

Rewiring Trust: Digital Influencers, MIL, and the New Media Landscape

Reestructurando la confianza: Influenciadores digitales, alfabetización mediática e informacional y el nuevo panorama de los medios

Religando a confiança: influenciadores digitais, AMI e o cenário das novas mídias

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Abstract: This article examines the paradoxical relationship between widespread institutional distrust and emerging forms of trust in digital spaces, particularly focusing on the phenomenon of social media influencers. Drawing from recent data, I analyze how declining trust in traditional institutions correlates with increased trust in stranger-to-stranger interactions and digital influence. I introduce the "4 C model" (Content, Creativity, Community, and Coherence) as a framework for understanding digital influencer dynamics, so I can argue that Media and Information Literacy (MIL) serves as a crucial philosophical and practical framework for navigating this evolving landscape. MIL can facilitate critical engagement with digital content, authentication processes, and expertise evaluation while addressing questions of authenticity, authority, and cultural impact in networked spaces. My analysis suggests that MIL's effectiveness depends on its conception as a dynamic framework extending beyond traditional educational boundaries, fostering individual empowerment and collective understanding in an increasingly complex digital environment.

Keywords:

Institutional Distrust, Social Media Influencers, Digital Trust, Media and Information Literacy (MIL), 4 C Model, Digital Spaces, Authenticity, Authority, Cultural Impact

Resumen: Este artículo examina la relación paradójica entre la desconfianza institucional generalizada y las formas emergentes de confianza en los espacios digitales, centrándose

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particularmente en el fenómeno de los influenciadores de las redes sociales. A partir de datos recientes, analizo cómo la disminución de la confianza en las instituciones tradicionales se correlaciona con una mayor confianza en las interacciones entre extraños y la influencia digital. Presento el "modelo de las 4 C" (Contenido, Creatividad, Comunidad y Coherencia) como un marco para comprender la dinámica de los influenciadores digitales y así poder argumentar que la alfabetización mediática e informacional (AMI) sirve como un marco filosófico y práctico crucial para navegar este panorama en evolución. Creo que la AMI puede facilitar la interacción crítica con el contenido digital, los procesos de autenticación y la evaluación de la experiencia, al tiempo que aborda cuestiones de autenticidad, autoridad e impacto cultural en espacios en red. Mi análisis sugiere que la eficacia de la alfabetización mediática e informacional depende de su concepción como un marco dinámico que se extiende más allá de los límites educativos tradicionales, fomentando tanto el empoderamiento individual como la comprensión colectiva en un entorno digital cada vez más complejo.

Palabras clave:

Desconfianza institucional, Influencers en redes sociales, Confianza digital, Alfabetización Mediática e Informacional (AMI), Modelo 4 C, Espacios digitales, Autenticidad, Autoridad, Impacto cultural

Resumo: Este artigo examina a relação paradoxal entre a desconfiança institucional generalizada e as formas emergentes de confiança nos espaços digitais, concentrando-se particularmente no fenómeno dos influenciadores das redes sociais. Com base em dados recentes, analiso como o declínio da confiança nas instituições tradicionais se correlaciona com o aumento da confiança nas interações entre estranhos e com a influência digital. Apresento o "modelo dos 4 Cs" (Conteúdo, Criatividade, Comunidade e Coerência) como uma estrutura para compreender a dinâmica dos influenciadores digitais e, assim, ser capaz de argumentar que a alfabetização midiática e informacional (AMI) serve como uma estrutura filosófica e prática crucial para navegar nesta paisagem em evolução. Acredito que a AMI pode facilitar o envolvimento crítico com conteúdo digital, processos de autenticação e avaliação de experiência, ao mesmo tempo que aborda questões de autenticidade, autoridade e impacto cultural em espaços em rede. A minha análise sugere que a eficácia da literacia mediática e informacional depende da sua

concepção como um quadro dinâmico que se estende para além das fronteiras educativas tradicionais, promovendo tanto a capacitação individual como a compreensão colectiva num ambiente digital cada vez mais complexo.

