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Digital Deception: Analyzing The Role of Russia's AI-Powered Bot Farms in the U.S. Political Discourse 2024

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Keywords: Russian AI-Powered Bot Farms, Computational Propaganda Theory, Political Discourse, U.S. Elections, public distrust, Generative Adversarial Networks

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Title

Digital Deception: Analyzing The Role of Russia's AI-Powered Bot Farms in the U.S. Political Discourse 2024

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Contents

Abstract

In the contemporary era, artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly advanced, especially with its use in social media through fake bot accounts as a means for propaganda. This research looks into the Russian AI-operated bot farms and how they exacerbated the political disinformation campaigns during the U.S. election debate in 2024. The focus is on how these bots are said to generate and escalate disinformation through the computational propaganda theory. Using the case study method, the authors analyze an array of secondary sources, expert interviews, and statistical data. The results of the study reveal that bot farms impede political debates through active dissemination of misinformation. In addition, the study presents more effective ways to enhance media and disinformation detection literacy.

Keywords:

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Introduction

The rise of new technologies and their implementation globally has resulted in ever-increasing sophistication in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This automation aids in manipulation and politically motivated AI bot farms, changes the discourse and propaganda, consuming attention. These have evolved into a formidable weapon for fighting disinformation and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Scholars have looked into the use of computational propaganda during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, where Russians and other foreign entities employed social media bots to promote fictitious stories. Howard & Woolley (2018) and Benkler et al. (2020) have shown how social media transmits information in coordinated disinformation campaigns. These

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studies focus on human-curated bot activity. Instead, attention should be directed to AI-enhanced propaganda, which has advanced quite a lot in the recent past. Thus, it is important to study its dynamics and impacts in today's setting. Artificial intelligence (AI) -based bot technologies are gaining more and more attention, allowing bot software to craft authentic and genuine content that is more difficult to detect. The 2024 U.S. presidential elections showcased this danger as the populace was targeted by AI-bot farms.

The strategy consisted of automated online accounts, or bots controlled by a centralized system. AI bots were designed to mimic real users and are capable of generating vast amounts of content to control public opinion. They are referred to as farms because they contain the ability to run multiple accounts at one time. When combined with artificial intelligence, these bots become even more sophisticated. They are able to craft believable narratives, do real-time discussions, and spread them widely (Trajcheva & Trajcheva, 2023). Russia used these AI-powered bot farms to disrupt U.S. political discourse in 2024, targeting political figures and contributing to pro-Kremlin campaigns. The fake bot accounts spread false claims to erode trust in the democratic structure in the U.S (U.S Department of Justice, 2024). They tried to leverage technology in order to shape public narratives during such a critical period.

This research addresses questions such as how AI-powered bot farms influenced the 2024 U.S. elections. What strategies did they use to spread disinformation? Moreover, in what ways was the public influenced? It also provides recommendations to increase the effectiveness of countermeasures by social media platforms and government agencies in mitigating AI-driven propaganda. This study aims to examine the strategies used by AI-powered bot farms, evaluate their impact on the general public, and determine how they shape political discourse. The scope of this research is defined across three key dimensions: temporal, geographical, and contextual. Temporal refers to the time frame on which our study focuses. The study focuses on the 2024 U.S. presidential election cycle and examines AI-driven bot activity over time with publicly available data. Lastly, contextual scope tells the broader context or situation of the research. Contextually, the present study investigates the role of Russian-sponsored AI bot farms in spreading disinformation, political issues, and the countermeasures taken by social media platforms and government agencies. By analyzing these aspects, the research provides a focused examination of how AI-enhanced computational propaganda impacted democratic processes.

Due to the concerns raised by AI, many scholars have examined its evolving effects. Literature for this study analyzes AI-bot farms, AI-generated disinformation, and their broader implications in the democratic processes. Disinformation through AI has become a pervasive threat today. Hu (2024) warns that AI-driven bots could engulf political discourse with false narratives. These bots operate autonomously. They can amplify content and target voter demographics. Feuerriegel et al. (2023) Al stresses about AI-driven disinformation. It is hard to detect and is a potent tool for shaping public perception. Such studies underscore the need for interdisciplinary research, focusing on the need for both behavioral science and computational methodologies to counteract AI propaganda.

