Twitter and the underground market

Carlo De Micheli & Andrea Stroppa

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• Founder of an Italian civic engagement project
• Security Researcher @ Security Brokers
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~$ whois Andrea Stroppa

- Blogger @ Huffington Post
- Writes for Repubblica and La Stampa
- Founder of an Italian civic engagement project
- “One of the most influential people on the Italian web scene” - La7
A little bit of history...

• Twitter
  • 500M registered users
  • 58M tweets/day
  • 59% monthly active users
A little bit of history...

How Big Is Twitter, Really?

- Only about half of Twitter’s registered accounts follow 2 or more people.
- Only about 10% of Twitter accounts (~15 million) follow more than 50 people.
- About 1.5 million Twitter accounts follow more than 500 people.
- 2 accounts follow more than 524,000 people.

Source: Twitter API
More history...

Based on this classification, we find a striking concentration of attention on Twitter, in that roughly 50% of URLs consumed are generated by just 20K elite users, where the media produces the most information, but celebrities are the most followed. We also find significant

Who Says What to Whom on Twitter

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What we saw

Fake Twitter Followers Become Multimillion-Dollar Business

By NICOLE PERLROTH

Cilia Poon
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我是女性，在香港土生土长。头像所显示的影像是在身体较差时与改善后的对比照片！过去，我是从事销售工作；因身体的不适，离开后，全程投入探索、学习并加以实践的 保健、自疗（治疗）、养生 的领域中，以实事求是的态度面对问题，累积了点滴心得，并写成文章与朋友分享了。现已上载至网络，欢迎你的莅临！
Cómo funciona el negocio de la venta de seguidores falsos en Twitter

Creating Fake Accounts Might Be the Best Way to Make Money From Twitter

Fake Twitter followers go for $18 per 1,000, RTs for 5 cents

World Solutions

Forbes

Twitter: Das Millionen-Geschäft mit Fake-Followern

Twitter ‘僵尸粉’催生3.6亿美元产业链

Twitter'da 'sahte kullanıci'ya zam geldi

Handel in valse Twitteraccounts levert miljoenen op

Twitter: il grande affare dei falsi account

The New York Times

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Fake accounts

• We estimated fake accounts make up for 4% of Twitter’s user base

• Does this make sense?

• Facebook makes it harder to create fake accounts yet openly declares: “As of June 30, 2012, we estimate user-misclassified accounts may have represented approximately 2.4% of our worldwide MAUs and undesirable accounts may have represented approximately 1.5% of our worldwide MAUs.”
The market size estimate

- Every account can follow up to 2000 people
- By statistically excluding overlapping fake accounts, just on the 12 main marketplaces (Fiverr, SeoClerks, InterTwitter, FanMeNow, LikedSocial, SocialPresence, SocializeUk, ViralMediaBoost), it turns out there are around 20M fake followers on sale right now.
- Followers are sold at an average price of $18/1000 followers (barracudalabs)
- Sellers can make between $2 and $36 per fake account
- Multiplying it out definitely shows a multi-million-dollar market
Fake Followers
Why buy fake followers?

Techcrunch reports “There’s a tremendous cachet associated with having a large number,” comedian Dan Nainan told The New York Times, after admitting to buying 220,000 fake followers. “When people see that you have that many followers, they’re like: ‘Oh, my goodness, this guy is popular. I might want to book him.’” Presidential candidates Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney have both been accused of trying to appear more tech-savvy by buying their way to fame.
What do followers mean?

- Legitimacy
- Popularity
- “For some, it's a status symbol, the holy grail of being on Twitter, for others by-product of successful community building. However, no matter what your motivation is, the more followers you have means the more people you can either influence or learn from and this is priceless” - Nathan Frietas, Salesforce Blog
What do fake followers mean?

• If people don’t know about it:
  • Popularity
  • Makes it easier to get new followers

• If people find out:
  • Credibility & Reputation issues
What do fake followers mean?

• “As unethical as it sounds, there are even people who buy followers for other people’s accounts so that they can point the finger and call them out as a fake”- Britt Michaelian, WorkSmart
Who doesn’t want fake followers?

