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Trick or Tweet? Twitter launches crackdown after millions are duped by fake accounts

By [Daniel Boffey](#)

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The social networking site Twitter is clamping down on fake celebrity accounts after being sued in America.

Thousands of famous names have fallen victim to impostors, including Britney Spears, Foreign Secretary David Miliband, the Dalai Lama and even the Queen.

This summer, Mr Miliband was forced to deny quotes widely attributed to him after the death of Michael Jackson. The comments had been written on a seemingly plausible Twitter account under his name.



Twitter has decided to act after Tony La Russa, the coach of an obscure American baseball team, launched a legal action over a fake account. He claimed that postings in which he appeared to make light of the death of two of his players had been 'hurtful'.

Twitter, which has six million users who can send instant blogs on their activities to anyone who chooses to follow them, denies it has any legal case to answer.

But it is now testing a new system to ensure that users can identify genuine celebrity accounts. In future, a tick alongside a name will guarantee it is genuine.

Until recently, Twitter has had a liberal attitude towards celebrity impostors as long as it was clear that the postings were not genuine.

One blogger claimed to be jailed record producer Phil Spector, writing from his prison cell. Among the fake Spector's comments were: 'People ask me for my opinion of American Idol. It's a total insult to music. Not my thing.'

A phoney account under the name of film star Christopher Walken and bearing his picture is still regularly read by more than 90,000 people.



And in March this year, actor Ewan McGregor's spokesman claimed the star was considering legal action to remove a fake Twitter account that had attracted 20,000 followers.

The Mail on Sunday's own Piers Morgan has also been targeted by an impostor who has accumulated a following of 17,650. One of the more recent postings has the Britain's Got Talent judge saying: 'Well done everyone for backing Susan [Boyle], such a talented lady.'

Jonathan Ross recently unmasked an impostor claiming to be comedian Jack Dee. The BBC presenter phoned Dee to check if the postings were really his.

A fake account in the name of Girls Aloud singer and X Factor judge Cheryl Cole was so convincing that Radio 1 DJ Chris Moyles was duped into becoming one of her more than 31,000 followers.

Star Trek star William Shatner told an interviewer who asked him about his hugely popular Twitter account: 'I don't even know what Twitter is.' But 116,000 people still follow the fake William Shatner.

A fake Twitter account for George W. Bush has 1,100 followers, and recently had the former President saying of the Queen's birthday: 'Queenie Lizzie's birthday party today. She's lookin' good for 110 years old, or however old she is.'

One of several fake Gordon Ramsays regularly swears at his 6,700 followers. In June, as the Fat Duck restaurant in Bray, Berkshire, suffered from an outbreak of food poisoning, the fake Ramsay wrote about the owner: 'Feel sorry for Heston [Blumenthal]. F***** bad luck.'

The number of fake accounts has led to British website Valebrity offering its own verification service. Its founder, Steven Livingstone, said many fake accounts were set up to carry out direct marketing.

He said: 'People are making a lot of money out of it. Nobody knows who's who on these sites.'

Typically, social networking sites remove fake accounts if there are complaints or fraud is suspected.

But Twitter is unable to track impostors because no proof of identity is ever requested from its users.

A Twitter spokesman said: 'We're working to establish authenticity, starting with well-known accounts that have had problems with impersonation or identity confusion.'

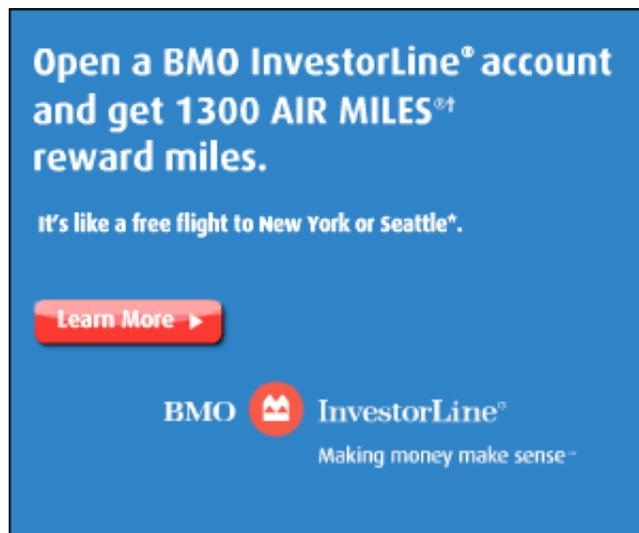
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