

Summary of the French Election Social Media Landscape Report 2017

Introduction

Open, successful, and democratic societies require a healthy public discourse. More and more of this discourse is taking place on social media – Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and forum sites – and the stakes are high at election time. Fake news and foreign influence are hotly debated topics but research is limited.

The private research group Bakamo¹ partnered with respected French journalist Pierre Haski to measure the reach and impact of unconventional media sources in connection with the 2017 French presidential election, with support from the Open Society Foundations. With a team of 20 social media analysts, the study analysed 20 million social media posts and 8 million shared links in public social media conversations taking place November 1, 2016 to May 22, 2017. Some 50,000 social media posts were read and coded. In addition, the study analysed over 1,000 media sources, of which 800 are non-traditional sources.

Key findings

1. The mapping of social media during the election shows a major divide between traditional media sources and new non-traditional sources that are based on profound distrust and opposition to mainstream media.
2. There is virtually no common ground between audiences of different information sources, but increasing polarization and separation in echo chambers.
3. Fake news emerges most often from “Reframe” and “Alternative” non-traditional media sources that aim to counter the mainstream narrative. Analysis of fake news shows that it appeals to emotional needs, such as people’s fears and desire to identify with a group. The emotional aspect leaves social media users open to manipulation through posts that confirm biases.
4. Fact-checking and debunking fake news only impacts the already-convincing but not those who no longer trust mainstream media. It doesn’t mean the story is dead and it doesn’t address or engage with the underlying issues.
5. Social media platforms have an indisputable responsibility in the circulation of news and should be more transparent and open in their practices, but they should not be exclusive gatekeepers. Citizens, regulators and the media must advocate and protect the flow of sound and transparent information required for democratic processes.

¹ Bakamo.Social uses a hybrid qualitative-quantitative to derive a meaning-driven understanding of the social media discourse, combining manual-human analysis with big data analytics.

6. Traditional media and professional journalists have lost the monopoly on news. Nevertheless, reputable sources of information such as traditional newspaper, radio and television news adhering to journalistic standards remain strong in France, comprising the majority of social media sharing.
7. Traditional media needs to understand the audience needs and motivations. Traditional media should develop content offerings that speak to the fears and concerns of the individual, acknowledges them, and explores triggers and roots – without leading the audience towards a nativist closed society model. To keep and regain audiences, traditional media must engage with the public, including those who distrust them.
8. Automated accounts shared fake news head of the French presidential election, and much of it came from sources that were exposed to Russian influence.
9. Conversation around the elections was disrupted by a counter-narrative that positions traditional media and institutions as elitist, sets the stage for disinformation, and offers solutions contrary to the democratic and pluralistic social order. Within the realm of the counter-narrative, fake news reinforces biases and may seem true.
10. Among non-traditional media sources, the most content is shared by three hard-right clusters: French Identity, Anti-Islam, and Anti-Global Patriots. Users sharing articles from non-traditional publishers are less likely to engage in consensus-seeking, meaningful conversations – which is the very thing required to build common ground.

The three-part study maps the types of news content distributed via social media, the patterns of disinformation, and users' sharing behaviours. Recommendations urge action to build common ground and diminish the reach of those who would sow distrust through falsehoods, conspiracies, and manipulation in order to weaken democracy and advance their own agendas. Regarding the ongoing debate on information in the era of social media, Pierre Haski urges engagement:

"If we don't go through the process of understanding the new landscape, its traps and its flaws as well as its bright sides, we may be in for a rough time – a rough time for democratic processes that rely on a sound and transparent information world."

The counter-narrative has anti-democratic implications

In broader implications, the study's findings in France point to a worrying vulnerability of open societies' public discourse, impairing a cornerstone of the democratic process. The study found that the conversation around the elections was disrupted by the presence of counter-narrative promulgated by networks of non-traditional media publishers using social media for distribution. This counter-narrative reduces the possibility of consensus-seeking conversations and exposes swaths of the audience segments to Russian attempts to influence public perception.

