



FRANCE: COPING WITH DISINFORMATION

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT

LCL (OF-4) François-Xavier HOUITTE de LA CHESNAIS

MAJ (OF-3) Julien BARAGLIA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
1. HOW DOES DISINFORMATION THREATEN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES?.....	5
1.1. Knowledge asymmetry: an unfavorable strength ratio for Western democracies in the information field.	5
1.2. Islands of French society: fertile ground for the manipulation of awareness through disinformation.	7
1.3. The widespread crisis of authority and trust.	9
2. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT	13
2.1. Evolution of public opinion during various developments in the Yellow Vest movement.....	13
2.2. Disinformation within the Yellow Vest movement: the fertile ground of mistrust.	15
2.3. Study of alleged Russian interference in the Yellow Vests movement	19
3. DEFINING A 3-LEVEL STRATEGY TO RESTORE PUBLIC TRUST.....	27
3.1. CONSOLIDATE – Strengthen and promote the action of the State in the fight against disinformation	28
3.2. SECURE – The disseminated information is certified or contained.....	30
3.3. EDUCATE – Citizens are educated about the risks of disinformation	31
CONCLUSION.....	33
APPENDIX 1 – How to deter malign actors from using disinformation?	34
DOCUMENTARY RESOURCES	35

At a time when public opinion plays a key role in political decision-making, Western societies are fragmented and exposed to acts of destabilization. Democracies face one of the greatest challenges they have ever faced: controlling the dissemination of information without denying the fundamental freedoms they defend. The study of the French case of *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) – a social movement born in France and allegedly supported by Russia – shows that restoring public trust is the key to coping with disinformation. Achieving this objective necessitates a 3-level strategy: the consolidation of the response capabilities of democracies (CONSOLIDATE), the implementation of certification or containment means for disseminated information (SECURE) and the education of citizens regarding the risks related to disinformation (EDUCATE).

INTRODUCTION

How to deter domestic and foreign malign actors from using disinformation? This is certainly a universal problem, but one that primarily concerns societies in which freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. Indeed, with the explosion of social networks and media, the manipulation of information poses an "existential danger" to Western democracies¹. Any opportunity is a good one for those who want to sow confusion in the minds of people who – paradoxically – receive more and more information but are demonstrably less and less well-informed.

For these democracies, the current period is marked by two very strong trends that explain the growing interest in the field of disinformation: public opinion has never been so important in political decision-making and, meanwhile, modern means of manipulation (press, radio, television, Internet) have never been so numerous and powerful. That is why we hold to the definition of "disinformation" given by Sophie Merveilleux du Vignaux: "manipulation of public opinion for political purposes by devious means of processing true or false information"². Contrary to misinformation, disinformation is therefore a voluntary act characterized by the addition of a political intent to disseminated information in order to influence a part of the public opinion, which we will call here "targeted audience".

In order to better distinguish the different stages of disinformation, we studied the terrorist attack perpetrated on a French teacher following a wave of disinformation within the French Muslim community. These steps are depicted in Diagram 1 below. In October 2020, a student claimed to her father she had been excluded from class for expressing her displeasure when the teacher showed a caricature of the Prophet (STEP 1). The father, supported by a Salafist preacher, posted a video on Facebook in which he defended his daughter and proclaimed his indignation at what he considered to be blasphemy. He also mentioned the name of the teacher and calls on the Muslim community to apply pressure on the school (STEP 2). The French Muslim community massively promoted this video on social networks (STEP 3). The teacher received numerous insults and threats to his physical well-being and life (STEP 4). Eight days after the broadcasting of the first video, teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded by an Islamist terrorist (STEP 5). We finally learned, just a few hours later, that the student who claimed to have been excluded never attended that class in question.

One erroneous or deliberately transformed piece of information, political intent that biases this information, a mass distribution network and a politicized community ready to share any piece of information supporting its ideology: here is the combustible formula of a disinformation explosion. Yet, we can infer that it was possible at STEP 1 to demonstrate that the student who made the charge did not participate in that particular history class. Might this have reduced or stopped the wave of hatred that fell on the teacher? We will never know.

¹ J.-B. Jeangène Vilmer, A. Escorcía, M. Guillaume, J. Herrera, *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies*, report by the Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces, Paris, August 2018.

² S. Merveilleux du Vignaux, *Désinformation et services spéciaux*, éditions du Rocher, 2018.

However, even if the French administration had had the intent to intercede at STEP 1, it is questionable whether it would have had sufficient means to compete with the Muslim community channels, to contain the spread of disinformation and to re-establish the truth among public opinion.

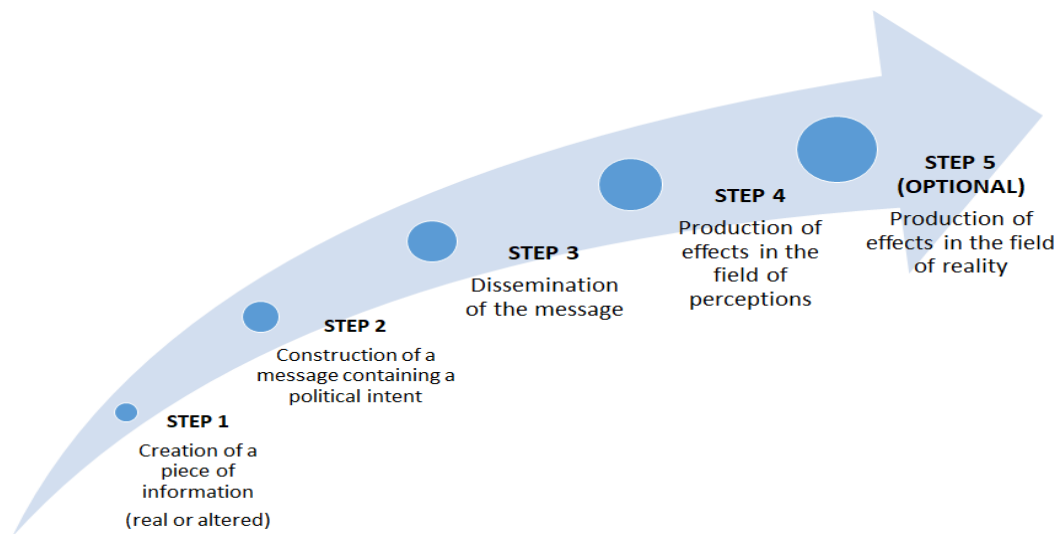


Figure 1 - Schematic representation of the steps of disinformation process

In an attempt to further elucidate these questions, we studied the case of the Yellow Vests. This led us to understand how public opinion can be targeted to paralyze political decision-making and to accentuate domestic unrest in Western democracies. In that frame, we highlighted, for instance, how Russian state media, including RT and Sputnik, amplified and heavily promoted the Yellow Vest movement in France on social media and how they exploited the vulnerabilities and flaws of French society.

Finally, even if the use of retaliatory measures is mandatory to strengthen the shield against disinformation, our approach led us to understand that this won't be sufficient to definitively deter malign actors. On the one hand, because they perfectly exploit the untraceability currently offered by digital networks and, on the other hand, because such measures regularly fuel conspiracy theories as they are denounced as infringements of fundamental freedoms. The anti-disinformation system should therefore be supplemented by preventive measures aimed at limiting and containing the effects of disinformation in the short, medium and long term. In addition, in a particularly changing world, cooperation between Western democracies will be essential to guarantee the greatest possible reactivity against new threats in the disinformation field.

1. HOW DOES DISINFORMATION THREATEN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES?

Before delving into the lessons learned from the Yellow Vest crisis in terms of disinformation, it is important to understand, more generally, why Western democracies are weakened by the growing importance they attach to public opinion.

We are therefore going to develop three characteristics which, in our opinion, particularly foster disinformation:

- the unfavorable balance of power for Western democracies in the information field,
- the way in which the social divides offer fertile ground for the manipulation of minds,
- the widespread crisis of authority and trust.

1.1. Knowledge asymmetry: an unfavorable strength ratio for Western democracies in the information field.

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.
If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.
If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle”.

Sun Tzu, The Art of War.

Predictability of Western decision-making processes. Friday, August 30, 2013. US President Barack Obama was about to make one of the most important decisions of his second term. That day, after much hesitation, the Democratic president chose not to order the prepared strikes against the Syrian regime. Despite the chemical weapon attacks revealed in the suburbs of Damascus, he chose to seek the advice of Congress. Two days earlier, British Prime Minister David Cameron had also been prevented by his Parliament from intervening. The "red line" drawn in 2012 had just been erased³.

The following week, President Putin took advantage of this indecision to raise the subject of Syria at the table of the official G20 discussions. The trap set by the Russian president had just closed on the Westerners. By highlighting the deep divisions within the international community, Vladimir Putin succeeded in imposing the UN as the only legitimate body to decide the outcome of the Syrian conflict. This episode marked the end of the credibility of Western powers to intervene as the world's policeman. And six months later, Putin seized this opportunity to intervene militarily in Ukraine. Surely he thought that, in spite of bold declarations, nobody would dare to oppose it.

This example shows to what extent Russia has gained the upper hand over Western decision-making systems. Western democracies are particularly sensitive to public opinion, which fears any event that could trigger a third world war. Putin knew this. Above all, he knew Obama's personality and he seized the opportunity Obama gave him to put Russia back at the center of the game.

Therefore, it would seem clear that Western democracies are predictable. Their decision-making processes are based within administrations whose mechanisms are well-known and on a pattern of thought generally adhered to by all the great leaders.

This is, again, one of the keys to the success of Islamic terrorism in France. Each attack pushes leaders to adopt increasingly strong security measures to the detriment of individual liberties. Even if France claims to be the country of liberties, its leaders have no choice but to enter into this security escalation if they do not want to be labeled as lax. The Islamic State has analyzed this vicious cycle and learned to carefully play its part against a country whose decision-making system is paralyzed by internal debate.

³ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/04/07/le-jour-ou-barack-obama-avait-efface-sa-ligne-rouge-sur-la-syrie_5107363_3210.html

The fractures within Western nations are easily identifiable. Each nation has its own fractures. However, few leave them as openly visible as the Western nations do. Let us just take two recent examples: racial divides in the United States and social fractures in France.

- On the one hand, the Black American community remains deeply marked by the slave and segregationist past of the country. On the other hand, the French working classes carry a long tradition of violent social struggle that regularly shakes the Republic.
- However sharp they are, these fractures are not veiled. For instance, in the cultural field, French literature is full of ancient and modern tales of workers' struggles and, on the other side, many American movies showcase both past and current racial divides in the United States to a worldwide audience.
- Over these fractures, the recent explosion of social networks and anonymous discussion platforms have just released the incredible waves of hatred contained in society. This is how social movements of unprecedented scale were recently formed in the United States (Black Lives Matter) and in France (Yellow Vest movement).

These examples are significant, but other equally important fractures exist within Western nations: identity issues, the debate on secularism, increasing economic inequalities, political divides, aspirations of minorities for equal rights in all aspects of life, and so on. In addition, each fracture creates opposing communities that expose themselves, as openly as possible, in the media and via social networks.

Therefore, it is quite easy for an adversary to analyze each of these communities and to learn their strengths and vulnerabilities. Above all, it is very easy to assess the respective weight and the capacity of influence that each community has in the democratic life of the nations in which they are formed. We will see later how easily these fault lines can be used to destabilize democracies using disinformation.

