Recent Developments in the Anthropology of Digital Media: Exploring the Influencer Phenomenon

Review of Emily Hund. *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023; Johanna Arnesson and Hanna Reinikainen (Eds.) *Influencer Politics: At the Intersection of Personal, Political, and Promotional*. Boston: De Gruyter, 2024.

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The books under review explore the phenomenon of influencers, i.e., digital content creators, whose fame and following in social media are commodified mainly by brands and, increasingly, by politicians. Although the geography of research in these works is limited to the USA and the Nordic countries, the frameworks they offer are relevant to understanding the digital influencer culture globally. In Russia, where influencer marketing is gaining traction in many spheres, there has yet to be a comprehensive study of the influencer economy. To some extent, the analysis provided in the reviewed books fills this gap, as they resonate beyond the original Western context. There have been studies of influencers from a qualitative social analysis perspective before. Notably, Crystal Abidin's book, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (2018) examines the evolution of online celebrity culture, tracing how it developed into the phenomenon of influencers, whom she defines as "vocational, sustained, and highly branded social media stars" (Abidin, 2018, p. 71). However, several key aspects of modern influencer culture have taken shape recently, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a fresh perspective.

Emily Hund's book, *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media,* offers "a critical history of the influencer industry's formative years in the United States" (Hund, 2023, p. 6). The history spans roughly two decades: it starts with the global financial crisis of 2008, which spurred a significant change in the media industry, causing a crisis of confidence in traditional institutions and allowing new actors, i.e., bloggers and early influencers, to carve out a niche previously occupied by professional journalists. Hund's own story of being a recent college graduate in the late 2000s, looking for a journalist job at a fashion magazine, not finding any, and discovering that a thirteen-year-old fashion blogger was hired to write a column at the magazine, in which she worked as an unpaid intern, was, in her words, "a microscopic part of a word-shifting pattern of events" (p. 5). The book takes the story to today's multibillion-dollar influencer economy affecting people's lives in profound and multifarious ways.

The book's author is a research affiliate at the Center on Digital Culture and Society at the University of Pennsylvania; she holds a PhD in communication studies and has a background in sociology. For her study, she employed methods from qualitative social sciences, including interviews with principal stakeholders and participant observation at industry events. She supplemented these methods with the discourse analysis of changing public views on influencers and influencer culture across many media outlets. Thus, her study connects the outside and inside views of the industry. It examines important economic, social, and technological factors underpinning the advent and growth of the influencer industry, including the neoliberal shifts in the labor market, "the gig economy" and economic precarity, disproportionally affecting women, and the emergence of social media platforms that allowed for sharing information online. It also gives voice to the industry's actors, who looked for ways to compensate for disruptive economic factors by capitalizing on emerging technological opportunities.

In Chapter 1, "Groundwork," Hund examines the "intellectual history of influence" (p. 14), tracing its origins to pre-digital and even pre-modern eras, particularly ancient Greek theories of rhetoric and persuasion, as well as Shakespeare's reflections on influence. This search for ancient origins is more a tribute to disciplinary tradition than a necessity for contemporary analysis. However, investigating more recent developments in the history of influence proves instructive. The "two-step flow of communication" model, developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), established, according to Hund, "the vocabulary with which people discuss influence." More recently, academic reflections on celebrity culture and media in the 1990s introduced the concept of the "attention economy." The emergence of Web 2.0, which enabled new forms of online attention-seeking, gave rise to the notion of "micro-celebrity."

Hund then shifts focus to the contemporary influencer industry, which emerged at the intersection of several key developments: the advent of software and social media, which enabled individuals without technical expertise to publish content online; the societal emphasis on entrepreneurialism; the neoliberal logic of self-branding; marketers' and advertisers' demand for "authentic" content; and the development of metrics platforms that facilitate the measurement and monetization of influence. The chapter concludes with an exploration of two key aspects of the influencer industry: first, the debate surrounding digital labor—whether it is empowering, exploitative, or

both—and second, an analysis of what constitutes "authenticity," a highly sought-after commodity in the transactions between influencers and brands.

