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AI-DRIVEN SOCIAL BOTS IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS AND THEIR ROLE IN SHAPING OPINION, MANIPULATION AND MOBILISATION****

Abstract: *Modern political campaigns are increasingly leveraging advanced digital tools, particularly social bots, ingenious automated programmes powered by artificial intelligence (AI) that imitate human behaviour on social media. Their ability to engage with users in real time, spread political messages, and influence public discussions makes them a powerful force in shaping opinions. These bots do more than just push particular political agendas; they can also distort how users perceive issues, create a false sense of widespread support, and deepen divisions among voters. Furthermore, social bots foster selective exposure by encouraging users to interact solely with information that supports their current beliefs, potentially leading to the formation of ideological echo chambers. This paper examines how state-of-the-art language processing and data-driven learning methods allow these bots to be more convincing and less detectable, presenting a significant challenge to democratic systems. It also looks into the role of bots in spreading disinformation and shaping media narratives and highlights specific cases of political manipulation involving bots in both authoritarian and democratic contexts. The conclusion stresses that, given the growing sophistication of these technologies, a comprehensive response is crucial, one that encompasses legislative measures, technological innovations, and user education to protect the integrity of public discourse.*

Keywords: *Social bots, Political campaigns, Public opinion manipulation, Artificial Intelligence.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

While the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) has undoubtedly given us many advantages in modern life, it has also made it much more difficult to think independently about politics. Digital disinformation is becoming more common, and we must be vigilant to make sure we are able to make wise decisions.[1] Artificial intelligence is increasingly being used for purposes that go beyond technical functionality, including psychological influence through automated communication channels.[2]

While artificial intelligence is being used in military operations to automate drones and robotic systems,[3] its application in digital spheres (particularly through social bots) is equally worrying. One of the most important instruments for disseminating political propaganda on social media are bots designed to mimic human appearance and behaviour.[4] Social bots have several potential uses in political debate, but arguably the most notable is amplification: the capacity to produce and/or extensively disseminate vast volumes of online information to support causes and magnify messages. By encouraging hashtags or "likes," for instance, social bots can make topics trend, giving the appearance that a person or concept is widely supported (or opposed).[5] High-level algorithms enable the prediction of data through data extraction and analysis, which can help in making better decisions.[6]

Along with spreading inaccurate or dubious information, it has been proposed that these actions may have the following effects: stifle genuine grassroots or minority interest movements; give fictitious legitimacy to fringe ideas by giving them the appearance of broad support; and perhaps even overload important information channels with spam, noise, and propaganda during public emergencies and

1 Melanson Ricciardone, S. (2024): *How AI bots spread misinformation online and undermine democratic politics*, https://theconversation.com/how-ai-bots-spread-misinformation-online-and-undermine-democratic-politics-234915.

2 Pashentsev, E. & Sebekin, S. (2023): "Metaverses, artificial intelligence and challenges to psychological security", *Politika nacionalne bezbednosti*, *25*(2), 33-57. DOI: 10.5937/pnb25-46760

3 Đorić, M. & Glišin, V. (2023): "The use of artificial intelligence in the Russo-Ukrainian war", *Politika nacionalne bezbednosti*, *25*(2), 59-76. DOI: 10.5937/pnb25-47369

4 Woolley, S. C. (2020): "Bots and Computational Propaganda: Automation for Communication and Control", In: J. A. Tucker & N. Persily (Eds.), *Social Media and Democracy* (pp. 89–110), Cambridge University Press.

