HOW MANY FAKE TWITTER FOLLOWERS DO YOU HAVE?

A real lesson amid the fakery

* * *

By Bree Rody-Mantha. This guest blog originally appeared in full form on BHIVE in early September.

Getting a new Twitter follower is an awesome feeling. That's one more person who will listen to all my 140-character wisdom and one more person who will become aware of any causes I'm supporting.

If only that were the case. A recent analysis proved that even someone as powerful as the President of the United States has a good chunk of fake or inactive Twitter followers.

Phonies in the Twitterverse

The study, courtesy of Fake Follower Check, revealed that 13 million of Barack Obama's 18 million Twitter followers were either not genuine users, or had inactive accounts.

Other public figures who turned out to have a far less genuine following were Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, and Katy Perry.

These fake followers don't make much of an effort to disguise themselves. They follow many, are followed by few, and have little if any personal information on their profiles.

It doesn't look particularly great for these celebrities, who might look as though they "bought" their following. There are merchants online who are selling Twitter bots and up to 2,000 re-tweets for just $15.

It's a problem on Facebook too, and while you'd think a business or celebrity wouldn't complain about a surplus of fans, plenty aren't happy about it.

Earlier this month, we learned about Limited Run, the unlucky software start-up which left Facebook after finding out that their ad clicks came from bots who never accessed their web site. Around the same time, the BBC performed an experiment with a fake business and found that there was a slew of suspicious Facebook accounts which they concluded were most likely fake.

Not just "rent a follower"

For a lot of businesses and stars, the bots aren't purchased. They just show up.

Even my own personal Twitter account, filled with not much more than quotes from cartoons and inane ramblings, has a surprising 7% inactive and 7% fake followers.

The bots are attracted to certain hashtags and locations. Many assert that bots will follow certain celebrities as well as schmoes like myself to not arouse suspicion. The more popular a star's account, the more likely bots are to latch onto them. These bots may have been created and bought by one celebrity or business, but the others they happen to follow may have just benefitted from a happy accident.

Implications for Tweeps

So what's the lesson to learn from this?

Social media allows advertisements to be a little more personal (hence the "social" aspect). That means that businesses or individuals using platforms like Twitter to market themselves cannot rest on their laurels. Twitter is great, but there are far more creative ways to actually interact with fans that will reach real, responsive audiences online. In the case of Obama, he made every geek's dream come true on August 29 when he hosted an "ask me anything" thread on Reddit, which attracted enough attention to crash the site.

If you're trying to create an online following, don't jump for joy just because you have more followers than your competition.

Instead, interact.

Make sure that your real followers have a reason to keep following you.

About the blogger

Bree Rody-Mantha is a recent English and cultural studies graduate from Wilfrid Laurier University and works as a freelance writer in and around Toronto. She is an alumnus of Laurier's award winning newspaper, The Cord, and specializes in arts and culture writing. This blog appeared in its entirety on BHIVE in early September 2012.