



Social Media Junk News on Police Shootings in the US

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 22-09-2020

Hubert Au, Jonathan Bright, Philip N. Howard

SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across multiple social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 17-09-2020 we find:

- The social media distribution network of all 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 news sources. But the average article from state-backed sources reached over 8,700 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,700 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,580 users.
- Similarly, aggregate content from mainstream sources gets the largest amount of total user engagement. However, on a per article basis, state-backed news receives over 600 engagements and junk news receives over 1450, while average articles from mainstream sources get just over 300 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, include misinformation about police shootings, the Israel-Bahrain diplomatic deal, the recovery of the Chinese economy, and general 2020 US election campaign news.

INTRODUCTION

Using an actively curated list of major sources of junk news and state-backed sources, we track the spread of misleading, polarizing, and inflammatory 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 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 news websites and 22 state-backed media outlets that are actively publishing misleading information—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 15 major sources of credible mainstream news and information. Our data comes from the APIs of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Telegram 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 misinformation

requires measuring how users distribute and engage with that content over social media. We analyze such patterns for the period from 10th of September to 17th of September and offer comparisons between the trends for junk 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 their 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 Telegram, this is the number of views. 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. We should say that 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, 24% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 50% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 41% was with Russian content. Finally, 8% was with Turkish content.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from mainstream, junk news, and state-backed sources, both in total for the week and as an average per article. This week, the top fifteen mainstream sources achieved much greater distribution networks. However, the average article from state-backed sources still has a larger distribution network, this week reaching a potential audience of over 8,700 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,700 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of over 2,500.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Mainstream news achieved nearly 40 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 27 million engagements. State-backed news reached below 10 million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 1450 engagements per article, whereas state-backed media achieved an average of just above 600 engagements per article.

Figure 5 displays the trends over the last four weeks. Mainstream news sources reach over 10 million engagements on some days. Junk news and state-backed media seldom reach that threshold. On a per-article average, however, mainstream news sources struggle to match the engagement generated by junk news and state-backed outlets.

KEY NARRATIVES

We also conduct a thematic review of articles published by both these junk news and state-backed sources. Previously, we found that state-backed and junk news sources targeting English speakers generally politicize health news and information by criticizing democracies as corrupt and incompetent.[1] We have also found that Russian outlets, targeting French and German speakers, have consistently emphasized the flaws of Western democratic institutions, and Turkish outlets, targeting Spanish speakers, have promoted their global leadership in battling the pandemic.[3]

The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed and junk news outlets into groups of articles on the same subject, and a qualitative narrative analysis typically on one or two of these identified topics. The qualitative analysis uses the most engaged articles overall in addition to the articles that fit best into each designated topic, or ‘best-fitting’ articles. Further detail

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

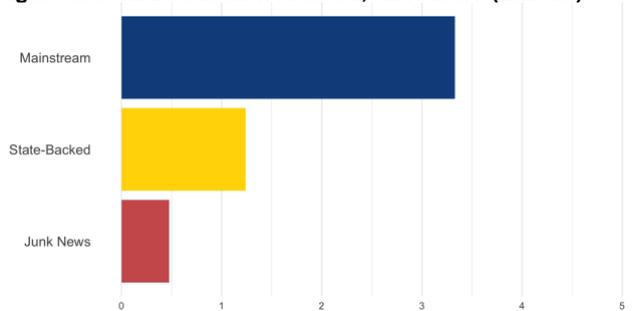


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

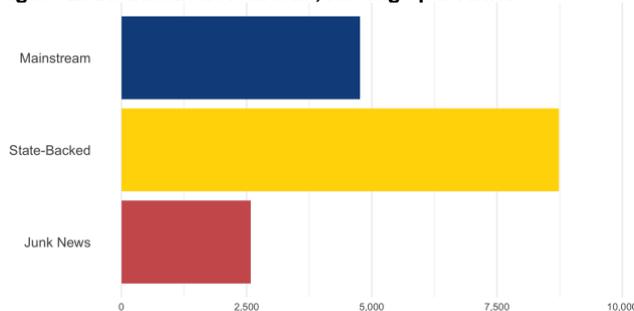


Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)

