



# Social Media Junk News concerning Kyle Rittenhouse

*Weekly Misinformation Briefing 30-11-2020*

Hubert Au, Jonathan Bright, Philip N. Howard

## SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across six social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 26-11-2020 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 8,400 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,700 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,100 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 1,600, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 200 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were accusations of oppression of the political right, photos of the week from Chinese state-backed media, President Xi's comments at the Group of 20 Leaders' Summit, allegations of electoral fraud in the US, 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, 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.

requires measuring how users distribute and engage with that content over social media. We analyze such patterns for the period from 19<sup>th</sup> November to 26<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 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

## DISTRIBUTION & ENGAGEMENT

Understanding the flow and impact of misinformation

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, 17% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 80% of engagements with state-backed media were with Chinese content, whereas 18% 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 8,400 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,700 users. Junk news articles reached an average audience of over 2,100 users. Mainstream news achieved 21 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 15 million engagements. State-backed news reached over 3 million engagements. 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 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]

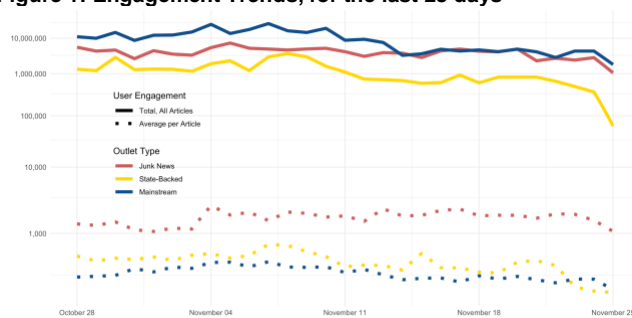
The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed and junk news outlets into groups of articles on the same subject, and a qualitative narrative analysis typically on one or two of these identified topics. 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
<b>Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions)</b>			
Junk News	0.5	↓ 1.6	↑ 4.2
Mainstream	3.1	↓ 10	↓ 2.7
State-Backed	1.2	↓ 2.0	↑ 0.7
<b>Distribution Networks, Average Per Article</b>			
Junk News	2,199	↑ 2.9	↓ 6.9
Mainstream	4,713	↓ 4.0	↓ 10
State-Backed	8,491	↓ 11	↓ 8.6
<b>Total User Engagements, All Articles (Millions)</b>			
Junk News	15.7	↑ 20	↑ 36
Mainstream	21.5	↑ 7.5	↑ 170
State-Backed	3.916	↓ 7.0	↑ 170
<b>User Engagements, Average Per Article</b>			
Junk News	1,634	↑ 7.7	↓ 19
Mainstream	281	0	↑ 28
State-Backed	327	↑ 16	↑ 60

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 19/11/2020-26/11/2020.

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



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 19/11/2020-26/11/2020.

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 "people", "police", "Biden", "America", "Black". The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 115,000 engagements. The top 20 best-fitting articles were almost all from junk news outlets. This topic contained a mixture of themes all centered around different purported examples of oppression. Articles attacked media institutions such as the BBC and accused the political left in the US as imposing a "police state mentality".[3], [4]

The second topic included words such as "photo", "November", "Xinhua", "province", "China". The top 20

best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 100,000 engagements. All best-fitting articles in this topic were from state-backed outlets. Like previous weeks, this topic consisted almost exclusively of articles containing photos of notable events or locations around the world from that week.[6]

The third topic included words such as “Chinese”, “economic”, “development”, “Xi”, and “cooperation”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were all from state-backed outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 75,000 engagements. Best-fitting articles in this topic discussed President Xi’s recent comments at the Group of 20 (G20) Leaders’ Summit, highlighting his message of global cooperation. China’s extension of aid to other countries for the coronavirus pandemic is particularly prominent.[7]

The fourth topic included words such as “Trump”, “election”, “vote”, “Biden”, “President”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from junk news outlets and generated over 29,000 engagements. This topic concerned the continuing dissemination of false narratives alleging widespread electoral fraud in different forms across a number of US states. Notably, however, best-fitting articles for this topic generated much fewer engagements than in previous weeks. This topic is discussed further in the next section.

