

# POLICY BRIEF 11 - Disinformation in the name of the ‘fight against disinformation’ *The case of ‘EU DisinfoLab’*

By South Asia Democratic Forum

09 March 2021 - DOI: [10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5625.PB.11](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5625.PB.11)

## Table of contents

1. Abstract
  2. EU DisinfoLab: a disinformation tool
  3. The Disinfo Lab sprawl
  4. The Islamist hidden link
  5. Freedom of expression
  6. Modern disinformation strategies
  7. Recommendations
- References
- Correspondence

## Keywords:

Disinformation, disinfoLab, google, twitter, islamist, iran, Benalla, US, Soros, crosscheck.

## 1. Abstract

This policy brief comes in the wake of a vicious attack to SADF made by EU DisinfoLab, an attack we responded in a [letter this organisation agreed to publish](#) in its website where we protested the ‘unfounded accusations and false allegations contained in the publications in question – ironically originating from an association claiming to counter disinformation and to make deep investigations.’

The authors of this piece failed to quote even a single line from any of our work. The piece more generally speaking was void of any substantial point. However, remarkably, beyond the expected reverberation obtained in Islamist circles, it gained a great traction in western media and political establishments.

We therefore decided to conduct a research on this organisation, which is developed in the second section of this policy brief. Created in December 2017, EU DisinfoLab gained full notoriety soon afterwards when it managed to convince French media and French authorities that an internal political scandal was being propagated by a ‘Russian conspiracy’. To our knowledge, this was the most obvious and almost successful contemporary disinformation manoeuvre in the democratic world.

Although an independent study rapidly managed to debunk ‘EU DisinfoLab’s Russian conspiracy theory, and although some among the independent press and various observers clearly denounced the manipulation, the fact is that the organisation continued its activities and – as is the present case – even managed considerable success in its disinformation strategies.

We proceed, in the subsequent section, to analyse the context of EU DisinfoLab’. We discovered it was part of a sprawl of ‘disinfo labs’ simultaneously emerging in 2017/2018, originally financed by technology companies. Whereas other, partnering organisations lack a style of aggressive and insulting disinformation comparable to that adopted by EU DisinfoLab, we found the logic of their actions debatable, as they seemed to believe that being sponsored by the biggest players in the information industry provides them with the authority to become some sort of information police.

We analyse the ‘Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making’ and we see therein an attempt to transform into the doctrine of the democratic world a framework for suppressing pluralism and freedom of expression – increasing the power and influence of the information industry’s major players and deviating the State from its crucial role of insuring a level playing field for information providers.

Modern disinformation strategies are yet more formidable and dangerous than those classic. They thrive in autocratic states; yet are also able to permeate democratic societies lacking the capacity to control their influence and facing a perilous

concentration of power on information providers. Whereas polarisation is inherent to democratic societies, modern disinformation strategies promote toxic polarisation, transforming activism into malevolent despotism.

We conclude by advising the democratic world to uphold three major principles.

- **The first is to consider freedom of expression as the cornerstone of all and any legal framework regarding information management.**
- **The second is to restrain dominant positions by companies and autocratic states that control information flows.**
- **The third is to fight against disinformation strategies developed by actors with the capacity of disrupting the democratic fabric.**

## 2. EU DisinfoLab: a disinformation tool

In the years 2017/2018 a plethora of ‘Disinfo Labs’ were created or announced in the EU and the US, among them the ‘EU DisinfoLab’. It was registered in Brussels on [13 December 2017](#) and inscribed in the EU Transparency Register on [23 February 2018](#).

Its founders and shareholders – Nicolas Vanderbiest, Alexander Alaphilippe and Gary Machado – also partner in a company called ‘[Saper Vedere](#)’ – created in Paris in August 2016 and moved to Brussels in 2019. One of the partners, Nicolas Vanderbiest, animates a blog called ‘Reputatio Lab’ (<http://www.reputatiolab.com/>). The three of them also appear in the organisation or activities of the [European Emergency Number Association](#).<sup>1</sup>

EU DisinfoLab achieved wide notoriety a few months after its creation, on the wake of a political scandal wherein certain members of the French political administration were accused of abusing their official prerogatives and usurping police and diplomatic functions.

The scandal is still ongoing as this report is written. EU DisinfoLab’s direct action is related to the misuse of police uniforms and facilities by one member of the

---

<sup>1</sup> The three of them get together in the annual conference of the foundation in Budapest, April 2017 and had previous associated with it in several ways.

French President's Cabinet, together with an official of his political movement (La République en Marche). Such misuse was undertaken to aggress citizens.

The facts took place at a student's [demonstration](#) on 1 May, 2018 and reached the French press on 18 July, 2018. From 23 July to 8 August, a strong campaign promoted by 'EU DisinfoLab' tried to discredit the facts related to the scandal.<sup>2</sup> EU DisinfoLab accused a Russian-engineered plot, promoted by an electronic disinformation campaign using twitter (the expression 'Russian eco-system', here as elsewhere, was the main buzzword) to overblow its importance.

The course of events developed mostly through twitter and the timeline was established in the blogosphere – among others, by a blog authored by [Olivier Berruyer](#),<sup>3</sup> which we will use here as the main reference:

### DISINFORMATION TIMELINE

23 July Start of the campaign through a 'Reputatio Lab study' that considers suspect the high number of tweets regarding the scandal. The only reference to Russia states that: 'That said, there are also suspicious initiatives on the side of the Republic on the March. For instance, a Russian account with generic first names and names, Alain Grand Bernard is one of them.'

27 July A Vanderbiest tweet claims a fictitious number of 11 million tweets in French on eleven days dedicated to the issue.

30 July A Vanderbiest tweet claims that 27% of 44% of tweets concerning the scandal belong to the 'Russophile eco-system'. A Russian flag is put on evidence. Another tweet says the number of tweets was inflated by a 'number of 20'; still another claims 'I would rather speak of trolls than bots since there is human touch'.

The whole 'EU DisinfoLab galaxy' starts tweeting and retweeting, thus inflating the initial claims. The EU DisinfoLab's twitter account transforms the initial claims of 12% of tweets (44% times 27%) in 27% of tweets, the 'Russophile eco-system' morphs into 'pro-Russian accounts' and then simply to 'Russian accounts'.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The scandal is better known by the family name of his main actor, Alexander Benalla. In this policy brief, we prefer to call it the 'French 2018 scandal'.

<sup>3</sup> The blog, called 'Les Crises' is avowedly pro-Russian. It is however the most complete and quoted source available on this EU DisinfoLab disinformation campaign. It fundamentally retrieves the meaningful tweets used by EU DisinfoLab in the disinformation operation.

<sup>4</sup> The EU DisinfoLab criteria for an account to be filed as 'pro-Russian' is to have retweeted a tweet from RT in May 2007.

The press, a European department called EUvsDisinfo, a European Commissioner, a European Parliament department, members of the French parliament and the Atlantic Council are among those tagged during the campaign.

Alexandre Alaphilippe (another founder of EU DisinfoLab) goes further and joins to the Russian flag the sentence ‘Digital Doping Targeting French President’, a message that by late afternoon ‘Saper Vedere’ transforms into ‘Digital Doping from Whom?’, a question which should not be difficult to answer as the same Russian flag appears after it.

Half an hour after the beginning of this tweet storm, the tagging starts working and twitter accounts linked with the Presidential party, including the account of its secretary general, retweet EU DisinfoLab’s tweets. By late afternoon, members of the French government join in the tweeting spree. Even when the word Russia is not spelled, the Russian flag leaves no doubts on who is accused of masterminding the conspiracy.

1 August BFM TV reproduces the claim of an artificial inflation of tweets regarding the scandal. A politician requires an inquiry committee on Russian manipulation.

3 August The French National Press Agency (AFP) produces a lengthy report which reproduces the essentials of EU DisinfoLab’s disinformation – the organisation is presented as an NGO fighting against disinformation – and develops further. The AFP, quoting Alexandre Alaphilippe, announces that EU DisinfoLab is working on a study that will soon be made public. Quoting EU DisinfoLab, the AFP says that the numeric inflating of tweets would be the responsibility of pro-Melenchon, pro-National Gathering and Russophiles. According to Alexandre Alaphilippe, there are anonymised accounts – working 24 hours per day and operating in an automatic fashion. A member of the French government interviewed by the AFP gives credibility to the claims and officially supports the proposal of a parliamentary inquiry committee.

4 to 7 August Following the AFP’s report, the French press, opinion makers and politicians all provide echo to the EU DisinfoLab’s claims as reproduced by the AFP.

7 August An independent, real study on the impact of the scandal on twitter is published which proves that the EU DisinfoLab's 'non-study'<sup>5</sup> is baseless and that there is no Russian conspiracy propagating this scandal.

8 August EU DisinfoLab finally publishes its 'on-going study'. Nothing in that analysis could ever substantiate the claims of 'Russian conspiracy' tirelessly propagated during the preceding weeks; in fact, it is not possible to understand how the EU DisinfoLab could draw any conclusion on this supposed conspiracy (whether it existed or not) based on the analysis presented at this point.

The document identified three twitter accounts that might have been centrally managed and twitting in an automatic fashion; however, it does not express any opinion on their location or foreign sponsorship. Otherwise, this possible automated centre cannot be said to have played a role in the affair at all.

According to a Q&A section introduced at the end of the study, EU DisinfoLab states the following:

'Was the Benalla scandal [2018 French scandal] orchestrated by Russia and Vladimir Putin?

- We did never insinuate such a thing. As far as we are concerned, we have no proof and this issue is not part of our mandate'<sup>6</sup>

And it proceeds:

'Was the EU DisinfoLab study politically misused?

