



FRENCH ELECTION  
**SOCIAL  
MEDIA  
LANDSCAPE**

2017

# Patterns of Disinformation in the 2017 French Presidential Election

This is the second in a series of three reports  
on the impact of non-traditional media  
on the 2017 French Presidential Election.





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## Preface

by **Pierre Haski**

There has never been as much talk about “Fake news” in a campaign as in this year’s French presidential election. It is also true that there have never been as many attempts at disinformation, manipulation, or distortion of facts as in this campaign, the first in the country in which social media has played such a big part.



It is too early to assess the impact of these false reports on the outcome of the vote, but the fact that the candidate who was their primary target came out on top of the first round of the two-round process may indicate a limited impact. Perhaps this is due to the massive media debate on “fake news”—a term with very different and sometimes confused meanings—since the US elections last November which is helping to raise awareness in the public.

The first report on the social media landscape during the French election, published before the first round, provided an exceptional Media Map of the sources shared on social media in France over the six-month period prior to the vote. It assessed and quantified the disruptive news sources opposed to traditional media and establishment information, an alternative world that is insensitive to criticism or fact-checking from mainstream sources. It showed that, among the millions of news stories shared in social media, almost a quarter came from sources in the “Reframe” and “Alternative” categories of the Media Map, mainly from the far-right but also from the far-left. Some reflected Russian influence and brought Russian-related topics, such as the war in Syria, into the election discourse.

This report, the second of three, extends these findings. It shows that while the sharing of traditional media and legitimate campaign sites has increased as the vote got closer, attempts at disinformation still abound. In April, one in five links shared are still from sources that not only contest the legitimacy of traditional media, but produce alternative facts and narratives that can often qualify as disinformation.

Several examples of techniques of disinformation are described in the report, such as the “credibility cloak” of planting fake news stories in the open blog platforms of legitimate media sites to claim they are the source. Such stories have repeatedly been exposed by fact-checkers, who have been extremely active in the campaign. Their actions are likely to limit the impact of disinformation outside the “reframe” and “alternative” worlds, even if they fail to deter those trying to spread it.

This polarisation between these two information worlds mirrors the deep divisions within French society. In helping to build a better understanding of the issue, this study can encourage those who seek strategies to bridge the gap and fight disinformation, a cancer in any democratic society.

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*Pierre Haski is a long-time journalist with Agence France-Presse and Libération, and a foreign correspondent in Johannesburg, Jerusalem and Beijing, Pierre Haski is the co-founder of the French news-website Rue89.com, currently a columnist with the magazine L'Obs. He is the author of several books, his latest, an essay on France : "Le droit au bonheur - la France à l'épreuve du monde" (Stock, 2017)*



## Introduction

Welcome to the second report of Bakamo's social media study of the 2017 French Presidential Election.

The first report, [\*The Role and Impact of Non-Traditional Publishers in the 2017 French Presidential Election\*](#), introduced the Media Map, a comprehensive typology of sources of political news including both traditional and non-traditional publishers. It measured the impact of these sources by the extent to which their content was shared in social media. In the process, it illustrated the mechanism by which disruptive and conspiratorial narratives enter the political discourse for some, but not all, citizens. Its most challenging implication was that there is little common ground between those who accept traditional media narratives and those who contest their validity.

This second report expands on these findings and delves deeper into five themes.

First, it extends the analysis of the Media Map through April 21 and presents updated social media sharing metrics. Second, it explores observable patterns by which disinformation or "fake news" enters political discourse using tactics designed to boost its credibility. Third, it reveals the way Russian influence systematically attunes French readers to messages that create sympathy for pro-Russian positions and the candidates who support them. Fourth, it examines how hashtags, particularly those formed from candidates' names, are used to spread adversarial messages. Fifth and finally, it presents a more refined understanding of how influencers share disruptive content and convey their politics through the use of symbols.

The final section of this second report foreshadows the analysis to come in the third. The third report will be a qualitative study of the comments people make as they share and engage with political content to understand their motivations and needs.

## Executive Summary

### Key Findings

- In April, sharing of traditional and campaign sources has increased both in absolute and relative terms. There are more social media users sharing links from these sources, and the number of links they share on average has increased.
- There are four patterns by which sources inject disinformation into the discourse, all of which effectively lend it an air of credibility. These are simple hoaxes, references to unorthodox polls, the co-opting of self-publishing sites, and taking articles out of historical context to support their position.
- Russian influence is introduced into the French political discourse via content about international issues. This content is framed to undermine traditional media sources, minimise issues raised in opposition to Russian activities, or otherwise shift the focus and blame to other actors. The content serves to mitigate criticism of Russia and create support for its political positions and, implicitly, the presidential candidates who espouse them.
- Hashtags are a battleground for the campaigns. The more they are shared across the Media Map, the more their meaning is contested. This is particularly evident with candidates' names, which partisans use to break through the walls of the adversary's "echo chamber".



- As shown in the first report, disruptive narratives from Alternative sources are shared alongside those from Reframe sources. This occurs in both the hard left and right communities. Sometimes these narratives are shared along with content from more mainstream right-leaning blogs. There is still almost no sharing of links across the divide between traditional sources and those which contest them.
- Social media users who share Reframe links use symbols/icons in their usernames as shortcuts for conveying their political attitudes. These are amongst the most active users in terms of sharing.

## Conclusions & Implications

- As the election draws closer, traditional media sources are capturing a greater share of the social media discourse. The political and election content they publish thus remains unequivocally relevant and relied upon by social media users.
- That said, still one in five links shared are from sources that contest the legitimacy of traditional media. These disruptive sources use the same tools and techniques by which traditional media sources gain their credibility, allowing them to create a veneer of legitimacy and simultaneously undermine traditional narratives. In essence, traditional media is having its tools used against itself.
- While it is difficult to say whether Russian influence represents intentional meddling or is simply finding like-minded publishers, the content is unambiguously destined for French audiences. It is published in French and covers topics that have become fault lines in French politics.
- With little common ground between users who accept traditional media narratives and those who contest them, techniques of disinformation will continue to be effective, especially because the communities that contest them are highly active and tightly knit.

