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# Introduction

Staring out from the cover of *New York* magazine's September 2019 issue was a close-up of a young woman's face, wide-eyed with a resigned "can you believe this?" expression, covered in red rubber darts. The cover line read, "What Instagram did to me." Readers familiar with the fashion blogosphere of the 2000s or New York City's arts or media scenes in the 2010s would recognize the face as that of Tavi Gevinson, who first made a name for herself in the late 2000s as a preteen style blogger. Her rise had been nervously and obsessively tracked by blog readers, journalists, and industry insiders. In the span of a few short years, Gevinson reaped enormous rewards from being an early entrant into the world of social media self-branding: from taking selfies to being photographed by Annie Leibovitz; from attending middle school to sitting front row at Fashion Week (and famously pissing off a *Grazia* editor by blocking the view with an enormous hair bow); from hanging out in the comments section of her blog to running her own digital teen magazine with the blessing of legendary editor Jane Pratt and radio producer Ira Glass. But by the time of this 2019 cover story, Gevinson, then aged twenty-three, had also been through the wringer. She had been a test case, patient zero, for the influencer industrial ethos: the idea that anyone can cultivate a loyal audience by providing consistent and relatable content on social media, and then use that audience's likes, follows, and other engagement metrics as evidence of "influence" to be leveraged for a range of social and economic rewards—many of them accessible through partnering with commercial brands to entwine their messages with one's own.

The notion that rewards await those who craft an authentic-seeming public image has existed for centuries, and it has been particularly salient in American entrepreneurial culture. As media historian Jefferson Pooley has pointed out, American literature of the early 1900s encapsulated a "core contradiction" of American culture then and now: "Be true to yourself, it is to your strategic advantage."[1] Given fertile ground by the technological and socioeconomic conditions of the 2000s, this concept has grown wildly in the twenty-first century, powering a multibillion-dollar industrial machine that has reshaped the creation and flows of culture, ideas about who and what is powerful, and technologies and social norms of communication. This is the influencer industry. And Gevinson was finding the whole thing a bit existentially troubling.

In the accompanying essay for *New York*, Gevinson wrote about how her experience growing up online shaped her sense of self and her experience of the world, in ways that are both obvious and unknowable. The audience she cultivated through her blog and grew exponentially through Instagram provided her with job opportunities on stage, film, and high-end ad campaigns, as well as with friends, entrée to elite events, and an identity. It gave her an income, and even a home in a luxury apartment building where she lived rent-free for a year in exchange for posting about the experience. "I can try to imagine an alternate universe where I've always roamed free and Instagram-less in pastures untouched by the algorithm. But I can't imagine who that person is inside," she wrote. Gevinson is acutely aware that it was her seemingly effortless ability to be herself that spawned this existence, but she admitted to doing "rapid-fire stage-mom math" to keep her digital persona in line with others' expectations. "Somewhere along the line, I think I came to see my shareable self as the authentic one and buried any tendencies that might threaten her likability so deep down I forgot they even existed," she wrote. Among the many reasons to distrust Instagram—not least of which is its exploitation of leisure time with constant data collection and ad-targeting—she continued, "most unnerving are the ways in which it has led me to distrust myself . . . I think I am a writer and an actor and an artist. But I haven't

believed the purity of my own intentions ever since I became my own salesperson, too."[2]

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Ten years before this cover hit newsstands, in the summer of 2009, I was an eager new college graduate with a longtime vision of working in magazines. I went to New York two weeks after graduation to start an internship in the features department of a storied fashion title. This was the exact sort of position in which I had dreamed I would land—aside, of course, from the lack of pay and stability. Another intern and I shared the job of department assistant, answering phones, scheduling, pulling products for front-of-book pages, and generally pitching in on whatever projects needed it. I was also continuing my paid job as a contributing writer at my hometown newspaper and relying on a loan from my parents, who had agreed to help with rent for two months. If I had not found a way to support myself fully by the time it ran out, my time in New York would be over. I knew the multidimensional absurdity of this situation, but I had accepted the toxic narrative that working for free was the only way "in" to a paying job at a major media company, and since no one in my life had ever pursued this type of path, that narrative was all I had. I was young and not ready to let reality get in the way of my ambitions.

