



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

Understanding Chinese, Iranian, Russian and Turkish Outlets

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SUMMARY

In this data memo, we examine French, German and Spanish-language distribution of coronavirus (COVID-19) news and information originating from media outlets backed by the governments of China, Iran, Russia and Turkey. We measure the total distribution networks of these state-backed media outlets on Facebook and Twitter, and compare how social media users are engaging with that content. Over the three-week period of this study, we find that:

- most of the state-backed outlets from China, Iran, Russia and Turkey generating content in French, German, and Spanish reaches tens of millions of social media users around the world, though through smaller distribution networks than the major news outlets operating in those languages;
- state-backed outlets producing coronavirus-related content in French, German and Spanish can achieve higher average engagement per article than prominent news sources such as *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel* and *El País*;
- the coronavirus coverage being produced and distributed by state-backed media outlets on social media varies by language and source country, for example:
 - Russian outlets working in French and German consistently emphasized weak democratic institutions and civil disorder in Europe, but offered different kinds of conspiracy theories about the pandemic;
 - Chinese and Turkish outlets working in Spanish promoted their own countries' global leadership in combating the pandemic, while Russian and Iranian outlets generated polarizing content targeted at Latin America and Spanish-speaking social media users in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

State-backed media can be used by governments to influence foreign public opinion, counterbalance dominant Western media narratives or conduct top-down propaganda operations. While state-backed outlets predominantly target English-speaking audiences, some are broadening their reach. Russia, for example, launched the English-language Russia Today (later rebranded as RT) in 2005 with a relatively modest operation.[1] Over time, RT has developed an anti-Western narrative and has become a propaganda weapon of the Kremlin. RT has simultaneously expanded its capacity to publish content in other languages including Arabic, French, German and Spanish. Through RT, the Russian government targets non-English speaking audiences to either attract support for Russia in places where the anti-Western narrative has strong resonance or promote a positive image of Russia in countries where they want to have allies and good relations.[2]

In addition to Russia, there are numerous Chinese state-backed outlets targeting non-English audiences across the globe to support China's soft power ambitions. For instance, China has launched a CGTN Español channel, targeting Spanish-speaking

countries, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, where China has economic, political and cultural interests.[3] Meanwhile, Iran also launched a Latin American-focused channel with HispanTV in 2012. This channel represents the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcaster's (IRIB) attempt to establish stronger connections with their allies in Latin America and to counterbalance Western media.[4] Finally, Turkey has also shown recent interest in Arabic, Spanish and German-speaking audiences, within the context of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's use of soft power tools to bolster the country's global reputation.[5][6]

In our earlier work on coronavirus reporting, we investigated several English-language outlets backed and/or funded by regimes in China, Iran, Russia and Turkey.[7] We found that they have a substantial online audience and level of engagement compared to the UK's BBC. We also found that some of their English-language content politicized the coronavirus by criticizing Western democracies, praising their home countries, and promoting conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. Recognizing the need to explore non-English language content distributed by state-backed outlets, this memo focuses on coronavirus news and information published in French, German and

Spanish. This content primarily targets countries in Europe, Latin America and Africa. It is undeniable that other languages and global audiences are also of interest to state-backed media. In particular, China, Iran and Russia sponsor similar Arabic-language operations that reach millions of people worldwide. Although this study explores content produced in Spanish, French and German, we will do more in the future to expand our understandings of non-English language media operations, such as in Arabic, backed by the governments of China, Iran, Russia and Turkey.

In this study, we ask: What is the global audience for French, German, and Spanish-language social media content about the coronavirus from state-backed media? What are the primary themes in this content? First, we measure the distribution of coronavirus coverage from state-backed outlets, focusing on content shared over Facebook and Twitter. We measure what we call the “social distribution network” of these outlets, by aggregating follower counts of the ecosystem of groups, pages and accounts which share their content. Second, we describe in detail the types of narratives being promoted by the state-backed outlets in French, German and Spanish.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF STATE-BACKED REPORTING

In this report, we define state-backed media outlets as organizations that are either directly funded by the state or are editorially managed by their governments. Our focus is on state-backed media funded or managed by the governments of China, Iran, Russia and Turkey, as these are countries where press freedom is limited and where governments are more likely to interfere with news reporting.[8] For this memo, we restrict our analysis to state-backed outlets that produce content in French, German and Spanish.

