

Business



ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES. PHOTOGRAPHS BY, UPPER RIGHT, MIKE WINDLE/GETTY IMAGES (JUSTIN BIEBER); LOWER RIGHT, KHALED ELFIQU/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK (NEYMAR); CENTER, NINA PROMMER/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK (TAYLOR SWIFT); LOWER LEFT, JOHN PHILLIPS/GETTY IMAGES (OPRAH WINFREY); AND UPPER LEFT, KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR TIDAL (BEYONCÉ).

Looking for the real Oprah

SAN FRANCISCO

Social media accounts that pose as celebrity sites bedevil public figures

BY JACK NICAS

Kip Moore, a country music singer-songwriter with hits like “Beer Money” and “Hey Pretty Girl,” has had some disturbing experiences with fans lately.

At some shows, women have approached him demanding to know why he stopped chatting with them on Instagram or Facebook. Some said they left their husbands to be with him after he said he loved them. Now they could be together, the women told him.

“They’re handing me a letter, you know, ‘Here’s the divorce papers. I’ve left so and so,’” Mr. Moore, 38, said. “If I check my inbox right now, I’d have hundreds of these messages. But I try not to check it, because it disheartens me.”

Mr. Moore, fueled by his country music fame, is a victim of what has become a widespread phenomenon: identity theft on social media. Recent searches found at least 28 accounts impersonating him on Facebook and at least 61 on Instagram. Many of the accounts send messages to his fans promising love and asking for money. Those who get duped often direct their anger at the real Mr. Moore.

The issue of fake social media accounts masquerading as public figures is acute. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter teem with accounts that mimic ordinary people to spread propaganda or to be sold as followers to those who want to appear more influential. But millions of the phony profiles pose specifically as actors, singers, politicians and other well-known figures to broadcast false-

hoods, cheat people out of money — or worse. Last year, the Australian authorities charged a 42-year-old man with more than 900 child sex offenses for impersonating Justin Bieber on Facebook and other sites to solicit nude photos from minors.

The sheer volume of social media impostors poses a challenge to even the wealthiest celebrities. In a video last year, Oprah Winfrey warned her Twitter followers that “somebody out there is trying to scam you using my name and my avatar on social media, asking for money.”

It was an unusual step. Harriet Seitler, chief marketing officer for the Oprah Winfrey Network, said her team only reports Ms. Winfrey’s social media impersonators that try to sell tickets to shows or to solicit donations when they gain traction. “There’s way too many to try to actively police them day in and day out,” Ms. Seitler said.

Even Facebook’s top executives, including Mark Zuckerberg, have struggled with impersonators. To get a sense of the scale of the problem, The New York Times commissioned an analysis to tally the number of impersonators across social media for the 10 most followed people on Instagram, including Beyoncé and Taylor Swift. The analysis, conducted by Social Impostor, a firm that protects celebrities’ names online, found nearly 9,000 accounts across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pretending to be those 10 people.

The Brazilian soccer player Neymar was the subject of the most fake accounts, 1,676. The pop star Selena Gomez was second, with 1,389, according to the analysis, which was completed in April and did not count explicit parody or fan pages. Beyoncé had 714 impersonators; Ms. Swift had 233, the least among the group. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook

have compounded the problem with lax enforcement of their own policies prohibiting impersonators. Some people who report such accounts said the sites had gotten better at removing them, but others said the companies did not police them adequately. Most people agreed that once the sites erased the accounts, they did little to keep those behind them from creating new ones.

“It’s just a Band-Aid,” Mr. Moore said. Facebook and its Instagram unit said they were cracking down on fake accounts. The social network said it had recently added software that automatically detected impostors and frauds, which it used to remove more than a million accounts since March.

Yet in April, tucked away in the fine print of an earnings document, Facebook increased its estimate of fake accounts on the site by 20 million — to as many as 80 million accounts, or about 4 percent of the total number of accounts. The company said the site’s sheer size made it difficult to measure the problem.

“Facebook and Instagram are really powerful ways to connect, and because of that, you have no shortage of people trying to use those systems in nefarious ways,” said Scott Dickens, a Facebook product manager who develops tools to fight hoaxes. “Those sets of people will continue to get smarter to evade detection capabilities that we put in place.”