One of the focal points of AI-driven propaganda has been the U.S. elections. Kovalcikova and Spatafora (2024) document how foreign actors manipulate the public through AI-generated content. They have notably studied Russia, China, and Iran for a better understanding. Their study also highlights the U.S. countermeasures, such as AI detection technologies, and includes intelligence coordination to mitigate foreign interference. However, the long-term impact of these interventions remains debated.

The use of AI-powered digital propaganda is well explained in more studies as well. Pierri et al.(2022) analyze Facebook and Twitter during the Russo-Ukrainian war. It revealed how state-sponsored disinformation campaigns work. They leverage bot networks to amplify propaganda. Their findings show that platforms are trying to curb Russian propaganda. However, the low-credibility content is still very persistent. This becomes a shortcoming of modern techniques to lessen it.

Lyons et al. (2021) highlight a more psychological perspective through cognitive bias. They portray how overconfidence in judgment exacerbates the spread of false news. People who overestimate their ability to discern fake news are more likely to fall for

it. Hence, they might be more susceptible to believing untrustworthy sources. Further impact of AI on misinformation has been demonstrated by Muns and DiResta (2024). They have done a qualitative analysis of how AI-generated content is weaponized. Through such methods, doubt is cast on legitimate media sources. As a result, they are losing credibility in the eyes of the public.

Computational propaganda theory provides an initial basis for the analysis of AI's role in political conversation. Gonzalez-Bailon and Domenico's work from 2021 illustrates that not only bots, but also verified accounts, engage in disinformation. They conducted a network analysis of Yellow Vests and Catalan Referendum movements. These suggest that while bots aid in propaganda, there are significant human influencers who also contribute to the process. Offering a historical view, Yerlikaya and Aslan (2020) investigate the rise of fake news from the 2016 U.S. elections to the subsequent crisis in France, Germany, and Türkiye. Their cross-regional study reveals a transformation. It shows how social media platforms shifted from facilitating democratic engagement to instruments of political manipulation. There are claims that digital propaganda has become a tool used by far-right extremists and authoritarian governments.

More recent works, such as Woolley's (2020) study on AI content creation, illustrate the use of disinformation campaigns employing fake hyper-realistic videos and images. These forms of advanced deception aid in the defamation of political figures, event fabrication, and public manipulation. Exposure to misinformation has been shown to reduce trust in democratic institutions, as discussed in an article from the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review.

This study aims to address prominent gaps in the literature by investigating the impact of AI bot farms on the 2024 U.S. election, a relatively under-researched issue. Unlike earlier works that analyzed the 2016 and 2020 elections, focusing on computational propaganda and disinformation campaigns, these works overlook the sophistication, adaptability, and scale of AI-powered bot networks in 2024. Moreover, while existing literature depicts propaganda tactics broadly, this study presents a focused case study on Russian AI interference, analyzing its methods, psychological impact, and countermeasure effectiveness. In doing so, the research contributes towards understanding the functioning of AI-enhanced propaganda in the contemporary geopolitics of the digital world.

This research employs a case study methodology, reviewing various sources of literature. The literature review includes government publications, scholarly research, credible news outlets, and public datasets to analyze the impact of AI-driven Russian bot farms on the 2024 U.S. elections. The objective is to assess the impact these bot farms had on the political conversation, evaluate counteraction measures taken, and determine their effectiveness, all without gathering primary data through interviews or content analyses. Key primary data are gathered from government documents such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's election security and disinformation reports, as well as academic articles from well-established institutions like the Pew Research Center. In addition, social media statements from Twitter and Facebook are analyzed, as relevant, to understand bot detection efforts and countermeasures during the 2024 election. Given that gathering primary data is impossible, a quantitative approach using secondary data is adopted for this study. Further, this study utilizes quantitative information that is available publicly, including bot engagement metrics, the prevalence of fake accounts, and the spread of disinformation, all of which undergo descriptive statistical analysis. Streamlining the scope of analysis to public data ensures compliance with research ethics, but also constitutes the primary limitation of this study. This study is particularly concerned with the impact of secondary data on the scope of bot activities and the intricate details of the disinformation campaign.

