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A France divided by the pandemic: The disinformation ecosystem leading up to the 2022 elections

Authors: Zoé Fourel, Roman Adamczyk, Sasha Morinière, and Cécile Simmons

Senior Advisors and Contributing Editors: Cooper Gatewood, Iris Boyer and Jiore Craig

About this report

This report presents the findings of a project investigating disinformation and misinformation ahead of the French 2022 presidential elections. Based on data collected during January 2022 and leveraging a combination of social media analysis, network mapping and qualitative analysis,this study provides an overview of the key communities which were actively spreading disinformation and misinformation on social media platforms ahead of the elections, and the dynamics and narratives shaping these communities.

The French disinformation landscape depicted in this report has been influenced by the period of data collection. In Jaunary 2022, online discourse in France was still very focused upon the Covid-19 pandemic, the potential risks of the emerging Omicron variant and the controversies around the vaccine pass and other sanitary measures. As such, the communities described in this study represent a robust illustration of the evolutions and compositions of French conspiracist, extremist and disinformation ecosystems online influenced by a nearly two-year-long pandemic. This study also offers important insight into the dynamics within these online communities that spread disinformation and polarising discourse during the presidential campaign, which remain relevant long after the the day of the vote.

In order to better understand the role of these communities in spreading disinformation and polarising narratives ISD has also produced complementary studies that focus on the period between the two rounds of voting in the presidential election as well as the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

About ISD

Founded in 2006 in the UK, ISD is now the leading global "think and do" tank dedicated to understanding and innovating real-world responses to the rising tide of polarisation, hate and extremism of all forms in the digital era. We combine anthropological research, expertise in international extremist movements and an advanced digital analysis capability that tracks hate, disinformation and extremism online, with policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world. We also work to empower youth and community influencers internationally through our pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.

In France, ISD has been advising key policy stakeholders for over a decade in the challenging contexts of the Islamist terrorist attacks, the rise of the Identitarian movement, the Yellow Vest movement[2], the Covid-19 infodemic, the French elections, the ever-growing influence of the far right and the recent war in Ukraine. ISD is notably a member of the Regular Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication's (ARCOM)[3] Online Hate Observatory and expert group on information manipulations. ISD has also been delivering pioneering research and programming in the fields of online hate, disinformation and extremism and set up ISD France in the form of a French association in 2020.[4]

Contents

Executive Summary

The 2022 French presidential elections took place in a context of elevated concerns about the impact of disinformation, misinformation and social polarisation on this high-stake vote. The presidential election follows the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2021), during which time ISD has observed the rise in anti-establishment and anti-system sentiment in France, the widespread propagation of misinformation and disinformation about the virus, the use of the pandemic to share anti-minority sentiment as well as the rise of authoritarian narratives.[6] [7] [8] At the beginning of 2022, polarising discourse and disinformation about the pandemic were still highly present on social media, contributing to continuing demonstrations against the vaccine pass and to the attempted organisation of a "Freedom convoy" in France, following the Canadian model, to protest restrictions related to the pandemic.[9]

The early days of the election campaign also saw the growing promotion of conspiratorial fringe ideologies by certain political candidates. Far-right polemicist, former journalist and presidential candidate Éric Zemmour, for instance, became a key promoter of the far-right notion of the "great replacement", originally championed by the Identitarian far-right, in the French public sphere.[10] This controversial concept was also evoked by Valérie Pécresse, presidential candidate for Les Républicans, during a campaign speech.

Likewise, the emergence and diffusion of discussions and disinformation casting doubt on the integrity and equality of the electoral process, at times amplified by political figures with large audiences on social media, has raised concerns about a potential "Stop the Steal" movement in France and attempts to undermine the vote.[11]

The presidential election campaign thus opened in a context of increased dissemination of disinformation and polarising discourse across a wide range of French online ecosystems. Combining qualitative research and social network mapping, this report provides a panorama of online communities identified as having been central vectors in the propagation of disinformation and polarising discourse in the run-up to the presidential election and attempts to provide keys to understanding the dynamics, interactions and modes of mobilisation that characterise these ecosystems.

To arrive at this result, ISD researchers first manually compiled a list of accounts identified as having an active role in the propagation of disinformation and misinformation on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Leveraging automated detection and analysis tools, ISD carried out a network expansion exercise and sub-divided the final network used in this analysis into sub-communities (clusters) based on commonalities in the content shared by accounts in these communities (see the Methodology section for more details). Data produced by the network analysed in this report was collected between 7 and 20 January 2022 and analysed qualitatively by researchers. The key findings of ISD's analysis are presented below.

Key Findings

- Opposition to or support for health measures and vaccination against COVID-19 is an important structuring element for many of the online ecosystems identified by this study. While part of this is due to the period covered by our analysis, which was marked by protests against the vaccine pass and concerns about the Omicron variant, it is also an illustration of the impact of the pandemic on the composition and strengthening of several online communities mobilised primarily around the health crisis and the measures taken by the government more than around traditional political cleavages.

- The main cluster of this research is composed of actors in favour of vaccination against Covid-19 and the implementation of strong health measures to contain the pandemic, which we have named the "Covid consensus activists". They appear in our study because of their strong activism on social networks to combat misinformation about vaccines and the virus. On social networks, they regularly share news articles and other publications criticising the behaviour of and misinformation spread by opponents of health restrictions. This sometimes includes the amplification of content produced directly by the anti-vaccine and anti-health restriction spheres to denounce them, illustrating the strong antagonism on social networks generated by the pandemic as well as the potential risk of unintentional amplification of disinformation.

- This research identified three clusters that converged in their opposition to health restrictions and vaccination. These three clusters regularly relayed very similar discourses, with strong anti-system and dissident overtones, accusing the government in particular of using health restrictions to encroach on individual liberty. The actors active in these communities also view very favourably contested figures from the medical world, including Dr Didier Raoult. These three groups, which differ in their political affinities, have been characterised as follows:

  - The "Anti-restriction left-wingers": a cluster so named because it is composed of accounts opposed to the government's health policy and which identify politically rather with the radical left or the extreme left.

  - The "Covid opposition opportunists": who appear to be sensitive to the influence of discourses from sovereignist political figures, who are more firmly rooted in the extreme right or of their influencers and relays on social networks. These digital activists seem to find in the movements opposing health restrictions an opportunity to distinguish themselves from their competitors on the institutional far right.

  - The "Anti-system protesters": a community of actors firmly and systematically opposed to the government in place, beyond the health crisis, which is distinguished by the fact that it does not have a single political leaning. We find, for example, figures from the Gilets Jaunes movement in this final group.

- The "Covid opposition opportunists" cluster is characterised by the sharing of two main types of content:

  - Messages inciting mobilisation against the vaccine pass and health restrictions or containing disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic; and

  - Publications featuring sovereignist and far-right political figures opposing vaccination and health restrictions.

The prominence of content from far-right or sovereignist figures such as Florian Philippot and François Asselineau in this cluster illustrates how the pandemic allowed their messages to reach a wider audience and to spread, in addition to misinformation about Covid-19, polarising discours traditionally circulated within most far-right online ecosystems. It also shows how these political influencers leveraged the pandemic and anti-system sentiments to assert themselves in the French political landscape, despite their inability to win elections and the ultra-minority status of their parties. It also highlights the important role they may have had in amplifying health misinformation and disinformation.

- The posting habits of the ten most active accounts in the "Covid opposition opportunists" cluster fit the definition of inauthentic behaviour used by ISD[12]. These accounts used a range of amplification and astroturfing techniques[13], including tagging and frequent reposting, to give disinformation greater visibility online.

- The "Anti-system protesters" cluster brings together actors who have no specific political affiliations but who converge in their anti-system positions and their frontal opposition to the government. During the period covered by this report, this cluster shared a wide range of anti-vaccine and anti-sanitary restriction content and brings together various sub-groups including anti-vaccine and anti-sanitary restriction activists and members of the Gilets Jaunes movement. This trend, characteristic of the anti-system movements that emerged during the pandemic and exemplified by the more recent and smaller 'Freedom Convoy' mobilisation[14] across the country, shows that anti-system sentiment can be harnessed to fuel social discontent among disparate online groups, all of whom consider themselves to be on the fringes of the mainstream.

- Communities supporting presidential candidate Éric Zemmour represented a smaller but nonetheless significant cluster in the dataset analysed. This cluster stood out for its active promotion of the candidate's campaign, which was just starting at the time of data collection. While Zemmour adopted an ambiguous stance on health restrictions, some accounts in this cluster distinguished themselves by denouncing the government's handling of the pandemic as liberticidal and displayed an anti-restriction commitment, showing a clear connection between pro-Zemmour activities and scepticism towards vaccines and health restrictions.

- The four clusters outside the mainstream were characterised by their low level of engagement with mainstream content. Within these clusters, barely 2% of accounts referred to the content of the "Covid consensus activists" cluster, denoting the self-contained nature of these clusters and their overwhelming engagement with fringe content.

- Conversely, the mainstream cluster regularly linked to content produced by the "Covid opposition opportunists" cluster in order to denounce its disturbing nature, with 38% of outbound links pointing to publications from this sub-group. This phenomenon is indicative of the way in which fringe discourses feed into mainstream discussions and highlights the risk of unintentional amplification and trivialisation of polarising content.

- The accounts of the "Anti-restriction left-wingers" cluster often shared links from the "Covid opposition opportunists" cluster - reflecting both a condemnation of the latter's discourses on some topics and a certain convergence of discourses shared by opposing political fringes on others, such as opposition to the Covid-19 restrictions or positions of Macron's government. It is important to note that this trend is not reciprocated and that the "Covid opposition opportunists" have shared few contents produced by the "Anti-restriction left-wingers". This trend illustrates the capacity of content produced by some actors close to the extreme right, especially about the COVID-19 pandemic, to provoke mobilisation on the part of groups from the radical left or extreme left, with these two groups converging in opposition to the health restrictions and other policies defended by Emmanuel Macron. As proof, 17% of voters who supported Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the first round voted for Marine Le Pen in the second round.[15]

- Accounts sharing content from various clusters and acting as relays between different clusters were predominantly characterised by the sharing of vaccine sceptic and anti-health restrictions content. Accounts acting as relays to the "Anti-restriction left-wingers", "Covid opposition opportunists" and "Anti-system protesters" clusters shared such content, with the "Covid opposition opportunists" and "Anti-system protesters" clusters additionally sharing conspiracy theories about Covid-19. Relay accounts in the mainstream cluster shared pro-vaccination content but also expressed criticism of the government, including in the wake of recent political scandals, thus serving as a bridge to the other clusters, characterised by their strong opposition to the government

Glossary

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

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

Conspiracy theory: Following political scientist Joseph Uscinski's definition, ISD characterises a conspiracy theory as an "explanation of past, ongoing, or future events or circumstances that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons [...] acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good".

Disinformation: In line with Wardle and Derakshan, ISD defines disinformation as false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.[16]

Far-right: In line with the conceptualisations established by Dutch political scientist and right-wing extremist expert Cas Mudde and UK-based academic Elisabeth Carter, ISD defines the far-right as a system of beliefs typically marked by several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and strong-state advocacy and authoritarianism.[17]

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

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

Inauthentic behaviour: A set of behaviours suggesting an online entity might be operating under a false or misleading identity. These behaviours include: a mismatch between geolocation and topic; poor use of stated language (misspellings, grammar mistakes etc.); little or no evidence of human activity in photos; profile photos or interactions; stock photographs used for profile photos; sudden dramatic changes in posting volume; topic or language or both without explanation; repetitive posting or sharing patterns. Signals used to detect potential inauthentic behaviour are constantly evolving, based on the changing tactics of actors using such approaches to deceive audiences online. ISD draws on the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)'s definition of inauthentic behaviour.[18]

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

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

Radical left/far-left: There is no broadly agreed definition of the far-left and radical left.
Following Mudde and political researcher Luke March, we define left-wing radicalism and far-left ideology as the advocacy of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and radically egalitarian, anti-fascist agendas, typically with an internationalist outlook. Radical left groups, actions or networks are typically rooted in Marxist, socialist or anarchist ideologies. Left-wing radicalism supports fundamental political and economic changes without being anti-democratic, so differentiating itself from far-left extremism.[19]
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Methodology

The objective of this research was to identify the key communities that are spreading disinformation and misinformation on social media in France ahead of the presidential elections and their key dynamics and narratives, seeking to answer the following questions:

- Which are the main communities spreading disinformation and misinformation on mainstream social media platforms in France (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) during the French presidential campaign? What are their characteristics?