How easy is it to impersonate someone online? To find out, I created my own impostors.

For those at home: I do not recommend doing this. Making fake social media accounts, even of yourself, is forbidden by the companies’ terms of service. After I made the accounts, I also informed the companies so that the profiles could be removed.

Making the duplicate accounts turned out to be a breeze. I created eight Facebook accounts in one hour recently that

purported to be me, using my exact name and job title and a photo pulled from my verified profile.

All that was required was a different email address for each account. (Email addresses are free and plentiful on the internet.)

On the fifth account, Facebook blocked me from using my name. I thought the jig was up. Then I added a middle initial, and the profile was approved. Later, I deleted the middle initial.

After I had created eight fake accounts, Facebook began requiring a phone number. So I waited a few days and then created three more.

The fake accounts were live for five days before I reported them via Facebook’s site. The company removed them all within minutes.

I used many of the same email addresses to construct Instagram impostors of myself. Instagram made it trickier, sometimes requiring a phone number, which I never offered, or blocking me outright. But by using several different devices, like my wife’s phone, I eventually created 10 profiles with my name and bio and a photo pulled from my verified account.

I then reported the 10 accounts to Instagram. The photo-sharing site removed five after a day. The other five were still active more than four days later.

Twitter was better. After I successfully created one impostor, the company blocked me from using my actual profile photo on a second phony account. The company quickly removed the impostor when I reported it.

I could have created many more accounts if I was willing to pay to do so. Dozens of websites reviewed by The Times sell bulk Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts. Scam artists can pick from detailed menus: accounts

U.S. threats stun world health agency

Delegates try to upend routine agreement on value of breast-feeding

BY ANDREW JACOBS

A resolution to encourage breast-feeding was expected to be approved quickly and easily by the hundreds of government delegates who gathered this spring in Geneva for the United Nations-affiliated World Health Assembly.

Based on decades of research, the resolution says that mother’s milk is healthiest for children and countries should strive to limit the inaccurate or misleading marketing of breast milk substitutes.

Then the United States delegation, embracing the interests of infant formula manufacturers, upended the deliberations.

American officials sought to water down the resolution by removing language that called on governments to “protect, promote and support breast-feeding” and another passage that called on policymakers to restrict the promotion of food products that many experts say can have deleterious effects on young children.

When that failed, they turned to threats, according to diplomats and government officials who took part in the discussions. Ecuador, which had planned to introduce the measure, was the first to find itself in the cross hairs.

The Americans were blunt: If Ecuador refused to drop the resolution, Washington would unleash punishing trade measures and withdraw crucial military aid. The Ecuadorian government quickly acquiesced.

The showdown over the issue was recounted by more than a dozen participants from several countries, many of whom requested anonymity because they feared retaliation from the United States.

Health advocates scrambled to find another sponsor for the resolution, but at least a dozen countries, most of them poor nations in Africa and Latin America, backed off, citing fears of retaliation, according to officials from Uruguay, Mexico and the United States.

“We were astonished, appalled and also saddened,” said Patti Rundall, the policy director of the British advocacy group Baby Milk Action, who has attended meetings of the assembly, the decision-making body of the World Health Organization, since the late 1980s.

“What happened was tantamount to blackmail, with the U.S. holding the world hostage and trying to overturn nearly 40 years of consensus on the best way to protect infant and young child health,” she said.

In the end, the Americans’ efforts were mostly unsuccessful. The Russians ultimately stepped in to introduce the measure — and the Americans did not threaten them.

The State Department declined to respond to questions, saying it could not discuss private diplomatic conversations. The Department of Health and Human Services, the lead agency in the effort to modify the resolution, explained the decision to contest the resolution’s wording but said the agency was not involved in threatening Ecuador.

“The resolution as originally drafted placed unnecessary hurdles for mothers seeking to provide nutrition to their children,” an agency spokesman said in an email. “We recognize not all women are able to breast-feed for a variety of reasons. These women should have the choice and access to alternatives for the health of their babies, and not be stigmatized for the ways in which they are able to do so.” The spokesman asked to remain anonymous in order to speak more freely.

