



Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:  
The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Tartu, Estonia / 18-21 October 2017

## THE ORDINARY MARKET FOR FAKE LIKES

Thomas Beauvisage, Kevin Mellet – SENSE, Orange Labs

In July 2012, a series of articles in the mainstream media revealed cheating practices on social media. Brands, artists, or even politicians, like Republican candidate for the US presidential election Mitt Romney, were accused of having bought fake *likes* and *followers*. Several surveys detailed the existence of an easily accessible industry of Facebook *likes*, Instagram *followers* or YouTube *views*. Five years later, although the question of fake followers attracts less media attention, the commercial supply for *likes* and *followers* is still active, and well structured, with stabilized products, channels and prices.

This paper aims to describe the rise and structuring of this market for fake *likes* and *followers*, and to understand how it became an important piece in the online reputation industry puzzle. We rely on an empirical material allowing us to document the emergence and stabilization of this market, its crafting techniques, and its place within the reputation economy. We have built a database of products and prices in 2013 and 2017 from the top 100 websites selling fake products on major social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram). Finally, we mobilize semi-structured interviews conducted in 2013 with professionals from legitimate social media marketing agencies and from providers of Facebook *likes*, Instagram *followers* and Youtube *views*.

### The rise of fake *likes* in the shadow of the early social media marketing industry

The business of cheating on social networks is the hidden face of an online reputation economy that has grown rapidly in the early 2010's. Reputation economy is positioned at the convergence of two dynamics: the expansion of quantification and performance measurements contributing to the establishment of an audit society (Espeland and Sauder, 2007), and the rise of *social media marketing* as an autonomous activity dealing with online reputation, seeking to identify, manage, and domesticate online participation (Mellet, 2016). Research on the domestication of social media by

Suggested Citation (APA): Beauvisage, T., Mellet, K.. (2017, October 18-21). *The ordinary market for fake likes*. Paper presented at AoIR 2017: The 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Tartu, Estonia: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

marketing has highlighted the centrality of measurement indicators in the construction of this market. In the absence of a shared quality convention (Favereau *et al.*, 2002), measurement indicators are in fact what coordinates actors (advertisers, agencies, websites) in the value chain. This situation tends to favor simple and affordable measurement techniques, the most likely to circulate in the market.

Concretely, the first advertising campaigns on Facebook aimed to increase the number of *likes* on brand pages. As the market grew and attracted new advertisers, agencies were quickly caught between purely numerical expectations of advertisers, and difficulties in completing these goals, and purchasing fake *likes* or *followers* was a convenient expedient to handle this situation. These counterfeiting practices aiming at increasing social counters are the main reason for the rise of the market for fake *likes*, but when the market got more mature, social media agencies realized their interest was in taking clear distance with deceptive practices. The disclosure of cheating practices was initially led by social media agencies themselves, who sought to clean up their business and restrict the reputational risk for their clients. Today, the market for social media marketing has explicitly banned counter faking practices.

### **A market for counterfeited reputation signals**

Yet, the market for fake likes has not disappeared. The evolution of its product characteristics, forgery techniques, and prices, between 2013 and 2017, shows how the market has rather gained autonomy from social media marketing. Concerning its products, beyond the widely shared claims of "true" and "active" users, in 2013, a large range of products were available on the market for fake *likes* and *followers* (variety of targeting options, activity options, etc.) with a high variation in prices. Furthermore, the corresponding techniques used to craft these *followers* were, in some cases, close to "grey hat" techniques used on the legitimate market (such as Facebook quizzes). In 2017, fake products are very standardized: crafting techniques are largely automated, prices more homogeneous determined *in fine* by the cost of avoiding counter-measures deployed by social media websites.

The nature of the demand for fake *likes* has followed this evolution. The reputational cost of being identified as a cheater has led major advertisers and agencies to avoid these practices. In the meantime, fake providers have attracted specific customers: small businesses, aspiring artists, photographers, or even teenagers for whom signals of reputation and visibility are necessary to step into local scenes, and who cannot afford the more traditional communication schemes (advertising, PR, etc.).

### **Stable market in the grey zone**

The market for fake *likes* or *followers* resembles neither quite an illegal market nor totally a counterfeit market, and its status is questionable. First, academic literature on illegal markets (Beckert and Wehinger, 2013) puts forward their invisibility, their underground character, and their poor equipment in terms of evaluation devices (standards, verification and quality assessment tools). Conversely, the social media counterfeit market is very well equipped: it has both a market infrastructure comparable to that of ordinary online commerce, and standard products with stabilized qualities.

Secondly, social media websites have quite ambiguous positions towards deceptive practices: while they usually emphasize the authenticity of their users, they have various policies with regards to bots and automation, and can have an interest in tolerating deceptive practices to a certain extent. In the blurred zones between social media websites' terms of service and their effective suppression policies, a stable industry of reputation forgery has emerged, with ordinary entrepreneurs who consider themselves as belonging to the marketing industry.

Fake *likes* are part of a wider range of online manipulations that slip into the interstices left vacant by the absence of legally enforced rules and by the more or less firm application of the ToS of major web players. These manipulations play on automation and new signals that inhabit digital spaces (Brunton, 2013; Gehl and Bakardjeva, 2017). They also aim at optimizing the indexing of web pages in the results of search engines ("black hat" SEO), at allowing start-ups to quickly grow their user bases ("growth hacking"), at generating impressions and clicks for advertising (advertising fraud). These manipulations have in common to combine the misuse of metrics and rankings, and to resort to massive automation. Their operators mobilize a set of various and constantly evolving techniques that are traded in marketplaces and online forums: content farms, exchange networks, zombie machines, botnets, clickjacking, crowdsourcing, etc. In this sense, the fake *likes* appears as the emblem of a new form of cheating with digital algorithms.

## References

BECKERT J., WEHINGER F. (2013), « In the shadow: illegal markets and economic sociology », *Socio-Economic Review*, 11, 5-30.

BRUNTON F. (2013), *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press.

ESPELAND W.N., SAUDER M. (2007), « Rankings and Reactivity : How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds », *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (1), 1-40.

FAVEREAU O., BIENCOURT O., EYMARD-DUVERNAY F. (2002). "Where do markets come from? From (quality) conventions!", in FAVEREAU O. and LAZEGA E. (eds), *Conventions and structures in economic organization: Markets, networks and hierarchies*, 213-252.

GEHL R., BAKARDJIEVA, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Socialbots and Their Friends: Digital Media and the Automation of Sociality*. Routledge.

MELLET K. (2016), "Marketing and the Domestication of Social Media", in MCFALL L., F. COCHOY & J. DEVILLE, *Markets and the Arts of Attachment*, Routledge, *forthcoming*