



# A HASHTAG AGAINST AGRIBASHING

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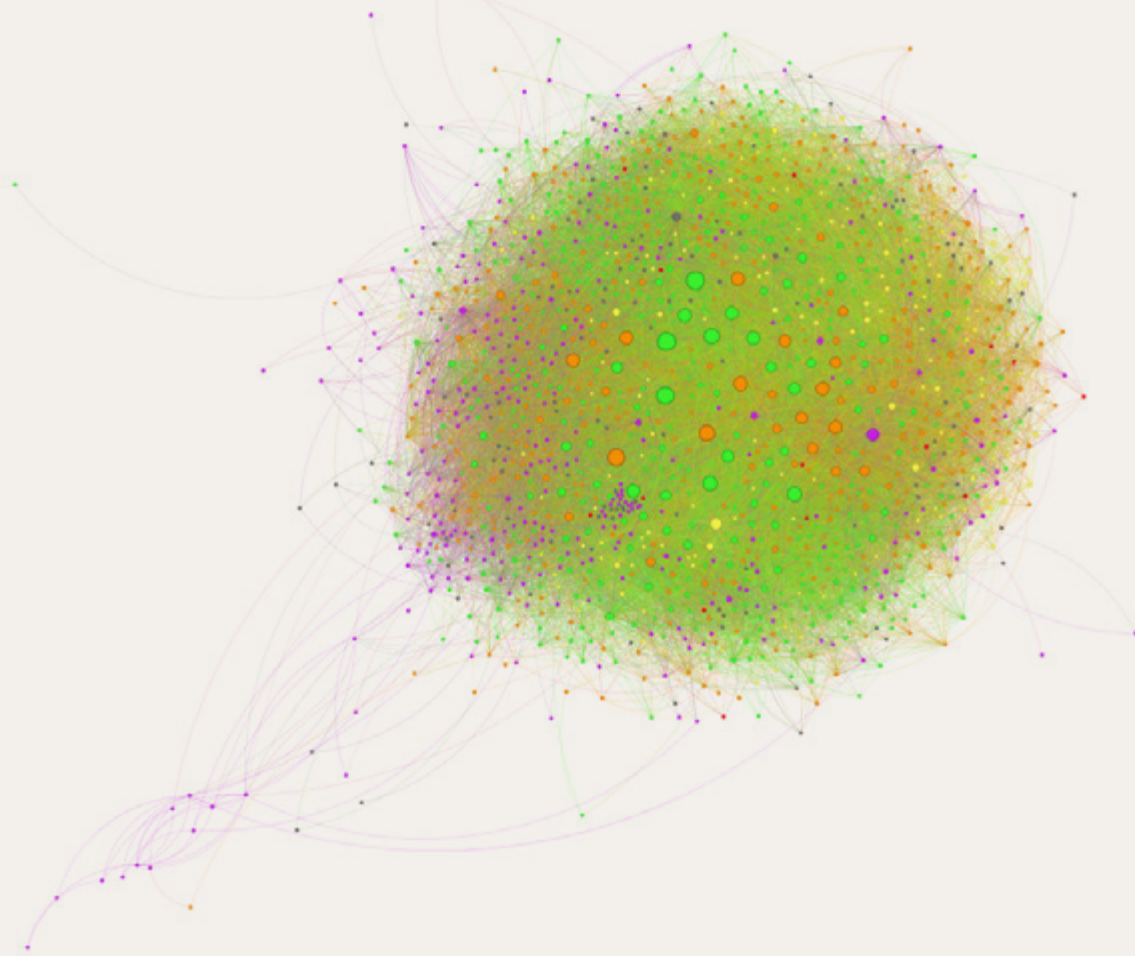


aced with increasingly vindictive and visible denunciations of large-scale agricultural production, a large community of workers in the agricultural and para-agricultural sector has formed on X/Twitter. The study carried out by Sylvain Brunier and Baptiste Kotras, using meticulous coding of tweets and retweets from this sector, reveals the effectiveness of the positive communication promoted by the network, a tactic which is very different from the traditional responses of trade unions and political parties to environmentalist arguments.

