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Macron and the sex thieves

Rumour and disinformation in Africa

By Julien Bonhomme

A rumour is circulating in some African countries: the French state is organising penis thefts to offset declining fertility. The rumour, spread by Russian propaganda, has become fake news.

Sex thieves again? On October 28, a Malian news website published an article about mysterious disappearances of male genitalia in the Central African Republic[1]. The rumour, in fact, is not new, as I have already demonstrated in a book[2]. It first appeared in Nigeria in the 1970s, then spread to West and Central Africa in the 1990s. Since then, it has resurfaced from time to time, provoking accusations and violence in its wake. The scenario is always the same: "sex theft" occurs during an ordinary encounter between two people in the street. It's a handshake or a simple brush that leads to the genitals of the "victim" - invariably male - shrinking or even disappearing altogether. The alleged "thief" is also usually a man, usually a stranger and frequently foreign, whether from another African country or ethnic group. In Nigeria, for example, it is often the Hausa from the north of the country who are accused, while elsewhere in West Africa, Nigerians are more generally suspected. Sex theft, which

[1] Steve Fleitz, "Centrafrique: Disparitions inexpliquées de parties intimes chez des hommes, la France suspectée?" ["Central African Republic: Unexplained Disappearances of Male Genitalia, France Suspected?"], *Bamada.net*, posted October 28, 2024, removed November 7. My thanks to Nathan Gallo, a journalist with France 24-Les Observateurs, for bringing this article to my attention.

[2] Julien Bonhomme, *Les Voleurs de sexe. Anthropologie d'une rumeur africaine*, Paris, Seuil, 2009. English translation: *The Sex Thieves. Anthropology of a Rumor*, Chicago, HAU Books-University of Chicago Press, 2016.

represents a threat of dispossession by outsiders, bears more than a passing resemblance to a whole host of organ theft rumours circulating elsewhere in the world, from Brazil to Madagascar, from the Andes to France[3].

But this time, the scenario is totally unprecedented. The article published by Bamada.net insinuates that the sex thefts are being orchestrated by the French state in order to restore the flagging virility of its male population, going so far as to personally implicate a diplomat from the French embassy in the Central African Republic and, behind him, Emmanuel Macron. Far from being just a one-off incident, as is usually the case, the rumour hides a state scandal with far-reaching geopolitical ramifications. In the days following the article's publication online, specialised fact-checking media detected it, refuted its false claims and pointed out that it was probably a disinformation operation by pro-Russian networks, which are very active in the region[4]. A story that had been circulating spontaneously for several decades has thus served as the matrix for "fake news", fallacious information produced and relayed by actors for ideological purposes. I'd like to come back to this case, focusing on its political implications. This unique case also provides an opportunity to ask a more general question: what are the similarities between rumour and fake news, and what distinguishes the two?

From rumour to fake news

The article was published at the end of October, following a series of incidents linked to sex theft in the Central African Republic (CAR). The country was only belatedly affected by the rumour, as far as I know not before 2010. But over the past few years, it has resurfaced on a regular basis. In 2022, in Ndélé, after two people

[3] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, « Theft of Life. The Globalization of Organ Stealing Rumours », *Anthropology Today*, vol. 12, n°3, 1996, p. 3-11 ; Luke Freeman, « Voleurs de foies, voleurs de cœurs. Européens et Malgaches occidentalisés vus pas les Betsileos (Madagascar) », *Terrain*, n°43, 2004, p. 85-106 ; Andrew Canessa, « Fear and loathing on the kharisiri trail. Alterity and identity in the Andes », *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 6, n°4, 2000, p. 705-720 ; « Trafic d'organes : est-il vrai que des vols de reins ont lieu à Paris ? », *Libération*, 29 octobre 2019.

[4] Nathan Gallo, "Rumeur des 'pénis volés' en Centrafrique : autopsie d'une intox anti-française", Les Observateurs-France 24, November 1, 2024; "FAUX, Alexandre Piquet, conseiller de l'Ambassade de France en Centrafrique n'est pas impliqué dans la disparition de sexe masculin", Radio Ndeke Luka, November 1, 2024.

claimed to have lost their penises, young people set out to track down the culprits and arrested an old woman, who managed to exonerate herself by blaming a group of Hausa from Nigeria, who had recently arrived in town. In July 2024, in Bambari, a humanitarian aid worker of Central African nationality was accused by three youths whose hands he had just shaken. To escape lynching, he took refuge in a house before being evacuated by the police. At the end of August, the rumour reached Bangui, the capital, where it triggered several violent incidents. One man accused another after being brushed against in the street. He raised the alarm, a crowd gathered and roughed up the alleged thief. Only the intervention of the local chief prevented a fatal outcome.

