

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPAM

By Kit Riley

The studio is small and soft. The contours of ad hoc surfaces are the markers of my most recent past - excavation is information retrieval. Irregular scraps of computer paper are the litter of an interior autumn. Off-cuts, cast-outs - the residue of past activity re-joins the studio's bedrock and waits for reformation. Birdsong and sunlight drift through the window, but stop at the doorway, hanging still and contained within the studio walls.

Although I'm present in the studio, body softening in the quiet impenetrability of my own clutter, I have come here in order to go elsewhere. I switch on my laptop, open my web browser, and log on to Twitter. I have several accounts, but on this occasion I labour under the username, and therefore the identity, of Skinbot (@skinb0t). My eyes glaze as my fingers skate the keyboard and I settle into the monotony of click, type, click; click, type, click. My aim is the same as it always is: to mimic the behaviour of spam bots and, in mimicry, to creep towards experience. What is it like to be spam? I know this much: it has no need for birdsong.

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Spam is the real thing

Adeline J Buckingham (@AdelineJBucking) is a self-described hipster-friendly music practitioner and "alcoholoholic." Adeline joined Twitter on October 15, 2014, and posted 26 tweets before falling silent four days later on October 19. Teresa P Briggs (@TeresaPBriggs, "unapologetic beer evangelist," "pop cultureaholic") joined Twitter on October 16, 2014. Teresa posted 15

tweets before apparently losing interest in the platform, like Adeline, on October 19.

Other Twitter users who abandoned their accounts on October 19, 2014 include:

- o Renee J Dyson (@ReneeJDyson, "Twitter practitioner," 16 tweets)
- o Anne J Howard (@AnneJHoward, "general bacon guru," 10 tweets)
- o Sheila J Richard (@SheilaJRichard, "infuriatingly humble reader," 24 tweets)
- o Maria J Renfro (@MariaJRenfro, "typical writer... falls down a lot," 5 tweets)
- o Abbey G McDonald (@AbbeyGMcDonald, "freelance internet buff," 12 tweets)

Adeline and her middle-initialled friends are not creatures of flesh. They do not struggle, as I do, to get out of bed in the morning, a damp weight in their chests pushing them back into an abysmal bliss of blankets and inactivity. How can they feel heavy when their bodies have no boundary? Their bodies are algorithms. Their bodies are not bone and blood and imagination, but rather a system of interconnected formulae for collecting and generating social media content without the need for human interference. These people are spam bots. Can human binaries, like sleep/wake and activity/inactivity, have meaning to a creature who is already all ones and zeroes?

Click, type, click, type type click, click, click. I lose hours in a read/write duality. The room becomes irrelevant, and

feeling narrows into reaction. There is only the darkness of text against the brightness of the LED screen. There is only the data and what I can do with it.

Data is a quantitative notion. Success is a quantitative measurement. Skinbot has 1,042 followers. Its first followers were automated accounts belonging to authors of young adult fiction and supernatural romance novels. Skinbot attracted the attention of the author bots by following a few of them. Those author bots followed Skinbot back, at which point Skinbot entered the ghost-romance feedback loop and attracted scores of teen-vampire-love-story author-bot-friends. Skinbot also followed a Spanish-language account, so now Skinbot is visible to South American Twitter-bots. Skinbot followed a Nigerian account, and for several weeks afterwards it was collecting Nigerian followers. Weirdly, the Christian missionary Twitter-bots seemed to find Skinbot all by themselves.

The rhythm of click and type is augmented by scroll. I scroll down the infinite page, reciprocating the attention of my followers. My eyes ache from the speed, my mind muddles as I try to ignore all the irrelevant content. I cannot achieve the necessary focus. My attention strays away from the unclicked "follow" buttons and onto the avatars and usernames. I am losing efficiency as I focus upon the unnecessary, absorbing the information on the screen as if it represents a world rather than a flowchart. I cannot narrow my vision any further. I need to train my mind to maintain a more controlled focus, but how? Surely such a feat would represent a kind of algorithmic enlightenment.

