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*ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies*

## **Strategic Communicators as Online Influencers**

ESSACHESS –  
Journal for Communication Studies  
Volume 16 Issue 1(31), p. 205-231  
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<https://www.essachess.com/>  
DOI: 10.21409/essachess.1775-352x

Cite: KENT, M. L. (2023). Strategic Communicators as Online Influencers. *ESSACHESS*. <https://doi.org/10.21409/RCG3-BS49>

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**Abstract:** The use of “influencers” in strategic messaging, particularly as related to marketing and advertising, has become mainstream. Many public relations students and professionals now take for granted the use of influencers in strategic messaging, as something that is necessary and “part of the cost of doing business.” This article presents an alternative way of thinking about influencers, from a public relations standpoint, positing that communication professionals should become influencers themselves and positioning their organization itself as social influencers.

**Keywords:** engagement, influencer, Public Relations, relationship, social media, spokesperson

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*Communicateurs stratégiques en tant qu'influenceurs en ligne*

**Résumé:** L'utilisation des « influenceurs » dans la messagerie stratégique, en particulier en ce qui concerne le marketing et la publicité, est devenue courante. De nombreux étudiants et professionnels des relations publiques considèrent désormais l'utilisation des influenceurs dans la messagerie stratégique comme quelque chose de nécessaire et "faisant partie des coûts de l'activité". Cet article présente une alternative

Article received on May 15, 2022. Article accepted on January 5, 2023.  
Conflict of Interest: The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

à la façon de penser les influenceurs, du point de vue des relations publiques, en posant que les professionnels de la communication devraient devenir eux-mêmes des influenceurs et positionner leur organisation en tant qu'influenceurs sociaux.

**Mots-clés :** engagement, influenceur, relations publiques, relation, réseaux sociaux, porte-parole

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### **Introduction**

Throughout the evolution of modern public relations, professional communicators have been responsible for educating themselves about emergent technologies and useful innovations. Thomsen (1995), for example, a quarter century ago, was perhaps the first public relations scholar to talk about online databases, only a few years after the internet was launched in 1993, describing “how online database and information services are being used by corporate public relations professionals” (p. 103). Heath (1998) a few years later also wrote about databases as an “emerging technology.” Similarly, Kent (2001a, 2005) was the first public relations scholar to write about Google Scholar and search engine technologies. The list of various technological innovations such as Listservs, VOIP, cloud storage, networks, analytics, social media, etc. is long, and communication technologies have been central to the practice of public relations, journalism, marketing, and advertising, for at least two decades.

One recent practice that has been largely ignored, has been the emergence of social media influencers. Influencers are active social media users who have developed online reputations and large followings as experts in various niche areas, covering the whole gamut of human experience. Over the last decade influencers have emerged in every area. For example, there are influencers for baking, cosmetics, fashion, finance, fitness, lifestyles, medicine, technology, toys, and video games. But there are also tens of thousands of other influencers that cover every hobby or interest such as bookmaking, dog training, engineering, knife making, leather crafts, quilting, whisky, and woodturning. Basically, there are influencers for literally everything. And yet, communication professionals outsource the job of influencer, paying established influencers for promotional support, rather than embracing the possibility of becoming an influencer themselves. Although hypothetically, anyone could become an influencer, and an organization might support several people in this role, communication professionals already have the skills and capacity to become influencers on behalf of clients or themselves, rather than paying other people to promote our clients and organizations.

This article seeks to problematize how we think about technology as a communication professional. Toward that end, this article follows the long tradition of communication professionals informing and educating themselves and their colleagues about emerging technologies and social media innovations, and how to use the innovations on behalf of ourselves or our organizations/clients.

This article will touch on several key areas relevant to the future of strategic communication and public relations, and will be divided into four sections. First, a brief review of genre critique, the method guiding this study. Second, an overview of the role of the influencer and how the practice of influence has impacted the communication fields. Third, a discussion of the role of public relations professionals as organizational counsellors, relationship builders and spokespeople. And fourth, a discussion what goes into becoming an influencer, and what it can mean for an organization.

### **1. Methodology: Genre Criticism**

The article utilizes a critical/generic method whereby a distinct communicative practice (a genre) is examined and explored through environmental scanning, close reading of texts, and content analysis as a means of understanding a communicative practice and how a genre manifests itself (cf., Bostdorff, 1987; Kent, 1997). As Kent and Taylor (2007) explain,

In practice, generic theory was developed as a method for examining related areas of discourse: sermons, weddings, funerals, public apologies, inaugural addresses, etc. As Martin (1976) explains: “A rhetorical genre is produced by a recurrent, distinctive relationship among three elements, (1) occasion, (2) audience and (3) speaker-role, from which springs discourse necessarily displaying recurrent similarities in theme, style, tactics, and perhaps presentational elements.” (p. 247)

Each of the features mentioned by Martin (1976) are apparent among the genre of social media influencer. We see an occasion, an audience, and a role played out in consistent fashion.

The sections that follow unpack the generic features of occasion, audience, and influencer roles. The first issues to take up will be a discussion of the nature of the influencer, the occasion, and the audience.

### **2. Social Media Influencer**

An influencer is a marketing term coined to refer to individuals with personal social media followings greater than 200 followers (considered the floor), on one or more social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Vine, YouTube, Facebook, personal blogs, etc.). Some influencers only have a few hundred followers, while others have tens of millions of followers (or even a hundred million). Just as there are different types of bloggers (Kent, 2008), there are different types of influencers. As Influencer Marketing Hub, an online content and media company headquartered in Copenhagen suggests, there are various types of influencers: Nano, Micro, Macro, and Mega, or celebrity influencers (categories are based on the number of followers,

from thousands to millions), as well as gamers, bloggers/vloggers, sports and fitness, travel, photographers, beauty, fashion, parenting, and others (12 [Types of Influencers...](#)).