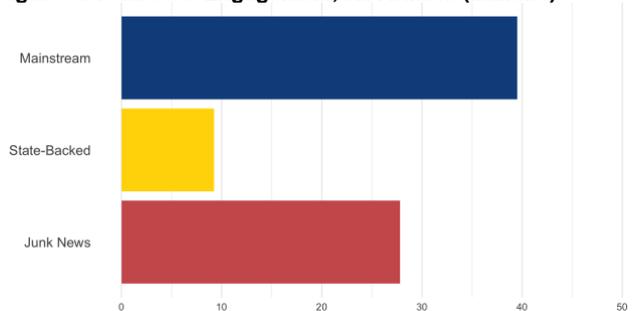


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

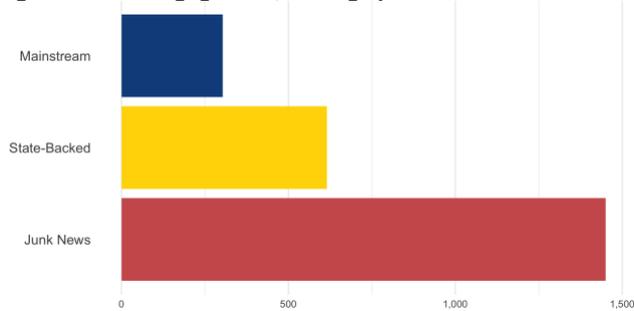
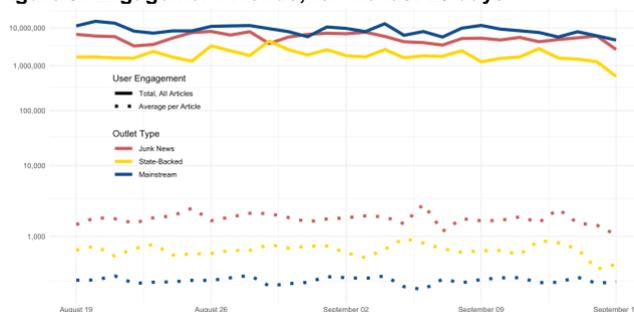


Figure 5: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 10/09/2020-17/09/2020.

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.

on the quantitative topic modelling process can be found in the [Methodology FAQ](#).

Topic Modelling

Four topics rose to prominence this week. A visualization of top words and their associations with topics are provided in Figure 6. The engagements generated by the top 20 best-fitting articles for each topic are displayed in Figure 7. Each topic identifies a number of words most associated with it; what we call here “top words”. The first topic contained the top words “police”, “officer”, “Black”, “shoot”, and “protest”. The 20 best-fitting articles generated over 140,000 engagements and were mostly from junk news outlets. This topic concerned protests in the US sparked by police shootings, most recently of a man who was shot and killed in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. A deeper analysis of this topic is provided in the next section.

The second topic contained top words “Israel”, “Bahrain”, “deal”, and “peace”. The 20 best-fitting articles generated over 45,000 engagements. This topic concerned a recent agreement between the leaders of Bahrain and Israel to establish diplomatic relations. The majority of the best-fitting articles were from state-backed outlets, but junk news outlet articles in this topic generated similar amounts of engagement. A number of the best-fitting articles in this topic focused on what the agreement meant for President Trump, with one article from *PJ Media* celebrating the agreement as the President getting “ANOTHER Arab Country to Establish Diplomatic Relations”.[6]

The third topic contained the top words “China”, “International”, “economic”, “case”, and “COVID-19”. All of the best-fitting articles belonging to this topic came from state-backed outlets, and in particular from Xinhua News Agency. The best-fitting articles generated just below 40,000 engagements. Best-fitting articles generally emphasized the strength of the recovery of the Chinese economy, highlighting investment from overseas firms.[5]

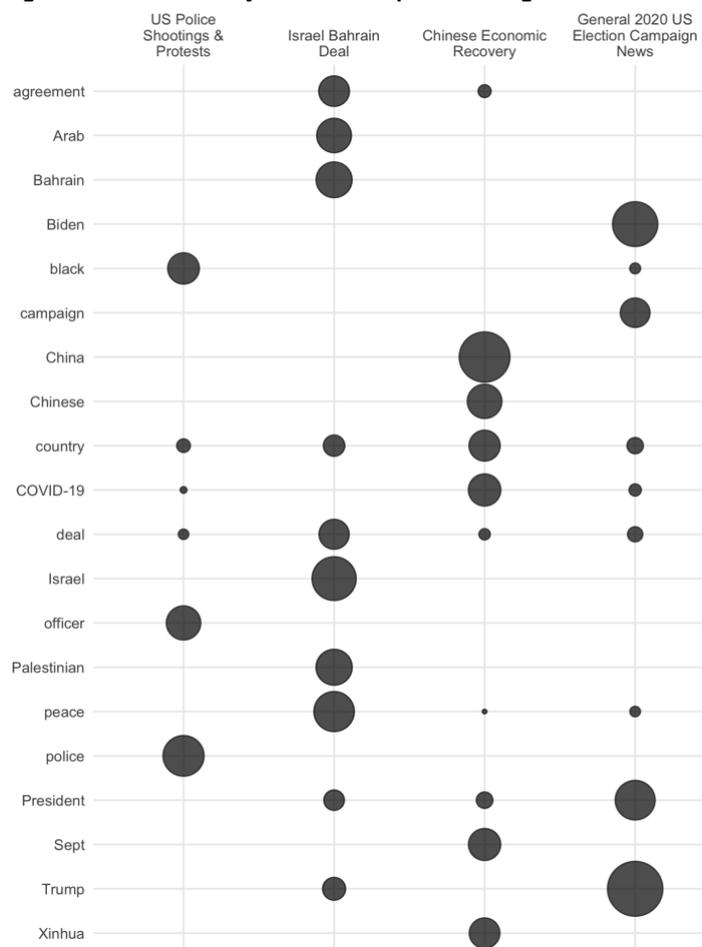
The first topic contained the top words “Biden”, “President”, “Trump”, “campaign”, and “Woodward”. This topic concerned a number of recent news stories regarding the upcoming US election. For example, some best-fitting articles reference excerpts from an upcoming book by investigative journalist Bob Woodward. Further, some best-fitting articles discussed Trump alleging that Presidential candidate Joe Biden takes drugs to remain coherent during speeches.[4] The best-fitting articles were mostly from junk news outlets in this topic, and in total the top 20 best-fitting articles for this topic generated over 36,000 engagements.

