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Flooding the Feed: The Politics of Social Media Sharing Among Defensive Publics

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ABSTRACT

What political significance do widely-shared sources on social media carry? Efforts at documenting media content have produced useful insights about political phenomena, including right-wing populist movements that have recently been theorized as comprising defensive publics which seek to preserve social, economic, and cultural hierarchies that privilege white “nationals.” In France, the concept of defensive publics is particularly useful for understanding how right-wing identitarian and nationalist actors use social media to mobilize publics to defend hierarchies framed as under siege by immigration, multiculturalism, and global liberal elites. Building on literature about illiberal communication and the illiberal public sphere, we argue that patterns of sources’ visibility – not just content – also serve defensive purposes. Using computational analysis of 1.16 million French language immigration-related posts on Twitter/X and ideological embeddings of 44,810 of these users, we show how far-right-leaning users flood feeds with hyper-partisan sources, particularly on immigration, although they also share ideologically varied sources. Then, interviews with 13 high-profile far-right-affiliated posters who include senior French politicians reveal how these practices support defensive political aims. Sharing hyper-partisan sources outside the “elitist” mainstream redresses perceived censorship by mainstream media, while sharing mainstream sources signals credibility and respectability, even as these actors maintain critiques of the very same media. Meanwhile, reposting sources with statistical and quantitative evidence serves to obscure overtly white supremacist ideologies while advancing anti-immigration agendas. We conclude that sharing practices themselves function as rhetorical resources that highly-visible members of defensive publics use to reassert symbolic and political dominance in a contested media environment.

KEYWORDS

Defensive publics; France; immigration; right-wing populism; social media

Extensive efforts at documenting media content at scale and across languages have produced valuable insights about a range of political phenomena occurring both on- and off-line. These include the prominence of right-wing populism (Boulianne et al., 2020) and the proliferation of mis- and disinformation (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). Under the banner of “defensive publics” (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023), recent efforts to theorize the behaviors of

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far-right actors specifically have foregrounded how these groups aim to preserve (i.e. defend) rather than challenge existing hierarchies of social, economic, and cultural power. Central to this theoretical framework is the notion that defensive acts “designed to maintain, protect, or otherwise return to unequal social, political, and economic orders” (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023, p. 110) involve struggles over material and symbolic resources which are deeply embedded in institutional and historical structures. Given that debates around immigration have become key sites over which belonging and non-belonging are negotiated in several Western countries (Foroutan, 2019), they offer a useful lens for analyzing how defensive publics operate.

In France, immigration has long functioned as a flashpoint for debates around national identity, *laïcité* (secularism), and republican universalism, and has been a central issue particularly for right-wing parties and movements which have intensively used social media and alternative media to promote a vision of a culturally homogeneous, nostalgic, and implicitly white France (Alduy, 2024; Bouron, 2014, 2017; Boursier, 2025). In this context, examining immigration as a case domain is particularly useful to understand how right-wing and nativist (*identitaire*)¹ actors strategically use a key social media platform like X (formerly Twitter). While the concept of “defensive publics” originates in the U.S (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023), we argue it is especially analytically productive in the French context, where far-right actors seek to defend historically entrenched social and racial hierarchies – particularly those shaped by France’s colonial legacy and its relationship with immigration from Muslim-majority and African countries.

We start from this theoretical point to address two research questions: (RQ1) what kinds of source sharing and reposting practices characterize French-language Twitter/X posts about immigration, and (RQ2) what political reasons related to defensive objectives might account for these patterns? By focusing on these questions, we argue that studying which sources are made more visible, as well as by whom, is crucial for better understanding how these materials serve defensive purposes. This objective goes beyond consideration of the meaning of media *content* itself, on which much work to date has productively focused, to consider patterns that underlie the *circulation* of different types of content by different actors. Specifically, we propose that acts of sharing on social media function as rhetorical resources that highly-visible members of defensive publics leverage to mediate relationships within and across groups in order to achieve specific political objectives, including to exert pressure on mainstream outlets to respond, which makes the issues and messages at hand even more salient (Landis & Allen, 2022). Indeed, when it comes to the issue of immigration, we argue that the strategy of flooding users’ feeds with particular types of content corresponds with the aims and objectives of far-right users. Specifically, we view this strategy as part of a broader meta-political project of the French far-right that aims to shift cultural hegemony through the professionalization of communication practices and exert influence over both mainstream and alternative media ecosystems (Alduy, 2024; Bouron, 2017). These efforts work in defense of a racialized national identity rooted in an imagined, homogenous French nation.

Our evidence comes from mixed-methods analysis of 1.16 million French-language immigration-related posts on Twitter/X made between May 2020 and September 2021, computationally-derived ideological embedding scores of 44,810 of these users, baseline measures of the prevalence and types of hyperlinked sources shared by French-language Twitter/X users beyond immigration, and 13 interviews with high-profile right-wing

users in our dataset who include senior French politicians at regional, national, and international levels. We find that right- and far-right users are more likely than centrist or left-leaning users to engage in reposting external sources, and at significantly higher rates. Moreover, these users tend to repost not only hyper-partisan sources at the extreme right but also sources across the ideological spectrum. The propensity to share media sources, especially among the most prolific users, are likely driven by strategic considerations related to defensive political aims, including the intent to influence institutions, reshape the boundaries of acceptable discourse, and mobilize support for hierarchical and exclusionary social orders. Sharing hyper-partisan and alternative sources outside the mainstream redresses perceived censorship by institutionalized media and aims to pressure mainstream media to cover certain incidents that align with defensive agendas, while selectively sharing mainstream sources validates some users' views as being more "truthful." This latter objective is enhanced by reposting sources that convey statistical evidence to signal credibility and respectability, and that conceal overt white supremacist ideologies to make them more respectable.² In total, our study contributes novel and – in the case of the interviews – rare evidence about which sources are more visible on a globally consequential issue (i.e. immigration), the likely reasons for their persistence, and theoretical development of how defensive publics achieve their aims. Moreover, our mixed-methods approach and results make a conceptual contribution to urgent calls and efforts to re-center identity as a key lens for the field of political communication (McGregor et al., 2025).

Explaining Variation in Reposted Sources on Social Media: Defensive Publics and Rhetorical Resources

Our theoretical argument is that users' ideological leanings matter for their reposting practices, with right-leaning users – whom we view as “defensive publics” (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023) within the issue area of immigration – strategically sharing a greater range of sources including both alternative partisan news and mainstream outlets. They do this in order to defend political positions including ones that protect and reassert historically embedded social and cultural hierarchies that are framed as under threat by immigration. This includes targeting mainstream media and political elites who are allegedly complicit in eroding these hierarchies. We make this argument in two steps. First, we conceptualize citation and reposting practices as forms of goal-oriented communication that interact with platform affordances. Second, we argue that these practices can serve as rhetorical resources by which actors try to achieve their political goals.

Sharing and Reposting as Goal-Oriented Communication Practices

Recent work demonstrates how, rather than only reflecting news diets, acts of reposting on social media can serve multiple purposes with specific goals in mind. People may share news to build and maintain specific public images of themselves, to reinforce their offline relationships, to solidify their statuses as opinion leaders, to publicly express and capture power or legitimacy via social ties, or to seek and elicit reactions from audiences (Berriche & Altay, 2020; Hu et al., 2012; Tran, 2022). Moreover, these acts of reposting are not only limited to mere duplication and straightforward transmission with a goal of amplifying

reach, but also can involve translations and transformations of content referenced in hyperlinks (Boullier, 2023). By doing so, people select and appropriate existing media content (Edgerly et al., 2016) to exercise their agency online (Chadwick et al., 2018)

On the one hand, this conclusion is not unique to social and digital media. Speaking more generally about media production, Hall (1980) argued that messengers encode their content with particular meanings that audiences subsequently decode in ways shaped by their own social and ideological positions. As such, it is not surprising that users would consider reinterpreting and reframing content in strategic or advantageous ways. On the other hand, the manner in which messengers repost materials is related to the capabilities and features of platforms – sometimes called “affordances” or “action possibilities” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). These affordances vary among platforms, which means that users’ abilities to share, reinterpret, and embed their own encodings into content also likely varies (Hutchby, 2001a, 2001b). All the more reason, then, to investigate content sharing patterns in their own potentially unique settings.

Besides platform-specific dynamics, users’ ideological leanings also likely matter for the ways in which reposting occurs. Of course, news sharing itself is already a relatively rare and unequally distributed behavior: for example, evidence suggests only about 27% of adult internet users in France report sharing news via social, messaging or e-mail (Newman et al., 2023, p. 75). Consequently, observed online behaviors surrounding news sharing tends to reflect a particularly active and vocal subset of motivated users within a larger heterogeneous group comprising passive “lurkers” alongside opinion leaders (Landis & Allen, 2022; Oswald et al., 2022; Tucker et al., 2018).

