Influencers could learn a thing or two from traditional journalism about disclosing who’s funding their political coverage

Edward Wasserman, Professor of Journalism, University of California, Berkeley

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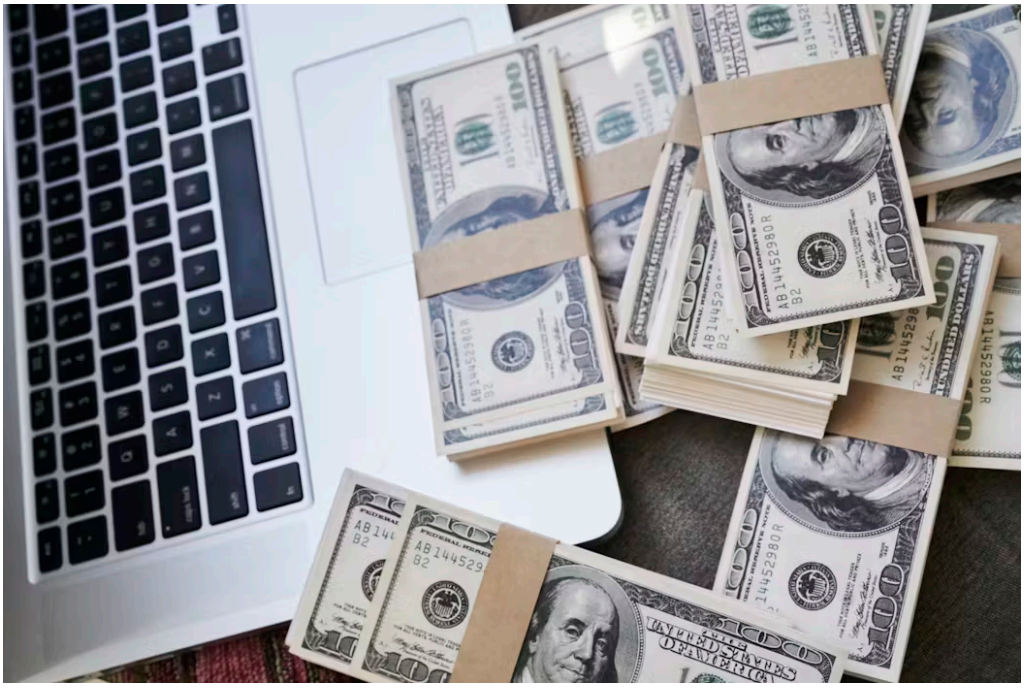

When influencers accept money and don't disclose it, then they're being influenced.
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Online influencers, through their postings on Instagram, Threads, TikTok and elsewhere, have created an exuberant universe of news and commentary that often outruns mainstream media in reach and even impact. They work the same waterfront as journalism and public relations, but their relationship with those mainstay practices built around fact and advocacy is an uneasy one.

And when it comes to the rules that are supposed to keep communicators honest, they have been slow to step up, as a raging controversy over undisclosed payments to freelance influencers shows.

For the past month, social media has been ablaze with postings about a provocative story alleging improper political influence among left-leaning online commentators. Headlined “A Dark Money Group is Secretly Funding High-Profile Democratic Influencers,” it ran in Wired, the San Francisco-based magazine that specializes in tech, and was written by Taylor Lorenz, a high-profile reporter who has built a stormy career of tech coverage for outlets including The Washington Post, The New York Times and The Atlantic.

The 3,600-word article focused on Chorus, described as a secretive arm of the Sixteen Thirty Fund, whose wide-ranging support for progressive causes totals more than US$100 million a year. Starting in spring 2025, Lorenz reported, Chorus quietly recruited and supported a coterie of liberal political influencers, with monthly stipends of anywhere from $250 to $8,000.

Just how tightly Chorus sought to control what the 90-some freelancers actually produce is somewhat unclear, and was sharply disputed in the reaction to the article.

But what is clear to me, as a journalist and student of media ethics, is that any creators who conceal financial support while weighing in on matters of interest to their funders are, by implication, falsely presenting themselves as independent voices. They are no less deceitful than the business journalist who covers a company they secretly invest in.

