

Working Paper:

Mapping New York City Influencers and Funding of Public Messaging

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Abstract

Governments around the world try to provide trusted information to citizens about the services that governments provide. In France and Canada and parts of the US, content creators/influencers disseminate information about health care, voting, and climate change and to reach young audiences ([Reveillhac, 2025](#)). This paper looks at the New York City influencers who communicate information about Mayor Mamdani's programs and New York City policies and regulations. These influencers are well described by the term "political relational influencers" (Goodwin et al 2023). This paper contributes to the field by providing some information about the influencer community in New York, promoting city programs and policies. We show that there are two types of relationships in place. There is a Signal group which the Mayor's office uses to communicate with a hand-picked group of influencers. There are also pilot programs aimed at using influencers on Instagram and TikTok to promote city services including immigration rights, public budgeting processes, and tenants' rights, as well as pre-existing campaigns providing information about voting and health care. We created a list of influencers who appear to have supportive relationships with the city government, explain the different characteristics of the group, survey relevant literature and conclude with recommendations for best practices.

Introduction

In a world of AI slop, and information overload, government agencies try to provide trusted information to citizens about the services that the government provides. Governments in France and Canada and parts of the US pay social media influencers to disseminate information about health care, voting, and climate change and to reach young audiences ([Reveillhac, 2025](#)).

Mayor Zohran Mamdani has been heralded as an innovative communicator who used Instagram and Tiktok to organize supporters and promote his mayoral campaign. Since he was elected, his image is ubiquitous in the city 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](#). His election has accelerated the use of influencers and brought them even more into the mainstream of NYC communications' strategy. The Mayor's office has hired a host of new Communications staffers and created a network of influencers who push out his messages to their followers.

On January 7, 2026 Mamdani held an influencer-only press briefing ([Lamorte 2026](#)). *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 that 78 influencers, with a reach of 82 million people. ([Grynbaum 2026](#)).

This paper looks at what, if anything, has changed in 2026, who is in the universe of New York City influencers and how government agencies are able to best work with influencers to provide useful and accurate information to New Yorkers.

We demonstrate that there are two types of relationships in place. There is a Signal group which the Mayor's office uses to communicate with a hand-picked group of influencers. There are also pilot programs aimed at using influencers on Instagram and TikTok to promote city services including immigration rights, public budgeting processes, and tenants' rights, as well as pre-existing campaigns providing information about voting and health care. We created a list of influencers who appear to have supportive relationships with the city government, explain the different characteristics of the group, survey relevant literature and conclude with recommendations for best practices.

Methodology

We interviewed 12 people, asked questions and fact-checked over email, conducted a literature review, reviewed social media postings as well as City budget documents, press releases and calls for proposals. For our report, we created a list of 189 influencers with ties to the administration. We used reverse image searches to create a list of who was at the January press briefing and we added in other content creators who seem to have ties with the Mamdani Administration. We looked at frequency of content related to the Mamdani Administration and non-social media information pointing to an existing relationship, including press coverage or publicly available information about contracts with City agencies.

Background –influencers in NYC

New York City government agencies have had an online presence for years but the Covid 19 pandemic was an inflection point. The trucks filled with dead bodies, the thousands of deaths created a sense of urgency for City officials who knew they had to reach New Yorkers with important health information, especially New Yorkers in underserved areas or in particular ethnic communities.

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.” Bayona points to journalists like Rico Dupuy of Radio Soleil, a trusted voice in the Haitian community, as well as outlets serving Latino, South Asian, Chinese, and other Caribbean communities.

In August of 2020, New York City Health + Hospitals (an independent agency funded by the government) began marketing campaigns with celebrities and online influencers to spread the word about Covid testing and then, once they became available, vaccines ([Boon and Golloub 2021](#)) ([NYC Health + Hospitals 2020](#)).

In their 2021 paper, Golloub and Boon, who were communication directors in New York City Health + Hospitals during the pandemic, describe how the agency recruited nano and micro influencers who created content “based on guidelines and assets” provided by New York City Health + Hospitals. After the videos were made, the agency paid to boost the videos. The Test + Trace campaign included 24 influencers with a reach of 12 million followers. The efforts of NYC Health + Hospitals were considered a success and the idea of working with influencers expanded to a number of City agencies.

Today “I can’t think of an agency that does not work with influencers,” said Natalia Goldstein, digital media strategist with the NYC Campaign Finance Board, noting that the NYC Campaign Finance Board expanded their efforts in 2021 and then in 2023 began to “scale” and “bring in house” their influencer work. The MTA enlisted online influencer New York Nico (who offline is a film maker Nicholas Heller) in 2021 to get celebrities to record announcements for the NYC subways. ([Wheeler 2021](#)).

Also in 2021, the Sanitation Foundation hired marketing firm Caryn Pace to hire content creator New York Nico as part of its broader campaign to remind New Yorkers not to litter ([Sanitation Foundation n.d.](#)) ([CPACE Solutions n.d.](#)). A Sanitation Department spokesperson says they received a “one-time grant” and hired influencers in order to spread the word about NYC’s composting program which expanded to more city neighborhoods in 2024 (NYC Community Compost Network, n.d.).

