



D1.2 Report on impact of disinformation campaigns (v.1)

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1. Introduction	3
1.1 The Role of Apache	3
1.2 Approach	3
1.3 Apache published 6 articles and several blogs on CrossOver in the first seven months of the project.	4
2. Report on impact of disinformation	5
2.1 The impact of foreign influence	5
2.1.1 The pressure from France and the Netherlands: Freedom Convoy	5
2.1.2 The pressure from Chinese state-controlled media: coverage of the war in Ukraine	6
2.1.3 The pressure from Chinese state-controlled media: coverage of the region Xinjiang related to the Uyghurs	7
2.2 Threats and emotions	8
2.2.1 Warning function: Flemish far right MP on Odysee	8
2.2.2 Warning function: Wanted, Ukraine women	9
2.2.3 Trying to understand the attention economy: emotions first	9
2.2.3.1 Lack of political support to a government campaign	9
2.2.3.2 Outrage about repatriation of ISIS women	10
3. Public communication activities	11



1. Introduction

The scope of CrossOver project is to observe and analyse the algorithms of social networks against disinformation and assess its impact. Therefore CheckFirst designed and created dashboards for monitoring and analysing the recommendation algorithms of social networks to expose malicious actors and actions.

The dashboards are the foundation of the monitoring and investigating activities on Google Search prediction, Twitter Trends, Reddit, YouTube search & suggest, Facebook posts, Google News and Odysee. The idea behind the creation of those dashboards is to understand how the recommended algorithms could lead users to be confronted with disinformation while they are navigating on those platforms and being pushed by algorithms.

1.1 The Role of Apache

The task of Apache consists of gathering information. Check First provides pre-analysed data through the dashboards. EU Disinfo Lab reveals data about disinformation as well. And together we analyse the info, investigate the instigators, actors, narratives and targets and, finally, disclose what we have learned and unveiled in collaboration with Savoir Devenir. Outputs of the investigations are published on Apache's and Crossover's websites and are disseminated through consortium partner's.

1.2 Approach

During the first seven months of the project journalists and researchers of Apache and EU DisinfoLab analysed the data displayed in the dashboards. They received support from the experts of Check First.

Any research starts from the data that the dashboards provide. It goes without saying that CrossOver members provide topics for the dashboards. These topics depend on current events. The picked keywords reflect central topics in the public debate, some topics are of a temporary nature, others have a long-lasting dimension. In short, newsworthiness is a key benchmark for initiating an investigation.

Then investigative journalism techniques and open source investigation techniques are employed to analyse the further revealed info. From this conclusions are drawn about the agenda-setting from policy, media and public. Finally, their impact on social and political developments is mapped.



1.3 Apache published 6 articles and several blogs on CrossOver in the first seven months of the project.

Different themes were tackled according to deliverables table T.3. (See OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES. INVESTIGATIONS: 2 on far right, 1 vaccination & health, 1 new platforms)

- the Freedom Convoy initiated by vaccine skeptics¹;
- the impact of disinformation on the Ukrainian war²;
- the disappearance of Russia Today (RT) and its vacuum being filled by the Chinese television CGTN³;
- the activities of the extreme right political party Vlaams Belang on Odysee⁴;
- public reaction to the return of ISIS women in Belgium⁵;
- online Chinese media offensive also reaches Belgium⁶

¹ <https://www.apache.be/2022/02/15/belgische-strijd-voor-vrijheid-importproduct>

² <https://www.apache.be/2022/03/11/desinformatie-over-oekraïneoorlog-kent-veel-gezichten>

³ <https://www.apache.be/2022/04/22/china-turkije-en-rusland-vormen-virtuele-voetvolk-oekraïneoorlog>

⁴ <https://www.apache.be/2022/05/30/dries-van-langenhove-zwerft-odysee-youtube-van-extreemrechts>

⁵ <https://www.apache.be/2022/06/24/nog-niet-uitgespeelde-jihad-lonkt-naar-aanslagen-europa>

⁶ <https://www.apache.be/2022/07/26/online-chinees-mediaoffensief-bereikt-ook-belgie>



2. Report on impact of disinformation

2.1 The impact of foreign influence

2.1.1 The pressure from France and the Netherlands: Freedom Convoy

The first CrossOver investigation was about the arrival of the self-proclaimed Freedom Convoy in Brussels. Project partners paired field research with data research and, as a result, detected quite an alignment between the two. A strongly recommended channel on YouTube was the Russian-controlled RTFrance, followed by France 24, the news channel RMC and Le Parisien. Among the recommended videos, content related to antivax positions prevailed.