Knowledge asymmetry: when adversaries know us better than we will ever know them. This situation is the counterpart of soft power. Western nations were built like open books in the hope that the rest of the world would find within them references for themselves. On the one hand, this ambition has produced effects on the circulation of universal values and even on the emancipation of a number of authoritarian societies. On the other hand, it has exposed our deepest weaknesses without allowing us to access the weaknesses of potential adversaries.

Conversely, the cultures of potential adversaries of the Western world are not so readily accessible. Only a small number of experts can understand the fractures that exist within Russian, Chinese, Iranian society and so on.

Referring to the quote from Sun Tzu, given in the introduction of this part, we can see that:

- our adversaries systematically know us better than we will ever know them,
- our adversaries sometimes know us better than we know ourselves.

Under such conditions, it seems likely Sun Tzu would predict that we will succumb in every battle.

Obviously, we are dealing here with a war that is waged in the informational field. And while such a war does not directly threaten the lives of citizens, it undeniably endangers their way of life and poses an existential danger to liberal democracies.

1.2. Islands of French society: fertile ground for the manipulation of awareness through disinformation.

Disinformation seeks to build on the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the target it is aimed at. Its purpose is to paralyze an actor's decision-making. In this way, the “disinformer” looks for flaws or fractures within a society in order to polarize public debate by making opposing camps irreconcilable. As such, today's France is a prey of choice insofar as its current society has many fault lines that make it particularly vulnerable.

Thus, French society is vertically fragmented along a social divide that pits the elite against the working classes. However, this vertical fragmentation results in a horizontal, i.e., geographic fragmentation of French society, between centers and their peripheries. We can therefore observe that these multiple fragmentations offer as many possibilities for disinformation as they do for polarizing a debate, sowing discord, discrediting an actor, or impeding any decision-making. In these two categories, we can find an infinite number of fissures and oppositions. However, for the purposes of this study, we will only consider those that are relevant to disinformation. Vertically, we will thus hold to the elite vs. popular class divide, which highlights other divisions such as those founded on education, or pitting the globalized vs. the forgotten. Horizontally, we will study the divide between urban centers and suburbs, which allows us to group together the cleavages between cities - countryside, and city center - suburbs.

Obviously, in order to analyze this disinformation, we will try to rely on theories that highlight the fractures in French society. Thus, the geographers, sociologists and demographers mentioned are all recognized researchers in their field, even if their theories have often been the subject of controversies exploited for disinformation.

The social divide weakens the cohesion of French society. The split between the elite and the working classes is now a major factor in the structure of social interaction in France. As we shall see, this cleavage plays an important role in the causes of the Yellow Vest movement. This opposition is realized through the growing autonomy of two increasingly distant categories. Indeed, the elite class represents nearly 30% of the population if we take the education level as a common criterion. For example, about 30% of the population has completed higher education, defined as five years after the baccalaureate. The increase in the number of graduates today allows the wealthy populations to be self-sufficient and to refuse social mixing.

In France, the decline in social mixing is expressed in particular through the social reproduction that Pierre Bourdieu put forward in his theory of *habitus*⁴. For Bourdieu, social categories cut the bridges between them because of unequal access to education and are conditioned by class heritage. This theory, while dating to the 60's, is still relevant today, albeit in renewed form. According to François-Xavier Bellamy⁵, education is a gaping fault line in French society. However, his observation is perhaps more generational. He notes that education has changed and no longer plays its role of transmission in France. This role is essential to continue building the nation because it provides common reference points and values. For our subject, this point is crucial because it may explain our society's vulnerability to disinformation. The success of conspiracy theories is here an emblematic example.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Héritiers, les étudiants et la culture*, 1964.

⁵ François-Xavier Bellamy, *Les Déshérités ou l'urgence de transmettre*, 2004. He is a member of the party Les Républicains and European deputy within the EPP (European People's Party).

The territorial fracture breaks the geographical unity of the French nation. This fracture materializes in the opposition between the political and economic decision-making centers and the peripheries. This cleavage thus allows us to synthesize the oppositions between the cities and the countryside on the one hand, and the city centers and the suburbs on the other. While geographers may disagree on the interpretation of a geographical divide in France, they all speak of these inequalities. Therefore, in order to enable us to synthesize this fragmentation, we choose to unite both under the center-periphery divide, even if it does not reflect all the cleavages and political movements that are currently seeking balance. However, the appearance of the Yellow Vest movement shows with even greater acuity this territorial divide. This is why we will rely on it to understand the causes of this movement.

“The metropolitan model does not make society. The metropolitan model abandons an entire peripheral France”⁶. The idea of a cleavage between center and periphery is first observed through the growing opposition that exists between the cities and the countryside. Indeed, for about twenty years now, cities have managed to become central to the country's economy. Thus, a country like France, which had initially based its model on agriculture, is today extremely dependent on the service sector. The France Strategy report, headed by Michel Yahiel, states that “the metropolization of economic development is driven by a trend towards the geographic concentration of managerial jobs”⁷. This idea can also be found in Jérôme Fourquet's book where he shows that Paris intramuros has become the bastion of a population of executives and senior intellectual professionals. Indeed, whereas in 1982 this population represented only 24.7%, it now represents 46.4%⁸. He even goes so far as to affirm that the decline in social cohesion leads de facto to a withdrawal, or even separatism, of the higher categories.

Here, the use of the term “separatism” by a figure such as Jérôme Fourquet, director of the opinion and corporate strategies department at the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP), is quite interesting because, while it illustrates the reality well, it becomes a weapon for those who use disinformation. Nothing is more divisive than the “*separatism*” of part of a given population. This opposition finds its culmination in the Yellow Vest movement, which gives substance to the idea of a “France from below” in opposition to “France from above”, which has since been widely taken up by many media outlets.

Which islands within the French society? Through the prism of these cleavages, and in view of the disinformation actions and campaigns that take place within French society, we agree with Jérôme Fourquet's idea that a number of islands fragment the French nation into small societies that are more or less autonomous. The question is not whether Fourquet's thesis is the best interpretation of society, but rather why it is special from a disinformation perspective. In his book *The French Archipelago*, Fourquet reveals six large islands that make up French society and thus contribute to its polarization: The Catholics, the elites, the working class, the middle class, the population resulting from Arab-Muslim immigration and the Corsican and Breton regionalisms.

In the framework of our study on the Yellow Vests, we will only deal with the island of the elites and the working classes, which played the most important role in this movement because they came into conflict.

The island of the elites. This includes about 30% of the population, according to different surveys. Here, we will retain as a criterion the level of study. The obtaining of an advanced

⁶ Christophe Guilluy, *Fractures françaises*, 2010.

⁷ Michel Yahiel, « *Dynamiques de l'emploi et des métiers : quelle fracture territoriale ?* », France Stratégie, La Note d'analyse N°53, février 2017.

⁸ Jérôme Fourquet, *L'Archipel français, Naissance d'une nation multiple et divisée*, 2019.

degree thus defines membership in this group. Moreover, this island is the winning side of globalization and digital development.

The island of the working classes. This comprises 52% of the French population. It is in decline since it accounted for about 60% of the population in 1982⁹. This island, in opposition to the one mentioned above, sees itself as the losing side of globalization and the forgotten side of digitization, so much so that one begins to speak of the “digital divide”.

In short, even if it may seem caricatural at first glance, this polarization is a perfect illustration of a gaping hole, a vulnerability that can be exploited by a malign actor wanting to use disinformation to paralyze a society. Moreover, this divide has the peculiarity of being based on the level of education. Disinformation is based precisely on the intellectual disarmament of at least part of a population in order to both speed and facilitate its spread.

The case of the Yellow Vests is a perfect illustration of this idea. Finally, this gap between these two islands is also seen in a socio-economic divide. Indeed, the elites possess the largest part of the country's wealth while being less numerous than the working classes. Finally, if the elites do not have a problem of political representation, the working classes increasingly underrepresented and even excluded from that power held by the wealthiest classes. The Yellow Vest movement is a crisis of authority because it aims to challenge institutions, the media and the elites.

1.3. The widespread crisis of authority and trust.

In France, as we have seen, the society offers a number of opportunities to malign actors looking to launch disinformation campaigns. Indeed, French society does not offer a perfectly united and coherent face. Economic, social and intellectual fractures thus put tension on the links between the different islands of the French “archipelago”.

Yet the process of autonomization of these islands, described above, leads to making them alien to one another, or even to bringing them into conflict. Disinformation campaigns have only to exploit this state of affairs, and to maintain it in order to paralyze political power, or stymie its decision-making process. However, this pattern leads to a situation of permanent crisis which illustrates the success of disinformation campaigns.

One of the most striking crises in recent years in France is that of the Yellow Vests. The Yellow Vest movement challenges this situation, which is seen as a diktat and a denial of democracy for the working classes who feel deprived of their due rights as citizens. The increase in the diesel tax is a typical example. While this tax may seem like a good idea from the Parisian

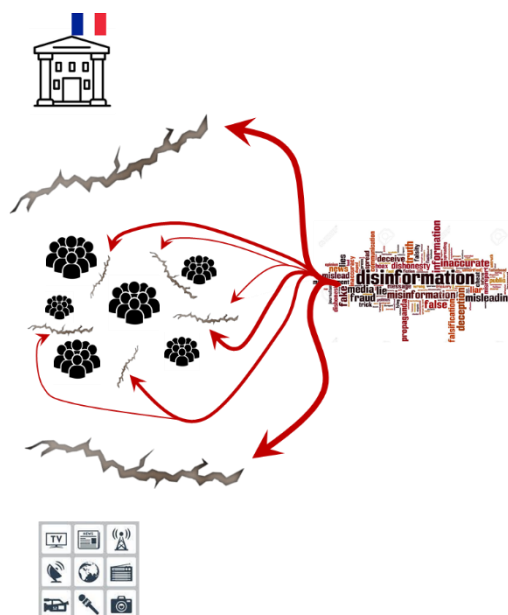


Figure 2 - How does disinformation threaten democracies?

⁹ Thomas Amossé, *Portrait statistique des classes populaires contemporaines*, Savoir/Agir N°15, 2015.

perspective, From the point of view of the countryside, this was seen as a direct attack on a way of life considered “backward” as seen from Paris. It was seen to strike at a way of life that is peripheral to the antipodes. COVID's management of the crisis highlights the same observations. Logical social distancing measures in conurbations where the population is dense make good sense. However, the same measures applied in the provinces immediately become above ground. In such a situation, disinformation becomes easy.

Since the beginning of the Yellow Vest movement, the exercise of power has been under permanent tension. Politics is now tantamount to crisis management. Politicians seem to be losing their freedom of action, which is one of the objectives of those who resort to disinformation. The success of a disinformation campaign can thus be measured by its capacity to generate crisis. In France, the Yellow Vest movement must therefore be analyzed through the unprecedented crisis of confidence, under the Fifth Republic, between those in power and the working classes.

This crisis has three different yet intimately linked aspects: a crisis of political representation, a crisis of political institutions and finally a crisis of the media.

The crisis of our political representatives is characterized by the disconnect between those who exercise power and their constituents. Paradoxically, at a time when the world has never been so connected, power tends to disconnect, cutting itself off from those over whom it is exercised. This is in fact an example of successful polarization. We see our rulers every day through the media. They themselves use the media (social networks) regularly, and yet direct contact seems to have almost disappeared. The connection, paradoxically, breaks the direct link between citizens and rulers. At the same time this connection allows more people to have access to their rulers, creating a seemingly irreducible distance through the filter of the screen.

