



CrossCheck

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The Impact of CrossCheck on Journalists & the Audience

Learning the lessons from a
collaborative journalism project
fighting disinformation online during
the French Presidential Election.

● 2017



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ABOUT

First Draft



First Draft is dedicated **to improving skills and standards about the reporting and sharing of information online.** It provides practical, ethical guidance on how to find, verify and publish content sourced from the social web.

First Draft formed as a nonprofit coalition of nine Founding Partners in June 2015 to raise awareness and address challenges relating to trust and truth in the digital age. In September 2016, it expanded by creating a Partner Network that now has over 100 organizations, including global newsrooms, technology companies, human rights organizations, and universities. **The network informs and scales the work of First Draft, and helps champion the importance of collaboration.**

ABOUT

The authors

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FOREWORD



By Claire Wardle,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

CrossCheck was the brainchild of Jenni Sargent, who was Managing Director of *First Draft* in January 2017. *First Draft* had partnered with ProPublica for their Electionland project, monitoring social reports of voting problems during the US presidential election.

It was an ambitious project involving over 600 journalism students and over 400 reporters located across the United States, and a newsroom hub in New York City with an additional 150 journalists, all collaborating virtually on election day over the story of people's voting experiences.

Inspired by the project, and full of the lessons learned, when French journalists suggested they would be interested in working **with First Draft on a French election project**, Jenni Sargent arranged a meeting with the help of David Dieudonné from Google News Lab in Paris on January 6. In the six weeks between that first meeting with over 40 journalists, to the launch of the project on February 27, the project was conceived, mapped out, and signed off. Workflows were designed and technologies chosen, a 3 day bootcamp was organized, and **a brand new website was built.**

The project was always considered an experiment.

No-one knew if it would work and it could quite easily have failed, either through newsrooms not being able to support additional work, or through lack of time to plan out the project sufficiently, or because it would be impossible to create **a new 'brand' in such a short space of time**, or because an early mistake would ruin the project's reputation forever.

The fact that the project worked, that the journalists are so proud of what was achieved and want to continue, is simply unbelievable. There are so many depressing stories about the news industry today, that being part of a good news story is wonderful. For First Draft, a nonprofit that works on testing assumptions in the field, **CrossCheck was the perfect example of how much we can learn when we try new things.** We commissioned this research because we wanted to know what worked and what didn't, and to learn what should be changed for future collaborations.

Thank you to everyone who made CrossCheck such a success, from project manager Jenni Sargent, to project co-ordinator Marie Bohner, to editors Sam Dubberley and Karolina Johanssen, to their tireless team of 10 student editors, to AFP who acted as the overall editorial newsroom, to all the participating newsrooms and technology companies, to our Dev team for staying up all night, and to Google News Lab and Facebook, who were willing **to work together on this project and provided much needed resources.**

1

Executive Summary

CrossCheck was a collaborative journalism project designed to fight disinformation in the ten weeks leading up to the 2017 French presidential election.

This report seeks to analyse the impact of the project on the journalists that participated in the project and the audience that consumed the output. CrossCheck was designed to test whether a collaboration at this scale might improve journalistic practices for the monitoring and debunking of online disinformation, as well as improve levels of trust between audiences and the news industry.

From February 27 until May 5, 2017, more than one hundred journalists in thirty-three newsrooms monitored claims and rumours, as well as fabricated images and videos, circulating on the social web. When misleading or manipulated information became widely shared, a debunk was published on the CrossCheck website, and, over the course of the project, 67 such articles were published. Each article was accompanied by an overall categorisation of the claim or piece of content (e.g. ‘True’, ‘False’, ‘Insufficient Evidence’, etc.) and by a visual icon which was designed to explain the type of disinformation that had been verified (e.g. ‘Misleading’, ‘Fabricated’, etc.). Each was also labeled with the logos of the newsrooms that had participated in the verification process underpinning that particular debunk.

The newsrooms partners also published CrossCheck stories on their sites, meaning that the reach of each debunk was considerably higher than it would have been if only published on the CrossCheck site.

Organized by First Draft, funded by *Google News Lab*, and supported by *Facebook* through promotional advertising on their platform, **CrossCheck was a unique example of multidimensional collaboration** — first and foremost between journalists from different newsrooms, then between platforms, and finally with the public, who were invited to ask questions on the CrossCheck website.

This project was partly created with several research questions in mind, and this report was commissioned to investigate what we learned from the project.

- 1** Did the collaborative journalistic processes embedded into the CrossCheck workflow improve the quality of verification?
- 2** Did working on an active debunking initiative improve journalists’ verification skills to a greater degree than classroom training?
- 3** Would a public alliance of recognized media outlets increase readers’ trust in their output?
- 4** Did publishing a step-by-step demonstration of the techniques used by journalists to debunk a claim or piece of content improve audiences’ media and critical literacy skills?

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on three research studies with two sets of participants:

- 1** Semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors that participated in CrossCheck.
- 2** A survey and follow-up interviews with members of the public who engaged with the project.
- 3** A discourse analysis of related tweets, Facebook posts, news articles and questions submitted by the audience

A total of 16 in-depth interviews, **based on an ad hoc topic guide**, were conducted with journalists and editors in June 2017—a few weeks after the project ended¹. The interviews were recorded and analysed thematically.

In total, 29 responses were received. In addition, **7 semistructured interviews were conducted with members of the public.** Though the sample is relatively small, it is representative of those that were particularly interested in the project and the demographic characteristics of those who responded shows that CrossCheck managed to reach a surprisingly wide audience that was diverse in terms of age, area of residence, education and political orientation, although they were more aware of fact-checking than the average French citizen. Those who were only occasionally in contact with the CrossCheck project are not included in the sample. This is an important limitation when it comes to the results of the study.

Finally, a discourse analysis based on the Reinert lexicometric method was used upon four different samples: comments on CrossCheck’s Facebook page, tweets containing the name of the project, questions that were submitted by members of the public, and news articles referring to CrossCheck.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the project was considered a success by those who participated in the project. They are very proud of the project, and would like to try to continue the collaboration, testing how it might work outside an election campaign.

Members of the audience that responded to the survey were also positive (*although there are limitations to the sample of people who responded to the survey*), with some commenting that they were sad to see the project end.

There is evidence that a core segment of the audience visited the website on a daily basis, and read entire stories; admitted to learning new skills from the processes outlined in the debunks, and shared these with their friends and family who were sharing disinformation.

IMPACT ON NEWSROOMS AND JOURNALISTS

1 Even though some of the partners in this project (*for example Le Monde’s Decodeurs team, and the fact-checking unit at Libération*) already had strong reputations in fact-checking and debunking, participants agreed that there should not be competition in this type of work, and in fact **it should be considered a public service.**

2 Journalists who took part in the project, even those who had worked in fact-checking and verification previously, reported learning new skills. While the kick-off bootcamp provided a strong foundation, the daily use of new tools and techniques (*for example NewsWhip and CrowdTangle*) and the frequent conversations on Slack **about the process of fact-checking claims and verifying images and videos** were noted as extremely powerful as ways of embedding new journalistic techniques, outside the training room.

3 The process of working transparently, and having to **‘show your work’** to newsrooms that would otherwise be seen as competitors resulted in higher quality journalism, with participants explaining that they were able to hold each other to account. Participants were extremely proud that no corrections had to be issued, and while some struggled that the project was often slow to publish, there was a shared acknowledgement that the cross-checking process, **while slower than traditional reporting, resulted in high quality journalism.**

4 The process of collective editorial decision-making allowed otherwise competitive newsrooms to make joint decisions about what to report and what to strategically ignore. Participants noted the power of these cross news-room conversations, particularly at a time when newsrooms themselves are being used **by agents of disinformation to amplify rumours and fabricated content**, relying on them to give additional oxygen and to move them out of niche online communities to wider audiences.

5 Overall, the public’s contributions were useful and diverse, which provides an important (*but hopefully an unnecessary*) reminder of including the audience in journalism collaborations.

IMPACT ON AUDIENCES

1 Having multiple newsrooms collaborate on stories meant that respondents had increased levels of trust in the reporting. **Respondents felt that CrossCheck was more independent, impartial and credible** because it included so many outlets.

2 Respondents noted that the technique of explaining how a rumour or piece of content was fact-checked or verified increased trust in the article, but also **helped them learn how they could do this work themselves.**

3 As well as learning critical reading skills, there is evidence that people also learned to be specifically wary of content with particularly emotional language or visuals.

4 Respondents explained how they had shared CrossCheck stories and information with friends and families, both online and off, who were sharing disinformation around the election, and some even claimed to have changed people’s minds around their voting choices.

5 The fact that the project included local outlets, appears to have been one of the reasons **why the project reached people across the political spectrum.**

The perceived impartiality of the project was also one of the reasons that it appealed to a wide spectrum of people.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

1 Undertaking additional research on effective debunks using images and videos. As the project evolved, changes took place to the original processes. For example, it became clear that including screenshots as **the ‘hero’ image on the posts**, (*which then got automatically dragged into social media posts*) meant that CrossCheck was perpetuating the original piece of fabricated content. AFP therefore designed a graphic template which allowed editors to use these alongside any image that referenced the fabricated content (*see Figure 3 for an example of these cards*). The impact of this needs to be researched in greater detail. In addition, towards the end of the project, CrossCheck editors started making short explainer videos for Facebook.

The metrics immediately showed that they were being shared widely* but more research needs to be undertaken about the most effective ways **of creating video based debunks and fact-checks.**

2 Understanding the ‘tipping point’
Reporting on disinformation requires different considerations, and the threat of giving oxygen to rumours, means that newsrooms will need to give additional thought to when and how to report on these types of stories. During CrossCheck, decisions were taken collectively. More analysis needs to be undertaken about where this tipping point sits, and what metrics journalists should be looking at before they decide whether and how to publish a story on a particularly rumour or piece of fabricated content.

3 Understanding the importance of cultural and time-bound contexts for collaborative projects. It is very likely that CrossCheck would never have got off the ground if First Draft had had a longer lead time (*which would have given senior editors more time to say ‘no’*) or if there hadn’t just been the active conversations about disinformation and its impact on the US presidential election.

While the results of this research have been very positive, **attempts to run similar projects around the UK and German elections have been less successful at getting newsrooms to collaborate.** It’s important we understand why CrossCheck worked in the French context.

1 _ See Appendix 3 for the Topic Guide of the interviews.

2 _ While the limitations of Facebook video view numbers are well known, one video did receive over 800,000 views.

2

Introduction

From the very beginning, **CrossCheck was a collaborative effort**. At a meeting **facilitated by First Draft** on January 6, 2017, representatives from a number of newsrooms spent the morning discussing ways that they could collaborate to prevent the spread of mis- and dis-information during the upcoming French election. Some of the ideas discussed at that meeting evolved into CrossCheck, **the most ambitious real-time collaborative journalism project to date**. The project plan, processes and logistics were finalised by First Draft and designed to test several research questions:

- 1** Did the collaborative journalistic processes embedded into the CrossCheck workflow improve the quality of verification?
- 2** Did working on **an active debunking initiative** improve journalists' verification skills to a greater degree than classroom training?
- 3** Would a public alliance of **recognized media outlets** increase readers' trust in their output?
- 4** Did publishing a step-by-step demonstration of the techniques used by journalists **to debunk a claim or piece of content** improve audiences' media and critical literacy skills?

The present research was commissioned **to examine the impact of CrossCheck on journalists** involved in the project and audience members who consumed content from CrossCheck.

Overall, we found that journalists involved in the project, and audience members who consumed CrossCheck content, **were very positive about the initiative, and wanted it to continue**. It improved verification skills across French newsrooms, and those involved in the project felt that the process of 'cross-checking' each other's work improved the quality of their journalism.

While the audience sample was not representative, our research does suggest that **audiences were more trusting of CrossCheck's content because multiple newsrooms had worked together on it**. People also suggested that they were more trusting of the content because they could see the processes used by the journalists to verify content.

In addition to answering the four questions stated above, the present research discovered that CrossCheck provided an opportunity for journalists to explore their identity by reconciling their work habits with those of their peers, whom they would normally see as competitors. These exceptional circumstances allowed for an exploration of what sets journalism apart as a profession, and how collaboration can help journalists **develop better practices and repair trust with their audience**.

The point of this research is not to demonstrate that collaboration can solve the crisis of the media, nor prove that it is the only solution to disinformation.

Our suggestion is rather that disinformation, and **the response of collaborative fact-checking**, can spur journalists to question and strengthen their identity, their skills and their mission of public service.

1 / WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT ONLINE DISINFORMATION ?

The term '**fake news**' colloquially refers to content that uses misleading or false information and/or mislabeled or manipulated images and videos. In this report, **we avoid using this term for a number of reasons**.

First of all, it is inadequate to describe **the complexities of mis- and dis-information**. It's a vague and ambiguous term is used to refer to many, very different contexts and practices (*including satire*³), and thus hinders the establishment of appropriate policy responses⁴.

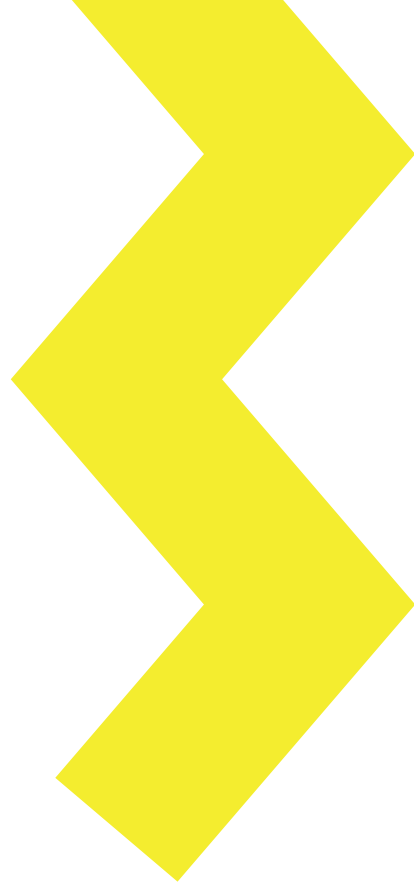
Additionally, the term has been co-opted by some politicians to discredit the free press⁵, and by the media establishment to discredit citizen journalists and alternative news sites⁶.

