

FONDATION  
**DESCARTES**



**VISUALIZATION OF THE NEW  
POLITICAL-MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN  
FRANCE**

**STUDY BY THE FONDATION DESCARTES**  
**October 2020**

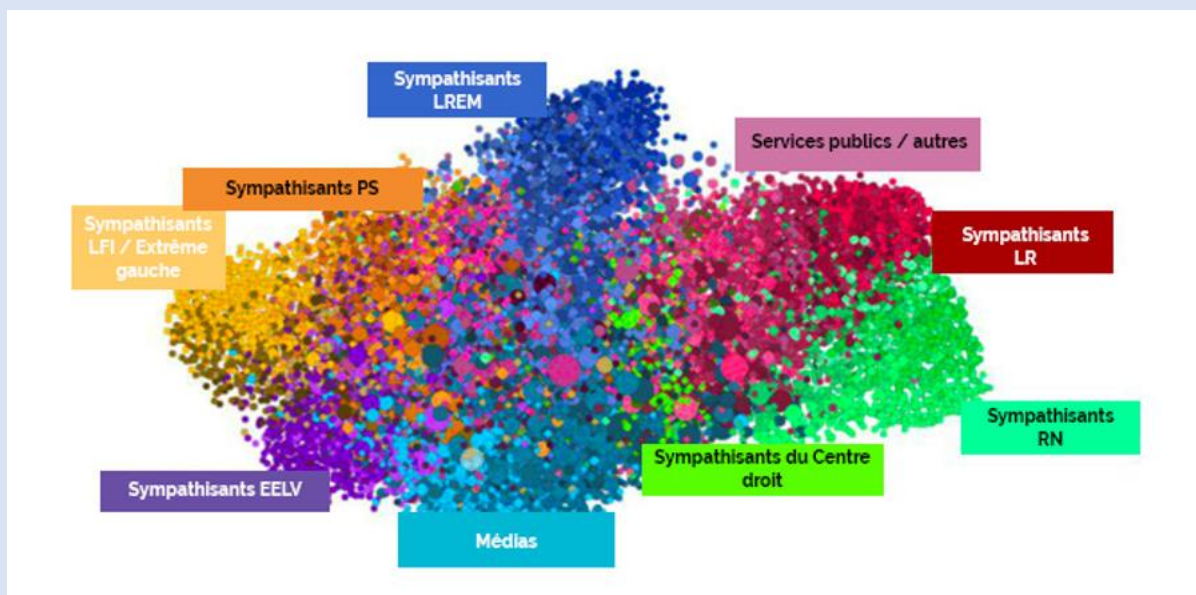
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## Visualization of the new political-media landscape in France

<b>Summary</b>	Erreur ! Signet non défini.
<b>I. A political landscape in reconfiguration</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. A new media landscape</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>III. What is the political-media landscape in France?</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>3.1 Purpose of the study</i>	4
<i>3.2 Method</i>	5
<b>IV. Visualization of the political-media landscape in France</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>V. Principal conclusions of this study</b>	<b>14</b>

## Summary

The political and media landscapes in France are both undergoing a profound reconfiguration. How do these two shifting environments interact on social networks today? In an effort to answer this question, we partnered with the company *Graphika* to develop a visualization of the new French political-media landscape, as it manifests itself on Twitter. We developed a map of the 15,000 most closely interconnected accounts on this social network, including those of 1,019 leading French political figures. Algorithmic analysis of this map revealed several account clusters, such as that of the media and journalists, or of individuals identifying to various French political trends.



**Visualization of the French political-media landscape on Twitter** (time period: 9/12/2019 – 8/01/2020). Each dot on the map corresponds to a Twitter account. The color of the dots indicates their affiliation to a group or cluster, and their size represents their number of followers (the larger the dot, the more followers the corresponding account has). The closer the dots are to each other, the more similarities exist between their respective subscription lists – in other words, the more interconnected they are on Twitter and the more likely they are to interact with one another.