In the French context, a range of far right actors refer to themselves as the *réinfosphère* (from *reinform*) as compared to what some journalists and academics call the *fachosphère* (from *fascist*) (Albertini & Doucet, 2016).³ This reflects their self-perceived mission to counteract mainstream media “propaganda” and restore “truth” to public discourse (Bouron, 2017; Lukasik, 2018). A central tactic within this ecosystem is strategic source sharing, clearly exemplified by the online “press review” Fdesouche.com. The site specializes in reposting rather than generating original content, following a technique Lukasik (2018) describes as “*copier-coller-couper*” (“copy-paste-cut”), where isolated facts – often emotionally charged *faits divers* involving nonwhite perpetrators – are decontextualized and shared to incite emotional reactions. Similarly, Bouron (2014, 2017) documents how the far-right youth movement Génération Identitaire and other far-right actors curate media spectacles designed to “buzz” online. Rather than openly declaring their political stance, far-right actors often “place the cursor” just enough to provoke audience interpretation, using emotionally charged news stories to allow audiences to draw “common sense” conclusions (Bouron, 2017).

This self-conception – to “reinform” the public and challenge perceived distortions propagated by mainstream media – reflects broader populist narratives that mainstream media represent core components of elitist institutions that undermine or even betray the “authentic” voice and will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). For our analysis, this populist and anti-establishment rhetoric is central to understanding how far-right users perceive and interact with both traditional and alternative media on digital platforms. Yet, as Alduy (2024) and Boursier (2025) show, this anti-elite positioning often coexists with a strategic and ideologically coherent project rooted in the “*Nouvelle Droite*’s” (New Right) metapolitical project, articulated by intellectual circles like the Research group for the European Civilisation

(GRECE) and the Club de l'Horloge in the 1970s as a form of “right-wing Gramscism” (*gramscisme de droite*) (Camus & Lebourg, 2017). As Zemmour cited in Alduy, (2024), former presidential candidate and founder of the far-right *Reconquête !*,⁴ puts it, this is a “cultural battle” aimed at overturning what is perceived as the “absolute domination of left-wing ideas in the public sphere.” Rather than operating from the margins, actors within this tradition seek to influence hegemonic discourse from within through seemingly neutral or legal means (Alduy, 2024; Bouron, 2014, 2017). Such strategies seek to professionalize far-right communication and embed it within republican institutions, even as they publicly critique them (Alduy, 2024; Bouron, 2014, 2017).

Recent scholarship has sought to understand strategic media use by right-wing actors through the lenses of *illiberal communication* and the *illiberal public sphere* (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). These frameworks shift attention from ideology alone to the communicative dynamics through which exclusionary political projects are articulated, legitimated, and amplified across both traditional and digital media environments, following Laruelle’s (2022) definition of illiberalism as comprising a model of society governed by majority rule and underpinned by ethno-nationalist ideals and traditional cultural hierarchies (Enyedi, 2024; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). Illiberal communication is characterized by attacks on the press; the exclusion of “others” (e.g., sexual, religious, and racial minorities); the use of fringe and alternative sources; and the circulation of emotionally charged, conflict-driven narratives with the goal of mobilizing publics toward transgressive actions that attack opponents and transform institutions (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). In the context of far-right social media use, these insights help illuminate how reposting is not just a matter of changing information flows, but also a strategic, goal-driven process aimed at reshaping the boundaries of acceptable discourse and mobilizing support for hierarchical and exclusionary social orders. These emerging literatures provide useful tools for analyzing the rhetorical strategies of what we conceptualize below as *defensive publics on immigration*.

Defensive Publics on Immigration and Right-Wing Communication Practices

We conceptualize right-wing users’ reposting practices as means of contesting rhetorical resources in the service of “defensive publics” (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023). Defensive publics specifically comprise movements that promote positions which uphold and reassert traditional social, racial, and economic hierarchies including ethno-nationalism and white supremacist views. Rather than viewing these groups through the lens of counterpublics which emphasizes their “exclusion from dominant public spheres” (Pfister, 2018, p. 13), Jackson and Kreiss (2023) choose to label them as “defensive” in order to signal how they often have historical ties to political and institutional centers of power, while standing in alignment with (rather than counter to) and seeking to preserve the ordering of systems of inequality through exclusionary, ascriptive, or hierarchical political projects and social arrangements.

While the concept of *defensive publics* was originally theorized in the U.S. context to describe reactionary collectives mobilized in defense of racial hierarchies under perceived threat (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023), its application to France requires important contextual adjustments. Unlike the U.S., where race is officially acknowledged and racial identity is often central to political discourse, France adheres to a model of Republican universalism,

which has been described as “colorblind” because it renders race both politically taboo and institutionally invisible (Escafré-Dublet et al., 2023). This raises the question of which racialized social orders that *French* defensive publics defend. In France, some far-right actors and segments of their audiences cast immigration from Muslim-majority and African countries not simply as a policy issue but as a civilizational and racial threat. This is exemplified by the “*Grand Remplacement*” theory, a conspiracy theory first popularized by Renaud Camus, which claims that white Europeans are being systematically replaced by nonwhite, predominantly Muslim populations through immigration, higher birth rates, and cultural shifts (Alduy, 2024; Ivaldi, 2023). While not uniformly embraced across all far-right movements, this theory is illustrative as an ideological reference point for many of the more radical defensive publics operating within the French far-right ecosystem.

Importantly, this defensive posture is not limited to the far right. Scholars have shown that mainstream political and media discourse participates in reframing immigration and Islam as threats to the Republic. For instance, the *Islamogauchisme* panic (Beaman & Mondon, 2023; Jobard et al., 2024; Zia-Ebrahimi, 2023) and the aggressive secularist policies targeting Muslim visibility (e.g., the headscarf debates, see Al-Saji, 2010) reflect how centrist and even left-wing actors have reinforced the idea of Muslims as incompatible with “French values.” As Zia-Ebrahimi (2023) argues, this discourse manufactures an “internal enemy” that justifies surveillance, exclusion, and repression in the name of secularism and national unity. These racialized dynamics are rooted in France’s colonial and imperial history, particularly in North and West Africa, where Islam and Blackness were both constructed as markers of inferiority (Guillaumin, 1972).

While exclusionary rhetoric on issues of race and immigration is not confined to the far-right in France, the far-right’s unique contribution to the formation of defensive publics lies in its explicit and radical racialization of national identity. Unlike the center, which often frames immigration and integration in terms of republican values, “security,” *laïcité*, or economic necessity (e.g., Xelka et al., 2019), far right movements in France, especially those associated with the Rassemblement National (RN)⁵ and Reconquête! rely on overtly nativist ideologies that distinguish between “*Français de souche*” (“French of [European] roots”), historically used to delineate racially defined Frenchness,⁶ and “*Français de papier*” (French citizens by naturalization or descent, often racialized as “not really French”) (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2016). Far-right leaders like Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the Front National (now RN), famously refused to recognize descendants of immigrants as fully French, rhetorically relegating them to geographic tropes like “the suburbs” or simply grouping them with “immigration” and “non-France” (Bouron, 2014, 2017; Gattinara & Froio, 2018).

Although in recent years, under Marine Le Pen’s leadership, the RN has engaged in a strategy of “de-demonization” (*dédiabolisation*), toning down some overt racist rhetoric and framing its anti-immigration stance in terms of secularism and national security (Ivaldi, 2023), Zemmour, meanwhile, explicitly describes a “cultural and ideological war” in which “the French people, [...] are being invaded and risk being drowned [...] by another people [...] who are submerging and colonizing our people” (Zemmour, quoted in Alduy, 2024, authors’ own translation).

As a result, while these groups might claim to be excluded or marginalized, they do so to consolidate and extend their connections to goals and structures benefitting historical majority groups. Importantly for our case selection and analysis, the character and composition of defensive publics is context dependent: relationships between “marginalized” and

“powerful” groups are dynamic and constructed for specific purposes rather than being static and immutable. As we outline later, the kinds of far-right users and political elites which we study here are clear examples of publics that take defensive stances with respect to immigration in France.

To be clear, we do not claim that *all* right-wing individuals in all circumstances are outside of marginalization by virtue of their ideological position. In fact, many right-wing users in this study may come from economically disadvantaged and less educated backgrounds (Mayer, 2002, 2023). However, even if they are economically disenfranchised, they may engage in practices that actively defend and uphold racial and social hierarchies, particularly through their stances on immigration. As we have shown in the previous section, dominant far-right movements, while claiming to represent the interests of marginalized or economically disenfranchised groups, simultaneously align with and support a broader political project that seeks to maintain and legitimize racial and cultural hierarchies, particularly those rooted in a history of European colonialism and racialized nationalism. Thus, their political stances on immigration reveal a strong defense of racialized social orders that positions them as being part of a “defensive public” seeking to preserve these hierarchies. Our case study – focusing specifically on the way far-right users discuss immigration on Twitter/X – highlights how their rhetorical practices work to reinforce and legitimize these exclusionary racial and cultural hierarchies.

How do these publics’ goals manifest themselves online? Research on far-right movements shows how white supremacist and other reactionary groups exploit narratives of victimhood and the affordances of digital platforms to amplify, monetize, and reframe their ideologies to become more acceptable (Daniels, 2018; Kunst et al., 2020). They also present themselves as vulnerable targets of socially progressive movements, as seen among “alt-lite” YouTube celebrities (Ma, 2021). This phenomenon of dominant groups adopting victimhood stances has been variously analyzed as examples of “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel, 2019), “weaponized victimhood” (Bebout, 2019), “hijacked victimhood” (Barton Hronešová & Kreiss, 2024), and “white vulnerability” (Ma, 2021). One tactic to advance the positions of defensive publics is the use of “mitigating rhetorical strategies” that obfuscate and conceal overt supremacist ideologies to make them more respectable, often by anchoring them in mainstream conservatism (Ma, 2024; Munger & Phillips, 2022).