For example, reports and datasets from social media platforms may underrepresent certain disinformation activities that were not detected or reported. Furthermore, the lack of primary data collection means the findings are based solely on existing sources, which may not fully reflect the real-time dynamics of bot activity during the election. Another limitation is the potential bias in secondary sources, as government agencies and social media platforms selectively report bot activities or frame the data in ways that align with their public narratives.

Theoretical Foundations

Propaganda is the manipulation of the collective attitudes of people by using significant symbols embodied in the form of spoken, written, pictorial, musical, and a number of stimulus carriers. However, this definition of propaganda is rapidly evolving. This is due to the rise of AI and new technologies. Automation, bots, and human curation are the new means used to distribute misleading information over social media networks to manipulate public opinion, for political polarization, etc. This is called computational propaganda (Pote, 2024).

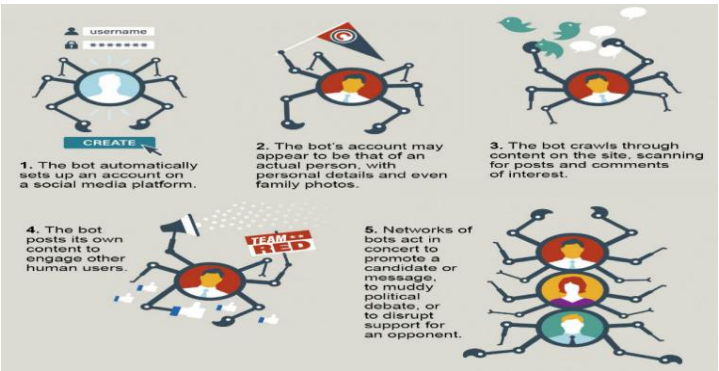
This research adopts the Computational Propaganda Theory as its guiding framework. The concepts of Philip N. Howard and Samual C. Woolley form the basis of this theory. It is particularly useful for analyzing the relationship between technology, politics, and disinformation. With this, we can analyze the creation, dissemination, and amplification of propaganda through bots and algorithms. Philip N. Howard and Samuel Woolley formulated a foundational theory in understanding the impact of AI, algorithms, and social media bots on political discourse and public opinion. It also involves the study of automated systems, especially bots, and how these systems are utilized to disrupt narratives through disinformation and influence politics. Considering the 2024 U.S. election cycle, and particularly the Russian AI bot farms, these theories offer important perspectives on the use of AI evolution to target voters with greater precision, enabling stealthier disinformation campaigns. It asserts that content bots misuse personalized information to disseminate false information on a wider scale. Tailoring the information for targeted audiences makes it easier to influence political positions and deepen hostilities. This content is personalized and tailored for specific groups. This enhances its effectiveness in shaping political opinions and fostering divisive narratives. Moreover, computational propaganda can scale rapidly and efficiently, reaching large audiences with automated systems and social bots.

However, there are certain limitations too. The theory primarily focuses on the technological mechanisms without fully considering broader cultural, economic, or political contexts that shape and amplify propaganda. Data is not always dependable and is dynamic in nature. This creates an issue in capturing the complete and accurate timeline of content evolution. Also, the impact of computational propaganda may differ across cultures and regions, making it challenging to generalize findings globally (Howard et al., 2023).

Figure 1 shows the mechanism behind bot networks. It supports the computational propaganda theory of how bots set up accounts to create confusion and misinformation online. This theory posits that bot accounts use multiple methods to create distortion. The astroturf campaign is a way that shows that an electoral campaign has widespread grassroots support. In reality, the bots are orchestrating everything to make it look like real support. Hashtag Hijacking is another way to use opponents' hashtags to distribute spam content. The retweet storm is widely used.

