Narratives of the Fake News Debate in France

Angeliki Monnier
University of Lorraine, France

Abstract

The objective of this article is to identify the topical repertoires, the underlying schemas that structure the fake news debate. Attention is focused on the mainstream French press, from the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States on November 8, 2016, until his inauguration on January 20, 2017. The narratives elaborated in and by the French media regarding the dysfunctions of the contemporary information landscape indicate a utopian vision of the role of journalists and reproduce the linear information model. The impact of this doxa is threefold. First, it forwards a certain vision of journalism, based on fact-checking, naively considered to be the solution to the post-truth problem. Journalists are the main victims and at the same time the main perpetrators of this perception. Second, on an epistemological level, it brings back into the agenda the long-ago abandoned concept of "masses". Finally, from a political standpoint, the rhetoric on media's superpower is far from promoting the democratic enhancement of societies. By blaming the dysfunctions of social media for the flaws of the information environment, public actors tend to forget to take thorough interest in the reasons that lead people to fall prey to fake news.

Keywords: fake news, journalism, narratives, French press, post-truth

Introduction

Disinformation is not just a problem of our times (Bloch, 1999; Huyghe, 2016; Ploux, 2001). Long before the recent emergence and propagation of fake news on social media, questions related to "trapped" contents (propaganda, rumors, hoaxes, trolls, etc.) had caught the attention of scholars (Dauphin, 2002; Froissart, 2002, 2004; Lebre, 2014). However, since the United States presidential election of November 2016, the issue is regularly discussed in the traditional offline and online media as well as on social networks. In France, debating fake news in public arenas became a "discursive moment", according to the expression forged by Sophie Moirand (2007), giving rise to spaces and practices of expression by different actors (media representatives, politicians, ordinary citizens, etc.). Starting from this observation, our thesis in this article is based on the following postulate: the discourses generated in relation to the dissemination of fake news crystallize some of the underlying topoi that form contemporary societies. This approach draws on works by Marc Angenot, according to whom discourses circulating within given spatiotemporal frames reflect a certain "state" of society.

Therefore, in this article, we will not analyze the process of the production, circulation and reception of fake news – topics on which academic literature already exists (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Berger and Milman, 2012; Zubiaga et al., 2016). We will not explore the relation of modern media with virality, nor will we denounce the phenomenon of disinformation adopting a socio-critical approach – even though disinformation is indeed reprehensible. The objective of our approach is to identify the topical repertoires, the underlying schemas, which occur when using this expression, as emblematic signs of common doxa. To put it shortly, we are interested in the way fake news is discussed, and we would like to shed light to the narratives that structure the debate. We will focus our attention on a micro-corpus coming from the mainstream French press: from the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States on November 8, 2016, until his inauguration on January 20, 2017. Even though fake news was part of the public agenda long before that time (e.g. Brexit), it abundantly occupied the media arena in the aftermath of the American presidential election.

It is commonly understood that fake news emanates from various motivations and can espouse different formats: humoristic pastiches, inaccurate information, sensationalist topics seeking to reach a large public, and so forth. Defining fake news is certainly an issue of major importance and several analyses have tried to discern the inherent characteristics of the concept, as well as its nuances in comparison to other terms similarly employed (hoaxes, rumors, etc.). However, undertaking such an operation entails confronting serious epistemological and long debated questions related to the meaning of truth – and the "fundamental tension that inhabits it" (Ricœur, 1955: 156) – objectivity, newness, and counterfeit (Post, 2014). Having in mind that our interest lies in the narratives of the fake news debate and not in the fakeness of the news themselves, these questions go beyond the scope of this paper.

Public Narratives Mirror Society

This work adopts the archaeological approach advocated by Marc Angenot. This author, through a situated analysis of specific discourses, seeks to identify the eventual topoi which characterize public doxa. Narration is at the center of Angenot's concerns. In a synthesis of his work put forward in 2006, the author explains that his goal is to "identify the eventual discursive invariants, the common premises, the dominances and the recurrences, the

homologies and the regulations hidden behind the apparent discursive diversity and cacophony" (Angenot, 2006, p. 3).

The author does not dissociate the "content" and the "form", that is, what is said and the way it is said. His approach echoes the theories about the "myths" (Barthes, 1957), the "frames" (Goffman, 1991), the social representations (Abric, 1994; Moliner, 1996), and so on, which are often used in the study of media and political discourses. But it goes beyond these postures by adopting a "gnoseological" perspective, which aims at shedding knowledge on the ways the world can be narratively schematized on linguistic materials at a certain moment.

For Marc Angenot (1978), this schematization is not only the result of the internal functions of the text. The author argues that the narrative cement of a discursive production lies in – and reveals – its underlying ideological maxims (Provenzano, 2006). In this sense, it constitutes a reflection of a "state of society" as social praxis. Indeed, far from sticking to a formalistic or a structural-functionalist approach, Marc Angenot is interested in the social dimension of discourses. One can note here a certain proximity to Michel Foucault's concept of "discursive formation" (1969, p. 56), but also to the Critical Discourse Analysis stand (Van Dijk, 1977; Wodak, 1989), as well as to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "fields" in relation to symbolic productions (Bourdieu, 1982, 1992). To put it in a nutshell, Angenot focuses on discourses as communication phenomena. The latter are understood as representations – symptomatic of a specific era – as performative productions, but also as topoi embedded in time and space. This is the conceptual frame that has guided our work.

On the Empirical Study

For the purposes of this work, we used a media aggregator, the Europresse platform[1], allowing access to the archives of several media outlets, online and offline. Our focus concerned the three French titles that traditionally represent the main political areas: *Le Figaro* (right), *Le Monde* (center), *Libération* (left). Both printed and online versions of these three newspapers were included in the analysis. Our research protocol used the key words "false information(s)" *[fausse(s) informations]* and "false news" *[fausse(s) nouvelles]* (singular and plural), which are the French equivalent for "fake news" – even though the term "fake news" was ever since established as such in the French public sphere. As explained before, our investigation was circumscribed within the period starting from the American presidential election (November 8, 2016) until the inauguration of President Donald Trump (January 20, 2017), that is, 2.5 months. It turned out that only thirty articles corresponded to the criteria initially set, forming the corpus of our analysis. Sixteen journalists signed their articles (next to nine unsigned articles), each of whom accounting for up to three publications. The full list of the texts with the details of the publication (date, name of the newspaper, newspaper section, journalists' names when mentioned) is provided in the appendix.