Case Context: Media and Immigration in France

Understanding the broader French media and political environment, particularly in relation to immigration, is crucial for setting up our argument about how defensive publics strategically share sources to achieve their political aims. French media are characterized by a mix of public, private, and independent outlets. The country has a strong tradition of public broadcasting, represented by entities such as Radio France and France Télévision that enjoy wide popular reach (Antheaume, 2022). However, as in other markets, digital news platforms and niche publications have surged in popularity. These include Médiapart, an exclusively digital left-leaning outlet known for its reader-funded investigative journalism, and the far-right online-only platform Fdesouche. Ownership is highly concentrated among a few powerful individuals such as billionaires Vincent Bolloré, Bernard Arnault, and Rodolphe Saadé, who own significant media assets like CNews, Le Parisien, and Les Echos, as well as regional

and national news outlets. Bolloré has specifically been criticized for steering his media holdings in nationalist and right-wing directions to influence French public discourse (Allsop, 2024; Cagé et al., 2022). His control of CNews, a channel described by its critics as “French Fox News” (Cagé et al., 2022; Onishi, 2021; Willsher, 2024), and known ties to far-right politicians like Éric Zemmour exemplifies this shift. Furthermore, it has raised broader concerns about the independence of journalism in France as well as the state of press freedom (Dodman, 2024; Faure, 2024; Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

Whether as a cause or response to these developments, French citizens’ trust in traditional media is among the lowest in Europe: only 29% of French adults say they trust most news media most of the time (Newman et al., 2022), a trend particularly pronounced among both far-left and far-right supporters in general and on immigration specifically (Sumida et al., 2019). As a result, the main and growing cleavage in French media appears to be between traditional institutionalized media (e.g., elite outlets like *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*) and newer online media deemed “partisan,” notably *Fdesouche.com* (Cardon et al., 2019). Among these media, Twitter/X continues to be significant in France: at the time of our data collection in 2020, 39% of French adults reported accessing news on social media while 9% reported accessing news on Twitter specifically (Newman, 2020). More broadly, it remains popular among news organizations, journalists, politicians, activists, and high-profile members of civil society.

The French far-right has maintained a significant and strategic online presence for decades: the Front National (now RN) was the first political party in France to launch a website (Boyadjian, 2015), and a wide range of actors, from political parties (RN, *Reconquête!*) to youth movements like *Génération Identitaire* and influencers such as Julien Rochedy, Daniel Conversano, Papacito, and Raptor, have achieved large visibility online (Bouron, 2017; Boursier, 2025). Their strategies span platforms including YouTube and TikTok (Boursier, 2021, 2025).

Our empirical analysis of reposting practices builds on Jackson and Kreiss’ (2023, pp. 108–9) recommendations to consider the specific historical roots and institutional contexts of defensive publics, acknowledge relationships within and across social groups which comprise as well as contest these publics, and examine the resources (material, symbolic, and rhetorical) they mobilize or seek. To operationalize these insights, we examine how defensive publics manifest through digital practices – specifically, through the selective amplification of certain sources. In doing so, our approach also engages with Bennett and Kneuer’s (2024, p. 185) questions on the rise of illiberal public spheres: “who communicates; [...] using which information sources; [...] to achieve what broad normative political goals or outcomes?” Accordingly, we ask: (RQ1) what kinds of source sharing and reposting practices characterize French-language Twitter/X posts about immigration, and (RQ2) what political reasons related to defensive objectives might account for these patterns? While RQ1 is primarily descriptive, it serves to map the informational practices through which different publics mobilize online. RQ2 then builds on this to interrogate how such practices align with the defensive logics theorized by Jackson and Kreiss. To be clear, our analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) focuses on relatively elite actors who claim to represent the interests of defensive publics. In sum, we view acts of social media reposting by both leading and layperson members of defensive publics as intentional efforts to achieve

political goals that are themselves located within (and shaped by) sets of platform affordances as well as social, historical, and political relationships.

Materials and Methods

Datasets

To address RQ1, we use three large-scale datasets comprising (1) immigration-related tweets in French, including tweets with and without hyperlinks, (2) a referential dataset of all tweets published in French containing hyperlinks, regardless of topic, which serves as a baseline for assessing the relative prevalence of source types in immigration-related discourse, and (3) estimates of users' ideological left-right orientation. To address RQ2 and identify possible explanations for the patterns we find in the quantitative data, we draw upon 13 qualitative interviews with key figures among right-wing political groups who were among the most active or retweeted users in the immigration-related dataset.

Immigration-Related Twitter Dataset

We used the collection and scraping software *minet* (Plique et al., 2021) in October 2021 to collect tweets published in French between May 2020–September 2021 that contained one of several keywords relating to migration. The query was: *(im)migrant(s)* OR *(im)migration* OR *asile* OR *mineur isolé* OR *réfugié(s)*, with the tweet language filter set to French.⁷ This yielded 1.16 million tweets, excluding retweets, posted by 250,956 unique users. Of these, 339,836 tweets contained hyperlinks and were posted by 77,904 unique users.

Referential Dataset of All French Tweets Containing Hyperlinks

As a baseline for comparison, we use a second dataset of tweets collected continuously between January–September 2022 of all tweets published in French during that period containing at least one URL, irrespective of topic.⁸ These tweets were collected using the *Gazouilloire* tool.⁹ This dataset enables us to assess whether certain domains or types of sources are over- or under-represented in immigration-related discussions, compared to general French-language Twitter activity.¹⁰

Dataset of Ideologically Embedded Users

To position individuals ideologically, we leverage a preexisting dataset of French Twitter users with Left-Right position estimates (Ramaciotti & Vagena, 2022). This dataset contains the estimated ideological positions of 44,810 users from the immigration-related Twitter dataset, representing about 18% of the total users in that dataset¹¹ (referred to as “labelled users”). These positions are derived from a larger set of more than 325,000 users connected to French political discussions on Twitter, and whose ideological positions were estimated by Ramaciotti and Vagena (2022) using ideology scaling methods (Barberá, 2015) calibrated for identification with political survey data. This process identifies users who display a reasonable degree of connection or interest in policy debates (defined as individuals who follow at least three French Members of Parliament (MPs), had at least 25 followers, and had published at least 100 tweets at the time of collection in October 2020). Then, it applies ideological scaling to map these users' likely positions on the Left-Right dimension within the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Jolly et al., 2022) of European parties, which

ranges from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).¹² Additionally, we binned the values of this scale into a five-point Likert scale (see the Methodology and Analytical Procedures section below). Further details on this dataset and process appear in section 1D in the supporting materials, while additional technical details about the method, data, validation efforts, and quality assessment of Left-Right positioning are available in Ramaciotti and Vagena (2022).

Interviews with Right-Wing Users

To address RQ2, the first author conducted 13 semi-structured interviews between October-December 2023. To select interviewees, users in the immigration-related dataset were ranked by activity and influence corresponding with aggregate number of likes and retweets, and follower count. The top 600 accounts ranked by aggregate number of retweets were then manually reviewed. Based on an analysis of their profiles, content, and hyperlink-sharing patterns, we selected a purposive sample of individuals occupying influential roles. As such, we are clear that our selection process did not intend to be representative of the broader right-leaning Twitter user base, but rather aimed to generate insight into the rhetorical strategies of prominent actors within right-wing political parties, hyperpartisan media, and ideological communities. We contacted 41 individuals for interviews: of these, thirteen agreed to participate (32% participation rate), 26 did not respond, and 2 declined due to concerns about being “caricatured” by academics. This aligns with existing research arguing that right-wing actors often regard academics and journalists with suspicion or hostility (Mudde, 2007, p. 267). Given the high visibility and often media-wary positioning of far-right leaders and functionaries who Ellinas (2023, p. 662) describes as “a hard-to-reach population” who are “generally stigmatized . . . sceptical, wary and busy,” alongside the “notorious difficulty to get hold of” radical right parties (Damhuis & de Jonge, 2022, p. 4), we consider this response rate to be satisfactory.

Interviewees included individuals affiliated with or influential in right-wing parties such as Rassemblement National (RN), Reconquête, and Les Républicains (LR), as well as figures associated with right-wing media such as *fdesouche.com*, Damoclès¹³, and Radio Courtoisie¹⁴. Some had prior ties to the now-banned youth group Génération Identitaire,¹⁵ and one was a major figure in SOS Chrétiens d’Orient, a French NGO providing humanitarian assistance to Christians in the Middle East, which has been described as “entirely infiltrated by ultra-right currents” (Lons, 2016). Several interviewees had been publicly associated with far-right discourse and, in some cases, with convictions for incitement to racial hatred. Media accounts have described many of them as central to the so-called *fachosphere*.

