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The Flourishing Business of Fake YouTube Views

Plays can be bought for pennies and delivered in bulk, inflating videos'

popularity and making the social media giant vulnerable to manipulation.

By **MICHAEL H. KELLER** AUG. 11, 2018

Interactive illustration by Adam Ferriss for The New York Times. Video footage by Scott Dalton, William Widmer, Joshua Lott and Martin Vassilev.

Martin Vassilev makes a good living selling fake views on YouTube videos. Working from home in Ottawa, he has sold about 15 million views so far this year, putting him on track to bring in more than \$200,000, records show.

Mr. Vassilev, 32, does not provide the views himself. His website, 500Views.com, connects

customers with services that offer views, likes and dislikes generated by computers, not humans.

When a supplier cannot fulfill an order, Mr. Vassilev — like a modern switchboard operator — quickly connects with another.

“I can deliver an unlimited amount of views to a video,” Mr. Vassilev said in an interview. “They’ve tried to stop it for so many years, but they can’t stop it. There’s always a way around.”

After Google, more people search on YouTube than on any other site. It is the most popular platform among teenagers, [according to a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center](#), beating out giants like Facebook and Instagram. With billions of views a day, the video site helps spur global cultural sensations, spawn careers, sell brands and promote political agendas.

Just as other social media companies have been plagued by impostor accounts and artificial influence campaigns, YouTube has struggled with fake views for years.

The fake-view ecosystem of which Mr. Vassilev is a part can undermine YouTube’s credibility by manipulating the digital currency that signals value to users. While YouTube says fake views represent just a tiny fraction of the total, they still have a significant effect by misleading consumers and advertisers. Drawing on dozens of interviews, sales records, and trial purchases of fraudulent views, The New York Times examined how the marketplace worked and tested YouTube’s ability to detect manipulation.

Inflating views violates YouTube's terms of service. But Google searches for buying views turn up hundreds of sites offering "fast" and "easy" ways to increase a video's count by 500, 5,000 or even five million. The sites, offering views for just pennies each, also appear in Google search ads. To test the sites, a Times reporter ordered thousands of views from nine companies. Nearly all of the purchases, made for videos not associated with the news organization, were fulfilled in about two weeks.

One of the businesses was [Devumi.com](https://www.devumi.com). According to company records, it collected more than \$1.2 million over three years by selling 196 million YouTube views. Nearly all the views remain today. An analysis of those records, from 2014 to 2017, shows that most orders were completed in weeks, though those for a million views or more took longer. Providing large volumes cheaply and quickly is often a sign that a service is not offering real viewership.

When Bought, Views Were Longer



Devumi’s customers included an employee of RT, a media organization funded by the Russian government, and an employee of Al Jazeera English, another state-backed company. Other buyers were a filmmaker working for Americans for Prosperity, a conservative political advocacy group, and the head of video at The New York Post. (Al Jazeera and The Post said the workers were not authorized to make such purchases and were no longer employed there.)

Multiple musicians bought views to appear more popular: YouTube views factor into metrics from the ratings company Nielsen and song charts including Billboard’s Hot 100.

Some companies bought views for clients with the promise of social media promotion that would result in real people watching their videos.

Dr. Judith Oppenheimer, 78, paid a company \$5,000 to promote a book she had self-published in hopes of securing a mainstream deal. Her video soon had over 58,000 views, delivered through Devumi.

“There was no increase in sales and no book deal,” she said. “Soon after I signed the contract I thought, ‘I’ll have no proof of what they do or don’t do.’ Now it begins to make sense. They can do it in a day.”

Purveyors depend on constantly evolving tactics to deliver views, including automated or “bot” traffic and pop-under videos on unsuspecting users’ computers, but YouTube says it has effective processes to defend against these approaches.

“This has been a problem we have been working on for many, many years,” said Jennifer Flannery O’Connor, YouTube’s director of product management. The company’s systems continuously monitor a video’s activity, and the anti-fraud team often buys views to understand better how these sites operate, she said. “Our anomaly detection systems are really good.”

Still, the challenges are significant. At one point in 2013, YouTube had as much traffic from bots masquerading as people as it did from real human visitors, according to the company. Some employees feared this would cause the fraud detection system to flip, classifying fake traffic as real and vice versa — a prospect engineers called “the Inversion.”

“The problem itself was extraordinary,” said Blake Livingston, a member of YouTube’s fraud and abuse team at the time who has since left the company.

But fixes were made that relieved the fake-traffic surge, which YouTube said resulted from an attack against the website.

Years later, the battle against fake views continues, even as YouTube contends with disinformation campaigns, like Russia's efforts during the 2016 election, and language it considers hate speech, including posts by [the recently banned Infowars site](#).

YouTube would not disclose the number of fake views it blocked each day, but said its teams worked to keep them to less than 1 percent of the total. Still, with the platform [registering billions of views a day](#), tens of millions of fake views could be making it through daily.

“View count manipulation will be a problem as long as views and the popularity they signal are the currency of YouTube,” Mr. Livingston said.