The counter-narrative is the bedrock of disinformation campaigns. Manipulated, false information – also known as fake news – builds on the frames popularized by counter-narrative content: pitting the elite against the people's interest. The counter-narrative nests fake news stories into the public discourse with a conspiratorial, cynical attitude towards an alleged elitist scheme. The counter-narrative interprets news and events with the assumption of distrust and deceit.

Viewed through the counter-narrative, mainstream traditional media, like other institutions of traditional authority, is seen working on behalf of the elites to disguise the true danger of issues, such as migration, globalized economy, and identity politics on national identity and people's prosperity. People, the narrative suggests, need to be "re-informed" to have a chance of understanding how their existence is gambled with by detached and self-interested elites. Within this context, factually false allegations appear normal, confirming existing biases. Leveraging this tension, disinformation campaigns play on the distrust of traditional media in engaging audiences to increase the campaigns' reach and impact.

People seek community and identity

Analysis of users' sharing behaviour confirmed that motivations to participate in political social media are decisively emotional. People sooth frustration by articulating their fears and simultaneously strengthen their sense of identity by belonging to a community. It is this emotional involvedness that is exploited and channeled towards ideas of nativist nationalism. Counter-narratives resonate because they speak to the existential fears of the audience and steer them towards radical, illiberal solutions, contrary to the democratic and pluralistic rule of law informed social order. The study found that content seeded into the French social media landscape by Russian media sources was used to boost the counter-narrative's credibility and to steer its agenda.

Social media itself exacerbates troubling trends. The study finds that how people share news (user sharing behaviour) is different for traditional narratives compared with counter-narratives. Users sharing articles from non-traditional publishers are less likely to engage in consensus-seeking, meaningful conversations, where the shared post is augmented with their own meaning, inviting others to engage and debate; rather, they simply act as repeaters to amplify the shared article's reach. In a way, social media constrains rather than vitalizes the public discourse.

Conclusion

The study provides a broad view of the landscape and dynamics of social media conversations around the French elections of 2017. In this process, we believe, the research identified a major threat to democratic, open societies: shrinking common ground.

The danger societies are facing does not come from fake news and disinformation campaigns. They are merely the symptom and exploits of a deeper problem. The real problem lies in the distrust of institutions and the dissipation of authority. This trend is fueled by people subscribing to views reflected by counter- narratives. They feel abandoned and disregarded by society's institutions. It is this frustration and anger that enables disinformation campaigns to gain traction and resonate with audiences. Foreign interests and radical elements are free to use this vulnerability to destabilize democratic societies.

As the recommendations try to convey, the danger can be mitigated and reduced by addressing the concerns underlying the counter-narratives. Society's cohesion must be improved to disallow adversarial interests from exploiting this weakness of open and democratic societies.

For more information, visit the Bakamo.Social website

Opportunities to reduce the influence of disinformation campaigns on societies are suggested by this research. Findings and insights of this study are both broad and detailed. We encourage readers to access the full reports at the French Election Micro-Site on the Bakamo.Social website.

Related links:

Reports, summaries and press releases

<https://www.bakamosocial.com/frenchelection>

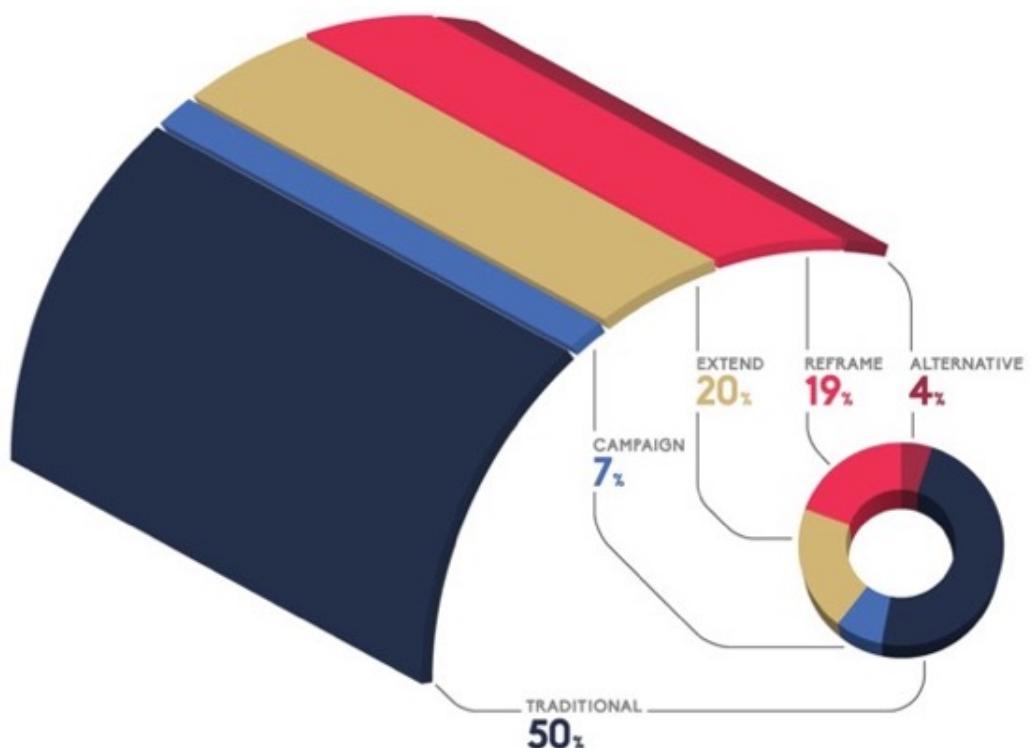
Pierre Haski about Bakamo's French Presidential Election Report

<https://youtu.be/cVk7gu97DtY>

Highlights of the three-part study are provided below to
guide readers seeking additional information.

Report #1: The Social Media Landscape

On the first level, the media map reveals the key divisions of the landscape. What kind of content do people share when they participate in the social media political discourse? Eight million shared links were collected over a six-month timeframe to discover websites publishing long-form articles.² The resulting data was used to create a **Media Map** showing the key divisions of the landscape.



Publishers are separated into five sections of the Media Map:

Traditional:
commercial or
public news
organizations

Campaign:
publications
belonging to
political parties
or candidates

Extend:
civic media sources
broadening
traditional coverage
and adhering to
journalistic
standards

Reframe:
media sources
aiming to
counterbalance
traditional
sources of
information

Alternative:
publishers of
conspiratorial and
'confusionist'
content

Media sources can be divided into two camps: (1) Traditional publishers include Traditional and Campaign sites; (2) Non-traditional media sources are in the Extend, Reframe and Alternative sections.

Two important aspects of the Media Map stand out:

- Half of all shared news articles are authored by traditional media, adhering to journalistic standards. The map reveals the resilient strengths of traditional media in France.

² Captured URL domains were ranked according to their prevalence in the gathered data. These media sources were manually checked for relevance prior proceeding with the next phase of the analysis.

- As the curvature of the map aims to suggest, there is a lack of visibility and common ground between sections. Content from different sections map depicts very different realities. They discuss different facts, they rely on and cite different sources of news, and they employ different narrative frames.

Narrative frames: left vs. right and global vs. local

Traditional media in France can be organized into a continuum covering political stances from left to right. For them, this left versus right perspective is the key binary opposition. For non-traditional media sources this distinction does not always apply. Worldviews and positions expressed cannot be explained by a left vs. right dichotomy. Instead their key distinction lies in the juxtaposing of global against local interests.

In the **Extend** section, the largest section of the non-traditional media sources, both narrative frames are present. Media sources utilize both narrative frames, with the global vs. local frame sharing the space with non-partisan and centrist positions. Overall, media sources in this section extend and broaden the reporting offered by traditional media.



