

DGAP POLICY BRIEF

Influencers and Their Ability to Engineer Collective Online Behavior

A Boon and a Challenge for Politics



Dr. Katja Muñoz
Research Fellow, Center for
Geopolitics, Geoeconomics,
and Technology

Influencers can be powerful allies in spreading important information, but they can also be weaponized to undermine social cohesion and democratic processes. While their ability to amplify narratives, engineer trends, and mobilize communities has made them into valuable commodities for promoting ideas and beliefs, their expertise and power can be exploited. This DGAP Policy Brief outlines strategies for policymakers to harness influencers' potential while mitigating the risks of manipulation to safeguard democratic stability.

- Influencers have emerged as alternative sources of trust in an era of declining faith in traditional institutions. They use their access to immense audiences and understanding of platform algorithms to shape online discourse and, ultimately, behavior.
 - Many have recognized the potential of coordinated influencer campaigns to create trends, amplify narratives, and, most importantly, mobilize communities both on- and offline. What was once a guerilla tactic has now gone mainstream.
 - Politicians need to take a multifaceted approach to influencers, engaging stakeholders to address this global, cross-platform phenomenon while preserving free expression and innovation. Ultimately, they should leverage influencers for positive civic engagement and accurate information dissemination.
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INFLUENCERS VS. CELEBRITIES

Influencers have established a significant online presence and considerable following on at least one social media platform. Often catering to niche topics, they leverage their accounts to create and share content with which they can shape opinions and behaviors. While every user on a social media platform is made a content creator by posting, only influencers hold sway over large communities. Examples include Mr. Beast, a US influencer with an accrued audience that includes several hundred million followers, and Rezo, a German influencer with an accrued audience that includes over one million followers. While there are “Mega Influencers,” i.e., those having access to more than one million followers, most influencers have a smaller reach. One can already be classified as a “Nano Influencer” with an audience of more than 1,000 followers. All influencers accrue mobilization potential, which they leverage to sell a product, communicate ideas or beliefs, educate their community, etc.¹

Celebrities are famous people, especially in entertainment or sports,² who might also have an online presence, but who grew their impact through their offline fame or accomplishments (Cristiano Ronaldo, Beyoncé, etc.).

There are, however, also **celebrities who have become influencers** by actively engaging with online communities and posting on social media platforms, e.g., Elon Musk, Taylor Swift, and Dieter Bohlen; or, vice versa, **influencers who have become celebrities**, e.g., Joe Rogan, Bretman Rock, and Pamela Reif.

Influencers have become a powerful force in shaping political discourse and mobilizing communities worldwide. Their ability to rapidly mold public opinion, amplify narratives, and orchestrate collective behavior online presents both opportunities and significant challenges for democratic processes.

This phenomenon is exemplified by recent events in the US political landscape. On July 21, 2024, as Kamala Harris announced her presidential candidacy, British pop star Charly XCX posted “Kamala is brat,” an endorsement that sparked an avalanche of pro-Harris content across social media platforms. Meant as a reference to her latest hit album, Charly XCX’s post became a positive meme associated with Kamala Harris.³ Within weeks, Harris-related content on TikTok alone reached over 232 million views,⁴ demonstrating the power of influencer-driven political messaging.

The Harris campaign started *organically*, via the route of a celebrity influencer. Yet, political entities are increasingly leveraging influencers *strategically*. For instance, the organizers of the Democratic National Convention invited over 200 content creators to attend and contextualize their message for diverse online communities.⁵ The posts resulted in nearly 400 million impressions.

This trend is not limited to the United States or to one side of the political spectrum. Around the globe – from Germany to India, from the UK to South Africa – political parties, movements, and grassroots initiatives of various ideologies are harnessing the power of influencers to reach and engage voters.

