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The challenges of studying visual misinformation during election campaigns

LSE's Nick Anstead and Bart Cammaerts explain how they approached studying visual misinformation during elections in four countries – Belgium, France, the UK and the US – discussing both the challenges they encountered and the questions they are starting to answer based on their data.

2024 was branded the year of elections. Across the globe, more than 3.7 billion people had the opportunity to vote. However, these elections took place against backdrop of unease, as the stability and sustainability of democratic institutions was openly questioned to an extent not seen since the end of the Cold War.

Fake news and misinformation have been central to rising concerns about the health of democracy. While the concept of post-truth politics has been with us for several years (indeed, it was **declared the Oxford English Dictionary word of the year in 2016**), the visual aspect of the problem has recently received greater attention. This is due to the evolution of technology, with the advent of powerful but easy-to-use AI tools capable of creating photo-realistic images and so-called deepfakes.

For researchers, understanding the evolution of visual disinformation, and the problems it poses, is difficult. Unlike broadcast media, social media offers a bespoke experience for individual users, which they consume privately on their personal feeds on their phones, tablets and laptops. Recent years have also seen social media platforms making it increasingly difficult for researchers to obtain data, **with Twitter / X severely curtailing the scale and increasing the price of access to its Application Programming Interface**, and **Meta/ Facebook closing down CrowdTangle**.

Therefore, in order to study visual misinformation during election campaigns, we had to take a different approach. Focusing on four countries (Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States, plus France, which we added to our data collection when an unexpected parliamentary election was

called in June 2024), we set up dummy accounts on four social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X. In each country, accounts were set to follow the accounts of either high-profile left-wing or right-wing figures. Working with a team of research assistants, we then monitored the accounts and gathered visual misinformation that appeared on their feeds.

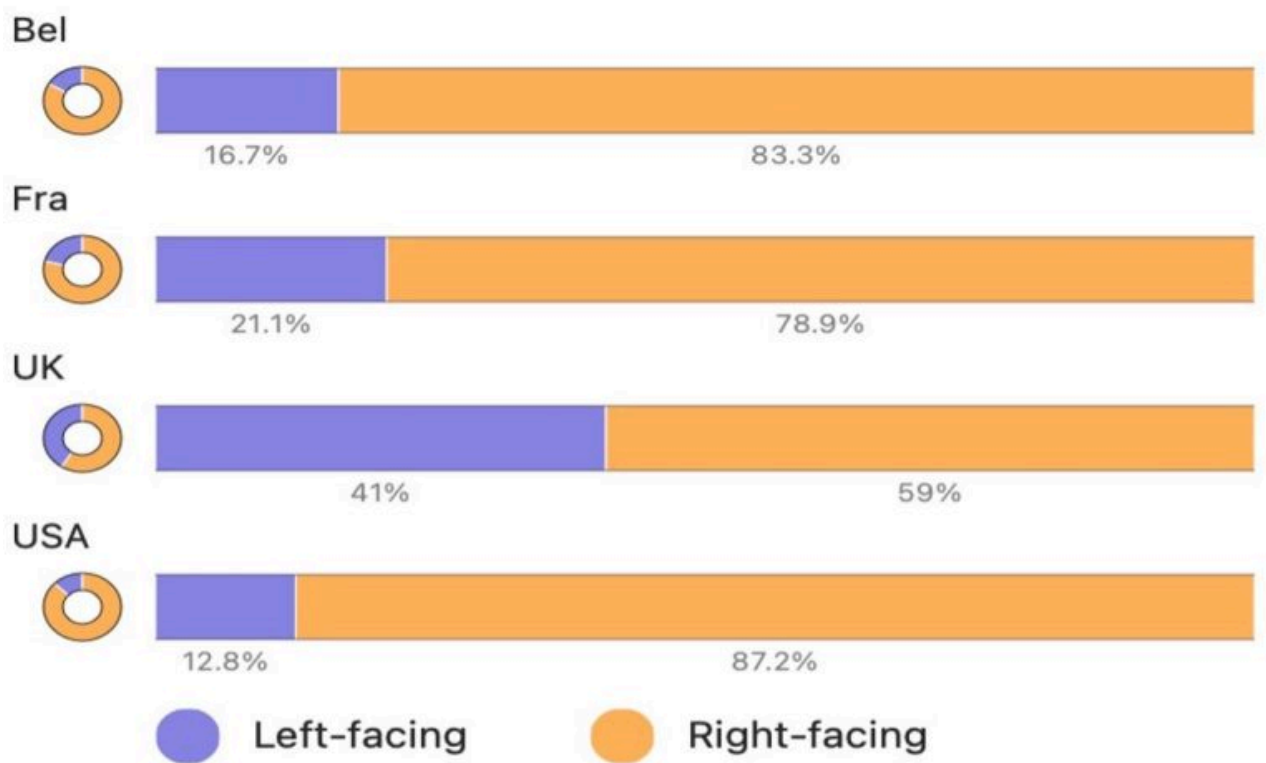
The total data we gathered is shown in Table 1. We cannot claim that this dataset is exhaustive or representative (not least because the nature of social media and users’ individualised feeds makes it almost impossible to define what a genuinely representative sample might look like). Still, it provides a comprehensive snapshot of the types of visual misinformation circulating online during the case study election campaigns.

Table 1: Data gathered across study countries

Country	Examples of visual misinformation
Belgium	24
France	76
United Kingdom	161
United States	141
Total	402

Our dataset reinforces something that **other work** on fake news and visual misinformation have found: it circulates more heavily on the political right. This corroborates recent findings of Petter Törnberg and Juliana Chueri (2025, p. 15), which suggest that “current political misinformation is not linked primarily to populism, but specifically to the populist radical right”. Our right-wing orientated accounts (e.g. those that there were set to follow prominent right-wing users of social media platforms) encountered more visual misinformation than did the equivalent accounts on the left (see Figure 1). This is true in all countries, and it is only in the UK that the figures are even somewhat close, where 59 per cent of the misinformation appears on the right-facing accounts vs. 41 per cent in the left-facing account (one possible explanation of this is the propensity of the British left to use AI to generate satirical content).

Table 2: Data-gathered from left facing vs right facing social media accounts



Note: Overall data n=402. Belgium dataset n=24, France dataset n=76, UK dataset n=161, US dataset n=141).

This is just the beginning of our work on this topic, as our dataset will allow us to shed more light on other questions about visual misinformation, such as:

- What is the role played by sophisticated techniques such as deepfakes, as opposed to more rudimentary forms of visual misinformation, when is content simply edited, cropped or mislabelled?
- Does visual misinformation come from official party accounts, or from the wider social media milieu?
- How does the visual misinformation landscape vary across our case study countries and how does this relate to the political context in which elections are fought?

Only by answering these sorts of questions can we really start to grasp the role played by visual disinformation in contemporary politics.

To read the full report, please see [here](#).

This post gives the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Photo by [Ernie Journeys](#) on [Unsplash](#)

About the author

Nick Anstead is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His archive of research can be accessed at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/view/creators/Anstead=3ANick=3A=3A.html> including his comparative work on TV debates in Parliamentary democracies.

Bart Cammaerts

Bart Cammaerts is Professor of Politics and Communication and former Head of Department in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. His current research focuses on the relationship between media, communication and resistance with particular emphasis on media strategies of activists, media representations of protest, alternative counter-cultures and broader issues relating to power, participation and public-ness.

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