

Bodega cats, voting rights, and freezing the rent: New York City's use of online influencers for public messaging

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ABSTRACT

Governments around the world aim to convey trusted information to their citizens about the public services they provide as well as about local laws and policies. In France, Canada, and parts of the United States, content creators and influencers use social media to disseminate information about health care, voting, and climate change on their governments' behalf, often hoping to reach young and traditionally underserved audiences.¹

This paper looks at the New York City influencers who communicate information about Mayor Zohran Mamdani's programs and the city's policies and regulations. These figures, who operate mainly online, are well described by the term "political relational influencers."²

In examining the differences between influencers and traditional journalists, we found a lack of clarity around the role influencers are playing in promoting city-related information. City payments to influencers hired by third-party marketing agencies are not transparent, and the public disclosure of paid relationships on the resulting TikTok and Instagram videos is inconsistent. This paper contributes to the field by providing information about the influencer community in New York that promotes city programs and policies.

We show that there are three types of relationships in place. There is a Signal group that the mayor's office uses to communicate with a selected group of influencers. There is a separate category of pilot programs aimed at deploying influencers on Instagram and TikTok to promote city policies and regulations related to immigration rights, public budgeting processes, and tenants' rights. Thirdly, there is an established set of campaigns that pay influencers to provide information about voting, health care, sanitation, and many other topics. We explain the characteristics of the various groups of influencers, survey the relevant literature, and conclude with recommendations for best practices.

¹ Maud Reveilhac, "Mapping Government Use of Social Media Influencers for Policy Promotion," *Media and Communication* 13 (2025): article 10371, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10371>.

² Anastasia Goodwin et al., "Political Relational Influencers: The Mobilization of Social Media Influencers in the Political Arena," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 1614, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18987>.

Introduction

In a world of AI slop and information overload, government agencies try to supply their citizens with trusted information about the services they provide. Governments in France, Canada, and parts of the United States pay social media influencers to disseminate information about topics such as health care, voting, and climate change, and to help public entities reach young audiences.³

Mayor Zohran Mamdani has been heralded as an innovative communicator who has used Instagram and TikTok to organize supporters and promote his mayoral campaign. Since he was elected in November 2025, his image has become ubiquitous on social media, whether he's sitting with kids to promote pre-K, putting on a hard hat and holding a shovel to announce a new infrastructure project, riding a bicycle in support of bike lanes, speaking at a mosque, or answering a question from an influencer on the street.⁴

Mamdani's election has accelerated the city government's reliance on influencers and brought them even more fully into the mainstream of the city's communications strategy. The mayor's office has hired a host of new communications staffers and built a network of influencers who push out his messages to their followers.

On January 7, 2026, Mamdani held an influencers-only press briefing.⁵ *The New York Times* described this as "a friendly summit," and quoted aides in the mayor's office who said the event was attended by 78 influencers with a combined audience reach of 82 million.⁶

This paper looks at what, if anything, has changed in terms of how the New York City government communicates with its constituents in 2026; who occupies the universe of New York City influencers; and how government agencies are best able to work with influencers to provide useful and accurate

³ Reveilhac, "Mapping Government Use," 2.

⁴ Zohran Kwame Mamdani (@nycmayor), "This morning, Ms. Rachel and I visited District 2 Pre-K Center, where we sang," Instagram, January 9, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DTTasyQkbNf/>; New York Mickey (@mickmicknyc), "Harlem Groundbreaking Ceremony with Mayor Zohran Mamdani," TikTok, February 18, 2026, <https://www.tiktok.com/@mickmicknyc/video/7608278748328250638>; Mamdani (@nycmayor), "I joined NY's Cutest on the Bergen Bike Bus," Instagram, May 6, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DYBNHhgRjIU/>; Allama Shabbir Hasan Maisami (@allamashabbirmaisami), Instagram post, February 26, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DVPivYnExAi/>; Feroz Khan (@khann_journey), "What do you do for a living? @zohrankmamdani," Instagram Reel, September 24, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DdsNgsAzyDw/>.

⁵ Mike Lamorte, "News 12 Takes a Look Inside the Mayor's Influencer-Only Press Conference," News 12 Long Island, January 8, 2026, <https://longisland.news12.com/2026/01/08/news-12-takes-a-look-inside-the-mayors-influencer-only-press-conference/2exg6whpLTznNBc00yqyA>.

⁶ Michael Grynbau, "Some Questions, Then a Selfie: Mayor Mamdani Meets the (Creator) Press," New York Times, January 7, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/07/business/media/zohran-mamdani-social-media-creators.html>.

information to New Yorkers. We explain the characteristics of the groups we studied, survey relevant literature, and conclude with recommendations for best practices.

Through our research, we found that there are three types of relationships in place between friendly influencers and the mayor's office, and that these often overlap. We set out to examine the influencers hired through public agencies to promote city programs and services. There are also pilot programs to promote city policies in the areas of immigration rights, public budgeting processes, and tenants' rights. Finally, there is a third category: unpaid influencers on a Signal group run by Emilia Rowland, Mamdani's director of new media and cultural communications.

In August, we published our findings in a working paper that garnered significant attention.⁷ Our most widely discussed finding was that Rowland had created the Signal group to communicate with dozens of unpaid influencers who spread, on Instagram and TikTok, announcements provided by the mayor's communications team. The mayor's press people had not replied to dozens of emails we had sent in July and August, but after our working paper was published, the mayor's office communications team wrote to say they had "engaged with" 1,200 content creators and new media outlets since the start of the administration. They noted that the Signal group is open to people who do not support the mayor, and that content creators can apply to join.

Methodology

We interviewed 15 people, conducted a literature review, and reviewed social media postings as well as New York City budget documents, press releases, and calls for proposals.

Background: Influencers in NYC

New York City government agencies have maintained an online presence for years, but the COVID-19 pandemic marked an inflection point. The severity of the pandemic created a sense of urgency for city officials who had to reach New Yorkers, especially those in underserved areas or particular ethnic communities, with urgent health information.

José Bayona, who served as the founding executive director of the New York City Mayor's Office of Ethnic and Community Media from January 2022 to May 2024, remembers that during the pandemic, "the outlets the city relied on to reach communities and promote vaccination were the ethnic and community media, and those outlets were the original influencers, because they held decades of community trust."⁸ Specifically, Bayona mentioned the key roles played by Ricot Dupuy of

⁷ Anya Schiffrin, "Mapping New York City Influencers and Funding of Public Messaging," working paper, Initiative for Policy Dialogue, Columbia University, August 28, 2026, <https://ipdcolumbia.org/publication/mapping-new-york-city-influencers-and-funding-of-public-messaging/>.

⁸ José Bayona, former executive director of the New York City Mayor's Office of Ethnic and Community Media, interview by Anya Schiffrin, Wyatt Christlieb, and Max Weber, Zoom, July 17, 2026.

Radio Soleil, a trusted voice in the Haitian community, and media outlets serving Latino, South Asian, Chinese, and other Caribbean communities.

In August 2020, NYC Health+Hospitals, a public benefit corporation funded by the government, received emergency federal funding earmarked for public outreach.⁹ Under the oversight of the mayor's office, the organization began working on marketing campaigns with celebrities and online influencers to spread the word about Covid testing and tracing and vaccines, when they became available.¹⁰

In their 2021 paper, "How social media influencers helped the NYC public health system raise awareness of COVID-19 testing among historically disadvantaged populations," Emily Golloub and Carmen Boon, who worked on the marketing and communications team at NYC Health+Hospitals, describe how the public corporation engaged marketing agencies via a request for proposals process that, in turn, recruited so-called nano- and micro-influencers to create content "based on guidelines and assets" provided by the corporation.¹¹

The Test & Trace campaign included 24 influencers with a combined 12 million followers. After the influencers made and posted the videos, the marketing agencies paid to amplify the content through social media advertising. Golloub and Boon described the success of NYC Health+Hospitals' efforts in raising awareness of testing to prevent COVID-19 spread, citing increased visits to the Test & Trace website and strong engagement rates with the influencer content.¹² The pandemic is seen as a turning point, after which the idea of working with influencers expanded to a number of city agencies.

Table 1. Definitions of Influencer Types

Influencer Type	Number of Followers
Mega-influencer	More than 1,000,000
Macro-influencer	100,000 to 1,000,000
Micro-influencer	1,000 to 100,000
Nano-influencer	Fewer than 1,000

Source: Emine Kuzoren, Irem Kiris, and Ismail Erkan, "Less Is More! The Power of Micro-Influencers: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Global Business Insights* 10, no. 2 (2025): 142–157.

⁹ For information about this public benefit cooperation, see <https://www.nychealthandhospitals.org/about-nyc-health-hospitals/>

¹⁰ Carmen Boon and Emily Golloub, "How social media influencers helped the NYC public health system raise awareness of COVID-19 testing among historically disadvantaged populations," *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing* 9, no. 3 (2021): 198-204; NYC Health + Hospitals, "Mayor de Blasio Announces Partnership with New York Yankees to Fight COVID-19 and Get More New Yorkers Tested," press release, August 24, 2020, <https://www.nychealthandhospitals.org/pressrelease/mayor-de-blasio-announces-partnership-with-yankees-to-get-more-new-yorkers-tested/>.

¹¹ Boon and Golloub (p.199), "How social media influencers helped

¹² Boon and Golloub, "How Social Media Influencers Helped"

Today, Natalia Goldstein, digital media strategist with the NYC Campaign Finance Board, told us, “I can’t think of a [city] agency that does not work with influencers.”¹³ She noted that the board expanded its efforts to engage with influencers in 2021 and, in 2023, began to scale and bring the work in-house.

In 2021, the Metropolitan Transit Authority enlisted online content creator New York Nico (filmmaker Nicholas Heller) to persuade celebrities to record announcements about good behavior on the subway.¹⁴ That same year, he worked on a separate project for the Sanitation Foundation, a privately funded nonprofit that partners with the New York City Department of Sanitation to conduct public education and outreach, which hired marketing firm Caryn Pace to employ him as part of its broader campaign to remind New Yorkers not to litter.¹⁵ In 2024, the city expanded its composting program to reach more neighborhoods. A sanitation department spokesperson said that the agency received a one-time grant that year, which it used to hire influencers to help spread the word about the program.¹⁶ According to a written statement from City Hall in While DSNY does not have a baseline budget for media and advertising, they received a one-time federal grant during the Biden administration of \$2 million for composting education, and spent just \$15,000 on trusted messenger creator PSA campaigns to help promote participation in the nation’s largest and easiest curbside composting program No city funds were used in these promotions.