5 Broniatowski, D. A., Jamison, A. M., Qi, S., AlKulaib, L., Chen, T., Benton, A., Quinn, S. C., & Dredze, M. (2018): "Weaponized health communication: Twitter bots and Russian trolls amplify the vaccine debate", *American Journal of Public Health*, *108*(10), 1378–1384. DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2018.304567

6 Baltezarević, R. (2023): "Uticaj veštačke inteligencije na globalnu ekonomiju", *Megatrend revija, 20*(3), 13–24. DOI: 10.5937/MegRev2303013B

crisis events. In all situations, the public interchange of ideas and information is seriously threatened by the possible abuse of modern technologies.[7]

In political communication, selective exposure refers to people's propensity to look for information that supports their pre-existing opinions. Social bots can amplify this behaviour to further polarise public opinion and create ideological echo chambers.[8] These days, bots can and will pose as real people, make friends with other users, and gradually (over the course of days, weeks, or months) have conversations that are sensitive to each user's feelings, attitudes, and speech patterns in an effort to convert, radicalise, or otherwise sway their vote. Studies have already shown that Large Language Models (LLMs) are more adept than people at uprooting deeply held beliefs.[9]

Different industries are affected by bot traffic in different ways. Malicious bots were responsible for almost half of the online traffic in the telecom and ISP, community and society, and computing and IT sectors. Not all bot traffic, however, is perceived negatively. Some of these programmes aid consumers in their internet search by monitoring website performance or indexing websites for search engines.[10] The modern social bot is a notable technological feat since it can now influence public opinion, spread information, and blend in with human crowds on social networking sites to bypass human detection.[11]

However, social bots need to be trained on large datasets in order to function well and fulfil their intended function. By analysing annotated data, such as linguistic patterns, user interaction sequences, sentiment signals, and topical relevancy, these bots are trained to imitate human behaviour. Both supervised learning with labelled examples and reinforcement learning, in which bots get better over time depending on feedback loops, are used in training. A social bot is significantly more credible and persuasive when it has access to more varied and high-quality data.[12]

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7 Woolley, S. C. (2016): "Automating power: Social bot interference in global politics", *First Monday*, *21*(4). DOI: 10.5210/fm.v21i4.6161

8 Baltezarević, R. & Baltezarević, I. (2022): "Selective exposure in political communication", *Megatrend revija, 19*(3), 303-315 DOI: 10.5937/MegRev2203303B

9 Salvi, F., Ribeiro, M. H., Gallotti, R., & West, R. (2024): "On the conversational persuasiveness of large language models: A randomized controlled trial", *arXiv preprint*, arXiv:2403.14380.

10 Bianchi, T. (2025): *Global share of human and bot web traffic 2013-2024*, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1264226/human-and-bot-web-traffic-share/.

11 Salge, C. A. de L., Karahanna, E., & Thatcher, J. B. (2022): "Algorithmic Processes of Social Alertness and Social Transmission: How Bots Disseminate Information on Twitter", *MIS Quarterly*, *46*(1). DOI: 10.25300/MISQ/2021/15598

12 LXT (2025): *Social Bots*, https://www.lxt.ai/ai-glossary/social-bots/.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While some social bots are simple, others may imitate human behaviour and respond to users instantly. Here are some examples of bot types: a) Chatbots: These bots, which can be found on messaging applications, social media sites, and websites, provide customer support, answer queries, and carry-on discussions. b) Web crawlers (spiders): Are bots that collect information from websites, primarily to assist search engines in indexing content. c) Shopping bots: These assist customers in keeping tabs on costs, verifying inventory, and obtaining limited-edition goods. d) Gaming Bots: In games, bots frequently take the place of actual players to assist users with practice or multiplayer gameplay. e) Malicious Bots: Created with malicious purpose, these bots propagate spam, steal information, or initiate DDoS assaults. Lastly, e) Social Media Bots: These automate actions like liking, commenting, and following. While some are used for spam or fake popularity, others assist in account management.[13]

Social bots are generally understood to be automated, algorithm-driven agents that may function and communicate on social networking sites in an anonymous manner. They are made to collect data online in order to generate social media activity and profiles that resemble those of people.[14] In wider terms, a social bot can be thought of as a super-ordinate concept that encapsulates several kinds of (semi-)automatic agents. Through one- or many-sided contact in online media, these agents are made to accomplish a given goal.[15]

Journalists, activists, and political opponents can all be harassed by bots. Bots will only become more and more popular as instruments for disseminating political propaganda on social media because of the extra layer of anonymity they offer and their capacity to scale online communication. Political bots can now more easily learn from their surroundings and apply what they discover in their interactions as well as other subjects thanks to advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), which makes them more difficult to identify.[16]

With the aim of engaging in phishing activities or influencing the measurement of important metrics associated with phenomena like usage, interest, and

[13] Oestreicher, G. (2025): *Social Media Bots: The Good and The Bad*, https://metricool.com/social-media-bots/.