- We did remark that some political personalities have used the preliminary results of our study according to their conveniences.'<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the EU DisinfoLab does not apologise or even tries to provide an explanation regarding why it conducted a campaign that succeeded in convincing both the media and political authorities of a fictitious Russian involvement. Quite on the

---

<sup>5</sup> This is the way the author of the real study, Damien Liccia, refers to the EU DisinfoLab study. As he explains, although the supposed study was widely referred by the media, the French Government, and the social networks, it was not published up to the date of publication of the real study he authored.

<sup>6</sup> In the original French : 'L'affaire Benalla a-t-elle été orchestrée par la Russie et Vladimir Poutine ?

Nous n'avons jamais insinué cela. En ce qui nous concerne, nous n'avons aucune preuve et cela ne fait pas partie de notre mission.'

<sup>7</sup> In the original French : L'étude du EU DisinfoLab a été récupérée politiquement ?

Nous avons constaté que plusieurs personnalités politiques ont relayé les résultats préliminaires de notre étude dans leur propre intérêt.

contrary, it tried to erase three weeks of massive campaign for the Russian plot thesis by stating that ‘EU DisinfoLab never insinuated that the scandal was orchestrated by Russia’. Indeed, EU DisinfoLab went so far as to insinuate that politicians were the ones inventing the claim in the first place.

EU DisinfoLab makes public the political profiles of 55.000 twitter accounts, including those of opposition leaders, political profiles that supposedly could serve the purpose of confirming Russian meddling. The tag of ‘Russophile’, among others, was used to politically classify the opinions of those scrutinised. Several victims of this political profiling complained publicly and to the authorities as this practice is forbidden in France (and in other democratic countries).

According to press reports EU DisinfoLab did withdraw these political profiles from the public domain and presented public excuses for having publish them.

The French media (for instance, Europe 1) publishes a dispatch from the national information agency concluding that there is no evidence for a concerted Russian effort to propagate the French 2018 scandal.<sup>8</sup>

10 August The French magazine Marianne, as several social media actors and following many reactions by citizens whose twitter accounts were targeted by the EU DisinfoLab, accuses said ‘EU DisinfoLab’ of manipulating information and of inventing a Russian twitter plot.

As several observers point out, the creators of ‘EU DisinfoLab’ had already been quite active in 2017 with the same apparent leitmotif of defending the political campaign of the future President Macron, liberally accusing all those opposing him of being somehow masterminded by Russia (among other demeaning considerations).

For three weeks, ‘EU DisinfoLab’ developed a remarkably effective campaign falsely claiming that social media criticism of the French Government was promoted by Russian cyberwarfare. Only after an independent study proved this claim to be false did the organisation (finally) publish its own study – which in no way supported the ‘Russian plot’ claim.

---

<sup>8</sup> This AFP dispatch, here and in other sources consulted, appears only in secondary sources. It is no longer available in the AFP website.

Never was any apology issued for having fooled the press, the authorities and the public at large. Quite the opposite, and contradicting overwhelming evidence, EU DisinfoLab simply denied being the promoter of the ‘Russian plot’ fiction.

Such an enormous lie contradicting overwhelming evidence obviously led to the total discredit of the organisation among independent media and observers.

We would like to underline just how deeply the EU DisinfoLab engaged in a disinformation campaign and willingly fooled public opinion. Crucially, this disinformation campaign was undertaken in the name of the ‘fight against disinformation’ – and was highly effective in duping both the media and the authorities.

If an independent study had not appeared that demonstrated the absence of any factual basis for the EU DisinfoLab’s campaign, said campaign could have been successful.

The political profiling undertaken by EU DisinfoLab is illegal under the French protection of freedom of thought and was therefore swiftly discontinued. One wonders, however, what would have happened in a country whose protection of data privacy was less effective.

### 3. The DisinfoLab sprawl

The EU DisinfoLab’s above-mentioned [study](#) refers to Crosscheck/First Draft as the source used for defining ‘rumours’ during the French Presidential campaign in February and March 2017. One of the leaders of the organisation, Claire Wardle, is also quoted as a source for the definition of ‘disinformation’.

Other than general references to programmes and methodologies (‘Python, Excel et Tableau Software’ are quoted as the vehicles for ‘statistical operations’ for instance) provided in this co-called ‘EU DisinfoLab’s study’, references to First Draft are the only ones both specific and relevant.

During the French Presidential campaign in 2017, Nicolas Vanderbiest had already made extensive [references](#) to the Crosscheck French project. Both organisations, as well as the ‘Kyev DisinfoLab’, appear together on the prospective ‘[Brussels DisinfoLab’ draft initiative](#)’.

Some months later, it was the turn of First Draft to appear as the motor for a global ‘DisinfoLab’. The ‘Disinfo Lab’ initiative was first announced by [Google](#) on 20



March 2018. In an [article](#) published on 21 March authored by Mathew Ingram, one can read:

‘A Disinfo Lab: Google is helping launch a lab based at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center, in partnership with First Draft, where journalists will monitor disinformation in advance of and during elections around the world.’

More details were provided a few days later, 11 April, by [Alexis Chiavegato](#): ‘The initiative is backed by the promise of a \$300 million expenditure over the next three years, funding major programs such as the Disinfo Lab and MediaWise. Disinfo Lab is a joint project with First Draft of the Shorenstein Center at Harvard Kennedy School of Media, Politics and Public Policy. At Disinfo Lab, media organizations will monitor and work against fake news, with a focus on news coverage of elections around the world.’

However, in a Harvard Kennedy School paper published on June 2018 ‘[Combating Information Operations Developing an Operating Concept](#)’, authored by Simon Jones, we can read that:

‘Some of these tactics, techniques, procedures have already been utilized to help identify and mitigate the impact of IO and disinformation with some success, such as the analysis offered by the EU Disinfo Lab during the French Presidential Elections in 2017, which helped to demonstrate that Russian-backed trolls had sought to spread documents obtained by hacks from the Macron Campaign.’

As a source of this information, the Harvard Kennedy School’s paper refers: “‘Projects: French Elections.’ EU DisinfoLab. Accessed on 28 March 2018. <http://disinfo.eu/projects/>.’ However, this link, as consulted in February 2021, provides no information on this project.

It is confusing that the very same institution that in March 2018 appears as a partner in the creation of a Disinfo Lab states, three months afterwards, that this Disinfo Lab already existed in 2017, and it analysed the French elections. This becomes even more peculiar if we consider that a project geared at following the French elections was developed by First Draft – which, since October 2017, was supposed to be part of the Shorenstein Center within the very same Harvard Kennedy School. The project was called: ‘[2017 CrossCheck France Initiative](#)’ and was presented as a partnership initiative between First Draft and Google News Lab. In fact, the

project addresses the same subjects and in a similar fashion as Mr Nicolas Vanderbiest – whom later would become one of the founders of the ‘EU Disinfo Lab’.

On 28 February, 2017, the project is presented under the title: ‘[CrossCheck Newsroom starts fighting false information in France](#)’ explaining that: ‘The CrossCheck project was devised and developed in consultation with newsroom partners and Google News Lab, a First Draft founding partner. Facebook also supported the project by providing dedicated tools and media literacy efforts helping to explain the verification process and keep relevant audiences up to date with both confirmed and disputed information relating to the election.’ The publication presents ‘34 newsroom partners’ – including virtually all the French mainstream press institutions.

We do find this financing mechanism problematic for media pluralism and independence. We think that the EU DisinfoLab disinformation campaign – and, that this organisation maintained any credibility after its disinformation tactics were debunked – cannot be understandable without it.

The [Google Digital News Innovation Fund](#) financing report, however, does not mention the project.

As consulted in the [First Draft website](#) in February 2021, the organisation states it was created in June 2015 by nine partners (including Google News Initiative) and expanded in September 2016. In October 2017, First Draft joined the ‘Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School’. In an undisclosed date, it became a ‘company limited by guarantee in the UK, with headquarters in London’.

At other times, First Draft is presented as created during a meeting in New York in [April, 2015](#). However, its activity date from at least [January](#) that year, when it published an extensive comment on the way media handled the Jihadi attacks in Paris. According to [another post](#) in the same website, dated from 2 October, 2017, First Draft was created in July 2016, being directed at the time by Jenni Sargent, and ‘First Draft is now led by Dr. Claire Wardle who was most recently Research Director at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.’ Furthermore, the post opens with the announcement: ‘We’re thrilled to announce

today that we are officially now housed at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.’

According to another post by First Draft, dated from the 24 April 2019, the organisation moved its headquarters to London in April 2019 – being at the time still a non-profit organisation. According to the same post: ‘The opening of our London office follows the launch of Comprobado, our ongoing collaborative verification project in Spain, and First Draft bureaux in the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, New York and the Centre for Media Transition at UTS in Sydney.’

The [news](#) on the launching of the Sydney office was produced some days later, on 30 April 2019: ‘the First Draft (opens an external site) Bureau will be based at the Centre for Media Transition (CMT) at the University of Technology Sydney.’

In this post we can also read: ‘The opening of the First Draft Sydney Bureau has been funded by the Google News Initiative as part of a series of innovative projects in the Asia-Pacific region.

“We’re pleased to be supporting First Draft in opening their first bureau in APAC, working with local partners UTS,” said Nic Hopkins, Google News Lab lead for Australia and New Zealand.

“We’ve supported First Draft at a global level since 2015 and together we’re committed to stemming the flow of misinformation and disinformation by collaborating directly with news organisations, especially ahead of elections.”

And still: ‘First Draft is headquartered in London and led by managing director Jenni Sargent. First Draft will also have a bureau in New York, at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism CUNY. The Australian and New York bureaux will work closely with the London office to share verification resources, map disinformation networks and encourage and support cross-border collaboration on the CrossCheck International platform.’