## Results

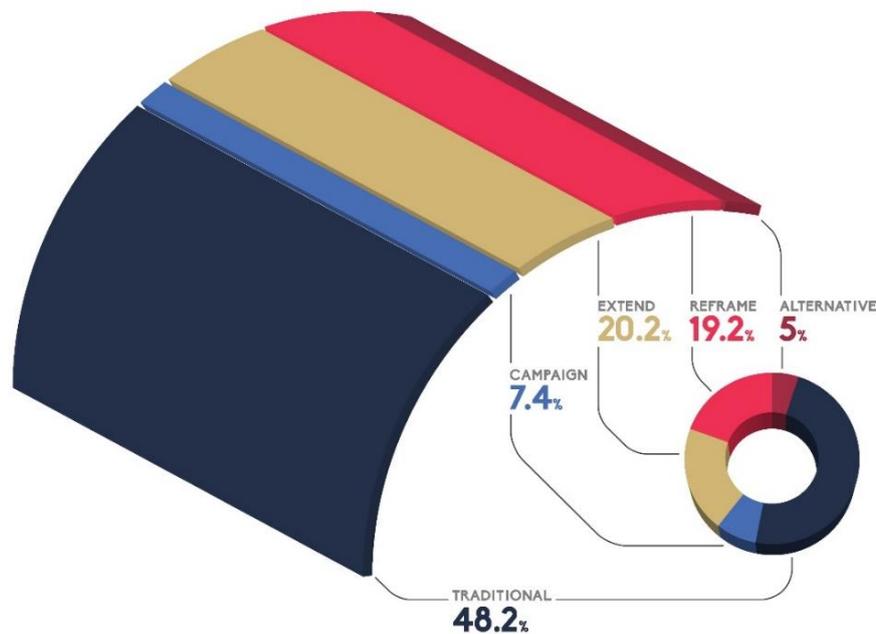
### Recapping the Media Map

The Media Map is a segmentation of the many sources of French political and election news. Five sections emerged from a content analysis of over 800 media sources most frequently cited in public social media discussions around the elections and politics in general. Together, these five sections capture the different types of influence and narratives people refer to when participating in the discussion.

With the media sources segmented, the study measured the number of times social media users shared links from each of the 800+ sources. The act of sharing content (a link to a story, article, video, or image) represents activity and engagement. Through April 21st, over nine million links were shared from sources in the Media Map. The percentages on the Map reflect the breakdown of links shared by each section.



**Figure 1 The Media Map by Section**  
 (percentages reflect data from 1 November through 4 April)



### Traditional Media

This section contains media sources that belong to the established commercial and conventional media landscape, such as websites of national and regional newspapers, TV and radio stations, online portals adhering to journalistic standards, and news aggregators.

### Campaign Media

The Campaign section of the Media Map holds the official web presences of the candidates and parties. All sites located in this section are clearly marked and operated by the campaigns.

### Extend

This section holds media sources that act to extend the journalistic scope of the traditional media. They include non-partisan or scholarly investigative reporting, anti-corruption watchdogs, personal or community blogs, and satirical and comedy sites.

### Reframe

Media sources in the Reframe section counter Traditional media. They see themselves as part of a struggle to “reinform” readers of the real contexts and meanings hidden from them when they are informed by Traditional media sources. This section breaks with the traditions of journalism and uses both traditional and alternative sources to craft a disruptive narrative.

### Alternative

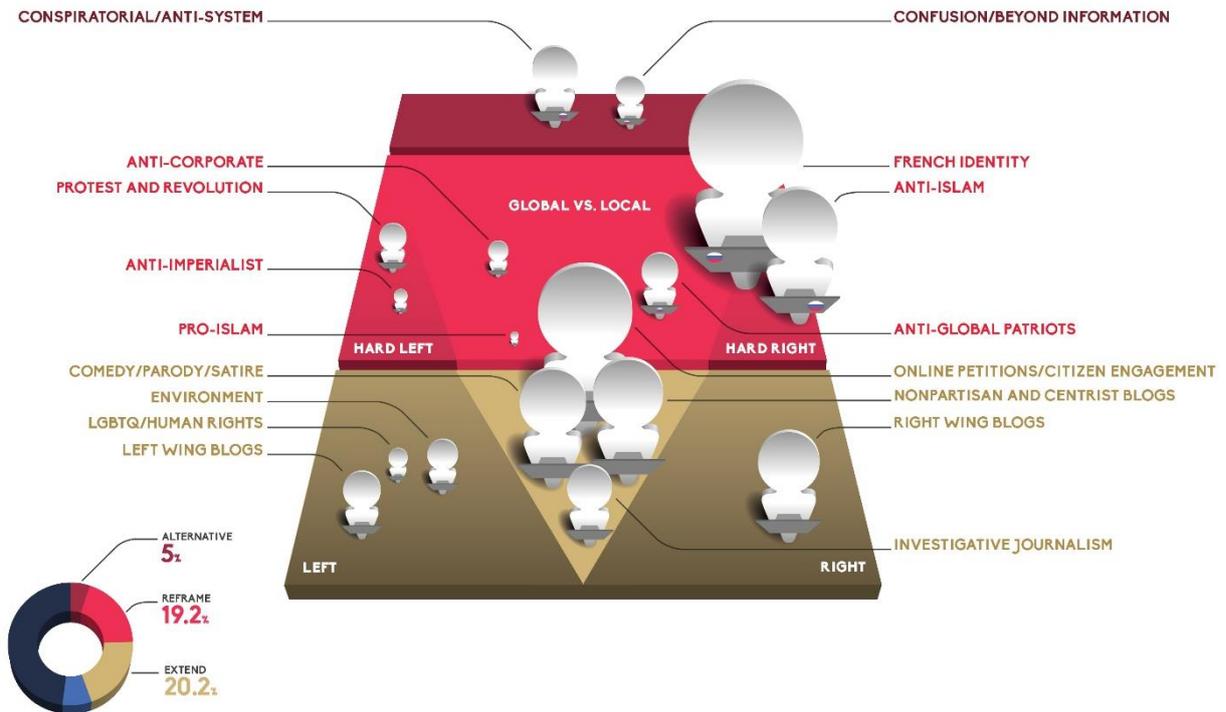
The Alternative section is an incoherent, confusing space. It fuses radical left and right views unified in their opposition to globalisation. Narratives are often mythical or discuss an intricate web of conspiracy. Traditional left-right political orientations are not present.

### Media Map Clusters

The three non-traditional sections of the Media Map (Extend, Reframe, Alternative) are composed of multiple subgroups, or clusters. These are constructed primarily from an analysis of the content published and the narrative frame invoked (left-right, global-local). These clusters are positioned on the image below. The size of the emblem indicates the relative size of the cluster.



