Johanna Arnesson and Hanna Reinikainen

Influencer politics: An introduction

1 Introduction

Recent years have seen an upsurge in what have come to be known as *social media influencers* – a promotional phenomenon in which the connection between self-branding, advertising, and micro-celebrity in digital media is made explicit (Khamis et al., 2017). Early definitions refer to influencers as individuals who share their everyday lives, consumption habits, relationships, and private thoughts on social networking sites or blogs, and actively interact with their audience in a way that also generates financial profit through various marketing agreements with companies and organisations (Abidin, 2015, 2016). With increased professionalisation, the monetisation of both audience and self-brand has become a key aspect of influencer culture, which has also developed into a promotional industry in itself (Hund, 2023). Cultivating a strong relationship with one's "followers" through interactions and perceived intimacy is often a basis for success in this business (Abidin, 2015; Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020). While sometimes referred to as a new and emerging form of advertising, the core principle of influencer marketing thus stems from the "two-step flow" of communication, and theories of influence through opinion leaders and parasocial relationships that were formulated as far back as the 1950s (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Katz, 1955).

From this perspective, the very idea of being an influencer is largely based on the intensified commodification of the self, in and through social media, in order to influence the audience to make certain choices – choices that might involve consumption practices but also ethics, values, and politics. It is therefore not surprising that the idea of influencers as political actors, or ideological intermediaries, has become increasingly visible in recent years. A trend of "political influencers", who incorporate specific politics into their content (Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022) and shape the attitudes and perceptions of political issues among their followers (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Schmuck et al., 2022) has been noticed globally. In the Nordic countries, for example, influencers have actively endorsed specific issues and incorporated them into their self-brand; for example, sustainability, feminism, animal rights, LGBTQ+ issues, and anti-racism have been recurring topics among some of the most successful influencers today. There are also examples of influencers who are involved in more "formal" politics, either by publicly supporting a certain party or politician (Suuronen et al., 2022), or – as in Sweden – influencers who in the run-up to forthcoming elections invite politicians

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onto their platforms and interview them about specific issues. Influencers in Finland were engaged in government information campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pöyry et al., 2022), and in both Norway and Sweden certain influencers have been held accountable for commercial collaborations or specific content based on the political views common amongst their followers (e. g. Arnesson, 2023, 2024).

The politicisation of influencers thus seems to be an ongoing process, and has drawn attention and concerns both in and out of academia. The process is also paradoxical, since influencers might engage in politics and act as opinion leaders in some cases, while simultaneously object to being considered powerful, and to be held accountable by their followers or news media, in other cases. Similar ambivalence can be seen among their followers, as well as among political experts, communicators, and journalists, when it comes to the issue of influencers and politics. This book seeks to highlight these current discussions about the role and significance of social media influencers in contemporary digital culture and politics. While the Nordic countries constitute its central focus, the content is not exclusively restricted to this geographical area. It also explores how German political strategists relate to influencers, as well as the politicisation of influencers in a conflict situation, i. e. the notion of "war influencers" related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2023). The book is thus the result of a common interest among researchers engaged in work on political aspects of influencer marketing and influencer culture from critical, cultural, and strategic perspectives. It offers a range of case studies devoted to both the promises and limitations of influencer politics in the promotional cultures in which we live.

2 The politicisation of influencers

As discussed above, a recent trend towards more "meaningful" content has been observed among many influencers, who integrate certain issues or politics into their product promotion (Riedl et al., 2021). The term "political influencer" is not, however, a notion that is uniformly employed in research, or in the news media, when talking about this phenomenon. Casero-Ripollés (2020), for example, characterises political influencers as "digital opinion leaders" who seek to have an impact on the public agenda in different ways. This conceptualisation includes political actors who redefine their communicative practices and seek social influence through connectivity, interactivity, and self-presentation on social media, as well as how the concept of an influencer is widening to include other professions, such as CEOs and intellectuals who participate in public debates. As the first chapter of this book shows, similar conceptualisations have been used by journalists covering the

topic. From this perspective, research might focus on how far-right actors adopt influencer strategies to further a metapolitical agenda in digital media (Maly, 2020), how populist politicians use social media as a campaign arena (Enli, 2017; Starita & Trillò, 2022), or how talk-show participants position themselves as political influencers on X (formerly Twitter) (Marcos-García et al., 2020).