However, the growing role of influencers in politics and their capacity to exploit platform algorithms present a double-edged sword for democracies. While offering unprecedented reach and engagement, they also pose risks of misinformation spread, polarization, and manipulation of democratic processes. Moreover, their role in carefully orchestrating collective mobilization online can potentially lead to social destabilization or even large-scale violence if misused by malicious actors.

- 1 Katja Muñoz, “Mobilizing Social Media Influencers,” DGAP Policy Brief, German Council on Foreign Relations, May 17, 2023: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/mobilizing-social-media-influencers> (accessed October 21, 2024).
- 2 Definition of “celebrity,” *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/celebrity> (accessed October 21, 2024).
- 3 A meme is the language of internet culture, a memorable piece of media that resonates with people for various reasons. See: *The Harvard Gazette*, “Excerpt from ‘Meme Wars’ by Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, Brian Friedberg,” October 3, 2022: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/?s=meme+war#gsc.tab=0&gsc.q=meme%20war&gsc.page=1> (accessed October 21, 2024).
- 4 Makena Kelly, “Kamala Harris’ Campaign Is a Windfall for Influencers,” *Wired*, August 7, 2024: <https://www.wired.com/story/harris-campaign-influencers/> (accessed October 21, 2024).
- 5 Zach Vallese, “Democrats grant special convention access to more than 200 content creators,” *NBC News*, August 14, 2024: <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/democrats-grant-special-convention-access-200-content-creators-rcna167272> (accessed October 10, 2024).

This DGAP Policy Brief examines the role of influencers in contemporary politics and their potential impact on democratic processes, focusing on four key questions:

- How do influencers leverage their audience, especially through algorithms?
- What is the nature of the ecosystem in which influencers operate and what are its implications?
- What role do influencers play in coordinated campaigns to engineer collective mobilization?
- Which potential technical, regulatory, and collaborative approaches can address the challenges posed by influencers' ability to orchestrate collective online behavior in ways that may threaten democratic stability?

By addressing these questions, this paper aims to provide policymakers with a comprehensive understanding of the issue and offer actionable recommendations to safeguard democratic processes in the digital age. The following sections will delve deeper into each of these aspects, analyzing the mechanisms of influencer impact, exploring both positive and negative consequences, and proposing strategies to mitigate potential risks while harnessing the benefits of influencer engagement in political discourse.

HOW INFLUENCERS LEVERAGE THEIR AUDIENCES

Influencers wield considerable power to shape public opinion and behavior, especially among generations who are growing up never having experienced life without social media platforms.⁶ Though still often dismissed, their impact goes beyond the superficial to affect daily routines and, increasingly, ideas, beliefs,

and political decisions.⁷ Influencers thrive in and highlight niche issues around which they set agendas.⁸

Three prominent examples of such influencers are Rezo, the German influencer who published his viral video “Die Zerstörung der CDU” – the destruction of the Christian Democratic Union, Germany’s largest conservative party – in the run-up to European Parliament elections in 2019; the US influencer Bookersquared, a lawyer and comedian, who has been highly active during the US presidential campaign; and the US influencer Michael Mezzatesta who regularly posts on issues related to economics and sustainability.

The power of influencers to shape online discourse and political landscapes stems from a potent combination of factors: their mastery of content creation, their ability to build and leverage strong online communities, and their deep understanding of social media algorithms. These factors are part of what Renée DiResta, former technical research manager at Stanford Internet Observatory and author, aptly terms a “new persuasion system”⁹ that enables influencers to engineer trends and manipulate visibility.

The Use and Abuse of Algorithms

The true power of influencers extends beyond their individual reach or ability to personalize content. It lies in their symbiotic relationship with platform algorithms, their skill in leveraging this knowledge, and their capacity to mobilize their communities in concert with other influencers, driving collective online behavior and even offline mobilization. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle through which influencer content, community interaction, and algorithmic amplification work in concert, exponentially increasing the potential impact of influencer-driven narratives.