**Figure 2 The Media Map by Cluster**  
 (percentages reflect data from 1 November through 4 April)

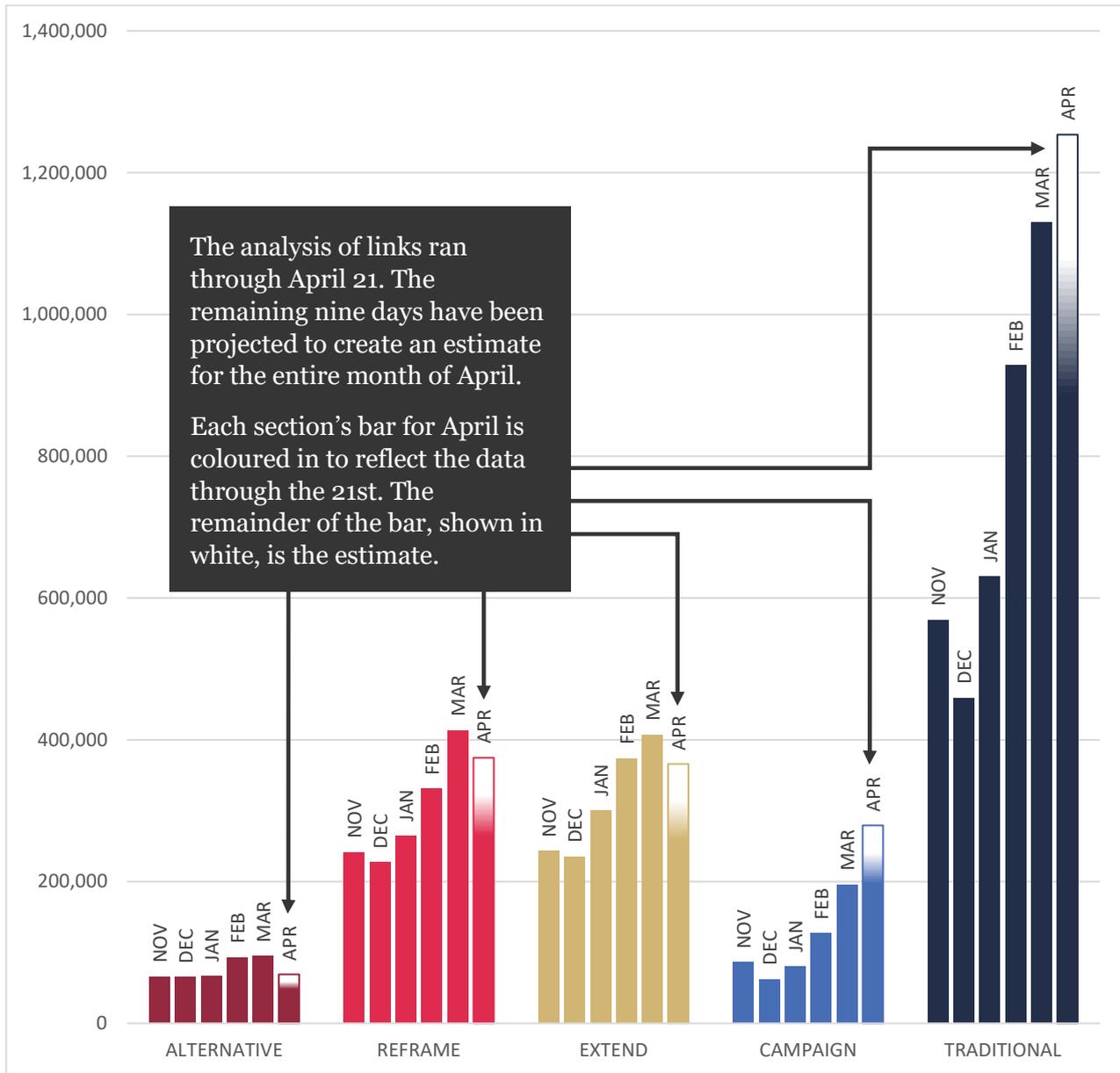


### April Update: Increased Sharing of Traditional and Campaign Links

The first report presented data on links shared in social media from 1 November 2016 through 4 April 2017. For this second report, the analysis extends to 21 April. Figure 3 visually depicts the trend in the number of links shared per section of the Media Map.



**Figure 3 Trends in Links Shared by Section (actual and projected)**



**Table 1 Number of Links Shared per Section, per Month (in thousands)**

	November 2016	December 2016	January 2017	February 2017	March 2017	April 2017 actual data (1st-21st)	April 2017 projected data
<b>ALTERNATIVE</b>	66	65	68	93	95	48	69
<b>REFRAME</b>	241	227	265	331	414	262	375
<b>EXTEND</b>	243	235	301	374	407	256	366
<b>CAMPAIGN</b>	86	63	81	127	196	195	279
<b>TRADITIONAL</b>	569	459	631	928	1 160	878	1 254
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1 206</b>	<b>1 050</b>	<b>1 345</b>	<b>1 854</b>	<b>2 241</b>	<b>1 640</b>	<b>2 342</b>



Because data analysis stopped on the 21st, the chart and the table show declines from March to April. To estimate the full month of April, the data have been projected using a simple assumption that social media users will continue to share links through the end of the month at the same rate they did through the 21st.<sup>1</sup> By the end of April, the Media Map is projected to encompass over 10 million links shared.

### **Trends in Links Shared: Traditional and Campaign Links Continue to Grow**

The trend through April confirms what was observed in the first report, namely that the number of links shared from Traditional sources is steadily growing. There are three explanations for this.

First, the number of social media users sharing links from Traditional sources has grown by more than 25% from January to March alone.<sup>2</sup> If the projection for April holds, the number of users will grow at least another 10% in April versus March.

Second, the average number of links shared per user has increased by over 50% from January to March. If the projection for April holds, the average links shared per user in April will remain about the same as March.

Third, though we have no way to directly measure it, there is almost certainly more content available to share. There are likely to be more stories about the election as the date gets closer, particularly those published by Traditional and Campaign media sources.

Links shared from Campaign sources have increased considerably as well. As of April 21, the number of links shared is almost equal to the whole of March. If the projection for the entire month holds, 40% more links will be shared in April than in March. There have been strong month-over-month increases (on the order of 50%) throughout 2017.

Meanwhile, through April 21 there are fewer links being shared from the non-traditional sections. The April projection suggests a shallow decrease of 10% in links shared from Extend and Reframe sources versus March. Sharing of links from Alternative sources is projected to decline by about 20%. The declines would imply both fewer users sharing links *and* fewer average links shared per user for those sharing content from Extend and Alternative sources. The projections suggest only that there are fewer users sharing links from Reframe sources.<sup>3</sup>

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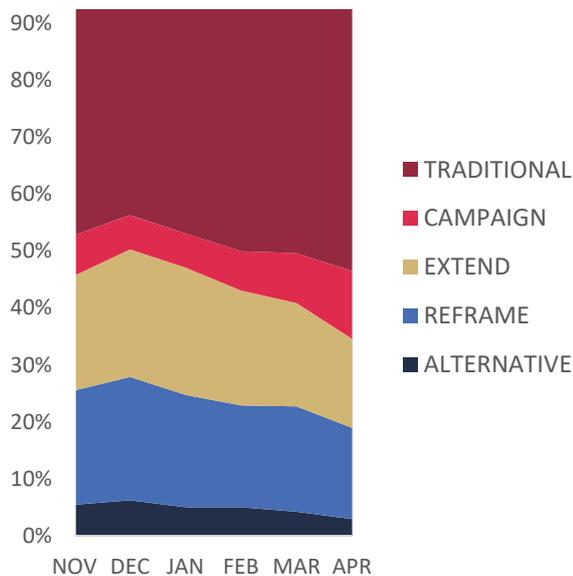
<sup>1</sup> We collected data through April 21. To estimate totals for the whole month of April, we multiplied the actual figures by a constant factor of  $30/21 = 1.43$ . This simple multiplier assumes that sharing will continue at the same rate for the remaining nine days of April.

<sup>2</sup> These numbers are approximate due to the link shortening issue discussed in the first report. Links that have been shortened by third party services show an unknown domain name that requires exporting data for analysis outside the Talkwalker platform. To precisely count the number of unique users, we would have needed to manually extract and process at least a dozen samples of data from “shortened links” and “visible links” to create a non-duplicated list of social media accounts.

