Social Media Misinformation on Hospital Fraud and Disinfectant Injections
Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 04-05-2020

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SUMMARY

Given the evolving nature of the coronavirus pandemic—and public understanding of the crises—we provide a weekly briefing about the spread of coronavirus misinformation across multiple social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 30-04-2020 we find:

- Of all the junk news that social media users engaged with last week, one third of it came from state-backed news agencies, and 98% of English language engagement with state backed agencies involves media outlets from Russia and China.
- Content from state-backed sources is distributed to hundreds of millions of social media accounts; among mainstream media outlets only the New York Times had a social distribution network on par with that of state-backed media.
- In total, articles produced by junk health news sources were engaged with almost five million times this week. On average, articles from state-backed media sources still stimulated the most engagement.
- Thematically, prominent junk health news narratives this week included (1) allegations that hospitals exaggerate coronavirus cases and deaths, and (2) claims that Trump did not suggest direct disinfectant injections or defenses of that suggestion.

INTRODUCTION

Using an actively curated list of major sources of junk health news and state-backed sources, we track the spread of misleading, polarizing, and inflammatory coronavirus content on social media. Some of these sources are state-backed media, either parts of information operations or editorially controlled national media organizations. Some are domestically and independently produced, 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 health news and information sources by evaluating whether their content is extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, or commentary masked as news.

We currently track 142 junk health news websites and 21 state-backed media outlets that are actively publishing misleading information about the coronavirus pandemic—163 in total. We examine how successful they are in terms of distributing their content on social media and generating engagement and compare this to several major sources of credible health news and information. Our data comes from the APIs of Twitter, Reddit and Facebook (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 coronavirus misinformation requires measuring how users distribute and engage with that content over social media. We analyze such patterns for the period from the 23rd to the 30th of April, and offer comparisons between the trends for junk health news and state-backed sources and the trends for five prominent English-language sources of credible news and information, two from the UK and three from the US: the BBC, CNN, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

The "social distribution network" of an outlet is the sum of the follower counts of the Facebook groups and pages, subreddits and Twitter accounts that shared at least one of the sources' articles over the previous week. This provides an impression of the capacity each source has for distributing its content. It is important to emphasize that not all these followers may have been reached by this content—only the social media firms themselves would be able to 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. Our overall engagement measure is the sum of all these actions. Again, we are not able to distinguish between genuine and inauthentic accounts or acts of engagement.

This week, we are able to offer some broad estimates of how English language social media users interact with content from junk news health sources and state-backed agencies. Fully 32% of the junk engagement we observed this week was to state-backed sources. Fully 98% of social media user engagement with state-backed media agencies involves Russian and Chinese media properties. It is very likely that there are Chinese

and Russian sources we do not know about, and of course other regimes may have sources we do not know about. These minor sources, however, are likely to receive little attention and not be as significant as the Russian and Chinese sources we have catalogued.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from junk health news and state-backed sources, both in total for the week and as an average per article. For total distributional reach, this week the *New York Times* had a total social distribution network nearly on par with that of state-backed media. The *Washington Post's* distribution reverted back to the level it had two weeks ago, prior to the temporary uplift from its publication of an op-ed by Mark Zuckerberg that Facebook itself promoted. The *New York Times* spike this week occurred because former President Barack Obama shared one of their articles on Twitter and Facebook.[2], [3] On average, state-backed media continue to have larger distribution networks.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Total user engagement generated for junk health news sources remains largest, though it fell from nearly eight million last week to just below five million this week. CNN and The *New York Times* generated substantially more total user engagement than state-backed media this week. On a per-article basis, state-backed media retains the largest numbers, consistent with evidence from previous weeks, while the mainstream media sources all have engagement roughly on par or better than that of junk health news sources. This contrasts with previous weeks, where at least some mainstream news sources lagged substantially behind junk health news on average engagement.

KEY NARRATIVES

We also conduct a thematic review of articles published by both these junk health news and state-backed sources. Previously, we found that state-backed and junk health news sources generally politicize health news and information by criticizing democracies as corrupt and incompetent.[1] Last week we found junk news sources focusing on "authoritarian" measures instituted by elected governors across the US, and attacks on prominent Democrats such as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Speaker Pelosi. This week, prominent narratives were (1) allegations of hospitals artificially inflating coronavirus cases and deaths, and (2) claims that either Trump did not suggest direct Lysol injections or that he was right in making the suggestion.