The outlets we study include international broadcasters and news agencies that all have a major web presence. From China, we focus on the China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Radio International (CRI) and Xinhua News Agency. From Russia, we include RT and Sputnik. From Iran, we include Press TV and HispanTV. From Turkey, we focus 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. See the **Data Supplement** for more detail on our inclusion criteria.

For comparison, we benchmark our analyses with an examination of widely known media organizations that produce content in French, German and Spanish. This includes 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.

Several social media platforms are effectively banned within the countries where state-backed media outlets are producing content. Facebook and Twitter, for instance, are banned in China. The Iranian government has also been tightening its grip over these platforms by restricting access to Facebook and Twitter in recent years. Finally, while Turkey and Russia allow access to popular social media sites, they employ strict censorship measures and severely limit freedom of expression on these platforms.

FINDINGS

Social Distribution Networks of State-Backed Outlets

Table 1 shows the “social distribution network” of each state-backed outlet as well as benchmarks for prominent news sources that produce content in French, German and Spanish. This metric represents the sum of all unique Facebook groups/pages and Twitter accounts in which coronavirus-related content from the state-backed outlet has been shared during the observation period. Xinhua is not included in Table 1 because this outlet aggregates social media followers across all of their English and non-English Facebook groups/pages. It should be noted that these figures represent potential reach, as social media users may not be exposed to all content shared in these channels. Furthermore, the method does not account for duplicate followers within platforms, such as individuals following two different accounts, or duplicate followers across platforms, such as individuals with accounts on both Facebook and Twitter. Our estimates should be regarded as theoretical upper bounds of the size of an outlet’s distribution network.

By this measure, the largest state-backed outlet producing content in French is CGTN, with a distribution network that can push content to over 75 million social media users. The largest state-backed outlet producing content in both Spanish and German is RT. State-backed media from Iran and Turkey have the smallest distribution networks across all three languages. Almost all of the state-backed outlets also have smaller distribution networks than the benchmark outlets used in this study. An exception is RT en Español, the Spanish-language arm of RT, which has a larger distribution network than *El Mundo* but a smaller network than *El País*.

To understand how global audiences are engaging with the coronavirus-related reporting produced by state-backed outlets from China, Iran, Russia and Turkey, we sum the numbers of all possible modes of engagement on Facebook and Twitter. Table 2 shows the volume of engagement generated by state-backed outlets.

During our observation period, coronavirus-related reporting from prominent news sources such as *El País* generated as much as 6 million engagements while the highest engagement level attracted by a state-backed outlet, RT en Español, was half this amount. Although state-backed outlets did not match the volume of

engagement achieved by prominent news sources such as *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel* and *El País*, the engagement generated per article in Table 3 reveals several points of interest. During the observation period, RT attracted the largest median engagement per article for content produced in French, German and Spanish. There was also notable variation for state-backed outlets across different languages, suggesting that some of their media operations are attracting more engagement than others. For example, Xinhua content in French and Spanish had substantially higher median engagement per article than their German-language content while the coverage from TRT Deutsch and TRT Français surpassed that of TRT Español.

These findings are generally in line with the results from our earlier work on English-language coronavirus reporting produced by state-backed media outlets from China, Iran, Russia and Turkey. In that study, we observed that state-backed outlets could achieve as much as ten times larger median engagement per article than news sources such as the BBC.[7]

State-Backed Narratives in Coronavirus Coverage

In this section, we provide a thematic overview of some of the coronavirus reporting in French, German and Spanish coming out of the state-backed outlets. We reviewed the top 20 most engaged articles for each

outlet and coded prominent themes over a week-long period during May 2020. See the **Data Supplement** for more detail on our thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Weak Democracies

The first theme relates to articles and reports that attempt to create chaos in the West and undermine trust in public institutions. During the data collection period, there was evidence of reporting on this broad theme across Chinese, Iranian and Russian state media. There were notable gaps in Turkish state-backed reporting— signalling contrasting strategies or areas of interest among the governments that back the media outlets examined in this memo.

French and German-language reporting from Russian state media highlighted acts of civil disobedience, and tensions with public authorities amid the pandemic. For example, RT Français and RT Deutsch both focused on a silent protest against the Belgian Prime Minister that was organized by healthcare workers.[9][10] These articles featured photos and videos with dozens of healthcare workers collectively “turning their backs” as the Prime Minister arrived at their hospital.