<sup>3</sup> Facebook recently announced that 30 000 accounts were closed for publishing fake news. There is no indication in our data that these closures are behind the decrease in unique accounts sharing Reframe links in April. We have also reviewed the data on number of unique accounts sharing links that was presented in the first report (from 1 November to 4 April). We find a modest decline of about 600 unique accounts of the 87000+ accounts sharing links from the Reframe and Alternative sections. We infer that these recently-closed Facebook accounts were not sharing links from the 800+ sources that make up the Media Map.



**Figure 4 Evolution of Media Map by Section**  
(data from 1 November through 21 April)



As the influence of Traditional and Campaign sources has grown at a faster rate than other sections, the Media Map proportions have changed slightly.

- Traditional: 54% of links shared (48% Nov-Mar)
- Campaign: 12% of links shared (7% Nov-Mar)
- Extend: 16% of links shared (20% Nov-Mar)
- Reframe: 16% of links shared (19% Nov-Mar)
- Alternative: 3% of links shared (5% Nov-Mar)

Figure 3 shows that, as the campaign reaches its climax, the number of links from traditional news sources and the official campaigns has grown in both absolute and relative terms. Whatever the reasons, the data show that news from Traditional and Campaign sources is still relevant and that people are relying on it in greater proportions as election day approaches.

## Patterns of Disinformation

The first report showed how media sources from the Reframe and Alternative sections of the Media Map publish seek to counter traditional media narratives. This report analysed their tactics and observed four patterns by which incorrect or intentionally confusing information is injected into the public discourse around the 2017 Election. These tactics are: cloaking false stories on an otherwise credible platform, taking news out of temporal context, using fake polls, and creating hoax sites.

### Credibility Cloak

This method of spreading false stories leverages the open platforms provided by respected media sources to lend credibility to unfounded allegations. The fact that an allegation has been published on the platform of respectable media source—despite only being posted in a place that is open to anyone for publish content on that platform, and thus not explicitly not carrying the formal endorsement of the platform—is used to provide “proof” of the allegation’s validity. A successful example of this can be seen in the campaign to connect Macron with illicit offshore funds.

The story began with an article ([Link](#)) published on the open collaborative blog linked to Mediapart, a well-known and reputable media source. The article insinuates that Macron is just like Jérôme Cahuzac, the former budget minister who was sentenced to prison for hiding funds in a Swiss bank account. Cahuzac’s actions were in fact revealed by Mediapart’s own editorial content. While the article never explicitly accused Macron of having offshore accounts, the suggestion appeared in the commentary, which then spread into social media via the #EmmanuelCahuzac hashtag. People who shared links to the story believed (or pretended to believe) that the article was authored by Mediapart itself. Visually, the difference between editorial and self-published content is hard to recognise.

In a similar case, a self-published article on Mediapart’s open platform defended Fillon from revelations of misconduct. The obvious contradiction that an ideological adversary (a left-wing blogger) would defend Fillon (a right-wing candidate) and write a story not reported elsewhere became the basis for the article’s “credibility” and enabled it to appropriate the authority and respectability of the media source. ([Link](#))



A more radical way of co-opting the credibility of reputable media sources is to allege censorship. This was the case with an article run by Europe-Israel.org. The article explicitly alleges that Macron has offshore accounts and that this would have been revealed in *Le Canard Enchâiné*, a traditional media source known for its investigative journalism, *except that it was censored by Le Canard Enchâiné's editors!* The source of the Europe-Israel article claimed to have confirmed the existence of this alleged report. The Europe-Israel article ([original link](#)) has since been removed, but there are traces of the allegations of censorship that are visible from a simple search of the URL.

By camouflaging false information as journalistic research or associating it with a respected brand, sources aim to spread false allegations that confuse and misinform readers.

### **Time Shifting**

Another method used to spread false information is the re-publishing of outdated information. Content that was factually true at the time of publishing is misleadingly recycled to give the impression the information is still valid. Often the original source is cited *without* its original publishing date.

This was the case with the rumour that Fillon had been cleared of all wrong-doing associated with the “fake job” scandal involving his family members. An article in the *Le Scrutateur* ([Link](#)) cited the opinion of a lawyer from the end of February. Fillon was indicted a month later. The article, written in April, had no basis to claim Fillon’s innocence, yet it did. The source’s intention is visible in the article’s title: “URGENT - FILLON BLANCHI ! Les média n'en parlent Pas !” (“URGENT! Fillon cleared - the media are not talking about it!”). Other remarks and citations assert that Fillon has not been indicted.

Shifting content in time turns originally factual statements into falsehoods. Republishing of outdated information is used to inject uncertainty and mistrust towards traditional media publishers.

### **Fake Polls**

Undermining the credibility of opinion polling has become a prominent strategy for spreading false information. Those engaged in these efforts assert that the polls conducted by traditional media sources are biased toward Macron (the candidate of the Elite) to ensure his election. They cite Trump’s success and the Brexit referendum as proof that polling methodology is outdated and inaccurate.

Fake polls have proven effective in changing the campaign discourse. For example, on 29 March, Sputnik, a Russian state-funded news organisation, reported results ([Link](#)) from a poll by Brand Analytics, a Moscow-based social media company, showing Fillon in the lead. Articles published by sources in the Reframe section cited the poll to point out the unreliability of classical opinion polling and promote the idea that Fillon had turned the tables to become a leading candidate.

Brand Analytics is but one of several previously-unknown companies whose polls have been used by Reframe media sources to counter those published by Traditional media sources. Filteris and Multivote also made headlines with polls claiming to use novel methodologies that predicted an outcome which contradicted consensus estimates from reputable pollsters. The fact that these fake polls ultimately proved to be inaccurate is immaterial. They succeeded in creating uncertainty and undermining legitimate polls to influence voters.

### **Hoax Sites**

Fake and cloned websites were also used to shape the election discourse by misleading readers. This happened with the Belgian media source LeSoir.be. A similar looking cloned site, LeSoir.info,



was used to publish a false allegation that Macron received financial support from Saudi Arabia. Another site imitated the look and feel of LinkedIn, a professional social networking site, calling itself LinkedEM ([Link](#)). It posted a fake profile page of Macron with his professional experience and competencies, all of which carried negative connotations. It used the hashtag #LinkedEM to share the site in social media.

### Conclusions from the Patterns of Disinformation

The disinformation campaigns detected via social media all share one common strategy. They leverage traditional sources of authority and trust for their own benefit, while simultaneously using them to undermine traditional media. As a consequence, they instil a general sense of distrust and chaos, which in turn makes radical solutions more appealing.

