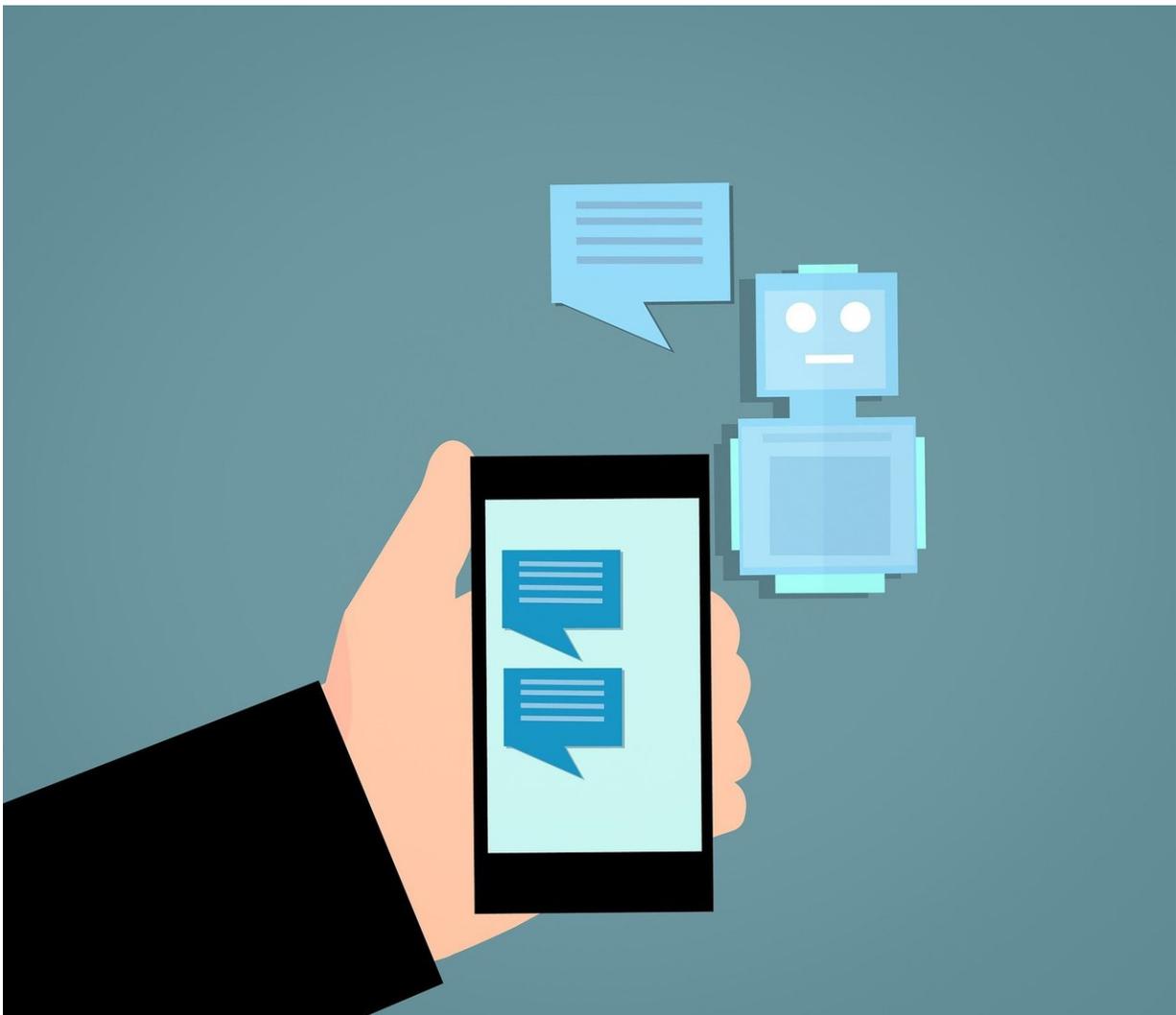


Bots actually target and pursue individual influencers

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New research co-authored by assistant research professor and associate director of Informatics at the University of Southern California Department of Computer Science, Emilio Ferrara, looks at "social hacking" over social networks that can increase violent commentary and can affect voting behavior.

The paper, "Bots Increase Exposure to Negative and Inflammatory Content in Online Social Systems" is published today in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The researchers believe this study to be one of the first studies to investigate the [content](#) bots generated and the specific strategy of the bots. In reviewing nearly 4 million posts on Twitter, researchers from Fondazione Bruno Kessler and the University of Southern California Viterbi School of Engineering, attempted to understand online behavioral dynamics, the type of content bots shared, and which users they targeted in the context of Catalonia's referendum on independence.

The researchers discovered that [influencers](#) who supported Catalan's independence were specifically targeted by the bots and became over 100 times more likely to engage with them. These influencers were also exposed to negative and violent narratives pursued by the bots.

Findings:

- The authors' findings contrast with earlier studies assuming bots were sharing information without specific strategies
- Bots, the researchers say, are selecting and pursuing specific targets
- Bots tend to generate negative content aimed at polarizing highly influential human users to exacerbate social conflict
- Looking at the election in Spain, it was determined human influencers who were targeted by bots, did not recognize they

were being targeted and being bombarded by non-human actors

"As we study this events, bots are so pervasive that anyone can be a [target](#)," said co- author Emilio Ferrara. "We need beyond the technical solutions to this problem. We need regulation, laws and incentives that will force social media companies to regulate their platforms."

More information: Massimo Stella et al. Bots increase exposure to negative and inflammatory content in online social systems, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1803470115](#)

Provided by University of Southern California

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