

Russia Gave Bots a Bad Name. Here's Why We Need Them More Than Ever | POLITICO Magazine

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Internet bots—those automated scripts that do everything from gathering stock prices to commandeering innocent computers to launch cyberstrikes—have recently come under attack as threatening the web, democracy and our very way of online life. During the 2016 presidential election, Russia unleashed an army of bots to troll Facebook and other sites, amplifying political division in support of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Twitter reported that in May alone it found nearly 10 million bots each week. Some of these Twitter bots posed as fans to enhance the popularity of celebrities (when the bots were stricken from the rolls, former President Barack Obama, Katy Perry and Oprah suddenly became about 2 percent less popular). Ever ready to wield a legislative remedy, California is considering laws to formally define and regulate all manner of online bots.

If these bots are so terrible, why not simply outlaw them?

Well, for starters, the internet could barely function without them. Google, for example, can only index the web and present search results through the use of bots—it calls the process “Googlebot”—which it describes as a spider that crawls nearly every website on the internet, often every few seconds. Say what you will about the fairness of algorithms that order search results, but you’re not going to have much patience for a search engine that depends on humans laboriously copying data from individual websites to craft its rankings. Businesses commonly use bots to crawl and scrape the websites of competitors for real-time pricing information. But there’s another argument in favor of bots that gets far less attention, at least outside of a courtroom in Washington, D.C. And it is challenging the notion that all bots—even fake accounts—are evil.

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