As Figure 1 reveals, *Le Monde*, mostly in its online version, published half of the articles produced in the period under review. *Libération* devoted the least amount of space to the topic, but in a balanced way between the printed and the online version. *Le Figaro* is positioned between the two, with a clear prevalence of the online publications.
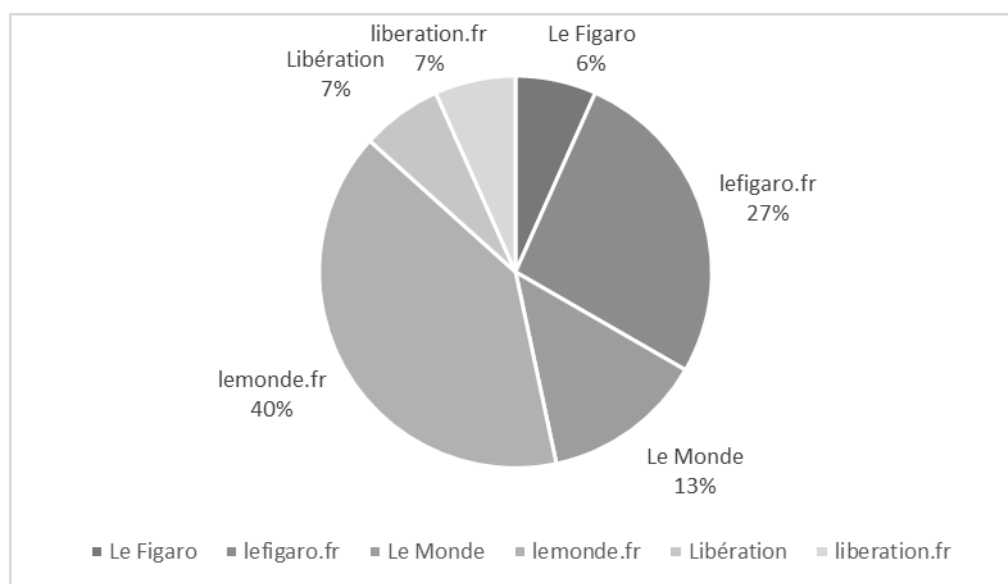
---

[1] http://www.europresse.com/en/

Figure 1: The distribution of the fake news debate in three French mainstream newspapers, from the American presidential election (November 8, 2016) to the inauguration of President Donald Trump (January 20, 2017).

Given the limited extent of the data analyzed, this work should be apprehended only as an exploratory research. Its goal is to identify the narratives of the fake news debate within the French mainstream media arena: the underlying symbolic schemas, the actors involved and their roles. Our approach entailed different operations: a thematic content analysis was conducted, and texts were classified based on semantic criteria; the chronology of their publication was established in relation to the hosting newspapers; relevant semantic occurrences were located; narrative universes were identified; underlying ideological maxims were, in an interpretative process, explored. Far from claiming that discourse represents "reality", our assumption is that it at least reveals human thought: visions of the world, which, through their performative effect, can lead to the construction of this reality.

This approach has obviously a lot to do with the researcher's interpretation capacities. It is a fact that we fully assume, and which seems to us fundamental in any research process:

> Texts are the result of an intention on behalf of actors and the object of interpretation on behalf of the analyst. How can the latter conduct the interpretation? […] One could compare the classes obtained with the results of an electrocardiogram; the interpretation of the curves or the choice of a surgical intervention always rests with the surgeon … It is not possible to interpret the classes by considering only the apparent meanings to which the words refer. (Fallery and Rodhain, 2007, p. 25, see also Compagno, 2017)

To support our analytical posture and ensure an unbiased approach to the texts beyond subjective readings and interpretations, we resorted to certain functionalities proposed by Tropes,[2] a language processing and semantic classification software (8.4 version). Tropes was initially developed by Pierre Molette and Agnès Landré, based on the work of the French psychologist Rodolphe Ghiglione. It uses the grammatical proposition (subject, verb, predicate) as the principal unit of division and carries out a complex Cognitive-Discursive

---

[2] https://www.semantic-knowledge.com/tropes.htm

Analysis process (CDA). Each proposition of the text is thus allotted a score, depending on its relative weight, its occurrence order and its argumentative role. The propositions are then sorted out according to their respective scores, which makes it possible to identify the *Remarkable propositions*, in other words "the most characteristic parts of the text", "without any previous interpretation" (Fallery and Rodhain, 2007, p. 12). These propositions introduce the main themes or characters, and express the events that are essential to the progression of the story (causal attributions of consequences, results, aims). Furthermore, the *References* function brings together into "equivalent classes" closely related common and proper nouns (for example, "Moscow" and "Kremlin" are grouped together into the "Russia" class). This makes it possible to quantify the referential universes of a text, only significant references being displayed. Finally, Tropes displays the relations between these various references. *Relations* indicate which classes of equivalents are frequently associated (i.e. encountered within the same proposition). *Relations* leave little room for chance. Indeed, it is rather unlikely for two classes of equivalents to be persistently connected, in the same order, within the same text – with the exception, of course, of compound words, for example "post-truth", or common associations such as first names preceding last names, for instance "Donald Trump".