According to the information provided to the [EU Transparency Register](#), First Draft headquarters, when registered in 18 January 2018, were located in the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, not in the Harvard Kennedy School.

First Draft is surprisingly unprecise as on the date of its creation; on its real headquarters and delegations; its role on ‘Disinfo Lab’ as well as on the identity of who directs it.

On the latest available Google News Initiative ([dated October 2020](#)) Google states that it continues to support First Draft; however, Google fails to provide financial or programming details. More specifically, no mention is found regarding what happened to the announced ‘Disinfo Lab’ project, one of the two projects wherein Google announced a 300 million Euros expenditure over three years.

Another mystery concerns why did the ‘Disinfo Lab’ brand officially announced in March 2018 as such an important subject disappears soon afterwards. The brand’s disappearance does not seem to have had an impact on the ongoing institutional cooperation.

Another ‘DisinfoLab’ –presented as the ‘Kyiv disinfoLab’ in the [correspondence between ‘saper vedere’ and the EEAS](#) – was registered in the [EU Transparency Register](#) prior to the creation of the ‘EU DisinfoLab’ itself. The address indicated for this Kyiv disinfoLab was ‘40 V Verhnyi Val Kiev Ukraine’. The register was later discontinued, and the organisation was rebranded as ‘Disinfo Tech’.

Up to the French 2018 scandal, the EU DisinfoLab announced [the intention of creating](#): an EU DisinfoLab-Italiano (January 2018); EU DisinfoLab-Français and EU DisinfoLab-Español (May 2018); EU DisinfoLab-Polsky (July, 2018) and then DisinfoEU\_RU; \_DE; \_NL; \_CZ; \_DK; \_SE (July, 2018).

None of these ten new ‘DisinfoLabs’ left any traces of their existence.

Could it be that the ‘French 2018 scandal’ tarnished the brand ‘Disinfo Lab’ in such a way that partner projects were rebranded?<sup>9</sup>

A fundamental actor in this context is Hossein Derakhshan, who appears in the [April 2015 New York](#) meeting sometimes mentioned as the founding reunion of ‘First Draft’.

He is the co-author (with Claire Wardle) of the most significant and popular work stemming out of ‘First Draft’: the report ‘[Information Disorder](#)’, commissioned by

---

<sup>9</sup> Our letter to First Draft asking for clarifications on their relations with EU DisinfoLab, the DisinfoLab sprawl and the 2018 French scandal was unanswered.

the Council of Europe and the ‘Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government’.

That report is dated 27 September 2017 – a few days before Claire Wardle announces the First Draft’s affiliation to the Shorenstein Center and months before the Shorenstein Center announces the attribution of a fellowship to Hossein Derakhshan (11 January 2018).

It is not at all clear when and why First Draft abandons the Shorenstein Center, moving its head-office to London. Equally unclear is the path trailed by Hossein Derakhshan, who also relocated and newly presented himself as a ‘[London-based media researcher](#)’.

Hossein Derakhshan was promoted mainstream press such as ‘The Guardian’ as an ‘[Iranian dissident](#)’, the father of the Iranian blogosphere that spent several years in jail because of his opposition to the regime.

This ‘oppositionist statute’ was however vehemently denounced by most of the Iranian exiled community in Western countries, who protested the whitewashing of his political curriculum of close cooperation with Iranian authorities.<sup>10</sup>

To provide a balanced view on the issue, one does not need to know Farsi or analyse the contributions by Hossein Derakhshan regarding the Iranian hard-line press and denounced by Iranian expatriates. He authors a vast array of publications in the Western press upholding his support of the Iranian regime.<sup>11</sup>

The crux of the matter, as a [collective letter by Iranian expatriates](#) points out, is:

‘We, the undersigned of this letter, consider this decision a clear act by Harvard Kennedy School to take sides with those who limit the space for dialogue and advocacy through government-sponsored means cyber and offline intimidation techniques, causing irreversible harm to the real leaders of our nation.’

---

<sup>10</sup> The list of organisations and personalities denouncing Derakhshan’s collusion with Iranian authorities is exceedingly long. We can point out to the following declarations: [Open Letter to the Shorenstein Center at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government \[on Hossein Derakhshan\]](#) :: [Campus Watch \(meforum.org\)](#) ; [Harvard’s shorenstein center to revoke Hossein Derakhshan’s fellowship \(wordpress.com\)](#) ; <https://iroon.com/irtn/quote/3948/please-publicly-clarify-whether-you-knew-about-hossein-derakhshan/> ; [IranWire | Blogger Working Against Dissidents Awarded Harvard Fellowship](#) ; [Canada a Safe Haven for The agents of the Islamic Regime in Iran | The Iranian](#) ;

<sup>11</sup> Other than the quoted publications in the Guardian, one can read, for instance, his pleading for a Nuclear Iran in the [Washington Post](#).

This issue has a much larger scale: it involves Academia (exemplified here by the Harvard establishment); it also involves the social media oligopoly by Google, Twitter, and Facebook – as well as the international political democratic establishment exemplified here by the ‘Council of Europe’.

#### 4. The Islamist hidden link

According to the declarations by ‘EU DisinfoLab’ (for instance in the Q&A regarding the [study](#) on the French 2018 scandal) the gathering of the three founders of EU DisinfoLab took place in the wake of the 2016 Jihadist attack in Nice. Apparently, there was a common concern regarding the rumours that followed it.

The oldest post of ‘[First Draft](#)’ we could find, dated January 2015, relates to the way the information was handled in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks (the author calls them ‘Paris shootings’).

In both cases, authors show a chilling indifference for the sake of innocent victims and seem only concerned with the possibility that rumours that may inflate or distort these tragic events can circulate in social media – and, to a certain extent, in the traditional media. The seminal reference to the new ‘[information order](#)’ completely ignores the vital informational component of Jihadism and only speaks of ‘Islamophobia’.

EU DisinfoLab, and in particular Nicolas Vanderbiest, seem obsessed with the need to silence, ridicule or attribute to the extreme-right<sup>12</sup> every negative reference attached to Jihadism.

In the wake of the Paris Charlie Hebdo massacre, the 9 January, 2015, still in the context of ‘[Reputatio Lab](#)’, Vanderbiest dedicates a study wherein ‘Je Suis Charlie’ appears as a way to sell tee-shirts and explore an emotional public for financial purposes. The endeavour was ridiculed. On the other hand, ‘Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie’ is associated with truthful regret for the loss of life but only as coupled with a condemnation of the opinion expressed by the newspaper. Some days afterwards, on the [29 January, 2015](#), the target is the French Government’s campaign ‘Stop-

---

<sup>12</sup> We consider this set-up of ‘extreme-right versus Jihad’ to constitute an oxymoron. Jihadism, as a religious supremacist ideology, is the archetype of an extreme-right political stand. This dichotomy whitewashes Jihadism and is therefore unacceptable. Otherwise, the ‘Islamism-leftism’ expression that has gained recently a lot of leverage, especially in the context of the French political debate (see for instance, the interview with the French Philosopher Pierre André Taguieff to [Brachet in Marianne](#)) fuels this view.

Djihadisme’ which Vanderbiest also tries to ridicule without presenting any alternative to effectively combat Jihadism.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find the very same approach in a text dedicated to the Paris terror attacks in the end of 2015 (post from 20 November 2015). The work is only dedicated to the distortion and inflating of events by social media, overlooking the drama or the informational strategy used by the perpetrators of the crime.

Regarding Jihadist slogans such as ‘[JeSuisKouachi](#)’ (Kouachi is the family name of two Jihadist murderers) Nicolas Vanderbiest simply (and without presenting any evidence) dismisses their importance claiming these are but jokes or are stemming from a disinformation campaign by the extreme-right.

The very same tactic is followed later regarding the [support in social media to the Islamic State](#)<sup>14</sup>. Here Nicolas Vanderbiest attacks the Belgium authorities’ efforts to combat Jihadism, arguing that messages of support to the Islamic State should not be given importance as they might be either part of a disinformation campaign or just jokes.

This political stand by the founder of ‘EU DisinfoLab’ remains within the organisation and resurfaces, for instance, on the [2019 national conference](#) wherein the Jihadi attacks of 2016 are dealt with only as regards the ‘Islamophobic’ backlash.

Other than the invented Russian conspiracy we spoke of in point 1, there is a complete silence on any form of Islamist disinformation by ‘EU DisinfoLab’.

The anti-Russian position was so strident that it earned the attention of most observers and analyses, both avowedly pro-Russian and independent<sup>15</sup>. However, prior to 2017, none of the founders of EU DisinfoLab published views on Russia in general or Russian disinformation policies in particular. As we observed, according to the founders of the organisation themselves, the leitmotif for their gathering was

---

<sup>13</sup> Coincidentally or not, the authorities’ campaign against Jihadism would be discontinued in the sequence of this attack – the authorities would replace the term by that of ‘radicalisation’. The replacement of a clear wording such as Jihadism by this euphemism is strongly criticised in our work ‘[Terrorism Revisited](#)’. Whereas it would be acceptable to see EU DisinfoLab express its disagreement with our option, it is unacceptable to see it smearing the book and its editors without giving any reason for their disagreement.

<sup>14</sup> Where Qatar appears as number one, Pakistan number two and Belgium number three...

<sup>15</sup> That most extensive is undertaken by an avowedly pro-Russian blogger, Olivier Berruyer, and it is called ‘Les Crises’. EU DisinfoLab’s supposed anti-Russian disinformation is so extreme that it ostensibly makes the case for the boycott of Russian state information networks such as ‘Russia Today’.

the need to counter what they perceived as a distorted and exaggerated reaction to the 2016 Nice Jihadi attack. This had nothing to do with Russia.