- What are the key narratives propagated by these communities?

- How are these communities connected?

- What are the most active and influential accounts in these communities?

Data collection
Using ethnographic methods of investigation, researchers produced a list of initial accounts (seed accounts) which were identified as spreading disinformation and misinformation. This resulted in a list of 183 Facebook entities (public pages and groups), 76 Instagram accounts and 407 Twitter accounts.

Using Method52 (M52), a bespoke machine learning tool developed by CASM Technology LLP (CASM), researchers carried out a network expansion exercise, identifying accounts which shared similar content to the seed accounts identified in the initial analysis. Accounts identified via this method were assigned an accuracy score.

Accounts which were computationally identified as having an accuracy score of over 25% were manually reviewed by researchers for relevance and added to the initial list of accounts. This allowed researchers to identify 157 new relevant Facebook entities and 1,777 Twitter accounts. ISD identified several categories to establish the relevance of accounts included in our seed list:

- Accounts affiliated to the far-right or promoting far-right concepts/rhetoric

- Accounts promoting conspiracy theories

- Accounts promoting disinformation, especially health disinformation/anti-vax content

The final account list consists of 340 Facebook entities, 76 Instagram accounts and 2,184 Twitter accounts. All posts from these accounts were gathered between 7 January 2022 and 20 January 2022, producing a dataset of 1,707,908 unique posts.

Narrative analysis

Accounts were grouped together (clustered) into sub-communities based on commonalities in the content shared (specifically, links) in messages over this time period. This clustering was undertaken by first creating a network that brought together accounts sharing links. The nodes (points) in the network were a mix of accounts (that sent messages) and links (that were contained in the messages). An edge (line) between nodes was created between an account node and a link node if the account shared that link in one of its messages. Accounts that shared the same link in any of their messages will be connected to one another in the network via that link, and so accounts that shared many different such links will be highly connected to one another and will tend to form clusters of highly connected nodes. These clusters were then identified using the network modularity clustering algorithm provided in the Gephi network analytics software suite. The five largest clusters within the network (in terms of number of accounts) were analysed in-depth, which represented 14, 10, 8, 7 and 4% of the overall network, respectively.

Figure 1: Network mapping produced by CASM Technology LLP.

All posts in the full dataset were processed with Beam, a system of analysis co-developed by ISD and its technology partner CASM. This system allows for the automated processing of social media contents across platforms, allowing for analysis in a unitary environment.

For each cluster, researchers qualitatively reviewed the most active accounts, the top shared posts and the most cited URLs to assess the nature of the accounts and determine their primary discussion topics.

Primary Communities

Given the timeframe of this research, the clusters are largely differentiated on the basis of their stances relative to the Covid-19 pandemic and response measures implemented by the government.

The largest cluster (purple in the diagram above), representing 14% of the overall network, is characterised by a general support of the sanitary measures put in place to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. It is largely composed of Twitter accounts that can be qualified as "Covid consensus activists". This includes many doctors, healthcare workers, pro-science activists and media figures that were actively promoting vaccines and attempting to counter disinformation related to Covid-19 and vaccination.

The next three clusters converge around outright opposition to the government's health restrictions in response to the pandemic. While there are many similarities in the messages and discourses that these clusters share, there are also certain characteristics that differentiate them:

- The second cluster (10% of the overall network - in green in the diagram) is characterised, in addition to a total rejection of health measures, by a strong opposition to the government and a political orientation to the radical left or extreme left of the French political spectrum. The inclusion of content from political figures associated with La France Insoumise in this cluster has led us to label it as "Anti-restriction left-wingers", even if it should not be considered as fully representative of this political party's positions on the pandemic. It is also important to note that not all individuals in this cluster are fully supporters of La France Insoumise.

- The third cluster (8% of the overall network) brings together a wide variety of actors and individuals involved in the fight against government health measures (in blue). Controversial media personalities propagating discourses of distrust towards vaccines, such as Dr Didier Raoult, and extreme right-wing sovereignist political figures claiming to be leaders of the protest against health restrictions have particular influence within this group, which leads us to use the term "Covid opposition opportunists" to define this cluster.

- The fourth cluster (7% of the overall network) is composed of actors opposed to health restrictions who have no particular political affiliation, but who project anti-system positions and discourses (in black). For example, this cluster includes some Gilets Jaunes activists who are hostile to the government's health policy. Based on its composition, we have labelled this cluster "Anti-system protesters".

The final cluster analysed, comprising only 4% of the overall network, distinguishes itself as the only cluster in our analysis that does not predominently focus on Covid-19. Instead, it is made up primarily of accounts supporting the (at the time) nascent presidential candidacy of Éric Zemmour (orange). This cluster is thus named "Éric Zemmour's supporters".

It is important to note that all of these clusters are to a certain extent heterogenous and that their composition was very dependent upon the online discussions about the pandemic when the data was collected. As such, certain accounts that have been classified within a particular cluster may be quite distinct from others within the same cluster, while having shared very similar contents over the period of study.

Covid consensus activists

This cluster, the largest in this study (14% of the network), contains 101 Twitter accounts. It is composed of two main types of actors.

The first group is made of doctors and activists who have:

- promoted the key role of vaccines as protection against Covid-19,

- defended the need to implement strict measures to fight the pandemic, and

- have been involved in the fight against Covid-19 disinformation.

They regularly debunk false information and share scientific-based knowledge about the pandemic on Twitter. They also often criticise the incitement of controversial doctors and the anti-Covid-19 restrictions movement. For example, two of the most shared tweets written by accounts of this cluster were:

- an Agence France-Presse tweet reporting an attack on its journalists during a demonstration against the Covid Pass in Paris, and

- a tweet from a doctor denouncing the behaviour of some Covid Pass protesters. These individuals confessed during an interview that they joined the march despite being infected by Covid-19.

Among this group, the most well-known French doctors have also been interviewed several times as experts by French mainstream media. Their appearances on TV and activities online have led them to be regularly targeted by attacks from conspiracy and anti-vax communities.

It is worth noting that this group of doctors and activists is extremely diverse politically. While some accounts seem to be favourable to the current French government, others have been very critical of its policies. In particular, some of them accused the government of not taking enough strict measures against the Covid-19 pandemic and of not allocating enough resources to public hospitals.

Among the ten most viral tweets produced by accounts from the cluster, there are three tweets from the journalist Nils Wilcke and one tweet from the French media Le JDD, highlighting the many controversies at the time around the French Covid-19 protocol for schools put in place by the government to face the Omicron variant.

The second group is composed of Twitter accounts linked to mainstream media, journalists and fact-checkers who have covered extensively the events around the Covid-19 pandemic for the past months. Their coverage of the pandemic has been largely neutral and factual.

The cluster's activity remained relatively steady during the period covered by this report, with between 3,250 and 4,560 posts each day. One hypothesis to explain the small decrease in the volume produced by the cluster after 13 January could have been the optimistic press articles suggesting that the Covid-19 situation linked to the Omicron variant would improve soon in France.[20] They might have reduced the worries of some accounts which feared the pandemic situation and reduced the number of discussions in the cluster about potential new Covid-19 restrictions.
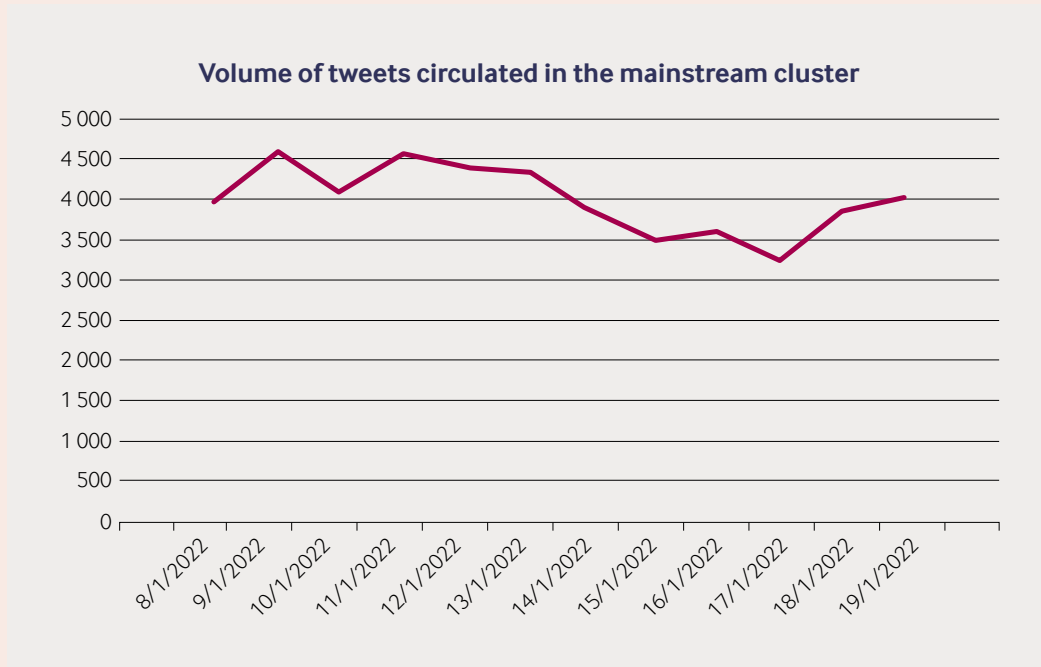
Figure 2: Volume of tweets circulated in the mainstream cluster from 7 January to 20 January 2022.

Most shared links
During the period covered by this report, the most shared links in the cluster were all connected directly or indirectly to the pandemic.

Many accounts in the cluster amplified links to press reports or tweets highlighting the incitement and disinformation spread by some French doctors or conspiracy figures during the pandemic. For example, among the 20 most shared links in the cluster, five were connected to the controversial French doctor Raoult, who is known to have been the main promoter of the use of hydroxychloroquine against Covid-19 in France. Several accounts even repropagated tweets and content directly from the actors they oppose, adding negative comments explaining why they disapprove of their positions.
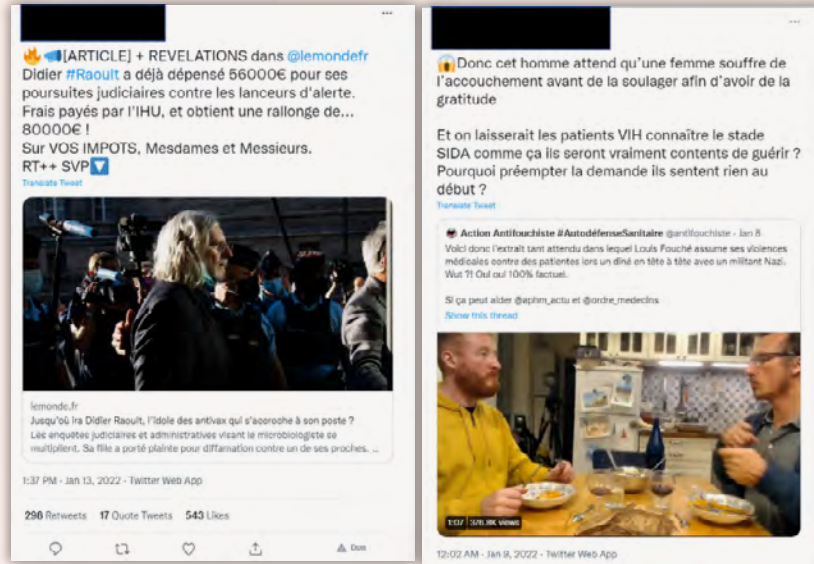
Figures 3 and 4 : On the left, screenshot of a tweet criticising the use of public money by the controversial doctor Didier Raoult to sue his critics. On the right, screenshot of a doctor's tweet reacting vehemently to a video involving the conspiracy doctor Louis Fouché confessing to letting pregnant women suffer to push them to accept some treatments during delivery.

