



Human Bots and Algorithmic Bots in Tanzanian Politics: A Rising Threat to Democratic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of bot farms, both algorithmic and human-operated, poses a critical challenge to democratic discourse in many African nations, including Tanzania. Political actors are increasingly deploying these bot farms to manipulate public opinion, hijack political conversations, and create artificial consensus on sensitive national issues. This paper investigates the influence of such bots on political communication, focusing on recent patterns observed across Tanzanian digital platforms. It explores how both algorithmic and human bots are systematically employed to flood social media with curated content, silence opposition voices, and shape electoral narratives. Through qualitative analysis of digital interactions and secondary sources, this study reveals the strategic use of bots to manipulate political narratives, promote astroturfing, and suppress dissent. The paper highlights the implications for digital democracy, including the erosion of authentic political engagement, and emphasizes the urgent need for regulatory, civic, and technological responses to preserve democratic integrity in digital spaces.

Keywords

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Introduction

The digital transformation in Tanzanian politics has accelerated the adoption of online platforms for political communication. Political parties, civic organizations, and individual actors have increasingly turned to social media channels like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to engage voters, disseminate campaign messages, and mobilize support. However, this progress has been accompanied by the proliferation of bot-driven manipulation. Human bots and algorithmic bots, automated accounts or accounts run systematically by humans have emerged as powerful tools for political influence [1], [2]. These entities can spread misinformation, create illusions of consensus, and amplify partisan narratives [3]. In a context where digital literacy and media regulation remain underdeveloped, the ability of these bots to distort public opinion poses significant risks to democratic participation and electoral integrity [4].

Political actors in Tanzania increasingly exploit these technologies to dominate online discourse. Particularly during election cycles, such practices intensify, with coordinated campaigns leveraging social bots to support ruling parties and discredit opposition voices [5], [6], [7]. These bots are often programmed or directed to flood platforms with favourable narratives, attack political opponents, and hijack trending discussions to align with governmental priorities [2]. Such activity is not only limited to automated systems but also involves human-operated accounts that mimic real users, making detection and accountability more complex. The systematic nature of these interventions has transformed digital platforms into contested battlegrounds where manipulation thrives over genuine debate. This manipulation not only distorts public perception but also erodes trust in democratic processes [4].

The primary aim of this paper is to analyze the nature and function of both human and algorithmic bots in Tanzanian politics, assess their impact on democratic discourse, and explore regulatory and civic strategies that can mitigate their harmful influence on political communication and electoral transparency.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the influence of human and algorithmic bots on political communication in Tanzania. A document-based analysis was conducted, drawing on academic literature, policy documents, digital security reports, and prior empirical studies addressing bot activity, computational propaganda, and online political discourse. Secondary data were collected from peer-reviewed journals, governmental publications, and NGO reports published between 2015 and 2025. To analyze patterns of bot-driven political manipulation, thematic analysis was applied, focusing on three core themes: (1) the nature and operation of bots, (2) their impact on democratic discourse, and (3) state and civic responses. Digital traces and examples reported in existing studies were used to illustrate bot

behavior within Tanzanian political contexts. This approach enabled an in-depth interpretation of current practices and challenges without direct data scraping, ensuring ethical handling of politically sensitive digital information.

Results and Discussion

A. Nature and Operation of Bots in Tanzanian Politics

Algorithmic bots operate through programmed algorithms that automate tasks such as reposting content, following specific accounts, liking posts, and engaging with hashtag trends. These bots are optimized to respond almost instantly to political events, often flooding social media platforms with synchronized posts designed to distort trending topics and manipulate the visibility of certain narratives [2], [8]. Their ability to operate at scale and speed makes them highly effective in overwhelming organic content and shaping the online agenda.