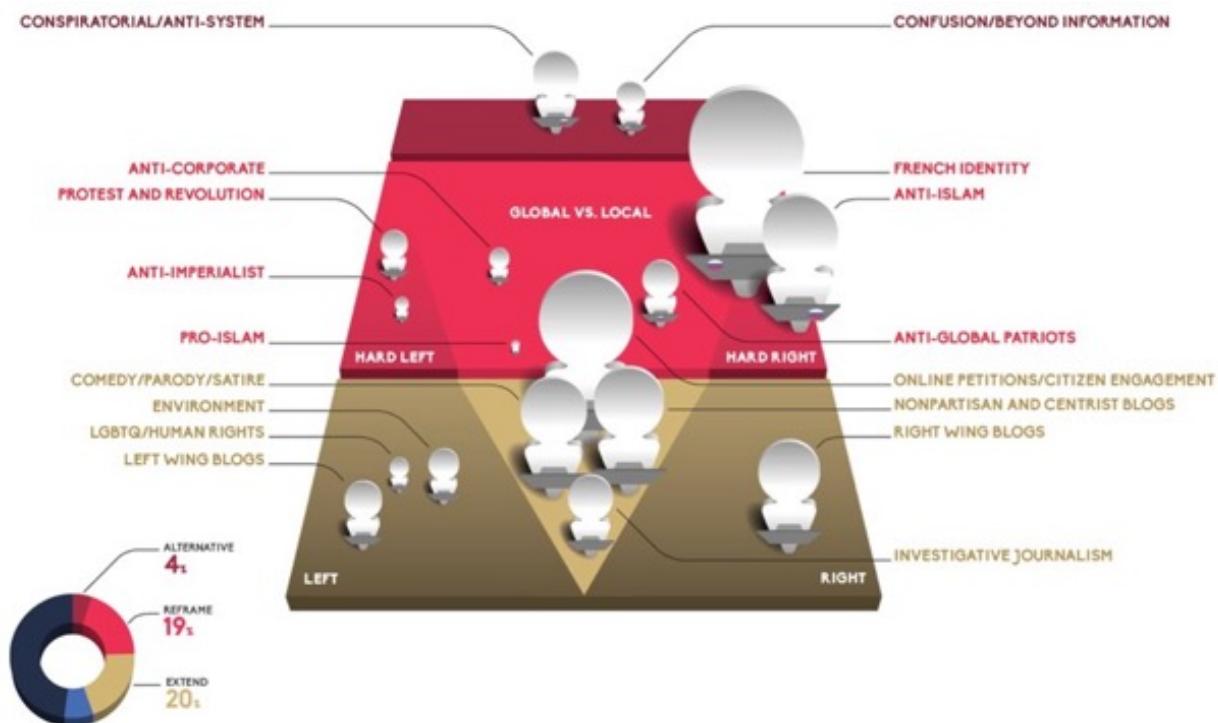
Publications of the **Reframe** section can be classified according to the left-right continuum on the two fringes, while other areas of the section are entirely subsumed in the global vs. local narrative frame. The section's identity is rooted in the intention to reframe the news to fit the narrative, or as they call it "re-inform" the audience. Re-information describes the idea that traditional media sources must be counter-balanced: readers need the counter-narrative to cancel out the alleged elitist manipulation of traditional media reporting. The counter-narrative propagated by these media sources re-interprets facts, and challenges the veracity of traditional media's reporting to embody the battle between the globalist elite and the patriotic locals. Information in this section of the Media Map is a weapon.

Content published in the **Alternative** section of the Media Map cannot be segmented according a left vs. right perspective. All media sources have a global vs. local outlook, and take a fiercely anti-globalist stance. Content published in this section has a confusionist, conspiratorial take on the world. This frame of reference explores the world by projecting cascading levels of conspiracy³ or aims to present an alternative explanation of the geopolitical global world order.

³ Stories either explicitly or implicitly frequently invoke imagery of the Illuminati or stereotypes of a homophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-migrant, etc. nature.

