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# From beauty to ballots

## Contradictory discourses on political influencers in Swedish news and social media

**Abstract:** In early 2022, two of Sweden's most popular influencers launched YouTube series where they interviewed political leaders about the upcoming parliamentary elections. The series were presented as a way to reach and engage younger audiences, who supposedly would not take part in politics otherwise. They also triggered a debate about political influencers, both in traditional newspapers and in social media, where actors in and outside of the influencer industry participated. This chapter examines the discursive construction of "political influencers" in these debates, by analysing contradictory stances, as well as the boundary work of journalists, experts, and influencers themselves, in mediated discourse. The chapter highlights how the commercial nature of influencers, and their tendency to bring forth their personal lives, creates tensions in relation to their perceived political function, role, and power. The chapter also underlines how influencers are constructed as both a promise and a threat to political interest and participation, specifically for young people.

**Keywords:** political influencers, journalism, stance-taking, boundary work, discourse analysis

## 1 Introduction

In March 2022, six months before the general election in Sweden, the popular vlogger Therése Lindgren announced that she would publish a series of interviews with leaders of the parliamentary parties on her YouTube channel. She motivated the initiative, called *Therése and the Election*, by saying that influencers are important intermediaries of political information for young people, "who do not take part in traditional media to such a large extent" (*Blekinge Läns Tidning*, 2022, 23 March). Lindgren was not the first Swedish influencer to use her social media channels in this way: Margaux Dietz, another well-known YouTuber and social media figure, started a similar series called *Partitempen* even before the preceding election of 2018, and followed up with a new round of interviews in 2022.

The two series attracted a fairly large audience, with the most popular video (Margaux Dietz's interview with the leader of the right-wing Sweden Democrats)

receiving approximately 355,000 views.[1] They also attracted media attention, resulting in a number of commentaries in newspapers around the country, as well as longer interviews with Lindgren and Dietz in the two leading morning papers. The idea of influencers as political opinion leaders or intermediaries of political information was also discussed in more general terms in relation to the election, both in the press and on social media. The election was a recurring topic, for example, on several more-or-less well-known influencers' own profiles, as well as on *Bloggbevakning*, a commercial website and Instagram account that covers and scrutinises the Swedish influencer industry.

In these discussions, influencers were both held up as social media wizards who would help uninterested or misinformed youth to gain a better grasp of politics, and perceived as a threat to democracy and to professional journalism. Similar opposing images also surfaced when the influencers themselves talked about their own political content and perceived position of power. These contradictory discourses are the primary focus of this chapter. It examines the discursive construction of political influencers in Swedish news and social media before and after the election of 2022. By analysing different ideas about their political function, role, and power, as well as the boundary work of different actors within this discourse (Carlson, 2015; Cheng & Chew, 2022), wider contemporary cultural tensions about influencers and their socio-cultural significance are highlighted (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022).

The chapter focuses on mediated discourses in a Swedish national context. Through systematic searches in the digital archive *Retriever Research Database*, I collected 23 newspaper articles of various genres that discussed issues related to influencers, politics, and power in the months before and after the general election of 2022. A majority of these focus on either the previously mentioned YouTube series from Lindgren and Dietz (n = 9) or on influencers and the election in general (n = 8). A smaller number of articles focuses on the perceived power of influencers, although not necessarily related to the election (n = 6).

Newspapers are, however, only "one link in a long chain of meaning-making activities" (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 2). As part of an ongoing research project on influencers and politics in Sweden, I have also spent a lot of time "lurking" on different platforms and influencer accounts, i.e. observing without participating, in order to build familiarity with social norms and specific contexts (Ferguson, 2017; McRae, 2017). Through this digital ethnographic approach, I have identified and collected additional materials in the form of content and user comments in which influencers' role in the 2022 election was discussed. For example, I have an-

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1 At the time of writing, 18 April 2023.

alysed a specific influencer's own posts on the topic and the following discussion among their followers, as well as the comments to a post on the website *Bloggbevakning* entitled "Election sprint", which lists a number of political appeals from Swedish influencers. While videos in the YouTube series *Partitempen* and *Therése and the Election* are not part of the analysis, some viewer comments on these videos are used to illustrate audience responses.

