# « Fake News » Digital disinformation

By Lucille Fitch

Auxipress : Study Facts & Figures

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# Reminders, definitions and clarifications

Historically, disinformation has always existed (hoaxes, propaganda, defamation, popular beliefs, parodies,…). Some people say that the rumour is the oldest medium in the world.

Still, it is not until 2017 that the term « fake news » pops up in the Collins Dictionary as the word of the year. It is defined as follows:

*« false information, often sensational, spread under cover of reporting ».*

The generalisation of the words « fake news » is directly linked to the election of Donald Trump in November 2016.  He uses it himself constantly to target the traditional media when they report facts that question him, particularly in the investigation into Russian meddling in the results of the election.



Since this election, the words « fake news » have been used abundantly and often erroneously by media all over the world, in a poisonous mix of hate speech, ideological propaganda, rumours, attempted destabilisation and journalistic errors often due to hastiness. The same goes for the resolution that was adopted by the European Parliament in a panic in November 2016, as it led to confusion between political and terrorist propaganda, and as it encouraged member states to set up counter-propaganda campaigns (1).

Fortunately, protests, particularly by journalist associations, (2) brought the European institutions back to reason and the creation of a HLEG (High Level Expert Group) (3) composed of academics, journalists, representatives of civil society, social platforms and networks, and media associations to tackle this issue.

In its report (4), published last March, this group opted for the term « disinformation » and more specifically defined its scope:

*« Disinformation as defined in this report includes all forms of false, inaccurate or misleading information, conceived, presented and spread to intentionally cause public harm or to make profit. It does not cover problems resulting from the creation and the online dissemination of illegal content (i.e. defamation, hate speech, and the encouragement of violence), which are subject to regulation in compliance with the European Union's legal framework or that of the member states, nor does it cover other forms of deliberate, but not misleading distortion of facts, such as satires and parodies. »*

Most French-speaking media continued to use the words « fake news » nonetheless, undoubtedly as it is easy, but also to refer to the context of the election of Trump and Brexit. It is true that the term « fake news » does not necessarily reflect the falsified aspect and the journalistic format that characterise the phenomenon.  Moreover, the notion of « fake news » (which we should translate to « false news ») was already treated in the French law of 1887 on the press.

Upon analysis, it appears that disinformation frequently and classically takes on the following forms:

*• The misuse of images and videos to illustrate facts they have nothing to do with;*

*• The creation and use of false accounts to slander someone's reputation;*

*• The creation and feeding of false websites that visually resemble real sites;*

*• The creation and spreading of false documents (false evidence) ;*

*• The use of bots to boost the viral nature of messages.*
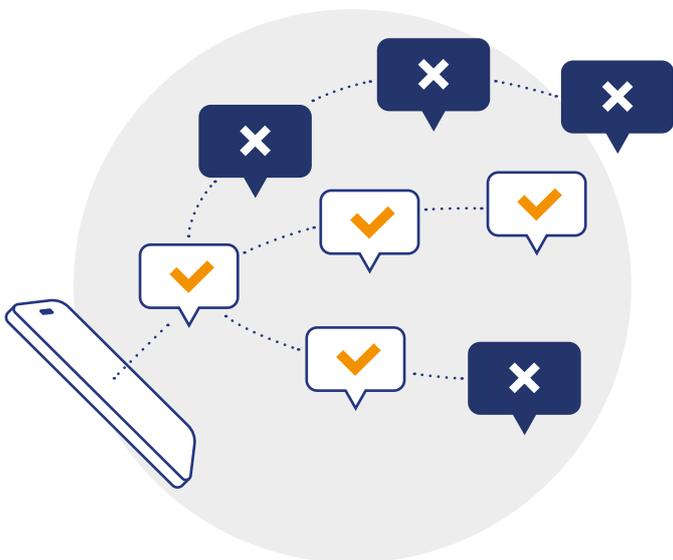
Still, other, more specific techniques are already in use or emerging.

