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NEWS INFORMATION AND CIRCULATION DYNAMICS IN FRENCH IMMIGRATION DEBATES

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News information and circulation dynamics in French immigration debates

Katharina Tittel[1]

Introduction

"Fake news", "infox" or "intox"[2] around immigration are a contentious issue in France.[3] While stories that were not quite true have existed and been propagated by newspapers long before the current preoccupation with "fake news" (Tucher 2022), the concern that their circulation on social media may significantly alter their effect has catapulted the topic on top of policymakers' agendas.[4] Moreover, cases where false information has real-world consequences regularly emerge. For instance, a video falsely depicting violence attributed to migrants in Calais, which actually originated from a protest in Israel, circulated widely in 2019, garnering over 2 million views on the Internet. The case sparked considerable attention, and the municipality of Calais even contemplated legal action in response.[5] Also in 2019, a rumor spread on social media making unfounded claims that Roma are involved in child abductions in the Paris region, accompanied by threats of violence. The authorities quickly denied these rumors and called for an end to their propagation. Despite lacking evidence, the rumor gained traction online and led to attacks on individuals from the Roma community, [6] based on false information and relying on centuries old stereotypes of Roma kidnapping children (Okely 2014; Stojanoski 2020).

Beyond fabricated or altered stories propagated by dubious sources, elected officials have also come under scrutiny for disseminating false information. For instance, far-right Rassemblement National deputy Julien Odoul has faced accusations of spreading inaccurate information, exemplified by statements regarding the costs associated with

unaccompanied foreign minors which he incorrectly stated as being higher than the public spending for families in the department Yonne.[7]

As a response to the threat posed by mis- and disinformation[8], a number of initiatives have been developed, including fact-checking efforts concentrated on immigration[9]. Increasingly, however, the effectiveness of fact-checking[10] as well as the prevalence and impact of online misinformation has been questioned (e.g. Altay, Berriche, and Acerbi 2023), renewing the importance of investigating the link between (dis)information and the larger media and political ecosystem. This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by conducting an analysis of the news information and circulation dynamics related to immigration. It aims to provide an overview over patterns of misinformation and disinformation related to immigration in the French (social) media context, and investigate media ecosystem dynamics and how they relate to deeper societal issues and the socio-political context. By examining the relationship between mainstream and fringe media sources on X (formerly Twitter), it seeks to understand how different actors contribute to the dissemination of immigration-related information on the platform.

The paper begins by reviewing existing literature on the connection between information and immigration attitudes and briefly introducing Stuart Hall's conceptualization of encoding/ decoding which posits that media messages are encoded with dominant ideologies by producers but are decoded differently by audiences based on their backgrounds. It then presents examples of mis- and disinformation in both the French and larger European contexts, relying on Claire Wardle's typology to categorize and analyze different forms of false or misleading content. Subsequently, the paper presents an empirical analysis of the French X debate around immigration as a case study to better understand how circulation of immigration-related (dis)information is situated in the larger French media ecosystem, encompassing both major authoritative news media and alternative sources producing dubious or false information. It shows: 1) A significant disparity in the circulation of content from fringe far-right outlets compared to mainstream media sources within the discourse on immigration on X, suggesting that is a serious issue contributing to information disorders, and, 2) That diverse audiences share sources that interpret the same facts in radically different manners, showing how messages imbued with dominant ideologies are variously

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[7] https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/bourgogne-franche-comte/yonne/mineurs-isoles-pourquoi-chiffres-donnes-julien-odoul-sont-inexacts-1881374.html

[8] Disinformation is understood as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit"—the definition used by the European Commission to differentiate it from incorrect information which is not deliberately deceptive ("misinformation") https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation

[9] In the French context, for example Desinfox Migrations

[10] e.g. fact-checker Julien Pain raises the question "Contredire des chiffres est-il suffisant pour faire évoluer le débat public ?" https://www.icmigrations.cnrs.fr/2022/04/02/medias-migrations-cr-tr1

interpreted by audiences based on their societal positions, and 3) That political actors from across the ideological spectrum heavily rely on official statistics and numbers to support fundamentally different narratives even around most controversial theories like the "grand remplacement". The analysis suggests that interventions must go beyond a content-centered focus and investigate the interests, motivations and backgrounds of both actors who produce immigration-related information and the communities who engage with this information.

Information & Immigration

Previous research has yielded conflicting results regarding the influence of disinformation on shaping public discourse and political attitudes, both in general and specifically concerning immigration. While some argue for the need for more accurate information, citing the correlation between overestimations of the number of immigrants in a country and negative opinions on immigration, others not only call into question the potential cognitive mechanism behind this, but also show that interventions with factual information can backfire, particularly among strong partisans.

The effect of information remains contested, as evidenced by a range of experimental studies attempting to gauge the impact of fact-based treatments on political views and policy preferences (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021; Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva 2018; Barrera et al. 2020; Grigorieff, Roth, and Ubfal 2020). While some people with negative views on immigration can become more supportive of immigration if their misperceptions about the characteristics of the foreign-born population are corrected (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021; Grigorieff, Roth, and Ubfal 2020; Wood and Porter 2019), others resist correct information (Kuklinski et al. 2000; Lawrence and Sides 2014). Accurate information about immigrant populations may reduce misconceptions (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021; Grigorieff, Roth, and Ubfal 2020), but this does not reliably shift perceptions on immigration (Hopkins, Sides, and Citrin 2019), policy conclusions or support for far-right candidates (Barrera et al. 2020; Lawrence and Sides 2014) or attitudes towards social welfare policies (Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva 2018).

Moreover, correct information is sometimes inaccurately recalled, is processed in a manner that entrenches pre-held beliefs, or has unintended counterproductive effects, such as the "backfire effect" in which corrections actually increase misperceptions among the group in question (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Moreover, the effects may differ on individuals' previous preferences. For instance, while individuals with strong partisan biases might acknowledge the facts presented to them, they often do so selectively, aligning them with their preferred worldviews, seizing on and producing attributional arguments that fit their

perspective (Bisgaard 2019). This points to the likelihood that those with deeply ingrained misconceptions and biases are especially immune to corrections based on facts. Hopkins, Sides, and Citrin (2019) in seven survey experiments over 11 years find that providing accurate information does little to affect attitudes toward immigration, even though it does reduce the perceived size of the foreign-born population. This is true even when people's misperceptions are explicitly corrected. Misperceptions about the size of minority groups may be a consequence, rather than a cause, of attitudes toward those groups.