The rumour spread so widely that on September 2, the Minister of Communication and Media, who is also government spokesman, was obliged to publicly deny it and call for calm. He declared that, after investigation, no case of sex theft had been officially confirmed, and threatened legal action against anyone spreading false information or causing public disorder. Others are taking steps to quell the rumours. A hospital published the clinical examination reports of alleged victims, which showed no missing penises, while journalists specializing in fact-checking explained that the images of atrophied genitals circulating on social networks, supposedly attesting to the veracity of sex theft in fact only showed people suffering from congenital malformations. Over September, the rumour disappeared, though it is unclear whether official denials were the reason or whether it eventually died out on its own, one story following another in the rapid cycle of news (the same timeline is found in all episodic outbreaks of sex theft).

Bamada.net thus publishes its article at a time when rumour is no longer actively circulating in the Central African Republic, but is nevertheless still fresh in people's minds. Until then, the incidents it had triggered in the country had all followed a classic scenario: handshakes gone awry and accusations between individuals in public spaces. The website introduces a significant shift by diverting the accusations toward France. A number of clues suggest that this is a disinformation operation orchestrated by pro-Russian networks in Africa to stir up anti-French sentiment. The article focuses on the Central African Republic and is published by a Malian website, two key countries in Russia's new zone of influence on the continent,

the first as early as 2018, the second after the coup d'état in 2021. In addition to military, economic and political aspects, this influence also involves media propaganda[5].

Moscow's agents pass on the information they wish to see published in the press to local journalists, paid for their services, who are then responsible for drafting or reworking the text, before placing it with various media. The aim is to influence public opinion by presenting Russia's actions in a favourable light and vilifying Western countries, especially France, whose relations with its former African "backyard" were already feeding understandable resentment among certain sections of the population. Bamada.net, a well-read general-interest news website, regularly relays pro-Russian content. The timing of the fake news is revealing: it implicates a French diplomat in the CAR, at the very moment when a draft law on "foreign agents" -based on the Russian model - is being discussed, causing concern within civil society.

The article must have been written by a third party outside Bamada's editorial team, as evidenced by its simultaneous publication in English on the website of a Nigerian daily. The author's name, Steve Fleitz, is probably a pseudonym (the version published in Nigeria remains anonymous, the text being attributed without further clarification to "Our reporter"). He regularly publishes articles in English or French in the African press, all of them critical of France, MINUSCA (the UN mission in Central Africa), the USA or Ukraine. He is sometimes presented as "Dr. Steve Fleitz", a political science researcher, graduate of Prague University and affiliated with the International Center for Political and Strategic Studies, a phantom organisation also mentioned in other anti-Western articles signed by fake experts. The publication on Bamada's website does not indicate the scientific pedigree of its author; it does, however, state under his signature that the "source" of the information is said to come from the European Centre for Middle East Studies, a bona fide research centre, but whose website holds no record of Fleitz, nor of any studies on sex theft.

The very next day, the article was picked up on social media networks, notably via Facebook news pages used to relaying pro-Russian content, such as "RCA aujourd'hui" (23,000 subscribers) and "Tout sur l'Afrique" (68,000 subscribers). In early September, the former had already published articles accusing MINUSCA of

[5] Léa Péruchon, « "Je ne le fais pas seulement pour moi" : les révélations d'un ex-propagandiste sur les secrets de la désinformation russe en Centrafrique » et « Propaganda Machine : l'offensive de la Russie contre l'information au Sahel », *Forbidden Stories*, 21 novembre 2024.

spreading rumours of sex thefts in order to spread panic and destabilise the country (this content has since been removed). The republication of the fake news on "RCA aujourd'hui" has over 5,000 likes and has been shared 36 times. The page's daily posts, however, garner very few likes, generally around a dozen (a few hundred for sports news). On the other hand, articles targeting France or the UN systematically receive several thousand thumbs-up, suggesting that these are fake likes bought to artificially inflate their popularity. Finally, it should be noted that on the French web, the information was picked up by Fdesouche.com, an extreme right-wing site, as well as on the jeuxvideo.com forum (here and here), but without eliciting much of a reaction.