*Nb: The accounts classified by the algorithm under a given political label are not necessarily those of members of that party. The algorithm labeled them as such on the basis of the accounts to which they themselves subscribed.*

The principal conclusions that can be drawn from this map's analysis are as follows:

- The *media landscape* in France is not, as a whole, strongly polarized. On the contrary, our map shows that media Twitter accounts are rather closely interconnected, regardless of their respective political leanings.
- All of the political groups represented on the map are themselves connected to the media cluster. Thus, in France there is no clear divide in the *political-media landscape*, contrary to what is observed, for instance, in the United States.
- However, every political group is not equally connected to the media cluster. On our map, the group located furthest to the right (labeled "*Rassemblement national*") and, to a lesser extent, the group located furthest to the left (labeled "*LFI / Extrême gauche*") are less closely connected to the media cluster than other political groups.
- Overall, the most influential media outlets of the French political-media landscape on Twitter seem to remain the "traditional" media.
- However, "peripheral" media outlets that are highly politicized and weakly connected to the rest of the media cluster are influential within the political groups whose ideas they reflect.

These results indicate that in France the "traditional" media still act, at least to some extent, as a common *agora*: a space dedicated to displaying facts and discussing ideas to which social network users of all political persuasions are more or less strongly connected. Our results suggest, however, that the French political-media landscape is not immune to gradual fragmentation at its extremes.

## I. A political landscape in reconfiguration

The French political landscape is undergoing a period of reconfiguration. The emergence of the presidential party, *La République En Marche (LREM)*, has profoundly weakened the traditional socio-democratic left (*Parti Socialiste; PS*) and is forcing the traditional right (*Les Républicains; LR*) to reposition itself. Parties at the extremes of the political spectrum are attracting a significant share of the French electorate, as evidenced by the results obtained by the extreme right (*Rassemblement National; RN*, formerly *Front National*) and the extreme left (*La France Insoumise; LFI*) in the first round of the last presidential election.

Parallel to this reshaping of the established left-right political spectrum, the “Yellow Vests” movement, emerging at the end of 2018, aggregates diverse political demands centering around a populist “anti-elite” agenda that transcends traditional cleavages. Indeed, both *RN* and *LFI* sympathizers, as well as non-voters, are over-represented within the “Yellow Vests” movement.<sup>1</sup>

## II. A new media landscape

The French media landscape is also undergoing profound change. According to a recent study by the *Institut Montaigne*<sup>2</sup>, the media space today is structured around four groups of media outlets exhibiting distinct behaviors:

- The *Heart*: the heart of the media, cited by all and citing no one in return (*Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, Le Parisien, 20 Minutes, Les Échos, etc.*).
- The *Crown*: the media surrounding the *Heart*, citing the *Heart* and satellite media outlets (*Russia Today, Fdesouche, Causeur, Valeurs actuelles, Contrepoints, etc.*).
- The *Satellites*: marginal media outlets, citing all types of media but cited by none in return (*Les Crises, Égalité et Réconciliation, Fawkes News, etc.*).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/-Qui-sont-les-Gilets-jaunes-et-leurs-soutiens-1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/ressources/pdfs/publications/media-polarization-a-la-francaise-report.pdf>

- The *Niche*: independent media outlets cited sporadically by all types of media, but themselves only citing the *Heart* (local news and specialized outlets).<sup>3</sup>

This study by the *Institut Montaigne* shows that, on the whole, the French media landscape is not strongly polarized, contrary to what can be observed, for example, in the United States. In other words, if the “traditional” media that make up the “heart” of the media space represent “moderate” political sensitivities on both sides of the left-right spectrum, this does not result in a pronounced cleavage between these two media poles. Indeed, we observe that “traditional” media outlets associated with various political sensibilities refer to and quote one another.

On the other hand, these media outlets almost never refer to content published by media outlets outside the “heart”. Therefore, if there is a clear divide within the French media landscape, it does not exist within the “traditional” media space, but rather between it and the “satellite” and “crown” media spaces. These emerging media are characterized as much by their relative isolation from the “heart” of the media space as by their editorial line, which often carries more obvious and marked ideological leanings, and which is often more radical than that of the “traditional” media.