Furious response misses the point

The Wired story declared that the program supporting influencers, called the Chorus Creator Incubator Program, “was aimed at bolstering Democratic messaging on the internet.” Funded commentators got regular briefings with lawmakers and others, organized by Chorus, on newsworthy issues.

The paid influencers also allegedly agreed to forewarn Chorus about interviews with prominent sources, Lorenz wrote, saying “creators in the program must funnel all bookings with lawmakers and political leaders through Chorus. Creators also have to loop Chorus in on any independently organized engagements with government officials or political leaders.”

And, a big red flag for anyone concerned with ethical communications practices: Participating influencers were also prohibited from telling anybody about the money they were getting.

The Wired story plainly hit a nerve and triggered a spasm of angry postings on Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, YouTube, X, Facebook and other social media sites. But for all their passion, the comments brought to light the disheveled state of online ethics.

Ad hominem attacks predominated. Posts denounced Lorenz as a liar and a hypocrite who had no business exposing the program because she herself admittedly receives similar funding. Some said her real motive was sabotaging the left. Others praised the Chorus program as a valuable attempt to sharpen the skills of participants and enrich their reporting. Still others asserted that Chorus is not hands-on, never assigns or edits anybody's stories and is an overdue corrective that gives left-leaning influencers just the kind of support the political right has had for years.

Only rarely did the commentary touch on what should have been the white-hot core of the problem: The absence of a shared understanding of the basic responsibilities that online influencers have to the people they serve. Those responsibilities are no different from those of journalists or professional advocates – to come clean.

As Don Heider, head of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, told Lorenz with admirable clarity: "If the contract for getting money from a particular interest group says you can't disclose it, then it's pretty simple, you can't take the money." Or, said the influencer Overopinionatedbrit3 on TikTok: "If you are getting paid disclose or you are an influencer being influenced."

An obligation to disclose

The principle of disclosure is one that is widely accepted by professional communicators.

From their earliest iterations a century ago, journalism codes have recognized that conflict of interest is perhaps the most toxic threat to the credibility of reporters and the trust they seek from audiences.

The Public Relations Society of America has based its efforts to professionalize advocacy in part on an insistence that practitioners not conceal support or withhold information about whose message they are conveying – prohibitions that, sadly, are not universally observed. One notorious breach was the use of on-air "military analysts" by CNN and other networks during the Iraqi invasion. They were typically former high-ranking officers now employed by arms contractors whose paychecks depended on cordial relations with the Pentagon, but who nevertheless proffered supposedly independent expert appraisals of the U.S. military campaign to CNN viewers. None of that was disclosed to the public.

Femi Redwood, who chairs the National Association of Black Journalists LGBTQ+ task force, was one of the few respondents among the flood of comments on the Wired story who zeroed in on the absence of online standards. Redwood defined the problem as “the intersection of news and influencing without the ethics of journalism,” and called for a code that would make the ethical obligations of influencers explicit.

The world of influencers is, admittedly, a bit of a Wild West. How universally ethical guidelines would be embraced and whether platforms might find the stomach to consider enforcement remain open – but pivotal – questions.

The lure of the high road

But the social media commentariat may be receptive.

Online practitioners have long claimed greater intellectual independence and cleaner hands than the legacy newspeople they challenge, who they say are trapped in the cobwebs of institutional bias and material thralldom. Much of their claim to the high road has rested on their greater candor – renamed transparency and hailed as the “new objectivity” – which calls for influencers to fess up about their predispositions and biases rather than go the traditional mainstream route and imply they have none. Secrecy over funding, plainly, is incompatible with such transparency.

Indeed, in the current moment, when colossal news organizations have been brought to heel by an administration in Washington that uses their owners’ financial ambitions to enforce ideological discipline, the influencers’ potential ability to claim moral superiority seems even stronger.

But the freelance model doesn’t ensure independence. It may only create a shifting roster of dependencies and allegiances that are wholly invisible to the audience being served and a potent source of corruption.

Disclosure is an imperfect remedy. But failing to adopt it as a minimum expectation leaves the robust online universe with a moral taint that is lethal to trust.

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