

# 'Fake news' becomes a business model: researchers

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Cyber criminals have latched onto the notion of "fake news" and turned it into a profitable business model, with services starting at under \$10, security researchers said Thursday.

The online security firm Digital Shadows released a report highlighting services aimed at creating bogus media websites, [fake reviews](#) and social media "bots" or automated accounts to promote or denigrate commercial products and services.

One of the methods used is creating bogus or "spoofed" media websites designed to look like those of legitimate news organizations. The researchers uncovered some 2,800 "live spoof" sites.

This can be done by changing a single letter in a web address to create a fake "clone" of a legitimate news organization site.

Some criminals use the same methods as Russia-based propagandists—modifying legitimate documents and leaking them as part of disinformation campaigns, the report said.

"Like any good news story, content will be shared, liked, reposted and distributed across many different platforms and channels," the report said.

"The more widely a piece of disinformation can be spread, the better the chances of it capturing the public imagination and achieving its objective—whether that is to discredit an opponent, sow discord or to generate profit."

While the use of these tools in political campaigns has become a growing concern, the same methods can be used for profit, according to the report.

"The sheer availability of tools means that barriers to entry are lower than ever," said Rick Holland, vice president of strategy at Digital Shadows.

"It means this now extends beyond geopolitical to financial interests that affect businesses and consumers."

Holland said "[tool](#) kits" are available on a trial basis for as little as \$7 to controls the activities of social media bots.

Retailers are also a target, with one [service](#) offering Amazon ranking, reviews, votes, listing optimization and selling promotions at prices from \$5 for an unverified review to \$500 for a monthly retainer.

Still other services tout the merits of crypto-currencies to push up the price, similar to stock "pump and dump" scams, the [report](#) said.

Many of these services are advertised on the anonymous "dark web" where users are difficult to trace, according to Holland.

But some are openly advertised as marketing tools as well, he said.

Holland said misinformation has been around for a long time but that "what has changed in the digital world is the speed such techniques spread around the world."

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