Digitization thus creates a form of immunity for the ruler, our elites, who can take measures without exposing themselves, or without worrying about the consequences of measures taken. As a result, power is denied to the working classes who are the least well-armed in the face of the challenge of connection. Indeed, both these classes, those who live on the periphery and those who are least educated, are the least connected.

The strata of society are exploited to generate a crisis that then feeds on itself, once this polarization is identified and nurtured. The consequence of this crisis of confidence in our representatives achieves the main objective of a good disinformation campaign: to paralyze decision-making. Any political decision is now immediately contested and strongly cleaves French society. Finally, the political party currently in power in France conveys the image of complicity between political representatives and elites, thus sensing the popular classes back to “*la France des derniers de cordée*”¹⁰. Thus, in 2017, 69% of the candidates for the presidential majority are from the upper classes, compared to 56% in 2012. Here again, the crisis of COVID 19 echoes that of the Yellow Vests. While the Yellow Vest crisis was seen by a large part of the working classes as favoring the wealthy classes (here referred to as elites), the pandemic highlighted the dependence of these same classes on the working classes.

¹⁰ “The Last of the Climbing”. In opposition to the expression given by President Macron in 2017 to defend the role of bosses and entrepreneurs in French society, “the first of climbing”.

The media crisis amplifies the phenomena of disinformation at work in French society. Whether in France or in other liberal democracies, the success of certain disinformation campaigns is due in part to the combination of three factors facing the media today.

First of all, we are witnessing a questioning of traditional media. Second, the development of social networks since the 2000s offers unprecedented access to information. Finally, the phenomenon of whistleblowers is opportunely feeding off the failures of traditional media.

The traditional media are currently experiencing an unprecedented crisis. Indeed, the advent of social networks and the mass media poses a major problem of profitability for them. Moreover, traditional media are suspected of conniving with the power in place, which partly explains, on the one hand, the treatment of the Yellow Vest crisis by the media themselves and, on the other hand, the rejection expressed by the Yellow Vests towards these media considered as "sold". Moreover, this idea is supported and amplified at present by the fact that anything that goes beyond the editorial line set by the traditional media is accused of being a conspiracy. Yet, far from calming this crisis, this disqualification, on the contrary, widens the already yawning gap between the government and the part of the population that is reflected in the ideas of the Yellow Vest movement. It should be noted that this movement enjoyed strong support in public opinion for nearly six months, despite the damages owing to the demonstrations. The traditional media are therefore in crisis because they participate in these disinformation campaigns by supporting the camp of those who consider themselves "oppressed". In the case of the Yellow Vests, the traditional media represent the wealthy part of the population and are therefore close to the government. Thus, through a sort of caste reflex, the media can participate in a more or less efficient way in the disinformation of a movement such as that of the Yellow Vests, which involves two parts of society.

Conversely, so-called "alternative" media are becoming increasingly successful. Accessible on social networks, barely controlled, scarcely sourced, they are numerous and come to fuel the thesis of the opposite pole of power, here the working classes. In the case of the Yellow Vest crisis, Sputnik, Russia Today and TV Liberty experienced a meteoric rise during the conflict because they were able to appear more objective from the point of view of the Yellow Vests.

Moreover, they are often free of charge and overtly defend the party opposed to power, thus capturing an audience among populations that are often anti-establishment. In addition, the advent of social networks allows everyone to become a journalist insofar as, armed with a cell phone, anyone can film a situation and post it on a social network. However, this new way of doing journalism is devoid of regulation and, in essence, authorizes the dissemination of erroneous or false content, manipulated or not. In France, the law on "fake news" illustrates how the political authorities have considered this and how important it is in controlling public debate.

Finally, the phenomenon of whistleblowers also supports the idea that social media are losing their influence. Indeed, whistleblowers often act to denounce the failures of public power and its impunity. What these alternative media have in common is the culture of "buzz" and therefore the way in which information is presented. Here, this action lies between influence and disinformation, which makes it particularly difficult to distinguish between the two.

The current media crisis is part of the ambient fog maintained around all information. Each piece of information is presented from a particular angle and can be used for purposes of manipulation. But this fog is exploited during a disinformation campaign because it can allow false information to drown in the

middle of real information in order to make it credible. Thus, not only is the information embedded in a continuous flow of data, but it is also oriented by the person who disseminates it, or even manipulated or assembled from scratch.

This very particular context explains to a large extent the success of disinformation in France and, consequently, within the Yellow Vest movement.

2. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE YELLOW VEST MOVEMENT

2.1. Evolution of public opinion during various developments in the Yellow Vest movement

As stated in the introduction, disinformation targets public opinion. It is therefore particularly relevant to study the evolution of public opinion regarding the Yellow Vests before entering into the study of the various cases of disinformation identified.

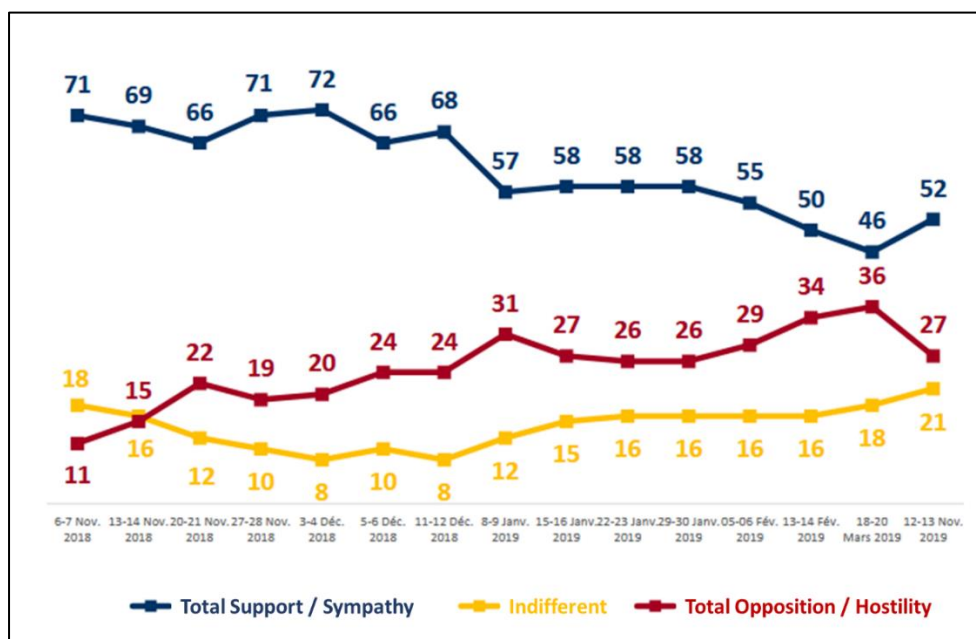


Figure 3 - IFOP-FIDUCIAL: The French and the Yellow Vest Movement, November 2019

Correlating these polling curves with the study of the successive transformations within the movement of the Yellow Vests allows us to learn about the mechanisms at work regarding public opinion.

Spontaneous generation of a massive popular support: the decisive role of social networks and alternative media. On Saturday, November 17, 2018, in reaction to numerous calls for mobilization against the rise in fuel prices, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered throughout France to carry out blockades on roads and traffic circles. The yellow vest, an item of road safety equipment, immediately became the rallying symbol of these demonstrators. Considering the success of this *#Acte1*¹¹, a call for mobilization was launched for the following Saturdays. A social movement had just been born without any political or labor organization attached to it.

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube served as platforms for coordination and fueled interest. At the same time, these social networks created a sense of community among the self-proclaimed “forgotten of the Republic”.

In the long French tradition of *Jacqueries* (Figure 4), this social movement was firstly that of a “peripheral France”¹². The demands therefore focused mainly on decisions considered unfair (a speed limit of 80 km/h on secondary roads, abolition of the wealth tax, ...) and on inequalities described as unbearable (the disappearance of administrative services in rural areas, a widening digital divide, ...).

¹¹ The typology “*#Acte1*” refers to the one used on social networks throughout the crisis to mobilize demonstrators every Saturday.

¹² C. Guilluy, *La France périphérique : comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires*, éd. Champs Actuel, 2015.

At this stage, the Yellow Vests did not recognize any leaders, although a few charismatic figures were emerging on social networks. In addition, they turned largely to alternative media (RT, Sputnik, YouTube Channels,...) which they trusted more because of their distance from the “single thought” allegedly imposed by the traditional media outlets (news channels, radios,...), accused of being in connivance with the political class.

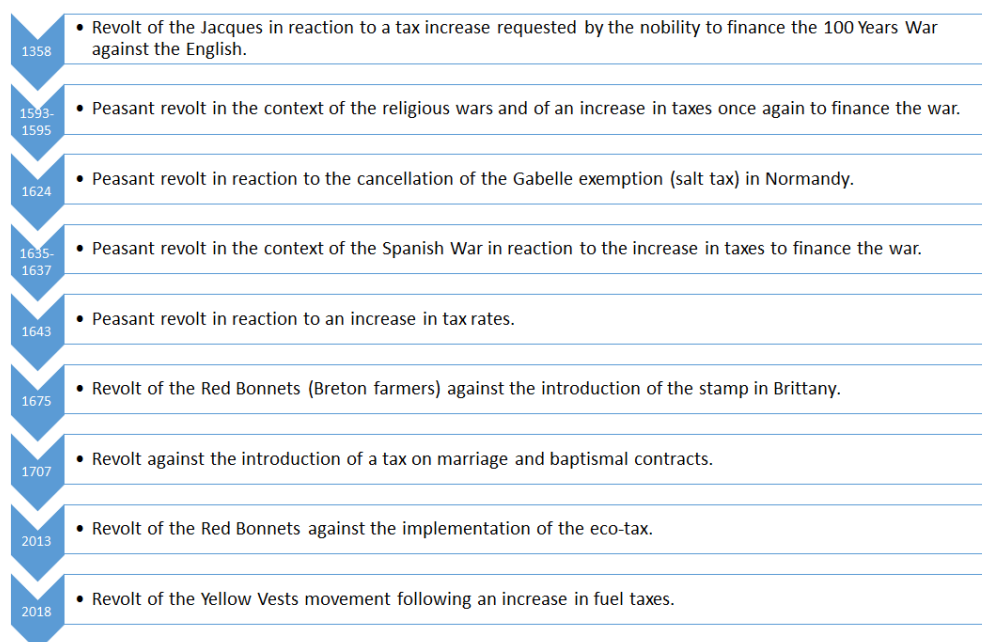


Figure 4 - The French tradition of Jacqueries

The power of attraction of public opinion: political recuperation attempts. #Acte3 of the Yellow Vest movement, on December 1, 2018, constituted a first step in the mutation of this social movement with the worldwide diffusion of images of violence committed against the security forces and the ransacking of the *Arc de Triomphe*. Despite these events, public opinion continued to overwhelmingly support the Yellow Vests (Figure 3, 72% total support on December 4, 2018). This gave rise to a belief that nothing could stop this legitimate wave of social protest.

Therefore, from mid-December, attempts at political recuperation became more and more evident. Regarding the seeming inability of the Yellow Vests to develop an independent political movement, the extremist parties declared their “readiness to welcome Yellow Vests”¹³ on their electoral lists in the run-up to the spring 2019 European elections.

These attempts did not succeed, but they provoked a second mutation of the movement through the politicization of the demands. From then on, the Yellow Vests were calling for greater representation of the working classes and rural areas in the governance of the state. The creation of citizens' initiative referendums became the leitmotif of the Yellow Vests, who continued to occupy traffic circles and gathered every Saturday in major cities.

