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# SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THE 2020 U.S. ELECTION: PAYING ‘REGULAR PEOPLE’ FOR DIGITAL CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

Coordinated networks of social media influencers, especially small-scale influencers with fewer than 10,000 followers, are now a powerful asset for political campaigns, PACs, and special interest groups. Partisan organizations are leveraging these “authentic” accounts in bids to sway political discourse and decision-making in the run-up to the 2020 U.S. elections. Political marketers tell us that they see influencers, particularly those with more intimate followings, as regarded as more trustworthy by their followers and therefore better positioned to change their behavior. Groups on both sides of the aisle are paying influencers to promote their causes. Many influencers don’t reveal they’ve been paid, and payments often take place off social media platforms. This amounts to a new and growing form of ‘inorganic’ information operations—elite-dictated propaganda through trusted social media spokespersons. What is more, top-down propaganda from influencers are better able to evade detection systems built to detect political bots and sockpuppets and to defy regulators concerned with digital free speech—all while using influencers’ captive audiences to more effectively prey upon fraught emotions during a highly contentious election. Such influencers, far from being “volunteer digital door knockers,” are paid, highly organized surrogates of political campaigns failing to report this new mode of politicking. Social media firms and governments face serious challenges ahead in dealing with this new form of digital propaganda. The propaganda research team at the Center for Media Engagement notes these challenges and offers cursory solutions.

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## AN INFLUENCER “AWAKENING”

Sarah Smith’s<sup>i</sup> Instagram profile is full of pictures documenting her journey as a mother and a healthy living advocate living in Arizona. Sarah’s posts to her 27,800 followers are mostly about motherhood, women supporting women, and living a “nature-first” lifestyle.<sup>ii</sup> She also shares deeply personal details about her life, such as her experience separating from her son’s father and the pain it has caused, interspersed with promotions for clean living brands. Against this backdrop of sunlit photos of gardens in mountainous terrains, two tabs in her story highlights labeled “WAKEUP” and “CoronaVirus” stand out from the others. The stories in “WAKEUP” are dominated by misinformation regarding COVID-19, with one post claiming that children have a 0.00% chance of dying from the virus. A second post equates social distancing to CIA torture techniques, while another claims the mainstream media is using race riots to distract from child-trafficking and pedophilia.

In March of 2020, Sarah began posting politically charged content in her stories and Instagram TV (IGTV) feed regarding masks and sharing links to videos that have since been removed from Instagram for spreading disinformation. In a controversial video posted on May 24, Sarah alludes to a conspiracy behind the mask mandates and encourages audience members to “do [their] own research” into the topic. The video has over 24,700 views,<sup>iii</sup> with many commenters asking to reshare and others tagging the post with popular QAnon hashtags like #wwg1wga, the most common QAnon rallying cry meaning “where we go one, we go all.” In a follow-up post about the video, Sarah says, “I almost deleted my whole account late last night due to the overwhelming amount of hateful comments I received on the video I posted yesterday.” She continues, “But I realized that I actually have a responsibility to speak up,” reflecting the sentiments of a growing number of lifestyle influencers who post political content on Instagram. Several users commented on the post that the video was *the* reason they began following her account.

Sarah’s story illustrates how social media “influencers” can legitimize and spread harmful ideas, as well as the way the incentive structures have changed for those who post this type of content. Previously, lifestyle influencers shied away from sharing controversial content due to fears of alienating their audiences and risking brand partnerships.<sup>1</sup> But events of 2020 have catalyzed changes in both audience expectations and the way influencers view their responsibility to speak about social issues.<sup>iv</sup> Now, influencers are being paid by campaigns and political consultants to spread partisan content.

<sup>i</sup> A pseudonym to protect identity. All other statements are sourced from a single, real account.

<sup>ii</sup> As of October 7, 2020.

<sup>iii</sup> As of October 5, 2020.

<sup>iv</sup> According to an influencer platform executive we spoke to: “A lot of people now feel such responsibility—now we have COVID, we have Black Lives Matter... their audiences are calling out for the influences to take a stand on certain things like repeatedly just in the first half of 2020. So, I think it’s kind of been a wakeup call for a lot of the influencers we work with.”

