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Brigitte Macron's never-ending fake news nightmare

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INVESTIGATION | For four years, the absurd rumor that the French first lady is a man has continually spread. The Macrons have taken legal action, both in France and in the US.

Daniel Nardello arranged to meet in a discreet lounge at the Lutetia, his Parisian base, this September. The luxury hotel and background jazz had the feel of a spy movie. It was rare for the 68-year-old American to come out of the shadows. Dressed in a loose-fitting suit with a neatly trimmed goatee, the former federal prosecutor in New York is now a high-end private investigator hired by companies and law firms to gather dirt on their adversaries in legal proceedings.

Business has been good for Nardello and his firm employs around 110 people – former FBI agents, ex-judges and lawyers – from Washington to Dubai, London to Singapore. Nardello & Co. is even expected to set up shop in Paris soon, and the company already has a particularly prestigious couple among its clients there: Emmanuel and Brigitte Macron.

For several months now, Nardello's investigators have been looking into the "Jean-Michel Trogneux case," a fake news story claiming that France's first lady is a transgender woman and accusing her of actually being her brother, Jean-Michel, an 80-year-old man who does really exist. For four years now, the Elysée Palace has been unable to shake off the rumor first made popular by a self-proclaimed "amateur journalist" and medium in a December 2021 video. Four years of denials, outraged statements and silence have not managed to calm the madness of social media. On the contrary, the racket now resonates around the world.

Candace Owens, the relentless crusader

The battle is no longer being fought only in France, where a cyberharassment trial against 10 people, following a complaint filed by Brigitte Macron in 2024, took place in a Paris court on Monday, October 27, and Tuesday, October 28. The final outcome could now be decided across the Atlantic, in the United States. The Macrons' new nightmare now stems from Tennessee. The influencer Candace Owens, 36, one of the most prominent voices in the Make America Great Again movement with 5.4 million subscribers on YouTube and 7.3 million on X, has decided to add this particular conspiracy theory to her repertoire.

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Owens has built up her persona since Donald Trump's first term in office (2017-2021). At the time, Trump had met with and celebrated the African American woman who was critical of the Black Lives Matter movement and aimed to redirect minority votes in favor of the Republican Party. Today, she is best known for her videos promising to reveal "What REALLY happened on 9/11" or for looking for proof that Israel might be behind the murder of Charlie Kirk, to whom she was close.

Pro-Trump influencer Candace Owens at a convention run by Turning Point USA, the organization founded by Charlie Kirk, in Detroit, Michigan, on June 14, 2024. JEFF KOWALSKY/AFP

Yet by far her biggest hit in recent months has been a series of videos called "Becoming Brigitte." The series got its start through the – unintentional – assistance of Emmanuel Macron. On March 8, 2024, the French president publicly commented on the conspiracy theory for the first time, in an interview with the television channel TF1, saying the rumor spread by "lunatics" was among his worst memories since taking office. News agencies picked up on the story, and it was immediately reported around the world.

Three days later, Owens seized on the gossip, pitching it to her audience as "the BIGGEST Political Scandal in Human History." She said she would stake her "entire professional career on the fact that Brigitte Macron, the current first lady of France, was born a man." The influencer posted video after video, cutting and scripting her "investigation" into episodes like a Netflix series producer.

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A childhood photo of the first lady, a birth announcement in the local press: Anything could serve as fuel for her dubious analyses of a "demonic" state secret. Owens, a devout Catholic, urged her followers not to doubt her. She said there were "people who tried to use Freudian jujitsu to make it seem like I was the one going crazy," pausing her monologues only to throw in lines like "find God and get three months free!" – a catchphrase to promote a prayer app.

The series proved to be a hit. Each of the 11 episodes covering the case has been watched between 1.4 million and 5.7 million times. The story was even shared by some of the most popular podcasters in the Trump sphere, from Joe Rogan to Tucker Carlson, who each have tens of millions of listeners. True to her provocative style, Owens sold t-shirts which, parodying *Time* magazine's cover, featured Brigitte Macron as the "Man of the Year."