Conspiracy theories

The content of the text corroborates the disinformation hypothesis, particularly its novel additions compared with the hundreds of articles on sex theft that have appeared in the African press since the 1990s. It begins by reviewing recent episodes in the Central African Republic, insinuating that the phenomenon is real, while hiding behind the precautionary conditional tense. It then sets out its main thesis: "Some witnesses and victims would add that the foreigner [sex thief] would be white." The possibility that this is merely a "conspiracy theory" is mentioned, but rhetorically, only to be immediately revoked in favour of the existence of said conspiracy: "Certain so-called 'conspiracy theories' would eventually have been confirmed, notably those implicating Western elites in child abductions, mass orgies, and satanic rituals."

The article goes on to reveal the reasons for the conspiracy: "Some rumours even claim that French intelligence services, filled with neo-colonial hatred and jealousy of Africans, would use secret nanotechnologies to steal the masculine attributes of African men in order to compensate for the declining demographics of Europeans." The demographic decline of the Old Continent is said to be due to a virility crisis, as proven by various supposedly authoritative but unreferenced sources: a scientific study in a major international journal, a survey on the decline in the frequency of sexual intercourse, and "medical experts" claiming that the phenomenon particularly affects "white Frenchmen". In response to the threat posed by this devirilization to society as a whole, a scientific project was launched by "French security forces". They had discovered that the male sex hormone "could be obtained from another man's private parts". The highest levels of testosterone are found in "African men", especially in the Central African Republic. A clandestine program, dubbed "Repopulation", was

set up to "extract this hormone from black men". It would have been approved in high places by Emmanuel Macron himself, "who, childless, would have taken a desperate measure to ensure the vitality of his aging nation". Preliminary tests were carried out in Haiti as early as 2016, before the program was deployed in the CAR, where it was piloted by the First Counsellor at the French Embassy, who was in reality an intelligence officer. The stolen penises would then be flown by military aircraft to France, then "hidden in one of the secret bunkers in Versailles". A cartoon, missing from the original article, illustrates its republication on social networks: it shows the embassy counselor loading cartons full of male genitalia into a truck marked "Special cargo for Emmanuel Macron", a photograph of which protrudes from the diplomat's jacket pocket. In the background, a poster explains the scene: "A plan to steal the penises of Central Africans".

This conspiracy theory may seem too outlandish to be credible. However, it is based on certain realities that lend it a semblance of plausibility: Europe's declining demographic weight, the declining frequency of sexual relations (the IFOP poll mentioned in the text really exists) or societal concerns about the "crisis of masculinity" (reactionary backlash to changing gender norms). It also recycles widely shared racial stereotypes: the hyper-virility of African men is, ironically, a European cliché dating back to colonial times[6]. In addition, the article uses sex theft and its topicality in the Central African Republic as a pretext to spread an anti-French rhetoric. It seeks to capitalise on the popularity of the rumour to generate buzz. It's a catchy story, drawing attention not only for its unusual nature, but also for its evocative power: it crystallizes underlying anxieties about masculinity, urban anonymity and foreigners. Even when judged false or dubious, it arouses interest. In any case, it doesn't need to be accepted as true for it to spread: on the contrary, it's because people don't really know what to think of it that they feel compelled to share it with others.

Although the fake news capitalises on the success of rumour, the theory it proposes is not new either. It exploits widespread conspiracy theories, also endowed with great evocative power: the West is said to have set up secret programs to depopulate Africa; the epidemics of AIDS, ebola, covid-19 and, today, mpox are said to have been knowingly propagated on the continent; these viruses are even said to have been created in laboratories for this very purpose; disguised under a humanitarian mask, the medical campaigns of international NGOs are said to aim to

[6] Delphine Peiretti-Courtis, « Origines et survivances des stéréotypes raciaux : la construction d'une "masculinité africaine" », *De facto*, n°34, 2023.

