Monitoring Disinformation and Influence Campaigns in the 2022 French Elections:

Lessons Learnt

Cécile Simmons, Cooper Gatewood & Zoé Fourel

About this paper

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) monitored disinformation, misinformation and influence operations on social media in the run-up to and during the 2022 French presidential and legislative elections. This paper offers an overview of the key findings of ISD's research carried out between October 2021 and June 2022. It highlights the tactics and actors involved in spreading disinformation and divisive narratives in the run-up to the vote. During the election campaign, ISD used a mixed methods approach to identify and analyse disinformation, misinformation and influence operations through social media analysis, ethnographic monitoring and policy analysis. Our research has found that despite social media platforms' commitment to addressing harmful content and threats to electoral integrity, malign actors leveraged social media platforms during the French elections to advance their agendas, with long-term implications for social polarisation in the country. Tactics and behaviours identified by ISD included the cross-platform sharing and monetisation of health disinformation, coordinated inauthentic and astroturfing campaigns, abuse of candidates online, and the use of platform functionalities to promote disinformation, misinformation and divisive narratives. ISD's monitoring also highlighted the hybrid nature of threats targeting French democracy, with disinformation and extremist or fringe discourse frequently coalescing in broad anti-establishment narratives that seek to undermine trust in institutions and democratic processes.

About the authors

Cécile Simmons is a Research Manager at ISD, specialising in malign influence operations targeting elections, public health and climate disinformation, far-right extremism and conspiracy theories. Her research includes social media network mapping, data analysis and ethnographic monitoring of closed online spaces. Her writing and commentary has been featured by the BBC, The Guardian, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and Wired, among others. She previously worked in publishing and journalism, and holds an MSc in International History from the London School of Economics.

Cooper Gatewood is a Senior Manager within ISD's Digital Analysis Unit, focusing on quantitative research into the spread of hateful and polarising narratives online, and how they are leveraged by extremist actors. Cooper also develops monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure the impact of many of ISD's intervention projects. Cooper is currently contributing to ISD's research on disinformation campaigns, particularly those aimed to influence and disrupt election processes. Cooper holds a Masters of International Affairs from Columbia University and a Masters of International Security from Sciences Po and is fluent in Spanish and French, as well as speaking proficient Japanese.

Zoé Fourel is a Research Coordinator at ISD. She is interested in social network analysis and the mapping of online networks related to extremism, disinformation and hate speech. Zoé has been involved in ISD's work on the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech in the context of various electoral processes. She mainly focuses in ISD's French activity, contributing to research work analysing the French online ecosystem. She holds a degree in International Affairs from Sciences Po Lyon (including studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and Georgetown University in Washington DC).

With special acknowledgements to Jiore Craig, Iris Boyer and Henry Tuck.

ISD

Powering solutions
to extremism, hate
and disinformation

Amman l Berlin l London l Paris l Washington DC

Contents

Introduction

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) monitored disinformation, misinformation and influence operations on social media in the run-up to and during the 2022 French presidential and legislative elections. This paper offers an overview of the key findings of ISD's research carried out between October 2021 and June 2022. It highlights the tactics and actors involved in spreading disinformation and divisive narratives in the run-up to the vote.

During the election campaign, ISD used a mixed methods approach to identify and analyse disinformation, misinformation and influence operations through social media analysis, ethnographic monitoring and policy analysis. Our research has found that despite social media platforms' commitment to addressing harmful content and threats to electoral integrity, malign actors leveraged social media platforms during the French elections to advance their agendas, with long-term implications for social polarisation in the country

Tactics and behaviours identified by ISD included the cross-platform sharing and monetisation of health disinformation, coordinated inauthentic and astroturfing campaigns, abuse of candidates online, and the use of platform functionalities to promote disinformation, misinformation and divisive narratives. ISD's monitoring also highlighted the hybrid nature of threats targeting French democracy, with disinformation and extremist or fringe discourse frequently coalescing in broad anti-establishment narratives that seek to undermine trust in institutions and democratic processes.

Main Findings

- **ISD's research has identified multiple instances of platform manipulation and cross-platform dynamics in the spread of disinformation and misinformation.** Researchers uncovered instances of coordinated inauthentic behaviour by far-right candidate Éric Zemmour's campaign team and cross-platform promotion and sales of fake vaccination passes. Additional tactics included the use of trending hashtags to spread of voter fraud-related narratives and the exploitation of platform functionalities – from live videos to polling - to foreground fringe ideas such as the "great replacement". ISD also found that cross-platform mobilisation was a key tactic during the campaign, with far-right influencers using mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to redirect users to less moderated platforms such as Telegram. Malign actors seeking to exploit health disinformation also used mainstream platforms to post links to redirect users to Telegram and promote the sales of fake vaccination passes.