Choosing how to respond

The scandal was not just lucrative, it also served a political agenda. Beneath a pop veneer, Owens revived some of the far right's classic accusations, in particular antisemitic ones. Convinced that Judaism is a "pedophile-centric religion that believes in demons [and] child sacrifice," she portrayed Emmanuel Macron as a "puppet" of the Rothschilds, "groomed from the time he was a child" by an individual – Brigitte Macron – with nebulous ties to the famous Jewish banking family. Isn't it strange, she suggested, that Brigitte Macron was born on April 13, 1953, the same day that the CIA's MK-Ultra program to research mind control techniques was launched? In the epilogue of her series, she even asked: What if the first lady was actually Emmanuel Macron's father?

Faced with this wave of conspiracy theories, the presidential couple sent a letter to Owens in December 2024, through their American lawyer, Tom Clare, asking her to immediately retract her "defamatory and highly damaging" allegations. However, the letter only fueled Owens' outspokenness. On July 23,

after two unsuccessful follow-up letters, the Macrons decided to file a defamation suit.

Read more Who is Candace Owens, the pro-Trump influencer spreading transphobic fake news about Brigitte Macron?

The 250-page lawsuit dissects all the false information that Owens had spread over the past year and a half as part of her "campaign of global humiliation," in the words of the couple's lawyer. "Every time the Macrons leave their home, they do so knowing that countless people have heard, and many believe, these vile fabrications," it states. The suit was filed in the state of Delaware, where Owens had registered her business activities.

The document appears to confirm that Emmanuel Macron took time out of his trip to Washington in February, in which he conducted negotiations over the war in Ukraine, to ask Trump to rein in the firebrand influencer. Owens later said, speaking on her show at the end of June, that the US president had called her himself to ask her to stop talking about Brigitte Macron. According to her, the French president had made this a precondition for any agreement on Ukraine. While the lawsuit denied the existence of such blackmail, it did not, however, dispute the nature of the conversation between the two presidents. The Elysée did not respond to *Le Monde*'s requests for comment on the matter.

Beyond the potential for further revelations about their private lives, the Macrons took another risk in filing the lawsuit: that of losing. In the US, a country that prides itself on free speech, "it's very hard for people who are considered public figures to prevail in libel actions," said Nardello, in the lounge of the Lutetia. This is where the investigator's work becomes essential.

Daniel Nardello, in New York, in October 2025. A former federal prosecutor who heads a major private investigation firm, Nardello worked with the American attorney representing Brigitte and Emmanuel Macron. MATTHEW HINTZ FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

"What you need to prove is that the person making the defamatory remarks acted with actual malice, or in reckless disregard of the truth," Nardello said. Over recent weeks, his role has been to construct a "narrative" portraying Owens as a political activist motivated by money and determined to harm the "modern, dynamic" president, according to the wording of the lawsuit. To do so, Nardello worked to trace back the influencer's many networks.

His work has highlighted some already well-known facts, such as her close ties to rapper Kanye West – now infamous for his antisemitic statements – and British misogynist influencer Andrew Tate, her many meetings with French far-right MEP Marion Maréchal, notably during a "right-wing convention" held in Paris in 2019, her friendly exchanges on social media with pro-Putin ideologue Alexander Dugin, and the fact that Nigel Farage, a British politician known for championing Brexit, attended her wedding to George Farmer, son of Michael Farmer, a major treasurer of the United Kingdom's Conservative Party.

French conspiracy theorists

Nardello's company did not do much digging, however, into the background of Owens's main accomplice, a thoroughly French figure. Xavier Poussard, 38, is not a publicly known figure. A former journalist for *Faits et documents*, a far-right newsletter, Poussard is close to being the only source for Owens' claims.

A Paris native, with a square jaw and librarian-style glasses, Poussard is obsessed with Jews and Freemasons, whose supposed influence and networks among the elites he maps out. He inherited this "know-how" from Emmanuel Ratier (1957-2015), the founder of *Faits et documents*, who was trained in the methods of Henry Coston (1910-2001), a journalist and collaborator during World War II.