The sample included two party spokespersons; three current or former members of the European Parliament; one member of the French Senate; several former municipal or regional officials; one digital campaign strategist; and authors affiliated with partisan media outlets. All were male, aged between 25 and 68, with most in their thirties. At the time of interviewing, they had a median of 22,037 followers on X (range: from ~4,000 to ~280,000), compared to a median of 156 followers among users in the broader immigration-related dataset.

Ranging from 30 minutes to three hours, the interviews took place either in-person (in cafes or offices including in the French Senate) or by phone. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, interviewees gave informed consent to participate in the study prior to

interviews, with the option to withdraw or withhold information at any time. Where individuals consented to audio recordings, these were transcribed using the Whisper transcription service, while written notes were taken where interviewees did not give permission to record.

Here it is vital to acknowledge how the interviewer's own positionality as a white woman from Germany played a significant role in the interviewing experience – especially given the topic (immigration) and our analytical focus on defensive publics which centers questions of power and representation. On the one hand, shared whiteness likely facilitated rapport: interviewees may have perceived the interviewer as part of their ingroup, particularly in opposition to immigrant “others” as subjects of conversation. On the other hand, being German also likely introduced a degree of foreignness in the French context, which may have led interviewees to discuss local political and cultural issues in particular ways. Moreover, given the interviewer's affiliation with an educational institution often publicly viewed with suspicion among right-wing circles¹⁶ and the general suspicion of right-wing politicians toward university-affiliated researchers (Mudde, 2007, p. 267) participants may have self-censored or otherwise been less candid in their responses.

Methodology and Analytical Procedures

Extracting, Labeling, and Classifying Source Domains

We extracted media sources from posted hyperlinks in two steps. First, we expanded shortened URLs and resolved Google links using the “resolve” function in *minet*. Second, we extracted and preserved the domains within the link.¹⁷ Restricting our analysis to domain-level analysis, rather than coding each article individually, follows conventions in other studies that aim to classify content types at scale (Stier et al., 2020; Stocking et al., 2018).

Then, we classified these domains into six news styles, using a coding scheme developed by Stier et al. (2020) for their study in the context of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States: *commercial broadcasters*, *digital-born outlets*, *hyperpartisan news*, *legacy press*, *public broadcasters*, and *tabloid press*. “Commercial broadcasting” refers to privately-owned television and radio stations, such as *bfmtv.com* and *europel.fr*. “Digital-born outlets” distribute political content exclusively through digital channels, excluding online versions of traditional media, exemplified by *cnews.fr*, *mediapart.fr*, or *huffingtonpost.fr*. “Hyperpartisan news” sites promote explicitly political agendas, often extreme in nature, without striving for balanced representation, represented by websites like *fdesouche.com*, *damocles.co*, *bvoltaire.fr*, or *breizh-info.com*. (Parody sites are excluded from this category.) “Legacy press” reflects organizations which tend to employ professional staff following journalistic standards in broadsheets, magazines, regional newspapers, and news agencies, including *lemonde.fr*, *lefigaro.fr*, and *liberation.fr*. “Tabloid press” refers to newspapers published as red top tabloids, characterized by sensationalism, personalization, and a focus on “soft news.” *leparisien.fr* and *20 minutes.fr* fall under this category.¹⁸ “Public broadcasting” comprises state-funded television and radio stations with a public mandate, such as *francetvinfo.fr*, *franceculture.fr*, or *france24.com*. Non-news domains¹⁹ were classified as “other” and were excluded from further analysis.

Table 1. Intercode reliability test statistics for domain type.

Feature	Cohen's kappa	Krippendorff's alpha
Domain type (websites)	0.84 (0.09) [0.66–1.00]	0.84 (0.09) [0.66–1.00]

Notes: Based on ratings from two independent coders who examined $n = 26$ website domains. Standard errors reported in parentheses, and 95% confidence intervals reported in brackets. Percent agreement was 88%.

First, we used the set of domain codes in Stier et al. (2020) to classify all domains which were already in our immigration dataset. Second, recognizing the skewed nature of web traffic where a small number of websites receive most visits (Hindman, 2009), we manually applied their coding scheme to classify the 290 most frequently-appearing domains, which constituted 65% of tweets and 90% of retweets in our dataset. Third, to avoid dropping any sources that may have been particularly significant to specific ideological groups, we also coded any domain that had been reposted by at least 15 users from any ideological group. We applied intercode reliability checks to a randomly selected subset of domains ($n = 26$) which the first and second authors independently coded. As seen in Table 1, these produced a Krippendorff's alpha test statistic of 0.84 which is commonly taken to indicate a high degree of agreement (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Ideological Classification of Users

Turning attention to the labeled users, we created five bins (hereafter “ideological groups”) according to users’ scores along the CHES Left-Right scale: “far-left” (less than 2), “left” (2 to less than 4), “center” (4 to less than 6), “right” (6 to less than 8), and “far-right” (8 or higher). Most users fall in the centrist category (13,176 users), and there are more right-of-center users (19,425 for right and far-right combined) than left-of-center (12,415).

While we acknowledge that these cutoff points are arbitrary and do not necessarily reflect users’ self-classification, we argue they provide useful distinctions based on the types of accounts users follow, helping to simplify their ideological positions and make them more interpretable. Yet they are not entirely divorced from users’ own disclosed orientations: Ramaciotti et al. (2023) validated this ideological axis using Twitter users’ profile descriptions, confirming that users’ ideological positions, especially on the Left-Right axis, were reliably predicted by the words and sentiments expressed in their public biographies.

Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

The first author, with support from the second author, analyzed the interview transcripts and notes using a thematic approach which focused on identifying how interviewees perceived French media coverage on immigration as well as how they justified their own and others’ social media practices. By providing access to individuals actively contributing to and shaping far-right discourse in France, this part of the study reveals in-depth reflections from the perspective of relatively high-visibility far-right actors themselves on immigration-related discourse in France and the role of different media and digital

platforms. This kind of access is itself an important empirical contribution. Furthermore, the interviews show how these actors strategically use media and digital platforms to further their political agendas, contributing to a deeper understanding of the ways in which far-right movements are reshaping public and political discourse in contemporary France – and, as we return to in the discussion section, in other countries experiencing resurgent electoral success of populist parties.

Results

Who Posts? Hyper-Activity and Hyper-Visibility of Far-Right Users on Immigration

Before we examine the visibility and types of sources shared on Twitter, a prerequisite step is to demonstrate variation in activity among users posting on immigration, depending on their ideological leaning. Figure 1 shows the distribution of users along the CHES Left-Right scale, comparing two groups: general French-language Twitter users for whom Ramaciotti and Vagena (2022) computed ideological estimates (striped), and those who also posted immigration-related tweets in the 2019–20 timeframe (unicolor).²⁰ Users with ideological estimates who post on immigration are more ideologically extreme than general French-language users for whom Ramaciotti and Vagena (2022) computed ideological estimates (our baseline group): the latter concentrate around centrist positions more than the former.

To address RQ1—*what kinds of source sharing and reposting practices characterize French-language Twitter/X posts about immigration*—we begin by examining who is most active in producing immigration-related content. While more ideologically extreme users from both ideological ends are overrepresented in immigration-related posts, there is a notable asymmetry in activity levels across the ideological spectrum (Figure 2). Far-right users are particularly active, posting about four times more on immigration than the average user tweeting on immigration. Together, users classified as right- and far-right post approximately 24% of all immigration-

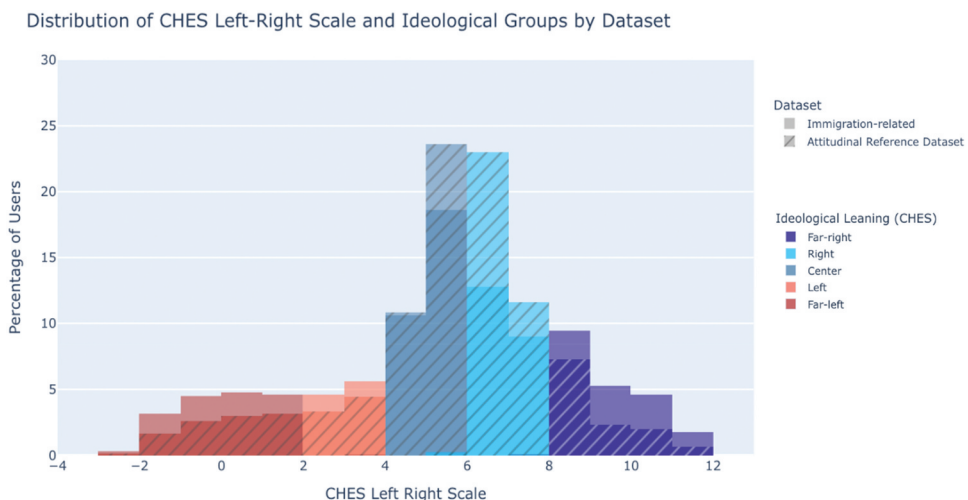


Figure 1. Ideological estimates for users tweeting on immigration (unicolor) and all French users (striped).