# INTRODUCTION

Pundits and reporters in the U.S. have deemed 2020 “the year” of many things: the woman political donor, persuasion, and resentment and partisan rage.<sup>2</sup> But our research suggests it is shaping up to be the year of the political influencer—individuals who have built their social media profiles into brands, often with the goal of cultivating followers in order to monetize their influence or gain prestige, and who are now using their platforms to discuss politics. Not only are Americans spending a markedly increased amount of time on social media due to COVID-19,<sup>v</sup> but voters are also immersed in this realm of influencers. According to our research, influencer content has become politicized—ignited by resistance to COVID-19 precautions, QAnon conspiracies, and protests following the May 25<sup>th</sup> murder of George Floyd. Furthermore, economic instability and job loss have led to an increase in the number of people seeking to become influencers and an increase in effort spent monetizing influence, especially among small-scale, or “nano,” influencers.<sup>vi</sup> The value of social media influencers has not gone unnoticed by those seeking to shape political discourse and sway voters. In the words of one prominent Democratic political strategist we interviewed: “We’re obsessed.”

Top-down political mobilization of networks of influencers, particularly small-scale nano-influencers with less than 10,000 followers, by campaigns and political groups seeking to sway decision-making is a concerning trend. The currency of social media influencers, especially those with smaller audiences, is authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Authenticity enables the forging of perceived intimate relationships with followers, which in turn begets trust, loyalty, and internalization of messaging.<sup>4</sup> When politicians are publicly endorsed by influencers and celebrities, they can benefit from increased visibility, but the central goal is often to transfer the trust followers feel towards the influencer to a candidate or cause.<sup>5</sup> That said, endorsements can backfire if they appear contrived, or if the celebrity is disliked or dismissed as a typical example of “liberal Hollywood.” On the other hand, networks of influencers—especially nano-influencers who are more likely to evoke trust—speaking about political issues and interweaving personal anecdotes are hypothesized to shift norms and sway political discourse, conceivably in favor of a specific candidate. Unfortunately, influencer disclosure of payment is poorly enforced, especially if the payment occurs off-platform, and campaigns can employ layers of subcontracting to evade detection in their own financial reports. Furthermore, political action committees (PACs) can use untraceable “dark money” to fund networks of influencers,<sup>6</sup> and it is possible that foreign actors could

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<sup>v</sup> According to the Harris Poll COVID-19 Survey Wave 10, between March 14 and May 3, 2020, 46% to 51% of adult Americans surveyed said the time they spent on social media had increased. The Harris Poll. (2020). The Harris Poll COVID19 Tracker. <https://theharrispoll.com/the-harris-poll-covid19-tracker/>.

<sup>vi</sup> According to one influencer platform executive we interviewed: “What’s interesting now is how the world has gotten just so crazy. A lot of micro-influencers now, you know, either they’ve lost jobs or the economic stability they once had they don’t have, so like they’re looking to really grow...They’re looking to really get as many brand deals as they can, grow their audiences quickly as they can.”

do so as well. Grassroots organizing can be mimicked, particularly if small-scale influencers are contacted individually and are unaware that they are being coordinated. In addition, it is much more challenging to detect and remove real accounts, as opposed to automated “bot” accounts. While some may regard the coordination of influencers as “virtual door-knocking,” if there is no disclosure of top-down coordination, it seems closer to manipulation than to door-knocking.

## RESEARCH

Since March of 2020, the propaganda research team at the Center for Media Engagement has been studying the role of influencers in the lead-up to the 2020 U.S. elections. We have conducted 14 in-depth interviews with well-placed experts, ranging from political strategists who harness influencers for their own partisan means to executives of so-called “influencer platforms” to governmental regulators and to, finally, the political influencers themselves. We have also conducted an observational study of influencer “engagement pods”: groups of people who coordinate to increase engagement on one another’s posts on social media. These pods are largely specific to Instagram, marshalled both formally through companies and informally through self-organization. Predicated on our interviews, our work has focused primarily on Instagram, with additional insights from political influencers on TikTok.

