



Social Media Junk News on Black Lives Matter and Coronavirus Impacts

Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 07-07-2020

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SUMMARY

Given the evolving nature of the coronavirus pandemic—and public understanding of the crisis—we provide a weekly briefing about the spread of coronavirus misinformation across multiple social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 01-07-2020 we find:

- The social media distribution network of all coronavirus articles from the top fifteen mainstream news outlets reached over three billion social media users this week, achieving much greater distribution than state-backed and junk health news sources. But the average article from state-backed sources reached over 8,500 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached slightly below 4,500 users and the average junk health article reached just over 3,300 users.
- Similarly, all content from all mainstream sources gets the largest amount of total user engagement. But on a per article basis, state-backed news gets over 100 engagements, junk health news gets fewer than 75 engagements, and average articles from mainstream sources get just over 25 engagements.
- In total, 49% of the engagement with non-mainstream information last week was with state-backed content. Further, 36% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 60% was with Russian content.
- Thematically, key junk health news themes were (a) implicit criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement, (b) continuing narratives that coronavirus is not as dangerous as portrayed, and (c) fueling distrust in public health experts.

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. 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 health 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 health news websites and 22 state-backed media outlets that are actively publishing misleading information about the coronavirus pandemic—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 several major sources of credible health news and information. Our data comes from the APIs of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, 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 coronavirus misinformation requires measuring how users distribute and engage with that content over social media. We analyze such patterns for the period from 25th of June to 1st of July and offer comparisons between the trends for junk health 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 its 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 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. Again, 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, 49% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 36% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 60% was with Russian content. Finally, 4% was with Turkish content.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from mainstream, junk health news, and state-backed sources, both in total for the week and as an average per article. This week, again the top fifteen mainstream sources achieved over triple the total distribution of state-backed and junk health news sources, respectively. 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 new articles reach slightly below 4,500 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of just above 3,300.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Both junk health news and state-backed news achieved low total engagement of around 1 million and 1.5 million respectively. By contrast, mainstream news sources achieved nearly 15 million engagements. Junk health news has reached over 6 million total engagements in previous weeks.[2] On average, state-backed media generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 100 engagements per article, whereas junk health news achieved an average of fewer than 75 engagements per article.

Figures 1 to 4 now contrast the top fifteen sites from each category, instead of the previous selection of five mainstream news sources. See our [Methodology FAQ](#) for further details. This week, we are able to provide a view of engagement trends over the last four weeks. Figure 5 displays the engagement trends for the last two weeks since the shift to comparison between top 15 sites in each category was made. Mainstream news sources typically achieved over 1 million engagements on most days, reaching above 7 million on some. Junk health news and state-backed media seldom reach that threshold. On a per-article average, however, mainstream news sources struggle to generate the same engagement junk health news and state-backed outlets do.

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 targeting English speakers generally politicize health news and information by criticizing democracies as corrupt and incompetent.[1]

Figure 1: Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions)

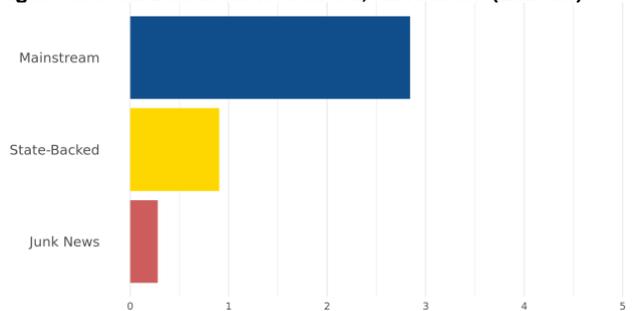


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

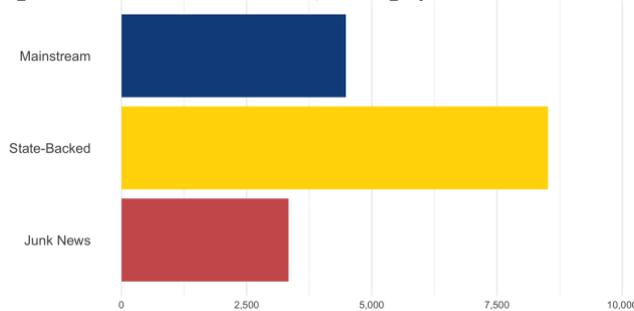


Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)

