

PEOPLE

Paying for online likes



Astroturfing, or buying online support, is hard to uncover, making it a well-liked tactic

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Want to be liked or win support for a cause or a petition?

Go online and you can get 1,000 likes on your Facebook page for as little as US\$15 (S\$18), claim several websites.

This practice, used by marketing companies and individuals wishing to generate online buzz for their products by buying "likes" and "support", has now evolved

into people buying support for political and social causes.

In July, political rivals accused Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot in India of buying a Facebook following from Turkey, reported Indian media.

His rivals said he had bought the "likes" from a Turkish tech team and said the more than two million "likes" he had were mostly from Istanbul, Turkey.

IT experts said the phenomenon is called astroturfing and it creates an impression of widespread support for a cause. In reality, these supporters are just bogus profiles. (See report below.)

IT and social media experts said astroturfing has been planted here too.

One of the latest is a petition posted on Oct 12 on online campaigning site avaaaz.org.

Calling for hijabs to be allowed in the Singapore workforce, it had garnered

about 12,000 signatures by last night.

It also had more than 6,500 shares on Facebook and almost 1,000 Twitter mentions.

Mr Mohamed Saiful Mohamed Najaib, 27, an IT engineer, said after analysing the site: "The site is flawed. You can sign the petition with a fake or invalid e-mail address and the counter will increase."

"If you click share on Facebook but did not authorise or actually share it, the counter will still increase."

"It's the same for Twitter share and e-mail function."

He said the site also allows for a petition to be created without proper validation or proof of the author.

Dr Michael Netzley of Singapore Management University said it's unclear in the hijab petition if astroturfing is at work.

He said: "We need to look at

the data or at the process behind this petition. Did they pay people to sit there and just sign the petition repeatedly?"

"If so, then we would have a case of falsely making this look like a petition with public support."

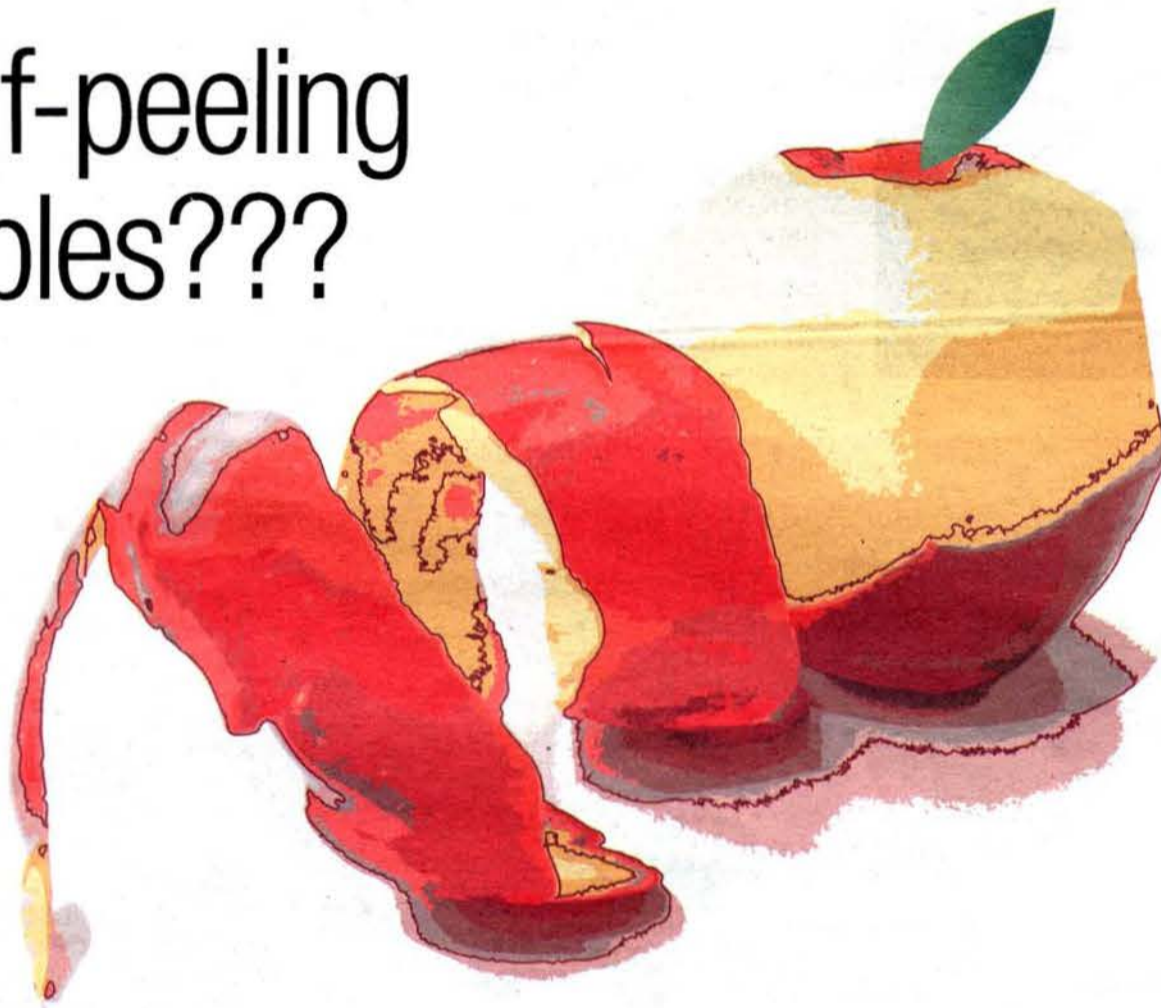
"But I do not know and cannot tell without looking at the collected data or talking with someone involved."