Worried about the uncertainty around the new variant Omicron, several Twitter accounts in the cluster also shared links to media articles, opinion columns or tweets being critical of the French government's Covid-19 policy to handle this new threat and insisting on the need to put more measures in place, especially in schools. Figure 6 shows the four links of the top 20 most shared URLs for this cluster.
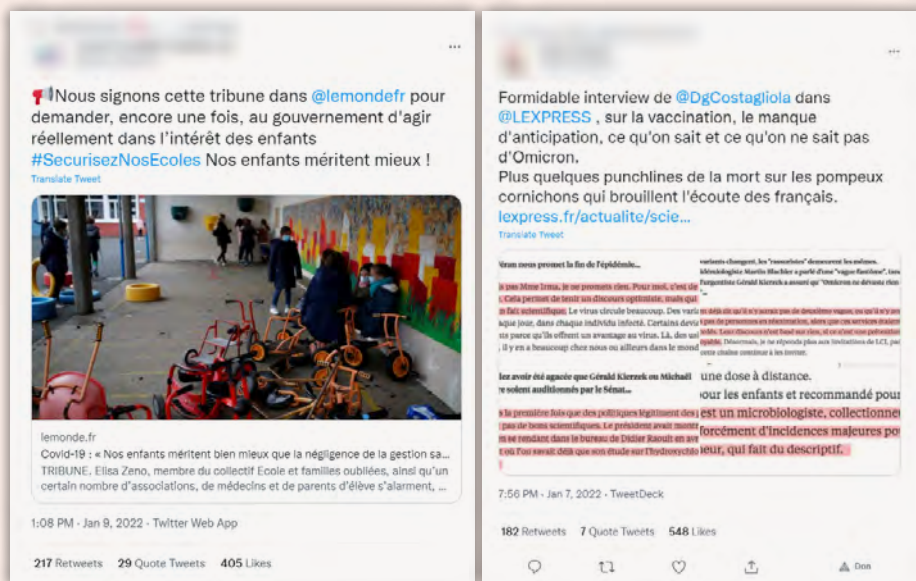
Figures 5 and 6 : On the left, screenshot of a tweet from a citizen group that signed an op-ed in Le Monde asking the government to improve the protection of schools from the Omicron variant.
On the right, screenshot of a tweet that positively highlights the interview of a doctor who criticised the government and some doctors for minimising the risks linked to the Omicron variant.

Meanwhile, a more limited number of accounts in the cluster continued to share links to scientific reports and press articles to debunk well-established false claims about the pandemic or to encourage people to get vaccinated. We identified in particular one Twitter account that shared multiple times scientific studies or specific content in Twitter replies of other accounts that have spread false Covid-19 information. This shows the desire of this account to share extensively scientific-based knowledge in Twitter ecosystems where disinformation circulates. It represents an effort to counter disinformation that was relatively successful at least in terms of reach.
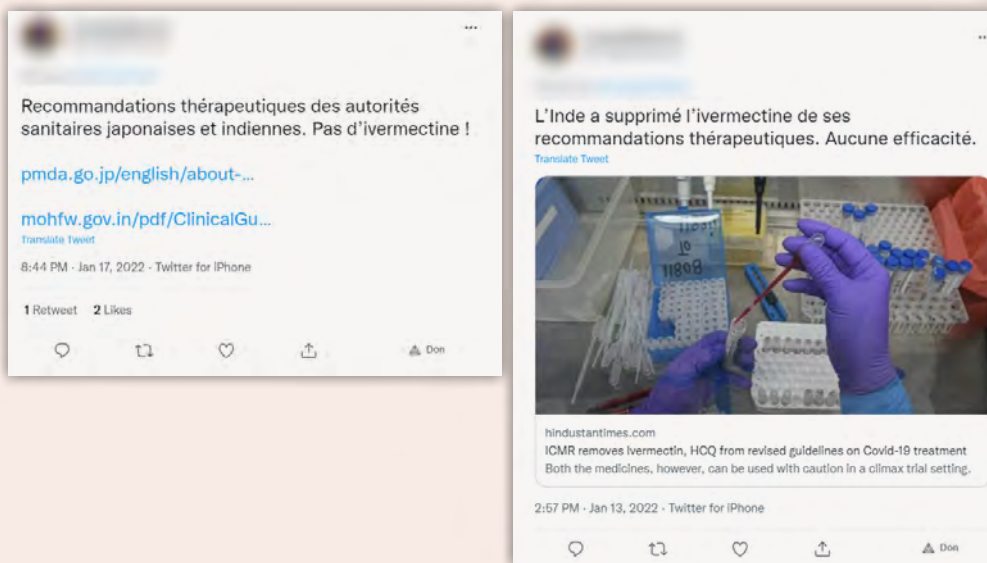
Figures 7 and 8 : Screenshots of tweets from a pseudonymised Twitter account that shared factual information in replies to tweets claiming falsely that some countries still recommended ivermectin[21] to cure Covid-19.

Figure 9: Screenshot of a tweet from a doctor highlighting the results of a study showing the benefits of Covid-19 vaccination for kids.

Most active accounts

The most active accounts in this cluster are mostly linked to activists, scientists and doctors who share a common commitment to fight health and Covid-19 disinformation and/or ask for more action from the French government to protect people from the pandemic. Among the accounts which produced the most content, some doctors like Jérôme Marty, Mathias Wargon or Christian Lehmann have also regularly interacted with French media outlets since the beginning of the pandemic (for example, in interviews, op-eds, participation in TV talk shows etc.).

Not all the actors in the cluster are supportive of the French government's Covid-19 policies. For example, one of the most active accounts of this cluster is Ecole et Familles Oubliées Oubliée (forgotten school). This is a citizen group for parents, which denounced the French government's policies to protect children in schools from the virus. Another very prolific Twitter account "profdhistgeo" is even extremely critical of Covid-19 vaccines, describing them as "failed," but appears in our cluster because it shared a similar position as some other accounts about the need to take more protective measures for children in schools.

Among the most active accounts in this cluster, are French local and national media outlets, which have extensively covered topics related to the pandemic, such as Sud Ouest, Agence France-Presse, Le Nouvel Obs, Le Journal du Dimanche etc.

Anti-restriction left-wingers

This cluster is comprised of 150 accounts and is exclusively made of Twitter accounts.

What is striking about this cluster is the anti-establishment and anti-governmental dimension with a political skew towards the far left of the French political landscape. Not all the accounts in this cluster claim to be members of La France Insoumise, and it should not be taken to represent the positions of the party concerning the pandemic. However, the presence of certain official accounts of La France Insoumise in the cluster, the large number of links shared in connection with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's candidacy, and the amplification of contents from actors belonging to this political party led us to qualify this cluster as left-wing.

The most prominent narratives in this cluster are the anti-health restriction discussions that verge on anti-vax conspiracy discourses, criticism towards the supposed implementation of a health dictatorship in France, as well as the Yellow Vests narratives.

A peak in tweeting activity has been reached on 16 January, the day the National Assembly strengthened the tools for managing the Covid-19 health crisis, whose main measure is the transformation of the health pass into a vaccination pass. The law was seen as a serious infringement of individual liberties by lots of actors of the French political landscape and by the majority of the accounts in this cluster. The more radical reactions saw this measure as a further step towards the establishment of a health dictatorship in France by Macron's government. That day, there were 11,199 tweets posted within this cluster.
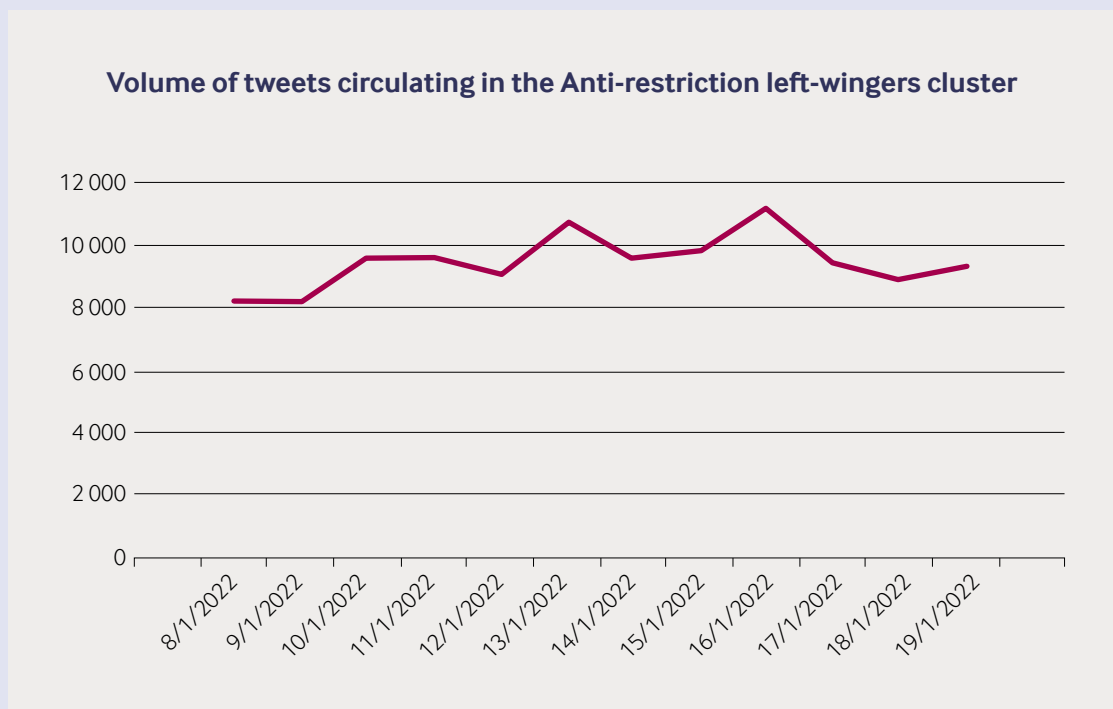

Figure 10: Volume of tweets circulating in the Anti-restriction left-wingers cluster from 7 to 20 January 2022.
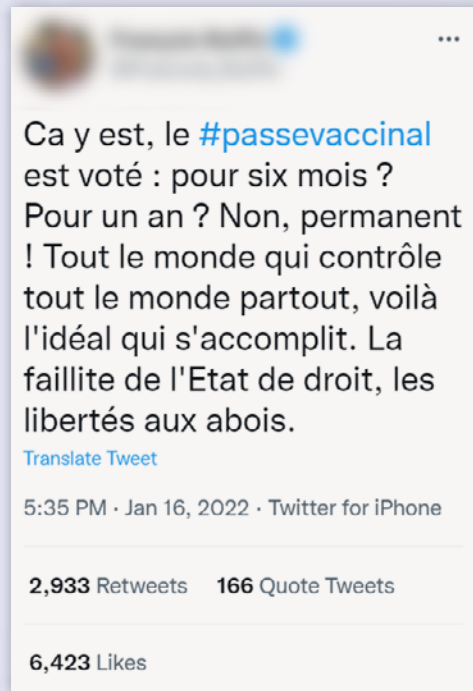
Figure 11: Screenshot of a far-left politician criticising the vaccine pass.