# 2 Drawing the boundaries around political influencers

The idea that influencers can strive towards more "meaningful" content (Riedl et al., 2021) and use their platforms to promote certain issues or politics is no longer a novel concept. The term "political influencer" has become increasingly prominent in the public sphere over the last decade, although it is not always clear what it actually means. It has been used to describe a range of different actors and practices, both in and out of academia (e.g. Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Riedl et al., 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022). Just like other professions that do not necessarily require a formal degree or licence, being a social media influencer is "a varied cultural practice embedded within a complicated social landscape" (Carlson, 2015, p. 2), and is affected by its relations with platforms, agents, advertisers, followers, and other media outlets. This elastic nature means that who is considered an influencer and how their influence is actually achieved and perceived vary depending on context. The same goes for politics, a term that might encompass formal structures, ideologies, and power relations, as well as individually expressed action frames mobilised around personal lifestyle values (Bennett, 2012; Suuronen et al., 2022).

With this in mind, this chapter examines how different actors make sense of political influencers as idea and practice. It does so by analysing the stance-taking and contradictory discourses that emerge in news and social media. Stance-taking involves "the ways that speakers/writers (often implicitly) express an epistemic (i.e. true or false) or evaluative (i.e. good or bad) judgement vis-à-vis the topic under discussion" (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 2). Stances are identified by paying attention to how linguistic meaning-making resources, such as modalities, lexical choices, and the presentation of self and others, express a certain position on a topic or about an object. These stances are often legitimised through rationalisation, moral evaluation, authorisation, or mythopoesis (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Previous research has shown that, on the one hand, influencers might be celebrated with references to their numbers of followers, as well as narratives of up-

ward mobility and myths of meritocracy; on the other, derisory discourses might lament their lack of a work ethic as well as their intrusion into "industries that do not want them" (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 7). Similar derogatory notions have also been found in the Swedish press, where journalists' *detestation* of influencers is argued to be not just a feeling, but also an action; an explicit practice whereby power structures of age and gender intersect as the influencer is "of the wrong age in the wrong gender; [and] doing the wrong things in the wrong way in the wrong place" (Nilsson, 2021, p. 56).

Such *boundary work* can be defined as a symbolic contest over the boundaries of a social practice or particular profession (Gieryn, 1983; Carlson, 2015). In this case, this means contestations over who can be considered an influencer, what counts as appropriate influencer practices and interests, what the normative values, ethics, and beliefs of influencers are, and what kind of political role and power they actually have. Lifestyle journalists, for example, might take a pragmatic view of influencers as *functional interlopers* who "can exist within and out of journalism's boundaries according to circumstance" (Cheng & Chew, 2022, p. 385). Simultaneously, they protect their professional autonomy by highlighting certain skills, education, and values that influencers presumably do not possess, and by asserting their own independence from both audiences and advertisers (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022).

Influencers, on the other hand, also perform boundary work to distinguish themselves from other professions, or from each other. This might involve highlighting transparency as a professional norm rather than objectivity, since personal assessments and experiences are argued to be what attracts followers (Maares & Hanusch, 2018). Authenticity is another professional norm, one that involves an ongoing negotiation of the tensions between being "genuine" and being strategic (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020). These negotiations include being "true to the audience" as well as oneself, which means that nurturing a positive relationship with followers is another core characteristic of influencers (Abidin, 2015; Wellman et al., 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Practices and values deemed to be "inside" the boundaries might also depend on influencers' *role perception*; how they view their role in society and what they aim to achieve with their work. Previous research has identified five different roles that influencers claim for themselves: providing exemplars of lifestyle; inspiration; educating followers and providing orientation; providing a service and giving advice; and entertainment and relaxation (Maares & Hanusch, 2018).

