DGAP POLICY BRIEF

Mobilizing Social Media Influencers

A European Approach to Oversight and Accountability

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To build a robust information space that is resilient toward the dangers of mis- and disinformation, European policy-makers must recognize the role of influencers and their messages. The EU's Digital Services Act aims to establish accountability and transparency in online platforms. It includes civil society as an essential component of achieving that goal. Through collaborating with independent platform councils and promoting radical transparency, influencers can contribute to combating disinformation and ensuring that public values are upheld in online governance.

— Social media influencers impact our collective societal mindset by shaping our thoughts and opinions or setting agendas.

— Past research on social influence must be unpacked to understand how social media influencers effectively create content using authenticity compared to celebrity. Establishing a sense of authenticity — consciously or unconsciously — enables them to come across as "being real." This ability can be exploited and abused to amplify disinformation.

— The Digital Services Act's approach to disinformation reflects the realization that platforms cannot adequately self-govern. Thus, it prescribes a structured role for civil society inclusion. For more oversight and accountability, EU member states will have to appoint Digital Services Coordinators who can be more effective if they work with platform councils made up of representatives from civil society, including influencer associations.

DEFINITIONS

A **social media influencer** is an individual who has established a significant online presence and has a considerable following on at least one social media platform. Influencers leverage their digital platforms to create and share content with which they can influence and shape opinions and behaviors. While every user on a social media platform can be a content creator, only influencers command influence through the impact they have on their communities. Unlike traditional celebrities with an online presence who grew their impact through their offline fame or accomplishments (Elon Musk, Cristiano Ronaldo, Selena Gomez, etc.), social media influencers grew theirs solely through their content creation.[1]

Misinformation is incorrect information that is being unintentionally circulated, e.g., a fake newspaper report or an exaggerated and pointed post that is easily recognizable as satire. **Disinformation** is misleading and incorrect information with an objective or intent to deliberately deceive or influence that is distributed in a targeted manner.[2]

INTRODUCTION

Dismissing social media influencers as self-indulgent, superficial individuals overlooks the significant impact they have on our daily lives and collective mindset, as well as how they actively contribute to forming opinions. While their content may revolve around seemingly trivial matters like what lipstick to buy or which secret getaway to explore, it shapes the everyday routines of many people. Their influence is not merely superficial and may also shape political choices by bringing attention to niche topics and promoting calls to action like those to intentionally support Black-owned businesses.

This Policy Brief aims not only to explain how social media influencers exert impact and why their messaging is so effective, but also to raise awareness of the impact they have on contemporary society. It seeks to initiate a conversation around their liability and the lack of accountability they face when constructing seemingly authentic arguments that are, in fact, misleading and contribute to the creation of false narratives and disinformation.

Disinformation poses a significant, multifaceted threat to democracy, jeopardizing the integrity of democratic processes and undermining the foundations of informed decision-making, public trust, and societal cohesion. Although social media influencers can play a key role in shaping social discourse[3] or amplifying disinformation online,[4] there are several reasons why social media influencers are an overlooked phenomenon in this regard. These include a patronizing perception of these actors by policy-makers, their limited accountability, the level of sophistication of disinformation campaigns and their key role within them, and the lack of regulatory oversight.

In a world where generations are growing up who never experienced life without the internet and the ubiquity of smartphones, it is imperative to understand why contemporary social media influencers have impact. Raising awareness of their potential role in amplifying disinformation is essential to assessing how they shape dynamics at the intersection of social media and democracy and studying the potential for their on- and offline mobilization.

CONTEXTUALIZING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Social media influencers, henceforth referred to as influencers, are a new phenomenon in the sense

1   Workshops of the German-American Initiative on Influencers, Disinformation, and Democracy in the Digital Age on "Incentives" and "Future of Content Creators" held from April 27 to 29, 2023, at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

2   German Federal Government, "What is disinformation?": https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/umgang-mit-desinformation/disinformation-definition-1911048 (accessed May 9, 2023).

