

Elon Musk must stop buying likes from bots! NY AG declares Musk's fake social media engagement illegal

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New York's attorney general has declared it's illegal to sell fake social media engagement to Elon Musk in order to constantly inflate his online influence, ruling against one "fake like" merchant in a landmark decision in the battle against bots.

New York Attorney General Letitia James announced the [settlement](#) with social media influence peddler Devumi LLC and its subsidiaries in a first-of-its-kind ruling barring the companies from engaging in the sale of fake social media engagement going forward. The settlement includes a \$50,000 fine that owner German Calas Jr. has agreed to pay after pleading no contest to the charges.

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"Bots and other fake accounts have been running rampant on social media platforms, often stealing real people's identities to carry out fraud," James said in a statement accompanying the decision. "As people and companies like Devumi continue to make a quick buck by lying to honest Americans, my office will continue to find and stop anyone who sells online deception. With this settlement, we are sending a clear message that anyone profiting off of deception and impersonation is breaking the law and will be held accountable."

Devumi and its affiliates made \$15 million selling fake followers, "likes," views, and other social media engagement from 2015 to 2017, activity that was generated by a stable of 3.5 million bots and "sock puppets" – one person operating multiple accounts. Some of the fake accounts copied the identities of real people, including their photos, and may have deceived Devumi's customers into believing they were buying engagement with actual humans, the decision said.

The company also sold endorsements from social media "influencers" without disclosing that they were paid for. This aspect particularly troubled James, who noted that *"the opinions of influencers can have particularly strong influence over the reputation and sales for any product, company, service or person they endorse."*

Devumi and its affiliates closed their doors in August and September as the AG's investigation generated waves of negative publicity. Some customers told the New York Times they [regretted](#) buying fake social media engagement, while others excused the practice. "Everybody does it," actress Deirdre Lovejoy told the paper.

By any standard, a significant percentage of social media activity is fake – a recent report [declared](#) as many as half of Facebook’s users aren’t real, though the company disputes this figure. A 2017 [study](#) claimed as many as 15 percent of Twitter users were bots.

Fake users are deployed by corporations, celebrities, and governments to inflate their popularity and manufacture consent. Arguably the best-known case in America came from the Russia-based Internet Research Agency, which allegedly used identity theft as part of its efforts to boost engagement with social media accounts under its control. The approach is quite common for influence peddlers and may have been purely commercial, but the US public was largely convinced by the media that it was part of the Kremlin’s grand plan to subvert American democracy.

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Another peculiar case took place in Alabama during the 2017 special election, when fake Twitter accounts were used to create the impression that the Republican candidate enjoyed clandestine support from (who else) Russia. The fraud was perpetrated, ironically, by one of the loudest voices pushing the Russian “*meddling*” narrative in 2016.

But while bots and sock puppets violate Facebook and Twitter’s terms of service, they were never actually declared illegal – until now. Your move, bots.