One technique is the crowd effect of more sophisticated astroturfing (5) (several individuals working together without revealing their complicity in a discussion thread to deceive those who are not in the know) with the goal of artificially raising the popularity of a topic. The lobbying campaign in the European Parliament organised by the GAFA against the reform of copyrights is a perfect example. (6)

Aviv Ovadya, an American expert in this field, has been warning platforms and social networks about the risk of the exponential increase of disinformation since 2016. No one listened, and we all know what happened next. Today, he warns against an outright « **infocalypse** »! He is specifically concerned about a technique he calls « automated laser phishing », the use of artificial intelligence to analyse the behaviour of social network users and to generate false but perfectly credible messages that appear to be sent by acquaintances. (7)

Another phenomenon that popped up at the end of 2016 and strongly linked to disinformation is **post-truth**. In Germany, this is known as perceived truth. The Oxford Dictionary gives the following definition:

*« An adjective referring to or indicating circumstances in which objective facts do not influence the public opinion as much as appealing to personal emotions and beliefs does. »*

In an editorial at the time, the New York Times did not mince words. It wrote that the important thing was not that the truth was being falsified or contested but that it had become secondary!

Whether we incriminate people's credibility or their propensity to support plot theories, it seems that any attempt to restore the factual truth is perceived as the ultimate proof that the message is true, the system is defending itself and trying to cover up the issue. In these conditions, there is no more room for a democratic debate!

Numerous experts consider the proliferation of disinformation to be a serious symptom of political breakdown.  When a White House spokesperson talks about « **alternative facts** », she is exempting herself from the principle of truth for the benefit of fabrications that serve her cause, a fabrication which is necessary to rattle the minds!

# Some very concrete studies

Since 2016, digital disinformation and its consequences have incessantly been the object of very detailed academic studies and analyses. Three of these are particularly revealing.

## 1. The Liberation Investigation: Facebook, one month in the information machine (8)

Between 6 February and 5 March 2017, in the midst of the French electoral campaign and, more specifically, in the midst of the Fillon affair, the Liberation team measured the activity and the audience of about 50 Facebook pages owned by French media.

The first objective was to assess how, with its recommendation algorithms and shares among friends, the social network modifies access to information and the distribution of news.

The investigation was also intended to quantify the power relations between the traditional media (Le Monde, Le Figaro, BFM TV, France Info, Ouest France, Libération, Le Point, Valeurs Actuelles, …), the pure players (Mediapart, Huffington Post, …) and alternative sources that are more or less rigorous or partisan (to the right: FdeSouche, Boulevard Voltaire, Egalité & Réconciliation, RT France, FN TV Libertés, … ; to the left: Osons causer, Fakir, Basta, … ; les inclassables : Brut, Actu 17, Jean-Marc Morandini, … ; and the religiously inspired sources (Oumma, Famille chrétienne, Le Monde juif info, …). These alternative sources were selected on the basis of a high number of subscribers and because they present themselves as information media, or even "re-information" media!

Despite the limits of the methodology, as pointed out by the authors of the survey, the major trends can easily be deduced. It appears that a channel such as RT France, financed by the Kremlin and barely present in France, boasts better performances than the recognised media such as France Info!

Out of the 30 most viral publications, the first traditional medium (Le Monde) ranks 25th, despite a base of 3.6 million subscribers! Mediapart comes in at 7th place. First and second place go to videos by 'Osons Causer' about Emmanuel Macron and the law on the time limit of financial crimes.

These two videos were shared more than 110,000 times, which is an enormous number for France, to be multiplied by the average number of Facebook "friends" (between 150 and 200). This implies that at least 20 million people were exposed to these videos!

Third place goes to TV Libertés with a video on "The riots of Bobigny started by scum" with very similar performances.