Mamdani election a turning point

A turning point in New York City’s relationship with influencers was, unsurprisingly, the election of Mayor Mamdani. A group of content creators and influencers, the Creators4Zohran group that supported his election campaign was reconfigured to promote coverage and talking points from the Mayor’s office. The group is run by the Director of New Media and Cultural Communications at the NYC Office of the Mayor, Emilia Rowland, and her staff, and members of the group receive daily updates, talking points and clips that they can use in their posts. The messages come over the encrypted messaging app, Signal and the group’s name is NYC Creators Announcements. Before joining the group, the selected influencers fill in an intake form that describes where they live and what topics they are interested in and then they receive invitations targeted to their interests. One example given by a City employee is that an influencer may be invited to join a neighborhood canvas or film the preparation of a canvas.

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

Tascha Van Auken ran Mamdani’s field program in 2025 and now serves as Commissioner for his Office of Mass Engagement (a new office that combined older outreach-focused departments when it was founded).

Jagpreet Singh, the First Deputy Commissioner at the Office of Mass Engagement. *Did not respond to repeated requests for comment*

Emilia Rowland, Director of New Media and Cultural Communications, New York City Mayor’s office—manages the group of influencers who get daily updates as to what the City and Mayor are doing and decide what to cover. *Did not respond to repeated requests for comment*

Emily Minster, who has been referred to as the “influencer whisperer” was appointed to the Office of NYC Mayor Mamdani as Deputy Press Secretary for New Media and creative partnerships in July 2026.

In many ways the Signal group is similar to a traditional press list created and used by communications teams in that the influencers receive updates but decide what they choose to 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. The most important is that journalists would not ethically be allowed to accept payment or gifts for their reporting.

There are more than 200 influencers in the Signal group. It includes micro influencers with 5,000-10,000 followers as well as influencers with millions of followers (Kuzoren, Kiris, and Erkan 2025). Network effects may extend their reach; if many creators post about similar topics, the Instagram and TikTok recommendation algorithms may amplify the messages. At the very least, seeding New York with newsy updates on and offline creates an impression of ubiquity and omnipresence as well as the sensation that the Mayor and his team are hard at work for the city.

Table 1. The Definitions of Influencer Types

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

Kuzoren, Emine, 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.

For the purposes of this paper we define the group we discuss as “Political relational influencers” (Goodwin et. al 2023) . In their 2023 paper in the *International Journalism of Communications*, Goodwin et. al. define them as “content creators who promote political and social causes toward their audiences by expressing support for them and endorsing them implicitly or explicitly.” This 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.”

We also find useful Aalto & Frig’s term “Journalistic Social Media Influencers” JSMI which they 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.” (Aalto & Frig 2026). While the the content creators we interviewed for this paper, have some similar practices to those of journalists, they mostly did not self-identify as such.

Influencers thought to be cost effective and able to reach under served communities

Using influencers to disseminate messages can be cost effective, when compared to traditional advertising, and can reach demographics that are not reached by traditional media outlets.

“If you spend \$50,000 dollars on influencers, you can have ten influencers replicate your message.If you spend \$50,000 on TV ads you have two TV ads and you don’t know if people see that. You’re not sure that people are going to be in front of the TV or in front of the streaming services, so talking about math, that’s the way to go. There was more and more benefit. Once Zohran Mamdani won, he elevated all of this, and now we are where we are today,” José Bayona said.

The NYC Campaign Finance Board works with influencers as part of its mandate to reach underserved populations. Research in 2019, carried out by the Campaign Finance Board, identified neighborhoods in

Brooklyn and Queens that were underserved for voter outreach and education. Often these neighborhoods include people with disabilities or low English proficiency. A Pew survey found that low-income audiences are more likely to get news from influencers (26%) than higher-income (16%) ([Stocking 2024](#)). Pew also reported that 38% of people in the United States aged 18-29 said they regularly get news from news influencers on social media ([Pew Research Center 2025](#))

“NYC Votes 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” - said Natalia Goldstein. NYC Votes is an initiative of the campaign finance board and provides practical information about voter registration and election dates. “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,” Goldstein said, describing the criteria her office looks for when hiring influencers.

On which city agencies are working with influencers:

The New York City government includes a number of different agencies tasked with providing information to New Yorkers as well as government agencies that provide a particular service and also do public outreach. With the election of Mayor Mamdani, some of these agencies have been reorganized. 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 efforts with influencers. The administrations of Mayor de Blasio and Eric Adams also created different offices so the city has several bodies with similar names.

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** ([Executive Order 07](#)). The Director of the New York City Office of Mass Engagement is Tascha Van Auken and under the 2027 budget released in July 2026, the office has a budget of \$5.5 million. The agency recruits volunteers who want to canvas, staff tables and do text banking to reach New Yorkers.

