

Bots blamed for COVID misinformation on Facebook

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(HealthDay)—Bots, not individual users, drive much of the COVID-19

misinformation on Facebook, according to a new study.

Bots are large numbers of automated accounts controlled by single users.

"The coronavirus pandemic has sparked what the World Health Organization has called an 'infodemic' of misinformation," said study leader John Ayers, a scientist who specializes in public health surveillance at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD).

"But, bots—like those used by Russian agents during the 2016 American presidential election—have been overlooked as a source of COVID-19 misinformation," Ayers added in a university news release.

The study authors measured how quickly the same links were shared in a sample of about 300,000 posts made to Facebook groups that shared 251,655 links.

Links repeatedly shared by multiple accounts within seconds of one another indicate activity of bot accounts controlled by automated software, the researchers explained.

The Facebook groups most influenced by bots averaged 4.28 seconds between shares of identical links, compared to 4.35 hours for the Facebook groups least influenced by bots, the findings showed.

Among Facebook groups least or most influenced by bots, the researchers monitored posts that shared a link to the Danish Study to Assess Face Masks for the Protection Against COVID-19 Infection (DANMASK-19). This was a clinical trial published in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

"We selected DANMASK-19 for our study because masks are an important public health measure to potentially control the pandemic and

are a source of popular debate," said study co-author Dr. Davey Smith, chief of infectious diseases at UCSD.

The researchers found that 39% of posts sharing the DANMASK-19 trial were made to Facebook groups most influenced by bots, while 9% of posts were made to Facebook groups least influenced by bots.

One in five of the posts made to Facebook groups most influenced by bots claimed masks harmed the wearer, contrary to scientific evidence.

Posts made to Facebook groups most influenced by bots were 2.3 times more likely to claim masks harm wearers and 2.5 times more likely to make conspiracy claims than posts made to Facebook groups least influenced by bots, according to the study.

The results were published June 7 in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

"If we want to correct the 'infodemic,' eliminating bots on social media is the necessary first step," Ayers said. "Unlike controversial strategies to censor actual people, silencing automated propaganda is something everyone can and should support."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention outlines what you need to [know about COVID-19](#).

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