French and German-language reporting from Russian state media also included several stories about the lockdown protests in France, Germany and Poland as

Table 1 – Followers of State-Backed Social Distribution Networks

	French		German		Spanish	
China	CRI	50,100,000	CRI	800,000	CRI	70,900,000
	CGTN	75,100,000	..	..	CGTN	69,200,000
Iran	Press TV	1,700,000	..	..	HispanTV	29,700,000
Russia	RT	27,500,000	RT	5,000,000	RT	205,500,000
	Sputnik	31,300,000	Sputnik	1,800,000	Sputnik	41,700,000
Turkey	TRT	1,000,000	TRT	300,000	TRT	1,200,000
Benchmarks	Le Monde	134,600,000	Der Spiegel	59,900,000	El País	431,300,000
	Le Figaro	116,900,000	Tagesschau	25,500,000	El Mundo	112,900,000

Table 2 – Engagement with Content Shared by Social Distribution Networks

	French		German		Spanish	
China	CRI	523	CRI	409	CRI	18,863
	CGTN	98,966	..	..	CGTN	139,179
	Xinhua	274,553	Xinhua	1065	Xinhua	206,747
Iran	Press TV	1439	..	..	HispanTV	294,396
Russia	RT	679,203	RT	249,741	RT	3,364,366
	Sputnik	658,301	Sputnik	90,114	Sputnik	497,472
Turkey	TRT	26,345	TRT	24,022	TRT	17,737
Benchmarks	Le Monde	1,376,862	Der Spiegel	1,143,350	El País	6,258,900
	Le Figaro	2,007,449	Tagesschau	324,563	El Mundo	3,269,981

Table 3 – Median Engagement per Shared Article

	French		German		Spanish	
China	CRI	5	CRI	3	CRI	122
	CGTN	90	..	..	CGTN	118
	Xinhua	374	Xinhua	4	Xinhua	144
Iran	Press TV	3	..	..	HispanTV	117
Russia	RT	528	RT	158	RT	442
	Sputnik	142	Sputnik	46	Sputnik	76
Turkey	TRT	43	TRT	44	TRT	18
Benchmarks	Le Monde	105	Der Spiegel	90	El País	27
	Le Figaro	37	Tagesschau	68	El Mundo	25

Sources Tables 1-3: Authors’ calculations based on data collected between the 18th of May and the 5th of June 2020.

Notes Tables 1-3: Total follower count includes Twitter accounts and Facebook groups/pages sharing content. Rounded to the nearest hundred thousand. Engagement includes all potential reactions on Twitter and Facebook.

well as violent demonstrations involving the *gilet jaunes* (translated as “yellow vests”).[11][12][13] Among the examples, one article from Sputnik suggested that the national lockdown and resulting economic crisis could incite a new “uprising” in France.[14] Additional German-language reporting from Russian state media sought to highlight how the divide between the rich and the poor in the West is exacerbated by the health crisis.[15][16]

This narrative was replicated to a certain extent in the Spanish-language reporting from Russian state media. However, it is important to note that this coverage appeared to target Spanish-speaking audiences in Latin America more so than those in Europe. For example, an article from RT en Español highlighted recent remarks from Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in which he allegedly condemned local governors and mayors for imposing strict lockdown policies.[17] The article went on to suggest that Bolsonaro wanted to “arm” the Brazilian public with weapons so they could fight back against lockdown measures across the country.[17] Another article from Sputnik claimed that the Chilean police had recently spent millions to purchase armored vehicles and other riot control equipment at the height of the pandemic despite reports of widespread human rights violations committed by the police forces.[18]

During the data collection period, Spanish-language reporting from Russian and Iranian state-backed media promoted anti-US sentiments. This reporting, which is not designed for an English-speaking US audience, builds on deep-seated tensions in the region. The coverage emphasized the detrimental effects of US sanctions on Venezuela’s ability to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, namely, by creating fuel shortages. In the absence of American aid, Iran sent several oil tankers to Venezuela. However, Sputnik and HispanTV reported that the US was planning to deploy “warships” in the region to prevent their arrival.[19][20] An article from Sputnik claimed that US President Donald Trump had threatened to sink the ships.[19] Related coverage from HispanTV emphasized that, while other countries were sending aid to Venezuela amid the pandemic, the US was preparing to “attack”. [20]

