



Social Media Junk News around US Supreme Court Confirmation Hearings

Weekly Misinformation Briefing 19-10-2020

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SUMMARY

We provide a weekly briefing about the spread of misinformation across six social media platforms. For the seven days prior to 15-10-2020 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 8,000 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 550 engagements and junk news receives nearly 1,400, while average articles from mainstream sources get over 300 engagements.
- The most prominent junk news and state-backed topics, in descending order, were police violence around the world, the confirmation hearings of Judge Amy Coney Barrett, US election campaign news, Chinese economic strength, and general coronavirus statistics.

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 8th October to 15th 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, 28% of the engagement with non-mainstream sources we observed this week was from state-backed sources. Further, 54% of engagements with state-backed media were engagements with Chinese content, whereas 36% was with Russian content. Finally, 10% was with Turkish content.

In lieu of figures displaying distributional reach and engagement patterns as in previous briefings, these statistics are now presented in Table 1. 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 8,000 users, whereas average mainstream news articles reach over 4,500 users. Junk news articles reach an average audience of over 2,300. Mainstream news achieved 50 million total engagements. Junk news generated just below 20 million engagements. State-backed news reached over 7 million. On average, junk news generated the most engagement this week, reaching nearly 1,400 engagements per article, whereas state-backed media achieved an average of above 550 engagements per article.

Figure 1 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]

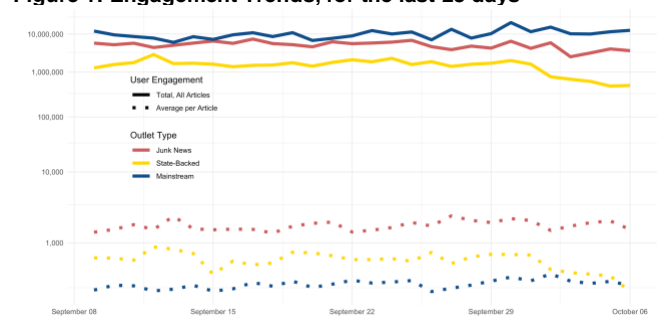
The thematic analysis presented in these weekly briefings incorporates both a quantitative topic modelling that categorizes articles from state-backed

Table 1: Changes in Misinformation Production

	This Week	Percent Change from Last Week	Percent Change from Last Month
Total Distribution Network, All Articles (Billions)			
Junk News	0.5	0.0	↓ 1.9
Mainstream	2.8	0.0	↑ 19.0
State-Backed	1.3	0.0	↓ 2.1
Distribution Networks, Average Per Article			
Junk News	2,391	↑ 8.4	↑ 7.9
Mainstream	4,530	↑ 4.0	↑ 5.2
State-Backed	8,288	↓ 3.4	↑ 5.4
Total User Engagements, All Articles (Millions)			
Junk News	20.0	↑ 1.1	↑ 40.0
Mainstream	50.0	↑ 31.0	↓ 21.0
State-Backed	7.7	↓ 58.0	↑ 20.0
User Engagements, Average Per Article			
Junk News	1,395	↑ 5.5	↑ 4.0
Mainstream	318	↑ 12.0	↓ 4.7
State-Backed	569	↑ 28	↑ 8.3

Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 08/10/2020-15/10/2020.

Figure 1: Engagement Trends, for the last 28 days



Source: Based on authors' calculations using data collected 08/10/2020-15/10/2020.

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.

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 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

Five topics rose to prominence this week. A visualization of top words and their associations with topics are provided in Figure 2. 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 3. The first

topic included words such as “police”, “black”, “state”, “report”, and “government”. The top 20 best-fitting articles were about half from junk news sources and half from state-backed outlets. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 200,000 engagements. This topic contained articles that related to police violence, though not all to the same set of incidences. Some articles were from state-backed outlets that used criticism of US police departments to promote anti-US narratives, writing that it is “terrifying [to white police officers] that black people could actually gain equality”.[3] Other articles detailed police brutality in Nigeria.[4]

The second topic included words such as “Barrett”, “court”, “Supreme”, “judge”, and “Amy”. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 170,000 engagements and were mostly articles from junk news outlets. This topic concerned the confirmation hearings of Judge Amy Coney Barrett who is President Trump’s nomination to the US Supreme Court. This topic is further expanded on in the following section.

The third topic included words such as “Joe”, “Biden”, “Trump”, “campaign”, and “election”. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 88,000 engagements. The top 20 best-fitting articles were about half from junk news sources and half from state-backed outlets. These articles concerned general reporting on the latest campaign-specific news of the upcoming US election. Junk news articles from across the political spectrum were present in the best-fitting articles, both emphasizing President Trump’s declining poll standings and attempting to embarrass Presidential Candidate Biden with the low attendance at his rallies.[5], [6]

The fourth topic included words such as “China”, “development”, “Shenzhen”, “economic”, and “cooperation”. The top 20 best-fitting articles in this topic generated just over 19,000 engagements, and all originated from state-backed outlets. Some articles in this topic typically promoted Shenzhen as a “paragon” of the rapid economic growth model adopted by the Chinese government.[7] Other articles describe how the recent tourism during the Golden Week holidays have demonstrated China “[winning] global economic recovery”.[8]

