[GB] Digital Culture Media and Sport Committee undertake enquiry into role and impact of social media influencers and the need for further regulation

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Currently, Digital Culture Media and Sport Committee of the UK Parliament is undertaking an enquiry, which started in June 2021, into the influencer culture, including the radicalisation by some influencers.

The enquiry is considering the power of influencers on social media, how influencer culture operates, and the absence of regulation on the promotion of products or services, aside from the existing policies of individual platforms. Research showed that more than three-quarters of influencers "buried their disclosures within their posts". Also, the enquiry will assess influencer impact on media and popular culture including their positive role, such as raising awareness for a campaign addressing vaccine hesitancy among people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

There have been four evidence hearings so far and a broad range of witnesses have been called, including Em Sheldon a content creator and influencer and Dr Francesca Sobande a lecturer, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, at Cardiff University. Whilst evidence has been taken from Amy Hart, a content creator, activist and former contestant on ITV's *Love Island*.

The evidence so far has identified different aspects of influencers and their impact. Nicole Ocran, co-founder of Creator Union, said that being an influencer was a proper job and a full-time obligation. Bloggers and influencers have set up an organisation called Creator Union to help steer influencers through the majority of issues that they confront in fulfilling that which was about encouraging a responsible community, and working to standards.

Other evidence revealed a class of influencer who used social media to influence opinion in order to have a disruptive or negative effect. Committee evidence showed that regulating political speech is very hard when simultaneously an influencer was advertising a product. Sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between a political or commercial endorsement. This raised the issue on where to draw the line between regulation and free speech for influencersand whether it is commercial or more political.

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There is the problem of disinformation for hire, where influencers have been hired to spread disinformation, including about COVID-19. Another problem area was identifying the funding of political influencers who are paid or receive money from organisations that are totally unaccountable or impossible to scrutinise in the public debate. The issue had to be understood in the context of social media platform policies when addressing influencer marketing.

Even though social media platforms have differing methods of scrutiny to identify fake news and disinformation, some influencers have developed techniques to avoid AI (Artificial Intelligence) detection such as using deceptive hashtags, for example QAnon using numbers instead of letters.

Other identified ways to disseminate disinformation and misinformation are campaigns operating are through more covert strategies. Examples of that include asking questions: "*I am just asking a question*". The Committee heard evidence that an influencers' aim is not necessarily to persuade but to cause doubt.

Another identified strategy is to use phrases such as: *"I am sharing a personal anecdote or an anecdote about a friend"*. One example given to the Committee was the effect of Nicki Minaj, a rapper and pop singer, who on 13th September 2021 tweeted to her followers about an unidentified cousin's friend in Trinidad, who was dumped at the altar by his bride because "*the vaccine*", presumably for COVID-19, allegedly made his testicles swell. Trinidad and Tobago's health minister said two days later the claim was debunked after being invetsigated.

Another issue highlighted in the enquiry is the fact that the people targeted by certain influencers, or by features of the internet which have made it much easier for harassment to occur, are the same people who are targeted by platforms with regard to the demonetisation of content.

The last hearing of evidence was on the 25 November 2021 and further details are awaited. A previous select committee enquiry on the harm of social media gave rise to the current Social Media Bill, which intends to legislate against hate speech on social media. Whether the current committee enquiry about influencer impact will lead to further regulation remains to be determined.

Influencer culture. Inquiry. UK Parliament

https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1126/influencer-culture/

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