The following analysis is structured around three focal contradictions found in the materials. These involve discussions on (1) the function of influencers in democratic processes, (2) the professional roles of influencers in relation to politics, and (3) the kind of power that influencers actually have. The use of *boundary-*

*making strategies* (Gieryn, 1983) in the interactions between actors, as well as how influencers' different *role perceptions* are expressed (Maares & Hanusch, 2018), are also discussed in relation to these overarching discursive struggles.

# 3 Political influencers as promise and threat

The first contradictory stance deals with the function of influencers when it comes to political participation and democratic processes. It involves the ways in which different actors characterise and (de)legitimise influencers' involvement in politics and the impact that this expansion of boundaries might have on certain actors, ideas, and processes.

## 3.1 A gateway to politics

The belief that there is a need to reinvent political communication, and to use new channels to reach young (potential) voters, seems to be an omnipresent idea in the analysed texts. An article in *Dagens Industri* (2022, 27 May), for example, states that first-time voters are "a group whose media habits clearly differ from those of older voter groups", specifically when it comes to the use of social media. As shown in the introduction, influencers themselves also highlight this perceived gap between the political parties and a young audience that does not follow traditional news media. Both Lindgren and Dietz emphasise that they see their YouTube series as a way to reach and engage with young people who might not be interested in the upcoming election, or who find politics too complicated and complex to understand. Their involvement in politics is here legitimised through rationalisation, a strategy that focuses on the goals and uses of social actions (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022; van Leeuwen, 2007). The influencers describe their interviews with party leaders as "a gateway to politics" or "a transport route for young people" intended to lead them into more initiated and knowledge-based political participation:

> Margaux Dietz herself describes "Partitempen" as "simple politics", a concept that should arouse an initial interest among younger voters (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 18 April).

The aim is said to be "to simplify and explain politics to first-time voters" (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 2022, 30 May) and to give "as concrete answers as possible" (*Expressen*, 2022, 31 March) when it comes to how the different parties want to tackle issues that engage young voters. Lindgren focuses on climate change, gender equal-

ity, and mental health, issues that are ranked high among young people, as well as animal rights, which is one of her own interests. The politics that the series is meant to introduce and explain is thus not specifically situated on the political left-right spectrum, but rather is characteristic of what is often referred to as identity and lifestyle politics (Bernstein, 2005; De Moor, 2017). Comments show that this approach is appreciated by followers: a first-time voter thanks her for the "educational and simple series" that gives "a better understanding" of what the different parties stand for.

Dietz's series *Partitempen*, on the other hand, focuses on the self-presentation of politicians, so that a younger audience can "get to know them as individuals" (*Dagens Industri*, 2022, 27 May). This motivation is very much in line with the increased personalisation of politics, where the personality and self-brand of individual politicians and party leaders takes precedence over party politics and ideology (McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020; Russmann et al., 2019). When looking at the comments on the videos, it seems that this idea also hits home with viewers, who appreciate the personal performance of specific politicians.

It is not just the influencers and their followers who see the perceived lack of political interest and knowledge of young people as something that needs to be addressed through new strategies. A media researcher who comments on the influencers' YouTube series has also suggested that there is a need for more engaging political communication. She argues that Swedish politicians were already participating in different forms of "infotainment" and light-hearted interviews back in the 1960s, and that this serves a different purpose than watching a more serious party leader speaking on TV (*AlingsåsKuriren*, 2022, 18 May). Similar views are expressed by a former political strategist who is featured as an expert in the previously mentioned *Dagens Industri* article. He states that initiatives such as *Therése and the Election* and *Partitempen* should be seen as a complement to more conventional political information and "qualitative journalism", and that they might "actually add something to democracy". Drawing on the work of Gieryn (1983), these views can be seen as examples of *expansion-based boundary strategies*, whereby the function of influencers is extended into the "twilight zone" of political communication and information (Maares & Hanusch, 2018).