Brief Chronology of the Fake News Debate

In the corpus examined, the first articles related to fake news appeared approximately a week after the election of Donald Trump, on November 15, 2016, in "LeMonde.fr". Two of them referred to the role of Facebook in the American election and its impact on the readers' behavior in a broader way; the third concerned the use of false information in the Syrian war. The question of the measures taken by Google and Facebook to fight against the production and dissemination of fake news occupied "LeFigaro.fr", the following day (16/11/2017). The printed version of *Le Monde* raised the same issue a day after, on 17/11/2017. The topic remained in the news with at least one publication (and up to three) every two to seven days (Figure 2; for the titles of the publications see appendix).
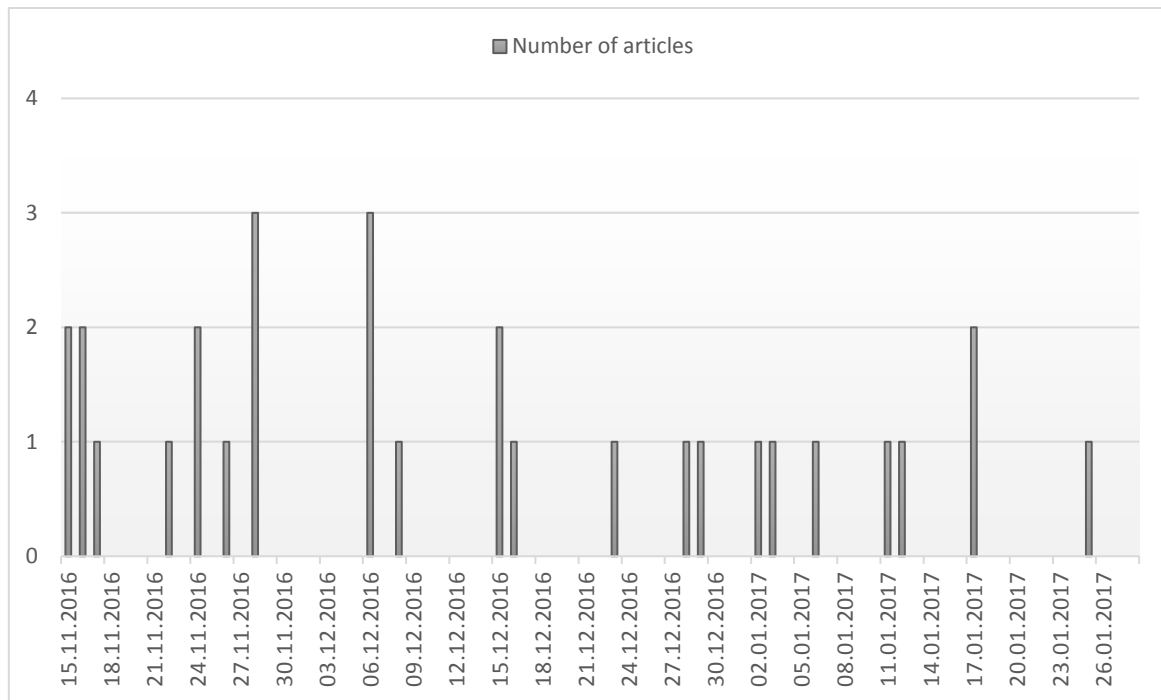
Figure 2: The chronology of the fake news debate in three French mainstream newspapers, from the American presidential election (November 8, 2016) to the inauguration of President Donald Trump (January 20, 2017).

A second series of articles appeared at the end of November 2016. It focused on specific cases of fake news (the stock market impact of false information disseminated about the Vinci group, a building and civil engineering company in France; comments erroneously attributed to Marine LePen, President of the National Rally political party – previously named National Front). At the same time, some articles opted for a more distanced, analytical approach ("Do Fake News Harm Democracy?", "LeMonde.fr", 26/11/2016, republished, with a different title, "On Democracy by Algorithms", two days later, in *Le Monde*, printed version).

At the beginning of December 2016, the subject was back in the news with the Pizzagate scandal, an online rumor associating a small neighborhood restaurant with presumed activities by the Democrat candidate Hilary Clinton (published on "LeFigaro.fr", "LeMonde.fr"), but also other cases of "brainwashing" [*intox*] disseminated on the web (treated on "Liberation.fr", and "LeMonde.fr"). The second half of December was again occupied by the measures undertaken by Facebook, and the aftermaths of the Vinci case, but also provided a more distanced analysis on the "information war" (*Libération*).

In January 2017, *Le Figaro* recounted Donald Trump's counter-attacks about fake news, and then probed Facebook's social responsibility, through an interview (published simultaneously on *Le Figaro*'s web and printed versions) with Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's Chief Operating Officer. *Le Monde* (online and printed) and *Libération* offered reflexive articles on the information process in contemporary societies.[3]

---

[3] The article of 6/1/2017 ("lemonde.fr") is only weakly related to erroneous information, mentioning, among other things, the risks of using fake images in the fight for the protection of animals.

Brief Typology of the Fake News Debate

The attribution of the articles (Figure 1) reveals the importance that the issue took in the newsrooms of *Le Monde*. This newspaper (online and printed version) accounts for 16 articles in total, more than those published in *Le Figaro* (10 articles) and much more than those of *Libération* (4 articles). The texts' distribution also highlights the importance of the Internet in this debate, which hosted most articles that came out (22 out of 30). What are the articles about fake news talk about *specifically*? An initially manual thematic analysis, supported and verified by Tropes, revealed three referents (Figure 3).
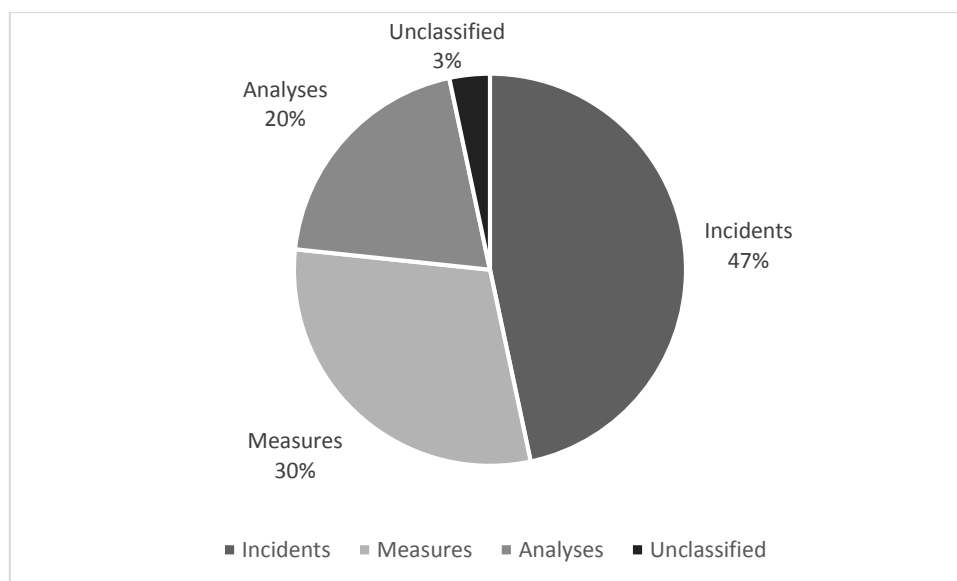

Figure 3: The typology of the fake news debate in three French mainstream newspapers, from the American presidential election (November 8, 2016) to the inauguration of President Donald Trump (January 20, 2017).