Read more (from 2022) France's first lady, her brother and an outrageous fake news story

In the spring of 2021, Poussard was contacted by Natacha Rey, an ordinary citizen with ties to the Yellow Vests protest movement, claiming she had uncovered the first lady's true identity. She was looking for a media outlet willing to publish her findings. For several weeks, the journalist complied, adding his own information to the investigation into "the Brigitte Macron mystery." The series of articles did not gain traction.

Rey then turned to Amandine Roy, a medium, in an attempt to spread her work via Roy's YouTube channel. Their video, published in December 2021, was viewed more than 450,000 times in just a few days before it was taken down from the platform. On X (then known as Twitter), the hashtag #JeanMichelTrogneux went viral. Russian television channels gleefully picked up on the story, inviting Rey to appear on their programs. The scandal was born.

Poussard, who was not involved in the video, tried to connect himself to the phenomenon by continuing his investigation in *Faits et documents*. Several special issues followed, one after another, promising "exclusive documents and previously unseen photos." His argument relied on a new toy: Chinese

facial recognition software, whose results, he claimed, proved that the photos of Brigitte Macron as a young woman were fake.

Owens and Poussard got in touch with each other after an exchange on X in March 2024 and have stayed close since then. Poussard appeared twice on the influencer's show and visited her at her home in Nashville. In February, he self-published a book (in French and English), *Becoming Brigitte*, with a foreword by Owens. It has regularly appeared on Amazon's bestseller lists. When contacted, he refused to say how many copies he had sold and did not wish to meet with us. In June, in a long profile of him published by *Society* magazine, Poussard said that, thanks to the book's sales, he had been able to purchase an apartment in Milan (where he lives with his wife and children), a car, and hire one of his family members as an employee.

Complex legal proceedings

His success has provoked jealousy and envy within the group of diehards obsessed with uncovering Brigitte Macron's "true" origins. Rey, in particular, has accused the journalist of having sold her story to Owens. "He refuses to give her a single cent; he is lining his own pockets," her lawyer, François Dangléhant, said. His client, who has barely scraped by through online fundraisers and has claimed to have applied for political asylum in Russia, is said to be preparing her own book, "in French and in English."

"I am in contact with a director for a Netflix series, with Natacha as the heroine," said the lawyer, who has notably defended Dieudonné, a comedian found guilty of inciting racial hatred several times. Though she purported to be apolitical, Rey told journalist Emmanuelle Anizon of *Le Nouvel Obs*, the author of an investigative book on the rumor (*L'Affaire Madame. Anatomie d'une fake news*, "The Madame Case: Anatomy of Fake News"), that she despised the Republic, which she claimed was built on the alleged "genocide" of the "Vendéens, aristocrats and priests."

For his part, Poussard was dismissed from *Faits et documents* at the end of 2024 by the polemicist Alain Soral, one of the magazine's shareholders. Soral, who has been convicted several times for antisemitic statements, accused him

of dragging the publication into "total Brigitte-ology." It was too risky a hobby, according to Soral, who lives in Switzerland to escape the French justice system.

Curiously, the Macrons have never filed a suit against Poussard. A source close to the couple explained that they feared their complaint would be dismissed. In matters of defamation, it is not only the substance of the remarks that counts. A journalist can argue that they were operating in good faith if they conducted an investigation based on sufficient factual evidence. In this case, Poussard has his 330-page book, which, while "not worth a dime," according to the same source, "was written with a great deal of caution."

The Macrons have already suffered several setbacks in court. The first complaint the first lady filed against Rey and Roy (jointly with her brother Trogneux) was dismissed in 2023. The charge requested, "invasion of privacy," was not the right one.

A year later, the Trogneux siblings obtained damages from the two women for defamation. However, the ruling was overturned by the Paris appeals court in July of this year, on the grounds that "the allegation of having undergone a gender transition and not having wanted to make it public cannot constitute an attack on honor or reputation." The court also found the accusations of lying and falsification to be too vague to warrant a conviction. Brigitte Macron has since referred the matter to the Cour de Cassation, France's highest court of appeal.