## 3.2 A threat to democracy (and to journalism)

Many journalists, on the other hand, take a different stance when it comes to the YouTube series' impact on democracy, and to influencers' interference in the political sphere. The interview series are described in several articles as "nonsense", "trivial", and "meaningless". Some critics claim that they are too cheerful and

"silly", while others describe them as too boring, strange, and "above all unnecessary". These derogatory accounts are very much in line with how influencers' work and characteristics have been systematically downgraded in the news media before (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022; Nilsson, 2021), and often legitimised through moral evaluation, where influencers fail to live up to either the value systems of journalism or democratic ideals (van Leeuwen, 2007).

Rather than simplifying politics, making it more accessible and interesting, initiatives such as *Partitempen* are characterised as making a mockery of its imagined audience: "the arrangement suggests underestimation, if not contempt, for the intelligence of young people" (*Expressen*, 2022, 13 April). The interviews are not described as entertaining, but rather as something that journalists have to "suffer through" in order to comment on them. Similar criticism is also expressed by actors in the influencer industry; Camilla Gervide, editor of *Bloggbevakning*, is reported to have called the Dietz series "silly and patronising" when she talked about it in a podcast.

The YouTube series are also characterised as being a threat to democracy, since Lindgren and Dietz are too "uncritical" and unable to demand answers from politicians. These are examples of *expulsion-based strategies* (Gieryn, 1983), whereby journalists deem influencers unfit to do the kind of work that they are undertaking (e. g. Carlson, 2015; Cheng & Chew, 2022). The fact that influencers engage in politics in this way, and lend their channels to politicians who prefer "soft chats" rather than critical interviews, is "problematic" and puts the spotlight on the wrong issues:

> But something will go wrong in the election results if questions and answers about, for example, the politicians' favourite dish are to define which party one votes for, as it is ultimately completely irrelevant to us and what our elected officials are appointed to work with (*Norran*, 2022, 19 July).

Statements such as the one above can be compared with lifestyle journalists, who assert boundaries by claiming that influencers only give the audience what they want, rather than what they need (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022). Similarly to how advertisers might circumvent journalism and go directly to influencers (Cheng & Chew, 2022), politicians might choose "familiar conversations" where there are "no follow-up questions, no accountability, not even entertainment" (*Aftonbladet*, 2022, 16 April).

This reasoning exemplifies a third boundary-making strategy, *protection of autonomy*, which is a defence mechanism to shield a profession or social field from outside influence (Gieryn, 1983; Carlson, 2015). The independence of journalism is perceived as being threatened, and therefore journalists are characterised as

the ones with the knowledge and competence to ask "uncomfortable" and "critical" questions, specific skills that influencers allegedly do not possess. Professional values, such as objectivity and keeping a distance from those in power (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022), are also invoked; influencers are seen as too close to the politicians, too intimate and friendly, because they might "go to a party" together immediately after the interview. This is specifically highlighted when it comes to Margaux Dietz, who is a close friend of the leader of the Christian Democrats.

# 4 The political roles of influencers

As shown above, discussions about influencers' function in the democratic process also evoke different stances on their professional role in relation to politics. In this section, these contradictions are explored further by analysing how influencers themselves emphasise specific role perceptions, such as giving advice, educating, or acting as life coaches (Maares & Hanusch, 2018), in relation to their political content. The analysis covers three different, but sometimes overlapping, roles taken on by influencers: the impartial guide, the subjective storyteller, and the branded "polfluencer".

## 4.1 The impartial guide

Some influencers engage in expansion-based boundary strategies when they talk about their role in politics. Margaux Dietz, for example, is said to be tired of being "just an influencer" (*Expressen*, 2022, 13 April), and Therése Lindgren states that "it is fun to be able to push the boundaries of what an influencer really is" (*Expressen*, 2022, 31 March) through her pre-election interviews with politicians. Still, both of these influencers position themselves as impartial guides for their followers, and they mirror professional journalistic ideals of objectivity when they talk about their own societal role (cf. Maares & Hanusch, 2018, p. 271). Lindgren says that she wants to "help spread information and let my channels be an extended arm", rather than sharing her own opinions. Similarly, Dietz states that the important thing for her is to influence people to use their right to vote, not to tell her followers which party she will vote for. Thus, their role perception focuses on educating and providing orientation (Maares & Hanusch, 2018, p. 272) when it comes to the political system and the different parties. It can be seen that this resonates with social media users in the comments section of *Bloggbevakning*, where statements such as "the only thing so-called influencers should tell people is to go and vote – not for what or whom" recur frequently.

