

# Russian trolls on Twitter aim to sow discord about vaccines

◆ Broniatowski DA, et al. *Am J Public Health*. 2018;108:1378-1384, <http://bit.ly/2OJ4bl4>.

Russian trolls on Twitter didn't just target the 2016 election, they also have been posting divisive messages about vaccines, a study found.

Researchers analyzed tweets from July 2014 to September 2017 and found bots that automate content, trolls who misrepresent their identities and content polluters who spread malware and commercial content were more likely to tweet about vaccines than the average user.

Bots and trolls posted pro- and anti-vaccine content in equal amounts. Researchers also found that compared to average users, content polluters posted 75% more anti-vaccine messages.

"Content polluters seem to use anti-vaccine messages as bait to entice their followers to click on advertisements and links to malicious websites. Ironically, content that promotes exposure to biological viruses may also promote exposure to computer viruses," co-author Sandra Crouse Quinn, Ph.D., said in a news release.

Researchers also looked at tweets using #VaccinateUS, which has been linked to Russian trolls from Russia's

Internet Research Agency and found similar rates of pro-vaccine and anti-vaccine messages, often connecting their arguments for either side to politics. Messages often mentioned issues like parental choice, rights and freedom. Users of the hashtag also sometimes linked their arguments to God or racial divisions, which authors did not find common in other vaccine posts.

"These trolls seem to be using vaccination as a wedge issue, promoting discord in American society," co-author Mark Dredze, Ph.D., said in a news release. "However, by playing both sides, they erode public trust in vaccination, exposing us all to the risk of infectious diseases. Viruses don't respect national boundaries."

The authors also found significant rates of anti-vaccine tweets from accounts in which it was hard to tell whether bots or humans were generating them and said it may be a more sophisticated combination of the two. They called for more research on the best ways to combat anti-vaccine content being generated by bots. The Academy has created an immunization social media toolkit, which is available at <http://bit.ly/2FJ0DXI>.

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