Other than the ‘Russian conspiracies’ EU DisinfoLab mainly dedicates to lengthy and well-publicised reports against India. Here as well, EU DisinfoLab claims against all evidence that the research is only a by-product of its anti-Russia-Today campaign.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the smear against SADF publications focussing on Jihadism appear not in relation with Jihadism but as a by-product.<sup>17</sup>

More to the point, it is necessary to emphasise that the ultimate outcome of the phony ‘Russian conspiracy’ on the French 2018 scandal was the notion that the Russian disinformation policy was overblown by media and French authorities.

Again, we quote the conclusion by EU DisinfoLab regarding this affair. The authors (1) denied they ever insinuated there was a Russian conspiracy; (2) stated that detecting such conspiracies was out of their mandate and (3) insinuated that French politicians, not them, were responsible for promoting the existence of a ‘Russian conspiracy’.

The strident campaign undertaken by EU DisinfoLab through twitter in the weeks preceding the 8 August 2018 bluntly deny EU DisinfoLab’s claims that they did not make such an insinuation of a Russian conspiracy.

If the Russian authorities were trying to prove that accusations of ‘disinformation activities’ against them were unfounded, EU DisinfoLab campaign served them magnificently to make their point.<sup>18</sup>

The critics of EU DisinfoLab – namely the pro-Russian ones – also emphasise its connections to the United States. EU DisinfoLab itself does this quite blatantly, very much publicising the grants received from American institutions, or institutions seen as close to the United States – such as financing by the Soros group of institutions.

EU DisinfoLab clearly wills to be seen as having a US affiliation by ostensibly using the unique US dating system MM/DD/YYYY in its reports. This dating

---

<sup>16</sup> ‘it all began when we read a publication by the European External Action Service (EEAS) about EP Today syndicating content from RT’ (EU DisinfoLab, 2020, p. 4)

<sup>17</sup> See our above quoted [letter](#).

<sup>18</sup> Sputnik, one of the most important Russian press agencies, by the pen of [Perrotin, M.](#), elected this ‘Russian conspiracy’ as story of the year 2018. The EU DisinfoLab invented conspiracy became therefore the most obvious tool for the Russian authorities to deny EU accusations of disinformation policies.



system is not used in Belgium or elsewhere in Europe as it is typically North American.

The disinformation campaign led by EU DisinfoLab on the 2018 French scandal raises the issue of whether its supposed anti-Russian and pro-American image is something other than a decoy to hide a pro-Islamist stand.<sup>19</sup>

##### 5. New ‘information order’ and freedom of expression

The paper co-authored by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (supported by Google and commissioned by the Council of Europe to ‘First Draft’ and the ‘Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government’), ‘[INFORMATION DISORDER: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making Disorder](#)’ became widely popular in the political and media establishments.

The paper starts with the popular notion that globalisation structurally changed the challenge posed by disinformation.<sup>20</sup>

This premise of the new character of contemporary disinformation is then used to present a variety of classic forms of disinformation as novelties brought by globalisation.

Being co-authored by a confessed partisan of the Iranian theocracy, it unsurprisingly finds no space for a critical view on Islamist disinformation strategies (not mentioned once). Russian disinformation by contrast is considered dozens of times.<sup>21</sup>

Remarkably, these Russian disinformation strategies are almost exclusively considered as export products, that is, in the way they try to influence outside actors, not as regards the way they act domestically.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Our letter to DisinfoLab asking for explanations for this very weird relation between the organisation, its founders, Russia, and the USA, was not answered.

<sup>20</sup> ‘While the historical impact of rumours and fabricated content were well documented, we argue that contemporary social technology means we are witnessing something new: information pollution at a global scale; a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming these ‘polluted’ messages; a myriad of content types and techniques for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content; and breakneck speeds of communication between trusted peers’. (p. 4, executive summary)

<sup>21</sup> Islam is mentioned in four contexts, all of them used to exemplify Islamophobia. The first, page 21 is on France; the second, p. 33 is on the United States; the third, p. 41, is on Myanmar; the last, p.77 is also on the United States.

<sup>22</sup> Among the dozens of references to Russian disinformation targeting Western audiences, there is a single reference, as a quotation, that considers its domestic impact: ‘That said, Russia’s active measures are presumably directed at a domestic audience as much as towards the West: They are

Except for outside influences by Russia, disinformation strategies are overwhelmingly seen as problems resulting from democracy itself.<sup>23</sup>

It considers ‘filter bubbles’<sup>24</sup> – cyber-ways of segmenting reality and tailoring it to the information consumer – as one of the main problems in democratic societies, not as a major consequence of attempts to curtail freedom of expression.

Whereas in a free society an individual may choose to act in specific groups of social media – exactly as in the past he could choose to read specific newspapers or magazines or listen to specific Radio or TV channels – in unfree societies, individuals are prevented from reading, listening, or seeing what the rulers do not want them to, precisely by the installation of ‘filter bubbles’.

However, the report does not consider these ‘filter bubbles’ when imposed by authoritarian powers – only when they are voluntarily chosen by individuals.

It is highly surprising to see democratic institutions endorse this view wherein the free choice of media outlets is considered as a problem, but state imposition of media outlets is not seen as problematic. It is far less surprising to see an ideologue close to a totalitarian system such as the Iranian theocracy endorsing said view. The criticism targeting the ‘information disorder’ seen as an illness of democratic systems be a subtle praising of the ‘information order’ favoured by totalitarian regimes.

The authors of the report quote Jürgen Habermas, who is certainly essential in conceptualising the importance of consensus inherent to democratic systems; however, they do not refer to the fundamental role of political choice.

---

designed to show that Europe and the U.S. are no alternative to Putin’s Russia.’ (p.34)

<sup>23</sup> There are a few minor exceptions. The first is the aforementioned Islamophobia acts in Myanmar; the second regards two of Iran’s neighbours that are routinely viciously attacked by the Iranian regime’s propaganda: Azerbaijan and Bahrain (p.31) and the third refers to autocratic acts of a democratic elected President, Duterte. Otherwise, Chinese disinformation is mentioned in the most positive possible way: ‘Perhaps the most notable of these state actors is China, which has paid people to post millions of fabricated social media posts per year, as part of an effort to “regularly distract the public and change the subject” from any policy-related issues that threaten to incite protests.’ (pp. 30-31). Within democracy, Trump appears to be the reason behind most problems, a view consistent with the toxic polarisation that submerged the country in the last few years – but also consistent with the Iranian-sponsored points of view in the US.

<sup>24</sup> According to [Google’s English dictionary](#): ‘a situation in which an internet user encounters only information and opinions that conform to and reinforce their own beliefs, caused by algorithms that personalize an individual’s online experience.’ In conjunction with these it also considers ‘echo chambers’. Still, according to [Google’s English dictionary](#): ‘an environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered.’

It is useful at this point to recall one of the classic authors of contemporary democratic political thought, Sabrina Petra Ramet. For her ‘democracy is a system based on the principles of political choice and social tolerance’ (Ramet, 1995: 13), and ‘the more political choice and the more social tolerance one finds in a given society, the more democratic a society is; and conversely, the less political choice or the less social tolerance one finds, the less democratic a society is’ (Ramet, 1995: 14).

Delving further in the roots of contemporary democracy we see the acknowledgement of different views and interests within the society and the need to learn how to make them work together in the classic James Madison’s Federal Papers (‘Federalist No. 10’): a ‘well-constructed Union’ would ‘break and control the violence of factions’. By a faction he understood ‘a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community’. Cain and Jones (1987: 14) point out that Madison was convinced ‘that conflicts of interests are inherent in human nature, and he recognized that consequently people fall into various groups. He wanted to avoid a situation in which any one group, with one bundle, as it were, of interests, controlled the decisions of a society’.<sup>25</sup>

The freedom of expression, the recognition of different interests in a society, are backbones of the democratic framework; they are not symptoms of any ‘information disorder’.

In the wake of this movement against ‘information disorder’, the world is witnessing an authoritarian wave of legislation ostensibly focusing on preventing ‘online misinformation’. As Freedom House told us in its 2018 report: ‘Governments around the world are tightening control over citizens’ data and using claims of “fake news” to suppress dissent.’ The situation did not in the least improve afterward as a recent article of the Economist (dated [2021.02.13](#)) explains.

Contrarily to the claims of the movement against ‘information disorder’, ‘Misinformation, misperceptions, and rumors have greater influence on citizen

---

<sup>25</sup> Here, Madison was not only concerned with the risk of ‘the tyranny of the majority’ to protect the minorities but also about the risk of a ‘tyranny of a minority’ (Cain & Jones, 1987: 14).

attitudes and behavior in authoritarian countries than in democracies’ (opening statement of the abstract, [Huang, December, 2017](#)).

As Haifeng Huang ([July, 2015](#) and [December, 2017](#)) notes, whereas most of academic studies focus on the impact of misinformation in democratic countries, these impacts are far more important in authoritarian states, exactly because the independent media, pluralism and respect for values are far better antidotes to misinformation than censorship and regulated ‘truth’.<sup>26</sup>

Democratic societies do face several important challenges in the domain of freedom of expression, the most important being the concentration in a very restricted number of actors the bulk of the power and profits of the information industry at large.

According to Kyle Daily from Axios, in the United States, by [mid-2020](#), four of the five top public traded companies were technology companies (Apple, Amazon, Alphabet and Facebook). As he concluded [Our thought bubble]: ‘The big four companies shape people's lives — what goods they can obtain, what media they're exposed to, how they connect with friends and family, how they understand the world. That's a stunning amount of power to entrust to a handful of companies run by a handful of men.’