In contrast to other definitions, Casero-Ripollés does not emphasise the commercial core of influencers in terms of self-branding, advertising, or monetising their audiences in different ways. Other accounts of political influencers often highlight this aspect when they define the focus of their investigations (e.g. Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Fischer et al., 2022; Goodwin et al., 2023; Riedl et al., 2021; Schmuck et al., 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022). Riedl et al. (2023), however, state that the term is highly contextual and that their definition might include content creators "who do not monetise their online activities at all" (p. 2). While we agree that context is critical here, and that the boundaries of what it means to be an influencer are fluid rather than fixed, the main contribution of this anthology is its focus on influencers who are deeply rooted in the commercial sphere – specifically in the beauty and lifestyle genres – and how their communication practices might be strategically "translated" into politics (Falasca & Grandien, 2017). Excluding the commercial and promotional nature of influencers from the definition means that all kinds of political activism or opinion formation in social media might be included. It also removes one of the underlying issues that makes this an interesting phenomenon to study: the perceived tension between politics and commercialism, often articulated through the notion of *authenticity*.

2.1 The gendered politics of authenticity

The ability to be perceived as "authentic", and to cultivate a self-brand that is both unique and relatable, is a key characteristic of influencers (Coco & Eckert, 2020; Khamis et al., 2017; Pöyry et al., 2019; Riedl et al., 2021). Early accounts of authentic online self-presentation stress an either/or view of being autonomous or being paid by others to present "strategically crafted messages aimed at manipulating or persuading consumers" (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015, p. 7). As Banet-Weiser (2012) has pointed out, however, this binary simplifies the issue, and does not help to explain the many ways in which authenticity is continuously being (re)constructed and negotiated in mediated performances. Authenticity is a "messy" concept, and it is also inherently gendered – for female influencers, the curation of "the self" in order to gain followers and success can even be understood as a form of *labour* framed by tensions related to ideals of femininity and vulnerability (Banet-Weiser, 2021). In addition, influencer genres focused on beauty

and lifestyle are predominantly born out of fashion blogging and therefore inherently intertwined with ideals of autonomy and amateurism, which might cause a need to downplay the strategic choices and practices used to gain success in digital media (Duffy, 2017). This means that these influencers often struggle with the *ambivalence* of authenticity (Cunningham & Craig, 2017), and engage in ongoing negotiations of how to be "true to themselves" as well as their audiences (Wellman et al., 2020).

Such ambivalence becomes especially visible in a political context, where politics might be integrated into influencers' content creation as expressions of their values and "authentic" selves, or, alternatively, something that is used by others to criticise or question their authenticity. As shown in chapter 3 of this book, the commercial practices of influencers – their ability to package and "sell" ideas as well as products – is also one of the things that might make them interesting to political communicators seeking to reach and engage with new audiences. At the same time, it is precisely such a "commodification" of politics that, for some, makes them a threat to democracy and to political accountability. Emily Hund (2023, p. 146) highlights how the lack of transparency and regulation in the influencer industry might make it hard to identify a political message that is seamlessly integrated into an influencer's content, and even more difficult to know who the sponsor behind the post is. She also asks the question if "selling access to our personal self-expression" really should be considered beneficial for society? To resolve these tensions, political parties might emphasise the creativity and authenticity of the content creators they collaborate with, as discussed in chapter 4, rather than highlighting their commercial impact and "wide reach".

In a political context, influencers' rise to fame through self-branding strategies and the "organic" cultivation of a following on social media also provides a contrast to traditional celebrity endorsements (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Relatability, and the ability to create active communities around themselves, has been characterised as a defining feature of successful influencers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Parasocial relationships that develop over time, specifically when people follow the influencers through their everyday lives for many years, give them a certain status and power of persuasion (Suuronen et al., 2022). Such relationships are often based on the performance of affective labour, which presupposes and relies upon perceived intimacy (Raun, 2018). By sharing personal thoughts and accounts of their everyday lives, as well as addressing their viewers in an informal and conversational style that suggests an emotional bond, influencers can be perceived as a "big sister" or best friend who might guide and advise their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Torjesen, 2021). Consequently, influencers often take on, or are attributed, the function of role models with expert knowledge and skills in certain areas, especially for young people (Harff & Schmuck, 2023;

Riedl et al., 2021; Schmuck et al., 2022). Chapter 5 in this book shows how influencers' conversational style and interactive relationship with their audience is one of the strategies adopted by politicians, and adapted to a political context. The importance of interaction with followers is also highlighted in chapter 2, where influencers' potential impact on political participation is discussed. Being "political" does not necessarily involve endorsing a specific issue, party, or ideology, but rather implies a focus on the role of influencers in promoting political interest and processes such as elections etc. among their (supposedly) young followers (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Riedl et al., 2021; Suuronen et al., 2022).