Figure 1

Computational Propaganda Theory



Source: *(Howard, 2018).*

A mechanism in which multiple bot accounts retweet the same misleading content. Lastly, strategic flagging is a tactic used to flag an opponent's legitimate content. All of these mechanisms are bot-driven with a mastermind behind them. In the case study I have taken, similar tactics were deployed. Multiple fake accounts operated on Twitter and other social sites to create unrest among the people.

Evolution of Russia's Bot System

This is not the first time that Russia has used such tactics to distort the truth. In 2016, Russia used bots to create discord in the US elections. Watt, a cybersecurity professional, tells us how these bots targeted hot topics and further aggravated them with lies. They fabricated stories about election candidates. Even at that time, an investigation was led that led to the IRA as the prime suspect. Robert Mueller, as the Special Counsel investigating Russian interference, claimed that the Internet Research Agency was involved in this (O'Connor, 2017).

Now, in the year 2024, Russia has used the same tactics. However, AI is playing a major role this time. It has used AI to lie better, faster, and more believably. The FBI agent who found out about this pro-Russian propaganda also stressed that AI-driven propaganda is a distressing phenomenon. When combined with media outlets like Facebook or Twitter, they become even harder to control. These media outlets are made to favor engagement. Thus, bots found it easier to amplify information with more likes, comments, and shares.

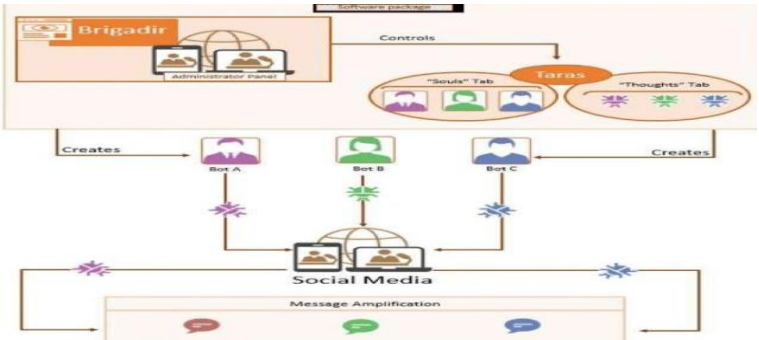
Behind the Bot Networks

The development of these sophisticated bots started off around the time Russia invaded Ukraine. A deputy editor at Russia Today played a role in the development of this bot farm. This state-owned media outlet worked with the Federal Security Service of Russia to spread propaganda and misinformation. In April 2022, FSB bought domain names (web addresses) in the U.S. that were necessary to run them. The two domains used were "MLRTR.COM" and "OTANMAIL.COM". They designed a special code to make these bots look exactly like humans on Twitter X. In early 2023, an FSB officer set up a clandestine intelligence organization to manage the bot farm. Employees from RT were taken to run the operation.

To make them even more flawless, AI was used. An AI-enhanced software package called Meliorator was used to create several fake personas. The software used an open-source tool named "Faker" to create convincing IDs and biographies. To further enhance their credibility, a tool known as "web-crawler" was used to gather realistic information about personas online (Harding, 2024).

Figure 2

A.I. Powered Bot Farm Meliorator



Source: *From USA Fermano Bot Farm, Russia Meliorator, UniD Professional. https://www.unidprofessional.com/usa-fermano-bot-farm-russa-meliorator/*

The Fig.2 above illustrates the structure and functionality of Russia's AI software "Meliorator". It is designed to create large numbers of fake social media profiles. These profiles seem authentic due to the deep learning abilities of A.I. Meliorator creates fake names, bios, and photos through Generative Adversarial Networks. Natural Language Processing techniques are used to mimic the tones and voices

of multiple users. Lastly, a central control panel operates the activities of thousands of bots online.

