

francesoir.fr

The website of France-Soir, a former national newspaper that relaunched online in 2015, and that has published unsubstantiated claims about the COVID-19 pandemic.



Proceed with caution: This website fails to adhere to several basic journalistic standards.

Score: 44.5/100

Ownership and Financing

France-Soir does not clearly disclose its ownership.

France-Soir is produced by Shopper Union France, according to the site's Legal notice. Shopper Union France belongs to the publicly traded, Paris-based company France Soir Groupe, according to the company's registration documents,

In a July 1, 2020, telephone interview with NewsGuard, the site's publishing director, Xavier Azalbert, said that different entities own different aspects of the site, such as its URL and its content, but he declined to name the site's owner, noting that he is not legally obligated to disclose ownership.

France-Soir generates revenue from advertising and sponsored content.

Content

FranceSoir.fr covers French and international news, social issues, and entertainment. The site divides content into sections including politics, society, economic trends, culture, and lifestyle. It publishes a breaking news feed, which is often based on stories from Agence France-Presse.

A section called "En Coop" features articles written by contributors including a military specialist, a medical expert, and animal rights activists. Some articles are written in English.

The website had employed four full-time journalists until October 2019, when the journalists said in a statement that they were dismissed "for economic reasons." In a June 30, 2020, telephone interview with NewsGuard, Azalbert declined to discuss the departures of the journalists, stating that he writes some articles for the site and relies on approximately 60 contributors.



Does not repeatedly publish false content (22points)



Gathers and presents information responsibly (18)



Regularly corrects or clarifies errors (12.5)



Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly (12.5)



Avoids deceptive headlines (10)



Website discloses ownership and financing (7.5)



Clearly labels advertising (7.5)



Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest (5)



The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information (5)

Criteria are listed in order of importance.

[More information.](#)

The website's mission, according to a Manifesto published in May 2020, is to "offer its readers a new experience that is informational, entertaining, and delivers services." ("proposer à nos lecteurs une nouvelle expérience à la fois informationnelle, servicielle et divertissante"). The website continued, "We promise to speak with everyone with an open mind, and not to restrict ourselves to an ideological and activist vision of the world, or to a ready-to-think collection of ideas that could be divisive and dangerous to us, but also to you." ("Nous nous engageons à parler à tout le monde sans sectarisme, et à ne pas nous enfermer dans une vision du monde orientée et militante ou dans un florilège de prêt-à-penser clivant et dangereux pour nous comme pour vous").

Credibility

France-Soir publishes a mix of original reporting by contributing writers and articles that are based on news from reliable news sites such as Radio Europe 1, weekly *Le Journal du dimanche*, and daily newspaper *Le Monde*. Headlines generally reflect the content of articles. Images are generally attributed.

Before its full-time staff left in October 2019, the website generally published accurate, well-sourced content. However, although a June 2020 review of the website found that many articles published straightforward news accounts, NewsGuard also found several articles that made unsubstantiated claims about the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, in June 2020, France-Soir published an interview with Silvano Trotta, a French YouTube personality, which advocated a mix of two antibiotics called macrolides and C3G to treat COVID-19. Trotta, who has promoted conspiracy theories about the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, claimed in the France-Soir article that a French family doctor named Sabine Paliard Franco successfully treated all of her patients with a mix of the antibiotics.

The article quoted Trotta saying that Paliard Franco had "noted a 100% recovery, including with very old patients, with tight chest." Trotta went on to say, "What's true is that Doctor Paliard Franco's treatment works like

a charm.” (“Elle avait 100% de guérison y compris de personnes très âgées avec les poumons de pris ...Ce qu'elle a de vrai est que le traitement du Docteur Paliard Franco fonctionne à merveille.”)

The World Health Organization, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the French Health Ministry have all said that as of June 2020, there was no specific treatment for the coronavirus strain responsible for the 2020 outbreak.