¹³ https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/du-rond-point-au-scrutin-les-gilets-jaunes-face-a-la-recuperation-politique-28-12-2018-2282209_20.php#



The red lines of public opinion: unjustified violence and attempted insurrection. #Acte8 of the Yellow Vests, January 5, 2019, marked a new development with the violent intrusion of demonstrators into the ministry of government spokesperson Benjamin Grivaux. This act resulted in a significant diminution in popular support for the Yellow Vests. The movement recorded a 10 points loss of support in the days following the intrusion (Figure 3, 57% total support on January 9, 2019).

In the following weeks, a form of insurrection gradually replaced contestation, and slogans calling for the dethroning of “King Macron” proliferated during the following acts. In addition, the regular rallying of Black-Blocks¹⁴ to the Yellow Vest demonstrations created a feeling of weariness and lead to ever-widening rejection of acts of violence. To illustrate this, it is particularly interesting to observe the progression of hostility towards the Yellow Vest movement. This hostility also increased by about ten points over the period observed previously. It seems viable to interpret this evolutionary “mirror image” as a red line drawn amongst public opinion: a support for popular protest, yes, but the rejection of unjustified violence and attempted insurrection.

2.2. Disinformation within the Yellow Vest movement: the fertile ground of mistrust.

In March 2019, the NGO AVAAZ published a report in which it stated “fake news surrounding the French Yellow Vest movement has reached an estimated 105 million views on Facebook alone”¹⁵. This statistic confirms the supposition that disinformation attains full effectiveness in a society plagued by deep fractures.

The diagram below (Figure 5), taken from the same report, shows the distribution of fake news according to its type of content.

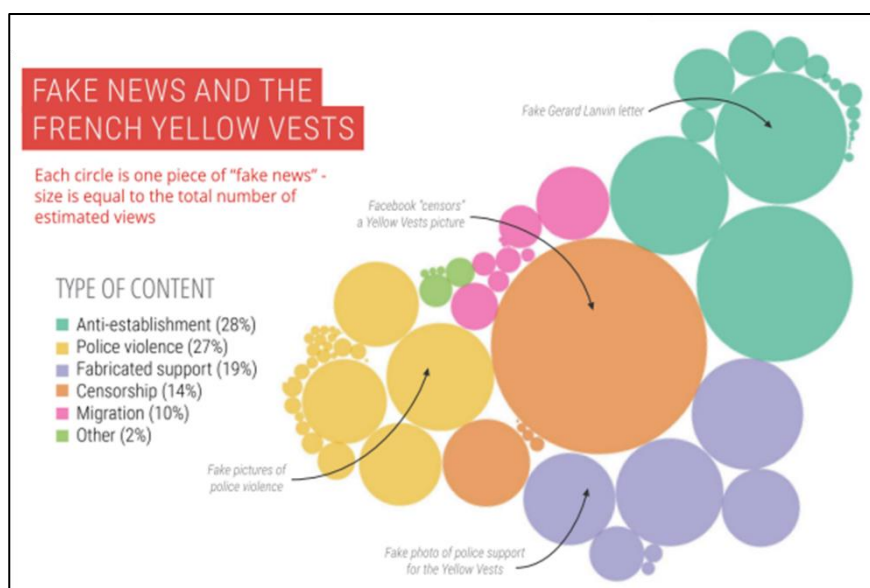


Figure 5 - AVAAZ Report, *Yellow Vests flooded by fake news*, March 2019.

¹⁴ A radical anarchist group whose members dress all in black and conceal their identities when protesting.

¹⁵ AVAAZ Report, *Yellow Vests flooded by fake news*, March 2019.

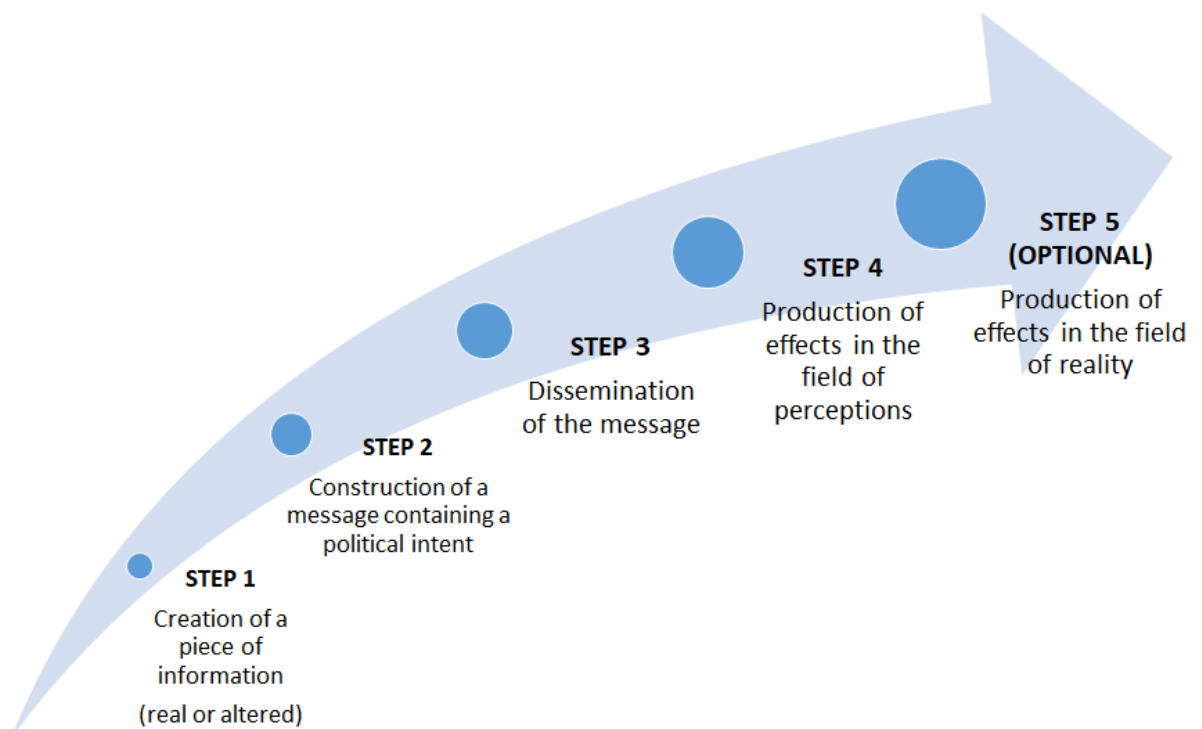
The following conclusions can be drawn from studying this diagram:

- Mistrust of the French State and of the traditional communications media is a fertile ground for disinformation (i.e., fake Facebook censors and fake pictures of police violence).
- The Yellow Vest movement searches for recognition and support (fake G. Lanvin letter).
- The Yellow Vest movement is also very sensitive to public opinion (fabricated support) particularly where this may provoke dissidence within the ranks of the State (fake photo of police support).
- Disinformation is also being fully exploited in areas peripheral to the priority demand for Yellow Vests (immigration).

Study of concrete examples. As a reminder, we noticed in the introductory example of teacher Samuel Paty's case that the authorities might have potentially stopped or reduced the dissemination of hatred if they had had a sufficiently powerful means to restore and disseminate the truth among the public opinion.

Here we analyze some concrete examples of disinformation within the Yellow Vest movement to see if this helps to bring out ideas to complete the strategy to fight disinformation.

For the rest of this study, we will refer to the distribution of actors and stages of disinformation (see figure 1) that we provide below as a reminder.



Example 1: CONTEXT AND DATE MANIPULATION

STEP 1: On October 12, 2020, BFMTV broadcasted the video of President Macron dancing at the summit of the International Organization of the Francophonie in Yerevan.

STEP 2: On November 17, 2020, the first day of the Yellow Vest movement, the video has been reposted on Facebook with the following message: "Macron dances while France suffers."

STEP 3: In just 10 days, the video has been viewed more than 5 million times and shared more than 180 000 times¹⁶.

STEP 4: A large number of hate messages were disseminated on social networks against the President, who the Yellow Vests then called "King Macron."



⇒ RESTORATION OF THE TRUTH: the media have since published several articles explaining the manipulation of dates and context. However, four months later, Facebook had still not removed the video nor referenced the defamatory nature of the video.

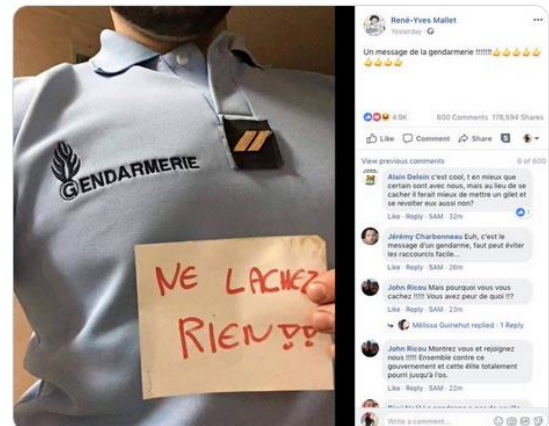
Example 2: FABRICATED SUPPORT

STEP 1: In October 2016, a gendarme published a photo in support of the police following the terrorist attack in Viry-Châtillon. The photo read: "Don't give up the fight!"

STEP 2: On November 24, 2018, this photo reappeared on Facebook, taken out of its context, with a message of support for the Yellow Vests and indirectly calling for the resignation of the security forces: "Show yourself and join us!"

STEP 3: Within 24 hours, this post has been shared nearly 180,000 times¹⁷.

STEP 4: In the minds of some of the Yellow Vests, as well as among public opinion, this post suggested that some of the security forces would be willing to join the movement.



⇒ RESTORATION OF THE TRUTH: the media have since published articles explaining the manipulation of dates and context and the post has been deleted.

¹⁶ <https://observers.france24.com/fr/20181203-emmanuel-macron-danse-il-alors-mouvement-gilets-jaunes-debute>

¹⁷ https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/gilets-jaunes-de-faussees-images-circulent-sur-facebook_2050473.html

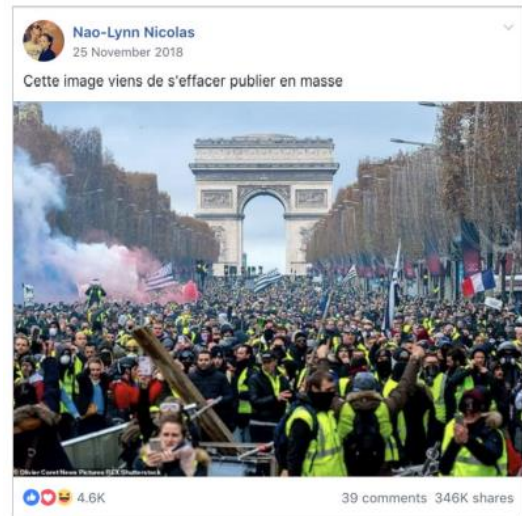
Example 3: RUMOR OF CENSORSHIP

STEP 1: On November 25, 2018, the photographer Olivier Coret published a photo showing a very large crowd of Yellow Vests.

STEP 2: That same day, a person reposted the same photo on Facebook saying: “this photo has been deleted, share it massively.”

STEP 3: By March 6, 2019, this post had been shared 349,000 times and viewed nearly 9 million times¹⁸.

STEP 4: The massive sharing of this post demonstrated the lack of trust in the traditional media accused of being under the influence of the state and of wanting to conceal or otherwise censor information.



