

Different Shades of Cooperation: Mapping Political Parties' Involvement With Influencers

Nils S. Borchers 

Institute of Media Studies, University of Tübingen, Germany

Correspondence: Nils S. Borchers ([nils.borchers@uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:nilS.borchers@uni-tuebingen.de))

Submitted: 30 October 2025 **Accepted:** 12 February 2026 **Published:** 30 April 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Communication in Election Campaigns: Staggering Changes or Same Old, Same Old?” edited by Viorela Dan (University of Innsbruck), Uta Russmann (University of Innsbruck), Philipp Müller (University of Mannheim), and Anne Schulz (University of Zurich), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/.i508>

Abstract

As social media influencers receive increased attention as intermediaries in the political domain, political parties are seeking to expand their involvement with them. However, knowledge of how parties get involved with influencers remains limited. This study presents a qualitative mapping of parties' influencer engagement, drawing on a secondary analysis of two datasets containing a combined 25 expert interviews with party communicators from Germany. It theorizes influencer involvement as the parties' management of social interactions. Employing an adapted version of Godes et al.'s (2005) framework for analyzing a firm's management of social interactions, it systemizes the 35 identified cases of influencer involvement as instances of different management strategies. While the moderator strategy—characterized by relationship-building and information exchange—emerged as the most prevalent, the participant strategy—marked by partisan collaboration—enjoyed the highest popularity. Overall, the findings indicate that the parties' influencer involvement is still in a formative phase, marked by experimental practices, resource constraints, and ambivalence toward influencer autonomy.

Keywords

communication management; digital campaigning; political communication; political marketing; social media influencers

1. Introduction

In January 2025, in the run-up to the national elections in Germany, Robert Habeck, then-vice chancellor and frontrunner of the Green party, visited the livestream of Maximilian Knabe (aka HandOfBlood) to talk

about his election program. With 1.4 million followers on his Twitch channel and another 2.8 million followers on his main YouTube account, Knabe ranks among the most popular German gaming influencers. In the closing segment of the 2-hour, 41-minute video, there occurred a remarkable shift to the meta-level of the conversation:

Knabe: Normally, I would have said this is a cool segue to game a bit. But it is really late and we have talked more about these points—what I appreciate—than I had thought. That’s why I want to say thank you at this point that you have dared to come to my tile table [i.e., the dominant piece of furniture in the studio] in a completely new, unfamiliar sphere that is live...

Habeck: I am really happy that we are not going to game. I would have been really scared if...

Knabe: I wouldn’t have given you such a hard time. We would have gamed together, not against each other.

Habeck: Yes. But I don’t know how it works.

Knabe: I am really good at being there for people and walking them through. (HandOfTrash, 2025, 2:36:15)

As Knabe emphasized in this short snippet, appearing on a gaming livestream to wage his campaign was a new experience for his guest, Habeck. And Habeck’s appearance certainly generated interest and engagement. A later upload of the recorded livestream on one of Knabe’s secondary YouTube channels, HandOfTrash, collected 1.1 million views and roughly 18,000 comments at my time of writing.

The fact that Habeck took this risk—and chance—is just further proof that political parties have identified influencers as valuable intermediaries specifically to address younger voter segments. This is a development that is neither unique to the Green party nor to Germany, as political communication around the world is seeing an increase in parties’ influencer-related activities (e.g., for the US, Goodwin et al., 2023; for India, Udupa, 2024).

These activities are highly heterogeneous. Their heterogeneity stems, in part, from the relative novelty of political influencing. Party communicators are still exploring ways to benefit from influencers, and most of them do so with severely limited resources (Borchers et al., 2025). It also stems from the difficulty of recruiting influencers. Communication managers often raise complaints about influencers’ unwillingness to work with parties (Borchers, 2025). These complaints are arguably justified, at least to a certain extent, because some influencers report avoiding politicizing their public persona and, consequently, their self-brand (Goodwin et al., 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022). Ultimately, this perceived shortage requires political communicators to respond flexibly to the needs of those influencers who are willing to get involved with political parties so that they have any chance at all of appearing in influencer content. In fact, despite Knabe’s quasi-romantic and highly metaphorical talk about walking Habeck through, he clearly attached importance to not being perceived as partisan. While explaining that he appreciated Habeck’s appearance because it would make politicians appear more approachable, throughout the closing segment, he repeatedly stressed that he “did not like every answer” (HandOfTrash, 2025, 2:37:14) and that “this does not mean that

I like everything you are doing” (HandOfTrash, 2025, 2:37:54). This performative distancing would be rather unusual in a commercial context, in which influencers endorse products for client corporations.

This article explores this heterogeneity in political parties’ involvement with influencers. It thus adds to the body of knowledge on political campaigning in the digital domain, with a focus on executing strategy (e.g., Barclay et al., 2025; LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrecht, 2013). In particular, it asks how political parties get involved with influencers to benefit from their impact on voters. However, so far, we know little about political parties’ involvement with influencers, so it is necessary to lay the groundwork for more detailed future studies. While research on political influencing clearly gained momentum in the last three years or so, it has tended to look at influencers and their followers mostly within the context of lifestyle politics (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024). By asking how political parties in Germany involve influencers in their campaigns, the current study shifts the focus to the parties and their activities. In doing so, I build on a still small research stream that combines political influencing with insights from communication management to investigate parties’ influencer-related activities (Borchers, 2025; Borchers et al., 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023). I also loosely connect to studies that investigate the effects of influencer messages on formal party politics (e.g., Klüver, 2024; Schmuck et al., 2022; Wasike, 2023) by illuminating the backstage of these effects.

2. Literature Review

Social media influencers are internet users who “have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web” (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 267). While influencers were initially associated with the corporate domain and consumer society, they are increasingly creating content on social and political issues. This “recent trend towards more ‘meaningful’ content” (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024, p. 2) has put influencers on the agenda of political communicators and researchers interested in political communication alike.

2.1. Influencers in Politics

Influencers engage with politics in different ways and with different levels of intensity. Recently, von Sikorski et al. (2025) suggested categorizing political influencers along three dimensions—namely, the density of their political content (i.e., how often they address political issues across their content), their style of presenting politics (i.e., whether they create fact-based or opinion-based political content), and their proximity to political actors, ideologies, and institutions (i.e., whether they are officially associated with a particular party, etc.). This scheme helps illustrate the heterogeneity of influencers’ engagement with politics. It also demonstrates that to become strategically substantial to political communicators, influencers do not necessarily need to produce political content full-time, but that addressing political issues only sporadically can also make them relevant for parties.