The France-Soir article did not include that information. The article’s unnamed author (Azalbert told NewsGuard that he was the writer) only asked Trotta about why YouTube had removed an April 2020 video that Trotta had published that promoted the same claims. “This video is 100% correct... But Big Pharma and future vaccine sellers did not like it,” Trotta responded in the France Soir interview. “It’s easy for them to silence these great family doctors, but a bit more difficult with the likes of Christian Perronne and Didier Raoult,” he added, referring to two French doctors who promoted another controversial treatment for COVID-19 known as hydroxychloroquine. (“Cette vidéo s'avère 100% exact ! (...) Cela n'est pas du goût des Big Pharma et des futurs vendeurs de vaccins. Il est facile pour eux de faire taire ces fantastiques petits généralistes, un peu plus difficile quand on s'appelle Christian Perronne ou Didier Raoult”).

In a June 2020 email to NewsGuard, Paliard Franco said that she had asked Trotta to remove the YouTube video, saying that while “the content was true, and reason for great hope,” her research was not yet ready for formal publication. “This is not a validated scientific study,” she told NewsGuard.

Asked about this article, Azalbert told NewsGuard in the June 30 interview that he merely transcribed what Trotta said in an interview. Azalbert also said that he was more interested in “Google’s censorship” (“la censure de Google”) than in the treatment promoted by Trotta, a reference to the fact that Google-owned YouTube took the video down.

After NewsGuard asked about this article, the website added a note at the top of the article stating: “This interview portrays exactly what Silvano Trotta said... and we received no message from Doctor Paliard Franco or anyone else about this video.” (“Cette interview représente les dires exacts de Silvano Trotta recueillis lors de l'entretien (...) et nous n'avons reçu aucun message du docteur Paliard Franco ni d'aucune autre personne au sujet de cette vidéo”).

In early July 2020, after NewsGuard published an earlier version of this Nutrition Label, Azalbert wrote an article about the review on FranceSoir.fr. In that article, he referred to NewsGuard’s analysis as “nitpicking” (“pinailage”).

In another June 2020 article, France-Soir suggested that countries with more stringent lockdown measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 actually increased their citizens’ chances of contracting the disease. The article noted that Belgium, which had reported more cases of coronavirus than the Netherlands as of late June 2020, had adopted stricter lockdown measures. For example, Belgium had closed schools and public places, while the Netherlands had allowed larger gatherings, with some limitations.

“The comparison between Belgium and The Netherlands suggests that a strict confinement accelerates contaminations,” the article said. (“La comparaison entre la Belgique et les Pays bas permet de suggérer même que le confinement strict accélère les contaminations”).

A study published in June 2020 in scientific journal Nature, which looked at 11 European countries’ efforts at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 virus, found that “major non-pharmaceutical interventions and lockdown in particular have had a large effect on reducing transmission.” The study added, “We find that, across 11 countries, since the beginning of the epidemic, 3,100,000 ... deaths have been averted due to interventions.”

In response to NewsGuard's inquiry about this article, Azalbert told NewsGuard that the article was an "analysis" and not meant to be "definitive." He added that the efficacy of lockdown measures in containing the virus "remained to be proven" ("reste encore a prouver"). "I am convinced that what we wrote is correct," Azalbert said. ("Je suis persuadé que les propos qu'on tient sont corrects").

In his article published about NewsGuard's review, Azalbert wrote, "It is not the same to conclude definitively that lockdowns prevented 3.1 million deaths and to say that it is an economic, human and social aberration." ("Il n'est pas pareil de conclure que le confinement a permis d'éviter 3.1 millions de morts que de dire que c'est une aberration économique, humaine et sociale").

In June 2020, France Soir published an article titled "A man-made COVID virus highly pathogenic for Humans was created by the Wuhan Virology Institute and by the USA," ("Un virus COVID synthétique hautement pathogène pour l'être humain créé par l'institut de virologie de Wuhan et les USA"). The article, which primarily reported on a 2015 study about a different strain of coronavirus unrelated to COVID-19, suggested without evidence that the COVID-19 virus could have been bioengineered.

"In its statements to the press, a French expert in virology denied that such manipulations could have happened in Wuhan or elsewhere. But what about research in secret military laboratories? ... We understand better why Americans and Chinese accuse each other of having been the origin of the SARS-Cov2 pandemic," the article said. ("Dans ses déclarations à la presse un expert virologue français a nié que de telles manipulations aient pu avoir eu lieu à Wuhan ou ailleurs. Cependant quid de la recherche dans les laboratoires secrets militaires ? ... Nous comprenons mieux pourquoi Américains et Chinois s'accusent mutuellement d'avoir été à l'origine de la pandémie du SARS-Cov2").