The office website does not include information about the number of employees at the agency but has links to sign up 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 canvas in person ([NYC Mayor’s Office of Mass Engagement, n.d.](#)). Its linkedin page is [Office of Mass Engagement](#) and this is the [page](#) where New Yorkers can sign up to get involved¹.

The Office of Engagement was created by Mayor Eric Adams in December 2022 and discontinued by Mayor Mamdan’s executive under which established the new Office of Mass Engagement by the Mamdani administration ([NYC Mayor’s Office 2022](#)) ([Mamdani 2026](#)). 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** ([Khurshid 2023](#)).

Public Engagement Unit Their offices are in lower Broadway in Manhattan and they were founded in 2015 by Mayor de Blasio. ([PEU, n.d.](#)). 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. Because they are a city agency they can target eligible New Yorkers and help steer them to the right departments so they can get benefits. The website describes their services as “comprehensive case management” ([PEU, n.d.](#)).

New York City Civic Engagement Commission

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 ([CEC 2018](#)) ([CEC 2025](#))

According to Jorwell Perez, the Director of Public Affairs for the Civic Engagement Commission, the Commission is an independent Commission with Commissioners appointed by the Borough Presidents, the Mayor, and the City Council speaker.

The Commission has 25 full-time employees and the Public Affairs department employs two people—one full time and one consultant. In 2026 Perez piloted a program of using influencers to spread the word about the city’s Participatory Budgeting Process (Perez, author interview June 2026). His office worked with five influencers and partnered with the Harlem ice cream shop Sugar Hill Creamery. They launched a new flavor of ice cream and encouraged citizens to get involved in the participatory budgeting process. The program name was “the people’s money” and the slogan was “4 million dollars, 5 boroughs, 20 projects” ([CEC 2026](#))

Perez expects that more agencies will start to use influencers and is keen to spread lessons learned. Influencers were paid for their involvement in the campaign and Sugar Hill Creamery was reimbursed for the cost of the ice cream. The Commission’s budget for The People’s Money implemented projects is approximately four million dollars while the budget for influencers was a small fraction of that amount.]

New York City Campaign Finance Board

The New York City Campaign Finance Board is an independent non-partisan City agency. Part of the organization’s mandate is to provide election-related information to underserved communities so as well as buying adverts on television and radio and working with journalists, the agency sometimes hires influencers to assist with their campaigns.

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

Any one campaign may have between 8-15 influencers and last as long as a year. Some examples of influencers working with the Campaign Finance Board are Shopcats which is about Bodega cats in NYC and gooddog-show which is mostly about dogs. Both include voter information into their instagram videos but not as the main subject of their postings.

For example in the Shopcats video Michelladonna is in a bodega talking to the shopcat and speaks to the owner in Spanish and then mentions that “voting is how neighborhoods speak their voice...we had a record turnout at the last elections”

In the NYC Votes videos, Sofia Dobrushin, walks a dog and talks about voting and asks people questions to test their knowledge about the elections.

The Campaign Finance board hires specialized agencies to hire the influencers, issue their contracts and work with them on deliverables. In 2026, the New York City Campaign Finance Board put out a call for an agency to manage its work with influencers. The start date is August 1, 2026 and the end data is 2029 and the funding provided is \$1.5 million over three years. This, of course, includes overhead and fees for the intermediary agency and not just direct payments to influencers ([CFB 2026](#)).

1. In the expense budget for FY 2027, the payroll and nonpayroll spending for OME is summarized on page 3E ([LINK](#)). It’s budgeted for 5.5 million total. There is also a breakdown of the OTPS spending on page 9E.

The influencers we spoke to believe they are helping people and filling a gap in the information ecosystem

Many influencers believe that transmitting information provided by the City and the Mayor's office is a public service and they want to help. Some of the influencers we spoke to see themselves as filling a gap in the information ecosystem by providing information that audiences would not otherwise be aware of.

Sari Beth Rosenberg, is a public school US history teacher and consultant for the American Federation of Teachers union and was one of the 200 influencers invited by the Democratic National Committee to attend the 2024 Convention (McHugh 2024). 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. Rosenberg views herself as providing information that is no longer easily accessible because of the hollowing out of local news and the way algorithms work online.

"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.

Like Goodwin et al (2023) we found that influencers were motivated by personal beliefs and felt that their relationship with the City and the information they conveyed would be useful for their followers and important for them to know. 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" (Harlow 2019 cited in Fischer et al. 2021. In that sense, these influencers have points in common with the solutions journalism or civic journalism movements.

José Vilson has a PhD from Columbia University Teachers College in sociology and education, is an adjunct professor at Teachers College and was brought into the group after an introduction from Sari Beth Rosenberg. An education activist, Vilson posts on politics, education, racial justice and New York City. Some of his posts include an interview with New York's Chief Equity Officer Afua Atta-Mensah as well as legendary antitrust and competition scholar Lina Khan and Commissioner Sam Levine, both arranged by the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection.

