



Social Media Junk News around President Trump's Coronavirus Diagnosis

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 12-10-2020

Hubert Au, Jonathan Bright, Philip N. Howard

SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across six US social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 08-10-2020 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 4,700 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,500 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 400 engagements and junk news receives over 1,400, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 300 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were President Trump's coronavirus diagnosis, perceived violence by Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists and the political left, the Chinese Golden Week national holiday and China's economic recovery, and the first US Presidential debate.

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 analyze such patterns for the period from 1st October to 8th October 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, 14% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 77% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 20% was with Russian content. Finally, 2% 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 4,700 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 over 65 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 20 million engagements. State-backed news reached around 3 million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 1,400 engagements per article, whereas state-backed media achieved an average of just above 400 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

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

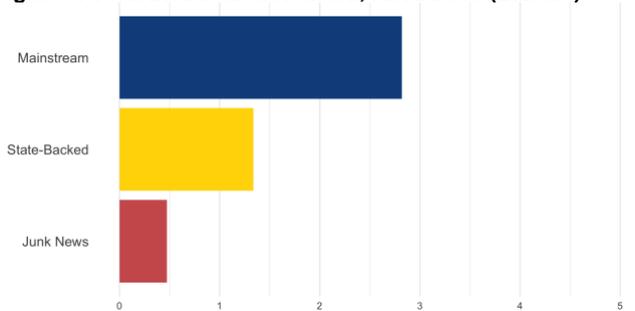


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

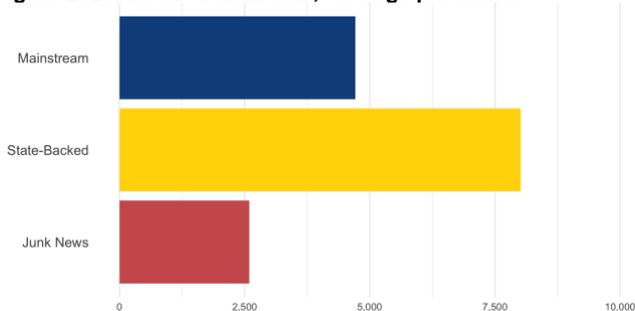


Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)

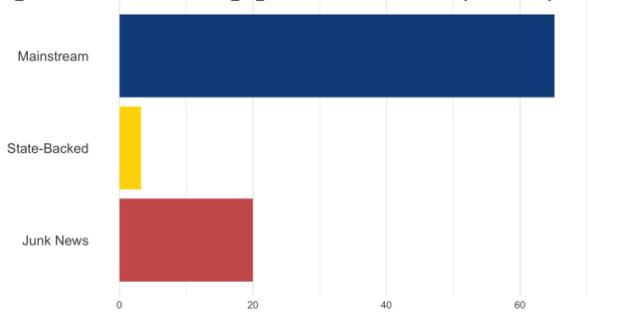


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

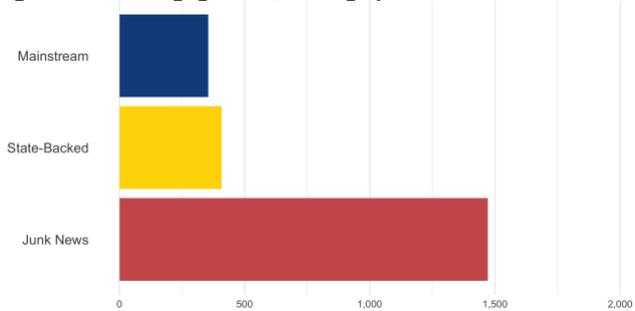
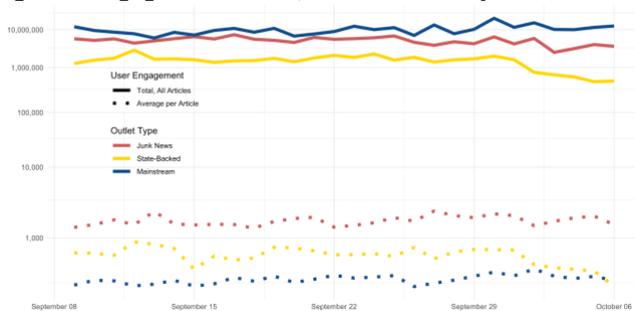


Figure 5: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 01/10/2020-08/10/2020.

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.

typically on one or two of these identified topics. The 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](#).

