



Social Media Junk News: Undermining Lockdown Consensus & Consent

Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 26-05-2020

Hubert Au, Jonathan Bright, Philip N. Howard

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 21-05-2020 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 96% 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 over five million times this week. On average, articles from state-backed media sources stimulated the most engagement.
- Thematically, this week's critical theme was how both state-backed and junk news sources used their platforms to try and undermine democratic consent for the lockdown.

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 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 YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and Facebook. Instagram and Facebook 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 the 14th of May to the 21st 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, 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 each source has 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 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 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.

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 from state-backed sources. Further to this, 96% of social media user engagement with state-backed media agencies involved Russian and Chinese media outlets. 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. This week, all but the BBC had individual distribution networks reaching more social media users than our watch list of junk health news sources. *The New York Times* did surpass state-backed media levels of distribution this week. On average, state-backed media have the largest distribution networks: the yellow colored bar reveals that on average state-backed media articles reach almost 7,500 users.

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 large, at over five million. On its own, however, CNN generated substantially more total user engagement than state-backed and junk news media this week. On a per-article basis, state-backed media retains the highest level of engagement, consistent with evidence from previous weeks.

Figure 5 is new this week. It reveals the smoothed trend of total and median engagement for junk news, state-backed media. The trend lines are calculated from daily engagement data, unlike Figures 1 to 4 which are weekly aggregates. The colored bands are a measure of confidence for the lines calculated. Junk news consistently achieves slightly more engagement than state-backed news does in total, though state-backed media consistently achieves higher engagement per article over the last month.

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) misinformation around German intelligence reports alleging the WHO withheld information on Chinese request, and (2) attacks on the US Democratic Party over the HEROES Act.

This week, state-backed and junk news sources worked to undermine consensus about the need for social isolation and lockdown policies. Anti-lockdown

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

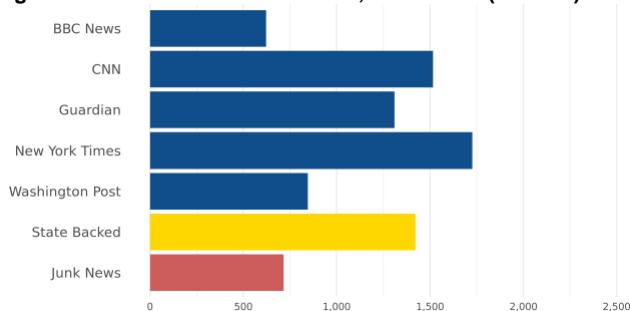


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

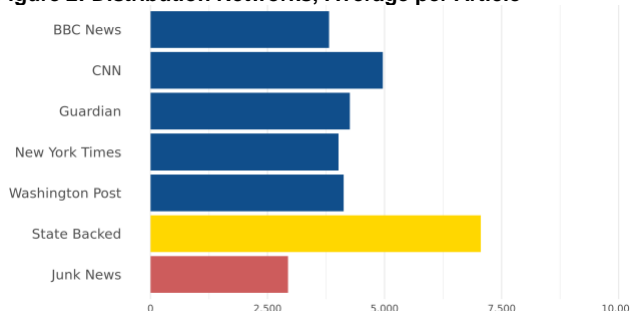


Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)

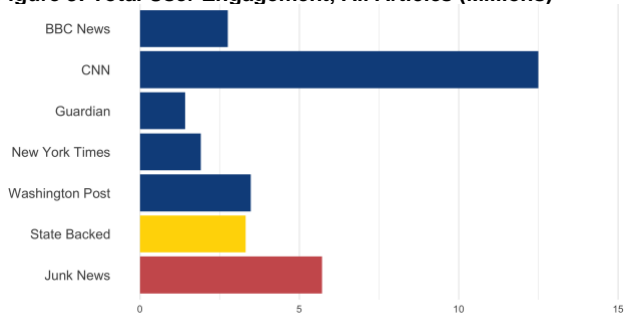


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

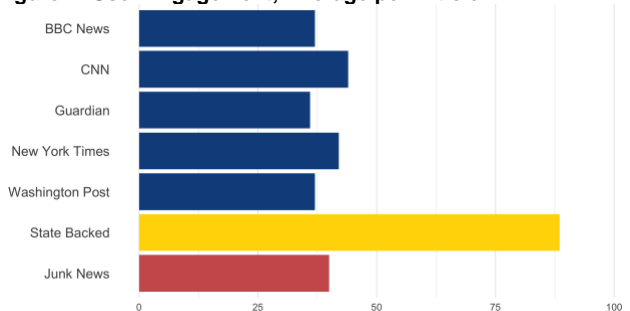
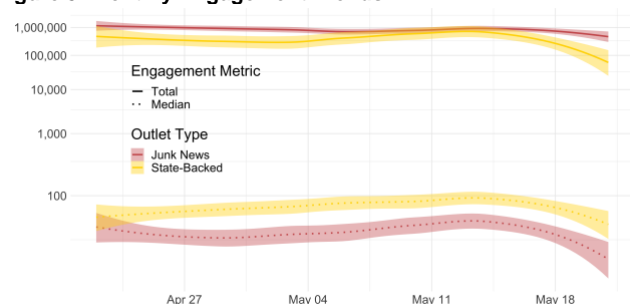


Figure 5: Monthly Engagement Trends



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 14/05/2020-21/05/2020.

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.

narratives were widespread on YouTube, with the Russian-backed Ruptly—a subdivision of the RT news network—posting videos on YouTube of anti-lockdown protests around the world, including protests in the UK, Spain, Germany. The videos tended to focus on instances of conflict during the protests between police and protestors, whether that be verbally abusing the police the police or recordings of police making arrests. Such videos emphasize how unreasonable the governments and police in democracies are being. Several examples of the most liked comments on such videos reflect this sentiment, with comments such as “governments are criminal” and “our future is totalitarian”. At the time of writing, these videos have achieved up to 170,000 views.

In the US, criticism of lockdown orders—especially those from Democratic governors—continues. *The Daily Wire* carried a piece with 284,000 engagements condemning Governor Gavin Newsom’s lockdown orders. The piece cited the claim from the Fresno County Sheriff that the police were too occupied with re-arresting criminals to comply with the order to enforce a lockdown.[2] Across the country in New York, *The Daily Wire* published an article that generated nearly 118,000 engagements with the headline “Impeach King Cuomo.”

REFERENCES

- [1] J. Bright *et al.*, “Coronavirus Coverage by State-Backed English-Language News Sources,” 2020, [Online]. Available: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/state-media-coronavirus/>.
- [2] A. Prestigiacomio, “California Sheriff: I’m Not Enforcing Lockdown, We’re Too Busy ‘Re-Arresting’ Criminals,” *The Daily Wire*, May 15, 2020.
- [3] J. Curl, “‘Impeach King Cuomo’: Angry New Yorkers Demand End To Coronavirus Lockdown,” *The Daily Wire*, May 17, 2020.
- [4] P. Bois, “Home Depot Co-Founder: Media Has Done A ‘Wonderful Job Frightening America,’” *The Daily Wire*, May 19, 2020.
- [5] T. Pearce, “Virginia Gov Asks For Help Enforcing Continued Lockdown. Sheriff Says No Way.,” *The Daily Wire*, May 13, 2020.

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, Luminate, 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 *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.

The article asserted that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo had been against business, had introduced new taxes, had caused unnecessary deaths, and is authoritarian.[3] Other articles celebrated acts of defiance against Governors, including those by sheriffs in Virginia, and cited Home Depot co-founder Bernie Marcus blaming the media for “frightening America” unnecessarily.[4], [5]

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](#).