Although the rural world is sometimes thought to be associated with dead zones and disconnection, the internet has long been an essential means of expression for many farmers. As far back as the late 1990s, pioneers were regularly exchanging information in dedicated online forums, particularly in arable farming regions such as Beauce. They discussed equipment, agronomy and politics, as well as more trivial matters. More recently, many farmers have taken to YouTube to produce and comment on videos depicting their daily lives on the farm in a highly personalised way, with a particular focus on working with powerful farm machinery. Real online communities were formed on X/Twitter at the turn of the 2010s, particularly in France, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, thanks to

hashtags that allow users to identify each other. This long online conversation has continued to grow ever since. In France, it took concrete form in 2017 with the creation of an association, France AgriTweets, which defends the principles of a more 'positive' communication, in response to the frequent accusations voiced in the media over health and environmental damage caused by productivist agriculture. France AgriTweets seeks to distance itself from the most confrontational responses of the Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles (FNSEA) (National Federation of Farmer Unions), the foremost farmers' union, to the claims of non-governmental organisations and environmental activists. It seeks to eschew confrontation and highlights the

## MEMBERS OF THE FRENCH AGRITWITTOS COMMUNITY



efforts made by farmers to combat global warming and protect human health, biodiversity and animal welfare. The individuals who adopt this approach share a sense of ideological defeat vis-à-vis the increasing criticism of agriculture, which they consider to be ill-informed, voiced by urbanites out of touch with reality, and sometimes purely malicious, or serving radical plans to abolish livestock farming and promote synthetic meat. They are particularly distressed by the emergence of controversies that directly impact their activity in spaces they believe should remain neutral, such as school textbooks and prime-time television programmes.

In order to better understand the structuring of this online counter-mobilisation, we developed a body of approximately 347,000 tweets published between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2021 that referred to France AgriTweets (#FrAgTw). We then retained 265,000 tweets from the 5 per cent most active accounts (n=1,448) within the corpus. Various qualitative codes were used to characterise these accounts: individual account or organisation account; man or woman;

profession; employer; political, union or association affiliation; position in defence of science, rurality or the environment; characteristic of the farm in the case of a farmer. Surprisingly, the study found that a large share of users were keen to identify themselves in a very precise way, far removed from the hordes of anonymous trolls that populate some online spaces.

Thanks to this meticulous manual coding work, we were able to carry out three types of analysis. The first analysis provided a fairly detailed representation of the social characteristics of the community of X/Twitter users who identify with the FranceAgriTweets hashtag, beyond the association itself. A second analysis allowed us to define the characteristics of this network by observing how accounts interact (re-posts, replies and quotes). These practices not only shed light on possible internal affinities and divisions, but also more importantly provide information on the relative authority of each account within the network. A third analysis focused on the content of the published messages using lexicometry to identify the terms most

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In this presentation, using Gephi software, of the network of retweets, quotes and mentions exchanged by the 1,435 most active accounts in the FranceAgriTweets corpus. Each node is an account: green = farmers; orange = para-agricultural workers; purple = non-agricultural accounts; yellow = agricultural organisations; grey = other organisations.



On the FranceAgritwittos feed, praise for the Aubrac breed of cattle, from one of its breeders in the south of the Massif Central.

frequently used, and most specific to the different groups forming this online community. These three levels of analysis were closely linked to a parallel field investigation, in which interviews and observations helped refine the qualitative coding.

What can we learn from all these analyses? First of all, it is striking to note the density and homogeneity of relations between accounts using this hashtag on X/Twitter. No real internal division is apparent, unlike the case of online spaces marked by strong polemics, where several clearly identifiable communities clash.