Our findings are described in the following three sections: (1) The current political-influencer landscape, in which we explore the relational power of leveraging small-scale influencers, partisan differences in adoption of influencers, and the logistics of coordinating a political influencer campaign; (2) How norms surrounding influencer discourse have shifted on the platforms in question, ignited by notable events in 2020 and motivated by influencers’ personal activism, audience expectations, and increased engagement following posts on certain topics; and (3) Techniques used off-platform to coordinate content and artificially enhance reach, specifically the investigation of pods and political Hype Houses on TikTok. The report concludes with a discussion of the ethics of coordinating influencers and cursory policy recommendations.

# FINDINGS

## THE CURRENT POLITICAL-INFLUENCER LANDSCAPE

Both the Biden and Trump campaigns are employing “digital-first” advertising strategies, with varying degrees of success.<sup>7</sup> President Trump has a well-established online presence, with roughly 86 million followers on Twitter and 29 million on Facebook, compared to Biden’s 10 million and 2.8 million followers, respectively.<sup>vii</sup> Long-form web-based video interviews are popular, with Trump often relying on surrogates, as is the case with Team Trump Online!, and Biden often incorporating celebrity and influencer guests to increase viewership. Trump himself has conducted few interviews, capitalizing on his own influencer status instead by retweeting thousands of followers’ tweets and memes, bequeathing prized endorsements, and promoting follower-generated content to his massive audience. Biden, whose team is working with the influencer firm Village Marketing, has been interviewed by a handful of lifestyle and parenting influencers, YouTube vloggers, and celebrities (notably, Cardi B<sup>8</sup> and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson<sup>9</sup>). While celebrity endorsement has long been a liberal tactic, the political mobilization of influencers, including those with small and large followings, is relatively new and is not without challenges, particularly regarding authenticity and quality control.<sup>10</sup>

Although highly visible, celebrity endorsements, interviews with mega-influencers, and the much-discussed Bloomberg Memes<sup>11</sup> are not the whole story of influencers and the 2020 election. Our interviews reveal the appeal and power of influencer networks, particularly those of nano-influencers, now being deployed by PACs, political strategy firms, and social movements. The most effective approach appears to be to rally small-scale influencers, described in interviews as “everyday people,” around a cause, not a candidate, and to help them to make their own “authentic” content, enlivened by details of their personal narratives.

### The Power of Small-Scale Influencers

The political appeal of harnessing nano-influencers—accounts with fewer than 10,000 followers—and other small-scale influencers is manifold. Unlike celebrity accounts, such small-scale influencers are normal individuals whose primary occupations are not being influencers, but rather being active members of their local communities who have connections to their followers offline. Noted for their close relationships with their followers and significantly higher levels of engagement, as they devotedly respond to questions and comments, these influencers are more likely to evoke the trust that people feel towards recommendations from friends and family.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, small-scale influencers have the benefit of highly targetable audiences, who share traits such as location, age, or a niche

<sup>vii</sup> As of October 1, 2020.

passion, making it easy for political actors to reach specific sects of voters to encourage or dissuade. Lastly, small-scale influencers are inexpensive,<sup>viii</sup> enabling the mobilization of multitudes in order to target highly specific audiences with “authentic” political messaging.

Coordinating small-scale political influencers is not without challenges. Not all influencer marketing platforms have small-scale influencers. One political group that we spoke with created their own database, painstakingly populated by searching Instagram and other platforms for nano-influencers’ contact information and contacting them individually. That said, small-scale influencers are an increasing focus in the commercial realm,<sup>13</sup> and the two well-known influencer marketing companies we spoke to had nano-influencers on their rosters, reflecting increasing demand from brands. Furthermore, even if small-scale influencers must be coordinated externally from the established platforms, they are likely to be flattered by the attention and may work as volunteers in exchange for face-time with a candidate or political merchandise, as mentioned by several of our interview subjects.

