

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 30, 2018

The Honorable Maureen Ohlhausen  
Acting Chairman  
Federal Trade Commission  
600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20580

Dear Acting Chairman Ohlhausen:

We write regarding the disturbing *New York Times* investigation over the weekend into Devumi, an American company that sells a panoply of social media actions, including followers, on some of the biggest social media websites, including Twitter and YouTube.<sup>1</sup> The company bills itself as a marketing company that can help clients increase their social media presence. In reality, the company allegedly uses bots to create fake social media accounts – evidently deceiving its own clients and creating tens of thousands of victims of a unique kind of social identity theft. This company seems engaged in unfair or deceptive practices, and we urge you to use all the tools at your disposal to take immediate action to investigate this company, along with any other similar services, and shut down any fraudulent practices they are engaged in.

Devumi's website – still live – offers any clients willing to pay a smorgasbord of social media influence: followers, retweets, and likes on Twitter; views, subscribers, likes, dislikes, and shares on Google's YouTube; plays, followers, likes, reposts, and comments on SoundCloud, the music-hosting site; followers, likes, and repins on Pinterest, the discovery and inspiration site; plays and followers on Vimeo; and followers and endorsements on LinkedIn, the professional networking site.

The advertising on Devumi's website belies its reported practice of purchasing bots to generate fake social media accounts and interactions. For example, regarding its YouTube-related services, Devumi advertises, "100% Real Views from Real People."<sup>2</sup> Yet this is clearly not the case. According to data analysis by The Times, Devumi operates from "an estimated stock of at least 3.5 million automated accounts." Even worse, Devumi appears to be complicit in a massive social media identity theft operation. At least 55,000 of these accounts use "the names, profile pictures, hometowns and other personal details of real Twitter users, including minors."

Devumi's fraudulent practices are likely linked to widespread consumer harms. The inflated number of followers, retweets, and the like enabled by Devumi's services have the effect of distorting the online marketplace and creating a false sense of celebrity, credibility, or importance in people, companies, or institutions that may not deserve it.

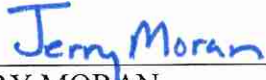
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://devumi.com/youtube-views/>

As you know, Section 5 of the FTC Act (15 U.S.C. §45) provides the FTC authority to bring enforcement actions against deceptive or unfair marketing practices. We urge you to use this statutory authority to investigate deceptive and unfair practices of these social media influencing services and take appropriate action. We respectfully request a response by February 14, 2018.

Sincerely,



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JERRY MORAN  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection,  
Product Safety, Insurance, and Data Security



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RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection,  
Product Safety, Insurance, and Data Security