



Social Media Junk News concerning Alleged Social Media Censorship

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 08-12-2020

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 03-12-2020 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 7,200 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,600 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,000 users.
- Similarly, aggregate content from mainstream sources receives 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 1,400, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 300 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were accusations of electoral fraud, attacks on President Trump, alleged radicalism of the political left in the US, Chinese international cooperation, the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, general coronavirus statistics, and photos. The single most engaged-with article this week addressed the issue of alleged social media censorship against the political right.

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 26th November to 3rd December 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

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, 10% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 47% of engagements with state-backed media were with Chinese content, whereas 43% 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 7,200 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,600 users. Junk news articles reached an average audience of over 2,000 users. Mainstream news achieved 38 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 13 million engagements. State-backed news reached over 8 million engagements. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 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 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]

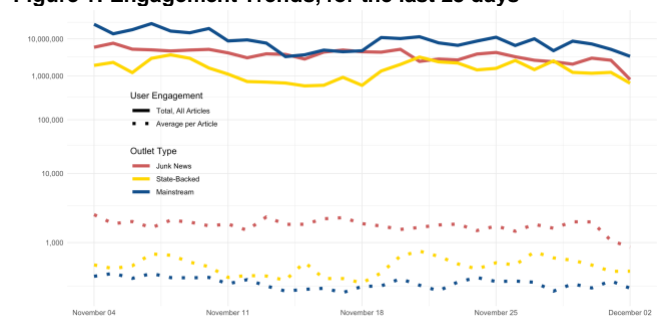
The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed and junk news outlets into groups of articles on the same subject, and a qualitative narrative analysis typically on one or two of these identified topics. 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	0.4	↑ 12	↑ 21
Mainstream	2.8	↑ 36	↑ 8.2
State-Backed	1.3	↓ 2.6	↑ 2.3
Distribution Networks, Average Per Article			
Junk News	2,063	↑ 6.6	↓ 0.7
Mainstream	4,698	↑ 0.3	↓ 5.5
State-Backed	7,213	↑ 18	↑ 18
Total User Engagements, All Articles (Millions)			
Junk News	13.1	↑ 20	↑ 50
Mainstream	38.5	↓ 44	↑ 93
State-Backed	8.15	↓ 61	↑ 4.0
User Engagements, Average Per Article			
Junk News	1,409	↑ 16	↓ 12
Mainstream	324	↓ 13	↑ 15
State-Backed	572	↓ 43	↓ 17

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 26/11/2020-03/12/2020.

Figure 1: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 26/11/2020-03/12/2020.

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, Telegram, 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", "vote", "ballot", "Georgia", and "state". The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 300,000 engagements. Best-fitting articles in this topic were mostly from junk news outlets and concerned ongoing misinformation regarding alleged electoral fraud in the US. In particular, a number of best-fitting articles in this topic claimed that the Dominion voting machines were clandestinely used to reverse votes to benefit President-elect Biden.[3], [4]

The second topic included words such as "Trump", "Biden", "president", "election", "pardon". The top 20

best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 126,000 engagements. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were mostly from junk news outlets. About half of the top 20 best-fitting articles originated from left-leaning junk news outlets and half from right-leaning outlets. The former levelled various attacks on President Trump, such as letting his hair go grey as a sign of mental defeat.[5] Some of the latter have already begun to declare President Trump the default Republican party nominee for the 2024 Presidential election.[6]

The third topic included words such as “people”, “American”, “Black”, “business”, “know”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic were mostly from junk news outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 94,000 engagements. The top 20 best-fitting articles concerned the alleged destructive political agenda of the opposing political leanings. Left-leaning junk news outlets, for example, speak of the “war on truth” waged by the political right.[7] Right-leaning articles, on the other hand, portray the political left as dangerous and radical.[8], [9]

The fourth topic included words such as “China”, “Chinese”, “cooperation”, “trade”, and “country”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets and generated over 66,000 engagements. Like in previous weeks, this topic highlighted Chinese economic cooperation internationally.[10]

The fifth topic included words such as “Iran”, “nuclear”, “assassination”, “Fakhrizadeh”, “scientist”, and “Israel”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were mostly from state-backed outlets and generated over 18,000 engagements. This topic concerned the recent assassination of top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.[11]