However, being “influential” does not have to be tied to marketing or advertising; there are influencers who eschew marketing and advertising. For example, “AVE” (ArduinoVersusEvil), a Canadian Engineer who has run a successful YouTube site for more than a decade, writes in his description: “This channel has awesome Patrons [from the Patreon site where patrons support creative people]. We have no need, nor any inclination to do corpo skill vids. If you are thinking you'd like me to review your fantastic new banana peeler, I invite you to please fuck off” ([www.youtube.com/@ave3989/about](http://www.youtube.com/@ave3989/about)).

There are millions of influencers worldwide who did not set off to become “influencers” but simply had a love of something they wanted to share. Probably most “influencers” (i.e., those who acquired influence as they became more famous, vs. those who consciously position themselves as influence marketers and exploit their status primarily for economic gain) (Read, 2023) started out with just having a love for something. As Moliere once crassly said of writing: “Writing is like prostitution: first you do it for the love of it, then you do it for a few friends, and finally you do it for money” ([GoodReads.com](http://GoodReads.com)). In many ways, this has been the path of evolution for social media influencers. First they do it for the love of something; then they do it for a few people; and then they do it for money, or try and grow their influence.

For more than a decade, the concept of social media influencer has been well established (Archer, 2019; Gillin, 2008; <https://izea.com/history-influencer-marketing>). Indeed, product reviews and the now ubiquitous “unboxing video” where a social media personality literally asks their viewers to watch them open a package, and then describe their first impressions as they examine the tool/product/item, have been around for more than a decade (Kelly, 2014). The rationale for “influencer” reviews and endorsements is guided by elaboration likelihood theory (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997), diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995), persuasion and demonstration (Aristotle, 1991; Cooper & Nothstine, 1992), and is designed to increase trust and liking of the influencer among the audience members, and encourage people to buy products or take action, in the case of sponsored content, etc.

### *2.1. Influencer Prevalence*

To understand both the significance of influencers and the viability of becoming an influencer, let us consider the numbers. Statista claims that there are 106-thousand global TikTok influencers ([www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)...) and 65-thousand US influencers ([starnage.com](http://starnage.com)...) Instagram is said to have more than 300-thousand influencers ([thesmallbusinessblog.net](http://thesmallbusinessblog.net)) and more than a 1.3 billion active users—roughly one influencer in 1,600. Similarly, on YouTube, an influencer needs to obtain about 4,000

watch hours in the previous 12 months and 1,000 subscribers, which equates to about six million potential influencers; while Facebook influencers have between one-thousand and several million subscribers. With 2.9 billion active users, Facebook has hundreds of thousands to millions of influencers.

Given the overlap of influencers on multiple sites, there is no reliable way to estimate exactly how many different global influencers there actually are, but based on the numbers above, one person in 500–700 people is probably the range in countries with reliable internet services. Globally, the number of influencers is probably 4–7 million. Still these numbers are conservative when you consider that Rogers (1983), in Diffusion of Innovations theory, suggested that innovators represent the first 2.5% of the individuals in a system to adopt an innovation (p. 246) and are seen as influential in getting other people to try new products or ideas.

On the one hand, influencers are mainstream. If one in every 500–700 people is an influencer, and the average Facebook user, for example, has a mean number of 200 friends, then about every other Facebook user follows at least one influencer, and the average person knows at least 100 people who follow influencers themselves. However, on the other hand, the propensity to follow an influencer varies by demographic background and age. Younger people are probably more likely to follow influencers and follow more influencers than older social media users.

As noted above, there are also many types of influencers, ranging from celebrities, athletes, and politicians, to self-made influencers who started out obscure nobodies and evolved into influential social media personalities. On the celebrity side, Cristiano Ronaldo (a Portuguese footballer), for example, is the 2nd most famous Instagram influencer with 125-million followers, but few people outside sports probably follow him. Similarly, on the self-made influencer side, VanossGaming, run by Evan Fong, a Canadian internet personality, video game commentator, music producer, and DJ, has 25.8 million followers, while PewDiePie, aka Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, a Swedish YouTuber known for his Let's Play videos, has 111 million subscribers. MrBeast is currently the biggest YouTube influencer in the world with 116 million subscribers.

Like all influencers, however, even someone with 100-million subscribers will only appeal to people interested in the area they contribute to. Exceptions include politicians (Bernie Sanders, Former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor Gretchen Whitmer), for example, who might have followers from an assortment of political backgrounds and constituent interests, as well as celebrities (Jack Black, Ryan Reynolds, Tia Mowry), musicians (Die Antwoord, Justin Beber, Pink Floyd), and others, who might have wider followings. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of influencers is ubiquitous and plays a role in billions of people's lives around the world.

## 2.2. Normalizing Influence

The activities of influencers are well known to most young people with internet access. According to Townsend (2019), 86 per cent of young people (ages 13–38) dream of becoming influencers, and 12 per cent (substantially more than the 0.14–0.2 per cent who actually are) already consider themselves to be influencers.

Although only anecdotal data exists regarding the perception of influencer value to campaign planning, over the last 5–10 years, as public relations and communication students plan campaigns and develop strategic ideas for class assignments, they often suggest hiring influencers to help reach key publics. The problem with this approach is that public relations budgets are typically a fraction of what marketing/sales budgets are, so very few public relations initiatives involve much money (or any) for advertising spending. Most students probably do not fully understand budgeting by the time that they graduate, and really do not understand what strategies and tactics cost or what communication professionals actually do on a daily basis. The details of budgeting, billing, and other financial concepts are often learned on the job in many fields.

On the management side, organizational engagement is often reified as simply a marketing and advertising strategy of likes and clicks (...social-media-statistics...), rather than a public relations activity of long-term relationship building and trust. As Hootsuite, an influential social media marketing firm explains, “Social media engagement is the measurement of comments, likes, and shares” ([hootsuite.com/social-media-engagement](https://hootsuite.com/social-media-engagement)). Engagement as clicks and likes is a standard marketing and advertising approach to determining “success” (i.e., increased customer attention), outside of actual sales.

In public relations and professional communication, the approach taken to thinking about engagement and organizational influence is not sales or revenue but building trust and relationships, solving problems and managing issues, and organizational counselling (cf. Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014). In public relations, the goal of strategic communication is not influence or sales, but facilitating stronger and more positive relationships (Kent, Sommerfeldt, & Saffer, 2016).