Mamdani’s Election

Mamdani’s victory marked a change in New York City’s relationship with influencers. The group Creators4Zohran, composed of content creators and influencers who supported his election campaign, was reconfigured to promote coverage and updates from the mayor’s office. The group, NYC Creators Announcements, is run by Emilia Rowland, the director of new media and cultural communications at the NYC Office of the Mayor, and her staff, who send press releases, summaries, and other information for creators to use in their social media posts. These materials are disseminated via the encrypted messaging app Signal.¹⁷ Applicants who are selected to join the group fill out an intake form that describes where they live and what topics interest them. They then receive invitations targeted to their interests, such as neighborhood canvassing meetings. In a September statement sent to the

¹³ Natalia Goldstein, digital media strategist at the New York City Campaign Finance Board, interview by Anya Schiffrin, Wyatt Christlieb, Max Weber, and Megan Sluzhevsky, Zoom, July 17, 2026.

¹⁴ André Wheeler, “An Instagram Influencer Recruits A-Listers to Help Rescue the M.T.A.,” *New Yorker*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/08/an-instagram-influencer-recruits-a-listers-to-help-rescue-the-mta>.

¹⁵ CPACE Solutions. “Sanitation Foundation Case Study: ‘Don’t Do NYC Dirty.’” Accessed August 6, 2026. <https://www.carynpace.com/casestudy/ddnycd>; Sanitation Foundation, “How New York Turned Civic Pride into Cleaner Streets: Launching a Grassroots Campaign for New Yorkers, by New Yorkers,” Sanitation Foundation (blog), January 13, 2026, <https://www.sanitationfoundation.org/blog/how-new-york-turned-civic-pride-into-cleaner-streetsnbsplaunching-a-grassroots-campaign-for-new-yorkers-by-new-yorkers>.

¹⁶ NYC Community Compost Network, “Thank You City Council!” accessed October 10, 2026, <https://nyccommunitycompostnetwork.org/thankyoucitycouncil>.

¹⁷ City Hall provided this information in September and October 2026 to give background.

author, the city said that ‘we’ provide “toolkits containing background, policy detail, resource links, deadlines, and [sic] access.”

In many ways, the NYC Creators Announcements group is similar to the traditional press lists created and used by communications teams, in that the influencers receive regular updates but are free to choose what they cover. There are, of course, clear differences between the work of journalists and social media influencers, and we will discuss some of these later in this paper. Unlike the Signal group influencers, journalists are expected to obtain a press card allowing them to cover City Hall. In order to get one, they must submit samples of their work demonstrating that they have covered relevant City events.¹⁸

There are more than 200 content creators in the Signal group, ranging from micro-influencers with 5,000 to 10,000 followers to some with millions of followers.¹⁹ If many creators post about similar topics, Instagram and TikTok recommendation algorithms may amplify the messages and further extend their reach. At the very least, seeding New York social media with newsy updates on- and offline creates an impression of ubiquity and omnipresence of the mayor’s office, as well as the sense that Mamdani and his team are hard at work for New Yorkers.

“Our job is to make government useful, accessible, and present in people’s lives, especially for communities kept furthest from the levers of power — across all neighborhoods, cultures, languages, and consumption habits,” Rowland wrote in an email. “Our team has built the blueprint for fulfilling the responsibility that City government has to reach and inform New Yorkers about services and how to access them, whether that’s reporting a pothole, signing up for a 2-K slot, re-enrolling in SNAP, visiting a jobs center, calling a mental health hotline, or filing a 311 report.”

After our working paper was published on August 28, the mayor’s office was accused of violating New York State’s 2025 Policy on Instant Electronic Messaging Records, which requires that digital messages that “document or relate to the decisions, actions, or policies of a City office or agency must be retained and transferred to a format and platform that allows for their proper preservation.” The policy also discourages the use of electronic messaging.²⁰

¹⁸ The New York City press credential rules provide that “the applicant must submit six (6) or more articles, commentaries, books, photographs, videos, films, or audios published, broadcast, or cablecast within the twenty-four (24) months immediately preceding the Standard Press Card application, sufficient to show that such applicant covered, in person, six (6) or more events occurring on separate days described in subdivision (a) of this section.” Rules of the City of New York, tit. 43, ch. 16, section 16-02, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/mome/pdf/43-RCNY-Chapter-16.pdf>.

¹⁹ Emine Kuzoren, Irem Kiris, and Ismail Erkan, “Less Is More! The Power of Micro-Influencers: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Journal of Global Business Insights* 10, no. 2 (2025): 150, <https://doi.org/10.5038/2640-6489.10.2.1302>.

²⁰ New York City Department of Records and Information Services, Policy on Instant Electronic Messaging Records, RMD-P-2025-01 (New York: Department of Records and Information Services, 2025), 1, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/records/pdf/2025-05-02%20Policy%20on%20Instant%20Electro%20nic%20Messages.pdf>.

Although disappearing messages had been enabled in the NYC Creators Announcements group for some time, city officials told us that the setting has been turned off since our paper appeared. Even when disappearing messages were turned on, they said, “the new media team retained substantive communications distributed to creators in this chat, including media toolkits, consistent with record retention policies established by the Department of Records and Information Services (DORIS).” In response to our follow-up questions, city officials said in an email that replies from creators have not been retained, adding that the “announcements chat is one-way.”

Political Relational Influencers

For the purposes of this paper, we define the group we discuss as “political relational influencers.” In their 2023 paper in the *International Journal of Communications*, Goodwin et al. define such figures as “content creators who promote political and social causes toward their audiences by expressing support for them and endorsing them implicitly or explicitly.”²¹ The group includes influencers who are remunerated and those who are not: “They are embedded in webs of coordination among campaigns, candidates, political strategists, influencer marketers, other influencers of lower or higher status as well as their own social media audiences.”²²

We also find useful Tuija Aalto & Meri Frig’s term “journalistic social media influencers” (JSMI), which the authors define as “media professionals who self-identify as both journalists and social media influencers, assemble livelihoods across multiple revenue streams and incorporate journalistic norms and ideals discursively into their branding practices.”²³

While the content creators we interviewed have some practices that are similar to those of journalists, they mostly did not self-identify as such.

Influencers thought to be cost effective

Using influencers to disseminate messages can be cost effective compared to traditional advertising, and can reach demographics that traditional media outlets struggle to access.

“If you spend \$50,000 on influencers, you can have ten influencers replicate your message,” Bayona, the former head of the mayor’s Office of Ethnic and Community Media, told us. “If you spend \$50,000 on TV ads, you get two TV ads, and you don’t know whether people are in front of the TV or in front of streaming services. Reach is cheaper now. Once Zohran Mamdani won, he elevated all of this, and here we are.”²⁴

²¹ Goodwin et al., “Political Relational Influencers,” 1616.

²² Goodwin et al., “Political Relational Influencers,” 1616.

²³ Tuija Aalto and Meri Frig, “Controversies over Journalistic Social Media Influencers: ‘Social Media Reality’ Practices Expanding the Boundaries of Journalism,” *Journalism Practice*, published online February 2026, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2612547>.

²⁴ Bayona, interview.

In 2021, New York City issued Local Law 83, which requires that a portion of city advertising be placed in ethnic and community media. The city publishes information about where the funds were spent. Bayona, who is now CEO of the consulting firm Grassroots Strategies, told us that he identified four influencer placements totaling \$568,590 between fiscal years 2023 and 2025 during the Adams administration, out of a total of \$130.9 million in all reported advertising in those years.²⁵ He cautioned that the figure is a floor rather than a total, since creators hired through an advertising agency do not appear in the records he consulted. Information on advertising spending for each outlet is not yet available, but in October we received a written statement from City Hall saying that in the period from 2024 to 2026, the Department of Transportation spent about \$15 million on traditional media and advertising, compared with \$109,000 on creator PSA campaigns.

The NYC Campaign Finance Board works with influencers as part of its mandate to reach underserved populations. Research by the board in 2019 identified neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens that were underserved for voter outreach and education. These neighborhoods often included residents with disabilities or low English proficiency.

A 2024 Pew survey found that audiences classified as low-income are more likely to get their news from influencers (26 percent) than those with higher incomes (16 percent).²⁶ Pew also reported that 38 percent of people aged 18 to 29 in the United States said they regularly get news from influencers on social media.²⁷

NYC Votes, an initiative of the Campaign Finance Board that provides practical information about voter registration and election dates, “was already really good at reaching voters who tend to turn out year after year, and influencers were a way to reach folks who weren’t already plugged in or following,”²⁸ said Goldstein, the board’s digital media strategist. “They’re reaching audiences we’re not reaching. We always ask about their audience breakdown — ages, location — so if we’re targeting youth, for example, we can confirm the fit, and we’re always looking for a large following in New York City.”

The influencers may fill a gap in the information ecosystem

For their part, many of the influencers we spoke to believe that transmitting information provided by the city and the mayor’s office is a public service and want to help. Some of them see themselves as filling a gap in the information ecosystem by providing and disseminating information that audiences would not otherwise be aware of.

²⁵ For information about Bayona’s consulting firm, see “About,” Grassroots NYC, <https://grassroots.nyc/about/>.

²⁶ Galen Stocking et al., *America’s News Influencers* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, November 18, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/11/18/americas-news-influencers/>. For a precise definition of how income is calculated, please see the methodology section of <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/11/18/news-influencers-methodology/>.

²⁷ Luxuan Wang and Naomi Forman-Katz, “News Influencers Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, November 4, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-influencers-fact-sheet/>.

²⁸ Goldstein, interview.

Sari Beth Rosenberg, a public school US history teacher, was one of the 200 influencers that the Democratic National Committee invited to attend the 2024 convention.²⁹ She has some 450,000 followers across multiple platforms and posts about history, political news, pop culture, her workout routine, and the importance of the teachers' union. She says she “occasionally” receives PAC money, which she discloses in her posts.

