

# Digital Influencers and Their Role in Shaping Public Discourse



**Moderator**

**Stavroula Logothettis**  
Senior Producer, TRT World

**Speakers**

**Riyad Minty**  
Manager of Digital Strategy,  
TRT World

**Humza Arshad**  
English actor, comedian and  
writer of Pakistani descent

**Subhi Taha**  
Blogger and modestwear  
designer of SUBHITAHA

**Didem Kaya**  
Deputy Producer, TRT World

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# Digital Influencers and Their Role in Shaping Public Discourse

*Prepared by*  
Aruuke Uran Kyzy

**TRT WORLD**  
RESEARCH CENTRE

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**PREPARED BY**

Aruuke Uran Kyzy

**PUBLISHER**

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE  
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**TRT WORLD İSTANBUL**

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347  
ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ  
İSTANBUL / TURKEY  
[www.trtworld.com](http://www.trtworld.com)

**TRT WORLD LONDON**

PORTLAND HOUSE  
4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4  
LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM  
[www.trtworld.com](http://www.trtworld.com)

**TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.**

1620 I STREET NW, 10TH FLOOR,  
SUITE 1000, 20006  
WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES  
[www.trtworld.com](http://www.trtworld.com)

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This is a report on a public session titled “Digital Influencers and Their Role in Shaping Public Discourse”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of speakers and participants present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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- Are digital influencers challenging the conventional media in setting and changing perceptions?
  - Is the presence of digital influencers representing different segments of the society creating a pluralist social media?
  - Do the discourses produced to become a digital influencer give rise to populism?
  - Considering social media law has not been fully established, what sort of an ethical stance should the digital influencers have?





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# Summary

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As digital media on mobile devices is the primary platform of communication with the outside world, the rise of digital influencers continues to grow. Community leaders and celebrities have been replaced by individuals who gain popularity on social media. The popularity of influencers on YouTube highlights how young people who create content on digital platforms have the ability to garner international attention. Digital influencers have become the role models of millennials. With their massive fan base, what role do they have in shaping public discourse? This session looks at the responsibilities of these digital influencers towards their audiences and the ways they could promote social good and inspire change.

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The popularity of influencers on YouTube highlights how young people who create content on digital platforms have the ability to gain international attention. Panellists began with sharing their personal experiences on the massive digital platform. The main question of the session was: 'With their massive fan base, what responsibility do they have in shaping public discourse?' Humza Arshad stated that with homemade videos it is possible to create social awareness content that would allow thousands to reach personal opinions on different topics through comments and grab attention of the audience. According to him, there is a huge competition between mainstream companies and digital platforms. Subhi Taha shared his personal experiences on how his religious background had helped shape his identity, in hopes of helping others find theirs. He emphasised the role of the minority in searching for the community to talk on social media, and share ideas, faith, goals and interests. Didem Kaya raised the question on whether the Internet is really connecting or dividing. She argued that people are recruiting others through the internet, from all ends of the spectrum. Riyaad Minty observed that digital platforms assumed the form of a decentralised model and have access to information anytime and anywhere. He further stated that when information is decentralised, costs are greatly reduced.

Overall the session discussed how each individual, as a digital influencer, could shape public opinion and change perceptions. Secondly, panellists emphasised how conventional, traditional media is being challenged by digital platforms in terms of its cost, speed and diversity. Thirdly, they raised the question of how the Internet sphere can label communities; do the discourses produced to become a digital influencer give rise to populism? Fourthly, speakers pushed forward the idea of whether people from minority backgrounds should be creating content for people within their own communities or whether they should be using their unique experiences to create stories that resonate with a wider audience.





Subhi Taha shared his personal experiences on how his religious background helped to shape his identity, in hopes that others will find theirs.

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# Introduction

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Popular agenda often frames social media as “the new media” – dynamism that may bring end to traditional forms of news, advertisement, broadcasting and publishing. As digital media on mobile devices becomes the primary platform of communication with the outside world, the rise of digital influencers continues to grow. The emergence of internet-based social media has made it possible for individuals to connect with hundreds or even thousands of people by sharing their lifestyles, thoughts and opinions. These individuals who gain popularity on social media have replaced community leaders and celebrities. The popularity of influencers on YouTube highlights how young people who create content on digital platforms have the ability to garner international attention. They have become the role models of millennials. How they shape public discourse forms the basis of the topics explored in this report. By understanding and conceptualising online social media, this question will be expanded to discuss the (1) responsibilities of digital influencers in raising social awareness and inspiring change, (2) competition with mainstream companies, and (3) negative labelling caused by social media.

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# Responsibilities of Digital Influencers

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For many decades television was the primary mean where people consumed news and entertainment. However, the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and the dwindling popularity of TV have prompted a redefinition of the word 'celebrity.' Social media has allowed the world to be constantly and conveniently connected with different people around the globe, allowing the breakdown of international borders and cultural barriers. Those who set trends, drive opinions, influence people and change perceptions are now the celebrities of millennials. These new age celebrities are more accessible and serve as authentic trustworthy gatekeepers in the media sphere. They are trusted because they are relatable and are known to actively engage with fans by offering interactive, two-way connections. The influencer becomes a mutual friend, because the voice it gives is far more authentic than the ones who are more traditional and academic.

