Covid-19 News and Information from State-Backed Outlets Targeting French, German and Spanish-Speaking Social Media Users

Data Supplement

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Inclusion Criteria

The outlets we selected for this study include international broadcasters and news agencies that produce content in French, German or Spanish and that all have a major web presence. From China, we focused on the China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Radio International (CRI) and Xinhua News Agency. From Russia, we included RT and Sputnik. From Iran, we included Press TV and HispanTV. From Turkey, we focused on the TRT network, which operates TRT Deutsch, TRT Español and TRT Français. While this list is not exhaustive, it includes a sample of non-English-language media outlets from these countries.

For comparison, we benchmarked our analyses of state-backed media with an examination of prominent news outlets that produce content in French, German and Spanish. This included French-language reporting from *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, German-language reporting from *Der Spiegel* and Tagesschau, and Spanish-language reporting from *El País* and *El Mundo*. These outlets can reach tens of millions of social media users around the world and have been credited for their impartiality in covering global news and events.

Data Collection

Data for this memo was collected in the period between the 18th of May and the 5th of June 2020. We used the CrowdTangle API (https://github.com/CrowdTangle/API), which provides access to data on the Facebook platform, and the Twitter search API (https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/search/api-reference/get-search-tweets).

We made use of the link search endpoint for the CrowdTangle API. Every eight hours, we queried this endpoint once for the website of every state-backed media outlet in our sample, plus the benchmarks, which include *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, *Der Spiegel* and Tagesschau, and *El País* and *El Mundo*. The API returns examples of public shares of the website in question: moments when people share content produced by that website in large scale forums on Facebook (in particular groups and pages). All groups and pages that are returned by the API are open and visible to anyone. We set our API query so that every eight hours we retrieved up to 2,500 shares per outlet. As our API queries were quite close together, some duplicates were returned, which we removed, hence each share was only counted once in our data. In addition to providing information on where the link was shared, CrowdTangle also gives out the two key metrics we use in our analysis: the number of followers of the page or members of the group in question (which we use to calculate our social distribution network metric) and the number of engagements (such as likes, comments and shares) that the content generates.

We made use of the search endpoint for the Twitter API. Every four hours during the data collection period we queried this API for "popular" tweets (a definition used by the API itself) containing links from the outlets under study. We set up our query to retrieve up to 1,000 popular tweets per outlet, though in practice we never hit that limit. Like CrowdTangle, the Twitter API provided us with the key

data for calculating our metrics: the number of followers of all the Twitter accounts sharing links from our outlets was used to calculate the size of the social distribution network, and the number of retweets, comments and favorites was used to calculate the engagement count.

It is important to acknowledge that neither of our data collection methods captured a full list of all the times our outlets were shared on the two social platforms in question. CrowdTangle only returns shares in large scale open public fora. Small, closed or private groups, as well as people's individual timelines, are not returned. We queried Twitter's search API only for popular tweets, hence many smaller scale ones are likely missing. However, this limitation is common across all our outlets.

State-Backed Media in Perspective

State interest in media representation is historically well documented. State-backed narratives aimed at global audiences date from at least the end of the Second World War, predominantly employing mediums such as radio and television.[1][2][3] From the late 20th Century onwards, live 24/7 international TV news coverage offered even greater scope for countries which sought to counter the Western monopoly of information.[4]

Outlets Included in the Study

China Global Television Network (CGTN)
China Global Television Network (CGTN) is a state media outlet established in 1958 under the name China Central Television (CCTV). It consists of six international television channels, and online news platforms in five languages. The platform's rebranding in 2016 from CCTV to CGTN was part of a broader movement by President Xi Jinping to further China's international soft power.[5] The news outlet is regarded by Xi as a tool to "tell China's story well" internationally, and as part of a "going out" project to combat negative international perceptions of China.[6][7]

China Plus (CRI)
China Plus is the online English-language platform of China Radio International (CRI), publishing audio, video, photo and print media. The CRI was established in 1947, and now broadcasts worldwide in 61 languages.[8] The CRI, as with most other international Chinese news outlets, is intended to play a significant role in China's soft power strategy by exporting and highlighting Chinese language and culture.[7] It also promotes China's official policies on issues such as Taiwan's official status.

HispanTV
HispanTV is considered the Spanish sister of Iran's Press TV. HispanTV was launched in 2012 with a view to targeting Latin American audiences. The channel is available in 17 countries in Latin America and represents the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcaster's (IRIB) attempt to establish stronger connections with Latin America and to counterbalance Western media.[9][10] At the opening ceremony of HispanTV in 2012, the then President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said, "The new channel will limit the ground for supremacy of dominance seekers".[11]

Press TV
Aiming to give Iran an international voice, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) network launched its first English-language TV news "Press TV" in 2007.[12] A few years after its launch, the channel lost its license in the UK in 2012 and has not been allowed to broadcast in the UK ever since.[13] The channel has had many controversies over the years, including the arrest of a journalist in the US in 2019 and the blocking of its YouTube channel by Google.[14][15]

RT

RT (formerly, Russia Today) was founded in 2005 as a public diplomacy tool for Russia. Over the years, this has changed, and the channel has been accused of spreading conspiracies against the US and Europe.[16] Currently, RT is categorized as a foreign entity in the US and the UK's Office of Communication (Ofcom) has imposed several sanctions against this channel for breaching the Communication Act.[17][18][19] The channel runs 22 bureaus across the world and employs more than 1,000 people with an annual budget of US$400 million.[20][21]

Sputnik

The Kremlin's newborn news agency was only founded in 2014 as a multimedia news platform.[22] In addition to being Russia's main news agency, Sputnik broadcasts a radio and functions in more than 30 languages. Similar to RT, Sputnik has been accused of disseminating disinformation against Western countries.[23][24]

TRT Network

Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) is an integral part of Turkish public diplomacy activities.[25] The TRT network was founded in 1964. It has long been in line with the Turkish government. With Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power, the TRT network was restructured, and controlled by AKP loyalists.[26] While media has become the AKP's prime focus to consolidate power, the TRT network continued its expansion. The network currently runs several channels in Turkish and many foreign languages including German, Spanish, French, Arabic and English, reaching 250 million people in 27 countries from the Balkans to the Caucasus [27].

Xinhua News Agency

Xinhua News Agency, or New China News Agency is the official state-owned news outlet of the Chinese government and was established in 1931.[28] It delivers news in multiple languages other than Chinese: English, French, Russian, Portuguese, Arabic and Japanese. It has further been routinely criticized for its positive portrayal of Chinese state policies. Xinhua News Agency is, along with China Daily, one of the five publications listed as functionaries of the Chinese government in early 2020 by the US Department of State.[29]

Thematic Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of coronavirus reporting in French, German and Spanish from the state-backed outlets included in this study. We reviewed the top 20 most engaged articles for each outlet and manually coded prominent themes during a week-long period between the 18th of May and the 24th of May 2020. We endeavored to translate keywords and phrases from the news stories into English, which are reported in the data memo using quotation marks. Recognizing the limitations of translation in cross-language and cross-cultural research, these keywords and phrases should be treated as approximations rather than direct quotes.[30]

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