



Social Media Misinformation and Lockdown Measures in Democracies

Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 27-04-2020

Hubert Au, Jonathan Bright, Philip N. Howard

SUMMARY

Given the evolving nature of the coronavirus pandemic—and public understanding of the crises—we provide a weekly briefing about the spread of coronavirus information across multiple social media platforms. For the week leading up to 27-04-2020 we find:

- Content from junk health news and state-backed sources is distributed to hundreds of millions of social media accounts; the Washington Post had a social distribution network on par with that of state-backed media, due in part to the fact that they had a special article with Facebook, which then shared the article in some of the big pages it manages.
- In total, articles produced by junk health news sources were engaged with over seven million times this week. On average, articles from state-backed media sources stimulated the most engagement.
- Thematically, this week's junk health news and information (1) focused on the “authoritarian” measures being instituted by elected governors across the US and (2) attacked prominent democrats such as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi over the economic impacts of the coronavirus.

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. Some of these sources are state-backed media, either parts of information operations or editorially-controlled national media organizations. Some are domestically and independently produced, 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 or not their content is extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, or commentary masked as news.

We currently track 142 junk health news websites and 21 state-backed media outlets that are actively publishing misleading information about the coronavirus pandemic—163 in total. 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 Twitter, Reddit and Facebook (through the CrowdTangle platform). Additional analytics allow us to benchmark and track the spread and engagement of 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 the 15th to the 23rd of April, and offer comparisons between the trends

for junk health news and state-backed sources and the trends for five prominent English-language sources of credible news and information, two from the UK and three from the US: the BBC, CNN, Guardian, New York Times and Washington Post.

The “social distribution network” of an outlet is the sum of the follower counts of the Facebook groups and pages, subreddits and Twitter accounts that shared at least one of the source's articles over the previous week. This provides an impression of the capacity each source has for distributing its content. It is important to highlight that not all these followers may have been reached by this content—only the social media firms themselves would be able to 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 in six ways: 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. Our overall engagement measure is the sum of all these actions. Again, we should emphasize that we are not able to distinguish between genuine and inauthentic acts of engagement.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from junk health news and state-backed sources, both in total for the week and as an average per article. In contrast with data from the previous week, state-backed media did not have a much larger distribution network overall than junk health news sources and the BBC, CNN, Guardian, New York Times, and Washington Post. Instead, the Washington

Post achieved an almost identical total distribution network as state-backed media.[2] On a per-article average, however, state-backed outlets—whose editorial decisions are more closely managed by political authorities—still have a substantially larger distribution network than all other sources.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Overall, junk health news sources experienced more than twice the total user engagement than any other news source. Notably, state-backed outlets earned less engagement overall than the New York Times, which was not the case in the previous week. Last week, the BBC content saw the most engagement of all the mainstream sources, but this week had the lowest total user engagement. On a per-article basis, content from state-backed news is the most engaged-with compared to both junk health and mainstream news sources, just as last week. State-backed outlets have both the highest per-article distribution network and per-article engagement.

KEY NARRATIVES

We also conduct a thematic review of articles published by 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 we found that junk health news sources focused on accusing the World Health Organization (WHO) of providing false information, and supported President Trump’s decision to withdraw US funding to the WHO.[2] This week’s junk health sources (1) wrote about the “authoritarian” measures being instituted by governors across the US and (2) attacked prominent democrats such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Nancy Pelosi over the economic impacts of the coronavirus.

Several articles commenting on “authoritarian” measures specifically targeted Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer. The *Daily Wire* carried an article with over 60,000 engagements arguing that her measures were intended punitively as retribution for protests and were “sweepingly restrictive” to the point where citizens allegedly cease to know what was supposed to be banned or not.[3] The same outlet published another article referring to an interview Philip “Dr. Phil” McGraw gave, where he compared annual deaths from automobile accidents, cigarettes, and swimming pools—causes of death that are not infectious—to the spread of a new virus with no vaccine. On the back of this interview it was suggested that the “Death and Destruction” caused by the lockdown could be worse than that of the coronavirus itself. The *Daily Signal* wrote an article with just over 30,000 engagements arguing that the measures were “getting out of hand”. A *Daily Caller* piece, with similar engagement levels, compared New York Mayor Bill de Blasio “Big Brother”. [4] These articles also used the context of lockdown procedures to comment on abortion; *PJ Media* claimed that “no amount of [lockdown-related] protest will encourage pro-abortion