2.2 Politics beyond parliament

As Suuronen et al. (2022) note, the nature of politics is also increasingly elusive in other ways, and only focusing on "formal" politics in terms of institutions, parties, and elections would not capture the many dimensions and expressions of politics in influencer culture. Influencers' content creation and communicative practices often blur the boundaries between public and private spheres, which means that something that might be considered personal in other contexts here becomes infused with politics. Climate change, for example, is an issue that is often framed by individual lifestyle choices and consumption practices, something illustrated by the emergence of the "greenfluencers" discussed in chapter 6. Like the "personal green bloggers" before them (Joosse & Brydges, 2018), these influencers mediate and translate the complexities of sustainability into everyday politics, through appeals aimed at either individual consumption and personal well-being, or more radical appeals of transformation and accountability aimed at both brands and politicians. As discussed above, however, the commercial contexts within which these influencers operate cause tensions, and appeals for consumer activism also evoke issues of class and privilege. Research shows that "lifestyle politics" and consumption-based forms of political participation predominantly appeal to well-educated, middle-class, and high-income earners (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2013).

Influencers in the beauty and lifestyle genres might also personify a specific form of popular feminism, which correlates with a significant increase in female entrepreneurship in digital contexts (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). The image of a "girl boss" who builds her own brand and fame, through both marketing agreements and product launches, resonates strongly within the neoliberal discourse of individualism, self-government, and empowerment through self-realisation, consumption, and political brand cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2018; Roivainen, 2023). Simultaneously, postfeminist articula-

tions within influencer culture might also take a much more ambivalent and emotional form, as shown in chapter 7 of this book. Empowerment and vulnerability are inherently intertwined in depictions of motherhood and femininity among influencers who seek to present themselves as an "authentic" alternative to the supposedly staged image of an "ideal" woman and micro-celebrity. Postfeminist ambivalence in relation to empowerment and exploitation can also be seen in the pressure to conform to unattainable beauty standards, among both influencers and their followers. The "affective body politics" of social media (Hynnä et al., 2019) means that the body of the (female) influencer becomes a site of contestation, where it can simultaneously come to represent both individual self-expression and structural objectification. This paradox has been visible not least in debates over influencers' responsibility when it comes to the presence of so-called "pro-ana" content on social media, as well as the different ways in which technical affordances, i. e. filters, editing, and cropping, are routinely used on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Chapter 8 discusses this politicisation of the influencer body in light of recent Norwegian legislation that bans the use of undisclosed photo editing in advertising – a law aimed at the practice of "improving" images with the help of filters, retouching, and other editing tools (Geiger, 2021).

Finally, the term politics can also encompass crises, conflicts, and war, where influencers – just like other individuals and businesses – are forced to adapt to a new situation. They might, for example, become intermediaries for "strategic narratives" produced by a political elite, as discussed in chapter 9. The fact that influencers were contacted by public agencies and involved in health information campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pöyry et al., 2022) shows that they are seen as strategic partners for governments during times of crisis. However, they might also play a part in spreading misinformation, false claims, and conspiracy theories about public issues (Harff et al., 2022). In relation to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there have been media reports of coordinated campaigns in which influencers were coerced to spread pro-Russian statements and propaganda (Gilbert, 2022). The United States government also reached out to TikTok influencers in an effort to debrief about its views on the current state of the war (Lorenz, 2022). Such initiatives can be seen as attempts to reach and engage with specific target groups, predominantly younger audiences, in a way that might not at first glance come across as persuasion or propaganda. Technological features of different platforms also shape the way that cultural trauma is expressed in digital media and impacts not just *what* influencers communicate about the realities of living in a conflict situation, but also *how* these audio-visual representations are formed (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2023).