On my first day, what struck me most was the emptiness and quiet of the offices. My desk was on the edge of the area where the staff sat; my view was of rows of empty white workstations. I swallowed my uncertainty and acted as though everything was normal, and that I belonged. But despite its seemingly impenetrable glamour, the Hearst Tower was not immune to the economic realities that seemed to be swallowing the world whole. Less than a year prior, the United States' housing market had imploded and took with it the livelihoods and ways of life for millions of Americans and much of the world. In the months leading up to my move to New York, I read the news from my rural college campus with awe and nervousness. January 2009: 600,000 jobs lost. March 2009: 700,000 jobs lost. By May 2009 nearly six million jobs had been lost in

the United States and many millions more globally. I submitted dozens of applications to paying jobs with almost zero response.

At the same time, bloggers and the nascent term "social media" were increasingly hot topics of conversation, especially among journalists and other media workers. Bloggers were still considered amateurs and outsiders—interesting, for sure, but with no real expertise or credibility in the fields they claimed to inhabit. Yet editors and professors repeatedly suggested to me and my aspiring journalist peers that we work on blogs to pass the time until jobs opened up, conveniently overlooking that one typically needs to be paid to get by. My fellow department intern and I would go for walks at night, stomping around Greenwich Village in the day-old heat and wondering how it could be that the only way we were going to move forward was by selling ourselves for nothing on the internet.

Not long after, the magazine hired thirteen-year-old Tavi Gevinson to write a column. The blogger was quickly becoming a wunderkind due to her eccentric style and earnest takes on fashion that she published from her suburban Midwestern family home. That moment was existentially clarifying. I knew that the DNA of the industry I had trained and planned to work in had permanently changed—and that these changes represented a much more sweeping shift for our information and cultural environment. On one hand, as an aspiring media worker, I felt deeply the ridiculousness and unfairness in a system that essentially required preexisting economic and social capital to get ahead. I knew that I was more fortunate than most in that my family was able to help at all for those two months, but I also knew that their generosity would not be enough to float me into a paying position. I would be leaving in early August, then staying with my sister in Philadelphia and commuting to finish my internship. The commute was nearly three hours door to door on standing-room-only New Jersey Transit trains, which gave me a lot of time to worry. It was not difficult to make the connection that when the pipeline for media jobs was this inaccessible, those who make it through—and end up responsible for producing and marketing the information and entertainment that plays a significant role in constructing a society's shared reality—are probably coming from a narrow

pool. On the other hand, I saw that while traditional media companies were laying off employees and demanding free labor of their entry-level and freelance workers, the public's demand for content was growing. And as our economic system crashed, it fanned the flames of deep skepticism of society's established institutions. People were hungry for content, but from providers who were "real"—who showed that they "got it" in a way that New York-based national and global media companies, from Condé Nast to the *New York Times* to the major television networks, never did.

Marching into this vacuum came bloggers. They followed different communication norms—in particular, a conversational tone and a lack of separation between their editorial content and that which was sponsored by a brand—and most of all, they portrayed themselves as driven by passion, indicating a wholesomeness and authenticity that elsewhere seemed lacking. They saw themselves as regular people searching for a like-minded community with whom to share and critique ideas, products, and more. Their independence was their power, though it would also become their meal ticket, and thus their most critical sacrifice. As bloggers and early influencers ceded independence for earning a predictable living—a perfectly rational and understandable choice, given the circumstances—they also helped create a growing digital media industrial machine interested in monetizing an authentic life, not embodying it.

I marveled over this state of affairs for another four years as I hopped around the tumultuous job market, working at a range of organizations as an assistant, then assistant editor, and later, a social media editor. I could not shake the feeling that my experience was a microscopic part of a world-shifting pattern of events, and I wanted to understand it better and help translate it for others. I went to graduate school ostensibly to study the shifting labor market for media workers and how this was impacting content. But fashion was my starting point of reference, and blogging was where these changes were going down. Turns out, as is so often the case, the fashion and retail industries were indicators of broader social and technological changes to come. Often, we get acclimated to new ways of life under the auspices of light-hearted commercialism, from viewing shopping as a route to self-actualization to

handing companies our personal data (in exchange for a discount, of course).[3]

For nearly a decade, I have followed along. I conducted in-depth interviews with dozens of people, attended industry events, and analyzed thousands of press articles and corporate and individual marketing materials, as "blogger" turned into multiplatform "influencer," amateurs turned into professionals, niche content gave way to generalized lifestyle content (and started to swing back again), free product turned into multimillion-dollar deals, and an industry spun up to affirm and expand the chaotic marketplace of digital influence, repackaging and reshaping "realness" to suit its needs.