A first series of articles, rather significant (14), recounts incidents and discourses due to the circulation of erroneous information. These are descriptive texts related to the uses of fake news (e.g. "the attack against Vinci" or the "Pizza Gate") that present the course as well as the immediate and tangible effects of an online rumor, of a malicious information, and so on. Two of the articles come from *Libération*'s fact-checking section named "Désintox" and aim at debunking erroneous information. In general, incidents are mostly posted online (Figure 4). A second series of texts (9) focus on the measures taken by the media to combat false news. Here, facts prevail as well but the overall approach is linked to an underlying question about the regulation of the media system. Texts refer to social networks, mainly Facebook, as well as other giants of the Internet, such as Google. Incident and measures are often published in the newspapers' economic column. Finally, a final series of articles, notably published by *Le Monde* (Figure 4), provides reflexive approaches to the phenomenon, its causes and especially its repercussions for contemporary societies. The angle here is more distanced and the tone speculative. However, no definition of the expression "fake news" is provided in these texts.
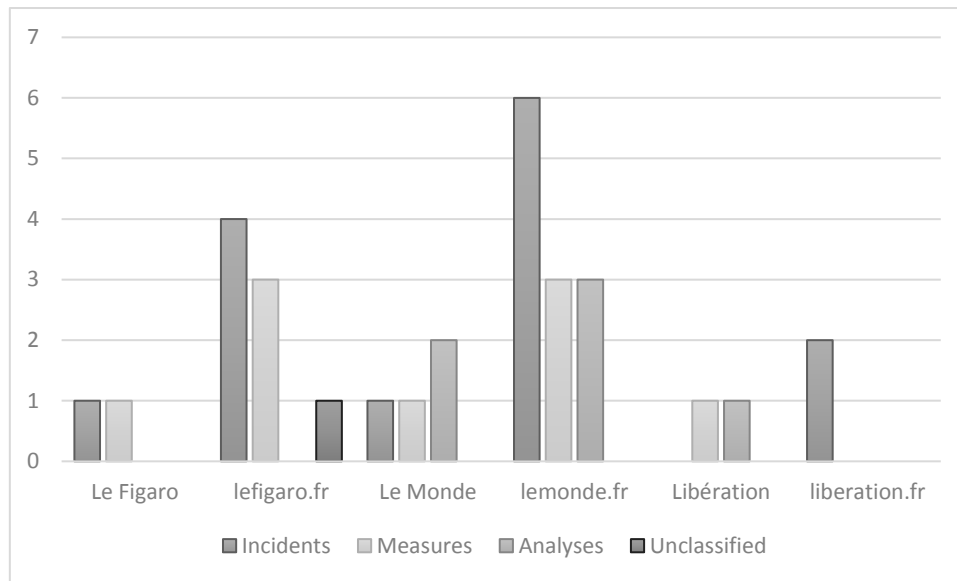
Figure 4: The fake news articles as distributed in three French mainstream newspapers from the American presidential election (November 8, 2016) to the inauguration of President Donald Trump (January 20, 2017).

The three referential axes of the media coverage of the fake news phenomenon correspond to the three levels of information ethics advocated by Daniel Cornu (1994, p. 116 sq., following Otfried Höffe's typology of justice, Höffe, 1991, p. 133). The first is descriptive and concerns practices. The second is normative oriented because it refers to the deontology and the regulation of practices. The third is positioned on a more abstract level and has a reflexive dimension. Drawing on this author's theses, we propose the following categorization of the coverage of fake news.

Level of coverage	Content
Descriptive	Incidents and discourses due to the circulation of erroneous information
Normative	Actions to undertake (measures), regulation of practices
Reflexive	Perspectives, analyses, reflections

Table 1: The Coverage of the Fake News Debate

It comes perhaps as no surprise to find that descriptive articles (incidents and measures) occupy almost half of the texts of the corpus (Figure 3). Indeed, as it has so often been highlighted, "information" is first about "reporting the facts": "what happens or what has happened" (Charaudeau, 2005, p. 121 sq., see also Esquenazi, 2002). Here are the facts reported:

- A false statement, sent to several media by e-mail, claimed that Vinci had been the victim of an accounting fraud which obliged the company to revise its accounts and caused the dismissal of its financial director (4 publications).
- A man opened fire on Sunday in an American pizzeria following a rumor born on the Internet about a pedophile network involving Hillary Clinton and the restaurant in question (2 publications).
- Donald Trump denounces the "fake news" linking him to Moscow.

- German diplomacy rests "puzzled" at Donald Trump claiming to be the victim of methods of denunciation worthy of Nazi Germany.
- Désintox debunks a video that denounces, by means of erroneous calculations, the social regime of self-employed workers in France.
- The "Anti-Trump demonstrators use buses" thesis is fake news.
- The president of the National Front (Marine LePen) never said that "Hitler did less damage in France than [François] Hollande". This quote was falsely attributed to Marine LePen.
- More than 93% of French are not ready to vote for Marine LePen in the 2017 presidential election. This statement is the result of intentional misinformation.
- The victory of the Syrian army on the rebels in Aleppo on Tuesday, December 13, was accompanied by false images and brainwashing (coming from both camps)
- False images do not serve the fight against the savage slaughter of animals in French slaughterhouses.

Texts related to the 2nd and 3rd categories (measures, analyses) are also very present in the media discourse. For these two categories, the study of the frequently associated "equivalent classes" discloses the contents dealt with and the questions raised.

Category "Analyses"	Category "Measures"
democracy-algorithm	arbitrator-truth
Facebook-election	fight-false information
Facebook-maker	Facebook-arbitrator
Election-maker	Facebook-fight
war-information	Facebook-false information
information-democracy	Facebook-information
risk-post-truth	Facebook-game
risk-society	Facebook-earnings
strategy-obscurity	Facebook-set of measures
	google-earnings
	information-social network
	internet-weapon
	internet-propaganda
	earnings-information

Table 2: Relations between References (more than two occurrences)

Narrative Universes of the Fake News Debate

It has been shown that most of the articles examined are of factual nature: they recount facts related to past events, as well actions to be taken (categories "Incidents" and "Measures"). The reflexive analyses of the phenomenon (category "Analyses"), which began, as was pointed out above, at the end of November, remain a minority. Nevertheless, these discourses attract our attention, because they reveal the interpretive angle through which the fake news phenomenon is understood.