Chapter 2, "Setting the Terms of a Transactional Industry," focuses on the emergence, in the late 2000s, of a cottage industry of the marketing middlemen "that angled to solidify, streamline and profit from the influencer-advertiser relationship" (p. 38). These digital marketing firms connect bloggers and brands and essentially set up transactional terms that define the industry language and norms. Hund based her discussion of evolving practices measuring digital influence and the industry's rules on her interviews with executives from numerous influencer marketing agencies, who described their companies' operational models. At first, companies relied on relatively straightforward data, such as the number of followers but then moved to the "engagement" metrics assessed by the number of clicks, comments, purchases, etc. She further discusses the tension between the influencer's desire "to be true to themselves" and create authentic content and the necessity to be strategic and maintain a coherent, predictable, and easily understandable personal brand.

In Chapter 3, "Making Influence Efficient," the author examines the development of the influencer industry in the mid-to-late 2010s, during which its infrastructure became well-defined. Key advancements included refining metrics for measuring digital influence, establishing pricing systems, and optimizing selection processes to identify the most suitable influencers for specific advertising campaigns. A significant transformation during this time was the industry's shift toward lifestyle content, which broadened the range of topics influencers could engage with and expanded the spectrum of brands with which they could collaborate. Additionally, technological innovations enabled influencers to generate revenue by embedding clickable links to retailer websites, thereby bypassing the need for formal brand contracts. This development facilitated the immediate and efficient commercialization of content. However, despite these monetization opportunities, content creators did not necessarily gain greater creative freedom.

The emergence of image-centric platforms such as Instagram exerted immense pressure on influencers to refine their visual aesthetics to align with the platform's distinctive stylistic norms, described by Hund as a "particular platform vernacular" (p. 88). The author highlights the increasingly disciplined aesthetics of influencers, which culminated in "a singular look that came to be colloquially known as "Instagram face" (pp. 90–91). This aesthetic homogenization significantly compromised the industry's pursuit of authentic self-expression. Nevertheless, it did not hinder the industry's rapid economic expansion, which reached its peak during this period.

The influencer industry experienced significant growth in the late 2010s; however, this expansion was accompanied by increasing public concern regarding the potentially harmful and manipulative aspects of influencer culture and social media. Chapter 4, "Revealing and Repositioning the Machinations of Influence," examines the backlash against influencers during this period, which led to substantial industry changes. These changes affected influencers' relationships with brands and prompted the development of new social media tools to enhance transparency.

A primary challenge faced by marketing agencies, brands, and the general public was the prevalence of "fake followers," which undermined the credibility of influencer marketing. In response, marketers implemented sophisticated software to identify potential metrics fraud. Additionally, there was a growing preference for individuals with smaller followings—commonly referred to as micro-influencers and nano-influencers—who were perceived as fostering more authentic and intimate connections with their audiences. Concerns over transparency extended to governmental bodies, which criticized influencers, including high-profile celebrities like Kim Kardashian, for failing to disclose sponsored content clearly. In response, social media platforms introduced disclosure tools that enabled influencers to tag sponsoring brands, thereby improving transparency. These developments contributed to the increasing precarity of influencers' careers, who felt the need to expand their businesses within and beyond social media (p. 126).

Chapter 5, "The Industry Becomes Boundaryless," explores the transformations of the influencer culture following the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests of 2020. During this period, people spent 10 to 20 percent more time on social media, looking there for information rather than in traditional outlets. Many industry participants abandoned their traditionally apolitical stance and engaged in open discussions on inequality and social justice. As Hund notes, the industry shifted its focus from "what to buy" to "what to think" (p. 131). This transition toward explicitly political content has led to so-called "genuinfluencers" (p. 138), bloggers who provide information and advice rather than promoting products. The early 2020s also witnessed multiple attempts by politicians to leverage influencers in their electoral campaigns, a practice that some media experts argued bordered on "propaganda" (p. 146).