3   Sascha Hölig et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022: Results for Germany* [in German], Leibniz Institute for Media Research|Hans-Bredow Institut, pp. 5−7: https://leibniz-hbi.de/uploads/media/Publikationen/cms/media/k3u8e8z_AP63_RIDNR22_Deutschland.pdf (accessed May 9, 2023).

4   Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Lab, Graphika, and Stanford Internet Observatory, *The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election*, Stanford Digital Repository: Election Integrity Partnership v1.3.0, March 3, 2021, pp. 181−206: https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069 (accessed May 10, 2023).

that they are a product of the digital era, operating on and owing their impact to social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook. This also means that they have potential access to all the millions of users of all platforms they are active on, and their content has the potential to go viral. Given their possibility to reach such a vast audience, it is essential to understand their impact on social media ecosystems and their potential to amplify disinformation.

Related scholarly work provides a foundation for contextualizing research at the intersection of politics and social media. Studying influence has been a priority for the last two millennia, going back to ancient philosophers in Greece and their quest to master the art of persuasion. In the 20th century, a mix of economic, industrial, and cultural factors – especially the observed mobilization of masses in conjunction with authoritarianism and its effective use of propaganda in the context of the Second World War – fueled the need to examine how social influence came about and the social consequences it produced.

The main drivers for current research on analyzing influence operations are very similar to those from back then,[5] i.e., describing an attempt by a state or transnational actor to non-transparently influence public opinion and/or public policy in a democratic country. There are now two foci of this research: first, exploring the ways in which the widespread acceptance of organized influence campaigns and the admiration for power in individuals emerged and, second, examining the extent to which people were affected or unaffected by these campaigns in terms of on- and offline mobilization.

Seminal works show how the evolution of studying social influence progressed and became sharper. The processes involved captivated researchers because of the profound societal ramifications they had witnessed over the years. German sociologist, historian, and political economist Max Weber defined charismatic authority[6] as a social construct that connects authority to influence. Soon after, the study of influence started to take off. The work of American theorist Edward Bernays[7] on propaganda and how organizations constructed and enacted influence on a mass scale, or the theory of American political scientist Harold Lasswell[8] that permacrises made people more susceptible to crude forms of propaganda, were groundbreaking because they showed how concepts borrowed from psychological theories could be applied to understand current politics. The study of social influence seemed to culminate in the 1950s and 60s with the realizations that influence can be exerted via "interpersonal networks"[9] and the "part played by people"[10] and "opinion leaders" is important to shaping opinions and attitudes within those networks.

This is similar to how influencers exert influence today because social media platforms allow for the formation of vast interpersonal networks only limited by the number of users online. However, the question of *why* they have impact remains. The key to understanding social influence is exploring the role that authenticity plays for influencers.

AUTHENTICITY AS THE DRIVER OF INFLUENCE

Tracing back the scholarly work that led to the study of social influence highlights the fact that influencers should not be looked at as a new or trendy phenomenon – nor will they vanish anytime soon. Contextual circumstances might change, but the dynamics involved in exerting influence will not.

When we asked a group of influencers[11] to define and evaluate authenticity, they stated that it means "being real" and is what makes an influencer have impact. In other words, authenticity aids in growing communities and impacting followers. Returning to Weber's observation that authority and influence are socially constructed, it is evident that, in this context, authenticity is as well. Depending on the location, time, or person asked, the meaning of au-

5 "What are influence operations?", Global Influence Operations Report, July 23, 2022: https://www.global-influence-ops.com/faq/what-are-influence-operations/ (accessed May 10, 2023).

6 Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology. Translated and Edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. 1946*: https://archive.org/details/frommaxweberessa00webe (accessed May 10, 2023).

7 Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York, 1928): https://archive.org/details/Propaganda_Edward_L_Bernays_1928.pdf (accessed May 10, 2023).

8 Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927): https://archive.org/details/PropagandaTechniqueInTheWorldWar (accessed May 10, 2023).

9 Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (New York, 1955), pp. 82–115.