Most shared posts

Among the most shared tweets in this cluster, the major theme is the criticism of the vaccine pass, which is perceived by many accounts as a step back for basic freedom. As an example, a tweet from an editorialist who worked at the French branch of the Russian state-controlled media RT, Alexis Poulin, whose discourses often merge with anti-vax conspiracies, has been widely retweeted within this cluster (152,300 retweets).

The most widely shared content opposing Covid-19 restrictions in this cluster are related to the question of vaccine: the rights of non-vaccinated people and the vaccine obligation mandate. The most widely shared URL, appeared in 47 posts within this cluster, and is about the treatment of professional tennis player Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open, who has become a sort of symbol of the anti-vax struggle in Australia but also in France.

Figures 12 and 13: On the left, screenshot of an active account in the cluster criticising Australia and France for their political management of the pandemic. On the right, screenshot of an influencer and former Russia Today France editorialist Alexis Poulin strongly opposed to Emmanuel Macron and his government's management of the pandemic.

The most shared tweets also showcase a strong anti-government discourse. For example, among the most shared posts are two videos both posted 24 times.

- One is a video of anti-government militants parodying the Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer in Ibiza, and

- another compiling some "fake news spread by the government".

It is also in keeping with the political tone of the cluster to notice that tweets from left-wing populist party La France Insoumise (LFI) deputies such as Baptiste Lachaud, Clémentine Autain, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's official campaign account were also widely shared.

Figure 14 : Screenshot of a tweet mentioning a video shared by the famous rapper Booba denouncing the government's so-called lies during Covid-19.

Most shared links
The far-left political affiliation in this cluster is consistent with a deeper analysis of the links that appeared in the posts collected in ISD's dataset. Of the top ten most tweeted links, four are YouTube videos redirecting to Mélenchon's campaign, including three videos of Mélenchon's immersive meeting in Strasbourg on 19 January that were tweeted 391 times combined. As such, the presidential campaign of LFI emerges as a key theme within this cluster. The second most shared link within this cluster is a screenshot from a video of the 8 January demonstrations against the Covid Pass that took place in Paris, which was shared by 32 accounts.

Figure 15: Screenshot of a video shared on Twitter about a demonstration against the Covid Pass in Paris on 8 January.

The opposition to the governmental health restrictions related to the Covid-19 vaccine is also another key theme in this cluster, which was covered by two 24-hour news channels, CNews and BFMTV. Figures 16 and 17 show two videos that appeared in 150 tweets within this cluster.

Figures 16 and 17: Screenshots of two critical tweets mentioning mainstream media videos about the Covid-19 vaccine. On the left, CNews (55 records and 28 accounts). On the right, BFMTV (95 records and 7 accounts).'

Many discussions within those accounts articulate the question of the vaccine. To illustrate that point, the French Health Minister Olivier Véran's tweet about having tested positive for Covid-19 has been retweeted by 33 out of the 150 accounts contained in the cluster.

Figures 18 and 19: Screenshots of two retweets of a tweet from the French Health Minister, Olivier Véran, declaring he tested positive for Covid-19.

Most active accounts
The analysis of the top accounts both in terms of activity and followers confirms a far-left dominance within this cluster.

Indeed, within the top ten most active accounts in the cluster, half of them self-identify as Mélenchon supporters in their Twitter username: either using #JLM2022 or mentioning LFI or its symbol, φ. The top five most active accounts produced a total of 25,546 tweets. Therefore, only 3% of accounts in this cluster (five most active) represent 22% of the total collected tweets in this cluster. This indicates that this cluster is dominated by a small subset of voices.

It is interesting to notice that these most active accounts do not have an outstanding number of followers compared to their daily Twitter activity. The fifth account, Eric Chamelton, produced roughly 300 tweets per day and has only 253 followers, which can significantly limit the impact of his messages.

The most active account, which reached an activity peak on 13 January (1,031 tweets per day), shared some content very much in keeping with the overall topics in this cluster. For example, figure 20 shows how the account shares news about the correlation between vaccination rates and the number of Covid-19 cases, which is used to debunk vaccine efficiency.

Figure 20: Screenshot of a retweet of a doctor's tweet debunking the Covid-19 vaccine efficiency.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the tweets and narratives discussed within these most active accounts showcase a radical fringe of far-left voices, very critical of Macron's government and with a very anti-establishment stance for the most part. Interestingly, the third most active account has since been suspended by Twitter and the fourth one is flagged as likely to display sensitive content (see figures 21 and 22).
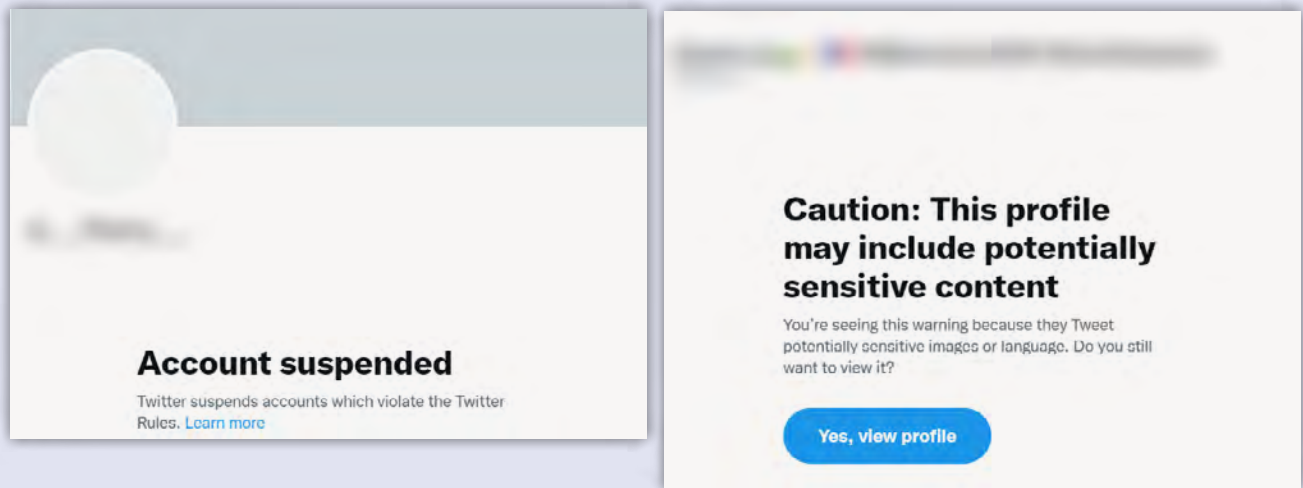
Figures 21 and 22: On the left, screenshot of one account being suspended by Twitter. On the right, a Twitter warning that the account might display sensitive content.

Analysing the most popular accounts in terms of followership gives less of an idea about the content shared within this cluster. The tweets of the three most popular accounts represent no more than only 2% of the total tweets in this cluster. But this gives an additional argument in favour of the cluster's political affiliation. The second most popular account is Mélenchon's appearing in 441 records and with 2,347,241 followers. Among the top most popular accounts, ISD researchers have also noticed the presence of the French LFI deputies Alexis Corbière, Adrien Quatennens, and also famous people such as TV host Yvan Le Bolloc'h and actor and screenwriter Bruno Gaccio — also known for their critical and strong views against the governmental management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid opposition opportunists

This cluster holds a total of 571 accounts, the majority of them Twitter accounts (566 out of 571), and the remaining are Facebook entities.

The volume of publication in this cluster is stable throughout the time period observed. There is not a clear peak of discussion over this period, the volume of posts varies daily between 41,000 and 48,000 with an overwhelming majority of accounts (between 520 and 535 accounts) active on a daily basis. This clearly indicates a high activity of most accounts in this cluster. These figures could suggest ongoing inauthentic behaviour and further analysis on this point is described below.
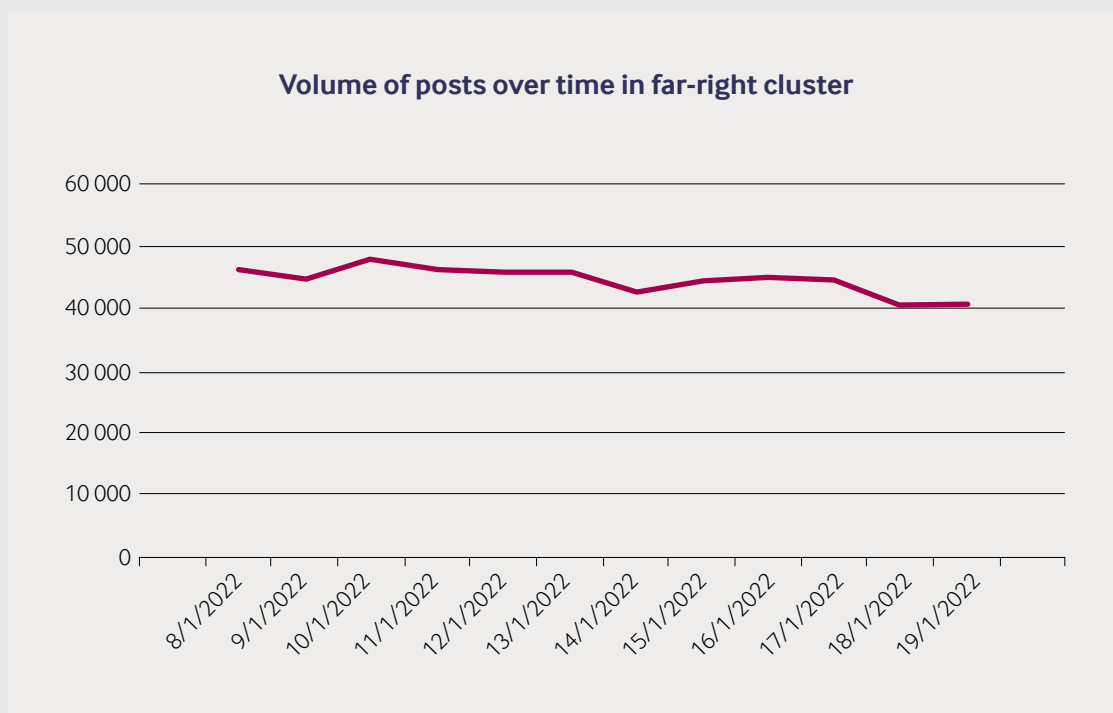

Figure 23: Graph which represents the volume of posts over time in this cluster.

Our analysts conducted a theme analysis on different pre-established categories which represent commonly discussed narratives in the French far-right and conspiracy ecosystems. This was based on ISD's previous research on the French online ecosystem.[22]

The three main narratives primarily discussed by the actors in this cluster were related to Covid-19 and Covid-19 vaccination. The three narratives with the highest volume of posts were:

- danger represented by the Covid-19 vaccine (12,600 posts),

- discussions related to the obligation to get the Covid-19 vaccine (8,425 posts), and

- conspiracy theories tied to the Covid-19 vaccine (5,336 posts).

For each of these categories, the ten most shared posts were all retweets of a single post. The controversial figure of the medical world Raoult is referenced twice. For instance, in one of these Covid-19 categories, the ten most shared posts were all retweets of a post from the official Twitter account of Raoult in which he questions the effectiveness of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Figure 24: Example of tweet from controversial medical figure Didier Raoult, which suggests the vaccine against Covid-19 isn't effective.