Conceptions of "authentic" content underwent another reevaluation, now driven by changing social media algorithms. The rise of TikTok, which encouraged users to share video reels with an "unpolished" aesthetic, rendered the previously dominant, highly curated brand imagery obsolete. Seeking less edited and more "real" content, many brands began incorporating everyday individuals into their advertising campaigns by offering various incentives so that more people "become potential channels for commerce" (p. 149). Hund then analyzes how the ever-changing formulas for successful content, the opacity of social media algorithms, the lack of a support system within the industry, and the absence of clearly articulated ethical standards have pushed the precarious nature of the influencer job to the extreme. The internal resistance of digital workers grew; many influencers interviewed by the author in earlier periods left this business in the post-COVID years.

Chapter 6, "The Cost of Being Real," serves as a conclusion to the book in multiple ways. First, it synthesizes key themes explored throughout the study, including the relentless commercialization of the influencer industry and the associated potential for exploitation within influencer labor, the conceptualization of authenticity as both a digital commodity and an "industrial construct," and the significant shift in power away from individual influencers toward media and technology corporations in recent years.

Second, the author concludes the study by offering recommendations to enhance industry transparency and accountability while mitigating exploitation

and inequality. She outlines several imperatives, including the need to regulate social media companies, establish professional organizations for influencers, and shift among brands and marketers toward values-driven creativity rather than ambivalent efficiency.

The transition from a research-based analysis to an advocacy-oriented stance is unexpected in academic work. However, it may be justified given the immediacy and contemporary relevance of the issues discussed. Nevertheless, a key limitation of this chapter is the ambiguity regarding the intended audience of these recommendations. The author does not explicitly address who should be responsible for implementing these proposed changes—whether it is Big Tech companies, brands, marketers, or another entity. Consequently, this question remains unresolved within the text.

The monograph *Influencer Politics: At the Intersection of Personal, Political, and Promotional* extends the discussion of influencer culture and its intersection with politics, initiated by Hund (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024). Political actors adopting influencer strategies on social media, such as interactivity and self-branding, are hardly the news. However, the book's primary focus is on influencers, who are traditionally embedded in commercial spheres and gradually shift towards political content. Part One examines various intersections between influencer culture and formal political institutions and practices, including elections and political parties. Part Two explores the seemingly unlikely convergence of beauty and lifestyle bloggers with public debates on pressing political issues.

The contributors to this volume, affiliated with leading research universities in Northern Europe, have diverse academic backgrounds in social sciences and communication studies. Their methodological approach is grounded in traditional and digital ethnography, as they conducted interviews with key actors in the influencer industry and performed qualitative analysis of blogs and posts, including visual images. The book opens with an Introduction announcing the main topics of the volume: the politicization of influencers, the tensions between politics and commercialism, "authenticity" as a "messy concept," which nevertheless is perceived as a key characteristic of influencers both within and outside the influencer culture, and the ambivalent relationship between authenticity, self-branding, and gender. The book comprises nine chapters, of which only four are included in the current review. In addition to space considerations the author selected chapters with maximum methodological and conceptual novelty.

Johanna Arnesson's chapter, "From Beauty to Ballots," investigates a case from the Swedish political landscape in which two prominent beauty bloggers conducted interviews with parliamentary party leaders in the 2022 election. The public discourse surrounding these interviews, as reflected in both traditional and social media, revealed conflicting expectations regarding the role of influencers in political discussions. On the one hand, there was an expectation that influencers should maintain objectivity and impartiality when engaging with political topics to live up to the standards set by professional journalism. Simultaneously, however, influencers were expected to retain their subjective and authentic voices to preserve the trust of their audiences. Consequently, the involvement of these bloggers in political discourse was perceived as both a potential asset and a threat to political interests.