### **Partisan Differences in Adoption of Influencers**

After Trump’s successful social media campaign in 2016, some marketing experts reported feeling fed up with the lack of similar efforts on the Democratic side. Recognizing the unique way influencers could be used to target key demographic groups, especially in swing states, and seeking to apply their business knowledge to politics, two influencer firm executives we spoke to described pursuing partnerships with progressive campaigns, even going so far as to offer their services for free or at reduced cost. “There’s a lot we can do on state and local elections as well. We can find influencers who live in [a] given area, in a given city, in a given town, and find people whose audiences also live in that area,” one executive told us. Interestingly, they told us that most of the Democratic campaigns they approached were not interested in working with them. Of the few campaigns who were interested, most wanted to maintain control of the content and format of the posts, undermining one of the alleged principal strengths of influencer marketing: perceived authenticity.<sup>14</sup> In the words of one influencer firm executive: “I think you get a lot of campaign managers, they obviously like control and I think that that makes sense, but when you work with influencers, you have way less control.” Nevertheless, there are several prominent Democratic influencer efforts that are well underway, such as those led by Main Street One<sup>15</sup> and NextGen,<sup>16</sup> which both prioritize the use of nano-influencers, and by Village Marketing,<sup>17</sup> as well as general influencer branding guidelines publicly provided by the Biden campaign.<sup>18</sup> This hasn’t stopped an advertising expert from claiming that political influencer marketing is “wildly under-utilized.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>viii</sup> According to WebFX, 2020 rates are as follows-- Facebook costs \$25 per 1,000 followers; Instagram: \$10 per 1,000; Twitter: \$2 per 1,000; YouTube: \$20 per 1,000; and, Snapchat: \$10 per 1,000. Of course, there are many estimates. WebFX. (2020). (rep.). *Influencer Marketing Pricing: How Much Does It Cost in 2020?* Retrieved from <https://www.webfx.com/influencer-marketing-pricing.html>.

Across the aisle, Republican groups appear to understand the utility of influencers. According to one politically agnostic influencer firm we spoke to, the Republican campaigns that approached them demonstrated a better grasp of how the influencer platforms could be used to mobilize hyper-specific audiences, as opposed to simply partnering with well-known influencers, as their Democratic counterparts were doing.<sup>ix</sup> The GOP has equipped “Rising Stars” with social media training and invited young, minority influencers to the RNC headquarters to discuss how to influence conversations in their local communities.<sup>20</sup> Without apparent GOP oversight, there are also collections of influencers who have gathered into “hype houses” on TikTok. They have large-scale reach: the Conservative Hype House has 1.5 million followers and the Republican Hype House has nearly 900,000.<sup>x</sup> Coordinated with greater GOP guidance, the conservative youth group Turning Point USA has a well-established Influencer Media Program with a reported 260 influencers who have an average following of 170,000 people.<sup>21</sup> An affiliate, Turning Point Action, was recently found to be operating an influence operation described as “among the most ambitious domestic influence campaigns discovered this election cycle.”<sup>22</sup> Operating through an external digital marketing firm, Turning Point Action paid individuals, including minors, to use their personal accounts to spread coordinated content without disclosing their affiliation or payment. Thousands of posts, replies, and comments across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were found, some of which used identical language. The coordinated content spread false information about COVID-19 and mail-in ballot fraud, sought to discredit mainstream media, implicate Joe Biden, and promote Republican candidates.<sup>23</sup> Due to evidence of coordination, particularly comments replicated en masse, Facebook and Twitter removed several accounts for violating manipulation and spam policies.<sup>24</sup>

### **Logistics: Coordinating an Influencer Campaign**

Those seeking to coordinate political influencers can work with influencers on existing marketing platforms, assemble their own rosters through outreach, or do a combination of both. By using influencer marketing platforms, campaigns are able to post advertising requests and select influencers based upon their style and, importantly, the demographics of their audiences. Taking this a step further, one group we spoke with gathers data from social listening software—extracting data from posts, news articles, web searches and the like—to determine what messages are most effective, pairs this data with traditional marketing tools like Brandwatch and customer relationship management platforms (CRMs), and then uses influencer platforms to choose influencers whose content will reach specific voters who are perceived to be most receptive to that messaging. According to an executive from the group, there is also an ongoing effort within their organization to build a proprietary