Clusters of the Media Map

More than 800 non-traditional media sources were captured and sorted into 17 distinct clusters. The illustration visualizes the location and the relative size of the media source clusters on the Media Map.



The clusters were defined on the basis of the topics discussed, narrative frames invoked, and a variety of other dimensions.⁴ The resulting mapping opens the media landscape to closer scrutiny, yielding several important observations:

- Content from three sections is shared the most by users (and so generates the largest presence on the Media Map): the intertwined hard-right clusters of French Identity, Anti-Islam, and Anti-Global Patriots. To highlight this opinion group's dominance: it is 1,000 times larger than the three clusters on the left of the Reframe section.
- Creating and garnering support for petitions and sharing comedy and political parody accounts for a significant share of people's online expression.
- Regarding the two clusters in the Alternative section, the small size is deceiving given their actual impact on the conversation. Narratives first published there resurface in content published by

⁴ For a full discussion of the differentiators of media clusters please consult the Report #1 description. Differentiators used in clustering were: issues and topics areas covered in published articles; narrative frame; expressed support/rejection of candidates; citations/referencing other media sources; look and feel; presence of foreign influence; advertisements and other commercial activity.

Reframe media sources. In a way, the Alternative section of the Media Map provides the ideas and stories – the ideology – to feed an immersive and ongoing counter-narrative stream.

Of interest in the research finding are the levels of expressed candidate support or rejection, dynamic the changes in data about user sharing behaviour, and the role of foreign influence.

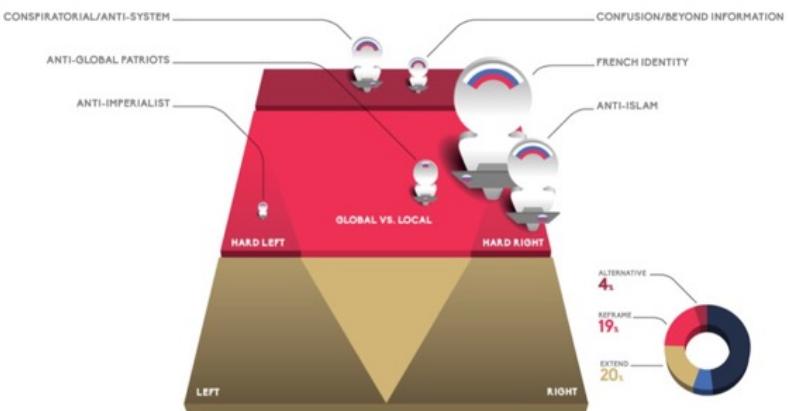
Report #2: Patterns of Disinformation

The study analysed the typical methods by which disinformation is concealed and disguised to amplify its reach and impact.

The study encountered Russian influence in two distinct ways. Some publishers reference and cite the French language outlets of Russia Today and Sputnik, which provides them with reporting that fits well

into the counter-narrative of the Reframe and Alternative sections. Other indications of Russian influence are the presence of French-speaking Russian blogs. The sites visually indicate their Russian identity, and publish content that places them in the Alternative section of the Media Map.

Russian influence is strongest in the Alternative section, where the share of media sources relying on Russian content in their reporting can reach half of all the media sources. Publishers in the Reframe section, particularly on the right, are reproducing Russian content by citing Russian sources directly or by referencing content from the Alternative section that was already exposed to Russian narratives. Thus the actual impact of Russian influence grows, as seeded narratives permeate through stories and are cited, referenced, and recycled across networks of Reframe publishers. A closer analysis of Russian narratives can be found in Report #2.



Disinformation campaigns

The research encountered numerous disinformation campaigns. Presence of these campaigns was noticeable on both in the content analyzed and in users sharing behaviour. Nested between the publishers and audiences, disinformation campaigns creatively utilize counter-narratives' tension to deliver the information to a greater share of the audience.

