



Social Media Junk News on the Death of Justice Ginsburg

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 29-09-2020

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SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across six US social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 24-09-2020 we find:

- The social media distribution network of all articles from the top fifteen mainstream news outlets reached just below 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 8,000 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,500 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,450 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 just below 1,400, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 300 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, include misinformation surrounding the US Supreme Court vacancy following Justice Ginsburg's death, China's role on the international stage, and protests and police shootings in the US.

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 fifteen 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 analyse such patterns for the period from 17th September to 24th 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 signalling like, love, laughter, anger, sadness, or amazement. On Twitter, users can retweet, comment, and signal their favourite 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, 23% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 61% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 33% was with Russian content. Finally, 6% 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 8,000 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,500 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of over 2,450.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Mainstream news achieved nearly 45 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 nearly 1,400 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.[2]

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

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

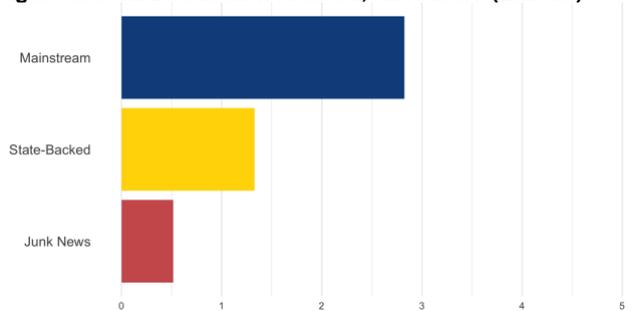


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

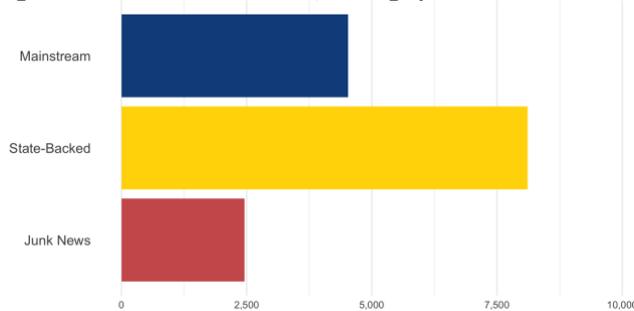


Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)

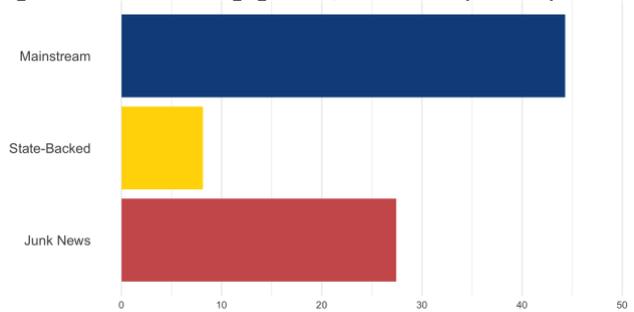


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

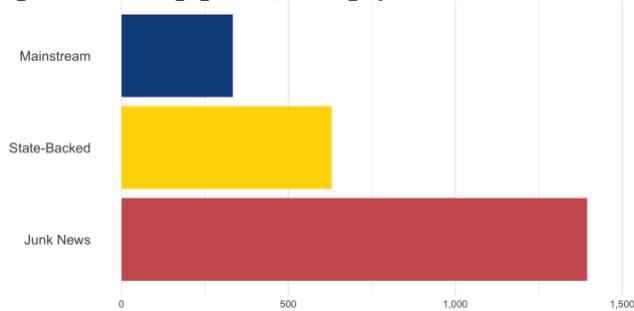
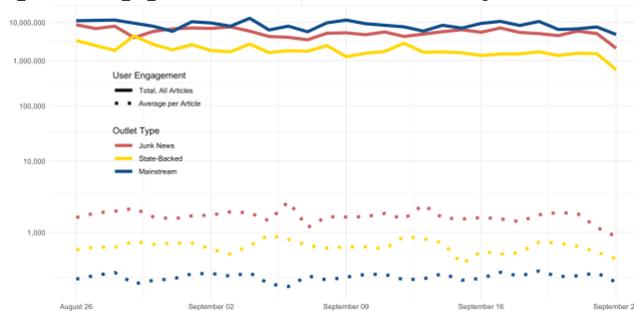


Figure 5: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 17/09/2020-24/09/2020.

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.

qualitative analysis uses the articles with the greatest overall engagement in addition to the articles that fit best into each designated topic, or ‘best-fitting’ articles. Further detail on the quantitative topic modelling process can be found in the [Methodology FAQ](#).

Topic Modelling

Three topics rose to prominence this week. A visualization of top words and their associations with topics are provided in Figure 6. Note that not all words associated with a topic can be displayed here. The engagements generated by the top twenty 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 “court”, “election”, “justice”, “McConnell”, and “Senate”. The twenty best-fitting articles generated just below 500,000 engagements and were mostly from junk news outlets. This topic concerned the recent death of US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, leaving a seat vacant. A deeper analysis of this topic is provided in the next section.

