

Attack of the killer bots

A local public service announcement warns that social media bots are spreading dangerous Covid-19 conspiracy theories and are putting lives at risk. By Georgina Crouth



Research conducted by the University of Southern California showed that people cannot determine which social media accounts are bots and which are human.

Photo: Supplied

Do you know who you are talking to on social media? Are they trustworthy, or do they harbour nefarious, hidden agendas?

Nearly half of all internet traffic is believed to be driven by bots mimicking human behaviour, learning and growing smarter by the day.

Estimates suggest there are between 500 million to a billion bot accounts on social media, many being used to spread disinformation and manipulate social narratives that shape beliefs and influence online and offline behaviour.

Notably, these bots, deployed by Russian agents, polarised political discussions around the 2016 US presidential election. In South Africa, they drove social divisions for the Guptas during the white monopoly capital campaigns run by disgraced former public relations firm, Bell Pottinger.

Most people are unable to identify whether or not a tweet is posted by a human or a bot. In *The Conversation*, Emilio Ferrar, an associate professor of computer science and communication at the University of Southern California, wrote about their research from 2016 to determine which accounts are bots or humans. "We learned, distressingly, that people were not able to ignore, or develop a sort of immunity toward the bots' presence and activity," he wrote. Bots were also being retweeted at the same rate as humans, without verification, which could have consequences, including spreading rumours, conspiracy theories or misinformation.

A locally produced horror-styled "mocumentary" warns that a large number of social-media bots are spreading dangerous conspiracy theories, which is putting lives at risk during the pandemic. Ironically, the public-service announcement has been banned by YouTube because its automated artificial intelligence (AI) system picked up on the film's Covid-19 messaging. The ban is being challenged, but the developer, Iron Heart, says the process could take a while.

The film has, however, been published on Shots.net, a global showcase for creativity in advertising, music videos, short films and "idents" (short sequences shown between programming that identify TV channels). The film is also currently viewable on Vimeo and Iron Heart's website.

Created in collaboration with The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) at UCT's Graduate School of Business, #CareZA and Iron Heart, the two-minute film *Ronald and Pete* is produced by Patriot Films' Zayd Halim and Lauren Dugmore, with direction by Aadil Dhalech. It features two characters: Ronald, a robot spreading false information about Covid-19 vaccinations and Pete, a gullible social-media user who falls for Ronald's crackpot stories about 5G towers being responsible for the spread of Covid-19; masks being dangerous; and vaccines containing nanotechnology which, when injected into the body, causes behavioural change.

Iron Heart's founders, Kush Chetty and Toni-Lee Cheiman, said the film was made to encourage public acceptance of the Covid-19 vaccine. Ronald the robot was designed and

Most people think social media is the news. They take what they see on social media and spread it out of concern, thinking they are helping or doing good

created by visual effects artist Robert Carlisle, who worked on *Judge Dredd* and *10,000 BC*. Ronald's face was printed in 3D.

Chetty and Cheiman started Iron Heart in 2020 to help small businesses, start-ups, and non-profits connect and communicate with their audience. Chetty worked on Toyota's Buddy the dog, MTN's Nightshift and Kia's Xhosa wedding, while Cheiman has worked on "everything from FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods] to financial services, fast foods, fashion, alcohol, automotive, telecoms and government".

Cheiman was also part of the team that created the Fake Dogfight Billboard for the National Council of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which went viral and resulted in the rescue of over a 100 dogs and over 50 arrests.

The CABC scans social media to look for

divisions in society. It was established to track and counter mis- and disinformation, and divisive rhetoric shared online. Where divisions are found, they intervene in defence of democracy. Chetty is a co-founder of the centre, which focusses on misinformation, gender-based violence, xenophobia and Radical Economic Transformation.

Chetty, who started his advertising career in 1998, was frustrated with the industry and realised it was time for a change. With the Cambridge Analytica and Bell Pottinger scandals threatening democracy, he wanted to help identify and address these issues.

"Advertising's a hard industry. My whole family is in advertising. With the demand for consumerism, the neglect [of] people, the planet and environment, I fell out of love with advertising."

Instead, he and Cheiman are using their skills to leave a legacy of change. "*Ronald and Pete* is one such project – developed using humour to drive home the message that conspiracy theories and misinformation have consequences.

"There's a pandemic of AI on these platforms that share conspiracy theories and ordinary people are being duped," says Chetty. "Most people think social media is the news. They take what they see on social media and spread it out of concern, thinking they are helping or doing good – we are social beings, after all."

