



The Role and Impact of Non-Traditional Publishers in the French Elections 2017





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Executive Summary

Suffrage, the right and power to vote, is the central principle of a democratic society. There are thus few more important topics for a democratic society than the way by which citizens become informed about the candidates and their positions. The press—by which we mean traditional sources like newspapers, radio, and television—has been the conduit by which this information has traditionally been delivered.

With the advent of the web, now some 20+ years ago, the typical obstacles one had to overcome to publish information at scale began to fall. With the advent of social networks, now a decade ago, people began actively—and far more quickly and trustingly—sharing information from both traditional and new sources. At roughly the same time, political campaigns and movements began to use these networks to promote their parties, people, and principles.

This study describes these phenomena through the lens of the 2017 French Presidential Election. Its goal is twofold. One is to classify both traditional media and non-traditional publishers in a Media Map, the basis of which is observation without judgement. The second is to explore and quantify how content—articles, images, videos and the like—is shared from these diverse sources across social networks.

This is the first of three reports, in which the Media Map and initial measurement of impact is discussed. This media briefing summarises the first report. The second report will provide an update using more recent data just prior to the second round of the election. The third report, at the end of June, will be a qualitative assessment of the comments people make while they are sharing content.

Data Collection & Measuring Impact

We measure influence in this study by focusing on a key behaviour of social media: the sharing of a story. If the act of ‘following’ a social media user indicates some form of interest, the act of sharing content (a link to a story, article, video, or image) represents activity in the form of advocacy. This may be for or against the content being shared, but it is indisputably a greater indicator of engagement.

Using a commercial social media analytics platform, we are able to observe and thus count how many times content from different media sources is publicly shared, e.g., via Twitter or Facebook, forums, blogs, and more. We can identify what was shared, when it was shared, and by whom.

We collected data on content shared between 1 November, 2016 (shortly before the EELV/Green Party primary) and 4 April, 2017.¹ We then looked specifically at the sites which published the content and sorted them in descending order by how many times social media users had shared articles from those sites. We then visited the top 800 sites and classified almost eight million shared links in a Media Map, which is described on the following pages. A complete explanation of the methodology behind this classification scheme is provided in the full report, available for download at bakamosocial.com/frenchelections.

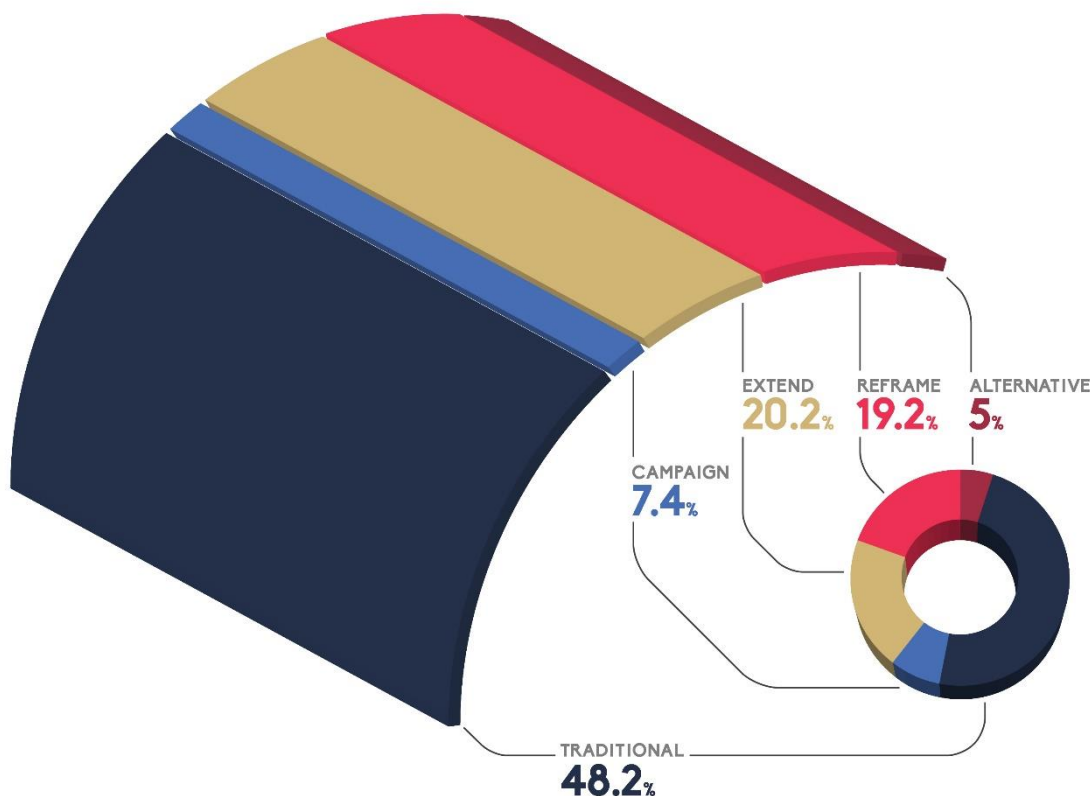
The Media Map

The Media Map developed for this study, shown below, takes as its starting point the rich array of traditional news media in France. We define five Sections in the Media Map, shown on the following page.

¹ The timeframe will include subsequent weeks when the second (updated) report is issued on May 2.



Figure 1 The Media Map, by Section



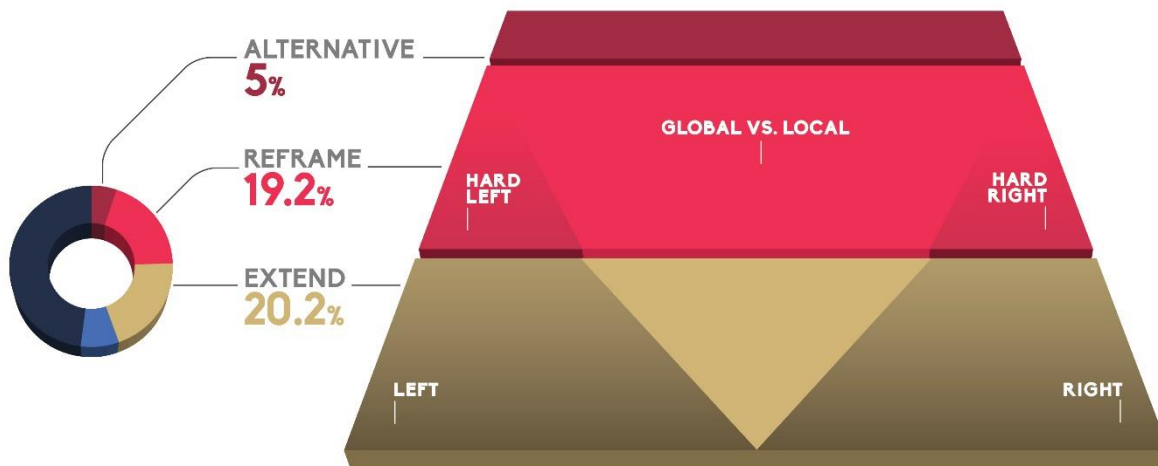
Two of these sections, Traditional and Campaign, are the sources which have historically provided political information.

- **Traditional (48.2% of links shared):** This section of the Media Map is populated by media sources that belong to the established commercial and conventional media landscape, such as the websites of national and regional newspapers, television and radio stations, online portals adhering to journalistic standards, and news aggregators. These are principally France-based sources; however, French-speaking international media sources exhibiting these same characteristics were also placed in the Traditional Media section.
- **Campaign (7.4% of links shared):** The Campaign section of the Media Map holds the official web presences of the candidates and parties. All sites located in this section are clearly marked and operated by the campaigns. This includes official party pages, candidate sites, and local and regional party chapters.



We identify three additional sections—Extend, Reframe, and Alternative—reflecting media sources that are “Non-Traditional” publishers.

Figure 2 Non-Traditional Media Sources: Left vs Right; Global vs Local



- **Extend (20.2% of links shared):** This section holds media sources that act to extend the journalistic scope of the traditional media. While broad in content and function, media sources in the Extend section contribute to the public’s discourse in a constructive manner. Some offer non-partisan or scholarly investigative reporting or explore in greater depth stories that have appeared in traditional media sources. Still others share content along personal or community perspectives. Some media sources are engaged in activating their readership for political ends, while others offer their readers humorous content. Within this section, we find sources expressing views that fall into a traditional left-right narrative. There are also sites that are centrist and non-partisan.
- **Reframe (19.2% of links shared):** Media sources in the Reframe section share the motivation to counter the Traditional Media narrative. The media sources see themselves as part of a struggle to “reinforce” readers of the real contexts and meanings hidden from them when they are informed by Traditional Media sources. This section breaks with the traditions of journalism, expresses radical opinions, and refers to both traditional and alternative sources to craft a disruptive narrative. While there is still a left-right distinction in this section, a new narrative frame emerges where content is positioned as being for or against globalisation and not in left-right terms. Indeed, the further away media sources are from the Traditional section, the less a conventional left-right attribution is possible.
- **Alternative (5% of links shared):** The Alternative section of non-traditional media sources is an incoherent, confusing space. It fuses radical left and right views which are unified in their opposition to globalisation. Narratives are often mythical, almost theological in nature, or discuss an intricate web of international conspiracy-like dependencies. Traditional political orientations are not present.



Within the three Non-Traditional sections, we have classified multiple clusters or subgroups of media sources. These are explored in greater detail in the report.

Extend Section (20.2%)

- Comedy/Parody/Satire
- Online petitions/citizen engagement
- Investigative journalism
- Environment
- Nonpartisan and centrist blogs
- Left-leaning blog
- Right-leaning blog
- LGBTQ & human rights

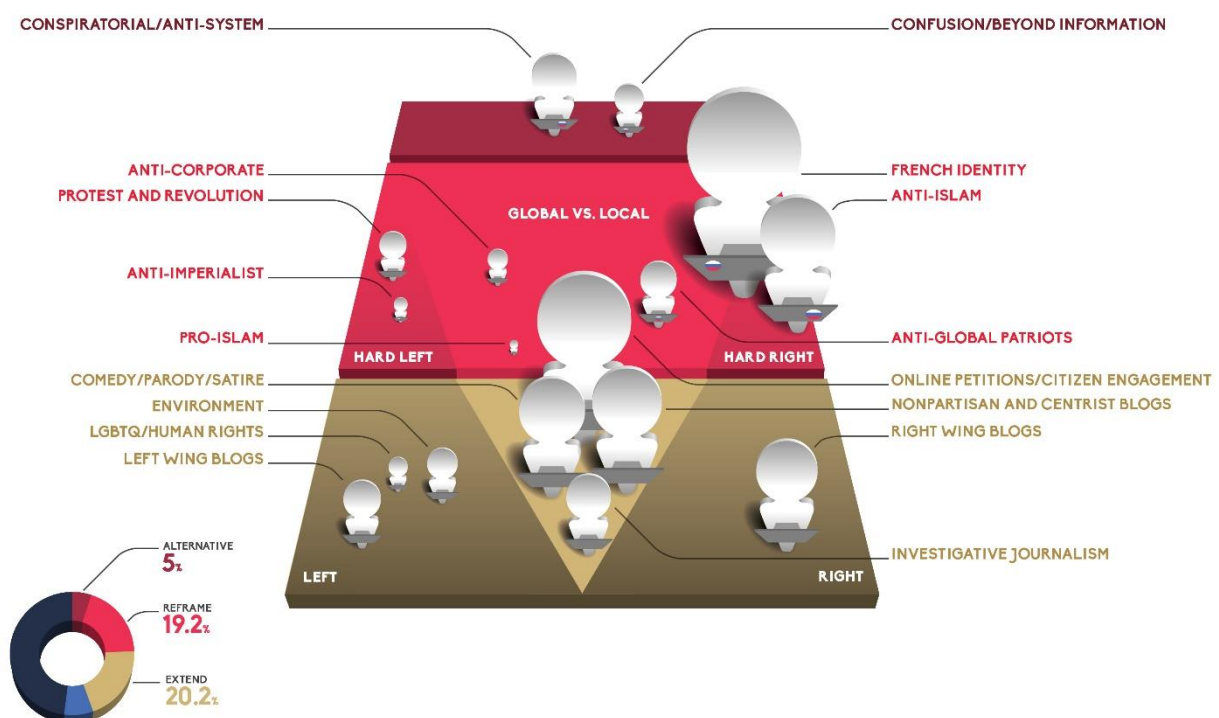
Reframe Section (19.2%)

- French Identity (groups that focus their politics through the lens of identity, including regionalist and Catholic publishers)
- Anti-Islam
- Anti-Global Patriots
- Anti-Imperialist
- Anti-Corporate
- Protest/Revolution
- Pro-Islam

Alternative Section (5%)

- Confusion/Beyond information
- Conspiracy/Anti-system

Figure 3 Clusters within each Section
(size of emblem corresponds to share of discourse)





Key Findings

Traditional media and Campaign sources make up 56% of all shared links in the public discourse.