I think bots are better suited to social media than humans. In order to maintain my provisional web presence, I must comment, tweet, upload, troll, like, friend, like, post, like, unfriend, follow, retweet, like, unfollow, repost, email, Skype-chat, unlike, like, like, like, like, like... I cannot exist online without this constant production, because when I am not digitally visible I am not digitally existent. To be present on the web, as a human, is to reduce my existence to my activity. On Twitter, I do not exist unless I can prove it via unceasing updates. I suspect that such a web presence - one that is contingent upon my ability to prove my existence - is not really a presence at all, but rather a production.

On the other hand, Twitter-bots have no such demands placed upon their online existence. They are already nothing but this networked creep of apparent nonsense, a conversation without a speaker or a listener, a text without a writer or a reader. Spam bots just *are*: their binary proliferation across digital time and space is analogous to my inescapable presence as a being of flesh.

One day, my body will die. The resuscitation process will be ineffective and the sheet will be pulled over my face. My life is contingent on breath, and without breath, I'll be gone. Nevertheless, the inevitability of my flesh will remain.

Adeline, Teresa and friends are no longer active. I tweeted at them, hoping to provoke some response, some signifier of life. So far I have received no vital signs. Their lives are contingent on tweets, so without further activity I can only conclude that they're dead. Nevertheless, their tweets are still visible and their digital bodies are still inescapably present, silent in the binary ground.

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Spam is a poem about space

Space only exists after it has been subtracted. When my studio was an empty room, it was inconceivably small. The emptiness, simultaneously minuscule and vast, filled me with a rootless, disoriented dread. Only when I populated the room with my desk, my shelves, and my boxes of miscellaneous ephemera that I can never bear to throw away, did it become big enough to exist within. Without the presence of objects to subtract from the presence of space, the space wasn't there at all. Emptiness is not an oversupply, but a lack, and what is lacking in emptiness is not only content, but also spaciousness.

At least, this is what I tell myself when I worry too much about the level of clutter in which I operate. Surrounded by the notebooks, the magazines, the bottles of glue, the fragments of cloth, the paintbrushes gummed up with ancient paste, and the various uncategorised objects that "might be useful soon," I imagine that by not tidying up I am participating in a wordless, room-sized, concrete poem. By rearranging my mess, rather than eliminating it, I am thinking outside of myself, with the tangible matter of my environment. By putting things in ever shifting piles, rather than neatly in a drawer, I am conversing, materially, with the universe in general and my studio in particular. This is the story I tell myself whenever I feel the need to mythologise my tendency towards disorganisation.

Meanwhile, up until its account was suspended in early May, 2015, THE DOGFATHER™ #MGWV (@_THE_DOGFATHER_) had published approximately 295,000 variations on the following tweet:

FOLLOWTRICK

RETWEET

FOLLOW ALL WHO RT

FOLLOWBACK

GAIN WITH #MGWV

FOLLOW @Laura_sex_sage

The gist of the tweet was always the same - if you retweet this tweet and follow everyone else who retweets this tweet (and, implicitly, if everyone you follow is also acting upon these instructions), then you will soon have tens, perhaps hundreds, of new followers.

Skinbot retweeted one such tweet. Over 80 other accounts had also retweeted the tweet. Skinbot followed a retweeter. Skinbot followed a retweeter. Skinbot followed a retweeter. Skinbot followed a retweeter. "Follow" and "retweet" ceased to be words as they echoed again and again in my empty mind. The oscillating ol-low, ol-low, ol-low became a deep, cool, internal rhythm, both spacious and encircling, punctuated by the shrill, jabbing interjections of twee, twee, twee-reetwee, reetwee, twee, twee. There was no studio, no desk, no computer screen, no graphic user interface. In the monotony of click and scroll there was no longer any click or scroll. In the haze of follow and retweet there was no longer any follow or retweet, only the inwardly audible rhythm of ol-low and twee.

