



Social Media Misinformation about the WHO

Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 20-04-2020

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SUMMARY

Given the evolving nature of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic—and public understanding of the crises—we provide a weekly briefing about the spread of coronavirus information across multiple social media platforms. For the week leading up to 20-04-2020 we find:

- Content from state-backed media and junk health sources is distributed to hundreds of millions of social media accounts, and the BBC, Guardian, New York Times, and Washington Post have roughly equal distribution to junk health news per article.
- In total, articles produced by junk health news sources this week were engaged with over nine million times; though articles from state backed media sources inspired the most engagement on average.
- Thematically, this week's junk health news and information focused on (1) accusing the WHO of incompetence, providing false information, and Chinese bias, and (2) supporting US President Trump's withdrawal of funding from the WHO.

INTRODUCTION

Using an actively curated list of major sources of junk health news and information sources, we track the spread of misleading, polarizing, and inflammatory coronavirus content on social media. Some of these sources are state-backed media, either as parts of military information operations or as editorially controlled national media organizations. Some are domestically and independently produced, 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 or not their content is extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial, or commentary masked as news.

Myths about the coronavirus are potentially deadly. So understanding how misleading information spreads is a key component of advancing public health. We evaluate sources for divisive content about:

1. inaccurate or harmful health advice which could threaten public health;
2. panic and public order, such as misinformation that could contribute to mass panic, diminish trust in public authorities, or risk public order;
3. minorities, immigrants, and vulnerable social groups;
4. the credibility and reputation of democracies, including misinformation about elected governments and coronavirus conspiracies.

We currently track 142 junk health news websites and 21 state backed media outlets that are actively publishing misleading information about the coronavirus

pandemic—163 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 Twitter, Reddit and Facebook (through the CrowdTangle platform). Additional analytics allow us to benchmark and track the spread and engagement of 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 the 8th to the 15th of April, and offer comparisons between the trends for junk health and state backed media and the trends for four prominent English-language sources of credible news and information, two from the UK and two from the US: the BBC, Guardian, New York Times and Washington Post.

The “social distribution network” of a source is the sum of follower counts of the Facebook groups, Facebook pages, subreddits and Twitter accounts that shared at least one of the sources' articles over the previous week. This provides an impression of how capable each source is in terms of distributing its content. It is important to highlight that not all of these followers may have been reached by this content—only 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 in six ways: 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, crossposts, scores and awards on posts containing the links to articles from our watch list. Our overall engagement measure is the sum of all these actions. Again, we should emphasize that we cannot distinguish between genuine and inauthentic acts of engagement.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from state-backed media and junk health news sites, both in total for the week and as an article average. State-backed content about the coronavirus pandemic has incredible reach over social media and has a greater distribution network than each of the BBC, Guardian, New York Times and Washington Post. The average story from those four credible sources has about the same distribution network as the average junk health news articles—roughly between 2500 and 5000. On average, however, articles from state-backed news publishers—whose editorial decisions are more closely managed by political elites—still reach the largest distribution network. Coronavirus information from state-backed media was distributed to hundreds of millions of user accounts last week.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources get for their articles. Overall, junk health news sources received much more engagement, in total, than the other sources of news and information about coronavirus, including those in the state-backed category. On a per article basis, content from state-backed news sites generated much more engagement than all of our mainstream comparators and the average junk health news article. The earlier figures demonstrated that state-backed media outlets had the highest average distribution network per article, and here we find that articles from these sources also had the highest levels of engagement on a per article basis.

KEY NARRATIVES

We also conduct a thematic review of articles published by these 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, praising their authoritarian governments for global leadership in medical research and aid distribution, and promoting conspiracy theories about the origins of the coronavirus and the policy choices of international public health agencies.[1] This week’s junk health news and information focused on (1) accusing the WHO of providing false information, being incompetent, and having a Chinese bias and (2) supporting US President Trump’s threat to withdraw funding from the WHO.

