Social Media Junk News on George Floyd Protests
Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 08-06-2020

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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 03-06-2020 we find:

- The social media distribution network of all coronavirus articles from the top fifteen mainstream news outlets reached well over three billion social media users this week, achieving much greater distribution than state-backed and junk health news sources. But the average article from state-backed sources reached over six thousand users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached four thousand users and the average junk health article reached three thousand users.
- Similarly, all content from all mainstream sources gets the largest amount of total user engagement. But on a per article basis, state-backed content gets over 75 engagements, junk health news gets almost 50 engagements, and average articles from mainstream sources get under 25 engagements.
- Summed together, 29% of the engagement with non-mainstream information last week was with state-backed content, and 95% of engagement with state-backed content was engagements with Chinese and Russian media content.
- Thematically, junk health news sources co-opted the George Floyd protests to fuel their existing narratives.

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. 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 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 28th to June 3rd and offer comparisons between the trends for junk health 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 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, 29% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further to this, 95% of social media user engagement with state-backed media was with Chinese and Russian media content. 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.

This week, we are able to provide a different form of comparison between mainstream, state-backed, and junk health news media. Figures 1 to 4 now contrast the top fifteen sites from each category, instead of the previous selection of five mainstream news sources. See our Methodology FAQ for further details. Due to this change, the trend graph that was introduced last week has been omitted.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from mainstream, junk health news, and state-backed sources, both in total for the week and as an average per article. This week, the top fifteen mainstream sources achieving over double the total distribution of state-backed and junk health news sources, respectively. However, on average state-backed sources still have a larger distribution network and reach a potential audience of over 6,000 users, whereas mainstream new sources reach just over 4,000 users.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Total user engagement generated for state-backed sources is low this week, at slightly less than 1.8 million whereas mainstream news sources achieved nearly 9 million engagements. Total junk health news engagement is particularly low, at below a million engagements, whereas in previous weeks it has reached over 6 million.[2] On average, state-backed media still generates the most engagement, with mainstream media receiving the least.

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] Last week, junk health news sources frame social isolation policies as attacks on religious freedoms.

This week, the overwhelming key theme concerned the death of George Floyd and resulting protests. Junk health news sites have weaved these events into their existing narratives, with particular attention paid to the subset of protests that have involved violence or property damage of some form. Little or no reference is made to the motivations of protesters, or any real

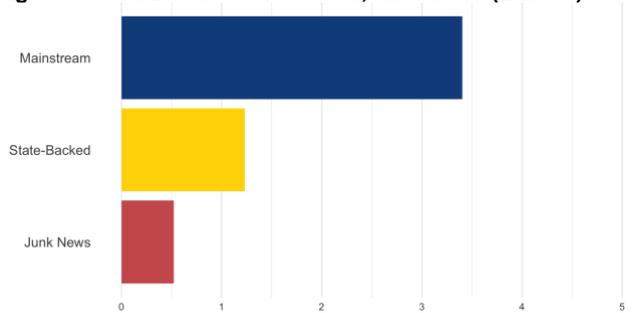**Figure 1: Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions)**

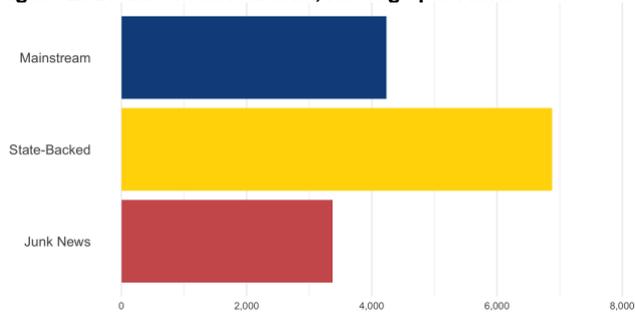**Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article**

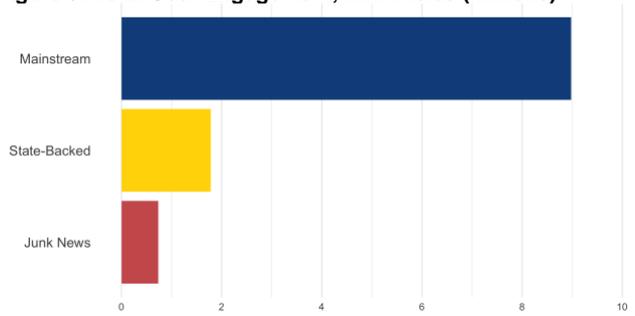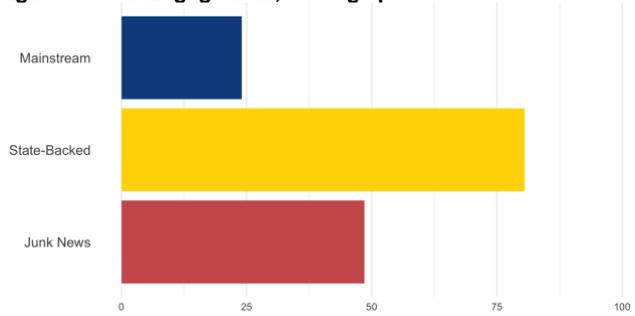**Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)**

Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 28/05/2020-03/06/2020.
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.

recognition that there might be systemic racism at play. One *Daily Wire* article with nearly 46,000 engagements, for example, disparaged New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio for for allowing public gatherings to protest but not allowing businesses to open or religious gatherings to occur. The article focused its attention on de Blasio and other Democratic politicians, suggesting that they are in favor of what the *Daily Wire* called destructive vandalism and rioting.[3] A *PJ Media* article with nearly 10,000 engagements echoed a similar narrative over

religious gathering in light of last week's Supreme Court ruling.[4] The same article paints protestors plainly as anarchists acting with impunity. Another *Daily Wire* article with over 34,000 engagements was a satire piece aimed at conveying that the Minneapolis Mayor was more concerned with protecting the protesters from the risks of coronavirus than the material damage caused to businesses.[5] A *LifeNews* article with over 20,000 engagements also inserted abortion into the narrative, painting protestors as arsonists and violent rioters, whilst previous lockdown protestors were merely "pro-life conservatives".[6] Finally, a *Daily Wire* opinion piece even defended the US record on race, stating that it was "the only civilization in history to oppose racism and for one reason only: Christianity".[7]

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

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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.