As the media became more and more dependent on the internet, [technology companies](#) grabbed an ever larger part of the publicity market on which media used to count on.

More worrying still, these companies are now presenting themselves as the ones who should ultimately control the quality and the veracity of what circulates in their systems; for this purpose, mounting financial systems further control the traditional media, as it is the case with the Google programmes analysed in point 2.

This view slipped into the democratic political establishment. The ‘information order’ proposed by the report goes in the opposite direction of what the democratic

---

<sup>26</sup> The same argument, although with different wording, is made perhaps in a more developed way in the [paper](#) first published on-line in 2015 and later published in print in 2017. The link to the December 2017 paper that we consulted on the 22 of February disappeared soon afterwards. This paper was published after ‘peer-reviewing’ in a completely different shape, full of the typical useless jargon one can find in the activism galaxy and empty of the substantive message it carried originally.

world should do in respect of the three most important actors: (1) technology companies; (2) state and (3) media.

Whereas the report proposes to further empower technology companies to reinforce their control on the information we are provided, democratic societies shall see as a priority the need to limit the power of the oligopoly by these technology companies.

Fortunately, in the United States, in a moment where both sides of the political spectrum overcame toxic polarisation, a Congressional antitrust hearing organised in [July 2020](#) showed how both sides of the house feel uneasy with the dominant power of technology companies, contradicting directly the advice of the Derakhshan/Wardle report.

Whereas the report proposes a larger role for states when searching for ‘information disorder’; supporting ‘quality news’; control Facebook publicity (but why not other social media publicity?); combat ‘fabricated news’ or establishing public service obligations, states should rather give priority to the restriction of the abuse of dominant positions and to the provision of independent regulators.

In one of the clearest threats to freedom of expression, the report proposes media collusion: ‘It makes little sense to have journalists at different news organisations fact-checking the same claims or debunking the same visual content. When it comes to debunking mis- or dis-information, there should be no ‘scoop’ or ‘exclusive’. Thus, we argue that newsrooms and fact-checking organisations should collaborate to prevent duplications of effort and free journalists to focus on other investigations.’

This media collusion would also involve a ‘strategic silence’ (second point).

This ‘information order’ has no place for pluralism; facts should not be seen in different shades and perspectives, there should be a central information authority deciding on what the public should be allowed to know.

Reading this report allows us to understand how it was possible, in the name of the fight against disinformation, to sponsor a disinformation institution such as ‘EU DisinfoLab’.

## 6. Modern disinformation strategies

While disinformation strategies developed by states and powerful interest groups have been common throughout history, the contemporary technological revolution made these more formidable and dangerous. For autocratic states and totalitarian ideologies, it is easier than ever to develop disinformation strategies. Democratic states can also fall prey to these strategies as autocratic states can easily sidestep territorial and other physical barriers. The present technological revolution created a technological oligopoly with a dominant position in the information market. In the case study under analysis, the disinformation campaign conducted by the EU DisinfoLab achieved a high disruptive level only because it was ultimately pushed forward by a powerful oligopoly.

The main target of contemporary disinformation campaigns has been the promotion of toxic polarisation. The phenomenon of polarisation can be described as a measure of the distance – either ideological or social – between different societal groups in a polity (McCoy & Raman, 2016, p. 1). Here, according to Di Maggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996: 692) it is important to be aware that ‘polarization refers to the extent of disagreement, not to the ways in which disagreement is expressed’. As such, polarisation is a ‘neutral concept encompassing and measuring the natural differences within any democracy’ (Stavarakakis & Katsmabekis, 2014; McCoy & Raman, 2016, p. 1).

These political differences or tensions over differing interests, identities, attitudes, or behaviours are essential parts of democracies. In other words, it is the inherent nature of democracy to produce and accommodate cleavages (conflicting positions, interests, and agendas). Consequently, the cleavages need ‘to be managed, not eliminated (McCoy & Raman, 2016, p. 1). This management of cleavages must be done by tempering conflicts with consensus but not by sanctioning political competition (Diamond, 1990: 49). This will have negative impacts on both state and society since an unbalanced management of diverging interests will further entrench cleavages, leading to an intensification of conflict, risking civil peace, and jeopardizing political stability and governance.

Consequently, depending on the management of diverging interests, political polarisation can have constructive (understood as democratic strengthening) as well as deconstructive (understood as democratic erosion) impacts on democracy (see also Somer and McCoy, 2018). It is interesting to refer to Larry Diamond (1990: 49), who highlights that a ‘democracy requires conflict’ but the intensity of conflict

and competition must stay in within ‘carefully defined and universally accepted’ boundaries.

The EU DisinfoLab disinformation manipulates the political and societal discourse surrounding the ‘pluralist, secular-Islamist cleavage’ and the threats related to the emergence of Jihadism aiming at the elimination, not the management of democratic competition; instead of democratic politic polarisation we see political intoxication.

We must take a closer look at the phenomenon of toxic polarisation through a theoretical lens. Given the toxic polarisation’s prominence in contemporary debates, literature provides strikingly little guidance as concerns definitions. The V-Dem Institute (Varieties of Democracy), based at the Department of Political Science in Sweden, defines ‘toxic polarisation’ in its [latest report](#) as an indicator on the polarisation of a society which ‘moves far beyond democracy’s beneficial wrangles over policy and cuts deep into the social fabric of a society’. This toxic polarisation, which Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer also call ‘pernicious polarization’, describes a state and process ‘when a society is split into mutually distrustful “Us vs. Them” camps’ (McCoy & Somer, 2019: 234). Authors point out that the emergence of pernicious polarization ‘is not attributable to any specific underlying social or political cleavage nor any particular institutional makeup’ (McCoy & Somer, 2019: 234). Polarisation in general (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996: 693) and toxic polarisation is ‘multidimensional in character’. One can argue that toxic polarisation emerges from various sources of discontent about social, political and/or economic conditions and occurrences creating cleavages within state and society as well as between common people and political leadership. Such cleavages [like class, ideology, religion, ethnicity, urban-rural, national-cosmopolitan, traditional-modern] usually reflect grievances traditionally sprouting from actual and perceived representation deficits, inequities und inequalities, or cultural clashes, and more increasingly from the interaction between religious versus secular values, beliefs, behaviour and belonging as well as the role of religion should play in public life and national identity which should find here its expression in the ‘pluralist, secular-Islamist cleavage’.

In this context, toxic polarisation rises in importance when political actors pursue partisan interests by using polarising strategies combined with the

instrumentalization of ideological differences and affective evaluations of perceived undesirable trajectories among both the citizenry and political leadership of the targeted polity. As such, it does not come by surprise that toxic polarisation comes across as a ‘noisy incivility in political exchange’<sup>27</sup> using a Manichean language within in moralising, divisive and demonizing discourses (McCoy & Somer, 2019: 244).

Prajak Kongkirati apparently sees the use of a Manichean language as both cause and consequence for the phenomena of entrenching, extraordinarily severe polarisation in polities. This finds its expression in a verbal ‘uncompromising fighting between the “good” and the “bad” producing a divisive discourse (Kongkirati, 2019: 37). The dualistic, moralising character of political interactions is for McCoy and Somer (2019: 244) ‘one of the most notable characteristics of pernicious polarization’. Moreover, they point out that such “black and white categorisations” ascribing to ‘nefarious, often immoral, intentions and demonstrate prejudice and bias against those in the opposing camp’ (McCoy & Somer, 2019: 244).

As outlined above (point 2), cases of disinformation - based on such strategic-political motivation producing toxic polarisation - involving EU DisinfoLab can be identified in at least two occasions. Firstly, in the ‘French campaign’ by the EU DisinfoLab, in which false information was widely circulated concerning an invented Russian disinformation plot. Secondly, EU DisinfoLab downplays the threats created by Jihadism (see point 4). As such, the activities by EU DisinfoLab confirm a phenomenon which [\*The Economist\*](#) describes with following words: ‘Converts to the cause of tackling fake news are often guilty of peddling the stuff themselves’. Here, we need to stress that what the magazine calls ‘Inconvenient truths’ have far reaching, destructive impacts on our polity and the quality of our democracy. Some of the most severe repercussions of the disinformation by EU DisinfoLab can be outlined as follows:

*(1) EU DisinfoLab functions as an essential tool for authoritarian information managements!*

---

<sup>27</sup> A term borrowed from (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996: 692) used here in a reversed conclusion to describe what polarization and toxic polarization is and is not.



Following a type of an ‘Madisonian spirit’ (Cain & Jones, 1987; Ramet, 1995), an analysis of disinformation campaigns by EU DisinfoLab reveals need to protect polities from a ‘new tyranny’ by biased disinformation entrepreneurs. Here, the crux of the matter is that political (responsible and accountable) institutions outsourced the necessary function of detecting disinformation and misinformation – and subsequently ensuring a free flow of ‘clean’ information - essential to provide political choices and contribute to the shaping of interests. This crucial process was outsourced to disinformation entrepreneurs such as EU DisinfoLab. However, the latter, rather than restraining themselves to the goal of detecting disinformation, started not only to influence and control but also manipulate the flow of information.

This creates a sort of information vigilantism which in its final consequence led to a ‘malevolent despotism’ (authoritarianism). This malevolent despotism finds its expression in the political will by disinformation entrepreneurs to decide in an autocratic behaviour what is information, and what is disinformation, and what is misinformation. In other words, disinformation entrepreneurs define what constitutes a clean and thus legitimate ‘information order’ and what constitutes an undesirable ‘disinformation disorder’ which needs to be eliminated.

