From Automation to Anonymity: ROBOTROLLING Tactics in 2018

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Robotrolling

• Published quarterly
• Considers messages about NATO and the four countries Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland
• Currently Twitter data for March 2017 - present
• VKontakte from Summer 2017 - present
Bots & Sockpuppets

Automated

Human-controlled
Яна Филатова
@missis_filatova
Мы не столько нуждаемся в помощи друзей, сколько в уверенности, что она будет.

Рыбинск, Россия
Joined April 2010
Jana and her sisters
Bot armies manipulating popular sentiment

- Case: NATO and Baltics, Poland
  - Counting -> junk statistics
    - In Estonia bots generated ~85% of tweets spring 2017
- Russian-language Twitter is dominated by bots
- Trolls echo Kremlin media
- Undermines discussions online
We have identified a change - firstly

In the beginning of 2018 the number of bot-tweets dropped by 15 percentage points for Russian and 20 percentage points for English.
We have identified a change - secondly

7% recognisable human / institutional

38%

Anonymous
Media
Institution

45% recognisable human / institutional

16%
We have identified a change - thirdly

Automated Russian-language bot accounts are dying

...but...

The actors are changing tactics

...and...

Increasingly they now rely on human-operated troll accounts
Pulse of the nation?

Labour dominating Twitter discussions, researchers say

Labour makes up 62% of specific party references on platform, while proportion of links to professional news sites rises - but so do those to fake news
Declining interest in NATO presence among humans
Bot activity is in decline in absolute terms, but Twitter in Russian remains more polluted than Twitter in English.

As social media companies intervene to clean up automation, they should take care that changes they introduce may enable new forms of manipulation.

As we prepare for the future we need to be aware of the rapid changes taking place in the information environment.
Robotrolling

Violent Extremism and Communications


Russia’s Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment

Academic journal ‘Defence Strategic Communications’