

Reddit troll activity during EU referendum

Overview

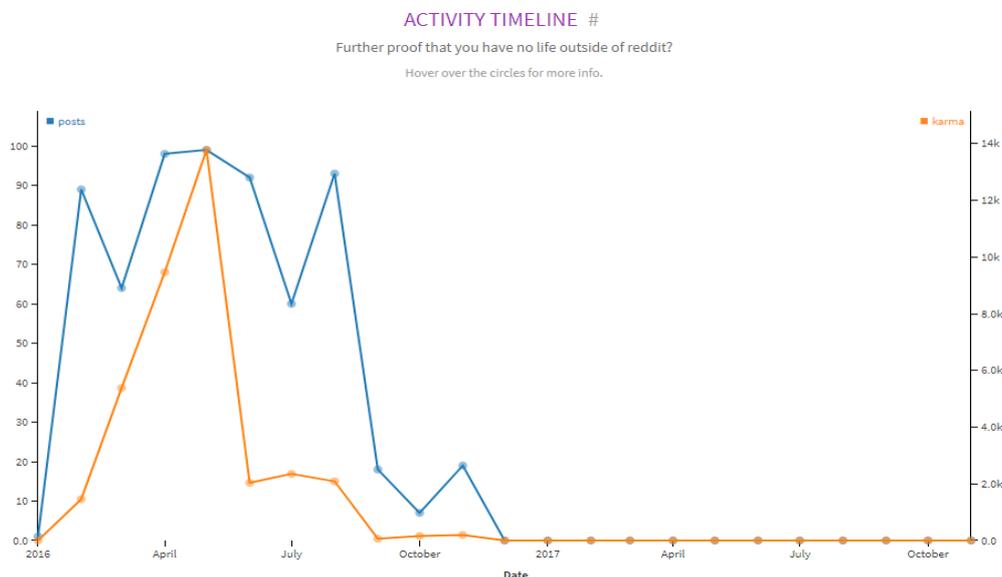
- Analysis of submissions to the [r/ukpolitics](#) subreddit during the British EU referendum campaign from 15 April 2016 to 23 June 2016.
- Key finding is that there was two types of bots active in this subreddit at this time both pro-brexit and pro-trump. The first seems to be managed accounts mixing propaganda links in with regular links. The second were all registered just before the end of the campaign and usually posted a few times, at least one of them became a pro-trump bot.

Limitations of Reddit APIs

- Only able to get the most recent 1000 posts of an account making tracking activity of highly active accounts hard.
- Important pieces of information hidden from us, including subscriber lists and who upvoted/downvoted a comment.
- The analytical framework and tool set around reddit is much less developed.

First group

- This group of accounts was created during December 2014 were they were idle for 14 months before becoming active in February 2016. They posted across a wide variety of subs to produce the appearance of a real user while inserting pro-trump links into their activity. Then in December to February 2017 they stop posting and have been inactive since then.
- The fact that these accounts have a very similar creation date and activity suggests these could be Russian propaganda accounts that were used to boost visibility of pro-trump stories and created the illusion of popular support.



An example of the first group of the accounts. More info can be been [here](#)

Second group

- A group of accounts registered just before the end of the campaign and the voting process. Markedly different from the other group these are a lot more obvious and cruder with little attempt at deception, some only posting one or two links. At least one was repurposed as a trump spam bot.
- Admittedly the scattered nature of these accounts may mean they were burner accounts created by people to post pro-brexit material independent of each other.

Deleted accounts

- Nearly 60 accounts that posted in the subreddit were suspended or deleted and due to the limitations of Reddit we are unable to find out what they produced. As such we must conclude they broke Reddit's rules and if counted as propaganda accounts this means that about 7% of all users that posted during the campaign were false accounts.

Conclusions

- Our findings suggest that there was an attempt to influence the sub's discussion of brexit by fake accounts and these accounts were also used in the Trump campaign.
- There is fake/troll/bot/manipulate accounts problem on reddit but detection is hard, compared to twitter/facebook there is not identifiable information to make an account a real person that can be easily discredited.
- Instead detection must rely on content posting and comparing it to other known accounts. Reddits removal of accounts also complicates matters as we have limited information about why the account was suspended and its posting history via the API.