This book offers a critical history of the influencer industry's formative years in the United States. I track its development from a haphazard group of creative people scrambling for work in the face of the Great Recession to today's multifaceted, multibillion-dollar industry with expanding global impact. I contextualize the industry's origins within key cultural and intellectual histories that predate the digital era, and explore some of its consequences—which, at the time of writing, are increasingly foreboding.

The influencer industry is a complex ecosystem, comprising influencers and those who aspire to be them, marketers and technologists, brands and sponsors, social media corporations, and a host of others, including talent managers and trend forecasters. I have interviewed people from all of these groups, except for the social media companies who did not answer my queries. I examined how these stakeholders negotiated the meaning, value, and practical use of digital influence as they reimagined it as a commodity for the social media age. The systems they created for producing, evaluating, and marketing "influential" content relied on a positive association with authenticity, or "being real." Yet, as their industrial definition of authenticity shifted along with the needs of marketers, so too did the tools we use to communicate and the social norms and values that animate them. More than a decade into the influencer industry's existence, these decisions have accumulated to something more than the sum of its parts. As the later chapters show, the industry's participants created logics and tools

for social media communication that have extended beyond their intentions and control, enabling propagandists (and worse) to insert their messages and misinformation into our feeds under the veil of "just being real."

Media professionals and researchers have long recognized that a sense of authenticity is critical to effective messaging. The meaning of authenticity has never been precise, but it is usually tied to some sense of genuineness or originality. As media scholar Gunn Enli wrote, authenticity is ultimately "about socially constructed notions about what is real"[4]—and thus, its exact meaning changes over time and in different contexts. In this book, I show how, in our current moment, authenticity is not just a social construction but an industrial one, continually tussled over by a sophisticated and complicated profit-making enterprise whose decisions about what expressions of reality are valuable help determine what types of content and tools for communication and self-expression are available to the world's billions of social media users.

My findings confirm that those who learn to construct and exploit the ever-shifting language and aesthetic of "realness" online hold immense commercial, political, and ideological influence, but they also show how fraught, contingent, and transactional authenticity has become. Casual observers often deride influencers for vapid self-indulgence, but influencers' messages about seemingly trivial decisions—such as how to dress, eat, travel, and work—shape our experiences of everyday life. Under the guise of superficiality, the industry has gone even further, shaping conversations about how to vote, raise children, and take care of oneself and one's community. Indeed, in the later stages of research for this book, the influencer industry seemed to be undergoing a shift—becoming less about what to buy and more about what to think.

The story of the influencer industry's development is marked by power shifts and attempts to make the intangible tangible. Democratic dreams gave way to industrial ossification. In retrospect, this story makes perfect sense. The influencer industry is both a symptom of and a response to the economic precarity and upheaval in social institutions that have characterized the early twenty-first century. Indeed, this is what enabled the influencer logic to expand and root itself so securely

in our way of life. While individual participants looked for a route to autonomy, stability, and professional fulfillment that seemed impossible elsewhere, they ended up creating a value system that advanced the erosion of boundaries between individuals' inner lives and commercialism, asking us to view ourselves as products perpetually ready for market, our relationships as monetizable, and our daily activities as potential shopping experiences. As such, I argue that influencers are neither "a flash in the pan" nor "a bubble about to burst," but indicators of a paradigm shift in the way we think about each other and ourselves.

The terms by which people refer to the industry help elide its consequences. Repeatedly and across time, in interviews and in the press, people use the term "Wild West" to describe the influencer industry. They use it to describe how no one seems to know for sure what is acceptable or what the future holds, and how people are figuring things out and testing boundaries as they go. For years now, though, the industry *has* had established norms and processes. Even if they are often shifting, they do so with the participation of people working in and around it. The influencer industry's "lawlessness," at this point, is a choice—one made and recommitted to daily by social media companies, who have had too much to gain by doing nothing (and more recently, acting only after problems seemed out of control), and regulators whose attentions are directed elsewhere. Further, "Wild West" as a descriptor makes it too easy for some to shrug off the industry's lack of transparency, persistent inequalities, and role as a conduit of mis- and disinformation.

