



Social Media Junk News around Electoral Fraud in the US Election

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 17-11-2020

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SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across six social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 11-11-2020 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. The average article from state-backed sources reached over 8,200 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,400 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,300 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 500 engagements and junk news receives over 1,600, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 350 engagements.
- Our data collection shows false claims on voter registration in Pennsylvania reached up to 28.3 million individuals on social media.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were attacks on the political left, Republican elected officials' responses to election results, China's International Import Expo, misinformation on electoral fraud across a number of US states, Pfizer's recent vaccine candidate, photos of the week, and general coronavirus statistics.

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, 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 4th November to 11th November 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, 33% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 18% of engagements with state-backed media were with Chinese content, whereas 80% was with Russian content. 1% was with Turkish content.

Distributional reach and engagement are presented in Table 1. This week, the top fifteen mainstream sources achieved much greater distribution networks than either state-backed or junk news sources. However, the average article from state-backed sources still has a larger distribution network, this week reaching a potential audience of over 8,200 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,400 users. Junk news articles reached an average audience of over 2,300. Mainstream news achieved 102 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 24 million engagements. State-backed news reached over 11 million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 1,600 engagements per article, whereas state-backed media achieved an average of over 500 engagements per article.

Figure 1 displays the trends over the last four weeks. Mainstream news sources achieved 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]

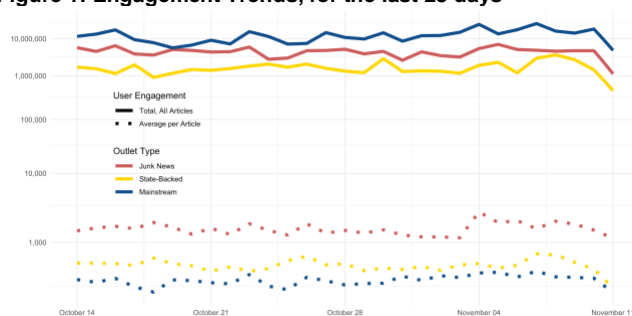
The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed and junk news outlets into groups of articles on the same subject, and a qualitative narrative analysis typically on one or two of these identified topics. The qualitative analysis uses the articles with the greatest overall engagement in addition to the articles that fit

Table 1: Changes in Misinformation Production

| | This Week | Percent Change from Last Week | Percent Change from Last Month |
|--|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions) | | | |
| Junk News | 0.5 | ↑ 4.4 | ↓ 6.1 |
| Mainstream | 2.8 | ↑ 6.5 | ↓ 1.3 |
| State-Backed | 1.2 | ↑ 7.2 | ↑ 4.2 |
| Distribution Networks, Average Per Article | | | |
| Junk News | 2,340 | ↓ 13 | ↑ 2.2 |
| Mainstream | 4,465 | ↓ 0.5 | ↑ 1.5 |
| State-Backed | 8,216 | ↓ 4.0 | ↑ 0.9 |
| Total User Engagements, All Articles (Millions) | | | |
| Junk News | 24.2 | ↓ 19 | ↓ 18 |
| Mainstream | 102 | ↓ 27 | ↓ 51 |
| State-Backed | 11.9 | ↓ 28 | ↓ 35 |
| User Engagements, Average Per Article | | | |
| Junk News | 1,612 | ↓ 23 | ↓ 13 |
| Mainstream | 379 | ↓ 1.6 | ↓ 16 |
| State-Backed | 535 | ↓ 11 | ↑ 6.3 |

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 04/11/2020-11/11/2020.

Figure 1: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 04/11/2020-11/11/2020.

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.

