



Social Media Junk News on Self-Isolation Rules and Religious Freedom

Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 01-06-2020

Hubert Au, Jonathan Bright, Philip N. Howard

SUMMARY

Given the evolving nature of the coronavirus pandemic—and public understanding of the crisis—we provide a weekly briefing about the spread of coronavirus misinformation across multiple social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 28-05-2020 we find:

- Coronavirus misinformation from junk health news and state-backed media generated up to 1.13 million engagements in a day. Summed together, 40% of the coronavirus misinformation engaged with last week came from state-backed news agencies, and 91% of that content was generated by Chinese and Russian media outlets.
- In total, articles produced by junk health news sources were engaged with over two million times this week, although CNN articles were engaged with over eight million times, a much greater volume than any other single outlet.
- Thematically, junk health news sources framed social distancing policies as attacks on religious freedoms.

INTRODUCTION

Using an actively curated list of major sources of junk health news and state-backed sources, we track the spread of misleading, polarizing, and inflammatory coronavirus 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 health 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 health news websites and 22 state-backed media outlets that are actively publishing misleading information about the coronavirus pandemic—164 in total. We examine how successful they are in terms of distributing their content on social media and generating engagement and compare this to several major sources of credible health news and information. Our data comes from the APIs of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, 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 coronavirus misinformation requires measuring how users distribute and engage with that content over social media. We

analyze such patterns for the period from May 21st to 28th, and offer comparisons between the trends for junk health news and state-backed sources, and the trends for five prominent English-language sources of credible news and information; two from the UK and three from the US: BBC News, CNN, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

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 its 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 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. Again, 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, 40% of the junk engagement we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further to this, 91% of social media user engagement with state-backed media agencies involved Chinese and Russian media outlets. It is very likely that there are Chinese and Russian sources of which we are unaware, and of course other regimes may also have sources we have not yet identified. These minor sources, however, are likely to receive little attention and not be as influential as the sources we have already catalogued.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from junk health news and state-backed sources, both in total for the week and as an average per article. This week, CNN, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* are roughly on par with state-backed media levels of distribution. On average, articles from state-backed media have the largest distribution networks, at around 7,500 this week.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Total user engagement generated for junk health news sources and state-backed sources is low this week, around two million. On its own, however, CNN generated over eight million total engagements. This is much greater than any other outlet, in part due to an active YouTube presence, accounting for over five million engagements alone. On a per-article basis, state-backed media retains the highest level of engagement, consistent with evidence from previous weeks.

Figure 5 reveals the smoothed trend of total and median engagement for junk news, state-backed media. The trend lines are calculated from daily engagement data, unlike Figures 1 to 4 which are weekly aggregates. The colored bands are a measure of confidence for the lines calculated. On average, junk health news and state-backed news achieve similar total engagement, though state-backed media consistently achieves higher engagement per article over the last month. There is a downward trend in average engagement for junk health news throughout this week.

KEY NARRATIVES

We also conduct a thematic review of articles published by both these junk health news and state-backed sources. Previously, we found that state-backed and junk health news sources generally politicize health news and information by criticizing democracies as corrupt and incompetent.[1] This week, junk health news sources frame social isolation policies as attacks on religious freedoms.

Several articles accused officials—both Democratic governors and Democrat-appointed judges—of attempting to oppress religious freedoms. These articles often cited the Bill of Rights. A *Daily Wire* article with nearly 60,000 engagements celebrated churches reopening in defiance of government orders.[2] Another article in *The Federalist* with 35,000 engagements said it was “about time” for churches to reopen.[3] A

Figure 1: Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Millions)

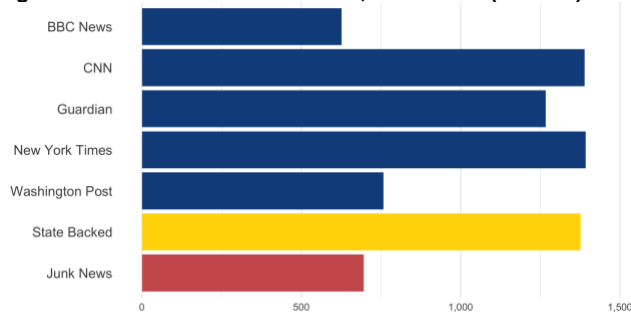


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

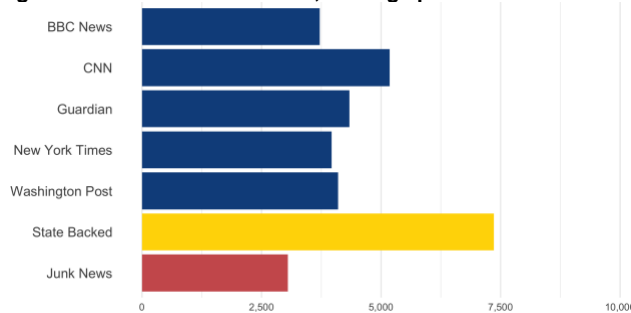


Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)