Palavras-chave:

Desconfiança institucional, Influenciadores de mídias sociais, Confiança digital, Alfabetização Midiática e Informacional (AMI), Modelo 4 C, Espaços digitais, Autenticidade, Autoridade, Impacto cultural

1. The Paradox of Trust

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024), we are heading toward a collision of trust, innovation, and politics. The latest edition of this yearly investigation reveals a new enigma at the heart of society: rapid innovation offers the promise of a new era of prosperity but, instead, risks exacerbating trust issues, leading to further societal instability and political polarization.

Trust in politicians, journalists, companies, and even science is in decline. In a year when half the global population can vote for new leaders, democratic governments stand at a critical juncture, steering environmental and digital transitions while facing increased polarization, heightened geopolitical tensions, and the social consequences of economic developments. According to the 2024 results of the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, only 39% trust their national government, and 37% are confident that their government balances the interests of current and future generations (OECD, 2024).

The same phenomenon affects the media, which seem to have lost the trust of their readers, listeners, and viewers. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism report for 2024 indicates a global search for alternative information sources in response to perceptions that finding reliable, rigorous journalism without ulterior motives is difficult (Newman et al., 2024). This has led to an increase in "selective news avoidance." About four in ten respondents (39%) report that they sometimes or often avoid the news—3 percentage points higher than the 2023 average. Additionally, the proportion of those who feel "overwhelmed" by the amount of news has climbed considerably (+11 percentage points) since 2019.

Science also seems to be under attack: while people agree that scientists are essential to accepting innovation, many are concerned that politics exerts too much influence on science. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, 53% believe science has become politicized in their countries, and 59% think governments and organizations funding research have too much influence over scientific practices (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, more people have adopted conspiracist worldviews, contributing to the rejection of science, especially concerning climate change, vaccination, and genetic modification. This perception erodes trust in the institutions that steer us toward a more prosperous future.

In this environment, building and maintaining trust in public institutions is a priority for many governments worldwide. The path to restoring trust is complex, requiring a rethinking of current professional practices and a serious approach to the audience. Underestimating people or dismissing their capacity for analysis can be counterproductive. Similarly, those who lean toward conspiracy theories should not be mocked or belittled.

We are thus living in an environment where the trust deficit is constant. However, a paradox emerges: this growing distrust does not lead to total skepticism. In recent years, more people have begun to place trust in strangers. Two recent phenomena exemplify this shift: the rise of collaborative economy platforms like Uber and Airbnb and the consolidation of digital influencers as powerful decision-making references.

Trusting strangers is a relatively new concept in the West and deserves in-depth interdisciplinary analysis. In modern society, structured around large metropolises, greater population density, and more connections expose us to new people, faces, family forms, and cultures. How does this impact Media and Information Literacy (MIL)?

2. Defining a Digital Influencer

It seems that people are more willing to trust strangers than ever before amid the current trust crisis. In this scenario, digital influencers—figures valued in specific areas and sometimes considered peers by their followers—have emerged in the last decade. This contrasts with the traditional "celebrity" model that dominated the 20th century.

Digital influencers, whose reach extends across social networks like Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, or Snapchat, represent both a challenge and a mystery. Although these individuals remain largely unknown to their followers, they cultivate trust. In daily life surrounded by

screens, digital influencers have expanded their presence. According to Statista, in 2023, the highest level of trust in brand and product recommendations from social media influencers was evident among Gen Z and millennials, with one-third of each generational cohort expressing complete trust (Chevalier, 2024). In 2024, nearly half of SheSpeak users purchased something on an influencer's recommendation.