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

Seven topics rose to prominence this week. A visualization of top words and their associations with topics are provided in Figure 2. 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 3. The first topic included words such as "police", "Democrat", "country", "attack", and "black". The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 200,000 engagements. The top 20 best-fitting articles were almost all from junk news outlets. This topic contained attacks against the political left on issues of socialism and race in the US that have been discussed in previous briefings. Attacks often targeted Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

The second topic included words such as "Trump", "Biden", "election", "win", and "legal". The top 20 best-

fitting articles in this topic generated over 160,000 engagements. The majority of best-fitting articles in this topic were from junk news outlets. This topic concerned the recent false rhetoric from President Trump and high-ranking officials in the Republican Party claiming fraud in the US Presidential election. This topic is discussed further in the next section.

The third topic included words such as “China”, “CIIE”, “Shanghai”, “international”, and “expo”. All best-fitting articles in this topic were from state-backed outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 109,000 engagements. These articles promoted Chinese contributions to the global economy with particular focus on the recent China International Import Expo.[4], [5]

The fourth topic included words such as “ballot”, “Pennsylvania”, “fraud”, “mail-in”, and “lawsuit”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from junk news outlets and generated over 90,000 engagements. This topic contained many articles concerning details of alleged electoral fraud in a number of states and associated legal actions. This topic was most likely made distinct from the second topic by the model due to the prevalence of specific words such as “legal”, “mail-in”, “ballots”. Nevertheless, the two topics are closely linked and both are discussed in the next section.

The fifth topic included words such as “Pfizer”, “COVID-19”, “effective”, “90”, and “trial”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from state-backed outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 58,000 engagements. This topic concerned the recent announcement from pharmaceutical company Pfizer that their vaccine candidate has appeared over 90% effective in preliminary analysis. Most articles from state-backed outlets appeared to report the facts. Some junk news outlets leveraged the news to level the accusation that the US Food and Drug Administration had withheld the information to disadvantage President Trump in the US Presidential election.[6]

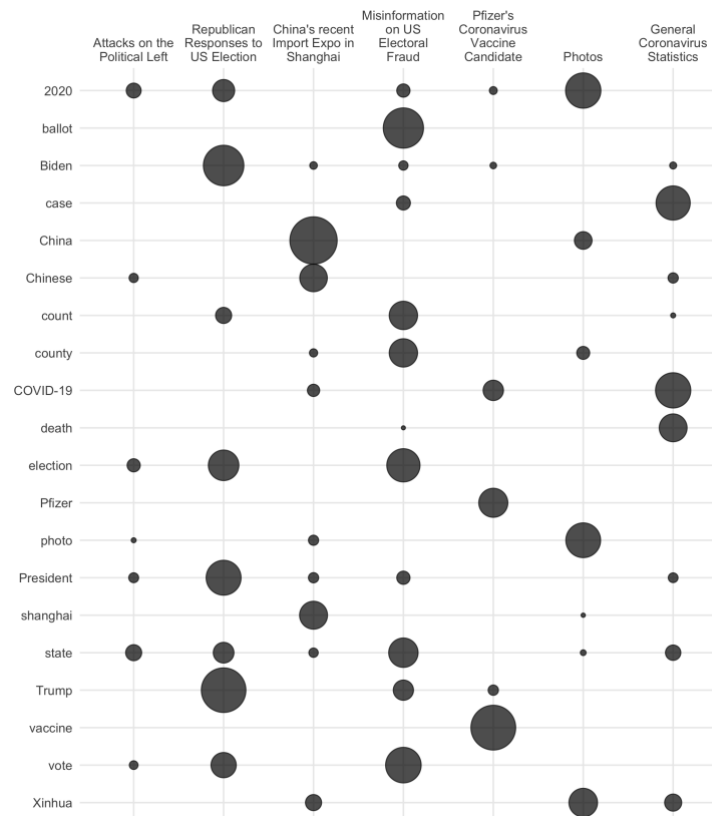
The sixth topic included words such as “Nov”, “2020”, “photo”, “show”, and “Xinhua”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were all from state-backed media. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 12,000 engagements. This topic contained articles predominantly using photos taken during the week of notable events or places worldwide.