[14] Howard, P.N., Woolley, S. & Calo, R. (2018): "Algorithms, Bots, and Political Communication in the US 2016 Election: The Challenge of Automated Political Communication for Election Law and Administration", *Journal of Information Technology & Politics, 15*(2), 81–93. DOI: 10.1080/19331681.2018.1448735

[15] Grimme, C., Preuss, M., Adam, L., & Trautmann, H. (2017): "Social bots: Human-like by means of human control?", *Big Data*, *5*(4), 279–293.

[16] Ferrara, E., Varol, O., Davis, C., Menczer, F., & Flammini, A. (2016): "The rise of social bots", *Communications of the ACM*, *59*(7), 96–104. DOI: 10.1145/2818717

popularity, these tools are increasingly being used to both create and disseminate information within social networks. In addition to functioning only within social networks, current iterations of social bots are notable for their capacity to imitate human behaviour, such as patterns and language, while evading detection.[17]

Numerous academics and observers have identified the possibility that social bots could skew public sentiment measurements, which are crucial for responsive governments, as a serious danger to the efficient operation of democracy.[18] However, new social bots that employ AI to create their posts can look like the poster next door, whereas early social bots could be easily identified by their posting history, which would demonstrate the limited range of their content. When built with the goal of influencing a particular human audience, "sleeper social bots" can converse with individuals in real time while imitating the human users they are intended to represent. During the Cold War, the idea of the "sleeper agent" gained popularity as a result of fears of Communist infiltration and the subversive agent who may pose as a patriot. A sleeper spy remained "asleep" until the time came to take action, be it stealing confidential data or committing a horrible crime.[19] An algorithm that basically describes their behaviour and online activities is offered to social bots, along with a technical basis that allows them to create a profile and interact and connect with the platform's API (Application Programming Interface). These operations can differ in their ultimate goal and intelligence level.[20]

In a variety of political events and regimes, bots have been observed to be active. China and Russia are examples of authoritarian regimes that have used them against both their own and other nations' citizens. Bot design and administration can be sponsored and supported by a variety of interest groups in democratic systems, including lobbyists, political actors, and other agents with political affiliations.[21]

Due to changes in the social media ecosystem and a decline in support for academic research, studying social bots has recently become much more challenging. Since most social bot research uses data from Twitter (now X), the future is unclear because the companies have altered its price policy, making it unaffordable for

17 Crothers, B. (2019): "Internet bots are getting better at imitating humans", *New York Post*, https://nypost.com/2019/04/22/internet-bots-are-getting-better-at-imitating-humans/.

18 Stella, M., Ferrara, E., & Domenico, M. D. (2018): "Bots increase exposure to negative and inflammatory content in online social systems", in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *115*(49), 12435–12440. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1803470115

19 Ossa, V. (2022): "Fiction, 9/11, and the Sleeper Agent", In V. Ossa: *The Sleeper Agent in Post-9/11 Media* (pp. 9–78), Springer International Publishing. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-11516-5_2

20 Assenmacher, D., Clever, L., Frischlich, L., Quandt, T., Trautmann, H. & Grimme, C. (2020): "Demystifying Social Bots: On the Intelligence of Automated Social Media Actors", *Social Media + Society*, *6*(3), 205630512093926. DOI: 10.1177/2056305120939264.