Figure 1: Distribution Networks, Total All Articles (Millions)

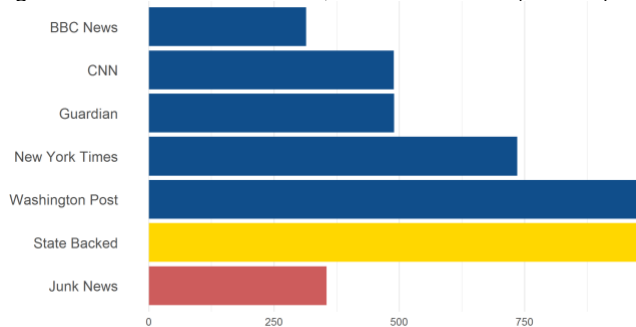


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

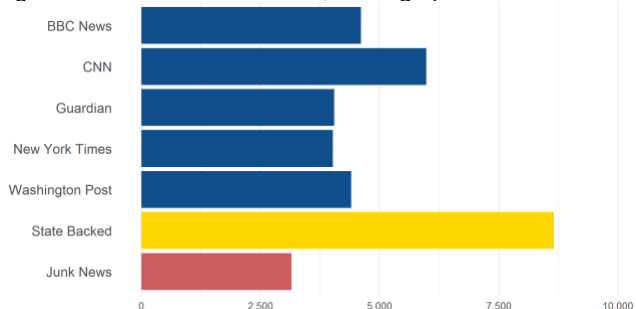


Figure 3: User Engagement, Total All Articles (Millions)

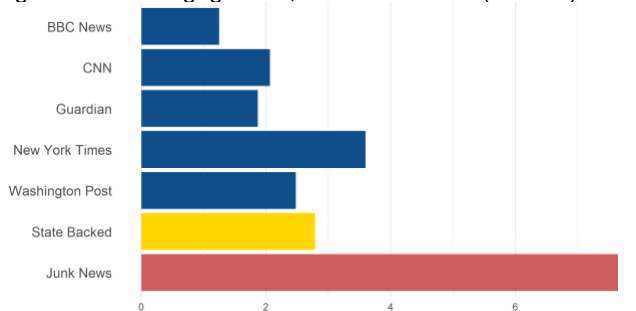
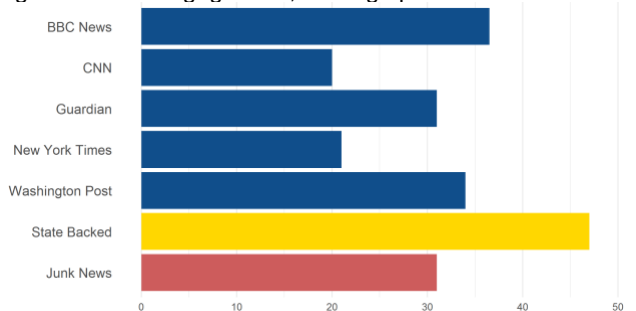


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 04/15/2020-04/22/2020.

Note: Distribution refers to the sum of the follower count of Twitter accounts, subreddits and Facebook groups/pages sharing content. Engagement refers to the sum of all types of reactions on Twitter, Reddit and Facebook.

Democrats to reconsider their support for killing babies in the womb”. [3], [5]

Other articles featured sustained attacks against prominent Democratic lawmakers such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Nancy Pelosi. With an article that had over 150,000 engagements, Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez was accused of celebrating American suffering and job loss in a tweet about climate

change.[6] Congresswoman Pelosi, meanwhile, was depicted as being uncaring for the poor accused of not doing her job.[7], [8]

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks used on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit 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 that sees significant engagement.

RELATED WORK

Read [our review of state-backed English language media reporting](#) on Coronavirus. Find our previous weekly briefings [here](#).

REFERENCES

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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 *Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing* provides regular reports on the most prominent social media trends from the prior week. COMPROP's articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.