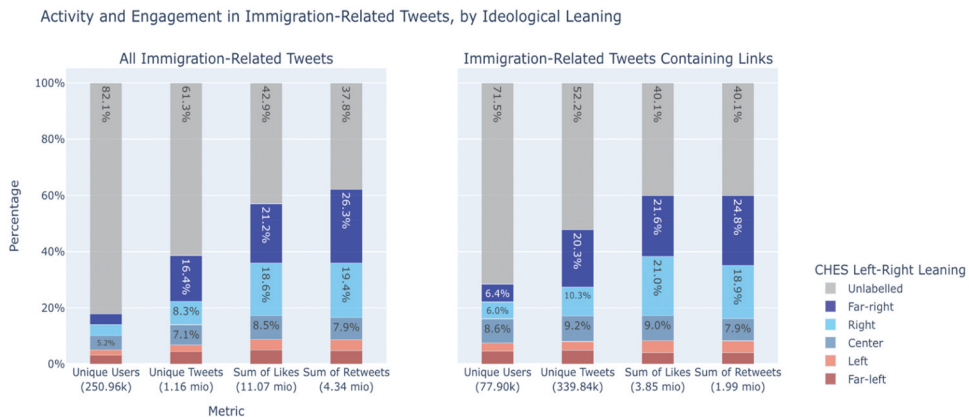


Figure 2. Activity and engagement in immigration-related tweets of users across the ideological spectrum.

related tweets, despite representing only 8% of the user base. These tweets also receive a disproportionately high level of engagement: posts by users classified as right-leaning generate 45% of all retweets and approximately 40% of all likes. This pattern holds across both the full set of immigration-related tweets and the subset containing hyperlinks (Figure 2, right).

In contrast, users classified as far-left and left in our dataset jointly make up around 5% of the user base in the entire immigration-related dataset (and 7.5% of those posting tweets with hyperlinks) and their tweets represent roughly the same share: approximately 7–8% of all immigration-related tweets and those containing hyperlinks, respectively. Non-labeled users make up the majority of all users (82% in the entire immigration-related dataset, and 71.5% of those including hyperlinks). However, due to lower activity and engagement levels compared to users classified as right-wing, their tweets make up only 61.3% of all immigration-related tweets (and 52.2% of posts including hyperlinks), and receive approximately 40% of all likes and retweets.

On the one hand, our finding that a small minority of users produce most content and engagement aligns with prior work: for instance, Grinberg et al. (2019) found that during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, 0.1% of users were responsible for nearly 80% of shared “fake news” sources. What is more, users at the political extremities tend to be especially hyperactive (Bail, 2022; Cardon et al., 2019). On the other hand, at least on immigration, our data clearly shows how this hyperactivity is largely restricted to the right. This aligns both with observations about how far-right parties tend to disproportionately emphasize immigration – a form of “issue ownership” (Lefevere et al., 2015) – and how voters themselves across many high-income countries including France attach more importance to the issue than pro-immigration voters, particularly in contexts where immigration has become politically salient (Kustov, 2023).

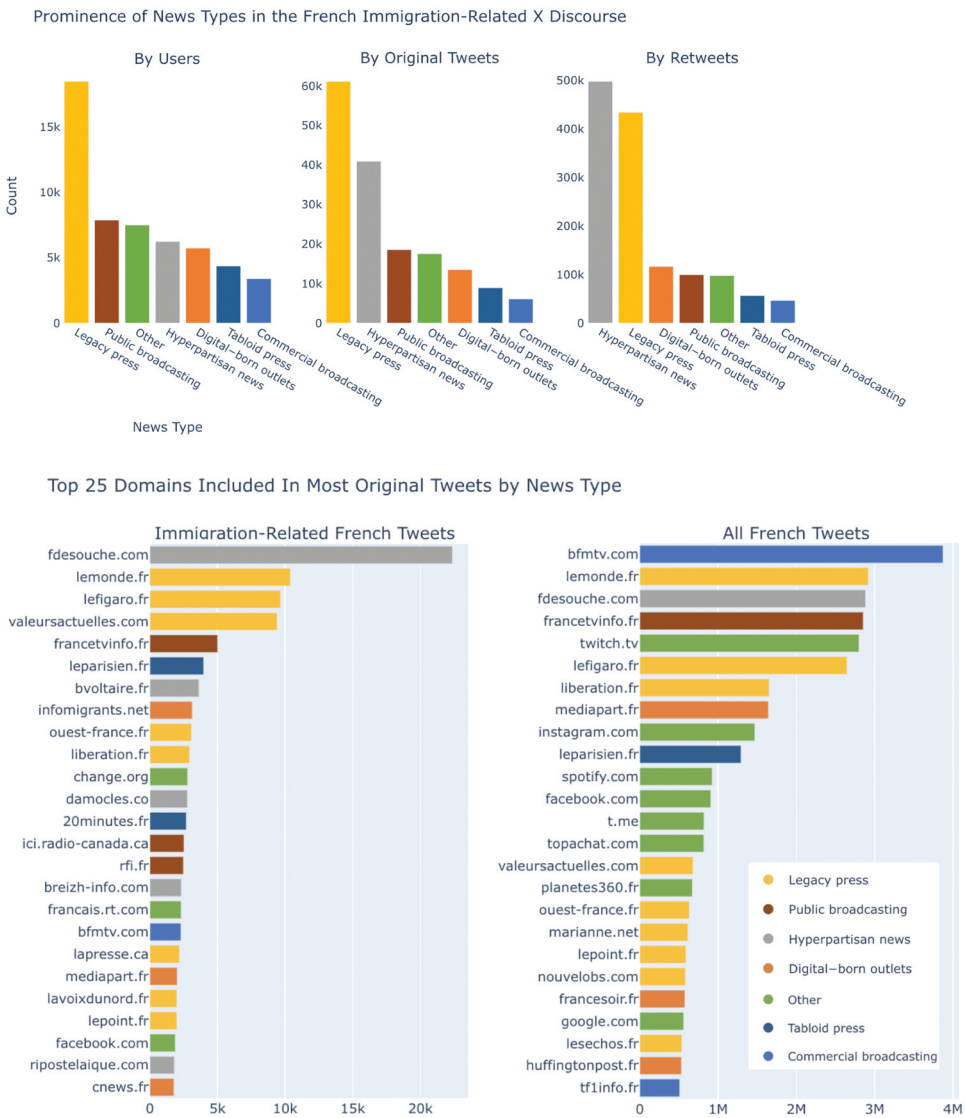


Figure 3. Distribution of source types (upper) and main domains (lower) in French immigration X posts.

Which Sources? Disproportionate Circulation of Hyperpartisan News Despite Widespread Engagement with Mainstream News Sources Across the Ideological Spectrum

Next, we turn attention to the types of sources being reposted. Legacy press outlets are shared by the largest number of users in immigration-related tweets, with about 18,500 users (23.7% of 77,900 users who posted immigration-related tweets containing hyper-links, hereafter abbreviated as IRTH) linking to these sources (top left panel, Figure 3). These links appear in around 61,000 tweets (17.9% of the 339,840 IRTH). In contrast, hyperpartisan sources are shared by fewer users (approximately 6,200; 8%), but with greater frequency: they are shared in about 41,000 tweets (12.1%) (center top panel of

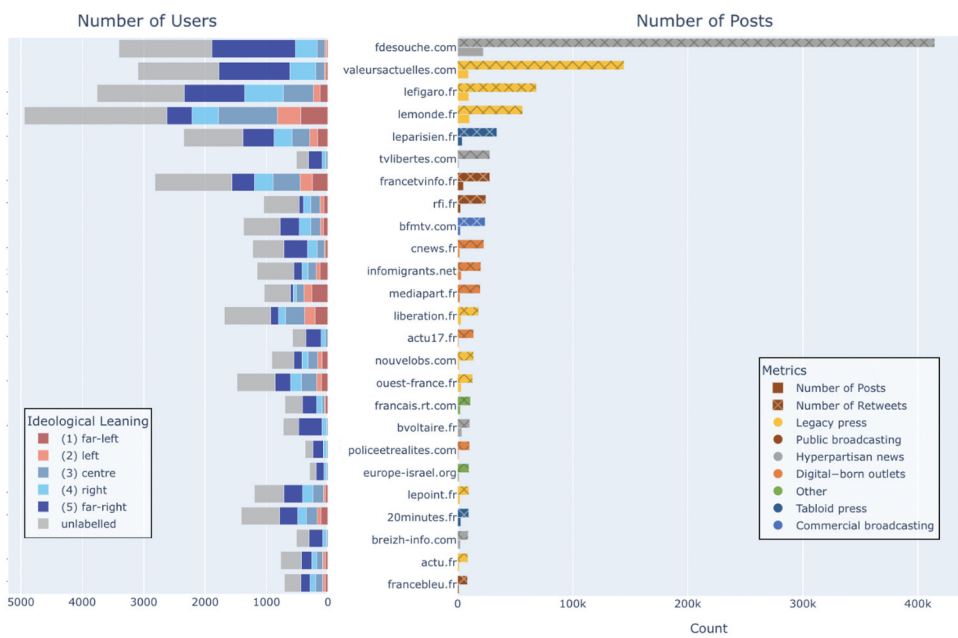
Figure 3). This contrast becomes even more pronounced when analyzing retweets (top right panel of Figure 3), where tweets containing links to hyperpartisan news are retweeted roughly 498,000 times (25% of 1.99 million retweets for IRTH), surpassing tweets containing links to legacy press sources, which are retweeted around 434,000 times (21.8%). Despite being shared by fewer users, hyperpartisan sources appear to flood feeds, reflecting highly active sharing behavior among this subset of users. What is more, this is particularly the case for immigration-related tweets: the bottom panel in Figure 3 shows that the prominence of hyperpartisan sources is much higher in immigration-related debates compared to the reference dataset. This pattern aligns with research indicating that hyperpartisan news often focuses intensively on immigration and related topics (Nygaard 2019).