6 Muñoz, “Mobilizing Social Media Influencers,” p. 2 (see note 1).

7 Sophia Rothut et. al., “Ambassadors of Ideology: A Conceptualization and Computational Investigation of Far-Right Influencers, Their Networking Structures, and Communication Practices,” *Sage Journals*, May 31, 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231164409> (accessed October 21, 2024).

8 Finding of the workshop of the “German-American Initiative on Influencers, Disinformation, and Democracy in the Digital Age” held from December 12 to 16, 2023, in Washington, DC, by the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and organized by Katja Muñoz und Maria Pericàs Riera.

9 Renée DiResta, *Invisible Rulers: The People Who Turn Lies into Reality* (PublicAffairs, June 2024).

SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS

Social media algorithms are complex systems that curate, suggest, and rank content¹⁰ on social media platforms, fundamentally shaping the user experience and flow of information. There is no single algorithm that governs our entire online experience. Rather, there are several that govern what, where, and how we see content – from ranking to suggesting to prioritizing and so on. While the exact workings of these algorithms are shrouded in secrecy, their primary goal is well known: to keep users on a platform as long as possible so they can see as much advertising as possible. This core motivation has inadvertently created vulnerabilities that savvy users, influencers, and an array of activists employing online guerrilla tactics are now exploiting for various purposes.

Examples abound¹¹ that demonstrate the sophisticated ways in which influencers can shape the digital information landscape, but I will only cite several here: to circumvent Meta's de-prioritization of political content, influencers present such content alongside provocative (sexy) imagery; to manipulate TikTok's search algorithms, they coordinate their actions with other high-reach accounts; and to influence the content categorization done by algorithms, they leverage their communities. In the last example, a female lifestyle influencer asked her female audience to engage with a sexy post to avoid its algorithmic suggestion to male audiences.¹² In this specific case, the lifestyle influencer intended to shape algorithmic ranking to grow her community with her preferred demographic. This approach is very strategic and can be used for various purposes.

Algorithmic expertise can be valuable for legitimate political messaging, but it also opens the door to strategic exploitation. Given the right incentives – be they monetary or ideological – some influencers can be

motivated to use such expertise to amplify disinformation or manipulate public opinion.

Indeed, since influencers have learned to skillfully exploit algorithm preferences, they can effectively *weaponize* these systems to amplify their messages.¹³ These “growth strategies,” when abused, can significantly undermine information integrity and democratic discourse. So-called bad actors can leverage their understanding of social media platforms to launch disinformation campaigns or manipulate public opinion on an unprecedented scale. While a news anchor's call to action would be overt and easily attributable, social media manipulators operate in a more covert manner, engineering collective online behavior that can lead to specific offline mobilization – such as voting for a particular party, participating in protests, or even inciting riots – all while maintaining a level of obscurity that makes their influence harder to detect and counteract.

Despite rapidly evolving technology, human psychology remains constant – we are inherently social beings craving connection. Therefore, the sense of shared identity and camaraderie that is fostered by social media platforms can make the influence of posts shared there more potent than, for example, the content of TV ads or programs. The research of Truong et al. underscores this, demonstrating how popular social media accounts can rapidly disseminate information within their tightly knit online communities. However, this same mechanism becomes a vulnerability when bad actors infiltrate these spaces to spread misinformation intentionally that can, in turn, be further amplified by the bot networks or fake accounts that are flooding platforms.¹⁴ In sum, our innate desire for connection and our tendency to form relationships becomes a potential avenue for the manipulation of collective online behavior.

By exploring how influencers leverage algorithms, we have set the stage for examining both the positive and negative implications of their role in shaping political discourse, as well as potential approaches to mitigate risks while harnessing benefits.

10 Dorcas Adisa, “Everything You Need to Know About Social Media Algorithms,” *Sprout Social*, October 30, 2023: <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-algorithms/> (accessed October 21, 2024).

