



# Social Media Junk News around the “Million MAGA March” and Alleged Electoral Fraud in the US

*Weekly Misinformation Briefing 23-11-2020*

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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 19-11-2020 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 7,500 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,500 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,200 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 300 engagements and junk news receives over 1,700, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 200 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were false claims about electoral fraud, the “Million MAGA March”, accusations of totalitarianism under Democratic Party government, China and the recent Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, coronavirus vaccine candidates, photos from the last week, and general coronavirus statistics from around the world.

## 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, Twitter, 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 11<sup>th</sup> November to 19<sup>th</sup> 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, 14% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 71% of engagements with state-backed media were with Chinese content, whereas 26% was with Russian content. 2% 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 7,500 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,500 users. Junk news articles reached an average audience of over 2,200. Mainstream news achieved 23 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 18 million engagements. State-backed news reached over two million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 1,700 engagements per article, whereas state-backed media achieved an average of over 300 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]

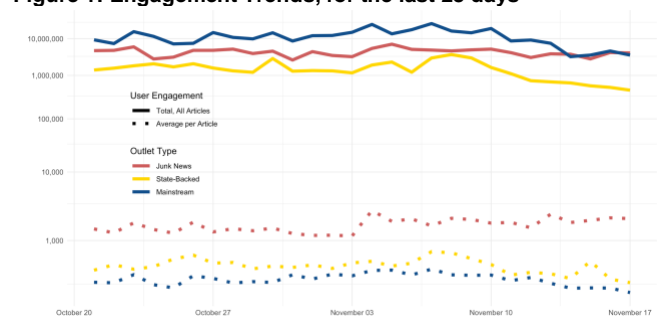
The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed and junk news outlets into groups of articles on the same subject, and a qualitative narrative analysis typically on one or two of these identified topics. 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       | ↑ 4.7                         | ↑ 5.8                          |
| Mainstream  | 2.7       | ↑ 3.7                         | ↑ 3.8                          |
| State-Backed  | 1.2       | ↓ 0.1                         | ↓ 1.0                          |
| Distribution Networks, Average Per Article          |           |                               |                                |
| Junk News   | 2,263     | ↑ 3.4                         | ↓ 10                           |
| Mainstream  | 4,527     | ↓ 1.4                         | ↑ 1.0                          |
| State-Backed  | 7,561     | ↑ 8.7                         | ↑ 26                           |
| Total User Engagements, All Articles (Millions)     |           |                               |                                |
| Junk News   | 18.7      | ↑ 29                          | ↑ 21                           |
| Mainstream  | 23.1      | ↑ 340                         | ↑ 110                          |
| State-Backed  | 2.93      | ↑ 300                         | ↑ 120                          |
| User Engagements, Average Per Article               |           |                               |                                |
| Junk News   | 1,761     | ↓ 8.4                         | ↓ 20                           |
| Mainstream  | 281       | ↑ 35                          | ↑ 19                           |
| State-Backed  | 378       | ↑ 42                          | ↑ 40                           |

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 11/11/2020-19/11/2020.

**Figure 1: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days**



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 11/11/2020-19/11/2020.

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 "election", "ballot", "county", "state", and "Georgia". The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 400,000 engagements. The top 20 best-fitting articles were almost all from junk news outlets. Similar to last week, this topic continued misinformation and damaging narratives about election fraud in the US election. This is further discussed in the qualitative section.

The second topic included words such as "Trump", "supporter", "rally", "win", and "claim". The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 200,000

engagements. The majority of best-fitting articles in this topic were from junk news outlets. This topic concerned the recent “Million MAGA March” in Washington D.C. in support of President Trump. Protestors clashed with black-clad critics of the President later in the day, and junk news outlets portrayed these clashes as yet another instance of supposedly mindless Black Lives Matter and Antifa violence.[3]–[6] This topic is also further discussed in the next section.

The third topic included words such as “Democrat”, “would”, “make”, “get”, and “police”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were mostly from junk news outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 140,000 engagements. Articles in this topic typically cast the victory of President-elect Biden as impending Soviet-style socialist doom, or “a quiet totalitarian revolution”. [7]

The fourth topic included words such as “China”, “RCEP”, “economic”, “international”, and “development”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets and generated over 37,000 engagements. These articles promoted Chinese contributions to the global economy with particular focus on the recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).[8], [9]

The fifth topic included words such as “vaccine”, “COVID-19”, “effective”, “trial”, and “available”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from state-backed outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 25,000 engagements. This topic concerned recent announcements from pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Moderna on the current state of their vaccine candidates. Most articles from state-backed outlets appeared to report the facts. Some junk news outlets leveraged the reports to claim credit for President Trump.[10]

The sixth topic included words such as “Nov”, “2020”, “photo”, “province”, 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 15,000 engagements. This topic contained articles predominantly using photos taken during the week of notable events or places worldwide.