Considering that the next three places are taken up by videos by Brut (salary equality, the time limit of financial crimes and an archive on Fillon), we can conclude that video formats on controversial or divisive topics rule on Facebook! Consequently, the traditional media which prefer text and practice professional, balanced journalism with respect for ethics are punished by Facebook's algorithm.
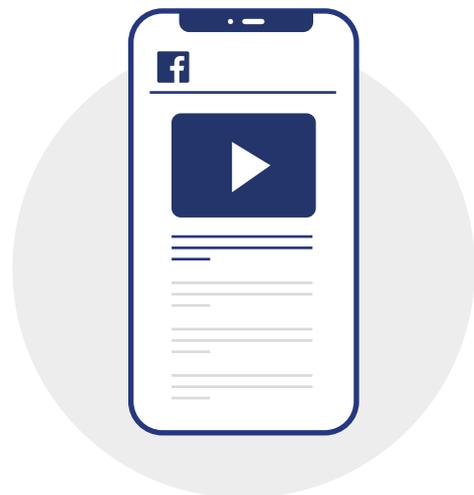
A site like RT France with about 300,000 subscribers, a tenth of Le Monde, achieves an impact of only two or three times less.

Considering the engagement (shares, likes and comments), traditional media dominates the game. Still, whereas BFM TV reaches 7.1 million interactions, RT France reaches 2.2 million, which is quite a lot more than Le Point (650,000 interactions). TV Libertés, FdeSouche and Actu 17 also reach scores that are 2 to 3 times larger.

These numbers can be explained by the incredible activity in the alternative media of the right. Within the scope of the study, RT France published 1,700 posts, about 60 a day, whereas Le Monde only published 1,500, the same level as Sputnik, the other medium financed by the Kremlin! This gives us an idea of the means committed by Russia to destabilise Western democracies.

To the left, the incredible engagement of the page 'Osons Causer' is worth noting, as it reached 1.7 million interactions with only 20 posts!

This type of survey deserves regular repetition, including in other countries, for comparison, and to monitor the evolution of the phenomenon.

# 2. M.I.T. research on the propagation of disinformation on Twitter (9)

This study goes back to the attack that took place in 2013 during the Boston marathon and the impressive number of tweets that were generated by the event. These tweets contained a lot of rumours and false information.

Three researchers at M.I.T. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) decided to model the flow of true or false information on Twitter. To do so, they followed close to 126,000 cascades of messages, accumulatively tweeted more than 4.5 million times by almost 3 million people between 2016 and 2017. They were assisted by Twitter, which allowed unrestricted access to its archives.

To determine whether information was true or false, they used six independent fact-checking organisations, whose findings were identical in over 95% of the times.

Among these 126,000 cascades, politics was the main category (45,000) followed by urban legends, business, terrorism, science, leisure and natural disasters.

The results indicated that:

- *The dissemination of false information is more significant in politics than any other category;*

- *Disinformation propagates six times faster than real information;*

- *The high propagation rate for disinformation is largely due to humans, and not robots;*

- *Disinformation has 70% more chance of being retweeted than real information;*

- *It seems that the « novelty », surprise or shock value of a tweet triggers the retweet reflex.*

The responsibility of Twitter users in the propagation of disinformation shows that we will not be able to counter the phenomenon solely with technological solutions.

# 3. The experiment of Neuchâtel University with the « filter bubble » of Facebook's timeline (10)

In February 2017, the Academy of journalism and media of Neuchâtel University decided to train its students in understanding how Facebook's timeline (the News Feed ranking algorithm) works to protect them from the impact of the filter bubble, which makes social networks prioritise content for every user according to his or her opinions.
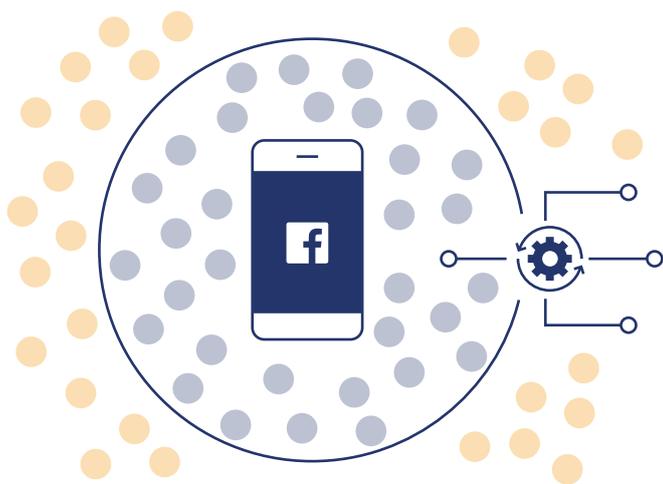