"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," said José Vilson whose Instagram account has 12,000 followers. He describes his followers as "working class people who are trying to make sense of what is happening out there in the world" between the ages of 20 and 60.

In other cases, influencers say their personal support of the mayor is the reason they want to help.

Diego León got a bachelor's degree in childhood education as well as a master's in literacy education, worked as a preschool teacher and realizing he could make more money as a content creator he began working as one in 2014. He focused on sharp dressing and wanted to be a role model for young people who would not normally see people dressed up. León's Instagram handle is @dandyinthebronx. During Mamdani's campaign he got an invitation to an event in the Bronx and became even more of a supporter than he was previously. León says that Mamdani has shown that New Yorkers can have a better life and the videos on Instagram convey that message and also show what the Mayor is doing to improve the city.

"I didn't know about the government until Zohran showed up. Adams, de Blasio, Bloomberg were just guys on TV. What were our Mayors doing for the last 30 years? These people literally did not exist to me," León said.

Use of influencers is growing but there is a lack of uniform standards

While the influencers described above, who are in the Emilia Rowland-led Signal group, say that they are not paid for their coverage of the Mayor and City policies, the academic literature on influencers notes that the definition of an influencer is fluid and that influencers straddle many roles (Aalto & Frig 2026) (Goodwin et al 2023). This was confirmed by the influencers we spoke with. The universe of New York City influencers is a large one and, unsurprisingly, involves different levels of engagement with the city and different forms of content. There are paid relationships and unpaid ones, there are informal relationships and there are hybrid relationships.

Information about these relationships is closely guarded. The influencer and advertising agencies that create the contracts did not reply to requests for information. Officials in the Mayor's office who we contacted repeatedly did not respond either. This lack of transparency about influencers is noted in some recent studies and comes up frequently in debates about the role of journalistic social media influencers (Aalto and Frig 2026).

On payments:

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 relationship management may mean 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 is available in City documents online.

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

- Malone Creative Group, LLC.
- Wolfe-Doyle Advertising NY, Inc.
- Venus Media, LLC.
- Bandujo Advertising and Design, Inc.
- Sound Communications, Inc
- D Expósito & Partners, LLC.
- OpAd Media Solutions LLC.
- Creative Jugos, run by Olivia Rios, has had multiple contracts with the Department of Social Services for social media and content creation. In 2025 the firms was awarded City contracts are available online [\[https://a0333-passportpublic.nyc.gov/contracts.html\]](https://a0333-passportpublic.nyc.gov/contracts.html)

The agencies we contacted for comment did not respond and we were told that their contracts with the city forbid them from speaking to "outside entities about their contract with the city and to disclose any information".

New York City agencies, working through intermediary marketing/advertising agencies, pay between \$5,000 and \$20,000 per influencer campaign which may involve co-creating content that includes messages that the agency wishes to promote. City agencies with small budgets are at a disadvantage when it comes to hiring influencers but may get support from influencers who believe in their campaigns. The influencers are hired as independent contractors which under New York State law gives them autonomy and also contributes to their freedom from editorial interference (author interview 2026).

City officials and influencers told us that some influencers offer discounts or work for free because they want to support the Mayor and they benefit from the traffic that comes from being associated with the Mayor. Other city employees have said that having a small budget has meant they can not get 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," said a member of the Public Engagement Unit, which was created to provide information about tenant and housing rights among other topics. Meanwhile City agencies with large followings are able to get influencers to work for free because they want the 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. 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," Vilson said

Fluid boundaries between journalism and content creation

Related to the fluid definitions of what is an influencer and what are the boundaries between the work of being an influencer and a journalist is the fact that many influencers have multiple roles ([Bainotti 2025](#)). This was confirmed in our interviews. Being an influencer for the City is combined with other kinds of work, paid and unpaid. León likes to promote small businesses in the Bronx and Bronx-related events. Many of his videos are watched by audiences in Europe as well as in the Bronx so he says he tends to post around noon NYC time. León described that when he was given two minutes with Mamdani during the campaign he made four different videos on different topics. Diego León receives updates from the Emilia Rowland Signal group but in the past did a paid advertisement for the Department of Sanitation. Leon also posts on stylish dressing and does a lot of Pokémon-related content. He earns income from some Pokémon and fashion campaigns mostly handled through agencies.

Allia Mohamed describes herself as an "accidental influencer." A co-founder of real estate startup Openigloo, Mohamed 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 her own red PSA sticker to some of her announcements ([Mo 2024](#)). Historically, Public Service Announcements were government announcements of important information for the public but since the pandemic have become widely used by social media influencers as a method of signalling that a message is important. (Manganello, Bleakley & Schumacher 2020)

Is Proximity to the Mayor, and access, a form of remuneration?

Access to important figures has always been viewed as a form of currency in journalism (Gans 1979). Journalists need access to experts, government officials and sources who can provide journalists with background information, original insights and breaking news. (Gans 1970) (Schiffrin 2012) (Starkman 2014). Interviews with important figures can boost circulation and elevate the importance of the journalists who do those interviews. Historically figures such as the New York Times columnist Flora Lewis and Tom Friedman or the *Wall Street Journal's* Karen Elliot House were considered celebrities in their own right but also ridiculed for being too close to 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 the world view of their sources (Stiglitz 2017) (Schiffrin 2012).

