

BOOK REVIEW

Emily Hund. *The influencer industry: The quest for authenticity on social media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023, pp. 218. ISBN 978-0-691-23102-0

Nils S. Borchers, University of Tübingen, Institute of Media Studies, Germany
 nils.borchers@uni-tuebingen.de

The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media, written by American media researcher Emily Hund, takes the reader on a scouting expedition into the U. S. influencer industry. Hund is a well-established author in social media influencer research, where her works on gender dynamics in the influencer industry have been particularly notable (e. g., Duffy & Hund, 2015, 2019). These works look at social media influence from a creative industry's angle, and *The Influencer Industry* also stands in this lineage. Although the title does not make it clear, the book offers, first and foremost, a chronological history of the influencer industry in the United States. Beginning with the advent of political bloggers in the late 1990s, each chapter focuses on a specific period and the overarching developmental milestones Hund identifies as constituting the period. This way, Hund provides a much-needed historical perspective on the influencer industry. However, the book wants to be more than that – and it definitely is – in that it also reflects on how the influencer industry impacts contemporary forms of sociation. In particular, Hund explores how the industry has become a leading force in defining how we perceive authenticity as a central value of today's (Western) cultures. As Hund explains in the Introduction, "Authenticity is not just a social construction but an industrial one, continually tussled over by a sophisticated and complicated profit-making enterprise whose decisions about what expressions of reality are valuable help determine what types of content and tools for communication and self-expression are available to the world's billions of social media users" (p. 7).

Chapter 1, "Groundwork," provides, on the one hand, the conceptual foundation

for the following chapters, including Hund's definition of influencers as "people who earn income as independent workers providing 'authentically' curated content to carefully cultivated online audiences" (p. 29). On the other hand, this chapter also explores the beginnings of the influencer industry. Instructively, Hund identifies technological, cultural, economic, and industrial factors that led to the industry's emergence and thus offers a rare explanation of the rise of influencers from a macro perspective. A crucial factor for Hund, which she returns to throughout her book, is the economic crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession of the late 2000s, which forced (aspiring) media professionals to explore career paths in social media rather than in media houses. Here, Hund shares her story of being a frustrated intern at a New York fashion magazine who saw her dreams of making a career in the legacy media world dashed.

Chapter 2, "Setting the Terms for a Transactional Industry," covers the late 2000s. Hund puts the spotlight on the monetization of influence, which allows influencers to develop professional careers by embracing advertising money as a revenue source. This step changed influencers' take on authenticity, too. While influencers, according to Hund, wanted to be authentic, marketers were satisfied when influencer audiences perceived the produced content as authentic. This led to dissociating authenticity (which should be pursued) from accuracy (which could be neglected), which became a recipe for the functional approach to authenticity, for which the influencer industry is often criticized today.

In chapter 3, "Making Influence Efficient," Hund turns to the marketer side and explains how they professionalized their engagement with influencers in the early 2010s.



A large part of the chapter is devoted to campaign management processes (e.g., selecting and pricing influencers). Here, I feel that incorporating the rich literature in strategic communication research on these issues would have benefitted the book.

Chapter 4, “Revealing and Repositioning the Machinations of Influence,” identifies the late 2010s as the “era of increasing distrust” (p. 115) in the influencer industry as well as in social media in general. Hund draws the reader’s attention to three “events” she identifies as particularly incisive: the more rigid monitoring of advertising disclosures in sponsored influencer posts by the Federal Trade Commission, the infamous influencer-endorsed Fyre Festival, and the massive purchase of fake followers to inflate reach. The three events challenged the actors in the industry to rethink their routines and procedures. They motivated some noteworthy modifications in the industry’s DNA, which should “serve as a public repudiation of fakery and endorsement of disclosure” (p. 126). Particularly, marketers began to team up with nano, micro, child, and virtual influencers, who promised to deliver more (perceived) authentic content, establish long-term relationships with influencers to improve influencer selection, and use big data-driven evaluation methods to reduce fake follower fraud. Meanwhile, influencers started “sharing more ‘realness’” (p. 124) in an attempt to regain authenticity and they started building platform-independent infrastructures for their business to reduce dependency on the few big platform providers.