During six weeks, in the midst of the French electoral campaign, students were divided into eight groups. For every one of the four presidential candidates (Fillon, Hamon, Le Pen and Macron), two false profiles were created, one female and one male, corresponding to the candidate's preference. The team also created two neutral accounts for control purposes.

All groups subscribed to the same list of 50 media, including traditional media as well as « buzz » sites, partisan sites and pages associated with the disinformation movement.

Every account was only allowed to accept the other seven (+ the two control accounts) as « friends ».

During the first four weeks, the students followed a protocol of interactions on their fictional accounts, posting comments, liking or sharing links corresponding to their role.

In the last two weeks, they were allowed to freely test their hypotheses (switching candidates, following other media, following political parties, adding other candidates,…)

Even if the results were similar enough to other experiments like the Libération one (5), they mainly allowed students to gain awareness of the impact of the algorithm on the access to information.

These conclusions were drawn:

*• The community of friends is more prominently shown than media. Still, the second false account supporting the same candidate was better ranked than the other accounts, which confirms the filter bubble;*

*• The news strongly impacts the content of the news feed. The Fillon issue had a strong impact on all accounts;*

*• The algorithm favours the orientation of the media over the content;*

*• The algorithm lacks nuance. Whether an interaction is positive or negative, it is treated the same way;*

*• It is very easy to create a false account and achieve visibility.*

These experiments show that the use of innovative, immersive and dynamic educational approaches is essential for setting up educational media efficiency training programmes.

# The economic impact of disinformation

The cited studies showed the staggering quantity of disinformation produced and its phenomenal virality based on recommendation algorithms and sharing tools on social networks.

While it is hard to calculate the percentage represented by disinformation in the entire data flow circulating on the Internet, social platforms and networks are, in fact, its main economic beneficiaries. Indeed, the more clicks and interactions, the more advertising revenues, and on the Internet, publicity is literally gobbled up by the duopoly Google/Facebook. This undoubtedly explains why these companies have been so slow to respond to the exponential growth of the phenomenon.
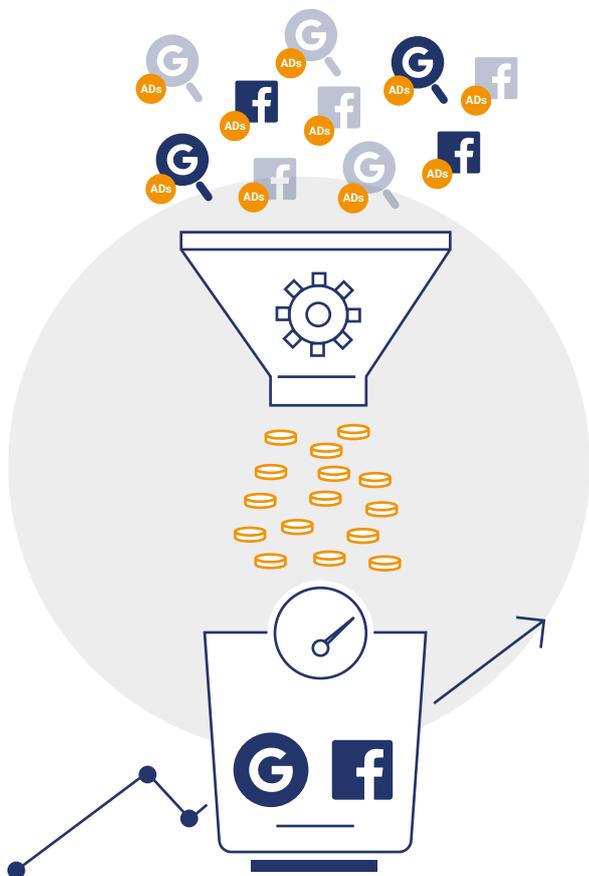