Hence, the impact of information on attitudes toward immigration is complex and varies depending on individual predispositions, the framing of information, and contextual factors. Despite efforts to correct factually false information, entrenched beliefs and selective interpretation of facts continue to shape public discourse on immigration. These challenges call into question the efficacy of corrective measures and highlight the complexity of the relationship between information and attitudes toward immigration.

Recognizing the complexities inherent in the relationship between information and attitudes toward immigration underscores the pivotal role of media in shaping public discourse. The challenges of correcting misconceptions and the mixed efficacy of fact-checking initiatives invite a deeper exploration of how information is not merely transmitted but actively constructed and interpreted within the media landscape. In this regard, Stuart Hall's conceptualization of encoding and decoding offers a theoretical lens through which we can understand the complexity of media message transmission and reception.

Encoding/ Decoding
Stuart Hall's (1973) theory of encoding and decoding describes how the same information can be read, used, and interpreted in numerous ways. Hall proposes that media messages are encoded with dominant ideologies by producers but are decoded differently by audiences based on their social, cultural, and ideological backgrounds. This theoretical framework is essential for understanding why the same piece of information can reinforce entrenched beliefs for some, while for others, it may serve as a basis for critical questioning or outright rejection.

Hall's model delineates three hypothetical positions from which media messages can be decoded: the dominant (or preferred) reading, the negotiated reading, and the oppositional reading. This framework can help explain the divergent framings and interpretations of content shared on platforms like X, where users with varying political affiliations engage with 'facts' mobilized by different actors. By applying Hall's encoding/decoding model, we can

better analyze the multifaceted ways in which information related to immigration is presented, engaged with, and understood within different segments of the population. This approach allows us to explore beyond the surface level of information dissemination and examine the encoding and decoding processes that mediate the relationship between media messages and audience perceptions.

Different types of dis-/ misinformation

While a lot of attention has been given to the term "fake news", scholars distinguish between three overarching categories of information disorder that differ according to their falseness and their intent to harm. To capture a range of contents related to what she calls "information disorders", Claire Wardle (2020) distinguishes between disinformation, misinformation and malinformation. Disinformation refers to intentionally false content intended to cause harm, often motivated by political interests or a desire to sow discord. Misinformation, on the other hand, consists of false or misleading information shared unknowingly, without malicious intent. Malinformation describes genuine information used to cause harm.

To illustrate the types of contents that fall under the different categories, we rely on Claire Wardle's typology of mis- and disinformation and give contemporary examples related to the French or wider European context and immigration debates. According to her scheme, there are seven types along a spectrum ranging from satire and parody; false connections; false claims; false context; imposter; manipulated; and false content.

Satire or Parody describes content that is satirical or comedic in nature but may be mistaken for genuine news. For instance, in 2023, an account on TikTok claimed that job centers across Germany are closing for a day so that Ukrainian refugees can collect a bonus payment of 250 euros per person there. More than a million people saw the video, and many reacted with outrage. While the original post is supposed to be satire, it is difficult to recognize as such and some viewers misinterpreted the post as genuine news, leading to confusion and controversy.[11]

False Connection occurs when the sources, visuals and links are false and do not support the content. For example, in 2017, during the French presidential election campaign, a far-right candidate shared a video on social media claiming to show a Muslim migrant attacking a nurse in a French hospital perpetrating an "anti-white" racist attack. However, the

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[11] https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2023/04/14/nein-ukrainische-gefluechtete-erhalten-keinen-250-euro-bonus-vom-jobcenter/

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video was later debunked as showing a Russian man attacking two Russian women in a hospital in northwest Russia.[12]

Misleading content involves information that is factually accurate but presented in a way that distorts its meaning. For instance, in 2023, a major German newspaper, Bild, published statistics about social assistance received by different segments of society, by nationality, and altered versions of the visualization widely circulated on social networks, notably of AfD politicians. While based on correct numbers, the visualization suggests that the largest share of social aid is received by Ukrainians and paints a distorted picture as they exclude the number of German welfare recipients, giving the impression that foreigners benefit excessively from it.[13] Another example is the widespread circulation of misleading information about the "Pacte de Marrakech" (Marrakech Pact), a non-binding agreement on global migration signed by Emmanuel Macron in 2018. The far-right in France misrepresented the pact as a precursor to mass migration, using exaggerated claims. The narrative originated from fringe sources like Polémia and YouTube conspiracy channels, and spread through social media and far-right websites. Additionally, one of the most well-known figures of the French "gilets jaunes" movement, Maxime Nicolle, mentioned it in a Facebook live session, and a petition to oppose it has gathered over 110,000 signatures to date.[14] Political actors, including Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National, amplified the narrative.[15]

False Context occurs when content is shared with misleading contextual information. In 2023, in the context of countrywide protests in France after the killing of Nahel, an immigrant-origin youth killed by the police, Hindu nationalist accounts, which often spread misinformation targeting Muslims, shared a video claiming to show the ongoing unrest, but it was actually taken from a movie.[16] In the same context, in several countries, fake stories resurfaced old videos and photos, presenting them as related to the protests following Nahel's killing. One example is the video of a car depot fire which was shared with the caption "Antifa criminals and second and third-generation Moroccan and African immigrants born in France burn down a parking lot with thousands of cars", but the fire actually occurred in Australia.[17]