By virtue of the time period that I conducted this research, as well as my position as a researcher following shifts I first noticed in the magazine world, this book focuses heavily on blogs, Instagram, and their associated technologies of self-commercialization—that expanding repertoire of tools that allows people to monetize their digital presence and adopt the ideology of the marketplace for their own self-expression. In this way, it could also be read as a study of what particular platforms—despite their frequent attempts to characterize themselves as neutral—make possible.[5] But the patterns described here often repeat themselves: on blogs, then YouTube and Instagram, then Snapchat, then TikTok and Substack, and will likely continue in the future so long as the ideologi-

cal, technological, and regulatory infrastructures that support them remain unchanged. The industrial construction of authenticity is everywhere media industries are, particularly in times when people who create media content—not just influencers, but journalists and pundits, designers and musicians, and everyday people looking for an audience—have little to lose and a whole lot to gain by cultivating the right kind of "realness" online.

Yet, at the end of the first decade of the influencer industry, I am not cynical. This is a story of rampant commercialism, questionable ethical decisions, indignities and unfairness, and frightening opportunities for negative social impact, from rabid misinformation to the commercial colonization of our very sense of selfhood—plus the environmental and psychological impacts of the never-ending onslaught of goods from consumerism's accelerating hamster wheel. But it is also a story of scrappy survival, especially for the women who have been at the forefront of this industry since its beginning, and of genuine efforts to live well and live better. In its complexity, you will see simple yet resounding calls for progress. Workers thrive with autonomy, resources, and opportunity. Our media environment best serves its consumers leading with intellectual honesty, understanding of the vast variations of human experience, and less noise. And from the technology that makes much of this possible, people demand transparency and respect rather than surveillance and exploitation. What academics, media professionals, and government and technology industry leaders need to do is listen—and act.

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In the remaining chapters, I contextualize and untangle the development of the influencer industry, demonstrating how the "influencer economy" emerged as a locus of power tied to tangible economic and social rewards on the social media-driven, visual web. I critically examine how participants in this system construct and operationalize what it means to be an influencer. And I explore the consequences of this industrialization of "authentic" influence for the production of culture, technological innovation, and everyday life.

I refer to the development of the influencer industry as *industrialization* because it represents a coordinated collection, processing, and commodification of a good or service. Marketers, brands, influencers, social media companies, and others worked (and continue to work) together to make influence meaningful as a commodity—to give it social meaning as well as financial value, and to build infrastructures for its measurement and sale.[6] The book's chapters are loosely chronological, but they are not an attempt at periodization. Rather, the chronology offers a means of making sense of the industrialization of influence and authenticity *as a process* that was informed by and responsive to current events. As will become clear in the ensuing chapters, this process was not always linear or evenly paced.

In chapter 1, I explain how the logic of a digital influencer economy was born out of a long history of intellectual thinking about what influence is, as well as a "perfect storm" of events in the 2000s. In chapter 2, I show how a range of creative professionals began working together to rebuild their careers in the wake of the Great Recession and, in so doing, created the mechanisms and negotiated the terms by which the influencer industry would blossom. In chapter 3, I explore how, once the industry began functioning in a coordinated way, stakeholders aimed to maximize its efficiency by introducing various new technologies for relationship management and monetization. The industry grew precipitously, and its growing impact on various cultural products became eminently obvious. Soon, however, a sort of backlash developed. Chapter 4 highlights the changing cultural environment of the late 2010s and some specific public events that contributed to wider suspicion about—and regulation of—the influencer industry. It then explores how various participants repositioned their work so the industry could continue to thrive. Chapter 5 untangles a series of existential and practical issues brought to the fore by the social tumult at the turn of the 2020s. I explore potential futures and current concerns as the influencer industry moves beyond commercial interests and becomes a tool for propaganda and misinformation, as well as for prosocial messaging. In chapter 6, I take stock of the complex system the influencer industry has become by the start of the 2020s: one that ensnares business owners and brand

executives, professional and aspiring influencers, ordinary social media users, technology companies of various sizes and scopes, and governments in a marketplace whose rules and system of value are constantly shifting and being renegotiated, yet whose successful navigation is increasingly required for understanding the flows of culture and information in the twenty-first century. I reflect on the industry's promise and peril and suggest what we as a society should consider as we reckon with it. For now, let's go back to the beginning.

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