Carlton E. Bynum II runs a website, [GetLikes.click](#), from a home office in Houston that sells YouTube views as well as Instagram and Twitter followers, Facebook likes and SoundCloud plays. Scott Dalton for The New York Times



“I can deliver an unlimited amount of views to a video,” said Martin Vassilev, owner of 500Views.com, a website based in Ottawa. Renaud Philippe for The New York Times

Real Money, Sham Audience

It took Mr. Vassilev about 18 months to go from being on welfare and living with his father in Canada to buying a white BMW 328i and a house of his own.

By late 2014, his website was on the first page of Google search results for buying YouTube views, fulfilling 150 to 200 orders a day and bringing in more than \$30,000 a month, he said. “I really couldn’t believe you could make that much money online,” he said. The Times reporter’s order on his site, for 25,000 views, was fulfilled one day later. A spokeswoman for Google, which is owned by the same company as YouTube, said that sites selling views appeared in search results because they were relevant, but that there was “room for improvement” in warning users.

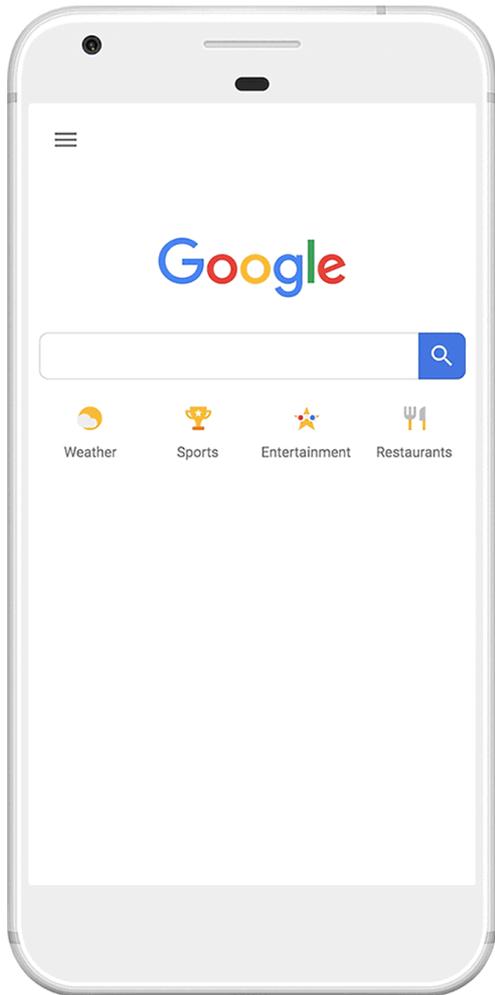
Mr. Vassilev declined to name his clients but said that many orders came from public relations or marketing firms.

Today, he fills most orders through

SMMKings.com, a wholesale supplier run by Sean Tamir, 29. Mr. Tamir charges him about a dollar for a thousand views, which Mr. Vassilev resells for \$13.99, throwing in 100 free likes.

Several times a year, YouTube makes changes to its detection system to try to disrupt fake views, Mr. Tamir said. A recent episode came in **late January**, but many of the sites were functioning a few weeks later when The Times made most of its purchases. Suppliers say they get around system updates by making their traffic appear more humanlike, ensuring that it comes from users with prior views, for example.

One purveyor, Carlton E. Bynum II, 24, uses advertising to attract customers. He collected more than \$191,000 in revenue this year but spent over \$109,000 in ads that appeared at the top of Google, according to financial records. His site, GetLikes.click, run from a home office in Houston, sells YouTube views as well as Instagram and Twitter followers, Facebook likes and SoundCloud plays.



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Google does not allow ads with terms like “buy YouTube views.” But Mr. Bynum said one workaround was to misspell the words and submit an ad multiple times if it was denied at first. When asked about advertising for paid YouTube views, Google removed some of the ads, including Mr. Bynum’s, but similar ones returned after two weeks.

Before Mr. Bynum sold views, he was buying them for himself. After he was discharged from the Marine Corps last year, he began posting product reviews on YouTube and taking a cut when visitors

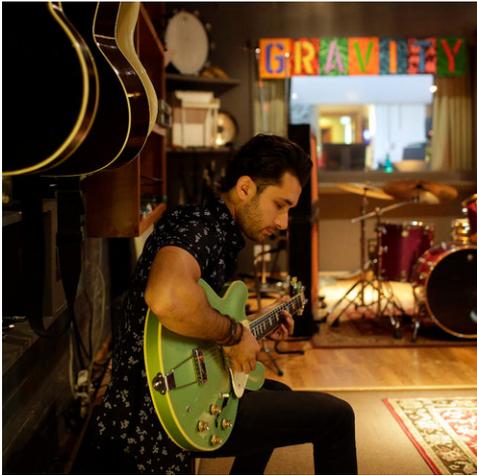
made purchases using his links. The views he bought would often cause his videos to rank higher than his competitors' in search, he said. The effect would snowball: His videos would gain traffic through search, and he would make more money. (A YouTube spokeswoman said views were just one factor among many that affected search rankings.) "It worked great," he said. "I can get views within a day. I can get likes within hours."