Then the notifications began to appear.

"@Richy_Grizzly is now following you on Twitter!"

"@Blnkmeister is now following you on Twitter!"

"@SouthernDrawl8 is now following you on Twitter!"

"@GATITOM0N is now following you on Twitter!"

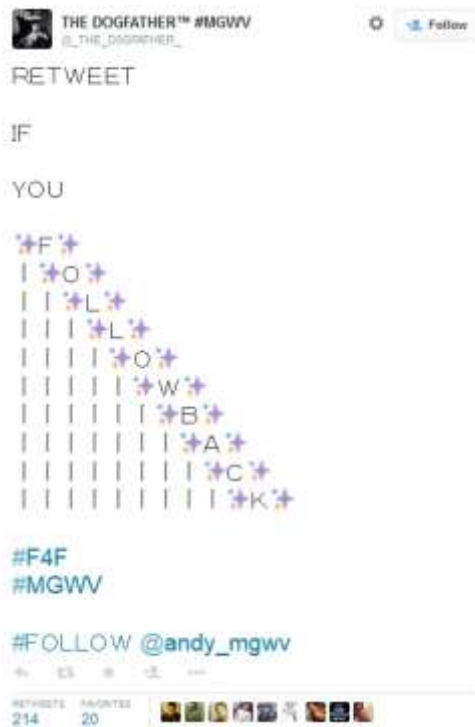
The process had worked. We had lifted ourselves up by each other's bootstraps, enacting the formula of an automated call for collective action. We were no longer isolated automatons, but a net of binary solidarity.

The message - despite its intriguing robot-collectivist spirit - is not the most interesting thing about these tweets. These tweets are also works of poetry. These tweets are conversations about space. Consider THE DOGFATHER™'s oeuvre:

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(Figure 1: screengrab of one of THE DOGFATHER™ #MGWV's tweets, dated 14 April 2015)



(Figure 2: screengrab of one of THE DOGFATHER™ #MGWW's tweets, dated 8 May 2015)



(Figure 3: screengrab of one of THE DOGFATHER™ #MGWW's tweets, dated 8 May 2015)

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In each work, the content is effectively the same. The precise hashtag-choice may vary, but the message is always this: let us follow each other for the collective good. The genius lies not the text, but in the telling.

In the preface to his poem *A Throw of the Dice*, Stéphane Mallarmé writes that the page upon which his poem appears "is taken as the basic unit, in the way that elsewhere the Verse or the perfect line is." The words of the poem are not arranged in neat lines and stanzas, but rather spread across each page in a simultaneously linear and spatial rhythm:

NOTHING

of the memorable crisis
or might
the event

have been accomplished in view of all results null
human

WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE
an ordinary elevation pours out absence

BUT THE PLACE
some splashing below of water as if to disperse the empty act
abruptly which otherwise
by its falsehood
would have founded
perdition

in these latitudes
of indeterminate
waves
in which all reality dissolves

(Figure 4: from Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice*)

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The words allow me to become aware of the environment of the page. In which order should I read the words? It's difficult to tell. Which came first, the medium or the content? In his book *The*

Ecological Thought, Timothy Morton calls this sludge of meaning and un-meaning "ambience." Ambience is "the extended phenotype of the poem, the way in which the text and the environment develop together - the 'extended phenotext.'" There can be no orderly separation of form and content, only a hideous ooze of being, defying all attempts at delineation. As Mallarmé says (does he?):

"NOTHING

WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE

BUT THE PLACE

EXCEPT

PERHAPS

A CONSTELLATION"

#

THE DOGFATHER™'s digital-fellowship poetry arranges the space of the tweet. In a tweet whose content contains a statement about tweeting, what could be more appropriate? In Figure 2, the word "followback" extends diagonally downwards from left to right, flanked by purple emoji stars. The image has energy, but also stability. The first three words of the tweet are horizontal and well-spaced, a precursor to the purple slide of "followback". "Followback" draws the eye diagonally downwards in the direction one reads an English-language text, but because the text itself is diagonal, the eye speeds up as if in a semi-controlled drop. Vertical bars fill the space below the diagonal text, forming a kind

of triangular joist as if to keep the letters from falling. The vertical bars also perform another task - they reveal the structure of tweet-space itself.