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[12] https://observers.france24.com/en/20170323-no-internet-man-hitting-nurse-not-migrant
[13] https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/hintergrund/2023/08/31/buergergeld-irrefuehrender-grafik-fehlt-kontext-zu-quoten-von-gefluechteten/
[14] https://www.konbini.com/news/macron-va-vendre-la-france-le-pacte-de-marrakech-la-nouvelle-fake-news-en-vogue/
[15] https://www.liberation.fr/les-intox/2019/02/14/pacte-de-marrakech-la-trajectoire-d-une-fake-news_1709464/
[16] https://observers.france24.com/en/europe/20230704-france-riots-protests-nahel-shooting-misinformation-debunked
[17] https://www.francetvinfo.fr/vrai-ou-fake/vrai-ou-fake-violences-apres-la-mort-de-nahel-on-a-retrace-l-origine-de-fausses-informations-qui-ont-circule-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-lors-des-emeutes_5928500.html
https://edmo.eu/2023/07/06/exaggeration-racism-and-xenophobia-characterize-disinformation-on-the-demonstrations-in-france/

Imposter Content is fabricated information presented as originating from reputable sources. For example, in 2022, with regards to the situation of Ukrainian refugees in several host countries, accounts posing as local Polish news accounts published false content about refugees and stories claiming that they were responsible for a spike in crime rates. An analysis of the sources by the Polish fact-checking project Demagog, part of the EDMO network, revealed that these accounts were set up by e-mail addresses with a Russian domain.[18]

Manipulated Content involves genuine content that has been altered or manipulated to deceive. Examples range from altered photos where details are inserted or removed to AI-altered videos where both visuals and voices may be manipulated. Their contentiousness is illustrated by a recent controversy surrounding media manipulation of images depicting migrants drowning at sea. Users on social media claimed that these images were edited or staged by journalists to raise awareness about migrant issues. However, fact-checks later revealed that the photos were not manipulated as suggested.[19]

Fabricated Content constitutes completely false information created to cause harm or provoke a reaction. An example is illustrated by the false rumor that there would be 7 million Algerians in France, which far-right internet users and websites have used to argue that the number of Muslims in France is vastly underestimated. This claim was supposedly based on a statement by the French ambassador to Algeria, but investigations showed the ambassador never made such a statement. The only official figures available indicate that there were 476,000 Algerian nationals in France in 2013, not accounting for descendants who are often French by birth. With regards to the number of French residents who are Muslim—who are not counted as the French law prohibits the census of people by religion---estimates based on surveys suggest there are about 3.6 million people of "Muslim culture" in France, with around 3 million practitioners, aligning with other recent estimates ranging from 2 million to 5 million Muslims, depending on the definitions and methods used.[20]

Beyond these examples where factuality can be established through fact-checks, there exist several grey areas between outright falsehoods and fact-based news coverage in which accurate figures or facts are used selectively to advance specific agendas – referred to by

[18] https://edmo.eu/2022/04/05/ukrainian-refugees-and-disinformation-situation-in-poland-hungary-slovakia-and-romania/
[19] https://observers.france24.com/fr/20180824-intox-medias-manipulation-images-sensibiliser-migrants
[20] https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/09/22/la-fausse-rumeur-des-7-millions-d-algeriens-en-france_5001751_4355770.html

Claire Wardle as "malinformation". Malinformation is frequently overlooked by a narrow focus on falseness and its detection is complicated by the difficulty to define "intent to harm", as this question is likely not interpreted in the same way by actors with different intentions.

To get a better understanding of the context in which different information circulates and gets diffused online and how different contents around immigration relate to a larger ecosystem and the particular interests of different actors, we zoom out and investigate sources sharing in the French X discourse around immigration as a case study.

Data & Method

In France, trust in traditional media is among the lowest in Europe: only 29% of French adults say they trust most news media most of the time (Antheaume 2022). Factors such as perceived bias and concerns about media ownership and influence contribute to this trend. Readers are particularly unsatisfied with French media's coverage of immigration, compared to other issues like the economy or crime (Sumida, Walker, and Mitchell 2019). People on the far-left and right end of the political spectrum in France are least likely to trust the media (Sumida et al, 2019). Similar to other countries, news avoidance has increased in recent years and 36% of French say they often or sometimes avoid the news (Newman et al. 2022). In this context of low trust, high choice, and increased relevance of online content, it is particularly relevant to understand the patterns of information sharing on various platforms around divisive issues.

X (formerly Twitter) plays a significant role in France, serving as a popular social media platform for news sharing and political discourse. Even though among the general public, Facebook or Instagram are more widely used (Newman et al. 2022), X plays a central role in breaking news and influencing media and political agendas. News organizations, journalists, and individuals often use Twitter to report on events, share updates, provide commentary on current affairs and disseminate news in real-time. It has become a source for breaking news and a means for journalists to engage with their audience directly. Among the wider French public, 40% of people access news on social media, and 9% report sharing news on Twitter specifically (Newman et al. 2022). Another practical reason for us to focus on X was the possibility to access its data.

Data

We collected immigration-related tweets in October 2021 covering the period from May 2020 to September 2021. The data collection was conducted using the minet tool (Plique et al. 2021). Tweets were captured based on keyword searches targeting terms such as

"(im)migrant(s)," "(im)migration," "asile," "mineur isolé," and "réfugié(s)." These terms were chosen to encompass a wide range of topics within the immigration debate, from general discussions to specific issues like asylum and unaccompanied minors.

This approach resulted in a dataset comprising 1.16 million tweets (excluding retweets) posted by 250,956 unique users during the specified timeframe.

In addition, we use a dataset of all tweets in French that contain hyperlinks in the period 01.-09.2022 as a baseline, for comparison with the prevalence of certain sources in the migration-related data. This dataset was also collected using collection and scraping software minet.

Methodology

Source sharing

To analyze the sources referred to in the tweets via hyperlinks, we implemented a coding process. Initially, we expanded shortened URLs, such as bit.ly and Google links, using the 'resolve' function in minet (Plique et al. 2021). This step enabled us to access the full URLs associated with each hyperlink. Subsequently, we extracted the domains of the full URLs for further investigation. In news consumption studies, this restriction to domain-level analysis instead of coding actual contents at the article-level is a common approach to classify online contents (e.g. Stier et al. 2020; Stocking, Barthel, and Grieco 2018).