Rosenberg, who is a member of the Signal group, views herself as providing information that is no longer easily accessible because of the hollowing-out of local news and the way online algorithms work. “A lot of people are too busy to seek out news about New York City, but they might follow my content or someone else’s, and might engage with it more, so that it’s going to pop up on their feed more,” Rosenberg said.³⁰

Like Goodwin et al. (2023), we found that influencers were motivated by personal beliefs. They feel that their relationship with the city and the information they convey is useful and important for their followers. In their study of German influencers on YouTube, Fischer et al. describe this as “journalistic extension.” Influencers “commit themselves to journalistic ethics, but often with an alternative set of normative standards to fulfill traditional journalistic roles such as being a watchdog or giving voice to minorities — thereby embracing partiality to a greater extent than mainstream journalists.”³¹ In that sense, these influencers occupy common ground with the solutions journalism and civic journalism movements.

Another member of the NYC Creators Announcements group is José Vilson, an adjunct professor and education activist, who has a PhD in sociology and education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Vilson posts about politics, education, racial justice, and culture in New York City on his Instagram account, where he has around 12,000 followers. His posts include an interview with New York’s Chief Equity Officer, Afua Atta-Mensah; he has also posted about his conversations with legendary antitrust and competition scholar Lina Khan and Department of Consumer and Worker Protection Commissioner Sam Levine, both of which were arranged by the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection.

²⁹ Calder McHugh, “The Influencers Stanning Kamala—and Infuriating the Press along the Way,” *Politico Magazine*, August 22, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/08/22/influencers-kamala-harris-dnc-2024-00175915>.

³⁰ Sari Rosenberg, public school US history teacher in New York City and part-time digital content strategist for the American Federation of Teachers, interview by Anya Schiffrin and Wyatt Christlieb, Zoom, July 24, 2026.

³¹ Summer Harlow, “Recognising the Importance of Alternative Media,” *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1364139>, cited in Tasja-Selina Fischer, Castulus Kolo, and Cornelia Mothes, “Political Influencers on YouTube: Business Strategies and Content Characteristics,” *Media and Communication* 10, no. 1 (2022): 262, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4767>.

“The majority of us don’t want to *just* be associated with Zohran. We want to ask good questions because we care about the city,” Vilson said. He describes his followers as “working-class people [aged twenty to sixty] who are trying to make sense of what is happening out there in the world.”³²

Other influencers say their personal support for Mamdani is the reason they want to help. Diego León, another member of the Signal group, has a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education as well as a master’s in literacy education. He worked as a preschool teacher before realizing that he could make more money as a content creator. He began creating Instagram content in 2014 using the handle @dandyinthebronx. His posts focus on menswear and emphasize sharp dressing and being a role model for young, low-income Bronx residents.

“As a Latino teacher, I wanted to dress up,” León told us. “When I was learning how to dress myself, a lot of the other creators were white, and I didn’t see a lot of people that looked like me doing this.” During Mamdani’s election campaign, León was invited to a paper-shredding event in the Bronx that increased his enthusiasm for the candidate. León says that Mamdani has shown New Yorkers that they can have a better life, and that the videos Mamdani and his team post on Instagram effectively convey what the mayor is doing to improve the city. “I didn’t know about the government until Zohran showed up,” León said. “[Eric] Adams, [Bill] de Blasio, [Michael] Bloomberg were just guys on TV. What were our mayors doing for the last 30 years? These people literally did not exist to me.”³³

The city’s use of influencers is growing despite lack of uniform standards

While the influencers mentioned above say they are not paid for their coverage of the mayor and city policies, the academic literature notes that the definition of an influencer is fluid, and that they can straddle many roles.³⁴ The influencers we spoke with confirmed this. The universe of New York City influencers is a large one and, unsurprisingly, involves varying levels of engagement with the city and different forms of content. There are paid relationships and unpaid ones; there are informal and hybrid relationships.

Information about these relationships is closely guarded. Despite our repeated attempts, the influencer and advertising agencies that create the contracts between city agencies and influencers did not respond to our questions about them. After our working paper was published, the mayor’s office told us that they do not pay influencers and are not involved in the advertising agency contracts. This lack of

³² Jose Vilson, adjunct professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, and education activist in New York City, interview by Anya Schiffrin and Wyatt Christlieb, Zoom, July 10, 2026.

³³ Diego León, content creator and former preschool teacher with a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and a master’s in literacy education, interview by Anya Schiffrin and Wyatt Christlieb, Zoom, July 25, 2026.

³⁴ Aalto and Frig, “Controversies over Journalistic Influencers”; Goodwin et al., “Political Relational Influencers.”

transparency is noted in some recent studies and comes up frequently in debates about the role of journalistic social media influencers.³⁵

On payments

Perhaps the most important difference between journalists and influencers is that journalists are not ethically allowed to accept payment or gifts for their reporting. For this reason, our working paper sparked intense discussions as to whether and how influencers are getting paid. But our attempts to understand the paid campaigns were stymied by the way the city budget is presented.

There are no clear line items in New York City's budget regarding influencer payments. "The city's advertising records are organized around who received a payment, not around what kind of persuasion it bought," Bayona told us. "Influencer relationships that run through subcontracts, platform boosting, or no payment at all are structurally invisible in those records."³⁶

Influencers and city staffers told us that New York City agencies, working through intermediary marketing or advertising agencies, pay \$5,000 to \$20,000 per influencer campaign. A campaign may involve co-creating content that includes messages the agency wishes to promote. City agencies with small budgets are at a disadvantage, but may get free support from influencers who believe in their campaigns. The city hires influencers as independent contractors, which gives the influencers autonomy under New York State law and contributes to their freedom from editorial interference.³⁷

City officials and content creators told us that some influencers offer discounts or work for free because they want to support the mayor, and because they benefit from the traffic that comes from being associated with Mamdani. But some city employees said that having a smaller budget has meant they cannot easily convince influencers to work with them. "I do believe they are really helpful. Just haven't been able to get them to work for us generally with our very limited/nonexistent ad budget," a member of the Public Engagement Unit, which provides information about tenant and housing rights among other topics, told us via email.³⁸ Meanwhile, agencies with large followings can lure influencers to work for free because the influencers want the extra traffic.

Influencers we interviewed said that not being paid gives them freedom from editorial interference. "I have not received a dime, and I think that's fine," Vilson said. "It gets weird, for example, when you have a legit critique of someone who happens to be paying you. I would rather keep the lines clear, as someone thinking of social impact, as opposed to just content creation."³⁹

³⁵ Aalto and Frig, op. cit.

³⁶ Bayona, interview.

³⁷ Anonymous city employee

³⁸ Email to author

³⁹ Vilson, interview.

Fluid boundaries between journalism and content creation

The fluid definition of an influencer — and the similarly fluid boundaries between influencers and journalists — are complicated by the fact that many influencers occupy multiple roles.⁴⁰ This was confirmed in our interviews. Many influencers we spoke to also do other kinds of work, both paid and unpaid.

León likes to promote small businesses in the Bronx and Bronx-related events. When he was given two minutes with Mamdani during the campaign, he made four videos on different topics. León receives updates from the NYC Creators Announcements Signal group, and did a paid message through an agency about sanitation. He earns income from some Pokémon-related content and fashion campaigns, most of which are handled through agencies.

Allia Mohamed describes herself as an “accidental influencer.” A cofounder of the real estate startup Openigloo, she began by making videos explaining the ins and outs of New York real estate law as part of her efforts to promote her firm. While doing so, she found a large audience for her Instagram videos explaining New York rent regulations.

Interestingly, Mohamed adds a red PSA sticker to some of her posts.⁴¹ Historically, public service announcements were government releases of information of public importance; since the pandemic, the term has become widely used by social media influencers to signal that a message is important.⁴²

Is Access a Form of Remuneration?

Access to important figures has always been viewed as a form of currency in journalism.⁴³ Journalists need access to experts, government officials, and sources who can provide background information, original insights, and breaking news.⁴⁴

Interviews with renowned figures can boost circulation and elevate the profiles of the journalists who interview them. Historically, figures such as the *New York Times* columnists Flora Lewis and Thomas L. Friedman or the *Wall Street Journal*'s Karen Elliott House were considered celebrities in their own

⁴⁰ Lucia Bainotti, “The Composite Careers of Social Media Content Creators: Labour, Precarity and Identity,” in *The Hashtag Hustle: Law and Policy Perspectives on Working in the Influencer Economy*, ed. Taylor Annabell et al. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 32-49, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035332816.00008>.

⁴¹ Zichuan Mo and Meihan Zhou, “Don’t Like Them but Take What They Said: The Effectiveness of Virtual Influencers in Public Service Announcements,” *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research* 19, no. 3 (2024): 2269-88, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer19030110>.

⁴² Jennifer Manganello, Amy Bleakley, and Patrick Schumacher, “Pandemics and PSAs: Rapidly Changing Information in a New Media Landscape,” *Health Communication* 35, no. 14 (2020): 1711-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1839192>.

⁴³ Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

⁴⁴ Anya Schiffrin, ed., *Bad News: How America’s Business Press Missed the Story of the Century* (New York: New Press, 2012); Dean Starkman, *The Watchdog That Didn’t Bark: The Financial Crisis and the Disappearance of Investigative Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Gans, *Deciding What’s News*.

right, but also ridiculed for being too friendly with the people they covered. Access journalism can also lead to “cognitive capture,” in which journalists become so close to their sources that they begin to take on their worldviews.⁴⁵

In their 2025 paper, Elizabeth Dubois and Katharine Dommett note that there are different forms of compensation for influencers, and cite Lopez et al. (2022), which points out that access is one form of compensation.⁴⁶

Indeed, in the world of online influencers, it may be even easier than it was in the days of print media to discern the effect of access on audience size and behavior. Newsstand sales are generally taken into consideration when deciding whom to put on the covers of magazines such as *Vanity Fair* or *Time*. Today, influencers are well aware of how various kinds of content affect their audience numbers, engagement, and potential for monetization.

Although influencers in the mayor’s office Signal group do not receive direct payments, their proximity to the mayor can enhance their views and engagement, and could be considered a form of nonmonetary compensation.⁴⁷ Zohran Mamdani’s star power and immense popularity are also attractive: “It always helps when the most popular mayor in the country is front and center of your video,” Vilson noted.⁴⁸

In a statement in September, the mayor’s office disagreed, writing, “Political content increasingly jeopardizes creators’ ability to secure brand deals.”⁴⁹

Understanding why trust and credibility are important

A key question about influencers is whether they actually have influence, and if so, what makes them credible, and in which domains. On social media, the mood or tone conveyed by an influencer can have more power for audiences than the actual content of their messages.⁵⁰

In his pioneering research on media trust, Carl I. Hovland and colleagues at the Yale Communication Research Program studied what made an idea or piece of information persuasive to audiences.⁵¹ They

⁴⁵ Schiffrin, *Bad News*.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Dubois and Katharine Dommett, “Reconceptualising Political Influencers: An Alternative Means of Definition and Analysis,” *New Media & Society* 28, no. 10 (2026): 5749-67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251395272>; M. López, M. Sicilia, and P. W. Verlegh, “How to Motivate Opinion Leaders to Spread e-WoM on Social Media: Monetary vs. Non-Monetary Incentives,” *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing* 16, no. 1 (2022): 154–71

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Max Alexander Weber for making the observation that interviews with the mayor or top city officials can be viewed as a form of payment in kind.