An entire parallel economy also revolves around disinformation. This goes for the geeks in a small village of Macedonia who participated in destabilising the US elections by massively publishing "fake news" and bringing in comfortable advertising revenues, the media RT France and Sputnik who were awarded 20 million euros by the Russian government to settle in France in 2017 via clickbait farms and other occult services that pollute the Internet with industrialised and robotised mass propaganda. (11) (12)

Some, like Paul Horner, the recently deceased American "fake news" producer, publicly turned it into a lucrative business. Particularly memorable was the article he spread on the Internet, pretending that the Pope supported Donald Trump, and which he flaunted as having favoured his election.

The impact on stock markets could be disastrous as well. The example of the false explosion at the White House which supposedly hurt President Obama was debunked a few minutes later, but still caused a loss of 143 points on the Dow Jones, equalling a minimum of 136.5 billion dollars! (13)

The advertising market is also impacted, as a large part of measured clicks are generated by robots. The major advertisers also do not want their campaigns to appear in the context of disinformation. The agencies seem bent on developing the necessary controls (14)

Companies' reputation is more and more often attacked by false information that wreaks havoc on its clients, and, as explained above, it is a long and hard struggle to debunk stated facts. In addition to the brands' solid presence on social media, it is crucial to remain very vigilant and to nip any potentially viral false information in the bud. (15)

# Causes and responsibilities

While it is true that political propaganda and the manipulation of information have always existed, and the primary perpetrators have been clearly defined, current conditions reveal some new actors and intermediaries who also share a non-negligible part of the responsibilities in the propagation chain of disinformation.

Of course, we could point out rulers who never shied away from a state lie or destabilisation operations, lobbyists who produce false studies to defend their clients' interests, extremist militants who spread their hate speech, and journalists who discredit their work by not respecting ethical rules and destroying the credibility of the profession and the media in general.

Today, however, the social platforms and networks clearly carry the largest responsibility.  They are beyond a doubt the largest beneficiaries of the digital disinformation phenomenon.

They were forced to explain themselves before parliaments on both sides of the Atlantic and simply contented themselves with lengthy apologies and promises to do better in the future!

We would also be at fault if we omitted academians, especially in social sciences, who, under the guise of « social construction of reality », reach a more and more dangerous relativism.

Lastly, let us not forget Internet users, who, as shown in the M.I.T. study (8), lose their critical minds and get swept away by their emotions when faced with news. (16)

# Counter measures

Without caving to pessimism, we can only observe that disinformation grows further. The formats are constantly changing and nobody has found a solution to the problem thus far.
We can, however, suggest several countermeasures to do some damage control.

## 1. Fact checking

Set up by entities (media, institutions, press agencies, social networks,...) or groups of entities, these initiatives grow like wildfire, but facing the exponential mass of content, the task proves hard to manage. (17) (18) (19) (20) (21)

## 2. Professional journalism

In the report issued by the European Commission's HLEG, one of the recommendations is to set up European programmes to support professional journalism to counter disinformation (4)

## 3. Labelling information sources

Considering that it is not up to states or private companies, which social networks are, to decide whether information is true or false, Reporters Without Borders and a number of partners (AFP, UER, Global Editors Network) launched an initiative for a European certification, an autoregulation system called « Journalism Trust Initiative » based on criteria like transparency, editorial independence or the absence of conflicts of interest. The entire process should be controlled by the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN). (22)
Interestingly, the publicity blocker Adblock Plus started a similar initiative but based on the blockchain procedure. (23)

## 4. Measures taken by social platforms and networks

After the election of Donald Trump, the involvement of social networks in Russia's meddling was established. After a short period of denial, the CEOs of Facebook and Twitter had to acknowledge their responsibility. Immediately afterwards, these social networks took a series of measures to counter disinformation. (24) (25) (26) (27) (28).
Partnerships with the media and fact-checking organisations were set up. (29)
However, it seems that one of Facebook's biggest decisions, downgrading media pages to the benefit of content posted by family and "friends", resulted in many interactions ending up in Facebook groups where the intimacy is better protected, which in turn risks increasing the impact of the "filter bubble" generated by the algorithm.