By examining the sources referenced in tweets, we aimed to gain insights into the types of content shared and the sources' credibility or influence within the discourse. Analyzing domains rather than individual tweet contents allows for a broader understanding of the online information ecosystem surrounding immigration discourse. We conduct a simple analysis of the most frequently shared domains by number of tweets, retweets and the number of users who shared the respective source.

Ideological orientation of users

To gauge the ideological stances of Twitter users, we followed the methodology outlined by (Ramaciotti Morales et al. 2023), tailored for Twitter data and focused around the time of immigration-related tweets. Users who followed at least three French MPs on Twitter in October 2020, had a minimum of 25 followers and published at least 100 tweets, were included in our analysis. These criteria, derived from Ramaciotti Morales et al. (2023) and also utilized in other studies such as those by Barberá (2015) and Barberá et al. (2015) were chosen to focus on active accounts that have some minimal visibility and follow enough MPs

to relatively reliably ensure that they have some political interest. The approach to estimate users' ideological leanings aims to inform understanding of how ideology intersects with the dissemination of immigration-related content.

The process involves two main steps: ideological scaling or embedding, and political attitude mapping onto reference scales. In the first step, we estimated ideal points on a latent scale for both MPs and their followers based on their Twitter following network, akin to the approach by Barbera et al. (2015). The second step involved mapping users' ideological positions onto the Left-Right dimension of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). This survey provides positions of European parties along various ideological dimensions, including Left-Right positions. We utilized a linear regression to map the latent scale positions to the CHES Left-Right dimension, enabling us to estimate the ideological position of each user in our dataset. This enabled us to assign a position estimate on the Left-Right scale to each user. The CHES Left-Right scale ranges from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right) for parties, with 5 representing the center. While the CHES scale was designed for parties, our dataset includes MPs and users who may have more extreme positions.[21]

Our analysis aims to first identify the most highly circulating media sources, and the profiles of users sharing them.

Findings

Disparity in Content Circulation: Fringe Far-Right Outlets vs. Mainstream Media

Our analysis reveals a significant disparity in the circulation of content from fringe far-right outlets compared to mainstream media sources within the discourse on immigration. Despite being shared by a relatively small number of users, fringe outlets such as fdesouche.com exhibit disproportionately high levels of circulation, particularly in terms of retweets. In contrast, legacy media outlets like Le Monde and Le Figaro, although frequently shared by users, experience limited circulation relative to their prominence.

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[21] It is important to note that this approach may position users who follow accounts on both ideological ends in the center, even if they follow such accounts for surveillance rather than due to a centrist orientation. Nevertheless, this variable provides valuable insights into users' political tendencies. Ramaciotti (2023) confirmed the correlation between self-declared left/right orientation and the rescaled left/right orientation indicator based on following relationships.

Figure 1: Most frequently circulating news sources shared in immigration-related tweets
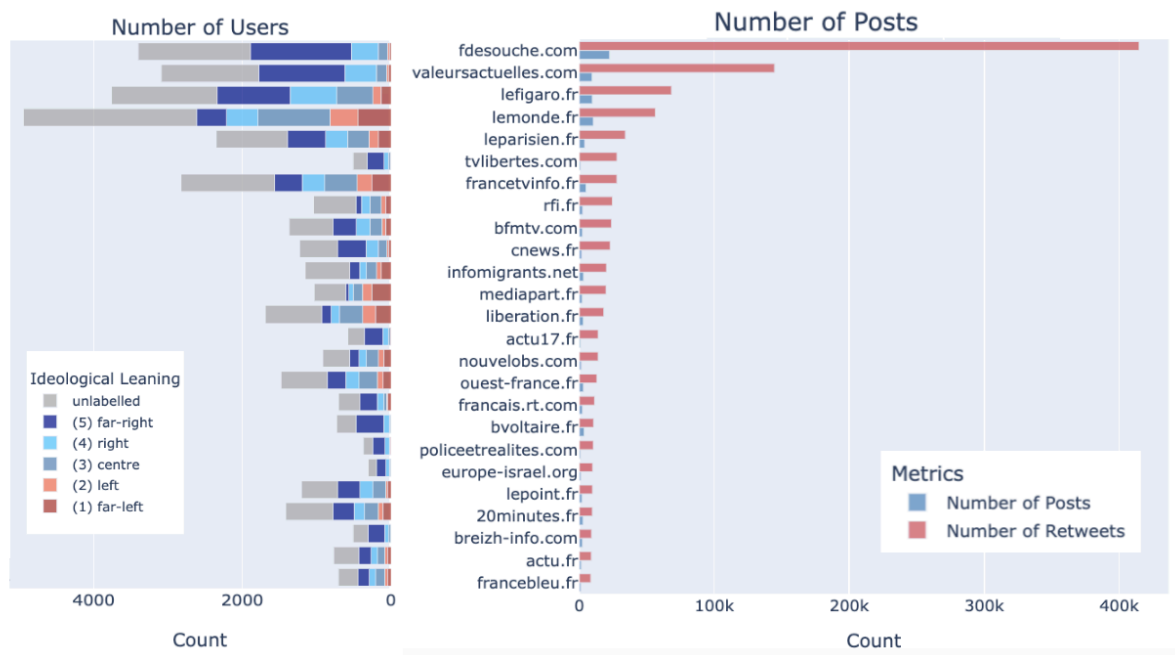
As shown in figure 1, the website fdesouche.com stands out as the most widely shared source, with 22.4k original tweets related to immigration containing URLs linking to this site during the specified period, surpassing all other outlets by more than double. This dominance is even more pronounced in terms of retweets: fdesouche.com garnered more than 414k retweets, constituting 21% of all retweets received by sources in the study. Fdesouche.com presents itself as a 'press review focusing on security, French politics, and communitarianism.'[22] The name 'Fdesouche' originates from 'Francais de souche,' colloquially referring to native or indigenous French people, suggesting a focus on issues related to French identity and nationalism. Established in 2005, before the widespread adoption of social media, the site initially started as an individual blog recounting the life of a 'Français de souche' in Paris. The platform aggregates news articles, opinion pieces, and videos from various sources, often highlighting topics such as immigration, crime, terrorism, and cultural conflicts.

