

Series of reports

Transparent Twitter

Twitter Purge 2018: True Story 4 years later

Historical review
of the audit report
launched in
November 2018
by SocialPuncher

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Transparent twitter. Series of audit reports

The question of how many bots are actually on Twitter has been actively discussed in the press since July 2022. The previous Twitter board claimed that they were no more than **5%** of the declared **MDAU**, a key indicator that determines the capitalization of Twitter. Within 6 months, no one gave a clear answer to this question, and a month after the transaction, it was completely forgotten.

Social Puncher has been researching Twitter since 2015 and has dozens of published case studies analyzing artificial activity. Now **Social Puncher**, as an activist auditor, is beginning a detailed audit of the social network, revealing the role of the simulated audience in inflating the value of the asset.

The purchase price is based on Twitter market capitalization with a premium of 38%. The stock price was based on the key metrics, **MAU** (**2013-2018**) and **MDAU** (**2019-2022**).

Prior to the deal, no social analytics company had audited Twitter. The number of **MDAUs**, percentage of bots, and other key metrics were provided and approved by Twitter, without verification by a third party. Only the financial results were audited, but no one analyzed exactly how those numbers were achieved.

Social Puncher is launching a series of previously investigated and audited cases that could shed light on the percentage and total number of artificial audience on Twitter. Some of them were published earlier and will be relaunched with additional data and comments.

The series opens with the **2018 Twitter Purge Case**. This was the only action that resulted in a significant one-time drop in followers for hundreds of thousands of accounts.

Social Puncher monitored the purge in real time, and audited Twitter's official statement about it. Following a detailed investigation, two parts of the audit report **Twitter Purge: True Story** were released: **Part 1**. Investigation and **Part 2**. Fact check and audit (available on socialpuncher.com).

Four years later, we're releasing an overview of that report, explaining how that purge affected the 2022 deal. The review begins with a short summary containing all the main facts and conclusions.

2018 purge review. Top 10 facts missed in press coverage.

1. The purge showed that twitter always had complete data on the number of bots in the system, and was even able to track botnets, as well as mass buyers of bots.
2. After auditing the largest purge, it can be said that Twitter never took systematic action to completely purge the platform of bots, although some executives were aware of its scope.
3. The purge was carried out to create the illusion that Twitter actively fights artificial activity, but not to stop illegal acts of manipulating the platform.
4. The object of the purge in 2018 was the cheapest paid followers, which were openly sold on hundreds of marketplaces. This group of botnets was brought together by Social Puncher under the name Junk Botnet, as the largest supplier of the most primitive followers.
5. The shortest description of the purge: Twitter temporarily disabled the current following lists for about half of the Junk Botnet, allowing it to start recovering after 3 days. Then these accounts were resurrected three times.
6. The goals and methods of the purge stated in the announcement were completely false. Journalists were misinformed by Twitter's official statement. All affected accounts did not belong to real people, and were not locked.
7. Twitter locked these accounts only on **November 9, 2018**, the day of the publication of the Reuters article based on the Social Puncher audit report.
8. This case shows an obvious conflict of interest. Audience simulation is the most important source of increasing advertising revenue and capitalization growth. Executives always strive to meet KPIs in any way they can, even turning a blind eye to an artificial audience.
9. **MAU** and **mDAU** are metrics that are very easy to manipulate. By adjusting the level of activity of different botnets, you can predictably reduce or increase audience statistics.
10. All platforms are interested in maximizing their own audience. In the absence of an independent third party audit, this turns into a simulation of fighting bots, instead of completely stopping the artificial activity.

Untold facts about the July Purge. Why did it end only in November?

The most important thing to know about the 2018 purge is that Twitter's official statements and media coverage of the purge did not reflect the actual actions of Twitter's tech team. The real goals, the details of this process and the final result were completely hidden from users, reporters, and investors.

In fact, the July Twitter purge lasted not one day, but **4** months. Removed accounts were resurrected 3 times, two times Twitter excluded them from followers again, but each time they freely returned back. It only finally ended on Friday, **November 9, 2018**, following the publication of a two-part investigative and audit report from Social Puncher detailing this purge. Following exposure and under threat of charges of deliberate disinformation, Twitter suspended these accounts for real.