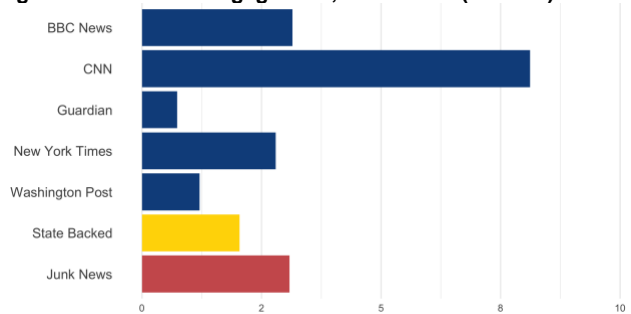


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

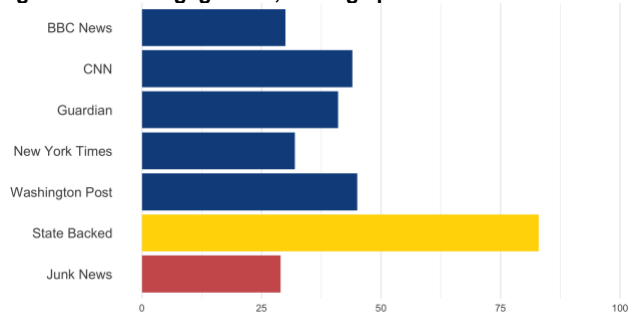
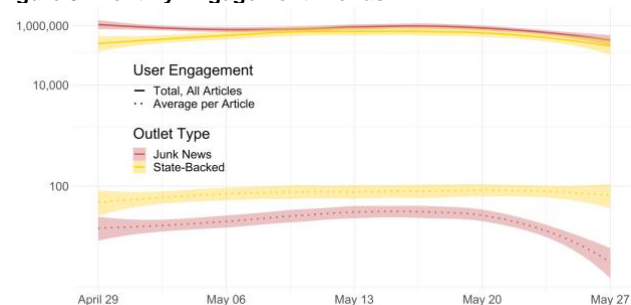


Figure 5: Monthly Engagement Trends



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 21/05/2020-28/05/2020.

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.

FrontPage Magazine article with over 60,000 engagements attacked two judges from the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals who ruled in favor of the Governor of California Gavin Newsom's temporary restrictions on in-person church services during the coronavirus pandemic. The article misrepresented the judges' opinion, saying that they were demanding a suspension of the Bill of Rights until there is a cure.[4] The judges in fact concluded that the ban is not in violation of the First Amendment if it (a) does not restrict activity on the basis of religious motivation and (b) does not selectively infringe on religious belief. There was no statement that the Bill of Rights should be suspended until a cure is found.[5] *FrontPage Magazine* also emphasized that the judges were appointed by Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. The Supreme Court subsequently denied an application to block the same set of restrictions, with Chief Justice John Roberts writing, "restrictions appear consistent with the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment".[6]

A *Daily Caller* article with 64,000 engagements attacked Dr. Anthony Fauci, accusing the public health expert of reversing his previous position on lockdown.[7] A similar message was echoed by a *Daily Wire* article with

32,000 engagements.[8] However, both articles ignore his repeated efforts to emphasize the importance of context in deciding whether or not to reopen, highlighting instead some selected words from Dr. Fauci that remaining in lockdown might cause "irreparable damage".

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube and the levels of engagement with content related to the coronavirus pandemic. Sources of junk health news and information have distribution networks reaching hundreds of millions of social media users. Junk health news websites generate huge amounts of content that is widely disseminated and receives significant engagement.

RELATED WORK

Read [our review of state-backed English language media reporting](#) on Coronavirus. Find our previous weekly briefings [here](#).

REFERENCES

- [1] J. Bright *et al.*, "Coronavirus Coverage by State-Backed English-Language News Sources," 2020, [Online]. Available: <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/state-media-coronavirus/>.
- [2] A. Prestigiacomio, "Thousands Of Churches Stand Up To Democratic Governors' Lockdown Orders: We Are Opening. Period.," *The Daily Wire*, May 22, 2020.
- [3] J. D. Davidson, "Thousands Of Churches To Defy Lockdown Orders. It's About Time.," *The Federalist*, May 22, 2020.
- [4] D. Greenfield, "Obama, Clinton 9th Circuit Judges Suspend Bill of Rights Until Coronavirus is Cured," *Frontpage Magazine*, May 25, 2020.
- [5] *South Bay United Pentecostal Church, et al v. Gavin Newsom, et al.* 2020.
- [6] *South Bay United Pentecostal Church, et al. v. Gavin Newsom, et al.*, vol. 590. 2020, p. ____.
- [7] V. Kruta, "Fauci Flips On Lockdown: Staying Home Too Long Could Cause 'Irreparable Damage,'" *The Daily Caller*, May 22, 2020.
- [8] P. Bois, "Fauci: Staying Closed Too Long Will Cause 'Irreparable Damage,'" *The Daily Wire*, May 22, 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, 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](#) (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 *Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly 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.