Though disinformation campaigns have different primary targets, they share a set of common characteristics:

- They attack traditional media and institutions' credibility with the goal to assert a different narrative;
- Their narratives both radicalize the audience and increase their uncertainty towards social institutions, such as media;
- They play on the trust people place in traditional media credibility;

- The campaigns co-opt traditional media's credibility to propel their message, while at the same time aim to undermine the trust people have towards traditional media. In this sense, disinformation campaigns try to reduce the common ground between different segments of society.

Disinformation campaigns are rooted in the counter-narratives published by media sources in the Alternative and Reframe section of the Media Map. These narratives pit people against a perceived elitist conspiracy, which disguises the truth as to perpetuate its rule. It is this tension that is being used by disinformation campaigns to resonate with the audience. Vice versa, the audience's beliefs are supplemented with false facts that appear credible, and hence attract users' motivation to assist in the story's distribution.

Successful disinformation campaigns tend to be creative in design. They use creative means to position the false information so to make use of the opposition and distrust towards the ideological enemies. The delivery mechanisms are key to conveying the false information with a sense of credibility.

The study found four reoccurring types of disinformation campaigns:

- Credibility cloak: co-opting traditional media's trustworthiness
- Time-shifting: circulating information out of its temporal context
- Fake polls: citing unscientific opinion poll results
- Hoax sites: cloning of established media sites to publish false stories

These delivery methods are empowered by an ambivalent attitude towards elitist institutions such as traditional media. Ambivalence is rooted in the frustrated aspiration to be an accepted member of the perceived elite community on one side, and rationalized rejection of elites on the other. False information delivered by disinformation campaigns merely needs to feel reasonable to be accepted as fact.

Campaigns using the **credibility cloak** method co-opt the authority of established traditional media organizations. They do this, for example, by alleging that a story around Emmanuel Macron's illicit campaign funds was authored by journalists of a national newspaper, but was censored by the corporate owners of the paper, in support of their elitist candidate. Other instances of disinformation campaigns take advantage of open blogging platforms of media organizations like Le Monde or Mediapart to publish false stories and then pretend that it is editorial, journalistically-verified content. Numerous articles published across different media sources of the Reframe section echo and amplify the false information, embedded in the 'revelation' story of the information's discovery.

The **time-shifting** mechanism was used extensively in and around the French presidential elections. This delivery method uses true stories from the past whose meaning today is misleading and manipulative. A few weeks prior the first round of elections, for example, a story that François Fillon is not under fraud investigation (while he in effect was being investigated) was circulated by a Reframe media source. The reason to believe was derived by the statement of a lawyer involved in the case. The lawyer's statement was made in January 2017, when the information was correct. Articles published for the campaign omitted the original date, when the information was valid, to confuse the audience's perception of Fillon's candidacy and raise doubts of the validity of the investigation.

Fake polls follow a similar path. Using recent failures of traditional opinion polling methodologies to predict election outcomes, results of unscientific polls were covered by Reframe media sources, indicating a significant difference to the results of established polling companies. Two polling companies claimed to use an innovative social media-based methodology: Filtris of Canada and BrandAnalytics of Russia. These two companies published research data showing much lower support for Emmanuel Macron, and higher popularity of François Fillon and Marine Le Pen, as compared with entrenched polling companies. Again, the unscientific polling results were embedded in stories that resonated with the counter-narratives propagated by Reframe and Alternative media sources, i.e., respected polling companies have a vested interest in the maintenance of the liberal, elitist order and hence are manipulation attempts themselves. In contrast, innovative research methods shed light on a different reality: while the audience might not necessarily believe the unscientific polling data fully, the campaign manages to reduce the trust people place in scientific polls.

Hoax sites are part of the disinformation campaign toolkit. This delivery mechanisms deceives audiences where the content has been published. The cloning of a Belgian newspaper Le Soir and LinkedIn, a business network site, are illustrative examples. Le Soir, a respectable and influential Belgian French-speaking paper can be accessed at www.lesoir.be. A clone site containing false information was created and accessible at www.lesoir.info. For irregular readers of this paper the difference is unnoticeable. Similarly, a cloned version of LinkedIn business networking site, titled LinkedEM, was used to present Macron as an elitist finance person. Disinformation campaigns took advantage of the credibility of the cloned sites.

