Social Media Junk News about the First US Presidential Debate
Weekly Misinformation Briefing 05-10-2020

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SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across six Is social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 01-10-2020 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. But the average article from state-backed sources reached over 7,500 users, while the average article from mainstream sources reached over 4,500 users and the average junk health article reached over 2,300 users.
- Similarly, aggregate content from mainstream sources gets the largest amount of total user engagement. However, on a per article basis, state-backed news receives over 600 engagements and junk news receives just below 1,700, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 300 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were the nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett for the US Supreme Court, the attribution of violence to Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the political left, the first US Presidential debate, and China's role in climate change.

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, Twitter, Telegram 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 24th September to 1st October 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 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 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, 23% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 50% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 42% was with Russian content. Finally, 7% was with Turkish content.

Figures 1 and 2 reveal the distributional reach for the published content from mainstream, junk news, and state-backed sources, both in total for the week and as an average per article. This week, the top fifteen mainstream sources achieved much greater distribution networks. However, the average article from state-backed sources still has a larger distribution network, this week reaching a potential audience of over 7,500 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,500 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of over 2,300.

Figures 3 and 4 reveal the levels of engagement that sources receive for their articles. Mainstream news achieved over 55 million total engagements. Junk news generated over 25 million engagements. State-backed news reached below 8 million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching nearly 1,700 engagements per article, whereas state-backed media achieved an average of just above 600 engagements per article.

Figure 5 displays the trends over the last four weeks. Mainstream news sources reach 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

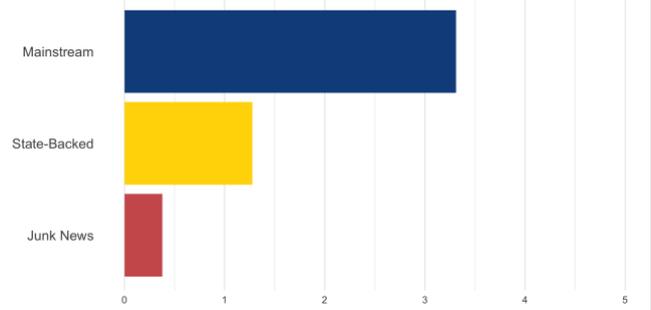**Figure 1: Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions)**

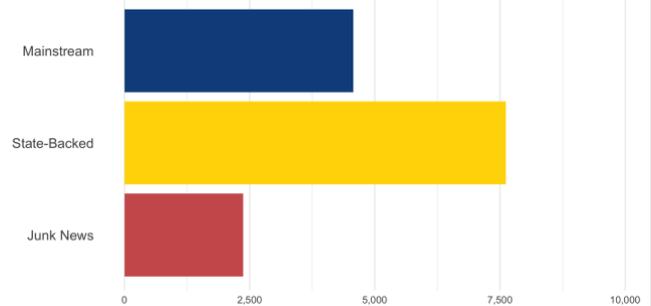**Figure 2: Distribution Networks, Average per Article**

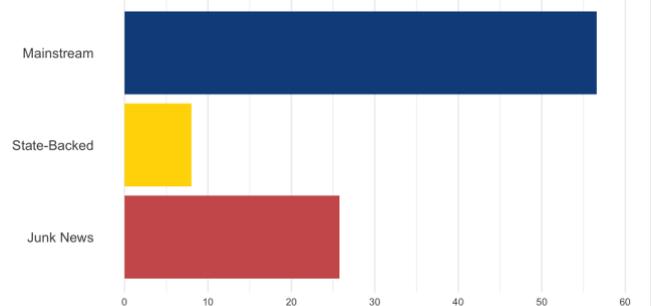**Figure 3: Total User Engagement, All Articles (Millions)**