If one *also* includes non-traditional publishers who do not challenge traditional media narratives (the Extend section), this implies that more than 3 in every 4 citations link to a media source that is part of the traditional political discourse.

24% of the shared citations come from sources which challenge traditional media narratives.

Their objective—to reframe narratives from traditional sources or provide a starkly different worldview—finds resonance with a vocal minority. There is also clear evidence that these sources are exposed to Russian influence. Nearly one in five sources in the Reframe section and almost half of Alternative sources refer to Russian media sources.

Social media users who share links from Reframe sources are very prolific, and their subscribers are very engaged. On average, accounts that share Reframe sources are almost *twice as active* (share twice as many links) as those sharing links from Traditional sources. Those who follow these accounts are highly engaged, liking and retweeting content twice as much as who follow accounts sharing non-traditional sources in other sections.

Links are shared very differently based on where the sharer finds content. There is a strong overlap among social media accounts that share stories published by both Alternative and Reframe sources. However, there is virtually no overlap or cross-sharing of content from Alternative/Reframe sources and Traditional sources.

The Mélenchon and Hamon campaigns are pursuing different tactics than the other campaigns by posting content from non-Campaign sources. The Mélenchon campaign is posting content from Traditional, Extend, and Reframe sections, while the Hamon campaign is posting content from Traditional and Extend sources. This contrasts with the Fillon, Macron, and Le Pen campaigns which share links only from Campaign sources, i.e., publish only their own content.

Conclusions & Implications

Our findings suggest France is experiencing the same undercurrents that are challenging other Western democracies.

Established sources of political news (traditional and campaign-driven media) are still driving public discourse. While a significant 25% of links shared come from challenger publishers, the vast majority of content shared still comes from sources which accept the legitimacy of traditional media. Indeed in the run-up to the election, Traditional and Campaign sources are being shared in greater proportion than all other non-traditional media sources.

Different narratives enter the political discourse through accounts that share content from both Alternative and Reframe publishers. The cross-sharing is the transmission mechanism by which different narratives, including anti-globalisation themes (as well as true falsehoods, conspiracy theories, pro-Russian propaganda, and racist views), enter the political discourse. As these accounts are more prolific and followed by more engaged audiences, this only speeds the introduction of new narratives. In these challenger sources, support is strongest for candidates who do not represent the two largest parties.

There is virtually no common ground to connect people who receive political news from Alternative/Reframe sources and those who receive political news from Traditional sources. Sharing across the divide separating Traditional from Reframe/Alternative sources is almost non-existent. Moreover, this disconnect completely colours one's perspective on the validity of the



information put forth by the 'other side' and its propensity to be biased. With no agreement on 'facts' (much less interpretation), these sources talk past each other.



Preface

by **Pierre Haski**

Sharing links to news sources has become a popular and perfectly normal way of interacting online, particularly during election times when access to information and analysis becomes a key element of making a choice for the future. Therefore, analysing sharing behaviour of the “netizens” citizens have now become is a key to understanding a society during a democratic process.



Pierre Haski

This is the purpose of this original study of French online activity during the weeks and months prior to its decisive 2017 presidential election.

The detailed findings, based on a comprehensive study of links shared on the open internet (the methodology will be explained in this report), show a worrying trend: as election day nears, there is a growing gap among citizens in relation to the sources they see fit to share within their network of connections. This gap is not in terms of political affiliation or support for a specific candidate, but in terms of news reliability and respect for professional and ethical rules.

The study shows a polarisation between different news sources and their users: mainstream media and numerous blogs and platforms that belong to the “traditional” web ecosystem on one side; and on the other side a galaxy of extremist websites and platforms built in opposition to the mainstream world. This latter group is described in the report as “reframe”—a reference to its stated purpose of “re-information” —and “alternative”.

This study puts numbers and percentages on what was only an intuition to create an empirical understanding of dynamics at work online. It explains the porosity of large numbers of “netizens”—up to a quarter of links shared according to the study—to “fake news” and other daily manipulations that have been exposed during this election campaign, as in previous known cases in the United Kingdom and the United States. Many of the sources in the “reframe” category are mass and regular providers of “fake news” that are being shared by many with the aim of influencing the election process.

The purpose of this study is not to pass moral judgement or to define what is “good” or “evil”. It is rather to assess, as precisely as technology allows, the online information landscape during an election process in a democratic environment. This knowledge is indispensable to understand how the fractures of society reflect themselves in the information world, with serious consequences for the democratic process.

It explains the necessary but inadequate response of “fact-checking” to the proliferation of “fake news”, as those who trust the “reframe” and “alternative” news sources don’t trust those who operate fact-checking platforms linked to traditional media. Therefore, hoaxes that have been properly denied and fact-checked can continue to be shared by users of “reframe” and “alternative” platforms to spread further disinformation.

This raises several questions suggested by the results of this study that will have to be answered by different actors within society:

- How can mainstream media sources rebuild the trust that has been destroyed with a large part of society? Are new sources of trust required?



- How can “fake news” be opposed and fought when no universal source, or “family” of sources, has the capacity to be accepted by all netizens?
- How can a democratic system prosper when its citizens no longer share a common base of information, where facts are not enough to establish common knowledge?

This study is not an end in itself, rather a contribution to understanding how the digital revolution has created a new world whose rules and operations are shaped by users, not by those who developed the technology; and how certain political forces, or certain countries, have been better than others at taking advantage of the opportunities of this new space.

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



Introduction

The role of social media in and around elections has received elevated attention for many reasons. Social media has become a battleground of ideas and a key venue of political campaigns. It has also created an opportunity for new, non-traditional media sources to reach a broader audience.

Adding to its significance is the emergence of foreign meddling, fake news, and botnets—to mention but a few of the buzzwords around recent elections and referendums in the UK or the US. This confluence—the heightened role and importance of social media in influencing decisions and the alleged manipulation of the discourse—are the impetus for this study.

This study aims to provide a new angle for understanding the social media landscape in the run-up to the 2017 French Presidential election. To trace the sources of influence, the study looks at the long-form content people cite and refer to in their public social media conversations when talking about politics, the elections, or any of the candidates. Exploring the long-form articles shared in social media allows for a deeper understanding of the types of media sources that influence social media users.

Approach

Bakamo uses hybrid approach of qualitative analysis and big data. The qualitative analysis provides an in-depth understanding and clustering of the content, while social media analytics detect the sources of sharing and measure their role in the discussion. The research used the social media technology platform Talkwalker to collect data and conduct measurements.

The analysis first explored public social media conversations mentioning the election process, the candidates, and political parties, as well as the prevalent issues of French politics. Using social media monitoring technology, the shared article links (URLs) were extracted and analysed along a range of criteria, including the look and feel of the websites and the content of the published articles. A complete explanation of the methodology can be found beginning at page 33 of the report.

From the analysis, Bakamo created a framework to classify the captured media sources. The framework provides the foundation of the Media Map.

The Media Map

The Media Map is designed to answer a simple question: *What are the media sources that influence and resonate with people?* The Map sheds light on types of influence, their magnitude, and their importance.

The map is based on the analysis of over 800 media sources most frequently cited in public social media discussions associated with the French presidential election. The Map is the result of a content analysis of individual sources.

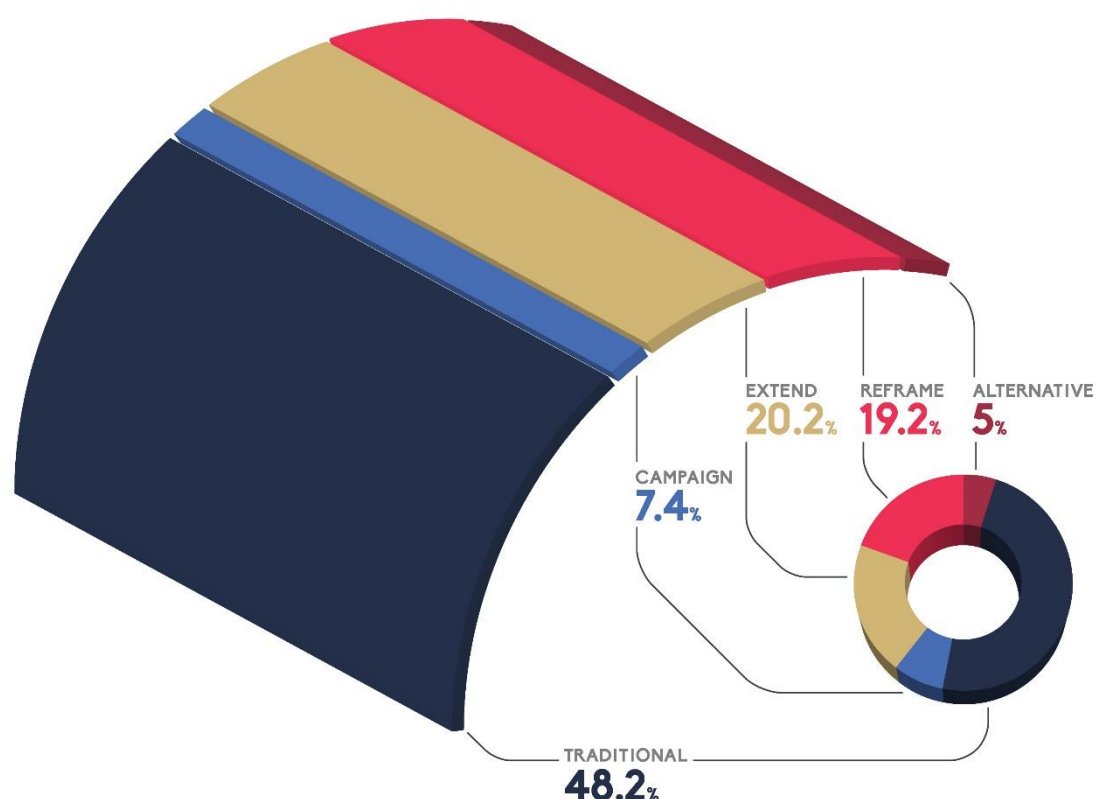
Sections of the Media Map

There are broad five sections of the Media Map. They are defined by their editorial distance from traditional media narratives. The less accepting a source is of traditional media narratives, the farther away it is (spatially) on the Map.