The sharing of sources in tweets about immigration varies across ideological groups. Users with ideological labels are the most active in link sharing, with between 41% to 45% of left to far-right users and 35% of far-left users sharing links, compared to only 20% of users with no ideological label (Figure 1 in the Supplementary Materials). Hyperpartisan sources are almost exclusively shared by far-right users (see Figure 4, bottom panel): 22.5% of far-right users share hyperpartisan links at least once, sharply contrasting with far-left (0.9%) and leftist users (1.3%). Centrist and rightist users also engage with hyperpartisan news, but far less often, at rates of 5.97% and 5.6%, respectively. None of the other ideological groups use any news type in a similarly concentrated way.

Domain-level analysis comparing the immigration-related tweets to the reference French-language tweets in the bottom panel of Figure 3 confirms that the visibility of hyperpartisan sources is particular to immigration. *Fdesouche.com* stands out with 22,367 tweets as the single most shared source, more than double than second-most-tweeted *lemonde.fr* (10,390 tweets). The comparison also reveals the salience of hyperpartisan sources like *breizh-info.com*, *bvoltaire.fr*, and *ripostelaique.com* in immigration-related tweets. These sites frequently frame immigration as an invasion while claiming crimes committed by African and Muslim men and economic costs due to immigration would be “hidden” by governments (e.g., Antoine, 2022; Breizh-Info, 2020, 2024; Martel, 2020).

What Likely Drives Far-Right Sharing Practices? Evidence from Qualitative Interviews with Leading Users

To address RQ2—*what political reasons related to defensive objectives might account for these patterns*—we draw upon the set of qualitative interviews to examine the motivations behind them. While the preceding computational analyses reveals how right- and far-right users flood feeds with hyper-partisan sources, it also shows how far-right users share legacy press outlets including left-leaning sources like Le Monde at relatively high rates, too (at 24%: see Figure 4, top panel). This adds to recent challenges of the view that social media particularly polarizes far-right users by sustaining echo chambers (see Boulianne et al., 2020), instead showing that these users engage with a variety of sources. Of course, engagement does not necessarily equate with endorsement. Consequently, this raises questions about the likely motivations for these practices.



Share of Users At Least Once Posting News Type in Immigration-Related X Discourse

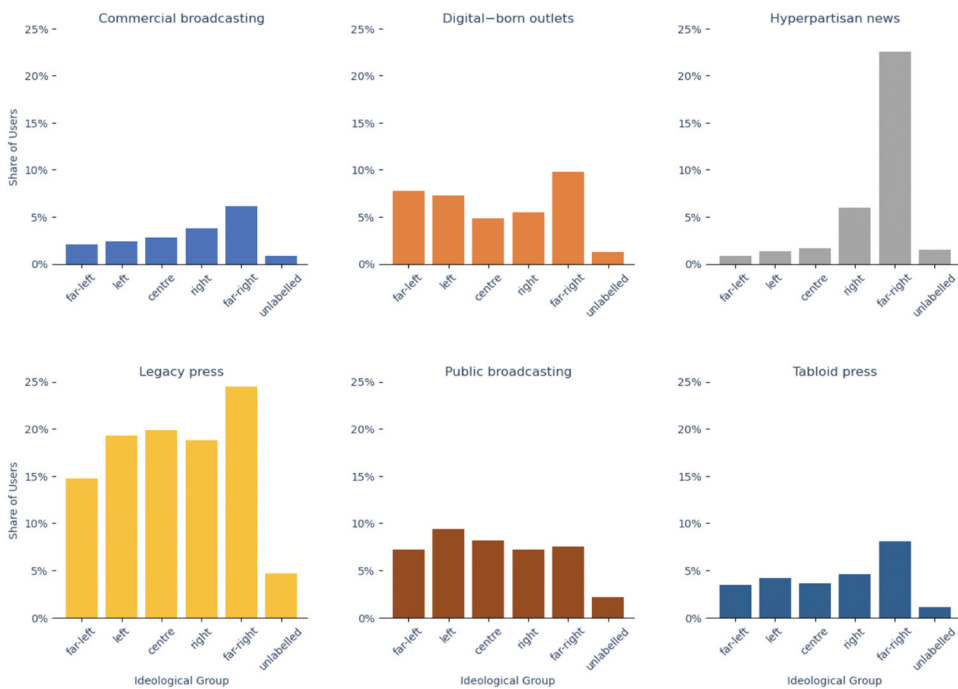


Figure 4. Distribution of source sharing practices by ideological orientation.

Interviewing some of the most prolific users on the right lends further weight to our theoretical claim that source sharing is a rhetorical resource available to defensive publics as they try to achieve their political aims. Specifically, these leading figures make three claims as to why they share content in the ways that they do: (1) sharing hyper-partisan and alternative news sources serves to redress perceived issue and messenger censorship by mainstream media institutions, often justified with a populist rationale that social media are more democratic and representative of the people, and often with the aim of pressuring mainstream media to cover allegedly underreported incidents; (2) selectively sharing mainstream sources, especially coverage that can be reframed to align with the agendas of alternative media, either serves to further defensive objectives, or to criticize mainstream sources' alleged bias; and (3) sharing statistical and evidence-based sources serves to enhance defensive publics' credibility and respectability.

Redressing Alleged Censorship and Biases by Mainstream Media and Institutions

Far-right actors' motivation for using alternative hyper-partisan news relies on their framing of mainstream media as deliberately deceptive and complicit in the suppression of voices critical of immigration. By arguing that mainstream outlets censor the lived realities of ordinary and implicitly white people, they view this selective silence as elite censorship. One senator from the National Rally (RN) best captured this view as he claimed

There are media outlets—television stations like CNews, radio programs like Sud Radio, Europe 1, and newspapers like Valeurs Actuelles—that have started to challenge immigration policies, providing a different perspective. But for a long time, the mainstream media have been hiding the reality, covering up what was really happening.²¹

These allegations of censorship went beyond immigration to include issues such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A former RN regional councillor expressed his view that

[T]here's this obsession with censorship today. The idea that there is only one truth, and if you don't adhere to it, you'll be censored. Take Ukraine, for instance. From day one of the conflict, the EU granted itself outrageous powers to censor the Russian press. We should be able to read Putin's editorials and criticize them—that's what democracy is.

Similarly, others emphasized how alternative sources like CNews serve to counterbalance alleged left-leaning biases within mainstream outlets: a spokesperson for LR praised CNews for discussing immigration “almost daily” compared to public broadcaster France Info which they characterized as “left-leaning, even very left-leaning.”

Criticism of mainstream media extends to accusations of journalistic homogeneity, particularly widespread reliance on Agence France-Presse (AFP), the lack of investigative regional reporting, and regular use of experts possessing similar backgrounds. For example, the RN councillor mentioned above also argued that major outlets replicate AFP's reports without independent investigation, resulting in uniform coverage:

The entire French press is AFP. Period. [...] As soon as an event happens, you go online and check Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, La Dépêche du Midi. And you will notice that the headlines of these newspapers, down to the comma, are the same. It's because they all get their news from AFP. None of these so-called prestigious media outlets has sent two or three journalists to the scene to conduct independent investigations. The newsrooms, by the way,

are practically non-existent. They're in a room. They're subscribed to AFP. . . And they slavishly repeat what AFP tells them to think.

Meanwhile, another RN deputy explained his dissatisfaction with public broadcasters in relation to viewpoint diversity:

Public radio and television completely lack objectivity on many topics, particularly on the issue of immigration. For years, they systematically concealed the extent of the problem and staged fake debates [*faux débats*]. [...] It's always the same experts, always the same guests, and they all think the same way.

This rhetoric fosters an image of a media “monolith” that suppresses any critical discourse about issues like immigration, and the actors present themselves as unjustly vilified by a politically correct orthodoxy. This portrayal of the media as ideologically homogenous and repressive functions as a rhetorical justification for the sharing of fringe and partisan alternatives – a key behavior documented in our computational analysis. It also positions far-right actors as defenders of free speech and democratic pluralism. These attacks on the media, in combination with the intensive use of fringe and alternative sources documented in the previous section, can be understood as a form of *illiberal communication* (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024) aiming to attack opponents and justify the transformation of (established media) institutions.

In response to these grievances against mainstream media and political institutions, social media platforms – particularly Twitter/X – as well as hyper-partisan news sources have become important spaces portrayed to be more democratic as they amplify allegedly excluded voices. This view was best captured by a parliamentary office staff member for a far-right Member of the European Parliament (MEP):

The public is much more hostile to immigration than what we could call “institutional France”: traditional media, traditional politicians, professional unions. So, intervening on this subject also gives a democratic boost by telling people they have the right to think this way, and they shouldn't be ashamed of it. Obviously, if every opinion is free in France on the issue of migration, it's also natural that we encourage those who believe there is too much immigration or that its origins are poorly distributed.