3 Influencer politics in social media

As this brief introduction has shown, trying to define what constitutes a political influencer is a rather complicated task because both "political" and "influencer" are concepts characterised by complexity and contextual dependency. Therefore, this anthology instead focuses on *influencer politics*, a concept that attempts to capture a specific form of convergence between the personal, political, and promotional in contemporary digital media and society. A key focus is how the core ideas of influencer culture – authenticity, intimacy, commercialism, and self-branding – shape the ways in which politics are expressed and understood in this context, as well as opening up space for new ways of connecting and interacting with the public. It also highlights the way that influencer culture itself is infused with politics, where issues of, for example, empowerment and exploitation are articulated and discussed in different ways.

We regard influencer politics as a concept with (at least) three dimensions: firstly, it covers influencers who engage in politics in different ways; for example, as part of their self-branding and commercial content, or as intermediaries who more or less explicitly promote certain policies, politicians, or ideologies. Secondly, it involves politicians or political parties who adopt influencer strategies and genre-specific practices, and adapt them to a political context. This might also include political actors who immerse themselves in influencer culture, and socialise with well-known influencers and micro-celebrities. Thirdly, influencer politics also includes the politicisation of influencer content and commercial collaborations, often through reactions and critique from followers and/or other media actors, who discuss issues of responsibility and power in relation to the influencer profession. This means that influencers' platforms are seen as sites for public debate, or part of a digital public sphere, where everyday politics is articulated and negotiated.

3.1 Outline of the book

The book is divided into two parts. The first part covers the intersection of influencers and the discourses and practices of so-called formal politics (see Suuronen et al., 2022), discussing both how influencers engage in formal politics, and how politicians and political actors adopt influencer strategies. The second part discusses the politicisation of influencer culture, presenting examples of how lifestyle content becomes politicised and how conflict situations, such as war, shape the practices and role perceptions of influencers.

In chapter 1, entitled "From beauty to ballots: Contradictory discourses on political influencers in Swedish news and social media", Johanna Arnesson examines the discursive construction of political influencers in the Swedish news and on social media before and after the Swedish parliamentary elections of 2022. The chapter addresses the tensions created by the commercial nature of influencers and their tendency to display their personal lives in relation to their political function, role, and power. Based on statements from influencers themselves, three political roles are identified: the impartial guide, the subjective storyteller, and the branded "polfluencer". The chapter also underlines how influencers are constructed as both a promise and a threat to political interest and participation, specifically among young people.

The possible promise of social media influencers continues in chapter 2, entitled "'Remember to vote!': How do people respond to social media influencers promoting political participation?" written by Essi Pöyry and Hanna Reinikainen. The chapter examines how an appeal to vote by a social media influencer affects the voting intentions of citizens, and how following social media influencers and political participation relate in general. By introducing the results of an experiment conducted with a Finnish consumer panel, the chapter claims that, while a social media post by an influencer can affect people's intention to vote, the way in which the appeal is made is also crucial – the audience's urge to interact with influencers is also pivotal when it comes to political appeals. In addition, the chapter shows that political participation, such as voting, and following influencers appear to be connected. For political strategists and campaign professionals, this is a reminder that people who follow social media influencers are, in fact, generally politically minded and aware of current affairs in society.

Chapter 3, "The influencer political communicators dream of: Seven theses on the ideal influencer in the political domain", continues to discuss the role of social media influencers in political campaigning. Nils S. Borchers introduces the ideas that German political communicators hold about the "ideal influencer" for a political communication campaign. The chapter shows how political communicators dream of working with social media influencers who break down complex political issues, bow to the dignity of politics, handle interactions with followers with expertise, show passion and authenticity, appear low-maintenance, and are lenient with political communicators. This chapter is among the first academic works to provide insights that illuminate how political communicators approach the integration of influencers into election campaigns.

Elections are also discussed in chapter 4, entitled "Election influencers on TikTok: Strategic utilisation of the short video format during the 2022 election campaign in Sweden". Here, Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm introduce how Swedish political parties have sought to utilise TikTok in their strategic communi-

cation practices in order to appeal to citizens who have generally been considered difficult to reach through traditional campaigning. The chapter assesses two cases: a collaboration between the Swedish Left Party and a group of content creators, popular among immigrant youth; and attempts by the Sweden Democrats to manage the short video format, utilising communicative styles and aesthetics often more familiar to commercial lifestyle influencers, in order to promote the party during their election campaign. The chapter concludes that the adaptation of political campaigning to new platforms seems to stimulate rather unorthodox ways of practising political communication.