# 5. Regulation

After the cataclysmic election of Donald Trump in November 2016, and in anticipation of the federal elections of 2017, the German government decided to vote a law that forces social media to remove "fake news" within 24 hours on the penalty of fines of up to €50 million. This political choice forced Facebook to hire hundreds of employees to filter contents accessible in Germany, and caused entirely legitimate content to be removed as well. Adopted in April 2017, this NetzDG bill was implemented in January 2018, much to the annoyance of journalists who see the danger of censorship. (30)

In France, after the presidential election that suffered malevolent attacks against candidate Macron, the new government announced its intention to adopt legislation against disinformation during elections, by means of a summary judgement, leaving it up to a single judge to urgently decide what is true and what is not!
With its typical lyricism, the French press came up with names like the « ministry of truth » and specialists hurried to point out that history abounded with examples to prove the inefficiency of state censorship. For example, after the invention of printing by Gutenberg, François 1st decided to ban the printing of books to fight Protestantism. He made Swiss printers very happy, but did not stop Protestantism! (31)

Despite all the protests that these measures are at best inefficient and inapplicable (32) (33) (34) (35), the text proposed by President Macron was adopted by Parliament early July. (36)

The temptation may exist for other member states to legislate, but the European Commission uses caution and waits for the online platforms to communicate a code of conduct in the coming weeks, aiming to limit the spreading of disinformation on social networks.

In the end, legislating the retort does not seem like a very effective solution, given the speed at which disinformation is propagated.
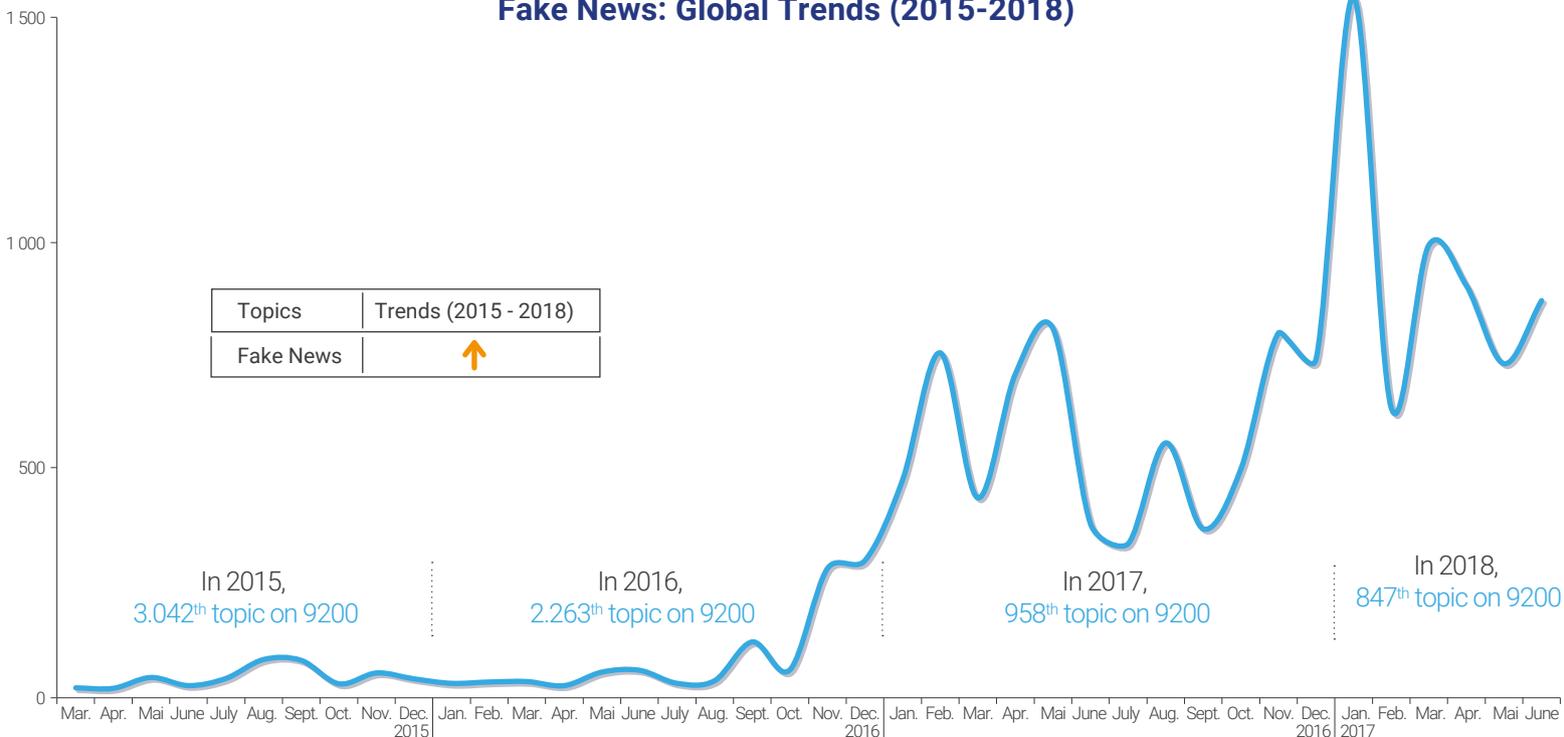
# Conclusion

