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TikTok 'bots' target pollie pages

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INFILTRATION Dozens of fake profiles are repeatedly praising or attacking leaders

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Eleanor Campbell

ARMIES of fake TikTok accounts are spreading repetitive praise or attacks on the social media accounts of major political figures - but no one seems willing to claim responsibility for deploying them.

Analysis by *The Canberra Times* identified more than 100 social media bots appearing on the TikTok accounts of Peter Dutton, Anthony Albanese, the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party and the Australian Greens.

Repetitive posts also appeared on the profiles of major news organisations and the individual accounts of political candidates with varying degrees of profile.

Comments were generic, repetitive and expressed a range of varying political views. Some voiced campaign talking points, while others denigrated individuals.

One bot posting on the TikTok accounts of Peter Dutton and the Liberal Party said, "Voting for Dutton means backing his values. Are they really yours? He talks tough like Trump, but his policies help the rich and leave everyday Aussies behind."

Another comment on a video posted to Labor's official campaign account said: "Change is coming! @EllieSmith for Dickson Independent has a real chance to kick Dutton out in Dickson. Vote #1 for Ellie and vote Dutton last. Want change? Vote for it!"

Several bots purporting to support the Independent candidate for Dickson, Ellie Smith, were identified on multiple videos posted to Labor's official campaign account.

A spokesperson for Ms Smith said her team was not responsible for the bots.

"Ellie's campaign has not paid for any bots or fake promotion online or on social media to fake support for her or to attack other candidates," the spokesperson said.

A generic comment posted to the 7News' TikTok account by an apparent bot praised the Liberal Party for its recent diss track against Anthony Albanese: "This is definitely a bold move in politics! Interesting to see how creative campaigns are getting."

A Liberal Party campaign spokesperson

said the party was not responsible for the bots and suggested the comment was a genuine display of support.

What are political bots?

A bot is an automated program that can mimic human language and behaviour, mostly through artificial intelligence. They often have generic usernames, incomplete profile information, or no profile picture.

Swinbourne University's Dominique Carlon, one of Australia's leading experts on bots, said political bots were designed to sway public opinion and amplify ideological divides.

"We do know that during election cycles they come out in force, which very much supports some type of targeted purpose in deployment," Ms Carlon said.

"They've been successful because they exploit the already existing ideological divides. They are very much tailored to interfere and create some sort of layer of doubt or information."

An analysis conducted by Queensland University of Technology researchers after the 2019 federal election found thousands of Twitter users tweeting about the election were bots.

The report found the top locations of accounts identified as bots were tweeting from New York, country NSW and Indonesia.

Ms Carlon said there were many motivations that could drive an individual or group to purchase bots, including to bump up a particular profile on a person's social media algorithm.

"We see this giant flood of upvoting, or liking a comment, to bump up follower counts," she said.

"Bots can also carry out conversations that can be very stale and look out of place, but it does engage with keywords that can elevate a profile on someone's account," she said.

University of Sydney lecturer Dr Francesco Bailo, who researches the use of social media in politics, suggested a low-profile



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political candidate would be most likely to use bots to prop up their social media presence, but added it was a "risky PR strategy".

"There are many different services a person can use. You might have bot farms, which are basically companies based in poor countries that have people in front of many mobile phones who are creating many accounts," Dr Bailo said.

"If you want to buy 1000 TikTok comments, some services can charge around \$69.

"In some sense, it can be a low-cost campaign strategy."

Bots in AEC, TikTok's sights

A spokesperson for the Australian Electoral Commission told *The Canberra Times* the use of paid social media bots by a political entity or an organisation was likely

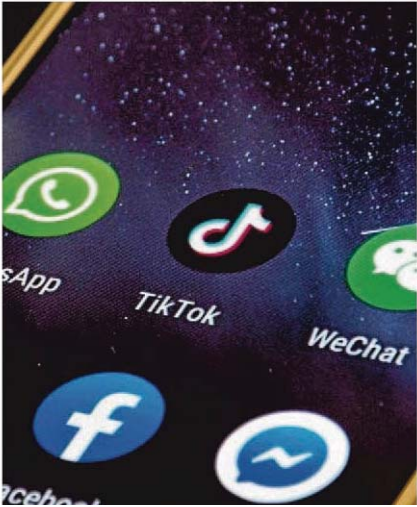
not authorised under electoral law.

"The AEC is aware that the source of bot accounts on social media can be difficult to trace, however, the AEC may utilise its regulatory functions to assist in this," they said.

A TikTok spokesperson said the platform did not allow spam or comments that may spam or mislead people.

"We always protect the integrity of our platform and during this election period our teams are working with the Australian Electoral Commission and other agencies to prevent the spread of harmful content," they said.

Political leaders have ramped up their use of social media during the election campaign in an attempt to reach younger voters, with both Anthony Albanese and Peter Dutton posting daily on their Instagram and TikTok accounts.



TikTok has about 8.5 million users in Australia.



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Repetitive posts by bots have been appearing on TikTok.



Dozens of non-human TikTok accounts have either praised or targeted Opposition Leader Peter Dutton.