Notably, fringe outlets not only propagate 'alternative' news but, to a large extent, rely on the same data as mainstream outlets. For instance, while Fdesouche.com has been accused to disseminate information from unreliable sources,[23] such as false information claiming that

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[22] https://www.fdesouche.com/, accessed Feb 21, 2024
[23] an analysis of the fact-checking group Les Décodeurs has identified fdesouche.com as one of the sites circulating most false information
https://www.lemonde.fr/le-blog-du-decodex/article/2017/09/08/sushis-vaccins-et-viande-humaine-le-palmares-des-fausses-infos_5182743_5095029.html

40,000 migrants sleep in hotels every night,[24] overall, the site mostly relays information from traditional media outlets like BFM TV, Libération, or Le Monde.[25]

Our analysis also reveals a significant mismatch between the number of users posting content from different sources, the frequency of original tweets containing these sources, and their circulation through retweets. For example, although a mainstream outlet like center-left Le Monde is used by the highest number of users and appears in numerous tweets following Fdesouche.com, its reach through retweets is comparatively limited. In contrast, rightist outlets like valeursactuelles.com and even Le Figaro enjoy higher levels of retweet circulation, despite being less frequently used by users. This indicates a notable disparity in the dissemination of content between traditional legacy outlets and (far)right sources, with the latter being disproportionately represented in immigration-related discourse.

Further analysis reveals that although users across the political spectrum engage in the X discourse on immigration, those who actively share content from specific sources tend to have a rightist ideological leaning. In fact, as shown in the left panel of figure 1, of the most circulating sources, only Mediapart, Liberation and LeMonde are shared more widely by leftist users than by rightist ones. Except for these outlets, all other sources are more widely shared by rightist users. Centrist users, even though the most numerous group, are much less actively posting sources, pointing towards a more passive role in the online discourse. This suggests that the online space functions as an alternative arena where far-right users, perhaps feeling marginalized from mainstream discourse, find and amplify voices that resonate with their views.

Finally, the presence of alternative news sources such as Breizh-info.com and Bvoltaire.com is significant, as they represent a skepticism towards mainstream media, positioning themselves as the bearers of truth in opposition to what they perceive as biased 'media correctness'. As shown in figure 2, these sources are relatively more frequently shared in the immigration-related X discourse compared to the general French X discourse, along with ripostelaique, the French version of the now banned Russian channel RT (Russia Today), CNews, and the information website infomigrants. This overrepresentation is in line what is known to be their hyperfocus on immigration. Bvoltaire positions itself as an alternative news

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[24]
https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/03/16/les-mille-et-une-ruses-de-l-industrie-de-la-desinformation_5095635_4355770.html
[25]
https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/03/16/les-mille-et-une-ruses-de-l-industrie-de-la-desinformation_5095635_4355770.html

outlet for conservative perspectives, emphasizing its commitment to reliability, meticulous verification of facts and providing alternative information free from what it considers mainstream media bias.[26] Breizh-info.com, presenting as a local outlet from Brittany, claims to offer news overlooked by mainstream media, criticizing what it sees as deliberate labeling of dissenting views as 'fake news' (on its website's call for donations, it states: "Do you know the real definition of a 'fake news'? It's information that bothers Libération and all the titles of the Official Great Press").[27] The outlet heralds the internet as a free alternative to state-financed press "where journalists are practically civil servants, concerned never to blaspheme against the State, this master who keeps them on a leash through public subsidy?" [28]

Figure 2: Top Domains shared in French immigration-related vs general discourse
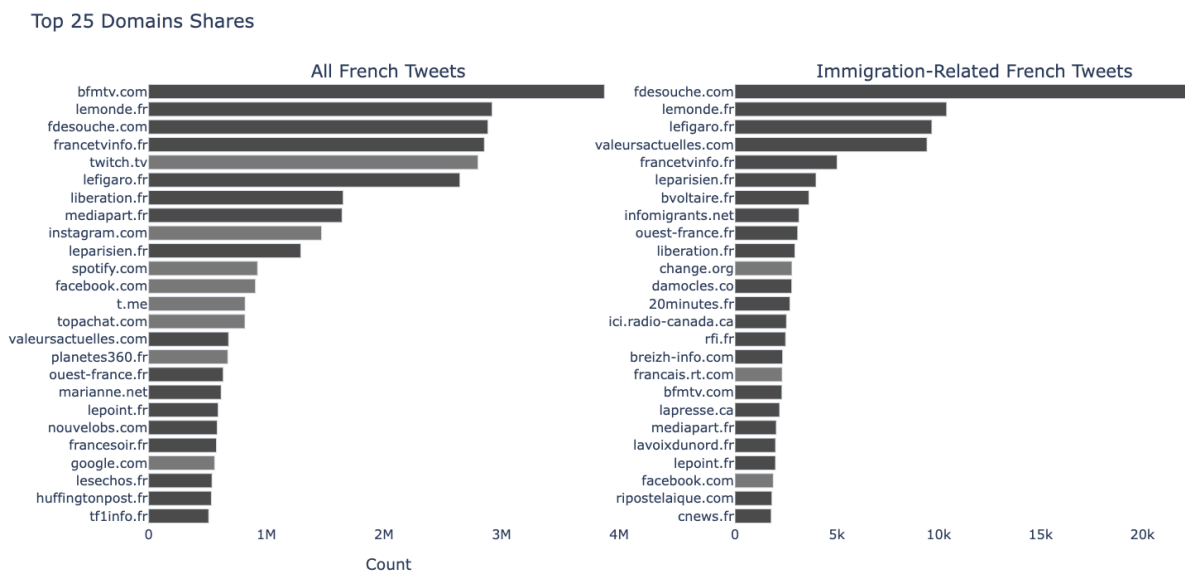
This situation, where fringe rightist outlets and mainstream media exhibit stark differences in content circulation and explicitly stress their reliance on facts in opposition to perceived media biases, suggests a complex enviroment of information mobilization in public debates. The emphasis on 'facts' by outlets such as fdesouche.com, despite accusations of spreading misinformation, coupled with the skepticism towards mainstream media's 'media correctness' by alternative sources like Breizh-info.com and Bvoltaire.com, underscores a critical challenge: navigating the contested terrains of truth in a high choice media ecosystem.