The second topic contained top words “China”, “country”, “COVID-19”, “international”, and “unite.” The twenty best-fitting articles generated over 125,000 engagements and were all from state-backed outlets. This topic concerned China’s role on the international stage, both in general at institutions such as the UN and on specific challenges such as COVID-19.[3]

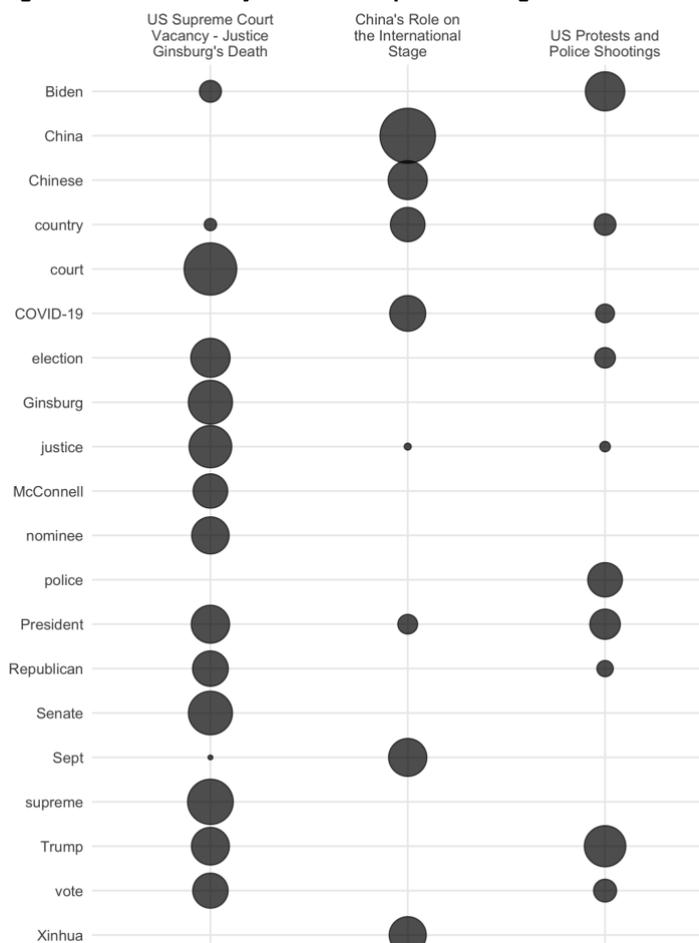
The third topic contained top words “Biden”, “police”, “black”, “life”, and “officer”. The twenty best-fitting articles generated over 60,000 engagements. This topic concerned police shootings and subsequent protests in the US.

Qualitative Analysis

The pre-eminent key topic this week concerned the death of US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the ensuing debates over whether the vacant seat on the court should be filled before the upcoming US Presidential election. Though articles from junk news and state-backed outlets primarily concerned this topic, a substantial portion of their output still continued to address police shootings in the US and the subsequent activism and protest that have followed in recent months. Further detail on the latter was discussed in further depth in [last week’s briefing](#).

A *Daily Wire* article with over 320,000 engagements described the Democrat response to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s statement of intent to allow a vote of confirmation of any nominee President Trump puts forth before the election.[4] The *Daily Wire* article derides the possibility of adding states to the union as a tactic to entrench a majority in Congress after the election. Though not explicitly about the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, these are the two most commonly discussed regions with regards to statehood, and it is likely the *Daily Wire* article was referring to them. Notably, no consideration is given to the substantive issue of whether statehood would provide

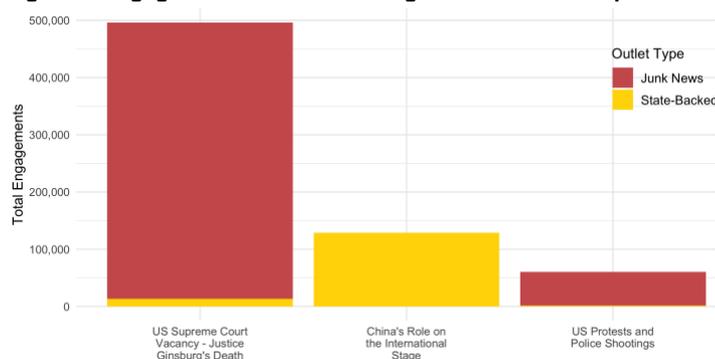
Figure 6: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 17/09/2020-24/09/2020.

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 17/09/2020-24/09/2020.

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

meaningful representation to the residents of DC and Puerto Rico. Instead, the article implies that any attempt to introduce statehood would be for political gain only, in an “anything-goes spirit”.

Other articles promote a narrative of violence about the political left, consistent with previous junk news themes noted in past weekly briefings. One article from the *Daily Wire* with over 260,000 engagements argued through a series of quoted tweets that “media figures” were

inciting violence and threatening to commit arson in Congress if a President Trump nominee were confirmed.[5] A very similar article from *The Blaze* with over 116,000 engagements quoted nearly all the same tweets with exactly the same arguments.[6] Both articles promote a dangerous perception of reckless and widespread violence in response to the possibility of a Supreme Court confirmation before the election. The article from *The Blaze* in particular headlines Democrats as promoting such acts. Though the quoted tweets are from public figures, none were from elected officials from the Democratic party.

Finally, junk news outlets have also promoted unsubstantiated claims that Democratic Party leaders were pushing conspiracy theories. A *Daily Wire* article with over 162,000 engagements claimed that Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi had asserted that the Republican party were involved a conspiracy to “come after your children”.[7] Another article from *Political Insider* with just below 9,000 engagements made similar claims.[8] However, both the *Daily Wire* and *Political Insider* articles intentionally misrepresented her points. The transcript of the interview easily reveals that Speaker Pelosi was commenting more broadly on the political agenda of the Republican Party, which has

attempted to repeal of the Affordable Care Act several times.[9] One policy within the Act is to allow children to be kept on their parents’ health insurance until the age of 26; Speaker Pelosi was arguing that the confirmation of a Supreme Court nominee to replace Justice Ginsburg before the election would contribute to this wider agenda. She was not suggesting that any confirmation itself would constitute “coming for your children”. These wilful misrepresentations and subsequent description of the Speaker as “unhinged” perpetuate an ecosystem of misinformation.

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

Find our [previous weekly briefings](#).

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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 *Weekly Misinformation 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.