The phenomenon of digital disinformation has not shown all its aspects, and, as shown by numerous specialists, we will not be able to avoid revising the rules of Internet governance if we are to counter it effectively.

## Fake News: Global Trends (2015-2018)

| Topics | Trends (2015 - 2018) |
|---|---|
| Fake News | ↑ |

In 2015,
3.042th topic on 9200

In 2016,
2.263th topic on 9200

In 2017,
958th topic on 9200

In 2018,
847th topic on 9200

Mar. Apr. Mai June July Aug. Sept. Oct. Nov. Dec. | Jan. Feb. Mar. Apr. Mai June July Aug. Sept. Oct. Nov. Dec. | Jan. Feb. Mar. Apr. Mai June July Aug. Sept. Oct. Nov. Dec. | Jan. Feb. Mar. Apr. Mai June
2015 | 2016 | 2016 | 2017

Trends in fake news indicate three essential components in the evolution and importance of the topic:

*• First of all, the media give more and more attention to the topic. We have observed that this interest has strongly emerged since 2015.*

*• Secondly, the topic fake news ranks among the 10% most covered topics in the media in 2018.*

*• Thirdly, we see a real change in the media at the end of 2016, with the most pronounced peak in January 2018.*

*• Taking these threee variables into account, it is important to understand the topic's acceleration to identify possible risks for brands.*

### Context of fake news in the Belgian media

*• Today, disinformation is mainly a political phenomenon. We observed a distinct peak in 2017, but the topic has been in the media the most in relation to fake news since 2016.*

*• Disinformation has also been rampant in 2016, especially concerning security issues related to terrorism. However, the trend has clearly been in decline in 2017 and 2018, stabilising at around 9% of the content about fake news.*

*• To a lesser extent, companies are affected by disinformation as well. However, more and more businesses are suffering from disinformation, going from 12% in 2016 to 14% in 2018. It is therefore important for companies to take measures against fake news and the impact it may have on their image and reputation.*

*Facts & figures : Auxipress*

**Fake News (2018)**

- Politics, society : **24,0%**
- Medias, Info-Com : **15,4%**
- Business : **13,7%**
- Security, Justice, Terrorism : **9,4%**
- Europe, International : **5,9%**
- Population, Organization : **5,2%**
- Economy, Finance : **4,4%**
- Technology : **3,9%**
- Teaching, Training, R&D : **3,7%**
- Culture : **3,4%**
- Health, Nutrition : **2,7%**
- Ecology, Agriculture : **2%**
- Employment, Pensions, Unions : **1,9%**
- Sports : **1,8%**
- Housing, Territory : **1,3%**
- Transports, Mobility : **1,2%**