*(2) EU DisinfoLab’s activities undermines the principle of good governance!*

It is extraordinarily worrying that, as demonstrated in the ‘French 2018 scandal’, the EU DisinfoLab did not only decide what constitutes disinformation and identified alleged subjects (based on manipulated information) but also took illegal measures to punish these alleged subjects. As such, EU DisinfoLab not only absorbed legislative but executive functions as well, undermining the basic notion of separation of powers. Moreover, the fact that crucial segments of mainstream media participated in the formation of an information oligopoly used for the ‘French 2018 campaign’ made the EU DisinfoLab even less subject to any kind of system of checks and balances. As such, the EU DisinfoLab contributes to the weakening of a core principle of (good) governance.

*(3) EU DisinfoLab activities result in the disempowerment of political institutions!*

From a tactical point of view, the strategy by EU DisinfoLab is multi-staged and leads to the disempowerment of political institutions. Firstly, they highlight the existence of an information anarchy, information disorder, or a ‘information pollution at a global scale’ (Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, 2017, September 27). Secondly, they point at the severe impacts of this information pollution which political decision makers need to consider. Third, they convince political decision makers that the polity (society, demos, and political institutions) needs guidance through this emerged polluted information ecosystem which is in a critical stage of disorder. Fourthly, they persuade politicians that they are the (only) adequate partners in addressing the problem of information pollution and can offer a much-required guidance. Fifthly, they manage to gain leverage among the government and bureaucratic circles to win over their trust.

The overall goal of disinformation entrepreneurs is to achieve the ‘interpretive authority’ on what constitutes dis- and misinformation (and subsequently what is credible information) as well gain power over their circulation. Here, it becomes apparent that with the control over the decision on what is legitimate information the EU DisinfoLab gains significant powers to penetrate the production of information as well. Consequently, producers of information are becoming dependent on the goodwill of ‘disinfoLab’s since an information stigmatised as disinformation becomes off-limits.

This means that political decision-makers are outsourcing a key state function to private organisations operating completely outside democratic control, with no need to be being accountable and transparent, neither to legitimate political institutions nor to the people, particularly not to the demos (the sovereign and the only source for democratic legitimate political power). In fact, the EU DisinfoLab effectively functions on behalf of (inter-) governmental institutions. However, although not officially endowed with formal authority, in practice the EU DisinfoLab is performing such powers - and disempowering political institutions.

*(4) EU DisinfoLab’s activities lead to the truncation of political choices, rights, and freedoms, and subsequently function as a catalyst of the process of toxic polarisation undermining the quality of democracy:*

EU DisinfoLab manipulates the discourse on the ‘pluralist, secular-Islamist’ cleavage for the sake of undermining threat perceptions regarding Jihadism, starting

by implying that people expressing their concerns and criticisms regarding Jihadism are ‘Islamophobic’ or from the extreme right, or both. In its worst forms, the strategy includes reputational attacks and character assassinations. The stigmatisation of voices not following the dictate of the mainstream ‘Islamophobia propagandists’ has created circumstances for intense political polarisation.

Moreover, in a situation marked by the exertion of such villainising pejoratives by one or both camps, it will be difficult to develop effective depolarising responses. The strategy unleashes ‘a powerful dynamic of irreconcilable opposition between camps that question or even deny each other’s legitimacy’ as well as the possibility of peaceful coexistence (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019: 7). The latter process is reflected in an ‘acrimonious rivalry’ combined with a ‘strong affective dimension’ on both elite and mass levels.<sup>28</sup> In result, the ‘pluralist, secular-Islamist’ becomes so deeply entrenched that it dominates large parts of the political life and overrides other, crucial socio-political issues.

When polities accept to be structured around such a strong binary division, a meaningful political and societal dialogue on how to ensure religious harmony, and inter-cultural tolerance on one hand and how to tackle Jihadism, extremist Islamism, and attempts to undermine liberal democratic principles on the other hand, appears impossible.

The fact that political decision makers allow biased disinformation entrepreneurs like the EU DisinfoLab to penetrate the establishment increases the perceptions of vulnerability among those who feel excluded and marginalized.

Consequently, disinformation campaigns promoted by biased disinformation entrepreneurs such as the EU DisinfoLab have destabilising impacts on governance systems, amplifying the phenomenon of eroding confidence in the political institutions.

## 7. Recommendations

### 1) Uphold freedom of expression

---

<sup>28</sup> The ‘elite’ is here understood as formal political actors such as political institutions, parties, and politicians as well as lobby organisations and media representatives (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019: 5). The polarisation at the mass level is also described as societal polarisation. The latter includes both the ‘politically informed and engaged public’ as well as the ‘less informed and less engaged public’ (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019: 6).

Freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom of information are the cornerstones of modern liberal democracies and must be the basis of any legal framework on information or ‘information order’ that democratic institutions must uphold.

Whereas the freedom of expression should be limited by human fundamental rights, namely the rights to privacy and dignity, the State should use its powers and authority to limit these in a legal and proportional way – ensuring that its action is structured in a way that ensures the existence of checks and balances and aiming to deflate the toxic polarisation charge of controversies.

Democratic elected representatives either in the Council of Europe or the European Parliament should take firmly on their own hands the political guidelines for defending democracy and freedom of information, not allowing private interests to prescribe any guidelines on these domains.

### 2) Check dominant positions in the information industry

Pluralism in the information industry is fundamental for a healthy, democratic social life, and the present situation characterised by a formidable concentration of power in the hands of technology companies as well as autocratic States that control information should be the major concern.

### 3) Fight against disinformation

The democratic State shall combat any attempts by autocratic States and companies to abuse their dominant position by further controlling media outlets, using industrial mechanisms for interfere in the free flux of information in democratic countries, for promoting disinformation and imposing their views as the only ones admissible.

In this regard, as the EU DisinfoLab case proves, the most dangerous sort of disinformation is the one disguised under ‘information vigilantism’ attire.

References:

- Afshin-Jam MacKay, N. (2018, January 19). Open Letter to the Shorenstein Center at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government [on Hossein Derakhshan]. Campus Watch.  
<https://www.meforum.org/campus-watch/25554/open-letter-to-the-shorenstein-center-at-harvard>
- AskTheEU.org. (n.d.). 'Connection of the EEAS with SAPER VEDERE and EU DisinfoLab'.  
<https://www.asktheeu.org/en/request/5858/response/19134/attach/html/3/Bussels%20Disinfo%20Lab%20Sep%202014.pdf.html>
- Azizi, A. (2018, January 22). Blogger Working Against Dissidents Awarded Harvard Fellowship. Iran Wire.  
<https://iranwire.com/en/features/5108>
- Berruyer, O. (2018, August 20). DisinfoGate: Les puissants partenaires de DesinfoLab et leurs effets... [DesinfoGate: DesinfoLab's powerful partners and their consequences...]. Les Crises, Espace d'Autodéfense Intellectuelle.  
<https://www.les-crises.fr/2-les-puissants-partenaires-de-disinfolab-et-leurs-effets/>
- Brachet, H. (2021, February 20). 'Entretien avec Pierre-André Taguieff, deuxième partie : la posture « islamo-gauchiste » à l'université' [Interview with Pierre-André Taguieff, second part: the 'islamo-leftist' posture at universities]. Marianne.  
<https://www.marianne.net/societe/entretien-avec-pierre-andre-taguieff-deuxieme-partie-la-posture-islamo-gauchiste-a-luniversite?fbclid=IwAR0hxXBz96pmg5f9U0wRmnheR0bL2YUcErxVMUhJQdZKtNdkL0pZGnvf0Cs>
- Call For Conscience. (2018, January 15). Harvard's Shorenstein center to revoke Hossein Derakhshan's fellowship.  
<https://call4conscience.wordpress.com/2018/01/15/first-blog-post/>
- Carothers, T., & O'Donohue, A. (2019). 'Introduction'. In: Carothers, T., O'Donohue, A. (eds.). Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization (pp. 1-13). Brookings Institution Press.

- Casaca, P., & Wolf, S. (eds). (2017). *Terrorism Revisited*. Springer.  
<https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319556895>
- Chemin, A. (2018, July 18). «Le Monde» identifie, sur une vidéo, un collaborateur de Macron frappant un manifestant, le 1er mai, à Paris [‘Le Monde’ identifies on video Macron’s collaborator hitting a protester in Paris on May first]. *Le Monde*.  
[https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/07/18/le-monde-identifie-sur-une-video-un-collaborateur-de-m-macron-frappant-un-manifestant-le-1er-mai-a-paris\\_5333330\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/07/18/le-monde-identifie-sur-une-video-un-collaborateur-de-m-macron-frappant-un-manifestant-le-1er-mai-a-paris_5333330_823448.html)
- Chiavegato, A. (2018, April 11). The Fake News Battle Rages on — and Google Aims to Win. *Linkedin*. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/fake-news-battle-rages-google-aims-win-alexian-chiavegato/?articleId=6389721407084994560>
- Daly, K. (2015, July 24). Big Tech's power, in 4 numbers. *Axios*.  
<https://www.axios.com/big-techs-power-in-4-numbers-de8a5bc3-65b6-4064-a7cb-3466c68b2ea0.html>
- Derakhshan, H. (2006, August 23). Iran Needs Nuclear Weapons. *Washington Post*.  
[https://web.archive.org/web/20080517000223/http://blog.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/hossein\\_derakhshan/2006/08/nuclear\\_iran\\_needed\\_for\\_defens.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20080517000223/http://blog.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/hossein_derakhshan/2006/08/nuclear_iran_needed_for_defens.html)
- Derakhshan, H. (2020, December). Mass personalization of truth. *Niemanlab*.  
<https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/12/mass-personalization-of-truth/>
- Diamond, L. (1990). Three Paradoxes of Democracy. *Journal of Democracy* 1(3), pp. 48-60.
- DiMaggio, P., Evans, & Bryson, B. (1996). Have American's Social Attitudes Become More Polarized? *American Journal of Sociology*, 102(3), pp. 690-755.  
<http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jcampbel/documents/DimaggioEvansBryson.pdf>
- EU DisinfoLab. (2018, August 8). ‘Affaire Benalla LES RESSORTS D'UN HYPERACTIVISME SUR TWITTER [Benalla Case: The consequences of hyper activism on Twitter].  
<https://spark.adobe.com/page/Sa85zpU5Chi1a/>

