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News Item

Social Media Influencers and the 2020 U.S. Election: Paying ‘Regular People’ for Digital Campaign Communication | Center for Media Engagement

By Anastasia Goodwin, Katie Joseff, and Samuel C. Woolley
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> Coordinated networks of social media influencers, especially small-scale influencers with fewer than 10,000 followers, are now a powerful asset for political campaigns, PACs, and special interest groups. Partisan organizations are leveraging these “authentic” accounts in bids to sway political discourse and decision-making in the run up to the 2020 U.S. elections. Political marketers tell us that they see influencers, particularly those with more intimate followings, as regarded as more trustworthy by their followers and therefore better positioned to change their behavior. Groups on both sides of the aisle are paying influencers to promote their causes. Many influencers don’t reveal they’ve been paid, and payments often take place off social media platforms. This amounts to a new and growing form of ‘inorganic’ information operations—elite-dictated propaganda through trusted social media spokespersons. What is more, top-down propaganda from influencers are better able to evade detection systems built to detect political bots and sockpuppets and to defy regulators concerned with digital free speech—all while using influencers’ captive audiences to more effectively prey upon fraught emotions during a highly contentious election. Such influencers, far from being “volunteer digital door knockers,” are paid, highly organized surrogates of political campaigns failing to report this new mode of politicking. Social media firms and governments face serious challenges ahead in dealing with this new form of digital propaganda. The propaganda research team at the Center for Media Engagement notes these challenges and offers cursory solutions.
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