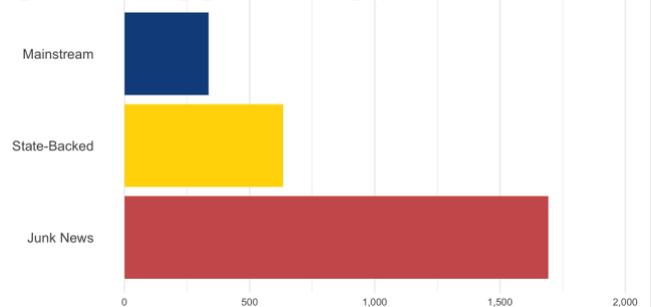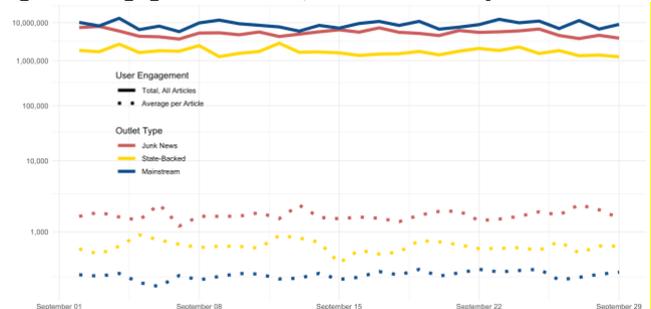**Figure 4: User Engagement, Average per Article**

Figure 5: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 24/09/2020-01/10/2020.
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.

qualitative analysis uses the articles with the greatest overall engagement in addition to the articles that fit 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

Four topics rose to prominence this week. A visualization of top words and their associations with topics are provided in Figure 6. 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 7. The first topic included words such as "Barrett", "Coney", "court", "judge", and "Senate". This topic concerned the announcement of Judge Amy Coney Barrett as President Trump's nominee for the Supreme Court vacancy following the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 450,000 engagements.

The second topic included words such as "campaign", "police", "state", "black", and "government". This topic concerned perceived violence by Black Lives Matter activists and the political left more generally, and we have discussed these junk news narratives in a previous briefing. These themes reappear this week, framing protests as "violent riots".[3] In addition to narrative devices identified previously, however, best-fitting articles included insinuations that the Chinese government is actively funding Black Lives Matter protests. Such speculations are used to undermine the movement for racial justice.[4] The 20 best-fitting articles generated over 220,000 engagements.

The third topic included words such as "Biden", "debate", "Trump", "Wallace", and "election". This topic concerned the first US Presidential debate held on Tuesday night. The 20 best-fitting articles generated over 69,000 engagements. Though this number is multiples smaller than engagements generated by the first topic on the nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett, the debate has been much closer to the end of our data collection and hence has had less chance to generate the same number of engagements. This topic is expanded further in the following section.

The fourth topic included words such as "China", "development", "global", "cooperation", and "international". The 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated over 29,000 engagements. Most best-fitting articles in originate from state-backed outlets. This topic concerned China's role in cooperating with other nations, particularly on tackling climate change.[5]