EU DisinfoLab [@EU DisinfoEU]. (2018, August 8). Certains comptes hyperactifs avaient déjà été identifiés: 2,8% actifs dans les 2 premières heures de Macronleaks; 9,3% avaient propagés au moins 3 rumeurs durant la présidentielle française; 27% étaient présents dans les comptes partageant le plus RT et Sputnik en 2017 [Some hyperactive accounts had already been identified: 2,8% were active during the first 2 hours of Macronleaks; 9,3% had spread at least 3 rumours during the French presidential elections; 27% were present in accounts sharing the RT plus and Sputnik in 2017]. [Tweet]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/DisinfoEU/status/1027078058082291712>

EU DisinfoLab [@DisinfoEU]. (2018, August 9). Bonjour. Le 1er fichier concerne les 55 000 auteurs les plus actifs sur l'affaire Benalla. Le second fichier permettait d'analyser la récurrence de la propagation de désinformations à plusieurs occasions parmi des acteurs hyper-actifs [Good Morning. The first file concerns the 55 000 most active authors regarding the Benalla case. The second file allowed one to analyze the recurrence of disinformation spread among hyperactive authors]. [Tweet]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/DisinfoEU/status/1027468131579703296>

EU DisinfoLab. (2019, June 1). Opening, Benjamin Cazenoves interviewed by Camille François.

[https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Day1\\_OpeningKeynote.pdf](https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Day1_OpeningKeynote.pdf)

EU DisinfoLab. (2020, December 9). Indian Chronicles deep dive into a 15 year operation targeting the EU and UN to serve indian interests.

<https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/indian-chronicles-deep-dive-into-a-15-year-operation-targeting-the-eu-and-un-to-serve-indian-interests>

EU DisinfoLab. (2019). Projects. <https://www.disinfo.eu/projects/>

Europa EU Transparency Register. Profile of Registrant EU DisinfoLab.

<https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/consultation/displaylobbyist.do?id=593474530364-05>

Europe 1. (2018, August 8). Affaire Benalla : aucune preuve d'ingérence russe sur Twitter [The Benalla case: no proof of Russian interference via Twitter].

<https://www.europe1.fr/politique/affaire-benalla-aucune-preuve-dingerence-russe-sur-twitter-3728927>

First Draft. (n.d.) New research shows the successful impact of newsroom collaboration on fighting disinformation.

<https://firstdraftnews.org/id/education/curriculum-resources/page/6/6997/page/11/>

First Draft. (n.d.). About.

<https://firstdraftnews.org/about/>

First Draft. (2017, October 2). First Draft moves to the Shorenstein Center.

<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/fd-shorenstein/>

Freedom House. (2018, October 31). ‘The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism: Fake news, data collection and the challenge to democracy; Governments around the world are tightening control over citizens’ data and using claims of “fake news” to suppress dissent.

<https://freedomhouse.org/article/rise-digital-authoritarianism-fake-news-data-collection-and-challenge-democracy>

Google English Dictionary. Oxford Languages and Google.

<https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

Google News Initiative. Digital News Innovation Fund Impact Report.

<https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/dnifund/report/>

Google News Initiative. 2020 GNI Impact Report.

[https://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/gni\\_impactreport\\_global.pdf](https://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/gni_impactreport_global.pdf)

Girard, E., & Saviana, A. (2018, August 10). Manipulation dans l’affaire Benalla: comment inventer un “complot russe” sur Twitter en quatre actes [Manipulation in the Benalla case: how to make up a ‘Russian plot’ on Twitter in four acts]. Marianne.

<https://www.marianne.net/politique/manipulation-dans-l-affaire-benalla-comment-inventer-un-complot-russe-sur-twitter-en>

Huang, H. (2015, July 24). ‘A War of (Mis)Information: The Political Effects of Rumors and Rumor Rebuttals in an Authoritarian Country’ Published originally online by Cambridge University Press and republished by British Journal of Political Science , Volume 47 , Issue 2 , April 2017 , pp. 283 – 311, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000253>

Huang, H. (2017, December). ‘Misinformation in an Authoritarian Society’. Memo Prepared for the Harvard Chinese Politics Workshop. Retrieved February 22, 2021.



<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/594dd86d1e5b6c229741fc7e/t/5def2149f9cab807680ee3a0/1575952714062/Misinformation+in+an+Authoritarian+Society.pdf>[MC1]

Ingram, M. (2018, March 21). The media today: Google offers news business a \$300 million olive branch. Columbia Journalism Review.

[https://www.cjr.org/the\\_media\\_today/google-news-initiative.php](https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/google-news-initiative.php)

Iroon. (2018, January 23). Quote from Farnaz Fassihi, Senior Writer for The Wall Street Journal.

<https://iroon.com/irtn/quote/3948/please-publicly-clarify-whether-you-knew-about-hossein-derakhshan/>

Jones, S. (2018, June). Combating Information Operations Developing an Operating Concept. Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

<https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/PAE%20Janes%20-%20web%20final%281%29.pdf>

Kongkirati, P. (2019). From Illiberal Democracy to Military Authoritarianism: Intra-Elite Struggle and Mass-Based Conflict in Deeply Polarized Thailand. ANNALS, The American Academy of Political and Social Science (AAPSS), 681, pp. 234-271.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218806912>

Kruger, A. (2019, April 30). Global misinformation experts at UTS. UTS.

<https://www.uts.edu.au/news/education/global-misinformation-experts-uts>

Rev. (2020, July 29). Big Tech Antitrust Hearing Full Transcript July 29. Rev Transcripts.

<https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/big-tech-antitrust-hearing-full-transcript-july-29>

Liccia, D. (2018, August 7). Affaire Benalla: une controverse sous influence? [Benalla case: a manipulated controversy?]. Medium.com.

<https://medium.com/damien-liccia/affaire-benalla-une-controverse-sous-influence-2e495e6025ec>

LobbyFacts.eu. First Draft.

<https://lobbyfacts.eu/representative/0a115a4266f04f3daa4ad25ce4390db7/first-draft>

LobbyFacts.eu. Disinfo Lab.

<https://lobbyfacts.eu/representative/7e7f2e064b054a6a9ba7b1f7d3447b44/disinfo-lab>

Malengreau, D. (2016, April 20). D'où viennent les chiffres de Jan Jambon? [Where do Jan Jambon's numbers come from?] L'Echo.

<https://www.lecho.be/dossier/terrorisme/d-ou-viennent-les-chiffres-de-jan-jambon/9756925.html>

Malt, J. (2015, January). "Janvier 2015: la France éteint les lumières (2015)" [January 2015: France turns off the lights]. Internet Archive.

[https://archive.org/stream/insomniaque\\_2015\\_janvier\\_15/insomniaque\\_2015\\_janvier\\_15\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/insomniaque_2015_janvier_15/insomniaque_2015_janvier_15_djvu.txt)

Maryse, G. (2018, August 10). Affaire Benalla: La CNIL saisie de plaintes liées à l'analyse de tweets par DisinfoLab. [Benalla case: The CNIL collects complaints linked to an analysis of tweets by DisinfoLab]. Le Monde Informatique.

<https://www.lemondeinformatique.fr/actualites/lire-affaire-benalla-la-cnil-saisie-de-plaintes-liees-a-l-analyse-de-tweets-par-disinfo-lab-72545.html>

McCoy, J. & Rahman, T (2016). Polarized Democracies in Comparative Perspective: Toward a Conceptual Framework. Paper prepared for presentation at the International Political Science Association conference, Poznan, Poland, July 23-28.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336830321\\_Polarized\\_Democracies\\_in\\_Comparative\\_Perspective\\_Toward\\_a\\_Conceptual\\_Framework](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336830321_Polarized_Democracies_in_Comparative_Perspective_Toward_a_Conceptual_Framework)

Moniteur Belge, Recherche: N° entreprise: BE679771446 (Saper Vedere)

<http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/tsv/tsvf.htm>

Moniteur Belge, Recherche: N° entreprise: BE685936383 (EU DisinfoLab)

<http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/tsv/tsvf.htm>

Moore-Berg, S., Hameiri, B., & Bruneau, E. (2020). The prime psychological suspects of toxic political polarization. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, pp. 199-204.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352154620300620>

Morrish, L. (2019, April 24). Week One: Setting up our new London headquarters. First Draft.