In their 2025 paper, Dubois and Dommett note that there are different forms of compensation for influencers and cite Lopez 2022 who points out that access is one form of compensation. Indeed, in the world of online influencers, it may be even easier than it was in the days of print to discern the effect that access can have on audience size and behavior. Newsstand sales are generally taken into consideration when decisions are made as to who to put on the cover of magazines such as *Vanity Fair* or *Time*. Today influencers are well aware of what kind of content affects their audience numbers, engagement and potential for monetization. For example, while influencers included in the Signal group of the Mayor's office may not receive direct payments, proximity to the Mayor can add to views and engagement and would be considered a form of non-monetary compensation.¹ Influencers say the star power of Zohran Mamdani and his immense popularity are also attractive for influencers.

¹ 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.

“It always helps when the most popular mayor in the country is front and center of your video,” Vilson noted.

Understanding why trust and credibility are important

A key question about influencers is whether they actually have influence and if so what is it that makes them credible and in which domains? On social media, it is often the mood or tone that is conveyed that influences audiences rather than the actual information ([Fischer et al 2021](#)). In his pioneering research on media trust, Carl I. Hovland and colleagues at the Yale Communication Research Program studied what made audiences find an idea or piece of information persuasive and published the findings in their book *Communication and Persuasion* published in 1953 (Hovland 1953). They assumed that persuasion was an indicator of trust because when audiences are persuaded by new information it is because they trust the source. Source, message content, and audience characteristics are three of the main elements of trust. Levi & Stoker argue that trust is relational as it involves trusting someone else, and it is usually conditional. It is possible to partially but not wholly trust (Levi & Stoker, 2000). It's not clear how trust can be restored once it is gone and 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” (Levi & Stoker, 2000)—that is to say from one familiar outlet to the media as a whole. People tend to trust what they consume more than other sources ([Daniller 2017](#)) ([Pew Research Center 2011](#)). It's not clear however what role selection bias plays i.e. whether people migrate to news sources they trust or whether regular consumption of news builds trust (Tsfati 2010).

At a time of declining trust in institutions, including the media, scholars have studied the question of why audiences trust influencers, and find them credible, and under what circumstances. Influencers are credited with being trusted, particularly by young people (Harff & Schmuck 2023). Angwin finds that many influencers work hard to build trust with their audiences often by showing their work and calling out influencers who they say are breaking users’ “trust” ([Angwin 2024](#)).

Looking at the professionalization of journalism that took place some 100 years ago, scholar Michael Schudson noted that in an age of partisan journalism, professionalization was a way of freeing journalists from the political and commercial pressures that surrounded them (Schudson 1981). Professionalization of journalism and objective reporting became both a response to propaganda and a viable business model. The idea of professional journalism was built upon the enlightenment model of trust along with verification and replication. Journalists’ responsibility to provide accurate and objective information to help inform citizenry was at the core of the profession and expected to engender trust in the media.

For influencers, credibility and trust are not just important for building and keeping an audience but are essential to the financial model of influencers. (Riedl et. al 2023) Earning revenue is necessary as many of them lead a life of precarity in a market where a few make substantial amounts of money and the rest cobble together a living from multiple activities ([Glatt 2022](#)).

Nile Berry describes himself as a video journalist. He posts explainer videos across social media, many of which are about New York real estate, and has 150,000 followers across social media between the ages of 25-40, mostly male, with many working in finance and real estate. He believes that the AI era has made reliable voices even more attractive to audiences. Berry says content like his which is based on deep research has an advantage “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... in a world of slop, people don’t want to listen to AI voices if they don’t know is actually speaking. There’s an immediate negative reaction to faceless content.”

The paradox of authenticity- influencers have influence because they are credible. But they are essentially doing advertising without disclosing.

This leads to the paradox of influencer credibility, noted by some of the people we interviewed. Credibility comes because a message is trusted, or the messenger is, but many of the influencers/content creators are paid for their content which is intended to look authentic.

“Influencer-created content will look more like something that isn’t paid. 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,” said one communications staffer who works with influencers.

While some paid promotions are clearly labeled as paid others are not. Thus Aalto & Frig argue that there is an inherent tension in the practice of “journalistic influencers” (the so-called JSMI) because their authenticity and credibility comes from something that is paid for. When asked about how they navigate this tension, JSMI refer to their own values in choosing what to promote and their own ethical standards as well as platform guidelines on labeling and transparency (Alto & Frig 2026)

We found that labeling is inconsistent. New York City Health + Hospitals Uses a #paidpartnership hashtag for announcements such as Grasia Mercedes encouraging menopausal women to make doctor appointments. A video with Clarence Angelo talking about going to the Pride Parade and telling people about vaccines and other services also has a #paidpartnership label. The New York City Campaign Finance Board uses #nycvotespartner while influencers promoting the NYC Civic Engagement Commission used @nyccec and @thePeoplesMoney

Measuring impact

Communication scholars have spent the last century debating how to measure the effects of exposure to different kinds of messaging. Often the difficulty is one of attribution of variables. 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 City messaging campaigns as influencers are only one part of those campaigns. Canvassing, tabling, interviews with journalists, signs on subways and kiosks around the city as well as advertisements on social media may all be deployed as well as influencers.