On this specific topic the CrossOver investigation concluded with some precision that social media users in Belgium are strongly influenced by neighbouring countries France and the Netherlands, countries that have seen large-scale street protests against elements of the establishment in recent years with the Dutch Boerenprotests and the French Gilets Jaunes. The results of the online data analysis were in fact confirmed by Apache's report in the field. This conclusion was also reported by the Brussels police department who registered around 130 vehicles during that particular day, mainly campers, vans and cars coming from France and the Netherlands.

Also noteworthy, the mobilisation online was extremely large but the group of demonstrators in real life was, on the other hand, very small. Nevertheless, the media coverage was particularly high. This shows how algo-influenced news can be. It showed how foreign media and influencers increase exposure for a topic so that politics and public opinion surf along on a wave of attention. The Freedom Convoy could be considered as an unmistakable example of algorithmic biased agenda-setting.

Publication on Apache: [THE BELGIAN 'FREEDOM CONVOY' IS AN IMPORTED PRODUCT](#)⁷

Date of publication: February 15, 2022.

CrossOver's first episode of the [podcast](#)⁸, produced by Savoir Devenir, is about the Belgian Freedom Convoy: "Les Combattant du Clavier" was released on July 13, 2022.

⁷ <https://www.apache.be/2022/02/15/belgische-strijd-voor-vrijheid-importproduct>

⁸ <https://crossover.social/podcast/crossover-podcast-episode-1-the-keyboard-fighters/>



2.1.2 The pressure from Chinese state-controlled media: coverage of the war in Ukraine

In this regard, the dashboards proved to be a valuable journalistic verification tool. It was possible to determine which media (e.g. RT France) were strongly recommended when it came to the Freedom Convoy. The influence of foreign media (France and the Netherlands) was particularly striking. Field work conducted by Apache and data from the dashboards seemed to correspond to a large extent.

The project came to the same conclusion regarding the coverage of the war in Ukraine, in particular, that Belgian media were hardly or not at all among the recommendations. Three months after the Russian invasion in Ukraine the CrossOver project examined what information about the war was available to Belgian YouTube users. This study was based on the search term "Russia" and results from a recommendation algorithm zooming in on the key question: are YouTube's algorithms addicted to state-controlled media?

The trigger for the data study is a measure that took effect in early March, namely the European ban on state-controlled international news television networks Russia Today and Sputnik. Both media outlets have strong ties to the Kremlin. To curb Russian disinformation about the invasion of Ukraine, the European Council decided to take the channels off the air, which led to discussions about censorship and press freedom. Yet virtually none of the Belgian media show up among the recommended views. Foreign media dominate the coverage of the Russian invasion in Ukraine.

The foreign dominance does not come from an unsuspected source: CGTN Français, Chinese state-controlled media broadcasted internationally. CGTN (China Global Television Network) is part of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. CGTN filled the gap left by RT in no time. So a medium under Russian control seems to be replaced by its Chinese counterpart. This raises some questions about YouTube's recommendation algorithm. CrossOver researchers reached YouTube for comments but to no avail. YouTube did not comment.

Publication on Apache: "China, Turkije en Rusland vormen het virtuele voetvolk in Oekraïne-oorlog"⁹

Date of publication: April 22, 2022.

Publication on De Tijd: a column in the Flemish newspaper De Tijd, written by Apache reporter Hind Fraihi, referred to the CGTN investigation of CrossOver. "Het algoritme dat nepnieuws groot maakt."¹⁰

Date of publication: June 15, 2022

⁹ <https://www.apache.be/2022/07/26/online-chinees-mediaoffensief-bereikt-ook-belgie>

¹⁰ <https://www.tijd.be/ opinie/column/het-algoritme-dat-nepnieuws-groot-maakt/10395953.html>

2.1.3 The pressure from Chinese state-controlled media: coverage of the region Xinjiang related to the Uyghurs

The Chinese proliferation of CrossOver's monitored social platforms was also shown in the coverage of the region of Xinjiang, more precisely in the period from July 15 to 20. Belgian internet users searching "Xinjiang" on YouTube would be likely to get recommended videos from Chinese state-controlled media, including CGTN, CGTN Français and New China TV. And on Google to search results for "Xinjiang" came from the official state press agency of China and the People's Daily, the newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party.