He added: "The fact that we cannot tell just by looking is an example of why astroturfing is possible, tempting and unethical."

The problem is that when the numbers start growing, genuine people might be swayed to join the herd.

Dr Ori Sasson, founder of home-grown IT firm Simulation Software & Technology, said: "Singaporeans have a habit of queuing up. They will think that if many people 'like' a page, I will also 'like' it."

Self-peeling apples???



We successfully started a petition to grow apples that peel on their own

With the help of an IT expert who declined to be identified, The New Paper created its own petition "We should start growing apples that would peel on their own" on avaaaz.org, the site where the hijab petition is hosted.

Within minutes of its creation yesterday, there were 20 supporters. In an hour, it had jumped to 107.

All with the aid of programming. Others use real people.

You might have seen these job advertise-

ments online calling on those interested in multiple reviews.

That is how you get hired to become an astroturfer - it's as easy as creating multiple identities to give Facebook "likes".

It's serious enough for the New York State Attorney General's office to launch a year-long investigation.

What they uncovered was shocking, reported tech news site ZDNet.

Companies billing themselves as "Reputa-

tion Management" businesses produce fake online consumer reviews on Yelp, Google Local and other such sites.

ZDNet reported last month that the "AG's office secured agreements from 19 of these companies to stop writing such reviews and collected US\$350,000 (S\$430,000) in fines from them".

These "reputation companies" had hired freelance writers from around the world, paying between US\$1 and \$10 each.

What is astroturfing?

- 1 Astroturfing got its name from the term "grassroots" - a movement in which large numbers of people stand up for or endorse something.
- 2 A study by Freedom House, a US-based non-governmental organisation which conducts research and advocacy on political freedom, showed that 22 out of 60 countries pay for pro-government commentators to influence online discussions.
- 3 Ms Belinda Ang, an independent social media practitioner, said university students are hired to post online comments, and they can be positive to promote a brand or negative to sabotage competitors.
- 4 Dr Michael Netzley, who teaches new media at Singapore Management University, said this practice will eventually become prevalent in Singapore, but not yet. He said: "Singapore is a conservative country and there are cultural disincentives for not doing so - for instance, the notion of protecting your name."

How to spot it

- 1 Number of likes or clicks increase at the same rate per hour
- 2 Number of comments found on the page are few, compared to the number of likes
- 3 Many of the participants on the page are based in other countries