

# The misappropriation of the identities of famous people on Twitter

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Professor Ana Mancera Rueda. Credit: University of Seville

Professor Ana Mancera Rueda from the Department of Spanish

Language, Linguistics and Literary Theory at the University of Seville has carried out research on false profiles, or 'fakes', of famous people on the social network Twitter and the use of language on these profiles. The study addresses whether the misappropriation of the identities of famous people is normal practice on Twitter, in what cases it is permitted, what effects the parody can have on the image of the celebrity and the social role of someone who is well known, and to what extent the messages published by fake accounts can be seen as examples of bad manners or even verbal violence.

Basing itself on the approaches of discourse analysis and sociocultural pragmatics, Mancera has made a linguistic study of 5,030 messages published on more than 50 Twitter profiles, all of which were parodic in nature and which were written in the guise of figures of social importance. These were grouped into different categories according to the area of the parodied subject—for example, politics, the communications media, sport, royalty, etc.

The aim of parody is to highlight the automatic style of writing of the figure being imitated, their habits and their idiolect, that is to say, their manner of expressing themselves. "The presentations of the parodied characters in the biographies of all the analysed accounts tended to take to extremes such characteristics as a first step toward drawing up the new identity of the subject being parodied. For example, in the profile of Mariano Rajoy, constant reference is made to the digraph 'sh' to ridicule the president of the government's way of speaking," explains Mancera.

This research allows for the identification of three macro-strategies used by the owners of such accounts: using activities of supposed self-image on the part of the subject being parodied; attacks on the image of internet users; and making threats against the image of third parties. With such strategies, the aim is both to damage the social image of the

public figure and their private image. "This is perhaps more vulnerable, as it is closer to the ego. For example, via attacks on the target's sexual orientation, highlighting their physical defects, or casting doubt on their mental faculties, which contribute to damaging their image of personal autonomy," says Mancera.

Using a game that is polyphonic in character, it is made to seem that it is the subject whose identity has been stolen holds points of view that cross the boundaries of what is politically correct, or to show a scornful attitude to the parody account's own followers, which also threatens their own sense of affiliation.

In addition, as Mancera has tried to show, the majority of these tweets use linguistic resources of a different type, which makes them offensive in character. Sometimes, they even go as far as verbal violence. However, Twitter's Impersonation policy allows the publication of these messages, with the only condition that it is made clear that they come from a parody account.

Mancera reminds us of the statement made by the Italian journalist Roberto Saviano, who stated in an article he wrote that to insult people on social networks is not freedom of expression, but a way to defame that can be used by those who feed from the fame of others.

"Unfortunately, this has become a strategy that is seen ever more frequently. Using it, the aim isn't only to damage the image of the public figure from the protection of anonymity, but also to try to increase the account holder's number of followers on Twitter using irony and verbal humour, with posts that, despite their offensive character, are marked as favourites and retweeted—that is to say, reposted by thousands of users."

**More information:** Ana Mancera Rueda, La usurpación de la identidad con fines paródicos en la red social Twitter: 'manifestaciones de descortesía verbal', *Rilce. Revista de Filología Hispánica* (2017). [DOI:](#)

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