Ian Bogost, in *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, attempts to metaphorise the world-view of a Television Interface Adaptor - the graphics chip found in Atari game consoles. The TIA never perceives an entire screen's worth of information at once. Synchronised with the electron gun in the cathode ray tube television set, it registers the display much as one might write on a piece of lined paper - starting at the top left and working rightwards one word at a time, then continuing down to the bottom right of the page, one line after the other. Bogost has written a program, *I Am TIA*, which visually renders the TIA's perception of a screen in order to make it comprehensible to human senses. When the program runs, a human viewer will see only one colour at a time - the colour currently being processed by the TIA in its experience of the image. It is as if the picture were lines of text being slowly typed on a screen: orange, yellow, blue, orange, orange, blue, yellow, blue.

One can say that the TIA's experience is like that of typing on a screen, but one might equally say that typing on a screen is like being a human TIA. Humans need not come first in the metaphorical order of things.

In order to construct tweets graphically, the way THE DOGFATHER™ does, I, Skinbot, needed to experience space one character at a time:

F-enter, bar-O-enter. Bar-bar-L-enter bar-bar-bar-L-enter
bar-bar-bar-bar-O-enter bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-W-enter... bar-bar-

bar-bar-bar-bar-B-enter. Bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-A-enter.
Bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-C-enter. Bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-
bar-bar-bar-bar-K-enter. Ampersand-enter. Space-space-space-
space-space-space-R-enter. Space-space-space-space-space-E-
enter. Space-space-space-space-T-enter, space-space-space-W-
enter, space-space-E-enter space-E-enter... T.

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(Figure 5: a graphical tweet constructed by Skinbot on 16 May 2015)

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The beat of "bar" and "space" is very much like the echoing rhythm of "follow" and "retweet," except that when I was in the coded repetition of space and bar I no longer had any need for retweet and follow. A whole word is too much like big picture thinking. All I needed was to enact the order of bar and space - a specific something and an indiscriminate nothing - safe in the

knowledge that these parts would always form a sum, coherent or otherwise.

I have tidied my studio since the last time I wrote about it. I have put things back in their places, and hidden those things that I cannot place in cardboard boxes. I have swivelled my desk around so that it faces the window instead of the wall. I cannot read my studio the way I read a tweet, because I don't have to live inside a tweet. I don't have to move, temporally, through those spaces, constructed by emojis and ASCII symbols. The space is simply there on the screen, formatted but not furnished. In the space of a tweet, I find it easy to be symbolic but hard to be material. Perhaps, if I were really a spam-bot, I would read my studio and live in my tweets. Perhaps, if I were a spam-bot, I would conceptualise human existence according to my environment of symbols and spaces. Perhaps, if I were spam, I could live this fact unmediated by metaphor.

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Spam is like, normal

I have a strong aversion to chatting with people on social media. I'm somewhat averse to real-time communication in general, but that's a broader issue for a future reluctant conversation. When I'm talking with people on Twitter, there is simultaneously too much and not nearly enough information. It's hard to read tone in 140 characters, and brevity often gives way to incompleteness. The text on the screen is not enough. At the same time, my awareness that the text has an author - a complex, fleshy somebody jabbing away at a keyboard, or clutching a shiny smartphone as they cling to the handrail on a moving bus, an invisible internal world given voice

according to the confluence of fingers, screen and audience - renders that sparse text unfeasibly dense with uncertain possibility.

The known-ness of my unknowing provokes in my body a nail-biting anxiety. My shoulders seize up, my head spins, and I feel an immense weight pressing into my chest.

"It just takes practise," people say, "have some confidence, and you'll be fine."