<sup>ix</sup> According to one influencer marketing executive we interviewed: “They really understood like: ‘Oh, I don’t just need an influencer who’s reaching those people, who looks like this and cares about this. I also need an audience who, you know, lives in these states and is this age group.’ Which is more advanced than what we’re hearing from the Democratic side.”

<sup>x</sup> As of October 5, 2020.

database of influencers by scraping social media platforms for progressive influencers and their followers, segmenting them based on characteristics like age, gender, and location to call on for future campaigns.<sup>xi</sup> The firm focuses on using nano-influencers because they tend to be highly trusted by their audiences as messengers. Influencer campaigns run by the firm emphasize narrative-style messaging with a local touch to mimic the appearance of grassroots organization.<sup>xii</sup>

## **NORM SHIFTING: INCREASING POLITICIZATION OF AND EXTREMISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS**

Echoed across interviews was the sentiment that there has been a distinct shift in Instagram’s influencer culture over the last year. With the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the spread of QAnon, influencers have begun to post content that would have previously been considered too controversial. Our research identified three main motivations behind this shift in influencer postings: the desire to use platforms for political activism, changes in audience expectations, and the incentivization of posting political content due to increased follower engagement.

### **Motivation: Personal political activism**

In the words of one influencer we interviewed: “My whole thing was that I wanted to spread a message that was meaningful. I wanted to make a difference in society, one way or another. I didn’t feel like I was doing enough.” The current influx of personally motivated political activism is causing ripple effects throughout the social media landscape, provoking and inspiring others, and, subsequently, establishing an expectation of political discourse. While this type of content may invigorate the influencer’s audience, it can also, conversely, invigorate those in opposition. One popular conservative influencer we spoke with told us that their primary motivation for becoming a partisan influencer was the activity they saw on social media during police protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd: “The main catalyst for me to start making content was after I saw people, you know, burning flags, stepping on flags, it kind of brought out this passion that was lost.” Once the apolitical norm of Instagram was broken en masse—arguably by the controversial “Blackout Tuesday” meme accompanied by Black Lives Matter hashtags<sup>25</sup>—political posts have bred political posts, regardless of whether they are authentic or performative.

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<sup>xi</sup> According to our interview with an executive of a company that explicitly coordinates political influencers: “We have our own sort of proprietary list of email addresses that we own of people that we have relationships with. And that’s well over 100,000. And will be probably a half a million by the end of the year... We ‘prospect’, which is like a scraping of creators, daily—several thousand, and we’re segmenting them by age, and size, and location, and all this stuff.”

<sup>xii</sup> According to a Democratic political strategist we interviewed: “Right now we are building a campaign where we are actually recruiting front-line workers, who are content creators and social influencers, tell their personal stories. And then we have subsets of micro-influencers who are sharing their personal interactions and experiences with those front-line workers. And think of those as concentric rings... it shows you the specificity with which you can create powerful, emotional, personal, and often local narratives to respond to or program ahead of what you’re seeing on the horizon in terms of harmful narratives coming out of the White House and other places.”



### **Motivation: Audience expectations**

According to those we spoke with, a main driving factor for influencers to post this new kind of politically-charged content is a general change in audience demand. Since influencers operate in an engagement-driven system, when their audiences expect them to speak about social issues, the influencers have to respond. In the words of one influencer platform executive: “It’s become a place where influencers are expected to say something, and they are expected to be on the right side of history if they want to continue to operate their businesses.” Especially for nano-influencers, whose audiences are smaller and highly engaged, these kinds of posts in support of a social movement can become a price of doing business. In the past, such posts may have been decried as “armchair activism” or “slacktivism,” but now, authentic or performative, they are expected.