- **ISD's research also found widespread content falling in the "grey area" of platform moderation strategies**. We found that abuse, incivility and hateful content targeting candidates was rife in Facebook comments, with cases of offline violence driving online abuse. Racist and misogynistic content frequently used visual content and language which could only be understood as hateful in the context in which it appeared, highlighting the limits of content moderation efforts. In our analysis of voter-fraud related narratives across mainstream and fringe platforms, we also found inconsistencies in the enforcement of Meta and Twitter's terms of service.

- **Our research found that the 2022 elections saw a shift in the actors involved in spreading polarising content.** The role of state actors, specifically Russia-backed state actors, in influencing the election was limited as a result of the EU-wide ban on Russian state media. However, non-state actors spreading disinformation and divisive narratives have become adept at exploiting existing and emerging crises to spread anti-institutional narratives. Sovereigntist and far-right public figures with large social media audiences, including presidential candidates, played a key role in fuelling disinformation and misinformation by flirting with voter fraud narratives, widely embracing anti-vaccine and anti-health restriction sentiment and sharing pro-Russian and anti-Western content following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

- **ISD's research highlighted the hybridised nature of threats to electoral integrity and democratic processes, and the overlap between disinformation and fringe mobilisation, in particular far-right mobilisation.** The COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the invasion of Ukraine, provided key topics of discussion for fringe online communities, with actors of often ideologically opposed affiliations showing narrative commonalities around anti-establishment sentiment. Pro-Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine were widely shared in these communities alongside COVID-19 disinformation and misinformation, showing that disparate events can be leveraged by fringe actors to fuel distrust of democratic institutions and electoral processes.

- **In addition, ISD's research shed light on the mainstreaming of extremist far-right ideas in public discourse.** Éric Zemmour's candidacy and campaign manifesto brought the conspiratorial idea of the 'great replacement' into mainstream conversation. ISD's research found that the candidates' campaign team sought to promote this concept among wider audiences by using inauthentic tactics online during the campaign. and the campaign also exploited COVID-19 disinformation and misinformation to bolster anti-establishment sentiment and the candidate's agenda.

France's Digital Policy Landscape Ahead of the Elections

Since the 2016 Brexit vote and US presidential election, and the hacking of candidate Emmanuel Macron's campaign during the 2017 election campaign, awareness has grown in France about the impact that online harms can have both on electoral integrity and society in general. The French government has discussed and adopted a new array of legislative measures to curb online disinformation, extremism and foreign influence operations. The adoption of the law on "fake news" in 2018 provided media regulator Arcom with a new mandate to demand transparency from large social media platforms on the actions taken to address disinformation and was followed by the establishment of a Disinformation Observatory by Arcom.[1] Ahead of the presidential campaign in July 2021, the French government established Viginum, a state agency tasked with identifying and responding to foreign influence operations online during elections.[2] This was shortly followed by the setting up of a Commission on Information Manipulation overseen by Gerald Bronner, which submitted recommendations to the French government on how to address disinformation and conspiracy theories.[3] France's presidency of the EU during the final stages of the elaboration of the Digital Services Act (DSA) brought digital regulation to the forefront of policy discussions. In the months leading up to the election, ISD joined forces with a coalition of civil society organisations and research institutes to establish the Online Election Integrity Watch Group to identify and collectively build a greater understanding of threats to electoral integrity.[4]

Glossary

Anti-system: ISD defines as anti-system individuals, groups or political parties who are critical of the establishment. The establishment or the system can include the political system, the social organisation but also the system as the health, financial, economic and capitalist institutions.

Abuse (Online): According to the Women Media Center online abuse should be understood as: "Online abuse includes a diversity of tactics and malicious behaviors ranging from sharing embarrassing or cruel content about a person to impersonation, doxing, stalking and electronic surveillance to the nonconsensual use of photography and violent threats[5]."

Astroturfing: Astroturfing is the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organisation (e.g., political, advertising, religious or public relations) to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participants.

Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour: This is a term used by Facebook to define collections of pages, groups or accounts that work together covertly to mislead users about who they are or what they are doing. The platform's definition of CIB requires this activity to involve a collection of more than one affiliated social media entity (individual accounts, channels, groups, pages) that is exhibiting a set of characteristics of inauthentic identity and behaviour, managed together by one actor or set of actors.

Disinformation: In line with Wardle and Derakshan, ISD defines disinformation as false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.