The message is: don't take what you watch on social media as truth, always verify the information before retweeting or sharing it on your own pages. **DM168**

Q&A WITH GILLIAN RIGHTFORD

By Georgina Crouth

Marketing expert and creativity advocate Gillian Rightford is the founder of Adtherapy, a consultancy aimed at marketers and agencies.

Where do you get your news?
Mostly Twitter.

George Carlin wrote: "Advertising sells you things you don't need and can't afford, that are overpriced and don't work. And they do it by exploiting your fears and insecurities. And if you don't have any, they'll be glad to give you a few." Your view?

Carlin is so funny because there's truth in his observations. Advertising raises many ethical questions, but people buy what they need and want. Some marketers have been trying to find "purpose" for their brands (Lifebuoy), but do advertisers also paint brands as helpful for aspirations? Yes. Do they highlight problems you didn't know you had? Sometimes. Can they force you to buy anything you don't want to? No (not legally anyway). If something is overpriced and doesn't work, it has a limited life span.

Why did you choose advertising as a career?

An aptitude test after school showed equal art and science ability and suggested marketing.

What would you do if you were not in advertising?

I'd be an intellectual property lawyer. If I had a trust fund, a writer.

What books are you reading?

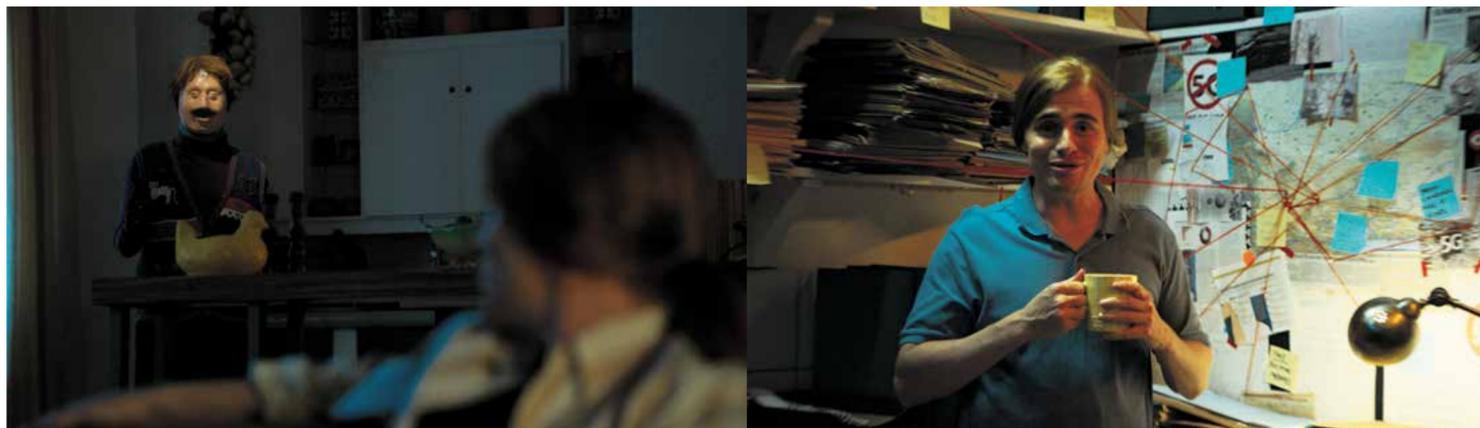
Gifts of Imperfection (Brené Brown); *Range* (David Epstein), and *Strategy Is Your Words* (Mark Pollard).

Which adverts (not yours) have made the biggest impact on you?

Reebok Theatre of Dreams; Guinness Surfer; John Lewis Christmas 2011; Coca Cola Happiest Thank You (dare you not to cry) and Always #LikeAGirl. Some of my favourite local ads include: IBM/ISM Elephant, Bells Reader, VW Memories, BMW Mouse, Topsy Foundation and Selinah. Ads that are strategically relevant and resonate with their audience off a strong insight, and produced with craft and impact, win it for me.

Lessons of the pandemic?

Creative people and knowledge workers don't have to work in a 9-to-5 office, shuffling through airports, to be effective. We need to optimise the balance, though, to give people time and space to think and collaborate. **DM168**



South African journalism would benefit from doing more listening

Are journalists always outside the communities they are meant to serve, instead of being one with their respective publics so they can be part of the solutions? University of Cape Town Professor of Media Studies Herman Wasserman's new book, *The Ethics of Engagement* (Oxford University Press), poses challenges to journalism. We should reflect on whether we in the global South impose global North values. Could we examine particular conditions and tailor-make our storytelling to contribute to deepening democracy? This is the politico-philosophical tension in the book, that of the universal versus the particular, a recurring backdrop theme is the media's role in a democracy.