In this report, we will instead use **the term disinformation**, as defined in the typology proposed by **Claire Wardle** and **Hossein Derakhshan**⁷, which derives from their Information Disorder theoretical framework.

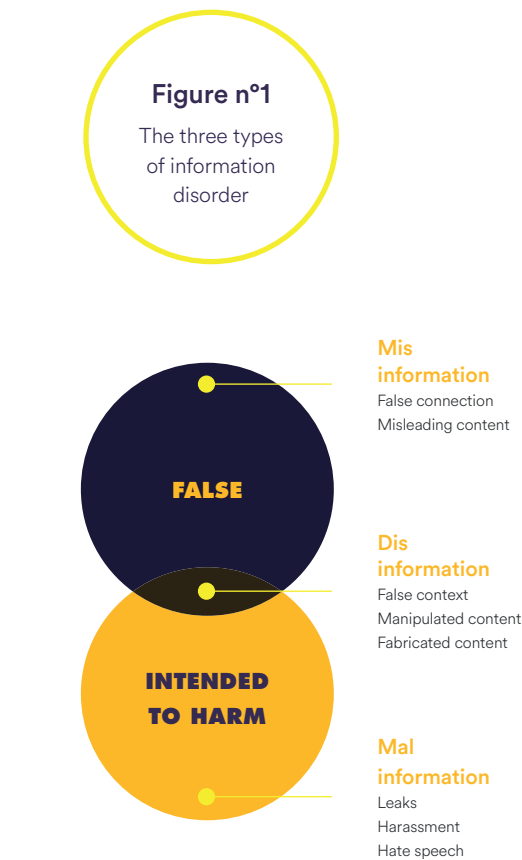
The three types of Information Disorder they identify are:

- 1 Disinformation:** Information that is false and deliberately produced to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.
- 2 Misinformation:** Information that is false, but not produced with the intention of causing harm.
- 3 Malinformation:** accurate information used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization, or country.

As shown in the figure below, these different kinds of disorders all refer to **the concepts of falseness and harm**.



INFORMATION DISORDER



(source: Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan, "Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking", Council of Europe, 2017)

"Disinformation has a negative effect on individual and collective memory¹², and on how the public perceives politicians, even when it is understood as satirical and balanced with the consumption of hard news¹³."

The explosion of online disinformation can be viewed as a symptom of the general crisis of media – a "**canary in the digital coal mine**"⁸ – that creates opportunities for journalism to renew itself. The global landscape of media and their business models have been profoundly affected by digitization. Newsrooms have been forced to adapt to new advertising models and distribution channels that depend on audience maximization, and thus economically value the popularity of false news and rumours⁹.

Indeed, distribution platforms such as Google and Facebook capture a significant portion of online revenue, and set online publishing standards that influence journalistic practices and even favour the spread of disinformation¹⁰.

However, this crisis is also political – and like the issue of disinformation – it is not new.

The roots of the disinformation phenomena can be located in the mainstream media's inability to address issues of partisanship, bias, ethical standards and ownership concentration, which has led to a growing distrust of journalism as a whole¹¹.

Disinformation has a negative effect on individual and collective memory¹², and on how the public perceives politicians, even when it is understood as satirical and balanced with the consumption of hard news¹³. **The psychological mechanisms at play when an audience consumes disinformation have been researched extensively**.

They include confirmation bias¹⁴, belief perseverance¹⁵ and selective exposure¹⁶. But the ultimate importance of these mechanisms is mitigated by other findings showing the short duration of political communication's impact¹⁷, and the fact that social media is the dominant source of news **for only 14% of Americans**¹⁸.

Nonetheless, the risk of disinformation causing long-term damage to the fabric of democratic societies – by contaminating the public sphere with confusion – is significant enough to demand strategies that can counter these phenomena. CrossCheck, a project organized during the French presidential campaign, is one such strategy that we will examine in this report¹⁹.

- ³ _ Baym, G. (2010). Real News/Fake News : Beyond the news/entertainment divide. In Allan, S. (Ed.) The Routledge companion to news and journalism (pp. 374-383). Abingdon: Routledge.
- ⁴ _ Article 19 (2016, November 25). Social media and fake news from a free speech perspective.
- ⁵ _ Tambini, D. (2017). Who benefits from using the term 'fake news'? LSE Media Policy Project blog.
- ⁶ _ Idem.
- ⁷ _ Wardle, C., Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. Council of Europe. For convenience we use the term disinformation in this report to refer to both disinformation and misinformation as defined by Wardle and Derakhshan.
- ⁸ _ Beckett, C. (2017). 'Fake news': The best thing that's happened to journalism. Polis, March 2017.
- ⁹ _ Tambini, D. & Goodman, E. (2017). Fake news: Public policy responses. The London School of Economics and Political Science.
- ¹⁰ _ Smyrniotis, N. (2015). 'Google and the Algorithmic Infomediation of News', Media Fields Journal, no 10.
- ¹¹ _ See Nip, J. Y. M. (2008). The last days of civic journalism. Journalism Practice (2) 179-196 and Lilleker, D. (2017). Evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee 'Fake news' inquiry presented by the Faculty for Media & Communication, Bournemouth University.
- ¹² _ Spinney, L. (2017). How Facebook, fake news and friends are warping your memory. Nature, 543(7644), 168-170.
- ¹³ _ Balmas, M. (2014). When fake news becomes real. Communication Research, 41(3), 430-454.
- ¹⁴ _ See Metzger, M. J., Flanagin, A. J., Medders, R. B. (2010). Social and Heuristic Approaches to Credibility Evaluation Online. Journal of Communication, 60(3), 413-439, Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. American Journal of Political Science, 50(3), 755-769 and Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2), 211-236.
- ¹⁵ _ Nyhan, B. & Reifler, J.A. (2012). Misinformation and fact-checking: Research findings from social science. New America Foundation.
- ¹⁶ _ Messing, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2014). Selective exposure in the age of social media: Endorsements trump partisan source affiliation when selecting news online. Communication Research, 41(8), 1042-1063.
- ¹⁷ _ Hill, S., Lo, J., Vavreck, L., & Zaller, J. (2013). How quickly we forget: The duration of persuasion effects from mass communication. Political Communication, 30(4), 521-547.
- ¹⁸ _ Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2), 211-236.
- ¹⁹ _ The authors would like to thank Claire Wardle, Nic Dias, Marie Bohner and Aimee Rinehart for their precious contribution to this report.

2/ THE PROBLEM OF DISINFORMATION IN THE FRENCH CONTEXT

The issue of online disinformation has become salient since the US's presidential election and the UK's EU referendum, both of which occurred in 2016.

Disinformation may not be a recent phenomenon, but its prevalence and impact on audiences have been amplified by rising mistrust in traditional journalism and, simultaneously, rising social media use. Indeed, scholars have linked decreasing trust levels in legacy media and the rise of social media²⁰, which has created a new landscape of news sources that can be difficult to navigate, even for professional journalists²¹. **France has been particularly affected by this phenomenon**: trust in the French media is among the lowest in Europe, with a 30% approval rate²² and **a population majority of that thinks journalists are influenced by economic and political forces**²³.

At the same time, social media use, particularly for news consumption, is constantly rising: Facebook is the second most popular website in France behind Google, with more than eight million unique daily visitors. In addition, according to different studies, between 15 and 20% of the French consider social networking sites to be an important source of news²⁴.

In a context of recurring terrorist attacks and longstanding socioeconomic issues (e.g., *high unemployment, slow economic growth, nepotism, tensions within working-class and multiethnic suburbs*), France has not been spared from the spread of conspiracy theories and increasingly disinhibited Islamophobic and anti-immigrant discourses. A vast network of loosely-connected, far-right online groups and websites – more or less related to Front National and known as the *‘fachosphère’*– has recently been especially successful at flooding the French internet with **a diversity of misleading information and xenophobic propaganda**²⁵.

These groups have been strengthened by the extreme mistrust of the French towards the political system. In fact, **only a small minority of the French population trusts political parties**, and the approval rate of former President François Hollande reached the historical low toward the end of his presidency in 2017.

Considering this **particularly unsettled context**, which can provide a fertile ground for disinformation – and given the precedents of disinformation campaigns in the US and UK – the 2017 campaign represented a trial for **French mainstream media's ability to handle the potential impact of a massive disinformation campaign on the election outcome**.

"Only a small minority of the French population trusts political parties, and the approval rate of former President François Hollande reached the historical low toward the end of his presidency in 2017."

²⁰ _ See Phillips, A. (2010). Transparency and the new ethics of journalism. *Journalism Practice*, 4(3), 373-382. O'Neill, O. (2002). A question of trust (*Reith lectures* ; 2002). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Donsbach, W. (2010). Journalists and their professional identities. In Allan, S. (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism* (pp. 38-49). London: Routledge and Couldry, N. (2013). Living well with and through media. In Couldry, N., Pinchevski, A., & Madianou, M. (Eds.), *Ethics of media* (pp. 39-56). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

²¹ _ Madden, M., Lenhart A., and Fontaine, C. (2017). *How Youth Navigate the News Landscape*. Data & Society Research Institute.

²² _ Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Levy, D., & Nielsen, R. (2016). *The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*.

²³ _ Ipsos, *La confiance des Français à l'égard de la parole publique*, 2015. Available at : <https://fr.slideshare.net/IpsosFrance/la-confiance-des-franais-lgard-de-la-parolepublique>

²⁴ _ See for example Médiamétrie, *étude Actu* 24/7, 2016.

²⁵ _ Astier, H. (2017, 5 April). French election: Is online far right a threat to democracy? BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39475635>



3

The CrossCheck project

3 / THE CROSSCHECK PROJECT

CrossCheck was launched in late February 2017, and lasted until the end of the French presidential campaign in May 2017. It was conceived as a joint effort **to combat online disinformation and foster a well-informed democratic debate throughout the pre-electoral period.**

The project aimed to debunk and verify suspicious information through a collaboration between more than 100 journalists in 33 regional and national newsrooms in France and the UK, and 10 journalism students who served as project editors. Every day, for two and a half months, **CrossCheck's participants reviewed hundreds of articles and social media posts related to the presidential campaign**, and published a total of sixty-seven debunking reports in both English and French²⁶.

Figure n°2

This is the original slide used to explain the project to the participants.



26_ <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/france-en/>

Figure n°3

This is a screenshot of the top half of a story on the CrossCheck website.

Each article published on the CrossCheck website included logos from the newsrooms that participated and confirmed its investigative work (See Appendices for additional examples).

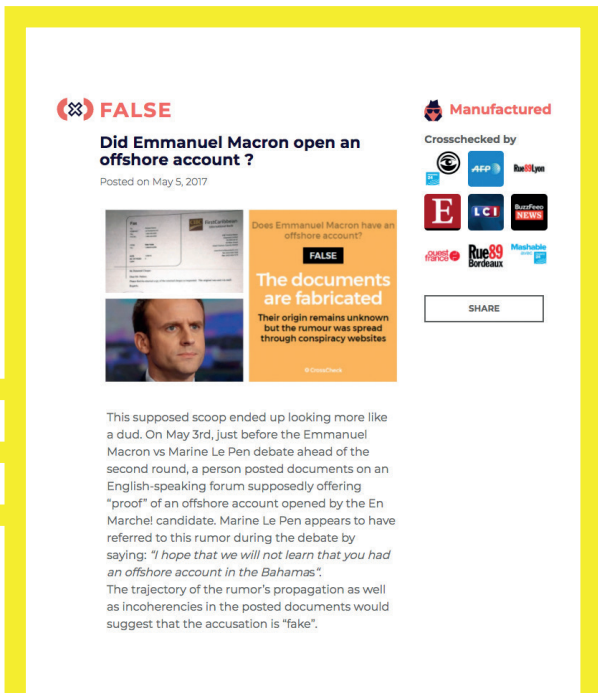
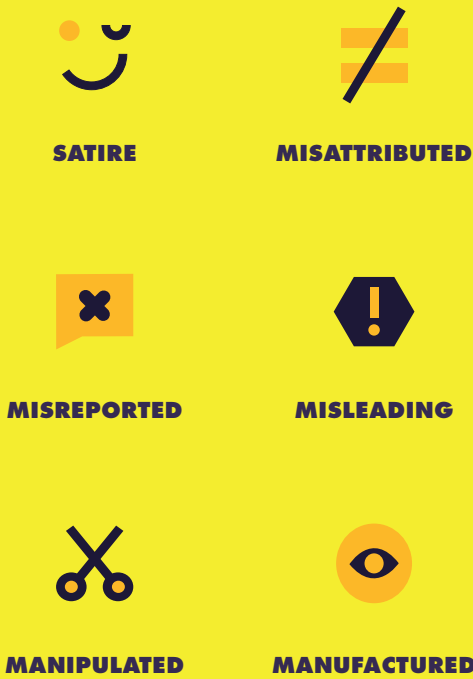


Figure n°4

These were the visual icons that were added to the stories.

All articles were marked according to the following typology:

True, False, Caution, Insufficient Evidence and Attention.
If a story was marked as False, an additional determination was also made – manipulated, fabricated, misattributed, misleading, misreported or satire – to help readers understand the nuances of the mis- and dis-information.



CrossCheck was based on several assumptions:

- 1 Collaborative journalism helps **build capacity around verification**, which benefits all newsrooms.
- 2 Including multiple logos of well-known media next to each published article will **boost its credibility** with readers.
- 3 Taking readers step-by-step through an analysis of where and how an online claim was right or wrong improves news literacy. **CrossCheck was organized by First Draft, a nonprofit, and funded by Google News Lab.** Google News Lab's input was fundamental, as it allowed for the creation of CrossCheck's website, the training of participants and the hiring of additional staff.
Facebook also provided funds to support ads for CrossCheck on its platform, thus increasing **the project's visibility beyond journalistic circles.** As such, this collaboration was also unique in that both **Facebook and Google set aside their rivalry to contribute to a common collaborative journalistic project** in response to critiques about their role in the growing problem of disinformation²⁷.

CrossCheck's audience was also invited to signal disinformation by asking questions on the project's website, which was enabled by a Hearken²⁸ plug-in.
As a result, CrossCheck received more than **600 questions from the public.** Furthermore, the project was very active on social media. Its Twitter page attracted more than **30,000 profile visits**, its Facebook page was liked by more than **180,000 followers**, and its short explanatory videos gathered more than 1.2 million views during the project's two and half months (See the Appendix for more detailed web & social media metrics).