10 Ibid., p. 13.

11 Workshop of the German-American Initiative on Influencers, Disinformation, and Democracy in the Digital Age on "Incentives" held from April 27 to 29, 2023, at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

thenticity changes. Based on what influencers themselves say, it is the reason why people establish an emotional connection to influencers, even developing parasocial relationships with them.[12] This term refers to the relationships that a person imagines having with another person whom they do not actually know, such as a celebrity or influencer.

In fact, the entire influencer industry has emerged on the premise that authenticity and influence are transactional,[13] and it benefits from parasocial relationships between influencers and their communities. The industry has shaped most of the terminology used when talking about influencers and is heavily reliant on commercial descriptions when referring to their inclusion in marketing campaigns. Brands have already recognized the mobilization potential of influencers and use it to monetize their products.

Often, content only needs to "feel" real but is not true

On the one hand, platform metrics provide data on reach, engagement, follower demographics, etc. that encourage influencers to see their communities as assets. In this context, brands look for effective messengers through whom they can benefit from the dynamics of social influence when their products are placed directly in front of their target groups. On the other hand, influencers want to "be real" and see their community as a result of their creative success. On a questionnaire,[14] most influencers agreed they would be incentivized by financial benefits, but this is neither the sole driver of their content creation nor the most important one. Yet, to keep content production and the level of their impact running,

many influencers depend on monetization that most often comes in the form of brand partnerships.

In this context, while some brand cooperations with influencers might perfectly align with their content, it is bound to happen that some of them will not. Nevertheless, cooperations go forward, and "strategic authenticity"[15] comes into play. Depending on the incentives of the influencer, the reason for their content production varies from networking to exposure, from raising awareness to community and empowerment, from monetization to fun, etc.[16] Financial dependence on continuously producing high-quality content seems to also play a role in accepting partnerships and relying on strategic authenticity, but the extent of it varies.

Another interesting aspect of strategic authenticity is that it does not necessarily have to mean that content must be accurate. In other words, it is often a reality that content only needs to "feel" real but is not true. This is a relevant observation when looking at disinformation and the role influencers might have in its amplification. Influencers who know how to construct content that comes across as "being real" can mobilize their communities to buy a product or galvanize them for a specific political call to action.

CONSTRUCTED AUTHENTICITY AS A CONDUIT OF DISINFORMATION

In a world where the amount of information available online is growing exponentially, those who are able to capture our attention become valuable assets. While influencers are often seen as a means to attract people's attention, it should be emphasized that most of them do not intentionally spread false narratives or disinformation. However, given the dynamics of social influence, influencers can grow communities or shape opinions because of the seemingly authentic message they are able to project. If their intent is to amplify disinformation, they can share narratives that galvanize and radicalize their followers by abusing their capacity to construct an authentic message. What is more, their activity and networks are concentrated on social media,

12   See definition of "parasocial relationship": https://www.dictionary.com/e/tech-science/parasocial-relationship/ (accessed May 5, 2023).

13   Harvard Business Reveiw IdeaCast, "The Ins and Outs of the Influencer Industry": https://hbr.org/podcast/2023/02/the-ins-and-outs-of-the-influencer-industry (accessed May 9, 2023).

14   Workshop of the German-American Initiative on "Incentives" (see note 11).

15   Delia Dumitrica and Georgia Gaden, "The 'Real Deal': Strategic Authenticity, Politics and Social Media," *First Monday* 20(1), December 27, 2014: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4985 (accessed May 9, 2023).

16   Workshop of the German-American Initiative on "Incentives" (see note 11).

and these platforms are designed to identify content that has the potential to go viral and boost overall engagement. In other words, content created by influencers is so effective when spreading disinformation because of their large interpersonal networks and the potential to go viral.

Still, there are reasons why they constitute an overlooked phenomenon in shaping social discourse. These include their perception, their limited accountability, the level of sophistication in disinformation campaigns, the complicity of platforms in recommending and amplifying false narratives and disinformation, and the lack of regulatory oversight of both platforms and influencers.