⁴⁸ Vilson, interview.

⁴⁹ Emilia Rowland, director of new media and cultural communications, and Hamaad Najam, deputy press secretary, NYC Office of the Mayor, written statement to Anya Schiffrin.

⁵⁰ Fischer, Kolo, and Mothes, “Political Influencers on YouTube,” 259-71.

⁵¹ Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953).

found that people are persuaded by new information because they trust the source, and they assumed that persuasion was an indication of trust. Source, message content, and audience characteristics are three of the main elements of trust.

In their paper “Political Trust and Trustworthiness,” Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker argue that trust is relational, as it involves someone else, and usually conditional. It is possible to trust partially, but not wholly.⁵² It’s not clear how trust can be restored once it is gone, or whether trust in media can exist in the absence of trust in other institutions. Nor is it clear whether trust can be generalized from “specific” to “diffuse” — that is to say, from one familiar media outlet to the press as a whole.⁵³ People tend to trust what they consume more than other sources.⁵⁴ It’s not clear, however, what role selection bias plays — whether people migrate to news sources they trust, whether regular consumption of news builds trust, or perhaps both.⁵⁵

At a time of declining trust in institutions, including the media, scholars have studied the question of why audiences trust influencers, and under what circumstances. Influencers are credited with being particularly trusted by young people.⁵⁶ Julia Angwin finds that many influencers work hard to build that trust with their audiences, often by showing their work or calling out other influencers, who they say are violating users’ “trust.”⁵⁷

Looking at the professionalization of journalism that took place a century ago, scholar Michael Schudson noted that in an era of partisan journalism, professionalization was a way of freeing journalists from political and commercial pressures.⁵⁸

Professionalization of journalism and objective reporting became both a response to propaganda and a viable business model. The idea of professional journalism was built on the Enlightenment model of trust, along with verification and replication. Journalists’ responsibility to provide accurate and objective information to their readers was at the core of the profession, and was expected to engender trust in the media in return.

⁵² Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker, “Political Trust and Trustworthiness,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000): 475-507.

⁵³ Levi and Stoker, “Political Trust.”

⁵⁴ Andrew Daniller et al., “Measuring Trust in the Press in a Changing Media Environment,” *Communication Methods and Measures* 11, no. 1 (2017): 76-85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2016.1271113>; Pew Research Center, “Press Widely Criticized, but Trusted More than Other Information Sources,” September 22, 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions/>.

⁵⁵ Yariv Tsfati, “Online News Exposure and Trust in the Mainstream Media: Exploring Possible Associations,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 54, no. 1 (2010): 22-42.

⁵⁶ Darien Harff and Desirée Schmuck, “Influencers as Empowering Agents? Following Political Influencers, Internal Political Efficacy and Participation among Youth,” *Political Communication* 40, no. 2 (2023): 147-72.

⁵⁷ Julia Angwin, “The Future of Trustworthy Information: Learning from Online Content Creators,” Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, December 9, 2024, <https://shorensteincenter.org/resource/future-trustworthy-information-learning-online-content-creators/>.

⁵⁸ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

For influencers, credibility and trust are not just important for building and keeping an audience; they are essential to their financial model.⁵⁹ Earning revenue is necessary, as many influencers lead a life of precarity, cobbling together a living from multiple activities, while a select few make substantial amounts of money.⁶⁰

Nile Berry describes himself as a video journalist. He posts explainer videos across social media, many of which are about New York real estate. He says his 150,000 followers are mostly male and aged between 25 and 40; many work in finance and real estate.

Berry told us that the AI era has made reliable sources even more attractive to audiences. Content like his, which is based on deep research, has an advantage, he said. “People trust people, and if you have an established brand that cultivates a consistent sense of trustworthiness and reliability, people believe you until you give them a reason not to,” he said, adding that, “In a world of slop, people don’t want to listen to AI voices” if they don’t know who is actually speaking: “There’s an immediate negative reaction to faceless content.”

The Authenticity Paradox

The paradox of influencer credibility was noted by some of the people we interviewed: Credibility comes because a message — or a messenger — is trusted, but many influencers and content creators are paid for posts that are designed to look independent and authentic.

“Influencer-created content will look more like something that isn’t paid,” one communications staffer who works with influencers said. “If we’re boosting a video of an influencer talking to a camera, people are more likely to stop and watch without realizing it’s an ad. It’s a little sneaky, but that’s the idea — it’s good to have a mix of content types in our ad campaigns so we get information about what performs better.”⁶¹

While some paid promotions are clearly labeled as such, others are not. Aalto and Frig argue that there is an inherent tension in the practice of “journalistic influencers” because their authenticity and credibility comes from something that is paid for. When the influencers were asked how they navigate this tension, they referred to their own values and ethical standards in choosing what to promote, as well as to platform guidelines on labeling and transparency.⁶²

We found that labeling is inconsistent. NYC Health + Hospitals uses a #paidpartnership hashtag for announcements such as actor Gracie Mercedes encouraging menopausal women to make doctor

⁵⁹ Martin J. Riedl, Josephine Lukito, and Samuel C. Woolley, “Political Influencers on Social Media: An Introduction,” *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 2 (2023): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177938>.

⁶⁰ Zoe Glatt, “‘We’re All Told Not to Put Our Eggs in One Basket’: Uncertainty, Precarity and Cross-Platform Labor in the Online Video Influencer Industry,” *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022): 3853-71, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/15761>.

⁶¹ Anonymous city agency employee

⁶² Aalto and Frig, “Journalistic Social Media Influencers.”

appointments.⁶³ This label is used by Instagram to comply with FTC disclosure requirements surrounding branded content, and appears under the influencer's username for the entire length of the video.⁶⁴ A video in which social media creator Clarence Angelo talks about going to the Pride Parade and telling people about vaccines and other health services also has a #paidpartnership label.⁶⁵ The Campaign Finance Board uses #nycvotespartner, while influencers promoting the Civic Engagement Commission used @nyccec and/or #thePeoplesMoney.⁶⁶

Measuring Impact

Communication scholars have spent a century debating how to measure the effects of audience exposure to different kinds of messaging. Often, the difficulty is one of attribution of outcomes to a particular variable. Given that people are exposed to multiple messages in multiple mediums, it can be difficult to know which variable is dispositive. This is certainly true in the case of New York City messaging campaigns, where influencers are only one part of the distribution model. Canvassing, tabling, interviews with journalists, and signs on subways and kiosks around the city as well as advertisements on social media may all be deployed in addition to influencers.

For space reasons, we cannot delve deeply into the communications literature on impact, but it is important to note that there is a difference between raising awareness and getting people to take action.⁶⁷ While prompting audiences to take action after seeing a message is the goal, it is nearly impossible to track. Therefore, "engagement" is the metric used to evaluate the "impact" of influencers working with New York City.

Focus on Engagement Rates

Scholars have researched how to define engagement and proposed different metrics for understanding it.⁶⁸ The people we interviewed say they focus on their engagement rate, which they define as audiences

⁶³ Gracie Mercedes (@grasiemercedes), "Nobody taught our moms about perimenopause. They just thought something was wrong with them.," Instagram, July 1, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DaNpYW3R1IS/>

⁶⁴ "When you tag a brand in your post for the first time, a request is sent to the brand. You'll be notified once the brand partner approves your request. When your request is approved by the brand, you'll be able to start tagging the brand in your posts and their brand name will appear in the Paid partnership with label." Instagram Help Center, "How to use the paid partnership label to tag organic branded content on Instagram," <https://help.instagram.com/1109894795810258/>.

⁶⁵ clarence angelo (@clarenceangelo), "little new york life update :) + happy pride !! sharing this resource for the new york gyals !!," Instagram, June 30, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DaOYp81JdBq/>.

⁶⁶ Jaeki Cho (@jaekicho), "Do local elections actually affect your life?," Instagram, June 4, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DZLaun3TNDG/>; Diego León (@dandyinthebronx), "BRONX! GO VOTE! We have a real chance to decide what happens in our neighborhoods," Instagram, June 12, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DZffvNhuTTu/>; Dasha Kofman (@dashakofman), "Which project are you voting for? Make your voice heard! @nyccec," Instagram, June 2, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DZFidjiKNpz/>.

⁶⁷ James Kite et al., "A Model of Social Media Effects in Public Health Communication Campaigns: Systematic Review," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 25 (2023): e46345.

⁶⁸ Mariapina Trunfio and Simona Rossi, "Conceptualising and Measuring Social Media Engagement: A Systematic Literature Review," *Italian Journal of Marketing* 2021, no. 3 (2021): 267-92, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43039-021-00035-8>.

reacting in some visible way to their messages, such as with a heart or a like. They noted that one of the limitations of traditional advertising is that it is difficult or impossible to gauge audience reactions. So, while engagement rates online do not reveal audience behavior after exposure to a message, they do indicate something about audience response. According to Goldstein, “Because each influencer has a different audience makeup, we mostly look at engagement rate, calculated based on their specific audience. As a rough guideline, 4 percent is strong, while 8 percent would be excellent.”⁶⁹

Goldstein noted that the impact of digital content created by influencers was easy to measure against more traditional ads. “We use a mix of designed posts, more traditional content, and influencer-created content, which is more lo-fi and native to the platform,” she said. “We think that works well because it uses a micro-celebrity, which is a bonus, and looks like something you’d already see on social media, which may feel more authentic.”⁷⁰

Compared to traditional advertising, where it is hard to know if a purchase is made after watching or reading an ad, it is, of course, easier to measure online whether someone clicks on a website after being exposed to influencer content. The Campaign Finance Board can track website visits, but privacy laws affect what data government agencies are allowed to track and collect from citizens.