Although lobbyists from the baby food industry attended the meetings in Geneva, health advocates said they saw no direct evidence that they played a role in Washington’s strong-arm tactics. The \$70 billion industry, which is dominated by a handful of American and European companies, has seen sales flat in wealthy countries in recent years, as more women embrace breast-feeding. Over all, global sales are expected to rise by 4 percent in 2018, according to Euromonitor, with most of that growth occurring in developing nations.

The intensity of the administration’s opposition to the breast-feeding resolution stunned public health officials and foreign diplomats, who described it as a marked contrast to the Obama administration, which largely supported the World Health Organization’s longstanding policy of encouraging breast-feeding.

During the deliberations, some American delegates even suggested that the United States might cut its contribution to the organization, several negotiators said. Washington is the single largest contributor to the health organization, providing \$845 million, or roughly 15 percent of its budget, last year.

The confrontation was the latest example of the Trump administration’s siding with corporate interests on numerous public health and environmental issues.

In talks to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, the

Americans have been pushing for language that would limit the ability of Canada, Mexico and the United States to put warning labels on junk food and sugary beverages, according to a draft of the proposal reviewed by The New York Times.

During the same Geneva meeting where the breast-feeding resolution was debated, the United States succeeded in removing statements supporting soda taxes from a document that advises countries grappling with soaring rates of obesity.

The Americans also sought, unsuccessfully, to thwart a W.H.O. effort aimed at helping poor countries obtain access to lifesaving medicines. Washington, supporting the pharmaceutical industry, has long resisted calls to modify patent laws as a way of increasing drug availability in the developing world, but health advocates say the Trump administration has ratcheted up its opposition to such efforts.

The delegation’s actions in Geneva are in keeping with the tactics of an administration that has been upending alliances and long-established practices across a range of multilateral organizations, from the Paris climate accord to the Iran nuclear deal to Nafta.

Iлона Kickbusch, director of the Global Health Centre at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, said there was a growing fear that the Trump administration could cause lasting damage to international health institutions like the W.H.O. that have been vital in containing epidemics like Ebola and the rising death toll from diabetes and cardiovascular disease in the developing world.

“It’s making everyone very nervous, because if you can’t agree on health multilateralism, what kind of multilateralism can you agree on?” Ms. Kickbusch asked.



Sales in wealthy countries have flattened for the infant formula industry.

A Russian delegate said the decision to introduce the breast-feeding resolution was a matter of principle.

“We’re not trying to be a hero here, but we feel that it is wrong when a big country tries to push around some very small countries, especially on an issue that is really important for the rest of the world,” said the delegate, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

He said the United States did not directly pressure Moscow to back away from the measure. Nevertheless, the American delegation sought to wear down the other participants through procedural maneuvers in a series of meetings that stretched on for two days, an unexpectedly long period.

In the end, the United States was largely unsuccessful. The final resolution preserved most of the original wording, though American negotiators did get language removed that called on the W.H.O. to provide technical support to member states seeking to halt “inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children.”

The United States also insisted that the words “evidence-based” accompany references to long-established initiatives that promote breast-feeding, which critics described as a ploy that could be used to undermine programs that provide parents with feeding advice and support.

Abbott Laboratories, the Chicago-based company that is one of the biggest players in the \$70 billion baby food market, declined to comment.

Nestlé, the Switzerland-based food giant, sought to distance itself from the threats against Ecuador and said the company would continue to support the international code on the marketing of breast milk substitutes, which calls on governments to regulate the inappropriate promotion of such products and to encourage breast-feeding.

In addition to the trade threats, Todd C. Chapman, the United States ambassador to Ecuador, suggested in meetings with officials in Quito, the Ecuadorian capital, that the Trump administration might also retaliate by withdrawing the military assistance it has been providing in northern Ecuador, a region wracked by violence spilling across the border from Colombia, according to an Ecuadorian government official who took part in the meeting.

“We were shocked because we didn’t understand how such a small matter like breast-feeding could provoke such a dramatic response,” said the Ecuadorian official, who asked not to be identified because she was afraid of losing her job.

Wesley Tomaselli contributed reporting from Colombia.