Positioning organizational communicators as social media influencers is not meant to help sell more products, but as a strategy to understand stakeholders and publics, research organizational issues, prepare for possible crises, manage potential issues, counsel senior managers about effective communication, etc. Public relations serves a distinct organizational function apart from brand management, marketing, and sales. Public relations professionals “*co-create meaning and shape reality via an interactive research and communication process conducted for the mutual benefit of individuals, groups, organizations, and the stakeholders and publics with whom they have social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and communicative relationships*” (Kent & Li, 2020, p. 6, authors’ emphasis).



For communication professionals and organizational spokespeople, an important goal might be to actually become influencers themselves, rather than paying others to transmit organizational messages and ideology on their behalf. Additionally, in the case of activists and non-profit organizations with more limited budgets than for-profit organizations, taking advantage of the opportunity to “partner” with an influencer over an issue of public health or social concern might be a way to reach millions of people for a fraction of the cost of using mainstream media or existing social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, etc.

### *2.3. Examples of the Rapid Ascension of Influencers*

Examples abound of the rapid emergence of various YouTube and blog celebrities becoming influencers and partnering with various organizations to cross promote each other. For example, Alec Steele, a blacksmith who created videos on shop safety and partnered with health professionals, went from zero subscribers at 17 years old, to more than 500-thousand subscribers in only three years. Now, Steele has 2.43 million subscribers after only nine years, and earns more than \$150 thousand a year just from YouTube views. Makers on YouTube often monetise their channels based on viewership and subscriptions (e.g., the use of [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) as a means of obtaining paying supporters), which is where the idea of “professional” influencers came from. However, the relationship building and access to communities of interest is what is perhaps more interesting for communication and public relations professionals.

An obvious move for public relations professionals is to become influencers on behalf of their own organization or industries (or themselves), rather than relying on paid outsiders, and to create genuine relationships based on mutual support and concern for others, rather than marketing or advertising initiatives. Additionally, the creation of an online persona also opens the opportunity for collaborating with other professionals and professional colleagues, and addressing important organizational and social issues.

### *2.4. Communities of Interest*

The field of public relations is increasingly concerned with how to use social media for strategic organizational purposes. Professional communicators working in an assortment of disciplines and areas have been enamoured with the possibilities inherent in social media and the internet for decades (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Kent, 2001b; Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, & Bronner, 2018). However, outside of public relations, most professional communicators have focused their attention on the many obvious, and simplistic, “controlled” messaging possibilities inherent in social media such as on Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.

Eschewing the risks and possibilities that exist with genuine engagement and interaction (being open to the encounter with strange otherness, coorientation, dialogue, parasocial attraction, self-persuasion, etc.), engagement offers many possibilities and

benefits, such as actually interacting with people in a formal, “higher level,” face-to-face sense of the term (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). Genuine engagement includes recognizing the “social embeddedness of self and others, social awareness and civic (greater good) indicators, acknowledgment of others (diversity/empowerment), recognition of diverse perspectives, [the generation of] social capital” (p. 7), etc. “Genuine engagement” or what might be called “public relations engagement” for the many articles on the topic calling for deeper engagement and dialogic communication (Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Lane & Kent, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014), is quite different than the social media engagement of marketing and advertising, focused on sales, likes, and clicks. Public relations engagement is about understanding, co-creation, trust, empathy, sympathy, etc., rather than on manipulation, persuasion, control, and sales/profits.

Social media, by design, have evolved around public participation and collaboration. Although the use of one-way social media sites such as Instagram and Pinterest are popular in marketing and advertising circles, one-way messaging does not capture the relational nature and communities of interest found on interactive social media that sites such as YouTube and vlogs do. YouTube and similar sites are characterized by a community of “followers” who have a genuine interest in the same things and often share similar world views.

Following a celebrity or politician, for example, is different than following a knife-maker, woodturner, or quilter. The followers of US Senator Bernie Sanders, for example, are interested in an assortment of political issues that he champions, as well as what his party might be doing, what the “enemy” is doing, in the case of republicans, etc. Whereas, the followers of Lyle Jamieson, a wood turner, are interested in woodturning.

An individual can like and follow a person on TikTok who offers “life hacks,” iPhone tips, or funny pet videos, but in practice, that community of viewers has little in common except for the enjoyment of being entertained by cats or learning a new iPhone feature, and almost never interacts with each-other in any substantive way. Additionally, the content found on Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok, Twitter, etc. come in short segments of “entertainment” and involve little interaction or “commitment to a conversation” (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Kent & Lane, 2017).

Contrast the more transitory or ephemeral, “cute cat videos,” of social media apps such as Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, etc., with individuals who follow what might be called “enduring” social media on YouTube such as hobbyists who follow an astronomy page, a baker, bookmaker, carpenter, electrician, engineer, knife maker, mechanic, etc., and we see very different possibilities emerging as a result of the communities of interest. YouTube videos are by their nature a longer form of entertainment and often require the audio channel to be on in order to follow the content.

When there are skills or techniques to learn YouTube videos are difficult to enjoy as passive background entertainment on the bus or while waiting for class.

The ability to reach out to a coherent community of interest is what sites such as YouTube offer. Similarly, influencers of all kinds make names for themselves by sharing aspects of their personality and interests, building rapport, and identifying with the members of the audience on multiple levels. The next section deals with the relational issues that are part of the job of the professional communicator and how creating an organizational persona can be beneficial to both organizations and organizational professionals.

### **3. Our Role as Organizational Counsellors, Relationship Builders, and Spokes-People**

A general misperception exists in the mind of the average person (including many public relations students) about what the actual job of the professional communicator is, with many people simply thinking about the public relations profession from the standpoint of television and movies as event planners or hospitality experts (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2020). As Sommerfeldt and Kent explain:

The public relations profession has...been the subject of many stereotypes perpetuated through popular media. The many pejorative television portrayals of public relations in television and movies include films such as *Phone Booth*, *Wag the Dog*, and *Thank You for Smoking*, as well as several television series such as *P.R. Girls*, *Sex in the City*, and the “Britcoms” *Absolute Power*, and *Absolutely Fabulous*. (p. 2)

The disconnect between the skill sets required of Public Relations professionals and what we actually do, can be seen clearly in the contrast between the historical practices of public relations as organizational counsellors, and the encroachment or co-opting of public relations by marketers, advertisers and journalists (Gesualdi, 2019; Kelly, 1993; Lauzen, 1991; van Ruler & de Lange, 2003).