Divergent interpretations, cherry-picking and selective use of statistics

To better understand the way how 'information' and 'facts' are mobilized by different actors, we use a controversial contemporary debate around the "grand remplacement" as a case study. The "grand remplacement" debate serves as a microcosm of the broader dynamics at play within the public discourse on immigration. It reflects a clash of interpretations, where each side selectively harnesses evidence to construct and buttress its narrative. This selective acceptance and reframing of facts creates a complex landscape where factually true information can underpin radically different perspectives.

The theory of the "grand remplacement" alleges that there is a replacement of white and Christian populations in Europe by Muslims or non-white people. It was first prominently theorized by Renaud Camus in his 2001 book "Le grand remplacement."[29] Camus paints a picture of European elites orchestrating this shift to combat population decline and, allegedly, to dilute national identities. He has called for stringent policies, like banning family reunification and tightening citizenship laws—measures that find echoes in some of France's contemporary immigration policies. The narrative has gained traction in various European countries, championed by figures such as Éric Zemmour, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, and Matteo Salvini, the German far-right party AfD, and has been a focal point in right-wing discourse, drawing upon selective statistics to support its claims. The following examples illustrate the argumentative strategies of opponents and proponents of the theory, showing how both heavily rely on 'facts' to support their arguments.

Proponents frequently propagate various forms of anecdotal evidence, including photos, videos, and satire, that purportedly illustrate the replacement of white, Christian populations by Africans and Muslims. Examples include claims that 'French' people have been displaced from certain neighborhoods or that an 8-year-old might question the existence of traditional French names like 'Pierre'. [30] Despite this reliance on anecdotal evidence, they also heavily depend on official statistics. For example, far-right outlets like Fdesouche offer numbers-based arguments, claiming, for instance, that 'international migration accounted for 89% of observed population growth in Belgium', [31] a statement that aligns with official

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[29] Historians like Nicolas Lebourg point out that Camus's theory is not novel but rather a modern reframing of older post-World War II anxieties about the influence of black and Asian soldiers in Europe. Lebourg, Nicolas. 2019. "Attentat islamophobe de Christchurch: retour historique sur le «grand remplacement»." *Mediapart.* https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/150319/attentat-islamophobe-de-christchurch-retour-historique-sur-le-grand-remplacement (February 26, 2024).

[30] Le résultat de décennies d'immigration massive ? \nLes Français ont été chassés d'innombrables quartiers, et un enfant de 8 ans se demande si le prénom "Pierre" existe vraiment. \nLe « Grand Remplacement », c'est maintenant !\nhttps://twitter.com/BFMTV/status/1384167431552135175/video/1

[31] https://twitter.com/F_Desouche/status/1265309670333452295/photo/1, link towards fdesouche article does not work anymore http://www.fdesouche.com/1379351-nouveaux-chiffres-de-limmigration-en-belgique-en-2019-les-migrations-internationales-representaient-89-de-la-croissance-observee-de-la-population

statistics.[32] Similarly, they use projections based on current INSEE figures to suggest that by 2050, more than 50% of French newborns will have African origins, or to 'prove' the dilution of the national culture, they use official statistics showing the overrepresentations of foreign nationals among certain convicts, without providing any context.[33] Using a similar strategy, a petition to "stop massive immigration" shared on Damoclès—a "mobilization media" website committed to restoring France's honor and pride by challenging what they describe as unchecked immigration, criticizing mainstream media censorship, and highlighting concerns over alleged jihadist infiltrations into state services[34]—has gathered more than 176 thousand signatures to date, heavily relying on data to make its argument. For instance, it cites studies such as TeO, conducted by INED and INSEE, indicating that half of the individuals born in France of North African, Sub-Saharan African, or Turkish origin find their partners in their country of origin, who then join them in France.[35]

Numbers and statistics often carry an aura of objectivity and authority, which can lend credibility to certain arguments while dismissing others as subjective or emotional (Porter, 1995). In debates like the "grand replacement," the appeal to statistical evidence by its proponents can be seen as an attempt to cloak ideological positions in the guise of objective truth.

In the context of the "grand replacement" debate, the dominant reading would align with the intended message of the content creators—whether they are proponents or opponents of the theory. For proponents, the dominant reading would involve accepting the theory as a credible explanation of demographic changes in Europe, interpreting statistics and narratives as evidence of a deliberate replacement of the white, Christian population. This reading accepts the message at face value, aligning closely with the encoder's intended meaning.

Negotiated readings acknowledge the validity of the "grand replacement" narrative but also recognize the complexity of immigration and demographic change, introducing nuances that were perhaps not intended by the original encoder. Audiences with a negotiated reading might accept parts of the argument but also consider other factors, such as economic necessity, humanitarian obligations, and the benefits of multiculturalism, which the original message might downplay or ignore.

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[32] https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/1-january-2020-belgium-had-11492641-inhabitants
[33] https://twitter.com/ObservatoireID/status/1419412129925550086/photo/1
[34] https://damocles.co/qui-sommes-nous/ accessed Feb 28, 2024
[35] https://damocles.co/immigration-stop-laxisme

Oppositional readings would completely reject the premise of the "grand replacement" as propagated by its proponents. An audience with this decoding stance might view the narrative as fear-mongering, racist, or unfounded conspiracy theory, choosing instead to focus on counter-evidence or interpretations that emphasize the positive impacts of immigration and the inaccuracies or manipulations in the use of statistics by proponents of the theory.

