

Political bots are poisoning democracy – so, off with their heads

June 21 2017, by Hadley Newman And Kevin O'gorman



Bottery and aggravated assault. Credit: Mopic

Propaganda bots posing as people are increasingly being used on social media to sway public opinion around the world. So says [new research](#) from the University of Oxford's Internet Institute, which found automated accounts and other forms of social media propaganda are rife in Russia, the US and Germany among other countries.

This follows a flurry of material about bots and the UK election. One [seminal work](#), which came from the same institute, showed that Twitter traffic had been dominated by Labour and that automated accounts favouring the party were more active than Tory equivalents.

Jeremy Corbyn's campaign was certainly boosted by fake Twitter accounts, regardless of whether his people had any involvement in setting them up. They were [spewing an average](#) of 1,000 messages a day against Theresa May or favouring Labour.

It was a similar story in last year's [US presidential election](#), and [also during](#) the Brexit referendum – with some of the bots in question graduating to pump out thousands more messages in the UK election. A [study by the FT](#) reported that during the referendum campaign, "the 20 most prolific accounts ... displayed indications of high levels of automation". This supported research last year, again from Oxford, that [found that](#) "on average 12.3% of traffic about UK politics is generated by highly automated accounts".

Bot seriously ...

That digital media would emerge as a tool for political campaigning is a no-brainer. At no point in history have candidates and parties had such a remarkable opportunity to reach out to such a wide audience so effectively.

Leaders can relay their messages in the most cost-effective manner with real evidence of interaction. Better still, [social media](#) provides a platform for two-way engagement. The average voter can boo, applaud, vent and taunt politicians and policies on their smartphones with a flick of a finger.

But politics is a game of one-upmanship – and not just among parties but

also over the public. For all the windows of expression that digital media has opened up for people, it now threatens to make fools of them.

Bots with large numbers of followers are the ideal conduits for disinformation, sharing fake news within the echo chambers that have grown out of the content display logic of social media algorithms. Some of this news will be crafted specifically for political gain, but even this doesn't always necessarily follow.

The US media reported, for example, [that](#) an army of Macedonian teenagers had been operating US political sites peddling made-up conservative news to make a quick buck on Facebook. With 44% of Americans [getting their news](#) from Facebook, and Donald Trump elected president, we may be paying a hefty price for such enterprises.

As one [detailed report](#) put it, media manipulators trade their stories by "using the power of networked collaboration and the reach of influencers". Even "when the misinformation is debunked, it continues to shape people's attitudes". Such overt mind manipulation can "ruin democracy", warned the report.

Speaking of ruining democracy, algorithms are also opening the door to another kind of Facebook manipulation. During the UK election, there [were reports](#) of "paid-for attack advertising" targeting specific voters in specific constituencies. The Conservatives have been particularly identified with this so-called "[dark advertising](#)". It threatens to break fundamental rules about campaign transparency and voter targeting. It also undermines the UK's longstanding ban on political parties buying TV and radio space.

Not OK, computer

From radio to TV to the internet, every new medium has disrupted the

political space. Each has served as a new tool to expand the audience and sharpen the dialogue. With social media, however, we find ourselves in unique territory.

The public has to wake up to the very real reality that fake news, junk news and automated tweets are almost certainly muddling political discourse and making different factions more and more polarised. Rhetoric and sloganeering are giving way to digital subterfuge and guerilla assaults on the public psyche.

People in the UK could console themselves [that they](#) are sharing "better quality information" than many US counterparts, but equally they compare poorly next to the French and Germans. In any case, favourable comparisons are beside the point.

It is time for a proper debate about how we respond to these developments. There is a clear argument for a system reboot, including a [digital media](#) code of conduct for [political parties](#) and campaigners. Bots need to be banned under this code and the system needs to be policed in real time during campaigns – the money it would cost would be well spent. The reality is that social media campaigning is rendering our democracy unfit for purpose. We need to do something about it quickly.

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