⇒ RESTORATION OF THE TRUTH: the newspaper *Le Monde* published an article the same day demonstrating that the photo had not been removed from the photographer's Facebook page and that it was even used by the media to illustrate the Yellow Vest movement.

Example 4: DISCREDITING ATTEMPT AGAINST THE YELLOW VESTS

Conversely, it is useful to see that attempts to discredit the Yellow Vests using disinformation have produced harmful effects and have also increased mistrust.

STEP 1/2: On November 17, the first day of the movement, the deputy Florian Bachelier¹⁹ declared: “under many yellow vests, brown shirts are more and more visible.”

STEP 3: This allegation was shared by many media and, ten days later, Minister of Public Accounts Gerard Darmanin supported the deputy's statement and associated a part of the Yellow Vests with the “Brown Plague.”

STEP 4: The comparison of the Yellow Vests with Nazi militias was highly contested in public opinion, and many people considered this as an awkward attempt to discredit Yellow Vest movement.



⇒ RESTORATION OF THE TRUTH: STEP 7: To date, these statements remain unproven and it is therefore impossible to say whether they were inferred, implied or real information. Yet these declarations proved quite controversial and widened the gap between the Yellow Vests and political leaders.

¹⁸ AVAAZ Report, *Yellow Vests flooded by fake news*, March 2019.

¹⁹ Member of the French Parliament, from the same political party as President Macron.

WHAT FAILED IN THESE EXAMPLES?

- × **Media level:** The fact checking carried out by the media proved to be poorly effective in countering the dissemination of the manipulated content.
- × **Social networks level:** They have not taken any measures to secure or contain the information disseminated on their platforms.
- × **Users' level:** They massively shared uncertified contents and took part, consciously or unconsciously, in disinformation process.
- × **State level:** Didn't manage to coordinate efforts in containing disinformation flows and/or reestablishing truth among public opinion.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE?

- ✓ **Coordinate efforts:** When the reputation of a state administration (police for instance) or a high-ranking leader (such as the president) is unfairly attacked, it is State's responsibility to coordinate the efforts with media and social networks to, at best, restore the truth or, at least, contain the dissemination of the manipulated content.
- ✓ **Contain dissemination of disinformation:** This requires monitoring information flows on social networks and poses ethical questions about the protection of individual freedoms. However, can bots or malign actors pretend to be protected? Obviously not. Then, the cooperation between the State and Social networks must be reinforced to detect diverted contents and suppress or contain it. Here, the use of an artificial intelligence seems to be mandatory to act as quickly as possible.
- ✓ **Alert and educate citizens:** Launch a massive awareness campaign aimed at revealing disinformation cases and explaining the processes used (debunking²⁰). To be perfectly efficient, such a campaign must be impartial and deal with disinformation issued from both sides. Thus, this should be performed by a non-state actor (such as an NGO) which should benefit from amplification levers at State's level (national TV channels for instance).

2.3. Study of alleged Russian interference in the Yellow Vests movement

"There should be patriotic people at the head of information resources, people who defend the interests of the Russian Federation. These are state resources. And that's exactly how it will be."²¹

Russian disinformation is a tool at the service of Russia's strategic ambitions. These objectives can be summarized around three main axes:

- Pushing back the American policy of containment carried out at the borders of the Russian Federation;
- Reaffirming Russian power on the international stage;
- Promoting a political alternative to the Western democracies.

²⁰ Expose or discredit allegedly false, exaggerated or pretentious claims.

²¹ RIA Novosti, Poutine : « les médias publics devraient être dirigés par des patriotes », 19 December 2013, <https://ria.ru/>

To achieve these major strategic objectives, Russia has developed the concept of a “new generation war”, described in the Gerasimov Doctrine. This is a hybrid war that combines military means with civilian and non-lethal means. Moreover, in this new generation war, the informational part occupies a central place “since (...) the main battlefield is the consciousness, perception and strategic calculations of the adversary.” The goal is to acquire “informational superiority.” The objective of this information war, which supports the great Russian strategy, is to paralyze the political decision-making system.

The use of disinformation in this information war has three main objectives:

- Discredit Western political authorities;
- Divide public opinion in Western democracies;
- Develop Russian influence in the West.

This doctrine is the response to the Russian awareness of the “protest potential of the population” after the popular protest movements in Ukraine from the square of Maïdan, or following the Russian parliamentary elections of December 2011. Thus, in the field of information, just as in armed conflicts, Russia is now waging real wars. “Frozen conflicts”²² have been unleashed. As the Donbass is a frozen armed conflict, the Yellow Vest movement is initiating a real frozen conflict in the information field.

Indeed, the Yellow Vest movement has triggered a succession of crises ranging from a protest over new taxes to challenges to both the security forces and management of the COVID 19 crisis. This informational conflict fully achieves its objectives: to paralyze the French political decision-making system in the long term. The French population is strongly polarized regarding the Yellow Vests, preventing the French government from making decisions quickly without facing challenges in the streets.

Finally, disinformation is both inherently invisible and eminently subjective; it is particularly difficult to identify on the one hand, and defies attribution on the other. Therefore, the examples below are drawn from academic organizations and the media, as well as from our own analysis. Now that the purpose of the use of disinformation seems clearer, it is a question of showing how Russia has implemented it regarding the Yellow Vest movement. However, we must first analyze how Russian disinformation works in order to be able to identify it in the case of the Yellow Vests.

Traditionally, Russian disinformation is based on opportunity. While the Kremlin controls the main lines of communication, the actors of Russian disinformation have a surprisingly large degree of freedom because many of them are civilians and belong to private companies. One can distinguish among white, or legal, disinformation; grey disinformation, which includes conspiracy sites and the darknet; and finally black disinformation, hidden behind proxies or hackers.

White disinformation. This disinformation is the tip of the iceberg. It is the clean face of it, because it acts under the cover of a mission of cultural influence. In this context, the Kremlin has a whole “media arsenal”, including two foreign-oriented agencies: Rossiya Segodnya and RT both run by Margarita Simonyan, who also owns Sputnik. The original intention of these media was to improve Russia's image in foreign countries, but this has taken a new turn and is now used to degrade the image of potential adversaries. Thus, they go beyond their primary mission of influence in favor of disinformation of opportunity in the service of the three axes of the Russian grand strategy mentioned above. Here, as far as the case of the Yellow Vests movement is concerned, the fact that the RT channel has created a “giletsjaunes.rt” site illustrates this idea perfectly. Thus as the “securingdemocracy.gmfus.org” website states, it is “information manipulation,” meaning “The coordinated use of social or traditional media to manipulate and influence public debate by deliberately spreading or amplifying information that is false,

²² Information Report No. 416 (2007-2008) by Mr. Josselin de Rohan, Ms. Josette Durrieux, Mr. Jean-Pierre Fourcade, Mr. Robert Hue, Mr. Yves Pozzo di Borgo and Mr. Roger Romani, submitted on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee on June 25, 2008.

misleading, or distorted, and/or engaging in deceptive practices like masking or misrepresenting the provenance or intent of content, and/or intentionally suppressing information."

As of July 2020, 1.14 million users follow RT France on Facebook, 160,000 on Twitter and 679,000 on YouTube, i.e. on the three platforms where Russian media are mostly concentrating their efforts. Sputnik France, whose financial and human resources are much lower than those of RT, has a smaller audience, with respectively 487,000, 87,000 and 112,000 subscribers on the same platforms. On YouTube, in addition to the number of subscribers, the audience can also be observed in terms of the total number of views of the two media's videos: RT France counts more than 291.5 million, far ahead of Sputnik France's 19.3 million views. On the subject of the Yellow Vests, RT published twice as many videos on the subject as Le Monde, a newspaper that is located on the center-left of the French political spectrum and that is one of the most serious newspapers in France. RT thus plays on its role of influence to amplify a cleavage within French society and thus amplify a pre-existing polarization. It is thus a question of disinformation insofar as RT does not balance its discourse and broadcasts oriented and thus manipulated information.



Figure 6 - As an example, to echo the debate on police violence in the context of the management of the Yellow Vests movement by the public force, Sputnik broadcast this article, clearly oriented: ["Macron's response to the yellow vests makes Putin look softer."](#)



Figure 7 - Screenshot from an [RT Germany webpage](#) shows a doctored image showing Putin with a construction manager in order to mock the Western view of Russian involvement in the Yellow Vests movement.

Besides, on Facebook, the content related to the Yellow Vests has reached roughly 105 million views in France, which would mean that the 35 million French people who have an account on Facebook have seen this content an average of three times. White disinformation is therefore very close to influence because it uses the means of influence to orient and polarize public opinion.

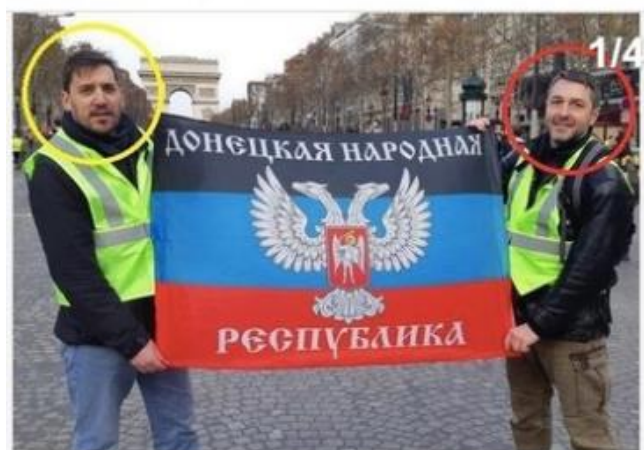


Figure 8 - On this screenshot, we can clearly distinguish the Russian flag during a Yellow Vests demonstration, which demonstrates the hold of Russia within the Yellow Vests movement.

Finally, to check if the influence of Russian media with the Yellow Vests still persists we used the Hamilton 2.0 dashboard²³ put online by the Alliance For Securing Democracy²⁴. We found that over the year 2020, the twitter accounts of Russian media published 900 tweets related to the news of the Yellow Vests. This may seem low but it brings us to an average of more than two tweets per day while the news of the Yellow Vests has been almost zero over the same period.

Above all, it is particularly interesting to note when the peaks of publication related to the Yellow Vests on twitter by these Russian media appeared:

- The first 3 Saturdays of January 2020 marked by large demonstrations against the pension reform;
- September 12, 2020, when the biggest social demonstration of 2020 took place;
- And, more surprisingly, the other peaks occurred around the dates of March 16, May 4 and July 14. These dates correspond to the speeches made by President Macron on the lockdown measures and prospects for exiting the Covid crisis. It is therefore quite surprising to find peaks of tweets related to the news Yellow Vests on these same dates.