While their potential to spread disinformation has slowly registered with policy-makers, influencers are typically not held to the same standards of accuracy and accountability as traditional journalists or media outlets. Moreover, they may spread false or misleading information while facing no or minimal consequences. First, it is difficult to identify originators of posts or attribute intent during influence operations comprised of concerted efforts by multiple actors. Second, social media platforms have limited incentives to police content or deplatform influencers in the case of disinformation that constitutes harmful[17] but not illegal content. And finally, the frameworks for addressing disinformation and its legal consequences are still evolving.

At the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, disinformation related to public health issues endangered citizens and destabilized societies and democracies. A very high level of expertise is required to not only understand where platforms are lacking in terms of content moderation and incentive but also how to use influencers strategically to authentically weave a specific narrative into their content. Careful data analysis of recent violent insurgencies in Washington and Brazil reveals thoughtful planning and organized amplification that followed an agenda across platforms.[18] Policies were circumvented by exploiting their various inconsistencies across sites, ensuring that different groups of users saw and engaged with false narratives and disinformation.[19]

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S APPROACH TO DISINFORMATION

The spread of narratives that threaten to undermine democracy is a complex problem with no single fix, but there is one all-encompassing need to do something. With so many topics targeted by influence operations – from democracy to public health debates, from migration to climate change – the stakes are high. Currently, one of the most important tasks is to raise awareness about the role of influencers in contemporary society and why they are such effective messengers. While social influence dynamics can potentially be exploited for personal gain or to drive a certain agenda, social media platforms exacerbate the problem through their design, access to millions of users, and recommendation algorithms that push posts due to their engagement, which, in turn, can amplify disinformation.

At the EU level, efforts to counter disinformation include a range of commitments and measures that will culminate in a broader regulatory framework of soft and hard law, reflecting the realization that self-governance by platforms is inadequate. These include the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, the Digital Services Act (DSA) that will be applicable law across the EU in February 2024, and the legislation on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising (TTPA),[20] which is currently in trilogue negotiations among the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Parliament. While the Code of Practice and the DSA aim to tackle disinformation by holding platforms accountable using several rules on obligations, only the TTPA mentions influencers directly[21] in the context of political advertisement.

There are two problems with the TTPA: the broad definition of what constitutes political advertisement and the harmonized proposed rules on targeting and

17 Ronan Ó Fathaigh et al., "The perils of legally defining disinformation," *Internet Policy Review* 10(4), November 4, 2021: https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/perils-legally-defining-disinformation (accessed May 13, 2023).

18 Katja Muñoz, "How to Plan and Execute a Coup," DGAP Memo, January 31, 2023: https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/how-plan-and-execute-coup (accessed May 14, 2023).

19 Workshop of the German-American Initiative on Influencers, Disinformation, and Democracy in the Digital Age on "Impact on German and American Disinformation Compared" held from April 27 to 29, 2023, at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

20 European Commission, "The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation": https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation (accessed May 13, 2023).

21 European Parliament, "Texts adopted: Transparency and targeting of political advertising," February 2, 2023, Amendment 1 – Proposal for a Regulation – Recital 1: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0027_EN.html (accessed May 13, 2023).

amplification techniques that will apply to political ads.[22] While greater transparency in regard to sponsored political ads is welcome, the broad way it defines political ads to include sponsored and unpaid content and the harsh sanctions it suggests in the run-up to elections will probably lead to the removal of large amounts of content in a rush to comply with these rules – with the potential to suppress civic discourse and curtail freedom of expression. Essentially, the TTPA implies that any person or groups expressing views about societal issues online would fall under this EU regulation.

