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How to maintain critical distance

Influencers as parasocial opinion leaders

The currency of personal information is one known all too well to influencers. On video sharing platforms, podcasts, live streams and microblogging sites, audiences are invited into the intimate realm of breakups, milestones and the mundane of their favorite influencers. Online, the most devoted of followers can confidently tell you what school they frequented, what their childhood bedroom looks like and what their morning routine entails. As updates from our favorite influencers sit post by post with dispatches from our closest friends, the line between "follower" and "friend" seems to become blurrier.

Digital intimacies

In the realm of digital discourses, the term "parasocial" has been used to describe everything from speculation about whether Taylor Swift will make it back in time for the Superbowl (she will, assured by the grace of time zones) to passionate exchanges among Harry Styles fans over the singer's new buzzcut.

The foundational work by Horton and Wohl saw parasocial interactions and relationships as "the specific asymmetrical nature of the interactional relationship between performer and user during a single exposure situation" as well as characterizing the phenomenon as "the more enduring, long-term and usually positive, one-sided intimacy at a distance that users develop towards media performers, based on repeated encounters"[1]. Parasocial relationships are unique, because the emotional connection that the viewer develops with the media performer is not reciprocated.

But it's not just lifestyle influencers selling supplements or celebrities that have appropriated the mechanisms of perceived intimacy to foster their online identity. Beneath the fluorescent illumination of a ring light, Brittany Sellner, *née* Pettibone, excuses herself for her prolonged absence. In so called "vlogs", shortened for video blogs, influencers like Sellner converse chummily with their audience, often within the familiar confines of their homes. Speaking directly to her viewers, Brittany Sellner divulges the reason behind her recent absence: a visit to her family in the United States as well as some private matters. Woven throughout the video are personal snapshots, capturing candid moments between Sellner, her husband and their one and a half years

old son. Sellner, who boasts an audience of 175.000 subscribers to her YouTube channel, has important personal news to share. Her husband has been acquitted. Brittany's spouse, Martin Sellner, founder of the Identarian Movement, stood trial in Vienna on charges related to incitement to hatred.

On Brittany Sellner's YouTube channel, adorned subscribers can encounter a spectrum of content, ranging from cultural commentaries of Greta Gerwig's blockbuster Barbie ("…a deeply subversive, radical feminist film that not only degrades men but also degrades motherhood") to dating advice ("Media Mocks Wife for DARING To Take Care of Husband") and pregnancy announcements. Interspersed amidst these perceived intimate moments of her life are narratives of white victimhood. Conspiracy theories, such as those related to "white genocide",

which posits that there is a deliberate plot to erase "white civilization", provide a particularly powerful narrative within white supremacist and far-right adjacent spaces. Giving both meaning and purpose to the feelings of anger felt by potential recruits, the aforementioned narrative framework as posited by Berbrier serves as a powerful recruiting strategy[2].

Parasocial relationships constitute a strong mechanism for narrative persuasion processes due to feelings of association between the audience member and the respective narrative character. A parasocial relationship with a narrative character thus may alter an individual's perception of social norms, including beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The narrative character is perceived as being part of the recipient's social network, where those asymmetrical relationships are seen as an extension of one's social circle.

Within the field of terrorism and extremism studies, women remain an understudied demographic, often relegated to the periphery. The digital far-right is largely perceived as a male-dominated space defined in parts by its misogyny and anti-feminist rhetoric. Yet, I would argue that the presence of women is not merely incidental but integral to the functioning of the movement. The scope of far-right movements extends beyond the traditional image of men marching in the streets. Through the sharing of cultural material on social media, women play a significant role in the dissemination of extremist ideologies. The perception of authenticity and accessibility, that women like Brittany Sellner offer, serve as a powerful tool of the modern far-right. Eviane Leidig[3] crucially contends that these leaders, navigating the virtual terrain and leveraging digital platforms, play a pivotal role in the mainstreaming of ideas that were previously confined to the fringes.

With more candor and openness than what the average person would probably divulge to their closest friends, Nick Fuentes tells his followers that a recently purchased candle has given him post-nasal drip. In a world full of digital echoes, Fuentes' words, however trivial they may seem, found resonance with the 75.000

viewers watching his livestream that day. The synchronous chat that accompanies the livestream buzzes with conversations and inside jokes from his online community.