Second, #FranceAgriTwittos (and its variants) belongs to the category of so-called 'recurring hashtags', namely those that structure the conversation on a given subject over time, similar to #farm365 in the United Kingdom and #AgChatOZ in Australia. Only a minority of accounts mentions trade unions, political affiliations or clearly stated ideological positions, whereas professional identities are frequently highlighted and described in great detail. On this basis, three groups can be distinguished. First, those who identify

themselves as farmers account for 28 per cent of the 1,435 accounts in the corpus. Second, those who have a job directly related to farming ('para-agricultural workers') account for 27 per cent of the corpus. They hold a wide variety of positions, from cooperative technicians to engineers employed by agrochemical companies, specialised journalists, or even speakers for a trade union. Third, official accounts of agricultural organisations represent 11 per cent of the total. This conversational space is thus all the more homogeneous, given that two-thirds of it consists of agriculture professionals in the broad sense.

There are relatively few women (32 per cent of accounts), and only 12 per cent of farmers are women – a much lower share than observed in the general population. Finally, far from being overtaken by journalists and communications professionals, this conversational space consists of a large number of ordinary professionals with no obvious political or trade union agenda. Its effect is therefore to abolish, or at least weaken, the traditional boundaries of trade representation, whereby agriculture should first and foremost be defended by farmers alone. Rather, the exchanges attest to a politicisation 'from below', whereby every participant embraces the shared mission of defending the morality of their professional activities and resisting criticism of the productivist model.

An analysis of the content of the exchanges, based on the identification of the recurring terms most specific to each category, reveals a form of division of communicative labour between farmers on the one hand, and para-agricultural workers on the other. The former talk about their daily work, their products ('pig', 'flax', 'wheat', 'calf'), precise work activities ('ploughing', 'sowing', 'harvesting'), time and the cycle of the seasons ('wait', 'time', 'year', 'autumn', 'frost'). Their messages are often accompanied by photographs and videos taken on the farm, driving their tractor, highlighting the surrounding countryside. Using a daily narrative on social media, the goal is to present aspects of the job that are often ignored or difficult, while at the same time enhancing the attractiveness of the profession through aesthetically pleasing representations. The latter are distinguished by

# *This new form of political representation has met considerable success with the media, public authorities and agribusiness players.*

their vocabulary, which highlights the moral qualities of community members ('heart', 'true', 'joyful', 'interesting'), their dynamism ('positive', 'initiative', 'support'), using terms with very positive connotations ('beautiful', 'great', 'pleasure', 'adore') and sometimes associated with the field of communication ('share', 'communication', 'meeting'). These two registers combine to create a discourse that promotes agriculture by celebrating the acts of production carried out by these diverse and interdependent professionals, epitomised in the idea of a production chain, connecting all essential actors of French agricultural production.

This new form of political representation has been met with considerable success within the media, public authorities and agribusiness players. The emerging community that it constitutes makes it possible, if need be, to bypass traditional trade union representation in order to organise, for example, a TV report, or a minister's field visit. Above all, because it mainly consists of ordinary professionals, the community benefits from a strong sense of authenticity that is invaluable to politicians and industrialists facing mounting criticism on the climate, animal welfare and health fronts. By asserting a strong sense of solidarity around the wider profession of farming, positive communication contributes to denying environmental organisations and activists any legitimacy in talking about agriculture. It enables an idyllic and unitary vision of agricultural sectors, which attempts to neutralise production relationships, inequalities and the criticisms that result from them. The angry demonstrations in which a large number of farmers participated during the winter of 2024 were a reminder that other, more direct and violent

forms of protest continue to exist, and remain under the aegis of the main trade unions. These two registers – one positive, and the other conflictual – nonetheless converge in reformulating economic and environmental issues in moral and emotional terms, urging political actors and the public to support (or even to 'love') agriculture as an economic sector. These terms are hardly compatible with the opening of a much-needed debate on the reorientation of productivist models.



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