### III. What is the political-media landscape in France?

#### *3.1 Purpose of the study*

How does the shifting French political landscape interact with this new structure of the media space? According to their positioning in the media space, how do politicians on different sides of the political spectrum and their supporters interact with each other and with the media and journalists? Are there, as we observe in the United States or, to a lesser extent, in Spain, two parallel political-media spaces within which politicians and their base gravitate in relatively closed circles around media outlets committed to their ideology, without communicating with or informing themselves from those of the opposite side?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/ressources/pdfs/publications/media-polarization-a-la-francaise-resume-FR.pdf>, p. 2.

To answer this question, we developed a visualization of the new French political-media landscape, as it was taking shape on Twitter at the turn of 2019-2020 – a time period that proved particularly pertinent for this analysis, as it was rich in social and political events (preparation of the reform of the pension system, large-scale social movements against this future reform, and the last outbursts of the “Yellow Vests” movement).

Utilizing Twitter data allowed us to measure the relationships between politicians, their supposed “sympathizers” and the media using proven quantitative methods. While it is important to note that Twitter is not an accurate and representative reflection of society as a whole, most leading French politicians are active on the platform, and many of their supporters follow them on this social network. Likewise, all media outlets have a Twitter account, as do a large number of journalists. It therefore seems legitimate use this social network to analyze the new political-media landscape in France.

### *3.2 Method*

This study was conducted in partnership with *Graphika*, a company specializing in social network analysis. In order to understand the relationships between politicians, supporters and the media on Twitter, we compiled a list of 1,019 leading French political figures active on the platform (members of parliament, leading figures from political parties, members of the government, presidents of regions and departments, mayors of large municipalities).

From this initial list, *Graphika* generated a map of the French political-media landscape, as it was structured between December 9, 2019 and January 8, 2020, incorporating the Twitter accounts that were most interconnected with those of the political figures initially identified. The media actors and “political sympathizers” who appear on this map – accounts that were therefore not included in our initial list – were selected by an algorithm on the basis of the Twitter interactions they have with these 1,019 political actors.

More precisely, the algorithm searched Twitter for any accounts following at least one of the accounts included in our initial list. Among the accounts identified in this manner, the algorithm retained for the final map only those that were most closely linked to the initial 1,019 accounts – namely, the accounts that followed the largest number of the political figures included in our initial list.



The resulting map of the political-media landscape consists of 15,000 accounts, which were then grouped by *Graphika's* algorithm according to the similarities between their respective subscription lists. Lastly, an algorithmic analysis allowed us to label these groups, resulting in the identification of the nine groups indicated in Table 1.

Groupe	Pourcentage de la carte (%)
Médias	19,75%
Sympathisants LR	17,55%
Sympathisants LREM	14,08%
Services publics / autres	11,76%
Sympathisants RN	9,94%
Sympathisants LFI / Extrême gauche	8,64%
Sympathisants EELV	8,23%
Sympathisants PS	6,94%
Sympathisants du Centre droit	3,11%

**Table 1 – Identified groups and their respective weights in the map.** *Nb: The accounts classified by the algorithm under a given political label are not necessarily those of members of that party. The algorithm classified them as such on the basis of the accounts to which they themselves subscribed.*