PARTICIPANTS

CrossCheck united a range of different actors, including top universities such as CFJ (*Centre de Formation des Journalistes*), Sciences Po, and the London School of Economics; and technical partners such as CrowdTangle, Hearken, NewsWhip, Check, and SAM. These actors were joined by a **diversity of media organizations**, all listed in the graphic below.

Figure n°5

CrossCheck partners



Technology Partners:



TRAINING

Before the project launched, all participants were invited to a three-day boot camp in Normandie, France.
At this boot camp, journalists and students attended a variety of workshops and were given the chance to learn how verification tools could be used.
While some tools were presented by their official representatives (e.g., CrowdTangle, NewsWhip and Check), **participants also learned about geo-location, reverse image search, and other verification tasks** from presentations by fellow news professionals.

²⁷ _ See for example Tufekci, Zeynep, "Zuckerberg's Preposterous Defense of Facebook", The New York Times, September 29, 2017.

²⁸ _ Hearken is a tool which makes it easier for newsrooms to ask questions of their audience, and to integrate those questions into their editorial output.

Figure n°6

Photograph taken
the CrossCheck
bootcamp



The goal of this training was primarily to level-up all participants and explain in detail how CrossCheck would work, but also to ensure participants were successfully acquainted, as they would be working together online during the project. During the training, participants were also introduced to **CrossCheck's methodology and workflow**. While some elements were necessarily adapted during the project as different cases of disinformation emerged (as we describe later in this report) participants were trained in the workflow outlined below.

CONTENT SELECTION POLICY

In general, participants had to follow a selection policy in determining which stories would be debunked by CrossCheck. An overarching goal of CrossCheck was to demonstrate efforts towards transparency and a commitment to balanced, fair and objective reporting. This translated into three important considerations. First, journalists had **to prioritize stories specifically about the presidential campaign**. Second, journalists had **to focus on original content** that had not been previously investigated. Third, journalists had **to observe a policy of strategic silence**, while being mindful of the popularity of a rumour in order to avoid providing oxygen to a story that had not reached many people.

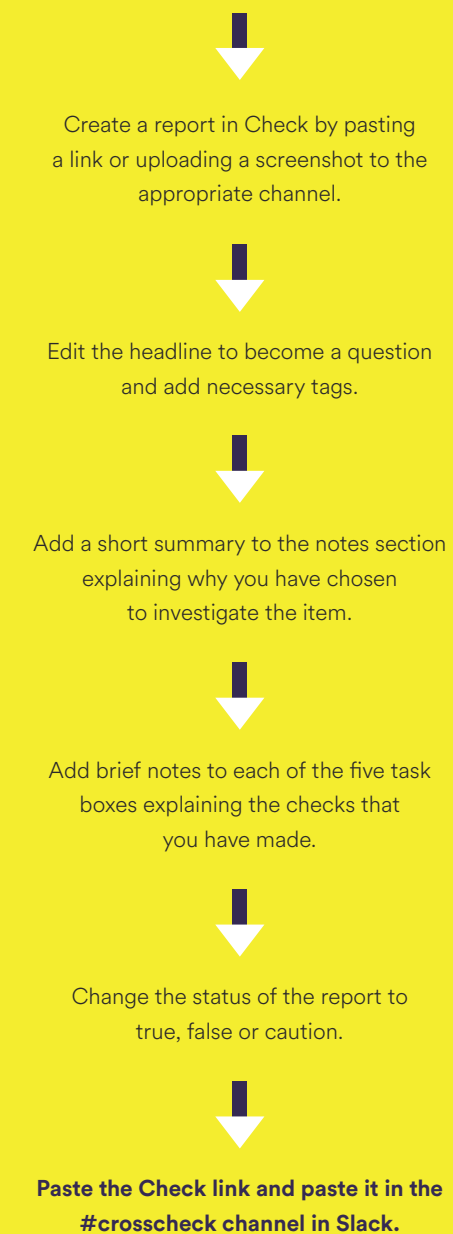
WORKFLOW

The following diagram was taken from the CrossCheck Handbook, which was given to all project participants.

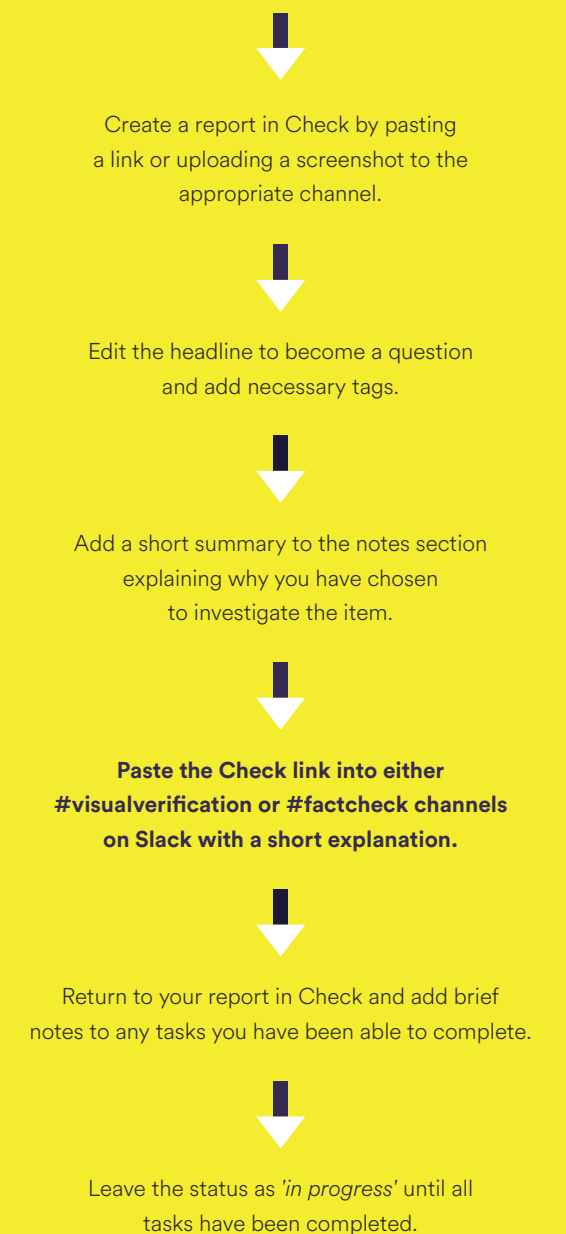
Figure n°7

CrossCheck workflow
as published in
the Participant
Handbook

If you have easily debunked or confirmed an item yourself :



If you need help to complete checks to confirm or debunk a report:



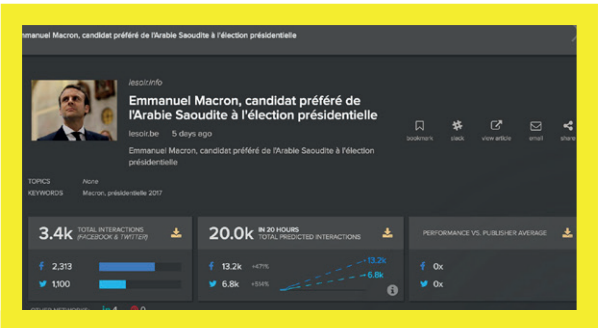
A SCREENSHOT FROM NEWSWHIP

Figure n°8

The platform allows you to see how much engagement a piece of content has received, and is likely to receive in the next 24-hour period.

The first step of the workflow consisted of project editors and journalists monitoring the internet, and specifically social media, **to identify cases of disinformation that were spreading considerably.**

This activity was powered by editors and the audience's questions, with the support of technology. Tools such as CrowdTangle and NewsWhip enabled journalists to quickly identify **which stories were attracting significant and/or an unusual amount of attention.** NewsWhip also allowed participants to algorithmically predict how much engagement a post was likely to receive over the next 24 hours.



These tools facilitated the daily editorial decisions about which cases of mis- and dis-information to address by enabling CrossCheck's participants to quantify and predict the visibility of a rumour. Additionally, editors could identify the spread of rumours via Google Trends by seeing if people had begun to search a rumour. The public also had the opportunity to ask questions on CrossCheck's website. If members of the audience had doubts about information they found online, or had witnessed the rise of a rumour, they were invited to report it through a question form. The form asked audience members to provide a description, a link, and their email address. Powered by Hearken, **the system published questions to a Slack channel in real-time**, so that editors could quickly select the most relevant questions according to the selection policy and transfer them to journalists.

Figure n°9

A screenshot from the CrossCheck website, where a Hearken plug-in allows audiences to submit claims, rumours, images or videos they wanted fact-checked or verified.

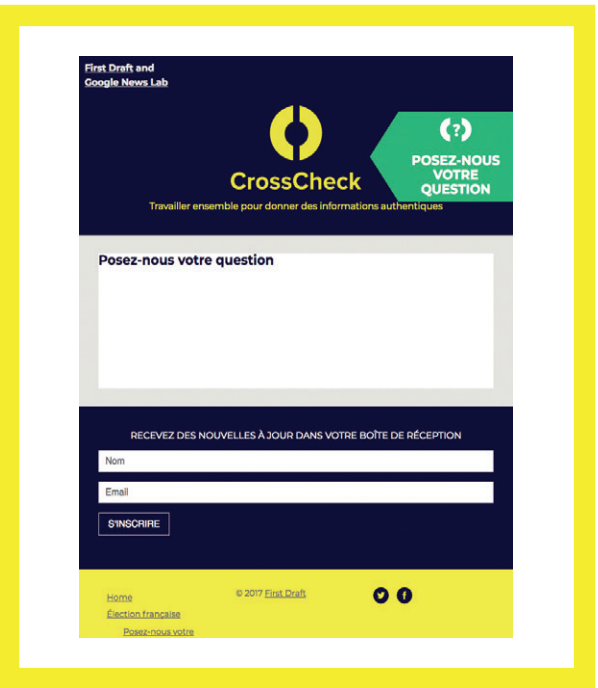


Figure n°10

Sample questions from the public

Sample questions from the public :

- Is it true that Macron used taxpayers' money to finance his movement En Marche?
- Is Le Figaro manipulating its surveys against Mélenchon?
- Is Arabic to be made compulsory in French primary schools?
- Is a Paris lighthouse being replaced by housing destined for migrants?
- Did Jean-Luc Mélenchon praise the Front National back in 1991?
- Are there mayors in France who sent out letters to citizens appealing for them to vote for Macron?

The second step of the workflow was initiated as soon as a rumour was deemed worthy of a debunk. **A verification card was created on Check**, an online tool that enabled journalists to clarify, structure and collaborate about the verification process.

Check allowed journalists to work through a defined checklist, which asked journalists to answer the following questions:

- 1 Is this the original form of the content?**
- 2 Who created the content?**
- 3 When was the content created?**

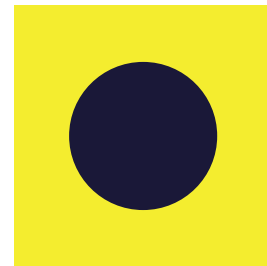


Figure n°11

These reproductions from Slack show how Check was used by journalists to share the verification work they were doing on pieces of content.

PRUDENCE

Il y a 7 mois 21 notes

Najat VB a-t-elle signé un accord pour permettre l'enseignement de l'arabe en primaire?

La ministre de l'Education nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, Najat Vallaud Belkacem, a rencontré son homologue tunisien, Néji Jelloul vendredi 31 mars. D'après le site d'information tunisien, Business News, un accord aurait été signé entre les deux pour enseigner l'arabe dans les écoles primaires françaises. Les deux ministres de l'Education ont également évoqué la création d'une école tunisienne située à Paris.

<https://www.valeursactuelles.com/societe/najat-v-belkacem-signe-un-accord-pour-enseigner-l-arabe-en-primaire-78207>

Rajouté par [redacted]

Tâche de vérification 5/5 résolue(s)

Motivation du Post

Pouvez-vous identifier les motifs derrière la publication du contenu examiné ?

Décrédiibiliser le gouvernement socialiste

Résolue par [redacted]

Chronologie de vérification

Ce média contient une ou plusieurs images.
Cliquez sur «Recherche» pour chercher des copies sur Google. **RECHERCHE**

il y a 7 mois

Titre modifié par [redacted]
L'enseignement de l'arabe en primaire sera-t-il obligatoire ?

il y a 7 mois

Tâche '*Originale*' résolue par:
[redacted]
Un article de Valeurs actuelles qui tire sa source d'un site tunisien.

il y a 7 mois

Tâche '*qui ?*' résolue par:
L'article source de Nusinewsnews (*site tunisien*)

il y a 7 mois

Commenter ce rapport

ENVOYER

Qui ?

Pouvez-vous établir l'authenticité de l'auteur ou de la publication à l'origine du contenu?

L'article source de Businessnews (site tunisien)
<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/neji-jalloul-et-najat-vallaud-belkacem-signent-un-accord-pour-enseigner-larabe-dans-lesecoles-francaises,520,71290,3>

Résolue par

Originale ?

Pouvez-vous garantir qu'il s'agit du post initial sur le sujet ?

Un article de Valeurs actuelles qui tire sa source d'un site tunisien
<https://www.valeursactuelles.com/societe/najat-v-belkacem-signe-un-accord-pour-enseigner-larabe-en-primaire-78207>

Résolue par

Preuves Additionnelles

Pouvez-vous apporter une ou des preuves indépendantes qui corroborent ce qui est dit dans le contenu examiné ?

VA et Business News ne précisent pas que l'enseignement de l'arabe sera une option, au même titre que l'anglais ou l'espagnol ou l'allemand. Le sujet a déjà été debunké par Adrien en septembre mais une pique de rappel ne serait pas de trop en ces temps troubles.

http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/09/29/des-parents-delirent-sur-des-cours-d-arabe-obligatoires-dans-le-sud_5005537_4355770.html

Résolue par

Source secondaire

Le contenu examiné fait-il référence à des sources secondaires (*citation, rapport, data*), de nature crédible ?