In chapter 5, “The Industry Becomes Boundaryless,” set in the early 2020s, Hund discusses the expansion of the influencer field. A first expansion movement concerns influencers’ engagement with topics that go beyond the endorsement of consumer goods. Hund interprets this expansion as an identity crisis, which many influencers were experiencing. Not wanting to further advance materialistic lifestyles, influencers turned to social and political causes. However, Hund also provides a critical reading of this development when highlighting influencers’ role in spreading conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic (while implicitly complaining that gatekeeping mechanisms to

filter out such content before it is published through social media do not exist). Another expansion movement involves marketers reaching out to ordinary social media users, that is users who do not enjoy a microcelebrity status, to obtain authenticity.

In the concluding chapter 6, “The Cost of Being Real,” Hund diagnoses that the influencer industry runs on an incentive system that is “profoundly borked” (p. 157). She devotes the subchapters to distinct actor groups and their failures, namely social media platforms (wield too much power!), influencers (fail to organize professionally!), marketers (merely seek efficiency!), and social media users (become too immersed with social media!). This overview does an excellent job of bringing together some of the main insights from the previous chapters, even though it paints a quite disillusioning picture of the industry. However, this evaluation does not come as a surprise, because rather than singing the praises of a creative industry that has gained economic and cultural impact at a breathtaking pace, Hund has kept a critical distance from her object of study throughout the book.

Encouragingly, Hund also presents remedies. These remedies uphold the chronological order of the book by pointing into the future – a future that could be brighter if only these remedies were pursued. In her closing appeal, Hund reminds us of the empowerment promise that the influencer industry makes: “The development of the industry enabled people to earn income, explore interests and facets of their identities that they might not have otherwise been able to, learn skills in creative production, and push for a more diverse representation across industries” (p. 171). A short note on the remedies: Some of the remedies sound compelling to me, such as putting more effort into building representations that express the collective interests of influencers. In some other cases, however, I felt that, to my liking, the remedies remained somewhat too abstract.

Regarding platform regulation, for example, I would have appreciated the argument being embedded in the rich literature on this topic, explicating what exactly it is that should be done from an influencer industry perspective (which is, to my know-

ledge, a perspective that is not yet visible in the current regulation debates). Regarding social media users, I feel somewhat unsatisfied with the general plea that they should “cultivate, as best as they can, a mindset of distance and utility” (p. 168). I think that a more thorough elaboration of the remedies could have enhanced the book’s impact.

In conclusion, *The Influencer Industry* succeeds in tracing the development of this new creative industry in a vivid and knowledgeable way. The book offers the first comprehensive history of the industry, thus closing a yawning gap in research on influencers in particular and the creative industries in general. True, this is the history of the influencer industry in the United States, and Hund rightly points out in the appendix that this history is not globally generalizable. However, even though the influencer industry is much less internationalized than, for instance, the film, music, or gaming industries, I think readers outside the U.S. would benefit from this book. First, from my Western European perspective, the basic lines of the industry’s development appear to correspond to the development in other countries, even if certain development periods may be dated slightly differently. Second, the book offers a compelling analysis of the current U.S. influencer industry, which is certainly valid also for the industry in many other (Western) countries. I especially enjoyed the analytical passages that popped out of the flow of historical descriptions throughout the chapters, in which Hund explains the influencer industry’s role in today’s culture. Having said this, I also feel that not everybody will ben-

efit equally from reading the book. Readers who are already familiar with the works on authenticity in contemporary digital culture (e.g., Heřmanová, Skey, & Thurnell-Read, 2022) and readers who already have a good understanding of the dynamics that govern the influencer industry (e.g., Duffy, 2017) might find that the book delivers new insights, yet possibly not at a punch rate that is high enough to justify taking the time to read the entire book. Readers, however, who are looking for a historical account of the influencer industry and those interested in an in-depth look at how the influencer industry works will find much to learn in this book.

References

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