

# The role of bots in Canadian politics

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## Abstract

Conventionally, citizens, journalists, government, and the media are seen as the principal actors/agents in democracy. The rise of social media, however, has brought forth an additional actor: bots, which are computer programs that perform automated tasks based on the platform's data (Shorey & Howard, 2016, p. 5033). These bots can act both as creators of political information and as tools used by other actors for political purposes.

This research project seeks to explore the role and influence of these political bots, particularly in Canada, and examine how such software interacts with other actors. In order to become familiar with the subject matter, a literature review and detailed search on bots were first performed. A narrower search was then completed to create a database of 209 articles published over a 11 month timeframe that mention bots or spam. A grounded coding scheme for content analysis was developed and applied to each article in order to understand what the roles of political bots actually are in the Canadian context.

## Context

Bots play an enormous role online. A report published in January 2017 by Imperva showed how roughly 51.8% of all website traffic in the last year was generated by automated agents (Zeifman, 2017). On Twitter, political bots have been deployed by political leaders in Venezuela, Turkey, Mexico, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia, as well as by Islamic State supporters (Dreier, 2015; Perrin, 2016). In the recent U.S. presidential campaign, bots were used to rapidly spread misinformation and intimidate dissidents on both sides (Misener, 2016).

Despite the increasing awareness of political bots, research on Canadian ones is scarce. The goal of this project is to map out the state of bots in Canada, and build on the research by Dr Elizabeth Dubois and her colleagues on the @gccaedits WikiEdit Twitter bot (Ford, Dubois, & Puschmann, 2016).

## Methodology

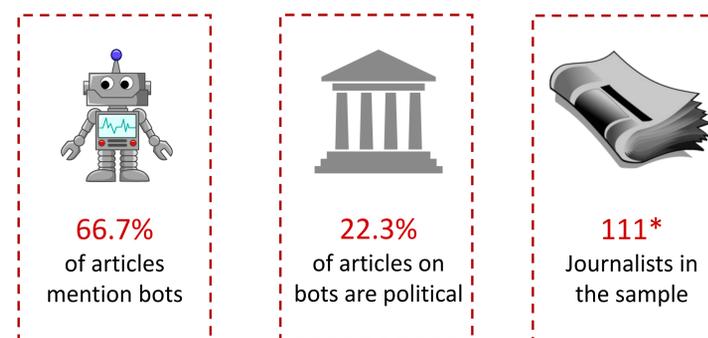
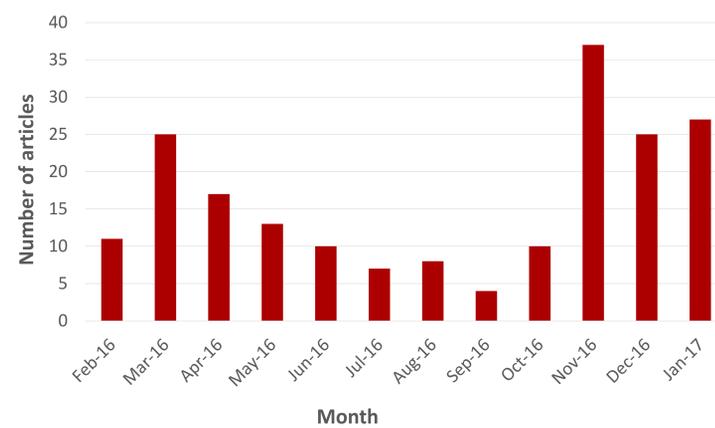
In this phase of the research project, qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the types of bots mentioned in Canadian news articles. After an extensive literature review, we developed a sampling strategy for news articles and a coding schedule which was used to analyze each article.

Using the database Factiva, articles from Canadian news sources published from February 1st 2016 – January 1st 2017 were collected using the following search terms: “bot” OR “spam”. Articles belonging in the “News release” and “Arts/entertainment” sections were excluded. 211 articles were collected, but 195 of them were analyzed after the removal of duplicates.

Each article was analyzed using the following coding schedule: author, date, publication venue, whether bots are mentioned, whether the mentioned bots are political, the type of bot, and additional notes, among other variables.

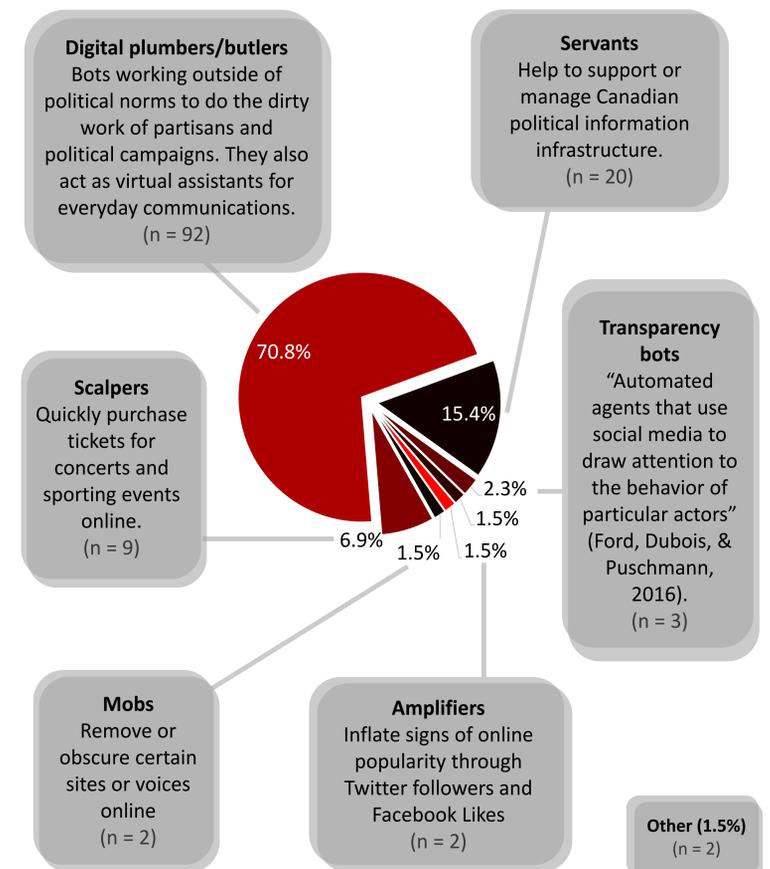
## Results

### Number of articles published, by month



\* Among the 145 articles that had authors

## Types of bots



## Conclusion

The goal of this phase of the research was to investigate the state of bots in Canada. After analysing these 195 news articles, it can be said that Canadian news sources mainly report on plumber/butler bots, and that very few of the reported bots are political in nature.

It is also interesting to note the large amount of articles on bots published in November 2016. This mainly because of the CRTC's legislation on spam calls that had been announced, as well as the US Presidential election.

The next steps will be to have a second coder analyze the articles to ensure intercoder reliability as well conducting interviews with journalists, government officials and bot creators in Canada.

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