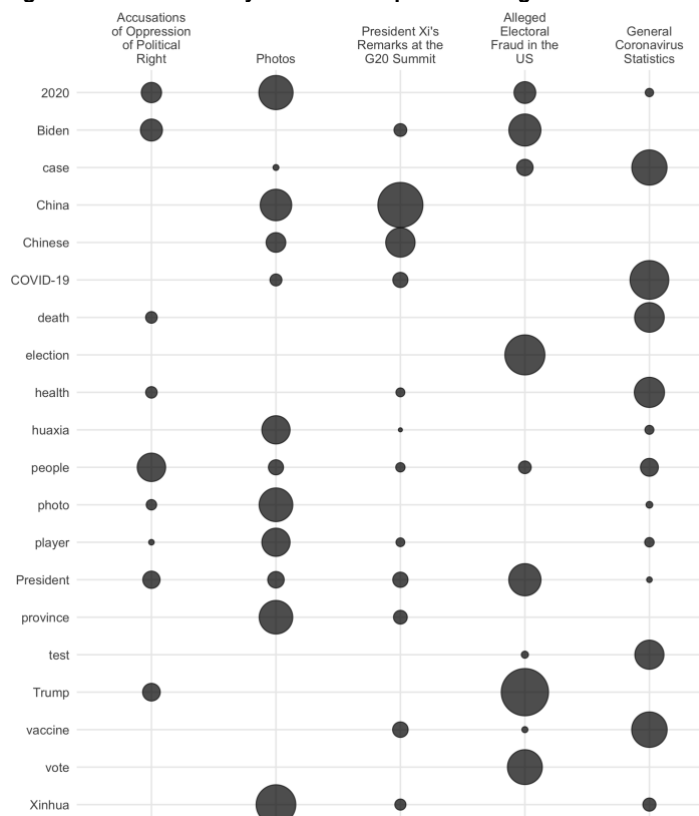
The fifth topic included words such as “COVID-19”, “vaccine”, “case”, “health”, and “death”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 8,000 engagements. This topic concerned general coronavirus statistics from around the world.

### Qualitative Analysis

The most prominent topics among junk news and state-backed outlets this week related to Kyle Rittenhouse and alleged electoral fraud.

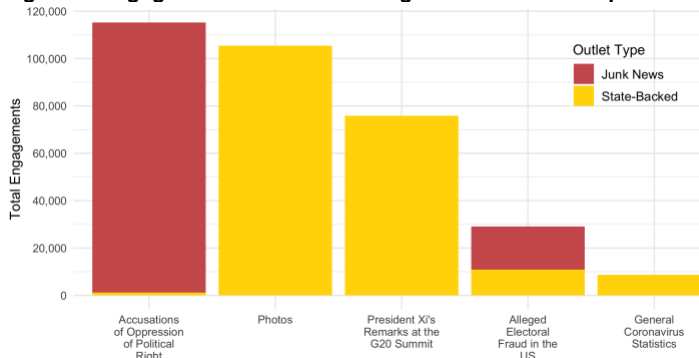
The article that received the most engagement this week was from *The Daily Wire*, generating over 240,000 engagements. The *Daily Wire* article celebrated the release of teenager Kyle Rittenhouse after his attorneys posted his \$2 million USD bail.[8] Kyle Rittenhouse has become a polarizing figure since he was arrested for shooting and killing two protestors in Kenosha, Wisconsin, that were taking place in response to the shooting of Jacob Blake. The *Daily Wire* article presented Rittenhouse as “FREE AT LAST!!!”, celebrating him as a national hero. Another *Daily Wire* article with over 83,000 engagements similarly characterized Rittenhouse as a hero for having shot what the outlet claims to be rioters.[9] The *Daily Wire* article that generated over 83,000 engagements drew heavily from a video report published by the *Washington Post* that details Rittenhouse and Rosenbaum’s backgrounds.[10] The *Washington Post* video examines both the shooter’s circumstances and their background in detail. In contrast, the *Daily Wire* article with over 83,000 engagements omits important details, such as how it is illegal to openly carry assault rifles in Wisconsin. The latter *Daily Wire* article also attacks the

Figure 2: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 19/11/2020-26/11/2020. 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 19/11/2020-26/11/2020. Note: Total engagements of the top 20 best-fitting articles are labelled by outlet type.