However, both influencers also emphasise that they are not trying to do journalism. Dietz says that it is precisely because she is *not* a journalist that she can ask politicians "questions that they are not used to" and that the informal format of the interviews forces them to "answer briefly and so that people understand" (*Blekinge Läns Tidning*, 2022, 25 February). This form of boundary work evokes specific skills and characteristics of influencers that protects the autonomy of the profession in relation to journalists, rather than the other way around. Influencers are also characterised by public relations (PR) experts and party officials as "skilled communicators" with the ability to "arouse interest" among their many followers. Less formal skills, such as personal experiences, might also give influencers credibility, specifically in the eyes of followers. A comment on *Bloggbevakning*, for example, argues that a traumatic childbirth might mean that a particular influencer "knows what she is talking about" when it comes to the impact of regional politics on maternity care.

## 4.2 The subjective storyteller

Other influencers, however, take a different stance and claim another role for themselves. In March 2022, the influencer Clara Lidström published a blog post in which, prompted by a follower's question, she reflects upon why she has turned down requests to interview politicians in the past, and will continue to do so in the future. She states that the election, and holding politicians accountable, is "too important for [her] as an influencer to handle":

> During an election year, the questions [posed] to politicians are extremely important so that we who vote can get a better grasp of politics. How would I avoid being deceived by a professional politician? And how could I avoid becoming a useful idiot who only goes about the politician's business?

Rather than characterising herself in the situation of a guide or facilitator, Lidström uses a derogatory term ("a useful idiot"), which indicates a loss of control and competence. She received approval from followers, who commented that they appreciate her decision, that she is "sensible", "wise", and "conscious of her own limitations". These expulsion-based strategies draw a boundary between her and other influencers, who are characterised as less "insightful". Distancing herself from election campaigning does not, however, mean distancing herself from being political. Lidström ends her blogpost by saying that she will write about the election on her blog – "soon even!" – indicating that politics is not banned from her platforms, only politicians. She is supported by Sandra Beijer, anoth-

er long-time blogger, who comments that influencers' "USP" – their unique selling point – when it comes to politics is the ability to engage in "subjective storytelling" based on their own political convictions, rather than letting opposing political actors use their platforms for campaigning.

Lidström and Beijer thus stress specific skills and competences to protect the autonomy of influencers against the threat of less competent colleagues, as well as "media-trained" politicians and PR professionals; revealing your authentic self and telling an engaging story, instead of acting as an intermediary for other people's opinions. Instead of objectivity and neutrality, these influencers highlight subjectivity as an ideal, a role perception that focuses on service and advice as well as depicting a specific lifestyle (Maares & Hanusch, 2018), whereby they incorporate certain values and practices into a desirable lifestyle and persona.

## 4.3 The branded "polfluencer"

It is, thus, not unusual for Swedish influencers to talk about politics and election campaigns, or for them to seamlessly integrate certain issues or opinions into their own content. For some, politics is even a primary aspect of their self-branding strategies, as a way to monetise their content and following. An article in *Dagens Nyheter* addresses the increased presence of "polfluencers" on social media and the impact that they might have in the upcoming election. The term is attributed to Amilia Stapelfeldt, an influencer described as an "independent liberal" and "classic" influencer, who combines fashion, beauty, and health content with "hot political issues". In addition to role perceptions such as educating and giving advice, she also aims to entertain and inspire her followers to act in a specific way (Maares & Hanusch, 2018).

