Social Media Junk News on Social Distancing Double Standards
Coronavirus Misinformation Weekly Briefing 22-06-2020

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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 17-06-2020 we find:

- The social media distribution network of all coronavirus articles from the top fifteen mainstream news outlets reached 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 8,000 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached slightly below 4,500 users and the average junk health article reached just over 3,500 users.
- Similarly, all of the total content from all mainstream sources gets the largest amount of total user engagement. But on a per article basis, state-backed news gets almost over 100 engagements, junk health news gets just below 50 engagements, and average articles from mainstream sources receive just under 30 engagements.
- In total, 63% of the engagement with non-mainstream information last week was with state-backed content. Further, 45% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 54% was with Russian content.
- Thematically, junk health news sources perpetuated a narrative critical of Black Lives Matter protests for hypocrisy around social distancing measures.

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 June 10th to June 17th 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, 63% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 45% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 54% was with Russian content.

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 again achieved over triple the total distribution of state-backed and junk health news sources, respectively. However, the average article from state-backed sources still has a larger distribution network, this week reaching a potential audience of over 8,000 users, whereas mainstream new articles reach slightly below 4,500 users on average.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Both junk health news and state-backed news achieved low total engagement of around 1 million whereas mainstream news sources achieved nearly 10 million engagements. Junk health news has reached over 6 million total engagements in previous weeks.[2] On average, state-backed media generated the most engagement this week, reaching over 100 engagements per article, whereas junk health news fell from over 100 engagements per article last week to just below 50 engagements this week.

As noted last week, 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. This week, we are able to provide an overview of engagement trends over the last three weeks. Figure 5 displays the engagement trends for the last two weeks since the shift to comparison between top 15 sites in each category was made. Mainstream news sources typically achieved over 1 million engagements on most days, whereas junk health news and state-backed media seldom reach that threshold. On a per-article average, however, mainstream news sources struggle to generate the same engagement that junk health news and state-backed outlets do.

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 news (a) sought to undermine trust in public health experts, (b) used the George Floyd protests to fuel misinformation

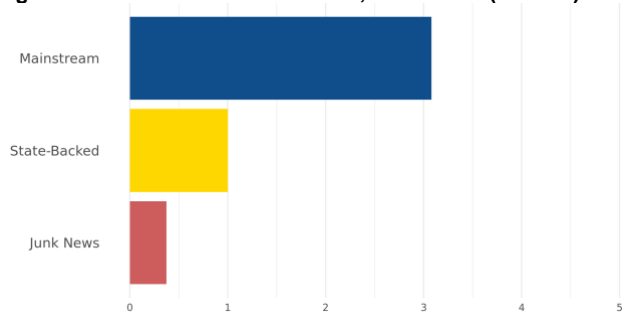**Figure 1: Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions)**

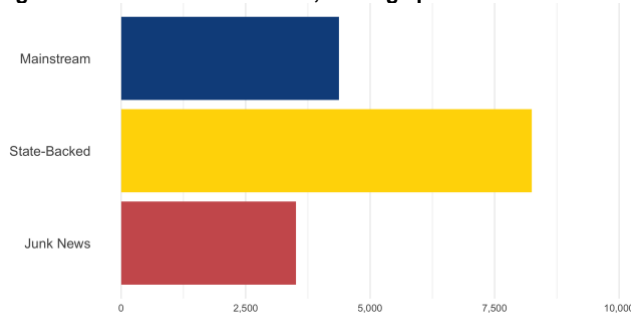**Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article**

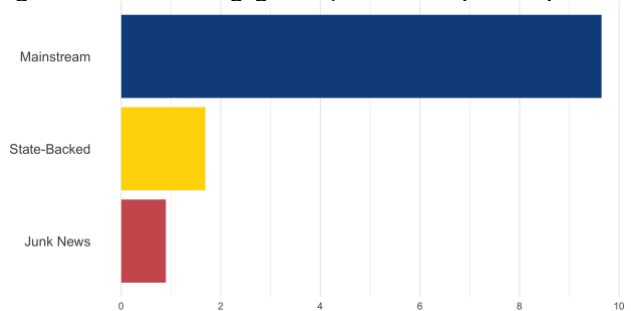**Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)**

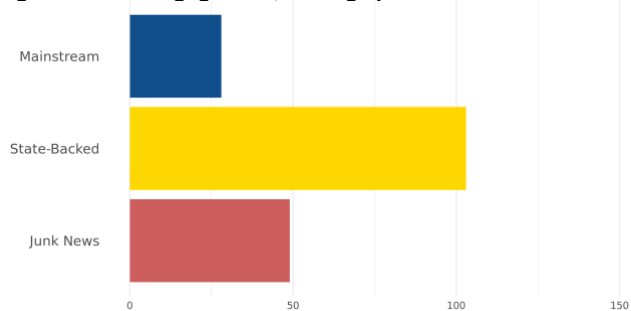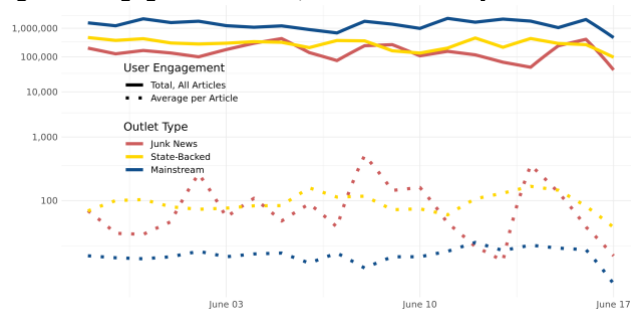**Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article**

Figure 5: Engagement Trends, for the last 21 days

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 10/06/2020-17/06/2020.
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.

and racist messages, and (c) advanced false claims about President Trump's success in managing unemployment and economic recovery in the US.

This week, the key theme amongst top junk news stories was proclaiming a double standard between Black Lives Matter protests and social distancing measures.

A *Daily Wire* article with over 75,000 engagements vilified New York Governor Andrew Cuomo for ignoring large protest gatherings whilst simultaneously warning that violations of social distancing rules at bars and restaurants might lead to a delay in reopening.[3] The same *Daily Wire* article used a *New York Times* briefing as a basis for their reporting, but singled out the one reference to Governor Cuomo amongst a list of other cities and counties around the country that have re-closed bars and restaurants.[4] A *Breitbart* article with over 54,000 engagements mocked Senator Chuck Schumer's criticism of President Trump for not caring about the Trump supporters attending a rally. The piece implicitly derided Senator Schumer for not also criticizing recent activism.[5]

Additional accusations of a double standard in applying lockdown rules come from articles about a Jewish community whose local playground had been welded shut, then cut open, then locked, then cut open again. A *Daily Wire* article with over 56,000 engagements emphasized that locking the playground was an infringement on freedoms and yet another example in support of the claim that New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio had "come down hard on average citizens".[6] An article from *The Blaze* with over 18,000 engagements and an article from *The Daily Caller* with over 16,000

engagements echoed similar sentiments.[7], [8] The article from *The Blaze* further suggested that this was part of a larger religious conflict in New York City, though many parks in the city are similarly closed.

Separate from the main theme but attracting considerable engagement, a *Raw Story* article with over 50,000 engagements attacked President Trump for ostensibly claiming that if testing for the virus stopped then the coronavirus would disappear from the US.[9] Whilst President Trump has made many misleading and factually inaccurate comments before about the coronavirus, the article had misinterpreted the comments. He was claiming that the US has had much wider and better conducted testing than other countries, and hence that the lack of testing overseas made the outbreak appear worse in the US.

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.