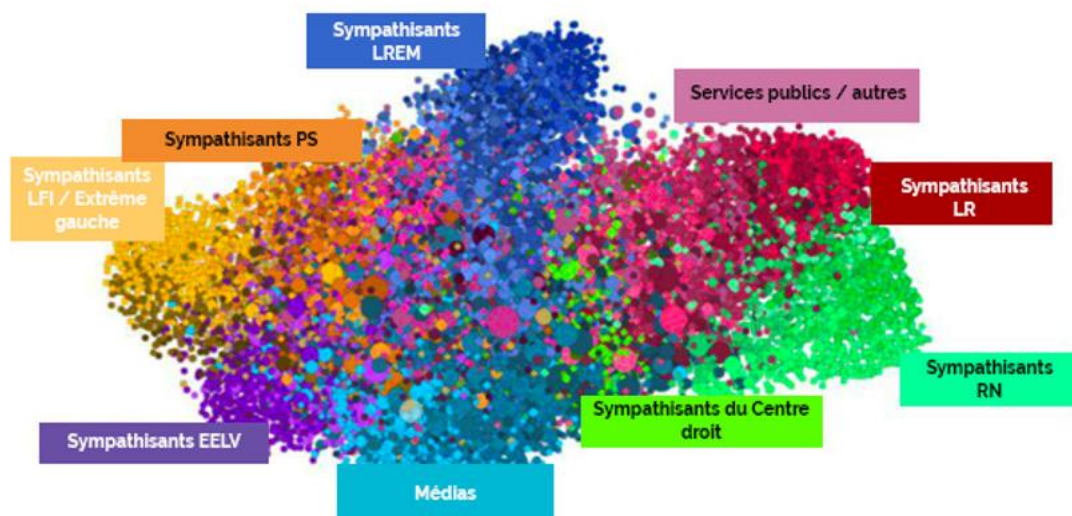
It is important to note that the accounts classified by the algorithm under a given political label are not necessarily those of *members* of that party. The algorithm categorized them as such on the basis of the accounts to which they themselves subscribed. For example, the algorithm classified an account under the label of a given party because it subscribed to a large number of accounts belonging to political figures of that party, and to other accounts also following these same political figures. The hypothesis underlying this approach is that such an account can be considered as a “sympathizer” of the party in question, due to the considerable interest it shows in the political figures of this party, and in other accounts that eagerly follow these figures.

The accounts affiliated with the media group (none of which were included in our initial list, which only considered political figures) correspond to accounts exhibiting highly similar subscription lists, which the algorithm identified as being the accounts of journalists or media outlets.

A visual inspection of the algorithm's selection and labeling of accounts confirms its overall relevance.

#### IV. Visualization of the political-media landscape in France

The visualization of the French political-media landscape resulting from our study is shown in *Figure 1*.

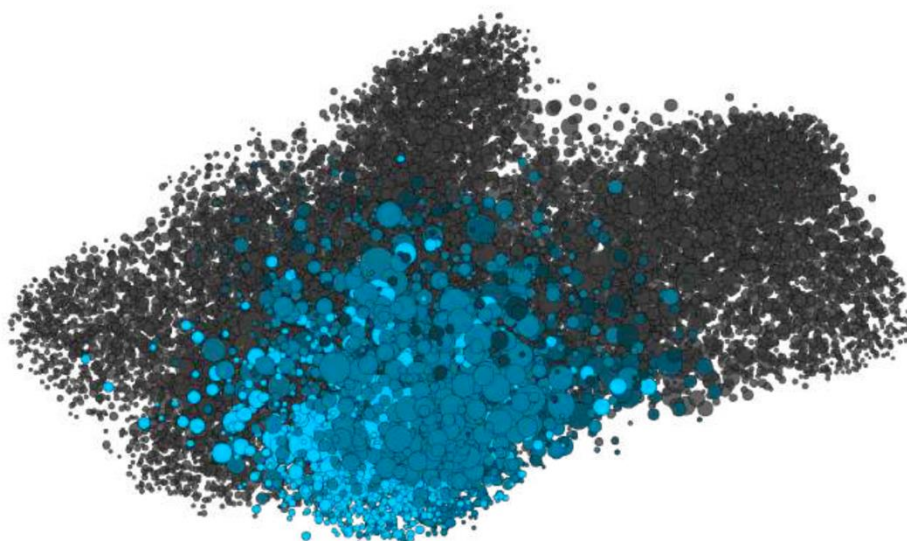


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**Figure 1 – Visualization of the French political-media landscape on Twitter** (time period: 9/12/2019 – 8/01/2020). Each dot on the map corresponds to a Twitter account. The color of the dots indicates their affiliation to a group or cluster, and their size represents their number of followers (the larger the dot, the more followers the corresponding account has). The closer the dots are to each other, the more similarities exist between their respective subscription lists – in other words, the more interconnected they are on Twitter and the more likely they are to interact with one another.

*Nb: The accounts classified by the algorithm under a given political label are not necessarily those of members of that party. The algorithm labeled them as such on the basis of the accounts to which they themselves subscribed.*

In order to better understand this visualization, Figure 2 highlights the accounts belonging to the media cluster (i.e. accounts of journalists and various media outlets).