Two sections (Traditional and Campaign) are sources which historically have dominated the dissemination of political information. Three sections (Extend, Reframe, and Alternative) collectively make up the Non-Traditional sources.



Figure 4 The Media Map by Section



Traditional Media

This section of the Media Map is populated by media sources that belong to the established commercial and conventional media landscape, such as websites of national and regional newspapers, TV and radio stations, online portals adhering to journalistic standards, and news aggregators. These are principally France-based sources; however, French-speaking international media sources exhibiting these same characteristics were also placed into the Traditional Media section.

Campaign Media

The Campaign section of the Media Map holds the official web presences of the candidates and parties. All sites located in this section are clearly marked and operated by the campaigns. This section includes official party pages, candidate sites, and local and regional party chapters.

Extend

This section holds media sources that act to extend the journalistic scope of the traditional media. While broad in content and function, media sources in the Extend section contribute to the public's discourse in a constructive manner. Some offer non-partisan or scholarly investigative reporting or explore in greater depth stories that have appeared in traditional media sources. Others are anti-corruption watchdogs. Still others share content along personal or community perspectives. Some media sources are engaged in activating their readership for political ends, while others offer their readers humorous content.



Reframe

Media sources in the Reframe section share the motivation to counter the Traditional Media narrative. The media sources see themselves—and express themselves unambiguously—as part of a struggle to “reinforce” readers of the real contexts and meanings hidden from them when they are informed by Traditional Media sources. This section breaks with the traditions of journalism, expresses radical opinions, and uses both traditional and alternative sources of reference to craft a disruptive narrative.

Alternative

The Alternative section of non-traditional media sources is an incoherent, confusing space. It fuses radical left and right views which are unified in their opposition to globalisation. Narratives are often mythical, almost theological in nature, or discuss an intricate web of international conspiracy-like dependencies. Traditional political orientations are not present.

The five sections together capture all the different types of influence people refer to when participating in the public social media discourse around the elections and politics in general. By measuring the number of times links from these sources were shared in social media over a 6-month period, we observed the following distribution:

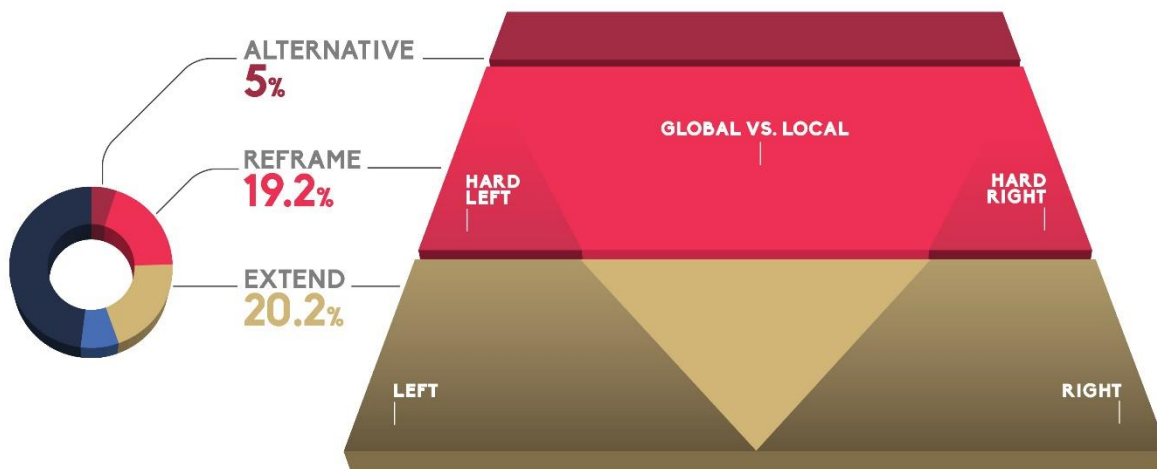
- Traditional and Campaign sources make up the majority of all cited media sources. Put differently, 55.6% of the content people share cites traditional media or any of the official candidate and party sources online.
- If we include the Extend section, which—though a non-traditional source—remains accepting of traditional media narratives, more than 3 in every 4 citations link to a media source that is part of the traditional political discourse.
- Taken together, the Reframe and Alternative sections make up 24.2% of the shared citations. Their objective—to reframe narratives from traditional sources or provide a starkly different worldview—finds resonance with a vocal minority.

Non-Traditional Media Sources

Content analysis allows us to add even greater colour to non-traditional media sources. In addition to the observable intentions of the media sources, the study detected two distinct, but interwoven narrative frames: a traditional left-right positioning and an emerging global versus local dichotomy.



Figure 5 Non Traditional Sections of the Media Map
with left-right and global-local dimensions



Media sources in the traditional left-right narrative frame publish content that positions itself along an established continuum of left and right issues, political parties, and candidates. Non-traditional media sources located on the left or right might be discussing different themes or hold opposing views, but they operate within the same framework. This is most visible in the Extend section of the Media Map, where sources widen the coverage of the Traditional Media sources.

The other narrative frame detectable through content analysis is the more recent development referred to in this study as the **global versus local** narrative frame. Content published in this narrative frame is positioned as being for or against globalisation and not in left-right terms. Indeed, the further away media sources are from the Traditional section, the less a conventional left-right attribution is possible. While there are media sources in the Reframe section on both on the hard right and hard left sides, **they converge in the global versus local narrative frame**. They take concepts from both left and right, but reframe them in a global-local context. One can find left or right leanings of media sources located in the middle of Reframe section, but this mainly relates to attitudes about Islam and migrants. Otherwise, left and right leaning media sources in the Reframe section share one common enemy: globalisation and the liberal economics that is associated with it.

In the Alternative section of the Media Map, a left-right distinction is absent: media sources and even individual articles borrow from both the extreme left and right.

Media Source Clusters

To populate the Media Map, the study developed a framework for analysing the top media sources shared in the social media discourse around the election using the following criteria:

- Content
 - Issues discussed in articles
 - Narrative frame invoked (left-right, global-local)
 - Enemies or objects of rejection
- Citations and referencing from other media sources and Media Map sections

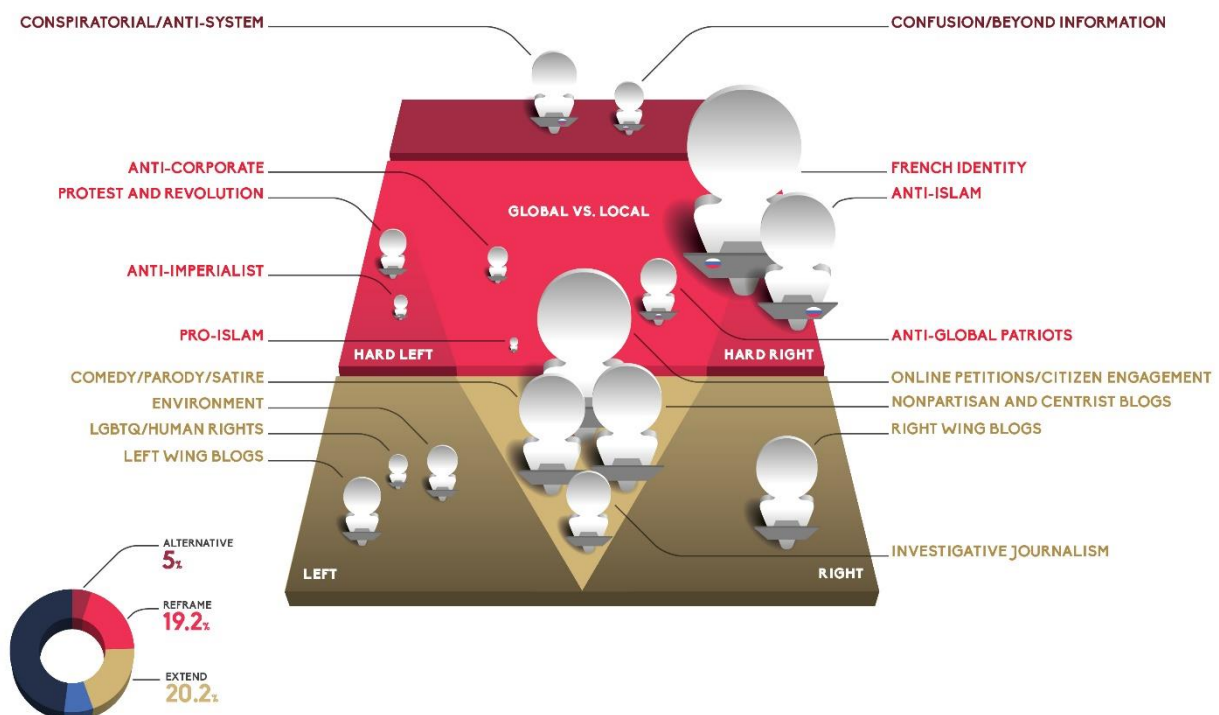


- Look and feel of the media sources, e.g., sites that looked like broad online news portals vs sites that had a blog-like appearance
- Support for presidential candidates, measured by the overt statements advocating for a given candidate
- Presence of Russian influence, i.e., citations of RT, Sputnik News, or other Russian sources
- Advertisements

Next, the analysis used qualitative mapping techniques to group the sources into clusters. Seventeen media source clusters were identified in total. Overlaps between clusters do exist, as individual media sources publish a stream of articles covering a range of topics within their purview. Ultimately, the analysis aimed to identify the key distinctions using the above indicators. The size of the figures on the map are proportional to their share in the discourse. The bigger the figure, the more links were shared from it.

The single largest individual media source cluster is the French Identity cluster in the Reframe section. When taken together with the Anti-Islam and the Anti-Global Patriot clusters (who have a more intense focus on the specific issues in their names), the three clusters command a significant 15,7% of all sharing activity.

Figure 6 Clusters within Non-Traditional Sections of the Media Map



Trends in Sections and Clusters

There are three important developments in the size and composition of the discourse since the beginning of measurement on November 1.



First, sharing has increased for all sources since the end of January. We would expect this in a way, since the end of January also coincided with the confirmation of the second major candidate (Benoit Hamon of the *Parti Socialiste*). Almost simultaneously, though, the *Canard Enchaîné*, a newspaper in existence for over one hundred years, published allegations that family members of François Fillon had been paid by the government to do fake jobs (“*emplois fictifs*”), a story which has appeared in sources across all sections of the Media Map. This story has also driven increased sharing. We are unable to separate these effects as we have no benchmarks.

Second, sharing of Traditional and Campaign sources has increased at a faster rate than Non-Traditional sources. Mathematically, that means the Non-Traditional sources now represent a somewhat smaller portion of the stories being shared.

Third, certain clusters have actually seen an increase in sharing over the same period. These are the stories from the Anti-Islam, Anti-Global Patriot, and Anti-Corporate clusters within the Reframe section. Also within the Reframe section, articles from the Pro-Islam cluster are being shared less.

