Information manipulations around the Covid-19: France under attack

Paris, 8 July 2020 - **While past elections have drawn attention to the use of crises to draft messages online that serve political goals, Covid-19 has been the breeding ground for information manipulations, should it be ideological narratives or fake news.**

Contributing to help governments and democracies deal with their concern for disinformation and information manipulation, Institut Montaigne and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue are publishing a new policy paper today: "Information manipulations around the Covid-19: France under attack". Based on a comprehensive study on the spreading and circulation of 37 messages within 6 thematic communities in France (nationalists, anti-capitalists, belonging to the Yellow Vests movement, anti-Islam, naturalists, anti-technology), it shows how these communities tend to be more sensible to narratives that comfort their beliefs or issues they are interested in while not being affected by disinformation or ideological messages in a similar way. The policy paper thus calls for actions that go beyond content moderation, better harmonized and effective cooperation between public and private entities against disinformation, facilitated access to data for researchers and legal accountability of online platforms regarding the information they prioritise.

"*Our mapping shows that the sharing of information and disinformation is always political. In this sense, this policy paper highlights the French public spaces' fragilities: groups that are interested in messages that defend authoritarian regimes and weaken Europe, and that share pieces of disinformation on the French government's response are possible entry doors for foreign and domestic actors wishing to influence French politics.*" explain the authors of the paper: Iris Boyer, Deputy Head for Technology, Communications and Education at ISD and Theophile Lenoir, head of Institut Montaigne's Digital Program.

Disinformation and ideological manipulations have found echo during the Covid-19 crisis, according to the sensibility of the different observed communities

The communities we looked at are the ones that present themselves as:

- **Nationalists:** using keywords such as "patriot", "nationalist", "Rassemblement National", the French far-right party.
- **Anti-Islam:** using keywords such as "anti-Islam", racial slurs, or insulting Islam and Muslims.
- **The Yellow Vests**, a French protest movement that started in October 2018: using keywords such as "Yellow Vests" or including a profile picture referring to the movement
- **Anti-technology**: using keywords such as "anti-technology", "anti-5G", "Linky meters" (which measure and share information on electrical consumption in French households, and were the source of intense debates online).
- **Naturalists**: using keywords such as "anti-vaccine", "homeopathy", "natural", sharing information against processed food products and pharmaceutical companies.
- **Anti-capitalists**: using keywords such as "alter-globalization" ("*altermondialisme*") , "far left", "France Insoumise", the French far-left party, "French Communist Party".

The key takeaways are that:

- **Pro-authoritarian narratives** were very successful among groups of far-right influencers gathered around nationalists or anti-islam themes.
- These influencers, as well as far-left oriented influencers like anti-capitalists, were very sensitive to **anti-European narratives**. Far-left influencers do not have an interest in pro-authoritarian narratives.
- **Conspiracies against 5G** were mostly present among anti-technology and naturalist communities, but also in Yellow Vests and anti-capitalist ones. Generally, communities that gather around technology and health issues were quite impermeable to narratives that do not concern them directly.
- Far-left communities were interested in **economic conspiracy theories** concerning corporations - especially pharmaceutical due to the nature of the crisis. Anti-Islam and nationalist communities were more sensible to **disinformation on the French government.**

Overall, social networks have played an important role in deleting obvious disinformation or fake news on their platform, raising the sensitive question of the role of traditional media in covering and spreading them.

Measures have been taken by both public and private entities, but they have proven to be insufficient

Major technology or social network companies like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Google or YouTube have introduced a series of responses to the Covid-19 'infodemic', including new guidelines to forbid fake accounts and advertisements promoting disinformation. Yet, those measures haven't always effectively been enforced.

Public organizations and governments faced the additional challenge of public accountability and securing freedom of speech and of the press. As a result, they mostly focused on **enhancing authoritative information**. However, policy approaches remained fragmented, barely visible and thus ineffective.