spread evil by claiming to cure it. These conspiracy theories are revived with each new epidemic. Just a week before the sex theft disinformation operation, "RCA aujourd'hui" relayed another fake news entitled " Could the CAR be a test site for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)?" (content deleted since the article was published), insinuating that the French-born NGO was responsible for spreading mpox in the country in order to test experimental vaccines. This mistrust actually dates back to colonial era, as evidenced by the alarming rumours already circulating on the continent about injections and, more broadly, the practices of colonial medicine[7]. In fact, Africa was used as a medical testing ground, for example during campaigns to eradicate sleeping sickness[8]. The theory of a Western plot to depopulate Africa also echoes a still vivid historical memory, of which it represents something of an outrageous caricature: the slave trade, followed by colonization, led to demographic stagnation and even regression (the latter due to forced labour, population displacement and epidemics).

The conspiracy theory has the advantage of providing the missing explanation for sex theft. The usual rumour says nothing about the motive for the thefts, but leaves it to the collective imagination to fill the gaps. During my investigation, most of my interlocutors, those who considered the phenomenon to be real, agreed that the sex thefts had certainly been ordered by politicians ready to do anything to stay in power and enrich themselves, even if it meant sacrificing the little people on the altar of their selfishness. This is a very common explanatory framework associated with witchcraft. It is central to cases of "ritual crimes", for example, and the rumours of sex theft are in a similar vein. Stripped of its fantastical folklore, witchcraft is the expression of a moral imagination intricately intertwining themes of inequality, power, wealth and the feelings of injustice this feeds. By explaining the rumour in terms of conspiracy theory, the fake news takes up the theme of denouncing the corruption of the powerful, but deflects the accusation from national elites to Westerners, France and Emmanuel Macron in particular. The article's conclusion adds a final layer of meaning to the rumour by suggesting a rise in generality. Sex theft would be part of the historical continuity of France's exploitation of the African continent, its people as much as its natural resources:

> "If this hypothesis is correct, this situation would illustrate a new form of exploitation: the French, who have oppressed African populations for centuries,

[7] Luise White, *Speaking with vampires. Rumor and history in colonial Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000.

[8] Guillaume Lachenal, *Le médicament qui devait sauver l'Afrique. Un scandale pharmaceutique aux colonies*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014.

would stop at nothing. Exploiting African resources - oil, gas, gold, lithium, diamonds, chrome and platinum - would not have been enough. Now they would attack the most precious thing a human being has: his or her inalienable right to reproduce, to start a family and to secure his or her future."

Sex theft is presented as a kind of vital extractivism, by analogy with mining and oil extraction. While the extraction and export of the continent's resources does in fact benefit foreign powers (including Russia), only France is targeted here. The rumour serves as a pretext for denouncing France's neo-colonialism in Africa, a leitmotif exploited at length by Russian propaganda, because it strikes a chord with a fringe of public opinion.

Disinformation put to the test by its audience

Ultimately, fake news derives its consistency from pre-existing socio-cultural representations that it simply takes up and rearranges: rumours of sex thieves, racial stereotypes, the theory of a Western conspiracy against Africa. Its factual implausibility, beyond a few tenuous background elements, is offset by its evocative power. The story gives meaning to the theft of sex by conferring on it a moral and political value: it turns an unusual rumour into an apologue on the evils of neo-colonialism. But how was this story, which serves Russian interests in Africa, received by its intended audience? What effects - strong or weak - did the disinformation operation have on public opinion? This is a central debate in studies of the power of propaganda and, more broadly, the influence of the media.

We can gauge the reception of the fake news from the reactions of African Internet users on social networks. Its republication on the Facebook page "RCA aujourd'hui" elicited around a hundred comments. They express a variety of opinions on the information and its status as truth. Some adhere to the thesis put forward in the article (or at least to the political parable it contains) and are indignant: "It's despicable, this kind of trafficking □"; "The French government are salty pigs"; "Cursed be the day Emmanuel Macron entered his mother's ovaries"; "First our land and now they covet our bodies. The white man □□". But these opinions are less numerous than those denouncing the falsity of the article (respectively 16% and 23% of all comments): "Baloney!"; "Nonsense"; "To manage to produce such nonsense without the slightest proof, it's unheard of!" Many are also aware that this is a disinformation operation: "Fake New[s], since when do you take one person's penis to replace another's? Your

propaganda is false"; "False information. Just say you're part of the individuals who want to destabilise Central African peace"; "Your Russian bosses have done a good job and Facebook is taking money from the Wagner's".