Scientific research suggests that the COVID-19 virus originated in bats, and no evidence supports the theory that it was bioengineered. A study published in the journal *Nature* in February 2020 found the new virus's genome is "96 percent identical" to a bat coronavirus. A March 2020 study published in the journal *Nature Medicine* concluded that the virus "is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus."

In an April 2020 statement, the U.S. intelligence community said that it "concur[s] with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not manmade or genetically modified." It later said that the intelligence community "will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan."

Asked about this article by NewsGuard, Azalbert said that "Many consensuses ... turned out to be wrong... and were modified eventually." He added, "I consider that it's a news website's job to be a counter-power to uniform thinking." ("Il y a plein de consensus (...) qui sont faux (...) et qui sont modifiés ex-post (...) Je considère que c'est le travail aussi d'un site de presse d'être un petit peu le contre-pouvoir d'une pensée unique").

In the article published on *FranceSoir.fr* in July 2020, Azalbert wrote: "Contrary to NewsGuard, we claim that this article, by its rigor, is a model of journalism". ("Au contraire de NewsGuard nous prétendons que cet article, par sa rigueur, est un modèle de journalisme"). (This sentence was later removed from the article.)

Because *France Soir* has published unsubstantiated claims about the COVID-19 pandemic, NewsGuard has made the judgment that the website does not meet NewsGuard's standard for gathering and presenting information responsibly.

The website has an opinion section, and labels some of its articles as such. However, opinionated articles also appear in sections that are labeled as news, which

does not meet NewsGuard's standard for handling the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

For example, a June 2020 article titled "Covid-19: Randomized trial is Big Pharma's new media-friendly weapon against ethics" ("L'essai randomisé la nouvelle arme médiatique de Big Pharma, contre l'éthique dans la Covid-19") said, "It is now difficult to captivate readers with a subject like conflicts of interests in the pharmaceutical industry since they have become such a common pathology of our society." ("Il est à présent difficile de captiver le lecteur avec un sujet sur les conflits d'intérêts dans l'industrie pharmaceutique tellement ils sont devenus une pathologie banale de notre société"). It was not labelled as opinion and was tagged in the categories Society and Health.

Another June 2020 article labeled Politics and World stated that "the UK therapeutic strategy against COVID-19, which does not treat people in the early stages of the disease, is profoundly wrong." ("La stratégie thérapeutique COVID-19 au Royaume-Uni, qui ne traite pas les personnes dans la phase précoce de la maladie, est profondément erronée"). It was not labelled opinion in June 2020 when NewsGuard reviewed the website, but has since been updated with an Analysis/Opinion label at the top of the text.

Another article published June 2020, titled "How the pharma industry sold its soul... Act III," ("Comment l'industrie pharmaceutique a vendu son âme... Acte III") was tagged "Society" and "Health" but not Opinion. According to the article: "A new, citizen-focused World Health Organization must emerge, that is not guided by conflicts of interest." ("Une nouvelle Organisation Mondiale de la Santé doit voir le jour, citoyenne, et non pilotée par les conflits d'intérêt").

Francesoir.fr does not explain how it handles corrections, and NewsGuard did not find corrections on the website. Azalbert told NewsGuard that corrections were made every time an error was notified by readers. "Generally, when we correct something, we say so," he said. ("En general quand c'est une correction, on l'indique").

However, asked to provide examples of corrections, Azalbert provided one story that was updated with additional information but that did not flag any errors, and another that noted that something was corrected, but did not explain what had been changed.

Because FranceSoir.fr does not publish corrections that describe the error and how it was corrected, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not meet its standard for regularly publishing transparent corrections.

Transparency

Although FranceSoir.fr discloses on its Legal Notice page that it is produced by Shopper Union France, it does not disclose that the company is owned by France Soir Group, as Shopper Union France's registration documents show . Asked about this lack of disclosure, Azalbert, as noted above, said in the July 2020 telephone interview that there was no legal obligation in France to provide more information about ownership.

The Legal Notice page lists the name of the website's publishing director.