Also, opposition to the vaccination pass is discussed especially in regards to the supposed infringement on individual liberties. The ten most shared posts of another Covid-19 related category were all retweets of the same post from the account of Le Rassemblement National Member of Parliament Stéphane Ravier. He claims the vaccine is not effective and opposes the vaccination pass, asserting that the vaccination pass violates individual liberties.

Figure 25: Tweet from senator Stéphane Ravier (former Le Rassemblement National member, now part of Éric Zemmour's party Reconquête). This tweet asserts the Covid-19 vaccine isn't effective and claims the vaccination pass goes against individual liberties.

Most shared links
Among the 20 most shared links of this cluster,

- six were links from mainstream media outlets,

- two from alternative news outlets,

- one was the link of a photo, and

- 11 were links to other social media posts or videos (including nine from Twitter, one from the video platform Odysee and one from YouTube).

The 20 most shared links were all in relation to Covid-19. Ten of the most shared posts which included one of the 20 most shared links were posted by an actor spreading anti-vax or anti-sanitary restrictions content.

In multiple instances, articles from mainstream media (such as *Bloomberg* or the regional outlet *Midi Libre*) which were related to the Covid-19 vaccine were used to spread an anti-vax message. For instance, an article from *Midi Libre* about a teenager ending up in the hospital after receiving the Covid-19 vaccine was among the top shared links. The ten most shared posts with this link were all retweets of the same post, which was shared by actors invested in sharing anti-vax and health or Covid disinformation content.

Figure 26: Post sharing one of the most shared links from this cluster, an article from the regional outlet *Midi Libre*. The caption of this tweet quotes the article link stating a young 16-year-old would have been admitted to the hospital as a result of getting the Covid-19 vaccine.

Influential figures of the French anti-vax movement were also represented in the activity of this cluster. One of the most shared links from this dataset was an Odysee video of conspiracy figure Idriss Aberkane. His video supposedly debunks 18 "lies" about the controversial medical figure Raoult. The ten most shared posts which included this link were all retweets of a post from the official Twitter account of Raoult. The influence of Raoult on actors of this cluster is clear, as one of the most shared links was a YouTube video of Raoult outlining the impact of the vaccine on the pandemic.

Far-right figures, mobilised against Covid-19 restrictions, were also present in our dataset as several of the most shared URLs were shared in tweets of far-right public figures such as Philippot or Asselineau, in which they clearly oppose sanitary restrictions. For instance, one of the most shared links from Philippot describes the sanitary and vaccination passes as an "apartheid" policy.

Figure 27: Tweet from far-right public figure Florian Philippot which compares the vaccination pass to an "apartheid" policy.

A recurring narrative in the most shared URLs is a clear opposition to the health pass or vaccination. Among the tweets sharing one of the most shared links, nine convey an anti-sanitary restriction message or more specifically oppose the sanitary or vaccination passes.

Figure 28: Tweet of Alexis Poulin which criticises the vaccination pass.

The analysis of the 20 most shared links also demonstrates a clear anti-system sentiment. The health pass — now vaccination pass — is especially targeted, as one of the most shared links was a picture of anti-vaccination pass demonstration taking place in January. This picture was shared in a tweet by an account self-described as posting news criticising the ruling party, La Republique En Marche (LREM).

The purpose of many of these accounts is to share French current affairs updates through an anti-government lens.

Figure 29: Tweet which shows the attendance at an anti-vaccination pass demonstration in Paris.

Most active accounts
The ten most active accounts of this cluster were Twitter accounts invested in promoting anti-sanitary restrictions content with conspiracy theories and health disinformation in regards to Covid-19 and the vaccine. There is also a very clear anti-system and anti-government sentiment in the posts shared by these accounts, which echoes some of ISD's previous research in France.[23] Accounts often shared posts from established conspiracy and anti-sanitary restriction accounts such as "Bas les masques" or "Anonyme Citoyen", or established anti-vax influencers such as Fabrice Di Vizio and well-known alternative sites such as France Soir. Several accounts also retweeted posts from far-right actors, such as Philippot, who has been actively mobilising against sanitary restrictions, and accounts spreading pro-Zemmour content. Once again, the overlap between actors promoting disinformation, conspiracy theories and far-right extremism illustrates the hybrid nature of these threats.

One particularity of the most active accounts of this cluster is the suspicion of inauthentic behaviour of a significant number of actors. All ten most active accounts of this cluster fit ISD's definition of inauthentic behaviour.[24] Three of the ten most active accounts were created since 2020, two in 2021 and one in 2020.

In multiple occurrences, the same account posted the same content only a few seconds apart, and most accounts which engaged in this type of activity were bot-like. For example, the four posts in the following figures were shared by the same account only seconds apart. These posts were included in the comments section of a post of this same account.

This post references the conspiracy theory of the New World Order[25]. One can assume this account has tagged these accounts to ensure greater visibility of the content shared, especially as many of these accounts tagged are influential actors of the French anti-vax or anti-sanitary restrictions narrative.
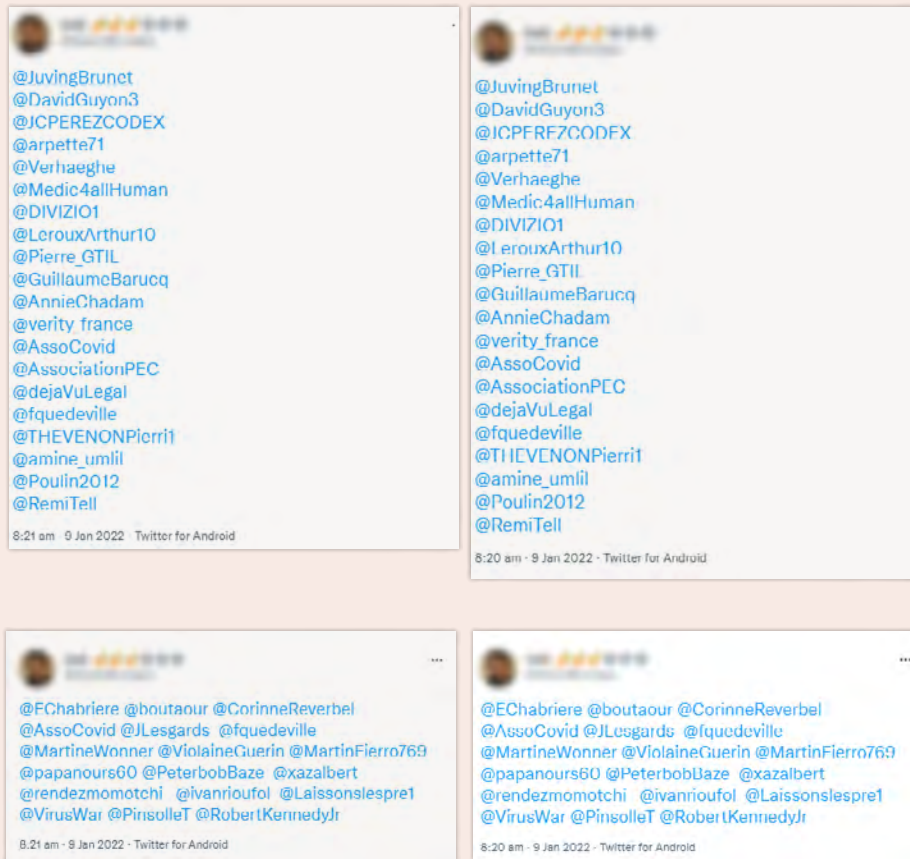
Figures 30, 31, 32 and 33: Example of tweets sharing anti-vax or anti-sanitary restrictions content, which were posted only seconds apart.

Another behaviour identified in several instances was responding in the comments section to different posts only a few seconds or minutes apart, which fits ISD's definition of inauthentic behaviour. For instance, this was the case with an account in this cluster. This account shared the same comment 22 times in six minutes, responding to posts from different accounts with the same caption and YouTube video link (a video of an anti-vaccination pass demonstration which took place in Paris on 8 January). All posts to which this account responded were in regards to the 8 January anti-vaccination pass demonstration.
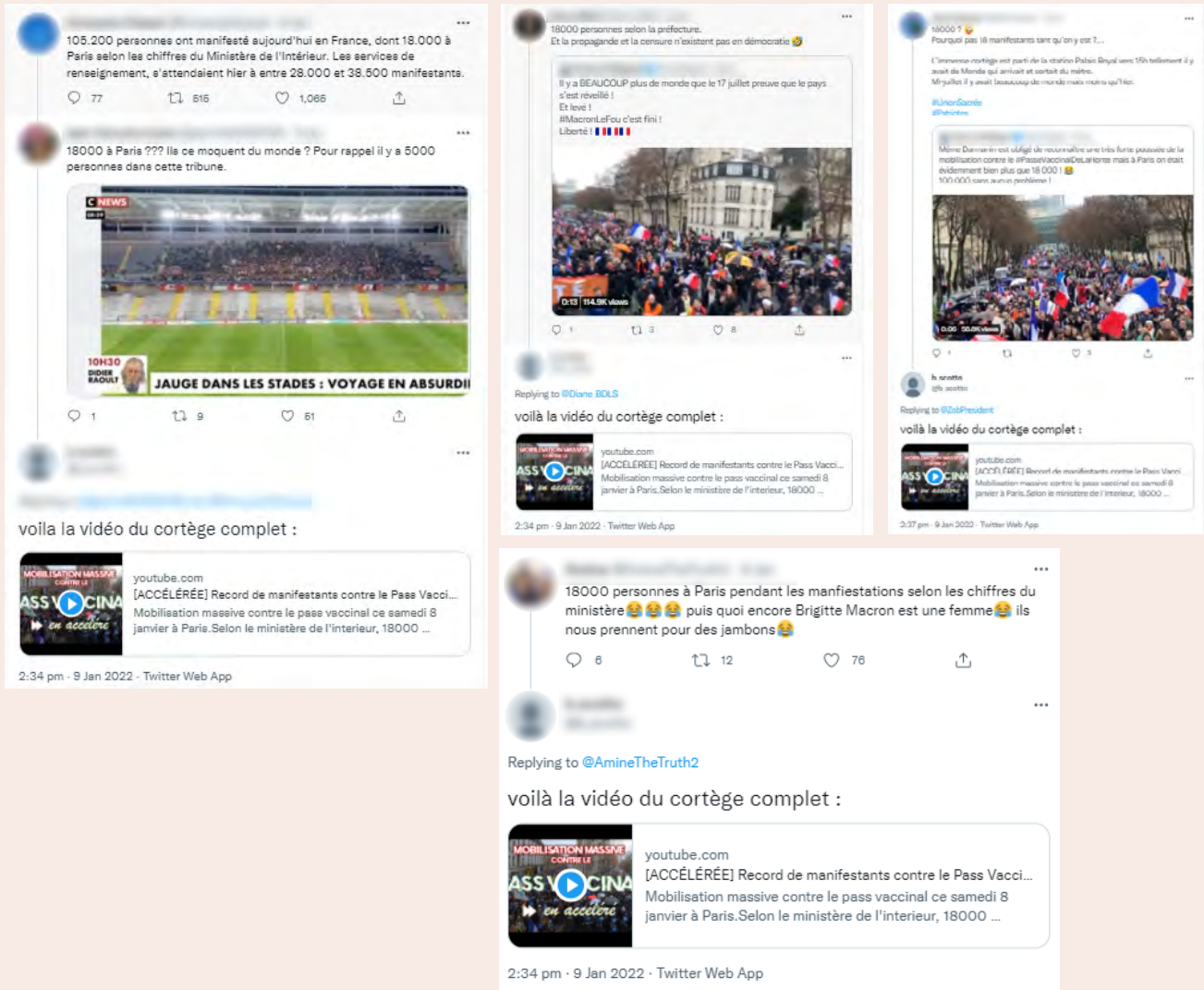
Figures 34, 35, 36 and 37: Example of posts shared by the same account only minutes apart.