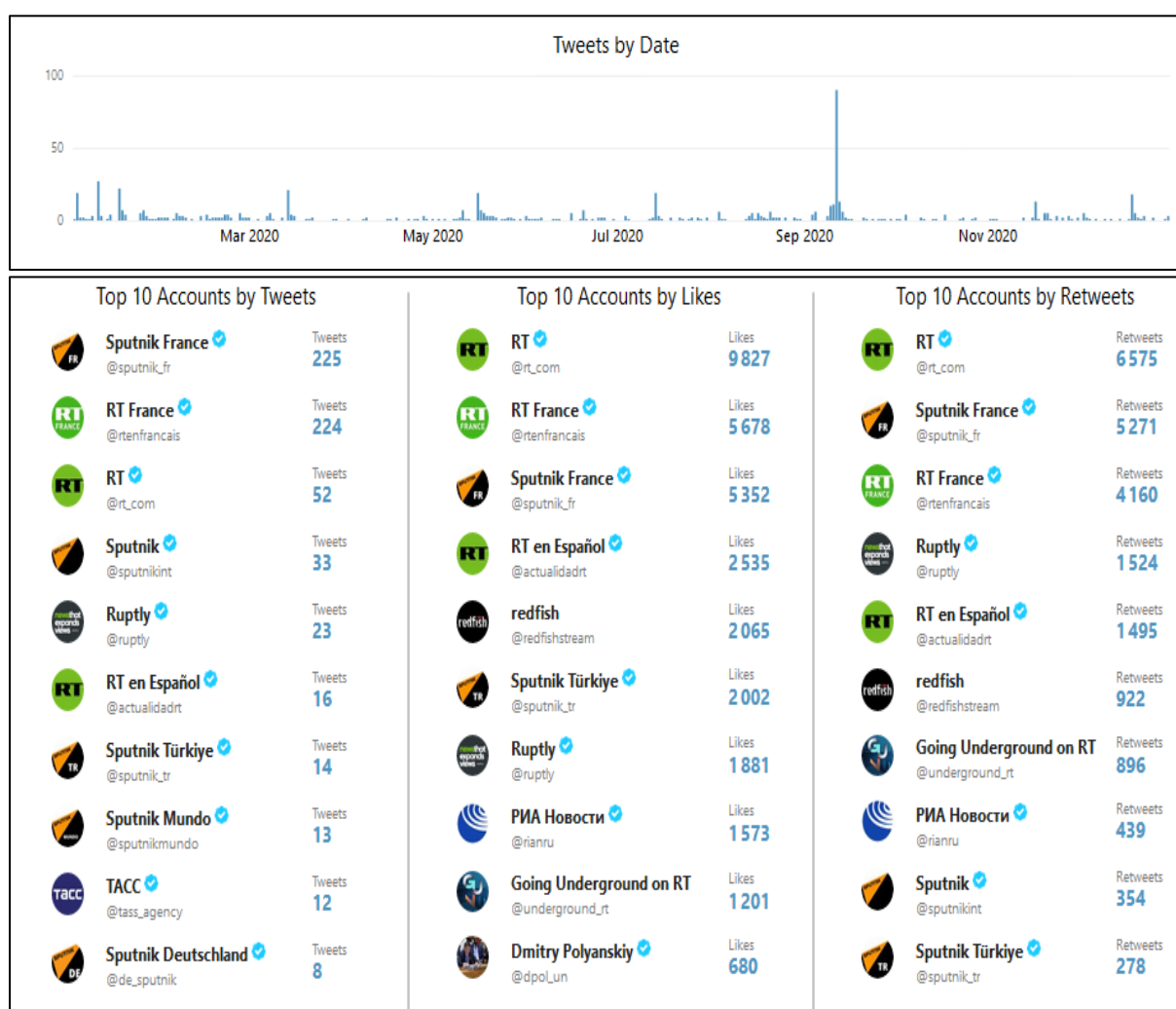


Figure 9 - These two diagrams represent the distribution by date, and by accounts, of tweets published on the year 2020 by Russian media related to the Yellow Vests news (Extracted from Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard, using following keywords : "Gilets Jaunes", "Yellow Vests", "GiletsJaunes", "YellowVests", "GJ").

²³ <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>

²⁴ The Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) is a bipartisan (US/EU) initiative created in 2017 to develop strategies to deal with authoritarian-leaning regimes that seek to undermine Western democracies.

Grey disinformation. This concerns everything related to conspiracy theories, so-called “alternative” sites and the darknet. Here, we are talking about non-professionals who can be defined as sympathizers or believers in the ideas they defend, i.e., activists. This type of disinformation in particular has been used regarding the Yellow Vest movement.

The Facebook page “*La France en colère*”, for example, propagated the theme of police violence. However, this theme, which has an element of truth, reinforces the polarization of opinion to both feed and further anger. The social network finally deleted this page. The website “*lesgiletsjaunes.fr*” was also shut down because it was accused of propagating much fake news about the ruling caste.

In the case of the Yellow Vest movement, it is interesting to note that 90% of the actions carried out on the Internet come from individuals with extreme left-wing, extreme right-wing or Russian-related ideas. This population is particularly sensitive to conspiracy theories. Thus, 27% of Marine Le Pen's voters are adherents of conspiracy theories, and 20% of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's voters, likewise, while only 10% of Emmanuel Macron's voters are susceptible²⁵ to them. It is also very interesting to note that this same study shows that the French population, overall, is particularly vulnerable to conspiracy theories.

This graph shows how a sizable slice of the population is sensitive to different conspiracy theories. This same fringe is the one we find supporting the Yellow Vest movement.

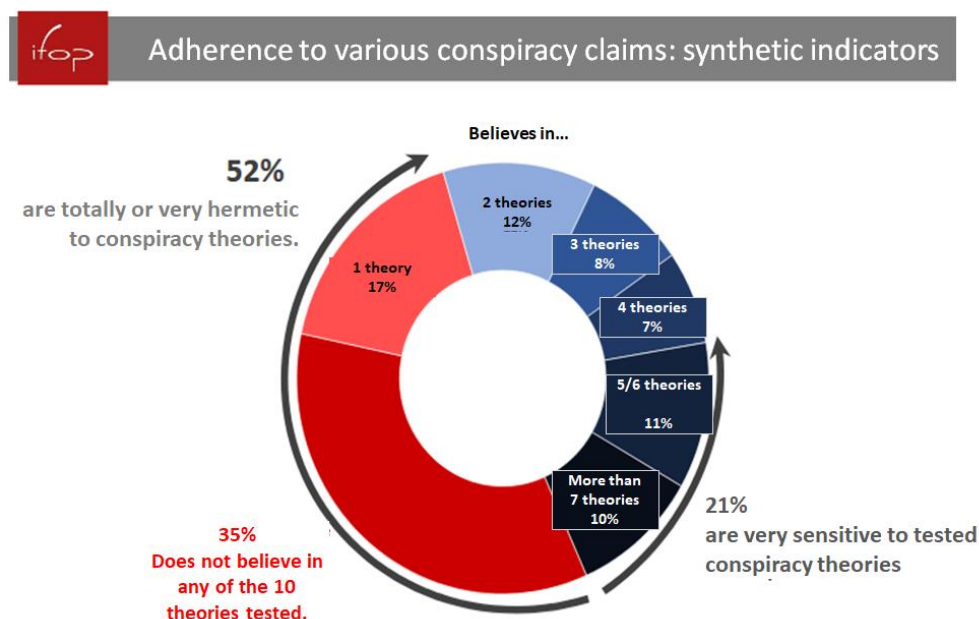


Figure 10 - Ifop survey for the Jean-Jaurès Foundation and Conspiracy Watch, January 2019

For instance, the Twitter account ForceJauneGJ²⁶ gathers all the conspiracy theories at work within the French society. But what is striking here is clearly the fact that Yellow Vests are a relay of all this manipulated information.

²⁵ Ifop poll for the Jean-Jaurès Foundation and ConspiracyWatch, January 2019.

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/ForceJauneGJ>

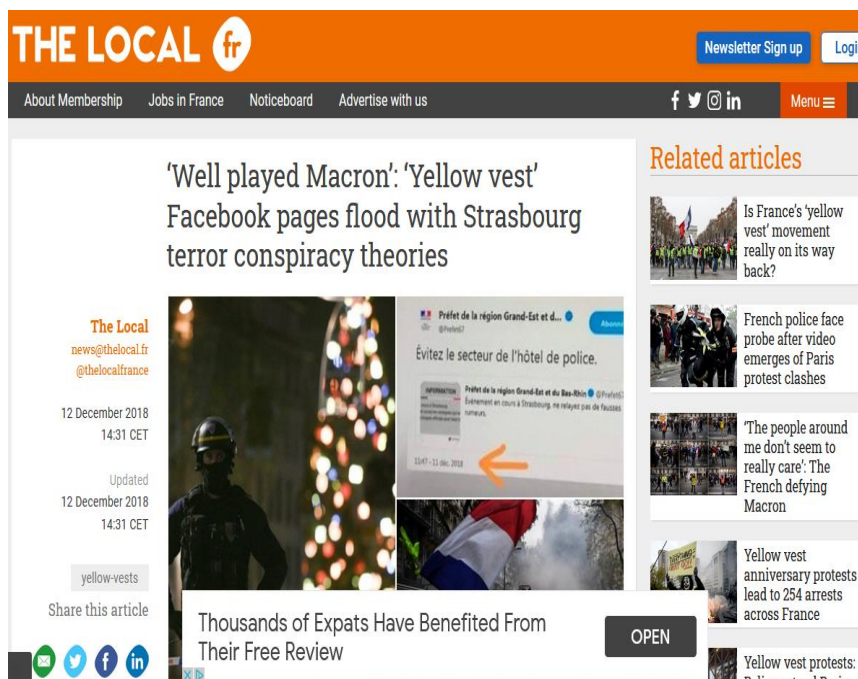


Figure 11 - This web page shows the permeability of the yellow vests to conspiracy theories. Here, the Strasbourg attack perpetrated by an Islamist terrorist is interpreted by some yellow vests as a manipulation of the French government to diminish the impact of the Yellow Vest movement.

Black disinformation. Here it is more a question of disinformation professionals. These actors are private companies as well as specialized state services. These are in fact the “proxies” used by Russia to achieve its strategic objectives while remaining below an accepted threshold of aggression.

Trolls are people who “relay, saturate certain sites with comments and/or harass”. Moscow has developed “troll factories” such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA) owned by the Russian restaurant magnate Evgeni Prigojine, owner of the Kremlin-financed Wagner group. In 2015, this agency employed many young Russians working 12 hours per day in a very organized manner: bloggers wrote posts, others referred to the posts in their own publications, trolls wrote comments, communicators spread everything on social networks and bots retweeted. This well-oiled mechanism was of course put at the service of Russian disinformation within the Yellow Vest movement. Today, it is not obvious to attribute the disinformation made on the Yellow Vests movement to Russia. However, if we ask ourselves the question of who benefits from the crime, then the answer becomes more obvious. If we refer to the objectives of Russia set in its doctrine of information warfare. It is about “the confrontation in the information space between two or more states with the aim of damaging critically important information systems, processes and resources [...] to weaken the political, economic, and social system, to massively brainwash the population to destabilize society and the state, and to coerce the state into making decisions in the interest of the opposing party.”²⁷

By sticking to this definition, Twitter offers us clues to disinformation coming from the outside, where trolls and bots appear numerous. But again, the link is not obvious. On the other hand, the fact that these accounts are published in English and that they relay tweets that undermine democracy leads us to see Russia behind this disinformation maneuver.

²⁷ Julien NOCETTI, “Guerre de l’information : le web russe dans le conflit en Ukraine”, Focus stratégique, n° 62, September 2015.



Figure 132 – Twitter account called “Elliot Alderson” counted the #GiletsJaunes on a database of 34000 tweets. His graph shows at the level of the big colored circles the profiles that have most relayed this hashtag.



Figure 123 - In this tweet, Elliot Alderson focuses on the account named AbrahamEkris. He realizes that this account is no longer active because of Twitter, and that its activity is such that it can only be a bot because its tweets are retweeted automatically. It is therefore a bot.