“There are some people who are really good at getting views, likes, or comments from real people who don’t do anything afterwards,” Mohamed, the self-described accidental influencer, said. “The video doesn’t motivate them to do anything afterwards. Other influencers get fewer views, but people go and do something afterwards, like register to vote.”⁷¹ Mohamed said that, in her experience, Instagram is most effective for raising awareness and reaching a large audience, but TikTok is much better at getting people to act.

The intermediary handling influencer hiring for a city agency often includes a list of required metrics in the contract. Influencers may be asked to provide data on their audience size, engagement rates, and information about when their viewers stop watching, known as the dropoff rate.

Timing Is Everything

The city agencies that hire influencers for paid campaigns give careful consideration to when their messages are posted. Releasing a message too early can seem forced or inauthentic, but posting it too late often means that audiences may not see it.

Berry, the journalist-influencer who covers New York real estate, said that most people will quickly stop watching online videos if they aren’t compelling enough. “If you don’t hook people in the first two

⁶⁹ Goldstein, interview.

⁷⁰ Goldstein, interview.

⁷¹ Allia Mohamed, co-founder of OpenIgloo and social media influencer, interview by Anya Schiffrin, Wyatt Christlieb, and Max Weber, Zoom.

seconds, they're not going to listen to the full story, and usually the more complicated stuff, the critical nuance, requires you to explain a few things to set it up," he said. That means that by the time influencers reach the heart of their message or argument, "people will have already dropped off."⁷²

It's harder — though sometimes possible — to find out if audiences take any action after watching a video on social media. Mohamed pointed to a video she made that directed people to the Division of Housing and Community Renewal website, which provides building rental histories. After her post, she said, so many people visited the website that it crashed.⁷³

Berry's account of dropoff rates is sobering. One of the people we spoke to said that a little dance often ensues between influencers and city agencies who want their message aired in the early part of a video. Creators often resist this kind of scripting. Under Adams, according to influencers and others we spoke to, communications officials provided more guidelines as to editorial content, while Mamdani staffers tend to be more hands-off. "I've never been told what to say, or given a deadline," Vilson noted.⁷⁴

While a city agency can create parameters for influencers, they are not supposed to dictate editorial content because influencers are contractors, not employees. Powerful creators can also refuse to sign a contract if it's not to their liking. "Creator independence is like that of journalists. Just like journalists will say, 'I won't share an article before publication,' the creators will say, 'I won't share the video in advance,'" the employee said.

⁷² Nile Berry, New York City real estate journalist-influencer, interview by Anya Schiffrin and Wyatt Christlieb, Zoom, July 27, 2026.

⁷³ Mihir Zaveri, "Is Your Landlord Overcharging You? This TikTok Shows How to Find Out," New York Times, February 29, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/29/nyregion/tiktok-rent-history-landlord.html>.

⁷⁴ Vilson, interview.

1. Which city agencies are working with influencer

The New York City government includes a number of agencies tasked with providing information to New Yorkers as well as government agencies that provide a particular service and also do public outreach. Since Mamdani became mayor, some of these agencies have been reorganized, while others have piloted efforts to work with influencers. It's a fast-evolving ecosystem and, at this writing, there is no one agency overseeing city-wide government interaction with influencers. The de Blasio and Adams administrations also created different communications and engagement offices, so the city has several existing bodies with similar names.

The city websites are not terribly informative and don't include basic information such as number of employees, annual budget, office address. We found many city agencies don't reply to email. Therefore, one of the contributions of this paper is providing information about some of the government agencies that handle communication and outreach and work with content creators.

In the Mamdani administration, some key players working with influencers are:

New Media and Cultural Communications is part of the Mayor's office and runs the unpaid influencer Signal group which came out of the campaign for the Mayor's election. This group is a department within the mayor's larger communications team. Staffers include:

- Emilia Rowland, director of new media and cultural communications, New York City Mayor's Office. She built the list of influencers who receive daily updates, press releases, video clips, and livestreams about what the city and mayor are doing.
- Emily Minster, who has been referred to as the "influencer whisperer," was appointed to the Office of NYC Mayor Mamdani as a deputy press secretary for new media and creative partnerships in July 2026. Previously she worked as communications director for Congressman-elect Brad Lander.
- Hamaad Najam, who started in January 2026, is the other deputy secretary for new media. He was a press staffer on the Mamdani campaign and worked with Rowland on the transition. Before that, he was an account executive at PR firm Berlin Rosen.

- Natasha Kersey joined Emilia’s team as deputy press secretary for new media and Black media in July 2026 after serving as deputy press secretary at the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development.
- Decota Letman serves as deputy press secretary for ethnic and community media. She also works with the many new media outlets, community pages, and creators reaching the city’s diaspora and immigrant communities, cultures, and neighborhoods in the languages they speak. Before joining the mayor’s communications team, she worked in entertainment, business, and cultural PR.

In response to our working paper, the mayor’s office sent a note saying: “We have never paid a creator, sponsored a post, boosted content, or purchased placement, and we have no budget from which to do so.”

The New York City Office of Mass Engagement was founded on January 2, 2026, with an executive order from Mayor Mamdani. According to the order, the **Public Engagement Unit** will now report to the Office of Mass Engagement and the **NYC Office of Civic Engagement will be discontinued**.⁷⁵ The director of the New York City Office of Mass Engagement is Tascha Van Auken, who ran Mamdani’s field campaign in 2025. Under the 2027 budget, released in July 2026, the office has a budget of \$5.5 million. The agency recruits volunteers who want to canvass, staff tables, and do text banking to reach New Yorkers. Jagpreet Singh is the first deputy commissioner at the Office of Mass Engagement. We did not receive a response to our repeated attempts to make contact or requests for comment.

The office website does not include information about the number of employees at the agency, but offers sign-up links for people who want to help with canvassing. In July 2026, the office announced a new campaign to talk to tenants about housing conditions in New York, and put out a call for volunteers to canvass in person.⁷⁶ New Yorkers can sign up to get involved with this work at the office’s LinkedIn page.^{77 78}

⁷⁵ Zohran Mamdani, Mayor of New York City, Executive Order 07, “Office of Mass Engagement,” January 2, 2026, <https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2026/01/executive-order-07>.

⁷⁶ NYC Mayor’s Office of Mass Engagement, “Talk to Tenants,” n.d., <https://www.nyc.gov/content/organize/pages/talk-to-tenants>.

⁷⁷ NYC Mayor’s Office of Mass Engagement, LinkedIn company page, accessed October 11, 2026, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/nyc-mayor-s-office-of-mass-engagement/>; NYC Mayor’s Office of Mass Engagement, “Organize NYC,” accessed October 11, 2026, <https://organize.nyc.gov>.

⁷⁸ [In the expense budget for FY 2027, the payroll and nonpayroll spending for OME is summarized on page 3E, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/omb/downloads/pdf/adopt26/erc6-26.pdf>. It’s budgeted for \$5.5 million total. There is also a breakdown of the OTPS spending on page 9E.]

The Office of Engagement was created by Mayor Eric Adams in December 2022 and discontinued by Mayor Mamdani’s executive order establishing the new Office of Mass Engagement.⁷⁹ What goes around comes around; when it was founded, the office of engagement was intended to streamline various engagement efforts and oversee the **Public Engagement Unit**.⁸⁰

The **Public Engagement Unit**, with offices on lower Broadway in Manhattan, was founded in 2015 by Mayor Bill de Blasio.⁸¹ The PEU uses phone banking, text banking, canvassing, and tabling to let New Yorkers know about benefits such as SNAP, Fair Fares, and rent laws. As a city agency, it can target eligible New Yorkers and help steer them to the departments where they can obtain benefits. The website describes the PEU’s services as “comprehensive case management.”⁸²

The New York City Civic Engagement Commission was created in 2018 under Mayor de Blasio, and approved by a voter ballot initiative with the intent to promote “creative initiatives and foster partnerships” to enhance civic trust and strengthen democracy in New York City.⁸³

According to director of public affairs Jorwell Perez, the commission is an independent entity with commissioners appointed by the borough presidents, the mayor, and the City Council speaker.

The commission has 25 full-time employees, including one in Public Affairs (a second Public Affairs worker is a consultant). In 2026, Perez piloted a program called The People’s Money that uses influencers to spread information about the city’s Participatory Budgeting Process.⁸⁴ His office worked with five influencers and partnered with the Harlem ice cream shop Sugar Hill Creamery, which launched a new flavor of ice cream as part of an effort to encourage New Yorkers to get involved in the participatory budgeting process. The program’s slogan was: “4 million dollars, 5 boroughs, 20 projects.”⁸⁵

⁷⁹ NYC Mayor’s Office, “Mayor Adams Establishes First-Ever Office of Engagement, Streamlines City’s Civic Engagement Efforts,” press release, December 13, 2022, <https://www.nyc.gov/mayors-office/news/2022/12/mayor-adams-establishes-first-ever-office-engagement-streamlines-city-s-civic-engagement-efforts>; Mamdani, *Executive Order 07*.

⁸⁰ Samar Khurshid, “Adams Consolidates City’s Civic Engagement Efforts under New Office,” *Gotham Gazette*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/11763-mayor-adams-nyc-civic-voter-engagement/>.

⁸¹ Mayor’s Public Engagement Unit, “About PEU,” NYC.gov, n.d., <https://www.nyc.gov/site/mayorspeu/about-peu/about-peu.page>.

⁸² Mayor’s Public Engagement Unit, “About PEU.”

⁸³ New York City Civic Engagement Commission, “Resolution of the Civic Engagement Commission,” September 30, 2020, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/civicengagement/downloads/pdf/cec-resolution-20200930.pdf>; New York City Civic Engagement Commission, 2025 Annual Report (New York: Civic Engagement Commission, December 31, 2025), 62, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/civicengagement/downloads/pdf/CEC-2025-Annual-Report-Final.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Jorwell Perez, director of public affairs at the Civic Engagement Commission, interview by Anya Schiffrin, Zoom, June 2026.

⁸⁵ Civic Engagement Commission (@nyccec), “We are beyond thrilled to be partnering with @sugarhillicecream to bring you a delicious, limited-edition matcha mango mochi flavor to enjoy throughout this People’s Money Vote season!,” Instagram, May 14, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DYU33pJDDUN/>.

Perez expects that more agencies will start using influencers and is keen to share lessons learned. Influencers were paid for their involvement in The People’s Money campaign, and Sugar Hill Creamery was reimbursed for the cost of the ice cream. The Commission’s budget for implementing “winning ideas” from the campaign is approximately \$4 million. The budget for influencers is separate and is a small fraction of that amount, Perez told us.