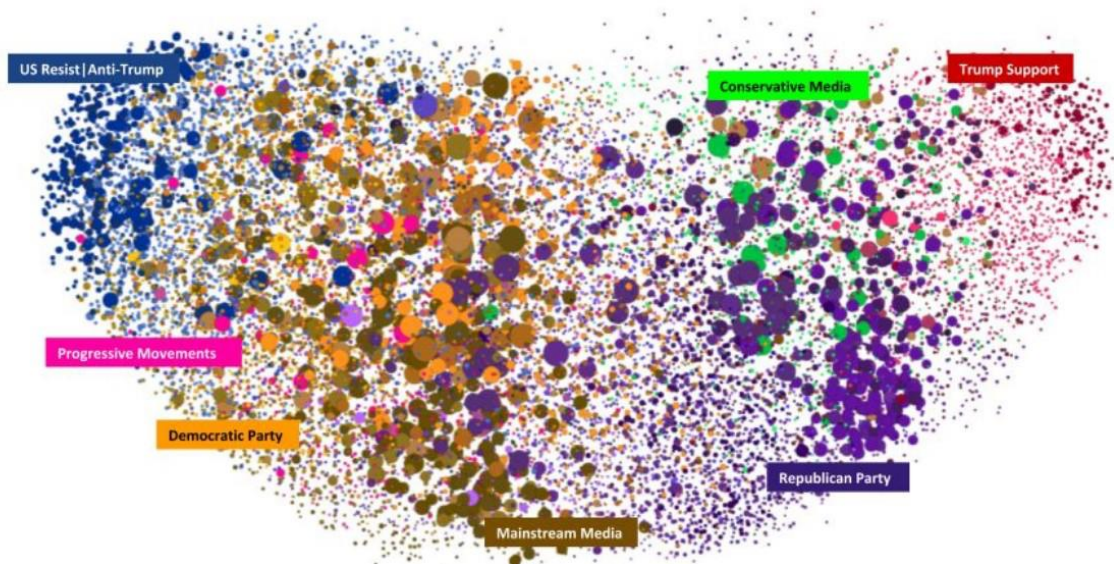
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**Figure 2 – Visualization of accounts belonging to the media cluster, in blue** (time period: 9/12/2019 – 8/01/2020).

As this map illustrates, the media landscape in France is not, as a whole, strongly polarized. Indeed, the geographical proximity of accounts belonging to the media cluster, visible in *Figure 2*, indicates that most of these accounts interact with one another (many of these accounts

follow each other). These findings are in line with those of the *Institut Montaigne*'s report on the absence of significant media polarization in France.

Meanwhile, *Figure 1* shows that every political group is connected to the media cluster. Thus, in France, there is no clear divide in the political-media environment. For comparison, *Figure 3* illustrates the situation in the United States, where, on the contrary, we observe the presence of two parallel political-media spaces that are poorly interconnected. This reflects the separation of American society into two large antagonistic ideological camps, whose members inform themselves and communicate with each other mainly through their own respective media channels.



**Figure 3 – Visualization of the political-media landscape on Twitter in the USA.** Each dot on the map corresponds to a Twitter account. The color of the dots indicates their affiliation to a group or cluster, and their size represents their number of followers (the larger the dot, the more followers the corresponding account has). The closer the dots are to each other, the more similarities exist between their respective subscription lists – in other words, the more interconnected they are on Twitter and the more likely they are to interact with one another.

However, it is important to note that not every political group identified in *Figure 1* is connected to the media cluster with the same intensity. As can be seen in *Table 2*, the groups

labeled *RN* (extreme right) and, to a lesser extent, *LFI / Extrême Gauche* (extreme left), are less closely connected to the media cluster than other political groups.

Our analyses also show that the most influential media outlets in the French political-media landscape remain by and large those of the “traditional” media (as opposed to “satellite” or “crown” media outlets). This is illustrated by the fact that “traditional” media outlets are more interconnected to the accounts of politicians and their supposed “sympathizers” than other types of media. Moreover, among all media accounts, those of the “traditional” media are mentioned most frequently, and their tweets are the most shared (see *Table 3*).