Figure 14 – Following this method, another account is caught in the act of disinformation. In this screenshot, it announces that the army is deployed in Paris following the Yellow Vests demonstrations. This is false. It was a relief of the Sentinel Operation which fights against terrorism in France.



These Russian means of disinformation have been used, as seen previously, to amplify and favorably exploit the Yellow Vest movement. For example, the American agency Bloomberg lists roughly 600 fake American Twitter accounts linked to the Yellow Vests and relaying both false and true news related to this movement. It should also be noted that a certain number of real American accounts linked to the Yellow Vests are also linked to the QAnon movement (grey disinformation). For its part, the American think tank New Knowledge²⁸ identified about 200 fake Twitter accounts that would have produced 1600 tweets and re-tweets per day about the Yellow Vests²⁹. However, these companies and NGOs do not benefit from the legitimacy that would render them credible. Indeed, the French satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné* denounced the creation of fake Russian Twitter accounts by the company New Knowledge during the American campaign of 2016. So, who should be believed? This, in essence, is disinformation.

Black disinformation, just like the other two strands of disinformation, mentioned above has been at work within the Yellow Vest movement, which has been perceived as such a vulnerability that France is now among the countries most targeted by Russia in terms of disinformation. It comes behind the United States and countries bordering Russia. The fact that the false accounts use the English language underlines the objective of the Kremlin, which beyond striking France and weakening its political apparatus seeks above all to divide the democracies and to discredit them this model on the international scene in order to promote the Russian model.

To find its true effectiveness, disinformation does not need to convince. It only needs to divide. In so doing, it hinders the ability of Western democracies to take action.

²⁸ New Knowledge was renamed Knology in 2019, the purpose of this think tank is, in its own words, to study the social sciences to make the world a better place.

²⁹ Yellow vests. A Russian network to encourage chaos? *Courrier international*, December 9, 2018.

In the previous sections, we have shown that disinformation operates on the fault lines of Western societies. It is therefore important to smooth out these fault lines in order to leave less room for domestic and foreign malign actors. As we have demonstrated on several occasions, restoring public trust is the objective to be achieved in order to deter these actors from using disinformation.

- the consolidation of the State's response capacities,
- the securing of the contents broadcasted on the various means of mass communication,
- and, finally, the raising of each citizen's awareness of the risks linked to disinformation.

[illegible]

France coping with disinformation: Lessons learned from the Yellow Vests movement
Page 27 sur 35

3.1. CONSOLIDATE – Strengthen and promote the action of the State in the fight against disinformation

The Yellow Vest crisis has shown that the action of the State against disinformation was not visible and that this fight lacks coordination between the different actors (State, media, social networks, citizen initiatives...). This lack of visible reaction has created a space favorable to the dissemination of disinformation. Beyond this crisis of the Yellow Vests, the same observations occurred during the Benalla cases³⁰, the demonstrations of the association “Justice for Adama”³¹ or the demonstrations against the Global Security Law³². Each time, the reputation of the State was massively attacked on social networks without any strong reaction to deter malign actors from using disinformation.

Thus, the following measures could consolidate the State's response to disinformation.

Create a High National Body to fight against disinformation.

We take up here one of the proposals made by the Director of the Institute of Strategic Research of the École Militaire (Mr. Jeangène Vilmer, IRSEM), which consists in developing a high national authority to fight against disinformation³³. This seems to be the priority and it seems possible to draw inspiration from what is being done in the Baltic countries, Scandinavia and Central Europe.

WHY?	Coordinate efforts to fight against disinformation
	Neutralize disinformation: this step is essential because without the capacity to strike, the previous measure is of little use. This strike capability must go from the immaterial field to the material field, so it is dual. This point will not be developed further for reasons of confidentiality and sovereignty.
HOW?	Anticipating tomorrow's disinformation: the State could strengthen the link with the private sector, especially start-ups, which remain the country's most important vector of innovation. Thus, while the French State has reduced its aid to these particularly innovative small businesses, their financial support could, on the contrary, be a profitable strategy in the medium term ³⁴ .
ADVANTAGES	Mobilize significant resources Strengthening French sovereignty in the information field
DISADVANTAGES	Substantial budget (that of the British in this area is 100 million euros)
RISKS	Reinforce the feeling of conspirators about institutional censorship
WHEN?	Long-term

³⁰ The Benalla cases are French judicial and political-media cases involving Alexandre Benalla, chargé de mission, coordinator of various services during the official and private trips of the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron. This affair has given rise to a wave of disinformation on social networks aimed at discrediting President Macron by claiming to have a relationship with Alexandre Benalla or accusing him of hiding information to protect his collaborator.

³¹ In June 2020, a series of demonstrations in support of Adama Traoré (who died in 2016 during a police arrest) brought together several thousand people. On social networks, this affair was associated with the #BlackLivesMatter movement and paved the way for unfounded accusations of systemic racism within the French police.

³² Again, it is the police institution that has been strongly targeted on social networks with massive sharing of videos of clashes between demonstrators and police forces.

³³ J-B - Jeangène Vilmer, La lutte contre la désinformation russe : contre la propagande sans faire de contre-propagande ?, conférence Panthéon-Sorbonne, Revue Défense Nationale n°801, June 2017.

³⁴ The example of the development of vaccines against COVID 19 is striking from this point of view. Indeed, the cooperation between Pfizer and the start-up BioNTech made possible to create the RNA vaccine in record time. The same objectives could be reached in the area of data management.

Enhance Cooperation with Allied Democracies

In the course of our research, we have indeed been able to observe that many tools for monitoring or fighting against disinformation exist but that France is very little present in these programs. For instance, we can highlight the project EUvsINFO³⁵ aimed at denouncing and unmasking Russian disinformation. It is very active, works in more than fifteen languages and has a database of more than 100,000 facts of Russian disinformation 2015 in Europe dating back to 2015. We also discovered the Hamilton dashboard³⁶ promoted by the ASD (Alliance for Securing Democracy) and which seems to be a powerful tool to detect almost instantly the use of disinformation by a foreign state actor.

WHY?	Sharing best practices and tools.
HOW?	Strengthen French cooperation with EASTRATCOM (European Task Group) or ASD (Alliance for Securing Democracy).
ADVANTAGES	Cost-effective Increase the French strike force
DISADVANTAGES	Problem of sovereignty to be solved
WHEN?	Short-term

Promote, within the society, the idea of a continuum of actions against disinformation.

As we have shown, the Russians have enshrined in their doctrine the use of disinformation and propaganda. They make a continuous use of it in time and space. Conversely, Westerners have a much more compartmentalized vision: peacetime vs. wartime, national territory vs. external theater of operations. This discontinuity of action in the field of information causes inertia, which must be countered by establishing a continuum of actions to combat disinformation. For its part, NATO defines a “comprehensive defense” which takes a dual approach to defense issues but takes more into account the technological aspect.

WHY?	To prepare from peace time and on the national territory each citizen and each component of the State to face disinformation.
HOW?	Launch an information campaign on the “barrier gestures” to respect when information arrives. Flyers illustrating good behavior, as well as flashes on the Internet or on television, in the manner of the fight against COVID-19, could increase the population's vigilance regarding how it deals with information. Set up a warning system: On the model of “kidnap alert” announcements, the State must be able to alert citizens without delay about massive attempt at disinformation (on traditional media and social networks).
ADVANTAGES	Make people aware that information has become a weapon requiring means of defense and, possibly, means of counter-attack.
DISADVANTAGES	This doctrine could make the fight against disinformation more legible.
RISKS	Without a constitutional framework, such a doctrine could become a pretext for a government to justify an authoritarian shift. Information is too fluid to be perfectly objective. This fear was particularly evident in France during the debate on the Avia Law ³⁷ on “fake news.”
WHEN?	Short-term

³⁵ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/fr/>

³⁶ <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>

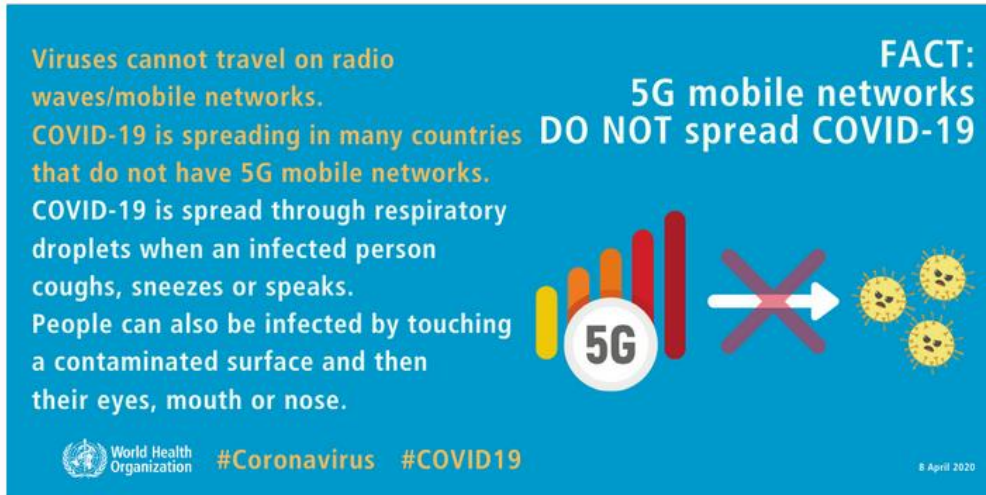
³⁷ Law No. 2020-766 of June 24, 2020 to combat hate content on the Internet.

3.2. SECURE – The disseminated information is certified or contained

This part is the least obvious to deal with. On the one hand, because any attempt by the state to intrude into the control of information can be seen as a desire for censorship that will fuel conspiracy theories. On the other hand, because the information market is a very lucrative field and any attempt to regulate it comes up against powerful lobbies. This is why we believe that the impulse must come from the citizen.

Make people want to consume “Healthy Information”

The idea is to set up a virtuous system that would push the majority of citizens to demand to “consume healthy information” in order to force the media and social networks to “produce and disseminate healthy information.” This revolution has taken place and continues in the world of the food industry. It seems therefore possible to set it in motion in the world of the information industry.

WHY?	Discredit disinformation and restore public trust in disseminated contents.
HOW?	Promote debunking initiatives³⁸. Seize any opportunity for disinformation detected to show in the most playful way possible how it was done. For instance, the debunking campaign led by W.H.O regarding Covid’s fake news seems to be a good manner to discredit disinformation. This kind of initiative must be promoted whenever a disinformation campaign is able to destabilize the decision-makers.  Introduce a quality label on information. It is not a matter of certifying every piece of content, but of informing citizens about the reliability of the information channel they choose. In this way, the media and social networks most active in the fight against disinformation could be awarded a quality label that would set them apart from their competitors. This attribution should be carried out by an authority independent of the State to avoid any risk of accusations of censorship.
ADVANTAGES	Raise the level of collective demand for quality information. To make the media and social networks adhere to the approach.
DISADVANTAGES	The implementation of these measures requires a real change in mentality to be accepted. Their effectiveness is therefore long term.
RISKS	Charge of censorship
WHEN?	Experimentation : short term / Effects : long term

³⁸ Expose or discredit allegedly false, exaggerated or pretentious claims.

3.3. EDUCATE – Citizens are educated about the risks of disinformation

The publication of the TIMMS survey³⁹ on the ranking of eighth-grade students in experimental sciences is a timely indication of the problem posed by the educational system in France. Here, France is ranked last among EU countries. The link between taking disinformation from a part of society and its level of education becomes obvious in the French case.