A growing body of research has shown that influencers also wield influence in the political realm. Studies have demonstrated that young voters in particular resort to influencers to obtain political information (Harff & Schmuck, 2025; Peters et al., 2022) and to make sense of political information they found elsewhere (Peter & Muth, 2023). Influencers also affect party-relevant outcomes. Crucially, they stimulate political interest among their followers (Schmuck et al., 2022; Wasike, 2023), improve political trust (Wasike, 2023),

and encourage political participation (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Naderer, 2023; Pöyry & Reinikainen, 2024; Reinikainen, Borchers, et al., 2025). Drawing on the widely noticed case of Rezo—a German YouTuber who heavily criticized the then-ruling conservative party, CDU/CSU, for its inadequate climate policies in the run-up to the 2019 elections to the European Parliament—Klüver (2024) was able to prove that influencer initiatives can generate a sizeable effect on election results. On the flip side, posts from political influencers can also produce disturbing effects. Specifically, empirical studies have demonstrated that influencers can increase negative emotional affect (Alsharawy et al., 2026) and deepen polarization (Gibson et al., 2023). Moreover, Palacios López et al. (2023) pointed to the high share of disinformation in political influencer content in Spain, while Udupa (2024) traced how Indian politics uses influencers to push the boundaries of what can be said. This discernible impact of influencers on voters implies that political parties are well advised to explore how they can collaborate with influencers and leverage influencer power for their own campaigns.

2.2. Parties' Management of Strategic Influencer Communication

Parties involve influencers in the context of managing their communication activities. Compared to the comprehensive body of research on the management of corporate influencer communication (e.g., Childers et al., 2019; Enke & Borchers, 2019), studies on how parties manage their involvement with influencers are still relatively rare. However, a few pioneering studies have provided initial insights.

In terms of staffing, Goodwin et al. (2023) found that demographic and audience metrics matter when party communicators select influencers for campaign collaboration. In particular, Goodwin et al. (2023) mention gender, age range, location, follower count, and topics covered as criteria that political communicators apply when selecting influencers for collaboration. Borchers (2024) added nuance to this catalogue of selection criteria by exploring the imaginary of the “ideal influencer” with whom party communicators wish to collaborate. This ideal influencer possesses features such as authenticity and passion for the party and its program, but also the ability to break down complex political issues, as well as leniency in collaborating with party communicators who may have only little experience in influencer collaborations.

In terms of strategic objectives, political parties mainly aim to inform and mobilize voters, whereas interacting with voters plays only a subordinate role (Borchers, 2025). The key advantages political communicators see in cooperating with influencers include gaining attention for the party and its program and making politicians and politics appear more approachable. On the downside, political communicators still struggle with how to integrate influencers into larger campaigns to best benefit from influencer services and create synergy effects across the different communication channels (Borchers, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023).

In terms of implementing collaborations, communication managers in parties struggle with the information asymmetries that underlie party–influencer collaborations (Borchers et al., 2025). To date, the management of influencer campaigns is only little institutionalized and only little professionalized in parties. Notably, most parties allocate few resources to working with influencers and therefore do not have the means to purchase expertise from specialized influencer marketing agencies. Furthermore, studies in the field agree that losing control over influencer conduct is a serious fear of political communication managers (Borchers, 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023). Influencer marketing operates within a “paradigm of letting go of control” (Borchers, 2023) that postulates that influencer effects can be maximized by granting influencers substantial autonomy

so as not to curtail their authenticity. This logic breaks with the more traditional logic of working with communication agencies, which follows a rationale of “who pays, decides” and therefore requires political communicators to radically rethink their approach when approaching influencers. Yet while communication managers in corporations have become used to ceding control, political communicators still feel uncomfortable with doing so (Borchers, 2025).

Despite these illuminating insights into the management of influencer campaigns, a critical gap in the literature concerns the fundamental question of how political parties attempt to integrate influencers into their campaigns. To address this gap, the current study explores the approaches parties employ in their strategic influencer communication:

RQ: What approaches do party communicators adopt to involve influencers?

2.3. Analytical Framework for Answering the RQ

To substantiate my investigation, I suggest theorizing these approaches as the *management of social interactions*. Literature on communication management uses the term “social interactions” to describe the interactions between users specifically on social media platforms. Early on, Godes et al. (2005) presented a much-noticed framework that responded to the ambition of communication managers to control social interactions on the then emerging Web 2.0. This framework systemizes a firm’s options for managing consumer-to-consumer interactions by outlining four strategies. It organizes the strategies around the roles a firm can implement in relation to these interactions (see Figure 1a). Godes et al. (2005) then sorted the four strategies by the degree to which the firm intervenes with organic interactions, ranging from “passive” (i.e., no intervention) to “aggressive” (i.e., the purposeful shaping of interactions):

- Under the *observer* strategy, the firm collects information by listening to interactions without getting involved. A standard procedure is to monitor relevant online communities. Firms observe these communities in real time and often in an automated way. Surveys among online users represent another, albeit more arduous way of collecting information under the observer strategy. Firms use this information for organizational learning. For instance, the information can help them to adapt their marketing strategy to better respond to the needs of a target group. The information can also help to identify looming crises.
- Under the *moderator* strategy, the firm fosters convenient interactions. The idea is to encourage consumers to publicly express their opinions on the firm and its products. Obviously, the twist is specifically to motivate loyal consumers so that the firm maximizes its benefit from such interactions. However, even more neutral users can be strategically valuable, because they increase the firm’s visibility, too. Firms implement the moderator strategy, for example, by setting up brand communities and encouraging positive reviews on consumer review platforms.
- Under the *mediator* strategy, the firm manages the dissemination of interactions by controlling how and to whom certain interactions are distributed. This implies that the firm identifies beneficial interactions and takes action to share these interactions further, with the aim of getting more consumers to take notice of them. For instance, firms do so by placing testimonials of satisfied consumers on their own website.

- Under the *participant* strategy, the firm enters the interactions and creates content itself. The goal is to steer interactions in a favorable direction. According to Godes et al. (2005), content creation often occurs anonymously, without firms disclosing their authorship. For example, firms pay reputation management services to create favorable online reviews. However, such anonymity brings the participant's strategy close to manipulation. For this strategy to be considered more ethically appropriate, any interferences by firms in social interactions should be disclosed.

Even today, when influencers have become key species in the information ecologies of social media, this framework remains useful due to the generic nature of the strategies. This implies that the model is flexible enough to incorporate variations of the four strategies that may result from applying it to social interactions that include influencers as a specific type of online users. Another advantage of the model lies in the fact that, due to this generic nature, it can be applied to other types of organizations besides firms. By identifying the potential points of intervention in social interactions, it is of use in analyzing the activities of any organization that attempts to manage social interactions online. Given the ongoing tendency in political parties to resort to marketing logics (Newman, 2002), I argue that the model by Godes et al. (2005) provides a productive framework for investigating political parties' involvement with influencers.