Nils S. Borcher, in his chapter "The Influencer Political Communicators Dream Of," examines the findings of his research on political communicators representing major parliamentary parties in Germany and their engagement with influencers. The term "political communicators" refers to professionals responsible for managing external communication on behalf of political parties. Through a qualitative content analysis, Borcher identifies seven key characteristics of the *ideal influencer* as envisioned by political communicators. According to his findings, "the influencer political communicators dream of, breaks down complex political issues, bows to the dignity of the political, handles interactions with followers, is passionate, authentic, low-maintenance, and lenient with political communicators" (p. 63). Borcher challenges the arguments of several scholars who highlight the risks influencer collaborations pose to democratic processes, particularly in electoral campaigns. He contends that the absence of financial compensation for influencers participating in political campaigns—a seemingly universal practice in German elections—mitigates concerns about the potential for buying opinions and votes.

In their chapter, "Greenfluencers and Environmental Advocacy," Ida Vikøren Andersen and Moa Eriksson Krutrök explore an emerging subset of influencers advocating for more environmentally sustainable lifestyles. Drawing on a relatively small sample of influencers from Norway and Sweden, they identify key rhetorical strategies used by environmental bloggers to promote sustainable ways of living.

One such strategy, *"feel-good sustainability,"* encourages users to help the environment "through manageable everyday actions, such as reducing meat consumption, recycling, and buying eco-friendly clothes" (pp. 110–111). Bloggers employing this approach appeal to individual well-being, suggesting that eco-friendly products contribute to improved health and personal growth.

A more radical approach, which the authors call *"transformative sustainability,"* promotes deeper ecological consciousness. This strategy urges audiences to reduce consumption by repairing, altering, and repurposing garments. While the emphasis remains on individual actions, the influencers using this approach place primary responsibility for environmental problems on politicians and advocate for policy changes.

Finally, the *"condemn and commend sustainability"* strategy encourages consumers to leverage their power to pressure brands and businesses into adopting more sustainable practices. The authors highlight Swedish writer and activist Johanna Leymann as an example of this approach. Leymann, whose *Slow Fashion Podcast* has recently gained traction, critiques the idea that individual consumers should bear the brunt of responsibility. Instead, she argues that blame should be directed at the true culprits: the billion-dollar fashion industry with its massive environmental footprint, the mass media perpetuating fast fashion, and policymakers failing to enforce meaningful regulations.

In their chapter "Tears and Body Insecurities," Louise Yung Nielsen and Mette Lykke Nielsen turn to a theme that, at first glance, seems unrelated to politics. They explore the performance of emotions in the mainstream blogs of six Danish influencers devoted to motherhood. Their study focuses on two specific types of visual images

that have recently gained popularity in influencer culture: the "*crying selfie*" and "*confessional body*" images.

The "*crying selfie*," characterized by a close-up of a person with red eyes and visible tears, has become a widespread trend among internet celebrities. The "*confessional body image*" typically consists of two selfies posted side by side: in one, the influencer poses to highlight their most flattering or "fit" appearance; in the other, they relax their body to reveal a less idealized version of themselves. As both types of images are prevalent in the blogs of the mothers studied, the authors analyze the politics of visibility underpinning these representations of motherhood and femininity.

Historically, women have fought for the recognition of their private domestic labor. Mainstream female influencers not only make the work of housekeeping and child-rearing visible but also capitalize on this visibility. However, the authors hesitate to frame this phenomenon as a straightforward feminist victory, instead conceptualizing it in post-feminist terms. When female influencers post crying selfies to depict the emotional labor of motherhood, the meanings of these images are highly contextual. While such representations may broaden stereotypical notions of normative femininity, they also contribute to the commodification of emotions on social media. The authors conclude that digital spaces serve as dynamic platforms "where individuals constantly negotiate their identities, transcend traditional gender roles, and reshape our understanding of the feminist project in the 21st century" (p. 136).

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