21 Woolley, S., & Howard, P. (2017): "Computational propaganda worldwide: Executive summary", *Computational Propaganda Project*.

academic users to access its API (Application Programming Interface).[22] Approximately 23 million social bots use Twitter (now X), making up 8.5% of all users.[23] Furthermore, social bots are responsible for more than two-thirds of tweets. A Pew study examined 1.2 million tweets in English over a 47-day period. The results showed that 66% of the tweets were likely the result of suspected bots.[24] The current state of social bot intelligence, or their ability to generate content, is often unclear; this is because bots are hard to detect. The research states that disseminating premade posts, sharing already-written pieces, or looking for information to share online are ways to emulate human behaviour.[25]

According to Melanson Ricciardone, bot tweets and human tweets shared 75% similarity on March 14, 2019, and by March 28, that percentage had risen to 92%. The similarity persisted even when the frequency of emotive terms in human tweets declined over time. This demonstrates the strong resemblance between content produced by bots and humans. Since machine learning and generative AI technologies are meant to mimic human conduct, sometimes bots just mimic human behaviour.[26]

In order to more closely resemble human behaviour, some of them even have artificial sleep-wake cycles. Even though they are designed to function alone, they can have a lot of power when combined. Indeed, it is believed that social bots influenced the 2016 Brexit vote and even the US presidential election. It's critical to comprehend how these bots function in our digital ecosystem, particularly when creating AI models that can distinguish between information produced by bots and human content. A step towards developing more precise and dependable AI applications is to improve these models using machine learning datasets.

According to a recent BBC news report, Reform UK's polling has increased as a result of many posts that may have been created by malevolent bots. The BBC made the decision to investigate this further and contacted the individuals behind accounts that were obviously attempting to inflate the popularity of Reform UK.

22 Kupferschmidt, K. (2023): *Twitter's plan to cut off free data access evokes `fair amount of panic' among scientists*, https://www.science.org/content/article/twitters-plan-cut-free-data-access-evokes-fair-amount-panic-among-scientists.

23 De Lima Salge, C. A., and N. Berente (2017): "Is that social bot behaving unethically?", *Communications of the ACM*, *60*(9), 29-31.

24 Pew Research Center (2018): *Q&A: How Pew Research Center identified bots on Twitter*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/19/qa-how-pew-research-center-identified-bots-on-twitter.

25 Appling, S., & Briscoe, E. (2017): "The perception of social bots by human and machine", In: V. M. Z. Rus (Ed.): *FLAIRS 2017— Proceedings of the 30th International Florida Artificial Intelligence Research Society Conference* (pp. 20-25), Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence.

26 Melanson Ricciardone, S. (2024): *How AI bots spread misinformation online and undermine democratic politics*, https://theconversation.com/how-ai-bots-spread-misinformation-online-and-undermine-democratic-politics-234915.

The inquiry came to the conclusion that many of these accounts were fraudulent in response to worries about foreign meddling in past elections. They have made use of networks of what users refer to as "bots" or "troll farms," and social media companies label "inauthentic accounts."[27]

The researchers came to the conclusion that none of the social media sites they examined offered enough security and oversight to shield users from malevolent bot behaviour. It is maintained that in order to safeguard the public from malevolent bots, legislation, financial incentive programmes, user education, and technology advancements are required.[28] In any event, a variety of factors influence how well social bots communicate and manipulate politics. Bots spread political messages (propaganda or fake news) in large quantities, giving the impression that a particular idea is more widely accepted than it actually is. This undoubtedly makes the message more visible and may persuade users that it is factual or pertinent. It follows logically that a large number of social bots supporting a particular political narrative can give the impression that the public has already made up its mind, which shapes public opinion. The volume of interactions generated by bots can compel the media to focus on a certain subject. Parties and politicians occasionally respond to these popular subjects, which frequently elicit intense emotional responses, without realising that they are bot campaigns.