Nordpresse reprend l'info dans un article parodique

<http://nordpresse.be/najat-vallaud-belkam-larabe-cp-ne-sera-obligatoire-cours-detude-coran/>

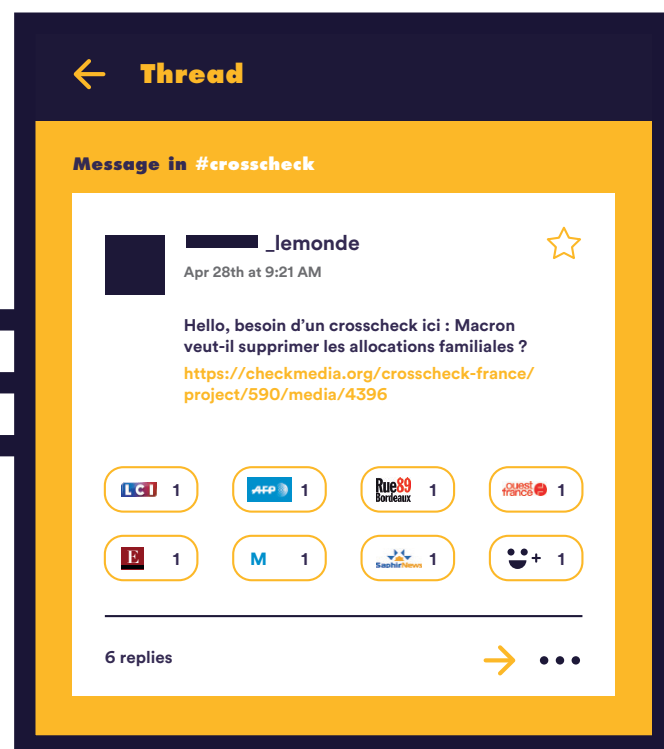
Résolue par

Any updates to the verification card were sent automatically to Slack. Once the verification process had been launched, journalists could discuss and determine who was best suited to contribute to a debunk. **When the verification process was concluded, journalists could review the verification card and add their media's logo if they wished to endorse a story.**

A REPRODUCTION FROM SLACK

Figure n°12

A Le Monde journalist asks other newsrooms to add their logos if they agreed with the verification work undertaken on this particular story.



If a story received at least two endorsements, project editors would then write a summary card that included the steps of the verification process, the sources of the rumour, and figures on the impact it had. After a final review by AFP journalists, **the summary cards were published in both French and English on CrossCheck's website**, along with the logos of newsrooms who had participated in the verification process behind it, a label that categorized the

debunk, and a picture to make the story visually appealing and comprehensible to the audience. Stories were shared on social media and sent in email newsletters.

In addition, as the project advanced, project editors began creating short explanatory videos, and published them on social media. **Participating newsrooms also had the opportunity to publish CrossCheck's content on their own platforms, as long as they credited CrossCheck.**



4 Metrics

ARTICLES PUBLISHED

On the French site, 67 stories were published. Newsroom partners published their own CrossCheck articles and they totalled 276.

WEBSITE METRICS

Overall, the CrossCheck website received 590,443 page views, which came from 335,993 visitors (83,146 were returning visitors). **11% of that traffic came from search, 16% came to the website directly, 30% was from social and 42% of the traffic came from links embedded on other sites.** 87% of the traffic came from France (24% from Paris), 2% from Belgium, 1.5% from the US, and 1.25% from the UK. Unsurprisingly 95% of the traffic went to the French language site, 5% to the English site.

FACEBOOK METRICS

The CrossCheck Page on Facebook had 180,598 followers which included 347,800 engagements over the 10 weeks and 1,207,642 video views in total. When CrossCheck posts on partner Facebook pages are considered, **CrossCheck content received 51,865 reactions and 18,669 shares.** The impact of the use of ad spend (provided by Facebook) is clear when you look at this graph. The ad spend started on April 11.

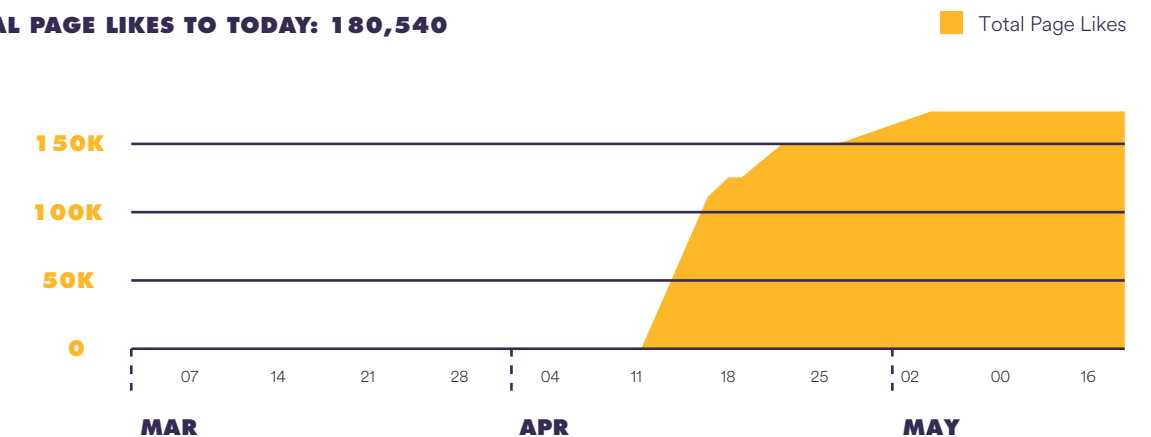
As discussed videos performed very well on Facebook. The most popular was **a video of Francois Fillon being flour bombed by a man who claimed to be on a government watch list.**

"The CrossCheck website received 590 443 page views, which came from 335 993 visitors."

Figure n°13

Total Facebook page likes over the 3 months of the project

TOTAL PAGE LIKES TO TODAY: 180,540



TWITTER METRICS

The CrossCheck Twitter page had 4,956 followers, and while a small number of followers, it received 1,919 mentions and 6,158 retweets.

NEWSLETTERS

The project sent out 2 newsletters (*both in French and English*), one prior to each elective round. There were just over 500 subscribers and 35% opened the newsletter. The first newsletter sent on April 20 had the title **‘CrossCheck Behind the Scenes: Learn how to Debunk.’** It included very detailed information about how CrossCheck debunked a claim that a Paris lighthouse that had been demolished in February was going to be replaced with social housing reserved exclusively for migrants.

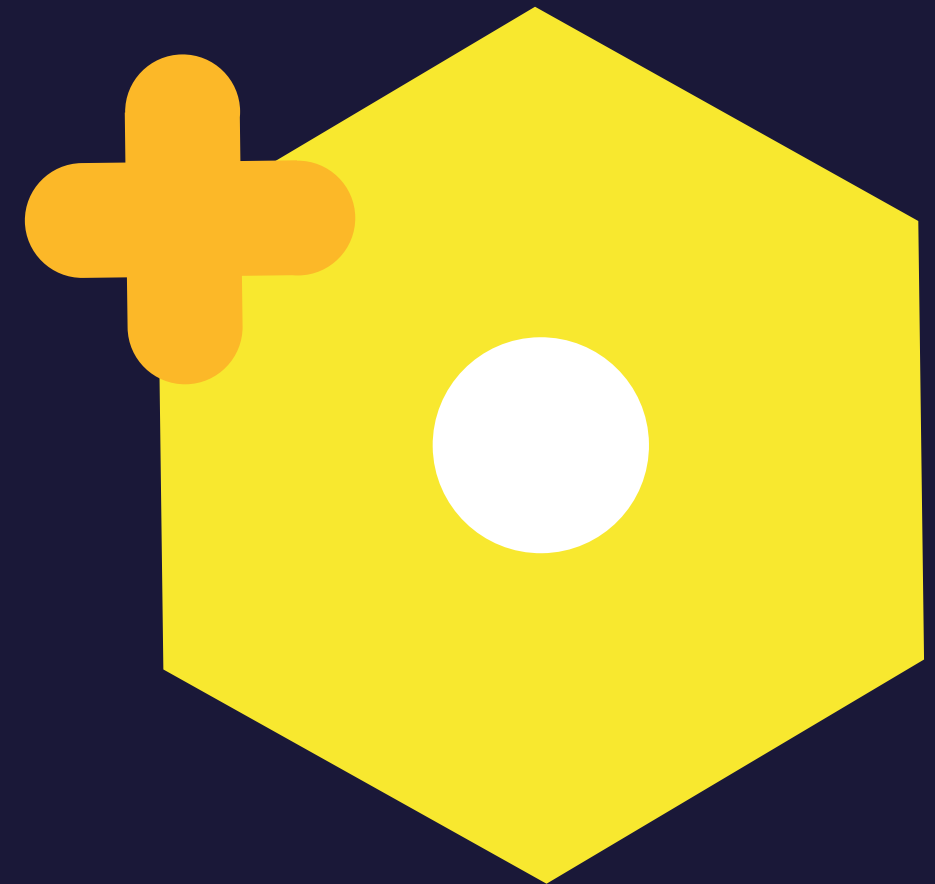
The newsletter walked readers through the different steps of the verification process:

- 1 Researching the original source of the information.
- 2 Contacting those concerned directly.
- 3 **Completing the verification checklist:** Who? What? Where? When? and Why?
- 4 Crosschecking the information with newsroom partners.
- 5 **Publishing the story**

On May 4, a second newsletter was sent out with highlights from the project.

Figure n°14

Metrics for the most popular CrossCheck video



5

Research Method

This report is based on two research studies with two sets of participants:

- 1 Semi-structured interviews with journalists and editors that participated in CrossCheck.
- 2 A survey and follow-up interviews with members of the public who engaged with the project.

ACCOUNTS OF MEDIA PARTICIPANTS IN CROSSCHECK

A total of 16 in-depth interviews, based on an ad hoc topic guide, were conducted with journalists and editors in June 2017—a few weeks after the project ended²⁹. The interviews were recorded and analysed thematically. **The journalistic experience of the seven women and nine men interviewed ranged from zero to 34 years.** *(These participants include journalism students, whose participation as project editors of CrossCheck was central³⁰.)* **The sample criteria were degree of participation, media type, organizational position, experience, and, of course, availability.** We mostly interviewed journalists that were particularly active in the project and worked online for television news stations, journalistic start-ups or wire agencies. The experience levels of interviewees ranged from journalism students to senior managers.

ACCOUNTS OF THE AUDIENCE

For the audience research, we used an online survey of 50 questions, which received 29 responses. We also conducted **7 semi-structured interviews** with members of the public. Participants were contacted by email or through Facebook. All had interacted with the project by either submitting questions to CrossCheck or commenting on CrossCheck’s Facebook page. Though the sample is relatively small, it is

representative of those that were particularly interested in the project for several reasons.

First, sample members participated by submitting a question or commenting on Facebook. Second, they accepted the invitation to either discuss the project or to complete a long online survey about the project.

Naturally, those who were only occasionally in contact with CrossCheck’s content, especially through Facebook, and **did not interact with the project are not included in the sample.** This is an important limitation when it comes to the results of the study.

These two studies were completed by an automated discourse analysis based on the Reinert lexicometric method.³¹ It was used on four different samples: comments on CrossCheck’s Facebook page, tweets containing the name of the project, questions that were submitted by members of the public, and news articles referring to CrossCheck. **This quantitative analysis was augmented with a more qualitative examination of the different samples.**

²⁹ _ See Appendix 3 for the Topic Guide of the interviews.
³⁰ _ See Appendix 4 for a full list of interviewees.
³¹ _ For the quantitative analysis, we used the IRaMuTeQ software that breaks down texts into segments based on punctuation and size criteria, and then classified them into clusters based on lexical similarity. The analysis proceeds to group textual units on a lexical co-occurrence criterion and allows for a clear view of the main themes of the analysed text.

6

The View of the Journalists: the project as seen by the participants

1 / A FUNDAMENTALLY COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

One of the particularities of CrossCheck was that it relied on collaboration between a hundred journalists from different newsrooms. What seems to have initially enabled the collaboration was a sense of interdependency between the media that translated into a sense of responsibility, and eventually a cross-partisan alliance with the goal of restoring audience trust and journalists' role as gatekeepers.

This was especially true in the context of the French elections, due to the real political risk that misinformation, disinformation, and online propaganda posed to the election outcome.

A MODEL OF HORIZONTAL COLLABORATION

Whereas research has recommended the creation of a cross-partisan consensus to increase the credibility of fact-checking²², this endeavour is double-edged and linked **to debate about the enduring biases of fact-checkers who claim to be objective or neutral²³.**

To some interviewees, the number of newsrooms validating a debunk was seen as a significant demonstration of credibility. But other interviewees were aware of the danger of a mainstream media alliance, which could be interpreted as a further homogenization of perspectives and an illegitimate claim to objectivity.

Ultimately, the legitimacy of the CrossCheck alliance was underpinned **by a sense of interdependency between media organizations as an ecosystem, both on national and international level.** In terms of image, interviewees mentioned that if one organization committed a mistake, it would potentially reflect upon the image of the entire project. Conversely, some journalists thought the collaboration created a virtuous circle that increased the quality of debunks and fact-checking by establishing a system of checks and balances between journalists:

"If some journalists behave haphazardly it reflects on the media class in its entirety. And by having something positive—very well-done—it's also positive for every media outlet."



This interdependence was also noticeable at the international level. The interviewees unanimously mentioned the 2016 U.S. presidential elections as a signal that initiatives ought to be taken **to prevent the 2017 French elections from being influenced by disinformation.**

Thus, this time of high stakes and institutional instability can be seen as an opportune moment, or '*kairos*'. As mentioned by one interviewee:

"The project worked well in France because we were in a time where us journalists had all seen the precedent of American elections. We were aware that we were standing on a breeding ground that could potentially be explosive in terms of fake news – with the rise of populism, crescendo scores for the Front national, and a dis-integration of traditional political parties."

COLLABORATION AND GATEKEEPING

Thus, the interviewees felt encouraged by a responsibility to act. However, this responsibility stemmed not from a belief that they had caused disinformation's spread, but rather from their duties as journalists to contribute to a healthy democratic debate. They also highlighted that this responsibility was not just theirs; **it also belonged to the audience and the social media platforms.** *(The latter two groups, as previously mentioned, had a role to play in CrossCheck.)*

This sense of shared responsibility, and consequent collaboration between media actors resonates with the academic debate that recommends the inclusion of different social groups in the discussion about what journalism should or should not do³⁴.