Stapelfeldt engages in intra-professional boundary work by stressing fundamental values such as transparency; she is "open and transparent" about what she thinks, in contrast to influencers such as Margaux Dietz. She also characterises her own content as more rooted in a personal interest since she "talked about politics before the election and will continue to do so after", rather than "because it is entertaining and relevant for [her] audience right now". This reference to a long-term commitment highlights authenticity as a professional ideal; that being "true to oneself" rather than to what is popular is an inherent part of what it means to be an influencer (Wellman et al., 2020). Interestingly, though, she also alludes to the fact that political content can be *profitable:*

> I was an influencer when I started with political content, but I noticed that the more social political material I created, the more engaged the followers became, says Amilia Stapelfeldt (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 20 July).

Engagement in terms of followers, likes, comments, and re-posts is hard currency in the attention economy of social media, where influencers need to create content that resonates with the interests and values of audiences on different platforms (Duffy et al., 2021). Branding oneself a "polfluencer" is therefore not just a way to make an impact in the political sphere, but also something that might lead to more exposure and a bigger audience, which means larger sums for advertising deals and brand collaborations. The fact that a prominent publication such as *Dagens Nyheter* uncritically uses a term that Stapelfeldt has coined for herself is therefore notable, since the article becomes part of the influencer's own brand management.

The article also exemplifies the elasticity of the term "influencer", because the journalist includes a range of actors who use social media to influence public opinion in the definition. For some, being called an influencer is not controversial or incorrect. A police officer interviewed in the article does not mind. He does, however, claim that all influencers are polfluencers to some extent, since "everything is political today" – an extension strategy that blurs the borders between personal and political spheres. In contrast, a medical doctor engaged in public debate about healthcare publicly renounced the term "polfluencer" and criticised the article on X (formerly Twitter):

> Influencers are private, personal, they sell crap with their looks, their personality and their lifestyle. This is so far from what I want to achieve with this account. I want to highlight how healthcare policy affects patients. It is NOT about me. (But sometimes it's about medicine.)

This statement can be seen a self-expulsion strategy, whereby this MD actively distances herself from any association with influencers, and simultaneously uses a derogatory discourse to position them outside the boundaries of legitimate political engagement. Influencers "sell crap" as well as themselves, a characterisation that draws a boundary between politics and commercialism, and alludes to the image of influencers as immoral imposters who would act as "advertising pillars" for anyone or anything that pays them (Nilsson, 2021, p. 52).

# 5 The power and powerlessness of influencers

A third contradiction in the media discourse involves different stances in relation to the political power and responsibility of influencers. On the one hand, influenc-

ers are held up as important media actors with the power to persuade the public; on the other, they are perceived as cultural "projections" controlled by political PR experts and advertisers, and thus as powerless intermediaries for the societal elite.

## 5.1 Powerhouses of the new era

Several articles present influencers in general, or specific actors such as Dietz and Lindgren in particular, as "the new holders of power" on social media. This framing is often based on reports suggesting that, to a large extent, young people get their political information from social media, as well as specific influencers' positions on lists such as *Maktbarometern*, an annual report that "maps the most powerful Swedes on our most popular digital channels" (Medieakademin, 2023). Power is here equivalent to factors that are measurable and comparable, such as reach, engagement, and profits:

> They are the powerhouses of the new era who make millions from their social media channels with hundreds of thousands of followers (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 18 April).

From this stance, it can be seen that a large audience, or "wide reach", is the foundation of influencers' perceived power, and a way to legitimise them as political actors through the "numbers game" of theoretical rationality (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022, p. 4). Power is also associated with responsibility, however – not least by the influencers themselves. Lindgren, for example, states that she has a responsibility to lend her platform to politicians because her audience has an interest in social issues, an expansion-based strategy that includes certain actors and practices in her professional field. Lidström, on the other hand, takes responsibility by "coming to her senses" and *not* getting involved with politicians and party campaigns, thus engaging in expulsion-based boundary work.