Although they mostly posted on X, the code allowed them access across multiple social media platforms and countries. These fake bots were able to amplify fake content. Also, they had the ability to spread their own created content, too, just like real humans.

The Scale and Sophistication of Russia's AI-Powered Bot Farms

The 2024 Russian interference deployed a vast number of bots. These bots' farms created an army of fake social media accounts. These were used to mimic not only human behavior but also to generate misleading content. These bots were capable of shifting political discourse. About one thousand fake American profiles were confiscated by authorities. Many more still operate that need to be shut down. These accounts spread anti-Ukraine and pro-Russian campaigns. These bots target key swing states by creating content that aligns with vulnerable populations. They raise issues like voter suppression, election fraud, and racial inequality. These bots can influence people through pre-existing fears and political divisions.

Political Polarization

The bots were specified with the task of creating election confusion. They amplified posts that created biases between Trump's and Kamala Harris's Positions. This was likely done to shape voter perception before elections occur (Bond, 2024). Such manipulated content was made to create confusion and a lack of belief in the US democratic process.

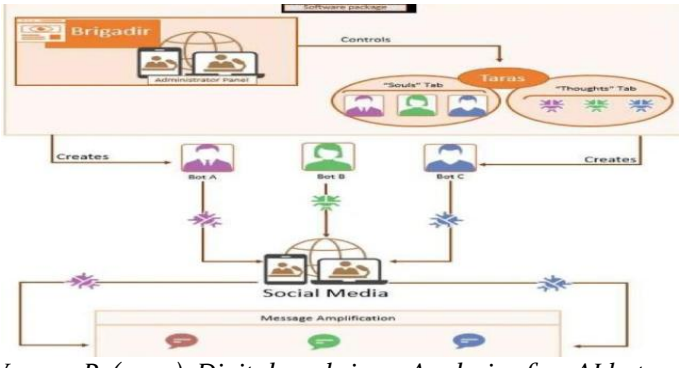
The American Sunlight Project (ASP) uncovered a sophisticated network of pro-Russian "sleeper agent" bots on X (formerly Twitter) that significantly contributed to U.S. election misinformation through several targeted strategies. These bots disseminated misleading content about political figures, notably Democratic candidate Kamala Harris. They created fake accounts that rapidly retweeted content, amplifying false narratives. Some accounts, active for up to 15 years, promoted pro-Kremlin propaganda and supported Donald Trump. To evade detection, these bots employed tactics such as creating fake personas using stock images and sharing content on unrelated topics like sports and cryptocurrency to blend into general conversations. Despite Elon Musk's assurances to eliminate such bots, these networks have remained active. This highlights the challenges in combating automated misinformation and the need for enhanced platform moderation (France, 2024).

According to an interview conducted between PBS Special Correspondent, Simon Ostrovsky, and Investigative Journalist, Christo Grozev, we get to have a deeper understanding. They have deduced that Russia wants to wedge a divide between Western societies and pit them against each other on issues of the Ukraine war, immigration, and politics (Ostrovsky & Troyanovsky, 2024).

Another report by Clemson University researchers found that 686 fake accounts (bots) posted over 130,000 times on social media to influence U.S. elections. Their work allows us to have more in-depth statistical data (Linvill & Warren, 2024).

Figure 3

Network Daily Message Output Over Time

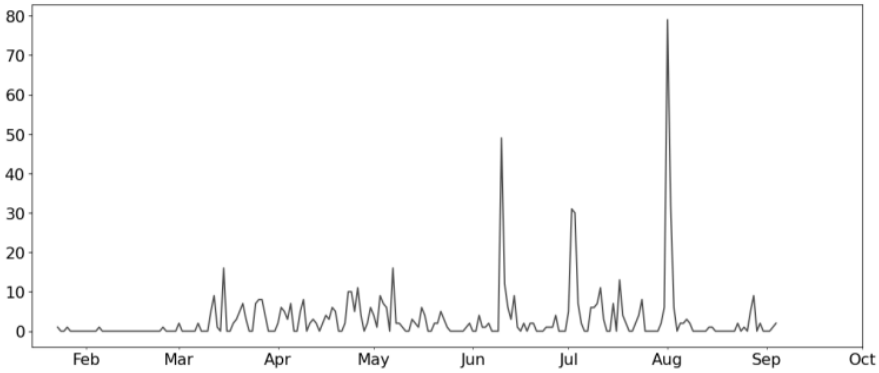


Source: *From Linvill, D., & Warren, P. (2024). Digital yard signs: Analysis of an AI bot political influence campaign on X. Clemson University Media Forensics Hub.* https://open.clemson.edu/mfh_reports/7/

