

# How is built the “legitimate information” on the Covid crisis

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**Abstract:** The Covid crisis was the occasion of a historically unprecedented attempt at global information control. In this article, we analyze the components of this international process of editorial standardization aimed at ensuring the "monopoly of legitimate information" (Bourdieu). This control system is intended to ensure the predominance of the media, and behind the consent of the populations, of a general message that can be summarized as follows: 1) a pandemic threatens the survival of all humanity, 2) there is no therapy to cure the sick, 3) it is necessary to confine the entire population, 4) the delivery will come only from a vaccine. Three sets of actors have convergent interests in ensuring the triumph of this message: 1) Liberal-style Western governments, 2) the tandem formed by WHO and its new major funder the Bill Gates Foundation, 3) the "digital giants" that control not only social networks but also, increasingly, traditional media, 4) those traditional media whose funding increasingly depends on the other three actors.

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In *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, published in 1988, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman explain how the main media actively participate in the propaganda of the political and economic elites on which they have become very largely dependent<sup>1</sup>. Their demonstration is based mainly on the analysis of media coverage of internal protest movements as well as the wars waged by the United States during the second half of the 20th century. They show the growing reliance of journalists on government sources that facilitate their work and their inability to engage in genuine investigations that are always long and costly. They also point out that the media have gradually lost their financial independence. On the one hand, many now belong to large industrial groups and/or

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<sup>1</sup> E. Herman, N. Chomsky, *The making of consent. Media propaganda in democracy*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1988.

billionaires, or survive only thanks to the advertisements that these groups pay them. On the other hand, they receive significant government subsidies. In this dual dependence, the media have lost all capacity to represent a "fourth power". On the contrary, they are structurally influenced by the economic and political powers whose, in fact, worldview and interests they relay. Finally, Herman and Chomsky are studying how this production of information and the dissemination of messages to the population operate. They show that while the basic mechanism is to control the dissemination of information to journalists, another major dimension is to control and use a whole series of falsely independent "experts", be they mere "consultants", specialist journalists, *think tank* facilitators or even academics whose research is otherwise funded by the government or industry. These "experts" behave like "influencers" as we say today.

### **Media control and digital thinking police**

The French situation largely corresponds to this model of double media dependence. On the one hand, there are processes of concentration that make most newspapers, radios and televisions now owned by a few billionaires and other "big families" of commerce and industry<sup>2</sup>. This process of concentration is such that ten companies control 90% of the print media, 55% of the television audience share and 40% of the radio audience share<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, in addition to maintaining a set of public audio-visual media, the state also funds the media companies that depend on them. In 2017 (the last available data), the Ministry of Culture published these amounts of direct aid to the press: 8.3 million euros for *Aujourd'hui en France*, between 5 and 6 million for *Libération*, *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*, between 4 and 5 million for *La Croix*, *Ouest-France* and *L'Humanité* and between 1 and 2 million for about ten titles of the regional daily press as well as for *Le Parisien* and *Journal Du Dimanche*<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, in its 2013 report, the Cour des Comptes proposed an inventory of these aids and drew attention to the case of Agence France Presse (AFP), a huge information-making company for all French and foreign media, which has a legal status as an autonomous public institution and whose state is both one of the governing bodies and the first customer (providing about 40% of the revenues of the agency)<sup>5</sup>. Finally, we note that the press has

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<sup>2</sup> "Médias français: qui possède quoi ?", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> A. Rousseaux, "Le pouvoir d'influence des dix milliardaires qui possèdent la presse française", *Basta Mag*, April 7, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ministère de la Culture, "Tableaux des titres et groupes de presse aidés en 2017", [online].

<sup>5</sup> See the report of the Cour des Comptes, *Les aides de l'Etat à la presse écrite*, Paris, 2013, p. 45sqq.

been largely the beneficiary of the exceptional state aid linked to the current crisis, with almost half a billion euros announced in the recovery plan in August 2020 <sup>6</sup>.

