News Item

Who's a Bot? Who's Not? | The New York Times

By Siobhan Roberts
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Over the long Memorial Day weekend, a Twitter storm blew in about bots, those little automatic programs that talk to us in the digital dimension as if they were human.

What first caught the attention of Darius Kazemi was the headline on an article from NPR, "Researchers: Nearly Half of Accounts Tweeting About Coronavirus Are Likely Bots" — which Hillary Clinton retweeted to her 27.9 million followers — and a similar headline from CNN.

Mr. Kazemi thought, "That seems like a lot." An independent researcher and internet artist in Portland, Ore., and a 2018 Mozilla Fellow, Mr. Kazemi has spent considerable time studying the nature and behavior of bots. Stereotypically, bots run amok on social media, at Russia's behest. Some would argue that there is a vast and often troublesome population of bots out there: In one recent paper — "What Types of Covid-19 Conspiracies Are Populated by Twitter Bots?" — the author noted that some bots were hijacking Covid-19 hashtags with disinformation and conspiracy hashtags, such as #greatawakening and #qanon.

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