



# Social Media Junk News on Policies Punishing US Conservatives

*Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 29-06-2020*

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 24-06-2020 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 8,000 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached slightly below 4,500 users and the average junk health article reached just over 3,500 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 125 engagements, junk health news gets 80 engagements, and average articles from mainstream sources get just over 25 engagements.
- In total, 61% of the engagement with non-mainstream information last week was with state-backed content. Further, 52% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 42% was with Russian content.
- Thematically, 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.

## 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 June 17<sup>th</sup> to June 24<sup>th</sup> 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, 61% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 52% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 42% 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 8,000 users, whereas average mainstream new articles reach slightly below 4,500 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of just above 3,500.

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 125 engagements per article, whereas junk health news achieved an average of 80 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 4 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 generally politicize health news and information by criticizing democracies as corrupt and incompetent.[1] Last week, the key theme

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

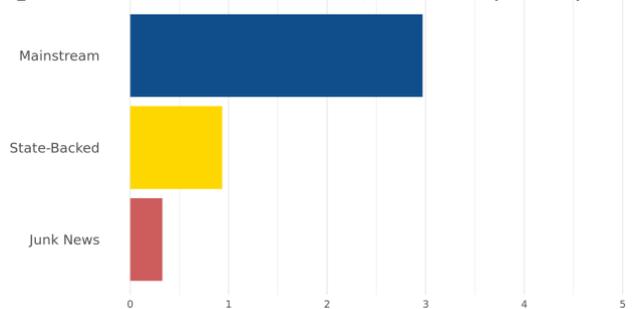


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

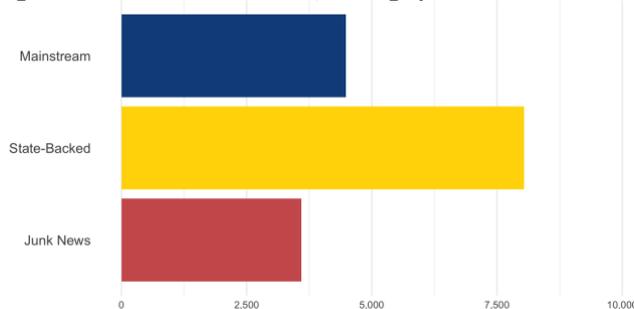


Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)

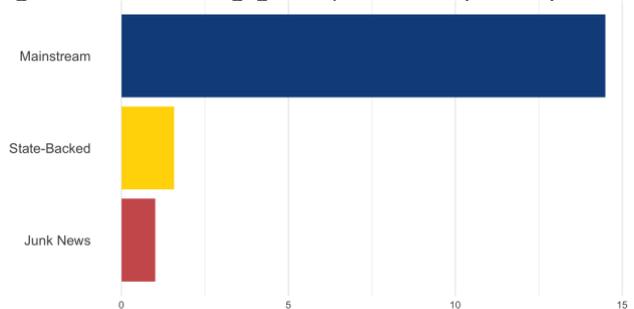


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

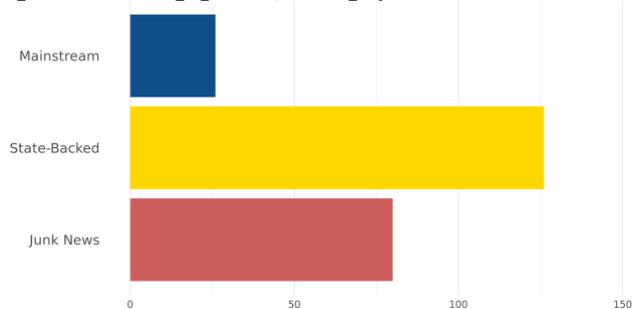
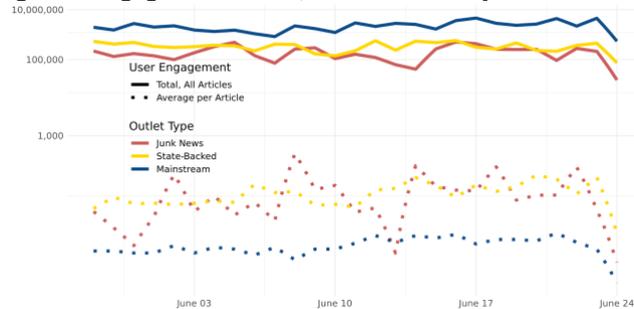


Figure 5: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 17/06/2020-24/06/2020.