Misinformation: Misinformation is incorrect or misleading information presented as fact. It is differentiated from disinformation, which is deliberately deceptive. Rumours are information not attributed to any particular source, and so are unreliable and often unverified, but can turn out to be either true or false.

Far right: In line with the conceptualisations established by Dutch political scientist and right-wing-extremist expert Cas Mudde and UK-based academic Dr Elisabeth Carter, ISD defines far right as a system of beliefs typically marked by several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and strong-state advocacy and authoritarianism.

Fringe: In this report, ISD defines fringe as opinions and voices coming from marginal communities that do not represent the wider public opinion and whose narratives are not shared by the whole ideological landscape of French society. These voices can either be extremists (far-right to far-left ones) or marginal communities spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation, for instance.

Great Replacement conspiracy: The conspiracy theory established by Renaud Camus, in his 2011 pamphlet The Great Replacement, claims that white European populations are being deliberately replaced at an ethnic and cultural level through migration and the growth of minority communities.

Mainstream: In this report, ISD defines mainstream as prevailing opinions that are more or less widely accepted or reflective of public opinion.

Methods

Data Collection & Analysis

Over a period of nine months, ISD used a mixed methods approach to identify, analyse and respond to electoral disinformation, misinformation, polarisation and influence operations across a range of mainstream (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) and fringe (Odysee, Telegram) platforms. Researchers used commercial tools that aggregate social media data to analyse broad trends in online discussion, bespoke social media analytic capabilities co-developed with CASM Technology (Beam) to gain insights into the tactics, actors and narratives at play, and daily ethnographic observation of fringe and extremist online communities. ISD's systematic monitoring covered over 2.1k Twitter accounts, 340 public Facebook groups and pages, and 76 Instagram accounts. The team's ethnographic monitoring included an additional 120 private and closed Facebook groups and 94 Telegram channels, as well as regular monitoring of the most shared videos on Odysee. These collections served as the basis for larger investigations, such as the disinformation landscape report described below.

Regular aggregate and ethnographic monitoring as detailed above provided the team with leads for further investigation. Once a trend was identified in this ongoing monitoring, ISD leveraged existing data collections and began new ones to better understand the drivers, relays and – where possible – impacts of these discussions. Examples of these more targeted investigations include analysis of the sale of fake sanitary passes and of the abuse of candidates on social media, also described below.

Response

Based on our research, ISD engaged in three primary types of response:

- Platform engagement: Firstly, when our team encountered content that violated platforms' terms of service, these would be flagged to platforms via the appropriate channels. However, it should be noted that ISD analysts received little to no feedback to these flags, and about 50% of flagged contents remained on the platform.

ISD also engaged with platform representatives directly through the work of the Election Integrity Digital Watch Group, convening meetings to discuss threats identified by our research and the platforms' mitigation strategies, though not all platforms agreed to this type of engagement.

- Government engagement: Secondly, the team engaged directly with government bodies where appropriate. Primarily, this consisted in convening meetings with agencies like ARCOM, Viginum, and the Ministry of Culture. The team also flagged to the government where we encountered contents that appeared to violate French law, both via the Pharos portal as well as directly to the Ministry of the Interior.

- Civil society engagement: Thirdly, ISD communicated our findings to broader civil society to raise awareness and encourage responses. ISD participated in the Electoral Integrity Digital Watch working group. ISD also shared our research findings with civil society organisations active in combatting hate, disinformation and extremism. And, finally, ISD publicised our findings in the media to raise awareness among the general public.

Limitations

The primary limitation for a project such as this is data access. As described above, ISD created a system drawing from numerous social media platforms to analyse the broadest possible swathe of social media.

Some platforms provide incomplete data access. This includes platforms like those owned by Meta, which only make certain data available via their API (i.e., posts on public pages and groups). This limits researchers' visibility over other areas of the platforms, like private groups and comment threads. The inability to search some platforms quickly and systematically, for example via a platform-wide search function or API, does not allow for a comprehensive overview of the content found on certain platforms.

ISD attempted to mitigate this data access limitation by also carrying out ethnographic monitoring, as discussed above. While this does not give a global vision over what may be happening on the platforms – as researchers cannot be sure they are in all relevant private groups – it does provide greater insights than those gleaned solely from programmatic monitoring.

There are numerous other platforms that we were not able to include in this research project, simply due to limitations of staff capacity. At the outset of the project, the team conducted a scoping exercise of all platforms that could be relevant, which provided API access for systematic monitoring, and which were more closed. The team then prioritised these platforms based on usership, relevancy (based on previous research) and feasibility. This scoping exercise resulted in the final selection of platforms listed above.