The **New York City Campaign Finance Board** is an independent nonpartisan agency. Part of its mandate is to provide election-related information to underserved communities. In addition to buying adverts on television and radio and working with journalists, the agency sometimes hires influencers to assist with its campaigns.

For example, the group may use online influencers to reach voters in neighborhoods with historically low voting rates and those who face higher barriers to participation, such as voters under 30 and those who primarily speak a language other than English. Recent campaigns include getting people to register to vote and reminding unaffiliated voters that they must update their party affiliation in order to vote in primaries.

Any one campaign may have between 8 and 15 influencers and last as long as a year. Some examples of social media accounts that worked with the Campaign Finance Board are Shop Cats (@Shopcats), which is about bodega cats in NYC, and Good Dogs (@gooddogshow), which is mostly about dogs. Both accounts include voter information in their Instagram videos, but it is not the main subject of their postings.

In one Shopcats video, influencer Michelladonna visits a bodega and talks to the shop cat. In Spanish, she then mentions to the bodega owner that “voting is how neighborhoods speak their voice ... we had a record turnout at the last elections.”⁸⁶

In a Good Dog video, the influencer Sofia Dobrushin walks a dog, talks about voting, and asks passersby questions to test their knowledge about upcoming elections.⁸⁷

The Campaign Finance Board hires specialized agencies to hire the influencers, issue their contracts, and work with them on deliverables. In 2026, the board put out a call for an agency to manage its work with influencers. The start date is August 1, 2026, and the end date is 2029; the funding provided is \$1.5 million over three years. This sum, of course, includes overhead and fees for the intermediary agency, in addition to direct payments to influencers.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Shop Cats (@shopcats), “Meet Cookie in the South Bronx. We had a historic voter turnout last year,” Instagram, June 17, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DZsaAYRsO-v/>.

⁸⁷ Good Dog (@gooddogshow), “Adopt Torpedo @bideawee ! NYC’s newest New Yorker surveyed the streets in a hard hat learning,” Instagram, June 17, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DZsQMMORTmi/>.

⁸⁸ New York City Campaign Finance Board, Solicitation for Influencer Management Vendor, PIN 004202600011 (New York: Campaign Finance Board, March 16, 2026), 2, <https://www.nycfb.info/media/2200/fy2026-solicitation-for-influencer-management-agency.pdf>.

Advertising agencies under citywide contracts that work with influencers and process payments

The City of New York works with a group of advertising and marketing agencies that place advertisements on behalf of city agencies and manage influencer relationships under citywide media placement contracts. This may include locating and hiring influencers, issuing contracts and payments, working with the influencers on the content they deliver, and monitoring the impact of that content. Some information about their contracts is available in city documents online.

A selection of the major advertising/marketing groups that work with influencers in New York City:

- Bandujo Advertising + Design, Inc.
- Creative Jugos, run by Olivia Rios, has had multiple contracts with the Department of Social Services for social media and content creation.
- d expósito & partners, LLC.
- Malone Creative Group, LLC
- OpAD Media
- Sound Communications, Inc.
- Venus Media, LLC
- Wolfe-Doyle Advertising, Inc.

City contracts can be viewed online at <https://a0333-passportpublic.nyc.gov/contracts.html>

We did not get a response from the agencies we attempted to contact. We were told that their contracts with the city forbid them from speaking to outside entities about their contract with the city or from disclosing information.

2. Regulating Influencers —a comparative look at emerging legislation

Much city government practice concerning influencer editorial content and disclosure of relationships seems to come from tacit understandings and personal relationships, as well as from contractual arrangements with third-party agencies. Our interviews found that regulations governing city-influencer relationships are unclear and poorly understood. We found a lack of standards as to disclosure and transparency, and a lack of knowledge about what laws, if any, apply.

By promoting consistent and comprehensive laws on the disclosure of influencers' partnerships and regulating their content, we believe that New York City could set the standard for other governments working with influencers to provide useful, accurate, and trustworthy information about public services. This is important not only for New York, but also for society at large.

Why Regulate?

By Joseph E. Striglitz

A natural question is: Why regulate at all? Doesn't any regulation infringe on principles of free speech? Influencers are similar to advertisers and social media, and there are well-established principles for regulating both, most of which transfer directly to influencers — or should do so. For instance, because advertisers can influence behavior and because it is costly to distinguish truthful from false information, we proscribe deliberately false and inaccurate information; this should be the case whether it comes from a corporation or an influencer.

Of course, that leaves most advertising and influencing untouched. The Marlboro Man's suggestion that smoking that brand would make one manly was clearly false, but the ads never explicitly said that; it was left to our imagination. Knowing that the "information" is coming from a cigarette company helps us interpret the message. That's why, more generally, there needs to be transparency in funding. But that may not suffice. Many unpaid influencers are partially organized by others to spread a message. Should that assistance be disclosed? And how is that different from any government department organizing a press conference to help spread word of a new program?

Regulations on social media and the press extend to harmful speech such as hate speech. Is there any reason that influencers — who can reach millions — shouldn't be subject to the same strictures?

Trust and social cohesion are critical for societies to function. We live in a world of growing polarization and mass distrust in institutions and news organizations, much of which has been fostered by President Donald Trump. Standardizing how influencer collaborations are carried out could be an important step toward rebuilding public trust and restricting the weaponization of influencers in politics, especially during elections.

Clear accounting for government spending is important. In 2025, the Irish Electoral Commission began working with influencers to spread information to young voters and other groups that don't consume traditional media. In addition to attending music festivals and visiting universities, the commission hired influencers to encourage people to vote. "We apply the EU principles of transparency and disclosure," the commission's chief executive, Art O'Leary, said. But he noted that all

Irish government agencies must provide public reports describing the effectiveness of their programs. “You can’t just toss money into a black hole,” he said in a recent phone interview. “You must account for how you spend taxpayer money.”⁸⁹

Gaps and Recommendations

In this section, we survey some laws regulating political relational influencers in other countries, as well as US regulatory gaps, and conclude with recommendations for New York. This is a relatively new field, and there are many gray areas that will be hard to regulate. As mentioned earlier, there have been multiple efforts to define influencers, and definitions matter. Laws based on the size of an influencer’s following have their limitations. For example, an influencer could have a relatively small following, yet one of their posts could still go viral. Monitoring all posts is burdensome, though AI could make this easier. If there are constraints on what can be done, the regulatory focus should be on the influencers with the largest audiences and those with records of abuse.

Generally, influencers may be regulated by political advertising and/or consumer protection laws aimed at shielding consumers from fraud. However, in the United States, researchers have pointed out the regulatory gap between the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Election Commission. While the FTC requires disclosure of payments for online promotion of commercial products and services and for unpaid relationships, there is no requirement for disclosure of payments to influencers involved in political campaigning.⁹⁰ We believe that this is an important regulatory gap that must be addressed.

In June 2026, California Congressman Mark Takano, a Democrat, proposed a new law, the Promoting Authenticity with Influencer Disclaimer (PAID) Act. It would amend the 1971 federal election law to require any person paid by a political candidate or committee to clearly disclose that in their communication.⁹¹

But if, as we believe, it is important to follow the money, to know in all cases who is being paid for making what statements and by whom, why should it matter if the person being paid is an influencer or advertiser, or if the message is spread over the internet or via legacy media?

In September 2026, California strengthened its 2023 disclosure law requiring paid political influencers to disclose their compensation. Regulators can impose a fine of \$5,000 per violation on influencers

⁸⁹ Art O’Leary, chief executive of the Irish Electoral Commission, interview by Anya Schiffrin, telephone.

⁹⁰ Max Weber, “How to Close the Federal Election Commission’s Dark Money Loophole,” Tech Policy Press, July 20, 2026, <https://www.techpolicy.press/the-federal-election-commissions-dark-money-loophole/>; Ken Bensinger, “Political Money Is Flowing to Influencers. But from Whom?” New York Times, May 16, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/16/business/media/influencers-political-financing-disclosure.html>.

⁹¹ Promoting Authenticity with Influencer Disclaimers Act, H.R. 9110, 119th Cong., 2d sess. (June 2, 2026), <https://www.govinfo.gov/bulkdata/BILLS/119/2/hr/BILLS-119hr9110ih.xml>.

who do not properly disclose.⁹² In 2024, Texas passed a rule requiring disclosure of payments of more than \$100 to post or repost political advertisements.⁹³

New York State has disclosure requirements for paid political advertising online, as well as rules about what sorts of advertisements can be posted before elections. In 2025, State Senator Liz Krueger (D-District 28) proposed a bill that would require content creators to disclose which social media posts are paid for by a campaign, and give the state board of elections some authority to implement regulations.⁹⁴ The bill, S2437/A3929, was cosponsored by Assemblymember Jeffrey Dinowitz, and would require a “paid for” label on influencer materials supporting a candidate or ballot proposal. The bill remains in committee. A 2026 law requires disclosure of the use of AI-generated images in advertising.⁹⁵

Social media platforms have their own guidelines and requirements on disclosure of branded content, but it’s not clear how this applies to creator content that is not clearly part of a paid promotion.⁹⁶ Furthermore, platform guidelines can change without warning, and their degree of enforcement is often obscure, so they are not a sufficient substitute for government regulation.

Our research finds that, as in federal law, there is a regulatory gap in New York State that should be addressed. Clarification of disclosure regulations is important, but more than disclosure may be required. “This is the Wild West right now, and people are coming up with the rules themselves,” Rosenberg, the history teacher and influencer, said. “I truly believe there need to be standards and federal policy around this. There are so many loopholes.”⁹⁷

⁹² Sophie Austen, “California May Fine Content Creators Who Don't Disclose They Were Paid to Post about Politics,” KPBS Public Media, August 10, 2026, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/politics/2026/08/10/california-may-fine-content-creators-who-dont-disclose-they-were-paid-to-post-about-politics>.

⁹³ Robert Downen, “Texas Ethics Commission Will Require Influencers to Disclose When They're Paid for Advertisement,” Texas Tribune, June 18, 2024, <https://www.texastribune.org/2024/06/18/texas-ethics-commission-influencers-political-ads/>; Austen, “California May Fine.”

⁹⁴ N.Y. State Senate, S. 2437, 2025–2026 Reg. Sess., January 17, 2025, <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S2437/amendment/original>.