In practice, journalists and public relations professionals have a love/hate relationship (Clementson, 2019). The nature of the “information subsidy” (Gandy, 1982) suggests that public relations needs an outlet for their news and information, with an imprimatur of credibility. Similarly, media outlets and journalists seek inexpensive content that is filled by public relations professionals. Similarly, marketers and advertisers see public relations as a cost effective or “free” way to reach customers (Gesualdi, 2019), and agencies can continuously bill for maintenance of social media sites, rather than just billing once for advertising buys or campaign planning/execution.

When we look at the body of public relations research or literature, we see a coherent body of public relations scholarship continuously referenced. We also see that a much broader range of skills is required. On the most basic level, marketing and

promotional skills are in the public relations professional's tool kit, but most communication and public relations scholars spend very little time on marketing. The introductory, writing, management, and case oriented public relations textbooks typically have no more than a few sporadic references to marketing or promotion. Heath and Coombs (2006) had but seven pages on marketing out of more than 500 pages; Kelleher's (2018) introductory text has nine pages out of more than 400; Heath's (2013) Encyclopedia of Public Relations with more than a thousand pages of content has one 2.5-page entry on marketing that basically describes it as a business practice revolving around sales rather than communication.

More importantly, public relations and communication professionals engage in so many more communication activities than sales or marketing, such as: community relations, consumer relations, corporate communication, corporate publicity, employee relations, entertainment and the arts, health communication, internal communication, international public relations, investor relations, issues management, media relations, media/broadcast speaker training, political public relations, public affairs and government relations, risk and crisis management, strategic consultancy, etc. Most of what public relations professionals do is unrelated to advertising, marketing, or promotion of any kind, and instead focuses on effective interpersonal and strategic communication, relationship building and maintenance, and organizational counseling.

The false image of public relations in the mind of the average person or a potential student is the result of inexperience, stereotypes, and sometimes laziness on the part of teachers. Educators often use examples of advertising and marketing campaigns and movies to illustrate various concepts, because those are often well-known to students and easy to cherry pick for illustrations; but using popular advertisements is counter-productive. Although educators try to carefully explain to students what they will actually do when they graduate, until someone genuinely understands strategic communication (cf., Botan, 2021), audience and media research, communication theory, and various interpersonal communication and management activities, what students learn about public relations from popular culture contexts will continue to influence them.

The interplay of ethics, values (individual, professional, organizational and societal), the communicator's role in uniting and dividing, the professionalism of public relations specialists/communicators (the criteria, ethics, duties, responsibilities, rewards and punishment), and the needs of stakeholders and publics rather than shareholders and management, is what does and should guide public relations. As communication specialists focused on the good of the organization itself, on key stakeholders, stakeholders, and publics, and on how best to build relationships with multiple constituencies, public relations professionals have a higher calling.

### *3.1. The Role of Organizational Counsellor*

Speak to any seasoned public relations professional and you will almost certainly hear tales of when they had to advise an organization or client not to take a course of action that management wanted to take. A professional who never advised his/her organization, was probably not doing public relations. Indeed, consider the many activities mentioned above: risk and crisis communication, issues management, community relations, speaker training, and we see a much broader communicative skill set than portrayed in the stereotypical representations in the media and popular culture as party planners and hospitality experts.

Public relations educators regularly explain to students that what we do is save organizations money, keep them out of legal trouble, and keep them out of trouble in the media, rather than spending our time on sales and marketing. But students often do not take their teachers seriously, until they start working and learn for themselves how important all those writing, interpersonal, organizational, and public communication skills are.

The problem is also in learning how to justify what public relations professionals do. Quantifying what advertising or marketing does is easy: “Were more products sold? Did people remember the messages from a new advertising campaign?” etc. But the perennial issue of how one measures success in public relations, or explains it to managers who understand the bottom line of sales, but not intangibles such as reputation, relationships, risk communication, issues management, and social capital remains a constant struggle. How does one quantify social capital or relationships—besides counting tweets or likes, which is not of much value—how does one put a value on “campaign research?” How does one quantify the value of ethical counseling that results in greater employee trust and loyalty?

Additionally, many students, probably most, do not understand that public relations professionals work in a more diverse world than marketers or advertisers do, interacting with multiple publics including managers, employees, lawmakers, government agencies, politicians, trade unions, the media, and many others depending on the industry. After graduation, more than half of all public relations trained students will not work in an agency or corporate settings, many will never be responsible for media relations, most will never hold a news conferences, and most professional communicators will not spend any time on “branding,” “reputation,” or other marketing or sales related activities.

The primary responsibilities in public relations revolve around communication, information, persuasion, and relationships. Although there are many communication professionals in agencies and corporate settings who work extensively on marketing and sales initiatives, there are also journalists who do public relations, and marketers who do governmental research, but these anomalies do not make those people archetypes for their profession.

Once students and professionals come to understand that they need a broader skill set than marketing assistant, or “social media gurus,” they come to realize that building relationships and counselling managers requires more creativity, constant research, and an understanding of the needs of one’s stakeholders and publics. Thus, the value of professional communicators having a social identity not just as organizational spokespeople, but also as influencers who maintain and foster a network of “followers” becomes more apparent. The final section of this article focuses on the possibilities of becoming a social media influencer and how it might be reified in a public relations context.

#### **4. Public Relations Professionals as Organizational Influencers**

This final section undertakes a discussion of the interplay of values and the communicator’s role in uniting and dividing individuals and publics (Doerfel & Gibbs, 2020), the professionalism of public relations specialists/communicators, and the skill set required of public relations specialists/communicators to pursue an evolving role in public discourse. Strategic communicators are as capable of becoming influencers as anyone else, and indeed are probably better positioned to do so, given our training in strategic communication, public communication, media relations, networking, etc.