The study of the "Analyses" using Tropes exposes their main "references fields" (Figure 5). The latter disclose the narrative of the fake news phenomenon universe provided by its different analyses: its spatial anchorages ("world"); its temporal circumscriptions ("year", 2016 or 2017); its actors, both human ("Trump", "President", "American") and non-human ("company", "media", "social network", "Facebook"); its stakes ("Democracy", "fake", "facts", "challenge", "post", "new", "information", "war").
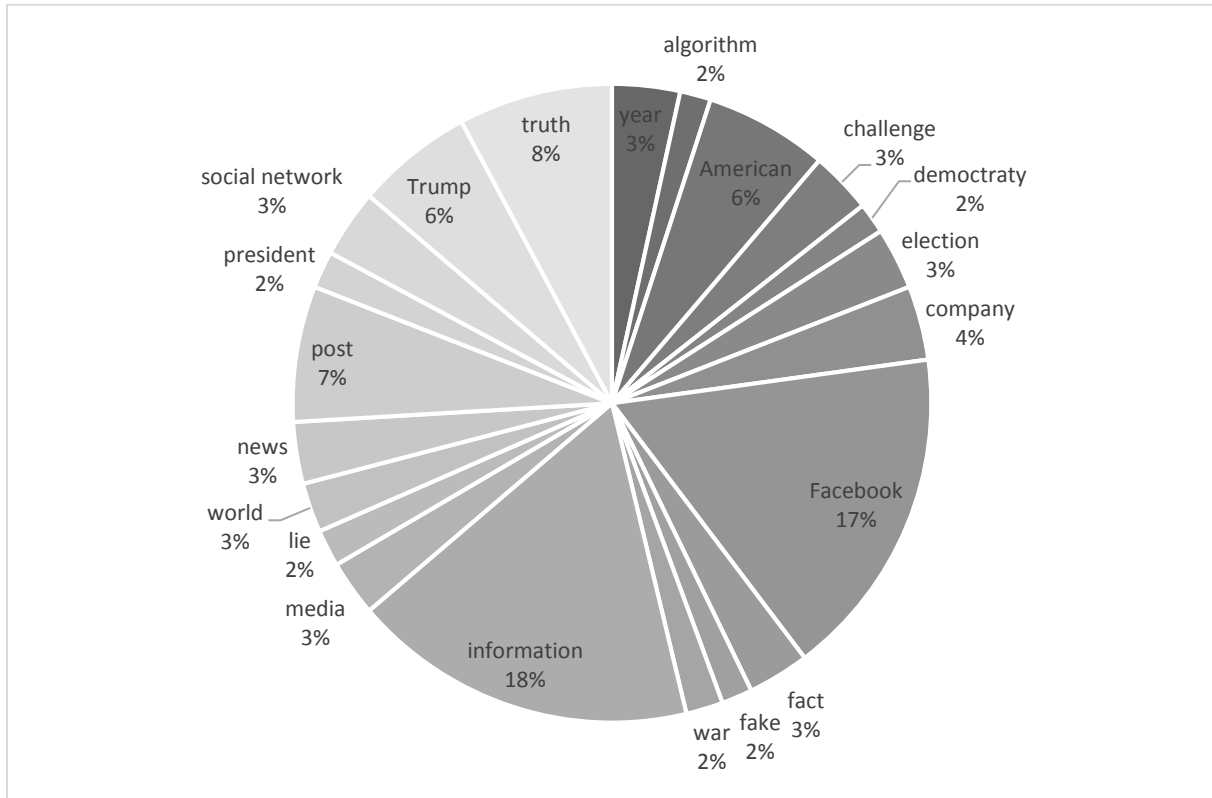

Figure 5: The reference fields of the analyses of the fake news phenomenon, as registered in three French mainstream newspapers, from the American presidential election (November 8, 2016) to the inauguration of President Donald Trump (January 20, 2017).

Like any narrative (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012), the symbolic construction of a social phenomenon – especially of a public problem – leads to the designation of actors endorsing positive or negative roles and forging the reality discussed (Palma, 1980). What are the actors involved in the narrative universe generated by the phenomenon of fake news? It is primarily the media, especially social networks (Facebook), but also the technological platforms in a broader way (Google), that emerge as actors "despite of their will". They determine the emergence and proliferation of fake news, because of their technical characteristics (the principle of algorithms and the subsequent amplification of "filter bubbles") but also the economic logics that underpin them. The question of whether social networks constitute media organisms, in the traditional sense of the word, that is subject to editorial logics and therefore responsible for the content they publish, is at the core of the debate. Analyses also point to the malicious role of those who make fake news as well as those who profit from their spread. The latter can be actors "from above", notably politicians aiming to discredit their opponents. Donald Trump or the extreme right are mentioned here. Fake news makers are also actors "from below", anonymous people, such as young Macedonians or Georgians, who seek to profit financially by creating and disseminating erroneous information that is likely to generate clicks. Finally, the users of the media themselves contribute to the

expansion of the phenomenon by their incredulity, their irresponsibility or their indifference. Despite their often-good intentions, the emotional approach through which they approach reality and information, as well as the search for self-promotion and empowerment, restrict their horizons instead of enlarging them. The following excerpts illustrate these narratives:

> Post-truth information […] addresses an ethical challenge to those in charge of technology companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, which convey fake news, and have, very lately, started to react. These companies contribute, without necessarily looking for it, to a collective consumption of information, through "cognitive bubbles", where each one locks oneself in one's own convictions (Editorial, *Le Monde*, 3 January 2017).[4]

> In the era of post-truth, also called "post-fact", information, truth is no longer always the basic value. The facts are not henceforth fundamental. Public figures can now announce false news in full knowledge of the facts, without any regard for the truth – and benefit from it (Not signed, lemonde.fr, 2 January 2017).

> The investigators of the major newspapers went to the sources of fake news. Occasionally, the *New York Times* ended up to unexpected places in Georgia (the Caucasus) or Macedonia, where idle but creative and technologically agile young men have explained them how they made up fake news that they released in the river of the Web; how they then watched them, marveled, flourish, become "real", massively followed, and paying off, because each "click" increases their market value in terms of advertising space. Today, even the production of fake news operates offshore … (Sylvie Kauffmann, *Le Monde*, 28 November 2016).