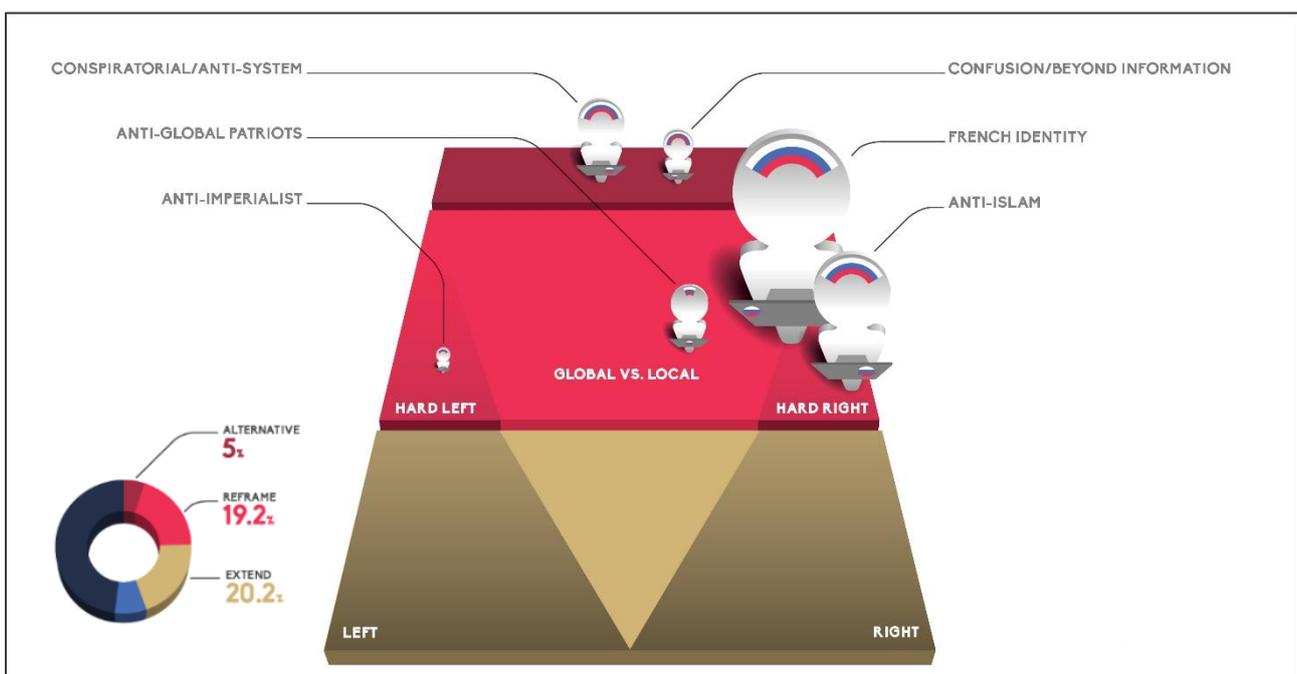
### Typology of Russian Influence

The first report of this study exposed foreign influence in the public social discourse around the French presidential election. The analysis only found Russian influence, which appeared in media sources in the Reframe and Alternative sections. This report provides a deeper analysis of the typical narratives emerging in the weeks prior to the first round of the election.

Figure 6 below shows the clusters in which Russian influence was found. Sources in these clusters either republish or reference Russian sites, including the French versions of RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik News as well as a range of Russian blogs dedicated to French readers. They may also echo Russian positions on international issues, presenting them as viable alternatives to those of Western liberal democratic governments.

50% of sources in the Alternative section showed Russian influence. In the Reframe section, about one-third of the sources in the French Identity (hard right), Anti-Islam (hard right), and the Anti-Imperialist (hard left) clusters showed Russian influence. About one-tenth of the sources in the Anti-Global Patriots cluster showed Russian influence.

**Figure 5 Russian Influences by Cluster**



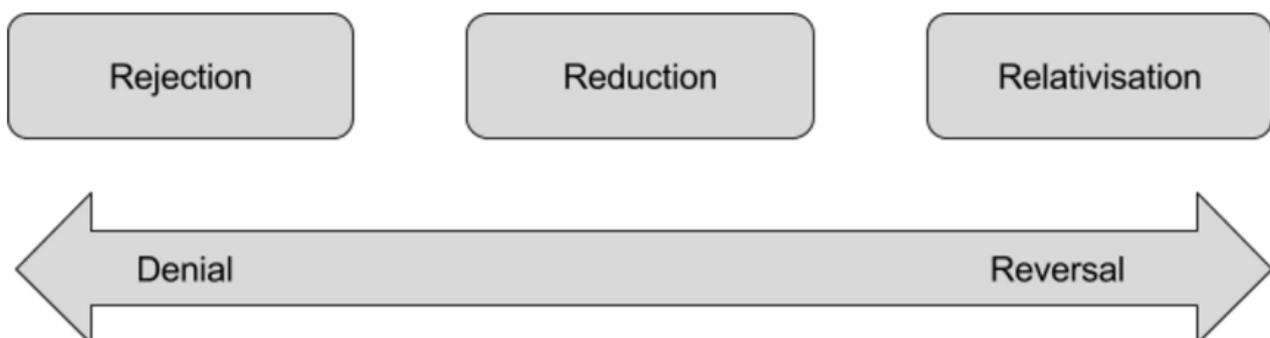
As the presenter of Sputnik News explained in a radio conversation with French military experts: *“Mainstream journals and politicians see Russian interference and even conspiracy everywhere.*



Instead one should recognise that these anti-Russian sentiments and fears stem from an anti-sovereigntist position. They fear embracing the Russian model of the nation state which is to promote national interest above anything else.” In essence, anti-Russian sentiments in the French political context are seen as representing “anti-patriotic” or “globalist” positions.

While the narratives touching on Russia’s role and interests span multiple topics, one of the most prominent and recent is the Syrian chemical gas attack. Stories on the attack which exhibit Russian influence (in the Reframe section) can be divided into three groups along a continuum between denial and reversal.

**Figure 6 A Continuum of Russian Influence**



While the analysis below looks at each type of influence via a different angle of the story, the overarching implication is that traditional media sources are not telling the full story.

### **Rejection**

This approach is designed to cast reasonable doubt on the evidence that the attack actually happened. Articles attempt to discredit information indicating Russian involvement in the attack. They present points like the following:

*The British doctor who documented the attack is likely a "committed jihadist", according to Western secret services. He was removed from the General Medical Council in 2016.*

On a broader level, the motivations of other international political actors are questioned. “One should always ask the question: who is the beneficiary of a certain action?” quotes one article. The article insinuates that the attack may have been committed by the Islamic militias fighting Assad, the Sunni states, and Israel, since each would benefit. ([Link](#))

One article likens the American military response to the chemical gas attack to George W. Bush’s decision to attack Iraq. It argues that because Iraq never had weapons of mass destruction and the US’ (unverifiable) intelligence sources turned out to be fake news, the Syrian attack must be fake news as well.

A popular conspiracy theory used to explain US actions is that Trump himself is not an independent actor. Trump is alleged to be influenced by the previous administration and interventionist liberals, such as Hillary Clinton, and Zionist manipulators. This explains why Trump changed his position so fast. ([Link](#))

Narratives emerging in this group all take aim at the believability of traditional journalistic reporting on Russia’s involvement in the attack. They tend to either introduce unreported or false details to sow doubt, or they analyse the event from a geopolitical perspective to show allegations against Russia are illogical.



## Reduction

Articles following the reduction strategy aim to deflate the impact of the chemical gas attack. Stories do not deny the attack, rather they convey that it was not an extraordinary event. Articles tend to follow one of two lines of reasoning.