But journalists' opinions on this extensive collaboration differed. Some expressed scepticism about audience participation, based on the necessity for journalists to maintain their gatekeeping role – **a limit that has been previously identified in the context of participatory journalism.**

COLLABORATION WITH PLATFORMS

The input of platforms was deemed indispensable and worthy of further, cautious development.

The interviewees recognized that CrossCheck could not have existed without the platforms' input, but also said that platforms could have provided even more resources. The logic behind this request was that journalists – with the exception of one interviewee who saw Google as a fully neutral actor – considered Facebook and Google **to be the primary and most fertile ground for disinformation to spread.** The interviewees were also aware of both their sector's financial hardships and increasing dependency upon online distribution platforms. Thus, some suggested **the need to agree on a mutually beneficial ground for collaboration,** where newsrooms could enjoy the technological and financial advantages of platforms, while retaining full autonomy over content. Indeed, when it came to CrossCheck, Google and Facebook did not intervene in the work of journalists, but only provided access to software and funding. **Consequently, journalists were able to play their gatekeeping role without external interference.** Nevertheless, as mentioned by several interviewees, the platforms' control of the tools and finances the project **was an important background issue connected to the increasing technological and economic dependency of journalism upon the tech industry.**

COLLABORATION WITH THE AUDIENCE

The journalists that were interviewed generally referred to the need **to find a strategy that maintained their gatekeeping role, while taking advantage of the audience as a resource.** Their accounts denoted an acceptance that the audience could provide better visibility of online trends and signal disinformation, thus overcoming challenges of filter bubbles. However, some interviewees also believed that journalists should decide on the validity and usefulness of this participation. The importance of the audience's participation was thus questioned by those who believed that, as professional journalists, **they are better equipped to address and process information.** Yet, the audience's participation was alternatively justified **by the need to increase efforts at community building, restore trust, and foster dialogue:**

"We had reactions from colleagues like, 'But why do you debunk stuff that nobody reads, or that only suckers will share?' It's very symptomatic of journalists in general. But we tried to make them understand that they weren't suckers. Something that has 30 000 shares—we consider it interesting to say it's false."

"Since we're in this moment of reflection, as media, to recreate a link of trust, I think it's essential that the public has someone to turn to, like reliable journalists. Otherwise, whom do they turn to? There's no one."

PUBLIC SERVICE VS. COMPETITION

An obvious obstacle to collaboration between newsrooms is competition. However, CrossCheck's participants managed to temporarily overcome this obstacle by focusing their efforts **on fact-checking under a common, overarching sense of public service.** Indeed, the interviews denoted that the issue of competition between newsrooms was overcome by two factors. First, the stakes were too high for journalists to work against each other. Second, the core practice of CrossCheck was fact-checking, which they essentially considered a public service devoid of the usual **'race for the scoop'**. Ultimately, overcoming the obstacle of competition was understandably seen as a significant collective achievement:

"By definition journalism is selfish. It's not a collaborative thing."

"Having a collaboration between media when media's business is to race for scoops, it seemed a bit counter-intuitive."

"I lost my sense of competition in the way I worked with others. When I work for my medium, I'm looking for scoops. It's really something that motivates me on a daily basis."

³² _ Nyhan, B. & Reifler, J.A. (2012). Misinformation and fact-checking: Research findings from social science. New America Foundation.

³³ _ Uscinski, J., & Butler, R. (2013). The Epistemology of Fact Checking. Critical Review, 25 (2)162-180.

³⁴ _ See Couldry, N., & Ward, S. J. A. (2013). Why media ethics still matters. Wiley-Blackwell and O'Neill, O. (2002). A question of trust (Reith lectures ; 2002). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

"Debunking fake news is not a scoop. There's a dimension of public utility linked to one of journalism's foundations to be the fourth estate, to ensure a sound functioning of democracy, inform the opinion in a healthy way, and help it if it is assailed by false information."

Thus, by joining forces, competition was temporarily overcome within a situation that was mutually beneficial to the organizations. The usual race for scoops was superseded by the possibility of reaching larger audiences, hence bringing greater societal benefits. **One interviewee qualified this type of situation as 'coopetition'.**

Indeed, the sense of competition was still felt by interviewees, as some participants did not seem to fully cooperate. But this lack of participation by some newsrooms was explained by hierarchical pressures and rigidities, rather than individual journalists' choices. In addition, **some interviewees mentioned their fear of 'freeloaders', as they gradually noticed unequal contribution from different participants.** However, this uneven contribution was seen as being balanced by the fact that each participant's contribution depended on the adequacy of their skills and resources, according to the situation:

"AFP was very involved from the beginning. After a week of work, we could identify who was participating the most. We feared that others would rest on their laurels and publish the results of CrossCheck on their website without having worked on it like us. But it turned out to be completely false."

It came in waves and it followed the rhythm of news. Local media were able to contribute when rumors concerned the provinces."

Fact-checking and verification have been deemed by the literature review and interviewees as a founding value of journalistic identity³⁵. In this collaborative context, it not only gained prominence in the daily practices of journalists, but also **reinforced the value of public service and challenged accepted notions of competition.**

2/ A MODEL OF HORIZONTAL COLLABORATION

One of the particularities of CrossCheck was that it relied on collaboration between **a hundred journalists from different newsrooms.** What seems to have initially enabled **the collaboration was a sense of interdependency between the media that translated into a sense of responsibility.** Collaboration about CrossCheck took place on a messaging app, Slack, which allowed all journalists to discuss and debate instantaneously, even though they were physically scattered in newsrooms across France and the UK. Discussions were instantaneous and multimodal throughout the project:

"The advantages were that we had access to everyone in one click. We were well organized by name and by media, we knew with whom we were speaking and at what moment."

³⁵ _ See Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2007). The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and What the Public Should Expect. New York: Crown and Fenton, N., Witschge, T. (2009). Comment Is Free, Facts Are Sacred: journalistic ethics in a changing mediascape. In Miekke, G. and Redden, G. (Eds), OnLine News and Journalism. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Discussions were described as horizontal – without a sense of hierarchy – even when participants ranged from interns to experienced fact-checkers and journalists. The discussions were courteous, spontaneous, fluid, factual and aimed at reaching a consensus:

"There were very few hierarchical dynamics. I did not feel that the opinion of an intern was less considered than that of a journalist."

"What I perceived that really made me excited from the beginning was to see that everybody wanted to move in the same direction."

The decisions to debunk a story depended on each participant's resources and skills. As explained before, participation was unequal due to the different profiles of the contributors. Thus, journalists were obliged to trust each other, and share their work with individuals with whom they would not normally work:

"It's been complicated at times to get used to trusting someone who's not from my medium, and who has different standards. But that was also the purpose of the game."

Trust was established as everyone's different capacities were revealed at the individual and organizational level, and the diversity of profiles ended up turning into an advantage. It became natural for a participant to debunk a specific story if it happened to be from his or her area of expertise, whether that be a topic, a language or skill.

By joining individual forces and delegating to the most capable person, participants were able to cover a vast array of disinformation:

"BuzzFeed was specialized in social media. Les Décodeurs were legitimized by their experience in deciphering information. We the AFP were useful with our global network."

"What was interesting was that, by aggregating a bunch of skills, we had a maximum of possibilities to verify the veracity of information."

"There were some differences in the working method, but it was more a question of delegating to the person who could do it the best."

The absence of strictly defined rules was also central to the collaboration. While all participants had received a three-day training to ensure everyone similar levels of verification skill and an understanding of how CrossCheck would work, the workflow was constantly adapted during the project. **Since the form and impact of disinformation varied, it was necessary for journalists to adapt to each situation according to the resources available.** Methods were established after discussion, and only if there was a consensus about them:

"It wasn't established from the beginning. We learnt by fumbling. There were processes that we defined gradually when we realized it was more or less working."

"It depended on each case of fake news, obviously. We had to find methods and ideas each time, we had to adapt and even use tricks sometimes."

But consensus was not easily reached. An overarching principle of the CrossCheck project was prudence, but this was a point of discord between journalists. It sometimes led to heated debates, due to the diversity and complexity of disinformation. Different methods between journalists created divisions between those **who wanted to follow their instinct and those with more experience with online debunking, who urged for caution:**

"That's also when you discover that people work differently, some do without flair, clinically. Personally, it gives me energy to know that a piece of news is false, to the point that sometimes other journalists told me, you're going too fast. The proof is, a couple of hours later, I was right. But for them it was too fast to say it was false."

Thus, a collaborative model emerged through horizontal, reasonable debate and the delegation of tasks to the most capable and knowledgeable, depending on the situation. Instead of a standardized code of conduct, CrossCheck's participants relied on a workflow that resembles the idea

of *'phronesis'*, a practical wisdom based on prudence, discussion and adaptability. This principle had priority in the effective conduct of work and allowed sufficient flexibility. In addition, **Slack enabled access to past and present discussions**, and to individuals with different capacities and in different places, thus unifying people and practices in time and space. **These parameters match the conditions of the ideal public sphere:** equal participants were given equal opportunities to deliberate, from relatively common journalistic knowledge, without coercion, and with a focus on the public good³⁶.

Two other important ingredients of the collaborative model were autonomy and immediacy. Interviewees mentioned their freedom to decide whether or not to publish CrossCheck's content on their own media as a positive feature that reinforced their autonomy versus that of the project. Immediacy, another potential obstacle to ethical journalism³⁷, was also seen as a challenge by the participants due to the tension between **the necessity to react quickly against rumours and the time-intensive nature of fact-checking**³⁸.

Interviewees diverged regarding how to best use time. Fact-checking, when conducted collaboratively, was noted to be slower while waiting for the approval of journalists from other newsrooms, who were working for CrossCheck in addition to their regular job. Journalists used to working quickly, because of the hierarchical pressures to publish, were also obliged to slow down and adapt for experienced fact-checkers who often recommended prudence and additional investigation. However, the amount of time taken on verification was appreciated by some journalists used to working in fast-paced news agencies or TV, particularly **because it was rewarded by the absence of a single error in the debunks**. Indeed, the absence of errors was mentioned by many as the ultimate gauge of success:

³⁶ _ Bohman, J., & Habermas, R. W. J. (2010). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Mode of access: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/habermas>.

³⁷ _ Couldry, N. (2013). Living well with and through media. In Couldry, N., Pinchevski, A., & Madianou, M. (Eds.), *Ethics of media* (pp. 39-56). Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

³⁸ _ Tambini, Damian, & Goodman, Emma. (2017). Fake news: Public policy responses. The London School of Economics and Political Science.

³⁹ _ At the same time the biggest part of the audience's questions to CrossCheck was also about rumours concerning Emmanuel Macron, which means that the choice to debunk these was also justified by the public's demand. For more details on that see point 7. What kind of discourse did CrossCheck generate?

"Maybe CrossCheck was a bit slow. Sometimes the validation on Slack would come after several hours. But the newsrooms had other needs, there wasn't always someone full-time on CrossCheck."

"I thought it was very pleasant to be able to say we take our time once in a while, coming from a media that always works in urgency. We would not publish until it's fully verified. It's an incredible luxury in today's journalism."

"To me what worked the best is that we didn't mess up."

This absence of mistakes reaffirmed journalists' purpose. They mentioned how the audience tends to consider mistakes – **from which journalists are not immune, especially under time pressures – as 'fake news'**. Here, favouring quality over immediacy made journalists more confident.

3 / THE QUESTION OF OBJECTIVITY, CREDIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Objectivity is intrinsically linked to credibility and transparency. Objectivity, as a claim, was questioned by interviewees. As a practice, it necessarily faced challenges because of the nature of disinformation, but it was reinforced by credibility and transparency. **Credibility was meant to be achieved through the aforementioned cross-partisan alliance**. Transparency was demonstrated both between journalists, and between journalists and the audience.

Participants had agreed to include as many sources as possible in their debunks, and to allow readers to follow the thread of verification, so as to increase trust with the audience. In addition, **journalists were happy to share their work with other peers**.

"To share my verification work with other newsrooms wasn't a problem for me. Transparency in journalism, it's essential to be credible in the verification."

"We insisted on putting a maximum of sources, for the readers."

But even though participants had intentions to be transparent and credible, CrossCheck's claim to objectivity was challenged by the overwhelming amount of disinformation directed at Emmanuel Macron. CrossCheck's participants faced a dilemma: debunking all of disinformation on Macron could reinforce the audience's assumption concerning the media's partiality, but ignoring it would go against their deontology³⁹. **They justified their choices by insisting on quality and depth in their work:**

"Factually, the bulk of disinformation targeted Emmanuel Macron more than any other candidate. That was kind of a trap. Obviously for us journalists it's complicated because all information processing implies balancing. The problem is that we're not going to invent cases of disinformation which don't exist. Ergo we reinforce that circle in which people say that journalists defend him anyway."

"Honestly I don't think we fell in the trap because we did quality work, and it showed that we tried to cover quite vast topics."

Another challenge to CrossCheck's credibility was satire, which was a divisive issue. Some satirical, false information may seem obviously 'fake', but when the level of virality was checked, it was often shared by a significant number of people. Here the journalists faced another dilemma: debunk the satire and appear to state the obvious to one segment, or ignore it and let hundreds of thousands of people potentially get confused. **The methods and threshold that defined when to debunk a story were thus constantly debated depending on the story and its level of virality.** These disagreements were an opportunity for participants to question their subjectivity through discussions with peers. Journalists seemed aware of their biases and, as they considered that absolute objectivity was unreachable, a prudence principle was prioritized:

"As journalists we also have our opinions and political affinities. I had the feeling that sometimes they carried a bias in the information processing."

"We've never managed to define a threshold. All of the problem lay in the interpretation of things, in how to say things in the most impartial way possible, which is basically our job, knowing that I personally don't believe in objectivity."

These accounts go beyond the academic debate to call for an ad hoc attitude, by highlighting two phenomena:

1 The impossibility of maintaining completely standardized fact-checking methods.

2 The unavoidability of biases, especially since the modern journalism industry constitutes quite a socially homogenous milieu. While these interviews cannot demonstrate how the audience received this approach, they still highlight a strategy to restore trust through transparency — from journalist to journalist, and from journalists to the audience.

4/ **IMPACT FOR JOURNALISTS, NEWSROOMS, AND THE PUBLIC**

After interviewing fifteen participants, it became clear that **CrossCheck had brought benefits beyond addressing disinformation, at both the individual and organizational levels.** Most journalists mentioned gaining invaluable skills by learning from one another. Through witnessing and comparing the methods of peers, journalists realized how their working routines were shaped, and sometimes restrained, by the medium for which they worked. Collaborating on the same platform obliged them to find common ground and adapt to each other to find a consensus.