A plethora of articles has been written to fight the narrative of the "grand replacement", frequently branding it a conspiracy theory. [36] Scholars and mainstream sources have countered the "grand replacement" narrative by presenting factual information, such as statistics indicating that France has below-average foreign populations and arrivals, compared to other European countries and that inflows of immigrants or highlighting socioeconomic factors like precarity as contributors to crime, challenging the idea of immigration as the primary cause. [37] Interestingly, even Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, known for tightening France's immigration policies, calls the theory a fear-mongering tactic of the extreme right. On X, he stated "When I was born in 1982, there were 6.8% foreigners in France; today there are 7.4%, half of whom are Europeans. The far-right's theory of the Great Replacement is not very serious. Their only objective is to maintain fear". [38] Along a similar line of argumentation, a tribune signed by the socialist mayor of the city of Rouen and a number of socialist politicians repeats similar figures of the evolution of the share of foreigners in France and claiming "Not only is our country not the most welcoming, it doesn't even take in its fair share: with 15% of the population of the European Union, France has welcomed only 4% of the Syrians and Iraqis, and 8% of the Afghans who have come to Europe", [39] hence relying on statistics, and selectively focussing on the nationalities of which fewer individuals are present in France compared to the EU-average.

Critics challenge these interpretations presented by opponents of the "grand remplacement" theory, arguing that such perspectives are (intentionally) misleading. For example, in response to Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin's comments regarding the percentage of foreigners in France, some users on social media called these statistics deceptive. Their critique hinges on two main points. First, they argue that the distinction between "foreigners" vs "French" people is used to skew perceptions of national identity and crime statistics by including "Français de papier" (French on paper)—a derogative term referring to naturalized

[36] For example, Damien Carême, a Green Party MEP, dismisses the theory as mere rhetoric, accusing right-wing factions of exploiting migration fears for political gain, suggesting it is a cynical manipulation rather than a reality https://www.damiencareme.fr/inspirations/370-a-quoi-ressemblerait-une-france-qui-accueille-2.html
[37] e.g. https://www.tdh.org/fr/recits/5-fake-news-sur-la-migration
[38] https://twitter.com/GDarmanin/status/1359979414113685509
[39] https://www.latribune.fr/opinions/tribunes/regarder-l-immigration-en-face-988924.html

citizens and descendants of ethnic minorities. For example, they argue that categorizing an act of violence by a "Farid," referring to a name with Arabic origins, as an assault by a "Frenchman" simply because the perpetrator is a legal citizen, would misrepresent the reality.[40] This perspective is further illustrated by the comment "Tous les arbres et les noix de la Terre sont "Francais de papier" donc ces stats ne veulent rien dire Ce qu'il faut c'est 2 classements un par couleur et un autre par religion" (All [Arabs] and [Blacks] on Earth are "paper French," so these stats mean nothing. What is needed is two classifications, one by color and another by religion),[41] reflecting a deeply racist viewpoint. Second, critics suggest that there is a denial of the concept of overrepresentation of certain immigrant groups in crime statistics,[42] referring to attempts to contextualise and explain, for example, the overrepresentation of certain foreign nationalities among certain crime rates.

The debate is further complicated by accusations of mainstream media bias and an alleged dismissal of dissenting voices. For example, the platform Damoclès which was founded by Samuel Lafont, who worked for the digital campaign of far-right presidential candidate Eric Zemmour,[43] published a series of articles critiquing fact-checking journalists like Samuel Laurent of Le Monde or Julien Pain of France Info, for their perceived bias in favor of immigration and their dismissal of dissenting voices as "racist", "identitarian", extremist, uninformed or "trolls."

This example not only demonstrates the contested nature of public debates on immigration but also highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how information is mobilized and interpreted in these discussions. It illustrates how on the base of "facts" and, partly, official statistics, actors develop diametrically opposed arguments. Both proponents and opponents of the "grand replacement" theory utilize numbers and statistics to bolster their arguments. Far-right outlets, politicians and opinion makers often present data, such as immigration figures, to support their claims of demographic change and cultural erosion. In contrast, mainstream sources, politicians who oppose the grand replacement theory and scholars use statistics to debunk misconceptions and provide alternative explanations for societal phenomena. Despite the availability of factual information, users with different ideological orientations interpret statistics differently. This divergence in interpretation reflects varying ideological perspectives and highlights the complexities of engaging with data in contentious debates like immigration.

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[40] https://x.com/lelapindufutur/status/1743535893204345144?s=20
[41] https://x.com/RGremux/status/1743589497013490125?s=20
[42] https://twitter.com/bourgeatguilla1/status/1743574772317851665?s=20
[43] Samuel Lafont's X bio: Président de Damoclès, Premier média de mobilisation | Stratégie numérique et levée de fonds | Porte-parole Porte-parole @Reconquete_off @ZemmourEric| #JeSoutiensCNEWS https://twitter.com/samuel_lafont accessed Feb 28, 2024

Discussion

The belief that presenting "true" information can effectively bridge political divisions on immigration-related issues is prevalent in France. For instance, academics have highlighted the tendency to criticize immigration management without regard for factual accuracy, suggesting that establishing a shared factual basis could potentially resolve political polarization.[44] Based on similar premises, mainstream media outlets regularly debunk "false news" or "common misconceptions" surrounding immigration, aiming to combat negative conceptions and highlight the human stories behind immigration statistics.[45] There appears to be a continued emphasis on the importance of fact-checking and truth-telling, despite widespread skepticism toward media and institutions. Our study, particularly focused on the dynamics within X (formerly Twitter), challenges this optimistic viewpoint, revealing a complex scenario where mis- and disinformation as well as one-sided narratives are deeply intertwined with socio-political contexts and the broader media and institutional landscape. This complexity suggests that factual accuracy alone is insufficient to mitigate political polarization.