The first key narrative is centered on the WHO’s global recommendations, issued early last week. These recommendations and its Director Tedros Ghebreyesus have been the targets of criticism.[2] The *Daily Caller* published a number of articles claiming that under Ghebreyesus’s leadership the WHO had become a “key cog in China’s propaganda machine”, and that

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

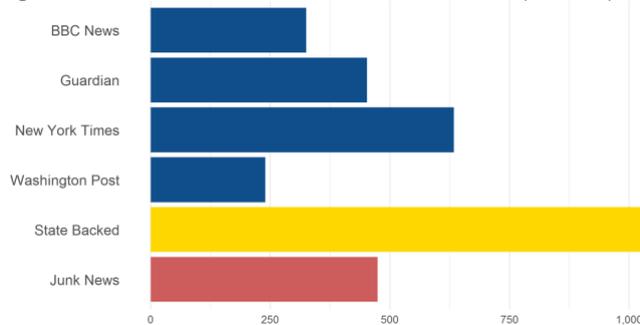


Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article

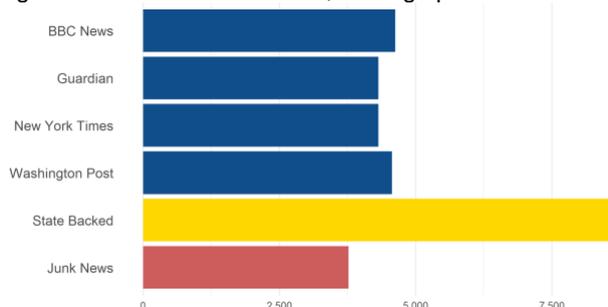


Figure 3: User Engagement, Total All Articles (Millions)

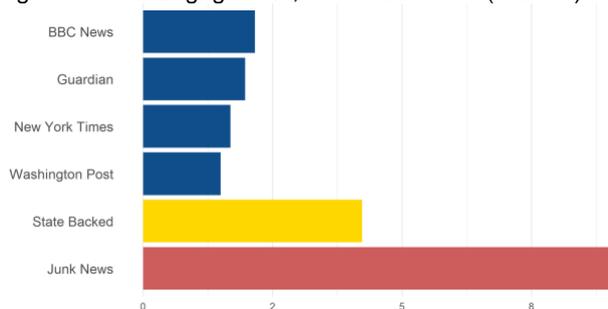
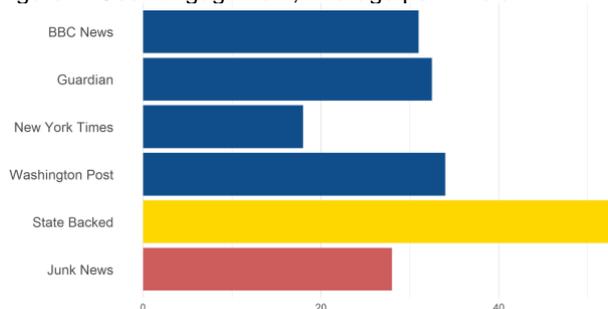


Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 04/08/2020-04/15/2020.

Note: Distribution refers to the sum of the follower count of Twitter accounts, subreddits and Facebook groups/pages sharing content. Engagement refers to the sum of all types of reactions on Twitter, Reddit and Facebook.

Ghebreyesus’s reproach of US President Trump revealed the WHO’s bias in favor of China.[3] The *Daily Caller* wrote that “Beijing misled the world”, stating that “China’s official statistics—which the WHO has endorsed—have significantly downplayed both deaths and cases of the coronavirus”. [4], [5] The *Daily Wire* carried pieces that similarly position the WHO as a “co-conspirator” with China in the “cover-up” of the

coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan. This source criticized the WHO Special Envoy for refusing to discuss the dishonesty of China.[6], [7] One report criticizes the WHO for being unwilling to name the doctors who voted against the declaration of coronavirus as a public health emergency, and displays this against a large photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Ghebreyesus shaking hands and smiling.[8] Other sources have used more inflammatory language, stating that there were “RED FLAGS EVERYWHERE and that “Dr. Tedros is a puppet of the Chinese”, and that the WHO agenda is to “use coronavirus funds to kill babies in abortions”.[9]

The second key narrative of the week portrays Trump in a wholly positive role, praising his leadership in questioning and contradicting medical advice. For example, *LifeZette* published an article characterizing the US President as having made a bold statement against the WHO, and trying to offer validity to President

Trump’s claims and conclusions. The WHO “[has] a lot of nerve” for criticizing Trump, and it is asserted that “the facts bear out the president’s analysis” such that the US would be justified in dropping funding to the WHO.[10] Other articles accuse Democrats of targeting a President unfairly during a public health crisis.[11]

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks used on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit and the levels of engagement with content related to the coronavirus pandemic. Sources of highly politicized health and clearly 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 that sees significant engagement.

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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 *Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing* provides regular reports on the most prominent social media trends from the prior week. COMPROP’s articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.