While these influencers acknowledge responsibility in different ways, the media debate also involves those who see influencers as clueless, or even in denial, about their own power. One editorial suggests that "influencers do not understand that they are public figures who will be scrutinised just like other people in power" (*Borås Tidning*, 2022, 23 September) and that the characteristic mix of private and public content means that influencers have been "spared from serious scrutiny" because the "established media" has not kept up with developments. Others, however, point out that influencers seem to be very aware of their power and how to use it. Getting politicians to make an appearance on your platform might be a "power demonstration" in order to be taken seriously by other actors, according to a researcher interviewed in *Dagens Industri* (2022, 27 May). One journalist spe-

cialising in the Swedish influencer industry says that the impact of "polfluencers" might be problematic, since they control their own platforms and can avoid critical questions, or situations where they might be contradicted by others (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 20 July).

The power of influencers is also characterised as problematic, or even potentially harmful, for journalists who are trying to do their job, a form of boundary work that focuses on protecting the autonomy of journalism. A column in *Göteborgs-Posten* (2022, 1 May) claims that "influencers are a threat to independent journalism", and the writer shares how influencers have become a "work environment problem" for her and her colleagues. Influencers try to control how they are represented in the media by creating "drama", and "use their platforms to silence critics" by turning their followers against journalists who publish unfavourable stories about them. This development is characterised as problematic in a political context as well, since "politicians who behave like influencers" also use the power of a mass following on social media to harass and silence journalists. Potentially, the writer says, this could mean that journalists avoid addressing certain issues, or writing about certain actors, for fear of repression.

## 5.2 Glamourous corporate mascots

In other articles, the idea of influencers as powerful actors with the capacity to persuade or threaten others is instead challenged. While claiming that political content might be a way for influencers to cement their position as important media personalities, the above-mentioned researcher also states that "we attribute more power to them than they actually have" and that "social media and the real world are in many ways parallel worlds" (*Dagens Industri*, 2022, 27 May). She, and other researchers and PR experts who are interviewed in different articles, instead highlight the benefits for politicians. A columnist in *Göteborgs-Posten* (2022, 30 May) writes that "regardless of whether the interviewer is biased or not, it is the politicians who benefit from appearing on our influencers' channels, not the other way around". Similar ideas are expressed by some influencers themselves, for example, the previously discussed Clara Lidström, who saw the approaches from politicians as a way to dupe her into something over which she would have no control, rather than as an example of her own power. From this perspective, influencers are an asset to be "managed and enticed" by politicians who wish to win elections in the future (*Ystads Allehanda*, 2022, 10 October).

Two articles take this stance very firmly, and question whether influencers really should be considered powerful and held accountable by their followers, the media, or themselves, at all. In a column published in *Aftonbladet* (2022, 9 No-

vember), two months after the election, the writer suggests that influencers are only "a projection" of the new conservative government's politics. In line with Nilsson (2021), they are understood here as "ghosts" who embody values and practices that people dislike, rather than being the actual root of the problem. In a similar column earlier that year, another critic states that "exposure and influence are not the same thing" and proceeds to criticise journalists and newspapers who highlight the need to scrutinise influencers and the industry they work in:

> To "investigate" the influencers, who are really just more glamourous corporate mascots in the style of Ronald McDonald or the Michelin Man, as "power holders" is to shoot the messenger in an almost comically literal way (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2022, 12 July).

The use of quotation marks in the extract above indicates sarcasm, and that the writer is questioning both the professionalism of other journalists and the positioning of influencers as central actors in political communication. Using the term "comically" also indicates that the ambition of other journalists is laughable and not something to be taken seriously, an expulsion-based strategy that positions them outside of serious journalism. Instead, this writer argues, the real power is held by those who pay influencers, not the influencers themselves. This stance is legitimised through personal authorisation (van Leeuwen, 2007), and references to "expert" knowledge provided by an academic doing research on the media representations (or lack thereof) of the extremely rich. Power is here defined by the ability to stay out of the spotlight, rather than be at the centre of it, and consequently avoid scrutiny, recognition, and accountability. The new obsession with the power of influencers thus only strengthens the social structures upon which the real (economic) power-holders thrive. This argumentation also alludes to underlying conflicts between "soft" lifestyle journalism and "hard news" genres (Cheng & Chew, 2022; Perreault & Hanusch, 2022), although in this case the journalists who investigate influencers are characterised as being too serious about something that is trivial, rather than the other way around.