11 Finding of the workshop on “black box algorithms” held as part of the “German-American Initiative on Influencers, Disinformation, and Democracy in the Digital Age” from April 23 to 27, 2024, in Berlin by the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and organized by Katja Muñoz und Maria Pericàs Riera.

12 Workshop held from December 12 to 16, 2023, by DGAP (see note 8).

13 Workshop on “black box algorithms” held from April 23 to 27, 2024, by DGAP (see note 11).

14 Bao Tran Truong et. al., “Quantifying the Vulnerabilities of the Online Public Square to Adversarial Manipulation Tactics,” *PNAS Nexus*, Vol. 3, Issue 7, July 2024, p. 258: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae258> (accessed October 21, 2024).

THE EFFECTS OF A CHANGED SOCIAL MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

In the current digital landscape, the role of legacy media continues to weaken. Influencers have emerged as alternative trusted sources of information, filling a vacuum left by declining trust in traditional media, government, and institutions – a shift in trust dynamics with permanent implications for information dissemination. This phenomenon transcends political ideologies, indicating a broader societal shift in information consumption habits. For some audiences, influencer content has even surpassed traditional media in terms of credibility and impact.

More and more politicians have grasped the importance of social media in political communication. Consequently, influencers are increasingly invited to attend fundraisers, party conventions, and rallies; to meet with government officials; and to participate in various governmental processes.¹⁵ This development reflects the political world's realization that, in an era of information overload, those who capture public attention become invaluable assets. However, this engagement often overlooks the deeper, more complex dynamics at play, particularly the potential for algorithmic manipulation.

The interdependent relationship between influencers and platform algorithms plays a crucial role in modern political communication. Let us refer back to the kick-off of Vice-President Harris's campaign. While Charly XCX's initial post originated organically with no intent to engineer visibility, it was the algorithm's recognition and promotion of the resulting memes and engagement that transformed the content into a viral sensation. Then, influencers – armed with a deep understanding of these algorithmic preferences – further amplified and shaped these trends to benefit from them.

The change in the perception of influencers by politicians and the role of influencers in society is significant. Yet, to truly understand their impact, we must also examine the constantly changing social media landscape in which they operate. Some of the most relevant dynamics there can be traced back to these recent developments:

INFLUENCERS HAVE BECOME ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF TRUST

While there are many kinds of influencers, all of them are able to nimbly adapt to new features and algorithm changes, maintain their ability to capture and direct public attention, and apply an expert understanding of the mechanics of the platforms on which they appear. Moreover, they are fluent storytellers who make highly effective use of resonant rhetoric and niche cultural elements.¹⁶

This combination of skills allows them to frame world events quickly and in a way that is customized for their audiences, giving them considerable power to shape narratives. Thanks to their speed and directness, influencers can bypass traditional gatekeepers of information, fundamentally altering how people consume and interpret news and current events. They have filled a trust vacuum in the media landscape to become alternative trusted sources of information.¹⁷

Yet, while their skill in highlighting and popularizing niche issues can bring important topics to light, it also risks oversimplifying complex matters.

- **Reduced platform safeguards:** Major platforms like X, Meta, TikTok, Snapchat, and Discord have significantly downsized their trust and safety teams – thousands have been fired or laid off.¹⁸
- **Decreased transparency:** Platforms have shut down tracking tools like CrowdTangle and have been very reluctant and selective in granting access to platform data, hampering the ability of researchers and journalists to track misinformation.¹⁹

¹⁵ Workshop on “black box algorithms” held from April 23 to 27, 2024, by DGAP (see note 11).

¹⁶ DiResta, *Invisible Rulers* (see note 9).

¹⁷ Workshop held from December 12 to 16, 2023, by DGAP (see note 8).

¹⁸ Ben Goggin, “Big Tech Companies Reveal Trust and Safety Cuts in Disclosures to Senate Judiciary Committee,” NBC News, March 29, 2024: <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/big-tech-companies-reveal-trust-safety-cuts-disclosures-senate-judicia-rcna145435> (accessed October 21, 2024).