- Social media agencies say:
  - Fake followers are...
    - Easy to spot
    - It takes time to build a quality following
    - Fake followers look unsurprisingly fake
    - Your credibility will be tarnished
    - You gain absolutely nothing!
You gain absolutely nothing... are we sure about this?

• Trending tweets & hashtags get more hits
What happens to the followers?

- Twitter bans them
- They automatically un-follow if not followed
Examples
Mercedes Benz

number of new followers

Mercedes @MercedesBenz
Jared Polis

![Graph showing the number of new followers for Jared Polis](image.png)

- Number of new followers

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2013/05/22

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Pepsi

number of new followers
Red Bull
Stratos

![Red Bull Stratos](image)

The chart shows the number of new followers over time for Red Bull.

*Number of new followers*

*Redbull*
MTV Music Awards
It’s not always their fault

• How Twitter (real & fake) account creation works:
It’s not always their fault

- How Twitter (real & fake) account creation works:
Re-Tweets
Why have many re-tweets?

What are Top Tweets?

When you search on Twitter.com, you can toggle between "Top", "All", and "People you follow" results. Clicking "Top" shows popular Tweets that many other Twitter users have engaged with and thought were useful.
The Re-Tweets Problem

During the same week the article on NYTimes was published, Forbes was saying...

The retweet accumulation tracking was done by checking the retweet amount of each tweet from Twitter every 5 minutes for 24 hours. The study was done on 3rd of April 2013 (The Next Web and Techcrunch) and on 8th of April 2013 (Mashable and Boy Genius Report), where we tracked 13-25 tweets from each source.

Brought to you by twheel™ Metrics -Insight on engagement- social media analytics tool that lets you understand social interaction beyond clicks (Launch in Spring 2013).

Techcrunch Retweets

Source: Forbes

number of retweets in 24h

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Mashable Retweets

Mashable

number of retweets in 24h

Source: Forbes
Notice something different?

The Next Web

Source: Forbes

number of retweets in 24h

32

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Not following anyone

All re-tweets of The Next Web
The Re-Tweets Problem

Carlo De Micheli @carldemic
@Zee That doesn't make sense to me, why would you opt out of your own tool but not stop it from RT'ing TNW... @nicoleperiroth @Andst7
Expand

Zee M Kane @Zee
@carldemic @nicoleperiroth @andst7 we didn’t want *more* sign ups.

???
The Business
Selling real followers

vs

Selling fake followers
Real accounts

YouLikeHits is a tool that will help you grow your Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, Google+, Digg, StumbleUpon, LinkedIn, Pinterest, SoundCloud and Websites for FREE. We allow you to pick and choose who you want to follow, like, friend, view, share or visit and skip those who you're not interested in.

YouLikeHits Helps You Promote All Of The Following
- Twitter Followers
- Twitter Tweets
- Twitter Retweets
- Twitter Favorites
- MySpace Friends
- StumbleUpon Followers
- LinkedIn Shares
- SoundCloud Followers
- YouTube Views
- YouTube Likes
- YouTube Subscribers
- Google+ Circles
- ReverbNation Fans
- Pinterest Followers
- Pinterest Repins
- Pinterest Likes
- Website Hits

Only Follow, Like, Friend, Subscribe, Circle, Share or Visit who and what you're interested in!
We don't sell Followers, Likes, Friends, Subscribers, Circles, Shares or Hits.
- We never post from your Accounts without your permission.
- We don't ask for your account passwords.
- We have a strict NO Bot/Macro/Automation policy.
What is the variable cost of creating a Twitter account?

$0

/fake account
What is the variable cost of creating a Facebook account?

$0.50/fake account
Is this happening on Facebook as well?

53,334 Likes
What we learned from our research

• All user interactions on the main social networks can be easily faked
• There is no way to effectively measure a company’s presence on social networks
Advertising $$$

- Is advertising on social networks worth it?

Cost of a Like through Facebook Adv: $1.07 (WSJ)
Cost of a Like on the black market: $0.05
Q/A ?

@carldemic    @andst7

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