



Social Media Junk News around Absentee Vote Counts in the US Presidential Election

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 09-11-2020

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SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across six social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 29-10-2020 we find:

- The social media distribution network of all articles from the top fifteen mainstream news outlets reached just below three billion social media users this week, achieving much greater distribution than state-backed and junk news sources. But the average article from state-backed sources reached over 8,500 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,400 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,000 users.
- Similarly, aggregate content from mainstream sources gets the largest amount of total user engagement. However, on a per article basis, state-backed news receives over 450 engagements and junk news receives over 1,200, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 350 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were the Chinese International Import Expo, final junk news commentary before the US election, terrorist attacks in France and Austria, updates on vote counts in key US states, and general coronavirus statistics around the world.

INTRODUCTION

Using an actively curated list of major sources of junk news and state-backed sources, we track the spread of misleading, polarizing, and inflammatory content on social media. Sources from state-backed media include information operations and editorially controlled national media organizations. Other domestically and independently-produced sources also act as politically motivated sources of misinformation.[1] All such media sources play a major role in the online information ecosystem and generate engagement from millions of social media users. We define junk news and information sources by evaluating whether their content is extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, or commentary masked as news. See our [Methodology FAQ](#) for further details.

We currently track 142 junk news websites and 22 state-backed media outlets that are actively publishing misleading information—164 in total. From these we select the top fifteen most engaged state-backed and junk news sites respectively for comparison. We examine how successful they are in terms of distributing their content on social media and generating engagement and compare this to fifteen major sources of credible mainstream news and information. Our data comes from the APIs of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Telegram and YouTube. Facebook and Instagram are accessed through the CrowdTangle platform. Additional analytics allow us to benchmark and track how users spread and engage with misleading information.

DISTRIBUTION & ENGAGEMENT

Understanding the flow and impact of misinformation requires measuring how users distribute and engage with that content over social media. We analyze such patterns for the period from 29th October to 3rd November and offer comparisons between the trends for junk news and state-backed sources, and the trends for fifteen prominent English-language sources of credible news and information.

The “social distribution network” of an outlet is the sum of follower counts of the Facebook groups and pages, subreddits, Instagram and Twitter accounts that have shared at least one of the sources’ articles over the previous week. On YouTube, this distribution network is counted as a channel’s number of subscribers. This provides an impression of the capacity that sources have for distributing their content. It is important to emphasize that not all of these followers may have been reached by this content—only the social media firms themselves could confirm this. We use “engagement” to refer to the sum of actions that users of social media took in response to content shared by the distribution network. On Facebook, users may comment on content, share it, and react by signaling like, love, laughter, anger, sadness, or amazement. On Twitter, users can retweet, comment, and signal their favorite tweets by clicking on the heart button. On Reddit, this is the sum of comments, cross posts, scores, and awards on posts containing the links to articles from our watch list. On Instagram, this is the sum of likes and comments. On

Telegram, this is the number of views. On YouTube, this is the video view count as well as comment and like reactions. Our overall engagement measure is the sum of all these actions. We should say that we are not able to distinguish between genuine and inauthentic accounts or acts of engagement.

We can offer some broad observations about how English-language social media users interact with content from junk news health sources and state-backed agencies. Overall, 30% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 22% of engagements with state-backed media were with Chinese content, whereas 77% was with Russian content. Finally, 1% was with Turkish content.

Distributional reach and engagement are presented in Table 1. This week, the top fifteen mainstream sources achieved much greater distribution networks than either state-backed or junk news sources. However, the average article from state-backed sources still has a larger distribution network, this week reaching a potential audience of over 8,500 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,400 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of over 2,000. Mainstream news achieved 74 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 19 million engagements. State-backed news reached over 8 million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 1,200 engagements per article, whereas state-backed media achieved an average of over 450 engagements per article.

Figure 1 displays the trends over the last four weeks. Mainstream news sources reach over 10 million engagements on some days. Junk news and state-backed media seldom reach that threshold. On a per-article average, however, mainstream news sources struggle to match the engagement generated by junk news and state-backed outlets.