For space reasons we can not delve deeply into the communications literature on impact but will note that there is a difference between raising awareness versus getting people to take action ([Kite 2023](#)). While getting audiences to take action after seeing a message is the ideal, that is largely impossible for the City to track although. Therefore “engagement” is the metric that is 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 engagement ([Trunfio 2021](#)). The people we interviewed define engagement rate as audiences showing some sort of reaction such as a heart or a like. They note that one of the limitations of advertising on radio and television is that it is difficult to see audience reactions to those advertisements. So while engagement rates online do not reveal audience behavior after exposure to a message they do indicate some sort of audience response. Natalia 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% is strong while 8% would be excellent.”

“Our paid advertising placements—content created by influencers tends to perform really well alongside more traditional ads. In our digital 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. 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—so it's easier to measure impact against our other ad content types,” Goldstein said.

Online it is, of course, easier to see whether someone clicks on a website after being exposed to influencer content whether it's part of a paid campaign or not. The Campaign Finance Board is able to track website visits after a campaign is launched. But privacy laws affect what government agencies are allowed to track.

“There are some people who are really good at getting views/likes/comments from real people who don't do anything afterwards. 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, “ said Allia Mohamed. Mohamed says that in her experience Instagram is better for raising awareness and reaching a large audience but Tiktok is much better at getting people to act.

The intermediary agency handling influencer hiring for a City agency, will likely include a list of required metrics in the contract. Influencers may be asked to provide data such as audience size, engagement rates with the content and information about when their viewers stop watching eg the so-called “drop off” rate.

Timing is everything—drop-off rates affect if message is heard

Where the message comes in a paid campaign is a question discussed by the agencies that hire influencers. Putting the message too early can seem forced or inauthentic but posting it too late means that audiences may not see it.

Nile Berry, the journalist-influencer who covers New York real estate, says most people quickly stop watching.

“If you don't hook people in the first two 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 — which is the specific point most people will have already dropped off before.”

It's harder to find out if some action is taken after the video is watched. But Allia Mohamed pointed to an example of a video she made directing people to a government website that provides rental histories. After her posting, the website crashed because so many people visited the Division of Housing and Community Renewal site ([Zaveri 2024](#)).

Berry's statistics about drop-off rates are sobering and one of the people we spoke to about working with influencers said there's often a little dance as the City agency wants their message in the early part of the video. Creators often resist this kind of scripting. Several people interviewed commented that under Eric Adams, city officials provided more guidelines as to editorial content while Mamdani administration communications staffers tend to be more hands-off. “I've never been told what to say or given a deadline,” Vilson notes.

A City employee told us that under NY State law, the influencers are contractors and not employees so while a City agency can “create parameters” they are not supposed to dictate the content of the script. 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.

Regulating political relational influencers: gaps and recommendations

Much of the practice about editorial content and disclosure of relations seems to come from tacit understanding and personal relationships as well as contractual arrangements with third-party agencies.

Our interviews found that regulations governing influencer relationships are unknown and unclear. We found

a lack of standards as to disclosure and transparency and a lack of knowledge about what laws if any apply. We believe regulation is important and we now turn to that topic.

Why regulate? By Joseph E. Stiglitz

A natural question is, why regulate at all? Doesn't any regulation infringe on principles of free speech? Influencers are at the same time both like 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 sort out truthful from false information, we proscribe deliberately false and inaccurate information, and this should be true whether it comes from a corporation or an influencer. Of course, that leaves most advertising/influencing untouched—the Marlboro man, with its suggestion that smoking that brand would make one manly, was clearly false, but it never 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, of course, that may not suffice: there are many unpaid influencers, partially organized by others to spread a message. Should that organizational 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 of 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?

By promoting consistent and comprehensive laws on the disclosure of influencers partnerships and regulating content, we believe that New York could set the standard for other governments working with influencers to provide useful, accurate, and trustworthy information about government services. This is important not only for New York but also for society at large. Trust and social cohesion are important for societies to function and we live in a world of polarization and mass distrust in institutions and news organizations, much of which has been fostered by President Trump. Standardizing how influencer collaborations are carried out may be an important step in rebuilding public trust and restricting future weaponization of influencers in the elections to come. In this section we survey some laws in other countries regulating political relational influencers, as well as US regulatory gaps, and conclude with recommendations for New York state.