> It is not the corrosive force of "misinformation" that must be held responsible for the dereliction of democracy, but the fact that those who rejoice in listening the most infamous arguments, the most vulgar projections, the hysterical calls to "burn the witch", and the most scandalous untruths … admit that these are spectacular enormities, or that it is normal to exaggerate when one is in campaign, or that everyone can commit deviations from proprieties, or that online forum discussions will be forgotten once the election has passed (Albert Ogien, *Libération*, 23 December 2016).

> [Fake news] is not always a thoughtful or planned process, with a political or financial afterthought. Sometimes it is an unlikely combination of circumstances, the addition of misinterpretations, bad faith and bad luck (Luc Vinogradoff, *Le Monde*, 22 November 2016).

The first observation in the light of these elements is that the phenomenon of fake news concerns all the instances of the traditional communication scheme: transmitters (those "from above" but also those "from below"), receivers and, of course, channels. The communication process, as the foundation of democratic societies, is thus disrupted. Second observation: all the actors mentioned so far turn out to be "opponents" (in the actantial sense of the term, Greimas, 1966) to this process: politicians who spread false information for ideological

---

[4] Translations in English were conducted by the author.

purposes, anonymous people who make them up based on pecuniary motivations, publics who consume them in credulity or indifference, media organisms which by their logics and characteristics let them happen. Last but not least: the only actors to be able to *remedy* the problems generated by fake news – or at least fight against them – are journalists and, to a lesser extent, the online social media. The duty of the first to promote a quality investigative journalism is underlined.

In other words, although several actors are responsible for the production and dissemination of fake news, solutions can apparently only be found in the media world (journalists, social networks). It is upon this discursive configuration that the metanarrative (Lyotard, 1979) of fake news builds, giving rise to two utopias in regard to information.

From the Narratives to the Metanarrative: The Utopias of the Informational Process

Beyond the democratic ideal in which the fake news debate is inscribed, its analysis within a actantial narrative framework (Greimas, 1966) – seeking to identify the "actants", and their roles – leads to two observations. The latter crystallize common perceptions, utopias of the informational process – which the narratives highlighted here merely consolidate.

The first perception is linked to the role of journalists and the margins provided by their working conditions. As if operating outside the media system, journalists are supposed to be the guarantors of truth and objectivity, without being seriously affected by the dysfunctions of the production and the circulation of information. The injunctions concerning their duty to fight against misinformation – even though they do fall within the ethical framework of the journalistic practice (Cornu, 1994) – also reproduce fantasies in regard to investigative journalism as the remedy to the evils of Society and the deficiencies of the media system (Hunter, 1997). On a more realistic level though, the working conditions of journalists, marked by precariousness, compartmentalization, the need for immediacy, and of course the race for audiences and profits, make investigation at least difficult, if not impossible. It is not our purpose here to excuse or defend media professionals, but to remind the multiple parameters that shape the media system and the constraints in which journalists evolve (Mercier, 2006; Neveu, 2013); and to note, in passing, that it is not certain that the emphasis put on the promises of investigative journalism serve the image of journalists themselves, often considered not to live up to their mission.

The second perception concerns the media power. Subject to considerable debates for decades, the paradigm of media's superpower tends to obscure the role of people in the communication process. From the "Two-step flow of communication" (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), the "Uses and Gratifications Theory" (Katz et al. 1973-74) and the "Spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), to the more recent understandings of the information and communications technology uses (Jauréguiberry and Proulx, 2011), several works highlight the limits of media power. However, although the latter constitute established epistemological acceptations (Maigret, 2003), public narratives seem to reproduce the linear information model. A fundamental question is often skipped or at least less explored when evoked: why people fall for fake news?

> The ease with which "hoaxes" circulate raises indeed questions about the numerical transformations of the political debate. But it is not proscribed to wonder about the reasons why millions of Americans wanted to believe in it and elected Donald Trump. If the "hoax" and "post" campaigns in favor of the

> Republican candidate were of no interest to anyone, Facebook's algorithm would probably have given them less importance: is Facebook responsible if its users consciously share lies intended to discredit the candidates they do not like, and which comfort their own vision of the world? (Michaël Szadkowski, Damien Leloup, *Le Monde*, 15 November 2016).

The impact of this doxa is threefold. First, it forwards a certain vision of journalism – whose professional perimeter seems, by the way, already uneasy to circumscribe (Ruellan, 1992) – based on fact-checking, naively considered to be the solution to the post-truth problem (Vargo et al., 2017). Second, on an epistemological level, it seems to bring back into the agenda the concept of "masses", long ago abandoned. For Patrick Chastenet (2017, n.p.), "this is doubtless a difficult reality to admit: public opinion needs propaganda, because in an increasingly complex and anxiogenic world, propaganda orders, simplifies and reassures by designating the camp of good and that of evil". Third, from a political standpoint, the rhetoric on media's superpower is far from promoting the democratic enhancement of societies. By blaming journalists and the dysfunctions of certain media for the flaws of the information environment, we forget to take thorough interest in the reasons that lead people to fall prey to fake news; and by doing so, we also reproduce a moralizing attitude towards individuals who, in this context, feel despised by a dominant discourse that they do not understand, and whose anger only serves the interests of extremist political currents.

Indeed, as Pascal Froissart (2002, 2004) has underlined, the success of trapped contents and misinformation has also a lot to do with people's emotional and cognitive dispositions: when the latter really wish for something to exist, it ends up "real", at least in the eyes of the observers concerned. Other analysts also insist on misinformation's resonance with people's fears and hopes (Lecoq and Lisarelli, 2011). As sociologist Gerald Bronner pointed out

> there are four categories of the actors who circulate false information: those who do it knowing that information is fake, just to put a mess in the system; those who do so by ideological militancy as to serve their cause; those who do so to promote political, economic or even personal interests; finally, those who do it believing information is true, and it is about them that the question of "post-truth" arises (Bronner, quoted in Hirschhorn, 2017, n.p.; see also Bronner, 2013).

It is for this reason that Gerald Bronner doubts the efficiency of devices destined to help users identify the least reliable information, which are only "just a drop in the ocean" (Bronner, quoted in Hirschhorn, 2017, n.p.).