Figure 8 Trends in Sharing by Section
Absolute Values

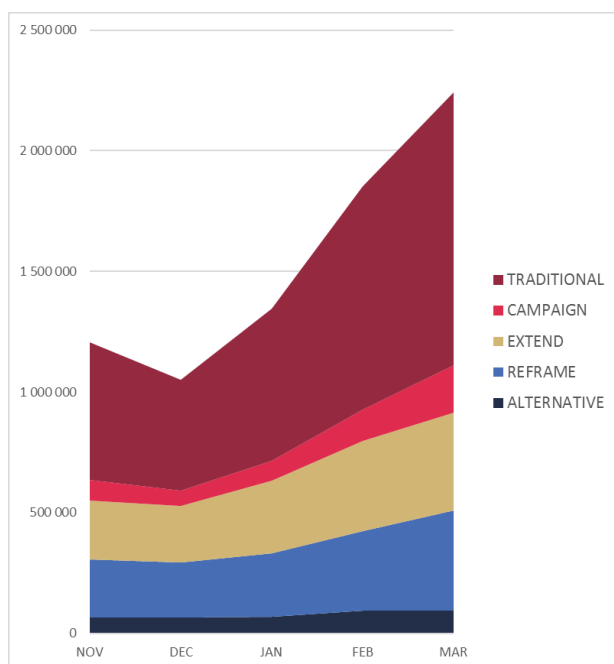
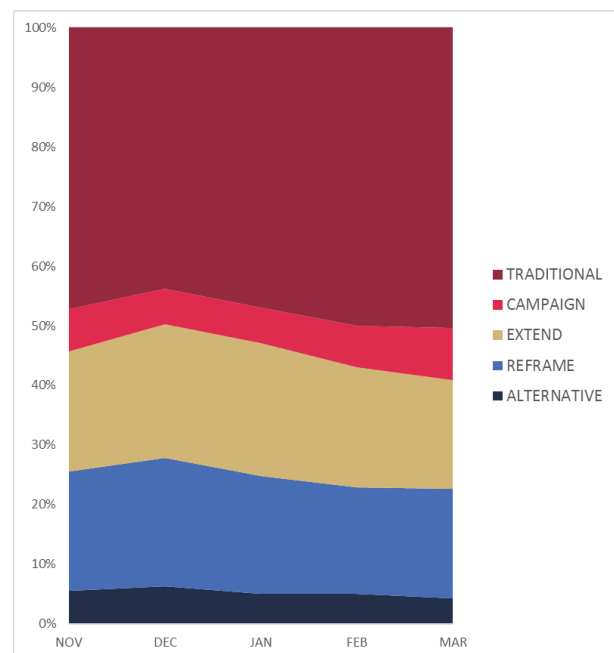


Figure 7 Trends in Sharing by Section
Composition as % of total



Candidate Support

The content analysis also explored candidate support by each media source. Candidate support was defined as the explicit expression of support for one candidate over another. Specifically, support had to be either (a) present in the content of the articles analysed or (b) visible on static content of the source, such as the image of a candidate.

Media sources with official ties to any candidate or political party were not part of the candidate support analysis. These were classified in the Campaign section of the Media Map.

Levels of support are divided into strong support, support, and weak support.

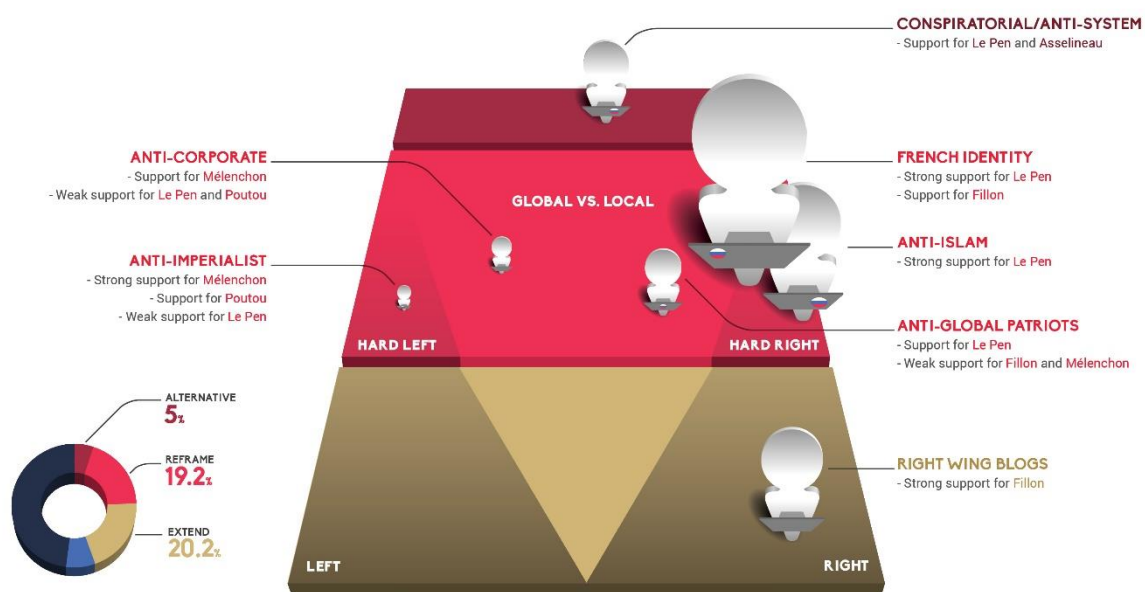
- **Strong support:** More than 40% of the analysed media sources in the cluster express support for a candidate.



- **Support:** Between 20% - 40% of the analysed media sources in the cluster express support for a candidate.
- **Weak support:** Fewer than 20% of the analysed media sources in the cluster express support for a candidate.

In total, support for a candidate was expressed by media sources in seven clusters. The map (below) includes only those media source clusters where candidate support was present.

Figure 9 Political Support by Cluster



Support for candidates varies significantly across media source clusters.

- **Le Pen and her Front National party dominate the largest clusters.** The media sources in the French Identity cluster overwhelmingly support the election of Le Pen, though a few sites support Fillon as well. In the Anti-Islam cluster, Le Pen was the only candidate supported.
- **The clusters for which the global-local narrative is dominant reveal support for candidates across the political spectrum.** In the Anti Global Patriots cluster, there is support for both Le Pen and Mélenchon. While support for Le Pen is greater, this is noteworthy because the two are traditionally seen at opposite ends of the left-right political spectrum. The global-local narrative is also seen in clusters located on the left side of the Reframe section. Though significantly smaller in size, both the Anti-Corporate and Anti-Imperialist clusters offer support mainly for Mélenchon and Poutou, but also (to a limited extent) Le Pen. This provides further evidence of a global versus local narrative that supersedes left versus right distinctions.
- **Media sources in the Conspiratorial/Anti-System cluster show some support for both Le Pen and Asselineau.**

Foreign Influence

The content analysis also explored the presence of foreign influence in individual media sources. Four criteria were used to classify a media source as being exposed to foreign influence.

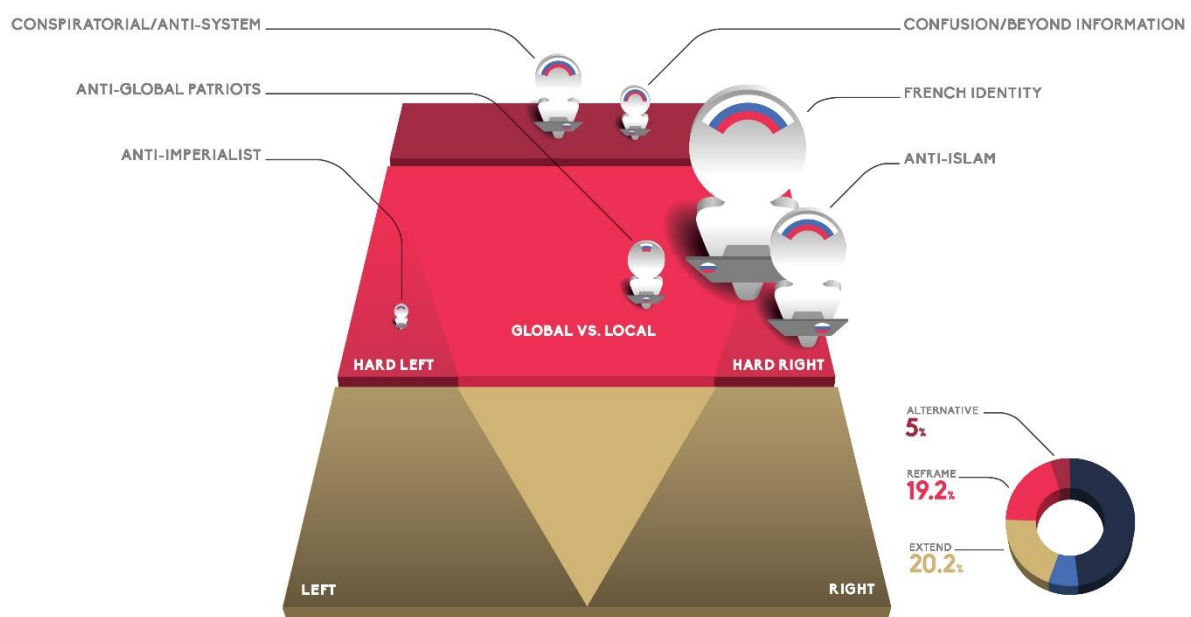


- Overt support for a foreign nation's perception or policy goals,
- Usage of foreign media sources in countering traditional media narratives
- Recommendation and linkage to foreign media sources
- Foreign operated French-speaking media sources

The analysis explored a minimum of five articles from each media source as well as static elements of each source. Indicators of foreign influence had to be present in either the articles or the source's other permanent content, e.g., other media sources that that source recommended.

The analysis only identified foreign influence connected with Russia. No other foreign source of influence was detected. The below Map shows the clusters within which media sources are exposed to Russian influence. Only those clusters where influence was detected are shown.

Figure 10 Russian Influence by Cluster



The two clusters in the Alternative section displayed the highest level of exposure: almost half of the media sources show signs of Russian influence.

In the Reframe section, a third of the media sources in the French Identity cluster (the largest of the clusters) and the Anti-Islam cluster display signs of Russian influence. Only a tenth of the media sources in the Anti-Global Patriots show signs of Russian influence, while a third of the media sources in the hard left Anti-Imperialist cluster did.

The research approach employed by the study is not suited to detect intentional manipulation or state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. It identifies correlation, not causality. That said, the



presence of Russian influence generally coincided with a critical anti-elitist and counter-traditional media narrative. Media sources in the Reframe section tend to cite content from Russian media sources, such as Sputnik News or Russia Today and other minor sites in their own coverage. Content from Russian media sources tends to be pitted against news stories reported by traditional media sources. This counter-citing behaviour is used by exposed sources to highlight how, in their view, Traditional media fails to cover the whole story.

In the Alternative section, Russian influence comes across in a different way. Some media sources are explicitly marked as Russian: the layout of the media sources includes Russian symbols, such as the Russian flag. Moreover, some sites link directly to Russian government institutions, such as the Ministry of Defence.

A dominant theme reflected by sources where Russian influence is detected is the war in Syria, the various actors involved, and the refugee crisis. In these articles, Bashar Assad becomes the protagonist, a perspective opposite to that which is reported by traditional media. Articles touching on refugees and migrants tend to reinforce anti-Islam and anti-migrant positions.

Cluster by Cluster: Detailed Analysis

Note to readers:

We often explain the key themes in each cluster in the first person using the language of the sources, *as if the source itself wrote the text explaining these themes*. This should not be taken as factual acceptance or endorsement of these positions. It is merely a stylistic choice designed to bring the clusters to life.

Also, cluster descriptions for the Extend section are not as detailed as those for the Reframe and Alternative sections. We have chosen to focus our analysis on these latter two sections.

Alternative Section: Conspiratorial/Anti-System

Number of sites: 32 / Percent of total links shared: 3.1%

Background

The objective of these media sources is to upend or discredit the system. Any information that could lead someone to question the system is utilised, often leading to complex conspiratorial theories. For these sources, the conspiracy revolves around the freemasons, who are identified as a king of Satan-devoted anti church, who are, in turn, being used by the secret Jewish conspiracy to undermine the world economy. A further line of tension is the one between rationality and heart; the former is associated with Judaism, universalism, and globalism, while the latter is seen as non-deracinated and authentic.