One is that, even if Syria committed the attacks, it is not a big deal since the same or worse atrocities happen all the time. Most of them, the logic goes, are committed by Western powers and their allies. This assertion is echoed by Jacques Sapir, a left sovereigntist, who argues that Russia might breach human rights to a certain degree, but it is infinitely less than the allies of the West. The other line of reasoning asserts that the attack could have been an accident or collateral damage that was instrumentalised by the Syrian rebels ([Link](#)).

Readers of content following the reduction strategy are thus led to believe that a chemical gas attack, even if it took place, has a smaller impact than what traditional media sources are reporting. The outcry against the inhumanity of a chemical gas attack is therefore overstated and unfounded.

## Relativisation

This strategy in Russian-influenced articles appeals to moral relativism to explain any possible Russian involvement with the chemical gas attack. It does so by implicating the US to shift blame and responsibility away from Russia.

The argument begins with the assertion that the Islamic State has frequently used chemical weapons in Syria, yet the Syrian government has almost never used them. The parties are therefore doing evil equally. This interpretation creates a binary logic that there are only two parties to the conflict: Islamists and the Syrian army. From this binary logic, it follows that those who fight Assad—in this case, the West—must be on the side of the Islamists. Through this association, a subsequent attack using chemical gas by the Islamic State in Mosul is interpreted as being ordered by the US. Further proof is “demonstrated” via Thierry Meyssan’s opinion that the White House has changed its stance due to British influence. The British are believed to want to preserve the jihadist system that they built themselves. Proof of this, the logic goes, can be found in a tweet by Peter Ford, former British ambassador to Syria, denouncing the US attacks launched on Syria that was ignored by traditional media.

The relativisation strategy is designed to do two things. First, it exonerates Russia by creating an alternative interpretation of events. Second, it uses international events to promote an anti-globalist agenda. Candidates who criticise Russia’s involvement in Syria must therefore be globalists who are not representing France’s interests. The three narrative approaches work in concert and reinforce each other.

## Hashtags

In social media, the hashtag—typically a word preceded by the # symbol (« la dièze » in French usage, the “hash key” in British usage, or the pound sign in American usage)—is a label indicating the topic area of the content being shared. Hashtags are used to search for topics and are thus a primary way by which people discover content. In the context of the French election, we find hashtags for political parties (#FN), candidates (#Fillon, #Hamon, etc), and issues (#Syrie). There are no “rules”, however, on how people use hashtags. They may reflect positively or negatively on what is being shared. They may even be irrelevant to the actual content being shared.

The analysis of hashtags focuses on two different scenarios. One is where the hashtag is widely used, appearing across nearly all clusters and sections in the Media Map with high frequency. The



other is where the hashtag appears frequently, but in few clusters. In both cases, the analysis focuses on the non-traditional sections of the Media Map (Extend, Reframe, and Alternative).

### **Figure 7 Most Used Hashtags by Number of Clusters**

(Not Including Traditional or Campaign sources)

1. #Macron (17)
2. #Presidentielle2017 (17)
3. #Fillon (16)
4. #France (15)
5. #Mélenchon (15)
6. #JLM2017 (14)
7. #FN (13)
8. #LeGrandDebat (12)
9. #Melenchon (12)
10. #Syrie (12)
11. #Trump (12)
12. #Hamon (12)
13. #EnMarche (11)
14. #feedly (10)
15. #Hamon2017 (10)
16. #politique (9)
17. #Guyane (8)
18. #hollande (8)
19. #LEmissionPolitique (8)
20. #Fillon2017 (8)

### **Hashtags used across many clusters**

Where hashtags are used across many clusters, their meaning varies greatly. Because hashtags are linked to discovery, the content one is likely to see in social media will also be varied. In some clusters the hashtag reflects neutral descriptive reporting, while in others it indicates either active support or opposition. Widely-used hashtags thus become a battleground in and of themselves. Put differently, contested hashtags become valves in the echo chamber: they permit sharers to reach people with different political beliefs.

Figure 7 shows the top 20 hashtags by number of clusters in which they are used. To illustrate this idea of contested meanings, the analysis looks at content shared with the top five candidate and party hashtags (#Macron, #Fillon, #Mélenchon/Melenchon, #Hamon, and #FN) along with the #MarineLePen hashtag. The analysis covers the thirty days between 22 March through 20 April.

### **#Macron**

Links shared from Traditional sources with the Macron hashtag report on his political platform, his campaign activities, and reflect on where he will draw voters, particularly following the “defection” of Manuel Valls. Other articles address his polling numbers.

Content shared from Campaign sources is far less benign. The top articles are from FN sources—the party, the Le Pen campaign, and Florian Philippot himself (Le Pen’s campaign manager)—that are critical of Macron.

Content shared from Extend sources reflects on Macron’s background and his proposals. One likens him to a chameleon and reflects sardonically, « *Dis moi qui tu es, je te dirai ce que tu veux entendre* ». (“Tell me who you are and I’ll tell you what you want to hear.”)

In both the Reframe and Alternative sections, content shared with the Macron hashtag is again negative and critical. Here, Macron is the candidate of, variously, the Elite, the Muslims, the Saudis, the Arabs, the Pro-Palestinians, the Jewish Conspiracy, and the System.

### **#Fillon**

In links shared from Traditional sources, the Fillon hashtag appears with links to polls, the recently-foiled terrorist attack in Marseille, and the scandal involving “fake jobs” for his family members.



Meanwhile, the Macron camp is using the Fillon hashtag to counter his platform from official Campaign sources.

Links shared from Extend sources are fewer in number. One shows satirical pictures of Fillon using amusing Snapchat overlays. (Fillon is not the only one subjected to this treatment.) Another is a petition to have Penelope Fillon “give us our money back”!

In the Reframe section, there are both sympathetic and opposing uses of the Fillon hashtag. A prominent source in the French Identity cluster takes traditional media to task for accusing Fillon of spreading fake news despite the fact “he was right” about Islamist violence in Paris. Those on the left position him as being anti-African and criticize him for the Penelope affair. In the Alternative space, Fillon is seen as the candidate who was dismantled by the system yet has somehow managed to come back from his fall from grace.

### #Mélenchon

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Articles shared from Traditional sources with the Mélenchon hashtag mainly discuss polling numbers, typically with the prediction that the run-off will be between Macron and Le Pen. Some the links point to articles calling for Mélenchon to ally himself with the other Socialist candidates to present a united Left front. Others discuss the Mélenchon phenomenon as a new Left populism which shares some characteristics with populism on the right.

The Mélenchon campaign’s strategic use of hashtags is visible in links shared by the campaign. Articles shared by users with the greatest reach are almost uniformly pro-Mélenchon. In effect, Mélenchon “owns” his name as a hashtag. Moreover, his campaign uses the hashtags of the other parties and candidates to spread the word about his political positions.

Criticism of Mélenchon using his hashtag begins to appear in the Extend section where his Communist leanings are discussed. In links shared from Reframe sources, sentiment varies depending on the left-right position of the sharer. Mélenchon is view positively by the left. Arabs and Muslims are encouraged to vote for him. On the right, one of the top articles discusses Mélenchon’s response to the pro-Palestinian march in Paris in the summer of 2014. Mélenchon is accused of being an anti-Semite for not condemning the fact that during the protest people chanted « *Mort aux Juifs !* » (“*Death to the Jews!*”). Another article suggests that, were he to be elected, it would be the end of pork in the cafeterias.

