



Social Media Junk News around Hunter Biden's Ukrainian Business Ties

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 27-10-2020

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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 22-10-2020 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 9,500 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,500 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,000 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 nearly 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 misinformation around Hunter Biden and his Ukrainian business ties, the confirmation of Judge Barrett to the Supreme Court, US Presidential campaign news, police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement, Chinese economic strength, articles with photos from Chinese state-backed outlets, and general coronavirus statistics 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, 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 15th October to 22nd 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, 22% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 43% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 47% was with Russian content. Finally, 9% 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. However, the average article from state-backed sources still has a larger distribution network, this week reaching a potential audience of over 9,500 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,500 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of over 2,000. Mainstream news achieved 48 million total engagements. Junk news generated above 22 million engagements. State-backed news reached over 6 million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching nearly 1,400 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 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]

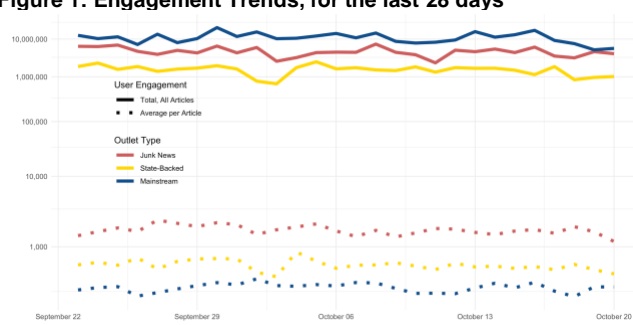
The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed and junk news outlets into groups of articles on the

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	↓ 7.1	↓ 1.0
Mainstream	2.8	↓ 1.4	↓ 0.4
State-Backed	1.2	↑ 5.1	↑ 10
Distribution Networks, Average Per Article			
Junk News	2,032	↑ 18	↑ 21
Mainstream	4,571	↓ 0.9	↓ 1.0
State-Backed	9,523	↓ 13	↓ 15
Total User Engagements, All Articles (Millions)			
Junk News	22.6	↓ 13	↑ 21
Mainstream	48.3	↑ 3.4	↓ 8.2
State-Backed	6.34	↑ 22	↑ 28
User Engagements, Average Per Article			
Junk News	1,410	↓ 1.1	↓ 1.1
Mainstream	334	↓ 4.7	0.0
State-Backed	530	↑ 7.3	↑ 19

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 15/10/2020-22/10/2020.

Figure 1: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 15/10/2020-22/10/2020.

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.

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 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 “Biden”, “Hunter”, “Joe”, “email”, and “laptop”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from junk news sources. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated nearly 640,000 engagements. This topic concerned the recent set of accusations against Presidential candidate Joe Biden’s son Hunter Biden. A *New York Post* article alleged that a laptop Hunter Biden had left at a computer repair shop in Delaware in April 2019 was never picked up and contained a “massive trove” of emails supposedly revealing dubious or illegal business dealings between the Biden family and Ukrainian businesses.[3] The data also supposedly contains sexually explicit images of Hunter Biden. This topic is further explored in the subsequent section.

The second topic included words such as “court”, “Barrett”, “Supreme”, “vote”, and “Senate”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from junk news outlets, and the top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 140,000 engagements. This topic concerned the confirmation hearings and vote to nominate Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the US Supreme Court. This topic was covered in greater detail in [last week’s briefing](#).

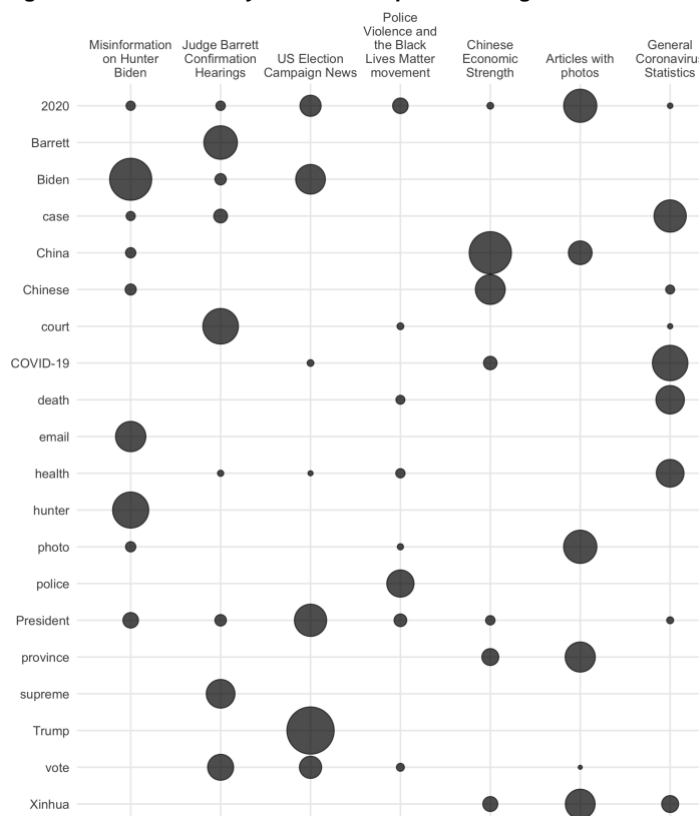
The third topic included words such as “President”, “debate”, “campaign”, “election”, and “poll”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from junk news outlets, and the top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 101,000 engagements. This topic concerned recent US Presidential election campaign updates, with particular focus on last week’s simultaneous town halls held by President Trump and former Vice President Biden respectively. A number of best-fitting articles shifted attention away from the President and the substance of his answers, instead commenting on a participant who said President Trump was “very handsome”. [4], [5] Other best-fitting articles papered over the fact that President Trump refused to disavow the QAnon conspiracy theory by describing QAnon as a “harmless boomer conspiracy theory”. [6]