Influencers need to organize themselves into an association or union

There is a valid discussion to be had on the topic of liability for influencers who share misleading content and strategically construct authentic messages that are inaccurate and used to amplify disinformation in influence operations. However, the broad definition of what constitutes political advertisement as it is currently proposed encourages a "better safe than sorry" approach in terms of censuring content and inhibiting amplification on platforms. This approach does not seem like the way forward in regulating free speech and may lead to high collateral damage for many good faith actors within the European Union.[23]

While the goal here is to protect democracies from disinformation with a push for increased transparency, especially during election cycles, the current version of the TTPA risks transforming online platforms that people rely on to access information into spaces free of politics and social debate initiated by anybody. Ensuring that users in the EU can rely on a resilient information space requires a different approach to including influencers into regulatory oversight. This approach should be tackled through platform councils on the national and European level, as well as by influencers themselves via professional organizations.

OVERSIGHT VIA PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION AND THE DIGITAL SERVICES ACT

The role and position of influencers in the digital age is an important issue that needs to be addressed. Despite the significant cultural and economic value that they bring to brands, platforms, and society, influencers are not formally recognized as professionals. To address this issue, influencers need to organize themselves into an association or union to advocate for their rights and protection as cultural laborers. By organizing into a professional group, influencers can better hold themselves responsible to each other and their audiences; they can also more easily establish and adhere to professional standards.[24] However, their incentive structure needs to change so that they are incentivized to produce authentic content that is not misleading or driven by financial constraints. There are already some global efforts in this respect,[25] but more needs to be done to incentivize the creation of such content.

An influencer association could offer training, networking, advocacy, and representation. Membership would be dependent on the acceptance of a code of conduct that encourages responsibility and transparency and includes restrictions on the dissemination of false or misleading information. This would increase the credibility and trust of influencers, making them more attractive to brands for collaborations. Disclosing membership status in the online bios of influencers would increase transparency and make it clear to users that the content featured on the accounts of influencers, although not always sponsored, is not the same as that of any other user.

22   Ibid., Amendment 19 – Recital 17.

23   Sebastián Rodríguez and SHU, "The EU will deplatform political content and millions of citizens," *EURACTIV.com,* February 8, 2023: https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/opinion/the-eu-will-deplatform-political-content-and-millions-of-citizens/ (accessed May 14, 2023).

24   Workshop of the German-American Initiative on Influencers, Disinformation, and Democracy in the Digital Age on "Future of Content Creators" held from April 27 to 29, 2023, at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

25   Among them, the Bundesverband Influencer Marketing e.V. in Germany, the American Influencer Council and the SAG_AFTRA in the United States, and the Creator Union in the United Kingdom.

Influencer associations could also play an important role for the Digital Services Act (DSA) because it prescribes the inclusion of civil society in its national implementation. Each EU member state will need to appoint its own Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) by February 2024, the time the DSA will be applicable across the European Union.[26] According to the legislative text, the establishment of the DSC in all EU member states requires lasting and structured cooperation with national civil society representatives.[27] National influencer associations could provide user representation on national platform councils. These would supply the DSC with external expertise that represents different segments of citizens, increases trust in the DSC's oversight work, and ensures civil society engagement.[28]

PLATFORM COUNCILS: AN EXPERIMENT IN PLATFORM GOVERNANCE

As civil society representatives working with a Digital Service Coordinator (DSC), platform councils could take on the role of national oversight boards – an experiment in terms of platform governance. Such external oversight boards with access to platform auditing reports under the Digital Services Act could have an important impact in guiding appropriate technology and policy strategies by enabling greater transparency and accountability.[29] But there are two conditions that need to be met to constitute a robust check: independence and the capacity to influence the audited platform via possible cooperation with the national DSC.