March – April 2020
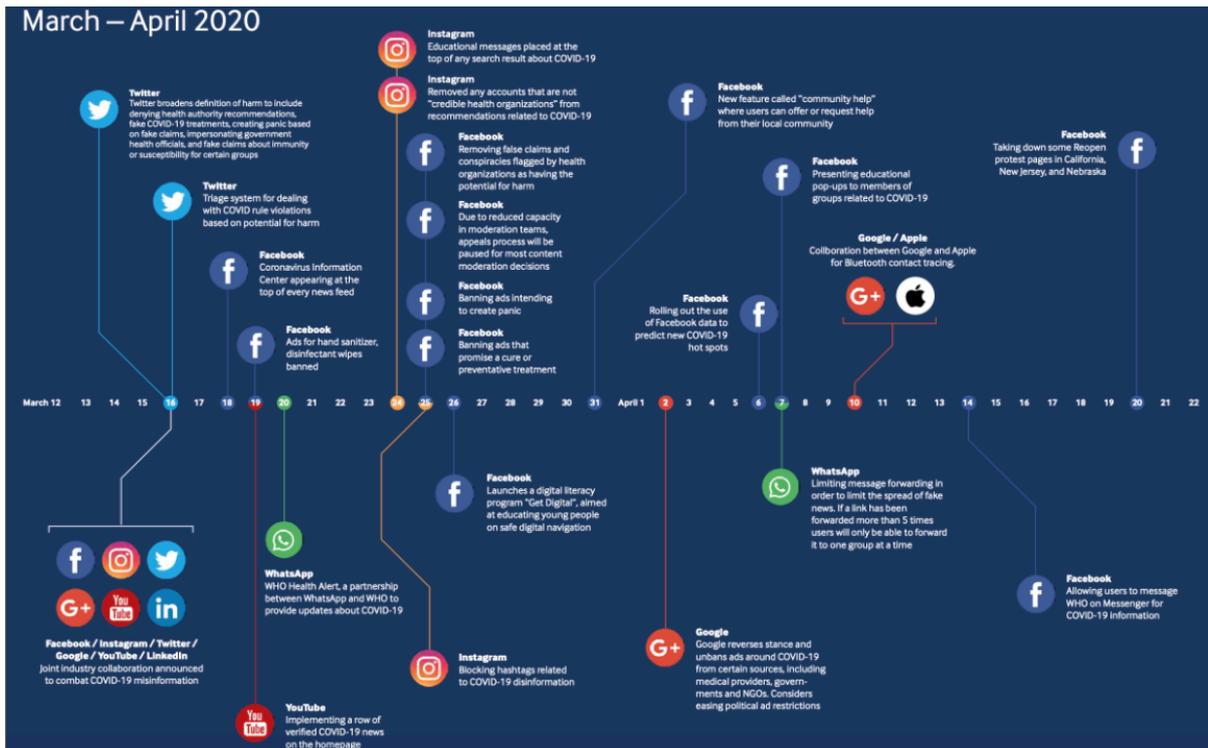
[ISD's interim review of responses to the COVID-19 'infodemic'](...) monitored platforms' crisis response to disinformation (through information hubs, moderation policies' updates, content down ranking and labelling, partnerships with fact-checking organisations, regulation of malign advertising and in kind marketing for authoritative organizations). Despite this mobilization across the sector, the report found that false and misleading content around Covid-19 is still widely circulated; extremist are hijacking Covid-19 content to spread their message; automated and inauthentic accounts are promoting Covid-19 disinformation and the related policy agendas of foreign states; and Google and Facebook continue to host advertisements banned under their new Covid-19 guidelines.

We should now foster better harmonization between public and private actors to protect our information ecosystem and our democracies

The West now needs to look beyond content moderation and to rethink the relationship between regulators and platforms to better understand the fragilities of public debates, and fully integrate communication infrastructures in geopolitical negotiations.

Three dimensions should particularly draw attention:

- Governments need to recognise this challenge as a priority area. Reliable and transparent information should further be promoted. New regulations to open channels of communication between platforms and governments should be created in order to facilitate information sharing.
- Access to data from online platforms should be facilitated for researchers in order to understand the fragilities of public debates and the extent to which they are exploited by foreign actors.
- Online platforms should be legally made accountable for prioritising authoritative information and down-ranking (if not even deplatforming) malign ones.

A RIGOROUS METHODOLOGY

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

How we identified discussion groups in which these messages circulate : with the help of **Linkfluence**, a French media monitoring and web analysis startup, 30,000 online posts and articles were found mentioning these 37 messages. Linkfluence then looked at the influencers who shared these pieces of information. 6 groups of influencers were created, based on both explicit information (a declarative statement in the description of a Twitter account) and implicit information (online practices, particularly sharing certain types of sources).

CLICK HERE
TO DISCOVER OUR POLICY PAPER

Subscribe to our **Newsletter**
Follow us on **Twitter** and **Instagram**
For interview requests, please contact
Lara Oliveau, Head of Communications and Press Relations at Institut Montaigne
+33 (0)6 99 79 43 62 - loliveau@institutmontaigne.org

About Institut Montaigne: Institut Montaigne is a nonprofit, independent think tank based in Paris, France. Our mission is to craft public policy proposals aimed at shaping political debates and decision making in France and Europe. We bring together leaders from a diverse range of backgrounds - government, civil society, corporations and academia - to produce balanced analyses, international benchmarking and evidence-based research. We promote a balanced vision of society, in which open and competitive markets go hand in hand with equality of opportunity and social cohesion. Our strong commitment to representative democracy and citizen participation, on the one hand, and European sovereignty and integration, on the other, form the intellectual basis for our work.

About ISD: The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent nonprofit organisation dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising global tide of hate, extremism and polarisation. We draw on fifteen years of experience to combine sector-leading expertise in global extremist movements with advanced digital analysis of disinformation and weaponised hate to deliver innovative, tailor-made policy and operational responses to these threats. Our team offers policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world and empowers youth and community influencers through our extensive and pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.