



D1.3 Summary report on investigated disinformation campaigns - v.1

Project name

CrossOver

Grant agreement

LC-01682253

Project coordinator

EU DisinfoLab

Dissemination level

Public

Author

Apache

Edition date

Sep 30, 2022

crossover.social



This project has received funding from the European Union's programme on the financing of Pilot Projects and Preparatory Actions in the field of "Communications Networks, Content and Technology" under grant agreement LC-01682253

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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.

During the first 9 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 CheckFirst.

This Report will summarise the findings of the disinformation investigations carried out during the respective periods of the project. Across the 15 months, at least 4 disinformation campaigns will be investigated in the broad areas of radicalisation and far right disinformation in Belgium (at least 2); vaccination and health disinformation (at least 1); and disinformation on newly emerging platforms (e.g. Parler) and its subsequent spread on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

This report involves the first 9 months of the project CrossOver. In this period we conducted an investigation on the broad areas mentioned above. A point of focus in addition was the war in Ukraine and its consequences, such as the proliferation of Chinese state media on Youtube following the European ban on Russian media outlets Russia Today and Sputnik. This impactful news event does not fall specifically under the intended research areas of radicalisation, far right, vaccination and health disinformation. Given the current events, it goes without saying that we also consider the war in Ukraine as a highly relevant area of investigation.



1.1 Investigated Cases

1.1.1 Investigation according deliverables

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

Different themes were tackled according to deliverables T.3. investigations, with the following goals and themes:

- Two investigations on radicalisation & far right.
- One investigation on vaccination & health.
- One investigation on newly emerging platforms.

During the course of our project we noticed that some areas of research overlapped. This brings us to the following overview in overlapped themes:

- THEME: RADICALISATION & FAR RIGHT + VACCINATION & HEALTH
[The Freedom Convoy initiated by vaccine sceptics¹](#).
- THEME: NEW PLATFORM + FAR RIGHT
[The activities of the extreme right political party Vlaams Belang on Odysee²](#).
- THEME: RADICALISATION
[The public reaction to the return of ISIS women in Belgium³](#).

1.1.2 Additional investigations

ADDITIONAL THEME: COVERAGE WAR UKRAINE

In addition, we also investigated the coverage of the war in Ukraine. This does not involve an initially envisaged theme but was explored due to the current need. Two investigations have been conducted for this purpose so far. A third is ongoing.

1. [The impact of disinformation on the Ukrainian war⁴](#).

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

² <https://www.apache.be/2022/05/30/dries-van-langenhove-zwerft-odysee-youtube-van-extreemrechts>

³ <https://www.apache.be/2022/06/21/xxx-jihadista-xxx>

⁴ <https://www.apache.be/2022/05/03/complotdenkers-great-reset-en-ontvolking-zijn-communiserende-va>
ten



2. The disappearance of Russia Today (RT) and its vacuum being filled by the Chinese television CGTN.⁵
3. Blog Sammy speelt online solo.
4. Blog Wanted Ukraine women.

ADDITIONAL THEME: PROLIFERATION CHINESE STATE CONTROLLED MEDIA

It goes without saying that relevant data events on the dashboards with a high news value are also subject to investigation. Regardless to the goals that are to be achieved in the specified areas related to far right & radicalization and vaccination & health. In July interesting data were noticed on the dashboard. If a Belgian user types the keyword "Xinjiang" in the Youtube Research bar, he would be confronted with videos of CGTN. This led to the following article:

Online Chinese media offensive also reaches Belgium⁶

⁵<https://www.apache.be/2022/04/22/china-turkije-en-rusland-vormen-virtuele-voetvolk-oekraïneoorlog>

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



2. Investigations

2.1. The pressure from France and the Netherlands: Freedom Convoy

AREA OF RESEARCH: VACCINATION & HEALTH AND FAR RIGHT



The first CrossOver investigation was about the arrival of the self-proclaimed Freedom Convoy in Brussels that planned to blockade the capitale. That was the intention of the Freedom Convoy, which was to occupy squares and tunnels with column-length vehicles on 15 February in protest against the coronavirus measures.

Apache went to the protest and made a report of the convoy, supported by data from CrossOver's dashboard. These are the conclusions in a nutshell:

- The CrossOver survey shows that this so-called Freedom Convoy was mainly a much discussed topic in French-speaking Belgium. We monitored subjects related to the Freedom Convoy on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google Search, Google News and Reddit. A first analysis showed that content about the protest ride to Brussels was mainly fed by French (social) media.
- A strongly recommended channel on YouTube was the Russian-controlled Russia Today France, followed by France 24, the news channel RMC and Le Parisien. Among the recommended videos, content related to antivax positions prevailed.
- On Twitter, too, the hashtag Parijs/Paris was among the trending topics the weekend before the manifestation. For the "Freedom Convoy," or more appropriately the "Convoi de la Liberté," we saw that French-speaking users of the social media we examined in Belgium are decidedly French-oriented. The Flemish media users in Belgium were on the other hand strongly influenced by neighbouring country the Netherlands, with recommendations on YouTube from the newspaper The Telegraph, Het Parool and vaccine sceptic Donna Van der Horst.