Finally, ethical and legal considerations limited researchers' access to closed or less accessible online spaces. While ISD incorporated research into private Facebook groups as well as Telegram channels and Odysee videos with large audiences, accessing messaging applications such as WhatsApp, where harmful content can circulate, raises ethical and data privacy channels. As a result, these platforms fell outside of the scope of this project.

Key Findings: Tactics and Exploitation of Platforms' Functionalities

ISD's monitoring has found that actors seeking to propagate disinformation and fuel polarisation continue to exploit platforms' functionalities to their advantage, using inauthentic amplification and dissemination tactics for their content, exploiting the grey areas of platforms' content moderation policies and deploying cross-platform strategies for their purposes.

Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour: the case study of Éric Zemmour's campaign

ISD research in the run-up to the presidential elections identified multiple instances of inauthentic behaviour led by Éric Zemmour's campaign team across Twitter and Facebook.[6] ISD found twelve petitions set-up by the organisation "Les Amis d'Éric Zemmour" (or "friends of Éric Zemmour") between 26th January 2021 and 5th June 2022. This organisation, close to Éric Zemmour's campaign team, only explicitly acknowledged setting up two petitions in 2021 (even though all twelve petitions were created by les Amis d'Éric Zemmour). ISD identified signs of inauthentic behaviour in the sharing patterns of all twelve petitions on Twitter, with mobilization being at its highest in the weeks before the presidential elections. Most petitions were launched in 2022, especially close to the date of the election (5 out of the 8 petitions created in 2022 appeared in March and April 2022). Secondly, ISD identified inauthentic efforts to mobilize support online for the candidate using the petitions. A small number of accounts, including prominent members of Éric Zemmour's campaign team, coordinated this mobilization effort. Finally, ISD uncovered cross-platform inauthentic coordination to disseminate the petitions, activity that clearly violated both Facebook and Twitter's existing policies related to inauthentic uses of their platforms.

Cross-platform dynamics in the spread and commercialisation of disinformation

Cross-platform efforts emerged as a key finding of ISD' research, with malign actors strategically using the functionalities of different platforms to disseminate content and reach wider audiences. ISD identified multiple instances of cross-platform mobilisation to advertise fake vaccination passes at the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022,[7] when vaccination passes became a requirement to access certain services in France.[8] We found a range of attempts at monetising fake vaccination passes using Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Telegram. Platform functionalities encouraged this activity: ISD found that Instagram's algorithms promoted accounts dedicated to promoting fake vaccination passes, posing a threat to public health policies. Malign actors exploited different platforms' functionalities to monetise deception, using mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to post about their services and re-direct users to encrypted (e.g., Telegram, WhatsApp) or closed online spaces to complete transactions, thereby violating Twitter and Meta's terms of service. Cross-platform coordination had a transnational dimension, with actors seemingly located outside of France seeking to sell fake vaccination passes to French audiences. The opportunistic use of different social media platforms correlates with findings from ISD's previous research in France. A report about far-right Identitarian mobilization online found that prominent Generation Identity figures use both mainstream and fringe social media platforms for different purposes, with platforms such as Instagram being used to recruit new followers and redirect them to fringe platforms (e.g., Telegram), the latter serving as a platform for ideological content and coordination.[9]

The normalisation of online abuse and incivility targeting candidates

ISD's research over several elections has shown that online abuse of candidates has become a political tactic to intimidate, distort democratic debate and discourage women and minoritized communities from participating in public life.[10] In France, the issue of threats directed at candidates and elected officials received growing public awareness following several cases of death threats targeting MPs belonging to Emmanuel Macron's La Republique En Marche (LREM) party as a result of the vote of the law on compulsory vaccination passes.[11] During the presidential and legislative election periods, smear campaigns and personalised attacks received widespread media coverage, obscuring debates about key policy proposals. ISD analysed the intersection between offline events such as attacks, controversies and high-profile nominations and online abuse on Facebook. Taking seven case studies spanning candidates across the political spectrum, we analysed a sample of comments on the Facebook posts about the incidents which received the highest number of interactions and analysed the proportion of online abuse related to these offline occurrences. We found that for most candidates, abusive comments represented 15 to 25% of all comments and reflected a normalisation of incivility towards candidates. Women, minoritized candidates and candidates with intersectional identities were more likely to be targeted with misogynistic and racist abuse, and abuse calling into question their place in society. Some racist and misogynistic content did not use words which were explicitly misogynistic and racists but could only be identified through contextual understanding. Thus, ISD's research found that contextual understanding and appropriate training of content moderators by social media platforms is essential in identifying abusive and hateful content which can go undetected. Abusive comments appeared underneath posts by mainstream media, which can be given enhanced visibility by social media platforms to tackle disinformation, with hateful and abusive content remaining widespread in the comments section.