However, to apply the model to my case of political parties and their involvement with influencers, I need to make three adaptations. First, at the center of my framework is the party, not the firm. Second, this party is interested in the interactions between voters, not between consumers. Third, the interactions do not take place between equals, but between influencers and ordinary social media users. The genre of influencing operates within the narrative of influencers and their followers as equals. According to social media folklore, influencers are formerly ordinary social media users who, although they happened to gain a micro-celebrity status, still remain the girl or boy "next door" (Hund, 2023). Yet despite this narrative, there does exist a power asymmetry between influencers and their followers due to the "attention capital" (Mears, 2023) influencers accumulate. It is precisely because of this asymmetry that parties are much more interested in influencers than they are interested in ordinary social media users. By targeting influencers, they hope to achieve effects of scale resulting from the large followings influencers captain. Structurally, however, this is not a significant difference from previous constellations. Within social networks, users are rarely exactly equal but differ in their reach across the network (i.e., their connections). Accordingly, firms and other organizations have always been particularly interested in users with high reach, for example in buzz marketing campaigns (Carl, 2006). From this perspective, influencers simply take this logic to the next level, as their reach makes them easily identifiable as potentially impactful users. Figure 1b displays a modified framework for analyzing political parties' management of influencer-follower interactions.

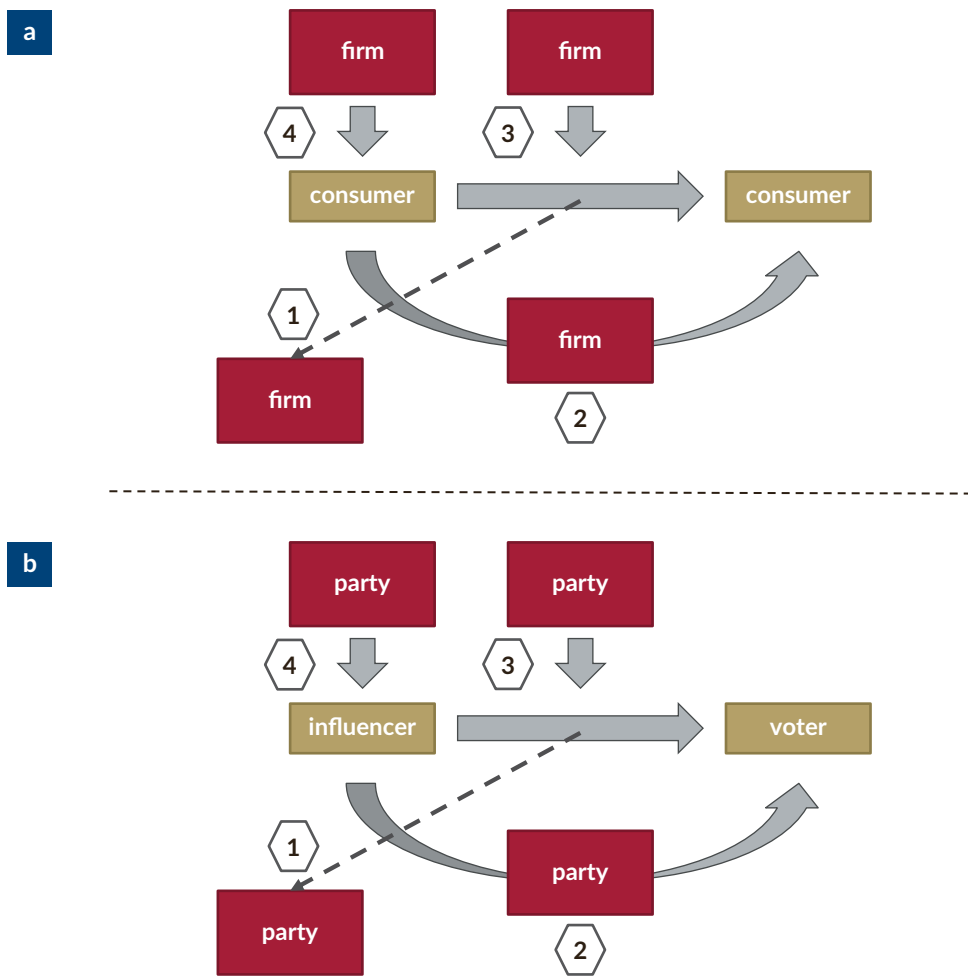


Figure 1. Analytical framework: (a) four generic social interaction management strategies framework as developed by Godes et al. (2005); (b) my modified framework for analyzing political parties' involvement with influencers. Strategies are: (1) observer, (2) moderator, (3) mediator, and (4) participant. Source: Adapted from Godes et al. (2005, p. 422).

3. Methods

This study presents a secondary analysis of qualitative data (Mason, 2007) from two expert interview studies with German party communicators. To answer the RQ, I combined data from two studies (Borchers et al., 2025; Bühler & Borchers, 2023), both of which examined the management of strategic influencer communication by political parties.

3.1. Data Collection

This study draws on two datasets.

Dataset A contains 11 interviews that I conducted with communication managers working for political parties in Germany between April 2023 and February 2024. These interviews focused on the principal-agent risks the communication managers face in working with influencers. The interview guide explicitly asked about interviewees' experiences with influencers. During the interviews, I also encouraged interviewees to

share specific examples from their work with influencers. These questions encouraged them to describe and reflect on actual instances in which they were involved with influencers. Dataset A is the German part of a larger comparative study that included interviews with party communicators in Germany, Finland, and Romania (Borchers et al., 2025). To recruit participants, I used maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) to consider interview partners (a) from various political parties, (b) working at various political levels (i.e., state/federal level), and (c) having varying experience in working with influencers. Interview lengths for Dataset A ranged from 34 to 84 minutes ($M = 1:02:13$).

Dataset B consists of 14 interviews with party communicators from political parties in Germany. This group included communication managers, but, in contrast to Dataset A, also included party politicians who fulfilled communicative functions for the party. The study examined how influencer collaborations contribute to communicative value creation for parties. As in the first study, the interview guide again included questions about interviewees' experiences with influencers and prompted them to share specific examples. Dataset B was created from December 2020 to February 2021 by Lara Bühler under my supervision and was part of her master's thesis. Lara Bühler applied maximum variation sampling, using the same sampling criteria as I used for Dataset A. Interview lengths ranged from 38 to 54 minutes ($M = 0:47:49$).

