Expert Report Syndicate 11: News influencers and journalism education: Rethinking ethics and pedagogy

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About one in five U.S. adults—and more than a third of those under 30—now get their news from social media influencers (Pew Research Center, 2024), transforming how civic information is produced, distributed, and consumed.

The term "news influencer" encompasses independent journalists, political commentators, and entertainers. This ambiguity reflects the fluid boundaries of journalistic authority and the evolving media landscape (Carlson, 2015).

Hurcombe (2024) describes "newsfluencers" as platform-native creators who blend influencer culture with journalistic practices—combining personal branding, audience engagement, and participatory storytelling. Pew (2024) defines news influencers as individuals with at least 100,000 social media followers who frequently post about current events, politics, and public issues. Most lack formal journalism training (77%); the majority are male (63%) and conservative.

Social platforms collapse distinctions between personal and professional identity (Papacharissi, 2011). Hurcombe (2024) describes the reality of "platformatised journalism," showing how social media's economic and algorithmic demands shape influencer behavior, emphasizing engagement and self-promotion over traditional journalistic norms.

For example, Miller and Maddox (2025) find that broadcast journalists on TikTok blend self-promotion with curated authenticity, often using behind-the-scenes and humorous content. Platform incentives reward visibility and emotional resonance—pressures that blur traditional ethical boundaries and encourage journalists to operate as entrepreneurs and entertainers (Editor and Publisher, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024).

Singer (2010) and Lewis (2012) show how digital disruption has forced journalists to renegotiate authority through transparency and engagement rather than institutional affiliation. Ouvrein et al. (2021) argue that identification and emotional connection often outweigh expertise in conferring credibility. As a result, influencers with little training can build authority through perceived relatability, often at the expense of journalists embedded at traditional outlets.

Recent examples underscore these tensions. Matt Taibbi's "Twitter Files" raised questions about selective disclosure and transparency (Bond, 2020). Ben Shapiro's Daily Wire merges ideological messaging with news packaging and merchandising, showing how attention can be monetized while shaping discourse (Parks, 2021). Political operatives and journalists increasingly occupy the same social spaces, complicating distinctions between advocacy and reporting (Flamino et al., 2023). Even legacy institutions like NPR are adapting. In 2021, NPR revised its ethics code to permit journalists to participate in human rights and climate justice demonstrations, reflecting shifting expectations around neutrality and identity (Montgomery, 2021).

Journalism education traditionally involves degrees in journalism or communications, internships, and training in verification and multimedia storytelling. Influencers follow less structured paths, building careers through personal branding, platform literacy, and entrepreneurial skills. Both roles require content creation and audience engagement but differ in normative goals: journalists prioritize fairness and accuracy; influencers often emphasize promotion and monetization.

Some universities are bridging these tracks with courses that embed social influencer strategy and entrepreneurial thinking in their journalism or communications programs. These hybrids reflect growing awareness of overlapping skills in journalism and digital content creation. Now we must ensure that journalism remains central to this effort, even as we resist ceding the influencer space to non-journalists. As Feng (2023) calls for, we need forward-looking ethical frameworks as emerging technologies outpace traditional guidelines.

This syndicate aims to generate dialogue and recommendations on how to preserve journalism's core values while adapting to platformization and changing student expectations around voice and authenticity. What principles should we embrace in building

a journalism ethic that is "anticipatory, interdisciplinary, and responsive to the ambient pressures of real-time publishing and performative engagement"? (Feng, 2023, p. 225).

Key questions include:

- How do principles like accuracy, transparency, and independence apply in spaces driven by algorithms and branding?
- What kind of ethical framework can prepare students to make good decisions in a digital world shaped by algorithms and speed?
- What ethical responsibilities should govern influencers who regularly report on public affairs?
- How can journalism education serve students who see themselves more as creators than reporters?
- How can we "sell" the value of journalism programs to students when they mostly consume "news" from influencers and other social media content?
- What norms are we willing to adapt or change as journalists strive to compete with non-journalist influencers for audience attention?
- What elements of traditional ethics remain essential?
- How do global differences in press freedom affect the influencer-journalist dynamic?
- How can educators prepare students to inform the public beyond institutional structures?

The **central question** the members of this syndicate will discuss and answer is: *"How do we frame and deliver journalism education to make it vital in the era of content creation and news influencers while holding on to journalism's core ethic?"*

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