On that day, Reuters published the article Twitter cuts suspect users from follower counts again, blames bug (By Paresh Dave), where it was officially confirmed that accounts locked in July were still active.

"Twitter said on Friday [November 9, 2018] that it "discovered a bug where some of these accounts were briefly added back, which led to misleading follower counts" for "very few accounts". In this comment, the Twitter Spokesman misrepresented the facts twice.

The first time when said that a bug had been discovered. There were no bugs, the tech team was in full control of the process. Twitter just discovered the Social Puncher report and couldn't ignore a question from Reuters.

The second false statement was about "very few accounts". It looks absurd considering one of the tens of thousands of those "very few accounts" was @Twitter, which suddenly got **2.4** million "some of these accounts" again. No one noticed this for a whole month, and exactly on the day after the report was published, Twitter tech team discovered a bug.

This is not the first time that the Twitter board has deliberately misrepresented the facts in the most obscure terms. Social Puncher audited the official Twitter announcement of the Purge and found that **4** of these major claims are completely false. Details of the audit are available on page 7.

Who did Twitter actually remove from followers in July 2018?

The only thing that reporters were able to highlight when covering this purge was a decrease in the number of followers for the most popular accounts. But the 2-4% loss for celebrities was just a side effect of the purge. About a hundred little-known but very large accounts lost from 45% to 92% of their followers. Thousands of smaller accounts also suffered huge losses. But not a single media wrote about them, except for **David Copperfield**, the loss of 2 of 3 million followers was noticed by a couple of reporters.

All really affected accounts have been known to Social Puncher since 2016, after the experiment of buying cheap followers on Fiverr, a list of the largest buyers of such bots was compiled. Based on the results of the investigation, a range of 15-18 million accounts was identified with synchronized automated behavior. They followed the same list of accounts, often in the same order. The Social Puncher called it the Junk Botnet at the time, although this is not entirely accurate.

This was not a giant botnet controlled from a single command center, but rather a group of independent botnets whose owners sold the cheapest followers through hundreds of open marketplaces. You can read more about the sellers of these bots in several interviews with stand-up comedian and writer Joe Mande, who bought 1 million followers for **\$400** as an experiment. After the purge, he lost 420,000 of them.

It is very easy to identify these bots, these are primitive mass followers, most often without a profile picture, bio, with a small number of tweets and followers or without them at all. Most follow the maximum number of accounts according to the old (2,000) or new (5,000) Twitter limit. Accounts created in different countries around the world. Based on the fact that international botnets have coordinated activities, it can be assumed that registration was carried out by many different teams, who most often sold accounts in bulk to dozens of large resellers, who then sold following as a service.

The largest legal seller of these bots in the US market will be revealed by Social Puncher in the next report.

Technical features of the purge and the chronology of resurrections

The purge consisted of two components: compiling a list of accounts, and a set of specific sanctions to them. Twitter never revealed how the full list of the affected accounts. The sale of followers is prohibited, all these accounts should have been suspended, but this did not happen. According to the official Twitter statement, they were locked and after it removed them from follower **counts**. This type of restriction has never been used before and later.

In order to correctly understand what happened it needs to be explained how following works on Twitter. When you follow a new account, it is added to your following list, and information about this connection appears inside the Twitter database. These are two separate processes. Twitter engineers deactivated these connections, but kept the purged accounts their their following lists. They still look the same as before, but not include in follower counts.

Moreover, after the purge, there was no sign that these accounts were locked, all of them remained active after it. Three days later, their owners/admins slowly started deleting their deactivated following lists. In just a month, 11 accounts returned more than 1 million followers, two of them got back 3.5 million and 4 million.

In early October, Twitter reacted and removed the same followers from the same accounts again, just like 3 months earlier. This was the first resurrection attempt, it was partial and short-lived, as it was carried out by botnet admins, but allowed a small group of accounts to temporarily regain lost followers.