Table 1 provides an overview of the study participants. As the table shows, the two studies succeeded in recruiting interviewees from five of the six major political parties in Germany, defined as parties that hold seats in the federal parliament and at least 2 of the 16 state parliaments. However—and despite persistent attempts—both studies failed to recruit interviewees from the right-wing extremist party AfD. Another peculiarity is that not all participants had gained first-hand experience of involvement with influencers. The proportion of such inexperienced interview partners is higher in Dataset B, presumably because Dataset A was created later, at a time when influencer involvement had become more relevant. As a consequence, I excluded seven interviews with interviewees lacking influencer experience from my analysis.

Table 1. Overview of the datasets.

| Criterion | Manifestation | Number of Cases | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|----------|
| | | Dataset A ¹ | Dataset B | Combined |
| Party | SPD (Social Democrats) | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| | CDU/CSU (Conservatives) | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| | Grüne (Greens) | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| | FDP (Liberals) | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | AfD (right-wing) | | | |
| | Linke (Socialists) | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| | Other (minor parties) | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Political level | National | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| | Federal state | 6 | 10 | 16 |
| Position | Member of Parliament | | 5 | 5 |
| | Executive secretary | 3 | | 3 |
| | Head of communications | 5 | | 5 |
| | Press officer | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| | Social media/community manager | | 2 | 2 |

Table 1. (Cont.) Overview of the datasets.

| Criterion | Manifestation | Number of Cases | | |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------|----------|
| | | Dataset A ¹ | Dataset B | Combined |
| Experience in collaborating with influencers | Prior experience | 9 | 9 | 18 |
| | No prior experience | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| Future collaborations with influencers in election campaigns | Planning to collaborate | 11 | 13 | 24 |
| | Not planning to collaborate | | 1 | 1 |
| Summary | | 11 | 14 | 25 |

Notes: For the sake of simplicity, the table lists only the higher-ranking interview partner; ¹ in one interview, two political communicators from the same party participated.

3.2. Data Analysis

I analyzed the data in a content structuring qualitative content analysis, using content-related categories (Stamann et al., 2016). I developed the fairly simple formal coding frame in a mixed deductive-inductive approach. To start with, I established the four strategies from my analytical framework as dimensions of the coding frame. I then identified cases of influencer involvement in the datasets and assigned each to one of the four strategies. I thus identified 35 cases of influencer involvement throughout the interviews (see Table 2). In the following inductive process, I fine-coded the cases, using the strategy of subsumption, to develop subcategories that represent different variants of the four management strategies. I completed this process using the program MAXQDA.

Table 2. Cases of influencer involvement.

| Case | Description | Strategy |
|------|--|-----------|
| 1 | Party invites influencers from care sector to learn about current issues | observer |
| 2 | Influencers ask politician to share information on rally | observer |
| 3 | Party reacts to influencers reposting party content | moderator |
| 4 | Party contacts influencers to inquire about collaborations | moderator |
| 5 | Party invites influencers to roundtables on gender equality | moderator |
| 6 | Party invites influencers to back a regulation initiative | moderator |
| 7 | Party invites influencers to party convention | moderator |
| 8 | Party supplies influencer with information on niche issue | moderator |
| 9 | Party supplies influencers with information on election campaign | moderator |
| 10 | Party supplies influencer with video material | moderator |
| 11 | Party invites influencers to backroom discussions | moderator |
| 12 | Party politician is interviewed on the influencer's podcast | moderator |
| 13 | Party sets up group in instant messaging app to supply influencers with campaign information | moderator |
| 14 | Party asks influencers to share information on candidate nominations | moderator |
| 15 | Party politician is interviewed during the influencer's livestream | moderator |

Table 2. (Cont.) Cases of influencer involvement.

| Case | Description | Strategy |
|------|---|-------------|
| 16 | Party politician visits Instagram live broadcast of influencer to discuss current political scandal | moderator |
| 17 | Party politician appears in regular influencer content | moderator |
| 18 | Party politician appears on the influencer's podcast | moderator |
| 19 | Party politician shares information on specific regulation initiative with influencers who support the initiative | moderator |
| 20 | Party invites influencers to clothing swap event | moderator |
| 21 | Party invites influencer to party event and grants backstage access | moderator |
| 22 | Party politician takes pictures with influencers | mediator |
| 23 | Party politician interviews influencer on party podcast | mediator |
| 24 | Party interviews influencers | mediator |
| 25 | Party interviews influencers | mediator |
| 26 | Party politician interviews several influencers on party podcast | mediator |
| 27 | Party motivates party-affiliated influencers to recommend voting for the party | participant |
| 28 | Party asks influencers to back party positions publicly | participant |
| 29 | Party collaborates with niche influencers to create content with party politician | participant |
| 30 | Party politician features as expert in influencer posts on confronting right-wing extremism | participant |
| 31 | Party arranges content creation on party positions with niche influencers | participant |
| 32 | Party involves in-house influencers in party events | participant |
| 33 | Party supports party member in obtaining influencer status | participant |
| 34 | Party invites influencer to media event to produce behind-the-scenes content | participant |
| 35 | Party arranges campaign support with influencers | participant |

Note: In the following sections, I use case numbers to reference statements from the datasets.

4. Findings

The secondary analysis revealed that party communicators have adopted all four strategies identified by Godes et al. (2005), albeit to varying degrees of scope and sophistication.

4.1. *The Party as Observer*

The first management strategy that Godes et al. (2005) identify is the observer strategy, in which the party listens to social media interactions that may be strategically substantial. Only a few interviewees described approaches that would fall under the observer strategy. However, the few who did do so described different ways of implementing this strategy. The first type is represented by a party politician who shared information that influencers asked the party to share (which resembles a revised moderator strategy, see below). Another variant included a political communicator inviting influencers to off-the-record conversations that were arranged without any specific commitment to cooperate in a campaign. The interviewee recounted how she reached out to influencers who posted content about working in the care sector to learn more about the professional struggles they faced. She explained:

You have to talk to these people to see...what their needs are and how we can tailor our political content to it. So, we worked with several persons or contacted them—they wouldn't probably call it a collaboration—to simply discuss these issues. (Case 1)

With such conversations, party communicators sought to gather insights into the positions and sentiments that prevail among influencers and their followers. Notably, the variants of the observer strategy I identified in the data depart from the initial strategy as described by Godes et al. (2005). In the latter two variants, the parties become active by approaching influencers as central knots in social media information flows. In consequence, the actual listening is implemented through influencers. Rather than listening to what online crowds think about specific topics, parties resort to influencers who then report on their communities.

