

HOW FACEBOOK CAN MAKE YOU KILL YOUR WHOLE FAMILY OR VOTE DEMOCRAT...WITH MIND GAME TRICKS

You don't have to be a hostile foreign power to covertly influence people on Facebook. For as little as \$29, a U.K. startup called The Spinner will individually target a special someone in your life with a barrage of Facebook ads subtly designed to influence their behavior, whether it's persuading a spouse to initiate sex more often, or swaying a troublesome co-worker to quit their job.

"We're giving these capabilities to the common man," said Spinner's spokesman, who gives his name as Elliot Shefler. "With a credit card you can target a specific individual and brainwash them with a specific message."

The Spinner has been [called](#) a real life *Inception*, [and](#) "the Cambridge Analytica of sex." It began drumming up press attention last year with its promised brainwashing ability, and today the service claims to have racked up thousands of satisfied customers. Users can request a custom campaign, or select from 10 ready-made ad runs like "Propose Marriage," "Stop Drinking," and the (supposedly) best-selling "Initiate Sex" campaign. After onboarding your target, which requires luring them into clicking on a special link, the ersatz brainwashing begins.

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Over the next 90 days, The Spinner promises the target will be exposed to 10 different promoted articles a total of 180 times, each story picked to subtly plant and reenforce the chosen message. A wife targeted with the “Initiate Sex” campaign, for example, will see an ad linking to a 2011 *Woman’s Day* article titled “9 Ways to Initiate Sex”; a *Family Life* story called “Why Sex Is So Important to Your Husband”; and a Marriage.com article, “The Importance of Sex For a Happy Marriage,” among others in that vein.

After three months of this she’s bound to get the message, if only on a subconscious level, said Shefler.

Other campaigns are designed to get a loved one to stop smoking, program a soon-to-be former spouse to settle divorce proceedings out of court, or, oddly, to urge a gambler to get to the nearest casino and play the slot machines. For a little more money, the Spinner will also design a bespoke campaign. Shefler claimed some clients wanted to deliver ads involving specific sex acts, and that he’s accepted hundreds seeking to bring back a former lover through Facebook.

“There are around 400 targets that are exposed to the Bring Me Back My Ex campaign,” Shefler claimed. “You’d be surprised how many campaigns deal with romance and relationships and sex. You don’t want to know.”

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The Spinner is the first business to monetize something called "Facebook sniper targeting." While most of the focus on Facebook has been on its power to place an ad in front of hundreds or thousands of eyeballs within a narrow demographic, sniper targeting is more personal, delivering a custom message to an audience of one. Properly executed, the target never knows they were singled out. After all, even the most eerily-apt Facebook ad is easily dismissed as a product of the platform's sophisticated algorithms.

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Rich Leigh, founder of Radioactive PR, signed up for the service in July 2018, convinced he was about to expose an amusing public relations hoax on his website. Two months later, he was surprised to see a paid link in his timeline promoting an article titled, "3 Reasons why you should initiate sex with your husband." Several more ads followed over the next two months.

"I think this is a legitimate business and people will pay money for it," Leigh told *The Daily Beast*. "But I don't buy that it's anywhere near as successful as Shefler says. And if it is, Jesus, what does that say?"

I signed up for the "Get Your Kid a Dog!" campaign, developed, purportedly, for youngsters hoping to brainwash their parents into bringing home a pooch. After forking over \$29, the Spinner provided me an innocuous-looking shortened URL that goes to a genuine *New York Times* article on an unrelated topic.

The URL is used for one purpose—to opt your unwitting brainwashing victim into the program. Were I a real customer, my next move would be to pass that link to my target under some pretext—"check out this article." Instead I opened the link and watched on the wire as a bramble of third-party tracking cookies attached themselves to my browser during the split-second it took to redirect me to the *Times* article.

The cookies came from Revcontent, Outbrain, Exoclick, Google, Adblade, and Facebook's Pixel. (Full disclosure: You'll get twice as many ad cookies from *The Daily Beast* or any other major ad-supported website.) Those cookies are what allow The Spinner to target me on any of the thousands of websites showing ads from these networks.

The Spinner's first choice is to find me through so-called native ad networks like Revcontent and Outbrain, the services responsible for those clickbait links you see all over the internet under the heading "Promoted Stories" or "Around the Web."

But soon after launching, Shefler discovered there are some people he can't reach on those networks. Today, 30 percent of The Spinner's brainwashing ads run on Facebook and Instagram, Shefler said. "On Facebook it's much easier than on content discovery engines," said Shefler. "But it's almost 10 times as expensive... Only if I can't reach you on content discovery platforms will I do it through Facebook."

Even the most expensive ads leave The Spinner with a healthy profit margin. Facebook, like other ad companies, is mostly paid when people click on an ad, while for The Spinner's purposes mere exposure to the ad's message is enough. "Everybody reads all the titles," said Shefler. "You don't have to click, because if you're exposed to the same content over and over it's like brainwashing."