Another example of this suspicious behaviour was identified in an account engaging in bot-like activity. This account references the conspiracy theory QAnon in its username, as well as anti-vax figure Professor Montagner in its profile. In less than a minute, this account posted once and commented on the exact same content on three posts from different accounts, sharing the same link from the French television channel, TF1, about the Delta and Omicron variants potentially merging. The content of the post implies this merge was orchestrated, which will justify a fourth dose of the vaccine. The comment further asserts that this could impact the outcome of the French elections, though it is unclear what is meant by this. In two instances, this account responded to influential anti-vax or anti-sanitary restriction accounts (e.g., Anonyme Citoyen and Philippot) which could be an effort to gain greater visibility.

Figures 38, 39, 40 and 41: Example of posts which were shared by the same post only seconds apart.

Anti-system protesters

This cluster is comprised of 156 accounts, which produced 104,817 posts in the period of study. This cluster is mostly made up of Facebook groups and pages (150), with a handful of Twitter accounts (6). As such, Facebook posts represent almost all of the data in this cluster (99%).

Contrary to the two clusters studied earlier in the report, this cluster is less politically marked. The main uniting factor in this cluster is the strong opposition to the Covid-19 restrictions taken by the French government, seen as limiting the fundamental freedoms and imposing a so-called "health dictatorship" in France. This cluster is pretty ideologically diverse and what is noticeable is the real convergence of anti-establishment, anti-health restrictions activists, anti-vaxxers and "Yellow Vests" accounts. The intricacy of different communities of interest within the French protest spectrum is characteristic of these post-Covid-19 movements, as the recent virtual organisation of the Convoy for Freedom in France showcased.

All of the most shared posts containing Yellow Vest movement content came from Jérôme Rodriguez's official Facebook page, with the top post being shared 5,909 times.

Figure 42: Screenshot of a livestream by one of the leading figures of the Yellow Vests movement in France.

The activity of this cluster during the period of study is dictated by Covid-19-related political events around restrictions. The volume over time graph in figure 43 clearly illustrates that point. In fact, on the 8 January 2022 there was a peak in activity for this cluster (52 accounts originated 1,330 posts), a date which saw anti-restriction mobilisations across France, fighting mostly against the adoption of the vaccine pass by the National Assembly. This happened several days after President Macron's remark on the non-vaccinated, whom he wishes to "piss off".[26]

Volume of tweets circulating in the anti-establishment cluster
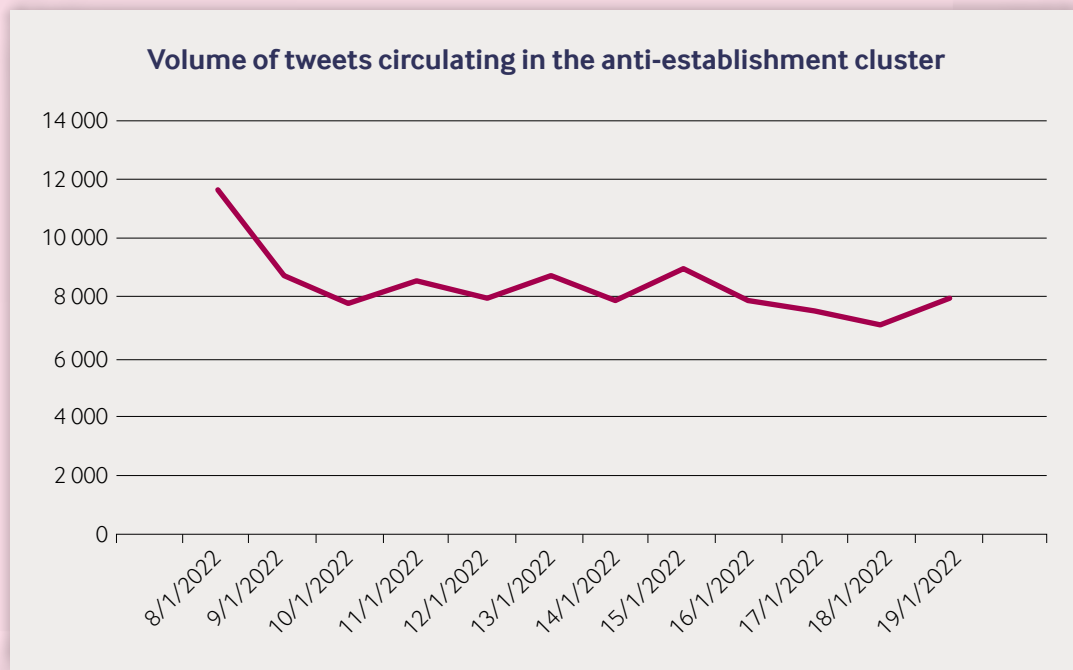
Figure 43: Volume of tweets circulating in the anti-establishment cluster from 7 January to 20 January 2022.

Most shared posts
Analysis of the ten most shared posts shows that the primary theme in this cluster is criticism of the government's management of the pandemic, with a focus on opposition to the adoption of the vaccine pass. More precisely, the majority of the top ten posts tend to spread the message that restrictions are motivated by purely political goals, divorcing the government's sanitary measures from their medical and scientific justifications. Posts also minimise the Omicron variant and use this minimisation to denounce the European governments' "liberticidal" measures. For example, the fourth most shared post contained a video of an Italian deputy (shared by 18 accounts), which denounces the control over citizens exercised by health measures in place in Europe (this video has since been deleted). Within the most widely shared posts, 31 posts contained a column written by a famous French rapper Akhenaton (shared by 18 accounts). This rapper is also known for his critical views towards the government's management of the pandemic and for having asserted a correlation between vaccination and the high virus cases.[27] This alleged correlation is referenced numerous times within this cluster. In fact, the most shared post within this cluster is an interview of Raoult by André Bercoff for Sud Radio questioning vaccine efficiency. This video has often been instrumentalised to assert that vaccines were not only not beneficial but also harmful. This video was shared by 27 accounts in this cluster.
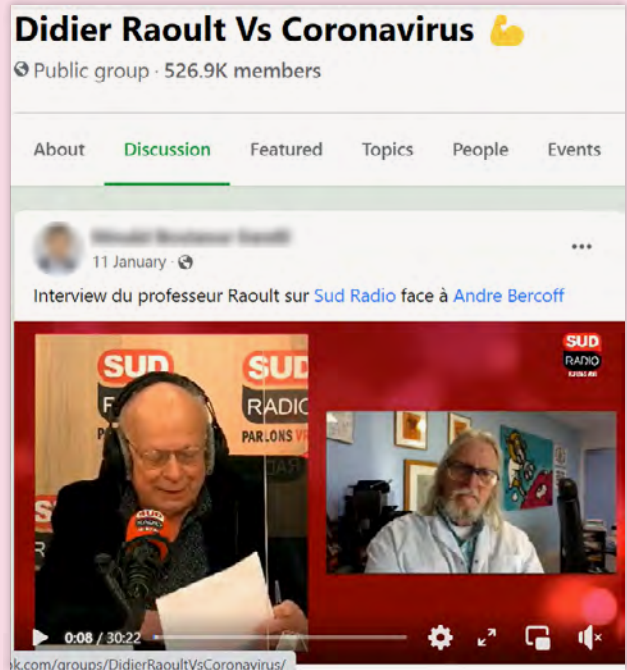
Figures 44 and 45 : On the left, screenshot of a European deputy criticising the "liberticidal" measures taken to fight the Covid-19 pandemic. On the right, screenshot of an interview of Didier Raoult by a controversial journalist André Bercoff talking about vaccine and questioning its efficiency.

The second most shared post is a video of a French person promoting Reiner Fuellmich's trial, which aims to judge world leaders and leading scientists accused of engineering a fake pandemic with fraudulent death certificates and erroneous PCR tests. He became the great hope of the global coronavirus conspiracy scene and received much attention in France when the trials started. This link is widespread in different Facebook groups that are very critical of Macron's government and where lots of Covid-19 disinformation narratives are being shared.

Most shared links

Analysing the most shared links of this cluster demonstrates its members' opposition to Covid-19 restrictions. In fact, the majority of the most shared URLs mention the restrictions and the upcoming adoption of the vaccine pass in France. In some cases, narratives in this cluster also verge on anti-vax narratives. Among the top ten most shared URLs is a video of the controversial doctor Christian Perrone, known for his false or misleading claims about Covid-19 vaccines and the epidemic.[28] In the link shared, he is being interviewed by the Belgian alternative media Kairos, which has been known to spread disinformation narratives during the pandemic (over 300,000 views). For example, the Kairos press has actively mobilised against Covid-19 restrictions and the management of the crisis by governments. It had promoted events such as the "Doctothon," which was a 24-hour live broadcast about Covid-19 on 10 and 11 December 2021, featuring the most influential figures in the covid-sceptic conspiracy ecosystem[29]

The most shared URLs reveal a certain revival of Yellow Vests mobilisation during the pandemic. The top URL links shared within this cluster redirect to content from three of the top figures of the Yellow Vests movement: Maxime Nicolle, Rodriguez and Olivier Rohaut (also known as Oliv Oliv). The links redirecting to their Facebook pages were widely shared across the accounts and they work in a collaborative way on social media to engage a wider audience. This illustrates the sort of revival of some individuals' popularity, historically "Yellow Vests," in the context of the pandemic.

Among the most shared URLs is Rodriguez's live stream, which was originally posted on 8 January, coinciding with the activity peak of this cluster. The live stream is staging the demonstrations happening that day in Paris and during which Rodriguez blamed the police for triggering some tensions within the cortège of protests. A link to the video was shared in 412 posts and by 38 accounts, with over 2 million views on Facebook.

Figure 46: Screenshot of a live stream showing a demonstration which took place in Paris from the Yellow Vests movement's key member Jérôme Rodriguez.

Within the top ten most shared URLs, there are five videos from Oliv Oliv, which were shared in 1,172 posts. He is one of the most active figures of the anti-restrictions movement and has recently been organising a virtual mobilisation of the French Convoy for Freedom. On 8 January 2022, one of the most shared posts was Oliv Oliv's live stream about the mobilisation in Paris, shared more than 15,484 times.

This analysis is in keeping with what ISD researchers have observed in recent years, which has seen anti-establishment groups seizing any cause around which they can mobilise.

Most active accounts
The top ten most active accounts illustrate both the strong anti-Covid-19 restrictions views and anti-vax narratives of this cluster, intermingled with a more general anti-system sentiment towards Macron's government.

The top three accounts, in terms of user activity, are three public groups with almost 100,000 members altogether. The top three most active accounts produced 24,468 posts, or approximately 24% of all posts in this cluster.

- The most active account is advocating for the resignation of Macron and posts approximately 800 times per day on average.

- The second and third most active accounts, "Resistance au pass sanitaire" (resistance to the Covid pass) and "Reaction 19" post around 700 and 600 times per day. These accounts have relatively large followings on Facebook.

Figure 47: Screenshot of a Facebook public group clearly calling for the resignation of Emmanuel Macron.

Éric Zemmour's supporters

A large majority of the Twitter accounts in this cluster are linked to anonymous political activists or known French public figures who had expressed openly their intention to support Zemmour's campaign for the upcoming French presidential elections, hence the name of this cluster.

This cluster contains the Twitter account of the far-right presidential candidate as well as accounts linked to members of his campaign (e.g., Samuel Lafont, Stanislas Rigault, Benjamin Cauchy, Jacline Mouraud, Emmanuel de Villiers). On the margins of this cluster, there are also several public figures and actors who are part of a larger French conservative extreme right ecosystem, but who haven't positioned themselves explicitly as supporters of Zemmour.