Key Findings: Actors

With concerns remaining high over foreign state-backed influence operations, ISD found that narratives promoted by foreign governments, specifically pro-Kremlin narratives, circulated widely in fringe French online communities, and content produced by Russian state media continued to be available to French audiences despite an EU-wide ban. Right-wing sovereigntist and far-right candidates and public figures played a key role in spreading disinformation and polarising narratives around the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine.

The relative impact of foreign state media on the election

The 2017 presidential elections in France raised concerns about foreign influence operations, reinforced by the hacking of Emmanuel Macron's campaign on the eve of the vote.[12] With evidence of foreign-backed influence operations affecting democratic processes elsewhere, the 2022 elections started with heightened awareness of the threat of this type of operation. The French government created Viginum, an agency tasked with detecting and responding to foreign influence operations ahead of the elections. ISD's monitoring during the elections found no example of major coordinated campaigns, apart from a few cyber-attacks after the invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022. This analysis was corroborated by other research organisations like IFG which reported that Chinese and Turkish state media interest in the election was notably limited.[13] The invasion of Ukraine by Russia resulted in a strategic repositioning of major Russian state-backed actors. ISD delved into the impact of the RT and Sputnik ban in France by seeking to identifying mentions of these media on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, using commercial social media analytics tools and performing ethnographic monitoring on fringe platforms Telegram and Odysee.[14] We found that the RT and Sputnik France ban led to their official French channels significantly reducing their activity on social media platforms. Sputnik France's website was fully suspended. Nonetheless, ISD observed limitations in the implementation of the ban. We found that social media users could bypass the geo-blocking of RT and Sputnik by changing platform settings. We identified multiple instances of French online actors promoting loopholes to access RT and Sputnik, such as using a VPN. These tactics allowed RT and Sputnik to remain available to France-based audiences in fringe online communities. The ban of RT and Sputnik

also fed into conspiratorial narratives targeting the French government, EU institutions, and social media platforms, all accused of orchestrating widespread "censorship".

Dynamics in fringe online communities

ISD research found that several online communities converged around common grievances during the election campaign despite strong ideological differences, with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures providing a backdrop for the mobilization of online groups of interest.[15] ISD's mapping of the French online ecosystem identified several online communities active in propagating misinformation, disinformation and polarising content: "anti-restriction left-wingers", a cluster of social media accounts opposed to the government's health policy and identifying with the radical left or the extreme left, "Covid opposition opportunists" or accounts which are sensitive to the narratives of sovereigntist and/or far-right political figures and "anti-system protesters", a community of actors with no clearly defined political leaning but firmly and systematically opposed to the government in place. These diverse communities of interest coalesced around anti-establishment and dissident narratives, accusing the government in place of using health restrictions to encroach on individual liberty. The convergence of ideologically-opposed communities and their sharing of similar content ahead of the election highlighted the circulation of broad anti-system and anti-establishment narratives among communities which are distrustful of institutions, blurring the line between communities propagating disinformation, misinformation and polarising content.

The role of political influencers and public figures

Political influencers — be they elected officials or candidates — contributed to the spread of disinformation, misinformation and polarising content during the campaign. ISD's mapping of key online communities involved in disseminating this content found that minor political figures with large social media audiences provided a rallying point for anti-establishment narratives among online communities sensitive to anti-system narratives.[16] Posts by far right or sovereigntist figures (e.g., Florian Philippot, François Asselineau etc.) expressing anti-restrictions and anti-vaccine views were widely shared by fringe communities and reached a wider audience during the campaign, highlighting the weaponization of the pandemic by political figures who sought to assert themselves in the French political landscape. The online reach of political influencers' narratives among online communities did not correlate with their electoral influence or party membership. Thus, influencers with little chance of winning the election or securing a meaningful share of the vote were able to influence online discussions and encourage distrust of democratic institutions and processes by amplifying health disinformation and misinformation. Far-right and sovereigntist politicians' ability to influence public debate through online engagement has contributed to the mainstreaming of their talking points, to the benefit of more established far-right parties like Rassemblement National (RN).

Key Findings: Narratives

During the election campaign, ISD observed the mainstreaming of previously fringe ideas and conspiracy theories in public discourse, driven by the active online mobilization of far-right activists and inauthentic tactics. ISD identified a broad shift in narratives in fringe online communities from COVID-19 to the war in Ukraine, united by anti-establishment sentiment. Widespread anti-establishment mobilization between the two rounds of the presidential election showed that polarising narratives tap into broader distrust of elites and institutions.