KEY NARRATIVES

We also conduct a thematic review of articles published by both these junk news and state-backed sources. Previously, we found that state-backed and junk news sources targeting English speakers generally politicize health news and information by criticizing democracies as corrupt and incompetent.[1] We have also found that Russian outlets, targeting French and German speakers, have consistently emphasized the flaws of Western democratic institutions, and Turkish outlets, targeting Spanish speakers, have promoted their global leadership in battling the pandemic.[2]

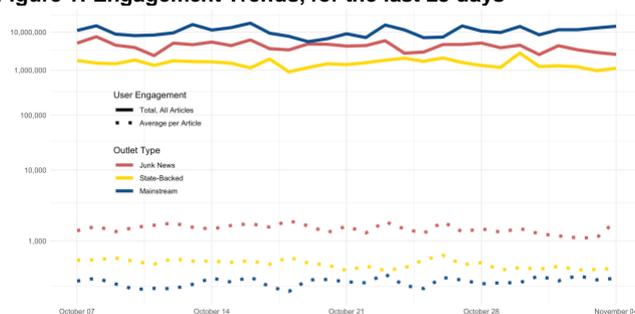
The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed and junk news outlets into groups of articles on the same subject, and a qualitative narrative analysis typically on one or two of these identified topics. The qualitative analysis uses the articles with the greatest overall engagement in addition to the articles that fit

Table 1: Changes in Misinformation Production

	This Week	Percent Change from Last Week	Percent Change from Last Month
Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions)			
Junk News	0.5	↓ 3.1	↓ 12
Mainstream	3.0	↓ 1.6	↓ 6.6
State-Backed	1.3	↓ 4.1	↑ 2.7
Distribution Networks, Average Per Article			
Junk News	2,048	↓ 0.1	↑ 27
Mainstream	4,442	↓ 4.6	↑ 6.1
State-Backed	8,542	↓ 9.2	↓ 6.2
Total User Engagements, All Articles (Millions)			
Junk News	19.6	↑ 8.4	↑ 1.9
Mainstream	74.2	↓ 23	↓ 12
State-Backed	8.48	↑ 2.3	↓ 62
User Engagements, Average Per Article			
Junk News	1,241	↑ 7.0	↑ 19
Mainstream	373	↓ 3.8	↓ 4.8
State-Backed	477	↑ 9.4	↓ 15

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 29/11/2020-03/11/2020.

Figure 1: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 29/10/2020-03/11/2020.

Note: Distribution refers to the sum of the subscriber count of YouTube channels and follower count of Twitter and Instagram accounts, subreddits, and Facebook groups/pages sharing content. Engagement refers to the sum of all reaction types on Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube.

best into each designated topic, or 'best-fitting' articles. Further detail on the quantitative topic modelling process can be found in the [Methodology FAQ](#).

Topic Modelling

Five topics rose to prominence this week. A visualization of top words and their associations with topics are provided in Figure 2. Note that not all words associated with a topic can be displayed here. The engagements generated by the top twenty best-fitting articles for each topic are displayed in Figure 3. The first topic included words such as "China", "development", "Shanghai", "import", and "international". The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 100,000 engagements. All top 20 best-fitting articles were from state-backed outlets. Consistent with previous weeks' evidence, this topic was constituted by content from Chinese state-backed media promoting the country's economic strength. This week this was promoted using the example of the ongoing Chinese International Import Expo (CIIE) in Shanghai.[3] Similar to previous weeks where examples such as the large volume of domestic travel during Golden Week were used to

highlight the strength of the Chinese economic performance during COVID-19, CIIE was used to highlight China’s willingness to share development opportunities with the rest of the world.[4], [5] Unlike previous weeks, however, best-fitting articles in this topic generated the most engagements of the detected topics.

The second topic included words such as “Biden”, “President”, “Trump”, “campaign”, and “supporter”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were mostly from junk news outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 78,000 engagements. Best-fitting articles in this topic typically consisted of op-eds that made final cases for each candidate before the US Presidential election.

