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What types of COVID-19 conspiracies are populated by Twitter bots?
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Abstract

With people moving out of physical public spaces due to containment measures to tackle the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, online platforms become even more prominent tools to understand social discussion. Studying social media can be informative to assess how we are collectively coping with this unprecedented global crisis. However, social media platforms are also populated by bots, automated accounts that can amplify certain topics of discussion at the expense of others. In this paper, we study 43.3M English tweets about COVID-19 and provide early evidence of the use of bots to promote political conspiracies in the United States, in stark contrast with humans who focus on public health concerns.

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Introduction

At the time of this writing (mid-April 2020) the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak has already put tremendous strain on many countries' citizens, resources and economies around the world. Social distancing measures, travel bans, self-quarantines, and business closures are changing the very fabric of societies worldwide. With people forced out of the safety and comfort of their life routines, social media take centerstage, more than ever, as a mirror to global social discussions. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to determine whether online chatter reflects genuine people's conversations or otherwise may be distorted by the activity of automated accounts, often referred to as bots (a.k.a., social bots, sybil accounts, etc.). The presence of bots has been documented in the context of online political discussion (Bessi and Ferrara, 2016; Ferrara, 2017; Luceri, *et al.*, 2019), public health (Subrahmanian, *et al.*, 2016; Broniatowski, *et al.*, 2018; Sutton, 2018; Hwang, *et al.*, 2012; Allem, *et al.*, 2017), civil unrest (Stella, *et al.*, 2018), stock market