New Jersey Middle School Ethics Bowl

Spare Case 3

Fake Followers

Think of some of the athletes, musicians, actors, political figures, or businesses you most admire. Chances are, at least some of them have paid companies to generate followers, "likes," and comments for their social media accounts. So claims Dan Leal, who, in a recent New York Times exposé on "follower factories," readily admitted to having purchased over 150,000 followers for his Twitter account, @PornoDan, from Devumi, one of the many companies that sells social media followers in bulk. Leal bragged that his investment in fake followers had more than paid for itself, and that he was confident that he would not be penalized by Twitter, despite the fact that buying followers is against Twitter's terms of service. Why? "Countless public figures, companies, music acts, etc. purchase followers," Leal told the Times. "If Twitter was to purge everyone who did so there would be hardly any of them on it." Some of Devumi's corporate records obtained by the Times lent credence to Leal's claims: among Devumi's clients were a number of celebrities and corporations, including former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis, singer Clay Aiken, and celebrity baker Paul Hollywood. So were the political campaign of Ecuador's current president, Lenín Moreno, and China's state-run news agency, Xinhua. Even a member of Twitter's board of directors and a travel writer for the New York Times were customers.

Followers and other forms of social media engagement are generated by follower factories in a variety of ways. In some cases, likes, retweets, and follows come from real people in "click farms," who make as little as $120 per year to sit at computers and click "like" for hours on end. In other cases, automated fake accounts (often called "bots") are created. Higher quality (and more expensive) bots look "authentic," often by closely imitating the accounts of real users. For example, a Minnesota teenager named Jessica Rychly was dismayed to discover that a Twitter account using her name and likeness, along with a username nearly identical to hers, was being used to promote cryptocurrency, Canadian real estate, and more. If it hadn't been for the Times investigation, she would never have known.

In an "influencer economy" in which billions of advertising dollars are spent every year promoting goods and services through influential social media accounts, it's difficult to know where to lay the blame. Are the companies who promise to generate followers for a price to blame, or are the people and organizations who pay them? Is the primary obligation on social media platforms to better enforce their own terms of service? Critics point out that, just as "influencers" get higher advertising revenues for having more followers, Facebook and Twitter garner higher stock prices by having more users, and so have a disincentive to crack down too hard on bots. Some influencers admit that buying followers is wrong, while others regard it as merely a tool of the trade. Some corporations who advertise through influencers have vowed to take responsibility by cracking down on influencers who buy followers. "This is a deep and systematic issue, an issue of trust that fundamentally threatens to undermine the relationship between consumers and brands," declared Unilever's Chief Marketing Officer, Keith Weed. "Brands have to play their role in resolving it . . . As one of the largest advertisers in the world, we cannot have an environment where our consumers don't trust what they see online."

Question: Is it ethical for companies to buy fake followers?

ATTRIBUTION: Kent Place School