The third topic included words such as “police”, “French”, “Vienna”, “terrorist”, and “Muslim”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from state-backed outlets, and the top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 60,000 engagements. This topic concerned recent terrorist attacks in Vienna and France, respectively. A substantial portion of these articles highlighted tensions between France and Muslim communities and countries.[7]

The fourth topic included words such as “vote”, “election”, “state”, “count”, and “win”. The top 20 best-fitting articles came mostly from junk news outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 58,000 engagements. Best-fitting articles consisted almost entirely of statistics and the latest updates on absentee votes being counted amongst key battleground states such as Wisconsin.[8] Though this topic ranked fourth out of five in our topics ordered by engagements of best-fitting articles, it is notable that this topic generated considerable engagement in the short time it overlaps with our weekly data collection period. This topic is discussed further below.

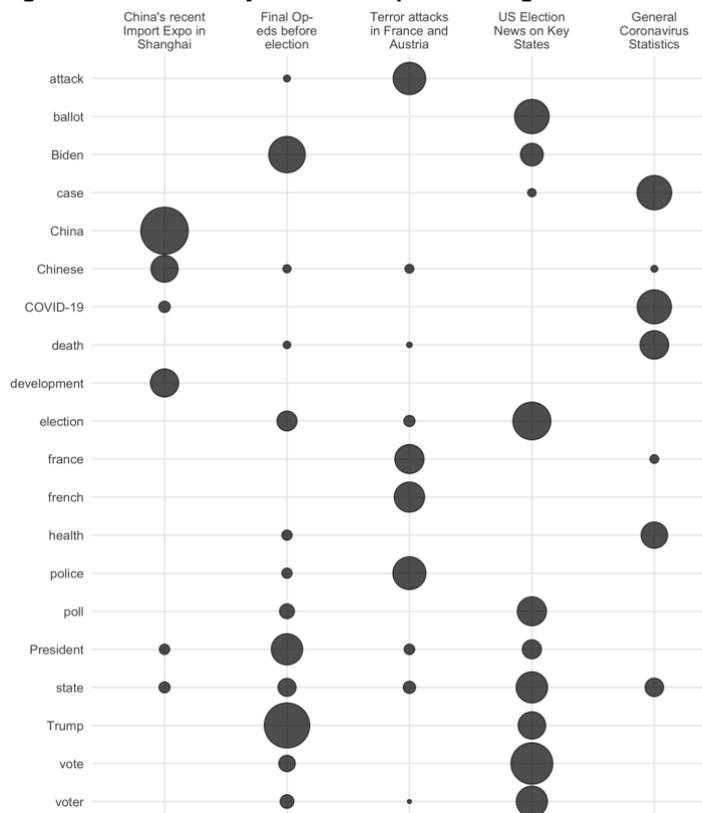
The fifth topic included words such as “COVID-19”, “country”, “case”, “death” and “health”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets, and the top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 8,000 engagements. This topic concerned general coronavirus statistics from around the world.[9]

Qualitative Analysis

The most prominent topic among junk news and state-backed outlets this week concerned a range of issues surrounding the US Presidential election. This week, these were not captured as neatly through the quantitative analysis as in previous weeks. The following discussion is thus informed primarily by our tracked engagement statistics, supplemented by the topic modelling above.

Several articles belonging to the fourth topic above peddled damaging narratives around vote counting to discredit the electoral system. A *Geller Report* article, for example, headlines the Democrats as “trying to steal the election” in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.[10] The evidence the *Geller Report*

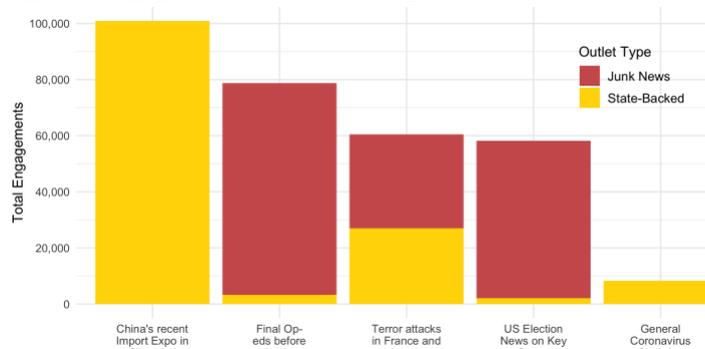
Figure 2: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 29/10/2020-03/11/2020.