	Sympathisants du Centre droit	Sympathisants LFI / Extrême gauche	Sympathisants EELV	Sympathisants LREM	Sympathisants LR	Médias	Services publics / autres	Sympathisants RN	Sympathisants PS
Sympathisants du Centre droit	5,35	0,17	0,5	1,1	1,14	0,87	0,99	0,19	0,54
Sympathisants LFI / Extrême gauche	0,17	5,36	1,06	0,25	0,2	0,68	0,55	0,52	0,65
Sympathisants EELV	0,5	1,06	3,37	0,54	0,25	1,05	1,14	0,14	1,31
Sympathisants LREM	1,1	0,25	0,54	3,72	0,43	0,74	0,97	0,17	0,78
Sympathisants LR	1,14	0,2	0,25	0,43	2,76	0,71	0,67	1,23	0,34
Médias	0,87	0,68	1,05	0,74	0,71	2,25	1,04	0,47	1,22
Services publics / autres	0,99	0,55	1,14	0,97	0,67	1,04	2	0,41	1,03
Sympathisants RN	0,19	0,52	0,14	0,17	1,23	0,47	0,41	4,9	0,13
Sympathisants PS	0,54	0,65	1,31	0,78	0,34	1,22	1,03	0,13	4,2

**Table 2 – Degree of connection between different groups** (time period: 9/12/2019 – 8/01/2020). The higher the value (a measure of “heterophilia”), the more two groups are closely connected. Note that the connections between accounts belonging to a same group can also vary in intensity.

These findings must, however, be nuanced. First, certain “satellite” and “crown” media outlets with strong political leanings are highly followed – and therefore influential – within particular groups but carry little to no weight outside of these circles. This is the case, for example, of *L’info libre* or *Radio Courtoisie*, both of which were placed into the *RN* group rather than the media group by *Graphika*’s algorithm. This is due to the fact that these media outlets are closely interconnected with accounts belonging to the *RN* group and very weakly connected to accounts from the media group, or with other accounts present on the map. We observe a similar phenomenon on the other side of our map, where “crown” media outlets

such as *Alternatives Économiques* and *Politis* are integrated into the *EELV/Droits Humains* group rather than the media group.

Top 10 des médias les plus influents dans le paysage politique français en ligne	Top 10 des médias les plus mentionnés	Top 10 des médias les plus retweetés	Top 10 des médias ayant reçu le plus de réponses
AFP Le Monde France Info Mediapart Le Figaro Libération Le Parisien Canard enchaîné France Inter BFMTV	Le Monde BFMTV France Info Le Parisien France Inter LCI Le Figaro Le Point Libération CNEWS	Le Parisien BFMTV AFP France Info Brèves de Presse* Le Monde Marianne Valeurs actuelles Le Point LCP	BFMTV France Info Le Parisien France Inter LCI Valeurs actuelles CNEWS Le Point Le Monde Europe 1

\* Brèves de presse est catégorisé ici comme un média, même si le compte est en réalité un agrégateurs publiant des dépêches venant d'autres media.

**Table 3 – List of media outlets according to their influence in the French political-media landscape on Twitter (time period: 9/12/2019 – 8/01/2020).**

Second, our findings put into question the central role that “traditional” media still seem to play in the French political-media landscape. If these media remain overall the most mentioned by all of the Twitter accounts include in our map, they are not always mentioned in a positive way.

Let us take the example of *Le Monde* – a newspaper often described as a reference point and located in the center-left of the political spectrum – which is, among all identified media, the outlet that was mentioned most throughout the time period under consideration (see *Table 3*, second column). Moreover, our results show that this newspaper is mentioned in a relatively homogeneous way over time by all of the political group present on our map (see *Figure 4*).