¹⁹ Barbara Ortutay, “Meta Kills Off Misinformation Tracking Tool CrowdTangle Despite Pleas from Researchers, Journalists,” AP News, August 15, 2024: <https://apnews.com/article/meta-crowdtangle-research-misinformation-shutdown-facebook-977ece074b99adddb4887bf719f2112a> (accessed October 21, 2024).

• **Less cooperative platform owners:** Elon Musk's actions on X around the anti-immigration riots in the UK this summer²⁰ and in the run-up to the US presidential election this November²¹ exemplify how platform owners can become superspreaders of misinformation. Even alleged criminal activity has not spurred Pavel Durov to expand content moderation on Telegram.²²

COLLECTIVE INFLUENCER CAMPAIGNS: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD FOR DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

Online calls to collective mobilization by celebrities and influencers can have positive political effects. Many were pleased by Taylor Swift's post that encouraged her 284 million followers to vote, which resulted in approximately 350,000 visits to the voter registration website [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) in the first 24 hours after it appeared. The team of social media volunteers that generates catchy memes to support Ukraine's war effort also uses its significant online reach for an admirable political cause.

However, the events following the fatal stabbing of three young girls in the north of England on July 29, 2024, present a starkly contrasting example. In this case, right-wing influencers, catering to the existing biases of their online communities, falsely spread misinformation relating to the suspect being a refugee. There were also unfounded rumors that he was Muslim. The anti-immigrant riots that resulted, the worst riots in the UK in more than a decade, demonstrate how influencers can exploit platform algorithms to amplify misinformation and mobilize communities – with severe consequences. However, while this case clearly illustrates the dark potential of influencer-algorithm symbiosis in political discourse, it goes beyond the usual influencer interaction on social media. Here, the driving causal factors behind the riots in the real world can be traced back to collective online mobilization.

The way these right-influencers collectively weaponized platform algorithms in the UK also illustrates

how quickly and effectively narratives can be shaped and propagated in our algorithmically driven social media landscape. Indeed, this cycle of creation, amplification, and manipulation highlights a critical aspect of modern digital communication: the ability to engineer visibility and, by extension, public discourse and even collective mobilization – both on- and offline.

Influencers increase their reach by using hashtags to trending topics, reposting content from other influencers, and posting across multiple platforms. The cross-platform amplification of narratives that are true or false – coupled with community engagement and possibly activity by bots or fake accounts – can result in algorithmic boosts that lead to narratives going viral. The engagement-driven model of social media algorithms further compounds these issues. By prioritizing highly engaging content regardless of veracity, these systems can amplify sensationalist or misleading information.

The nature of collective influence campaigns, which are based on the participation of many influencers and multi-directional, cross-platform strategies, varies widely.²³ Recent examples of coordinated influencer-driven grassroots mobilization campaigns across social media include [#protecttaylorswift](https://twitter.com/protecttaylorswift), [#fingerwegvonmeinempoptuch](https://twitter.com/fingerwegvonmeinempoptuch), [#operationwatermelon](https://twitter.com/operationwatermelon), and [#stolzmonate](https://twitter.com/stolzmonate). They demonstrate how diverse actors – including far-right groups, Islamic extremists, and pop culture fandoms such as Swifties or BTS ARMY – can exploit platform vulnerabilities. While the use of such campaigns²⁴ isn't exactly new, their mainstream adoption is.

The increased prevalence of such collective influence campaigns is now being leveraged to engineer social trends at scale in political communication, raising significant concerns about the integrity of democratic discourse. In fact, the weaponization of algorithmic literacy has emerged as a major platform vulnerability. This aligns with the growing evidence of coordinated influencer-driven collective mobilization, which has emerged as a powerful force in shaping public opinion and mobilizing communities.