By far the most engaged article this week came from *Global Research*, with over 300,000 engagements and twice the engagement of the next most prominent misleading article. *Global Research* relayed a Fox News interview with Minnesota State Senator Scott Jensen, who claimed that hospitals were being paid to label cases as coronavirus cases: 13,000 USD per case and 39,000 USD if the patient required a ventilator. On this basis, *Global Research* claimed that hospitals were incentivized to and had inflated figures.[4] The *Global*

Figure 1: Distribution Networks, Total All Articles (Millions)
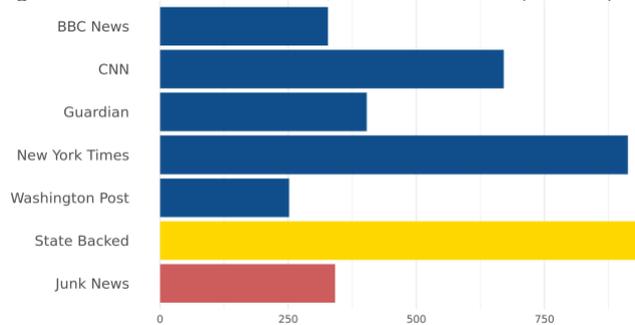

Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article
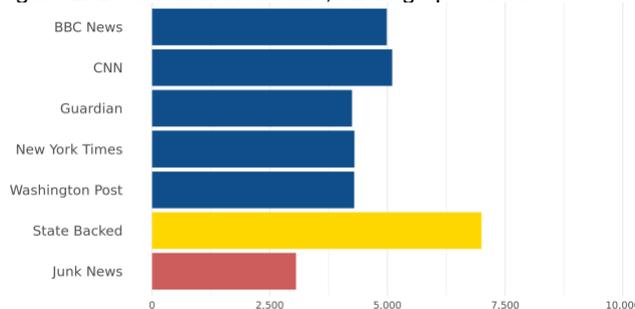

Figure 3: User Engagement, Total All Articles (Millions)
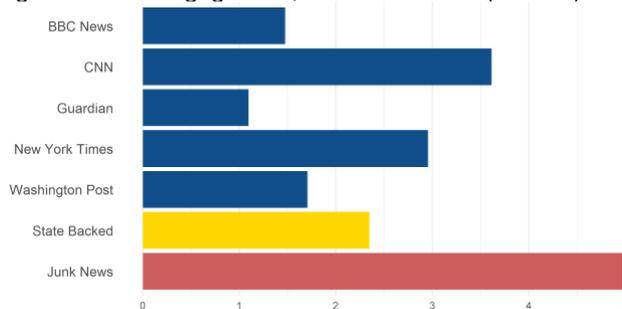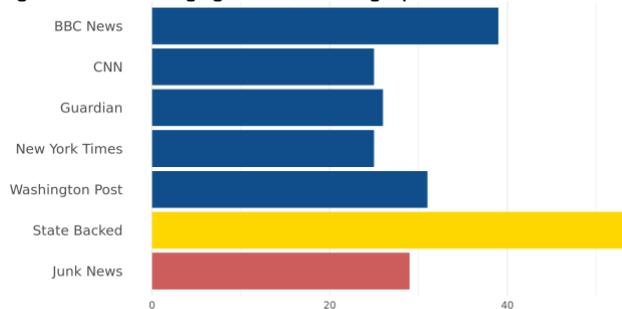

Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 04/23/2020-04/30/2020.
Note: Distribution refers to the sum of the follower count of Twitter accounts, subreddits and Facebook groups/pages sharing content. Engagement refers to the sum of all types of reactions on Twitter, Reddit and Facebook.

Research headline extends the claim to include the idea that hospitals are being compensated for deaths, even though the original assertion is about case labelling. So far Snopes and Fact Check have investigated this claim, and have found (a) Medicare does not pay one-size-fits-all sums to hospitals as described and there are geographic variations as well as patient-specific variations, (b) payment by the government for hospital treatment is not in itself an indication of anything

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nefarious, especially during a public health emergency. Jenson has since affirmed in an interview with Fact Check that he did not believe hospitals were perpetrating fraud, despite his comments being interpreted in that way.[5], [6]

A second set of narratives centered on Trump and the suggestion of direct injection or ingestion of Lysol or other disinfectants. A *PJ Media* article vehemently defended Trump, re-interpreting his statement. "And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in a minute," said Trump. "One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning." The article suggested President Trump was asking rather if disinfectant could be injected, not recommending it be injected.[7], [8] A *Daily Wire* article asserted that the "wrongly portrayed" remarks caused a media "frenzy", similarly re-interpreting the statement as a question or a sarcastic remark.[9]

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks used on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit and the levels of engagement with content related to the coronavirus pandemic. Sources of junk health news and information have distribution networks reaching hundreds of millions of social media users. Junk health news websites generate huge amounts of content that is widely disseminated and that sees significant engagement.

RELATED WORK

Read our review of state-backed English language media reporting on Coronavirus. Find our previous weekly briefings here.

REFERENCES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 *Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing* provides regular reports on the most prominent social media trends from the prior week. COMPROP s articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.