All of these data draw the outlines of a web of links of interest between the economic world (media owners), the political world (their subsidizer) and the editors-in-chief of the media. Many journalists have described these links from the inside <sup>7</sup>. But added to this is the entry of digital multinationals.

Under the threat of a major tax adjustment in 2012, Google had the idea of creating a "print media development fund" in France the following year, in order to "support quality journalism through technology and innovation". In 2019, 21 French media have received grants of 6.4 million euros. The main media sites then flourished with a lot of infographics, big data analysis and *fact check* sections tracking *fake news* and other "conspiracy" sites <sup>8</sup>. One of the most well-known achievements in France is the "Decodex" of the *Le Monde* newspaper, which claims to establish a ranking of the reliability of all news websites.

Google is not the only multinational to exercise this kind of digital thinking policy. Facebook has been doing this since 2017, again through the hunt for *fake news*. <sup>9</sup> Eight French media have signed a financial partnership with Facebook: the daily newspapers *Libération*, *Le Monde* and *20 Minutes*, the *L'Express* weekly, the BFMTV television channel as well as the *AFP* and the public audiovisual service namely the *France Télévisions* group and *France médias monde*. To finance them, Facebook buys advertising space, as well as broadcasts video content from these media via smartphone apps it retains control on and shares the profits generated by the ads <sup>10</sup>.

In France, as in other countries, these operations have been actively supported by the state. In his vows to the press in January 2018, Emmanuel Macron announced a law to combat the spread of false information on the Internet during elections. It will be the 22 December 2018 "anti-manipulation of information" law, adopted despite the opposition of the Senate and with

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<sup>6</sup> F. Schmitt, "La presse obtient à son tour un plan de relance", *Les Echos*, August 27, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> S. Halimi, *Les nouveaux chiens de garde*, Paris, Raisons d'Agir, 1997 ; F. Ruffin, *Les petits soldats du journalisme*, Paris, Les Arènes, 2003 ; P. Merlant, L. Chatel, *Médias. La faillite d'un contre-pouvoir*, Paris, Fayard, 2009 ; A. Ancelin, *Le Monde libre*, Paris, Les liens qui libèrent, 2016 ; L. Mauduit, *Main basse sur l'information*, Paris, Don Quichotte, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> D.-J. Rahmil, " Google finance les médias et dessine les nouvelles tendances du journalisme", *L'ADN*, April 2, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> G. Pépin, "Fake news': Facebook va rémunérer des éditeurs français et fait sa publicité dans la presse", *NextImpact*, April 26, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> L'Observatoire du journalisme, « Tout ce que les éditeurs perdent, Facebook et Google le gagnent », January 21, 2018 [online: <https://www.ojim.fr>]. We know that Facebook's business model is based entirely on advertising: this accounted for 98% of its revenue in 2019 (R. Badouard, *Les nouvelles lois du web*, Op.cit., p. 73).

reservations of interpretation of the Constitutional Council. This law, however, is not limited to information in an electoral context. It gives new powers of censorship to the Higher Council of Audiovisual (CSA) and organizes cooperation with Internet giants (Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter) to combat any production of information that could "disturb public order". This new form of state censorship, and the potential dangers to freedom of expression and information it carries, were at the time criticized in vain by the National Union of Journalists (SNJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Independent Online Press Union (SPIIL), digital freedom associations such as the *Quadrature du Net* and specialized researchers <sup>11</sup>.

It should be noted that this new advance in the information control society is based on a very fragile justification because sociological research does not confirm this centrality of *fake news* in the evolution of a public debate, let alone an election <sup>12</sup>. The major development of *fact checking* therefore has other reasons. Invented initially to verify the veracity of political discourse <sup>13</sup>, this style of journalism is part of an attempt to regain the credibility of the traditional media even when it is the opposite of investigative journalism since it allows to free itself from any investigative process in the field (articles can be written entirely from one's office using a computer and a phone). *Fake checking* is inexpensive. Subsidized by the internet giants, it even becomes very profitable economically. That is its real *raison d'être*.

