

2017 French Election: a case study in Fake News

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Abstract. This literary review explores the phenomenon of "fake news" by briefly examining its origins, evolution, and impact on contemporary society and political events, particularly during the 2017 and 2022 French elections. It briefly examines the historical context of fake news, the tools used to disseminate it, and its implications for modern politics and society. The findings highlight how fake news was spread during these elections, the impact it had on public opinion, and the challenges it poses to democratic processes. The research emphasizes the need for more effective measures to combat misinformation and its potential long-term impact on Western culture and politics.

Keywords. Fake News, 2017 French Elections.

1. Introduction

The use and spread of so-called "fake news" is not new, but the term "fake news" itself is considered more recent. Merriam-Webster notes that "fake news" is about 125 years old, with the term emerging towards the end of the 19th century [1]. Currently, the phrase is generally regarded to refer to "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke" [2].

Alternative truths have been a common occurrence throughout history, with toxic messages in texts and tweets echoing similar content from various historical periods, including ancient times [3].

This work will consist of a brief analysis of the "fake news" phenomenon. This analysis will approach the origins of the expression "fake news" from a historical point of view, going through the reports and events that marked and initiated this issue. The aim is to provide an overview of how the "fake news" in the 2017 French election was spread in such an important and decisive moment in European history.

2. Defining "Fake News"

2.1 What is "fake news"?

Fake news is not produced by reputable media sources that follow journalistic standards. It doesn't refer to articles with unintentional errors that are corrected by organizations committed to accuracy. Fake news is not just information or opinions a consumer disagrees with. Politicians often label stories as fake news to dismiss facts. Fake news is created by those seeking financial gain or political influence and spreads via social media, bots, and emotional reactions. It's designed to provoke outrage and reinforce biases, aiming to influence opinions or

generate ad revenue. Fake news is entirely false, not satire or a joke, and designed to provoke its audience [4].

2.2 Fake News is not new development

The spread of false news is not a recent occurrence. Since ancient times, it has been used to harm the social and political standing of individuals and institutions. For instance, in 44 BC, Octavian's propaganda campaign against Antony utilized slogans etched onto coins to tarnish Antony's reputation, a strategy that could be likened to modern-day social media tactics [5]. False news has also been used for defamation. In 1522, Pietro Aretino penned scathing sonnets about all but one candidate, who later became Pope Adrian VI. These sonnets were displayed on the bust of a figure known as Il Pasquino in Rome, giving rise to "pasquins" as a method of spreading often false news about public figures [3].

2.3 Tools

The spreading of fake news is reliant on the several social networks currently available online. Nowadays, social media is a major platform for discussing public policy and politics. Political actors and governments use people and algorithms to shape public opinion. It is also necessary to mention the widely used bots, software designed for simple, repetitive tasks and can perform legitimate activities such as delivering news or engage in malicious actions like spamming and harassment. Bots can quickly disseminate messages, imitate human users, and spread false news within social networks [6].

Research by the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) at the University of Oxford found that up to a quarter of political links shared on Twitter in France were based on misinformation. Classified as deliberately

misleading and expressed ideologically extreme, partisan and conspiratorial bias with logical flaws and opinions presented as facts. But it was also found that false media reporting was not as prominent as it was in the 2016 US presidential race. The analysis, based on a review of 840,000 politics-related Twitter messages, showed that more than a third of the posts linked Certain “hashtags” originated in the USA, even if a few went viral in France [7].

3. 2017 French Election

The 2017 French Election serves as a notable case study in the political, social, and legal repercussions of fake news dissemination. The election was crucial for the future of France, the European Union, and its allies and adversaries, touching on contentious topics such as labor and immigration policies, crime, security, and France's EU membership. The race was highly competitive, with five first-round candidates presenting conflicting views [8].

3.1 The first round

The 2017 French election marked a departure from the traditional political landscape that has been dominated by the Socialists and the center-right since the 1950s. An unpopular ruling Socialist party and a Republican candidate under judicial investigation have paved the way for a president who has never been elected to the French National Assembly [9].

Regardless of the winner France would have had a president advocating for change. Voters were deciding on France's future direction and its role in the European Union. Macron supported EU reform and deeper integration, including a eurozone budget and finance ministers. Le Pen wanted to replace the EU with a "Europe of nations" and promise to negotiate France's return of sovereignty within six months, potentially leading to a referendum on France's euro membership [9].