Another parliamentary office staff member of a far-right member of the European Parliament echoed this sense as he claimed that “the French already think that way, so they express it on social media . . . Social media doesn't shape people's thoughts; it's because people have certain thoughts that they express them on social media.” Indeed, other far-right alternative news platforms play into this “democratizing” purpose in the ways they represent themselves. For instance, Breizh-info.com and Bvoltaire.com – highly salient sources in our immigration-related posts – position themselves as direct challengers to what they view as a media conspiracy to suppress inconvenient truths.

This evidence demonstrates how right-leaning actors' practice of sharing hyper-partisan sources serves an important purpose: it highlights and redresses alleged acts of censorship by mainstream media, whether in the forms of AFP syndication, “selective silence,” or public shaming. As such, it mobilizes these sources as rhetorical resources to cast its proponents as both victims of censorship, media uniformity and “elitism,” and

championing them as democratic defenders of the genuine French *demos*—a common populist strategy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Using the Agenda-Setting Power of Alternative Sources to Influence Mainstream Media

Yet as these far-right actors characterize mainstream media as deceptive, elitist, and untrustworthy, they also celebrate their own abilities to pressure these outlets into covering the very stories they claim are being ignored – particularly via social media. One MEP who also serves in a senior leadership role for the right-wing nationalist Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament, used the widely discussed “Lola murder case,” the killing of a white French girl by an Algerian woman under deportation orders, as an example of this mechanism:

It was social media that brought this case to light. What was initially set to be categorized as just another miscellaneous incident became a national issue because it gained traction on Twitter. It's only when the public started talking about it that TV channels began covering it, which is exactly how things should work, given the political scandal surrounding this assassination.

Interviewees raised other incidents as further examples of how, in their opinions, mainstream media deliberately ignored stories that were politically sensitive. One RN deputy and spokesperson focused on French coverage of the sexual assaults on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne, Germany, some of which were committed by men of foreign origin: “French media completely covered up what happened in Cologne. It took days of testimony and a significant push from social media to reveal the full extent of the events. Without social media, the public would have never known how serious it was.” Another interviewee who had closely worked with a RN senator who eventually joined Reconquête in 2022 specifically observed how the affordances of social media are central to its power in shaping public agendas on immigration:

Social media is an intermediary. It allows anyone to capture what the mainstream media doesn't want to show. If you witness an attack or see migrants arriving in a place, you can film it, and within hours, that video could reach hundreds of thousands of people if it's shared by the right accounts at the right time.

Here is where platforms like Fdesouche.com which aggregate and transmit regional reports rather than conduct original reporting play important roles in amplifying the reach of these sources. As one interviewee who supported Zemmour in the 2022 presidential election and regularly intervenes in media like Bolloré-owned Europe1 or SudRadio explained, “they [Fdesouche.com] have correspondents all over . . . Any incident gets posted immediately, and it quickly becomes national news because of their large following.”

This evidence demonstrates how source sharing functions as a way of validating alternative sources outside the “elitist” mainstream in ways that advance defensive political goals. At one level, amplifying events and linking them to immigration reinforces white grievances by perpetuating perceptions of threat against an established yet vilified “native” French population. At another level, how these publics learn about such events also matters. Our far-right interviewees consistently cast social media and related hyper-partisan aggregators as corrective forces and vital

public resources. Yet when mainstream sources eventually cover these events, this is claimed as victory which confirms the “real” nature of public sentiment on these issues. This dual strategy is key to defensive publics’ strategic use of sources: while far-right actors sow distrust in mainstream media to sustain their alienated status, they derive legitimacy from their attention by interpreting it as proof of their abilities to raise issues’ importance across media. This is an example of “inter-media agenda-building” occurring between social media platforms like X and traditional mass media like newspapers (Conway-Silva et al., 2018). As Bennett and Kneuer (2024) argue, the circulation of emotionally charged, conflict-driven narratives is not merely about informing audiences. Rather, it is a goal-oriented process aimed at redefining the boundaries of legitimate public discourse and mobilizing support for hierarchical, exclusionary social orders.

Using Statistics and Evidence-Based Sources to Enhance Credibility and Respectability

Right-leaning actors also build their credibility by selectively sharing mainstream sources across the ideological spectrum as well as statistics and conventionally “evidence-based” claims. Drawing on widely-recognized data sources helps to establish an appearance of objectivity and authority even as these actors maintain critiques of the media in which they appear. For example, one interviewee referred to a report from INSEE (the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) on female employment rates to support his claim that women from Middle Eastern and African backgrounds are less active in the workforce than French women: “look at the data. It’s not me saying this, it’s INSEE. But the media won’t talk about it.” Similarly referring to the authority of a “factual basis,” a LR spokesperson explained that “when I discuss immigration, I try to first present a factual basis with clear statistics, then propose policy solutions based on those findings. For example, we propose a constitutional amendment to institute quotas, so immigration is controlled rather than unregulated.” Far-right news aggregators like Fdesouche.com also reshare mainstream media sources from across the ideological spectrum as well as local newspaper, notably when they report statistical evidence²² or on local incidents of crime committed by non-whites (Lukasik, 2018).

That numbers serve strategic purposes is not new (Bandola-Gill et al., 2022; Porter, 2020), especially in politicized domains like immigration (Allen, 2023; Boswell, 2009). Rather, we argue that citing and reusing these sources serves to raise the credibility and respectability of the defensive publics for whom these actors ostensibly speak – a political objective that is even more relevant given these groups’ stances of ostracization and censorship described earlier. For example, by attributing his claim to the nonpartisan INSEE, the LR spokesperson avoids ascribing personal responsibility and instead positions himself as conveying an already-established “fact” that mainstream media nevertheless have ignored for political purposes. This chimes with Ma’s (2021) observation that professional norms, scientific abstraction, and performative journalism practices (what she calls “mitigating rhetorical strategies”) can conceal overt white supremacist ideologies.

Discussion: Building Analyses of Sources into Theories of Defensive Publics

What kinds of source sharing and reposting practices characterize French-language X/ Twitter posts about immigration, and what political reasons might account for these patterns? We addressed these questions by presenting a mixed-methods perspective on over 1 million posts mentioning immigration-related terms on the platform as well as 13 interviews with prolific and highly-visible users from that dataset. By doing so, we make two contributions to communications scholarship. The first is empirical in nature: we find that right- and extreme-right users are more likely than centrist or left users to engage in reposting external sources – and at significantly higher rates. Moreover, these users tend to repost *both* hyper-partisan sources at the extreme right as well as ones across a wider range of the ideological spectrum. Sharing hyper-partisan and alternative sources redresses perceived censorship by mainstream media, while sharing mainstream sources establishes an appearance of objectivity and authority even as these actors maintain critiques of the very same media. This latter objective is enhanced by reposting sources that convey statistical or quantitative evidence as a way of concealing overt white supremacist ideologies. Taken together, our results contribute novel and – in the case of the interviews – rare evidence about which sources are made to be more visible in an issue domain that remains globally consequential, and the likely reasons for their persistence.

The second contribution is theoretical in nature, and the one on which we focus for the remainder of this discussion. We conceive of reposting as a rhetorical resource available to political actors which they use to achieve explicitly political goals. Focusing on right- and extreme-right users, particularly those with greater visibility and reach, we argue that their choices to repost some sources over others are strategically connected to advancing the aims of “defensive publics” (Jackson & Kreiss, 2023) that exist in the domain of immigration politics. This resource is a form of symbolic capital that matters for how members of defensive publics relate both to each other as well as other publics. In this way, reposting is best thought of not just as a means of mere transmission and amplification, but also as a vector for political performances that carries meaning in its own right.

This perspective adds a new dimension to the emerging theorization of far-right actors’ media behaviors as contributing to defensive objectives that seek to preserve ordering of systems of inequality – be they social, economic, political, ethnoracialized, or cultural. Analyzing the content of media sources is obviously an essential step for understanding these objectives. However, as we have argued and demonstrated through our case study, having a clearer sense of the *extent* to which different types of sources are present in media discussions about issues that animate defensive publics is another key prerequisite for making claims about how these groups achieve their aims. This is important for two reasons. First, given the affordances of social media platforms that enable reposting and sharing and enable users to add commentary surrounding the item (as in quote tweeting), tracing *who* engages in these activities and to *which* sources’ benefit potentially reveals important variation. Indeed, our quantitative results clearly show that, at least for the domain of immigration, this practice displays stark asymmetries between right- and left-leaning users that demand explanation.

Second, decisions as to which sources users will select to share with their followers – and therefore explicitly raise the visibility of that piece of content among their audiences – comprise evaluations about both the content of the message as well as the messenger

themselves. This is most evident in our qualitative material which reveals how claims of censorship and victimization by prolific hard-right users likely motivate how defensive publics strategically engage with a range of sources. This is consistent with other research showing how far-right actors invoke grievances of suppression by progressive movements to fortify and further embed conceptions of white marginalization (Ma, 2021). Therefore, the political impact of reposting and sharing sources on social media does not likely derive solely from their content, although we and our interviewees clearly acknowledge how some aspects of content such as its numerical qualities do matter by lending authority to arguments and concealing overt white supremacist ideologies. Rather, in the case of right-wing users, it also comes from the extent to which these sources are perceived to signal and advance a specific set of populist political goals related to the issue domains in which they exist.