In chapter 5, Christina Grandien and Johanna Arnesson further discuss the attempts by politicians to address current and future constituents through social media. In their chapter, entitled "A human behind the politics? Personalisation and interactions in the comments sections of Swedish politicians' YouTube channels", Grandien and Arnesson analyse the viewer comments about videos posted on YouTube by two Swedish politicians, Annie Lööf and Ebba Busch. The chapter concludes that these comments reflect influencer-like communication strategies, resembling realistic social interaction. Two-way interactions, referring to politicians responding to viewer comments, appear to enhance viewer engagement and contribute to an active commenting environment. Comments also serve as reflective engagement, characterised by immediate and emotionally charged responses, which are typical of lifestyle influencer content. The chapter also highlights concerns about insincerity in politicians adopting influencer personas.

The second section of the book delves into how lifestyle content posted by social media influencers intertwines with politics. In chapter 6, "Greenfluencers and environmental advocacy: Sustainability representations and appeals to action in content by Scandinavian influencers", Ida Vikøren Andersen and Moa Eriksson Krutrök discuss "greenfluencers" – influencers who manage to combine environmental issues and their personal lives in their content creation. The chapter suggests three different appeal strategies used by "greenfluencers": the feel-good appeal, the transformation appeal, and the condemn and commend appeal. The chapter further suggests that these appeals invite followers to take different roles: to act either as responsible consumers who consume sustainably and call out bad business practices, or as active citizens who seek to leverage their influence to change environmental policies.

Chapter 7 shifts the focus to one of the key elements of influencer cultures: how authenticity is negotiated, constructed, and presented. In their chapter, entitled "Tears and body insecurities: The authentic influencer as change-maker?", Louise Yung Nielsen and Mette Lykke Nielsen analyse the performances of emotions, motherhood, and body insecurities by six Danish influencers, and discuss their potential as a feminist contribution to influencer culture. The authors use

a postfeminist framework to define influencer culture based on the politics of authenticity and visibility, and to untangle its ambivalent relationship with feminism. The analysis focuses on two core motifs: the crying selfie, which explores how female influencers perform emotions and motherhood, and images revealing the manipulative nature of images of their bodies.

The ambivalent relationship between influencer cultures and feminism is continued in chapter eight "Body and beauty pressures in the Norwegian influencer industry: Exploring media discourses on influencers and their impact on beauty standards" by Mathilde Hogsnes and Tor-Morten Grønli. The chapter analyses media discourses of the perceived impact influencers have over young women's body and beauty pressures – identified as a significant issue by the Norwegian authorities, politicians, and influencer communities. The chapter finds that there are contradictions when it comes to the perceived roles of influencers and their practices in relation to body and beauty issues. On the one hand, it is argued that influencers are subjected to the same type of stereotypical body ideals and beauty standards that guide their practices. On the other, influencers are considered professional commercial actors who should be held to the same standards as any other commercial actor. In addition, while some influencers can be considered advocates for individual choice and pleasure, influencers also often reinforce stereotypical beauty standards, challenging the achievement of greater diversity and representation within the influencer industry.

Chapter 9 closes the book by examining how political and commercial influence have been brought together in the extreme context of the war in Ukraine. In their chapter, "Instagram as an affective battlefield: Patriotic inspirational influencers as strategic narrators", Nuppu Pelevina, Oksana Domina, and Salla-Maaria Laaksonen examine how Ukrainian social media influencers have communicated about the war in Ukraine and participated in disseminating strategic Ukrainian narratives and renegotiating their roles, genres, and practices amid the war against Russia. The chapter finds that Ukrainian social media influencers have functioned as information disseminators, public social activists, and inspirational patriots, by providing first-hand information about the situation in Ukraine, mobilising their followers to support the war effort, and building a consciousness of a shared past, an understanding of current events, and paths to a peaceful future. Thus, many lifestyle influencers in Ukraine have transformed themselves into intermediaries of strategic narratives, while engaging in shaping the nation's collective memory and national identity.

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