Additionally, everyday people interested in becoming influencers are often limited by their budget, training, communication skills, experience, and access to expertise, having to train themselves to do everything and learning “on the job.” However, as members of organizations, many communication professionals have staff members they can draw upon for technology and the technical support required to create compelling content (equipment, studio access, software, technician, etc.).

Before getting into the details below, however, I will briefly discuss our responsibilities as communication professionals, and what we need to do to be prepared for a role as an influencer. The first issue to consider is our role as relationship builders.

##### *4.1. The Interplay of Values and the Communicator’s Role in Uniting and Dividing*

Not everyone agrees on what the role should be for organizational communicators, or what public relations should do. For some, relationship building means bridging together various groups and working for the benefit of all. What are known as cocreation theories (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2006). A related concept that has been introduced in public relations is the notion of *tertius iungens*, a concept that encourages public relations professionals to unite with others rather than exploit or divide (Kent, Sommerfeldt, & Saffer, 2015).

By contrast, for decades in public relations the field was guided by management theories grounded in “excellence” and “systems” theory that prescribed what we did

as communication professionals as shaping public opinion on behalf of organizations (cf., Kent & Lane, 2021). In many countries around the globe, public relations is still seen as subservient to marketing/advertising (a phenomenon called encroachment in the public relations literature) (Gesualdi, 2019), rather than as independent, strategic, communication and management experts. Excellence was not about uniting stakeholders and publics but adherence, obedience, and convincing publics to want to do what the organization wants them to do. Thus, the emphasis of excellence was on segregating and controlling publics (a concept known as *tertius gaudens* in the management literature) (Kent, Sommerfeldt, & Saffer, 2015). Edward Bernays (1928) described the managerial approach almost a hundred years ago—an approach to strategic communication that persisted for 75-years—in his book, *Propaganda*:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country...It is not usually realized how necessary these invisible governors are to the orderly functioning of our group life. (pp. 9 & 10)

Although the management model persisted for decades, contemporary public relations professionals “co-create meaning and shape reality...for the mutual benefit of individuals, groups, [and] organizations...” (Kent & Li, 2020, p. 6). “Co-creation of meaning” and “benefiting others” is reified most clearly in our relationship building function. Yes, information dissemination is important, but meeting the needs of stakeholders and publics with that information is more important.

Thus, social media that focuses solely on sales and marketing misses a bigger opportunity to build relationships, to identify with internal and external publics. Building relationships takes time, and requires “consubstantiality” and identification (Burke, 1969). In other words, the more opportunities to interact with someone, even virtually or symbolically, the greater chances are of developing a relationship of trust and compassion. The possibilities inherent in becoming an influencer mean that communication professionals have the potential to build strong relationships with key stakeholders and publics, as well as shape and cultivate an organizational image or reputation.

#### *4.2. The Possibility of Becoming an Influencer*

The possibility of becoming an influencer on behalf of one’s organization, cause, or client, is within the reach of most communication professionals. The question is what do we need to do to become influential, and what do we need to keep in mind from an ethical and practical standpoint? To paraphrase an adage, why pay for the influencer when you can get the relationship for free? That is, if money and resources were directed to a public relations department or organizational communication professionals to create an organizational persona via YouTube or other channel, rather

than to paying others for promotional activities that are transitory, the potential for creating a valuable long terms organizational asset exists. Indeed, some organizations may become influential enough that others come to them. Obviously, the value of influence is more than an economic issue.

The corporate use of influencers had become a 15-billion dollar per year industry ([www.businessinsider.com/influencer-marketing...](http://www.businessinsider.com/influencer-marketing...)), with 75 per cent of all major brands using some form of influencer marketing, and organizations spending millions of dollars per year on influence, why not redirect a small percentage of that to creating an organizational social media presence and an online persona that represents the values of an organization?

In practice there are two types of influencers: those that target large but diverse audiences on Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, etc. and those that cater to more specific, niche, groups, such as we see on YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, etc. Given the two approaches, the niche approach where an influencer focuses on content of interest to a coherent group of stakeholders/publics makes more sense. The value of creating an organizational identity can be seen most clearly in medium and large organizations such as the King Arthur Baking Company, Weaver Leathercraft, and the Whiskey Vault, three organizations that have created YouTube pages to promote their organizations and build a following of loyal stakeholders and customers.

What sets apart social media influencers from simply an organization having a web page or social media presence is that there are hundreds of thousands of organizations with Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, but few have a recognizable persona. Starbucks, for example, with 32.9-billion in revenue in 2022 and 36.2-million subscribers on Facebook, posts an assortment of messages but they are posted anonymously by the “owner” or just “Starbucks.” Although some messages are used to publicize important causes such as Women’s history month or employee profiles, there is no spokesperson for Starbucks on Facebook who speaks directly to subscribers, nor is there a YouTube page, despite the obvious potential to talk about coffee related issues.

#### *4.3. Why Become an Influencer*

Although the potential value of becoming an influencer has been reviewed above, several additional features are worth noting here. The issues include both the potential for building trust and identification, the potential for research and learning more about an organization’s stakeholders and publics, and the value of creating open and honest communication. One of the first issue to understand is cocreation.

##### *4.3.1. Cocreation*

The value of having an identity or known person to communicate with cannot be overstated. Indeed, research suggest that people spend the bulk of their time interacting with a very small group of close friends, and an increasingly small amount of their



time (seconds per day on average) interacting with more distant friends (Dunbar, 2021). Thus, given the relative triviality of most organization–public messages, very few people spend much time interacting with organizations via social media, even when opportunities exist for interaction. A relationship is what changes the math. People simply do not have the cognitive capacity or time to manage more than about 150 relationships (Dunbar, 2012, 2021; King, 2012). The people, groups or organizations that are trivial, or on the periphery, receive zero to very little attention.

Barring some brilliant advertisement from organizations such as Apple or Nike, few people will feel affinity for an organization or brand simply because they see advertisements on social media. Indeed, people have been muting advertisement on television and the internet for more than 70-years, since the invention of the television remote (The Television Remote...). To trust and feel favourably toward other people requires more: commonality, past experience, repeated interaction, personal interactions, confirmational messages from friends, family, colleagues, etc.