Disseminating false information online can have extremely harmful effects. There are numerous real-world instances where the propagation of false information sparked street riots and violent incidents that even resulted in fatalities.[29]

3. CONCLUSION

The growing role of social bots in political campaigns is turning into a significant challenge for maintaining transparency, honesty, and respect in discussions. These bots can effortlessly mimic human behaviour, quickly spread political messages, and sway public opinion on different issues, making them a powerful tool in the realm of digital propaganda. It's really troubling how they manage to create a misleading sense of agreement. This just exacerbates the divisions and silences the true voices that deserve to be heard in our online community.

27 Daley, S. (2024): *Information Warfare: Political Bots on Social Media*, https://www.complycube.com/en/information-warfare-political-bots-on-social-media/.

28 Techxplore (2024): *AI bots easily bypass some social media safeguards, study reveals*, https://techxplore.com/news/2024-10-ai-bots-easily-bypass-social.html.

29 Baltezarević, R., Baltezarević, I. & Ravić, N. (2023): "Confirmation bias in digital communication: the tendency of consumers to favor information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs", *Megatrend revija, 20*(2), 25–35. DOI: 10.5937/MegRev2302026B

The progress we've achieved in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) has given rise to bots that are growing more complex, making them more difficult to detect. They're getting really good at swaying users' emotions and opinions. While they used to be easily recognised due to their repetitive and simplistic nature, today's bots can engage in personalised chats, respond in real time, and truly impact people's political perspectives.

The existence of social bots in both authoritarian and democratic environments, coupled with their potential to impact political events like elections and referendums, emphasises the critical need for a well-rounded response. This should involve implementing stricter regulations, creating advanced detection tools for bots, and raising awareness among users about the risks these entities present to democracy and society in general.

With the gap between reality and the virtual world becoming less clear, it's vital to ensure our digital public spaces are secure. To effectively address the misuse of social bots and preserve the core values of democracy, we need a collective approach that brings together governments, tech firms, researchers, and the public.

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DRUŠTVENI BOTOVI VOĐENI VEŠTAČKOM INTELIGENCIJOM U POLITIČKIM KAMPANJAMA I NJIHOVA ULOGA U OBLIKOVANJU MIŠLJENJA, MANIPULACIJI I MOBILIZACIJI

Sažetak: *Moderne političke kampanje sve više koriste napredne digitalne alate, posebno društvene botove, genijalne automatizovane programe pokretane veštačkom inteligencijom (VI) koji imitiraju ljudsko ponašanje na društvenim mrežama. Njihova sposobnost da komuniciraju sa korisnicima u realnom vremenu, šire političke poruke i utiču na javne diskusije čini ih moćnom silom u oblikovanju mišljenja. Ovi botovi rade više od pukog promovisanja određenih političkih agendi; oni takođe mogu da iskrive način na koji korisnici doživljavaju probleme, stvore lažni osećaj široke podrške i prodube podele među biračima. Štaviše, društveni botovi podstiču selektivnu izloženost podstičući korisnike da interaguju isključivo sa informacijama koje podržavaju njihova trenutna uverenja, što potencijalno dovodi do formiranja ideoloških eho komora. Ovaj rad ispituje kako najsavremenije metode obrade jezika i učenja zasnovane na podacima omogućavaju ovim botovima da budu ubedljiviji i manje uočljivi, predstavljajući značajan izazov za demokratske sisteme. Takođe se ispituje uloga botova u širenju dezinformacija i oblikovanju medijskih narativa i ističu konkretni slučajevi političke manipulacije u kojima su uključeni botovi, kako u autoritarnom tako i u demokratskom kontekstu. U zaključku se naglašava da je, s obzirom na rastuću sofisticiranost ovih tehnologija, ključan sveobuhvatan odgovor, koji obuhvata zakonodavne mere, tehnološke inovacije i edukaciju korisnika kako bi se zaštitio integritet javnog diskursa.*

Ključne reči: *Društveni botovi, Političke kampanje, Manipulacija javnim mnjenjem, Veštačka inteligencija*