The mainstreaming of Identitarian ideas

During the election campaign, ISD monitored the mainstreaming of far-right Identitarian narratives online. During the campaigns, previously fringe concepts such as the "Great replacement" received growing attention on mainstream media and online. Éric Zemmour's candidacy, whose manifesto was built around the conspiratorial notion of the "Great replacement" brought this concept into mainstream discussion. Political figures from traditional parties and the conservative right (e.g., Éric Ciotti, Valérie Pécresse) referenced this notion in public statements. A report by ISD about Identitarian mobilisation online found widespread mobilization by Identitarian activists online to bring their ideological agenda into the mainstream and bolster Éric Zemmour's campaign. ISD's election monitoring found that Éric Zemmour's campaign team used inauthentic tactics to amplify his ideas.[17] Éric Zemmour's party, Reconquête, directly echoed the far-right group Generation Identity's language, with concepts such as the "Great replacement" and "remigration" being central to his campaign programme, and prominent former members of the French Identitarian movement (e.g., Damien Rieu) rallied his campaign. Inauthentic online tactics such as astroturfing and the coordinated promotion of petitions in favour of the candidate contributed to the mainstreaming of his ideological agenda.[18]

From COVID-19 to Ukraine: the impact of the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine on online discussions

As the war in Ukraine broke, several investigations highlighted the spread of disinformation about the conflict in French fringe and conspiratorial communities[19] and the shift from COVID-19 disinformation to the war. To understand the scale of disinformation about the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, ISD analysed online discussions among the network of fringe online communities mentioned above. ISD found that the war featured prominently among the main fringe communities identified in our mapping, with discussion about Ukraine and Russia increasing significantly within a month after the Russian invasion. These communities spread several pro-Russian narratives, blaming NATO, western governments and Ukraine for the conflict, as well as transnational conspiracy theories about the conflict, including conspiracy theories about the presence of "biolabs" in Ukraine.[20] These narratives went hand in hand with other key topics of mobilization which predated the conflict, notably anti-government rhetoric and health misinformation, suggesting that pro-Russian narratives and conspiracy theories about Ukraine merged with pre-existing grievances in fringe online communities and were used to promote distrust of institutions and elites. For instance, fringe left-wing communities and Zemmour supporters frequently shared misinformation while embracing the initial reactions of Jean-Luc Melenchon and Éric Zemmour to the conflict. The anti-system protesters and Covid-19 opposition opportunists used the war in Ukraine to bolster the anti-establishment narratives they had shared prior to the conflict. These findings highlighted the adaptation of pro-Russian narratives and conspiracy theories about the war in Ukraine to the French context and their use to reinforce pre-existing grievances.

The mobilisation of anti-establishment voices

ISD's research in fringe online ecosystems found that various topics and tactics were mobilized to fuel distrust of mainstream institutions and elites. In the days preceding the first round and between the two rounds of the presidential election, ISD's monitoring found widespread and increased activity of far-right and anti-system actors on both mainstream and fringe platforms. Their efforts aimed to prevent Emmanuel Macron's re-election and boost far-right candidates' visibility online.[21] These efforts resulted in far-right candidates receiving higher engagement online than more moderate candidates. Between 16th January and 20th April 2022, Éric Zemmour's Facebook page generated a total of 6.29 million interactions, more than three times the number of interactions generated by the incumbent president. Anti-system actors used trending hashtags such as #ToutSaufMacron (#AnythingButMacron) to gather support. The use of these hashtags peaked in the days before the vote and were promoted by anti-establishment influencers, including prominent Yellow Vest spokespeople such as Olivier Rouhaut (Oliv Oliv). Influencers used anti-system rhetoric to call for widespread demonstrations against the "system" and president Macron in the run-up to the vote, highlighting the interactions between online engagement around anti-system narratives and offline mobilisation. Far right or sovereigntist figures such as Florian Phillippot used their Telegram channels to call for demonstrations and anti-system actors used popular platform functionalities such as live videos and online polls to bring anti-establishment and anti-Macron narratives to wider audiences.