20 Sander van der Linden, "Has Elon Musk Been Radicalised by His Own Platform?", *The Independent*, August 8, 2024: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/elon-musk-radicalised-twitter-x-far-right-b2593249.html> (accessed October 21, 2024).

21 Kit Eaton, "Musk's Deepfake of Harris Prompts Backlash Depicting X's Owner as a Nazi," *Inc.*, September 4, 2024: <https://www.inc.com/kit-eaton/musks-deepfake-of-harris-prompts-backlash-depicting-xs-owner-as-a-nazi.html> (accessed October 21, 2024).

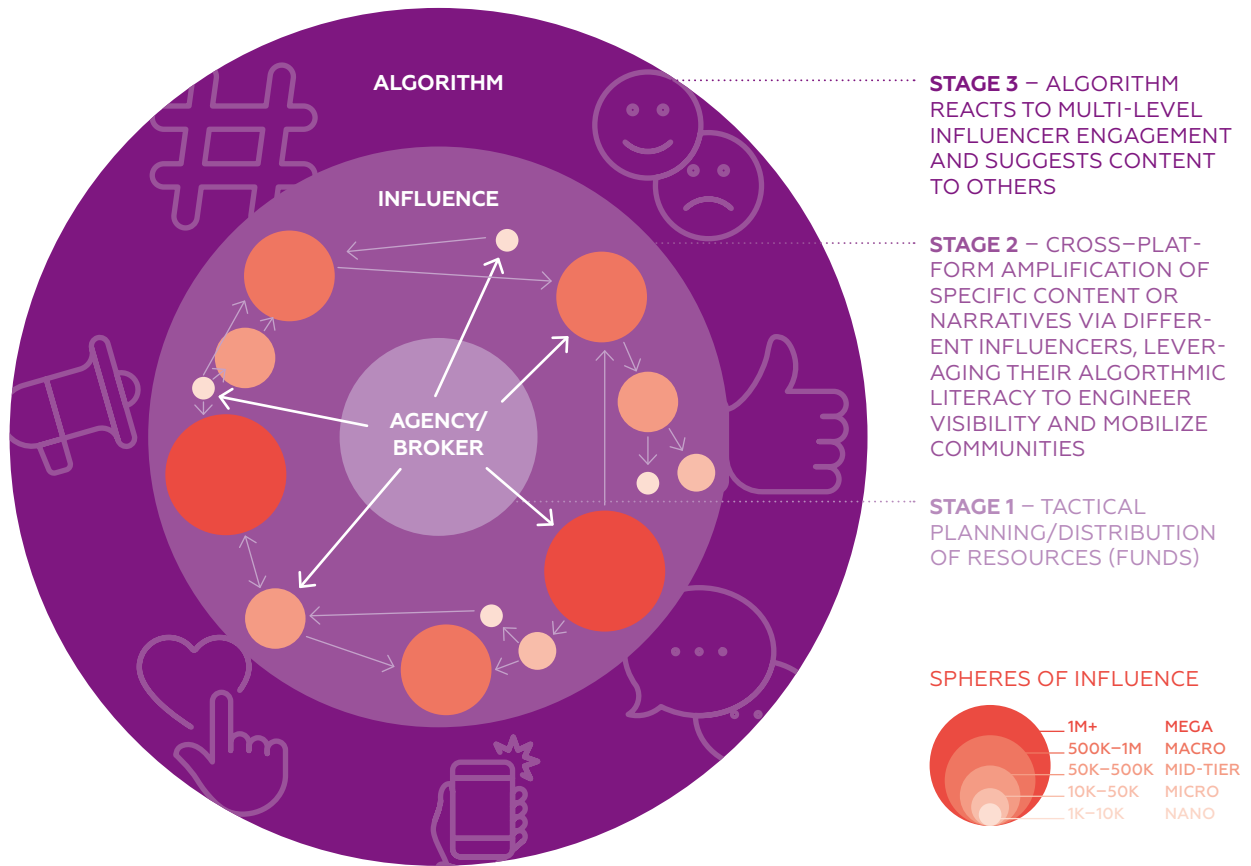
22 Justin Hendrix, "Durov, Musk, and Zuckerberg: Tech Oligarchs Cry Censorship and What It All Means," *Tech Policy Press*, August 30, 2024: <https://www.techpolicy.press/durov-musk-and-zuckerberg-tech-oligarchs-cry-censorship-and-what-it-all-means/> (accessed October 21, 2024).