### **Motivation: Increased engagement and followers**

Social media platforms have long been fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories and, in 2020, countless “mainstream” influencers, from fitness gurus to beauty bloggers, have joined the ranks of those spreading the content. A prime example is QAnon, a conspiracy theory that came out of the fringe message board site 4chan in 2017.<sup>26</sup> The conspiracy theory alleges that Donald Trump is defending the world against a large network of satanic elites who are running a global child-trafficking operation. QAnon has found its way into mainstream platforms through the co-option of existing social causes like the anti-vaccination and anti-child-trafficking movements.<sup>27</sup> Using language like “#savethechildren,” many QAnon posts appear innocuous upon first glance—moms speaking out against child abuse and sex-trafficking—but the posts are often also tagged with hashtags like #thegreatawakening and #wwg1wga, which lead followers to more radical conspiratorial content. QAnon followers are extremely active, and these hashtags also help them, and QAnon automated “bot” accounts,<sup>28</sup> to “signal boost” to other members, which leads to masses of comments, likes, and reshares of the content. Posts often encourage people to do their own research into topics, and even suggest what web browser to use to do so, giving preference to those which index alternative news sources higher in the search results.<sup>29</sup> Influencer culture that thrives on authenticity and being an individual fits well with these kinds of messages that encourage individuality in pursuit of the truth (e.g., questioning mainstream media, the government, and academia).<sup>30</sup> Posts focused on rescuing children and other QAnon adjacent talking points also represent a “watered-down” version of the core QAnon content, enabling it to be more palatable and sharable for ordinary people, and shifting the norms regarding acceptable discourse.<sup>xiii</sup> QAnon

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<sup>xiii</sup> According to an established journalist and QAnon expert we interviewed: “The concern there is that every step that QAnon is watered down, it’s easier to swallow, and so at the end of the day if someone goes ‘Oh, this influencer I love is spreading the idea that we should save the children from being kidnapped. Okay, why would I go against that? That’s so nice, you know? I want to save children so I’m going to start believing that or supporting that.’”

is no longer a fringe theory; 2 out of 10 Americans think it is “very good” or “somewhat good” for the country, and 4 in 10 Republicans believe the same.<sup>31</sup> From our interviews, it appears to be an established tactic for influencers to capitalize on QAnon to get a boost in followers and engagement, even if the engagement isn’t sustained.<sup>xiv</sup> A recent study of climate change deniers found that they have begun to use QAnon hashtags and post QAnon content, gaining a marked increase in engagement.<sup>32</sup>

## **OFF-PLATFORM ENGAGEMENT MANIPULATION: INFLATION AND COORDINATION**

### **Engagement Pods in the United States**

Since Instagram changed its algorithm in 2016 from prioritizing posts based on chronological order to a more complex and evolving system based on user preference and engagement,<sup>33</sup> influencers have had to find new ways to get their content into their follower’s feeds.<sup>34</sup> Fake influencer marketing, which includes the purchase of fake followers and likes and the use of bots to increase engagement, is predicted to cost brands \$1.5 billion in 2020, not including the costs to user trust when these tactics are employed.<sup>35</sup> Within this fake engagement ecosystem, engagement “pods” have formed as a less detectable way to manipulate engagement on Instagram due to their use of actual users instead of automated methods.<sup>36</sup> Pods, which allow users to trade engagement in the form of comments, likes, and follows, are often run on encrypted messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram, but also appear in Facebook groups and in direct message groups on Instagram. Although many pods are self-forming groups of niche users who post in a similar genre, some of the largest groups are run by companies who also sell other forms of fake engagement. Wolf Global, which runs over 50 engagement pods on Telegram and claims to have over 500,000 members, also sells “real USA followers” and auto-liking as premium services.<sup>37</sup> The groups themselves are monitored by bots that remove inactive members and check for member violations like leeching engagement without engaging back.