Our findings highlight a significant disparity in content circulation between fringe far-right outlets and mainstream media sources. Fringe sources, despite being shared by a relatively small user base, achieve disproportionate visibility, particularly in terms of retweets. This finding invites reflection on the socio-political and technical contexts that facilitate such disparities. First, it raises questions about the unique patterns of content circulation on X, compared to other platforms. As user populations and the presence of media and political actors are known to differ across platforms, future research should include cross-platform analyses. Second, the high activity of politically extreme users suggests that different social media platforms serve as alternative spaces why some segments feel marginalized from mainstream media. Third, the relative silence of centrist users invites contemplation on their role in shaping online discourse and the potential implications for polarization dynamics. Finally, it raises questions about the influence of factors such as algorithmic influence or coordinated efforts to amplify certain contents. For example, a Le Monde study showed how

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[44] For example, François Héran,chair of Migrations and Societies at the Collège de France, highlights: "it is easy to criticize the management of immigration, without worrying too much about the facts, while trying to gain advantage over political competitors." Carretero, Leslie. 2022. "French Presidential Election 2022: 'Migration Debate Has Become More Radicalized.'" *InfoMigrants*. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/38561/french-presidential-election-2022-migration-debate-has-become-more-radicalized (March 8, 2024).
[45] For example: InfoMigrants. 2023. "Fact-checking : cinq fausses idées-reçues sur la migration." *InfoMigrants*. https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/50137/factchecking--cinq-fausses-ideesrecues-sur-la-migration (February 29, 2024). Terre des hommes. 2019. "5 fake news sur la migration." https://www.tdh.org/fr/recits/5-fake-news-sur-la-migration (February 26, 2024); Blin, Simon. "Cinq fake news à déboulonner sur l'immigration." *Libération*. https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/cinq-fake-news-a-deboulonner-sur-limmigration-20221108_WEO7TA5S2BHRBG65XIY4VONA6I/ (February 29, 2024).

artificial and organized efforts have artificially amplified the Zemmour campaign on Twitter.[46] These factors may shape content circulation and interpretation in ways that warrant further investigation, both on algorithmic impacts as well as the motivations, strategies and tactics of actors who orchestrating online diffusion patterns.

More generally, the disproportionate visibility of fringe sources on platforms like X raise questions about the traditional journalistic field's monopoly over "truth". Fringe media outlets, by leveraging social media, bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms to construct alternative narratives that resonate with specific audience segments. This dynamic underscores a contestation of legitimacy within the media landscape, where fringe outlets assert their own forms of credibility and authority among their audiences, despite or perhaps because of their marginalization from mainstream journalistic fields.

Applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework, our study found that immigration-related information is encoded with ideological biases and decoded through varied lenses by the audience. This is exemplified by the divergent interpretations around the "grand remplacement" narrative, where both proponents and detractors utilize factual information to support fundamentally different viewpoints. This finding highlights the contested nature of "truth" and challenges the assumption that establishing a shared factual basis can easily resolve political polarization. It emphasizes the need for a deeper exploration of the socio-economic conditions and mistrust in institutions that shape these divergent interpretations. The right-left dichotomy, while providing an initial framework for analysis, should be enriched by examining the underlying socioeconomic conditions and the specific mistrust in mainstream institutions that might inform these opinions. Therefore, a more nuanced approach that considers these factors, coupled with an analysis of how political entrepreneurs exploit these sentiments, could yield deeper insights.

In France, fact-checking initiatives have already extended their work to increasingly do "enriched fact-checks" that consider the context and actors diffusing misleading, false or dubious information. Our analysis emphasizes this need to move beyond a content-level analysis and better understand the structures that disseminate and audiences that differentially engage with information.

The reliance on numbers and statistics by both fringe and mainstream outlets illustrates the contentious role of quantification in the immigration debate. The sociology of quantification

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https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/video/2022/02/02/comment-des-militants-d-eric-zemmour-gonflent-artificiellement-la-presence-du-candidat-sur-twitter_6112033_6059010.html

literature reveals that this reliance is not neutral; it is a form of power that shapes perceptions of reality (Espeland and Stevens 2008). In the context of the "grand remplacement" debate, the selective use of immigration statistics serves to legitimize specific narratives, often at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of migration.

By converting complex social phenomena into comparable metrics, such as using "inflows" of immigrants, quantification practices facilitate the simplification of intricate realities (Espeland and Stevens 1998). This simplification can obscure the multifaceted nature of migration, such as the reasons behind migration flows, the diversity within migrant communities, and the socioeconomic factors at play, reducing it to easily digestible numbers and percentages. Our analysis reveals that both fringe and mainstream media participate in this process, albeit with differing intentions and effects.

Finally, quantification plays a crucial role in the construction of social categories and identities (Desrosières 1998). In the "grand remplacement" debate, the use of statistics to delineate between "native" and "foreign" populations can reinforce and naturalize social divisions. This process of categorization can essentialize complex identities, reducing individuals to quantifiable attributes and potentially exacerbating racialised perceptions of an "us" versus "them" distinction.

Conclusion

As the impact of information on attitudes toward immigration remains a contested terrain within scholarly literature, our analysis emphasizes the need to move beyond a content-level analysis and better understand the structures that disseminate and audiences that differentially engage with information. Utilizing Claire Wardle's typology, we illustrate a range of contents ranging from satire and to fabricated information and highlight both the prevalence of and complexity to delineate 'malinformation', factually true information used to cause harm. Our findings reveal stark disparities in content circulation between online fringe outlets and mainstream media in the French immigration-related X discourse, raising questions about both the socio-political and technological reasons behind this.

Moreover, our analysis shows that diverse audiences share sources that interpret the same facts in radically different manners, illustrating how, within the contentious debate of the "grand remplacement," both sides construct opposing narratives grounded in the same statistical realities. Through the lens of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, we gain insights into how messages imbued with dominant ideologies are variously interpreted by audiences based on their societal positions.

Finally, by drawing upon the sociology of quantification, our study highlights the potential inadvertent effects of a heavy focus on numbers, including to "debunk" certain information. As numbers and statistics often carry an aura of objectivity and authority, the appeal to statistical evidence can be seen as an attempt to cloak ideological positions in the guise of objective truth. Moreover, the repeated reliance of statistics that make binary distinctions between "foreigners" and "natives" when discussing complex phenomena like immigration can essentialize identities, reducing individuals to quantifiable attributes and perpetuating social divisions.

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