## Focus on topics, companies and political actors most associated with fake news

• *Donald Trump is the dominant political personality associated with fake news. In Belgian politics, starting in 2017, the N-VA enters the top 20 of most influential topics related to fake news in the media. The MR enters the top 20 in 2018. Elections are a propitious time for « organised » disinformation.*

• *Social networks play substantial role in disinformation. Facebook remains associated with fake news constantly. Twitter is the second most cited social network in the context of fake news.*

• *The risks of disinformation weigh on businesses and their leaders, who are mentioned just as often.*

• *In 2016, the impact of disinformation about attacks, terrorists and the wars was highly mediatised. However, this mediatisation dissipated in 2017 and 2018, to be replaced with other important societal themes, such as religion in 2017 or immigration in 2018.*

• *Finally, young people and children are more and more associated with the news, signalling the potential risks for future generations and the way they consume information today.*

| Topic | Value |
|---|---|
| Reform movement | 832 |
| N-VA | 834 |
| The young | 908 |
| Google | 993 |
| Woman | 1 012 |
| Users | 1 075 |
| Man | 1 079 |
| Technology | 1 079 |
| Russian political actors | 1 129 |
| The children | 1 305 |
| Democracy | 1 359 |
| Internet/Web | 1 367 |
| Political parties | 1 608 |
| Elections | 1 849 |
| Leaders, CEO | 1 966 |
| Twitter | 2 129 |
| Business | 2 287 |
| Journalists | 2 493 |
| Donald Trump | 2 923 |
| Facebook | 7 786 |

*Facts & figures : Auxipress*
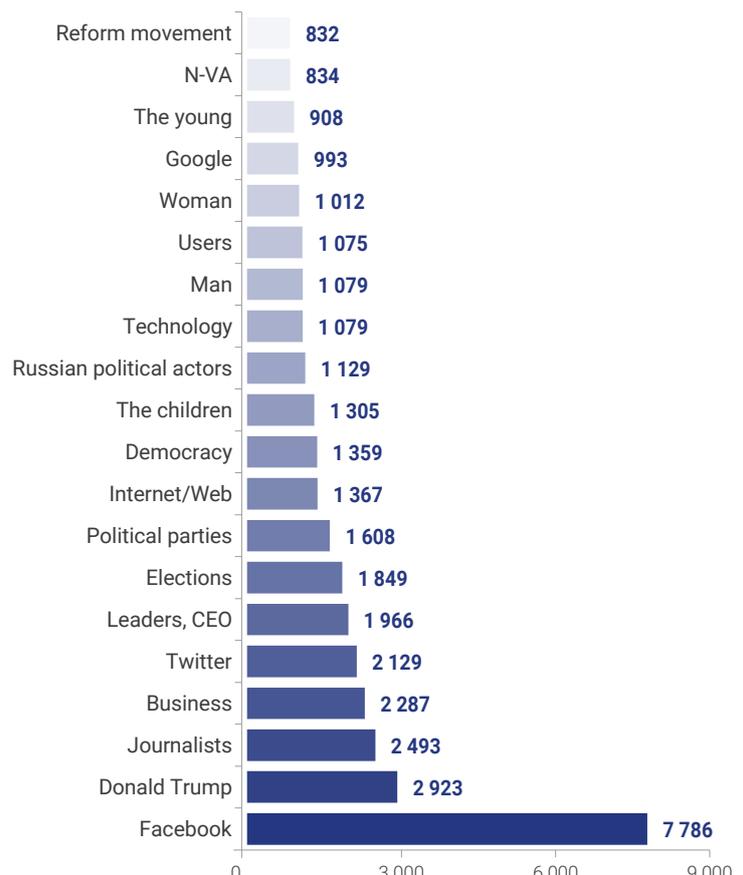
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## Contact us :

+32 2 514 64 91

info@auxipress.be

**www.auxipress.be**