Early studies on parasocial relationships were primarily focused on the influence of mass media, particularly through soap opera character and fictional TV personas. As technologies have advanced, so have parasocial relationships. The advent of social media has added another component to the dynamic of parasocial relationships, as occasionally the performer *will* interact with you.

A message from a user under the moniker "Rabadam" pops up on the livestream.

"Rabadam", who has donated three dollars through the super chat function, wants to know what Fuentes thought of Kanye West's latest performance. In exchange for the monetary contribution, a small price to pay for those wanting to be acknowledged by their favorite social media personality, Fuentes shares his thoughts on West's sartorial choices live on the stream. Fuentes, who had previously received payments of up to 30.000 dollars from Kanye West's failed presidential campaign, is no stranger to the rapper. On the live stream Fuentes muses: "Dude, it's epic that this guy went out and said he loved Hitler and then goes and is just like the most iconic cultural legend of our time". Fuentes, who has been deplatformed from most mainstream social media sites, including
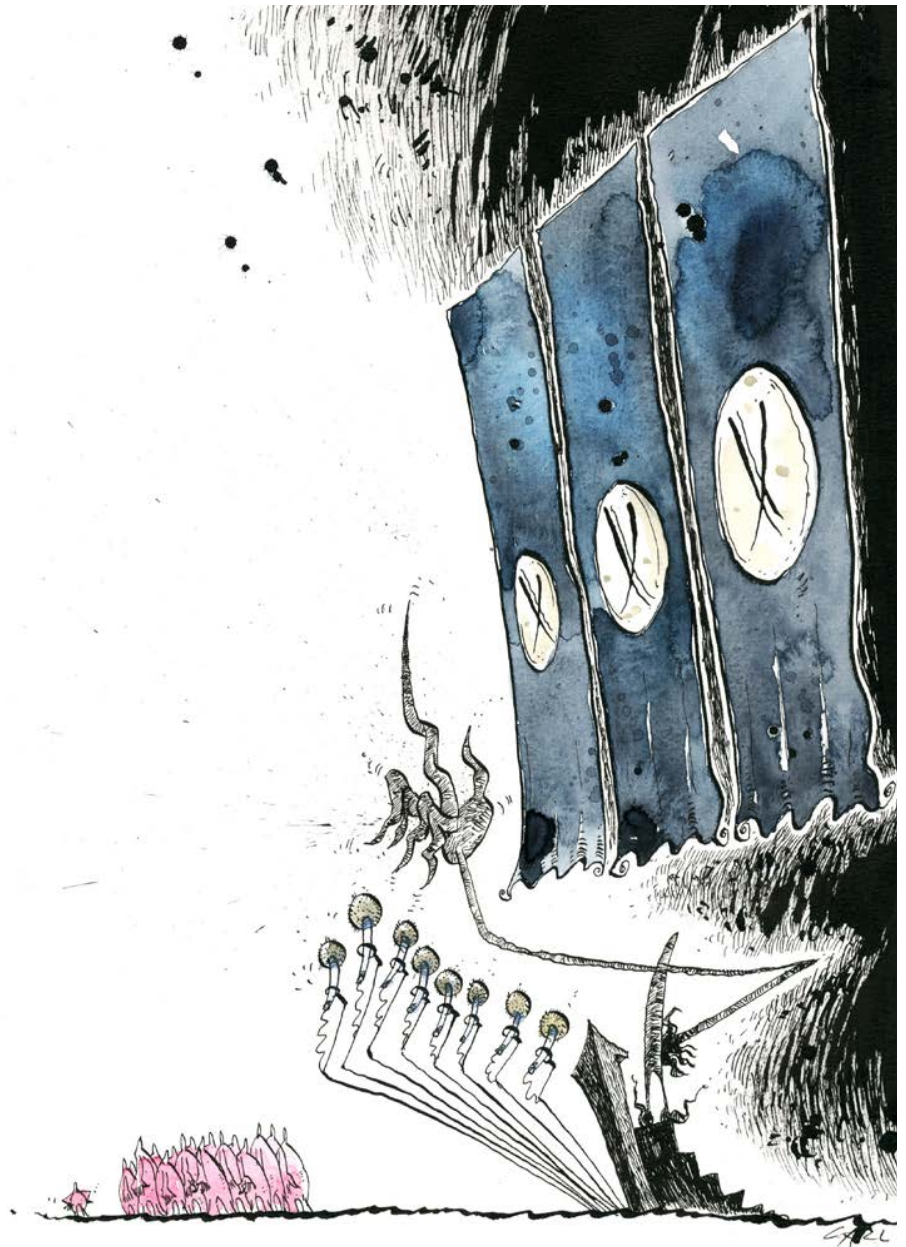
X, for hate speech, the promotion of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and the denial of the holocaust, has since migrated to alt-tech platforms. So has his community. The unique character that social media platforms offer mean that parasocial relationships between an influence and its audience may turn into multisocial relationships between audience members.