To build trust and a sense of identification also requires face-to-face (or virtual) exposure. We know from the interpersonal communication research that relationships are built over time, and via successive interactions with others (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Most organizational social media use follows a unidirectional/asymmetrical marketing/advertising model of advertisers and marketers pushing out content, and using analytic data and “social media metrics” to track and encourage “engagement” (Constantinides, 2014; Tuten, 2020; Zarrella, 2010). Many managers chose to use controlled media such as Instagram, rather than open the organization or brand up to unwanted criticism on uncontrolled media outlets. Many managers see the ability to control their messages as more important than genuine engagement or relationship building.

Defining engagement as clicks and exposure, or counting customer service responses as engagement misses out on the capacity for organizations to “get their house in order” (Heath & Coombs, 2006), or confront problems and issues of controversy. If an organization is concerned with customer/stakeholder attacks, rather than hiding behind some anonymous interface, an organization would be best served by talking about what the problems are and how to fix them.

An organizational influencer, by definition, needs to offer content that is of value to subscribers. Whether the content involves dealing with organizational controversies or simply showing interesting content is an organizational choice. The concern over public controversy may be why most organizations shy away from taking on more public roles. Ultimately, organizations that have highly controversial business practices should work to change public perceptions (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

Providing a target in the form of a social media influencer could attract unwanted attention for a controversial organization, but could also be a strategic opportunity to open a discussion about various organizational issues. Many of the marketing-based

YouTube sites attract their share of controversy and avoid it by simply disabling comments.

By contrast, an influencer values the feedback of his/her subscribers and succeeds because of the number of followers. The interest and support from subscribers and followers is largely because of (1) simple audience/market analysis (knowing one's subscribers) as well as (2), the cocreation and parasocial relationships that develop and deepen over time (cf., Read, 2023). Another potential way to build identification, trust, and serve the needs and interests of stakeholders is for an influencer to collaborate with others.

#### 4.3.2. Partnering with Communities of Interest

The idea of collaborative marketing has been around for decades. We regularly see organizations cross promoting with other organizations (Coca-Cola and McDonalds, Coca-Cola and Burger King, The Hobbit and Burger King, etc.). Porsche and Tag Heuer, for example, have run advertisements for a Porsche inspired Tag Heuer watch (Tag Heuer Carrera Porsche Chronograph), that draws on imagery from the car and watch. What we rarely see, however, are organizations collaborating on issues unrelated to marketing or sales. Why do we not see, for example, two fast food competitors collaborating on feeding the homeless, or two publishers collaborating on literacy, censorship, and free speech?

Such collaborations are common among influencers who regularly appear with other individuals and organizations (often "competitors"). Often, someone more established helps someone less established. But imagine Starbucks helping a local coffee merchant (not Starbucks), Taco Bell cross promoting with a local taco truck, Gucci helping a small leather goods maker to succeed, etc. The collaboration that characterizes many budding influencers follows directly on Daft and Lengel's (1986) notion of the strength of weak ties, and Kent et al. (2016) idea of *tertius iungens*, that focuses on inclusion and support rather than competition and "power over" strategies.

On YouTube, for example, "That Chocolate Vegan" promotes fellow YouTubers and vegan restaurants, Alec Steele, a blacksmith, partnered with Prometheus Medical to present shop safety videos, etc. In both cases, the content talked about relates to the individual's area, but is of more importance to the audience. The idea of cross promotion is not new, broadcasters have done it for years—usually promoting related content from a company's other holdings, as in the case of the big media conglomerates (Bagdikian, 2004). But in the case of corporate media, the goal of the collaborations are to benefit shareholders and company bottom lines, rather than serving a genuine public good.

The ethical influencer (i.e., those who are genuinely interested in their audiences, rather than those merely interested in making themselves famous), is trusted and looked to as a source of advice. By creating an organizational influencer presence,

unrelated to simply sales or marketing, an organization may be able to position itself as a thought and opinion leader without having to pay others to do it for them. Indeed, being able to take advantage of commenting on stakeholder issues also has the potential to serve an issues management function. Ultimately, creating an influencer persona involves a public relations focus rather than just being used for marketing as many brands currently do.

The “organizational influencer” model needs to be something more than just product marketing. An organization that wants to create an inhouse influencer to help market and sell its products will not engender the sort of trust and impartiality that “real” (non-corporate) influencers hold. There are already hundreds of thousands of organizations that have created product videos on YouTube and other platforms showing how their products function (cf., Saniei & Kent, 2021; Kickstarter; Indiegogo), but virtually none that use social media to create a genuine social presence (cf. Li & Kent, 2021).

We can find abundant YouTube videos, for example, by durable goods manufacturers such as kitchen or house appliances, carmakers, knifemakers, medical equipment manufacturers, tool makers, etc. demonstrating their products, but those demo videos are intended solely to promote and sell their own products. None of the content are about how customers can achieve relevant personal goals or further their individual interests, etc. Many corporations have YouTube pages, such as Coca-Cola, which has one of the biggest brand presences on YouTube, but the Coca-Cola site is nothing but marketing and advertising. Coke does not engender any interpersonal trust or relational presence, the comments from visitors are random, and critical posts are ignored by Coca-Cola. Similarly, on sites such as Lego, the biggest brand on YouTube, Lego posts promotional and marketing videos but regularly turns off comments to videos they do not want criticized or mocked. Another important consideration for building relationships of trust, is about making content available.

#### 4.3.3. The long Tail

The long tail is a metaphor associated with internet sales (Hayes, 2019) and generally refers to the notion that since electronic media or products do not take up any storage space, there is no limit to how many can be offered, even things that do not sell well, don't take up any “shelf space.” That said, the same principle works with influencers. Guests, potential subscribers, and existing subscribers often want to binge watch videos from sources that they enjoy. Konrath (2011), one of the first Amazon publishing millionaires, suggested the same about electronic books a decade ago. Thousands of articles about binge watching YouTube, television, and other content have suggested the more content available the better (Steiner & Xu, 2020).