Because pods are made up of real users, the activity is harder to detect than the use of fake profiles and bots. Wolf Global also encourages its users to leave “quality comments” by pretending they are friends with the poster and to avoid generic phrases like “this is great” or “love your profile.” Although Wolf Global’s groups have a zero-tolerance policy for content containing offensive content like violence and hate, they have no clear guidelines surrounding the sharing of political content for engagement. In March of 2020, the company also added warnings and “additional monitoring measures” for posts related to the coronavirus, warning users that anyone found spreading disinformation regarding COVID-19 would be banned from the groups. These policies highlight a key concern regarding

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<sup>xiv</sup> According to an established journalist and QAnon expert we interviewed: “In terms of follower counts, I think if like a really normal, mainstream influencer suddenly posts something QAnon, she’ll probably lose followers...but once QAnon people pick up on them, QAnon people are very good at ‘signal boosting’ to each other. They’ll bring them in and, you know, they’ll get those followers.”

amplification of harmful messaging through the use of pods. One expert who studies pods explained that these groups have the ability to boost the content in an inorganic way, which poses serious concerns when it comes to politics. “What you’re getting in a pod is you’re magnifying sort of a pre-cooked message or view. So, from a political point of view...you’re not hearing from stakeholders outside the pod... it tends to create a distortion, almost a distortion of actual reality.” Pods can enable bad actors to amplify and spread harmful messages in a more organic-appearing way than using automated methods. And because pods tend to be segmented by types of accounts, such as mommy influencers and travel influencers, pods can make it appear as though a certain type of messaging is popular with a specific type of user on the platform.

### **Political Influencers on TikTok**

TikTok, the controversial<sup>38</sup> Chinese-owned video sharing platform with a reported 100 million monthly users in the United States,<sup>39</sup> 62% of whom are aged 10 to 29,<sup>40</sup> has become a hotbed of “Gen Z” and millennial political commentary. Collectives of political influencers, organized into a variety of conservative or liberal “hype houses,” have become popular. Several of the collectives are owned by companies that control multiple accounts and merchandise companies. We spoke with two influencers who are members of political hype houses to understand how they coordinate and enhance their influence. First, they recruit a small network of like-minded influencers. Then, to gain traction, they use established tactics such as doing popular dances and “every beat you drop a fact,” and targeting “14-year-olds and middle schoolers” because they are a highly engaged and malleable audience. In the candid words of one of the influencers: “When you target to the most manipulatable audience it’s going to be really easy to gain a following and have people worship what you’re saying.” Once they create an established account with well-curated content, they recruit more influencers. The hype house has multiple tiers of influencers, based upon quality of content and number of followers, and a council of main brand ambassadors that initiates new influencers, manages partner accounts, handles the selling of merchandise, and, most interestingly, coordinates the topics and messaging that they would like to see from their influencers. The message coordination meeting takes place once a week: “Let’s not talk about this, we need to focus on this. Or maybe it’s, you know, hey, for the long term, we’re going to be making content about this over the next couple of weeks.” However, our interviewee was quick to stress that “it’s not strict,” adding “it’s their own personal accounts and they can post anything that they really want.”

These groups of charismatic young people who post enthusiastically about politics, with their several hundred thousand to million-plus followers, seem ripe for marshalling by traditional political campaigns, PACs, and strategists. However, the two influencers we interviewed had not received marching orders or payment from external sources. Their

only source of payment came from selling merchandise, if they made money at all. “Most of us, we do this without any payment, because we want to educate society. And we want to educate young people, it’s a very important time in our history... We almost see it as a duty and not necessarily a job.” That said, we were only able to interview two of many, and it is easy to see the potential symbiosis of PACs and campaigns coordinating messaging through political hype houses, be they paid in money, connections, or simply recognition from an admired politician.