Wasserman's book is engaging and accessible. Interestingly, it even proposes a radical intervention into – or a total overhaul of – the self-regulation system of the Press Code in SA, towards more ethical engagement within the framework of "listening journalism". Wasserman does not pose the questions I've listed above, but asserts strongly that we are too fixated on "professional codes of ethics", rather than being engaged with our local communities by practicing listening. How does he get there?

Using radical democracy theory, Wasserman argues that conflict is normal. It is part of the human condition. We cannot eliminate conflict, but we can change its character. Africa has particular conditions, and we cannot simply apply theory from the North to the South. He then applies this theoretical framework to reporting of conflict: How does

journalism report ethically? Does it amplify conflict or does it contribute to peace?

Journalism needs to engage more with communities and be part of communities, he writes. This proposition goes against the present "professional" codes, with their lauding of objectivity and distance. The rest of the world can learn from Africa, to make journalism ethical, if we practice listening journalism.

To do so, fewer boundaries are needed between publics and journalists, not more. The argument is: let's not amplify conflict but let's contribute to peace in Africa, and the rest of the world. When we talk about the public service function of journalism – indeed, what other function should it have? – are we talking about escalating conflict and war, or do we want to make the world a better place?

The Ethics of Engagement approaches the media's role from the angle of conflict, democratisation and transition. Wasserman takes off from the premise that the collapse of authoritarian regimes and the transition to democracy in recent decades are significant global phenomena shaping political life around the world. This applies as much to Africa as to the rest of the world.

The book comes shortly after the release of the SA National Editors Forum (Sanef) *Inquiry into Ethics* report. A conference will be held in May to plot the way forward for a new kind of journalism based on higher ethical codes and standards. It appears Wasserman would like journalism to go much further than the normative ideals we have before us.



MEDIA MATTERS

Glenda Daniels



Using radical democracy theory, Wasserman argues that conflict is normal. It is part of the human condition. We cannot eliminate conflict, but we can change its character

In 2011 and 2012, the Press Council of SA revised its codes of good practice, after the Press Freedom Commission hearings under Justice Pius Langa. Wasserman believes this "reform" is not enough. He seems to dislike the epithet "professional", seeing it as alienating, as standing in the way of journalism's participation in the social body, of being part of it. He wants to see more collaboration in an unfolding democracy. He asks that we "rethink completely".

What would a more radical opening up of journalism to the public entail? More town-hall meetings or community dialogues? The book refers to the community dialogues initiated in 2011 by *DM168* editor Heather Robertson, when she was editor of *The Herald* in the Eastern Cape, working with Allan Zinn, the director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy (Canrad) at Nelson Mandela University. This is an oft-used example of listening: the editors, journalists and the community gathered regularly to listen to the issues affecting the community and what they'd like covered in the paper. It was a successful intervention.

But has there been real interrogation of what happens to initiatives like this when editors move on or owners want to turn listening exercises into profit centres? Most community dialogues or "town halls" have become revenue streams – sponsored webinars during the Covid-19 pandemic or fee-paying big events for the wealthy and elite, with experts in conversation with each other and journalists.

There is no tapping into what communities deem important or listening to them. Wasserman does pointedly ask how we are to translate the listening into better reporting on poor communities. It may well be that cultural and other approaches to better ethics in journalism are superior to what is presently on the table in the West – and to which we in SA have an attachment. But how would ownership, management and editor structures support this shift, when newsrooms are being depleted of staff in bloodbaths of

retrenchments? I think different approaches can operate in tandem – professional codes with listening journalism and cultural approaches. The opening up of journalism is a splendid idea, but the "how" is the question.

Not doing harm by not exacerbating conflict is an important principle that Wasserman explores and I fully endorse. Lots of challenges exist – archaic concepts such as distance, neutrality and objectivity lead to a chasm between publics and journalists. This breeds a cynical view of the media and journalism on the part of the public.

Other ideas to reflect on include the need to protect the dignity of subjects rather than viewing them merely as objects; to give dignity to subjects in conflicts and wars as well as conditions of poverty, such as starvation.

Reflecting on peace journalism, the ethics of listening, the discussion of voyeurism and avoiding exposure to more pain makes it clear that more empathy and compassion are needed all round. In Wasserman's view, there is still room for watchdog journalism, as we presently have it in SA, which holds the powerful to account for their corruption.

The Ethics of Engagement is a great book to read, with lots of food for thought for media companies, newsrooms, editors and journalists, academics and consumers of media. **DM168**

Glenda Daniels is an associate professor in the Media Studies department at Wits University and the author of *Power and Loss in South African Journalism: News in the Age of Social Media* (2020).