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.

amongst top junk news stories was the identification of double standards of Black Lives Matter protests in relation to social distancing measures.

This week, the key themes were: (a) the victimization of the 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.

On the first theme, a *Daily Wire* commentary article with over 55,000 engagements portrays US conservatives as embattled.[3] The author claims that whilst the Supreme Court was meant to be conservative it has betrayed the people with their recent decisions. The Supreme Court has, supposedly, caused "untold havoc" on the US Constitution. The author then relates these decisions to a broader sense of victimization and ongoing "intense spiritual onslaught". Another article from *The Blaze*, also with over 55,000 engagements, accused the Democratic Party of putting non-citizens ahead of citizens by offering financial relief to immigrants, stating that citizens have been relegated to "the bottom rung".[4]

On the second theme, articles focused on the political rally that President Trump held on June 20<sup>th</sup> in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Two *Raw Story* articles with over 30,000 engagements and 17,000 engagements respectively derided President Trump for a poorer attendance than expected, describing it as a "pitiful turnout".[5], [6] Meanwhile, articles from the opposite end of the political spectrum with high engagement did not mention attendance whatsoever. An article from *The Blaze* celebrated a victory against a legal challenge that would have imposed social distancing measures on the rally, writing that "the rally must go on".[7] Another article with over 25,000 engagements from *Breitbart* implicitly ridiculed accusations made by Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill that by attending the rally Trump supporters were "gleefully putting other people at risk".[8]

## 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] H. Au, J. Bright, and Howard, Philip N., "Social Media Misinformation and Lockdown Measures in Democracies," Apr. 2020, [Online]. Available: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2020/04/ComProp-Coronavirus-Misinformation-Weekly-Briefing-4-27-2020.pdf>.
- [3] D. Limbaugh, "LIMBAUGH: The Silent Majority Can Be Silent No More," *The Daily Wire*, Jun. 20, 2020.
- [4] A. Wilkow, "Wilkow: Hey Democrats, we don't owe illegal immigrants a PENNY," *TheBlaze*, Jun. 22, 2020.
- [5] B. Brigham, "'Pitiful turnout': Trump mocked for 'hilariously weak' attendance at Tulsa rally held during coronavirus pandemic," *Raw Story*, Jun. 20, 2020.
- [6] B. Brigham, "Trump scraps speech to overflow area of Tulsa rally as turnout looks 'well below campaign's expectations': report," *Raw Story*, Jun. 20, 2020.
- [7] C. Garcia, "Tulsa mayor rescinds curfew for Trump rally; court denies request filed by local attorneys to impose social distancing standards on the event," *TheBlaze*, Jun. 19, 2020.
- [8] P. Key, "McCaskill: Trump Supporters 'Gleefully Putting Other People at Risk,'" *Breitbart*, Jun. 19, 2020.
- [9] P. Bois, "Former NYT Reporter Alex Berenson Rips New Yorker For COVID-19 'Panic Porn,'" *The Daily Wire*, Jun. 22, 2020.
- [10] C. Enloe, "Coronavirus has significantly weakened, could disappear without vaccine, top doctor reveals," *TheBlaze*, Jun. 22, 2020.
- [11] C. Spiering, "Social Media Elites Furious as Trump Says Coronavirus Called 'Kung-Flu,'" *Breitbart*, Jun. 21, 2020.

On the third theme, a *Breitbart* article with over 13,500 engagements described media reporting on the state of coronavirus in the US as "panic porn".[9] An article from *The Blaze* with over 22,000 engagements quoted an Italian medical professional who had said that the coronavirus has significantly weakened and might "disappear without vaccine".[10] It is unclear whether the original Italian doctor was referring to the disappearance of coronavirus in Italy specifically or more generally. Further, the same article in *The Blaze* chose not to highlight the effectiveness of social distancing and mask-wearing, which was also part of the doctor's quote.

In addition to these themes it was noted that a *Breitbart* article with over 33,000 engagements said that mocked the "social media elite" that were enraged at President Trump calling the coronavirus "kung-flu", indicating the emergence of a new theme gathering substantial engagement.[11]

## 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](#).

## 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 *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.