Apache was also able to establish these dashboards results 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 on the Facebook groups we noticed Flemish and Dutch accounts with ties to far right groups like “Vecht tegen Onrecht” active in the low countries.

Publication on Apache: [THE BELGIAN ‘FREEDOM CONVOY’ IS AN IMPORTED PRODUCT](https://www.apache.be/2022/02/15/belgische-strijd-voor-vrijheid-importproduct)⁷.

Publication date: February 15, 2022

CrossOver’s first episode of the [podcast](https://crossover.social/podcast/crossover-podcast-episode-1-the-keyboard-fighters/)⁸, produced by Savoir Devenir, is about the Belgian Freedom Convoy: “[Les Combattant du Clavier](https://crossover.social/podcasts/)”⁹ was released on July 13, 2022.

2.2. Flemish far right MP on Odysee

RESEARCH AREA: NEWLY EMERGING PLATFORM + FAR RIGHT

In March 2022 CheckFirst launched an enhanced version of the dashboards and added a new platform, Odysee, to the monitoring. Not without reason. The video platform Odysee, founded in 2020 by LBRY Inc., is gaining popularity in France and the United States. Odysee’s attractiveness will also be partly related to its cryptocurrency-based source of income. 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. The emerging platform is even regarded by experts as a virtual training ground for a young generation of right-wing extremists, precisely because of the more lax regulation and virtually absent monitoring.

The platform is gaining popularity in Belgium but during the 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 but a Belgian member of the parliament already has a channel there.



In May 2021 Odysee gained popularity in Belgium after the broadcast of the documentary Hold-up, which denounces the alleged manipulation and a worldwide conspiracy about Covid-19. That documentary was previously censored by the Vimeo platform, and that's exactly where the sting is: it is wrong to assume that by deleting accounts, content, pages and groups on the major social media platforms, the spreading of disinformation will end. On the contrary, conspiracies, fake news and hate speech are only getting louder on alternative social media outlets like Telegram, Odysee and Bitchute. Alt-tech, as it's called.

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/>

⁹ <https://crossover.social/podcasts/>

It shows that censorship doesn't always solve the problem, but sometimes moves it and even transforms messages of extremism and disinformation with the aim of stimulating a wide range of triggers that can stimulate affective polarisation. This is a form of polarisation that is more emotionally driven than ideological.

According to a recent study by the Flemish Peace Institute, affective polarisation is of a problematic nature, because it means that citizens increasingly personally dislike people with opposing views. The report of the Flemish Peace Institute states that “Due to affective polarization people who do not have strong opinions withdraw from the debate and feel politically alienated.”

And Odysee certainly looks like that: it is the lost land of alienated and suspicious dropouts. In addition, the successive large-scale crises from Covid-19 to the war in Ukraine is a continuing story of fake news. The latest plot twist on Odysee was the rise of the monkeypox virus, which is breathing a new life into conspiracy theories of all kinds, according to research from CrossOver. It shows how fake news reinvents itself.

Publication on Apache: [Ook Dries Van Langenhove zwerft op Odysee, het 'YouTube van extreemrechts'](#)¹⁰.

Publication date: 30 May, 2022.

Publication translated on website DaarDaar: [Dries Van Langenhove a déjà son canal sur Odysee, le « YouTube de l'extrême droite](#)¹¹.

Publication date: 1 June, 2022.

2.3. The public reaction to the return of ISIS women in Belgium

AREA RESEARCH: RADICALISATION

The Belgian government announced the repatriation of ISIS women in May 2022. It was the second repatriation of women and children of Islamic State (ISIS) to Belgium and it provoked a lot of criticism. There is a lack of understanding, mistrust and a fear of new attacks. The return is stirring up public opinion on social media, as shown by CrossOver. The dashboards show that the topic became trending in twitter in the Flemish region in no time. The news provoked a lot of

¹⁰ <https://www.apache.be/2022/05/30/dries-van-langenhove-zwerft-odysee-youtube-van-extreemrechts>

¹¹ <https://daardaar.be/rubriques/politique/dries-van-langenhove-a-deja-son-canal-sur-odysee-le-youtube-de-lextreme-droite/>

outrage from the public. The reactions were hardly supported by facts, if at all, but by great misunderstanding, disinformation and a fear of a new wave of terror.

Is the fear legitimate? How likely is a terrorist attack? Apache asked the question to a jihad expert Pieter Van Ostaeyen, researcher at KU Leuven university, who considers the general threat to attacks increasing. "Partly because of a new player in the jihadi landscape, who emerged in February this year," says Van Ostaeyen. "Specifically, Hurras Al-Tawheed, a group that calls for new attacks in Europe and seeks to unify al-Qaeda and Islamic State."



Hurras Al-Tawheed called in the English-language magazine Mujahedeen in the West (Fighters in the West) to attack embassies and courts, among other things. An alliance between Islamic State and al-Qaeda could mean a combined strength. In the latest magazine Al Naba, ISIS made another warm recommendation to perform the hijra, Islamic migration, to Africa. It is an appeal to a jihadist journey long unmade since ISIS lost territory in Iraq and Syria.