The perceived relationships that viewers build with their favorite streamer can be significantly amplified through the live contact taking place in real time as well as extended viewing (most of Fuentes' live streams average two hours). Furthermore, the communities that live streamers foster are not limited to live broadcast, often extending into third-party messaging services, where viewers can interact with one another. Underneath Fuentes' Rumble stream, eager followers can find links to his other channels. Fuente's streams average over 90 comments where his followers not only interact with him, but also with one another.

Podcasting the intimate self

An old video clip of the British-American kickboxer turned influencer Andrew Tate, ranting that "unless you're a hot female (…) if you're some fat dude that just had a heart attack", he will not perform CPR on you, resurfaces on YouTube Shorts. Despite being banned from Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, Podcast excerpts featuring Tate's transatlantic accent seem omnipresent on the curated feeds of most teenagers. Influencers like Tate, who are capitalizing on toxic masculinity by creating content that is largely associated with the manosphere, are as motivated by financial gains as they are by their ideological agenda. Through his controversial online course, which promises "high-income skill development", followers were incentivized to cut, edit and re-post his most contentious takes with the aim of increasing engagement, making his content go viral long before the first Op-Eds reached the porches of worried parents. A victim of his own success, Tate claimed that the shortened clips in which he promoted warped views of masculinity and propagated retrograde attitudes towards women, that circulated online,

lacked context. Furthermore, Tate's content may constitute a gateway into more extreme ideologies and violent online communities. According to a recent study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue on the manosphere, encompassing a number of interconnected misogynistic online communities, findings revealed that the YouTube Shorts algorithm optimized aggressively in response to user behavior, leading to the rapid display of increasingly extreme video in a shorter time frame.

Not only has the golden age of podcasting humanized the news, but podcasting also lends itself particularly well to the development and fostering of parasocial relationships. Both personal and communal, the podcast format allows its listenership to simultaneously be a silent private participant in other people's conversation and

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generate a sense of connection or community even. Differing greatly from previous notions of intimacy within the context of mass media for instance, the intimacy of podcasts refers to the medium's effort to create both emotional experiences and personal connections. As Tate's most ardent of listeners spend hours with his voice in their head, they also feel like they know him.

Hedder and Schlütz (2021)[4] contend that audio media is capable to both sustain and build parasocial bonds, better than any other medium. In a study, which explored both what specific characteristics of a podcast host would promote parasocial relationships as well as if those can be persuasive, emotional tactics employed by the host emerged as a positive predictor of parasocial relationships. It is particularly the host's ability to simulate a form of intimacy whilst at a distance from their

listenership, through the act of self-disclosure, that proves to be a potent asset. Tate's most ardent of fans can tell you with authority about his complex and strained relationship with his father, a pro chess player. A YouTube video titled "Andrew Tate opens up about crying after being released from jail", in which the influencer candidly recalls regaining freedom after being incarcerated among other things, has 1.5 million views.

In the vertical frame of the 28 second edited clip, Sheikh Ibrahim, oscillating between erudite and instructive, assures his followers that a Muslim is certainly allowed to wear a football jersey. He effortlessly speaks the vernacular of his younger followers, nods to their experiences and even occasionally injects a dose of humor to lighten the discourse. The self-proclaimed scholar presents himself more as a friendly mentor than a zealous preacher. "But", Sheikh Ibrahim cautions, "one should be very careful to ensure that those jerseys do not display symbols that might be associated with non-believers, such as the cross, nor should they bear the names of such individuals."

