

# METRO in focus

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Graphic by Sophie Harwin @sophiemetronews

# Twitter ye not... my fans are real

**W**HICH came first, Twitter or the Twitter egg? Like them or not, Twitter eggs aren't going anywhere. There are millions of them.

Part of the site's initiation process – you are assigned a default egg when you register before you upload a profile picture – to most users they mean one thing... spam.

No tweeter wants to be followed by a non-tweeting egg, or do they?

Last summer, Republican US presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich was embroiled in controversy after a former staff member for his campaign claimed a firm had been asked to increase the politician's Twitter follower numbers by creating fake accounts. His campaigners

More and more tech companies are willing to make you look increasingly popular by selling you thousands of extra followers on Twitter. **JENNI MARSH** asks if anyone truly believes having a band of bogus buddies can make you look good...

denied the allegations, but people search engine PeekYou claimed 92 per cent of Mr Gingrich's followers were fake. He currently has more than 1.4million.

Twitter followers have also been the subject of debate by those on both sides of the political divide in Britain.

Last week, left-wing writer Sunny Hundal raised questions on his blog about the Twitter followers of Mark Clarke, who unsuccessfully stood as a Conservative candidate in Tooting, south London, in the 2010 general election.

Mr Clarke, who goes under the Twitter handle @MrMarkClarke, has amassed more than 48,000 followers since he

joined Twitter in March. He has tweeted 325 times and is following 168 other Twitter accounts.

On his blog, Mr Hundal claimed Mr Clarke was being followed by a number of fake accounts.

Mr Hundal, who has more than 24,000 followers and has made more than 88,000

US presidential candidate Newt Gingrich's campaign team denied claims it had bought Twitter followers last year to boost his election hopes. He boasted he had six times the followers as other candidates combined, but search company PeekYou claimed only 8% of his followers were real people

Australian web company uSocial.net claimed it had been asked to provide **25,000** Twitter followers for singer Michael Jackson just weeks before he died in 2009

The most followed on Twitter:

- Up to **46%** of the Twitter followers of companies could be fake profiles generated by bots
- 1. Lady Gaga @ladygaga 26m
- 2. Justin Bieber @justinbieber 24m
- 3. Katy Perry @katyperry 22m
- 4. Rihanna @rihanna 21m
- 5. Britney Spears @britneyspears 18m
- 6. Barack Obama @BarackObama 17m
- 7. Shakira @shakira 16m
- 8. Taylor Swift @taylorswift13 15m
- 9. Kim Kardashian @KimKardashian 15m
- 10. YouTube @YouTube 14m

Sources: IULM University Milan, Twitter Counter

tweets, believes there are a number of British bloggers out there boosting their Twitter numbers with fake followers.

He said some Twitter users could let ambition get the better of them. 'If you're well-known, it's embarrassing to join Twitter and, in those early days, have a few hundred followers,' he said.

'There is also a growing importance placed on the "most influential on Twitter" lists, which are often based on numbers.'

Mr Hundal fears that if politicians did choose to purchase followers, they would be giving themselves a false mandate to raise issues based on non-existent public support.

'Having a Twitter following gives legitimacy to a politician and their policies,' he said.

Mr Clarke told Metro: 'I have never checked who my Twitter followers are.'

A number of online services exist for those willing to pay to boost their popularity on Twitter. One of them, Get Fast Twitter Followers, is based in London and offers a variety of packages – 1,000 followers cost £10 while 20,000 cost £150.

'Everyone realises the importance of social media nowadays and if someone or a company has many followers on Twitter, it gives value to him or his company.'

She disputed the suggestion that what they are doing was morally questionable.

'We are not selling humans – we are offering followers that are a part of the Twitter marketing strategy.'

Establishing "gaming" – as friend and follower forgery on social networks has been dubbed – beyond reasonable doubt is tricky. However, there are some universal hallmarks of a Twitter cheat.

Their followers will experience a sudden and dramatic spike and they will have a suspicious number of egg followers who have tweeted only a handful of times.

And because Twitter fakers are followed by hollow accounts, their messages are sent to online ghost towns, so they don't get re-tweeted and slowly their numbers fall.

For this reason, web entrepreneur Iain Scott, who has more than 3,600 followers, says those who fake it to make it have missed the point.

'Bought followers either aren't real accounts or belong to people with 1,000 other accounts who have agreed to follow for financial reasons,' he said. 'They have no interest in what the person has to say and there is absolutely no value in that.'

Neal Mann, social media editor at The Wall Street Journal, who has more than 48,000 followers, agrees.

'A big Twitter following was never an objective when I first started using the service,' he said.

'I recognised quickly the power of Twitter for journalists and set out using it as part of my job.'

'A big following isn't necessarily important when it comes to influence, it is about who is following you which makes you influential.'

'A user may have only 300 followers but if their followers are important in their sphere or line of work then they have a great deal of influence.'

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