To establish oneself as an influencer requires a recognition that abundant and regular content needs to be produced, and a recognizable persona needs to be developed.

There must be someone with whom people can identify with and come to know. People need to feel that they know the influencer, his/her quirks and eccentricities, what s/he stands for and values. The last issue to consider is the value of parasocial communication.

#### 4.3.4. The Power of Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships were first identified by Horton and Wohl (1956). The theory of parasocial relationships explains how people come to believe that an actual relationship exists between themselves and celebrities they might watch on television (or now, YouTube) but have never actually met. Indeed, many individuals upon meeting celebrities behave as if they are good friends with the person in question and often refer to the person by the name of their character rather than their own actual identity. In the case of “evil” characters, fans have been known to call them names or even spit on them (cf., Christian, 2012, p. 58). Such passion suggests how powerful the parasocial bond can be, just from watching actors on television or online.

The strength of the illusory parasocial relationship is strong and includes both the delusional relationship where people think they actually know the individual because s/he has watched the person so many times that they feel an affinity, as well as the healthier relational bonds such as we form with local news castors and weather people, who we trust as members of our own communities. As Rubin and McHugh (1987) explain:

Television networks and producers actively seek attractive television personalities so that audiences will continue to view programs week after week. They hope that audiences will form relationships with the characters, and audiences do...[S]ome viewers exhibit great amounts of affinity with the medium and with the characters they watch...These relationships resemble interpersonal relationships in many ways. For example, in interpersonal relationships, uncertainty about others is reduced over time, allowing for increased attraction...and relationship growth. (p. 279)

In practice, most social media makes it difficult to build new relationships with strangers, or with more than a few individuals, because of the time needed to form a strong bond, and other affordance constraints of the interface. Relationships take time and interpersonal interaction. When an organization communicates with thousands or millions of followers, individuals cannot easily be singled out, and visitors must have a reason to talk to an organizational communicator. As noted above, most people do not spend more than a few seconds a day on such relationships (Dunbar, 2021).

The experience created by the mediated interaction found on television, YouTube, etc. allows an individual to create a bond with thousands, tens of thousands, or more individuals via the parasocial dynamic. Thus, influencers make choices about what to talk about, which is perhaps the first decision that someone makes regarding whether

to watch or follow an individual or organization. But the second decision comes from the personality of the person creating the content and the ability of the audience to identify with that individual.

#### 4.4. *What to Influence*

The discussion to now has ignored the most difficult part of what it would take to become an influencer, speaking of the practice only in theoretical/scholarly terms. So let us consider some specific examples.

To be a successful influencer first requires an understanding of what an influencer does, or can do, as well as understanding which social media platforms provide the best chances of creating a public relations relevant persona. The value of being an influencer on behalf of an organization includes the ability to set the public agenda on organizational and social issues, being seen as trusted and impartial, having a greater capacity to collaborate with others groups or organizations, as well as having the capacity to build relationships with other stakeholders and publics.

For example, the top Instagram influencers include: Ariana Grande, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, Selena Gomez, Kylie Jenner, Kim Kardashian West, Neymar Jr., Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, etc. Although Selina Gomez might post a picture of herself wearing Adidas that garners 6-million likes, Gomez’s post will not provide any public relations support if Adidas has a crisis, she is not someone that an individual might follow to find out about athletic shoes, or the person a journalist will call for a quote. Gomez’s posts are largely just sponsored advertising content using her face to sell things, and the demographic of subscribers are people who like her work, and are typically of a particular age range and gender. Gomez’s posts are unpredictable, and represent little more than eye candy for her “fans.” Many celebrities create Instagram sites so that they essentially can foster an alternate revenue stream and keep themselves in the limelight and socially relevant.

Contrast Instagram, a primarily image-based social media, with YouTube, a video based social media where the top influencers talk to people and include: MrBeast, Dude Perfect, Vlad and Niki, Like Nastya, Kids Diana Show, PewDiePie, etc. and we see a very different approach. YouTube videos are information and entertainment based. Conversely, Instagram is personality based. Elon Musk, for example, has an Instagram page that focuses largely on his professional interests as CEO, but there are also “fan” pages wherein virtually every picture is of Musk. “Fans” have always created web sites and social media sites since the birth of the internet, but no one will create a fan site for say, Alec Steele ([www.youtube.com/@AlecSteele](http://www.youtube.com/@AlecSteele)), a blacksmith, because as much as viewers find him personally compelling (young, perky, handsome, optimistic), his channel is more similar to a club or group of people with a shared hobby or interest than a “role” played by an actor. People can already be part of Steele’s “show.”

A second issue involves understanding that influencers are storytellers and entertainers (Kent, 2015). A “celebrity” wood turner or knife maker such as Carl Jacobson ([www.youtube.com/@CarlJacobson](http://www.youtube.com/@CarlJacobson)) or Trollsky ([www.youtube.com/@Trollsky](http://www.youtube.com/@Trollsky)), are not just showing examples of knifemaking or woodturning, but also sharing pictures of their shop, reading viewer comments, talking about their families, and inspiring people to try and follow in their footsteps, etc. People come to woodturning conventions and knife shows to meet Carl, Trollsky, and hundreds others, just as someone might hope to catch a glimpse of their favourite actor/actress, author etc. at a sci-fi convention. The image that viewers have of Carl Jacobson, however, is not grounded in a fictitious persona the way that television or movie actors identities are. Carl and Trollsky are real people who struggled to build their YouTube sites, have bills to pay like everyone else, etc. They are people that everyday people can identify with.

How would an organization build such a persona is an important question, because “corporate spokesperson” is not the image that someone would want to foster. As Sommerfeldt and Kent (2020) noted, public relations professionals are not seen as trustworthy or honest. Being a corporate “shill” or “mouthpiece” constantly spouting the organizational party line will not cut it. People want to be entertained by real people and “characters” they like. In general, humans only trust people who are honest and believable, and who we have a shared history with on some level, even if only virtual.

