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Bots without borders: how anonymous accounts hijack political debate

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A bot (short for robot) performs highly repetitive tasks by automatically gathering or posting information based on a set of algorithms. They can create new content and interact with other users like any human would. But the power is always with the individuals or organisations unleashing the
Politicalbots.org reported that approximately 19 million bot accounts were tweeting in support of either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton in the week before the US presidential election. Pro-Trump bots worked to sway public opinion by secretly taking over pro-Clinton hashtags like #I'mWithHer and spreading fake news stories.

Bots have not just been used in the US; they have also been used in Australia, the UK, Germany, Syria and China.

Whether it is personal attacks meant to cause a chilling effect, spamming attacks on hashtags meant to redirect trending, overinflated follower numbers meant to show political strength, or deliberate social media messaging to perform sweeping surveillance, bots are polluting political discourse on a grand scale.

**Fake followers in Australia**

In 2013, the Liberal Party internally investigated an unexpected surge in Twitter followers for the then-opposition leader, Tony Abbott. On August 10, 2013, Abbott’s Twitter following soared from 157,000 to 198,000, having grown until then by around 3,000 per day.

A Liberal Party spokesperson revealed that a spambot had most likely caused the sudden increase in followers.
An April 2013 study found 41% of Abbott’s then-most-recent 50,000 Twitter followers were fake. Most of the Coalition's supporters do not use social media.
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As the UK's June 2016 referendum on European Union membership drew near, researchers discovered automated social media accounts were swaying votes for and against Britain's exit from the EU.

A recent study found 54% of accounts were pro-Leave, while 20% were pro-Remain. And of the 1.5 million tweets with hashtags related to the referendum between June 5 and June 12, about half a million were generated by 1% of the accounts sampled.

Following the vote, many Remain supporters claimed social media had an undue influence by discouraging “Remain” voters from actually voting.

Fake news and echo chambers in Germany

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has expressed concern over the potential for social bots to influence this year's German national election.

The right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) already has more Facebook likes than Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) and the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) combined. Merkel is worried the AfD might use Trump-like strategies on social media channels to sway the vote.

It is not just that the bots are generating the fake news. The algorithms that Facebook deploys as content is shared between user accounts create “echo chambers” and outlets for reverberation.

Spambots and hijacking hashtags in Syria

During the Arab Spring, online activists were able to provide eyewitness accounts of uprisings in real time. In Syria, protesters used the hashtags #Syria, #Daraa and #Mar15 to appeal for support from a global theatre.

It did not take long for government intelligence officers to threaten online protesters with verbal assaults and one-to-one intimidation techniques. Syrian blogger Anas Qtiesh writes:
These accounts were believed to be manned by Syrian mokhabarat (intelligence) agents with poor command of both written Arabic and English, and an endless arsenal of bite and insults.

But when protesters continued despite the harassment, spambots created by Bahrain company EGHNA were co-opted to create pro-regime accounts. They flooded the hashtags with pro-revolution narratives.

This was essentially drowning out the protesters' voices with irrelevant information – such as photography of Syria. @LovelySyria, @SyriaBeauty and @DNNUdates dominated #Syria with a flood of predetermined tweets every few minutes from EGHNA's media server.

Since 2014, the Islamic State terror group has “ghost-tweeted” its messages to make it look it has a large, sympathetic following. This is to attract resources, both human and financial.

Tweets have consisted of alleged mass killings of Iraqi soldiers and more. This clearly shows how extremists are employing the same social media strategies as governments.
Stop it mukhabarat Twitter is not Bashar's spam machine! >
@TheLovelySyria #Syria #Homs #Aleppo #Damascus
#Lebanon http://is.gd/Plii1Z
6:20 AM - 19 Apr 2011
To everyone who can hear me!

#SaveAleppo
#SaveHumanity

8:23 AM - 13 Dec 2016

31,070

16,351

Lina shamy
@Linashamy

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Sweeping surveillance in China

In May 2016, China was exposed for purportedly fabricating 488 million social media comments annually in an effort to distract users' attention from bad news and politically sensitive issues.

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A recent three-month study found 13% of messages had been deleted on Sina Weibo (Twitter’s equivalent in China) in a bid to crack down on what government officials identified as politically charged messages.

It is likely that bots were used to censor messages containing key terms that matched a list of banned words. Typically, this might include words in Mandarin such as “Tibet”, “Falun Gong” and “democracy”.

What effect is this having?

The deliberate act of spreading falsehoods by using the internet, and more specifically social media, to make people believe something that is not true is certainly a form of propaganda. While it might create short-term gains in the eyes of political leaders, it inevitably causes significant public distrust in the long term.

In many ways, it is a denial of citizen service that attacks fundamental human rights. It preys on the premise that most citizens in society are like sheep, a game of “follow the leader” ensues, making a mockery of the “right to know”.

We are using faulty data to come to phoney conclusions, to cast our votes and decide our futures. Disinformation on the internet is now rife – and if that has become our primary source of truth, then we might well believe anything.