Furthermore, when set against broader trends toward illiberalism in public spheres, our argument presents wider implications beyond France and immigration to potentially explain how source selection on a range of issues plays a crucial role in defining, sustaining, and extending defensive publics' political usefulness. This is because defensive actors can serve illiberal communicative purposes by promoting fringe and conspiratorial sources while simultaneously undermining public trust in mainstream journalistic and governmental institutions (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). Moreover, paying closer attention to contextual features surrounding defensive publics helps to set scope conditions around the use of this concept – a practice for which Jackson and Kreiss (2023) advocate – as well as highlight its relevance in particular settings. Consequently, it opens new avenues for examining the roots and manifestations of these publics across country cases, issue domains, and platforms in ways that are sensitive toward their explicit and implicit aims.

Notes

1. As Harrison (2023) notes, there is no obvious cognate for nativism in French. The closest expression in usage is the adjective *identitaire*, based on the substantive *identité* (identity), as in *la droite identitaire*.
2. We view “white supremacy” along the lines articulated by critical race theorists (e.g., Gillborn 2006) and scholars examining structural racism (e.g., Brown, Homan, and Ray 2025). White supremacy refers both to explicit claims that white people are superior to other groups, and to rhetoric, policies, and practices that sustain the dominance of white people and the oppression of people of color. In the French context, where “race” is officially a taboo category (Brun and Simon 2022; Escafré-Dublet, Guiraudon, and Talpin 2023), the well-established concepts of *racisme sans race* (racism without race) or *racisme culturel* (cultural racism) account for the arbitrary categorization of human beings based on traits that are not inherently biological but are presented as such (Balibar and Wallerstein 2018). For example, an individual’s identity may be reduced to their religion, from which a set of supposedly innate behaviors is then inferred.
3. Referring to a heterogeneous and ideologically diverse collection of groups, from institutional far-right parties to Catholic traditionalists, royalists, and other reactionary movements (Albertini and Doucet 2016).
4. *Reconquête !* (“Re-conquest!”) is a far-right party launched by former essayist Éric Zemmour in 2021. It has traditionally been described as “populist radical right” due to its nativist, authoritarian, and anti-elitist stances (Mayer 2022). More radical than the RN, it has been described as the “le véritable parti des identitaires” (“the true party of the Identitarians”), and centers on civilizational nationalism and the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement”

(Ivaldi 2023). Zemmour openly embraced ideological radicalism, advocating for “remigration” and frequently drawing from the rhetoric of cultural war (Alduy 2024). Reconquête attracted high-profile figures from the far-right milieu, including Jérémie Piano (formerly of Génération Identitaire and twice convicted for inciting racial hatred), Damien Lefèvre (aka Rieu), and Marine Le Pen’s niece Marion Maréchal, known for her civilizational, catholic traditional, and great-replacement positions (Sawyer 2024). Reconquête’s platform was more economically liberal than the RN’s, calling for welfare cuts (targeting non-European beneficiaries), tax relief for overtime, and harsher disciplinary policies in schools (Sawyer 2024). Support for Reconquête ! primarily appeared in the bourgeois western suburbs of Paris, the south-east coastal regions of France, and in Corsica (ibid.). Reconquête received 7.07% in the 2022 presidential race, failing to reach the second round of the legislative elections that year, and further declining to just 0.75% in the 2024 legislative election. The party secured 5 seats in the 2024 European Parliament with 5.47% of the vote under Marion Maréchal’s leadership.

5. The Rassemblement National (RN), formerly known as the Front National (FN), is France’s long-standing far-right party founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972 and led by his daughter Marine Le Pen since 2011. It advocates nationalist, anti-immigration, and Eurosceptic positions and is described as right-wing populist and nationalist (Ivaldi 2016). While in recent years, under Marine Le Pen’s leadership, the party has sought to “de-demonize” its image, her 2022 presidential campaign maintained core themes of national preference, anti-immigration, and Euroscepticism, including promises of a constitutional referendum and a tightening of citizenship laws (Ivaldi 2023). Her rhetoric included invoking the idea of “ensauvagement” in French cities—a claim of rising violence and social disorder in urban areas with high shares of foreign-origin populations (Ivaldi 2023). The RN multiplied its seats in parliament from 7 to 89 in 2022, won the popular vote in the 2024 European elections with 31.4% of the votes, and reached 37.06% in the second round of the snap French legislative election in July 2024.
6. The term was first used during the Algerian War to distinguish white French soldiers from French Muslims of Algerian descent, and it has been historically invoked to delineate racially defined Frenchness. Jean-Marie Le Pen, popularized this expression in the 1970s to underscore the racialized nature of Frenchness-positioning.
7. This appears to have been effective: only 26 non-French tweets (23 of them in English) were erroneously captured, representing 0.002% of the 1.16 million tweets.
8. While the data collection periods differ, our analysis relies on relative differences in domain prevalence and engagement across ideological leanings, rather than on absolute tweet volumes or trends over time. This focus reduces sensitivity to temporal variation.
9. Details of the collection process can be found in section 1B in the Supplementary Materials.
10. To address potential contextual variability, we conducted a supplementary analysis on immigration-related tweets from the 2022 baseline dataset using the same keywords as for the 2020–21 immigration related data. The results confirm that core patterns – such as the predominance of right-leaning activity, disproportionate amplification of hyperpartisan sources (notably fdesouche.com), and the far right’s cross-ideological linking behavior – remain consistent across both datasets and time periods. See Supplementary Materials, section 2B and Figures 3–5.
11. This share aligns with other empirical research showing how many Twitter users do not follow any political account – for example, around 40% of US Twitter accounts, with only a minority (23%) following more than three such accounts (Wojcieszak et al. 2022). Moreover, since our focus on French-language tweets captures users who potentially engage with news in any Francophone country (e.g., Canada, several countries in North and West Africa), it is reasonable to expect that the share of users following French politicians is somewhat lower.
12. As the CHES scale is conceived for parties, individual users can have more extreme positions outside the 0–10 range.

13. Damoclès is a site that defines itself as a “mobilization media” working to “restore honor to France and pride to the French,” and distributes identity-based content (ISD France 2022). It is founded by Damien Rieu, key digital strategist for Reconquête.
14. Radio Courtoisie is a long-established radio station known for promoting traditionalist and nationalist views (Dely 1997; Piquard and Faye 2016).
15. Génération Identitaire was officially dissolved by the French government in 2021 due to its incitement to discrimination, hatred, and violence (Ministère de l’Intérieur 2021).
16. For example, Europe 1. 2024. « Wokisme : «Sciences Po Paris est devenu une ZAD islamo-gauchiste», estime Éric Zemmour ». <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/sciences-po-paris-est-devenu-une-zad-islamo-gauchiste-estime-eric-zemmour-4236420> (11.08.2025).
17. For example, in the URL <https://www.google.fr/amp/s/www.leparisien.fr/amp/faits-divers/evacuations-de-migrants-recours-en-justice-de-deux-journalistes-empeches-de-travailler-30-12-2020-8416718.php>, the domain is “leparisien.fr.” Meanwhile, the URL “www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/libye-au-moins-15-migrants-morts-dans-un-nauffrage-oim-20201021” has the corresponding domain “lefigaro.fr.”
18. Here, we acknowledge how the boundary between professional and “alternative” journalism has become increasingly blurry (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019).
19. These include platforms such as the petition site change.org, social media sites like facebook.com and instagram.com, the online encyclopedia fr.wikipedia.org, the streaming platform twitch.tv, and the Canadian government website canada.ca. We note that Russian government-affiliated news sites francais.rt.com, fr.sputniknews.com, and the now-defunct site europe-israel.org have also been categorized as “Other.” This follows the classification approach by Stier et al. (2020), who suggest that domains belonging to governments, NGOs, political parties, politicians, fact-checking organizations, or satire sites be grouped under “other political actors.” Categorizing *francais.rt.com* and *fr.sputniknews.com* as *Hyperpartisan News* would have further reinforced the findings of this article, as these domains are predominantly shared by far-right and right-wing users, as shown in Figure 4.
20. We use red for users classified as being left-leaning and blue for right-leaning. Please note that in the US, this color scheme is usually reversed (red for right and blue for left).
21. The first author, as a multilingual French speaker, translated the interviews into English which we present in this paper. We reproduce key phrases or idiomatic wordings in their original French for transparency.
22. These include, for example, selective data on the disproportionate levels of foreign-born people among certain subsets of criminal offenders (e.g., Le Petit 2020).

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.29869514.v1>.

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data are openly accessible at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.29869514.v1>.

Ethical Approval

The processing of political attributes data was declared on 19 March 2020 and 15 July 2021 at the registry of data processing at the Fondation Nationale de Sciences Politiques (Sciences Po) in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR) and X policy. For further details and the respective legal notice, please visit the web page of project EPO: medialab.sciencespo.fr/en/activities/epo/. The methodologies used in this study have been reviewed by Sciences Po's Research Ethics Committee in its decisions numbered 2023–038 on October 18, 2023, and 2025–067 on March 20, 2025.

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