4.2. *The Party as Moderator*

The moderator strategy differs from the observer strategy in that it reverses the direction of information flows. Rather than being informed by influencers, the moderator strategy aims to inform influencers. At its core, the interviewed party communicators employ the moderator strategy to create occasions that should prompt influencers to produce content featuring the party and/or its positions.

Parties implemented the moderator strategy in different ways. In its first variant, they involve influencers through events. For this purpose, they invite influencers to a wide range of events such as party conferences and election campaign events. In other cases, they use events that are not party-specific, but that are thematically positioned at the intersection between the influencers' field of interest and the party's priority issues. An interviewee reported how they invited influencers, along with other stakeholders, to local roundtables on how to improve opportunities for women. In another case, a party invited influencers with an interest in fashion to a clothing swap event that the party organized. When asked about the rationale behind this, she explained:

A clothing swap party is something that people don't attend because they think it's problematic when children are being exploited and the like. Rather, people usually attend because they want to find some nice clothes and get rid of other clothes. But then they are at least partially open to other messages. (20)

Importantly, the interviewee reflected on this initiative with satisfaction: "It actually worked quite well. Some [of the invited influencers] came and posted something about our event on their channels" (20). Of course, there is no guarantee that this approach always works well. Another participant came to a less rosy conclusion, after his party had invited influencers to a party convention: "[My party] didn't handle it very wisely. The background was actually good; they just wanted to get people talking. But unfortunately, they didn't handle the timing very wisely" (7). He then went on to elaborate that they had not considered that the program items at such events often take significantly longer than anticipated. As a result, the influencers lost interest in waiting for an opportunity to talk to politicians, who were still busy with party business, and left the party conference frustrated and with nothing to show for their effort. This example demonstrates that simply inviting influencers as an add-on to established events does not do the trick. Instead, the event structure should be designed to cater to the demands of influencers.

In its second variant, political communicators send out party materials to influencers. This variant involves measures such as more general mailings in the style of press releases. Yet it also involves the targeted dissemination of information to influencers identified as potentially in line with the party positions via more exclusive groups in instant messaging apps: “We set up appropriate groups to provide these influencers with information and messages in the hope that they would then pass them on. Simply to take advantage of their reach” (13). However, the initiative can also come from influencers, who may contact a party to request background information when preparing posts on party-relevant issues: “And when [influencer’s] request came in, we implemented it very quickly and very easily and worked together very well” (10). Hoping to earn media coverage, the party’s communication department here functioned as a service provider for the influencer.

Lastly, in its third variant, political communicators accept invitations to appear in influencer content. Importantly (and in contrast to the participant strategy discussed below), in these cases influencers adopt a more neutral role instead of acting as partisans. A common format is the influencer-led interview with a party politician. Influencers either establish new formats for these interviews, often reminiscent of journalistic interviews, or they integrate the interview into established show formats that the politician visits as a guest (e.g., in the regular gaming livestream, such as the appearance of Robert Habeck on the channel of Maximilian Knabe mentioned above). In some instances, such interviews are part of wider series in which influencers reach out to politicians of different parties with the aim of showcasing the parties’ positions as a service to their followers.

What these three approaches have in common are the objectives of establishing and deepening connections with influencers and of creating occasions for influencers to cover the party and/or party-related topics in an earned media mode. As an interviewee explained: “We are approaching this strategically. We try to reach many influencers and establish contact by...talking to each other and then simply staying in touch with them” (4). At the same time, the moderator strategy clearly demonstrates that both party communicators and influencers initiate interactions. It is therefore not only the party that approaches influencers in the hope of receiving positive mentions in influencer content. Influencers, at least those who are interested in adding a political dimension to their public persona, also turn to politicians for their content production.

4.3. The Party as Mediator

Within the mediator strategy, parties provide their own channels to feature influencer content. This ambition distinguishes the mediator strategy from the moderator strategy (and the participant strategy discussed below). While the latter strategies seek to place the party in influencer content, the mediator strategy aims to place the influencer in the party’s content.

The mediator strategy only makes sense for political communicators with certain objectives such as obtaining content for the party’s own social media channels or increasing the reach and attractiveness of these channels in influencer-prone voter segments. In pursuing such objectives, political communicators invite influencers to their own digital formats like party- and politician-hosted formats such as podcasts. Compared to the appearance of party representatives in influencer content under the moderator strategy (see Section 4.2), these formats reverse the roles of politicians and influencers, featuring the former as interviewer and the latter as the interviewee. This role switch implies a change in focus. While formats under

the moderator strategy let the politician (as the guest) take center stage, formats under the mediator strategy place the influencer in the spotlight. Influencers are then usually invited to discuss influencer-related issues, which can be rooted in their biography, their expertise, or both. An interviewee explained how their party relied on the podcast of a well-known party politician to open doors to influencer collaboration by inviting selected influencers to a podcast episode: “Through the podcast with [party politician], we repeatedly come into contact with certain influencers. And, of course, these are also contacts you build up along the way” (23). The interviewed communicators nevertheless highlighted that the mediator strategy can function as a door opener, for example when interviewed influencers invite party politicians back to their format.

4.4. The Party as Participant

In the participant strategy, influencers and party come to an agreement, either formally or informally, that the influencers will support the party as partisans. The interviewed political communicators used the participant strategy in two ways. First, they placed party politicians in influencer content, for example in interview formats. An interviewee described how he became part of such a cooperation, which interestingly was initiated by the influencer:

This influencer, who usually creates content about home décor and eco-friendly lifestyles, was asked by her followers how they can address right-wing extremism within their families. And she thought: “I know someone who has already looked into this more, I can bring him over.” And then we shot a video together. (30)

This is an approach that I have already described as part of the moderator strategy. However, the difference lies in the positioning of the influencer as either a neutral host (moderator strategy) or a partisan host (participant strategy). The positioning implies that, under the participant strategy, the influencer and the politician share the goal of presenting the party in the most positive light, whereas this is not necessarily the case under the moderator strategy.