<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/week-one-setting-up-our-new-london-headquarters/>

- Orsini, A. (2017, April 21). Sur Twitter, les partisans de Le Pen et de Fillon sont les champions des fausses rumeurs [On Twitter, Le Pen and Fillon's followers are the champions of false rumours]. Numerama. <https://www.numerama.com/politique/251234-sur-twitter-les-partisans-de-le-pen-et-de-fillon-sont-les-champions-des-fausses-rumeurs.html>
- Perrotin, M. (2019, January, 7) Best of 2018: BenallaGate, encore un coup des Russes? [Best of 2018: BenallaGate, still another coup of the Russians?]. Sputnik. <https://fr.sputniknews.com/international/201901071039553645-best-of-2018-benallagate-complotisme/>
- Le Point. (2018, August 10). Affaire Benalla: des politiques se plaignent d'apparaître dans une étude statistique [Benalla Case: politicians complain of appearing in a statistical study]. [https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/affaire-benalla-des-politiques-se-plaignent-d-apparaître-dans-une-etude-statistique-10-08-2018-2242791\\_20.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/affaire-benalla-des-politiques-se-plaignent-d-apparaître-dans-une-etude-statistique-10-08-2018-2242791_20.php)
- Ramet, S. P. (1995). Social Currents in Eastern Europe: The Sources and Consequences of the Great Transformation. Duke University Press.
- Reputatio Lab (adm). (2018, July 23). Affaire Benalla sur les réseaux sociaux : où la résurrection des partis de l'opposition [The Benalla Case on social media: where is the resurrection of opposition parties]. <http://www.reputatiolab.com/2018/07/affaire-benalla-reseaux-sociaux-resurrection-partis-de-lopposition/>
- Reputatio Lab. (2019, January 9). Analyse de #jesuischarlie sur les reseaux sociaux (mis à jour) [Analysis of #jesuischarlie on social media (update)]. <http://www.reputatiolab.com/2015/01/analyse-de-jesuischarlie-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux/>
- Reputatio Lab. (2019, January 29). #StopDjihadisme: une communication politique plus qu'une campagne marketing [[#StopDjihadisme: a political communication that is more than a marketing campaign]. <http://www.reputatiolab.com/2015/01/stopdjihadisme-une-communication-politique-plus-quune-campagne-marketing/>

- Rinehart, A. (2017, February 17). CrossCheck Newsroom starts fighting false information in France. First Draft.  
<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/crosscheck-starts/>
- Sargent, J. (2015, January 12). Respecting the eyewitness: Learning lessons from the Paris shootings. First Draft.  
<https://medium.com/1st-draft/respecting-the-eyewitness-learning-lessons-from-the-paris-shootings-a1391a7cbe23>
- Schindler, P. (2018, March 20). The Google News Initiative: Building a stronger future for news. Google Company News.  
<https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/google-news-initiative/announcing-google-news-initiative/>
- Shiravand, F. (2010, October 1). Canada a Safe Haven for The agents of the Islamic Regime in Iran. The Iranian.  
[https://iranian.com/2010/10/01/canada-a-safe-haven-for-the-agents-of-the-islamic-regime-in-iran/?\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk\\_\\_=a0d3d5051b1d2c9740330c8619a538c3de47192d-1613656255-0-AQAhyHxhfx5ZNsf4iLIAU9BDp8XxoLjII52At88r\\_UONCgHvYgbavC\\_TrybbtQJAK1zso--U-j1Suw9JiF4C1irtI6qLpEsyFdq-Mg08agLp-fzLy8gcUmrkP8hYYYYVImt0ztuIytUp682sLDa573JFvsYmez70kkSFOcGUa-sYsViyazMFTJW1hCkJgKA6poxfWrXweahIW7JrOyrgnN4fzSTapBy54CZySONqmvqBXUSBvMzxCMMtgKRyf4UfyT9XZwC1DVLdGw9zeSn7yJECHu3VUM0c1ElXaO\\_5x7g\\_dkByHzU8e2B5lScfzGI96Y2jVOGuVKJTZIZ10uSyt1sAsPXHAJL\\_xMEBpW3lRa5NE-h4bI6PPrfIhVxzSsh8XMKTGSCkCd8lpDPF88yXrkc](https://iranian.com/2010/10/01/canada-a-safe-haven-for-the-agents-of-the-islamic-regime-in-iran/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=a0d3d5051b1d2c9740330c8619a538c3de47192d-1613656255-0-AQAhyHxhfx5ZNsf4iLIAU9BDp8XxoLjII52At88r_UONCgHvYgbavC_TrybbtQJAK1zso--U-j1Suw9JiF4C1irtI6qLpEsyFdq-Mg08agLp-fzLy8gcUmrkP8hYYYYVImt0ztuIytUp682sLDa573JFvsYmez70kkSFOcGUa-sYsViyazMFTJW1hCkJgKA6poxfWrXweahIW7JrOyrgnN4fzSTapBy54CZySONqmvqBXUSBvMzxCMMtgKRyf4UfyT9XZwC1DVLdGw9zeSn7yJECHu3VUM0c1ElXaO_5x7g_dkByHzU8e2B5lScfzGI96Y2jVOGuVKJTZIZ10uSyt1sAsPXHAJL_xMEBpW3lRa5NE-h4bI6PPrfIhVxzSsh8XMKTGSCkCd8lpDPF88yXrkc)
- Somer, M., McCoy, J. (2018). Déjà vu? Polarization and endangered democracies in the 21st century. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), pp. 3–15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818058>
- South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF). (2021). Disinformation attack.  
<https://www.sadf.eu/disinformation-attack/>
- Stavrakakis, Y., & Katsambekis, G. (2014). Left wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19(2), pp. 119-142.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266>

The Economist. (2020, June 27). The advertising business is becoming less cyclical—and more concentrated.

<https://www.economist.com/business/2020/06/25/the-advertising-business-is-becoming-less-cyclical-and-more-concentrated>

The Economist. (2021, February 13). Censorious governments are abusing “fake news” laws.

<https://www.economist.com/international/2021/02/13/censorious-governments-are-abusing-fake-news-laws>

The Guardian. (2021). Profile: Hossein Derakhshan.

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/hosseinderakhshan>

Trippenbach, I. (2018, August 3). Affaire Benalla: l’activisme de la «russosphere» sur Twitter intrigue [The Benalla Case: the ‘russiansphere’s activism on Twitter is intriguing]. L’Opinion.

<https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/politique/affaire-benalla-l-activisme-russosphere-twitter-intrigue-158352>

V-Dem (2020, March). Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg.

[https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy\\_report.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20dcc53dba/democracy_report.pdf)

Vanderbiest, N. [@Nico\_VanderB]. (2018, August 8). [#AffaireBenalla](#) Il y avait bien 1 % des acteurs qui a produit 47 % du contenu en prenant les retweets compris. (3378 individus pour 2163 000 tweets) Le volume reste exceptionnel même sans ces hyper-actifs [[#AffaireBenalla](#) 1% of participants produced 47% of content including all retweets (3378 individuals produced 2163 000 tweets). The volume is exceptional even if we discount hyperactive accounts]. [Tweet]. Twitter.

[https://twitter.com/Nico\\_VanderB/status/1027080054189252608](https://twitter.com/Nico_VanderB/status/1027080054189252608)

Vilars, T. (2018, August 9). ‘Etude sur les tweets dans l’affaire Benalla : DisinfoLab se défend de tout “fichage politique” [Study on tweets linked to the Benalla Case: DisinfoLab denies any ‘political profile’]. L’Obs.

<https://www.nouvelobs.com/les-internets/20180809.OBS0727/etude-sur->

[les-tweets-dans-l-affaire-benalla-disinfolab-se-defend-de-tout-fichage-politique.html](#)

- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017, September 27). Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe report, DGI (2017). <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>
- Wardle, C. (2017, November 16). La recherche sur les journalistes et les lecteurs de CrossCheck suggère un impact positif pour le projet. First Draft. <https://fr.firstdraftnews.org/crosscheckrecherche-qualitative/>

## Correspondence

EU DisinfoLab  
To the attention of Mr Alexandre  
ALAPHILIPPE, Director of  
publication and Executive Director  
Rue Maurice Wilmotte, 17

B - 1060 BRUXELLES

Brussels, 22 February 2021

by e-mail ([info@disinfo.eu](mailto:info@disinfo.eu))

Dear Sir,

Concerns : EU DisinfoLab's Disinformation activity

Following the disinformation operation through which you targeted SADF, (<https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/indian-chronicles-deep-dive-into-a-15-year-operation-targeting-the-eu-and-un-to-serve-indian-interests/>), we conducted a research on your past activities.

Before we publish these, we would be grateful if you could clarify the following points:

1. Prior to 2017, did your founding members produced« any statement or declaration on Russian disinformation activities, or Russian policies in general?
2. Can you explain why, between 27 July and 8 August, 2018, you produced an enormous number of tweets on Russia's supposed involvement in the so-called 'Benalla Affair' - while on 8 of August, you suddenly denied having done so and even claimed this issue was out of your mandate?
3. Can you explain why you use the American dating system of your reports, although your organization is based in Belgium?

Yours sincerely,



Paulo Casaca  
Executive director, SADF

FIRST DRAFT  
London

Brussels, 22 February 2021

by e-mail ([info@firstdraftnews.com](mailto:info@firstdraftnews.com))

Dear Sirs

**Concerns : First Draft's DisinfoLab projects**

While searching for data regarding EU DisinfoLab's disinformation activities, we came across references on your involvement with DisinfoLab's projects. Thus, according to a [Google](#) declaration produced in March 2018 : 'We're launching the Disinfo Lab alongside the First Draft to combat mis- and disinformation during elections and breaking news moments.'

However, we could not find much information either from your side or from Google on these DisinfoLab projects.

Therefore, we would be much obliged if you could clarify the connection between your DisinfoLab projects and EU DisinfoLab's activities.

We are particularly interested in the EU DisinfoLab's disinformation campaign on a Russian plot to inflame the so-called 'Benalla scandal' in France in 2018.

Yours sincerely

  
Paulo Casaca  
Executive Director SADF

19 Avenue des Arts 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium  
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles  
Email: [info@sadf.eu](mailto:info@sadf.eu) Web: [www.sadf.eu](http://www.sadf.eu)