

Information Warfare: Automated Propaganda and Social Media Bots

That Moron Who Spews Garbage and Doesn't Listen to Reason May Be a Bot

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Rampant Disinformation

NATO has [announced](#) that it is launching an “information war” against Russia.

The UK publicly [announced](#) a battalion of keyboard warriors to spread disinformation.

It's well-documented that the West has long [used false propaganda to sway public opinion](#).

Western military and intelligence services [manipulate social media](#) to counter criticism of Western policies.

[Such manipulation](#) includes flooding social media with comments supporting the government and large corporations, using [armies of sock puppets](#), i.e. [fake social media identities](#). See [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#).

In 2013, the American Congress [repealed the formal ban](#) against the deployment of propaganda against U.S. citizens living on American soil. So there's even *less* to constrain propaganda than before.

Information warfare for propaganda purposes also includes:

- The [Pentagon, Federal Reserve](#) and other government entities using software to track discussion of political issues ... to try to nip dissent in the bud before it goes viral
- [“Controlling, infiltrating, manipulating and warping”](#) online discourse
- Use of [artificial intelligence programs](#) to try to predict how people will react to propaganda

Automated Propaganda

Some of the propaganda is spread by software programs.

We pointed out 6 years ago that people were [writing scripts](#) to censor hard-hitting information from social media.

One of America's [top cyber-propagandists](#) – former high-level military information officer Joel Harding – [wrote](#) in December:

I was in a discussion today about information being used in social media as a possible weapon. The people I was talking with have a tool which scrapes social media sites, gauges their sentiment and gives the user the opportunity to automatically generate a persuasive response. Their tool is called a “Social Networking Influence Engine”.

The implications seem to be profound for the information environment.

The people who own this tool are in the civilian world and don't even remotely touch the defense sector, so getting approval from the US Department of State might not even occur to them.

How Can This Real?

Gizmodo [reported](#) in 2010:

Software developer Nigel Leck got tired rehashing the same 140-character arguments against climate change deniers, so he programmed a bot that does the work for him. With citations!

Leck's bot, [@AI_AGW](#), doesn't just respond to arguments directed at Leck himself, it goes out and picks fights. Every five minutes it trawls Twitter for terms and phrases that commonly crop up in Tweets that refute human-caused climate change. It then searches its database of hundreds to find a counter-argument best suited for that tweet—usually a quick statement and a link to a scientific source.

As can be the case with these sorts of things, many of the deniers don't know they've been targeted by a robot and engage AI_AGW in debate. The bot will continue to fire back canned responses that best fit the interlocutor's line of debate—Leck says this goes on for days, in some cases—and the bot's been outfitted with a number of responses on the topic of religion, where the arguments unsurprisingly often end up.

Technology has come a long way in the past 5 years. So if a lone programmer could do this 5 years ago, imagine what he could do now.

And the big players have a lot more resources at their disposal than a lone climate activist/software developer does. For example, a government expert told the Washington Post that the government “[quite literally can watch your ideas form as you type](#)” (and [see this](#)). So if the lone programmer is doing it, it's not unreasonable to assume that the big boys are widely doing it.

How Does It Work?

How does this work?

We have no inside knowledge, but we can imagine some possibilities:

- Any article that includes the words “Russia” or “Ukraine” automatically triggers comments accusing Russia of seeking to form a new empire, Putin of being the new Hitler, and the Russians invading and being responsible for all of the violence Ukraine
- Any article including the words “NSA”, “spying” or “mass surveillance” automatically triggers comments saying that the government is just trying keep us safe, and anyone who questions their actions is a tinfoil hat wearing conspiracy theorist who lives in his mom’s basement
- Any article mentioning the phrases “Federal Reserve” or “quantitative easing” automatically launches comments saying that the Fed is doing the best it can under difficult circumstances, and that the economy would be much worse without QE

So that moron who keeps spewing garbage - and doesn’t seem like he’s even listening to *your* responses - may actually be a bot.

How Effective Are Automated Comments?

Unfortunately, this is more effective than you might assume ...

Specifically, scientists have shown that [name-calling and swearing breaks down people’s ability to think rationally](#) ... and intentionally [sowing discord](#) and posting junk comments to [push down insightful comments](#) are common propaganda techniques.

Indeed, an automated program need not even be that sophisticated ... it can copy a couple of words from the main post or a comment, and then spew back one or more radioactive labels such as “terrorist”, “commie”, “Russia-lover”, “wimp”, “fascist”, “loser”, “traitor”, “conspiratard”, etc.

Given that Harding and his compadres [consider](#) anyone who questions any U.S. policies as an enemy of the state - [as does](#) the [Obama administration](#) (and [see this](#)) - many honest, patriotic writers and commenters may be targeted for automated propaganda comments.

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