The spread of voter fraud-related narratives

ISD's research has highlighted the importation of voter fraud narratives from the US following the 2020 elections and the emergence of the 'Stop the Steal' movement. We have found that such narratives have taken hold in other geographical contexts, including Germany and Australia.[22] During the French election campaign, ISD monitored narratives related to voter fraud in the country in several hundred Facebook pages and groups and 91 Telegram channels known for spreading disinformation,

misinformation and polarising content.[23] We found various claims that cast doubts over the integrity of French electoral processes, including allegations that the 500 signatures needed to run for office and the fact that president Macron secured them first was a sign of manipulation. Other misinformation narratives claimed that polls were being manipulated and that the government used consulting firm McKinsey to manipulate the election in favour of the incumbent president. While a comparative analysis between the volume of discussion about voter fraud and another political event (the McKinsey scandal) found that voter fraud narratives had limited reach on mainstream social media, claims about 'stolen elections' were amplified by far right or fringe political figures such as Florian Philippot, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan or François Asselineau. The spread of voter fraud narratives in France shows how highly polarising content falls within the grey area of content moderation. Inconsistencies remain in platforms' policies related to moderation of deceptive content that can impact democratic processes. In its civic integrity policy, Twitter commits to labelling or removing 'false or misleading information intended to undermine public confidence in an election or other civic process.'[24] ISD's research found that Twitter's labelling of content as 'misleading' was inconsistent, with the platform failing to label statements about voter fraud by public figures with large social media following. Similarly, ISD identified allegations about electoral fraud related to the use of voting machines which Meta had failed to label.

Implications & Reccomendations

ISD research has highlighted the variety of actors and tactics involved in spreading disinformation, misinformation and polarising narratives among French audiences. As state-sponsored influence campaigns were less present in the 2022 election, our research has shown that a broad range of domestic non-state actors are able to weaponise domestic and international events – from the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine – to fuel distrust of institutions and democratic processes.

The spread and commercialisation of disinformation and misinformation happens across platforms, with online actors using both mainstream and fringe platforms with little to no content moderation to carry out their activities. Mainstream platforms are used to promote deceptive content and redirect users to less moderated online spaces where more extreme content thrives. Online actors have become adept at exploiting the grey areas of platforms' content moderation policies and various functionalities. ISD's analysis of voter fraud and anti-establishment narratives found that actors can utilise different platform functionalities to their advantage, from live videos to polling. The use of inauthentic coordinated tactics by campaign teams to promote far-right candidates has shown that campaign teams can use platforms to violate campaign rules.

Based on the implications outlined above, ISD proposes the following recommendations for consideration for government, policymakers and social media companies.

- **Government should ensure that the French media regulator is appropriately resourced and fit for purpose to audit social media companies and ensure that they provide comprehensive transparency reports about their policies to mitigate disinformation, influence campaigns and harmful content which poses a threat to electoral integrity.** The adoption by the European Union of Digital Services Act (DSA) on 19th October 2022 has paved the way for the establishment a comprehensive regulatory regime which places due diligence, transparency and reporting obligations on social media platforms, including transparency obligations related the systems underpinning the curation and amplification of content. ISD research has highlighted the cross-platform and transnational dynamics at play in the sharing,

amplification and monetisation of disinformation during the 2022 election, and the need for social media platforms to communicate transparently on their mitigation strategies. Government therefore needs to ensure that the regulator has the needed resources and means to enforce social media platforms' obligations.[25]

- **Government should consider the hybrid nature of threats to electoral integrity and support greater monitoring of a wide range of threats to democracy by creating opportunities for collaboration and dedicated working groups.** These groups could include the Viginum agency, civil society organisations and research institutes. Support for the monitoring of hybrid threats could involve the creation of a fund dedicated to support and structure monitoring efforts at a national level. While many research organisations are involved in monitoring such threats, efforts remain siloed and need to be supported by coalition-building opportunities, sustainable financial investment and increased public awareness.

- **Social media companies should ensure better enforcement of their content moderation policies, put in place robust mitigation strategies to minimise disinformation and influence campaigns related to elections and to ensure that their platforms are not utilised to promote and amplify deceptive and divisive content.** ISD's research during the French elections has found that social media companies failed to consistently enforce their policies related to election fraud narratives and health disinformation. Social media companies should communicate transparently about their existing mitigation frameworks, including the human, financial and technological means deployed to address online harms.

As part of their transparency efforts, social media platforms should archive and preserve all data relating to content removals undertaken during key electoral cycles and share data with researchers to enable an analysis of the volume and nature of the content removed, as well as the successes and shortcomings of content moderation strategies.

