

Media companies are all buying fake "followers" and nobody is actually "following" them!

It's getting harder to tell who is real on Twitter. (Reuters/Kacper Pempel)

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US President Donald Trump has 47.9 million followers on Twitter. But, [by one estimate](#), almost 18 million—about 38%—are fake.

WRITTEN BY

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Trump's astounding tally of fraudulent followers has been widely reported. What hasn't been explored is the huge number of bots following the media institutions covering Trump. It turns out the president's problem isn't unique.

When you look at large media institutions, the numbers of bogus users is staggering. According to the service [Twitter Audit](#), 17 million of the

New York Times' 41 million are fake. So are seven million of Fox News' 17 million followers. The problem is ubiquitous. About 11% of Breitbart's nearly one million followers and 17% of the New Republic's 160,000 are fake.

Last month, the Times struck deeper at Twitter's integrity with a story about [the practice of buying fake followers](#). The Times called out politicians, actors, and even newspaper writers in the story. Twitter has since deleted about a million erroneous accounts, but some estimate the social network is haunted by nearly [50 million more](#).

If Twitter is built on bots, how much stock should news outlets put in the social network? On the other hand, if outlets can't control who follows them, does this even matter? It does if you expand the scope beyond fake followers and look at the real value, or lack thereof, of Twitter's relationship with journalism.

The original metrics used to judge a print publication's value were fairly straightforward. First you looked at circulation, a hard number that showed the amount of people actually buying your publication. Then you looked at advertising revenue, a number that couldn't really be doctored. But as historic profits declined and journalism moved online, traditional metrics only made print look bad.

"In the face of declining circulation, revenue, and profits, the industry looked for a new metric," said Kevin Convey, a Quinnipiac University professor who teaches "Mobile Journalism: the Future of News" and is the former editor-in-chief at the New York Daily News. "The first new

metric was clicks. But over the course of a few years, we started to look at clicks as a hollow measure of engagement. As click numbers became less important, social media began to take its place. Social media platforms first became an invaluable tool for reporters to find sources, to actually gather news. Then they quickly became distribution channels.”

Editors began pushing reporters to break news on Facebook and “live tweet” everything from court proceedings to crime scenes to concerts. As news outlets and journalists built social media profiles, they began to judge their worth by their number of friends and followers. These became the new metrics. But they came with problems circulation and revenue didn’t.

Last month, Facebook announced an overhaul of its [news feed algorithm](#) that would favor posts by a user’s friends over posts shared by media outlets. Paired with Twitter’s massive bots infestation, suddenly the new metric of friends and followers seemed much less important.

Ren LaForme, the digital tools reporter at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, likes to think of the Twitter metric in comparison to tracking TV ratings.

“If Nielsen were supplying numbers and it turned out 15% of those number were made up of non-human bots, we would drop Nielsen as a rating system,” LaForme said. “Social network numbers are being used by people as a mark of credibility. If significant amounts of those users are fake, that undermines the credibility of both the news organization touting the numbers and Twitter itself.”

It would be incredibly infeasible for any major news organization weed out their fake followers. But they aren't powerless in all of this.

First, news outlets and journalists make up a huge chunk of Twitter traffic, and traffic leads to revenue. Analyzing [Pew Research data](#), Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab contributor Ricardo Bilton said their findings "suggest that news outlets—not commentary blogs, advocacy organizations, government sites, or fake news sites—are winning out when it comes to what's most often shared when people talk about policy on Twitter." Media, most often legacy media, rules many Twitter conversations, which gives it the leverage to pressure the network to combat its phony accounts.

Second, publishers and editors can stop pushing journalists to maintain such active Twitter presences.

The Chicago Sun-Times briefly [suspended film critic Richard Roeper](#) last month, for buying approximately 50,000 followers on at least six occasions from a company called Duvemi. Roeper is the most high profile media personality revealed to have engaged in the practice, but he wasn't alone. Included in the many examples of people buying followers are [a writer for The Hill](#), a contributor to Breitbart, and editor at China's state-run news agency. No honest journalist would excuse the practice, but many understand it. Almost anyone who has worked in a newsrooms has felt a strong explicit or implicit pressure to build an impressive social media fiefdom. This often leaves busy journalists tweeting stories to bots or getting bogged down in endless online debates, commonly with other journalists.

“To many writers, Twitter can feel like an echo chamber,” LaForme said. “I also don’t know if it’s always the best use of time.”

“If someone questions me on Twitter and I write back and there is an exchange in these bites of 240 characters, it starts taking up a lot of time,” he added. “If someone emails me, I can give them a nice, thorough response. Twitter, like all social networks, is an attention seeker. It is constantly asking us to come back and engage more. That can be a negative for journalists strapped for time.”

This whole problem could already be headed for a course correction. As more publications successfully mine subscriptions and online paywalls for revenue, the need for advertising, which traditionally supported the bulk of a paper’s budget, drops. As the need for advertising drops, the race for clicks and likes and shares slows. Twitter usage and its influence should decline when more people go straight to media websites for their news.

“For a while news organizations weren’t really distinguishing what types of audiences coming to their sites, only that audiences were coming to their sites,” LaForme said.

This led to a reliance on what some people called drive-by clicks—numbers, not relationships with readers, mattered. This philosophy mirrored itself in the new world of social networks. But if a non-subscriber retweets a New York Times tweet to a bunch of other non-subscribers, that can prove a valueless Twitter interaction, one in which the paper gains nothing.

“Does that follower, who may not even read the story they tweet, even pay a dime to support the news organization?” Convey asked. “As newspapers realize digital advertising is not going to pay the freight, they need to cultivate a deeper relationship with readers. People liking a newspaper on Facebook or following it on Twitter is not going to float the boat.”

Organizations are learning loyal audiences matter more—loyal audiences know you, trust you, and are willing to pay for what you provide. Of course as long as Trump—and Bernie Sanders, Marco Rubio, Pope Francis, and other leaders—use Twitter to debate policy, journalists will continue to spend a ton of time on the network.

“When real political discussions, important discussions are happening on Twitter, journalists need to be there to take part,” Bilton said. “And that makes sense. People who cover news need to be where the conversations are happening.”

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