The majority of CGTN's videos are of promotional content of Chinese President Xi Jinping making a visit to the northwestern region of Xinjiang in mid-July. The findings by CrossOver coincide with a Reuters story on China asking United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet to bury a highly anticipated report on human rights violations against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, set to be published in August.

Xinjiang is traditionally disputed territory where predominantly Muslim Uyghurs are the largest ethnic minority group. In recent years, more and more evidence has surfaced that the Uyghurs are being forced to abandon their religion and culture. The Chinese government is said to have detained Uyghurs in re-education camps. But according to human rights organisations torture, forced labor are alleged.

A long-awaited United Nations report on human rights violations by China against the Uighurs in Xinjiang is falling badly in Beijing. China is trying to stop the presentation of the report, which was planned for August. The online media offensive also targeted Belgian users. This is what CrossOver data research shows.

Publication on Apache: [Online Chinees mediaoffensief bereikt ook België](https://www.apache.be/2022/07/26/online-chinees-mediaoffensief-bereikt-ook-belgie)¹¹.

Date of publication: July 26, 2022.

Publication on Politico: "[Propaganda loves Belgium](https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/china-direct/britain-after-bojo-xi-biden-call-big-bridge-for-croatia/)"¹², the newsletter of Politico Magazine mentioned our research on July 28, 2022.

Conclusion

The dashboards were found to provide relevant insights into spheres of influence that are of (geo)political interest. In our conducted studies, simulating home searches from around the country, we already see that foreign influences displace the domestic ones. The question however is how Chinese media manage to influence Belgian users' searches.

¹¹ <https://www.apache.be/2022/07/26/online-chinees-mediaoffensief-bereikt-ook-belgie>

¹² <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/china-direct/britain-after-bojo-xi-biden-call-big-bridge-for-croatia/>

2.2 Threats and emotions

2.2.1 Warning function: Flemish far right MP on Odysee

The video platform Odysee gains popularity¹³ in France and the United States. The site claims to be free from censorship and prides itself on freedom of expression.

Away from the big tech corporations, Odysee has emerged as the “YouTube of the far right,” where hate speech blends seamlessly with conspiracy theories. In March CheckFirst launched an enhanced version of the dashboards and added a new platform, Odysee, to the monitoring.

The platform is gaining popularity in Belgium, but during research the CrossOver-team noticed that Belgian member of the parliament Dries Van Langenhove (from the Flemish far right party Vlaams Belang) already has a channel there. Hence CrossOver was able to detect the presence of a politician on questionable media. This article fulfilled a signalling function, as it were: the detection of 'early adaptors' from a certain political corner.

Van Langenhove's video titled "How safe is Belgium?" seemingly innocently features the hashtag Freedomhouse, but it is unequivocally used for the purest conspiracy theories brewed by supporters of Trump, Qanon and a string of anti-vaxxers. Dries Van Langenhove's channel on Odysee is a year old, which might indicate little coincidental timing. In May 2021, Odysee gained some popularity in Belgium after airing the documentary "Hold up," which exposes the alleged manipulation and a global conspiracy surrounding Covid-19.

The successive large-scale crisis from Covid-19 to the war in Ukraine acts as a continued story of fake news. The latest plot twist is the rise of the monkeypox virus, which is breathing new life into conspiracy theories of all kinds, according to our research. It shows how fake news reinvents itself.

Publication on Apache: [Ook Dries Van Langenhove zwerft op Odysee, het 'YouTube van extreemrechts'](#)¹⁴.

Publication date: May 30, 2022.

Publication translated on website DaarDaar: [Dries Van Langenhove a déjà son canal sur Odysee, le « YouTube de l'extrême droite](#)¹⁵.

Publication date: June 1, 2022.

