

The website of FranceSoir, 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 severely violates basic journalistic standards.

Score: 22.5/100

Ownership and Financing

FranceSoir 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.

FranceSoir generates revenue from advertising and sponsored content. It also solicits donations from its readers. In July, FranceSoir launched a competition called The Expert Challenge, through which readers who buy FranceSoir's premium content get the chance to win a house.

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 outside contributors, including a military specialist, a medical expert, an animal rights activist, and an anonymous collective made up of 450 citizens. Some articles are written in English. In 2020, the website's coverage often focused on COVID-19 and the impact of policies aimed at curbing the pandemic.

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, Xavier Azalbert, publishing director of the site, declined to discuss the departures of the journalists, stating that he writes some articles for the site and relies on

-  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.](#)

approximately 60 contributors. In a video interview published on the site in December 2020, Azalbert said that journalists worked alongside outside contributors.

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").

In a November 2020 column on the site, Azalbert wrote: "France Soir strongly believes in the value of debate. No offence to our critics, France Soir is not conspiracy-minded, it's a skeptical media!" ("France Soir croit profondément en la valeur du débat. N'en déplaise à nos détracteurs, France Soir n'est pas un média complotiste, c'est un média 'sceptique' !")

Credibility

Before its full-time staff left in October 2019, the website generally published accurate, well-sourced content, with a mix of original reporting by contributing writers and articles based on news from credible sites like Europe 1, Le Journal du dimanche and Le Monde.

Yet, in the Spring of 2020, FranceSoir started publishing articles based on sources NewsGuard has found to repeatedly publish false news, such as GlobalResearch.ca, and articles that made unsubstantiated claims about the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, a Sept. 24, 2020, op-ed titled "The battle to make the pandemic last," ("La bataille pour faire durer la pandémie") claimed that "official mainstream science is actively trying to deny that the pandemic is over: it has to continue so we can make and sell

vaccines.” (“La science officielle mainstream s'emploie actuellement à nier que la pandémie soit terminée : il faut qu'elle dure pour pouvoir fabriquer et vendre les vaccins”).

In fact, when the article was published, there was no sign that the pandemic was over. On the contrary, a Sept. 21, 2020, update by the World Health Organization stated that globally, “there were almost 2 million new cases of COVID-19, which represents a 6% increase compared to the previous week, and the highest number of reported cases in a single week since the beginning of the epidemic.” The pandemic was still raging as of December 2020, according to the WHO and other health authorities.

Asked about this article in December 2020, publishing director Azalbert declined to comment and posted NewsGuard’s question under the article, directing it to the author of the FranceSoir article, who did not respond.

In November 2020, FranceSoir.fr published several articles promoting “Hold-Up,” a nearly three-hour French documentary containing numerous baseless claims about the COVID-19 pandemic. (Azalbert appears as a guest in the documentary.)

For example, in an op-ed about the film published on FranceSoir.fr in November 2020, the producer of the film, Christophe Cossé, described the pandemic as “customary and seasonal,” and added that “what is looming is massive vaccination, and its corollary, the tracking of everyone. In France, in Europe, but also all over the world, under the pretext of a virus that is no more aggressive than another seasonal COVID.” (“épidémie, somme toute habituelle et saisonnière” - “se profile la vaccination massive, et son corollaire, le fichage de chaque individu. En France, en Europe, mais dans le monde entier, au prétexte d’un virus pas plus offensif qu’un autre COVID saisonnier”).

Although comparing disease death rates is complicated by issues such as asymptomatic cases, there is no basis for the claim that COVID-19 is no deadlier than a seasonal disease, and there is evidence that the

opposite is true. A May 2020 study published in JAMA Internal Medicine, a publication of the American Medical Association, found that in the U.S., weekly death tolls from COVID-19 in April 2020 were 20 times higher than the deadliest week of an average flu season. In March 2020, the World Health Organization stated on its website: “Mortality for COVID-19 appears higher than for influenza, especially seasonal influenza.”

In response to an inquiry from NewsGuard, the WHO stated in July 2020: “Even though we do not yet know the precise CFR (case fatality ratio) or IFR (Infection fatality ratio) for COVID-19, the bottom line is that there is a significant number of people who die....” The WHO added that “the crude clinical case fatality rate currently (17 July) is about 4% (total deaths divided by total cases),” while that of the seasonal influenza “varies year to year but is estimated at about 0.1%.”

