

Open Society Foundations + Bakamo

The 2017 French Presidential Election

Bakamo first explored online disinformation in 2015 by examining Russian attempts to distort perceptions of Ukraine in western Europe. In 2016, amid concerns about disinformation in the US Presidential Election, the London office of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) asked us to map and analyse patterns of disinformation in the run-up to the 2017 French Presidential elections. OSF anticipated that foreign governments were committed to disrupting the French Presidential Election with malign intent and wanted evidence to alert the public and provoke action.

Bakamo could meet the need. We were able to combine digital tools, qualitative skills, and behavioural theory to safely explore online worlds. OSF asked us to examine two areas. First, the supply-side, meaning the digital media ecosystem and the methods by which bad actors were seeding misinformation. Second, the demand-side, meaning how and why innocent individuals chose to amplify disinformation. Working with OSF, we developed two hypotheses: first, that long-form content like articles and blog posts were the foundations of disinformation; and second, that measuring how innocent individuals shared links to dubious long-form content would expose their motivations.

To avoid biasing the sample, we collected all of the 18 million social media conversations in French that mentioned *politics, politicians, elections* and/or trending political issues over the preceding 15 months, then filtered to the eight million that included a web link, and finally applied big data tools to produce a ranked list of sources of long-form content. Former Deputy Editor of *Libération* Pierre Haski then divided this list, distinguishing between sources with transparent funding and observable journalistic standards, and those without.

A team of cultural anthropologists from Sorbonne University then examined the 5,000 most shared dubious sources. They combined data from real-time monitoring with historic data to see if factual debunking was an effective countermeasure, and found it wasn't. They also examined similarities among dubious sources and clustered the most prominent by their key differentiating features, like tone and content. Ultimately, they produced a list of 800 key sources, grouped into 11 types.

The analysis also established how disinformation spreads. By monitoring the dubious websites, we saw how real people shared disinformation, along which paths it travelled, and how sharers enhanced its credibility.

Spreading depends on innocent people choosing to share disinformation. To understand their motivations, we used qualitative content analysis and the frame of systems theory to explore how real people benefitted from sharing. We observed sharers forming symbiotic

digital communities around dubious sources in which they used the symbolism of disinformation to construct, or reconstruct, their social identities.

OSF used Bakamo's reports to influence as well as to understand. They published the first report soon before the first round of voting, alongside media coverage, to make the public and policymakers aware of the dangers. After the election, OSF published the [full findings](#) for policymakers, media, politicians, and the public with recommendations on effective communication strategies, social media education, and other effective countermeasures.

We collaborated with OSF to spread the word at conferences ([Esomar 2018](#), [Insights 2018](#)), in workshops at [EuropCom 2018 'Facing up to Fake News'](#), at [JRC Big Data, Psycho-targeting and the Future of Democracy](#), and with [University of Perugia 'Social Media and Data-driven Targeting in Election Campaigns'](#)). Other coverage includes:

English

- The Verge | [France has a fake news problem, but it's not as bad as the US](#)
- The Economist | [Once considered a boon to democracy, social media have started to look like its nemesis](#)
- Financial Times | [Flawed Macron hack provides lessons for both sides](#)
- The Daily Mail | [Most French police officers say they are voting for Marine Le Pen in Sunday's election because of her strong anti-terror stance, survey finds](#)
- Reuters | [Experts say automated accounts sharing fake news ahead of French election](#)
- VoxEurop | [Russia and the French Presidential Election: The Kremlin interference](#)
- EUObserver | [Russia-linked fake news 'lost influence' in France](#)
- EUObserver | [Macron vows law against fake news](#)
- The Daily Beast | [Study: Bots Spreading Fake News Ahead of French Election](#)
- Social Media and Politics Podcast | [The French Elections and Social Media Part 1: What News are Citizens Sharing on Social Media? with Daniel Fazekas](#)

French

- Le Figaro | [Les cinq «fake news» qui ont pollué la campagne présidentielle](#)
- Libération | [La présidentielle à l'épreuve des «fake news»](#)
- Les Echos.fr | [Réseaux sociaux : un lien partagé sur quatre pourrait être du «fake news»](#)
- 20minutes.fr | [Présidentielle: Sur les réseaux sociaux, près de 25% des liens partagés autour de la politique seraient des «fake news»](#)
- RTSinfo | [L'influence des "fake news" sur la présidentielle française serait réelle](#)

Hungarian

- 24.hu | [A magyar választás körüli minden kérdésre ott van a válasz a Facebook naplójájljaiban](#)
- The Budapest Beacon | [Az álhírek kormányzati eszközökkel való visszaszorítása komoly veszélyeket hordoz magában](#)

Other languages

- Publico.pt | [Notícias falsas com ligações à Rússia “perderam influência” em França](#) (In Portuguese)
- Friedrich Ebert Stiftung | [„Nothing is true, everything is possible?”](#) (In German)

Academic citings

- Chloe Francis, 2019, *Trail of Truth: Law and fake news*. University of Edinburgh
- Tambini, Damian, 2018, *Targeted propaganda and the Italian election campaign*. LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog (08 Feb 2018).
- Georgiana Stanescu, 2018, *The Role of Mass-Media in the Rise of Nationalist Movements in the European Union*. Editura Sitech, Craiova, Romania, 2018, 4(1), pp: 112-121
- Harsin, Jayson, *Un guide critique des fake news : de la comédie à la tragédie*, Pouvoirs, vol. no 164, no. 1, 2018, pp. 99-119.
- Romain Badouard, 2018, *Les mutations du débat public en ligne*, *érudit Online publication*, 2019, Volume 64(4), p. 26–32

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