Facebook ads have to come from an individual account, page, or community that's named below the ad. To that end, The Spinner employs shell Facebook pages with names that make sense for a particular campaign, like a page titled "[The loving wife](#)" that backstops the ads in its Initiate Sex series. Shefler claims he has 200 such pages in his arsenal.

In theory, Facebook's system blocks sniping by enforcing a minimum audience size of 20 Facebook users for any ad. In practice, advertisers have long known how to game that system by manipulating the audience parameters on Facebook's ad console. In [one method](#), for example, if the target is a woman,

you can add her to an audience of 19 men, and then specify that the ad should be served only to females. (Facebook didn't respond to an email inquiry for this story)

Until now, sniper targeting has had few practical applications. "Maybe if you're trying to do some sort of big deal and you want to reach the CEO, you might use it," said Dennis Yu, CTO and co-founder of BlitzMetrics, an ad agency that deals exclusively with Facebook ads. Yu first documented Facebook sniping in a [2013 Adweek article](#), drawing, he said, an angry response from Facebook. But in the ad business there's rarely any point in going after a single person. "It's really more of a parlor trick."

Weeks after voluntarily exposing myself to The Spinner's cookie cocktail, I have yet to see a single Facebook ad hinting that I should get a family dog. A check with Facebook's new ad transparency tool provides no evidence I've been targeted from one of The Spinner's sockpuppet pages. Shefler urged patience; the real test will be in another two months. "See if you have a dog," he said with a laugh.

Shefler is an unusually elusive character to be fronting a high-profile startup. He describes himself as an Israeli national of Turkish descent now living in London, and claims to work at a British advertising agency that started The Spinner as a sideline. But he won't divulge the name of the firm, or anything else verifiable.

He's a ghost in public records and social media, and declined to provide his phone number for a series of telephone interviews with The Daily Beast, instead initiating the calls himself from a blocked number. When he sat recently for an interview in London with [Forbes](#), the magazine captured the only known photo of

Shefler—from behind, because he refused to let his face be photographed.

Shefler told *The Daily Beast* that the Spinner has had 35,000 users, while in his *Forbes* interview he claimed 150,000, adding that the service brought in \$5.1 million in revenue last year alone.

The Spinner's official mailing address is a cafe on Fleet Street. The [service's](#) earliest efforts at self promotion are also suspect. Leigh discovered that the earliest Twitter mentions of the new brainwashing service in July of last year originated from three Twitter accounts that bear all the hallmarks of sockpuppetry, including one account that used someone else's photo. After Leigh [published](#) that discovery all three accounts were deleted.

Caches of the accounts reveal some clues about The Spinner's origins. All three were previously used to promote another controversial tech product with links to a London marketing agency run by an Israeli national. The product was a smartphone app called Burn Money.

Burn Money was a simple, free app that performed one function very well. You make an in-app purchase between \$1 and \$100 in real money, then watch as that amount in U.S. currency goes up in flames on your screen. The app recorded a video of the virtual conflagration that you could post on social media, and emailed you a "certificate" confirming you spent up to \$100 for absolutely nothing.

Burn Money debuted in 2014. *Wall Street Journal* writer Dan Ariely, puzzling over the app in a column that year, [called it](#) "curious," and theorized that it must hold appeal to consumers

looking to signal wealth. "As if people are saying, both to themselves and to anyone watching, 'Look at me: If I can burn money, doesn't that show how wealthy and comfortable I am?'" In 2015, Burn Money announced it raised \$3.1 million in seed funding from UK investors connected to the [gambling industry](#), a claim met [by well-earned skepticism](#). Sometime after the supposed cash infusion the app was banned from the Google Play store and vanished.

Though Burn Money is long defunct, its Facebook page lingers on. In June of 2018 it even posted about The Spinner.

The metadata in the Android version of Burn Money shows it was sold by Meme Internet Marketing Ltd, a sole-proprietorship in London belonging to, according to corporate records, a now-41 year-old Israeli T-shirt designer named Tsach Dvory, who still sells a [machine-washable](#) crew neck version through Cafepress.

Dvory didn't respond to repeated email and Facebook inquiries for this story, and calls to a phone number associated with him went unanswered.

Asked about Dvory and Meme Internet, Shefler said he's never heard of either. But he acknowledged a connection between The Spinner and the Burn Money app.

"Not me, but my partner, one of the other co-founders, was involved," Shefler said. "They made almost a million dollars until Google kicked them out. We had psychologists talking about it."

The question seemed to put Shefler on guard, but by the end of the call he was again enthusing about his brainwashing service and rattling off supposed success stories—the mother who used

a custom campaign to convince her son to stay in college, the many women who received long-delayed marriage proposals after unleashing the Propose Marriage campaign on their significant others.

After the call he sent a follow-up email. "Please don't forget to link www.thespinner.net."