⁹⁵ Office of Governor Kathy Hochul, “Governor Hochul Announces First-in-the-Nation Law Requiring Disclosure When Advertisements Include AI-Generated Synthetic Performers Is in Effect,” June 9, 2026, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-first-nation-law-requiring-disclosure-when-advertisements-include-ai>; New York State Board of Elections, “Notice to Filers Regarding Changes to New York State Election Law Relating to Political Advertisements,” accessed October 12, 2026, <https://elections.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2023/11/noticetofilersrepoliticalads.pdf>.

⁹⁶ TikTok. “Branded Content Policy.” Last modified November 2023.

<https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/bc-policy/en>; Instagram, “Branded Content Policies,” Instagram Help Center, <https://help.instagram.com/1695974997209192>.

⁹⁷ Rosenberg, interview.

When it comes to disclosure, the people we interviewed, including those who hire influencers, seemed uncertain as to what laws exist and suggested that consistent rules about disclosure of paid relationships would be a good idea.

“When we have a paid relationship, I don’t know that we include a direct ad disclosure,” one marketing person from a city agency said. “Those videos tend to be integrated into our organic social, and not categorized as an advertisement. My understanding is, when we pay an influencer and it’s not an ad, then it’s a different thing. Influencer marketing is still undefined and still a new frontier.”⁹⁸

The civic engagement office, which worked with influencers and the Harlem ice cream shop Sugar Hill Creamery to promote participatory budgeting, said it has paid influencers for posts, but that the influencers don’t disclose this. “It’s informal,” one staffer said, adding that this could change in the future. Asked whether there are disclosure laws in New York, he said he didn’t know.⁹⁹

Table 2. U.S. Regulatory Landscape

Jurisdiction	Key Provisions
Federal (FTC)	Requires disclosure of payment for commercial promotion online — the general framework for influencer marketing disclosure, but not written with political speech in mind (Weber 2026; Bensinger 2026).
Federal (FEC)	In 2023, exempted paid influencer content from the definition of “advertising” when updating its internet activity rules; two Democratic commissioners dissented, leaving political influencer payments undisclosed.
Federal Legislation	Rep. Mark Takano’s draft 2026 bill, H.R. 9110, would require disclaimers on communications paid for by a political committee (Monnin 2026).
New York State	Sen. Krueger / Asm. Dinowitz bill (S2437/A3929) would require a “paid for” label on influencer content supporting a candidate or ballot measure.
California	2023 law requires disclosure of paid political influencer content; in September, Governor Gavin Newsom signed legislation that would give the FPPC direct authority to fine violators up to \$5,000 per violation, bypassing the court process (Bensinger 2026).
Texas	In 2024, the Texas Ethics Commission approved rules requiring influencers to disclose when they are paid more than \$100 to post or repost political ads (Downen 2024; Austin 2026).

Sources: Weber, Tech Policy Press, 2026; Bensinger, New York Times, 2026; Monnin, NOTUS, 2026; New York State Senate, S2437/A3929, 2025; Austin, Associated Press, 2026; Downen, Texas Tribune, 2024.

⁹⁸ Anonymous city employee

⁹⁹ Anonymous city employee

European Laws

The European Union has laws that cover consumer protection and disclosure of political advertising, and some countries have rules regarding political influencers.¹⁰⁰ In most EU countries, influencers can be regulated as “audiovisual media service providers” and must follow national media rules stemming from the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which sets European standards for television and streaming in a range of areas including hate speech and copyright law. This includes rules such as Article 5, which requires disclosure of location and contact information, in case the service provider needs to be contacted for any reason such as by the police or government.¹⁰¹ Article 6 forbids incitement to violence or hatred, or public provocation to commit acts of terrorism, with rules designed to protect minors.¹⁰² Political influencers must also follow rules governing audiovisual commercial communications.¹⁰³ Some elements of the EU’s Digital Services Act relate to influencers.

Influencers in EU countries are also subject to consumer protection laws that bar false advertising and require proper disclosure, whether or not they are considered audiovisual media service providers. There are advertising self-regulatory bodies in the EU that offer guidelines on disclosure and ethics and train influencers on these topics. The European Audiovisual Observatory’s 2024 report, “National rules applicable to influencers,” notes that several self-regulatory bodies in France and the Netherlands, for instance, offer certification for influencers.¹⁰⁴ However, one study found that only 56.5 percent of digital content creators knew about these programs, and very few participated in them.¹⁰⁵

Further, the European Commission has a legal hub for commercial influencers so they can understand the rules.¹⁰⁶ The hub clarifies the disclosures required to identify paid commercial content: that the commercial nature of a post should be stated in the language of the content, prominently distinguished from other information, and placed where users will see it immediately. Additionally, disclosures aimed at children should be understandable to children.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ Eric Munch, “National Rules Applicable to Influencers” (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2024), <https://rm.coe.int/national-rules-applicable-to-influencers/1680b5540c>.

¹⁰¹ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, “Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD),” Directive 2010/13/EU, chap. III, art. 5, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2010/13/oj/eng>.

¹⁰² Publications Office of the European Union, “Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD),” EUR-Lex, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/audiovisual-media-services-directive-avmsd.html>; Directive 2010/13/EU, chap. III, art. 6; Munch, “National Rules Applicable to Influencers.”

¹⁰³ Directive 2010/13/EU, chap. III, art. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Directive 2010/13/EU; Munch, “National Rules Applicable.”

¹⁰⁵ L. Ha, *Behind the Screens: Insights from Digital Content Creators: Understanding Their Intentions, Practices and Challenges* (Paris: UNESCO, 2024), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392006>.

¹⁰⁶ European Commission, “Consumer Rights and Complaints,” https://commission.europa.eu/topics/consumers/consumer-rights-and-complaints_en.

¹⁰⁷ Maria Niestadt, “Regulating Influencer Marketing in the European Union” (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, December 9, 2025), 6–7, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/779254/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)779254_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/779254/EPRS_BRI(2025)779254_EN.pdf).

Even so, gaps exist. A 2024 study carried out by the European Commission and consumer-protection authorities examined 576 influencers across platforms including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X, Facebook, and Twitch, and found that although 97 percent posted commercial content, only around 20 percent systematically identified those posts as advertising.¹⁰⁸ Thirty-eight percent avoided platform labels such as “paid partnership,” instead using vague language such as “collaboration” or “thanks to the brand.”¹⁰⁹ In addition, 62 percent of content creators from 45 countries stated that they did not verify information before sharing.¹¹⁰

Spain and France have some of the most robust laws regarding influencer payments. In Spain, influencers may not use words like “thanks to” or “in collaboration with” but must clearly state that the content is an advertisement or paid. This disclosure must be visible and repeated throughout the message.¹¹¹

Spanish law applies to “high-profile” influencers. The threshold for this category is having more than one million followers on one platform or two million across multiple platforms; earning more than €300,000 annually; and making at least 24 videos in the previous calendar year.¹¹² Spain is also among the countries in which a self-regulatory body has published a code of conduct for influencers.¹¹³

France adopted a dedicated influencer law, Law No. 2023-451, in June 2023. Under Article 1, commercial influence occurs when an individual receives compensation for directly or indirectly promoting goods, services, or a broader cause through electronic content.¹¹⁴ The law broadened the definition of “a cause” beyond conventional product advertising to include other types of compensated advocacy and sponsored content. Article 5-2 further established that when influencers post content

¹⁰⁸ European Commission, “Investigation of the Commission and Consumer Authorities Finds That Online Influencers Rarely Disclose Commercial Content,” February 14, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_708.

¹⁰⁹ European Commission, “Investigation of the Commission and Consumer Authorities.”

¹¹⁰ Ha, *Behind the Screens*, 7.

¹¹¹ Paula Ferrándiz, “What You Need to Know If You’re an Influencer and Want to Avoid Being Fined,” LetsLaw, October 16, 2025, <https://letslawes/en/what-you-need-to-know-if-you-are-influencer/>.

¹¹² Nuria López, “New Spanish Royal Decree Regulating Influencers,” DLA Piper, February 12, 2025, <https://www.dlapiper.com/en-us/insights/blogs/mse-today/2024/new-spanish-royal-decree-regulating-influencers>.

¹¹³ The Spanish organization promoting self regulation is called “Autocontrol”. See European Audiovisual Observatory, “New Code of Conduct for Influencers by Autocontrol,” IRIS Legal Observations, <https://merlin.obs.coe.int/article/10406>.

¹¹⁴ France, *Décret n° 2025-1137 du 28 novembre 2025 portant application de l'article 8 de la loi n° 2023-451 du 9 juin 2023 visant à encadrer l'influence commerciale et à lutter contre les dérives des influenceurs sur les réseaux sociaux* [Decree No. 2025-1137 of November 28, 2025, implementing Article 8 of Law No. 2023-451 of June 9, 2023, to regulate commercial influence and combat influencer misconduct on social networks], art. 1, Légifrance, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000052950561>.

with a commercial intent, that relationship must be disclosed in a clear, legible, and visible manner throughout.¹¹⁵

The French law also regulates relevant commercial relationships. Article 8 requires qualifying written agreements to identify the parties, describe the services provided, specify monetary and in-kind compensation, establish the parties' respective rights and obligations, and apply relevant French law when the activity targets audiences in France in the French language. Responsibility is shared between influencers, advertisers, agents, and other parties involved in the agreement.¹¹⁶ A 2025 implementing regulation, No. 2025-1137, clarified these requirements by mandating a written contract when the combined value of compensation and in-kind benefits from the same advertiser reaches €1,000, excluding tax, within a single year for activities serving the same promotional objective.¹¹⁷ The law applies not only to influencers based in France but also, in certain circumstances, to foreign influencers whose commercial activity is directed toward French audiences. Influencers established outside the EU, EEA, or Switzerland who target audiences in France are required to designate a legal representative within the European Union.¹¹⁸

Other EU countries also regulate social media posts under non-influencer-specific media legislation, sometimes with guidance from national media regulatory authorities to clarify how the legislation applies to influencers. We have included selected examples of European and New York City regulations below.

Table 3. European Regulatory Landscape

Jurisdiction	Key Provisions
European Union (AVMSD)	Influencers treated as “audiovisual service providers” must disclose contact information (Art. 5); rules bar incitement to violence/hatred (Art. 6) and protect minors (Art. 6a). They must also follow rules with regard to audiovisual commercial communications (Art. 9).
France (Law 2023-451)	Commercial relationships must be disclosed clearly and visibly throughout content; written contracts required above €1,000/year with a single advertiser.
Spain	Applies to influencers with 1M+ followers on one platform (or 2M across platforms) earning over €300,000/year; disclosure must be visible and repeated, not just via “thanks to” language.
EU-wide compliance	2024 sweep of 576 influencers: 97 percent posted commercial content, but only around 20 percent consistently labeled it as advertising; 38 percent used vague terms like “collaboration.”