Private matter

While waiting for this next stage, a trial for cyberharassment against the first lady took place at the Paris criminal court. Brigitte Macron filed the suit in August 2024, after a photo of her in a swimsuit sparked a new wave of mockery, insults and insinuations about her gender.

"All these allegations have had a significant impact on those around me and on myself," she said during her police interview, which took place at the Elysée Palace in December 2024. "I have not traveled abroad once without someone

bringing it up," the first lady added. "There is not a spouse of a head of state who is not aware." Nevertheless, she did not want to be examined by a doctor to determine if any potential harm had been done to her mental health.

Ten people stood trial in Paris, including Roy, the medium, and two prominent figures in France's conspiracy theory sphere: Aurélien Poirson-Atlan, known by the alias Zoé Sagan, and Bertrand Scholler. The remaining defendants appear to be ordinary internet users. The police unit specializing in crimes against individuals (BRDP), which led the investigation, explained, in a report, that it had selected "only the most virulent against Brigitte Macron." Poussard, who was questioned by both Italian and French police in Milan on September 17, was not among the defendants, as his case has been treated separately.

Lawyer Tom Clare, in Washington, in October 2025. MATTHEW HINTZ FOR M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE

Officially, the Paris prosecutor's office has handled the case without any intervention from the presidency. Patrice Faure, the Elysée advisor to whom prefects report threats and rumors that target the president, limited himself to merely coordinating the suits filed on behalf of the couple, which he

reviewed and signed. (He has recently left his position to serve as the Paris police prefect.) The Elysée has insisted that not a single euro of public money was spent on the Macrons' legal defense, a private matter. That is not a trivial question, given that the American legal proceedings could prove costly. According to *The New York Times*, their lawyer, Clare, can charge as much as $1,800 per hour.

Unavoidable exposure

Yet the highest price they have had to pay could well be their privacy. In 2017, Emmanuel Macron admitted to *Vanity Fair* that he had a "neurotic relationship" with "the intimate" sphere, saying that he hated seeing the press dig into his own past and that of his wife. Today, despite the rumors, Brigitte Macron has been reluctant to release any photos of herself pregnant or holding her children. Nor has she organized any photo shoot with her brother, which would directly disprove the absurd accusations they face. A source in her entourage said that this would be too intrusive. The conspiracy theorists would, in any case, claim that the images were faked.

Interest in the conspiracy theory partially stems from the couple's 24-year age gap. When young Macron joined the La Providence theater class in Amiens, Picardy, where his future wife was teaching, he was 14 and she was 39. According to various books and articles written about their lives, their romantic relationship began two years later. Those who spread the rumor about Brigitte Macron believe she groomed Macron as a minor. According to Owens, it is confirmation that "pedophiles are in power," an old far-right refrain, regardless of the country in question.

Speaking to a person close to her who was outraged by such comments on social media, Brigitte Macron said that her parents, who lived in Amiens, had received anonymous letters calling her a pedophile even before the internet existed. "I've already lived through that. It's just the form that has changed," she told the person. In their lawsuit against Owens, the Macrons made sure to address these accusations. "At all times," the suit states, "the teacher-student

relationship between Mrs. Macron and President Macron remained within the bounds of the law."

The couple's exposure has likely only just begun. Speaking via videoconference, their lawyer, Clare, reiterated what he had previously told the BBC: Brigitte Macron was prepared, if required as part of the proceedings against Owens, to undergo physiological tests to prove that she is a woman, the same examinations that some female athletes accused of lying about their gender are subjected to. According to him, family photos could also be submitted as evidence.

"It is very important that Emmanuel and Brigitte Macron clear their name from this falsehood. It is a priority for them, which is why they're taking this step," he said. "We want the trial to be next year, in 2026," he added. "The sooner we can put this falsehood to rest, the better." According to Clare, the Macrons would be willing to travel to Delaware to appear or testify before the court. Will we see a sitting French president appear before the courts of a foreign power? Such an event would be unprecedented. Just like the scale that this scandal has taken on.

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