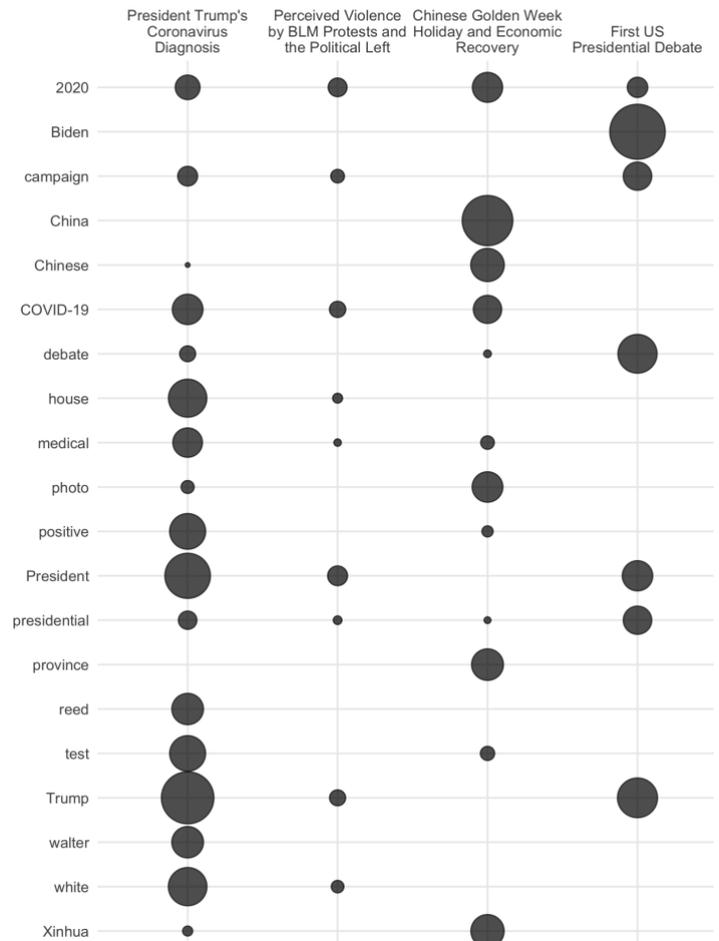
Topic Modelling

Four 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. The first topic included words such as “Trump”, “positive”, “test”, “Walter”, and “Reed”. The twenty best-fitting articles in this topic were about half from state-backed outlets and half from junk news outlets. Collectively the twenty best-fitting articles generated over 190,000 engagements, with most of the engagement generated by the articles from junk news outlets. This topic concerned President Trump’s recent positive coronavirus testing and admission to Walter Reed military hospital for treatment. Best-fitting articles in this topic consisted primarily of early factual reports that President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump had been diagnosed with the virus, with comparatively little commentary.[3]–[6] This is likely due to the similarity in phrases used to report the same facts about President’s Trump’s diagnosis. Commentary and misinformation surrounding the topic, which has more textual variation, is less likely to be grouped and exposed through quantitative analysis. Commentary was found more through our qualitative analysis, which is expanded further in the next section.

The second topic contained words such as “people”, “state”, “court”, “country”, and “government”. The twenty best-fitting articles in this topic generated just below 90,000 engagements and like the first topic there were roughly even proportions of articles from state-backed and junk news outlets respectively. This topic concerned attributing violence to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.[7] One article from RT also used a recent vote in New Caledonia as evidence to undermine “BLM and woke ‘left’ narratives”.[8]

The third topic contained words such as “China”, “COVID-19”, “holiday”, “festival”, and “tourist”. The twenty best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 76,000 engagements and were all from Chinese state-backed outlets. The “Golden Week” of 1st October to 8th October was celebrated alongside Mid-Autumn Festival. Articles in this topic typically used this week of national holiday, which is often a period of greatly heightened travel, as evidence of China’s success in handling the coronavirus pandemic. An article from XinhuaNet, for example, reports that 425 million domestic tourists travelled in the first four days of the week-long holiday.[9] An article from CGTN stated that while “other countries with more advanced medical equipment and technologies” continue to struggle, China has effected a remarkably strong and rapid recovery.[10]

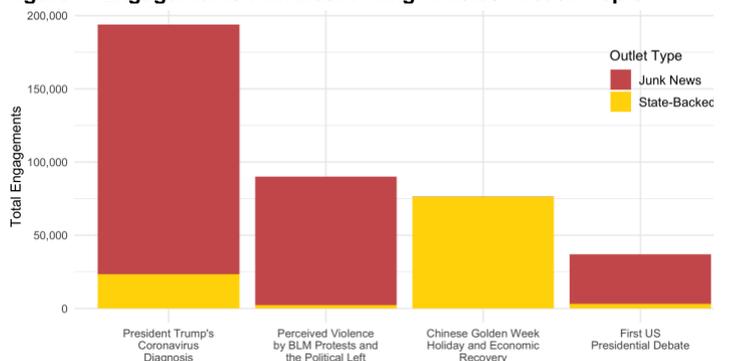
Figure 6: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 01/10/2020-08/10/2020.

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 01/10/2020-08/10/2020.

Note: Total engagements of the top 20 best-fitting articles are labelled by outlet type.

The fourth topic contained words such as “Biden”, “debate”, “Wallace”, “candidate”, and “moderator”. The top twenty best-fitting articles in this topic were mostly from junk news outlets. This topic primarily concerned the first US Presidential debate held last week, which [last week’s briefing](#) addresses in greater detail.