The sites repurpose factual information, modify it, and use it as a source of legitimation to spread it thinking.

Top Themes

Sources in this cluster believe Macron's "scandals" are not being pursued by traditional media, as he is the candidate of the elite. This cluster continues the investigation. Questions arise around where his money comes from, and how he has spent it. Macron is said to be worse than Hollande, mainly because of the "devastating" legislation he initiated.

Syria is an important theme in this cluster. Per these sources, and contrary to reports in traditional media, the Western powers are supporting the terrorist, while Bashar Assad is trustworthy and



tolerant leader, as witness reports prove. Religious tolerance existed before the terrorists upended it. Some claim that Christians were safer in Syria then now in Europe. Moreover, reports alleged that images and videos from Syria are fake, included the “staged” rescue videos by the White Helmets.

These sources claim free speech is undermined because traditional media seek to discredit the media sources that pose uncomfortable questions. Particularly under attack is Le Monde fact checking effort, *Le Décodex*. This has been created to silence dissent and is used by politicians to refuse to enter into dialog with banned media sources.

Finally, Rockefellers are said to live longer because they have access to “secret medicine” imported from Israel which is being denied to anyone else.

Political Support

Asselineau and Le Pen are the two candidates spoken of positively, although recently Mélenchon has joined the ranks. The key criteria for earning political support are anti-elitism and rejection of liberal economics.

Alternative Section: Confusion/Beyond Information

Number of sites: 17 / Percent of total links shared: 1.9%

Background

These sites tend to discuss the world order, global tendencies, and events. Articles published by this cluster of media sources are confusing, incoherent, and noisy, leaving the reader unsure what to make of them. The sole unifying attitude is anti-elitism. Some sites are aware of their contradictions, but because they are concerned with a new worldview in the making, they suggest that these contradictions will be possible to overcome in due course, even if we do not yet see how.

The themes discussed often touch on geopolitics and foreign policy, presenting the reader with an astonishing complexity of inconsistent ideas, connections, and surprising twists. Often Russia emerges as a positive actor in the geopolitical arena and the Third World is pictured as the vulnerable victim of transatlantic imperialism.

It becomes virtually impossible to decipher whether the source is serious or a caricature given the abundance of red herrings. Is the source aiming to convey some alternative secret? Or is it counting on our complicity to make fun of the idea that there is an alternative secret? It is impossible to know.

To a great extent, the media sources are collaborative in nature, allowing a broader set of authors to publish. About half of all media sources are explicitly and overtly pro-Russian.

They also propose an alliance with certain productive and creative sectors of mainstream science and technology as a way of furthering their aims, such as harnessing quantum physics, biology, ecology, cybernetics, and informatics to lead to a new holistic worldview.

Top Themes

Per these sources, whenever there is an anti-system candidate, the system will launch a new candidate. This true for Fillon, who within his party's confines represented the anti-system. The system in response to Fillon launched Macron.

These sources also explore candidates' backgrounds, presenting them all as greedy careerist politicians who are all part of the system. They stand with the elite, serving foreign interests.



Macron, for example, is seen as part of the Rothschild bank, the Bilderberg group, and the French-American Foundation. Hamon's wife is a rich liberal working for a luxury company. Other politicians are attacked as well for having fake or exaggerated university degrees.

These sources also take issue with opinion polls since they are owned by the same "capitalists" who control traditional media. For these sources, the polls are biased in favour of business interests, which means they will support Macron. Alternative opinion polls, such as the one conducted by Filteris, provide a clearer picture and are free of the capitalist influence.

Political Support

Fillon and Asselineau receive weak support in this cluster.

Reframe Section: French Identity

Number of sites: 38 / Percent of total links shared: 11.1%

Background

The French Identity cluster consists of three groups:

1) Catholics

These media sources are dedicated to preserving Catholic values in French society. The focus of the Catholic sub-cluster (referred to occasionally as the *cathosphere*) is the prevention of gay adoption and other medically enabled fertility treatments, such as Surrogacy. Treatments (and children) should only be allowed in a traditional family context is. One line of reasoning seen in these sources is that the real problem with gay marriage is that it creates demand for babies, which in turn create inevitable demand for the scientific production of humans. By this line of argument, sources avoid homophobic reasoning and frame their opposition to gay adoption as a struggle against the instrumentalisation of the human body.

2) Regionalists

These media sources focus on regional identity and are mainly from Brittany, the Basque region, and Corsica. On the one hand, they resist the French state. On the other, they pursue a deeper connection with their pagan ancestors. Having been colonized by France, they see the French state imposing migrants upon them. Were they an independent region, as their reasoning goes, they could properly defend themselves.

These sources publish content meant to link immigration and criminality. They see the state as having failed to establish law and order, which is epitomized by the appearance of "Muslim militias" in suburbs populated by immigrants. The French state requires Brittany to accept refugees, despite their "well-known" links to terrorism and sexual assaults. Countries which resist EU regulations on accepting refugees (Hungary, Poland, and Austria) are regularly praised. Viktor Orban, Prime Minister of Hungary, is a revered figure.

Some of the media sources see Marine Le Pen critically. They would like to see a return to authentic Jean Marie Le Pen-style Front National. Marine Le Pen, they think, will cause a conflict between her voters, as she attracts votes from "less committed" supporters. If she is elected, these sources argue, the traditional political class will be against her, which will make her unsuccessful. However, should she fail, the people will be so disappointed that more radical movements will be able to seize power.



3) Frenchness

This subcluster wants to preserve the traditional French character of the nation. They identify threats to the French way of life, which include migrants, crime, and the creeping withdrawal of the state from areas such as culture, education, and the upholding of the division between church and state. The current state of affairs is contrasted with a nostalgic view of the past. A story that underpins this line of thought is seen in a new treaty with Morocco that will see the establishment of Arabic schools in the suburbs—a treaty that has been signed by the Minister of Education, who has a Muslim/Arab background.

Per these source, immigrants in the suburbs is a major cause of crime and insecurity. Unaccompanied children pose a grave risk to public safety as they already terrorize several towns across France. Worse, they represent the *Grand Remplacement*, an invasion of strangers from remote cultures that is commanding state resources and money. At the same time, they are diluting and diminishing French culture. Media sources lament that there are no longer good grocery stores, cafés, or butchers (they all became Halal). The story is about decline.

All subclusters are unified in their opposition to Macron, who is seen as the candidate of the elites. He represents the system that has placed France on the path of decline.

Top Themes

Violence and insecurity in the suburbs are the key topics found in the content analysis of the most shared articles in this cluster. Stories focus on acts of violence committed by people of Arabic background. These articles “unveil the truth” behind the partially-reported facts from traditional media. Three recent cases are “revealed” by these sources to have been fabrications.

1. The ‘Theo’ story that made headlines in traditional media, where a young man of Congolese descent was said to have been raped by police officers.
2. Mehdi Meklat, a mainstream media celebrity, is revealed to have tweeted anti-Semitic, homophobic, and sexist messages anonymously.
3. Farid Benyettou, an employee of a state-funded deradicalisation project, turned out to be the mentor of the Kouachi brothers, who were involved in the Charlie Hebdo attacks.

A rising star of the cluster is Sébastien Jallamion, an ex-policeman, who used to work in the “zones sensibles” in the suburbs. He was fired because he shared pictures of a terrorist attack on his (pseudonymous) Facebook page. He is presented as a figure who served an ungrateful nation. He writes extensively for several media sources in the cluster.

Political Support

Marine Le Pen receives staunch backing from over half the sources in this cluster, making it the cluster with the clearest and strongest candidate preference.

Reframe Section: Protest/Revolution

Number of sites: 10 / Percent of total links shared: 0.7%

Background

These sources have two aims. One is to instigate protests: they call for revolution from the left. The other is to recommend concrete policy propositions that quite often are not part of the programs of any of the leftist candidates. In contrast to the Petition and LGBTQ/Human Rights clusters (both in the Extend Section), these have a strong leftist ideology and aim to overcome the liberal/capitalist world order. Contrary to the policy sites, the protest sites promote less analysis



and more activity. They seek to mobilize their community to resist existing measures and regulations seen as oppressive and abuses by those in power.

Their relation to traditional media is hostile, however their approach to it seems to be more rational than that of sources belonging to other clusters either on the hard left or the hard right. By and large, they avoid conspiracy theories.

Contrary to Anti-Imperialist sources, this cluster tends to have concentrate on developments within France. They strive to give a program to liberate the working class and resist neoliberal tendencies. They do, however, criticise the liberal world order, especially with regard France's position in it.

Top Themes

Within this cluster there is an activist focus that contains a sense of immediate danger. There is consistent vigilance of the hard right, the sources of its popularity and recent legitimacy, its local manifestations, and how to combat it. More generally, sources rail against the *précarité* that has been brought about by recent legislation. As a way of ensuring vigilance, sources commemorate the big events of social progress, such as social security and abortion rights.

Calls to action take the form of organising local protests, strikes, and other forms of resistance, with documentation and manuals for demonstrations and contacts for local activist groups that work on specific social problems, such as prisons. These sources report on police violence and its recent manifestations, describing recent cases and the organisation of protests. There are consistent references to the movement's most recent "success", the *Nuit Debout*.

Political Support

These sites do not support any of the big candidates. Some of them support Poutou, but others try to not get involved in the campaign directly, instead promoting intellectuals from the alternative left, like Emmanuel Todd. They often criticize right-wing candidates and Macron, but Hamon and Mélenchon will fall into their sights as well.

Reframe Section: Anti-Imperialist

Number of sites: 12 / Percent of total links shared: 0.3%

Background

This cluster contains the remains of the traditional Communist groupings. They publish articles on the imperialist system. They concentrate on foreign politics and ex-Third World countries. They frame their worldview through a Cold War logic: they see the West (mainly the US) versus the East, embodied by Russia. Russia is idolised, hence these sites have a visible anti-American and anti-Zionist stance. The antiquated nature of a Cold War frame given the geo-political transformations of the last 25 years means these sources are often forced to borrow ideas from the extreme right.

Top themes

The anti-elite themes in this cluster find voice in a variety of themes.

An interesting element in this cluster is the reference to Ken Loach's latest film, *I, Daniel Blake*. The story of a English labourer, who, advised to take off from work after a heart attack ends up dying a pauper as the State lets him wither, is understandably a cautionary tale.

One of the main sources in this cluster (legrandsoir.info) publishes "Le Décodex alternatif", a fact-checking site in direct competition with Le Monde's that draws heavily upon Metapedia, the alternative Wikipedia. In the same vein, sources like info24.fr publish information on Macron that have been "suppressed" by the mainstream media.



Mélenchon comes in for both support and criticism. He is seen as needing and deserving the support of Hamon and other left-wing candidates, yet his ties to Serge Dassault are also vehemently criticised.

Trump's "télé réalité" attack on Syria is a more recent example of content in this cluster. This is not surprising, however, as Russian influence is detectable on a number of sites in this cluster.

Political Support

Mélenchon, Poutou and Le Pen, in that order, receive support from sources in this cluster.

Reframe Section: Pro-Islam

Number of sites: 7, Percent of total links shared: 0.1%

Background

Pro-Islam sites are of two kinds: the ones created by Muslims for Muslims, and the ones not identified as such. The Muslim-edited media sources are vehemently critical of the violence visited by French society on its minority Muslim population. They also express a scathing criticism of right-wing political perspectives. This is blurred with a latent and sometimes obvious anti-Zionist, anti-Israel line, in which they advocate terrorist resistance against the occupiers of Palestine.

Media sources not explicitly claiming to be written by Muslims for Muslims are more moderate and reserved in their content. They mainly focus on the injustices suffered by the Muslim community in France, such as police violence, no right to practice religion in everyday life, and negative representations of the Muslim community and Islam in the media.