In parallel, human bots simulate authentic user behaviour, making their presence far more difficult to detect [2], [9]. Unlike their algorithmic counterparts, human bots are typically individuals or groups paid to maintain fake personas that align with political campaigns or parties. These actors are tasked with monitoring opposition voices, amplifying pro-government sentiments, and engaging in digital debates to steer public opinion. In Tanzania, both algorithmic and human bots have been systematically employed to support the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party. Their operations are particularly visible during periods of heightened political significance, such as general elections, constitutional debates, and policy reform campaigns, when controlling the digital narrative becomes essential for political dominance [4], [7].

Human bots often post repetitive, favourable content, echo pro-government sentiments, or react aggressively to critiques of the ruling party. By mimicking widespread approval or disapproval, they generate a false sense of public consensus, thereby exerting pressure on undecided users or silencing dissent [10], [11]. This practice, known as astroturfing, creates an illusion of grassroots movements, blurring the distinction between genuine democratic participation and orchestrated manipulation.

B. Impact on Political Engagement and Discourse

The deployment of bots alters the landscape of political participation in profound ways. These bots can overwhelm authentic civic discourse by flooding timelines with repetitive or misleading content, effectively silencing genuine voices. This suppression leads to an uneven digital space where opposition views are marginalized, and manipulated narratives dominate [8], [12]. On Tanzanian platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, several documented cases highlight the use of coordinated bot operations to suppress hashtags and conversations critical of government policies or controversial legislation [1], [10]. These actions limit public exposure to alternative viewpoints and hinder the democratic function of online dialogue.

Moreover, the pervasive presence of bots has significant implications for electoral transparency and citizen trust. By simulating mass public support or dissent, these automated and human-directed accounts generate a misleading image of consensus. This engineered sentiment can misguide undecided voters, influence mainstream media coverage, and reinforce the ruling party's narrative dominance [1], [8]. The algorithmic nature of social media platforms often exacerbates this dynamic by prioritizing content that appears popular, regardless of its authenticity. Consequently, a feedback loop is created where bot-generated content is further amplified while organic discourse is buried.

As a result, citizens increasingly feel alienated from political engagement in digital spaces. They may come to believe that their contributions have no impact or that public opinion is already firmly established, discouraging participation [12], [13]. The systematic distortion of public sentiment also fosters a culture of political apathy, particularly among young or first-time voters. Over time, this digital disengagement risks undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions and weakening the accountability mechanisms that vibrant political dialogue is meant to uphold. The presence of bots undermines electoral transparency [1]. By simulating public consensus, these tools contribute to voter misperception and political apathy. The manipulation of online sentiment can even sway media narratives and influence undecided voters [7], [14].

C. Regulatory and Societal Responses

In response to rising digital manipulation, the Tanzanian government has enforced cybercrime laws, including the Cybercrimes Act 2015, aiming to control digital misinformation [10]. These measures target online fraud, misinformation, and unauthorized data breaches and are intended to create a more accountable digital environment. However, critics argue these laws have also been weaponized to silence opposition under the guise of cybersecurity [6], [10]. Politicians, journalists, and activists have reported harassment or arrest following online criticism of the government, raising concerns over free speech and the selective enforcement of these laws [13].

Civil society and digital literacy advocates call for broader awareness campaigns and ethical tech use to combat the malicious deployment of bots [2], [5]. Training in digital resilience and media verification is being promoted, particularly among youth and grassroots movements. International collaboration is also crucial to track bot networks that often operate across borders and platforms [6], [12]. Some regional alliances are beginning to share intelligence and technical expertise in detecting disinformation campaigns, reflecting a growing consensus that the problem extends beyond national boundaries and requires global solutions.

Conclusion

The rise of human bots and algorithmic bots in Tanzanian politics signifies a growing threat to authentic democratic engagement. As political entities adopt increasingly sophisticated

tools for narrative control, the boundaries between real public opinion and artificial amplification continue to blur. Addressing this challenge requires comprehensive strategies involving policy reform, digital literacy, and cross-sector collaboration. Tanzania's experience reflects broader global trends, underscoring the importance of proactive governance in preserving digital democracy.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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