



Patterns of Disinformation in the 2017 French Presidential Election

SUMMARY



This document is a short summary of the study, its primary findings, and its conclusions. To read the full report (only available in English), please consult the study micro-site at: <https://bakamosocial.com/frenchelection>.

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.