It is not surprising that a very large share of discussions in this cluster revolved around the upcoming presidential elections. Many accounts pushed messages favourable to the Zemmour campaign or attacking their opponents. Due to the context, the French government was also attacked on the health pass issue by multiple accounts in the cluster. On several occasions, the Covid-19 restrictions were presented as proof of an authoritarian drift within the French government. For example, one of the most shared tweets in the cluster was a tweet from Djokovic about the Australian visa controversy due to his unvaccinated status, which prevented him from playing during the Australian Open. It highlights this cluster's interest in Covid-19 restrictions and vaccination issues.

While the data shouldn't be over-interpreted due to the short time span covered by our study and the specific context (tightening of the measures linked to the health pass and Covid-19 vaccination), a closer look at the narratives spread in the cluster suggests a sympathy from part of the pro-Zemmour ecosystems for anti-restrictions and anti-Covid-19 vaccinations narratives, even though the far-right politician has had more nuanced positions on these issues. It should be noted that the usual far-right narratives (anti-refugee, minority crime, islamophobia) continued to be shared in the cluster at the same time as messages linked to the pandemic.

The volume of activity produced by this cluster on Twitter remained quite stable over the period covered by our study, between 16,600 and 20,700 posts each day. A deeper analysis looking at the volume of tweets by the hour identified that days with slightly higher levels of activity were often the ones with a significant event linked to Zemmour's campaign (political meetings, media interviews, local visits, etc.).
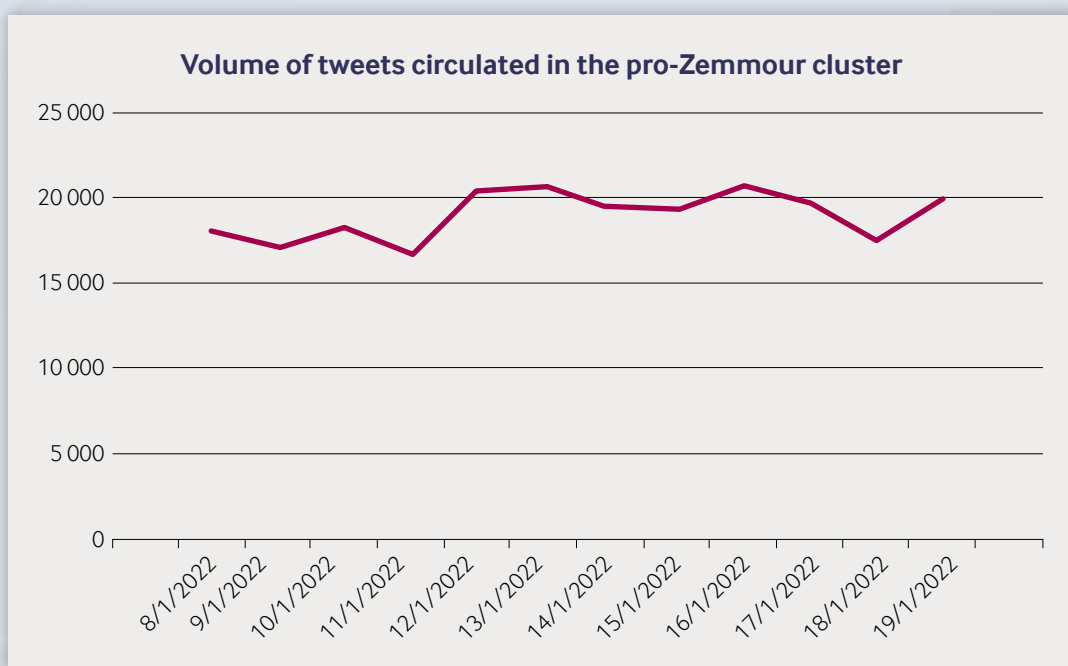
Figure 48: Volume of tweets circulated in the pro-Zemmour cluster from 7 January to 20 January 2022.

Most shared links

A very large share of the links generating the most interactions in this cluster redirected people to content and websites linked to Zemmour's campaign (parti-reconquete.fr, jesoutienszemmour.fr, zemmour2022.fr).

Figures 49, 50 and 51: Screenshots of tweets from Éric Zemmour and prominent members of his staff that included some campaign materials and were retweeted by other accounts in the Pro-Zemmour cluster.

Interestingly, among the 20 most shared links in the cluster was a YouTube video supposedly showing a large demonstration against the Covid-19 health pass, and a tweet from the TV channel BFMTV containing an interview with the conservative politician Christian Estrosi, who pledged more restrictions against non-vaccinated people. However, this content was mostly recirculated in an indirect way, with accounts in the cluster retweeting messages opposing Covid-19 restrictions, often citing content from users outside the cluster. This includes for example Pro-Zemmour accounts retweeting the sovereigntist politicians Asselineau and Philippot, who are not part of the cluster but have been significantly involved in the French movement against Covid-19 restrictions and vaccination. As such, opposition of a part of the cluster to the health measures was more often manifested by the amplification of content from other communities very invested in these issues rather than through the production of original content on these themes.

Figures 52 and 53: Screenshots of tweets criticising Covid-19 measures from Florian Philippot and François Asselineau, which were retweeted by accounts in the Pro-Zemmour cluster.

Also among most circulated links in the cluster was a tweet from a journalist from the alternative media Livre Noir, which has been accused of being too close to Zemmour's campaign by several press articles.[30] The tweet, which shows pedestrians being grabbed by people inside a car, was shared by Zemmour's Twitter account and by the conservative lawyer Gilles-William Goldnadel to denounce the lax justice sentences in France. They claim that the mainstream media won't talk about it because the victim is white and the aggressors are not white.

Figures 54 and 55: Screenshots of tweets from Gilles-William Goldnadel and Éric Zemmour commenting on the video showing a violent attack against pedestrians.

Most active accounts

During the period covered by this report, the most active accounts in this cluster were linked to pro-Zemmour or far-right activists. These Twitter accounts often have between 1,000 and 20,000 followers, and many are pseudonymised. The most prolific accounts include Lafont, Zemmour's strategic director for online communications, who was accused of developing inauthentic online strategies on Twitter to boost the French far-right politician's candidacy after an investigation by *Le Monde.*[31]

While they were often less prolific than the hyperactive far-right activists' accounts, part of the conversation in this cluster was also driven by accounts linked to Zemmour's campaign, such as the far-right politician's own personal Twitter account as well as the account of his political party spokesman, Rigault. Also in the cluster are some alternative and far-right media and influencers, who are often either officially part of Zemmour's campaign or have shown some degree of sympathy for the far-right presidential candidate: Français de souche, Le Salon Beige, Jean-Yves Le Gallou, de Villiers, Christine Boutin, Paul-Marie Coûteaux, etc.

Relationships between primary clusters
These clusters have been constituted on the basis of the accounts interacting with each other, but that does not mean that an account within a particular cluster does not interact with accounts or content from other clusters. It is important to keep in mind that these clusters at times engage with the same content, and discussions within one cluster can influence those in another.

One way to better understand the relationships that exist between clusters is to examine how frequently links occur between them. In the case of this network map, a link between two clusters represents two accounts from separate clusters sharing the same content (e.g., a URL). How frequently this occurs can serve as an indicator for how closely particular clusters are linked.

Table 1 shows the number of links between the five largest clusters within this network, as a percentage of all of that cluster's links to all external clusters. So, for example, 2% of links shared in the Anti-restriction left-wingers cluster were part of the Covid consensus activists cluster, and 15% of links shared in the Covid consensus activists cluster were part of the Anti-restriction left-wingers cluster.

Links from cluster…		Covid consensus activists	Anti-restriction left-wingers	Covid opposition opportunists	Anti-system protesters	Éric Zemmour's supporters
to…	Covid consensus activists		2 %	1 %	1 %	1 %
	Anti-restriction left-wingers	15 %		10 %	3 %	3 %
	Covid opposition opportunists	38 %	66 %		47 %	60 %
	Anti-system protesters	1 %	2 %	5 %		1 %
	Éric Zemmour's supporters	7 %	5 %	22 %	4 %	

Table 1: Table showing the number of links between the five largest clusters within this network, as a percentage of all that cluster's links to all external clusters.

One important thing to note is how isolated many of these communities are from the Covid consensus activists cluster. In all four other clusters, 2% or less of accounts are connected to content from the consensus cluster. This indicates that members of those clusters infrequently engage with the more mainstream content (e.g., reliable information about Covid-19 vaccinations).

Meanwhile, the consensus cluster links substantially to content from the Covid opposition opportunists cluster – 38% of all its outbound links. This is indicative of how mainstream discussions are driven by more marginal narratives. As previously mentioned, many accounts in the consensus cluster aimed to directly debunk content emerging from the opportunists. While fact-checking is important, it can also provide visibility to content that may be marginal.

Another notable figure in this table is the 66% of links from the left-wing cluster connecting to the opportunist cluster. As seen in our analysis above, many of the narratives within these two clusters are aligned.This is particularly interesting to note as the left-wing cluster is principally composed of actors ideologically aligned to the far left, while the opportunist cluster is principally composed of actors ideologically aligned to the far right.

However, this connection does not seem to be reciprocal, as only 10% of links from theopportunist cluster direct to the left-wing cluster.

Finally, perhaps the most isolated cluster is the cluster of Éric Zemmour's supporters, which is only substantially connected to the opportunist cluster (with 60% of links from the pro-Zemmour cluster directing to the opportunist cluster). Connections to other major clusters are limited to 3% or less of all outbound links.

Relays between clusters

The connections between clusters are frequently facilitated by particular users that serve as relays between clusters. These are users that sit on the borders of the clusters, sharing content from one or more clusters into their own. The top five most well-connected users from each cluster are analysed below.

The top five relays for the Covid consensus activists cluster are characterised by their support for greater governmental action against Covid-19 and the country's vaccination programme. One of the accounts belongs to the parent group Ecole et Familles Oubliées (School and Forgotten Families), which advocates for enhanced protection for children in schools against the virus. Politically, the top five accounts are characterised by their diverse political leanings. While one of the accounts frequently posts content that is favourable to the incumbent president, other accounts express criticism against the government for its handling of the pandemic (including a perceived inadequate management of the pandemic), its use of private consultancy firms as well as Macron's record in office.[32] Accounts that are in favour of the implemented sanitary measures bridge to other clusters which display strong anti-government sentiment, notably the left-wing cluster.

The top five accounts which act as relays for the Anti-restriction left-wingers cluster are characterised by their support for LFI leader Mélenchon. As of April 2022, one of the accounts had been suspended for breach of Twitter's community rules. Three of the accounts share anti-vaccine content and oppose France's vaccination pass, reflecting the overlap with other clusters which share such content, including the opportunist cluster. The relays' spreading of anti-vax content reflects the partial overlap in narratives shared by the opportunist and left-wing clusters. Both sets of users frequently share the view that the government is using the pandemic to impose a health dictatorship in the country.

Analysis of the top five relay accounts in the Covid opposition opportunists and Anti-restriction protesters clusters shows that these are very similar in nature. These accounts share a wide range of anti-vax, anti-establishment and sometimes conspiratorial content. One of the accounts in the opportunist cluster had been suspended by Twitter as of April 2022. Several accounts expressed belief in or support for a range of conspiracy theories, including the Great Reset and promoted unverified cures to Covid-19.[33] After the period of study, one of the relay accounts in the opportunist cluster started promoting the conspiracy theory about Ukrainian bioweapons labs, signalling a new focus on the Ukrainian conflict.