¹³ <https://www.similarweb.com/website/odysee.com/#traffic>

¹⁴ <https://www.apache.be/2022/05/30/dries-van-langenhove-zwerft-odysee-youtube-van-extreemrechts>

¹⁵

<https://daardaar.be/rubriques/politique/dries-van-langenhove-a-deja-son-canal-sur-odysee-le-youtube-de-lextreme-droite/>

2.2.2 Warning function: Wanted, Ukraine women

One month after the Russian invasion, the search term “vrouwen” (women) remained popular on Google search results for Flemish internet users looking for information about Ukraine. With billions of searches, Google often knows how to predict what users are looking for. For the specific search term Ukraine, the term “vrouwen” (women) was hitting highs for weeks now. On March 14, “vrouwen” (women) was even in the top 5 suggestions for Ukraine.

The Russian invasion that began on February 24 led to high interest in Ukrainian women on Google, with more searches in the first week after the war broke out.

CrossOver's dashboards proved to be a barometer of public interest in a well-defined topic. The data results were consistent with warnings from various civil society organisations in Belgium that noted disgusting reports from people who wanted to accommodate Ukrainian women from sexual motives¹⁶.

Publication on Apache: “Oekraïense vrouwen blijven in trek op Google¹⁷”
Publication date: March 24, 2022.

2.2.3 Trying to understand the attention economy: emotions first

2.2.3.1 Lack of political support to a government campaign

Shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Belgian federal government launched the solidarity action under the hashtags Plekvrij and Placedispo. CrossOver mapped the impact of the solidarity action. What did it show?

On social media, former State Secretary for Asylum Sammy Mahdi stood virtually alone in his solidarity action for Ukrainians. The campaign was not a success online, political support was lacking. Despite the federal campaign, Sammy played solo. He did receive support from regional newspaper coverage with high emotional content.

This blog allowed us to zoom in on the impact of a solidarity campaign. It was clearly not pulled by politics but rather by the local media who paid a lot of attention to emotions than to facts in their coverage.

Publication on Apache: “Online speelt Sammy solo¹⁸”.
Publication date: March 24, 2022.

¹⁶ https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220308_97873675

¹⁷ <https://www.apache.be/crossover-blog>

¹⁸ <https://www.apache.be/crossover-blog>

2.2.3.2 Outrage about repatriation of ISIS women

A high emotional content was also seen in the news about the return of ISIS women. The Belgian government announced the repatriation of ISIS women in May. The dashboards show that the topic became trending in twitter in the Flemish region in no time. The news provoked a lot of outrage from the public. The reactions were hardly supported by facts, if at all, but by great misunderstanding. Here, too, the dashboards proved to be a barometer for social media trends

Publication on Apache: “**Nog niet uitgespeelde jihad lonkt naar aanslagen in Europa**”¹⁹.

Publication date: June 24, 2022.

Conclusion

The article about Odysee and the blog about Ukraine women drew attention to social and political trends, which are aimed at detecting changes in society. The investigation detected changes that may indicate a threat from a political angle (a Flemish MP sharing misinformation on a sulphurous platform) and a threat from a public angle (a dubious motive for harbouring women from Ukraine). By gathering data CrossOver managed to identify suspicious content.

¹⁹ <https://www.apache.be/2022/06/24/nog-niet-uitgespeelde-jihad-lonkt-naar-aanslagen-europa>

3. Public communication activities

Besides investigations public debates about CrossOver were initiated.

The first debate was organised on April 7, 2022 on the [Day of Youth journalism in Antwerp](#)²⁰.

The second debate was organised on June 4, 2022 on the [Day of Apache in Ghent](#)²¹.

Also, a CrossOver-related article was mentioned in [News in the Classroom](#)²² (Nieuws in de klas), an initiative of Mediawijs, Flemish News Media, We Media, Media.21 and VRT NWS with the support of the Flemish Government. In addition, a publication of the magazine [de lage landen](#)²³ referred to CrossOver.

²⁰ <https://www.apache.be/2022/04/04/cafe-apache-desinformatie-en-jongeren>

²¹ <https://www.apache.be/dag-van-apache-2022>

²² <https://www.nieuwsindeklas.be/aan-de-slag-met-nieuws-in-de-klas/online-themadossiers/desinformatie/>

²³ <https://www.de-lage-landen.com/article/hind-fraihi-extremistische-propaganda-is-tuk-op-regelmaat>

CROSSOVER

We observe and analyse the algorithms of social networks against disinformation

 crossover.social  [@eucrossover](https://twitter.com/eucrossover)



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