DEFINITIONS

Debunking is comprised of three steps: explaining why the mistaken information was thought to be correct, sharing why the information is wrong, and explaining why the alternative is correct.[30]

Fact-checking means verifying the accuracy of information and statements made online.[31]

Pre-bunking is the psychological inoculation against mis- and disinformation on social media to improve resilience at scale. It aids in the recognition of manipulation techniques, boosts confidence in spotting these techniques, increases people's ability to discern trustworthy from untrustworthy content, and improves the quality of their sharing decisions.[32]

The idea of platform councils is not new. Major platforms have, in fact, already set up self-regulating councils.[33] However, because they are part of the platforms or are funded by them, they are not independent. Some of them also have deliberate limitations placed on the scope of their work or lack the authority to implement change.[34] Public trust in platform councils can only be fostered by highlighting their independence from platforms and operating with radical transparency. These councils also need to ensure that public values are genuinely reflected in the governance of platforms and avoid superficial fixes and mere gestures toward ethical considerations.[35] To avoid becoming an instrument for ethics washing, they need to have a broad mandate and be

26   The DSC, a regulatory body that is not affiliated with any platform, should be established to ensure compliance with regulations by smaller platforms. This regulator should work with the European Commission and other DSCs to enforce regulations across the board. See: Julian Jaursch, "Platform oversight," *Verfassungsblog*, October 31, 2022: https://verfassungsblog.de/dsa-dsc/ (accessed May 15, 2023).

27   European Commission, "The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment": https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act-ensuring-safe-and-accountable-online-environment_en (accessed May 14, 2023).

28   Julian Jaursch, "Platform oversight" (see note 26).

29   Flynn Coleman et al., "The Promise and Pitfalls of the Facebook Oversight Board," Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, May 2021: https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/facebook_oversight_board.pdf (accessed May 11, 2023).

30   University of Minnesota News and Events, "The science of debunking misinformation," October 21, 2020: https://twin-cities.umn.edu/news-events/science-debunking-misinformation (accessed May 11, 2023).

31   Andrew Tompkins, "Is fact-checking effective? A critical review of what works – and what doesn't," *DW Akademie*, October 12, 2020: https://akademie.dw.com/en/is-fact-checking-effective-a-critical-review-of-what-works-and-what-doesnt/a-55248257 (accessed May 11, 2023).

32   Jon Roozenbeek et al., "Psychological inoculation improves resilience against misinformation on social media," *Science Advances* 8(34), August 24, 2022: https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abo6254 (accessed May 10, 2023).

33   For example, Meta's Oversight Board, Twitter's Trust and Safety Council, etc. See: *Digital Society Blog*, "Social Media Councils: An effective means of holding digital platforms accountable?", Alexander von Humboldt Institut für Internet und Gesellschaft, September 29, 2022: https://www.hiig.de/en/social-media-councils/ (accessed May 10, 2023).

34   Lakshmi Gopal, "Facebook's Oversight Board & the Rule of Law: The Importance of Being Earnest," *Business Law Today*, October 12, 2021: https://businesslawtoday.org/2021/10/facebooks-oversight-board-the-rule-of-law-the-importance-of-being-earnest/ (accessed March 21, 2022).

35   *Digital Society Blog*, "Social Media Councils" (see note 33).

able to study the platform's design, algorithms, and mechanisms of automated content moderation.

Platform councils should be established not only on a national level but also on a European one because various contexts and understandings exist of what constitutes harmful speech. Such a bi-level approach could unify and oversee existing efforts to monitor and counter influence operations through debunking and fact-checking disinformation.

The councils could also take up the function of pre-bunking. A recent study by the University of Cambridge and Google's Jigsaw division finds that the efficacy and efficiency of pre-bunking lies in its potential to manage expectations of users once they encounter harmful misinformation.[36] Actively campaigning against disinformation, debunking, or cooperating with the government is not seen as an attractive option to many influencers because of the active confrontation to which it may lead. On the other hand, pre-bunking was identified as a powerful tool that they can foresee using[37] because it would enable them to anticipate potential false claims or rumors related to their area of expertise and manage the expectations of their community before the disinformation gains traction – an effort that would be facilitated by the emotional connection that they share with their follower base.

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36 Jon Roozenbeek et al., "Psychological inoculation improves resilience" (see note 32).

37 Workshop of the German-American Initiative on Influencers, Disinformation, and Democracy in the Digital Age on "Impact on German and American Disinformation Compared" held from April 27 to 29, 2023, at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

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