



Social Media Misinformation on German Intelligence Reports

Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 18-05-2020

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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 14-05-2020 we find:

- Of all the junk news that social media users engaged with last week, 33% of it came from state-backed news agencies, and 83% of engagement with state backed agencies involves media outlets from Russia and China.
- In total, articles produced by junk health news sources were engaged with four million times this week. On average, articles from state-backed media sources nonetheless stimulated the most engagement.
- Thematically, prominent junk health news narratives this week included (1) misinformation around German intelligence reports alleging the WHO withholding information on Chinese request, and (2) attacks on Democrats over the HEROES Act.

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.

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, Instagram, 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 7th of May to the 14th of May, 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: BBC News, 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 have shared at least one of the sources’ articles over the previous week. This provides an impression of the capacity that 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. On Instagram, this is the sum of likes. 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 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, 33% of the junk engagement we observed this week was with state-backed sources. Further to this, 83% of social media user engagement with state-backed media agencies involved Russian and Chinese media properties. It is very likely that there are Chinese and Russian sources of which we are

unaware, and of course other regimes may also have sources we have not yet identified. These minor sources, however, are likely to receive little attention and not be as influential as the Russian and Chinese sources we have already 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. Like last week, CNN, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* exceed junk health news for total distributional reach. *The New York Times* did not reach state-backed media levels of distribution this week. On average, state-backed media continue to have larger distribution networks than either junk health or individual professional news outlets.

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, remaining close to four million like last 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 highest level of engagement, consistent with evidence from previous weeks.

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, prominent narratives involved (1) extending the virus origin story with new rumors about the Wuhan virology lab and (2) attacks on non-citizens in the US who would benefit from the economic stimulus proposals coming from the US Democratic Party. This week, prominent narratives involved (1) misinformation around German intelligence reports alleging the WHO withheld information on Chinese request, and (2) attacks on Democrats over the HEROES Act.

A *Daily Caller* article with 98,000 engagements fueled the narrative that China had colluded with the World Health Organization (WHO) in order to delay the release of “critical information” to the rest of the world.[2] In particular, the claims blamed WHO Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus, a strategy which we examined in previous misinformation briefings.[3] *The Daily Caller* based their claims on an article from *Der Spiegel* that cites a report from the foreign intelligence service of Germany.[4] *The Daily Caller* also implicitly used this claim to justify demanding financial reparations from China over the coronavirus outbreak.

However, the WHO has categorically denied that such a call happened, and it is not clear what information China supposedly asked WHO to withhold.[5] In fact on the day previous to the alleged call on the 21st of Jan, 2020 China had confirmed publicly the crucial information that human to human transmission was possible.[6] Additionally, German national public

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

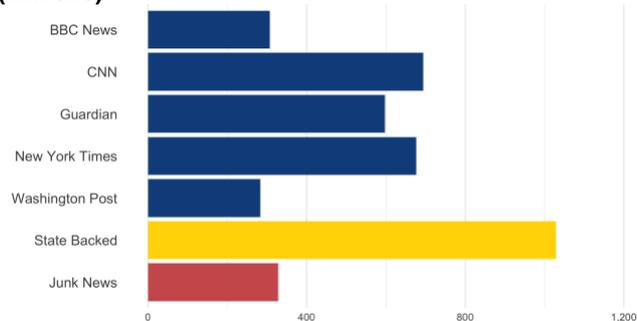


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

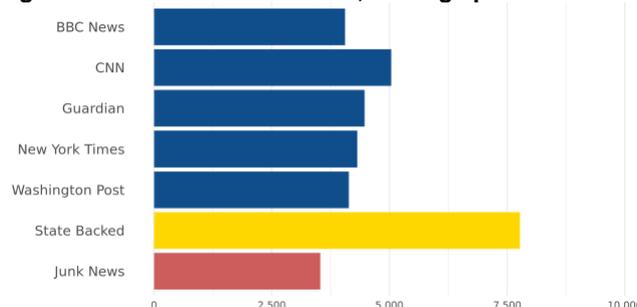


Figure 3: User Engagement, Total All Articles (Millions)

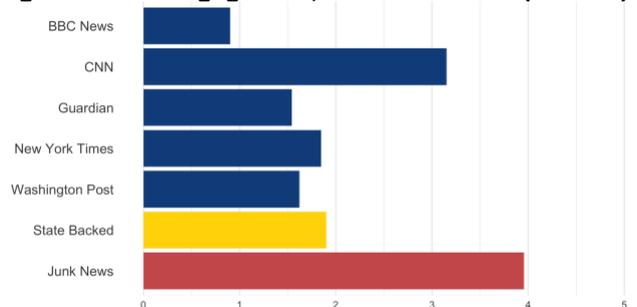
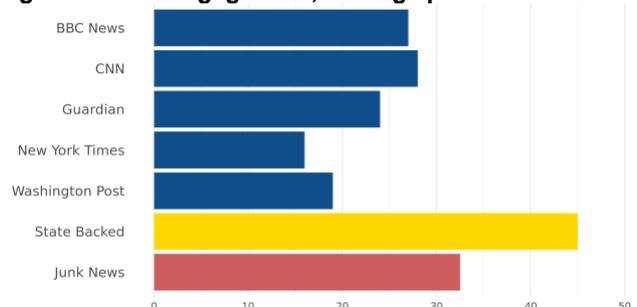


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 07/05/2020-14/05/2020.

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

service broadcaster ARD wrote that the document in question was an extract from a “Five Eyes” paper, a collaboration between Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Great Britain and the US. ARD doubt that such a joint paper even exists.[7]

Other articles continued attacks on Democrats over the recent Helping Emergency Responders Overcome Emergency Situations Act of 2020 (HEROES Act of 2020). One *Daily Wire* article with over 65,000 engagements called this a Democratic money grab, with particular ire directed towards states with less economic power such as Illinois. *The Daily Wire* insinuate that these states deserve less help.[8] Similarly, CNS News reported Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell rejecting the plan as a “far-left makeover”, with CNS News accusing the Democrats of attempting to “recreate the US in their image”.[9]

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks used on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, 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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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.