Links shared from the Alternative section with the Mélenchon hashtag accuse him of being the Tsipras of France. He is also condemned for being in the pocket of the Jews for not having supported Marine Le Pen’s statement denying French complicity with the Vel d’Hiv deportation.

### #Hamon

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Links shared from Traditional sources with the Hamon hashtag mainly discuss his low poll numbers. Some discuss universal basic income, one of the central planks of his platform. His campaign puts this case forward in the Campaign section, but finds itself being trolled by the Mélenchon campaign, which counters that a vote for Hamon is a wasted vote.

The abandonment of Hamon by Valls and much of the left becomes fodder for the parody site Le Gorafi, which “reports” that Hamon’s mother will be voting Macron! This is the most shared article in the Extend section with the Hamon hashtag.

Links shared with the Hamon hashtag from Reframe sources are uniformly critical. On the left, Hamon is seen as needing to ally himself with Mélenchon. One metaphor calls him the acorn who will never produce a tree. (« *le gland qui n’accouchera jamais d’un chêne* ») On the right, Hamon and Mélenchon represent “antiracism at its senile stage”. From an Alternative source, Hamon has



apparently been abandoned by the Jewish Lobby, which has allegedly forced him to change his position to seek Jewish votes.

### #FN

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One of the interesting findings of this analysis is the absence of a Marine Le Pen hashtag in either of the top 20 lists. The FN hashtag is used far more frequently.

Links from traditional sources with the #FN tag refer to Valls' alliance with Macron (presumably to stop the FN), Le Pen's program, her meeting with Putin, and her comments about the Vel d'Hiv deportations. There is even an article reporting a "fake jobs" scandal in the FN, similar to that of which Fillon is accused.

In official Campaign sources, the FN has been actively promoting candidates for the upcoming legislative elections. There are also links being shared by the Mélenchon campaign using the FN hashtag to appeal to FN voters.

Links shared with from the Extend section with the FN hashtag mainly reflect opposition. A Belgian source opposed to the FN wrote a satirical article promoting a Plastic Bag challenge, for which FN voters are invited to wear a plastic bag over their heads for 30 minutes to show their support. Another, more serious in tone, is from a Jewish blogger challenging Le Pen's comments about the Vel d'Hiv. More supportive was a petition demanding that Macron apologise for what he said about the FN in Marseille.

Links shared from Reframe sources are again a function of where the sharer sits on the left-right divide. One suggests that the FN is being actively discriminated against in overseas voting locations. It shows a photo alleging that there are campaign posters of every candidate except Le Pen. Another attempts to link anti-fascist protests with anti-Semitism by saying the *antifas* are calling the FN « Juifs, voleurs, assassins ! » ("Jews, thieves, assassins!"). On the left, articles say that FN Members of the EU Parliament have voted against workers and practise intimidation in the towns they control. Finally, an Alternative source uses the FN hashtag to decry all the candidates as *clochards* (*tramps* or *bums*), exclaiming "we need a billionaire"!

### #MarineLePen

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The #MarineLePen hashtag has more limited use, occurring in only six of the clusters. Links shared with this hashtag from Traditional sources mainly reflect the polls and her prospects of reaching the second round. Links shared from campaign sources show Le Pen's platform as well as Mélenchon's tactical outreach to FN supporters.

In the Extend category, there is mainly support for her programs, although there is also an editorial cartoon calling for the lifting of her EU parliamentary immunity. Links shared with her hashtag from Reframe and Alternative sources are uniformly supportive. That her name as a hashtag is only shared in limited clusters where sentiment is favourable suggests that opposition is focused more on the FN as a movement than her as a candidate.



### Figure 8 Most Used Hashtags by Frequency

(Not Including Traditional or Campaign sources)

1. #Macron (17)
2. #Changez2017 (1)
3. #JLM2017 (14)
4. #Presidentielle2017 (17)
5. #France (15)
6. #Fillon (16)
7. #politique (9)
8. #LeGrandDebat (12)
9. #AvenirEnCommun (4)
10. #Mélenchon (15)
11. #FN (13)
12. #Melenchon (11)
13. #hollande (8)
14. #immigration (3)
15. #migrants (4)
16. #islam (5)
17. #NDA2017 (3)
18. #Paris (5)
19. #Syrie (12)
20. #LEmissionPolitique (8)

### Hashtags used frequently, but in a limited number of categories

If widely-used hashtags are ways of communicating outside one's like-minded political group, hashtags used in a limited number of categories become shortcuts for finding content within one's echo chamber. The discussion around immigration clearly shows this.

Immigration is one of the central issues of the campaign and lies on a fault line of French politics along with other related topics, including territorial borders, sovereignty, terrorism, radical Islam, and the secular foundations of the Republic. Yet as the analysis shows, the use of these topics has hashtags remains limited to certain clusters.

There are three main hashtags used to explore immigration: #Syrie, #immigration, and #migrants. Only the #Syrie hashtag is used across all sections of the Media Map (including Traditional and Campaign), but its meaning varies. Over the past thirty days, Traditional and Campaign sources shared with this hashtag link to content on the US missile strikes following the chemical weapons attack. This contrasts with a

prominent article in the Reframe section which speculates (in a way that has been supposedly validated by Putin) that the chemical weapons attack is a US false flag as a pretext to an invasion.

Meanwhile, the #immigration hashtag is "owned" by the French Identity and Anti-Islam clusters. For all intents and purposes, the #islam hashtag is as well, although it is shared with some Alternative content as well. #Migrants is used by traditional sources, but this is principally via RT, Russia Today. In effect, if one searches social media using these hashtags, one is almost certain to find content that favours a hard right position. Links shared from these Reframe sources universally point to articles equating immigration and Islam with lawlessness and a loss of Frenchness.

### Hashtag Conclusions

As the analysis shows, hashtags are hardly benign topic flags that facilitate neutral discovery. Rather, they are essential weapons on the battlefield of social media. In some cases, broad use allows sharers to promote their point of view and to counter others'. The greater the cross-over and frequency of use, the more meanings are loaded onto the hashtag. There is no better example of this than the way in which candidates' names contested. Conversely, where hashtags are used across a small number of clusters, it suggests that the topic has a single meaning. In this campaign, for example, the hashtags around immigration and Islam are effectively owned by the hard right clusters.