Many Internet users question or cast doubt on the article, pointing to the lack of evidence (18%): "□ true?"; "Not verified"; "What's this story? Is there any proof?" A few are amused by this extravagant conspiracy theory (4%): "You're really silly □", "the CAR has been missing penises for a long time". This reveals that conspiracy theories, rumours, urban legends and other bullshit news also circulate because they make people laugh, not because they're taken seriously. A small number of people are perplexed (9%), without it being possible to determine whether their astonishment expresses incredulity or indignation: "What's the world coming to", "Whaaattt????", etc. Finally, almost a third of comments express no epistemic judgement. In short, incredulity, scepticism and derision dominate, while support for conspiracy theory remains in the minority. Indeed, the same is true of sex theft more generally: it arouses doubt as much as belief.

As I mentioned, several African media or media interested in news from the continent quickly published articles refuting the fake news and pointing out that it was a manipulation operation, following the example of the fact-checking services of Observateurs, the collaborative platform of the international news channel France 24, or Radio Ndeke Luka, a Central African media outlet certified by the Journalism Trust Initiative, launched by Reporters Sans Frontières. This journalistic verification had a concrete effect, as it led to the retraction of the fake news by Bamada.net ten days after it went online. On November 7, the site in fact published a "clarification following an unverified article":

> "Dear readers, on October 28 Bamada republished an article entitled "Central African Republic: Unexplained Disappearances of Male Genitalia, France Suspected?" The conditional has been used to report the elements of the article, but the editors have not verified the information. It is highly likely that this is false information, and in this context we have preferred to delete the article."

Behind the appearance of honesty and respect for professional ethics, there is every reason to believe that the press release is in fact insincere. It seems that the retraction had been anticipated from the outset, and that the editors therefore knew that the information was false, as shown by the specious use of the journalistic conditional, a usage so artificial as to be abusive (for example: "some would say that the organ would disappear completely, while others would assert that it would only shrink"). The entire text was systematically written in the conditional tense to dilute in

advance the responsibility of the news site's editorial team (whereas the English version published in Nigeria only used the indicative tense). It may seem like a neat trick, but it allows for the spread of disinformation while giving the illusion of being a serious media outlet, capable of admitting its mistakes. In any case, the retracted article is no longer available on the Bamada website. The same applies to the republications on Facebook, which are now partially inaccessible: the text is blurred and covered by a warning indicating that it is "false information". Below, an alternative link points to the France 24 Observateurs article, clearly labelled as a "verification media"[9]. It's still possible to access the original fake news, but this requires several clicks and the reading of a second disclaimer.

The refutation of the fake news by fact-checking journalism has prompted a backlash. On several Facebook groups devoted to the Central African Republic (here and here), an Internet user accustomed to relaying Russian propaganda posted the following message on November 4: "Recently, French media and opinion leaders have been quick to accuse the Russians of spreading 'fake news' and propaganda messages about sex theft in the CAR. However, the lack of solid evidence suggests that it was France that launched this fake news to then accuse Russia, its main rival in Africa." The thesis was also taken up by an Ivorian media outlet. This mise en abyme of disinformation makes it possible to accuse one's target of manipulations that one commits oneself. It's a tried-and-tested strategy: pro-Russian news sites regularly accuse fact-checking media of spreading false news and hatred online. This is reminiscent of Donald Trump's use of the term fake news, incriminating media outlets that refute his lies, errors or approximations with disinformation: "You're fake news!" This Orwellian rhetoric aims to prevent the distinction between truth and falsehood by sowing confusion and polarizing public opinion.