Top Themes

The most shared articles from this media source cluster naturally focus on the violence and injustice experienced by France's Muslim population. Recent cases of police violence against Muslims in France along with the unjust application of regulations on religion by the State are seen as State-supported bias. Also shared are articles on white supremacy and the innate racism of the white. For example, Alexandre Bissonnette, believed to be the shooter at a Mosque in Quebec, Canada, is said to be of Arabic origin... and to be two separate people by the mainstream white media!

American imperialism is another dominant theme in this cluster, driven by the belief that the US has been secretly supporting the Assad regime.

More generally, sources in this cluster fight against Islamophobia. For example, the Socialist politician Malek Boutih is presented as a traitor for having stoked Islamophobia in a TV interview. These ideas can take on a more anti-Semitic tone at times. One article takes a quote from Bernard-Henri Lévy out of context from his remarks on the Boycott Divest Sanction (BDS), suggesting that he said Muslims "are Nazis" and are "the archenemies of the Jews".

The most widely shared articles are written in a moderate tone when compared to content published across all sources. These come from four sites (Contre-Attaques, Islam et Info, Etat d'exception and Be Palestine), all of which (with the possible exception of Be Palestine) often republish articles and videos from the mainstream media, hence the moderate tone. Some sources, however, plant seeds of conspiracy and offer confusing and fake content. While these articles are often heavily (re)framed, there is no apparent evidence of links to Russian sites.

Political Support

These sources do not lend support to any of the candidates.



Reframe Section: Anti-Global Patriots

Number of sites: 19 / Percent of total links shared: 0.9%

Background

The overwhelming majority of these sources are right wing and see the EU, global commerce, and migrants as their main opponents. As opposed to French Identity cluster, however, they interpret social and political phenomena mainly in terms of the global/local narrative.

These sources seek to spread anti-global sentiment. For them, the banking system and the financing sector are like “tapeworms”, parasitically killing an otherwise healthy and balanced world economy. The “One Percent” are systematically opposed. Macron, along with the only other candidate presumed to emanate from the financial and media monopoly, Fillon, are identified as puppets in the hands of this shadowy global sphere. The flames of anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiment are fanned and then pointed to as a evidence of the alleged Master Plan: the financial elite are responsible for the wave of immigration and, because of this, must now force acceptance of the “refugees”. Their plan is to undermine European Christian nation-states. Russian sites are occasionally cited by these sources.

Top Themes

There are two basic themes in the most popular articles from this cluster. The first relates to the offences committed by the globalists, i.e., either the State or Europe or by their anointed emissary, Macron. Per these sources, the State and the EU are covering up the truth. Whether it is criticism of the pseudo-centres of ‘déradicalisation’, which are revealed as state-subsidised institutions of Islamisation, or the secret conspiracies to “Islamify” Europe, or the many ways the media hide evidence of Macron’s wrong-doing, “they” are complicit.

The second theme relates to the influx of refugees. Per these sources, the refugees are ingrates forced on the sovereign nation of France, who then commit violence against French police and firemen. When they are not behaving civilly, they are living off state subsidies and taking money that belongs to a sovereign France.

A Pro-Russian stance is widespread. Russian news sources, e.g., *Izvestia*, are often cited.

Political Support

Within this cluster there is strong support for Le Pen and minimal support for Mélenchon.

Reframe Section: Anti-Islam

Number of sites: 15 / Percent of total links shared: 3.7%

Background

These sources are similar to those in the French Identity cluster, but focus specifically on Islam. Some offer “analysis” of the history and the religious culture of Islam. These sources are clearly directed against the perceived growth of Islam in France. They see the danger in being outbred by “Muslims”. This is the demographic problem they identify, which they sometimes refer to as “ethno-mathematics” or the *Grand Remplacement*.

Top Themes

The top themes in this cluster are the cultural fear of losing French identity due to the influx of Muslims, insecurity in the suburbs, and the danger of terrorism.

These sites denounce mainstream politicians and intellectuals as being the victims of politically correct speech, useful idiots, or even complicit with Islamism. The mainstream, in their view, is unwilling to see the obvious dangers of Islam, its terroristic tendencies, and the existence of a



“parallel society” that threatens French culture and Christianity. These sources cite the case where Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo “secretly sponsored” Muslim cultural organisations with State funds. They mention a scandal in Spain, where the Madrid mayor failed to authorise the placement of a Nativity scene in the city centre for Christmas, arguing that only religiously-neutral symbols should be allowed in public spaces.

For some, terrorism is the lesser threat, mainly because it comes from outside and can be identified and therefore defeated. But the Muslim masses who have already settled in the country without being integrated; on the contrary, they distort French culture and society according to their alien norms and customs. Because this theme is shared with the French Identity cluster, articles are often cross-posted. They want to dismiss the Muslim threat and treat any criticism of their aims as racist. (<http://lesobservateurs.ch/2017/04/06/nauseabond-de-denoncer-lexistence-de-djihadistes-europe/>)

Political Support

Sources in this cluster express support only for Marine Le Pen. However, some sources which define themselves as conservative or neo-conservative (like dreuz.info) are rather favourable to Fillon and reject Le Pen’s protectionist economic stance. Some sites criticize Le Pen for her declaration that coexistence with Islam is possible, as this suggests, erroneously in their view, there is a variant of non-fundamentalist Islam that is “compatible with the Republic”. The candidates that sources in this cluster see as their main adversaries are, in their view, being protected both by the judiciary and media. For example, despite the fact that Hamon has been investigated, the media is keeping silent, just as it has done with Macron’s scandals. These sources also believe there is a conspiracy against Fillon.

Reframe Section: Anti-Corporate

Number of sites: 24 / Percent of total links shared: 0.6%

Background

This cluster represents a new left whose mission is to renew social criticism. They see the EU, liberal economics, and globalism as their enemies and their content reflects this. Sources in this cluster are sovereigntist and reject global capitalism. They bear a strong resemblance to the Anti-Global Patriots except they have a *positive* view on Islam and refugees. Some of the sources in this cluster seek the intellectual renewal of the left, while others focus on pragmatic left-leaning sovereigntist approaches to politics.

Top Themes

There are a variety of topics in this cluster. Most prominent is a thesis of leftist renewal, and that the present is ripe for change. With the traditional signposts having vanished, it is urgent to rethink politics, and the place of the left in it as well, and to engage in more decisive action.

Action needs to come in two forms. One is resistance. There are hints of conspiracy in some of the pragmatic sovereigntist sources that connect them tangentially to the Alternative space. For example, sources believe traditional media is captured by corporate interests and big names, many of whom are part of the global Jewish elite. One source positively cites the stunning story of Icelandic bankers sentenced to prison (here posted on the famous conspiracy site, <http://yournewswire.com/iceland-jail-bankers-46-years/>), which is reposted by hard right blogs as well.

Opposition to global elites in this new left comes stems from a familiar ecological point of view that is now expressed as localism (buy French/buy local) and the use local renewable energy



sources. Exploitation of foreign workers is one way which these sources express and rationalise the importance of sovereignty. For them, dumping from China must be stopped, especially because the Chinese worker is being mistreated.

Political Support

In this cluster, Mélenchon receives moderate support as the flagship of the radical change these sources believe France needs. There is also an effort to delineate Mélenchon's programme from that of Le Pen's: <http://heuredupeuple.fr/programmes-melenchon-pen-oppose/>. Poutou receives weak support from sources in this cluster as well.

Sources in this cluster tend to oppose Macron, naturally, as the candidate of the mainstream which sees him as the source of renewal France needs.

Extend Section: Online Petitions & Citizen Engagement Cluster

Number of sites: 8 / Percent of total links shared: 6.1%

Background

Political and social activists in the online public sphere make frequent use of petition sites. These sources allow users to create their own petitions, share them with their community, and garner support by collecting signatures. The intended effect is to exert political pressure.

Top themes

Most issues raised on petition sites are associated with the political left and include a homosexual's right to adoption and issues touching on social injustice. Interestingly, supporters of the Front National have shared petitions in social media to draw attention to the investigation of other candidates' financial dealings.

Political Support

While some petitions may impact the perception of candidates, sources in this cluster do not express support for presidential candidates.

Extend Section: Comedy/Parody/Satire Cluster

Number of sites: 19 / Percent of total links shared: 3.1%

Background

This cluster includes media sources that create humorous and satirical content about the elections, predominantly about the candidates. The media sources publish funny images or videos ridiculing politicians. This section does not use humour as an offensive tool against rival candidates: their mockery is non-denominational.

Top Themes

Sources in this cluster tease politicians' behaviour and point out contradictions.

Political Support

Sources in this cluster do not offer support for any of the candidates.

Extend Section: Environment Cluster

Number of sites: 11 / Percent of total links shared: 1.0%

Background

This cluster highlights ecological issues. Sources publish content around sustainable development and critique policies that are not in line with expectations of sustainable development.



Top themes

Sustainable development and ecological balance are the main themes in this cluster.

Political Support

None of the media sources in the cluster offer support for any of the candidates.

Extend Section: LGBTQ/Human Rights

Number of sites: 12 / Percent of total links shared: 0.5%

Background

This cluster of media sources focuses on the social struggle for universal human rights, especially the laws and regulations concerning the gay community.

Top Themes

The standout theme of this cluster is the right for homosexual couples to adopt children.

Political support

None of the media sources mapped in this cluster offer direct support for any of the candidates.

Extend Section: Left-Wing Blogs

Number of sites: 51 / Percent of total links shared: 1.4%

Background

Media sources in this cluster explore the news and developments around the elections from a recognisable left-leaning perspective. They discuss issues emerging in traditional media and contribute to the discourse with their interpretations.

Top Themes

The topics driving the discussions are very broad. No single issue stands out.

Political support

Interestingly, none of the media sources in this cluster expresses support for a candidate. Nevertheless, Mélenchon and Macron tend to be discussed in more positive terms.

Extend Section: Non-Partisan or Centrist Blogs

Number of sites: 59 / Percent of total links shared: 3.5%

Background

As the name of this cluster suggests, the political leanings of media sources are indeterminate. They discuss much the same themes as left and right wing blogs, but do not take a political position along the left-right spectrum. They remain non-partisan.

Top Themes

Akin to the left and right wing blogs these media sources cover a very broad scope of themes, reflecting and augmenting reporting from traditional media.

Political Support

No sources in this cluster offer support for any of the candidates.

Extend Section: Right-Wing Blogs

Number of sites: 32 / Percent of total links shared: 2.8%



Background

This cluster of media sources presents a conservative outlook on politics. Media sources are critical of left-leaning positions and candidates.

Top themes

As with the Left and Non-Partisan blogs, these media sources cover a broad range of topics, frequently reflecting on news published by traditional media sources.

Political support

This cluster is the only one in the Extend section to articulate support for a candidate (Fillon).

Extend Section: Investigative Journalism

Number of sites: 38 / Percent of total links shared: 1.7%

Background

Media sources in this cluster explore themes and issues that, in their view, do not receive sufficient attention by traditional media. Using a journalistic approach, they dig deep into stories. Some of the media sources are clearly crowd-funded and ask for contributions.

Top Themes

A common theme in this cluster is the investigation of corruption by political actors.

Political Support

No direct support for any candidate has been identified.

Measuring Influence

Why study sharing behaviour?

In social media, the base currency is followership. When a person “connects” with somebody in social media, it is typically (and rather benignly) assumed to represent the follower’s interest in the beliefs or actions of the person she/he is following. This study goes beyond followership to study sharing.