23 Workshop on "black box algorithms" held from April 23 to 27, 2024, by DGAP (see note 11).

24 Katja Muñoz, "How to Plan and Execute a Coup," DGAP Memo, German Council on Foreign Relations, January 31, 2023: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/how-plan-and-execute-coup> (accessed October 21, 2024).

Engineered Collective Mobilization

Exploiting Platform Algorithm Vulnerabilities to Cause a Ripple in the Pond



Source: Author's own compilation

Transactional Influence Designed to Deceive People and Shape Discourse

Even more concerning than coordinated campaigns are the ones designed to deceive the public. The commodification of influence²⁵ has created a black market for transactional political services. Here, anonymous mega-influencers are hired to post; they, in turn, mobilize smaller influencers and their networks. The result is a complex web of paid, covert, influencer-driven narratives that intend to shape public opinion to impact electoral outcomes:

We know that such coordinated campaigns span the political spectrum and cross national borders, even if we cannot say for certain whether they all involve compensation. In Germany and France, far-right parties regularly launch coordinated online campaigns to boost the visibility of their content and shape political discourse. Russia funded severe interference in Moldova's recent referendum on the future its EU integration. A recent indictment by the US Department of Justice alleged that employees of RT, a media outlet owned by the Russian state, contracted right-wing

25 Tabela Timse et. al., "Influence-for-Hire Trend Is Distorting Public Discourse, Poses Threat to Foundations of Democracy," *Daily Maverick*, May 26, 2024: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-05-26-influence-for-hire-distorts-public-discourse-threatens-democracy/> (accessed October 21, 2024).

influencers in the United States to disseminate Kremlin talking points – a model that has also been copied by other actors in Global Majority countries and underscores the evolving nature of political communication.²⁶ A specific example: Murmur, a technical research firm, identified an “influence for hire” scheme in South Africa that involved coordinated efforts by influencers to shape narratives.²⁷ The mechanics of online mobilization follow similar, highly effective patterns that start off with multi-level influencer engagement to boost initial visibility. As platforms inadvertently interpret the content as highly engaging, algorithmic amplification follows. Eventually, the narratives are picked-up by legacy media, further legitimizing the pushed content.

The universality of these tactics highlights both their effectiveness and the challenges they pose for maintaining the integrity of public discourse. The implications of such coordinated campaigns are profound, for instance:

- **Blurred lines between organic and engineered trends:** It becomes increasingly difficult for users to distinguish between genuine grassroots movements and coordinated campaigns.
- **Amplification of fringe opinions:** What starts off as a marginal viewpoint can quickly gain visibility and credibility through coordinated influencer efforts.
- **Cross-platform impact:** The ability of influencers to operate across multiple platforms extends their reach and impact beyond single audiences or demographics,²⁸ creating a ripple effect across the digital landscape.
- **Manipulation of electoral processes:** In extreme cases, these campaigns can potentially sway public opinion enough to impact electoral outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Approaches for Addressing the Challenges Posed by Influencers’ Ability to Orchestrate Collective Online Behavior

In conclusion, the rise of influencers as alternative sources of trust represents both an opportunity and a threat to democratic discourse. While most influencers are not in the business of strategically manipulating users for political gain, the potential for misuse is significant. Even more concerning is that the knowledge of how algorithms can be gamed by influencers to shape public opinion has gone mainstream – as demonstrated by the US Department of Justice’s recent indictment of RT influence that illustrates the vulnerability of a trust-based social media ecosystem to exploitation.²⁹

The growing role of influencers in politics and society demands constant and careful consideration. Their ability to rapidly mobilize audiences can be harnessed for positive change, or it can be exploited for harmful purposes. Therefore, any comprehensive approach to the challenges of social media manipulation must account for:

- The crucial role that influencers play in the digital information ecosystem;
- The concerted campaigns that are used to shape visibility and trends across platforms; and
- The potential for both positive engagement and harmful manipulation.