Moreover, a retrospective study by French Institute Inserm and the Dijon Hospital involving 130,000 hospitalizations in France for the flu and COVID-19, published in December 2020 in The Lancet Respiratory Medicine journal, found a death rate three times higher among hospitalized COVID-19 patients than among patients of the seasonal flu.

As for the claim about the vaccine containing a 'tracking' mechanism, numerous websites have promoted the idea that Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, a long-time supporter of vaccination campaigns, plans to use COVID-19 to implement a mandatory vaccine program with microchips to surveil people. However, there is no vaccine — for COVID-19 or otherwise — with a microchip or other surveillance feature. In December 2019, researchers at MIT, who had received funding from the Gates Foundation, published a paper about technology they developed that can keep a vaccination record on a patient’s skin with an ink-like injection that could be read by smartphone. The technology does not have the capacity to track patients’ movements, Kevin McHugh, a Rice University bioengineering professor who worked on the study while at MIT, told FactCheck.org.

Asked in December 2020 about these claims, Azalbert declined to comment and said these questions should be directed to the film's producer, Christopher Cosse. Azalbert copied NewsGuard's question at the bottom of the column and directed it to the author, who did not respond.

In June 2020, FranceSoir 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 FranceSoir 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 FranceSoir 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 FranceSoir 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 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, FranceSoir 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, FranceSoir 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”).

On July 20, 2020, after NewsGuard inquired about this article, a note was added at the top stating that “this article is an analysis of coronaviruses in general, not COVID-19, which is a subset.” (“cet article représente une analyse sur les coronavirus en général qui ne sont pas à confondre avec le Covid-19 qui en est un sous-ensemble”).

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 FranceSoir has published numerous false or unsubstantiated claims about the COVID-19 pandemic, NewsGuard has determined that the site repeatedly publishes false news and does not gather and present information responsibly.

Headlines are generally not deceptive and reflect the content of the article.

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, in a December 2020 article titled “Breaking news: the Professor Fourtillan, who appeared in the documentary Hold-Up, has been committed in a psychiatric hospital against his will” (“[Alerte Info] Le Pr Fourtillan, apparu dans "Hold-Up", interné en hôpital psychiatrique contre son gré?”), an unnamed author wrote: “After the censorship, the freedom of expression, the summoning of doctors for various reasons, the death threats against Professor Raoult, we are witnessing a privation of liberty with the commitment against his will of Professor Fourtillan in a psychiatric unit. Where will it stop? It’s really the first word of the national motto that is being jeopardized.” The article was tagged Society and Crime, but not opinion. (“Après la censure, la liberté d'expression, les convocations des médecins à l'ordre pour diverses raisons, les menaces de mort contre le Pr Raoult, nous assistons à une

privation de liberté par internement contre son gré du Pr Fourtillan. Où va-t-on s'arrêter ? C'est bien le premier mot de la devise nationale qui est mis à mal”).

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.

On its Legal Notice, Francesoir.fr describes its corrections policy, saying that “FranceSoir commits to modify and correct in a precise and transparent way all errors in its articles” (FranceSoir s’engage à apporter des modifications et corrections précises et visibles à toutes les erreurs figurant dans nos articles”). 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 général quand c’est une correction, on l’indique”).

Several articles indeed bear editor’s notes explaining that they have been corrected. However, as noted above, NewsGuard found several false claims uncorrected on the website. Therefore, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not meet its standard for effective corrections practices.

Transparency

FranceSoir.fr discloses on its Legal Notice page that it is produced by Shopper Union France and adds that the company is owned by France Soir Group.

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

Most FranceSoir 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 are usually distinguishable from editorial content. Articles in the shopping section on the site usually contain a note identifying the content as sponsored, and explaining that FranceSoir receives

commissions if users purchase the products. However, a review of that section by NewsGuard in December 2020 found that several paid articles were only labeled “Partner Articles” (“Articles Partenaires”), which does not meet NewsGuard’s standard for clearly labelling advertising.

Azalbert did not respond to a December 2020 email from NewsGuard requesting a comment on the site’s labelling of sponsored contents.

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 *FranceSoir* re-launched as a website in 2015.

As noted, in October 2019, after a monthslong strike, FranceSoir’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 Dec. 29, 2020, to add new comments from the site’s publishing director and to reflect that the site now fails NewsGuard’s standard for avoiding false news and for labeling advertising. This update also reflects that the site now meets NewsGuard’s standard for disclosing ownership. The criteria checklist was adjusted accordingly.

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Credibility

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