There are many grey areas that will be hard to regulate. As mentioned earlier, there have been multiple efforts to define what is an influencer and definitions matter. Laws based on the size of an influencer's following have their limitations. For example an influencer could have a micro following but one post could go viral. Monitoring all postings is burdensome—though may be increasingly easy with AI; if there are constraints on what can be done, obviously the focus should be on the influencers with the most influence and those who have a record of abuse.

Boundaries are vague: Amplification of Mamdani Administration Messaging

As well as traditional influencers (individual content creators), New York City is home to a progressive advocacy organizations that amplify the Mamdani Administration's messages on social media. Although

these are *independent* organizations in that they are not paid mouthpieces for the administration and value their independence from him on many subjects, they were integral in helping him win in 2025 and continue to amplify his achievements. They boast large digital followings. Groups such as New York Working Families Party and Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH) often act as de facto influencers rather than traditional advocacy organizations. Advocacy organizations in New York City are very active on social media, and the digital exposure that groups like the NYWFP and DSA provided to the Mamdani campaign in 2025 likely contributed to his victory. Disclosure regulations may need to take this kind of amplification into account.

Generally, influencers may be regulated by political advertising laws in some cases and/or by consumer protection laws aimed at protecting consumers from fraud. However, in the US, multiple papers 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 unpaid relationships, there is no requirement for disclosure of payments to influencers involved in political campaigning. (Weber 2026) ([Bensinger 2026](#)). We believe that this is an important regulatory gap that needs to be addressed.

In a recent op-ed, Weber explains that in 2023 when the Federal Election Commission updated its laws on political advertising to include “internet-based activities” it included an exception for social media activities. “The FEC’s reasoning was that paid influencer content doesn’t constitute advertising. It’s just individuals expressing themselves, even when they are paid to do so,” Weber wrote, noting that two Democratic commissioners dissented. Congressman Takano in 2026 proposed a new law that would amend the 1971 Federal election law to require “a disclaimer for certain communications paid for by a political committee, and for other purposes” ([Monnin 2026](#))

But no case has been made for any exception. If, as we believe is the case, it is important to “follow the money,” to know who is being paid for making what statements and by whom, why should it matter if it is an influencer or advertiser, if it is done over the internet or on legacy media?

Table 2. The 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	TSen. 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; a pending 2026 rule would give the FPPC direct authority to fine violators up to \$5,000 per violation, bypassing the court process.

Jurisdiction	Key Provisions
Texas	Texas Ethics Commission approves rules requiring influencers to disclose when they are paid for political advertisements (Downen 2024; Austin 2026).

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.

European laws– In the European Union there are laws that cover consumer protection and disclosure of political advertising and some countries also have rules regarding political influencers (Munch 2024). In most countries, influencers can be regulated as “audiovisual service providers” and have to follow national media rules stemming from the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. This includes, for instance, rules (Article 5) requiring disclosure of location and contact information in case the provider needs to be contacted. They also need to follow rules (Article 6) against incitement to violence or hatred or public provocation to commit acts of terrorism and rules with regard to the protection of minors (Article 6a) (Munch 2024) ([European Union 2018](#)). They must also follow rules with regard to audiovisual commercial communications (Article 9). There are also aspects of the EU’s Digital Services Act which relate to influencers.

In all EU countries, influencers are subject to consumer protection laws that bar false advertising and require proper disclosure, whether or not they are considered as audiovisual media service providers. There are also advertising self-regulatory bodies that provide guidelines on disclosure and ethics and training for influencers on these topics. The 2024 report notes that several self-regulatory bodies, in France and the Netherlands for instance, also have certification for influencers. However one study found that only 56.5% of digital content creators knew about these programs and very few participated in them ([Ha 2024](#))

Further the European Commission has a legal hub for commercial influencers so they can learn what the rules are ([European Commission n.d.](#)) The hub clarifies the disclosure needed to identify paid commercial content: 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 (Niestadt 2025, 6–7).

Even so, a 2024 study carried out by European Commission and consumer-protection authorities examined 576 influencers across platforms including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X, Facebook, and Twitch. Although 97% posted commercial content, only around 20% systematically identified those posts as advertising. Thirty-eight percent avoided platform labels such as “paid partnership,” instead using vague language such as “collaboration” or “thanks to the brand” ([European Commission 2024](#)) As well, 63% of content creators from 45 countries stated that they do not verify information before sharing ([Ha 2024](#))

Spain and France are two of the countries with more robust laws applying to influencer payments. It should however be noted that other countries also regulate this under non-influencer-specific media legislation, sometimes with guidance from national media regulatory authorities clarifying how the national media legislation applies to influencers in that regard.

In Spain influencers have to clearly disclose commercial relationships. Influencers may not use words like “thanks to” or “in collaboration with” but have to clearly state the content is an advertisement or paid. This disclosure must be visible and repeated throughout the message ([Ferrándiz 2025](#)). Spanish law applies to influencers with more than one million followers on one platform or two million across multiple platforms, earns more than 300,000 euros, makes 24 videos in the previous calendar year ([López 2025](#)). In addition to the law, Spain is also among countries where the self-regulatory body has published a code of conduct for influencers.