Mr. Bynum said he believed real people were watching his videos. "But let's say there's a small chance I'm wrong and it is bots," he said. "Their videos are still getting ranked."

Mr. Vassilev, who also said he used fake views to increase the search ranking of videos promoting his website, makes no pretense that what he is selling is authentic viewership. "It's impossible," he said.



"They told me if I got a certain number of hits I would sell a certain amount," said Elizabeth Clayton, a self-published poet. William Widmer for The New York Times



“The beautiful thing about these social media platforms is when they came out it was genuine,” said Aleem Khalid, a musician. “But now I feel it’s all fake.” Joshua Lott for The New York Times

Promised a Following

The salesman on the phone said it would be simple: Elizabeth Clayton, a retired English and psychology professor, could pay Hancock Press \$4,200 to publicize her self-published works of poetry. The company said online promotion, including 40,000 guaranteed YouTube views, would translate into sales, emails show.

Ms. Clayton, 77, was optimistic. She had been publishing for seven years but had not sold much. One royalty check came to \$1.47, another to \$0.75. She signed up for Hancock to promote two videos, costing her \$8,400, records show.

“They told me if I got a certain number of hits I would sell a certain amount,” she said.

Instead of traditional marketing, Hancock paid \$270 for 55,000 views from Devumi for each video, the records show. The views eventually reached about 60,000, where they remain. But there was no increase in sales. “They couldn’t tell

me anything about the people that were watching the video,” Ms. Clayton said. “I suspected something, but I couldn’t get any information.”

Wayne Hancock, the 92-year-old chief executive of the Arkansas-based company, said he believed real people were watching the videos. That’s how Devumi marketed its views. Mr. Hancock’s daughter, K. C. Shay, who helps run the business, dismissed Ms. Clayton’s documents and the Devumi receipts as fakes.

But Devumi records show that Hancock Press spent about \$26,000 over three years, obtaining more than five million views for 75 or so authors. Interviews with six other Hancock clients are consistent with Ms. Clayton’s experience.

Devumi did not respond to repeated requests for comment. The company, whose website says that it has closed, came under investigation in two states in January [after The Times reported](#) that it sold fake Twitter followers.

Many Devumi clients came from the music industry, where buying views is common and often seen as necessary. “YouTube is one of the premier sources of music consumption and an important indicator of musical trends and popularity,” said Silvio Pietroluongo, a vice president at Billboard. As a new artist, Aleem Khalid hired Crowd Surf, a promotion company, in 2014. Without his knowledge, he said, the firm bought 10,000 views each on three of his videos. They now have between 11,000 and 42,000 views. “The beautiful thing about these social media platforms is when

they came out it was genuine. But now I feel it's all fake," said Mr. Khalid, 25. (Cassie Petrey, a co-founder of Crowd Surf, said she thought Devumi was producing real views, based on statements on its website.)

Others who relied on Devumi said they were similarly surprised at the company's tactics. Ami Horowitz, the conservative filmmaker, bought 10,000 views for a video he appeared in — "What We Learned at the People's Climate March" — on the YouTube channel for Americans for Prosperity, the Koch brothers' political influence group. Mr. Horowitz, who is often a guest on Fox News, also bought views for a video about the protests in Ferguson, Mo.

In a statement, he said he had believed Devumi worked like traditional web advertising. But "it wasn't what we expected," he said, adding that he never used Devumi or similar services again. A spokeswoman for Americans for Prosperity called the behavior unethical and said the group would "not knowingly engage" in it.

Spotting the Forgeries

YouTube's engineers, statisticians and data scientists are constantly improving in their ability to fight what Ms. O'Connor calls a "very hard problem," but the attacks have "continually gotten stronger and more sophisticated," she said.

After the Times reporter presented YouTube with the videos for which he had bought views, the company said sellers had exploited two

vulnerabilities that had already been fixed. Later that day, the reporter bought more views from six of the same vendors. The view count rose again, though more slowly. A week later, all but two of the vendors had delivered the full amount.

Fake View Purchases Were Largely Successful



Even when it looks closely, YouTube can miss videos with fake views. A 2017 Google public report on disinformation during the 2016 election looked at RT's YouTube channels, concluding that there was “no evidence of manipulation of our platform or policy violations.” Yet The Times recently found that an RT employee bought fake views for videos in 2016, which YouTube acknowledged it did not detect.

James Brown, a correspondent for RT, had purchased 30,000 views and 300 likes across three videos that focused on problems involving homelessness and immigration in Europe. Mr. Brown said he took Devumi at its word that the views would be real people. An RT spokeswoman said the company was unaware of the purchases and was conducting an internal review.

“It concerns me that while Twitter and Facebook appear to have made some credible progress in this area, YouTube still struggles to identify inauthentic

and coordinated activity on its platform,” said Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, the top Democrat on the Intelligence Committee.

View-selling sites continue to advertise with apparent impunity. A post on the YouTube Creator Blog [warning users against fake views](#) has numerous comments linking to view-selling sites.

“The only way YouTube could eliminate this is if they removed the view counter altogether,” said Mr. Vassilev, the fake-view seller. “But that would defeat the purpose of YouTube.”

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