Still, Van Ostaeyen considers the likelihood of Western fighters leaving for Africa small. "Crossing the border into Syria via Turkey is a lot easier than crossing Africa. Moreover, no whites or Arabs are to be found in ISIS propaganda material in Africa. Although some caution is still required. After all, about 120 Belgian foreign terrorist fighters are still missing. You can be sure that some of them are fighting in Africa. In addition, there is also an imminent threat from ISIS in Afghanistan, a magnet for Western jihadis in the nineties," according to Van Ostaeyen. Finally, says Van Ostaeyen, we should also keep an eye on the Syrian fighters captured here who will soon be released. Through an interview with an expert Apache wanted to nuance the feeling of threat about jihadism, as well as debunk disinformation about it.

Publication on Apache: "[Nog niet uitgespeelde jihad lonkt naar aanslagen in Europa](#)"¹².
Publication date: 24 June, 2022.

2.4 Coverage of the war in Ukraine

2.4.1 The pressure from Chinese state-controlled media

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? Conclusion: in the

¹² <https://www.apache.be/2022/06/21/xxx-jihadista-xxx>

coverage of the war in Ukraine Belgian media were hardly or not at all among the recommendations. Foreign media dominated the coverage of the Russian invasion in Ukraine. A dominant media player proved to be 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 Russia Today (RT) in no time. So a media under Russian control seems to be replaced by its Chinese counterpart. This raises some questions about YouTube's recommendation algorithm: does YouTube mainly recommend videos on Russia from CGTN Français because the Chinese channel has significant production on the topic? Is it because of the huge increase of views of CGTN Français or because the videos were recently uploaded? How CGTN manages to gain prominence on YouTube remains a mystery, because CrossOver researchers reached YouTube for comments but to no avail. YouTube did not comment on it.

Publication on Apache: "China, Turkije en Rusland vormen het virtuele voetvolk in Oekraïne-oorlog"¹³

Publication date: 22 April, 2022.

¹³ <https://www.apache.be/2022/04/22/china-turkije-en-rusland-vormen-virtuele-voetvolk-oekraïneoorlog>

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](#)."¹⁴

Publication date: June 15, 2022

2.4.2 Wanted, Ukraine women

The Russian invasion that began on 24 February led to high interest in Ukrainian women on Google, with more searches in the first week after the war broke out. The CrossOver team noticed this in the Flemish region of Belgium.

The Dutch search term "vrouwen" (women) remained popular on Google search results for Flemish internet users looking for information about Ukraine. For the specific search term Ukraine, the term "vrouwen" (women) was hitting highs for weeks now. On 14 March, "vrouwen" (women) was even in the top 5 suggestions for Ukraine.

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 motives.

Publication on Apache: "[Oekraïense vrouwen blijven in trek op Google](#)"¹⁵

Publication date: 24 March, 2022.

2.4.3 The impact of the federal campaign for refugees

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 on social media. It became apparent that former State Secretary for Asylum Sammy Mahdi had no allies in the government, nor in local politics. He stood virtually alone in his solidarity action for Ukrainians.

The campaign was not a success online, political support was lacking. He only received support from regional newspaper coverage with high emotional content. This small investigation allowed us to zoom in on the impact of a solidarity campaign for refugees. It was clearly not pulled by politics but rather by the local media who were purely concerned by public emotions rather than facts.

Publication on Apache: "[Online speelt Sammy solo](#)"¹⁶.

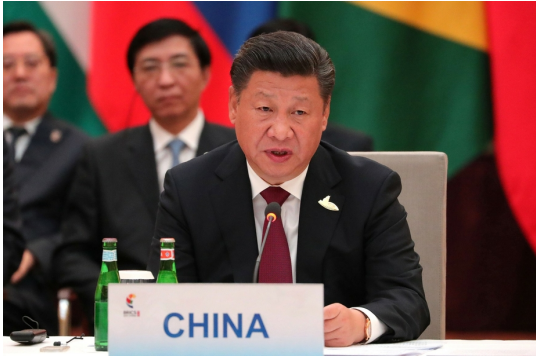
Publication date: 24 March, 2022.

¹⁴ <https://www.tijd.be/opinie/column/het-algoritme-dat-nepnieuws-groot-maakt/10395953.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.apache.be/crossover-blog>

¹⁶ <https://www.apache.be/crossover-blog>

2.5 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 15 to 20 July. 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, 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 2022.

The long-awaited United Nations report on human rights violations by China against the Uighurs in Xinjiang was falling badly in Beijing. Hence, China was trying to reverse the perception by an online media offensive that also targeted Belgian users. This is what CrossOver data research showed.

Publication on Apache: [Online Chinees mediaoffensief bereikt ook België](#)¹⁷

Publication date: 26 July, 2022.

Publication on Politico:

<https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/china-direct/britain-after-bojo-xi-biden-call-big-bridge-for-croatia/>, the newsletter of Politico Magazine mentioned our research on 28 July, 2022.

¹⁷ <https://www.apache.be/2022/07/26/online-chinees-mediaoffensief-bereikt-ook-belgie>

CROSS OVER

We observe and analyse the algorithms of social networks against disinformation

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 This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement LC-01682253