The fourth topic included words such as “police”, “people”, “officer”, “attack”, and “life”. The top 20 best-fitting articles came half from junk news outlets and half from state-backed outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 98,000 engagements. This topic contained rhetoric against on police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement. [7], [8] See [previous briefings](#) for recurring narratives on this topic.

The fifth topic included words such as “Chinese”, “government”, “economic”, “recovery”, and “growth”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets, and the top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 57,000 engagements. Similar to previous weeks, best-fitting articles belonging to this topic promoted China’s rapid economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic. This week, articles asserted that the Chinese economic recovery is also lifting the world economy. [9]

The sixth topic included words such as “province”, “photo”, “county”, “show”, and “aerial”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets, and

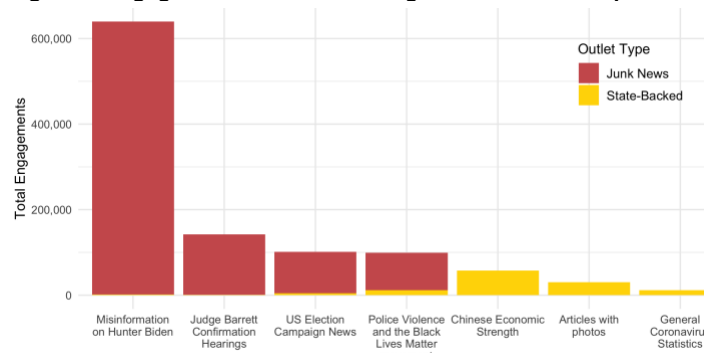
Figure 2: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 15/10/2020-22/10/2020.

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 15/10/2020-22/10/2020.

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

the top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 30,000 engagements. This topic captured articles from state-backed outlets that consists predominantly of photos not necessarily with any thematic focus but are grouped in our quantitative analysis due to lexical similarity. [10], [11]

The seventh topic included words such as “COVID-19”, “case”, “health”, “death”, and “infection”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets, and the top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 11,000 engagements. These articles were regular updates on the status of coronavirus cases and deaths around the world.

Qualitative Analysis

The most prominent topic amongst junk news and state-backed outlets this week concerned misinformation around Hunter Biden, son of the presidential candidate Joe Biden.

As mentioned in the previous section, a *New York Post* article was published on October 14th, 2020 asserting a “smoking-gun email” revealed that Hunter Biden had facilitated a meeting between his father Senator Biden and Vadym Pozharskyi, an adviser to the board of Burisma. Burisma is a Ukrainian gas company.[3] However, as numerous fact-checking organizations have pointed out, there is little to no evidence that such a meeting took place.[12], [13] *PolitiFact* found, for example, that no email metadata that would usually be used to verify the authenticity of an alleged email was provided. Further, a Republican Senate investigation that published a report in September found no wrongdoing on the part of Senator Biden when he was Vice President.[14]

A *Geller Report* article that did not generate the same levels of engagement but was one of the best-fitting articles in this topic utilized particularly provocative imagery, overlaying Senator Biden’s face onto portrait of Chairman Mao.[15] The same *Geller Report* article, along with comments on Facebook that appeared subsequent to the original *New York Post* article claimed that there were thousands of pornographic images of children on the hard drive.[16] There is no evidence for such explicit and illegal imagery.

In the days following the above, a *Fox News* report appeared claiming to have two independent sources confirming the authenticity of the emails in question.[17] A *Daily Wire* article with over 160,000 engagements echoes the *Fox News* reporting.[18] However, in both the broadcast clip presented with the original *Fox News* article and in the text itself there is no further detail on what evidence may have been provided to *Fox News* regarding the authenticity of the supposed email chain. An article from *The Blaze* with over 82,000 engagements reported very similarly to the *Daily Wire* article, also basing their information on the *Fox News* claims. The article from *The Blaze* further paints social media companies as having an anti-conservative bias as both Facebook and Twitter have limited the sharing of the original *New York Post* article.[19] Another article from the *Daily Wire* with over 36,000 engagements also claims a double-standard in social media company policies, even though the material in question has thoroughly lacked evidence.[20]

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](#).

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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.