Along with the second purge, there was a second resurrection, and it was different from the first. In the first half of October, a third of all purged accounts fully restored their following as of July 11, as if the purge never happened. Only Twitter employees could plan and carry out such an operation. It took place gradually, in 2 stages, without sharp statistical changes. After the exposure, on November 9th, Twitter claimed it was a bug and removed these accounts from followers for the third time, finally locking them. At the end of 2022, all of these still exist, all have zero following and are no longer active.

Twitter's actions during the purge seem strange, chaotic, spontaneous, and inconsistent, and before exposure did not meet the stated plan.

Audit of the official statement by Viaya Gadde, July 11, 2018

The Twitter purge was announced by a Twitter investor blog post Confidence in follower counts by **Vijaya Gadde**, Legal, Policy and Trust & Safety Lead. It contained 4 main statements that could be verified. The Social Puncher audited them, and concluded that they were all false.

1. The accounts were locked because of a sudden change in behavior.

There are two statements here, audit one after the other. They did not show any sudden change in their behavior, they had almost no activity other than following. And they were not locked either after the first purge, or after the second purge in July, or after the third purge in October 2018, until the publication of the audit.

2. All locked accounts were removed from follower counts. They were removed from the followers, but they were not forbidden to return, which these accounts took advantage of three times.

3. The accounts were owned by real people who lost control of them.

There are two statements here again, and both are false. Each of them has never been a personal account of any person. Of course, the owners of these accounts were real people, but everyone owned not just one account, but from tens of thousands to millions of them. There was no sign of losing control of them either before or after July 12, until the release of the Social Puncher's audit report

4. The owner of the locked account has no ability to log in. This was not true on July 12th. These accounts ceased their activity 4 months later, which indicates that the owners of botnets have lost the opportunity to log in.

But the most important thing was not mentioned at all in the announcement. It was not specified what exact number of accounts would be affected by the purge. Without this number, it is impossible to verify any statements. The author of this announcement, Chief Legal Officer **Vijaya Gadde**, did not implement the purge. It was impossible without a direct order from the **CEO** and technical control from the **CTO**. In 2018 it was Jack **Dorsey** and Parag Agrawal respectively. These 3 people, according to their positions, are responsible for the deliberate misinformation of investors, user, and reporters.

The impact of the purge on key Twitter metrics since 2018

Based on the results of the audit, one can answer the question of what impact this purge had on Twitter's capitalization. Here are two facts that investors have not taken into account when trading shares of Twitter for the past 4 years.

First fact. The purged accounts were resurrected three times, showing obvious synchronized behavior, which completely refutes all claims that they belong to real people.

Second fact. The other half of the so-called **Junk Botnet** is **still active** and **counts as followers**. It still inflates the audience of thousands of accounts, misinforming users about their true popularity. The largest such account still has nearly **2.5 million** followers and is owned by Qatari businessman @AdelAliBinAli.

Twitter's actions were inconsistent and incomplete, and did not comply with Twitter's rules regarding the purchase of followers. This was sufficient for global media coverage of the purge, but quite insignificant for real confidence in the follower count, as promised by the official Twitter announcement.

"...We believe accuracy and transparency make Twitter a more trusted service for public conversation," Viaya Gadde stated in July 2018. But it is clear from the audit results that the **purge was neither accurate nor transparent**. Since all these facts were not disclosed, Twitter continued to be considered a trusted service. The problem of bots after 2018 was no longer raised and did not affect capitalization. The raised issue about the percentage of automated accounts in 2022 did not change the terms of the deal.

The announcement ended with a statement about the impact of the purge on key metrics. "Removing locked accounts from followers doesn't impact MAU or DAU. Locked accounts that have not reset their password in more than one month are not included in MAU or DAU."

It is impossible to verify the statement that these accounts are not included in MAU in Q3, 2018. Since the audit of the announcement revealed multiple facts of hiding important data as well as deliberate misinformation about the purge, it is impossible for investors to be sure about the key metrics of the Twitter audience. Twitter's MAU numbers in Q3 2018 are definitely not reliable. **All subsequent quarterly reports, with the disclosure of MAU, and then mDAU, should be a subject to a detailed audit.**

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