Qualitative Analysis

The pre-eminent key topic this week concerned the first US Presidential debate between Democratic Nominee Joe Biden and President Trump. A number of narrative devices and strategies appear in the depictions of the first Presidential debate. Almost all of these strategies involve the ignoring of President Trump's actions that were otherwise considered controversial, namely his
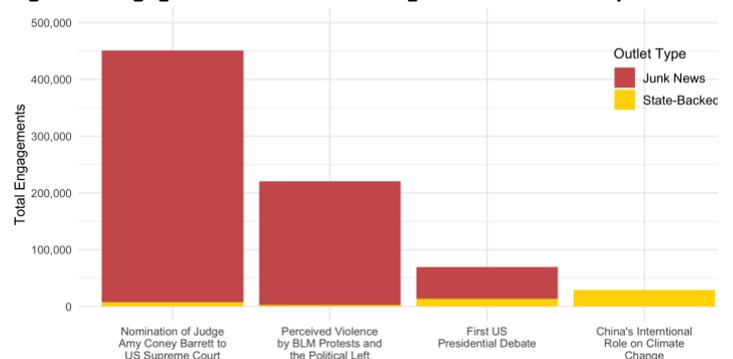
Figure 6: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling
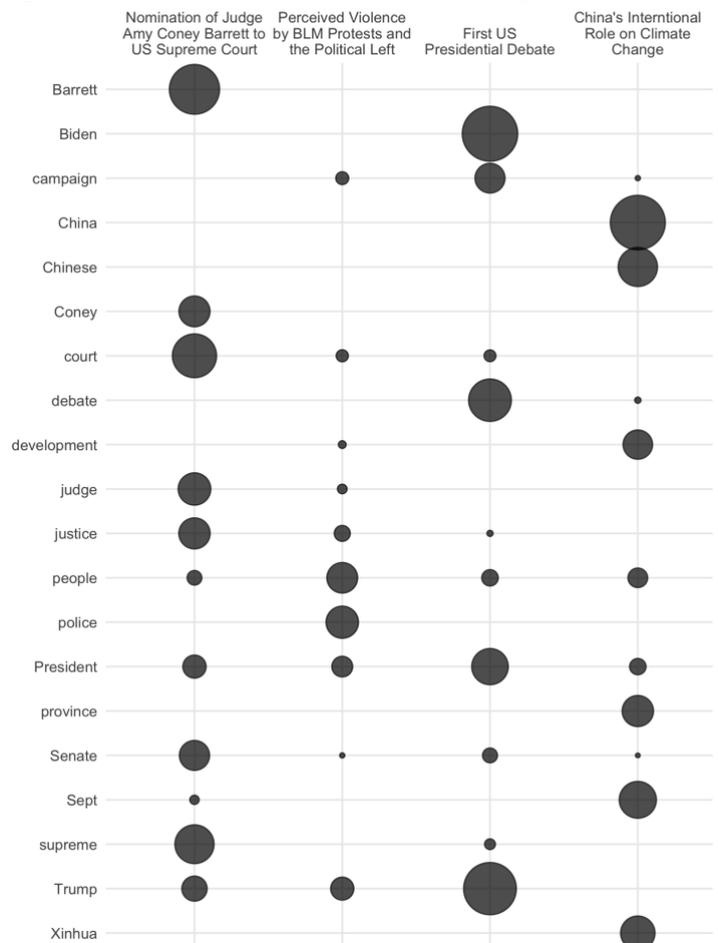
Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 24/09/2020-01/10/2020.
Note: The size of each circle indicates how important each word was to each topic.

Figure 7: Engagements with Best-Fitting Articles in each Topic

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 24/09/2020-01/10/2020.
Note: Total engagements of the top 20 best-fitting articles with each topic, split by outlet type.

refusal to denounce white supremacy and his repeated interruptions of Biden.

One common theme was to redirect blame onto the moderator Chris Wallace, anchor of "Fox News Sunday". A *Daily Wire* article with over 400,000 engagements took this approach, collecting a long series of quotes from a wide range of conservative commentators stating that Wallace had moved "from moderator to debator" and that he was "shamelessly

biased" in favor of Joe Biden.[6] The article, as suggested above, does not mention President Trump's interruptions of Biden. Another article from the *Daily Wire* with over 133,000 engagements describes Wallace as "[running] interference" for Senator Biden.[7] Other articles ran similar arguments, such as one from the *Daily Caller* with over 34,000 engagements.[8]

Another common device was to question Senator Biden's language, claiming that it was unpresidential, and implicitly claiming that Senator Biden's choice of language was worse than the actions of the President. The same *Daily Wire* article from above with over 133,000 engagements made this argument, focusing particularly on the Biden's use of "clown" and "shut up".[7] The article presents the use of "clown" and "shut up" as isolated, perhaps unsolicited, insults, rather than responses President Trump's interruptions. An article from *The Blaze* with over 31,000 engagements claimed that Biden descended into "high school fight mode" with these words.[9]

Further, sharp criticism was levied against the reactions of mainstream media. A *Daily Wire* article with over 20,000 engagements detailed a CNN's panel response to the debate, and although it mentioned Trump's refusal to denounce white supremacy, it also claimed that Biden was the one that sunk to personal insults.[10] Another article from *NewsBusters* that had comparatively few engagements at over 3,000 but was one of the best-fitting articles in the topic model of the previous section employed a similar strategy with NBC's panel reaction.[11]

Of particular significance, few articles engaged with the issue of white supremacy, and the ones that did simply denied that President Trump had not condemned white supremacists.[12]

CONCLUSION

We measure the social distribution networks of Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Telegram 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

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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 *Weekly Misinformation 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.