By understanding and addressing the mechanisms through which influencers shape public opinion, policymakers can work toward preserving the positive aspects of this new form of communication while safeguarding against its potential misuse. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that involves the stakeholders categorized below. If these stakeholders can follow these recommendations, they can contribute to creating a more resilient digital information ecosystem that supports informed civic participation and protects against manipulation of collective online behavior.

26 Dhara Mungra et. al., “How Social Media Influencers Are Scaling Surrogate Political Campaigns in Global Majority Elections,” Tech Global Institute: <https://techglobalinstitute.com/research/how-social-media-influencers-are-scaling-surrogate-political-campaigns-in-global-majority-elections/#> (accessed October 21, 2024).

27 Timse, “Influence-for-Hire Trend” (see note 25).

28 Muñoz, “How to Plan and Execute a Coup” (see note 24).

29 Andrew Couts and Tim Marchman, “Right-Wing Influencer Network Tenet Media Allegedly Spread Russian Disinformation,” *Wired*, September 4, 2024: <https://www.wired.com/story/right-wing-influencer-network-tenet-media-allegedly-spread-russian-disinformation/> (accessed October 21, 2024).

For Governments and International Organizations

- **Knowledge Transfer and Digital Literacy:** Implement nationwide digital literacy programs that go beyond teaching basic tech skills. These should focus on critical thinking, identifying manipulation tactics, and understanding the psychological aspects of online engagement. For example, the EU could establish a Digital Literacy Task Force to develop standardized curricula for member states.
- **Policy and Regulatory Measures:** Allocate substantial resources for independent research on the societal impacts of social media algorithms and influencer culture. This could involve creating dedicated research funds or establishing partnerships with academic institutions. Additionally, develop measures that require platforms to provide users with greater control over their data and content exposure.
- **International Cooperation:** Enhance collaboration among nations to counter foreign interference through information manipulation. This could involve creating an international task force within NATO or the United Nations to share intelligence and best practices in combating coordinated inauthentic behavior across borders.

For Tech Platforms

- **Platform Accountability and Design:** Encourage the adoption of ethical design principles that prioritize user well-being over engagement metrics. This could involve developing industry-wide standards for algorithmic transparency and implementing regular, independent audits of platform algorithms.
- **Cross-Platform Collaboration:** Facilitate information sharing among platforms to better identify and combat coordinated inauthentic behavior across multiple networks. This could involve creating a shared database of known manipulation tactics and actors.
- **AI-Powered Detection:** Invest in and deploy advanced AI tools to detect coordinated inauthentic behavior and label disputed content. These tools should be regularly updated and audited to ensure their effectiveness and fairness.

For Civil Society Organizations

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch widespread initiatives to inform users about potential risks and manipulation tactics used on social media platforms. These campaigns should be tailored to different demographics and utilize various media channels.
- **Influencer Accountability:** Develop and promote a code of conduct for influencers engaging with politicians and governments, emphasizing transparency, authenticity, and accountability. This could involve creating a certification program for “ethical influencers” who adhere to these standards.
- **Monitoring and Reporting Systems:** Establish independent monitoring bodies to track influencer activities and create user-friendly systems for reporting potential ethical violations. This could include developing a publicly accessible database of influencer-politician interactions.



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Rauchstraße 17/18
10787 Berlin
Tel. +49 30 254231-0
info@dgap.org
www.dgap.org
@dgapev

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