Chinese state-backed reporting in German, Spanish and French contributed to this broad narrative by undermining the credibility of US political leaders and, in some cases, suggesting that the country posed an imminent threat to global peace and security. French-language reporting from Xinhua claimed that the US was spreading a “political virus” by blaming China for the global pandemic while an article from CGTN Français suggested that the White House was staging a “Hollywood-style” production to divert attention away from its own “catastrophic” coronavirus response.[21][22] German and Spanish-language reporting from CRI was similarly critical of the United States, for example, alleging that US politicians were racist, self-serving, and bringing their country towards the “edge of the abyss”. [23] German-language

commentary by CRI also emphasized how growing income inequalities and alleged incompetence by the Trump administration during the pandemic exemplifies “the failure of US democracy”. [24][25][26]

Theme 2: Successful State Response

The second narrative theme embraced by media operations in all three languages emphasized how successfully the home countries of state-backed outlets were responding to the coronavirus pandemic. This narrative was particularly prominent in Chinese and Turkish media across their French, German and Spanish-language reporting.

Chinese outlets underscored the country’s leadership role in promoting international cooperation and facilitating a global recovery from the public health emergency. German-language reporting from CRI Deutsch emphasised the need for international solidarity and portrayed China as the driving force behind the imminent global economic “revival”. [27][28] Reporting by CRI Español celebrated the International Monetary Fund (IMF) sharing lessons with the global community from China’s successful fight against the coronavirus.[29] French and Spanish-language articles from Xinhua highlighted international praise for China’s poverty-reduction initiatives as part of the country’s coronavirus response.[30][31] State-backed outlets also published stories about the recipients of Chinese aid, ranging from Algerian medics, as reported by CGTN Français, to the Bangladeshi government, covered by CRI Español.[32][33] Meanwhile, French-language reporting from Xinhua acclaimed “mutual support” provided by China and African nations in the fight against the coronavirus.[34]

Spanish-language editions of Xinhua and CGTN dedicated several articles to China’s apparent progress in vaccine development against the novel virus.[35][36] In these reports, the vaccine is positioned by President Xi as a “global public good” and further endorsed by British medical journal, *The Lancet*, which allegedly called the initial clinical trials “promising”. [37][35] Adding to this narrative, China’s pledge of two billion dollars to the World Health Organization (WHO), reported by CGTN Español, was juxtaposed against the US withdrawal of its WHO funding and alleged lack of solidarity, which was condemned by Xinhua’s French edition.[36][38]

Like China, Turkey’s state-backed media emphasized the country’s role in responding to the pandemic. In its Spanish-language edition, TRT Español asserted Turkey’s world-class record for successfully identifying, isolating and treating coronavirus cases to minimize loss of life and pressures on its healthcare system.[39] French, German and Spanish-language reporting from TRT celebrated a new hospital unveiled by Turkish and Japanese officials in Istanbul to treat coronavirus patients, positioning the city as an “international center for healthcare”. [40][41][42] Adding to Turkey’s alleged successes in driving international collaboration, TRT

coverage in Spanish and German reported on bilateral efforts to reopen Turkey's tourism industry as well as host preliminary talks with Russia to launch potential vaccine development against the coronavirus. [43][44][45] Additional coverage from TRT Deutsch featured a new radiation system developed by "Turkish Beam" that is being tested in the US for its potential role in fighting coronavirus infections. [46]

Russian outlets did not produce significant coverage about their own state response to the coronavirus, perhaps given domestic challenges facing Russia's public health system during the observation period. Instead, Russian state-backed media promoted China's achievements in responding to the crisis and stoked divisions between China and the United States. [47] Iranian state-backed media, whose outlets publish French and Spanish-language coverage, also contributed to this narrative. Among the examples, Press TV coverage reported on Iranian collaboration with China while criticizing the US response to the pandemic. [48] State-backed media from Iran also highlighted the country's foreign aid programme to support strategic allies facing the coronavirus. During the observation period, Iran's Spanish-language HispanTV acclaimed Iran's provision of coronavirus aid to Kyrgyzstan while also praising its Latin American ally, Cuba, whose doctors have reportedly cared for some 26,000 coronavirus patients around the world. [49][50] Since Iran was hit hard by the coronavirus in the early stages of the global pandemic, its state-backed media is now focusing on promoting a positive image of the country to deflect attention from the domestic difficulties Iran encountered. HispanTV, for example, recently asserted Iran's progress in "eradicating COVID-19 from the country" in an article published shortly after our coding period concluded. [51]