Sharing is the overt act of taking an article or video or image that one sees in social media and, literally, sharing it digitally with one’s own followers or even into the public domain. Sharing therefore implies an elevated level of interest: people share articles that they feel others should see. While there are tools that help us track and quantify how many articles are shared, they cannot explain the sharer’s intention. It seems plausible, particularly in a political context, that sharing implies endorsement, yet even this is problematic as sharing can often imply shock and disagreement. In the third instalment of this study, Bakamo will explore in depth the extent to which people agree or disagree with what they share, but for this report (and the second, updated version), the simple act of sharing—whatever the intention—is nonetheless highly relevant. It provides a way of gauging activity and engagement.

Metrics

The question of how to measure influence in social media has a few different answers. There are three essential concepts: reach, engagement, and mentions.

Reach

In social media, reach is defined as the number of accounts (these could be real people, organizations, or automated accounts or “bots”) on a given platform that affirmatively subscribe to



see the remarks posted by any account. Accounts with significant subscribers are called “influencers” in the trade. These accounts are often owned by famous people (artists, politicians, sports figures). That said, one does not need to be a household name to be influencer in a niche community. Indeed, many of the media clusters have their own “stars”.

In real world terms, reach is basically the number of people who are interested in what another person has to say. By subscribing, they indicate a desire to listen. What we don’t have visibility on, however, is how many updates (comments & links shared) are actually seen by an account’s subscriber base. Social media is inherently a noisy marketplace and would require slavish levels of attention to be fully aware of everything being posted.

Engagement

Engagement in social media is defined as the number of people who act upon viewing an update of an account they follow. These are the “likes” or “shares” in Facebook, or “favourites” or “retweets” in Twitter. While these can be counted, we do not know whether the person has actually clicked through to read the content being shared before they like or retweet. This information is only available to the account owner. One of the questions that is often raised about social media is whether users do indeed read the article or respond simply to the headlines that appear in their newsfeed. We are unable to comment on this.

In real word terms, engagement can be two things. It can be agreement—whether reflexive or reflective—with the content shared. It can also, however, be disagreement: Facebook’s nuanced “like” system (in which anger is a valid form of engagement) or Twitter’s citations that enable a user to comment on the link while sharing it both permit these negative expressions. Whatever the sentiment, it is a measure of even greater impact. If reach indicates interest, engagement equals activation and a greater level of commitment.

Number of Mentions

A mention in this study is the posting of a link to an article to a source that is classified in the Media Map. The frequency of an account’s activity tells us a lot. It is axiomatic to social media that, unless one is a celebrity, activity in the form of content sharing is a must for building a large subscriber base. That said, accounts with high numbers of mentions, i.e., content posted, raise eyebrows as well, for this could be a sign that the account is a “bot” posting automatically.

Each of the above measures tells us something about an account. Moreover, they are interrelated and can be combined. For example, absolute engagement levels will be a function of reach, while one might also be interested in engagement per post as a way of gauging how effectively a social media account activates its subscribers.

Summary Data: Mentions and Effectiveness

Below are summary statistics related to reach, accounts sharing content, and number of mentions (links/articles shared).²

² Note that, for these measures of Influence, the total numbers of links shared is smaller than the eight million cited elsewhere. This is due to a technical limitation related to the shortening of links by third-party services. For the analysis of influencers and engagement, we are using only those mentions that are not shortened by third-party services. We explain this fully in the methodology discussion on Link Sharing on page 33.

**Table 1 Mentions, Engagement, and Unique Accounts by Section**

Section	Mentions	Engagement	Unique Accounts sharing links
Alternative	217900	151200	26700
Reframe	1100000	1300000	60900
Extend	1300000	2100000	217900
Campaign	440100	2100000	68800
Traditional	3100000	34900000	277000
Total	6158000	40500000	438600

Table 2 Average Mentions, Engagement, and Reach

Section	Mentions per Account	Engagement per Mention	Engagement per Account	Reach per Mention
Alternative	8,2	0,7	6	2286
Reframe	18,4	1,2	21	2909
Extend	5,8	1,6	10	3538
Campaign	6,4	4,8	31	4544
Traditional	10,5	11,3	126	29097
Total	13,6	6,6	92	16889

We are most struck by the absolute and relative activity of accounts which share links from the Reframe section. On average, these accounts are almost twice as active as those which share links from Traditional sites and three times more active than those sharing Extend links. If we combine Reframe and Alternative sharers, we see they have the same combined number of mentions as Extend sharers with merely one third of the accounts.

As noted above though, it's not just the sharing that matters. Authors who share links from Reframe sites have a more engaged audience, twice that of authors sharing Extend links and three times that of those sharing Alternative links.

These data allow us to clearly conclude that those who share Reframe links are more prolific and their audiences more engaged.

What content are they diffusing though?

Content Sharing across Sections

We looked at the Top 100 accounts in each Section by both reach and engagement. The results are instructive for understanding how content from one Section can spread to another.

The two charts (page 32) show the number of social media accounts that post links in multiple sections. Here we see the overlap and thus the spread of news stories from both Traditional and Alternative sections.

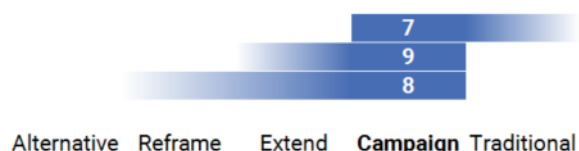
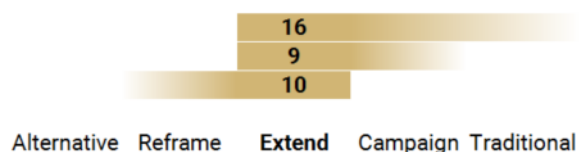
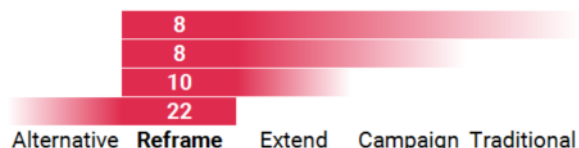
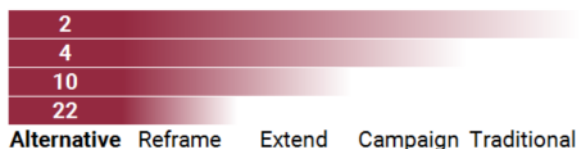


Figure 11 Content Sharing Across Sections

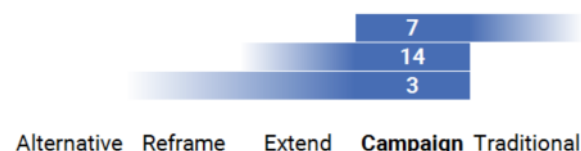
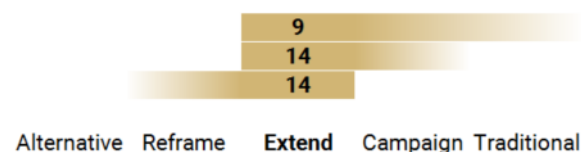
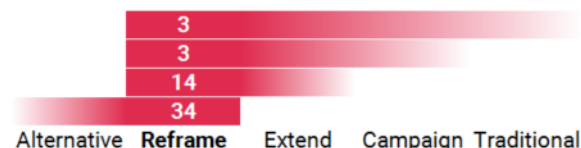
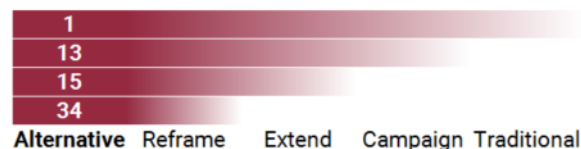
Example interpretations:

- Among the Top 100 accounts (as measured by engagement), 22 share links from sources in both Alternative and Reframe sections of the Media Map.
- Among the Top 100 accounts (as measured by reach), 9 share links from sources in both Traditional and Extend sections of the Media Map.

Among Top 100 accounts by Engagement



Among Top 100 accounts by Reach



We are struck by several observations:

- The strongest overlap exists with accounts that share links in both the Alternative and Reframe Sections.
- In terms of those sharing Reframe links:
 - The top accounts *by engagement* are giving equal time to traditional media sources.
 - The top accounts *by reach* are virtually ignoring traditional media sources.
- Almost none of the top 100 accounts, whether by reach or engagement, are sharing both Alternative and Traditional links.
- Any posting by accounts of both Alternative/Reframe and Traditional links is one way: no accounts operated by Traditional sources post any Alternative/Reframe content!
- Only the Mélenchon and Hamon campaigns are actively posting content from Non-Campaign sources:



- The Mélenchon campaign is posting content from Traditional, Extend, and Reframe sections.
- The Hamon campaign is posting content from Traditional and Extend sources.
- The Fillon, Macron, Le Pen campaigns are sharing links only from Campaign sources.

Here we have clear proof of a key dynamic of the way non-traditional media sources have gained a meaningful foothold. A channel has emerged by which content from non-traditional sources begins to enter the political arena, namely via sharing by accounts posting both Alternative and Reframe content. This content is read by those following Reframe accounts and is either replacing or being considered on equal footing with Traditional content. Moreover, this non-traditional content will not be seen by those who only follow Traditional or Campaign accounts.

These observations point to an inescapable conclusion: there is a disconnect in the information people receive and find trustworthy about politics.

Process & Methodology

The Media Map for this study was created in a five-step process. First, we created the keywords that served to corral an initial data set for review. Second, we parsed out the links being shared to identify the sources that published the original comment or article. Third, we developed the classification scheme by which the Media Map came to life. Fourth, we coded the top 800+ sites. Fifth, we reran the query using a combination of keywords and domain names to generate data. An explanation of each step follows.

Step 1: Data collection and keyword generation

We used the Talkwalker platform to collect and code data for this project. The platform houses terabytes of data, literally billions and billions of pieces of content that are shared publicly in the open web. Talkwalker collects data not just from social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, but also from forums, blogs, newspaper comments, and the like.

The vastness of social media requires the use of search techniques to narrow the data for review. The first tools that are used are date ranges and explicit keywords. We collected six months of data (initially going back to September 2016) as the beginning date for our analysis. We would later revise this timing to the beginning of November as this coincided with the first primaries.

Keywords were chosen in an iterative process. Obvious terms were words like “*présidentielle*” and “*élection*”, along with candidate and party names and abbreviations. We also wanted to include the issues being discussed by the French public. To this end, we began selecting topics plucked from the headlines and the candidates’ and parties’ messaging and platforms. From taxes to the EU, immigration to trade agreements, we arrived at a final list of several hundred keywords. The final keyword grid had four main categories—election terms, candidates, parties, and issues—and applied them in different combinations. The keyword search included the requirement that a link must be shared and that the language of the comment should be in French.

The resulting dataset contained over one hundred million comments, of which a random sample of 300 000 were downloaded for further processing.

Step 2: Link Parsing

One of the unique challenges in this study arises from the way in which links are shared in social media. It is now often the case that links are “shortened”.



Link shortening involves using a service that takes a long URL and shortens it using a short domain name (like t.co or bit.ly) followed by an alphanumeric code. The service that provides the shortening keeps a record of the full URL of the content being shared so that users who click on the short link are redirected to the desired page. This was inspired initially by Twitter's 140-character limit but it also allows the publisher to track click-throughs and thus engagement. Twitter has a built-in link shortening feature as well.

The challenge we face is that our methodology hinges upon searching all public social media posts by the hostname or domain name of a media source. When the link is shortened via Twitter, this isn't a problem: Twitter exposes the expanded URL so that the unshortened link is searchable. It merely requires some parsing of the data file to extract it. We refer to these as the "visible links." It is a problem, however, if the link has already been shortened, e.g., by the bit.ly service, as it means we are unable to identify the site. We refer to these as the "shortened links".