Third, organizations that want to position themselves as influencers have to have something of substance to talk about. Again, imagine a site such as Lego where the only thing talked about are Lego toys and Lego cartoons, followers’ comments are ignored, there is no single person or persona responsible for creating a mood, etc.—essentially what exists now. Such a site will not engender the kind of trust that a general toy site might with real children (not actors), and content that is not just about one thing. Consider the several top YouTube sites by children reviewing toys: Shfa (with 37.9 million subscribers), Ryan’s World (with 36.6 million subscribers), Toys and Colours (with 39 million subscribers) and you can see that an influencer site that is just about marketing will be limited in appeal compared to a more open site about toys. Lego may have a lot of subscribers (15.9-million), but they have no influence.

Obviously, a tool or equipment manufacturing organization might be able to talk about hundreds of things in regard to their projects or specialty. A tool company or hardware store such as Lee Valley, Lowes, or Bunnings, for example, might run videos demonstrating hundreds of different home repair, maintenance, or creative projects, just as Chuck Dorsett does for Weaver Leathercraft ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=B\\_tNJdV3AMo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_tNJdV3AMo)). Other examples include YouTube channels such as Jimmy Diresta ([www.youtube.com/c/jimmydiresta](http://www.youtube.com/c/jimmydiresta)), a YouTuber with nearly 2-million subscribers who produces videos of all kinds revolving around his work, his

homelife, his interests, etc. or the anonymous Canadian YouTuber AVE ([www.YouTube.com/@arduinoversusevil2025](http://www.YouTube.com/@arduinoversusevil2025)) with 1.4 million subscribers, whose videos have millions of views, and who bring in tens of thousands of dollars a month from his Patreon supporters. AVE never shows his face, only has hands and the projects he works on. In both Diresta and AVE's case, their focus is on their personal and professional skill sets used to create compelling videos that entertain and educate viewers—we also hear the tone that might be sought after by others in such videos.

But what might a company with a more limited scope (a carpeting or paint manufacturer, a local sandwich shop) focus on? What about organizations with a broader scope, such as a major university with a thousand faculty, hundreds of majors, and hundreds of thousands of alumni? Striking the proper tone and having a compelling person to create the identity is no easy task. When we examine the most successful influencers, we find people with unique and compelling personalities. "Sleeping pills" rarely succeed unless the low energy persona portrayed is what is being presented (Ben Stein, for example).

*Three final points are worth noting here:*

(1) The best sites have high quality production values. For an individual starting out, thousands of dollars for camera equipment, tripods, lighting, wireless mics, video editing software, etc. is a high bar. But for the many organizations that spend anywhere from hundreds of thousands to tens of millions on advertising, such an expenditure is insignificant. Even small organizations can afford the modest technology outlay, perhaps using a cell-phone to shoot video in the beginning, just as tens of thousands of existing influencers have. Additionally, most medium to large organization probably already have the needed equipment or personnel needed.

(2) As noted above, creating an online persona takes time and practice. No one is an internet sensation overnight. There must be a compelling story, content must be built up (the long tail), and time needs to be put into promoting the site. Even an experienced communicator will require practice and perhaps training to be able to provide compelling content. If we examine the YouTube content from when someone started to when they became established or achieved success, we see a learning curve of skills.

The last point, (3) has to do with having a public relations focus. As noted above, a site that just focuses on corporate content is nothing more than a marketing page. Our communicative focus needs to be on relationship building, cocreation, trust, transparency, not on organizational promotion. The ability to act not simply as an organizational representative but instead as someone that others want to engage with is a high bar but is something that communication professionals have been uniquely trained for.

### Conclusion

The approach taken in this essay was a generic or genre approach where the boundaries and expectations of a communicative genre are identified and highlighted so the reader can understand them. A genre approach was appropriate and useful in this essay because of the nature of the rhetorical situation examined. Influencers are often thought of as powerful marketing tools—as people to pay to reach specific publics—rather than simply everyday people who put in a lot of work to create their unique public identities. The essay describes the nature of the influencer genre and talks about how communication and public relations professionals may use that insight to craft a personal or organizational social media personae of their own.

Overall, I believe that the case for organizational influencers is compelling. Communication professionals have drawn on new technologies and new communicative possibilities for decades, and the possibilities around becoming an influencer should be obvious. However, as noted above numerous times, the creation of an organizational influencer persona needs to be more than a marketing or advertising ploy. People do not give up their valuable time to watch advertainments or infomercials (which is what many corporate videos are), unless they are looking to buy something (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b). As we know from the scarcity of viral videos, fewer than one per cent ever go viral (Thompson, 2017). Thus, relying on marketing or advertising videos to garner a regular or wide audience would be largely a waste of organizational time and resources. As Thompson noted,

A tiny percentage [of content], about 1 percent, was shared more than seven times. But nothing really went fully viral—not even the most popular shared messages. Most of the news that people see on Twitter—around 95 percent—comes directly from its original source or from one degree of separation.

The creation of a widely subscribed to and viewed influencer channel is a task that will minimally take several years, but is something that has the potential to make an organization's voice powerful and unique on the world stage. The idea of such a long-term and valuable approach is not new (Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Theunissen, 2021), but does involve a shift in corporate and organizational thinking.

As the notion of organizations becoming situated as influencers takes hold and more organizations take advantage of the opportunity, there will be practical and ethical issues to consider such as what happens when someone positioned as an influencer for one organization moves on to another, perhaps a competitor. Similarly, a “famous” influencer may want to be paid more money for his/her activities. Although we are not yet to the point where such questions need to be posited, they will eventually emerge.

At present, I know of no well-known (or other) organizational influencers, outside of some corporate bloggers with large followings. However, in practice, corporate blog authors focus on organizational issues, so what they have is not so much influence



and trust as “information.” Public relations has always adapted to the times; and communication professionals have always had to educate themselves about those changes. I believe the time has come for an organization to take the leap and begin to create an organizational persona of their own, just as thousands of communication professionals have had to do in the recent past with the internet, social media, analytics, etc.

### **Funding and Acknowledgements**

This study did not benefit from any funding or financial support of any organization, group or individual.

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