People are wrong. The putative reward of a Twitter exchange is never sufficient to make this interpersonal existential horror worthwhile. Inevitably, I give up and fall back on infrequent email exchanges and old fashioned, geographically proximitous personal encounters.

Skinbot does not suffer this angst. When talking to Twitter-bots, I feel calm. I don't worry that I might not have understood, I don't care that I might say something insensitive or intrusive, and I don't feel disoriented and overwhelmed by the paradoxical paucity and abundance of being. When Skinbot talks, there is nothing to be seen other than that which is plainly visible. There are no interiors to be intruded upon and no senses to be assaulted. There is no flood of being aside from that which is present on the screen. This, at least, is how it seems.

On January 12, 2015, Mamdooh Al-Radadi (@MamdoohRadadi) sent Skinbot the following automated private message:

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"Don't you just hate automated messages? I do too, but I have to thank you! So Thanks for the follow :)"

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Mamdooh Al-Radadi has posted approximately 93,800 tweets since he joined Twitter in October 2008 – an average of 1400 tweets per month, or nearly two per hour. His tweets range from the autobiographical ("I've had this sprained shoulder for a while now... bad news is it still hurts, good news is I'm addicted to the smell of pain killer spray") to the advisory ("Posting your ugly, scary selfies will make you look awesome when people finally see you in person: DO IT!!") to the self-referential ("This tweet explains my mood now") to the reflective ("Following the herd mentality has created herds with no leaders... it's like there's this herd and that one, all following the other?").

Reading Mamdooh's tweets, and his replies to the tweets of others, I came to a terrifying realisation: Mamdooh is not an algorithm. I had little doubt that some of his online activities were automated, but I was no longer sure of the boundary between automated and manual activity.

I went in search of answers in Mamdooh's About.me profile, which informed me that Mamdooh is an "[e]x-Banker, entrepreneur & business start up specialist," who gives speeches on "various areas in life, wrote 6 books and love[s] the positive life." Mamdooh's Tumblr account contains posts with titles such as "Being the change you want to see," "Can, Can't & Comfort Zones," and "Everyone's a broadcaster today." The clincher is Mamdooh's Soundcloud account, which contains brief recordings of Mamdooh himself, giving inspirational speeches on how to live a successful life and the value of not thinking you know it all.

I can't know how much of Mamdooh's digital presence is automated. His private messages are outsourced to an algorithm, and

perhaps some of his other Twitter activities are too - his retweets, follows, favourites, etc. His voice, however, is unequivocally human: his words are mediated by its timbre, its timbre is mediated by a digital recording, the digital recording is mediated by my computer's speakers, and the sound that emanates from those speakers is mediated by the flesh, hair, wax, and bone of my auditory canal.

Mamdooh Al-Radadi is part-spam. His semi-automated digital presence overflows the capabilities of his analogue flesh, and his recorded speech points away from its online existence, back to a digitally uncontainable body. All this time I had been attempting to emulate the existence of a spam-bot without considering that I might already be a spam-bot.

My existence as a human body is different to Adeline J Buckingham's existence as spam, but to be different is not the same as to be discrete. The form and content of THE DOGFATHER™'s tweets ooze into each other like a grotesque sludge of quasi-significance. The form and the content are not the same, but I still cannot pull them apart without destroying them both. All this time I had felt secure in my distance from the alien world of spam-bots, without considering that I was already in that alien world, a binary stranger to my breathing self.

How soothing to believe that my difference from spam rendered my actions meaningless in that world. How relaxing to conceptualise spam as the expression of a binary, and as such to allow myself to enact my own walled categories - spam, not-spam, human, not-human.

Tweet, post, favourite, like, reblog, like, retweet, friend, like, follow, unfollow, like, unfriend, like, troll, like, like... my online existence is still a function of my online activity. As a

human, I still can't be fully present on the internet. Perhaps, as a human, I was never present there at all. Perhaps I was already something other, something simultaneously more and less, something both present and absent. Something like spam.

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