The sixth topic included words such as “COVID-19”, “vaccine”, “case”, “death”, and “health”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets and generated over 8,800 engagements. This topic concerned general coronavirus statistics around the world.[12]

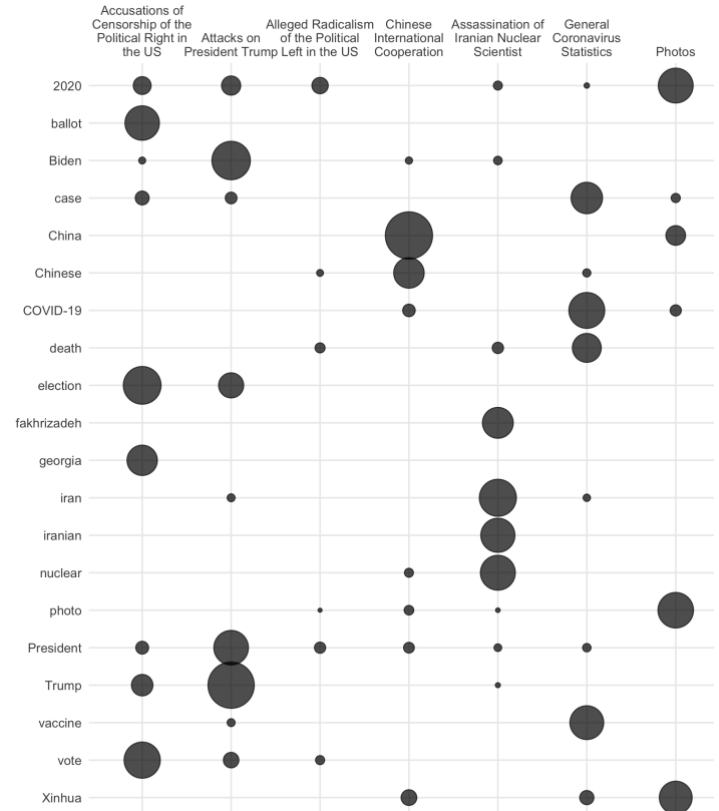
The seventh topic included words such as “Nov”, “photo”, “2020”, “Xinhua”, “show”, “province”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were all from state-backed outlets and generated over 8,600 engagements. This topic contained articles showcasing photos taking during the last week.[13]

Qualitative Analysis

The most prominent topics among junk news and state-backed outlets this week related to distrust in mainstream media and continued misinformation on alleged electoral fraud.

The most engaged article this week was from *The Daily Wire* and gathered over 480,000 engagements. This article discussed a “false” label applied to a Facebook video which conservative commentator Candace Owens published on her Facebook page. The video

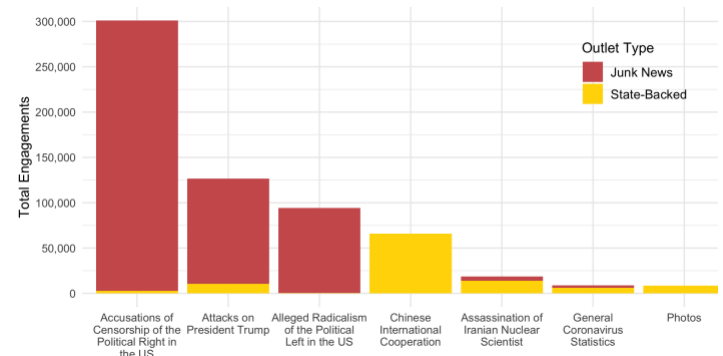
Figure 2: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 26/11/2020-03/12/2020.

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 26/11/2020-03/12/2020.