¹¹⁵ France, *Décret n° 2025-1137*, art. 5-2.

¹¹⁶ France, *Décret n° 2025-1137*, art. 8.

¹¹⁷ France, *Décret n° 2025-1137*, art. 1.

¹¹⁸ France, *Décret n° 2025-1137*, art. 9.

Table 4. Proposed New York City Laws on Disclosure and Advertising

Bill	Title	Sponsors	What the Bill Does
Int. 1075-2026	Prohibiting candidates from appearing in certain government-funded third-party communications during an election campaign	Carr (prime), Wong, Morano	Bars public servants who are candidates, and their spouses, from appearing in government-funded influencer-style content within 90 days before an election in which they are a candidate.
Int. 1076-2026	Reporting on third-party public communications	Carr (prime), Wong, Brewer, Morano	Requires every use of city funds or resources for third-party content to be reported (author, handles, vendor, dollars, etc.) and published as open data within 60 days of use of authorization.
Int. 1080-2026	Requiring disclosures on third-party public communications paid for with government resources	Feliz (prime), Carr, Brewer, Wong	Requires a label saying “Paid Partnership with the City of New York,” or the name of the funding agency, on city-funded third-party content. Violations carry a misdemeanor charge and civil fines up to \$10,000.
Int. 1099-2026	Requiring campaign finance disclosures in content posted on internet websites, digital applications, and social media platforms	Wong (prime), Carr, Morano	Extends the city’s campaign finance “paid for by” rules explicitly to online and social media content and directs the Campaign Finance Board (CFB) to issue guidance on paid third-party posts.

Source: Table created by Aum Desai.

Table 5. How the Proposed Bills Amend and Stack Up to Existing Laws

Bill/Category	Int. 1075	Int. 1076	Int. 1080	Int. 1099
Law amended	NYC Charter §1136.1, which affects existing limits on government resources for candidates. This adds a new definition, para.1(h) and rewrites para.2(b)	NYC Charter new §1136.3	NYC Charter new §1136.2	NYC Charter §1052(a)(15)(c) which affects independent expenditures. Admin. Code which affects §3-703(16) candidate committees
Money Affected	City funds or resources	City funds or resources	City funds or resources	Private political money. It affects candidate committees and independent spenders where there's a \$1,000+ aggregate, which is the existing threshold
Who It Affects	Any public servant who is a candidate and that person's spouse	Any public servant who uses or authorizes the use of city funds or resources	Any public servant who uses or authorizes the use of city funds or resources	Candidates and their committees and also independent-expenditure spenders
Obligation	Must not appear or otherwise participate in government-funded third-party content published less than 90 days before a primary or general election in which they are a candidate. The existing 90-day mass-mailing rule is kept as is in para. 2(b)(2).	Report each use to the Department of Records and Information Services (DORIS), which reports to the mayor and the speaker and posts everything on the city's open data portal.	Must not fund third-party content unless it carries the required disclosure.	Online and social media content joins existing "paid for by" rules. The CFB must issue guidance covering content posted by paid third parties.
Disclosure wording	There is none. This just prohibits it, which is different from the other ones.	This one has none on the posts themselves. The public report lists author name, every platform and username, subject matter, vendor if the author was hired through one, and funds or resources used which includes dollar amount.	Must write "Paid Partnership with" and "the City of New York" or the agency's name. It must be written conspicuously on text and graphics and spoken at the start or end of audio. It also has to be spoken and written when on video. Also required in captions and in the post's primary language.	Must disclose the "Paid for by" and sponsor. For independent spenders, the top three donors who gave \$5,000 or more. The text lets the written disclosure go in the caption where a box is not feasible, if it's a social post where that's an issue.
Timing/frequency	Rolling 90-day window before each primary and general election	Report due "no less than 60 days after" use (might be a drafting error). DORIS publishes quarterly in election years and twice a year otherwise.	Every covered communication	Every covered communication in a covered election, which is usually defined as a city election for mayor, public advocate, comptroller, borough president, or council.
Enforcement effective date	The existing §1136.1 penalties would apply, which are a misdemeanor and CFB civil penalties up to \$10,000 per violation. This would all be effective immediately.	Effective 90 days after enactment.	They defined an intentional or knowing violation as a misdemeanor. The CFB and the Conflicts of Interest Board can then investigate and impose civil penalties up to \$10,000 per violation on public servants. This would be effective 90 days after enactment.	Effective immediately
Already Law vs. New	This is mostly already law. Charter §1136.1 already bars candidates and spouses from government-funded TV, radio, print, and internet ads from January 1 of the election year. State Public Officers Law §73-b already bars elected officials from publicly funded ads-year-round. Int 1075 would extend the ban to content posted by third parties such as creators for 90 days before an election.	This is entirely new. No current rule requires the city to publish which creators it paid or how much it paid them.	This is entirely new. No current rule requires a label on city-funded creator posts.	This is mostly already law. "Paid for by" is already required on campaign and independent-expenditure communications. Int. 1099 would add an explicit mention of online and social media content and a caption option. It would also add required Campaign Finance Board guidance on paid third parties.

Source: Table created by Aum Desai.

Sources: NYC Council, *Int. 1075-2026 (Legistar)*, NYC Council, *Int. 1076-2026 (Legistar)*, NYC Council, *Int. 1080-2026 (Legistar)*, NYC Council, *Int. 1099-2026 (Legistar)*, amNY, "Signal issues: Council presses City Hall over influencer records" (22 Sep 2026), NYC Campaign Finance Board, *Charter §1136.1 text*, NYC Campaign Finance Board, "Restrictions on the Use of Government Resources", NY Senate, *S2437-A (Krueger)*, NY Assembly, *A3929-B (Dinowitz)*, *intro.nyc*, David M. Carr *legislation (Int. 0962-2026)*

Ideas for Further Research

Part of our original research plan was to examine the effects of appearing to promote Mayor Mamdani and his agenda. We wanted to see how public information spread when disseminated by influencers, and whether videos in which the mayor himself appeared received more views and/or engagement. As a starting point, we compiled a list of content creators we believed may be part of Emilia Rowland's Signal group.

We created a list of 189 influencers with ties to the Mamdani administration. We used reverse-image searches to create a list of those who attended the January 2026 influencers-only press briefing and added other content creators who seemed to have ties to the administration. We looked at the frequency of the content they posted about the administration and non-social-media information pointing to an existing relationship with the current administration or the mayor's office, including press coverage and publicly available information about contracts with city agencies.

We believe the patterns of posting by the people in this database may shed light on the effects of having ties to the mayor. We hope to monitor how the administration's ideas are disseminated, and whether being seen with the mayor affects an influencer's audience size or engagement. We have not included information about this group in this paper, but we may publish anonymized data about engagement patterns and the spread of news at a later time.

We also see potential for more policy research. Countries around the world are just starting to consider how to regulate disclosure and transparency, and how to think about relationships between governments, content creators, and influencers who do communications work for public agencies or who post political content. We also want to understand where platform policies are compatible or incompatible with disclosure regulations. We hope to build on our research in future papers that will examine some of these topics in greater depth.

3. Conclusion

This paper explores the role of influencers in providing quality information to New Yorkers, and examines the question of how this takes place in an information ecosystem that is generally underfunded, fragmented, and polarized. Rather than funding public media in the United States and attempting to reach a broad audience, content creators have become messengers, in some cases providing narrowly targeted dispatches aimed at niche audiences.¹¹⁹

The implications for democracy are profound. Much has been written about the effects of “the Daily Me,” the expression popularized by Eli Pariser to describe the risks of polarization and dangers to democracy stemming from algorithmic microtargeting. In this paper, we have attempted to focus on an adjacent question: What is the ecosystem of influencers in New York doing when it comes to messaging about government programs and policies, and how can the city become a standard-setter in promoting transparency and disclosure regulations so that New Yorkers know and trust the sources of the information they receive?

Recommendations for the New York City and State government

- 1) Mandate clear disclosure of relationships between city agencies and influencers, applying to paid and unpaid content. Budget information about spending on influencers should be more transparent.
- 2) Standardize disclosures, including consistent use of hashtags, at the top of social media posts or videos. We recommend disclosure guidelines requiring clearly posted hashtags at the beginning, middle, and end of a video, or keeping the hashtag visible at all times. The significance of the hashtag should be clear (such as #paidpartnerships).
- 3) Consider some sort of label or disclosure for unpaid but persistent relationships. Again, this should be clearly visible throughout the message or video.
- 4) Consider regularly publishing lists of influencers who work with the mayor’s office and city agencies, and clearly explaining the nature of those relationships.
- 5) The mayor’s office should publicize the disclosure rules and provide in-house training for city employees, as well as for influencers and the vendors and marketing agencies that work with

¹¹⁹ Rodney Benson, Mattias Hessérus, Timothy Neff, and Julie Sedel, *How Media Ownership Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025); Victor Pickard, *Democracy without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

them. This training is especially important for newly hired city employees, who may not be aware of the regulations.

- 6) We also suggest that the mayor's office create an online, publicly visible hub, like those posted by the EU and the FTC, to provide clear information and ethical guidance regarding content, as well as information on regulations that cover influencers and best practices.¹²⁰

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¹²⁰ Federal Trade Commission, Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers (Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission, November 2019), <https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/disclosures-101-social-media-influencers>; Federal Trade Commission, FTC's Endorsement Guides: What People Are Asking (Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission, June 2023), <https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/ftcs-endorsement-guides-what-people-are-asking>; European Commission, "Influencer Legal Hub," accessed August 10, 2026, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/consumers/consumer-rights-and-complaints/influencer-legal-hub_en.

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About

The Tow Center for Digital Journalism, established in 2010, provides journalists with the skills and knowledge to lead the future of digital journalism and serves as a research and development center for the profession as a whole. Operating as an institute within Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, the Tow Center is poised to take advantage of a unique combination of factors to foster the development of digital journalism. Its New York location affords access to cutting-edge technologists, a strong culture of journalism and multiple journalism and communication schools, with outstanding universities attached to them. The Tow Center is where technology and journalism meet, and where education and practice meet.