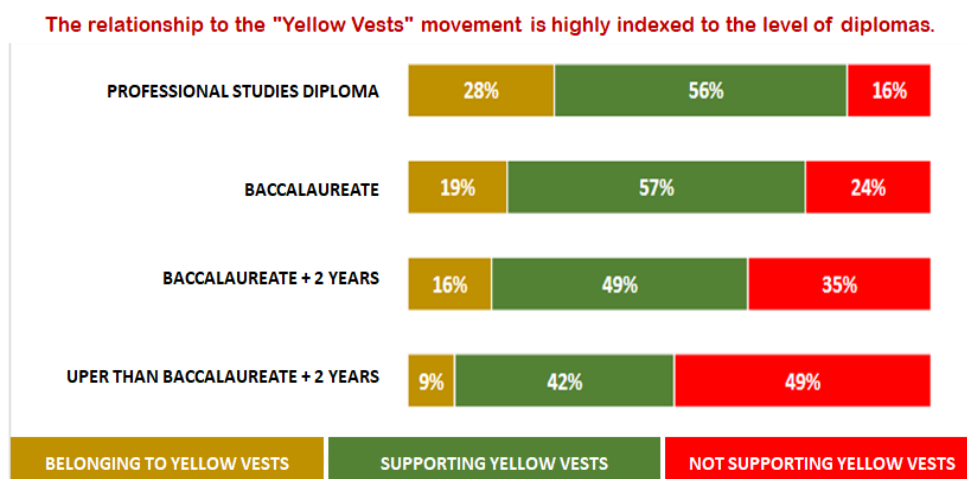


Figure 16 - The ratio of Yellow Vests is highly indexed to the level of the diploma.

This graph shows, in brown, the proportion of Yellow Vests broken down by education. We can see that only 9% of the people claiming to be a Yellow Vest have a level of baccalaureate + 2 and more, while 28% have a professional studies diploma. As we have seen previously, when analyzing the “French archipelago”, education appears as the main fault line that separates these islands from one another. It is therefore a question of reducing these divides. Consequently, one of the most important actions to combat disinformation lies in the education. These would be short-, mid- and long-term measures and, finally, a permanent process that should be maintained.

Two measures regarding education could limit the effectiveness of disinformation.

Reducing the gap between traditional media and citizens.

The Yellow Vest crisis and the various crises that followed have highlighted a form of marginalization of traditional media, such as major newspapers. For example, the Kantar⁴⁰ polling institute shows that 50% of French people surveyed do not trust when information comes from sites or applications of the print or audiovisual media. Furthermore, the same survey reveals that 68% of respondents believe that journalists are not independent. This study highlights the mistrust of the French towards traditional media, which are, paradoxically, the most controlled and therefore the most likely not to relay false information. Through these figures, we can draw the conclusion that the French are turning more towards the Internet and social networks, places where information is not controlled, or only slightly so, making the French population all the more vulnerable to disinformation.

³⁹ TIMSS 2019, International Results: Students Achievement in Mathematics and Science.

⁴⁰ Barometer of French people's confidence in the media for the newspaper La Croix, January 2020.

WHY?	Alleviate the mistrust of traditional media
HOW?	Create courses on how to process information. This measure could be developed in coordination with school documentation centers. The aim, here, would be to create an intermediary between the individual and the information through a teacher or the staff of the documentation center.
ADVANTAGES	“Arm” children against disinformation, making a society more resilient and less prone to division. Make the whole population aware of the problems related to information in the age of social networks. Giving children access to controlled traditional media and giving them a media culture.
DISADVANTAGES	Requires means of implementation and a real political will to fight against disinformation, a politically risky subject.
RISKS	Abandonment of this measure by a new administration. The political administration in place could once again be accused of “brainwashing our children.”
WHEN?	Mid- and long-term

CONCLUSION

The Yellow Vest crisis is a concrete example of the fragility of democracies in the face of disinformation. The lessons learned from this case study could be applied in nearly every case where a democratic state faces deep mistrust and wide divisions within its society. France is not an isolated case in this regard. The strategy proposed here, while perhaps not revolutionary, may help set a goal as well as a path by which to reach it. The measures seem realistic provided there is a real political will to coordinate efforts at the national level but also among the various nations committed to the defense of individual freedoms. Be that as it may, inaction is not an acceptable posture in view of the successive crises that are impacting the world at present, and whatever the final scope of our proposals, we are honored to have been able to contribute to enriching the reflection on what could be one of the greatest challenges to the existence of democracies in the decades to come.

During the last American elections, a video appeared on social networks in which Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-Un transmitted the following message: "It's not hard for a democracy to collapse. All you have to do is nothing."⁴¹ In reality, this video had been created by the non-profit organization RepresentUs using "deepfake"⁴² technologies to make Americans aware that inaction would lead to the loss of democracies.



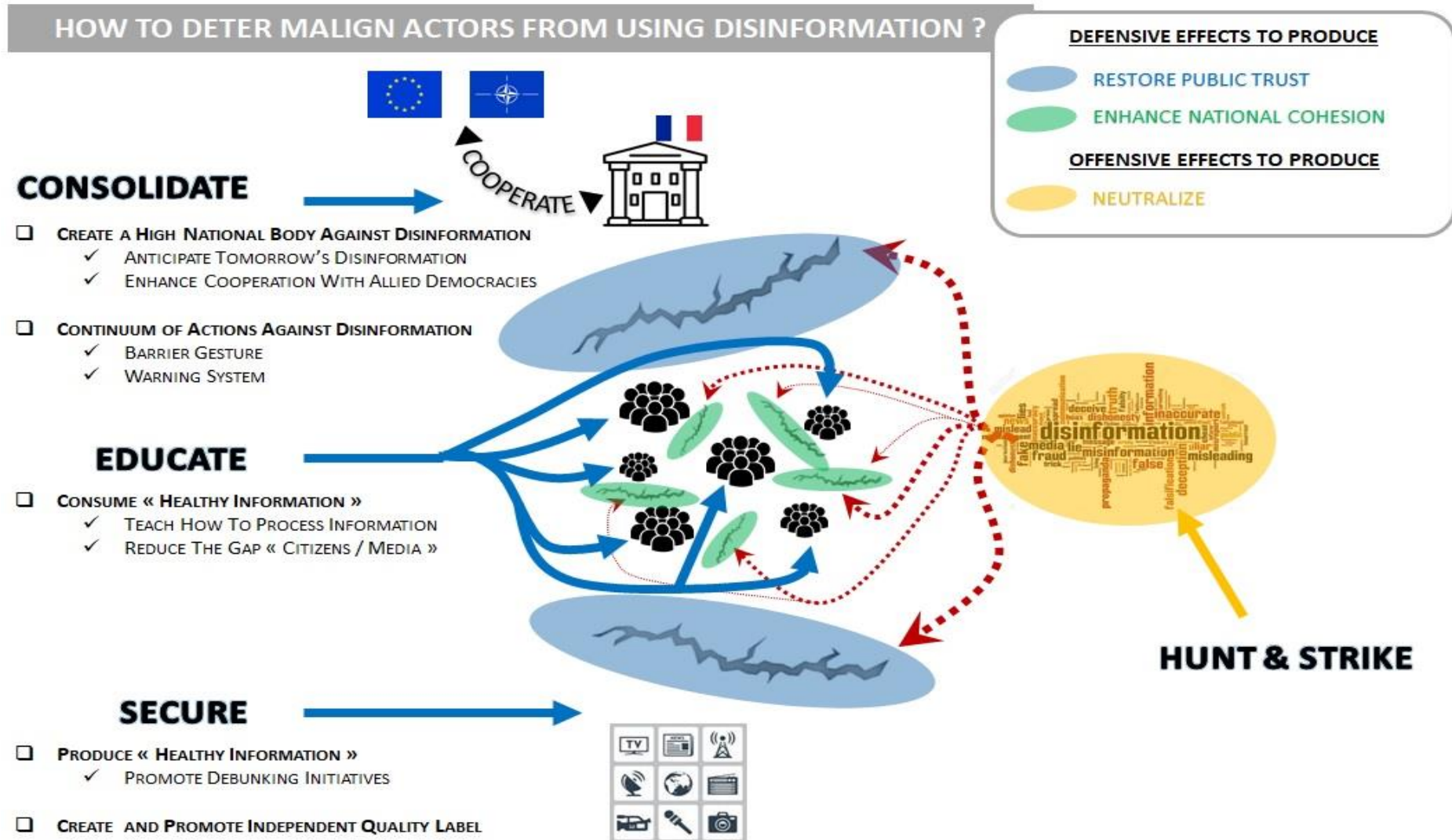
But what would be the effect of such a video during open war? How long would citizens and soldiers remain morally mobilized to defend their own nation if every day they receive from the enemy deep-fake videos announcing bad news or giving contradictory orders? These questions obviously depend on the level of cohesion of the country and the trust of its people - citizens or soldiers - in their leaders.

It is the duty of those same leaders to prepare the consciences of their citizens from peacetime against disinformation and subversion and to prepare the informational weapons that will sow confusion among the enemy.

⁴¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7368533/deepfake-vladimir-putin-kim-jong-un-ads/>

⁴² A video of a person in which their face or body has been digitally altered so that they appear to be someone else or appear to be saying something they have never said.

APPENDIX 1 – How to deter malign actors from using disinformation?



DOCUMENTARY RESOURCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- RT, Sputnik and the Yellow Vest movement: mapping political communities on Twitter, Colin Gérard, Guilhem Marotte and Loqman Salamatian, 2020.
- AVAAZ Report, Yellow Vests flooded by fake news, March 2019.
- Jérôme Fourquet, L'Archipel français, Naissance d'une nation multiple et divisée, 2019.
- J.-B. Jeangène Vilmer, A. Escorcía, M. Guillaume, J. Herrera, Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies, report by the Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces, Paris, August 2018.
- Yellow vests. A Russian network to encourage chaos? Courrier international, December 9, 2018.
- S. Merveilleux du Vignaux, Désinformation et services spéciaux, éditions du Rocher, 2018.
- Yellow vests. A Russian network to encourage chaos? Courrier international, December 9, 2018.
- J-B - Jeangène Vilmer, La lutte contre la désinformation russe : contrer la propagande sans faire de contre-propagande ?, conférence Panthéon-Sorbonne, Revue Défense Nationale n°801, June 2017.
- Michel Yahiel, « Dynamiques de l'emploi et des métiers : quelle fracture territoriale ? », France Stratégie, La Note d'analyse N°53, February 2017.
- C. Guilluy, La France périphérique : comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires, éd. Champs Actuel, 2015.
- Julien NOCETTI, "Guerre de l'information : le web russe dans le conflit en Ukraine", Focus stratégique, n° 62, September 2015.
- Thomas Amossé, Portrait statistique des classes populaires contemporaines, Savoir/Agir N°15, 2015.
- Christophe Guilluy, Fractures françaises, 2010.
- Information Report No. 416 (2007-2008) by Mr. Josselin de Rohan, Ms. Josette Durrieu, Mr. Jean-Pierre Fourcade, Mr. Robert Hue, Mr. Yves Pozzo di Borgo and Mr. Roger Romani, submitted on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee on June 25, 2008.
- François-Xavier Bellamy, Les Déshérités ou l'urgence de transmettre, 2004.
- Pierre Bourdieu, Les Héritiers, les étudiants et la culture, 1964.

SITOGRAPHY

- <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/fr/>
- <https://giletsjaunes.rt.com/>
- <https://ria.ru/>
- <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/>