Politically, relay accounts for the opportunist cluster are split between accounts which support Philippot and Zemmour, showing a clear overlap with the pro-Zemmour cluster. In both the opportunist and the anti-system clusters, researchers found accounts which expressed support for prominent French conspiracy theorist Di Vizio. The hybrid nature of the far-right relays — combining support for far-right politicians and the dissemination of COVID-19 disinformation — highlights the close connection between far-right ideological mobilisation and conspiracy theories. This is part of a broader global trend which ISD research has highlighted in other geographical contexts in Europe, North America and Australia.[34]

The relay accounts for the pro-Zemmour cluster seem to be the most closely connected. All five accounts are openly supportive of Zemmour's campaign, retweeting the candidate's messages and sharing content in favour of him. The focus of the accounts nevertheless shows variations.

- Two of the accounts also shared content supporting Philippot in addition to voicing their support for Zemmour, highlighting an overlap with the opportunist cluster and anti-system cluster, in which Philippot features prominently.

- The relay accounts also shared anti-vax content, bridging the gap with the other non-consensus clusters, where anti-vax sentiment represents a key narrative.

Conclusion and recommendations

This report provides an overview of the groups and communities that played an important role in the dissemination of disinformation, conspiracy theories and polarising discourses in the run-up to the presidential and legislative elections, during a period when the Covid-19 pandemic remained a major controversial issue in France.

One of the central trends identified by this research is how three communities (the "Covid opposition opportunists", the "Anti-restriction left-wingers" and the "Anti-system protesters"), which sometimes have very different political positions on many points, mobilised around anti-system discourses and regularly shared similar content to oppose vaccination and health restrictions. The relay accounts identified by our study, which served as links between these three clusters, thus reflect the transpartisan nature of certain anti-institutional and anti-system discours, which helped to mobilise a heterogeneous range of actors in a common opposition to the government's health measures.

The implications of this phenomenon are not limited to the pandemic. For example, an analysis published by ISD just before the second round of the presidential election illustrates how the amplification of anti-system rhetoric on social networks promotes extreme positions and weakens the Republican barrage.[35]

Although more research is needed to quantify the phenomenon, there are many signs suggesting that the mobilisation of actors located on opposite fringes of the French political spectrum around anti-system, anti-institutional and anti-restrictional discourses has also contributed to the construction of bridges between the far-right and far-left votes, even if these remain limited ('only' 17% of Jean-Luc Mélenchon voters voted for Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election), with the exception of certain French regions where the proximity and transfers between the two electorates are more marked.[36]

These dynamics, combined with a steadily rising abstention rate, illustrate the systemic attitude of rejection of the political elites and the 'system' among a growing part of the French population. This trend represents an opportunity for the fringes and extremes, notably the far right, which has attempted to convert these 'anything but Macron' reactions into votes for Marine Le Pen, using these resentments to appeal to a wider population.

This research also highlights how some far-right and sovereignist right-wing actors have made misinformation and disinformation about Covid-19 as well as conspiracy theories important elements of their political discourses, thereby contributing to the diffusion of this content into wider environments.

Although this phenomenon is somewhat less pronounced in some ecosystems of the institutional far right in France, it is interesting to note that the use of conspiracy rhetoric as a vehicle for mobilisation by some actors in the French far right resembles the efforts of other far right movements around the world analysed by other ISD research, reflecting a deeper global trend of convergence between some far right ecosystems and groups and conspiracy spheres.

The report also identified the deployment of inauthentic activities by some accounts in the "Covid opposition opportunitsts" cluster to amplify misinformation and polarising rhetoric, highlighting how such manipulations can be used to influence online discussions and democratic debate. This finding suggests that regulators need to conduct more thorough investigations into the rise of online political activity and that social networking platforms need to focus more on removal strategies, in parallel with intensifying their moderation efforts.

Beyond the clusters converging in opposition to health restrictions, this report also identified a cluster of pro-Zemmour accounts, primarily seeking to promote the far-right presidential candidate and the content produced by his campaign. A secondary part of this cluster's activities also consists of amplifying messages that are highly critical of the government's policy of health restrictions.

Finally, this investigation reveals how the main cluster of "Covid consensus activists" may have unintentionally contributed to the amplification of misinformation and polarising discourses coming from clusters with more radical positions, especially on the pandemic, by seeking to denounce them. This highlights the need to explore in depth the extent to which certain actors may contribute to the trivialisation and amplification of marginal and extreme ideas by seeking to develop counter-narratives. It also reflects recent observations by other actors on the responsibility of mainstream media in the overexposure of the polemics launched by Éric Zemmour and theb centring of his agenda during the French presidential campaign.

Recommendations for policymakers and government

- Policymakers and government should recognise the danger of politicised disinformation to social cohesion and electoral integrity. This research has highlighted the hybrid nature of fringe activity online, combining disinformation and polarising ideological mobilisation. Policymakers and government should also be aware of the risk of offline mobilisation partly fuelled by online mobilisation (as demonstrated by anti-sanitary measures demonstrations and violent actions or the French Convoy for Freedom more recently). Policymakers seeking to protect democratic integrity should take these trends into account in their risk assessment and mitigation responses, and put the designing of more articulate redress mechanisms in close coordination with social media and the regulator at the top of the agenda, particularly in the context of the upcoming application of the recently adopted European Digital Services Act (DSA). In doing so, an emphasis needs to be made on involving political parties and the media and holding them accountable about their online activities during and beyond major political events.

- Policymakers and government should pursue efforts to implement a comprehensive regulatory regime for social media platforms that does not solely focus on content removal but also takes into account the actors involved in the production, sharing and amplification of harmful content as well as its dissemination mechanisms. Regulation of social media platforms should be comprehensive and include provisions to audit social media companies' systems, processes and content moderation policies, as well as transparency obligations for platforms. A systemic approach to digital regulation geared towards demotion strategies and focused on fostering a more meaningful cross-sectorial mobilisation is at the heart of the DSA, with France's Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) providing an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in digital regulation at an EU level and driving forward the implementation of the DSA.

- Policymakers and government should continue to provide support to civil society organisations (CSOs) and researchers dedicated to monitoring disinformation. As this report has shown, some of the key actors involved in spreading misleading content during the election campaign have started to shift their focus away from Covid-19 towards new crises, including the conflict in Ukraine. ISD's research has shown how disinformation spikes during moments of crisis, necessitating flexible and adaptative responses to national and international events. [37] Policymakers and government should ramp up their monitoring and support to trusted organisations and be more open to multi-stakeholder partnerships on these issues. They need to articulate more informed real-time decision-making during moments of crisis and more risk-averse pioneering policies in the longer run.

Recommendations for social media platforms

- Social media companies should ensure better enforcement of their content moderation policies, put in place robust mitigation strategies around disinformation and elections to ensure that their platforms are not utilised to promote and amplify politicised manipulative and polarising content. And they should communicate transparently about their existing mitigation frameworks so that online users and actors working on protecting democratic integrity can have greater awareness of online manipulation, distortion and interference attempts and be empowered to better understand these mechanisms and expose them, with a view to reduce their potentially harmful impact. Mitigation strategies can include provisions to give authoritative content from recognised institutions and media organisation greater visibility, as well as demoting harmful super-spreading accounts, as well as groups and channels acting as major disinformation sources. Social media platforms should work closely with CSOs and research institutions involved in monitoring threats to electoral integrity. This is in order to facilitate access to disaggregated data contributing to building a more comprehensive and up-to-date collective understanding of these threats to democracy. They should also devise practical solutions and educational, communicational and technological response mechanisms to information manipulations on their platforms.

- Social media companies should continue to reinforce measures to mitigate inauthentic activity on their platforms, especially during election campaigns. This research has highlighted examples of inauthentic behaviours to promote contents hostile to sanitary measures. Social media companies need to provide greater transparency about the measures taken to address the inauthentic use of their platforms, as well as the human, technological and financial resources deployed for their content moderation, with greater granularity at the market level and greater emphasis on linguistic gaps and regional context needs.

Recommendations for practitioners and civil society

- Civil society actors and practitioners involved in countering disinformation and polarisation should be aware of the risks of unintended amplification of harmful content in electoral contexts. As this research has highlighted, mainstream actors who are committed to tackling misleading content can inadvertently contribute to amplifying this content by sharing it, so contributing to the mainstreaming of fringe agendas. Social media efforts to counter disinformation by CSOs and media-affiliated fact-checkers should include robust risk assessments. Similarly, influencers should carefully consider how to prioritise and communicate their findings, and to which audiences, taking into account whether exposing activities might contribute to aggravating the issue. As such, it is recommended to adopt strictly non-participatory monitoring and to avoid mimicking trolling mechanisms when trying to expose harmful actors online. CSOs are encouraged to rely on existing resources and guides to addressing disinformation during elections.[38]

- Civil society actors monitoring disinformation and polarisation should enhance their monitoring during elections and work in partnership with fact-checking organisations, research institutes and law enforcement to report any content that breaches platforms' terms of service. Working in partnership with research institutes and other CSOs and creating coalitions of actors during times of enhanced risk of political destabilisation and polarisation, such as elections, is needed to establish response mechanisms to disinformation and harmful content which can threaten democratic debate or result in offline mobilisation.[39]

- Civil society actors need to remain alert to emergent national and international crises and malign actors' ability to weaponise emergent issues, ensuring that their monitoring efforts remain nimble. CSOs are encouraged to develop flexible monitoring frameworks, which can be adapted to new crisis points. This may include informal exchanges and formal partnerships with likeminded and complementary organisations to gain mutually beneficial insights on the evolving nature of the threats and to build collective resilience against them.

End notes

1   https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/what-can-the-most-shared-urls-on-social-media-during-the-french-election-tell-us-about-public-opinion-of-the-vote/
https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/comment-lamplification-de-la-rhetorique-anti-systeme-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-favorise-les-positions-extremes-et-affaiblit-le-barrage-republicain/

2   The yellow vests protests or yellow jackets are a series of populist grassroots weekly protests in France, at first for economic justice and later for institutional political reforms, that began in France on 17 November 2018.

3   French independent administrative agency resulting from the merger on 1 January 2022 of the High Audiovisual Council (CSA) and the High Authority for the Distribution of Works and Protection of Rights on the Internet (Hadopi). ARCOM is responsible for both audiovisual and digital communications.

4   For more information on ISD's research on French online ecosystems please see: ISD, Publications archive.

5   ISD coordinates a multi-sector response to hate, extremism and disinformation in France, drawing on cutting-edge digital research. Find out more at ISD France.

6   https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-apercu-de-la-defiance-anti-vaccinale-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux/

7   https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/la-pandemie-de-covid-19-terreau-fertile-de-la-haine-en-ligne/

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10   https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/la-conquete-numerique-des-identitaires-un-effort-de-mobilisation-multi-plateformes/

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12   A set of behaviours suggesting an online entity might be operating under a false or misleading identity. These behaviours include: a mismatch between geolocation and topic; poor use of stated language (misspellings, grammar mistakes etc.); little or no evidence of human activity in photos; profile photos or interactions; stock photographs used for profile photos; sudden dramatic changes in posting volume; topic or language or both without explanation; repetitive posting or sharing patterns. Signals used to detect potential inauthentic behaviour are constantly evolving, based on the changing tactics of actors using such approaches to deceive audiences online.

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

14   The Convoy for Freedom is a series of protests and blockades in Canada against COVID-19 vaccine mandates and restrictions, called the Freedom Convoy (French: Convoi de la liberté) by organizers, began in early 2022. This mobilisation inspired other countries, including France end of January beginning of February.

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18   Medium.com, #Botspot: twelve ways to spot a bot, 2017.

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20   France24, Covid-19: from pandemic to endemic, hope for a scenario, 2022.

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