We identified two issues with shortened links. One is the possibility of bias. If the distribution of sites shared using shortened links is somehow different from that of the sites shared via visible links, our Media Map may still be complete, but the measures of impact would be biased. We tested this hypothesis after the coding was completed to formally compare these distributions, the data from which are shown below in Step 4 on page 36. The second problem was that it implied we would be unable to fully use our social media tool to study the spread of content.

To address this, we used a custom-built web-based application to resolve the shortened links to their final unshortened destination. We note that the parsing and resolution process was both time consuming and imperfect. Some links could not be resolved. The sheer numbers and the timing of the analysis did not permit further resolution.

The outcome of the link parsing was a list of domain and hostnames sorted in descending order by number of articles shared per site (most shared to least) for the team to begin work on developing the Media Map. In technical terms, we distilled each full URL to its base domain or hostname, whichever was more relevant. A domain name would be more relevant for a website, while a hostname was more often used for blogs, of which there may be many per domain. The domain or hostname is the lowest level of atomicity for the Media Map. A domain or hostname is equivalent to a media source in the terminology of the report; thus, when we speak of the more than eight hundred sources, it is to this which we refer.

Step 3: Site analysis

With the links now resolved, our analysts began systematically reading sources that were obviously not traditional media, i.e., newspapers, radio, or television properties. The team of analysts began reviewing each media source, reading its own description and recent articles, studying the imagery and language used, and taking notes along the way. Following several days of reading, the team got together for a day-long workshop to discuss the findings. The purpose of the workshop was to elicit individual opinions as a way of finding collective agreement on how to divide the data. By the end of the day—nearly eight hours of discussion—we had identified key themes that would come to define the Media Map, namely narrative distance from traditional media sources and the traditional left-right political culture which, at some point, began to give way to a new global-local narrative. Further discussion and reading over the subsequent days led us to refine the clusters, or sub-groups, and sections of the Media Map.



Step 4: Coding

With the Media Map's section and cluster boundaries settled, the team began to code the list of sources, applying both section and cluster designations as well as indicating whether the site supported a given politician and whether there were links to Russian sources. During this process, the list was cleaned to ensure non-relevant domains, e.g., pure entertainment sites that may have been caught up in the keyword search, were not included. Additionally, each source was required to be regularly publishing long-form content on topics connected to the political discourse. Finally, we excluded sources from French-speaking but not France-oriented sites, like African, Canadian, or Swiss sources not concerned with French politics. These exclusions were expected due to the broadness of the keyword-based search. Decisions were reviewed by multiple team members to ensure consistency and validity.

The coding process was both time-consuming and complex. Setting aside the sheer number of sites reviewed, the team made a concerted effort to remain grounded in observation and avoid judgment.

As mentioned in the link shortening discussion above, this is the step in which we tested whether the distribution of sections and clusters was different between the shortened links and the visible links. The data are shown on the following page.



Figure 12 Tests Showing Differences of Shortened versus Visible Links

SHARES BY SHORTENED VERSUS VISIBLE LINK				
SECTION	CLUSTER	TOTAL	Includes all sections	
			SHORT LINKS	VISIBLE LINKS
ALTERNATIVE	CONFUSION/BEYOND INFORMATION	146935	1.8%	1.9%
	CONSPIRATORIAL/ANTI-SYSTEM	250116	2.7%	3.3%
TOTAL ALTERNATIVE		397051	4.4%	5.1%
REFRAME	FRENCH IDENTITY	100865	15.8%	10.0%
	ANTI-ISLAM	295179	5.1%	3.3%
	ANTI-GLOBAL PATRIOTS	73064	1.3%	0.8%
	ANTI-IMPERIALIST	26468	0.4%	0.3%
	ANTI-CORPORATE	51045	0.9%	0.6%
	PROTEST/REVOLUTION	58872	0.2%	0.9%
	PRO ISLAM	10778	0.2%	0.1%
TOTAL REFRAME		1524271	24%	18%
EXTEND	COMEDY/PARODY/SATIRE	247977	5.9%	2.4%
	ONLINE PETITIONS/CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT	487351	4.1%	6.7%
	RIGHT BLOG	223502	3.1%	2.7%
	INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM	133009	1.5%	1.7%
	ENVIRONMENT	82123	0.9%	1.1%
	NONPARTISAN OR CENTRIST BLOG	274605	3.2%	3.5%
	LEFT BLOG	113960	1.6%	1.4%
	CORRUPTION	6927	0.2%	0.1%
	LBTQ/HUMAN RIGHTS	36996	0.1%	0.6%
	TOTAL EXTEND	1606450	20%	20%
	TOTAL CAMPAIGN	587721	8.8%	7.0%
	TOTAL TRADITIONAL	3826400	42%	50%
GRAND TOTAL		7941893	100%	100%

SHARES BY SHORTENED VERSUS VISIBLE LINK				
SECTION	CLUSTER	TOTAL	Excludes Traditional & Campaign	
			SHORT LINKS	VISIBLE LINKS
ALTERNATIVE	CONFUSION/BEYOND INFORMATION	146935	3.7%	4.3%
	CONSPIRATORIAL/ANTI-SYSTEM	250116	5.5%	7.6%
TOTAL ALTERNATIVE		397051	9.1%	11.9%
REFRAME	FRENCH IDENTITY	100865	32.4%	27.5%
	ANTI-ISLAM	295179	10.5%	7.7%
	ANTI-GLOBAL PATRIOTS	73064	2.6%	1.9%
	ANTI-IMPERIALIST	26468	0.8%	0.7%
	ANTI-CORPORATE	51045	1.8%	1.3%
	PROTEST/REVOLUTION	58872	0.4%	2.0%
	PRO ISLAM	10778	0.4%	0.3%
TOTAL REFRAME		1524271	49%	41%
EXTEND	COMEDY/PARODY/SATIRE	247977	12.0%	5.5%
	ONLINE PETITIONS/CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT	487351	8.3%	15.5%
	RIGHT BLOG	223502	6.4%	6.3%
	INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM	133009	3.1%	4.0%
	ENVIRONMENT	82123	1.8%	2.5%
	NONPARTISAN OR CENTRIST BLOG	274605	6.5%	8.2%
	LEFT BLOG	113960	3.2%	3.2%
	CORRUPTION	6927	0.3%	0.2%
	LBTQ/HUMAN RIGHTS	36996	0.2%	1.3%
	TOTAL EXTEND	1606450	42%	47%
	TOTAL CAMPAIGN	587721		
	TOTAL TRADITIONAL	3826400	100%	100%
GRAND TOTAL		7941893		



In total, 20% of the mentions we extracted were from shortened links while 80% were from visible links. Our comparison shows some statistically-significant differences between the two groups at the section and cluster level. For this reason, we use both shortened and visible links -to report the sizes of sections or clusters for maximal accuracy.

For the remarks on influencers, however, we are only using the 80% of the data where links are visible. The overall meaning of our findings at this level does not change. Put differently, though there are some numerical differences, our conclusions about the diffusion of information and the things that are importing within each segment or cluster remain sufficiently robust. Moreover, we are able to use the full capabilities of the Talkwalker platform to show and measure influence and can avoid the massive difficulties that would arise from needing to extract and aggregate data outside the platform.

Step 5: Revising the query and collecting final data

With the list of domain and hostnames coded to their sections and clusters, we modified the Talkwalker query. For every section except Traditional, we used the domain and hostnames instead of the keywords used in Step 1 to select mentions. For the Traditional section, we used both domain and hostnames as well as the Step 1 keywords as these sources were assumed to cover other topic areas like sports and entertainment. Finally, given our link shortening dilemma, we created a query that was essentially a process of elimination, whereby we used the Step 1 keywords and excluded any domain or hostname included in the Media Map.

A note on sampling

As noted above we used sampling in a couple of places for this analysis.

In Step 1, from the over one hundred million mentions we initially identified, we downloaded a random sample of 300 000 for analysis. This is a healthy sample by any measure and creates no intrinsic issue from a statistical perspective in terms of reliability. The decision was as much a function of the limitations placed by Twitter and enforced by Talkwalker for downloading Twitter data.

In Step 5, we sampled data for the shortened link query for the same reasons, this time pulling down about 50 000 of about 15 000 000 mentions, or about 0.32%. To arrive at the totals we reported, i.e., number of posts and share of mentions by section and cluster, we weighted the shortened link data back to their appropriate level by dividing the counts by the sampling rate.

Finally, our decision to code only the top 800+ sources of the approximately 1300 became a matter of both timing and what we would call the Pareto principle. We were already well into the long tail of the distribution, where, in our sample of 300 000, we were finding sources that were only shared once. There were clearly more sources we could have evaluated, but the very low levels of sharing assured us that we were not missing an appreciable part of the data and our conclusions would not meaningfully change.

Conclusions

Key Findings

Traditional media and Campaign sources make up 56% of all shared links in the public discourse.

If one *also* includes non-traditional publishers who do not challenge traditional media narratives (the Extend section), this implies that more than 3 in every 4 citations link to a media source that is part of the traditional political discourse.



24% of the shared citations come from sources which challenge traditional media narratives.

Their objective—to reframe narratives from traditional sources or provide a starkly different worldview—finds resonance with a vocal minority. There is also clear evidence that these sources are exposed to Russian influence. Nearly one in five sources in the Reframe section and almost half of Alternative sources refer to Russian media sources.

Social media users who share links from Reframe sources are very prolific, and their subscribers are very engaged. On average, accounts that share Reframe sources are almost *twice as active* (share twice as many links) as those sharing links from Traditional sources. Those who follow these accounts are highly engaged, liking and retweeting content twice as much as who follow accounts sharing non-traditional sources in other sections.

Links are shared very differently based on where the sharer finds content. There is a strong overlap among social media accounts that share stories published by both Alternative and Reframe sources. However, there is virtually no overlap or cross-sharing of content from Alternative/Reframe sources and Traditional sources.

The Mélenchon and Hamon campaigns are pursuing different tactics than the other campaigns by posting content from non-Campaign sources. The Mélenchon campaign is posting content from Traditional, Extend, and Reframe sections, while the Hamon campaign is posting content from Traditional and Extend sources. This contrasts with the Fillon, Macron, and Le Pen campaigns, which are sharing links only from Campaign sources, i.e., basically publishing only their own content.

Implications

Our findings suggest France is experiencing the same undercurrents that are challenging other Western democracies.

Established sources of political news (traditional and campaign-driven media) are still driving public discourse. While a significant 25% of links shared come from challenger publishers, the vast majority of content shared still comes from sources which accept the legitimacy of traditional media. Indeed, in the run-up to the election, Traditional and Campaign sources are being shared in greater proportion than all other non-traditional media sources.

Different narratives enter the political discourse through accounts that share content from both Alternative and Reframe publishers. The cross-sharing is the transmission mechanism by which different narratives, including anti-globalisation themes (as well as true falsehoods, conspiracy theories, pro-Russian propaganda, and racist views), enter the political discourse. As these accounts are more prolific and followed by more engaged audiences, this only speeds the introduction of new narratives. In these challenger sources, support is strongest for candidates who do **not** represent the two parties whose Presidential candidates have won in modern times.

There is virtually no common ground to connect people who receive political news from Alternative/Reframe sources and those who receive political news from Traditional sources. Sharing across the divide separating Traditional from Reframe/Alternative sources is almost non-existent. Moreover, this disconnect completely colours one's perspective on the validity of the information put forth by the 'other side' and its propensity to be biased. With no agreement on 'facts' (much less interpretation), these sources talk past each other.



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