Most France-Soir articles are attributed only to FranceSoir. Some articles are attributed to a group calling itself "The Citizen Collective." In most cases, no biographical or contact information is provided for the authors whose names are listed.

Asked by NewsGuard about the lack of information on content creators, Azalbert said in the June 2020 telephone interview that this was an editorial choice. "We do not want to give the reader any bias... it is very important with a collaborative media," he said. ("C'est dans un souci de ne pas donner un biais au lecteur (...) c'est hyper important dans un média de type collaboratif").

In the July 2020 FranceSoir.fr article about NewsGuard's review of the site, Azalbert wrote: "Anonymity is not forbidden by law, and it's used in response to a request from content creators themselves, in order to avoid some biases in the way the information is presented. For example, pressures can be exerted on authors whose articles do not follow

the norm that NewsGuard pretends to defend.”
 (“L’anonymat n’est pas proscrit par la loi et justement cela répond à des demandes émanant des rédacteurs eux-mêmes afin d’éviter certains biais potentiels dans la présentation de l’information. Par exemple des pressions peuvent être exercées sur des auteurs d’articles qui ne vont pas dans le sens de la doxa admise dont NewsGuard s’érige en gardien”).

Users can reach the site through a general contact form.

Advertisements and sponsored content are distinguishable from editorial content. A shopping section on the site publishes articles promoting products that users can purchase through links within the stories. Each article contains a note at the end identifying the content as sponsored, and explaining that France-Soir receives commissions if users purchase the products.

History

On July 14, 1941, French resistance members Robert Salmon and Philippe Viannay founded the first issue of the newspaper *Défense de la France*, the predecessor of *France-Soir*. The publication was printed in the basement of the Sorbonne university in Nazi-occupied Paris. The newspaper changed its name to *France-Soir* in November 1944.

The media group Hachette purchased the newspaper in 1949. Led by the celebrated publisher Pierre Lazareff, *France-Soir* became one of the most widely read newspapers in the country, publishing the work of such acclaimed writers as novelist Joseph Kessel, war correspondent Lucien Bodard, and the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. In the mid-1950s and early 1960s, the newspaper featured the slogan, “the only French daily printing more than 1 million copies” (“le seul quotidien français tirant à plus d’un million d’exemplaires”).

After the death of Lazareff in 1972, *France-Soir*’s print circulation dropped considerably, and the newspaper changed ownership several times. The newspaper’s

circulation fell to fewer than 50,000 copies by 2006. It printed its last issue in 2011.

In 2012, the company CardsOff paid 510,000 euros to acquire the newspaper's remaining assets, and relaunched France-Soir as an iPad publication. CardsOff changed its name to Mutualize Corporation in 2014, and France-Soir re-launched as a website in 2015.

As noted, in October 2019, after a monthslong strike, France-Soir's four full-time journalists said in a statement that they were fired for economic reasons. "But it's not the end of France-Soir. Our employer has indeed decided to continue publishing this newspaper, which used to be one of the biggest ones in France after the war. With which framework? To do what? Everyone should remain attentive," the staff wrote in a press release at the time. ("Pour autant, ce n'est pas la fin de France-Soir. Notre employeur a ainsi décidé de continuer à éditer ce qui fut l'un des plus grands journaux français de l'après-guerre. Avec quel cadre ? Dans quel but ? Il appartiendra à tous de rester vigilant").

Corrections: An earlier version of this Nutrition Label erroneously reported that France Soir Groupe is traded under the name Mutualize Corp. The group was traded under that name in the past, but no longer was as of 2020. A previous version of this label also mistakenly said that the newspaper Défense de la France was founded on July 20, 1941, when it was actually founded on July 14, 1941. Finally, an earlier version of this label erroneously reported that Défense de la France changed its name to France-Soir in October 1944. The newspaper was renamed in November 1944. NewsGuard apologizes for the errors.

Editor's Note: This Nutrition Label was updated on July 9, 2020, to include comments from the site's publishing director. In June 2020, its rating was updated to reflect NewsGuard's determination that FranceSoir.fr no longer meets NewsGuard's standard for gathering and presenting information responsibly and for regularly issuing corrections, but does meet NewsGuard's

standard for clearly labelling advertising and for revealing who is in charge. The criteria checklist was adjusted accordingly.

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