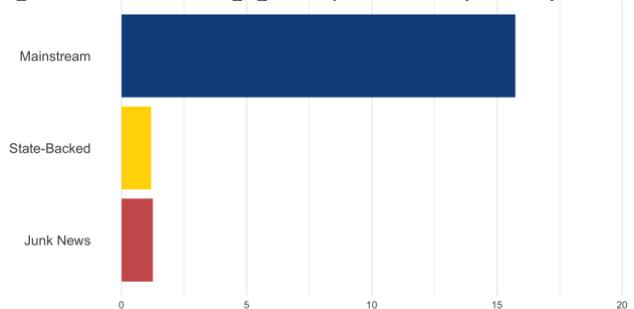


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

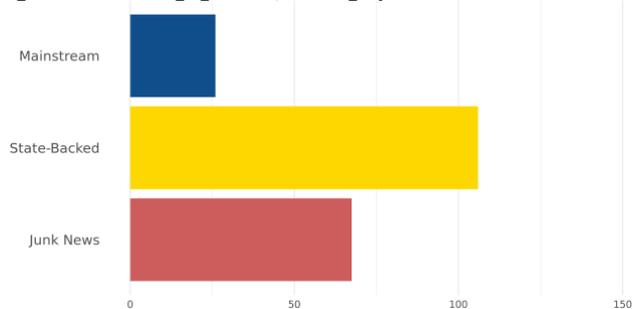
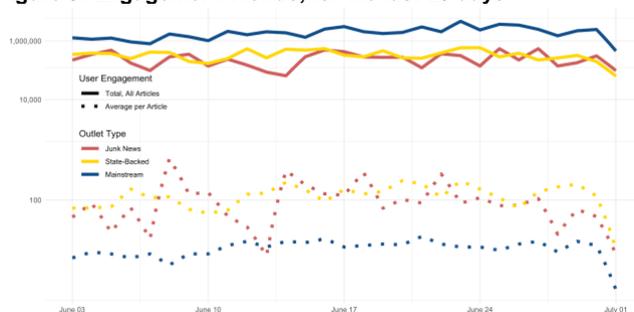


Figure 5: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 25/06/2020-01/07/2020.

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.

We have also found that Russian outlets targeting French and German speakers consistently emphasized the flaws of Western democratic institutions, and Turkish outlets targeting Spanish speakers promoted their global leadership in battling the pandemic.[3]

Last week, the key junk health news themes were (a) the victimization of conservatives in the US; (b) the politics of the representation of President Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma; and (c) continuing narratives that coronavirus is not as dangerous as portrayed. This week, the key themes were: (a) implicit criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement, (b) continuing narratives that coronavirus is not as dangerous as portrayed, and (c) fueling distrust in public health experts.

On the first theme, by far the most engaged material this week was a *Daily Wire* article with over 418,000 engagements concerning nearly the 800 million USD loss that Nike suffered in the last quarter.[4] The article paired their narrative about the loss to an otherwise irrelevant 2018 deal Nike struck with National Football League player Colin Kaepernick. This allowed implicit criticism of recent Black Lives Matter protests and Nike by association. The Facebook post that carried over 180,000 of these engagements had many comments echoing these sentiments. Relatedly, a *Daily Wire* article with over 76,000 engagements reported on the NBA and WNBA's decision to paint "Black Lives Matter" courtside when games return.[5] By associating with Black Lives Matter, the article accused WNBA of associating with a "far-left organization behind recent... riots", implicitly criticizing the movement and protests.

On the second theme, a particularly concerning article from *The Daily Wire*, with over 33,000 engagements, distorted CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield's recent comments about the possible number of actual cases in the US being 10 times higher than currently known.[6] Highlighted very early in the article is a multiplication of the currently known number of active cases from around 2.5 million to 25 million. On that basis, the article stated that the death rate could be as low as 0.5%, and cited

an April study from Stanford that determined a death rate of between 0.1% to 0.2%.[7] The article then claimed that the virus was not as fearsome as has been portrayed, neglecting to reference that deaths always lag behind case numbers.[8] The same article further fueled distrust in public health experts by criticizing models that have overestimated death numbers.

On the third theme, another *Daily Wire* article, with over 38,000 engagements, quoted public health expert Dr. Anthony Fauci expressing doubt over whether herd immunity could be achieved if a vaccine were to be successfully produced.[9] The 'general anti-science, anti-authority, anti-vaccine feeling among some people in this country' was the reason for his doubt.[10] The same article attempted to discredit Dr. Fauci by painting him as untrustworthy. He supposedly admitted on *TheStreet* to initially misleading the public on the efficacy of masks and subsequently reversing that advice.[11] His apparent admission of guilt was in fact a clarification that (a) there was a need to manage the shortage of personal protective equipment, and (b) the medical understanding of the coronavirus had changed. This then resulted in different sets of public recommendations.

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube 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 receives significant engagement.

RELATED WORK

Read [our review of state-backed English language media reporting](#) on Coronavirus. Find our previous weekly briefings [here](#).

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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 articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.