Note: The size of each circle indicates how important each word was to each topic.

Figure 3: Engagements with Best-Fitting Articles in each Topic



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 29/10/2020-03/11/2020.

Note: Total engagements of the top 20 best-fitting articles are labelled by outlet type.

presented relied heavily on posts marked as disputed and potentially misleading by Twitter. Further, the graphic upon which *the Geller Report* claim was made did not originate from Michigan officials but instead from a news organization that confirmed a typographical error. Finally, it is not the case that election officials are all Democrats. Other articles, such as one from *The Blaze*, claimed that Democrats were trying to register dead voters in an election fraud effort.[11]

An article from *The Blaze* with over 164,000 engagements describes a recent incident between a Biden-Harris campaign bus and Trump supporters on a Texas highway. The Trump supporters are described as a simple escort, and the Biden team is accused of

over reacting.[12] A number of vehicles flying Trump flags had in fact been interfering with the vehicle's journey, at points positioning themselves in front of the bus and slowing down in the middle of the highway.[13] Another article from *The Daily Wire* with over 150,000 engagements similarly celebrated the intimidation, endorsing the view that these cars were "just showing support", and derided the Biden campaign's statements on the issue as having "ripped [into]" the drivers.[14] These articles dismiss real concerns about voter intimidation and political violence at election time.[15]

Another article from *The Blaze* with over 85,000 engagements reported on President Trump's recent declaration of the 1st of November to be a "National Day of Remembrance for Americans Killed by Illegal Aliens".[16], [17] In the declaration, the President's declaration continued his longstanding strategy of positioning himself as the candidate of "law and order". The article from *The Blaze* used this declaration as a reason to describe non-citizens as threats to US citizens. As is often the case with junk news outlets, several conceptual leaps and inconsistencies are made. One piece of evidence cited in support of their argument were arrest rates of citizens and non-citizens.[18] *The*

Blaze writes that because the proportion of arrests that are of non-citizens is higher than the proportion of the population that are non-citizens in the US that non-citizens are consistently committing murder on US soil. *The Blaze* writes that since non-citizens are arrested at higher rates than average citizens, non-citizens are consistently committing murder on US soil. At minimum, however, it is well documented that various factors influence arrest rates, such as biased policing patterns.

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Telegram and YouTube and the levels of engagement with junk news content. Sources of junk news and information have distribution networks reaching hundreds of millions of social media users. Junk news websites generate huge amounts of content that is widely disseminated and receives significant engagement.

RELATED WORK

Find our [previous weekly briefings](#).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the European Research Council for the project “Computational Propaganda”, Proposal 648311, Philip N. Howard, Principal Investigator. Project activities were approved by the University of Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC OII C1A 15-044). We are also grateful to the Adessium, Civitates, Luminare, and Ford Foundations for their support. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Oxford or our funders.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The [Computational Propaganda Project](#) (COMPROP), based in the [Oxford Internet Institute](#) and University of Oxford, involves an interdisciplinary team of social and information scientists researching how political actors manipulate public opinion over social networks. This work includes analyzing how the interaction of algorithms, automation, politics, and social media amplifies or represses political content, disinformation, hate speech, and junk news. *Data Memos* present important trends with basic tables and visualizations. While they reflect methodological experience and considered analysis, they have not been peer reviewed. *Working Papers* present deeper analysis and extended arguments about public issues and have been collegially reviewed. Our *Weekly Misinformation Briefing* provides regular reports on the most prominent social media trends from the prior week. COMPROP articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.