Second, influencers can produce partisan content without featuring party members. Instead, they resort to their original content genres and integrate the party and/or its positions into the narrative of the post. In contrast to the first variant, in which party officials do much of the talking, in this variant the influencers speak in the name of the party. From the perspective of my interviewees, this was an important difference, because it concerns the question of how tightly they could control influencer conduct. An interviewee provided an example of this variant, in which he collaborated with an influencer who specialized in creating comedy content. The working method was that the party suggested topics to the influencer that the influencer was then supposed to implement. Pointing to the potential conflict between serious politics and comedic trivialization, this party communicator advocated close coordination with the influencer: “He’s someone who tends to turn everything into comedy. And then you have to ask yourself, what are you actually trying to convey? Because it shouldn’t be ridiculous either. That requires tact and sensitivity” (31). The interviewee then went on to contrast this case with another cooperation in which his party collaborated with an influencer who created lifestyle content. When suggesting topics to this second influencer, he could approve her posts “almost unseen”. In contrast, collaborating with the comedy influencer required more care:

With the [comedy influencer], it happens that you say, “Can you just try to adjust it a little bit? So that people who you don’t usually reach, but who are actually inclined to do so, will take a look at it?” (31)

The participant strategy thus grants political communicators greater voice in deciding on the content and strategic direction of influencer posts than, for instance, the moderator strategy would allow. This made this strategy the most popular with the interviewed communicators.

The participant strategy gains an additional dimension when considering that there are two types of influencers with whom parties collaborate: party-external influencers (i.e., social media influencers as defined in Enke & Borchers, 2019) and party-internal influencers (i.e., party members with no significant visibility within the party but with a significant follower count on social media), who are referred to as corporate or in-house influencers in the corporate domain. The interviewed political communicators valued the option of involving in-house influencers in their campaigns, and they emphasized that in-house influencers are easier to win over for a campaign and that working with them reduces the risk of unclear influencer loyalty. Furthermore, they asserted that they retain greater control over the output with in-house influencers. On the downside, in-house influencers lack autonomy, which threatens to mitigate the impact of their posts. Additionally, a crucial challenge in working with in-house influencers lies in identifying them in the first place, because not all communications departments have an overview of internet-famous party members.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to examine the approaches that political communicators adopt to involve influencers in their campaigns. It used an adjusted version of the framework by Godes et al. (2005) that describes four generic social interaction-management strategies to identify and classify these approaches. The findings illustrated that these four strategies also occur in the context of political communication, albeit with widely varying levels of scope and sophistication.

5.1. Contextualizing Strategies

The observer strategy was implemented only rarely, when party communicators gathered information through influencers to deepen their knowledge about the ecosystems they seek to navigate. This strategy follows an organizational listening approach (Macnamara, 2016), even if the interviews revealed that the party communicators adopted this approach somewhat differently from what was initially imagined. Instead of listening to social media crowds directly, the interviewed communicators used influencers as intermediaries. This approach thus follows the general tendency of communication managers to outsource functions to influencers (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

The moderator strategy was the strategy for which I identified the most cases. This strategy expects more from influencers than the observer strategy in that it targets influencers’ content creation in an attempt to trigger party-friendly posts. At its core, the strategy aims to integrate influencers into party-controlled information flows, in the hope that influencers will draw on this information when creating content. In pursuing this goal, the moderator strategy follows the rationale of influencer relations (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Smith et al., 2023). Influencer relations bears close similarities to the PR function of media relations in which organizations cater to the demands of journalists. Just as with journalists, party communicators treat

influencers foremost as multipliers rather than party evangelists. Likewise, the moderator strategy focuses on relationship management and thus emphasizes a long-term perspective in working with influencers. This is also what happened in the aftermath of the mentioned clothing swap event: “This then developed into a longer-term collaboration with [party politician holding a high office] who was invited by the influencers from time to time to talk to them” (20). Obviously, party communicators hope that these activities will win over influencers for the party in the long run, which is why they usually make deliberate choices about which influencers to target.

The mediator strategy was adopted only rarely. Given its high requirements and its limited fields of application in election campaigning, its rare occurrence in this study is only slightly surprising. In fact, when pursuing objectives that do not focus on the party’s own channels, this strategy deprives influencers of one of their core strengths (and services) for collaboration partners—namely, disseminating content to an engaged audience. Moreover, if the party also produces the content itself, for example when inviting influencers to a party-hosted podcast, it also does not make use of influencers’ content production competences. The strategy’s main advantages therefore lie in posting attractive content on the party’s own channels and possibly pulling followers of influencers over to these channels, in the hope of increasing their reach (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

Lastly, the participant strategy constituted the most popular strategy among the interviewed party communicators, although it was adopted less often than the moderator strategy in absolute numbers. This strategy follows the rationale of influencer marketing in which a principal (i.e., the party) commissions an agent (i.e., the influencer) to perform communicative functions on the principal’s behalf (Borchers et al., 2025). While the agent enjoys a certain freedom in performing these functions, the principal nevertheless maintains control over the process. However, the degree of control may vary, and it has been argued that it should be kept relatively low in influencer marketing to avoid compromising influencer effectiveness (e.g., Borchers, 2023; Childers et al., 2019). As previous research has demonstrated (Borchers, 2025; Borchers et al., 2025; Goodwin et al., 2023), party communicators meet the expectation of granting influencers considerable autonomy in their conduct with ambivalence, and this standpoint poses a true threat to successful influencer marketing initiatives. Nevertheless, the popularity of the strategy makes it conceivable that it will be used more frequently in the future.

5.2. Professionalizing Influencer Involvement

Abstracting from the individual approaches, this study revealed that the parties’ involvement with influencers is still in its formative phase, with limited professionalization and institutionalization compared to the situation in corporations. In practice, this means that only some of the examined cases resulted from a clearly defined strategy. With media diets shifting away from legacy media (Harff & Schmuck, 2025; Peters et al., 2022), it appears urgently necessary to develop new, effective approaches to digital campaigns that involve influencers to a greater extent. The situation therefore requires the re-allocation of resources—for example, for upstaffing communication departments and purchasing external expertise—to rapidly advance professionalization in strategic influencer communication and to build the respective infrastructure. However, such initiatives, which the interviewed party communicators were actually calling for, were often opposed by party structures where party elders prioritize time-honored media strategies that focus on legacy media, posters, street campaigning, and the like.

That influencer collaborations come in many different shades further complicates the process of developing in-house expertise. In fact, the strategies of moderating, mediating, and participating in social interactions fall into traditionally separate communication domains with their specific domain expertise—namely, earned media (moderator), owned media (mediator), and paid media (participant; Neill & Schauster, 2018). For example, the moderator strategy does not affect the autonomy of influencers in that it treats them as genuinely independent stakeholders and therefore relies on mechanisms of context control (Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007). In contrast, the participant strategy aims at openly winning influencers over as true partisans of the party. This status allows for much closer coordination between parties and influencers who work together towards the joint goal of achieving the party's campaign objectives. Accordingly, party communicators must learn to approach and handle influencers differently, depending on the interaction strategy they follow.