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the discursive construction of political influencers in Swedish print news and social media before and after the general election in 2022. It shows how the stance-taking and boundary work performed by different actors construct the political function, role, and power of influencers in sometimes contradictory ways. First of all, influencers are described as both a promise and a threat to political interest and participation, specifically for young people.

The "reach" of influencers is seen, for example, as a defining feature of their relevance, although it is perceived differently depending on stance and context. When it comes to political function, their large following makes them potential saviours of democracy, individuals who can engage and inspire audiences to take an interest in politics. When it comes to power, the same persuasive potential makes them a menace to society, since they either do not recognise their own power or use it in a harmful way.

Secondly, contradictions are also visible among influencers themselves, with some adopting journalistic ideals of objectivity at the same time as asserting that their political content has other functions and benefits than journalism. This creates a paradoxical role, whereby influencers simultaneously fail to live up to the standards of "serious" journalism, or to the perceived standards of influencers' authentic and subjective storytelling. Influencers who expand the boundaries of their profession in this way need to manage tensions between what is seen as their strength – their ability to produce engaging content grounded in their personal lives and values (Maares & Hanusch, 2018) – and what are perceived to be successful standards within the field of political reporting. For others, the orientation towards objectivity is perceived as a loss of value similar to that of standardising content for commercial purposes (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021), and expectations of neutrality are seen as incompatible with what being an influencer means. These tensions between role perceptions show that "influencing", just like journalism, is a cultural practice that is constantly shifting and shaped by its context, and by how different actors struggle to define what is deemed "inside" and "outside" of its boundaries. As Carlson (2015) points out, these symbolic struggles are not without material rewards, since the position as a "legitimate" political actor might result in increased profits in terms of both social and economic capital.

A third point worth highlighting is therefore the commercial nature of influencers, and the underlying tensions that this creates in relation to their political function, role, and power. As one of the experts in the material notes, political "infotainment" is not a new phenomenon. Swedish politicians – in line with general trends in political communication – have been featured in light-hearted interviews as well as programmes aimed at a young audience for decades. It seems, however, that the commercial core of the influencer profession creates specific tensions in a political context, for critics as well as for the influencers themselves. While lifestyle journalists might see influencers as peripheral actors in their field (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022), most critics in this chapter place them unequivocally outside of "quality" journalism, which is perceived as having a specific democratic significance. The way in which influencers package, or commodify, politics is a matter of concern from this perspective, since it risks reducing important matters to what is "sellable" in the entertainment industry. There is also the underlying sus-

picion that influencers are always "for sale" (Nilsson, 2021, p. 52), and therefore will promote whatever politics they are paid to endorse. To manage this, some influencers try to adhere to ideals of neutrality, while others emphasise the authenticity of their political content as being "true to themselves" and their own values. At the same time, it is precisely this promotional aspect that makes them politically irrelevant for some, since they themselves are entangled in dependence upon commercial partners and platforms.

This chapter has focused on the stance-taking and boundary work of, predominantly, journalists and influencers in the beauty and lifestyle genre. Future research could build on this work, specifically when it comes to the self-professionalisation of influencers, and how the symbolic struggles over boundaries also lead to material benefits (or losses). The proposed categorisation of political role perceptions could also be applied in other genres and national contexts in order to further develop our understanding of how political and cultural conditions impact upon the professionalisation and politicisation of influencers. Although beyond the scope of this analysis, the image and role of politicians in this context is also something that would be of interest for future studies – it is not just the field of influencers that expands into politics; the promotional practices and characteristics of politicians also increasingly overlap with the field of social media influencers.

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