Qualitative Analysis

The pre-eminent topic amongst junk news and state-backed outlets this week was President Trump’s

coronavirus diagnosis. As mentioned in the previous section, a substantial number of articles simply report the diagnosis and an article from *The Blaze* that did so generated over three times the engagement any other article did with over 900,000 engagements.[11]

More of interest, however, is how junk news outlets constructed narratives around these events. Some articles worked to project an image of President Trump as a strong leader. One *Daily Wire* article, for example, commented on images of President Trump apparently hard at work.[12]

Many junk news articles that generated considerable engagement focused on “giddy” leftists hoping for President Trump to die of the coronavirus.[13] These articles often follow a similar structure where the majority of the text are quoted tweets that are particularly provocative, hyperbolic, or incendiary. These articles curate a selection of tweets that exhibit such characteristics and junk news outlets. One *Daily Wire* article that generated over 290,000 engagements did just this, headlining with “I hope [President Trump and Hope Hicks] both die”.[14] Another *Daily Wire* article with nearly 180,000 engagements took a similar line, with particular focus on tweets by opinion columnist Jennifer Rubin.[15] Independent of whether language used in the quoted tweets should be condemned, however, these articles served to bolster existing narratives portraying critics of President Trump and the political left more broadly as condoning of reckless violence and public disorder. Some of these themes have been discussed in [previous briefings](#).

The same *Daily Wire* article that focused on tweets by Jennifer Rubin also touched on President Trump’s drive around Walter Reed military hospital where he was treated.[15] The article quotes CBS National Correspondent David Begnaud criticizing President

Trump for not wearing a medical grade mask in the car during the drive. Instead of considering whether the drive was advisable in the first instance and what protections for the others in the vehicle would have been appropriate, the *Daily Wire* article places blame on David Begnaud, implying that to demand a specific type of mask is too extreme and unreasonable in this context.

Other articles also ignored the substantive issues of the President’s conduct, namely the removal of his mask upon arriving back at the White House. An article from *The Blaze* with nearly 150,000 engagements attacked CNN reporter Kaitlan Collins for pointing out Trump’s actions.[16] Again, instead of engaging with the potential risks to others in contact with the President or what kind of message the choice might broadcast, the article criticizes Collins for having removed her mask in the White House press room. As above with the quoted tweets in other articles, this is intended to highlight some of the mechanism of junk news outlets and not to litigate the details of the particular incident concerning Collins in the White House.

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](#).

REFERENCES

- [1] J. Bright *et al.*, “Coronavirus Coverage by State-Backed English-Language News Sources,” Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford, UK, Data Memo 2020.2, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/state-media-coronavirus/>.
- [2] K. Rebello *et al.*, “Covid-19 News and Information from State-Backed Outlets Targeting French, German and Spanish-Speaking Social Media Users,” Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford, UK, Data Memo 2020.4, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/covid19-french-german-spanish/>.
- [3] “Trump flown to Walter Reed as ‘precautionary measure’ for Covid-19, will be working from military hospital for a ‘few days,’” *RT International*, Oct. 02, 2020.
- [4] A. Hagstrom, “Trump Boards Marine One, Heads to Walter Reed Hospital ‘Out of An Abundance of Caution,’” *The Daily Caller*, Oct. 02, 2020.
- [5] “US President Trump and first lady test positive for Covid-19,” *TRT World*, Oct. 03, 2020.
- [6] Daily Wire News, “Trump Being Transported to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center,” *The Daily Wire*, Oct. 02, 2020.
- [7] S. Green, “Life on the Streets: A Cop Confesses What Policing Is Like in the Age of BLM/Antifa,” *PJ Media*, May 20, 2020.
- [8] “New Caledonia votes to remain French colony, throwing spanner in BLM and woke left narrative on the ‘evils’ of empire,” *RT International*. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/502686-new-caledonia-colonialism-woke/> (accessed Oct. 08, 2020).
- [9] Xinhua, “Economic Watch: First Golden Week holiday since COVID-19 mirrors China’s economic bounce,” *XinhuaNet*, Oct. 05, 2020.
- [10] CGTN, “The belated ‘Spring Festival,’” *CGTN*, Oct. 07, 2020.
- [11] C. Garcia, “President Trump tweets that he and the first lady have tested positive for coronavirus,” *TheBlaze*, Oct. 02, 2020.

- [12] R. Saavedra, "WH Releases Photos of Trump Grinding Away at Work While in Hospital," *The Daily Wire*, Oct. 04, 2020.
- [13] D. Urbanski, "Leftists giddy that President Trump has COVID: 'I hope he suffers through this and dies as he's losing on election night,'" *TheBlaze*, Oct. 02, 2020.
- [14] Daily Wire News, "Leftists Cheer News Trump, Hope Hicks Infected With COVID-19: 'I Hope They Both Die,'" *The Daily Wire*, Oct. 02, 2020.
- [15] Daily Wire News, "Leftists Explode Over Trump Taking Short Ride Outside Hospital: Charge Him with Crimes, Remove from Power," *The Daily Wire*, Oct. 04, 2020.
- [16] C. Garcia, "Kirstie Alley trounces CNN reporter over President Trump's return to the White House: 'You hate him. Just report that,'" *TheBlaze*, Oct. 06, 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 *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.