### **Discussion: The Ethics of Mobilizing Political Influencers**

Is coordinating networks of influencers to share political content ethical? On the one hand, some argue that it is no different than conventional volunteer work. In the words of one strategist, “This is digital door-knocking, I think of this as e-canvassing.” However, there are three key differences: (1) scale of reach, (2) influencers’ relationships with their audiences, and (3) disclosure and transparency regarding coordination. Influencers differ from canvassers because a single post can reach thousands of people in an instant versus the reach of a canvasser who is knocking on a single door or calling a single number at any given time. There is also a relational difference between a canvasser knocking on a stranger’s door and an influencer whose audience has a relationship with them, perceived or otherwise. Lastly, canvassers gain trust by affiliating with a campaign so they are willing to disclose, while influencers gain trust by remaining “authentic.” Lack of disclosure regarding payment or affiliation make it extremely difficult to assess coordination, enabling secretive political groups, dark money,<sup>41</sup> and foreign actors to potentially sway masses of unsuspecting voters through the voices of trusted friends and idols.

By focusing on disclosure, proponents of paid political influencers overlook the deeper issue of digital astroturfing—the coordination of accounts, deceptively seeking to mimic legitimate discourse.<sup>42</sup> In recent years, social media bots were a primary method of artificially inflating a candidate’s popularity online,<sup>43</sup> but as technologists have become more adept at detection, bot usage appears to be waning. User-generated content is both effective at swaying public opinion and creating the appearance of a groundswell of grassroots support. Coordinating real humans to post political content, although more time consuming, is also a tactic to avoid detection. As discussed prior, in the lead-up to the 2020 election, Turning Point Action reportedly paid teenagers in Arizona to reply to tweets posted by Democratic politicians and news organizations on Twitter in order to manipulate conversations on the platform.<sup>44</sup> The teenagers, who were pulling approved messages from a shared document, did not disclose that they were working in coordination with a political group and several used pseudonyms. Notably, Turning Point Action claimed that this coordinated effort was “sincere political activism” that was pushed online due to COVID-

19,<sup>45</sup> echoing the justifications we heard from strategists coordinating political influencers on Instagram.

## **CONCLUSION: POLICY SOLUTIONS STYMIED**

Influencers pose a threat to campaign transparency, accountability, and informational quality. Political influencer posts do not qualify for the stricter rules imposed by Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter on political advertising due to the fact that payment occurs off-platform. Without standardization of disclosure practices, differentiating between coordinated political campaigns and genuine grassroots political speech will continue to be difficult for the platforms. Furthermore, the Federal Elections Commission—which could change the legal requirements surrounding these kinds of political advertisements—once again finds itself without a quorum, leaving it powerless to act.<sup>46</sup> The commission itself has also become increasingly polarized in recent years, and disclosure has become a party-line issue. Current rules regarding online political speech are “technology-neutral and platform-agnostic,” leaving social media platforms and campaigns to make up many of the policies themselves.<sup>47</sup> The environment has been described by one former Federal Election Commissioner we interviewed as a place where bad actors “can just act with impunity, and there’s never going to be any enforcement.”

Lack of proper disclosure regulations leaves significant openings for dark money and foreign actors to fund influencer operations with little to no detection, threatening the security and integrity of elections in the United States and beyond. Russian influence operations in Africa have been testing tactics to spread disinformation by using local people instead of fake accounts to avoid detection of Facebook.<sup>48</sup> As Facebook and Twitter focused more attention on foreign actors after the 2016 election, the Kremlin’s Internet Research Agency successfully targeted black Americans on Instagram by mimicking influencer behavior as a part of an orchestrated disinformation campaign in 2017.<sup>49</sup>

In order to combat the rise of political influencers, both the federal government and social media firms must act. While some precedents have been set for monitoring influencers paid for commercial purposes, the use of political influencers is different. Ultimately, the use of paid political influencers amounts to active, professional electioneering. It should be treated as such. Even when influencer groups are not paid to communicate by political groups, as seems to be the case with the “hype houses” mentioned earlier, they are often using inorganic organizing tactics in bids to game what social media firms prioritize in trends and recommendations. The use of broadscale coordination of influencers, particularly small-scale nano-influencers who are basically “regular” users, in efforts to dictate outcomes

on digital systems amounts to computational propaganda by other means. Here, political groups may not be using bots or sockpuppets, but they are seeking similar outcomes.

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