**Figure 4 – Visual representation of mentions of *Le Monde* (horizontal axis) by the different groups included in our map (vertical axis). The dots located to the right of the names of each group represent the mentions of *Le Monde* by this group (each line of dots with the same color corresponds to a sub-group of the overarching group of that color). The more shaded the dots are, the higher the number of mentions of *Le Monde*. (time period: 9/12/2019 – 8/01/2020.)**

In order to determine whether the tone of the mentions of *Le Monde* differs according to the groups from which originate, we conducted a qualitative analysis by sampling of tweets mentioning *Le Monde*. This analysis showed that, during the time period covered by our study, most groups mention *Le Monde* as a reference or as a source for sharing news, with the exception of the *RN* group, which primarily mentions *Le Monde* in order to criticize it.

These criticisms can be split into two groups:

- 1) *Criticism of the contents published by the newspaper.* These criticisms aim to dispute specific assertions made by the newspaper. These claims can be made with or without supporting arguments. While this type of criticism can stem from most of the groups identified on our map, it originates proportionally more frequently from the *RN* group than from other groups.

2) *Criticism of Le Monde as a news organization.* Here again, if this much more fundamental criticism of *Le Monde* is not the sole prerogative of the *RN* group, the latter makes use of it much more frequently than other groups.

We should note that a similar qualitative analysis of Tweets mentioning the *Figaro* – a newspaper generally considered to hold a right or center-right editorial stance – does not show an above-average amount of criticisms emanating from the most left-leaning group on our map (group labeled *LFI / Extrême Gauche*).

The results of these qualitative analyses should, however, be taken with caution, as they only consider a time period of one month. This is an important caveat, given that the virulence of the criticisms stemming from various groups likely depends on current events and their media treatment. Nevertheless, we can state with certainty that while “traditional” media remain the media sources that are most frequently mentioned by every political group present on our map, they are regularly mentioned in a critical manner.

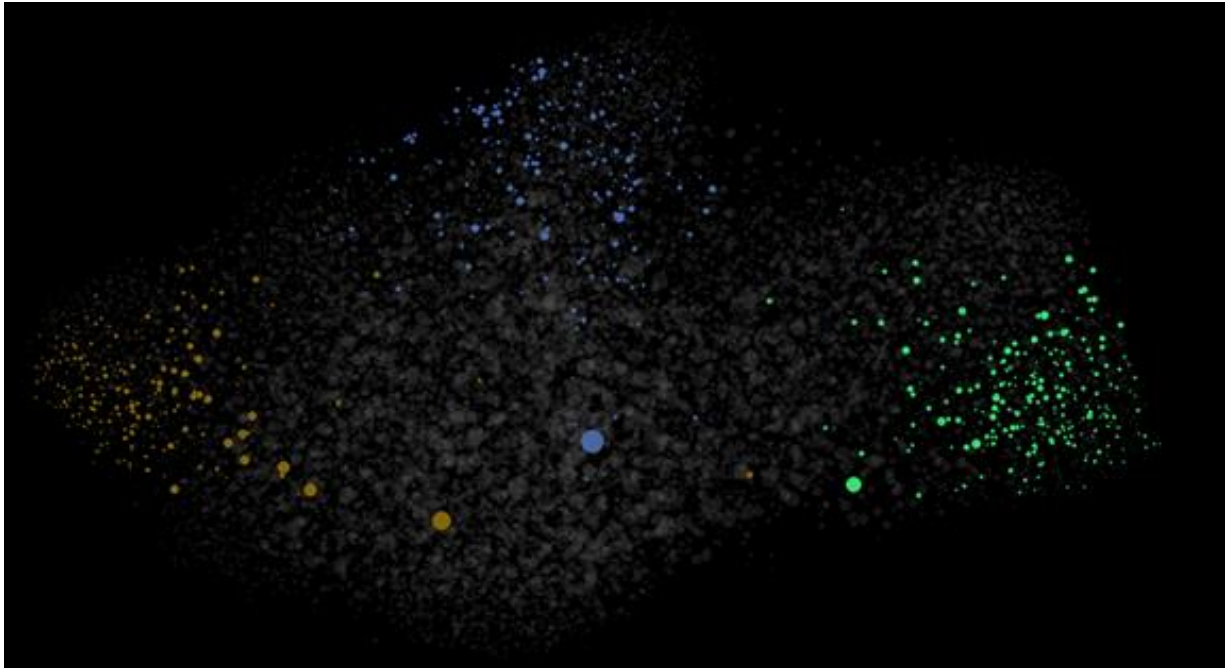
Lastly, while the media and journalists clearly occupy a central position on our map, in that all of the political groups identified are to some extent connected to it, not all of the accounts within these groups have the same proximity to the media cluster. In this respect, we see that leading political figures (party leaders, in particular) are closely connected to the media cluster, whereas this is not the case for their presumed closest “sympathizers”.