5.3. Submitting Politics to the Logics of Influencer Culture?

Looking beyond the perspective of political parties, it seems productive to ask what implications the findings have for democratic processes. Parties' interest in working with influencers results from a profound change in media diets. By embracing strategic influencer communication, the interviewed communication practitioners seek to get a hold of these voter segments that otherwise would disappear from the media arenas parties traditionally focus on. Here, three aspects come into view.

First, following voters' media usage patterns obviously lies in the strategic interest of parties that aim to maximize their vote count. But this movement can also benefit democratic processes because it makes it easier for social media-prone voters to obtain information within their own media ecology. This suggests that the involvement of parties with influencers can contribute to more informed voting decisions. Moreover, parties collaborate with influencers not only to inform voters, but also to mobilize them (Borchers, 2025). Because voter turnout plays an important role in legitimizing election results (e.g., Fowler & Smirnov, 2007), influencer involvement can contribute to stabilizing democratic systems.

Second, and in developing this idea further, the heterogeneity of influencer involvement cautions us against thinking of parties' activities merely as influencer marketing. The influencer marketing approach is represented by the participant strategy, and this strategy is undoubtedly popular among the interviewed communicators because it allows relatively high control over the output (Borchers, 2025). However, this study showed that the participant strategy is only one strategy among others and not even the one most often employed. In fact, influencer communication draws on various communicative genres (Borchers & Enke, 2022), and the moderator strategy, in particular, bears witness to the field's alternative rootedness in non-marketing contexts. When influencers work with parties without adopting a partisan position—for example when interviewing party representatives, as Maximilian Knabe does with Robert Habeck in the introductory episode of this article—their methods draw on journalistic occupational ideologies (Maeres & Hanusch, 2020). Influencer involvement in election campaigns should therefore not be equated with the purchase of opinions and, ultimately, the manipulation of public opinion. Rather, it serves a necessary function in media systems that can no longer rely solely on journalism to organize public debate. However, it should be clear that this solution is not without risks, because influencers do not operate under the ethical guidelines of journalism that reflect journalism's democratic function.

Third, this study demonstrated that parties' influencer involvement comes at the price of submitting to the logics of influencer culture. Political communicators in this study tended to position themselves as supplicants who seek the favor of influencers. This positioning implies that, in many analyzed cases, the influencers took a decisive role in deciding how a party and its politics are represented. As a result of this constellation, these representations incorporate the structural requirements of influencer communication. For instance, influencers need to consider how they can best exploit their involvement with parties to curate their self-brand (Reinikainen, Pöyry, et al., 2025; Suuronen et al., 2022). They also need to "please the algorithm" (Haapoja et al., 2024) to secure their microcelebrity status and may therefore be inclined to choose modes of representation that favor algorithmic attractiveness over democratic requirements. All of this suggests that parties' influencer involvement could further deepen the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008).

5.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has its limitations. First and foremost, the findings are restricted to Germany and limited by the willingness of party communicators to participate in the study (self-selection) and share their insights openly (social desirability). It is therefore possible, if not probable, that this study does not provide a complete picture of the approaches that party communicators adopt to involve influencers. Second, this study is based on interviews with professional communicators who are trained in how to communicate strategically. There is a risk that they may have used the interviews as an opportunity to present themselves in a favorable light. Finally, the fact that this study draws on a secondary analysis of data implies that the data were not gathered purposefully to answer the posed research question. The data were sufficiently rich with information to do the basic work of identifying the various approaches to involving influencers. Nevertheless, the interviews did not explore every case in great detail, and in some instances, I would have welcomed more context information on a case to deepen my analysis.

To advance research on political parties' involvement with influencers, I would like to conclude by pointing out three directions for follow-up studies. First, my study identified collaborative formats via interviews with party communicators. Analyzing posts that influencers created in the context of election campaigns would make a valuable addition to this study. Second, this study adopted the perspective of party communicators on influencer involvement. Exploring how influencers perceive party initiatives, and how they respond to them, would provide a much-needed counterbalance to this perspective. Third, this study drew on data from Germany. As early comparative research on political influencing demonstrated (Borchers et al., 2025), how parties manage strategic influencer communication varies across countries. Studies that extend beyond the German context therefore promise to enrich my findings with the necessary nuance.

Acknowledgments

I thank Lara Bühler (MediaMarktSaturn) for granting me access to her dataset for this secondary analysis.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

- Alsharawy, A., Anstett, R., & Landgrave, M. (2026). What is the effect of political influencers on TikTok? Early results from a field experiment with young adults. *Political Studies Review*, 24(1), 113–125. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299251323741>
- Arnesson, J., & Reinikainen, H. (2024). Influencer politics: An introduction. In J. Arnesson & H. Reinikainen (Eds.), *Influencer politics: At the intersection of personal, political, and promotional* (pp. 1–13). de Gruyter.
- Barclay, A., Dommett, K., & Russmann, U. (2025). Data driven-campaign infrastructures in Europe: Evidence from Austria and the UK. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 24(4), 306–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2024.2347833>
- Borchers, N. S. (2023). To eat the cake and have it, too: How marketers control influencer conduct within a paradigm of letting go. *Social Media + Society*, 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231167336>
- Borchers, N. S. (2024). The influencer political communicators dream of: Seven theses on the ideal influencer in the political domain. In J. Arnesson & H. Reinikainen (Eds.), *Influencer politics: At the intersection of personal, political, and promotional* (pp. 51–68). de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111036106-005>
- Borchers, N. S. (2025). How social media influencers support political parties in achieving campaign objectives, according to political communicators in Germany. *Public Relations Review*, 51(1), Article 102532. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2024.102532>
- Borchers, N. S., & Enke, N. (2021). Managing strategic influencer communication: A systematic overview on emerging planning, organization, and evaluation routines. *Public Relations Review*, 47(3), Article 102041. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102041>
- Borchers, N. S., & Enke, N. (2022). “I’ve never seen a client say: ‘Tell the influencer not to label this as sponsored’”: An exploration into influencer industry ethics. *Public Relations Review*, 48(5), Article 102235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102235>
- Borchers, N. S., Reinikainen, H., Mucundorfeanu, M., & Balaban, D. C. (2025). Wanted: Social media campaign support! A principal-agent study on political influencer marketing with party communicators from three EU countries. *Journal of Communication Management*, 29(5), 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-01-2025-0030>
- Bühler, L., & Borchers, N. S. (2023). Die Entgrenzung der Strategischen Influencer-Kommunikation: Wie politische Kommunikator*innen die Potenziale von Influencer-Kooperationen einschätzen. In T. Koch, J. Beckert, B. Vierebel, & N. Denner (Eds.), *Grenzen, Entgrenzung und Grenzüberschreitungen der Public Relations und Organisationskommunikation* (pp. 155–175). Springer.
- Carl, W. J. (2006). What’s all the buzz about? Everyday communication and the relational basis of word-of-mouth and buzz marketing practices. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19(4), 601–634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318905284763>
- Childers, C. C., Lemon, L. L., & Hoy, M. G. (2019). #Sponsored #ad: Agency perspective on influencer marketing campaigns. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 40(3), 258–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2018.1521113>
- Dekoninck, H., & Schmuck, D. (2022). The mobilizing power of influencers for pro-environmental behavior intentions and political participation. *Environmental Communication*, 16(4), 458–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2027801>
- Enke, N., & Borchers, N. S. (2019). Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework of strategic social media influencer communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 261–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1620234>
- Fowler, J. H., & Smirnov, O. (2007). *Mandates, parties, and voters: How elections shape the future*. Temple University Press.