As one of the fastest growing social media apps counting nearly a billion users, TikTok has become central to the social media strategies of leading Salafi preachers and influencers. From lengthy sermons that are livestreamed on the app to interactive Question and Answer videos like the one illustrated above, influencers are able to grow their audiences on the video-sharing app by interacting with their audiences.

Through short, easily digestible videos, Salafi influencers provide accessible online guidance, covering all facets of life, from spiritual matters to private affairs. Figures like Sheikh Ibrahim, also known as Ibrahim al Azzazi, despite facing bans for "hateful behaviour", delivers simplistic, polarized and black and white answers to the intricate and nuanced questions their followers may have in regard to gender roles, family dynamics and sexuality.

On TikTok, where watch time or interactions with a video equal more recommendation, the algorithms do not discriminate between those who are religiously

radicalized and those who are simply curious. As such, watching one short clip can result in being served up similar content in enormous volumes.

From the interpersonal to the parasocial

In his seminal study "The People's Choice"[5], Lazarsfeld and his co-authors set out to study people's voting behavior in the lead up of the 1940s presidential elections. Highlighting interpersonal influence and opinion leaders in shaping voting behavior, they concluded that "ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population" underscoring the crucial role of these influencers[6].

Mass media studies in the 1940s were characterized by atomized audiences. But what implications does Lazarfeld's conception of opinion leaders have for our understanding of mediated communication in an age where we are able to disseminate information without spatial or temporal constraints?

People in Europe and elsewhere tend to have fewer friends than they did just decades ago. During the pandemic, we siloed with our smartphones as our screen became our window to the outside world. The pandemic magnified our reliance on digital platforms for connection, information and distraction, providing fertile ground not only for the fostering of parasocial relationships with our most watched influencers but also the risk of manipulation.

In 2005, Mark Zuckerberg envisioned Facebook as a digital counterpart to our physical reality, a "mirror of what existed in real life". In the aftermath of the storming of Capitol Hill, alongside the proliferations of baseless conspiracy theories such as pizza gate and the rampant spread of Fake News, this idyllic vision couldn't seem more distant. Luxembourg's trust in media is low. A recent survey by the Trustlab survey administered by STATEC revealed that only 35% of population expressed trust in media institutions[7]. It seems as if public discourse is no longer shaped by traditional gatekeepers, but by

the viral and the visceral. And thus, parasocial opinion leaders emerge, not through established channels of legacy media but through vlogs, podcasts, streams and viral videos.

But how do we navigate the vast and varied landscapes of influencers that shape our online experience? And how can consumers of digital content maintain a critical distance when engaging with influencers?

Influencers have become a permanent fixture in our media landscape. The era when traditional media stood unchallenged as the gatekeepers of information has come to an end. It's imperative that we adapt to the current landscape. As such it is worth exploring how these dynamic forces may be leveraged beyond the realm of conspicuous or problematic content.

How can the dynamics of parasocial relationships be leveraged positively in the dissemination of important and factual content? Why not theorize how those relationships can be harnessed to foster greater awareness and drive meaningful action on issues related to solidarity, inclusivity and diversity? In a time marked by institutional shortcomings, we should ask ourselves how we can harness the power of influencers to cultivate a more inclusive and diverse media landscape. ◆

1   Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass communication and para-social interaction", in: *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes, vol. 19,* 1956, p. 215-229.

2   Mitch Berbrier, "The Victim Ideology of White Supremacists and White Separatists in the United States", in: *Sociological Focus,* vol. 33 (2), 2000, p. 175–191.

3   Eviane Leidig, *The Women of the Far-Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalisation.* Columbia University Press, New York, 2023.

4   Daniela M. Schlütz and Imke Hedder, „Aural Parasocial Relations: Host-Listeners Relationships in Podcasts": *Journal of Radio & Audio Media,* vol. 29 (2), 2021, p. 1-18.

5   Robert K. Merton, "Patterns of influence" (1949), in: Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (eds.), *Communication research*, vol. 47 (6), 2011, p. 180-219.

6   Ibid. p. 151.

7   http://tinyurl.com/44483re9 (last accessed on: February 14, 2024).