A March poll indicated that 7 out of 10 French voters opposed leaving the EU, but Macron was the only pro-EU candidate in the first round of the presidential election [9].

The first round did not lack in controversy. One incident was regarded as a pivotal moment in the election. François Fillon, considered the center-right frontrunner, faced controversy when the news outlet *Le Canard Enchaîné* reported that his wife, Penelope Fillon, had been paid a high salary for many years as his parliamentary assistant. This scandal became known as "Penelopegate" and likely impacted Fillon's chances and led to his presidential defeat [10].

3.2 The second round

Right at the beginning of the second round, in an online forum frequented by Alt-Rigth in the United States, 4Chan, an anonymous user incited others to bombard social media in support of Marine Le Pen, the far-right candidate, through “memes”, “hashtags”

and other digital tricks that were successfully employed in the US presidential race the previous year. In a matter of days, online and similar discussions boiled over with hundreds of American users offering help in the campaign [10].

Another group of Facebook and Twitter users supported candidate Le Pen against candidate Macron, the main opponent and leader of the polls at the time. Many of the messages attacking the opponent were shared by supporters of more traditional politicians, including those of François Fillon, a right-wing candidate who finished third in the first round [10].

A “fake news” website disguised as *Le Soir*, a Belgian newspaper, attempted to spread rumors that Macron's campaign received funding from Saudi Arabia. Marion Marechal-Le Pen, niece of candidate Marine Le Pen, posted the article on Twitter and quickly removed it after it was discredited [10].

On Twitter, where automated accounts are allowed, many accounts previously used to promote Donald Trump have turned their attention to bold conspiracy theories and far-right ideas, according to Kevin Limonier, who studies social media manipulation of the French and Clinton elections. Watts, a former FBI agent and now a senior fellow at the George Washington University Center for Cyber and Homeland Security [7].

Emails and data were made available online the Friday before the election on Sunday, just before the presidential campaign ban began. The documents, which quickly spread on American social media in right-wing extremist groups and Wikileaks, were called by Macron's team an attempt at "democratic destabilization, like that seen during the last presidential race in the United States [11]".

After the anonymous user urged others on 4Chan to start an “Absolute Meme War” to help Le Pen, he warned not to imitate the US-style attacks. Still, many international supporters repeatedly used the Pepe frog, a design associated with anti-Semitism and racism that has become the far-right movement's unofficial mascot, and many did so without realizing that the amphibian is often used as an insult to French population [10].

It can be seen that the transplantation of tactics did not work despite all efforts. The aforementioned portion of the far right in the United States and elsewhere failed to connect with the French electorate. The efforts have not yielded good results, with “memes” often written in English and extremist photos not being successful with French voters [10].

However, while international activists find it difficult to enter the French political debate, local and native supporters have had more success. Like when Marine Le Pen and internet activists insinuated that her opponent, Emmanuel Macron, had a secret account in the Bahamas during a heated television debate. Le Pen later admitted that she did not have

proof of the Bahamian accounts mentioned [12].

Macron had said that Le Pen's National Front party was "the party of financial scandals", referring to the inquisition into allegations of misuse of European Union funds. So, the candidate replied: "I hope we don't find out that you have an offshore account in the Bahamas, or something like that, I don't know. I hope we don't hear anything in the next few days or weeks. Nobody understood what you said about your properties." Macron immediately accused her of "defamation," but it was enough for the allegation to spread online [13].

The Bahamas case emerged shortly after the Atlantic Council, a US think tank, and BuzzFeed, a news website, reported that far-right activists were attempting to circulate anti-Macron content on social media. Russian or Russian-aligned media also attempted to damage Macron's reputation by spreading rumors that he was gay, funded by Saudi Arabia, and washed his hands after greeting workers [13].

Another study carried out by CNRS and EHESS researchers studied nearly 60 million political tweets from the 2017 French presidential election and found fake news flagged by Le Monde Decodex fact-checking website accounted for just 0.1% of Twitter content. Most of the fake information (73%) was spread by two political communities [14].

The researchers tracked interactions between 2.4 million accounts during the campaign (June 2016–May 2017). The study revealed 5,000 tweets (0.081% of total) linked to fake news identified by Le Monde. While the researchers found no "tsunami" of fake news, they acknowledge these figures may underestimate the true extent [14].