Thus, their skills, flair and efficiency were increased, independently of their previous experience. CrossCheck also required the use of technological tools such as NewsWhip, CrowdTangle, and Google Reverse Image Search, which facilitated the verification process. Mastering these tools inspired a healthy scepticism in the participants about the content they might encounter:

"To be confronted with others' verification techniques and sensibilities from other media it allows you to reevaluate yours and to highlight reflexes that we accumulate by staying in the same newsroom for years."

"I strengthened my reflexes, I progressed in my profession, in fact-checking, and it enabled me to gain efficiency and speed on a work that is closely related, which is UGC."

"These are reflexes I didn't have before, although they're really simple. I think it really enlightens my work. I also noticed that I've become more skeptical on many more topics."

The professional visibility of participants increased within their own newsroom, within the field of fact-checking, and internationally. **Now acquainted with each other, participants built lasting networks and are considering future collaborations.** Understandably, the most experienced web journalists felt less enthusiastic about the individual benefits they gained, but they denoted humility by highlighting that journalism is a profession where one constantly learns new things. Participants also mentioned how they had used a story debunked by CrossCheck **to demonstrate the salience of online propaganda, and the social utility of CrossCheck to government officials.**

The positive aspects of this collaborative project also reflected on newsrooms, and on the image of the mainstream media. To be publicly associated to CrossCheck and its probity constituted a strategic promotion:

"For the media, I think my boss's motivation, a priori, was to associate our brand to a beautiful project like CrossCheck, that tries to rebuild trust with readers."

Newsrooms could insert their logo on CrossCheck stories that they had helped debunk. Particularly appreciated by publishers, this feature increased their brand's visibility. They received positive feedback from their audience, and some partners reported gaining a significant amount of traffic on CrossCheck-related content. Thus, the collaboration may have worked because CrossCheck's image did not interfere with the newsroom's own visibility, but conveyed intellectual integrity to newsrooms' audiences. **CrossCheck was even useful for the most established fact-checking media,** whose experience and knowledge of disinformation was enriched.

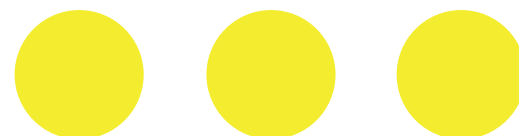
The interviewees, unanimously, were enthusiastic about this collaborative experience, lauded its positive energy, and even regretted it was over. It positively reinforced the journalists' self-perception by asserting their sense of responsibility, purpose, and professionalism, in times where all of these were questioned and attacked by politicians and segments of their audiences.

With regard to impact on the audience – which, after all, remains CrossCheck's primary purpose – journalists were aware that it might be limited due to fact-checking's reputation, CrossCheck's material limitations, and the fact that some parts of the audience were out of reach. Although additional time and financial resources could have increased their efficiency and immediacy, one interviewee noted the significant barriers that psychological mechanisms such as belief perseverance and selective exposure posed. Furthermore, fact-checking tends to be addressed to an audience that is already convinced and trustful of mainstream media. **Other segments – those in greatest need of verified information – are also the most difficult to reach and convince:**

"Fact-checking is addressed to a restricted public, who's already aware of false information. It's difficult to go further because there are people we will never touch."

"There will always be a population sceptical about media. There will always be a danger, that doesn't mean we can let ourselves be scared."

The interviewees' disappointment regarding CrossCheck's limited reach was counterbalanced by the quality of their work and the practical advantages of collaboration. They also suggested solutions to increase impact — **like the idea of building a network of faithful followers to counter disinformation quantitatively, and the idea of having platforms provide more exposure and funds.**



7

The View of the Audience: how the public received, used and interpreted CrossCheck

In order to recruit members of the audience for this research, requests were posted on the CrossCheck Facebook page, and emails were sent to everyone who submitted a question on the project website. In total, twenty-nine people responded to the online survey, and an additional seven took part in a semi-structured interview. Respondents were unanimously pleased and curious about CrossCheck and its impact.

1 First, they demonstrated a significant amount of knowledge about the agents of disinformation – their motivations, targets, and organization – and explained that part of this knowledge was a result of consuming CrossCheck content.

2 Second, the interviewees explained that the project had taught them skills, as they felt they could now ‘read’ messages in a critical way by focusing on sources.

3 Third, they interpreted CrossCheck’s approach and debunks in alignment to the way they were produced by the journalists, and took action by communicating them to their peers. While it’s important to note that there was a significant element of self-selection in the sampling process for this audience research, the accounts of those interviewed suggest the respondents’ backgrounds were far more diverse than expected.

While this qualitative analysis is only based on the accounts of few users who were already familiar with misinformation and verification, there are elements which point to a surprisingly wide impact for CrossCheck.

1 / PROFILES OF THE RESPONDENTS

Respondents’ profiles were very diverse in terms of age, gender, occupation, area of residence and education level. However, a majority of respondents had a university degree and the youngest among them was 35 years old.

Political orientations covered a wide spectrum, with a small minority of participants who identified with the far right.

In terms of political engagement, answers were also diverse.

Some respondents declared themselves militant, while others did not feel at all engaged in politics. A majority of respondents said they are moderately interested in politics out of civic duty.

Regarding their general media consumption, an overwhelming majority of respondents use mostly computers or mobile phones to consume news. **Their main sources of information were established French mainstream media such as *Le Monde*, *Libération* and *Le Figaro*, but many also mentioned international media such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.** Interestingly (*and we shall further analyze this later*), many mentioned Facebook as one of their main sources of news.

Almost all respondents have a Facebook account that they use to sometimes post news articles, or comment on posts. We can thus assume that the respondents are more connected and active on the internet and social media than the average French citizen. Two-thirds of respondents declared they sometimes engage in conversation with strangers in the comments of Facebook posts about a news articles. While most considered such engagements to be a waste of time, **because of hateful comments and the impossibility of convincing other individuals**, they did like to express their opinion and learn from others, and wished the debate on Facebook was more open and intelligent.



2/ THE RESPONDENTS' USE OF CROSSCHECK

Most respondents preferred to follow CrossCheck by directly visiting the website, which highlights the importance of having a project URL apart from that of the partner sites.

Even when respondents had a Facebook profile, not all of them followed CrossCheck, nor did CrossCheck posts appear systematically in their newsfeed.

Most respondents checked the website every day or every week, while a third did so depending on what disinformation they had encountered.

An overwhelming majority of respondents preferred to read the articles in their entirety. However, some only read the headlines. Their explanations for this behaviour suggested a high level of trust in the work of CrossCheck and also pointed to the helpfulness of visual icons in giving audiences a quick understanding of the type of disinformation being debunked. Overall, by using a clear system of logos and colours, alongside short but detailed and factual articles, **CrossCheck managed to reconcile two parts of the audience:**

- 1** Those who **'are bored with reading long articles stuffed with hyperlinks'**⁴⁰
- 2** Those who are eager to learn about the details and methods of verification.

"[How many articles did I read entirely]? Zero, because that was not the point. The point in my opinion was just... I mean the verification is important, but to say that it's false or true, that was enough for me. I don't know why, but I had trust and so I thought, well, if they say so, it must be true"

"Personally I was content with the signs and logos on the topics I was interested in, that is it was false, partly false... In general, I'm not a big reader because I'm having a hard time focusing my attention on a screen. As long as the information is signaled as fake, that's enough for me"

"Yes, I've read all the articles entirely. If you're interested in what the hoaxes are saying, you have got to be interested in what the debunks are saying. If not it's useless, if you only read the title"

40 _ Mantzarlis, A. (2016) There's been an explosion of international fact-checkers, but they face big challenges. Poynter. Available at: <http://www.poynter.org/2016/theres-been-an-explosion-of-international-fact-checkers-butthey-face-big-challenges/415468/>

MOTIVATIONS FOR FOLLOWING CROSSCHECK

The factors that led the respondents to follow CrossCheck include being overwhelmed by the amount of information available and witnessing the fast spread of mis- and dis-information between their friends, family, or Facebook contacts. Having followed the US elections, the respondents had all heard about the problem of disinformation before CrossCheck was launched, and were preoccupied with its potential impact on the French presidential elections. Thus, CrossCheck came at an opportune moment, and filled a gap by helping respondents to determine what information was reliable.

"I think I realized the huge impact that disinformation could have on a nation, even the world. To influence a presidential election via the diffusion of false information, it's something"

"Internet has become the supermarket of stupidity and gossip... It was time to tidy this electronic mess"

"I was looking for a tool/website like CrossCheck. I'm very active on social media and I'm quite political, so I wanted to be able to distinguish information from misinformation. CrossCheck arrived at the best moment"

"Since many years, and the phenomenon has intensified with the American, British and French elections, I've felt the need to verify the quality of the information I consume"

HOW THEY FOUND OUT ABOUT CROSSCHECK

The respondents first learned about CrossCheck mostly via Facebook or other news media. Other reasons included discovering the project through their own research, or hearing about the project through hoax-busting or verification networks to which they already belonged.

This highlights the importance of Facebook ads, which were pushed particularly during the last weeks of the project, and of external media coverage from partners.

Certainly, the fact that CrossCheck was a completely new 'brand' meant its audience was smaller than it otherwise could have been, and there were questions raised about the project's identity and purpose.

Most respondents mentioned that their social circles did not know about CrossCheck until they informed them about it (which they all did).

Respondents were unsure of who was included in the media alliance, and who funded CrossCheck. Some interviewees also confused CrossCheck with Facebook's Third Party Fact-Checking Initiative, which flags articles that users report as dubious. **However, even if CrossCheck's identity and purpose were not necessarily clear to them, respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the project.**

HOW THEY UNDERSTOOD CROSSCHECK

The fact that CrossCheck constituted an alliance of media was generally seen as very positive. It was thought to reinforce objectivity, neutrality, reliability, and efficiency.

As one respondent explained:

"Actually I thought that it was quite neutral in the way fake news were debunked. It was not partisan, it was not just in favor of one candidate. Really all candidates were covered. I also assume that some were more targeted than others, but I thought there was a real effort of neutrality, a real journalistic work"

Most respondents did not understand that the project was focused only on the presidential elections.

They were worried about the fact that the project had stopped, since they saw the problem of disinformation as a durable one. They considered CrossCheck to be very useful in the way it responded to the urgent need of providing neutral and reliable information. All respondents were aware of the existence of other fact-checking and verification organizations in France, such as **Les Décodeurs** and **Désintox**. However, CrossCheck was seen as a different, complementary option for verification, precisely because of the image of independence and credibility fostered by the media alliance.

"I still do consider Le Monde as being of a certain editorial neutrality, but I mean Libération not at all, so I really prefer something that's really politically neutral to verify information"

While journalists, as explained before, were concerned about inevitably having to cover more cases about Macron, **this concern didn't translate to the public's perception of the project.**

3 / IMPACT

In terms of impact, two elements were unanimously mentioned by respondents that point to long-term and wide-spread success for CrossCheck. **The first is the acquisition of typical fact-checking skills**, like the ability to identify sources and to critically appraise content. **The second is the fact that consumers of CrossCheck stories spread the debunks** beyond the sphere of fact-checking's typical online audience.

FACT-CHECKING SKILLS AND CRITICAL APPRAISAL

The difficulty of identifying the sources of information on the internet has been raised by academics ⁴¹, and this echoes some respondents' comments. Indeed, some considered Facebook **as a medium rather than a platform**, talking about Facebook as a source of news. One respondent who works with young students highlighted their tendency to ignore differences between types of publishers (*e.g., blogs, professional media, alternative and citizen media*) and their lack of effort in researching and verifying the identity and motivations of news sources. By clearly and accurately identifying in its articles the sources of misinformation, and who had worked on verifying it, CrossCheck helped the audience comprehend through which channels rumours spread. The sharing of these elements made respondents feel better equipped against misinformation, because it taught them how to verify sources and to be more cautious before sharing information.

The appeal of the clear methodology and source identification is further confirmed by the success of CrossCheck's short explanatory videos, which were posted on Facebook and gained more than 1.2 million views.

⁴¹ _ Brooke, D. (2016), Stanford researchers find students have trouble judging the credibility of information online, Stanford News Center, November 22, 2016. Available at: <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-findstudents-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online>

⁴² _ McGrew, S., T. Ortega, J. Breakstone & S. Wineburg, (Fall 2017) The Challenge That's Bigger Than Fake News: Teaching Students to Engage in Civic Online Reasoning. American Educator.

"I thought that articles were interesting exactly because they were sourced. It was not just the title that was relevant"

"Really what I liked about CrossCheck, is all the sourcing and the work of explaining misinformation, why it's misinformation, and the links to verification. That I thought was very, very relevant, and right."

In addition to learning how to source information, the respondents highlighted other potentially durable fact-checking skills they acquired through the CrossCheck initiative. Interestingly, **the fact that debunks detailed the sources of information seems to have translated into 'lateral' reading**, which refers to assessing a source by checking other pages. It also pushed the respondents to be sceptical towards, for example, emotionally appealing headlines. As explained by a recent study ⁴², these are the typical reflexes fact-checkers have, and judging from the interviews with CrossCheck consumers, it seems they also developed these skills. **Many respondents identified characteristics of mis- and dis-information when asked whether they had gained any reflexes thanks to CrossCheck.**

**"1. Look at the sources
2. Look at who owns the media (and his political influence if he has any)
3. Writing style"**

"Yes, the URL address and the newspapers' presentation"

"Yes. As soon as the information displayed is trying to look extremely shocking (often in the title), I get suspicious and look at the article in detail, and the origin of the article, what newspaper? What reputation does this newspaper have?"

"Often, there are very catchy titles, that generate strong emotions, that I think that I've noticed thanks to CrossCheck. Or else images that are particularly striking too, I think I've become more aware following CrossCheck."

"Hoaxes spread very easily. CrossCheck enabled me to develop a critical mind towards the media which I used to follow blindly."