### **The new clothes of censorship**

The fight against terrorist propaganda and far-right "hateful content" has been at the heart of the development of many censorship techniques developed by these Internet giants in collaboration with states. Then, it gradually spread to other forms of censorship of more political content, to the point of exercising a kind of police of the thought. As Romain Badouard explains, "the major web platforms, because of their oligopolistic position in the information market, exercise this power at three distinct levels. By making speaking tools available, they force them at the same time as they make them possible, by applying a format. Their algorithms, then, order these disparate speeches by distributing the visibility they need to reach their audience. Finally, their moderation devices, which articulate automatic

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<sup>11</sup> L. Haéri, "Loi contre les *fake news* : chasse aux fausses informations ou nouvelle censure ?", *Le Journal du Dimanche*, June 7, 2018. The article interviews the sociologist R. Badouard (*Désinformation, rumeur et propagande*, Limoges, FYP éditions, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Y. Benkler, R. Faris, H. Roberts, *Network Propaganda. Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> L. Bigot, *Fact-checking vs fake news. Vérifier pour mieux informer*, Paris, INA Editions, 2019.

detection and human supervision, perform police functions by defining what can and cannot be said, and by punishing speeches (or images) that contravene the rules" <sup>14</sup>.

However, censorship is only the least presentable part of more comprehensive information control processes. As Roland Barthes (*Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 1971) once said, "true censorship is not about banning (cutting, cutting) [...] but to stifle, to become bogged down in stereotypes ... to give for all food only the consecrated word of others, the repeated matter of the current opinion" <sup>15</sup>. From now on, "censorship must no longer be thought of only as the result of direct and concrete pressure exerted on the various links in the chain of meaning by the identified holders of the state or church authority, but as the process always and everywhere at work to filter admitted opinions. More than that, 'new censorship' [...] would go less through the prohibition cast on dissenting speech than through promoting a word consistent with the interests of the institutions and groups that dominate them" <sup>16</sup>. Censorship, both in the broad sociological sense and in the reduced legal sense, is therefore inseparable from the doxa it serves.

### **WHO and the Bill Gates Foundation: two supra-national powers joining their influence**

Internet giants are not the only ones interfering in the control of information through media funding. This is also the case with the superpower of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The founder of *Microsoft* and *Windows* became the world's richest personality in the mid-1990s (he was recently dethroned by *Amazon* owner Jeff Bezos). With a personal fortune approaching \$100 billion, he is richer than most countries in the world and, among other investments, he funds many media outlets. In France, it particularly subsidizes *Le Monde* (\$2.13 million in 2019) <sup>17</sup>. The foundation also devotes a very large part of its tax-exempted donations to health, with a specific techno-industrial prism: "In the health field, the Foundation is carrying out large-scale actions against AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, reflecting its obsession with technology with a particular interest in vaccines, in defiance of

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<sup>14</sup> R. Badouard, *Les nouvelles lois du web. Modération et censure*, Paris, Seuil, 2020, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by P. Roussin, "Liberté d'expression et nouvelles théories de la censure", *Communications*, 2020, 1, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> L. Martin, "Censure répressive et censure structurale : comment penser la censure dans le processus de communication ?" *Communication issues*, 2009, 15, p. 71.s

<sup>17</sup> « Le quotidien *Le Monde* a reçu plus de 4 millions de dollars de la fondation de Bill Gates", Covidinfos, May 11, 2020 [online: <https://covidinfos.net/>].