In other words, by implying the centrality of the journalists' power in establishing truths, common discourses may promote a rather simplistic vision of news, enhance shortcuts and impoverish reality from its inherent complexity. In this sense, they fail to reinforce individual empowerment as one's capacity to be aware of one's own responsibility to keep a critical eye on public discourses.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that the narratives proposed in regard to the dysfunctions of the contemporary information landscape convey a utopian vision of the role of journalists as remedies to the problem. We have discussed the limits of this perception and the pitfalls it

induces. Of course, it would be wrong to forget that these results fall within the given spatiotemporal – and certainly limited – framework of the present study: the mainstream press French, during the first weeks of President Donald Trump's election. Are there other underlying framings of the fake news phenomenon? Debates on public issues are struggles over meaning (Angenot, 2006) that depend on the public arena in which they are carried out. Analysis of social media could, for example, reveal how ordinary people understand and comment on the fake news phenomenon. Voices coming mainly from academia progressively shift the focus of the fake news debate. The latter insist on the complexity of the phenomenon, the role of people's cognitive attitudes (Bronner, 2013; Pennycook and Rand, 2017) as well as the economic dimensions of it (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Even "Decoders", *Le Monde*'s fact-checking section[5] has recently revised its policy: except for extreme cases, it is ultimately for the readers to exercise their critical capacity to evaluate the reliability of an information and thus regulate the cognitive market. However, the problem remains unsolved: by putting into broader perspective our relation to truth and reality (Pouivet, 2017), don't we end up corroborating the constructivist postulate that fueled fake news in the first place? The debate is more open than ever.

---

[5] http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs

References

Abric, J. C. (1994). Les représentations sociales: aspects théoriques. In J.C. Abric (Ed.) *Pratiques sociales et représentations* (pp. 11–36). Paris: PUF. Allcott, H., Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31*(2), 211–236. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211

Angenot, M. (1978). Fonctions narratives et maximes idéologiques. *Orbis Litterarum, 33,* 9500. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0730.1978.tb01885.x

Angenot, M. (1989). *1889: un état du discours social*. Montréal: Préambule.

Angenot, M. (2006). Théorie du discours social. Notions de topographie des discours et de coupures cognitives, *COnTEXTES*. Retrieved from https://contextes.revues.org/51

Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil.

Berger, J., Milkman K. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research, 49*(2), 192–205. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353

Bloch, M. (1999). *Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre*. Paris: Allia.

Bourdieu, P. (1982). *Ce que parler veut dire. L'économie des échanges linguistiques*. Paris: Fayard.

Bourdieu, P. (1992). *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil.

Bronner, G. (2013). *La démocratie des crédules.* Paris: PUF.

Charaudeau, P. (2005). *Les médias et l'information*. Bruxelles: De Boeck/INA.

Chastenet, P. (2017, 12 May). Nouvelles intox ou veille propagande? *The Conversation (France).*

Compagno, D. (2017). Signifiant et significatif. Réflexions épistémologiques sur la sémiotique et l'analyse des données. *Questions de communication, 31*, 49–70. https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.11048

Cornu, D. (1994). *Journalisme et vérité. L'éthique de l'information au défi du changement médiatique.* Fribourg: Labor and Fides.

Cornu, D. (2010). *Les médias ont-ils trop de pouvoir ?* Paris: Seuil.

Dauphin, F. (2002). Rumeurs électroniques: Synergie entre technologie et archaïsme. *Sociétés, 76*, 71-87. https://doi.org/10.3917/soc.076.0071

Esquenazi, J. P. (2002). *L'écriture de l'actualité. Pour une sociologie du discours médiatique*. Grenoble: PUG.

Fallery, B., & Rodhain, F. (2007). Quatre approches pour l'analyse de données textuelles : lexicale, linguistique, cognitive, thématique. In *16th international conference on Strategic Management*, Montréal, Canada. Retrieved from https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00821448 (accessed June 25, 2018).

Froissart, P. (2002). *Les images rumorales, une nouvelle imagerie populaire sur Internet*. Bry-Sur-Marne: INA.

Froissart, P. (2004). Des images rumorales en captivité : émergence d'une nouvelle catégorie de rumeur sur les sites de référence sur Internet. *Protée, 32*(3), 47–55. https://doi.org/10.7202/011258ar

Foucault, M. (1969). *L'archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.

Goffman, E. (1991). *Les cadres de l'expérience* (Transl. I. Joseph, M. Dartevelle, & P. Joseph.). Paris: Minuit.

Greimas, A. J. (1966). *Sémantique structurale: recherche et méthode*. Paris: Larousse.

Hirschhorn, M. (2017). Conversation avec Gérald Bronner: ce n'est pas la post-vérité qui nous menace, mais l'extension de notre crédulité. *The Conversation (France).* 19 February. Retrieved from http://theconversation.com/conversation-avec-gerald-bronner-ce-nest-pas-la-post-verite-qui-nous-menace-mais-lextension-de-notre-credulite-73089

Höffe, O. (1991). *La justice politique* (Transl. Merlé, J. C.). Paris: PUF.

Holstein, J. A., Gubrium J. F. (2012) (eds). *Varieties of narrative analysis*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Hunter, M. (1997). *Le journalisme d'investigation*. Paris: PUF.

Huyghe, F. B. (2016). *La désinformation, Les armes du faux*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Jauréguiberry, F., & Proulx, S. (2011). *Usages et enjeux des technologies de communication*. Paris: Éd. érès.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973-1974). Uses and Gratifications Research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 37*(4), 509–523. https://doi.org/10.1086/268109

Katz, E., Lazarsfeld, P. (1955). *Personal Influence. The Part played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

Lebre, J. (2014). Des idées partout : à propos du partage des hoaxes entre droite et extrême droite. *Lignes, 45*, 153–162. https://doi.org/10.3917/lignes.045.0153

Lecocq, T., & Lisarelli D. (2011) *Encyclopédie de la webculture*. Paris: Robert Laffont.

Lyotard, J.F. (1979). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. G. Bennington, & B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, reprint 1997.

Maigret, E. (2003). *Sociologie de la communication et des médias*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Mercier, A. (2006). Journalistes et Conflit israélo-palestinien: Malinformation, mais pas forcément Désinformation. *Questions de communication, 9*, 221–236. https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.7933

Moirand, S. (2007). *Les discours de la presse quotidienne. Observer, analyser, comprendre*. Paris: PUF.