However, other accounts also seem to point at a potential media literacy backfire effect. It has been shown that individuals who are asked to determine the credibility of information sources, and do not have enough critical research skills, may end up distrusting the media in general and further reinforcing their own beliefs⁴³. While a majority of respondents could not recall any examples in particular of debunks that they considered as problematic, some did express a blind scepticism towards the ‘media’ in general **by including involuntary mistakes from trusted media brands in the category of ‘fake’⁴⁴:**

"CrossCheck has taught me to distrust everything"

"I’ve seen a lot of misinformation on the websites of your contributors (le Monde/l’Express/le Point...) often showing as imprecisions, voluntary omissions or distortion"

SOCIAL REINFORCEMENT

In addition to providing fact-checking skills, and tools to critically appraise online content, most significant is evidence **that the project helped respondents convince peers with opposing views who had been influenced by cases of disinformation.**

Academics have highlighted the fact that the reach of fact-checking is limited to a small audience that is already inclined to it, and that people do not use fact-checking services if they are not motivated enough⁴⁵.

The importance of endorsement as a factor of credibility when people make sense of information has also been researched, as well as the fact that peers and family represent important actors in the evaluation of information⁴⁶.

Furthermore, it has been shown that the esteem of people

is reduced when they share false information⁴⁷. But, at the same time, people trust news shared by others they know⁴⁸. Respondents’ answers support these conclusions.

According to their accounts, the respondents had witnessed peers from their own intimate social circles spreading misinformation, both in face to face conversations and digitally. Many also described that they talked about CrossCheck and shared its debunks with their social circle.

Some respondents explained they wanted to make sure they weren’t sharing false information, and wanted to prevent friends and family from doing the same, due to its social consequences.

As one respondent explained:
"[I]t enabled me to realize that some stuff was false, and therefore at my own level to relay real info and not false info, more in that sense. It was useful for me to not look like a loser by ditching information that is fake."

And another explained:
"Unfortunately, the majority of my friends and family don’t know [about the] CrossCheck, but I’ve already explained to several people how CrossCheck works and its importance in a context where lies are disseminated as "alternative facts".

Overall, respondents highlighted the usefulness of CrossCheck when debating face-to-face with peers who had been convinced by disinformation, as it provided them with factual, researched arguments and a general sense of credibility.

As another respondent stated: "[CrossCheck] enabled me to open a debate, and to have a couple of arguments during a conversation".

And another explained: "[CrossCheck is useful because it] enables people to debunk rumours with concrete arguments and thus fight against those who create and peddle them with dishonest intentions"

CrossCheck’s debunks appears to have provided some audience members with the confidence to confront peers who thought differently. Thus, even if CrossCheck’s direct online audience was limited to individuals who we would expect to consume fact-checking, the project seems to have reached beyond this audience.

As one respondent admitted:
"[I]t enabled me to share the debunks to all my contacts.

Since the credibility of the website is recognized, and it’s widely shared, I genuinely think that it has had an impact on the election."

Through its image of neutrality and accuracy, CrossCheck was used by audience members as a source to debunk their peers’ misconceptions. While the type and sample size of this study are inadequate to provide definite insights on whether or not CrossCheck effectively countered the impact of disinformation, some respondents went so far as to say their casual debates had convinced their peers to change their vote:

"Many people around me were convinced that [misinformation] was true before I demonstrated the opposite to them. This changed their voting intention."

⁴³ _ Boyd, d. (Jan. 5, 2017) Did Media Literacy Backfire, Data and Society: Points <https://points.datasociety.net/didmedia-literacy-backfire-7418c084d88d>

⁴⁴ _ This is a general trend : See Nielsen R.K., Graves L., (2017). "News you don't believe": Audience perspectives on fake news. Reuters Institute.

⁴⁵ _ Written evidence submitted by InformAll and the CILIP Information Literacy Group to the UK Parliamentary Inquiry on Fake News, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/culture-media-and-sport-committee/fake-news/written/48215.html>

⁴⁶ _ See Metzger, M. J., Flanagin, A. J., Medders, R. B. (2010). Social and Heuristic Approaches to Credibility Evaluation Online. Journal of Communication, 60(3), 413-439 and Messing, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2014). Selective exposure in the age of social media: Endorsements trump partisan source affiliation when selecting news online. Communication Research, 41(8), 1042-1063.

⁴⁷ _ Marchi, R. (2012). With Facebook, blogs, and fake news, teens reject journalistic "objectivity". Journal of Communication Inquiry, 36(3), 246-262.

⁴⁸ _ Lazer, D., Baum, M., Grinberg, N., Friedland, L., Joseph, K., Hobbs, W. and Mattsson, C. (2017) Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action. Harvard. Available at: <https://shorensteincenter.org/combatingfake-news-agenda-for-research/>

RESPONSIBILITY

When asked about who they thought to be responsible for the spread of disinformation, the respondents showed a surprising diversity of opinions but, still, a general scepticism towards French politicians and the mainstream media was observed. A few respondents thought that misinformation was caused when journalists were not objective enough and too dependent on '*media moguls*'.

Others blamed '*naïve*' citizens and it should be noted that respondents were highly aware of **the consequences caused by a lack of media literacy and education in general.**

Nevertheless, **the majority of respondents identified the '*fachosphère*' as the main agent of disinformation**, which they defined as a network of far-right websites that tend to spread a large amount of false news and/or propaganda and include websites such as Fdesouche and personalities such as Alain Soral. These websites emerged regularly in the monitoring processes used by the CrossCheck project editors, and their content was regularly debunked.

However, what is interesting is that, when the respondents were asked to define the aforementioned '*fachosphère*', some produced answers that illustrate attitudes towards these sites are more nuanced than might be expected.

One respondent explained:
"If we listen to the media and the general idea about the "*fachosphère*", we quickly understand that you're part of the "*fachosphère*" as soon as you're a nationalist. I don't particularly know the websites of the "*fachosphère*", and if what they say is coherent and respectful to their ideas without calling for hate towards the others, then let them do what they want".



AUDIENCE DIVERSITY

CrossCheck's audience was more diverse politically than expected. Most of the respondents were politically moderate and mostly convinced that there is a need for verification by the mainstream media. However, other respondents did not seem to be the type of audience you would expect for a fact-checking initiative from the '*mainstream media*'. For example, some respondents toned down the danger of the '*fachosphère*', the vast network of loosely connected, far-right online groups and websites – more or less related to Front National.

They also blamed both political extremes for disinformation, and expressed distrust toward established journalism.

We think it is noteworthy that people who identified as anti-establishment, and even openly mentioned far right-tendencies, stated that they knew and trusted CrossCheck, read several debunks in their entirety, and took the time to thoroughly answer **the 50 questions on an online survey**. One respondent who identified themselves as far-right even added an extra commentary at the end of the form, stating: '*Happy that CrossCheck exists*'.

Two elements are worth mentioning as to why CrossCheck was followed by some people.

One respondent mentioned that he learnt about the project via a local newspaper he already trusted. Several insisted on the importance of CrossCheck's independence, which was seen as a factor of credibility. This confirms the usefulness of having local media participating in the project, and the positive reception the media alliance had even among those who distrust the mostly Parisian mainstream media. Thus, while journalists were reasonably worried about how this alliance would be interpreted, and also expressed doubts regarding the '*bubble*' in which CrossCheck may have been situated, the audience's accounts would seem **to suggest that the project's main principles were understood by, and useful to, a wider audience.**

5 / IMPROVEMENT AND APPRAISAL

The respondents provided some indications as to how CrossCheck could improve. This includes above all the necessity to continue the project, due to the fact that they were still witnessing the spread of disinformation.

They also mentioned the necessity of diversifying the topics of verification, and possibly debunking some cases of disinformation in a more detailed, visual, and researched way. Furthermore, many highlighted a need to provide better visibility for CrossCheck's content. Suggestions included replying to the questions asked on the website, sending more newsletters, and increasing the project's visibility on social media. The audience also suggested making the website more navigable and user-friendly by creating categories, an app, or a browser extension. However, they all recognized that CrossCheck did its job well, considering that it was new and innovative, as illustrated by the following quotes:

"Your work is vital for the good health of democracy, keep going!"

"Thank you for your work that is saving our societies"

"I find that your project is so important, we need to find a way to deflate all this fake news quickly! Unfortunately the rational and objective arguments may not be enough... it might be needed to dig other tracks based also on the emotional and viral side... Good luck to you on this beautiful project! I am available in case you want discuss again."

"Keep going, you are doing excellent work, very enriching and necessary to those citizens who don't always understand of other countries or groups of influence"

8

What kind of discussions did CrossCheck generate on Facebook, Twitter, in the media and from the audience?

After conducting the qualitative analyses of the journalists' work during CrossCheck, and of the audience's interpretation of it, we carried out a discourse analysis of the online textual interactions related to the project.

We looked at four different groups of texts: the questions and requests submitted by the public via CrossCheck's website, comments on CrossCheck's Facebook page, tweets that mentioned CrossCheck, and, finally, articles from the French press that mentioned CrossCheck.

The lexicometric processing of these four samples provides a general perspective on the discourses generated by and about CrossCheck, in the French media and among audience members. Thus it helps locate the main themes associated with the project and allows to verify the validity of some findings of the first two studies.

8.1 / **ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS SUBMITTED BY USERS ON CROSSCHECK'S WEBSITE**

One of CrossCheck's original features consisted of mobilizing the audience by having them report election-related rumours that were spreading online and could be considered as disinformation. These questions complemented the monitoring of social media carried out by project editors. The questions submitted by the audience provided an overview of the claims and fabricated content that the audience wanted verifying, a sign that they were gaining traction. Therefore these questions provide **a sense of the types of disinformation a portion of French web users were mostly worried about during the election campaign.**

The number of questions shows the success of the project. Indeed, between February 28 and June 16, 2017, **621 questions were posted on the platform,** including 321 between April 10 and May 7 (*which represents an average of 12 per day during this period*). Given the project's innovative nature, and the challenging task of gaining visibility at the beginning of the project, this rhythm is substantial.

In addition, the qualitative analysis of the questions shows that a large majority are authentic requests for the verification of rumors. Very few appear to be spam or irrelevant.

Finally, the grammar and syntax of the questions are in most cases correct, at least more so than what is usually found in the comment section of news websites. On the one hand, this indicates the authors' relatively high level of education.

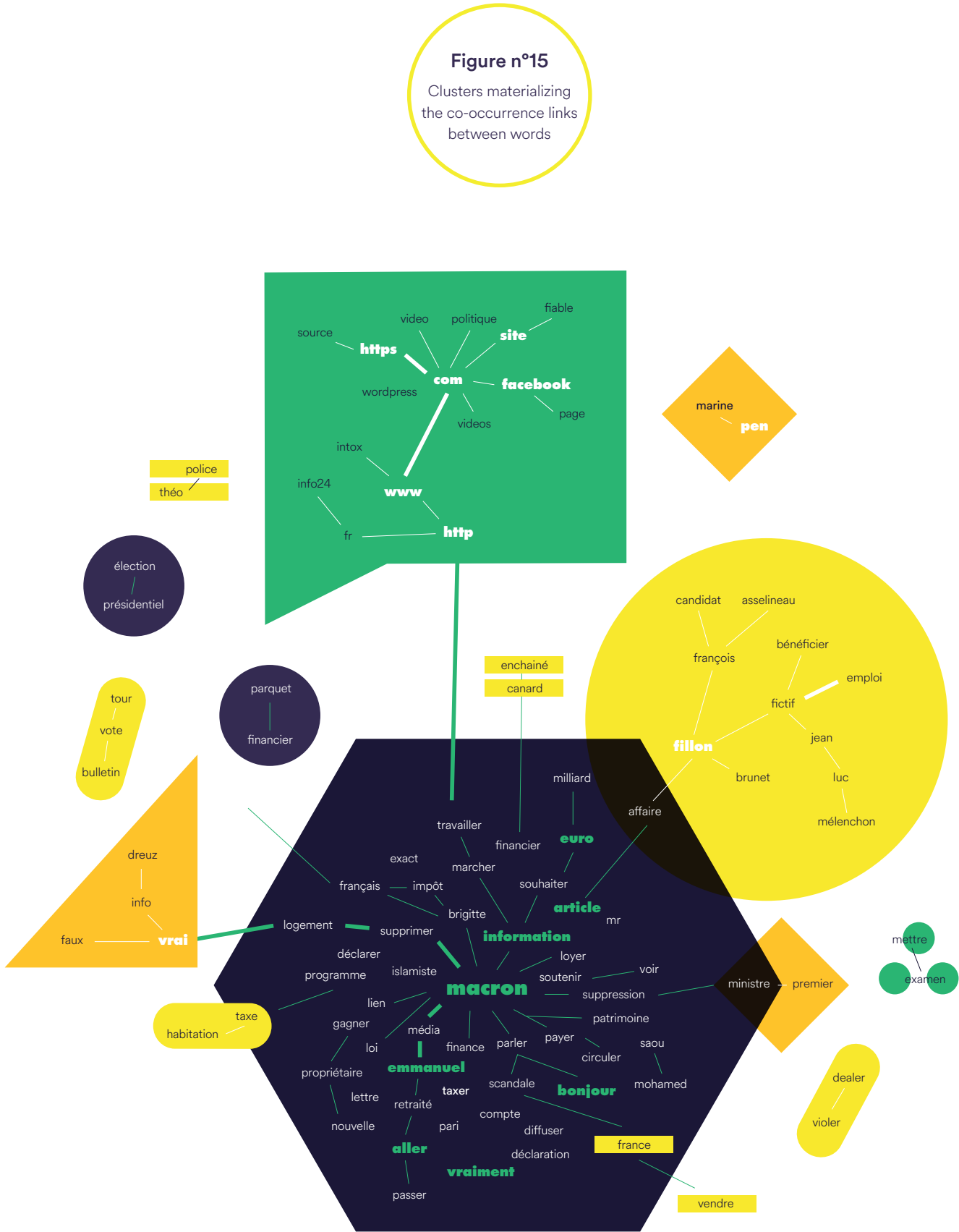
"On the other hand, it suggests a certain care and conscientiousness was invested in the drafting of questions, which highlights the importance assigned to the endeavor".

Lastly, a large number of individuals who submitted a question provided their first and last names on the platform, thus taking eponymous responsibility for their demand.