Theme 3: Conspiracy Theories

A final theme present in the reporting from state-backed outlets in China, Russia, and Iran involved conspiracy theories about the coronavirus. Turkish state-backed outlets did not push these types of narratives and mainly focused on positive portrayals of their home country's efforts in combating the coronavirus. Chinese state media in all three languages pushed back against allegations that the coronavirus originated in China. Spanish-language reporting from CRI highlighted cases of the virus that could not be traced to a Chinese origin including a New Jersey mayor who believed that he was infected long before the outbreak in China. [52] French-language coverage from CRI also reported that cases of the coronavirus in France did not originate in China or Italy but were instead caused by an "unknown" and "locally-circulating" strain of the virus, citing a study conducted by the Pasteur Institute in Paris. [53]

Related to these efforts, state-backed reporting from China also promoted conspiracy theories that the coronavirus is a bioweapon manufactured by the United States. German-language reporting from CRI asserted that the "US owes the world an explanation

for its biological laboratories overseas", emphasizing concerns that the laboratories might have military purposes. [54] An article from CGTN Español also asked whether "more than 200 US military biological laboratories around the world" are "developing biological weapons" or "deadly viruses". [55]

Although some narratives about the origins of the coronavirus were exclusive to Chinese state-backed outlets, they were joined by their Russian and Iranian counterparts in making connections between the coronavirus and US biological warfare laboratories. The German arm of Sputnik published an article suggesting that the US was conducting "dangerous epidemiology" in post-Soviet states such as Georgia, Kazakhstan and Armenia, while also citing rumors about a 2018 outbreak of meningitis during which bloggers allegedly reported that the US military was testing bioweapons. [56] The same narrative was taken up by Iran's Spanish-language outlet, HispanTV, which suggested that the coronavirus might have originated in a US laboratory. [57] The article quotes a Russian spokesperson who alleged that Americans are "creating and modifying various pathogens" that could produce "dangerous diseases". [57]

In contrast to overt accusations about the origins of the coronavirus, Russian state-backed media also used more subtle tactics to increase engagement with popular conspiracy theories. In particular, RT Deutsch reported on an Italian politician who demanded the arrest of Bill Gates for "crimes against humanity" amid the global health crisis. RT Deutsch mocks these allegations as "absurd theories", but nevertheless describes them in detail, including claims that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is pushing plans for forced vaccinations, and that its harmful "vaccination campaigns" against previous diseases have "sterilized millions of women in Africa". [58] Another article from RT Deutsch criticizes the German government for praising the Gates Foundation without considering their "inhumane" operations, once again describing allegations related to vaccine development and the sterilization of young people in India. [59] This coverage was specific to German-language reporting for our data collection period, but demonstrates how Russian state-backed media can increase public engagement with conspiracy theories without directly supporting them.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we systematically examined French, German and Spanish-language coronavirus reporting published by state-backed outlets from China, Iran, Russia and Turkey. A mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology was employed. We measured the social distribution networks used on Facebook and Twitter, and the levels of engagement with content related to the coronavirus. Over the three-week period of this study, we found that state-backed media from China, Iran, Russia and Turkey are attracting tens of millions of French, German and Spanish-speaking social media users around the world. While most of these outlets

have smaller distribution networks than prominent news sources such as *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel* and *El País*, some state-backed media operations can achieve higher engagement levels for the content they produce. Coronavirus-related reporting being distributed by these state-backed outlets reflects a combination of reputable and false or misleading information, some of which

attempts to undermine Western democracies, bolster their source country's successes, and fuel conspiracy theories. The variations in French, German and Spanish-language coronavirus coverage identified during the observation period ultimately underscored the distinctive goals and objectives of these non-English language media operations amid the global pandemic.

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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, Luminare, 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), which is based at the Oxford Internet Institute, 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 articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.