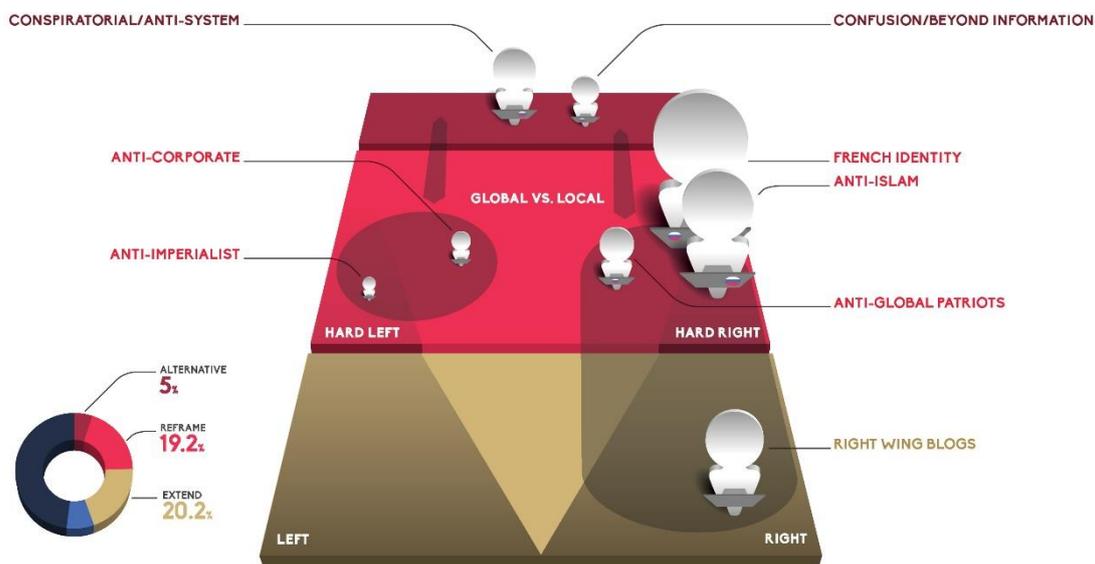
## Influencers

In the first report, the analysis of influence showed the extent to which social media users shared links from multiple sections in the Media Map. The analysis focused on the top 100 accounts sharing links per section. It found significant crossover between accounts sharing links from both Alternative and Reframe sections.

With this report, the crossover comes into clearer focus at a cluster level. The same approach was used, whereby the top 100 accounts sharing links from a given cluster were analysed to find how many of them shared links from multiple clusters. The image below depicts three key findings:

1. The overlap in links shared from hard right clusters (French Identity, Anti-Islam, and Anti-Global Patriot) is the strongest. The greatest overlap is with those who share links from both French Identity and Anti-Islam sources (38 of the top 100 accounts).
2. There is overlap from the Reframe section into the Extend section: 14 of the top 100 accounts share links from both French Identity (Reframe) and Right Blogs (Extend).
3. Though smaller in magnitude, there is also overlap in links shared on the left side of the Reframe section: 15 of the top 100 accounts share links from both Anti-Corporate and Anti-Imperialist sources.
4. Links from the Alternative section permeate both the hard left and hard right clusters in the Reframe section. For example, 18 of the top 100 accounts share links from both Conspiracy/Anti-system and French Identity sources, while 13 of the top 100 accounts share links from both Confusion/Beyond Information and Anti-Corporate sources.

**Figure 9 Sharing of Links Across Clusters**



## The Use of Symbols

The analysis of influencers also examined their use of symbols and emoji in their social media user names. Iconography provides a convenient and frequently used shortcut to communication in social media. By using symbols, users hope to communicate attitudes or feelings which the symbol acquires through sustained sharing. With the list of the top 100 users sharing links by cluster as the reference, the analysis shows four prominent symbols.



The **Greek letter phi**,  $\Phi$ , has been used by the Mélenchon campaign to represent the abbreviation *France Insoumise* (F.I.), its campaign slogan that carries the meaning of a *rebellious and indomitable nation*. This symbol is used by just over 10% of those who share links from Left Blog (Extend), Anti-Corporate (Reframe), and Anti-Imperialist sources, where one would expect Mélenchon's narrative to resonate. The symbol is also found associated with accounts that share links from the Comedy/Parody/Satire and Investigative Journalism sites.

The **Arab letter Ħ**, equivalent to the letter N, represents the town of Nineveh and is thus ascribed to people of Christian faith. This symbol became prominent as a sign of support for the Christians in Mosul being persecuted by the Islamic State. The cross, †, is used less frequently. These symbols are used by about 15% of those who share links from the French Identity (Reframe) and the Right Blogs (Extend) sources.

The **French Flag** 🇫🇷 is a symbol of patriotism. Though less used, it does appear in around 10% of the usernames who share links to French Identity, Anti-Islam, and Right Blog sources.

The **Frog**, 🐸, refers to the cartoon character Pepe the Frog. Though once benign, the image is now used by nationalists to signify deep opposition to (if not outright racism toward) foreigners and immigrants. In effect, the frog enables a user to say the unsayable. It appears in the usernames of about 5% of the top 100 users who share links from French Identity and Anti-Islam sources.

### Influencer Conclusions

Further investigation into the sharing of links from multiple different clusters reinforces findings from the first report. There is negligible overlap in sources that share links from both traditional media and sources that contest traditional narratives. There is considerable sharing within the Reframe and Alternative sections, however. With this report, the transmission mechanism by which new narratives spread across clusters becomes clearer. Truly alternative narratives are entering the discourse on both sides of the traditional left-right divide. Sharing within the Reframe section is pronounced among the hard left clusters and among the hard right clusters.

Sharing rates are highest among the clusters with the closest communities. One reflection of this closeness is the use of shared iconography to convey political attitudes. As will be discussed in the third report, the use of these icons speaks to users' emotional commitment—beyond any rational decisions they might take—to their causes.

## Conclusions & Implications

As the election draws closer, more links are being shared from Traditional and Campaign sources. More people are becoming activated and engaging with political news from these sources. While this may be partly due to an increased awareness of "fake news", it surely suggests that the political and election content being published by these sources is both relevant and relied upon by social media users.

Despite this, in April nearly one in five links are shared from sources contesting the legitimacy of traditional media. Some of these disruptive narratives emerge as "fake news". Sources publishing these narratives imitate traditional techniques and mimic well-known brands to become more believable. By appropriating credibility, they inject false information that simultaneously undermines trust in traditional media. In effect, traditional media is having its tools and techniques used against itself.



Russian influence emerges as a particular category of the disruptive narrative, bringing international issues into the French election to develop sympathy for Russian positions and promote a sovereigntist agenda. Is Russia meddling? Whether it is or is just finding like-minded readers is unknowable, yet one thing is sure: the content is destined for the French market. Articles are published in French and speak to issues that reverberate along the fault lines of French politics.

Within social media, hashtags become a primary battleground in the competition for votes. One of the few deliberate ways voters in different camps speak to each other is via the hashtags of candidates' names. Each campaign has its partisans who aim to break through the walls of the opposition's "echo chamber". This is less common with issue-based hashtags which tend to be "owned" by more homogenous groups. Because the social media battle is focused on a limited set of topics, and because competition for users' attention is intense, standing out requires eye-catching headlines.

Beyond the use of hashtags, there remains little common ground between users who accept traditional media narratives and those who contest them. Conspiratorial and confusing content and disinformation are shared by those on the left and the right. This content, which gains credibility by borrowing the tools and techniques of traditional media, will continue to find an audience in the highly active and tightly knit communities that share it.



For more information, please visit Bakamo's micro-site at  
<http://bakamosocial.com/frenchelection>

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## Contacts

For more information, please contact Daniel Fazekas at [dani@bakamosocial.com](mailto:dani@bakamosocial.com).