In sum, disinformation campaigns leverage and increase the distrust and lack of common ground harbored by opposed fractions of the audience. The most visible aspect of disinformation campaigns is fake news.

Report #3: Sharing Behaviour

The social media landscape attains its role and importance through users who engage with and share content to their own followers. The study found that social media users enter a symbolic relationship with the media sources. They form a community around the media source they are ideologically aligned with. As part of that relationship, users aid the publisher through propelling to wider audiences through their own social media posting behaviour. In return, they can think of themselves as accepted members of community. Exhibited sharing behaviour is deeply connected with the user's sense of identity and community.

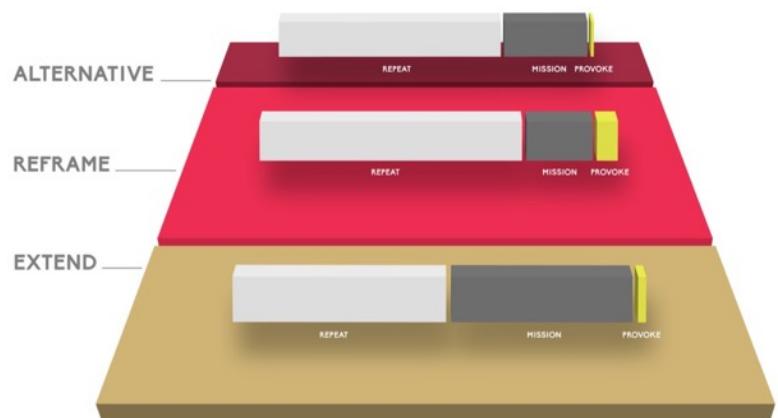
Posting is the act of sharing a link to expose it to one's followers or visitors. The study found three distinct types of posting:

- **Repeat:** These posts only include the title and URL address of the shared article. Users do not provide information on why or how the content resonates with them. Nonetheless, they push the

content into their followers' timelines. This behaviour requires little effort, yet still provide the benefit of reinforcing one's identity.⁵

- **Mission:** The posts contain a personal expression along the shared link. These are purposefully created posts that frame the information and steer impact towards the author's objectives. Users situate themselves as part of the political debate, assuming a facilitating role in the dispersion of information.
- **Provoke:** The posts combine a shared link with a customized message intended to incite audiences of contrarian views. These posts are tactically crafted and placed to maximize the chance the message confuses, insults and slanders the author's political or cultural opponents. People act along ideological dichotomies when engaging hostile audiences. Enemies are the projections of fears of an homogenous other. People engage in an emotionally asymmetric behaviour, where self-affirmation is obtained by negating others.

The Repeat behaviour is the most accentuated one across all three non-traditional sections of the Media Map; further, it is most dominant when it comes to sharing articles from media sources of the Reframe section. The Repeat behaviour makes up two thirds of the conversations generated in the Alternative section and significantly less in the Extend section.



The analysis explored the sharing behaviours' impact on subsequent conversations sparked by the post on the one hand, and the interrelation of the shared content with the sharing behaviour on the other. Please find the detailed analysis and interpretation in Report #3.

⁵ Due to the simplicity of the Repeat behaviour, one can assume a significant share of social media conversations following this behaviour have been automated and are executed by bot networks.

Recommendations

Using the insights collected over the three reports, the study formulated a set of recommendations. The actions are aimed at the five key stakeholders of social media discourse: the media, social media platforms, regulators, political actors, and at citizens. The recommendations have two basic objectives: to pierce opinion bubbles and take action to maintain and enhance society's common ground; and to create transparency. The new communication opportunities created by the social web can be the tools of a thriving and vivid public discourse. It is key to have awareness of how it works.