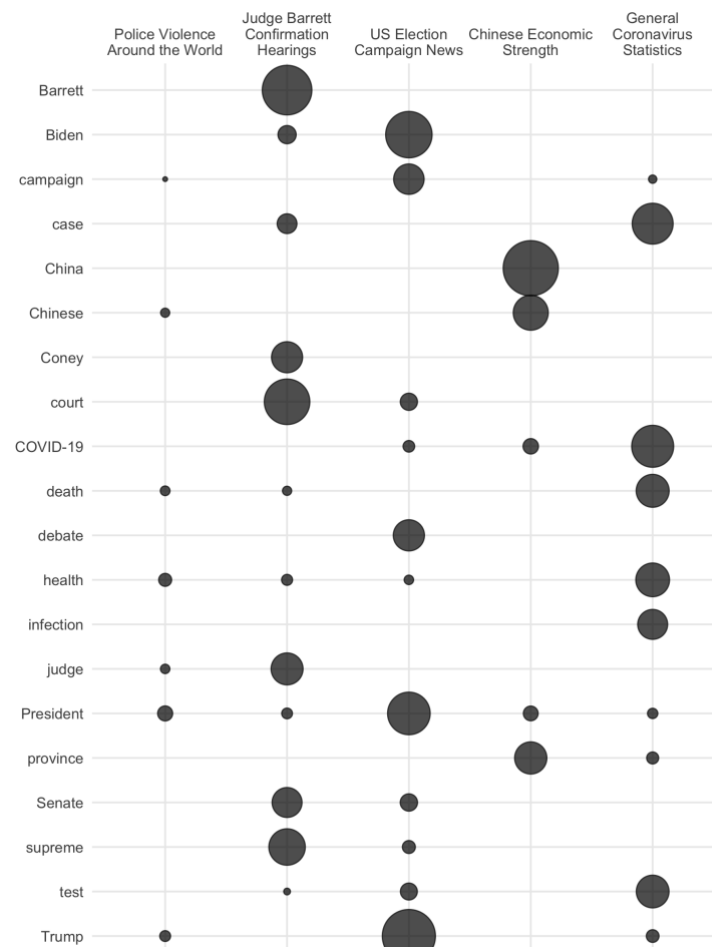
The fifth topic included words such as “COVID-19”, “case”, “health”, “death”, and “test”. The top 20 best-fitting articles generated over 10,000 engagements, and all originated from state-backed outlets. This topic concerned general reporting on the state of coronavirus around the world.[9], [10]

Qualitative Analysis

The pre-eminent topic amongst junk news and state-backed outlets this week concerned the confirmation hearings of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the US Supreme Court.

One of the most engaged articles this week was a *Daily Wire* article that generated over 300,000 engagements.[11] This *Daily Wire* article frames

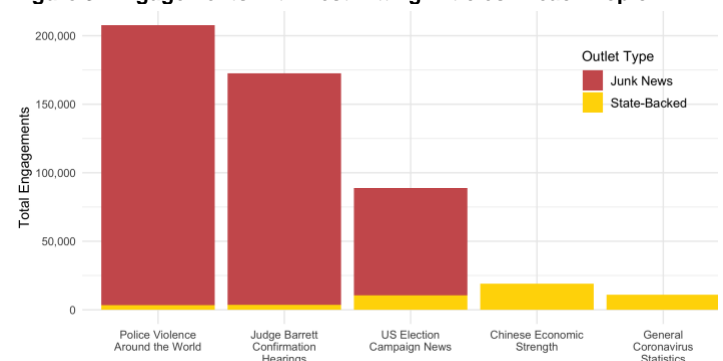
Figure 2: Junk News Keywords and Topic Modelling



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 08/10/2020-15/10/2020.

Note: The size of each circle indicates how important each word was to each topic.

Figure 3: Engagements with Best-Fitting Articles in each Topic



Source: Based on authors’ calculations using data collected 08/10/2020-15/10/2020.

Note: Total engagements of the top 20 best-fitting articles are labelled by outlet type.

Presidential candidate Biden as having been caught out saying that voters do not deserve to know his position on whether Democrats would expand the number of seats on the US Supreme Court, known as “court packing”. Though Senator Biden did respond in the negative to the question “don’t the voters deserve to know?”, the recording also shows that this answer had been delivered in response to rapid series of questions. Moreover, the interviewer phrased the question about whether voters deserve to know about Biden’s position

on the Supreme Court more specifically in relation to the *viewers* of interviewer's local news outlet. The framing in the *Daily Wire* article, then, is another instance of willful misrepresentation. We would emphasize that this analysis does not interpret Senator Biden's answer in a particular way. Rather, we highlight here the strategies and mechanisms employed to use instances such as this to create misinformation.

In a similar vein, a best-fitting article belonging to this topic from *The Gateway Pundit* painted, as dangerous because Democrats would seek to pack the court with "Marxists".[14]

One *Daily Wire* article with just over 69,000 engagements targeted comments made by US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.[12] Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez had said that if Jesus were to appear on the Congressional floor to repeat his teachings, Republicans would attack him for it. The usage of Jesus as an example was intended illustratively to claim that Republican elected officials, though largely self-identifying as Christian, do not actually follow the teachings of Jesus. The same *Daily Wire* article, however, proceeded to completely ignore the substantive point and retorted with the statistic that over 99% of Republican members of Congress identify as Christian.

Finally, another best-fitting article belonging to this topic as identified from the preceding quantitative analysis was an article from *LifeNews* with over 1,800 engagements.[13] This *LifeNews* article misrepresented US Senator Patrick Leahy's objection to Judge Barrett's confirmation on the basis that her legal attitude towards abortion and the *Roe v. Wade* precedent would significantly undermine the rights of women and set them back. The *LifeNews* article suggests that Senator Leahy's objection made little sense because a woman on the Supreme Court could not plausibly vote for judgements that would harm the rights of women generally, which is of course untrue.

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](#).

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The [Computational Propaganda Project](#) (COMPPOP), 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. COMPPOP articles, book chapters, and books are significant manuscripts that have been through peer review and formally published.