How, then, do we define a digital influencer? Together with Miriam De Paoli and Juan Marengo (Balmaceda et al., 2022), I have tested a formula we call "the 4 C model," based on four key dimensions:

- a. Content and Curation:** Digital influencers create original content or make innovative selections from available materials, balancing creator, content, and platform synergistically.
- b. Creativity and Perseverance:** Influencers' reach extends through the organic spread of content and algorithmic recommendations. However, platform opacity presents obstacles, as algorithms may restrict content that does not conform to platform guidelines.
- c. Community and Trust:** Beyond follower counts, influencers cultivate communities that require trust and attention. Many creators even purchase followers to create an illusion of influence.
- d. Coherence and Consistency:** Influencers construct a public persona and brand by maintaining consistency and a coherent narrative. Missteps can lead to public backlash and "cancel culture," a significant risk in influencer marketing.

3. MIL and Digital Influencers

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) emerges as a critical framework in our contemporary landscape, where digital influencers hold unprecedented power to shape opinions, consumer behavior, and societal trends. Yet its effectiveness fundamentally depends on our recognition that we face not merely a technological shift but a profound cultural transformation that demands a deep philosophical examination of modern media dynamics.

The first dimension of MIL manifests in its capacity to illuminate persuasive tactics. This encompasses the obvious distinction between genuine content and commercial partnerships and extends to the subtle architecture of influence itself. Through MIL, we can develop an understanding of how emotional manipulation operates within content creation and how psychological triggers are deployed in the service of persuasion. This understanding serves not to cynically dismiss all influence but to engage with it consciously and deliberately.

Content authentication represents another crucial philosophical aspect of MIL. Beyond simple fact-checking, it provides a methodological framework for truth-seeking in digital spaces. This framework acknowledges the complexity of modern truth claims, recognizing that verification requires cross-referencing and a deeper understanding of contextual dynamics. In this sense, MIL builds upon traditional epistemological approaches while adapting them to contemporary challenges.

The analysis of lifestyle portrayals through MIL reveals profound questions about authenticity and representation in digital spaces. When we examine carefully curated realities, we confront individual instances of selective presentation and the broader philosophical question of authenticity in an age of digital mediation. The gap between presented and actual lifestyles raises fundamental questions about the nature of reality and representation in our networked world.

Expertise evaluation through MIL transcends simple credential checking. It raises essential questions about the nature of authority in digital spaces and how knowledge claims are legitimated in contemporary society. This aspect of MIL encourages us to examine the relationship between popularity and expertise, pushing us to consider how traditional forms of authority interact with emergent digital influence.

The commercial dimension of MIL reveals the complex interplay between economic and social forces in digital spaces. Understanding monetization strategies and commercial relationships becomes a practical skill and a lens through which to examine how economic structures shape digital discourse and social relations. This understanding enables more conscious engagement with the digital spaces' marketplace of ideas and goods.

Cultural impact assessment through MIL provides a framework for examining how digital influence shapes societal values and norms. This examination must consider direct effects and the subtle ways digital discourse shapes our understanding of ourselves and our relationships

with others. The role of influencers in cultural production raises fundamental questions about agency, authenticity, and the nature of cultural evolution in digital spaces. Digital well-being, viewed through MIL, becomes a question of personal health and social ecology. How do we maintain authentic human connections and healthy psychological boundaries in spaces designed for constant engagement? This aspect of MIL encourages philosophical reflection on the nature of human flourishing in digital environments.

MIL's effectiveness ultimately depends on its conception not as a fixed body of knowledge but as a dynamic framework that evolves with our digital landscape. It must be understood as an ongoing dialogue between traditional concerns and emerging digital realities. This framework should be integrated into our educational systems not as a separate discipline but as a fundamental aspect of understanding human knowledge and interaction in the digital age. It must go beyond the classroom to the society itself.

4. From Individual Empowerment to Collective Understanding

In conclusion, MIL empowers individuals through practical skills and deeper understanding. It enables us to engage critically with digital content while maintaining our autonomy and capacity for independent thought. This empowerment represents individual benefit and a collective movement toward more thoughtful and ethical digital discourse. As our digital landscape continues to evolve, MIL's foundations will become increasingly crucial in guiding our understanding of truth, influence, and human connection in digital spaces.

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