France became the first EU Member State to adopt a dedicated influencer law, Law No. 2023-451, in June 2023. Under Article 1, commercial influence occurs when an individual receives compensation for promoting directly or indirectly goods, services, or a broader cause through electronic content (France 2023, art. 1). The act broadened the definition of “a cause” beyond conventional product advertising, to say that other types of compensated advocacy and sponsored content may fall within the law’s scope. Article 5-2 further establishes that when influencers post content with a commercial intent, that relationship must be disclosed in a clear, legible, and visible manner throughout the duration of the content (France 2023, art. 5-2)

The 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 (France 2023, art. 8). A 2025 implementing regulation, No. 2025-1137, clarified these requirements by mandating a written contract when the combined value of compensation and benefits in kind from the same advertiser reaches €1,000, excluding tax, within a single year for activities serving the same promotional objective (France 2025, art. 1). Influencers established outside the EU, EEA, or Switzerland who target audiences in France are required to designate a legal representative within the European Union (France 2023, art. 9). 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.

Table 3. The Global Regulatory Landscape

Jurisdiction	Key Provisions
European Union (AVMSD)	Influencers treated as “audiovisual service providers” must disclose contact info (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)	First EU member-state influencer law. 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 “thanks to” language.
EU-wide compliance	2024 sweep of 576 influencers: 97% posted commercial content, but only ~20% consistently labeled it as advertising; 38% used vague terms like “collaboration.”

Munch, European Audiovisual Observatory, 2024; France, Law No. 2023-451 (2023); Ferrándiz, LetsLaw, 2025; López, DLA Piper, 2025; European Commission press release, Feb. 2024.

New York City disclosure laws – New York has disclosure requirements for paid political advertising online and a 2026 law that requires disclosure of the use of AI images in advertising ([New York State](#)

In 2025 State Senator Liz Krueger proposed a bill to New York’s legislature (S2437/A3929) requiring disclosure of social media posts that are paid for by a campaign and gives the state board of elections some authority to implement regulations ([New York State Senate 2025](#)) The bill was cosponsored by Assembly member Jeffrey Dinowitz (A3929) and would require a “paid for” label on influencer materials supporting a candidate or ballot proposal

In 2023 California passed a disclosure law requiring paid political influencers to disclose their compensation. However enforcement currently requires the Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC) to seek a court order to compel disclosure, which can take months. A new 2026 bill would fix that by giving the FPPC direct authority to fine influencers and the political committees that paid them up to \$5,000 per violation, bypassing the court process entirely ([Austen 2026](#)). In 2024, Texas proposed a rule that would require disclosure of payments of more than \$100 to post or repost political advertisements, according to the Texas Tribune ([Downen 2024](#)) ([Austin 2026](#))

The platforms do have some guidelines and requirements on disclosure of branded content but it’s not clear how this applies to creator content that is not clearly a paid promotion ([Tiktok 2023](#); [Instagram n.d.](#)). Furthermore guidelines can change and so are not a sufficient substitute for regulation.

Our research finds that, as with Federal regulation, 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,” said Sari Beth Rosenberg. “I truly believe there need to be standards and federal policy around this. There are so many loopholes,”

When it comes to disclosure, the people we interviewed—including those hiring influencers—seemed uncertain as to what the laws are 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. 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,” said one marketing person from a government agency.

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 but that the influencers don’t disclose the paid relationship. “It’s informal,” the 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.

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 US and attempting to reach a broad audience (Benson 2025) (Pickard 2021), content creators have become messengers in some cases providing narrowly targeted messages aimed at niche audiences. The implications for Democracy are profound. Much has been written about the effects that “the Daily Me” and micro targeting have on Democracy and polarization. In this paper, we attempt to focus on something adjacent; what is the eco system of influencers in New York doing messaging about government programs and policies and how can New York become a standard-setter by promoting transparency and disclosure regulations so that New Yorkers know the source of the information they receive? Accordingly we close with a short list of recommendations for New York.

Recommendations for New York

1. Clear disclosure of relationships with influencers applying to paid and unpaid content. Many City agencies and offices do not clearly disclose their relationship.
2. Standardized disclosure including consistent use of hashtags at the top of the video. The hashtag should remain throughout the video or be repeated consistently. We recommend following disclosure guidelines requiring clearly posted hashtags at the beginning, middle and end of a video, we recommend keeping the hashtag visible at all times. The hashtag should be clear such as #paid partnerships
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. The City could consider regular publication of lists of influencers who work with the Mayor's office and city agencies and clearly explain what the relationships consist of.
5. The Mayor's office also needs to publicize the disclosure rules and provide inhouse training for City employees, vendor and marketing agencies that work with influencers as well as training for influencers, staff and vendors. This is especially important for new hires who may not be aware of the regulations.
6. We also suggest that the Mayor's office also create a hub like the EU has and the FTC [pages](#) in order to provide clearly-written information and ethical guidance regarding content as well as information on regulations that cover influencers and best practices.

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