To illustrate this point, *Figure 5* shows the Twitter accounts of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Emmanuel Macron, and Marine Le Pen, as well as those of the individuals most closely connected to the accounts of these political figures. We observe that the accounts of these political leaders are located towards the center of the bottom half of the map, which corresponds to the zone occupied by the media cluster (see *Figure 2*). The accounts of their supposed “sympathizers” are, however, located in the periphery of the map, far from the media cluster.

This indicates that different actors utilize Twitter in different ways: a political leader will seek to communicate with a large number of actors in the network and to maintain a strong proximity with the “traditional” media, whereas political “sympathizers” will tend to remain focused on their own group – within which there may potentially be a certain number of



“satellite” and “crown” media outlets. The high concentration of “traditional” media outlets at the center of the map could therefore reflect the frequent accusations of these outlets remaining in a closed circle among themselves.



**Figure 5 – Positioning of political leaders in relation to that of their supposed “sympathizers”.** (time period: 9/12/2019 – 8/01/2020). The three large dots located towards the center of the bottom half of the map are those of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (in orange), Emmanuel Macron (in blue), and Marine Le Pen (in green). The small dots of corresponding color located in the periphery of the map represent the accounts of their respective supposed “sympathizers”.

## V. Principal conclusions of this study

The principal conclusions that can be drawn from our study are as follows:

- The *media landscape* in France is not, as a whole, strongly polarized. On the contrary, our map shows that media Twitter accounts are rather closely interconnected, regardless of their respective political leanings.
- All of the political trends represented on the map are themselves connected to the media cluster. Thus, in France there is no clear divide in the *political-media environment*, contrary to what is observed, for instance, in the United States.

- However, every political group is not equally connected to the media cluster. On our map, the group located furthest to the right (labeled “*Rassemblement national*”) and, to a lesser extent, the group located furthest to the left (labeled “*LFI / Extrême gauche*”) are less closely connected to the media cluster than other political groups.
- Overall, the most influential media outlets of the French political-media landscape on Twitter seem to remain the “traditional” media.
- However, “peripheral” media outlets that are highly politicized and weakly connected to the rest of the media cluster are influential within the political groups whose ideas they reflect.

These results indicate that in France the “traditional” media still act, at least to some extent, as a common *agora*: a space dedicated to displaying facts and discussing ideas to which social network users of all political persuasions are more or less strongly connected.

And yet, it is important to note that the significance of this common media *agora* is perhaps somewhat exaggerated by the methodology employed in our study. Indeed, the map presented in this report was generated from an initial list of prominent French political figures (see section 3.2). The map being structured around the media cluster is therefore a direct result of their Twitter behavior. But as we have shown, the positioning of political figures in relation to the media cluster is not representative of their supposed “sympathizers”, whose positions are far more peripheral. These Twitter users are therefore only indirectly connected to the media cluster via the political leaders they follow.

In conclusion, let us note that the French political-media landscape may not be immune to gradual fragmentation at its extremes. Indeed, the groups located furthest to the right and, to a lesser extent, furthest to the left on our map are less closely connected to the common media *agora* than the other political groups identified. In this context, “peripheral” media outlets could possibly gain in influence among groups located at the extremes of the political spectrum, to the detriment of the “traditional” media. This hypothesis of a progressive fragmentation of the French political-media landscape can only be corroborated or refuted by regular monitoring of how its structure continues to evolve in the future.

To cite this report:

Cordonier, L., Brest, A., Guedj, N., & Ruault, T. (2020). *Visualization of the new political-media landscape in France*. Study by the Fondation Descartes, <https://www.fondationdescartes.org/en/2020/11/visualization-of-the-new-political-media-landscape-in-france/>