

TECH

Every make-up girl and musician online has mostly fake social media popularity

By Nick Whigham, News.com.au

 A close up of a person using a smartphone

Composite; iStockphoto

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The internet has brought new meaning to the old adage, “Don’t believe everything you read.”

From fake news and fake Twitter accounts to fake Instagram followers and fake Amazon reviews, the online world is

awash with forgery.

The digital platforms that have come to dominate our online lives like Google and Facebook have spawned new incentive structures which users are quick to corrupt or manipulate for their own gain.

When likes, followers and views can be monetized, essentially becoming their own kind of currency, it doesn’t take long before counterfeiters move in.

An [investigation by The New York Times](#) has revealed just how much money can be made from delivering such innocuous things as fake YouTube views.

One Canadian man, Martin Vassilev, has made \$200,000 in 2018 alone after selling about 15 million phony views to users on the popular video-sharing site.

His company — [called 500views](#) — promises to boost organic traffic to customers’ videos by delivering a bunch of fake views that will

boost their appeal and rankings in search results.

“Have you ever wondered why musicians buy YouTube views? How do most musicians become famous on YouTube? We can help you achieve fame,” his website tells visitors.

Unlike so-called click farms where rooms of poorly paid workers in developing countries manually click on links, subscribe to accounts or watch videos, Vassilev’s company connects customers with services which generate views by computers, not humans.

His business — which also sells fake Instagram followers — harnesses the power of automated systems to generate YouTube Views, likes, comments and subscribers.

“I can deliver an unlimited amount of views to a video,” Vassilev said in an interview with The Times.

Inflating views violates YouTube’s terms of service. But according to Vassilev, while Google does crack down on the shady practice, the difficult game of cat-and-mouse means such services will likely continue to exist.

“They’ve tried to stop it for so many years, but they can’t stop it. There’s always a way around,” he told the Times.

Ironically, a Google search turns up plenty of companies offering up fake YouTube audiences — and it’s no wonder given the huge amount of money that can be made.

“I really couldn’t believe you could make that much money online,” Vassilev said, who claims he went from welfare to buying a house and a BMW 328i in 18 months after he started selling YouTube views.

Given the immense size of the video platform, it’s not surprising that there are those who want to manipulate or exploit the service for profit. After all, there’s nothing illegal about it.

According to the latest figures, about 300 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute and almost 5 billion videos are watched on YouTube every single day. Fake activity is bound to slip through YouTube's fraud detection measures.

"We take any abuse of our systems, including attempts to artificially inflate video view counts, very seriously," a YouTube spokesperson told News.com.au.

"For well over a decade, YouTube has built, deployed and invested in proprietary technology to prevent the artificial inflation of video view counts. We also periodically audit and validate the views videos receive and, when appropriate, remove fraudulent views and take other actions against infringing channels."

A pretty large industry has popped up around the fake economy of the internet. Wannabe social media influences can purchase phony followers — one online tool is selling 1,000 "quality" followers for \$10, which seems to be about the going rate.

Meanwhile, other companies offer services claiming to protect brands that hire influencers by providing a way to uncover accounts that have fake followers.

A quick online search and you can also find companies willing to sell you SoundCloud plays as well as Spotify followers and song plays on the major music streaming platform.

If you want to look popular online, there's someone willing to sell you the mirage.

Services such as these show how the incentives and reward structures created by tech companies have led to a perverse kind of fakery.

Most famously, groups of young men in Macedonia used social media to spread fake and completely sensationalist political news stories in America. Fake news tends to spread much quicker than

genuine news and the teens were able to profit from the traffic via automated advertising engines, like Google's AdSense.

While that particular industry involves humans (for now) to write the fake stories, when automated systems do the heavy lifting, it can make up a significant portion of online activity.

At one point in 2013, YouTube had as much traffic from bots masquerading as people as it did from real human visitors, the company once said.

Another tech giant that has faced troubles with bots is Twitter. The social media company recently cracked down on suspect accounts, causing Donald Trump to lose more than 300,000 followers as fake accounts were purged. But CEO Jack Dorsey is quick to point out that not all bots are bad, as there is plenty of automated activity on these platforms that provide useful and helpful functions.

Many of the fake YouTube services investigated by The New York Times were able to deliver on their promise of view within a week or two.

A member of YouTube's Fraud and Abuse team told the publication that while only a tiny fraction of fake views get through each day, millions will still inevitably get through.

"View count manipulation will be a problem as long as views and the popularity they signal are the currency of YouTube," the team said.

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