- **Social media companies should put additional resources into addressing inauthentic uses of their platforms during elections.** ISD's research has shown that platforms can be leveraged by online actors, including official campaign teams, to amplify ideological content using inauthentic tactics, in violation of electoral legislation. In addition to providing transparent communication about the measures taken to address inauthentic behaviour, social media companies need to be held accountable and share transparent feedback about their internal assessment and redress provisions when coordinated inauthentic behaviours and networks are identified and exposed by academics, journalists or the open-source intelligence community. This feedback process needs to happen in a timely manner during election periods or at times of greater domestic and international instability (e.g. invasion of Ukraine).

- **During election campaigns, social media companies need to ensure that enhanced mitigation strategies to prevent threats to electoral integrity are effectively and comprehensively enforced.** Examples of mitigation strategies can include provisions to give authoritative content from recognised institutions and media organisation greater visibility, as well as demoting harmful super-spreading accounts, as well as groups and channels acting as major disinformation sources. Platforms should also put in place measures to address and minimise abusive content targeting candidates, while sustaining efforts on moderating online hate affecting all users. This might include public awareness campaigns on their services, enhanced flagging functionalities and review processes for abusive content, as well as training and support to candidates on both online safety, digital ethics and responsibilities while campaigning.

- **Social media platforms should also work closely with civil society organisations and research institutions involved in monitoring threats to electoral integrity.** They should offer enhanced access to data civil society and researchers to build a more comprehensive and up-to-date collective understanding of online threats to democracy and electoral integrity. Gaps in the content moderation of disinformation narratives which can be damaging to electoral processes, such as voter fraud narratives, show the need for greater access to data for researchers. A major public event in the run up to such regulation like the French elections would have been a perfect opportunity for social media companies to pilot more ambitious and meaningful ways to open data to researchers.

Endnotes

1   Désinformation: malgré la "loi fake news", Facebook et Twitter refusent de répondre à l'Arcom (bfmtv. com)

2   Présidentielle 2022 : la France se prépare à la propagande sur les réseaux sociaux pendant la campagne (lemonde.fr)

3   Emmanuel Macron installe une commission sur le complotisme présidée par le sociologue Gérald Bronner (lemonde.fr)

4   French-elections-report_Online-Election-Integrity-Watch-Group.pdf (isdglobal.org)

5   Online Abuse 101 - Women's Media Center (womensmediacenter.com)

6   Amplifying Far-Right Voices: A Case Study on Inauthentic Tactics Used by the Eric Zemmour Campaign - ISD (isdglobal.org)

7   Fake health passes are easily moving across French social media despite platform policies - ISD (isdglobal.org)

8   loi 22 janvier 2022 pass vaccinal gestion de la crise sanitaire | vie-publique.fr

9   French Identitarians are Mobilising around the 2022 Presidential Elections - ISD (isdglobal.org)

10   La campagne de l'intimidation : étude de cas des violences numériques envers les candidats aux élections de 2022 - ISD (isdglobal.org)

11   Covid-19: French MPs get death threats over support for vaccine pass - BBC News

12   Emmanuel Macron's campaign hacked on eve of French election | French presidential election 2017 | The Guardian

13   French-elections-report_Online-Election-Integrity-Watch-Group.pdf (isdglobal.org)

14   Implementation and Impact of the RT and Sputnik Ban on French Online Ecosystems - ISD (isdglobal. org)

15   A France Divided by the Pandemic: The Disinformation Ecosystem Leading up to the 2022 Elections - ISD (isdglobal.org)

16   A France Divided by the Pandemic: The Disinformation Ecosystem Leading up to the 2022 Elections - ISD (isdglobal.org)

17   Amplifying Far-Right Voices: A Case Study on Inauthentic Tactics Used by the Eric Zemmour Campaign - ISD (isdglobal.org)

18   L'ancien identitaire et militant RN Damien Rieu rejoint Eric Zemmour (lefigaro.fr)

19   De Boutcha en Ukraine à la Seconde Guerre mondiale : le complotisme en temps de guerre (francetvinfo.fr)

20   Unmasking "Clandestine," the Figure Behind the Viral "Ukrainian Biolab" Conspiracy Theory | ADL

21   Comment l'amplification de la rhétorique anti-système sur les réseaux sociaux favorise les positions extrêmes et affaiblit le barrage républicain - ISD (isdglobal.org)

22   "US-imported" voter fraud claims on the rise on Facebook in the lead up to elections in Australia - ISD (isdglobal.org)

23   Le spectre de la fraude électorale : l'impact des discours de désinformation pendant les élections de 2022 - ISD (isdglobal.org)

24   Twitter's civic integrity policy | Twitter Help

25   L'Arcom rappelle à Twitter ses obligations légales en matière de contrôle des contenus en ligne (lemonde.fr)

ISD

Powering solutions
to extremism, hate
and disinformation