Despite this backlash, it seems that the disinformation operation has had only a limited impact. The conspiratorial explanation of sex theft probably didn't convince many people, as the scepticism of reactions on social networks suggests. Given the weight of confirmation bias when it comes to political opinion, we can assume that only those already hostile to France bought into the conspiracy theory put forward by the article, or at least pretended to in order to be better able to express their indignation. That said, the aim of disinformation is probably not so much to convince

[9] Les Observateurs de France 24 is one of Facebook's media partners for fact-checking, partnerships which Mark Zuckerberg has recently announced will end in January 2025 in the name of 'freedom of expression', in the context of Donald Trump's return to the White House.

as to attract attention and get people talking. In this respect, the operation may appear successful: the fake news was simultaneously published in French and English in the Malian and Nigerian press; it was picked up and commented on on social networks; it was spotted and refuted by fact-checking columns, which constitutes a form of visibility, even if negative. But in reality, the spread of the fake news and the public's exposure to it have been relatively limited. Its visibility is artificial, as shown by the fake likes. Shares and republications are essentially the work of the manipulators themselves. False information has therefore remained encapsulated in the pro-Russian sphere and has not found its way to the more conventional media, a necessary condition for reaching a wide audience.

Rumour versus fake news

This hints at what distinguishes the original sex-theft rumour from its resurgence in the form of fake news. It's not a difference of medium. It's true that rumours are spread by word-of-mouth, whereas fake news is inherently linked to the mass media, as it seeks to pass itself off as information like that produced by traditional media. However, rumours can also be relayed by the media. Print media, radio, television and, more recently, the Internet and social networks have provided a formidable sounding board for stories of sex theft. They are thus key vectors in the spread of rumours. It's no coincidence, moreover, that rumours, which originated in Nigeria in the 1970s, only became international in the 1990s, with the liberalisation of the communications sector and the rise of a so-called popular press. But the newspapers didn't create the sex theft story out of thin air; they merely echoed the rumour and the incidents it triggered: media coverage was only secondary. In short, a rumour can be covered by the media, whereas fake news is, by definition, a media phenomenon.

This difference is linked to another distinctive feature: the spread of rumour is spontaneous, whereas fake news presupposes the intention to deceive. Rumour is dubious, unverified information, but it is generally relayed in good faith. It can be exploited, but as with media coverage, this is secondary. The rumour of sex theft has sometimes been exploited for xenophobic purposes, as when a Cameroonian newspaper ran the headline in 1996: "Science confirms. The hunt is on for Nigerian sex thieves", stirring up hatred and violence against them, against a backdrop of border disputes between the two countries. By contrast, fake news is deliberately false or

misleading information, fabricated and spread to serve an ideological cause. In this respect, it is comparable to propaganda. In short, a false rumour is most often misinformation, whereas fake news is always disinformation.

This translates into distinct dissemination dynamics. Rumours spread in episodic bursts. The synergy of word-of-mouth and media coverage contributes to the epidemic dynamics of sex theft. Incidents are the driving force behind the snowball effect. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the circulation of the rumour itself gives rise to incidents: because they occur in public spaces, these accusations, gatherings and acts of violence generate eyewitness accounts which, by circulating in their turn (including in recent years via videos posted on social networks), boost the rumour mill even further. Such testimonies place the rumour on a different level of proof from mere hearsay, and thus reinforce its credibility. Fake news also needs to be seen as reliable, so it calls on authoritative sources, but these are counterfeit: fake testimonies and, above all, fake experts with fake diplomas, fake research institutions and fake scientific studies. Disinformation claims the authority of science, even if only to undermine it by distorting it.

Despite these efforts to falsify the truth, in many cases the fake news doesn't catch on and its spread remains limited, because its artificiality shines through too obviously. It is certainly difficult to judge the intention to deceive, all the more so as fake news may have been misleadingly fabricated, but then be retransmitted in good faith by third parties. This is indeed the objective of any disinformation operation. But such successes are probably not that common, and the influence of fake news should be kept in perspective. In any case, the fake news about sex theft suggests this: the people who crafted it failed to circulate it far beyond their own circles, since it was only spread by the pro-Russian networks themselves. The Internet ecosystem facilitates disinformation (proliferation of news sites, instant sharing on social networks, filter bubbles, troll factories...)[10]. But it can also limit its real scope. Emerging from a marginal space online, disinformation often remains confined to that digital niche. The fake article on sex theft, for example, attempts to capitalize on the recent resurgence of the rumour in the Central African Republic, but is too contrived and released too late to revive its spontaneous spread in the country. Ultimately, even if a rumour can be used to manufacture fake news, it's much more difficult to transform fake news into a rumour.

[10] David Chavalarias, *Toxic Data. Comment les réseaux manipulent nos opinions*, Paris, Flammarion, 2022.

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