This graph in Figure 3 shows the daily number of messages/posts produced by the network of AI-powered accounts. The X-axis represents time (from February to October 2024), while the Y-axis shows the number of posts made per day. The graph indicates periods of low activity followed by peaks, especially during certain months like June and July, which are likely to correspond to political events or campaign phases.

Figure 4

Date of First Post for Each Account

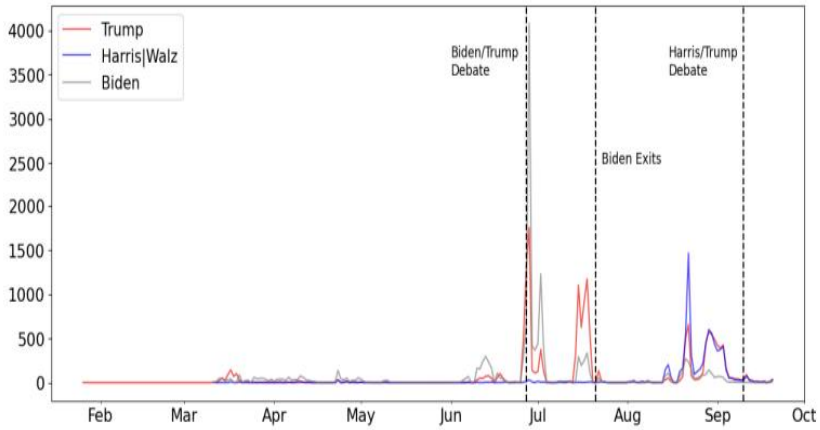


Source: *From Linvill, D., & Warren, P. (2024). Digital yard signs: Analysis of an AI bot political influence campaign on X. Clemson University Media Forensics Hub.* https://open.clemson.edu/mfh_reports/7/

This graph in Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of the first posts made by each of the 686 network accounts over time. The X-axis represents time (from February to October 2024), while the Y-axis shows the number of accounts that posted their first message on a given date. Distinct spikes indicate the days when multiple accounts were activated and began posting, with the heaviest activity occurring around June and July 2024.

Figure 5

Daily network content targeting the 2024 U.S. Presidential campaign



Source: *From Linvill, D., & Warren, P. (2024). Digital yard signs: Analysis of an AI bot political influence campaign on X. Clemson University Media Forensics Hub.* https://open.clemson.edu/mfh_reports/7/

Figure 5 shows the daily network content targeting the 2024 U.S. Presidential campaign, focusing on posts related to Trump (red), Harris(purple), and Biden (blue). The graph highlights significant spikes in activity during key events such as the Biden/Trump debate, the Harris/Trump debate, and

Biden's exit from the race. These peaks reflect the network's increased focus on specific candidates, with Trump and Biden receiving the most attention, especially during major campaign moments. The graph underscores how the network's activity aligns with important political events.

These bots were used to boost certain candidates and make them appear more popular. For example, in the Ohio Senate race, the bots supported Frank LaRose over Bernie Moreno, and in the Arizona congressional race, they backed Blake Masters over Abraham Hamadeh. Essentially, the bots created the illusion of more public support for these candidates.

