nouvelle, décentralisation, délimitation
2015	Charlie Hebdo attacks and following related attacks	Charlie Hebdo, journaliste, Montrouge, policière, Hyper Cacher, Chérif Kouachi, Saïd Kouachi, Amedy Coulibaly, Ahmed Merabet, Cabu, Charb, Honoré, Wolinski, Tignous, Elsa Cayat, Bernard Maris, Mustapha Ourrad, Michel Renaud, Clarissa Jean-Philippe, Yohan Cohen, Yoav Hattab, Philippe Braham, François-Michel Saada, jesuischarlie
2015	Republicans March	Marches républicaines, charlie Hebdo, je suis charlie
2015	Macron Law	49.3, loi Macron, croissance, assemblée nationale, gouvernement, Emmanuel Macron, Manuel Valls
2015	November attacks	Bataclan, attentat, terroriste, Voltaire, Petit Cambodge, Carillon, La Belle Equipe, Casa Nostra, Bonne Bière, Stade de France, terrasse, Paris, Saint Denis, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Brahim Abdeslam, Chakib Akrouh, Ismaël Omar Mostefai, Samy Amimour, Foued Mohamed-Agga, Ammar Ramadan Mansour, Mohamad al-Sabaawi, Bilal Hadfi, Mohammad al-Mahmod, Salah Abdeslam
2015	COP 21	COP 21, Paris, écologie, Anne Hidalgo
2015	Regional Elections	Front National, régionale, élection, montée, défaite, victoire
2016	Labor Law	Loi Travail, manifestation, mécontentement, économie, Myriam El Khomri, Manuel Valls
2016	Constitutional Revision	déchéance de nationalité, constitution, état d'urgence, gouvernement, manifestations
2016	Nuit Debout Movement	Nuit debout, manifestation, France, convergence des luttes, Place de la République
2016	Nice Attacks	Terroriste, promenade des anglais, 14 juillet, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel
2016 – 2020	Adama Traoré	interpellation, mort, non-assistance à personne en danger, plaquage ventral, Adama Traoré, Assa Traoré
2016	Primaries are organised	Primaire, Europe Ecologie les Verts, EELV, Les Républicains, droite, centre, Yannick Jadot, Michèle Rivasi, Cécile Duflot, Karima Delli, Jean-François Copé, François Fillon, Alain Juppé, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, Bruno Le Maire, Jean-Frédéric Poisson, Nicolas Sarkozy
2016	Calais Jungle is dismantled	Calais, démantèlement
2016	Hollande is not candidate	Présidentielle, deuxième mandat

Year	Name	Keywords
2017	Primaries are organised for the left	parti socialiste, Benoit Hamon, Manuel Valls, Arnaud Montebourg, Vincent Peillon, François de Rugy, Sylvia Pinel, Jean-Luc Bennahmias
2017	Fillon Affairs	emploi fictif, la revue des deux mondes, assistante parlementaire, assemblée nationale, François Fillon, Pénélope Fillon, Marc Joulaud
2017	Théo affair	Aulnay sous Bois, matraque, Théodore Luhaka
2017	Guyane Protests	Kourou, manifestations, mouvement social, Guyane
2017	Terrorist Attack Champs Elysées	Champs-Elysées, attaque, fourgon, Xavier Jugelé, Karim Cheurfi
2017	Presidential Elections	élections, présidentielle, président, Front National, Les Républicains, France Insoumise, Europe Ecologie les Verts, En Marche, Parti Socialiste
2018	Unrests and strikes in Mayotte	Mayotte, manifestation, grève, grève générale, Jean-Yves Le Drian, Annick Girardin
2018	Carrassone attacks	Carcassone, attaque, Super U, Radouane Lakdim, Jean Mazières, Christian Medves, Hervé Sosna, Arnaud Beltrame
2018	SNCF Strikes	SNCF, grève, statut, cheminots
2018	Benalla Affairs	violences, contrescarpe, 1 <sup>er</sup> mai, sécurité, passeport, Alexandre Benalla, Emmanuel Macron, Vincent Crase
2018 – now	Yellow Vests Movement	gilets jaunes, manifestations, taxe carbone, limitations de vitesse, 80 km/h, Edouard Philippe, Emmanuel Macron, Eric Drouet, Priscilla Ludosky, Maxime Nicolle, Jérôme Rodrigues, Jacline Mouraud, Ingrid Levavasseur, yellowvests, giletsjaunes, ecokapitalism, yellowvest, yellowrevolution
2018	Strasbourg Attack	marché de Noël, Strasbourg, Attaque terroriste, attentat, Chérif Chekatt, État Islamique
2019	Diplomatic tensions with Italy	Italie, ambassadeur, France, crise diplomatique, gilets jaunes, Luigi Di Maio, Matteo Salvini, Jean-Yves Le Drian, Emmanuel Macron
2019	Unrests in Grenoble	Affrontements, émeutes, Grenoble, violences, Mistral
2019	Climate March	marche du climat
2019	Militaries killed	Gorom Gorom, militaires, tués, Burkina Faso, otages, libération, Cédric de Pierrepont, Alain Bertoncello
2019	European Elections	Rassemblement National, extrême droite, élections, européennes, LREM, Europe Ecologie, Union de la droite et du centre (Les Républicains), France Insoumise, Parti Socialiste, Marine Le Pen, Jordan Bardella, Nathalie Loiseau, Manon Aubry, Raphaël Glucksmann, François-Xavier Bellamy, Yannick Jadot
2019	Strikes in the ER	grève, urgence, hopital, manque de moyens, Agnès Buzyn
2019	Attacks at the Paris Prefecture	Préfecture de Police, Paris, attentat, morts, Christophe Castaner, Mickaël Harpon

Year	Name	Keywords
2019	Accident in Mali	combat de la vallée d'Eranga, soldats, morts, force Barkhane, Florence Parly
2019	Strikes due to the retirement reform	SnCF, grève, statut, cheminots, retraite, Edouard Philippe, Muriel Penicaud, Elizabeth Borgne, Emmanuel Macron
2020	Coronavirus Lockdown	confinement, Emmanuel Macron, Agnès Buzyn, Olivier Véran, covid19fr
2020	Mayor Elections	Les verts, victoire, participation, municipales, élections, LREM

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## State-backed Information Manipulation: The French Node

Online information manipulation operations continue to be a growing concern to democracies around the world. It is often assumed that all countries are targeted by information manipulation operations. But is it the case? How does France fit into wider international manipulation operations?

In this note, we establish a lay of the land by identifying how France has fit into the wider strategies of state-backed information manipulation networks that have been identified and taken down by Twitter since October 2018. We conducted a broad analysis of all 211 million tweets that Twitter identified and released as part of their information operation (IO) reporting from 19 countries or groups.

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