Sturgeon ‘has 73,000 fake Twitter followers’

Mark Macaskill

Twitter has been urged to investigate hundreds of “suspicious” accounts linked to Scottish politicians after a snapshot study suggested that up to one in seven of their followers are fake.

Academics conducted a sweep of 7,000 accounts that track politicians including Nicola Sturgeon, John Swinney and Jo Swinson. Almost 800 were flagged as potential web robots – known as bots – that have been linked to efforts by countries such as Russia and Iran to spread disinformation on social media. The analysis, carried out by researchers at Birmingham and Reading universities, suggests that 14% of Sturgeon’s Twitter followers are likely to be fake.

In recent years, a rise in Twitter accounts with eight digits in their name has fuelled suspicion that they are fake and mass-created by “agents provocateurs” to promote political messages.

Sasha Talavera, a professor in financial economics at the University of Birmingham, and Tho Pham, from the University of Reading, examined the 1,000 most recent followers for each of seven politicians who enjoy a strong presence on Twitter.

Sturgeon, the first minister, had the highest number of potentially fake followers, with 144 accounts (14%) flagged as suspicious for containing eight numbers in their name. Many of the profiles also lack photos or personal information.

For Jackson Carlaw, the interim leader of the Scottish Conservatives, 140 accounts were highlighted as suspect bots; for Swinney, the deputy first minister, the number was 136 followed by Richard Leonard, the Scottish Labour leader (109); Mhairi Black, the SNP MP (93); Swinson, the Lib Dem leader (88) and Willie Rennie, the Scottish Lib Dem leader (81). In total, of the 7,000 accounts analysed, 791 were picked out as suspicious. Talavera and Pham also examined tweets in the past three months across the entire Twitter-sphere that contained the #Brexit hashtag. They identified a spike in the number of new eight-digit Twitter accounts on September 6, with more than 400 created, roughly double the daily average.

On that day, the headlines covered the
resignation of Boris Johnson’s brother Jo and his fading prospects of securing an election after Jeremy Corbyn and the SNP agreed to block any poll until the prime minister secured an extension to the Brexit deadline.

Talavera and Pham found evidence that fake accounts previously locked, deleted or suspended by Twitter had been reactivated. “Bot accounts are typically used for spreading fake news, amplifying statements, or incentivising individual users or even groups of users for actions,” said Talvera. “Twitter still has millions of these accounts and many of them were created recently.”

Twitter Audit, a New York firm that uses a “conservative” algorithm to identify fake and “low-quality” followers, ran a fresh sweep last week for this newspaper. It claims that almost 12,000 of Swinney’s 74,500 followers are probably fake, which if true translates to 16% of his following. The ranks of Sturgeon’s 1m Twitter followers have been infiltrated by almost 73,000 bots (7.3%)

The findings echo a report commissioned by SNP MEP Alyn Smith last year, estimating that between 4% and 12% of Scottish Twitter activity is “potentially malign” and heavily centred on Scottish independence and Brexit. The report warned that Scotland is a “clear target for hostile state and non-state actors” because of its position as an “independent nation operating under devolved power arrangements during a time of crisis from the United Kingdom”.

It predicted that such activity would increase, rather than decrease, over time. Last night, Smith, who has almost 39,000 Twitter followers, said he believed fake accounts were behind a rise in online abuse against him since being announced as the SNP’s candidate for Stirling at the next general election.

“There are malign forces trying to undermine the democratic space, it’s as sinister as hell and we should all be concerned,” he said. “These fake accounts are generating a huge amount of content that is designed to create division and drown out voices of moderation. I think Twitter could be doing more.”

A Twitter spokeswoman said: “We have not identified any co-ordinated activity with regard to the accounts which have been brought to our attention and are taking aggressive enforcement action against any which violate our platform manipulation and spam policy.”

The platform said it had improved its “rate of action” on accounts created after a previous suspension with 100,000 shut down between January and March.