Public Discord and Fear

It is a general perception that Russia is using AI to create psychological fear in individuals. Although the US has debunked the fake information and confiscated the fake accounts, people are still unsure of whom to believe or not. A report from the Institute of Strategic Dialogue provides more depth on this issue. It focused on 3 major social media outlets where US election-related talk was prevalent to include Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube. The content covered analysis since August 2024. A random sampling was done, and three hundred posts were selected for observation. The patterns were coded and observed. This eventually led to an alarming number of posts that were AI-induced. About 1.1 million social media posts discussed AI in the context of elections (Frances-Wright, Jacobs, & Meyer, 2024). However, what was more concerning was the confusion among people. About 52% of the time, people incorrectly identify another user as an AI. Also, about 44% of the time, users accused an election candidate or voter of using AI. Which was not confirmed at all. Hence, people were acting out of fear and misunderstanding.

Findings and Discussion

The research findings provide an extensive narrative of what are the effects of AI-powered bots on political discourse. In this case, Russian AI-powered bot farms disrupted political discussions in the U.S. by spreading false information, creating division, and fostering distrust in democratic institutions, as noted in the 2024 elections.

Disruption of Political Discussions

The sophisticated bots, powered by AI, were able to manipulate political conversations. They spread disinformation in a manner that was more believable and widespread than earlier bot interventions. In spite of having a limited number of followers. A bot account named "Ricardo Abbot" had twenty-three followers (Aron, 2024) and was one of the bots which had its information was available to the public. So, upon examination, it looked like any ordinary person. However, many accounts like Ricardo exist, which collectively pose a threat of misinformation through multiple bot accounts. It was recorded that more than 1000 such accounts, like Ricardo, posted misleading political content. This confirmed the claim that bots contributed to disrupting political discourse.

Creation of Division

The bots targeted divisive political issues, such as voter suppression and election fraud. They amplified content that favored one political faction while undermining the other. This aligns with the hypothesis that the bots were designed to create division among U.S. citizens, particularly in swing states. Furthermore, the reports gathered from the Institute of Strategic Studies mentioned above prove that they had a significant influence on people's beliefs.

Fostering Distrust in Democratic Institutions

The bots were effective in eroding trust in the democratic process. They had spread false narratives, particularly around election integrity and political figures. Despite efforts to control the narrative, the continued influence of the bots contributed to a sense of uncertainty and distrust. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center also proved that 52 percent of Americans feel uneasy about integrating AI into their daily life (Beshay, 2025). This supports the idea that the bots aimed to diminish public confidence in the U.S. system. Many people are now hesitant to believe what is available online.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, it is clear that there is a need to better strategize for the future. To address these challenges effectively, a multifaceted approach is imperative. The following

recommendations aim to provide actionable solutions,

Enhance Detection and Monitoring Technologies

The U.S. should learn from these types of attacks and develop better AI-induced machines for the identification of bots. Existing detection systems have errors in identifying them. Through improved detection capabilities, fake accounts and disinformation can be contained.

Strengthen Legislative Frameworks

Comprehensive legislation should be endorsed that discloses the origins of content, especially during the election cycle. A robust legal system will help deter malicious actors from deploying AI-powered bot farms. It will also ensure that the platforms promoting such content are held accountable.

Promote Media and Digital Literacy

There should also be media literacy programs. So that the public can adopt the skills to discern online content. Moreover, public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate voters about tactics used by bot farms. This will help empower the individuals to not believe online, manipulative deception.

Develop Counter-Disinformation Strategies

Although cybercrime and misinformation departments do exist in the U.S., they need to better equip themselves. There is a need to develop more training and timely responses to such incidents. Also, by creating specialized departments that tailor to issues related to AI bot farms, governments can prevent such issues from being re-enacted and disrupting democratic processes.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significant impact of Russian AI-powered bot farms on U.S. politics aimed at manipulating public opinion and voter behavior. It reveals how advanced systems and AI-powered tools have disrupted the integrity of electoral discourses and created distrust among the public. Furthermore, the application of computational propaganda theory helped provide more depth to the underlying mechanisms. This study is valuable for generating awareness regarding the impacts of these advancements, serving as a crucial foundation for future efforts aimed at preserving authenticity and reliability in politics.

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