Recommendations for media:

- Develop new media offerings to resonate with audience currently unengaged with traditional media. Their need for polarizing and identity-strengthening content is provided by Reframe media sources.
- Address contentious topics and issues such as national identity and migration. Discussion of topics connected with existential fears in non-nativist frames will serve to gain trust and journalistic authority. Also, engage opposed audiences in conversations, provide space to sound their concerns and vent frustrations. This enables an emotional discharge, which lays the foundation for meaningful conversations at a later time.
- Simplify language and avoid labels associated with political correctness. Normative labels like "racist" are counterproductive as they create distance rather than engage the issue at hand.
- Educate existing audiences about the existence of the counter-narrative and their alternative interpretations on issues. Bringing hidden realities into the shared domain allows for a more meaningful engagement.

Recommendations for social media platforms:

- Facebook and Twitter, the two main venues of public discourse, must foster the maintenance of common ground and be more supportive of meaningful conversations. Otherwise, these companies stand the risk of becoming the henchman of radicals' intent to destroy open societies.
- Meaningful conversations are hindered by a conflict between the business interests of the social media platform and the interests of the public good. Companies are optimizing their platforms to maximize the time spent on site, not the quality of the conversation generated. Using algorithms to distribute content, the platforms become complicit in shrinking the common group by selecting and displaying content most likely to find agreement with the individual audience members. The widespread presence of bots and fake accounts used to echo and amplify narratives might help companies to achieve higher user engagement figures and thus better financial performance, but it is not conducive to meaningful conversations.
- Be transparent. Contrary to media or telecommunication companies, social media network operators do not reveal their content distribution and moderation processes. Secretiveness of the platforms has been recently illuminated by leaks⁶ of internal guidelines. Public

⁶ As reported by the Guardian, Facebook's internal moderation guidelines were leaked and revealed major inconsistencies and arbitrariness in the social network's policies. Please see:
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/may/21/revealed-facebook-internal-rulebook-sex-terrorism-violence>.

awareness of how these platforms operate is essential to public understanding of how these companies use their power and influence on the public discourse.

Recommendations for regulators and political actors:

- Social media networks are essential elements of the communication landscape. Regulatory bodies should have a vested interest in ensuring social networks contribute to the public discourse. Social media networks play a role in ensuring plurality of opinions, and this requires safeguarding. However, regulation must be extremely careful, as for-profit media companies such as Facebook or Twitter might easily slide into over-censoring conversations to avoid breach of regulations.
- Educate citizens on the role of social networks, personalization, and behavioural targeting and retargeting. Citizens are often unaware that their newsfeed is not universal, but individually tailored to suit their assumed preferences.
- Create legal frameworks to enforce transparency on moderation, content prioritization mechanisms, and targeted dark advertising. Spending on dark advertising as part of political/election campaigns must be tracked and made public.
- Regulators and political actors should define a code of conduct covering data, targeting, and messaging. Collection of data from social networks and other sources of digital breadcrumbs on individuals needs to be in line with local legislation, if such exists. What the data means and how it is used by campaigns should be publicized. New communication platforms enable micro-targeting of individual voters on a personal level. While the capabilities might be in place, deployment needs to be in line with society's awareness of these techniques.

Recommendations for citizens:

Members of the public have vital and vested role in defending the democratic processes. Citizens drive the public discourse explored by this study. To a large extent they shape the discourse through sharing and discussions the political discourse. Citizens can take the following actions:

- Follow people you don't agree with. Learning about other points of views is necessary, even if you only aim to get your message across.
- Explore the media landscape, and find out how facts are reinterpreted, shaped, and transformed. This enables you to navigate the media landscape and be your own fact-checker.
- Initiate and engage in constructive conversations. Do not simply share an article, express what it means to you. This enables others to understand why you believe A over B, and you might start a meaningful conversation with the potential to reach consensus.
- Pay for journalism. Advertising-funded reporting exposes journalism to outside influences.
- Ask Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms to be transparent. Platforms are constantly monitoring user behaviour and will adapt to people's demands, if revenue is at risk.