The seventh topic included words such as “COVID-19”, “case”, “death”, “health”, and “test”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were all from state-backed media. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 12,000 engagements. This topic concerned general coronavirus statistics from around the world.

Qualitative Analysis

The most prominent topic among junk news and state-backed outlets this week concerned claims of electoral fraud in the US Presidential election.

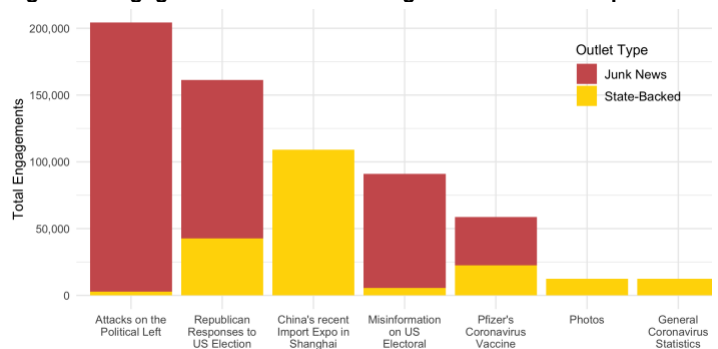
Figure 2: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 04/10/2020-11/11/2020.

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

Figure 3: Engagements with Best-Fitting Articles in each Topic



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 04/11/2020-11/11/2020.

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

A number of articles, generating large amounts of engagements, pushed baseless claims of either explicit electoral fraud or reasons to cast doubt on the electoral process. One article from *The Daily Wire*, that generated 163,000 engagements, claimed Wisconsin election law may have been violated by allowing election clerks to supply additional information to absentee ballots.[7] Specifically, absentee ballots in Wisconsin require a witness and the witness's address. The Wisconsin Election Commission had instructed clerks to resolve missing witness addresses through personal knowledge, voter registration records, or a phone call.[8] The *Daily Wire* article claimed Wisconsin law states that if a witness's address on an absentee ballot is missing it may not be counted for the

election.[9] At best, the *Daily Wire* article is missing context and misleading, but at worst, the article headline insinuates that ballots themselves were altered. Several news organizations and fact-checking organizations have debunked the claims in *The Daily Wire* article.[10]–[12] First, the Wisconsin legislature does not specify who must supply the witness address. Second, the instructions to clerks have been in place in previous Presidential elections with no challenges. Third, the process was publicly observable. Finally, the state’s top election official, Meagan Wolfe, has repeatedly stated that no irregularities were reported to her office.

Other widely engaged articles pushed misinformation on other states. An article from *The Blaze*, for example, with over 150,000 engagements, claims there are 21,000 deceased voters on Pennsylvania’s voter registration rolls.[13] *The Blaze* implies on that basis that a substantive number of votes attributed to deceased individuals may have been counted. A legal firm, Public Interest Legal Foundation (PILF) has filed lawsuits against the state of Pennsylvania on the subject of maintaining voter rolls. However, an investigation by *The New York Times* into the same claims has noted that Judge John E. Jones III has ruled that the court could not accept the allegations of PILF over the supposed number of deceased individuals remaining on voter rolls.[14] Further, the Attorney General’s Office has stated there was no evidence that the votes of deceased persons had been counted in Pennsylvania. The investigation by *The New York*

Times also noted that Facebook posts containing the unsubstantiated claims about deceased voters reached up to 11.3 million people. Our own data collection reveals that the article from *The Blaze* had a social distribution network - and hence potential audience - of 28.3 million individuals across the sites we track.

The same few outlets have made a substantial number of similar claims regarding other states. The full range cannot be covered for the purposes of this weekly briefing. Another *Daily Wire* article with over 230,000 implicitly claims systematic or at least wider electoral fraud on the basis of a case brought against a social worker.[15] Other articles with tens of thousands of engagements make similar claims about voter fraud in Nevada.[16], [17]

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Telegram, Twitter 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.