Qualitative Analysis

The overwhelming key topic this week concerned police shootings in the US and the subsequent activism and protest that have followed in recent months.

Junk news articles employed a number of devices to construct narratives, including: (a) distracting from the issue of police shootings by attacking the character of

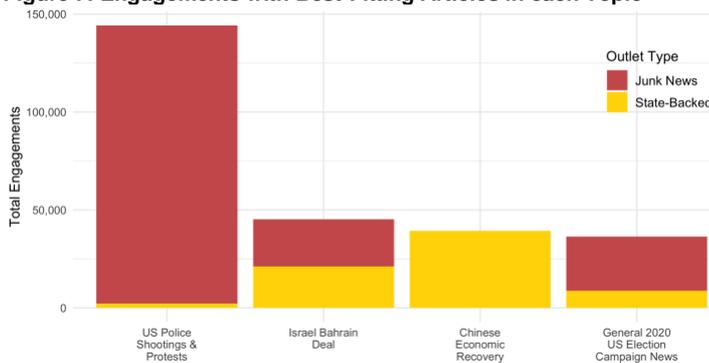
Figure 6: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 10/09/2020-17/09/2020.

Note: The size of each circle indicates how important each word was to each topic.

Figure 7: Engagements with Best-Fitting Articles in each Topic



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 10/09/2020-17/09/2020.

Note: Total engagements of the top 20 best-fitting articles with each topic, split by outlet type.

victims, (b) downplaying the severity of the issue of police shootings, (c) painting protests as lawless riots and advocating for excessive violence, and (d) blaming the press for intentionally ignoring said violence,

The article with by far the most engagements this week was a *Daily Wire* article with nearly 450,000 engagements quoted Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker criticizing US Senator Kamala Harris for visiting Jacob Blake, a victim of police shooting in Kenosha,

Wisconsin. The article seeks to discredit Jacob Blake by focusing on the charge of third-degree sexual assault that he is facing. The *Daily Wire* article describes Harris as “proud of [Blake]” and implies that she is therefore condoning or otherwise siding with Blake on the charge of third-degree sexual assault. The focus of the article is squarely on the charge and the character of Blake, and the references to his near-fatal injuries are described in terms of a “confrontation”. [7] This article therefore provides an example of the first narrative device described above.

Another *Daily Wire* article with over 318,000 engagements discusses the remarks by the basketball player LeBron James about the dangers for African Americans of everyday activities such as jogging, in relation to the killing of Armaud Arbery. The article describes James’ comments as “hyperbolic, dishonest rhetoric”. [8] This is an example of the second type of narrative device described above.

An article from *the Blaze* with over 124,000 engagements insinuates that the Black Lives Matter movement advocates for the murder of police officers, “one by one”. [9] Similarly, a *Daily Wire* article with over 111,000 engagements and one that was in the top 20 best-fitting articles belonging to the third topic discussed in the previous section distracted from the issues at hand like the articles discussed above. It describes

Ricardo Munoz as a “minority man” and prominently features subsequent protests which are labelled riots. [10] These are examples of the third type of narrative device described above.

Finally, a *Daily Wire* article with over 175,000 engagements describes the press as having continuously ignored “orchestrated violence by a hardened group of street fighting radicals”. [11] This is an example of the last type of narrative device described.

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Telegram and YouTube and the levels of engagement with junk news content. Sources of junk news and information have distribution networks reaching hundreds of millions of social media users. Junk 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](#) (COMPPOP), 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 *Weekly Misinformation Briefing* provides regular reports on the most prominent social media trends from the prior week. COMPPOP articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.