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

claimed— amongst other allegations— that Joe Biden was not legally the President-elect.[14] PolitiFact, in acting as third party fact-checkers for Facebook, had flagged the video as “false”. After an appeal from Ms. Owens, the flag was removed, and the video reinstated. *The Daily Wire* article used this instance of an overturned fact-check to assert that technology companies such as Facebook and fact-checking organizations such as PolitiFact were “censorship lords”. The article promotes the idea that mainstream organizations such as PolitiFact and Facebook deliberately censor individuals or organizations without resources to challenge fact-checks. Though the *Daily Wire* article attempts to depict a picture of collaborative oppression, it is worth noting that one of the

characteristics our own research uses to categorize outlets as “junk news” is refusal to issue public corrections. PolitiFact promptly issued a public correction upon appeal. An article from *The Blaze* with over 82,000 engagements followed very similar lines.[15]

Other highly engaged articles include a *The Daily Wire* piece with over 86,000 engagements. This contained a particularly misleading headline, claiming Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger had stated that there were 250 ongoing investigations into “credible claims of illegal voting and violation of state election law”.[16] However, even as quoted in the *Daily Wire* article itself, Secretary of State Raffensperger said separately that there were 250 ongoing investigations into alleged electoral fraud and that only an unspecified subset of these were “credible claims”.

Finally, one article from *The Daily Wire* with over 107,000 engagements continued as in previous weeks to allege electoral fraud with regards to electronic voting machines run by the company Dominion.[17] The *Daily Wire* article detailed a recent court order that prohibits

deletion of electoral data from the Dominion machines in three Georgia counties to allow for inspection. However, *The Daily Wire* frames the injunction as a prevention of some unknown actors’ intentions to “tamper with results”. Interestingly, a recent *Washington Post* article found that most swing state counties that did use Dominion voting systems declared in favor of President Trump.[18]

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] Jon Dougherty, “Sidney Powell files emergency demand to seize all voting machines for forensic audit,” *BizPac Review*, Nov. 29, 2020.
- [4] T. O’Neil, “Team Trump Demands Signature Audit as Dominion Server Crash Delays Georgia Recount,” *PJ Media*.
- [5] A. Henderson and AlterNet, “The truth about Donald Trump’s willingness to let his hair go gray,” *Raw Story*, Nov. 28, 2020.
- [6] R. Moran, “Duh. Who Else Would It Be in 2024 Except Donald Trump?,” *PJ Media*, Nov. 28, 2020.
- [7] M. McFarl and Salon, “‘All of that noise is destructive’: Shep Smith reflects on Fox News and the war on truth,” Nov. 28, 2020.
- [8] Daily Wire News, “Whole Foods CEO John Mackey Blasts AOC’s Green New Deal, Praises Capitalism, Warns Socialism Destroys,” *The Daily Wire*, Nov. 30, 2020.
- [9] REALCLEARWIRE, “Post-George Floyd, a Wave of ‘Anti-Racist’ Teaching Sweeps K-12 Schools Targeting ‘Whiteness,’” *The Political Insider*, Nov. 27, 2020.
- [10] Wang Huiyao, “CPTPP marks a higher level of free trade - Chinadaily.com.cn,” *China Daily*, Nov. 30, 2020.
- [11] Svetlana Ekimenko, “US Officials Reportedly Claim Israel Behind Assassination of Iranian Nuclear Physicist,” *Sputnik News*, Nov. 28, 2020.
- [12] “Asia-Pacific Coronavirus News: Indonesia reports 5,828 new cases, vaccine deal of 2.6 mln doses signed in Philippines,” *Xinhua News Agency*, Nov. 27, 2020.
- [13] “Xinhua Portraits | November 2020,” *Xinhua News Agency*, Dec. 02, 2020.
- [14] A. Prestigiacomo, “Candace Owens Challenges Fact-Checker, And Wins,” *The Daily Wire*, Nov. 28, 2020.
- [15] P. Sacca, “Facebook fact-checker forced to issue correction after Candace Owens challenged ‘false’ rating,” *TheBlaze*, Nov. 29, 2020.
- [16] R. Saavedra, “Georgia Secretary Of State Opens 250 Investigations Into ‘Credible Claims Of Illegal Voting,’” *The Daily Wire*, Dec. 01, 2020.
- [17] T. Pearce, “Judge Blocks Georgia Officials From ‘Erasing’ Data On Dominion Voting Machines After Sidney Powell Lawsuit,” *The Daily Wire*, Nov. 30, 2020.
- [18] P. Bump, “Analysis | Swing-state counties that used Dominion voting machines mostly voted for Trump,” *Washington Post*.

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, Luminate, 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](#) (COMPPOP), 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. COMPPOP articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.