SIMILARITY ANALYSIS

Figure n°15

Clusters materializing the co-occurrence links between words



The above word similarity analysis which graphically depicts the words present in questions submitted by the audience (Figure 15), **clearly shows the predominance of Emmanuel Macron compared to other candidates' names, words or terms.** The analysis confirms there was an overrepresentation of questions connected to Emmanuel Macron (35.5%). Comparatively, **only 8.2%** of the questions were about Marine Le Pen. Another important group of questions is the one that mentions sources and ask for verification, or that simply signal suspicious websites such as Eurocalifat and Dreuz.info that are prominent members of the 'fachosphere'. This represents 32% of the questions.

2 / ANALYSIS OF OF THE COMMENTS POSTED ON CROSSCHECK'S FACEBOOK PAGE

CrossCheck's reports were systematically published on the project's Facebook page, which was quite successful, thanks in particular to the promotional budget offered by Facebook. **The project's official page gathered 180,598 followers, 347,800 engagements (likes, shares, comments), and 1,207,642 video views (See Appendices for details).** We were able to collect and process 4,532 comments posted on 94 different posts between February 6 and May 25, 2017, including 4,286 during the most intense period of the campaign between April 12 and May 6 — **the key period of the election's first round.**

Figure n°16

Word cloud of Facebook comments

The word cloud which graphically depicts the words present in the comments (Figure 16) clearly shows the overrepresentation of the words Macron (*which resonates with the former corpus*) and France. Marine Le Pen and the Front National are also quite present.

A closer look at the different topics and the number of comments enables us to better understand the debates that took place in the comments on CrossCheck's Facebook page and to refine the previous results. **The four most commented topics are the following:**

- 1** Macron pressing charges against those that peddle the rumour of his alleged offshore account (456 comments initially posted, 299 published after moderation).⁴⁹
- 2** A violent incident in a Russian hospital that supposedly happened in France (399 comments posted, 166 published).
- 3** The Front National allegedly financed by drug money (363 comments, 70 published).
- 4** The alleged orders given to journalists by the French public TV chief to support Macron (353 comments, 124 published).

⁴⁹ _ For a global view on social media metrics see Appendices. The total number of Facebook comments mentioned in this section might differ due to different periods included in the sample.

These four posts, from a total of 94, attracted 1,571 comments out of the total of 4,532, which represents 34%. We can therefore note a significant concentration of comments on a small number of topics.

The analysis shows that Emmanuel Macron represents the main topic of comments on Crosscheck's Facebook page. He was notably the focus of two out of the four most commented topics.

Further analysis of the comments shows that the production of CrossCheck assumed a truly political function, even if its scope was limited. Indeed, it enabled its audience to argue in a direct way against disinformation and especially far-right propaganda in discussions about the election that took place on Facebook.

This confirms earlier findings about the fact that the project became a useful tool for those looking for arguments against disinformation, significantly expanding its reach. Nevertheless, even though **most of the discussion on Facebook was about the content of the debunks there was also some debate about the nature and the objectives of the project.** Some commentators denounced a political '*mainstream*' bias in this cross-media alliance and also the fact that Facebook '*imposed*' the presence of CrossCheck in their newsfeed via sponsored posts.

3/ ANALYSIS OF TWEETS AND PRESS ARTICLES ABOUT CROSSCHECK

Beyond Facebook, CrossCheck was also present on Twitter, where it was the subject of a significant number of tweets, and also benefited from a large press coverage, especially from project partners.

For this analysis, we have used a sample⁵⁰ of 2,063 tweets 50 posted between February 1 and June 27, 2017 by 1,277 different accounts and a sample of 261 articles mentioning the term CrossCheck, published between January 7 and June 12, 2017, by 83 different French news media⁵¹ (*online and print*).

50 _ This corpus was kindly provided by Denis Teyssou from AFP, and we would like to warmly thank him for it.

51_ The corpus of 261 articles was retrieved from the databases Factiva and Europresse.

Figure n°17

Word cloud
of tweets



Globally, the analysis of the Twitter corpus and the media coverage of the project denote that **the presence of CrossCheck outside of its own space has been relatively important.**

It was essentially focused on two important topics: the presentation and explanation of the project during the launching period (*What are its objectives? Who are its participants?*) and discussion and analysis of numerous cases of debunked, viral disinformation.

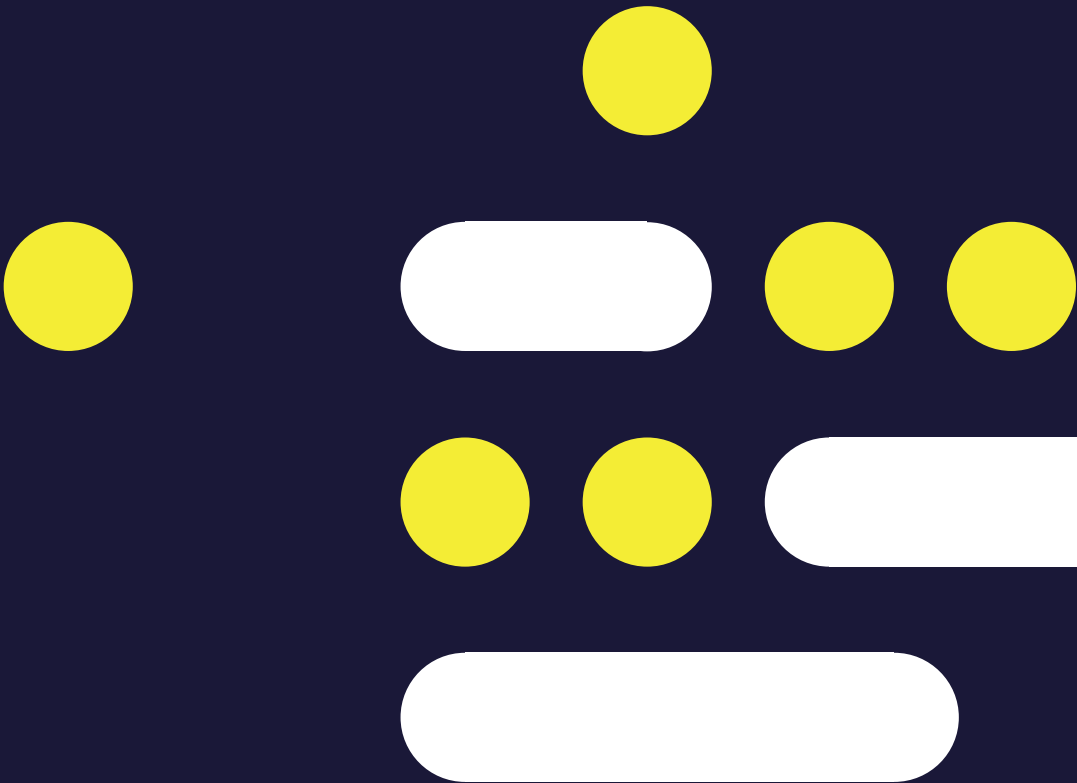
What was particularly salient in this coverage was the importance of the fact that Google and Facebook backed the project, which can be linked to the discussion about their responsibility in the spreading of disinformation, and also **the cross-media alliance that was at the heart of the project.**

Conclusion

This research is a first attempt to understand the impact of the CrossCheck project on the journalists that participated in the project and the people who consumed its output. **The next phase of research around the project will be published by Lisa Fazio shortly.** She is running experiments around the visual icons used as part of the stories, testing whether they were effective in helping audiences gain a greater understanding of rumours and fabricated content. Did the icons help or hinder audience understanding? Another piece of research is analysing the visuals and memes that surfaced during the project as a way of building a typology of visual, election-related disinformation.

This project was a first of its kind and all elements require systematic analysis so we can learn what works. CrossCheck has already inspired a similar collaborative project in Japan, and there is a responsibility to understand the implications of these types of projects **on the news industry as well as audiences**, if it is to be replicated further.

APPENDICES



1 / LIST OF INTERVIEWEES (JOURNALISTS)

Name	Media	Role during CrossCheck
Adrien Sénécat	Verification Specialist / Les Décodeurs	Journalist
Alexandre Capron	Verification Specialist / Les Observateurs / France 24	Journalist
Amandine Ambregni	Web Journalist / AFP	Journalist
Anaïs Condomines	Journalist / LCI	Journalist
Clémence Lemaistre	Web Editor in Chief / Les Echos	Journalist
David Dieudonné	Lead / Google News Lab	Organizer
Delphine Bernard-Bruls	CFJ Student/ Libération	Project Editor
Denis Teyssou	MediaLab Lead / AFP	Journalist
Gaël Favennec	Sports Journalist / AFP	Journalist
Grégoire Lemarchand	Deputy Editor in Chief Social Media / AFP	Journalist
Juliette Mauban-Nivol	CFJ Student / BuzzFeed	Project Editor
Louis Pillot	CFJ Student/ Rue89 Strasbourg	Project Editor
Margaux Gatty	LSE Student / BBC	Project Editor
Natalia Gallois	Reporter and Deputy Director / Explicite	Journalist
Samuel Laurent	Lead / Les Décodeurs	Journalist
Walid Salem	Walid Salem Founder and Managing Editor / Rue89 Bordeaux	Journalist



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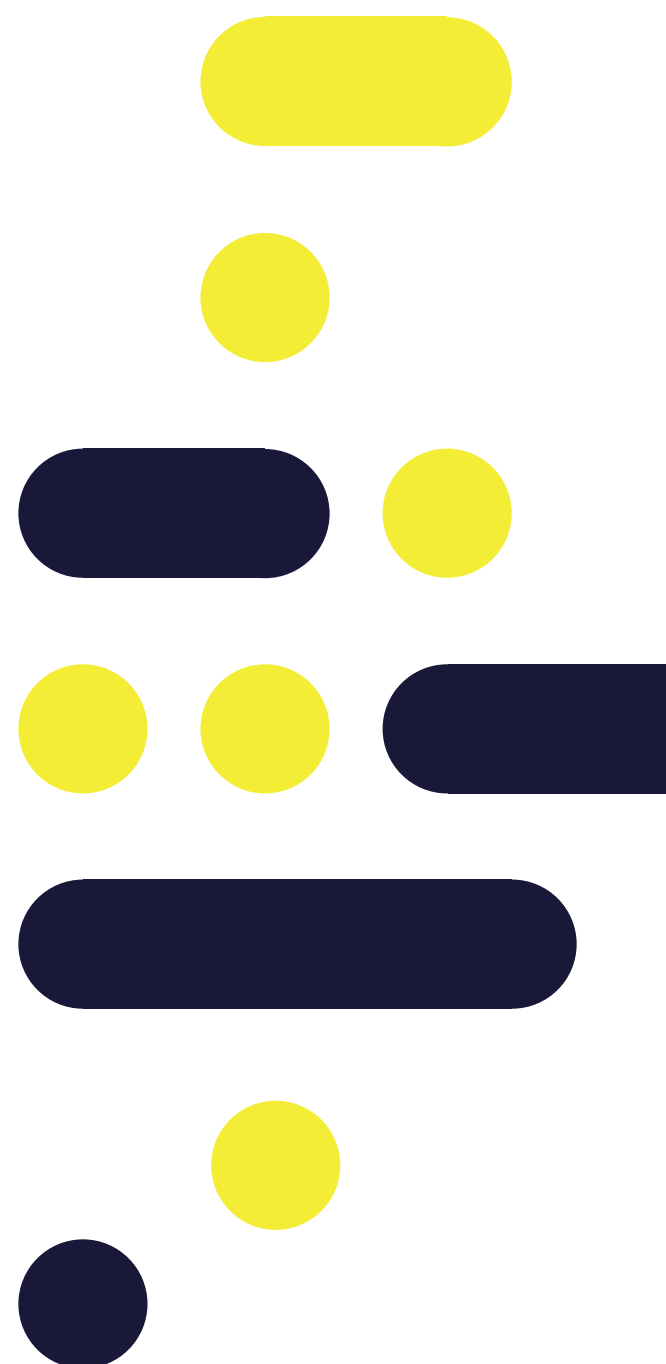
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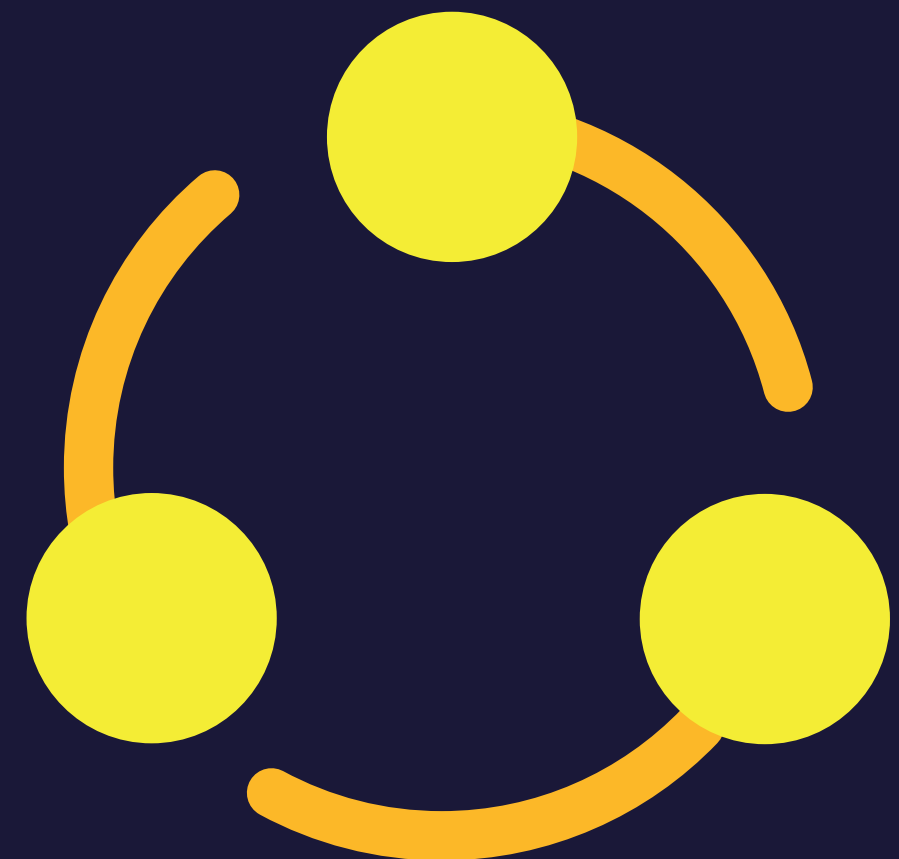
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