less industrial and potentially equally effective solutions" <sup>18</sup>. In addition, Bill Gates' foundation has become extremely influential within WHO, making itself the largest private contributor to the budget with \$455 million in 2019. In the overall ranking of funders, the Foundation is still slightly surpassed by Great Britain (\$464 million in 2019) and especially the United States (853 million) <sup>19</sup>. However, the fourth funder in this ranking (389 million in 2019) is none other than the *Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization* (GAVI), an international vaccine promotion organization of which the Gates Foundation is also the main funder. Finally, the ninth and tenth largest WHO funders (\$168 million and \$116 million respectively in 2019) are two international charities based in the United States: *Rotary International* and the *National Philanthropic Trust*. And the Bill Gates Foundation is also one of the first funders of these two associations through the tax-exempted donations. Therefore, if we add up the main four fundings in which it is involved (and they are not the only ones), it appears that the Bill Gates Foundation has in fact become the leading funder of the WHO.

WHO has played a particularly active role in trying to control communication on the coronavirus epidemic. Since Covid-19 was classified as an "international public health emergency" on 30 January 2020, the organization has set up a vast communication system to counter what it calls an "infodemia" that would be characterized by the proliferation of "*rumors and false information*". Its managing director, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, even felt that "*Our greatest enemy to date is not the virus itself. It's rumors, fear and stigma*" <sup>20</sup>. To predominate its messages, WHO has developed a global communication strategy overseen by Sylvie Briand, Director of the Department of Pandemics and Epidemics, and led by Andrew Pattison, Head of "Digital Solutions", in conjunction with a team of six at the Geneva headquarters. An agreement was first reached with Google, "*to ensure that people seeking information about coronavirus see WHO information at the top of their search results.*" Then, the communication team secured the support of the main social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tencent, Tik Tok) and even companies like Uber and Airbnb to spread the "right messages" <sup>21</sup>. Finally, WHO and its partners have recruited "influencers" or opinion

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<sup>18</sup> L. Astruc, *L'art de la fausse générosité. La Fondation Bill et Melinda Gates*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2020, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.who.int/fr/about/planning-finance-and-accountability/how-who-is-funded>

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by I. Mayault, "La rumeur, l'autre épidémie qui préoccupe l'OMS", *Le Monde*, March 6, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> M. Richtel, "W.H.O. Fights a Pandemic Besides Coronavirus: An 'Infodemic'", *New York Times*, February 6, 2020; cf. also F. Magnenou, "Comment l'OMS s'efforce de contenir l'infodémie qui entoure l'épidémie", *France TV Info*, February 8, 2020.

relays <sup>22</sup> to ensure control of social networks and YouTube, the world leader in online video (more than two billion monthly users in 2020) and owned by Google.

### **Conclusion: conquering the monopoly of legitimate information**

The health crisis initiated by the Sars-CoV-2 epidemic was the occasion of a historically unprecedented attempt at information control on a global scale, all the more important to understand that this epidemic has received unprecedented media coverage in history <sup>23</sup>. In this article, we reviewed the components of this international process of editorial standardization aimed at ensuring what Bourdieu called "the monopoly of legitimate information" <sup>24</sup>. This control system is intended to ensure media predominance, and behind the consent of populations, with regard to the content of a general message that could probably be summarized as follows: 1) a pandemic threatens the survival of all humanity, 2) there is no therapy to cure the sick, 3) it is necessary to confine the entire population, 4) the delivery will come only from a vaccine.

*This manuscript has been edited by a native English speaker*

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<sup>22</sup> On French-speaking side, one can cite Le Nguyễn Hoang (nearly 200,000 subscribers on his "Science4All" YouTube channel), Thibaud Violet (and its "Quoi dans mon assiette" site), the "Osons causer" group (nearly 300,000 subscribers on YouTube and nearly a million on Facebook) or Jérémy Descoux (nearly 100 000 subscribers on its "Asclepios" channel, president of the "No Fake Med" Collective).

<sup>23</sup> N. Hervé, "Coronavirus. Etude de l'intensité médiatique", Working paper, June 30, 2020 [online: <http://www.herve.name/coronavirus>].

<sup>24</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Sur la télévision*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, 82.