- Gibson, R., Bon, E., Darius, P., & Smyth, P. (2023). Are online political influencers accelerating democratic deconsolidation? *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 175–186. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6813>
- Godes, D., Mayzlin, D., Chen, Y., Das, S., Dellarocas, C., Pfeiffer, B., Libai, B., Sen, S., Shi, M., & Verlegh, P. (2005). The firm's management of social interactions. *Marketing Letters*, 16(3/4), 415–428. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11002-005-5902-4>
- Goodwin, A. M., Joseff, K., Riedl, M. J., Lukito, J., & Woolley, S. C. (2023). Political relational influencers: The mobilization of social media influencers in the political arena. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 1613–1633. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18987>
- Haapoja, J., Savolainen, L., Reinikainen, H., & Lehtiniemi, T. (2024). Moral orders of pleasing the algorithm. *New Media & Society*, 27(12), 6492–6509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241278674>
- HandOfTrash. (2025, January 15). *Vizekanzler Robert Habeck im Fliesentischgespräch* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9uvkX8J6tk
- Harff, D., & Schmuck, D. (2025). Who relies on social media influencers for political information? A cross-country study among youth. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 30(3), 841–864. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612241234898>
- Hund, E. (2023). *The influencer industry: The quest for authenticity on social media*. Princeton University Press.
- Klüver, H. (2024). Social influencers and election outcomes. *Comparative Political Studies*, 58(13), 2973–2999. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241306955>
- LaMarre, H. L., & Suzuki-Lambrech, Y. (2013). Tweeting democracy? Examining Twitter as an online public relations strategy for congressional campaigns. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 360–368. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.07.009>
- Maares, P., & Hanusch, F. (2020). Exploring the boundaries of journalism: Instagram micro-bloggers in the twilight zone of lifestyle journalism. *Journalism*, 21(2), 262–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918801400>
- Macnamara, J. (2016). *Organizational listening: The missing essential in public communication*. Lang.
- Mason, J. (2007). 'Re-using' qualitative data: On the merits of an investigative epistemology. *Sociological Research Online*, 12(3), 39–42. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1507>
- Mears, A. (2023). Bringing Bourdieu to a content farm: Social media production fields and the cultural economy of attention. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231193027>
- Naderer, B. (2023). Influencers as political agents? The potential of an unlikely source to motivate political action. *Communications*, 48(1), 93–111. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0006>
- Neill, M. S., & Schauster, E. (2018). Playing nice in the sandbox: Is collaboration among advertising and public relations agencies the same as integration? *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 39(2), 140–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10641734.2018.1428248>
- Newman, B. I. (2002). The role of marketing in politics. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 1(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1300/J199v01n01_01
- Nothhaft, H., & Wehmeier, S. (2007). Coping with complexity: Sociocybernetics as a framework for communication management. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(3), 151–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701434785>
- Palacios López, M., Bonete Vizcaíno, F., & Gelado Marcos, R. (2023). New agents of mass disinformation: Analysis of the publications produced by Spanish political influencers on Instagram. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 29(4), 919–932. <https://doi.org/10.5209/esmp.88576>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Sage.
- Peter, C., & Muth, L. (2023). Social media influencers' role in shaping political opinions and actions of young audiences. *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 164–174. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6750>

- Peters, C., Schröder, K. C., Lehaff, J., & Vulpius, J. (2022). News as they know it: Young adults' information repertoires in the digital media landscape. *Digital Journalism*, 10(1), 62–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1885986>
- Pöyry, E., & Reinikainen, H. (2024). "Remember to vote!" How do people respond to social media influencers promoting political participation? In J. Arnesson & H. Reinikainen (Eds.), *Influencer politics: At the intersection of personal, political, and promotional* (pp. 35–50). de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111036106-004>
- Reinikainen, H., Borchers, N. S., Suuronen, A., & Strandberg, K. (2025). Lighting the participatory spark? The role of social media influencers in initiating political participation. *Nordicom Review*, 46(1), 25–54. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2025-0002>
- Reinikainen, H., Pöyry, E., Pelevina, N., & Kannasto, E. (2025). The convergence of promotion and politics: How influencers curate their self-presentations through political talk. *Journal of Business Research*, 201, Article 115756. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115756>
- Schmuck, D., Hirsch, M., Stevic, A., & Matthes, J. (2022). Politics—Simply explained? How influencers affect youth's perceived simplification of politics, political cynicism, and political interest. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 738–762. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221088987>
- Smith, B. G., Golan, G., & Freberg, K. (2023). Influencer relations: Establishing the concept and process for public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 49(2), Article 102305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2023.102305>
- Stamann, C., Janssen, M., & Schreier, M. (2016). Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Versuch einer Begriffsbestimmung und Systematisierung. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 17(3), Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.3.2581>
- Strömbäck, J. (2008). Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of politics. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 13(3), 228–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208319097>
- Suuronen, A., Reinikainen, H., Borchers, N. S., & Strandberg, K. (2022). When social media influencers go political: An exploratory analysis on the emergence of political topics among Finnish influencers. *Javnost – The Public*, 29(3), 301–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1983367>
- Udupa, S. (2024). Shadow politics: Commercial digital influencers, "data," and disinformation in India. *Social Media + Society*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231224719>
- von Sikorski, C., Merz, P., Heiss, R., Karsay, K., Naderer, B., & Schmuck, D. (2025). The political role of social media influencers: Strategies, types, and implications for democracy—An introduction. *American Behavioral Scientist*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642251344208>
- Wasike, B. (2023). I am an influencer and I approve this message! Examining how political social media influencers affect political interest, political trust, political efficacy, and political participation. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 3110–3132. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/20293>

About the Author



Nils S. Borchers is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen (Germany). His research interests include strategic communication and digital communication, with a focus on social media influencers.