4. 2022 French Election

Twelve candidates contested the first round of the French presidential election, with the top two advancing to the second round. The campaign began on 28 March, with the rising cost of living as voters' main concern. Other issues included health, security, pensions, the environment, and immigration [15].

Despite the Russia-Ukraine crisis initially overshadowing the campaign, focus soon returned to domestic matters. Analysts highlight the significance of the 2022 French presidential election for Europe, as France holds the EU presidency until July [16]. The 2022 Election was also controversial and with several incidents of Fake News involving all the candidates, specially the two main candidates, Macron and Le Pen, again.

As in many campaigns, misinformation and false claims have infiltrated political discussions and online discourse. Such as claims about the election being "stolen" were spread various social media groups supporting far-right candidates like Marine Le Pen, Eric Zemmour, or left-wing Jean-Luc Melenchon [16]. Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le

Pen advanced to the second round after none of the candidates secured a majority in the first round [15].

Both main candidates issued worries about fake news. Macron has previously warned that election misinformation poses a threat to democracy itself and argued that those responsible for spreading "fake news" should be held accountable and possibly brought to justice. And Le Pen's campaign is reportedly seeking legal ways to respond to "fake news disseminated massively and likely to alter the ballot". This reinforces the idea that election campaigns provide fertile ground for misinformation and false claims to spread online [16].

As an example, one false claim circulating on social media alleges that Dominion's electronic voting machines would be used to validate the first round of voting results, even though France has never used the company in elections. Dominion, previously accused by former US President Donald Trump and his supporters of enabling widespread electoral fraud in the 2020 election, has consistently denied these unfounded allegations. The company later sought over €1 billion in damages for defamation [16].

In the second round, Emmanuel Macron had beaten Marine Le Pen in the presidential runoff and is currently serving another term as president of France. Macron was re-elected for a second term, winning 58.54% of the vote against Le Pen's 41.46%. The election also saw a high level of spoiled ballots, reflecting disillusionment with the choices [15].

Regarding the fake news issue, the French government established an agency to combat foreign disinformation, and independent fact-checkers have intensified efforts ahead of the 2022 election. Chine Labbe, Managing Editor at NewsGuard, wrote in 2020 that misinformation about voting is flourishing online, posing a threat to American democracy and sowing distrust in Europe's electoral process [16].

5. Considerations

Perhaps due to its influence in the most recent high-profile elections and interference in social issues, misleading news is more relevant than should be possible. The ease of entry into the commercial niche and reach of misleading news, mainly due to social media and the attention given to these stories by some of the more traditional media platforms, has disrupted the Western political and social agenda [18].

The creation of stories to move an agenda, political or otherwise, can hardly be considered new, but the current proportions of interference in the perception of true and verifiable facts have not been seen since it was realized that responsible journalism can be profitable. Stability and demand for reliable platforms gained ground, but sensationalism always sold well.

The manipulation of opinion through half-truths or

deliberate lies seeks to stir popular imagination and emotional responses and, therefore, its level of influence is highly susceptible to the culture and particular social and political structure of the territories. Another notable fact is how its prominence in the United States did not translate to France. The tactics of popularizing “memes” and “hashtags”, overloading media platforms only had any relevance when addressed by figures of some importance in France, unlike the United States situation, in which any news that was repeated enough times it became a fact with influential potential.

Some platforms, such as Facebook, have declared that they will implement policies to debunk false information. Facilitating complaints, stamping markers of challenges by third parties, warning when information disclosed by politicians and personalities are some of the measures to be followed [19]. However, due to late concern and the already secure establishment of “fake news” as a profitable form of propaganda, they may not be as effective as desired.

For some, it would be up to consumers to police and maintain some quality of the entertainment and information they absorb. But, given the circumstances, this method provides little basis for believing that this responsibility can be attributed to the population. Whether “fake news” had a significant influence on a world event or not is not something that can be accurately measured. But this trend will play a crucial role in global events and politics in the times ahead. Both because of its ability to interfere in structures legitimized by society and because of what it says about our own perception of the truth and legitimacy of an idea. The lack of policies and effective measures to ensure that rumours and falsehood do not unjustly harm individuals, entities and countries determines the pace of action on this issue, which still has a long way to go.

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