character of the first of Rittenhouse’s alleged victims – Joseph Rosenbaum. The article quotes a substantial amount of information about Rosenbaum’s troubled past and criminal convictions, with little equivalent detail for Rittenhouse. And article in *The Daily Wire* quoted Rosenbaum’s fiancée, Kariann Swart, out of context. In the quote Swart questions why Rosenbaum was physically present at the protests in Kenosha. However, the article omits the first half of that quote; “I don’t think there’s any sort of self-defense when there’s an unarmed person in front of you, and you’re holding an assault rifle two feet away”.[10] A number of articles from other junk news outlets also published very similar pieces. One from *the Blaze* gathered over 74,000 engagements.[11]

Another prominent theme this week, continuing from previous weeks, is that of alleged electoral fraud. This week, numerous highly engaged articles and best-fitting articles from the fourth topic identified in the quantitative analysis involved the promotion of accusations of voter fraud, based on claims by Sidney Powell, a former federal prosecution attorney. One best-fitting article from *Gateway Pundit*, for example, dismissed Fox News host Tucker Carlson's refusal to endorse claims of systematic voter fraud, in response to Powell's refusal to present evidence.[12] Neither an article from *The Blaze* with over 89,000 engagements nor another similar article from *The Daily Wire* with over 81,000 engagements challenge Powell's claims.[13], [14] Powell has made completely unsubstantiated claims that software was used all across the US to flip a predetermined percentage of votes originally for President Trump to be in favor of President-elect Biden.

Since Powell has made these claims, President Trump's legal team and campaign have distanced themselves from Powell.[15]

## 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](#).

## REFERENCES

- [1] J. Bright *et al.*, "Coronavirus Coverage by State-Backed English-Language News Sources," Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford, UK, Data Memo 2020.2, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/state-media-coronavirus/>.
- [2] K. Rebello *et al.*, "Covid-19 News and Information from State-Backed Outlets Targeting French, German and Spanish-Speaking Social Media Users," Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford, UK, Data Memo 2020.4, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/covid19-french-german-spanish/>.
- [3] Judicial Watch, *Chris Farrell: The Left Loves Using #CancelCulture As A Way to Silence Their Opponents!* 2020.
- [4] J. Morill, "10 things I hate about news: Here's what the BBC News website has wasted your money on this year," *RT International*, Nov. 22, 2020.
- [5] S. Green, "Insanity Wrap #93: Former Pfizer VP Says Lockdowns Were a Mistake, YouTube Forcibly Removes His Video," *pjmedia.com*, Nov. 23, 2020.
- [6] Xinhua, "Xinhua Photos of the Day (Nov. 22)," *XinhuaNet*, Nov. 22, 2020.
- [7] Xinhua, "Xinhua Headlines: Xi's remarks at int'l meetings send strong signal of promoting solidarity, development against pandemic, unilateralism," *XinhuaNet*, Nov. 20, 2020.
- [8] A. Prestigiacomio, "Kyle Rittenhouse Out Of Jail With Help From Actor Ricky Schroder, MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell," *The Daily Wire*, Nov. 21, 2020.
- [9] A. Prestigiacomio, "I Had To Protect Myself: Rittenhouse Speaks Out Before Jail Release; New Details Emerge About Fatally Shot Rioter," *The Daily Wire*, Nov. 21, 2020.
- [10] J. S. Lee, R. O'Harrow, and E. Samuels, "Kenosha: How two men's paths crossed in an encounter that has divided the nation," *Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 2020.
- [11] C. Garcia, "Liberals lash out at former child star Ricky Schroder after he helps bail Kyle Rittenhouse out of jail," *TheBlaze*, Nov. 21, 2020.
- [12] J. Hoft, "NOTE TO FOX NEWS: President Trump and His Team Have More than Enough Solid Evidence to Prove Their Case - Provided Below," *The Gateway Pundit*, Nov. 23, 2020. <https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/11/note-fox-news-president-team-enough-solid-information-prove-case-see-attached/> (accessed Nov. 26, 2020).
- [13] R. Saavedra, "Trump Lawyer Sidney Powell Responds To Tucker Carlson: Conduct Your Own Investigation," *The Daily Wire*, Nov. 20, 2020.
- [14] C. Pandolfo, "Sidney Powell: Evidence of voter fraud could be released online 'by this weekend,'" *TheBlaze*, Nov. 20, 2020.
- [15] "Sidney Powell: Trump team cuts ties with lawyer who peddled bizarre fraud claims," *BBC News*, Nov. 23, 2020.

## 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), 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.