Moliner, P. (1996). *Images et représentations sociales*. Grenoble: PUG.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The Spiral of Silence. A Theory of Public Opinion. *Journal of Communication, 24*, 43–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x

Neveu, R. (2013). *Sociologie du journalisme*. Paris: La Découverte.

Palma, J. (1980). *Analyse socio-sémiotique d'un discours politique*. Liège: Université de Liège.

Ploux, F. (2001). Bruits alarmants et fausses nouvelles dans la France du XIXe siècle (1814-1870). *Hypothèses, 4*(1), 303–314. https://doi.org/10.3917/hyp.001.0303

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2017). Who Falls for Fake News? The Roles of Analytic Thinking, Motivated Reasoning, Political Ideology, and Bullshit Receptivity. *Social Science Research Network (SSRN)*. Retrieved from https://ssrn.com/abstract=3023545 (accessed October 25, 2017).

Pouivet, R. (2017, August 28). Les origines de la post-vérité chez les intellectuels français. *The Conversation (France).*

Post, S. (2014). Scientific objectivity in journalism? How journalists and academics define objectivity, assess its attainability, and rate its desirability. *Journalism, 16*(6), 730–749. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914541067

Provenzano, F. (2006). Notes à la lecture de quelques travaux de Marc Angenot. Autour du concept d'*idéologie*, *COnTEXTES*. Retrieved from://contextes.revues.org/125 (accessed June 25, 2018).

Ricoeur, P. (1955). *Histoire et vérité*. Paris: Seuil.

Ruellan, D. (1992). Le professionnalisme du flou. *Réseaux, 10*(51), 25–37. https://doi.org/10.3406/reso.1992.1922

Van Dijk T. A. (1977). *Text and Context*. London: Longman, 1977.

Vargo, C. J., Guo, L., & Amazeen, M. A. (2017). The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016. *New Media & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817712086 (accessed June 25, 2018).

Wodak R. (1989). *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Zubiaga, A., Liakata, M., Procter, R., Wong Sak Hoi G., & Tolmie P. (2016). Analysing How People Orient to and Spread Rumours in Social Media by Looking at Conversational Threads. *PLoS ONE, 11*(3), e0150989. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0150989

Appendix

N°	Date	Newspaper	Newspaper Section (if available)	Article Title	Author(s)
1	15/11/2016	LeMonde.fr		Facebook, maker of the American election?	Michaël Szadkowski, Damien Leloup
2	15/11/2016	LeMonde.fr		Facebook's indecisions on false information.	
3	16/11/2016	LeFigaro.fr	Economy – Newsflash	Google and Facebook cut ad revenues from fake news sites.	
4	16/11/2016	LeMonde.fr		Facebook accused of playing Donald Trump's game.	Michaël Szadkowski, Damien Leloup, William Audureau
5	17/11/2016	Le Monde	Economy and Business	Facebook opens the hunt for false news.	William Audureau, Damien Leloup, Michaël Szadkowski (republication of the 16/11/2017 article)
6	22/11/2016	LeMonde.fr		Trump and the protesters, or how a tweeted false information becomes credible.	Luc Vinogradoff
7	24/11/2016	Liberation.fr	Futures	Vinci: "Counterfeiters have shown great creativity".	
8	24/11/2016	Le Monde	Economy and Business	Hackers plunge the Vinci share price	Philippe Jacqué
9	26/11/2016	LeMonde.fr	Chronic	Do fake news harm democracy?	Sylvie Kauffmann
10	28/11/2016	LeFigaro.fr	Stock exchange	Prudente, the Paris stock exchange hesitates on the direction to take.	
11	28/11/2016	LeMonde.fr		A quote falsely attributed to Marine Le Pen on Francois Hollande and Hitler	Adrien Sénécat
12	28/11/2016	Le Monde	The world - Chronic	On democracy by algorithms.	Sylvie Kauffmann (republication

					of the 26/11/2016 article)
13	6/12/2016	LeFigaro.fr	Tech & web	Politics, pedophilia and misinformation: how the "Pizza Gate" rots the life of a small American restaurant.	Elisa Braun
14	6/12/2016	LeMonde.fr		« Pizzagate": from an online rumor to the gunshots in a pizzeria.	Luc Vinogradoff, Violaine Morin
15	6/12/2016	Liberation.fr	Detox	RSI: life and death of a 5-million-views Facebook fake news	
16	8/12/2016	LeMonde.fr		« 93% of French citizens ready to vote Marine Le Pen": the trajectory of a far-right fake news.	Adrien Sénécat
17	15/12/2016	LeFigaro.fr	Tech & web	Facebook tests a new tool against false information.	
18	15/12/2016	LeMonde.fr		False images and propaganda of the battle of Aleppo.	Samuel Laurent, Adrien Sénécat
19	16/12/2016	LeMonde.fr		Facebook announces a series of measures to fight against false information.	
20	23/12/2016	Libération	Ideas	The war of info is declared.	Albert Ogien
21	28/12/2016	LeFigaro.fr	Economy-Business	The attack against Vinci shakes the Paris stock market.	Bertille Bayart
22	29/12/2016	Le Figaro	Business	The attack against Vinci shakes the Paris stock market.	Bertille Bayart (republication of the 28/12/2016 article)
23	2/1/2017	LeMonde.fr	Editorial	The risks of the "post-truth" society.	
24	3/1/2017	Le Monde	Editorial	The risks of the "post-truth" society.	Republication of the 2/1/2017 article
25	6/1/2017	LeMonde.fr		The crusaders of the animal cause.	Pierre Sorgue
26	11/1/2017	LeFigaro.fr	International news	Furious, Donald Trump denounces the "false information" linking him to Moscow.	Etienne Jacob

27	12/1/2017	LeFigaro.fr	Newsflash	Trump: German diplomacy "perplexed".	
28	17/1/2017	Le Figaro	Tech	"Facebook does not want to be the arbiter of the truth" Sheryl Sandberg	Lucie Ronfaut (also published online)
29	17/1/2017	LeFigaro.fr	Tech & web	Sheryl Sandberg: "Facebook does not want to be the arbiter of the truth"	Lucie Ronfaut (also published in print)
30	25/1/2017		Event	Internet releases its anti-fake news weapons.	Pauline Moullot

Corresponding author: Angeliki Monnier
Contact email: angeliki.monnier@univ-lorraine.fr