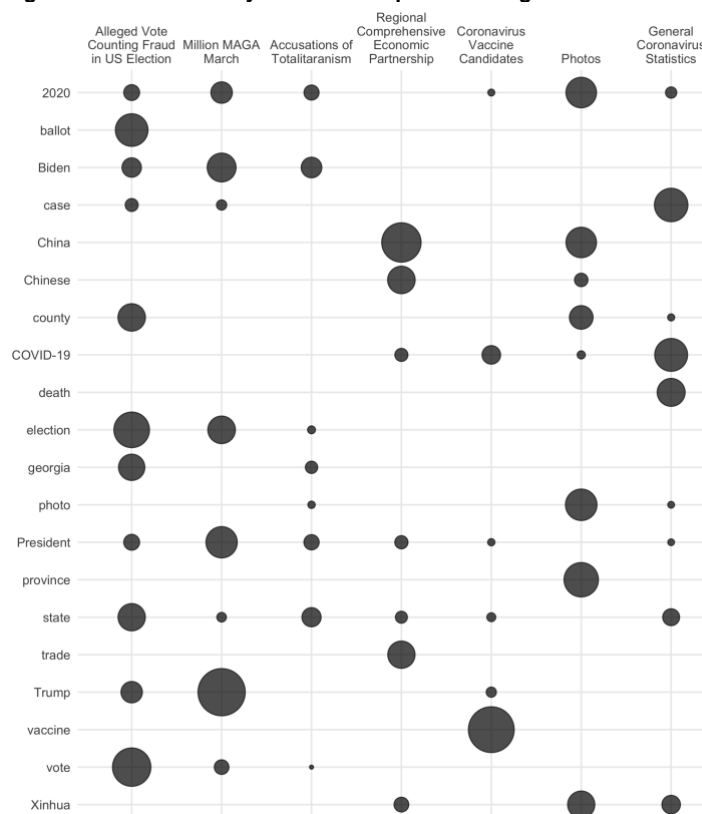
The seventh topic included words such as “COVID-19”, “case”, “death”, “health”, and “test”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were all from state-backed media. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 9,000 engagements. This topic concerned general coronavirus statistics from around the world.

## Qualitative Analysis

The most prominent topic among junk news and state-backed outlets this week concerned violence at the “Million MAGA March” protests and claims of electoral fraud in the US Presidential election.

The second topic from the previous section concerned the portrayal of violent clashes between pro-Trump

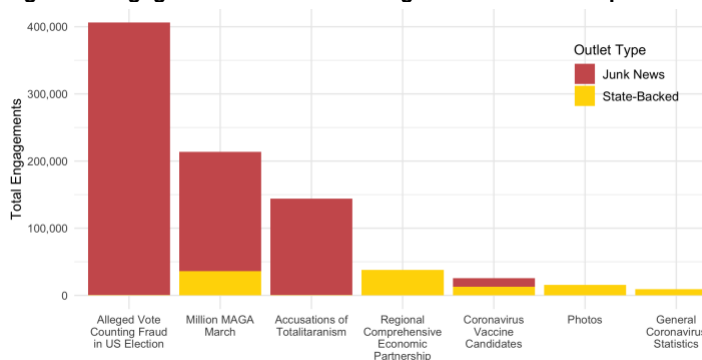
**Figure 2: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling**



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 11/11/2020-19/11/2020.

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 11/11/2020-19/11/2020.

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

protestors at the “Million MAGA March” and President Trump’s detractors. Whilst there is evidence of violent action by both sides, junk news outlets presented the event as one-sided, erasing the violence of the President’s supporters to present a dangerous narrative. One article from *The Blaze* with over 137,000 engagements positions President Trump’s supporters as non-violent and being subjected to continued harassment.[11] An article from *The Daily Caller* with over 31,000 engagements similarly made no mention of any misconduct by supporters of President Trump or attempts by counter-protestors to defuse some of the violent situations that arose.[12] A substantial number of other articles took similar lines. Our discussion here does not condone any violence on either side, rather we

seek to point out the unbalanced portrayals of events that junk news outlets consistently present.

A number of best-fitting articles from *The Gateway Pundit* purported to have definitive evidence of the US Presidential election being stolen from President Trump.[13], [14] *The Gateway Pundit* articles write that the reported results in the state of Pennsylvania are statistically impossible. This supposed statistical impossibility is claimed because of the difference between the percentage of votes President Trump received on election day and the percentage of mail-in votes that subsequently went his way. The difference is claimed to be suspiciously consistent at 40% across all counties in Pennsylvania. This is illustrated by a graph depicting the difference as a distinct flat black line. This graph from *The Gateway Pundit* is not reproduced so as not to continue to propagate misinformation. From their own table of data displayed below the graph it is clear that the visual illustration not only does not accurately plot the data, but it has been manipulated to fit their narrative. The graph presents one clear black line as exactly horizontal at 40%: the table data reveals instead that this black line, if drawn correctly, contains data points ranging from 21% to 46%. Further detracting from their own claims, the *Gateway Pundit* articles make similar statements about voting patterns in Arkansas. For Arkansas, however, the *Gateway Pundit* articles produce a graph with an equivalent black line to that in the Pennsylvania graph, but sloped. A sloped line at the very least directly contradicts claims of a constant difference, which is the contention.

A number of articles centered around Floyd county in Georgia where 2,600 votes that were not included in a previous total were discovered during a state-wide audit.[15]–[18] By far the most engaged article this week was from *The Daily Wire* and belonged to the same topic, generating nearly 800,000 engagements.[19] This article had a potential distribution network of 57 million across the platforms we track. The *Daily Wire* article pushed a narrative of widespread electoral fraud on the basis of a second Georgia county that had discovered previously uncounted votes. However, both counties put together with the previously uncounted votes are far from sufficient to allow President Trump to carry Georgia, and Georgia does not provide enough electoral votes to change the overall outcome of the election. Further, the vast majority of counties in Georgia have been experiencing no changes in the recounts.[20]

## 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.