They give reliability and strength to several topics by using different social strategies to influence their audience. By targeting their content to a specific niche, their popularity on YouTube highlights how young people on digital platforms can maximise their ability to truly garner international attention.

Panellists in this session shared their personal experiences on the global digital platform. According to Humza Arshad, with homemade videos it is possible to create social awareness content that would allow thousands to connect with each other and share different opinions on important topics. By using comedy as a means to appeal to young people, Humza makes videos to raise social awareness on topics that are likely to affect the youth, such as bullying and radicalisation. Subhi Taha sees responsibility as a moral approach to his audience. He explains how his videos are mainly inspired by his faith and hopes to use his content to tackle current social issues and make real positive change, whilst still holding firm to his interest in fashion.

It is therefore no doubt that the social media industry has given every individual and civic institution the power to build its own network of targeted communication channels. Digital influencers are generally people who have the ability to create content with their own audience. The content has to be highly informative and creative. Discussion over authenticity is relevant to how these social media personas influence public discourse. It is all about trust - which urges us to analyse how effective individuals can be in using social media to shape public attitudes and perceptions.

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***Social media has allowed the world to be constantly and conveniently connected with different people around the globe, allowing the breakdown of international borders and cultural barriers.***

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The session discussed how each individual, as a digital influencer, could shape public opinion and change perceptions.

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Panellists in this session shared their personal experiences with the global digital platform.

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# Negative Labelling

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Traditional celebrities act according to their systematic rules and strategies, rather than free will. However, YouTube personalities connect better with their audiences by being approachable with one-on-one experiences. Their friendly demeanor, fun sense of humour and risk-taking spirit makes them more relatable than the ordinary celebrity. They are not afraid to speak up on personal matters and social issues. Therefore, with this new emphasis on autonomy and engagement, panellists raised the question of how the internet sphere can also facilitate the development of populism. Since a person's race, background and ideas are the major determinants of the reason they use digital platforms, both the content they share and information they consume is what becomes their main sense of popularity. In racial discriminative societies, non-white social media users place a greater emphasis on these platforms as alternative ways to articulate their ideologies and spread their messages.

In traditional media, celebrities always seem detached with their fans. Digital personalities on the other hand, regularly reply to comments, act easily reachable, which makes the interaction inside the social media arena much more transparent. According to Didem Kaya, instant feedback has its pros and cons, because feedback is not necessarily all that informed. There are no filters on the internet and the anonymity that it allows can lead to offensive and disruptive communication. In this context, Riyaad Minty states that it has become more difficult to deal with trolls since their anonymity encourages them to reveal certain aspects of their personality that are normally held in check by the rules of etiquette in society.

We live in a world where we have created this polarised space bubble, where people just label each other as right/wrong, good/bad, black/white, so on. This is why individualism and self-expression can be seen as a positive outcome for self-esteem and autonomy, but can also lead to acts of verbal abuse and even violence. Therefore, social media platforms, directly or indirectly, promote a kind of individualism whose outcome has a direct impact on how racism and hate speech is articulated online.

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# Mainstream Company

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Due to the increasing influence of social media, citizen journalists have played an active role in news media over the last decade. They have used social networks to capture and share news material, essentially performing the same tasks as professional journalists. There is certainly no doubt that social media has transformed the economics of news and information. Smartphones are the new camera crew. Tweets are the modern day press conference. Teenagers watch more YouTube than TV. Television is used less and in some cases only for watching football, family shows or series. Nowadays most teenagers grow up with YouTubers and know more YouTubers than other traditional celebrities. Teenagers can stay in contact with their favourite YouTubers by leaving comments and sending private messages. In short, the national debate over social media seems to land in two camps. One that says social media has opened a door to a more engaged electorate and is creating pathways for greater civic engagement, corporate and political accountability, and journalistic integrity. The other claims that the speed and selectiveness of information shared on social media impedes critical thought and merely closes us off from differing viewpoints. According to Humza Arshad there is huge competition between mainstream companies and digital platforms. While we cannot argue with the growth of social media's use, its influence is far more complex than we tend to acknowledge. It is true that social media has changed how we receive and engage with information, however questions remain on exactly what role it plays in shaping regional public discourse? According to Riyaad Minty, digital platforms have assumed the form of a decentralised model and have access to information anytime and anywhere, further stating that when information is decentralised, costs are greatly reduced.





Panellists emphasised how conventional and traditional media are being challenged by digital platforms in terms of its cost, speed and diversity.





According to Humza Arshad there is huge competition between mainstream companies and digital platforms.

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# Conclusion

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Social media platforms now have the power to reach millions, with influencers who regularly use and engage with its networks and apps to enact or contribute positive changes in the world. These influencers command the attention and respect of massive audiences and have the ability to sway public opinion and inspire followers to action.

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## **Session discussed:**

*how each individual, as a digital influencer, could shape public opinion and change perceptions.*

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## **Panellists emphasised:**

*how conventional, traditional media is being challenged by digital platforms in terms of its cost, speed and diversity.*

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## **In that context, we can observe:**

*how the internet sphere can label communities and give rise to populism.*

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## **Speakers pushed forward the idea:**

*whether people from minority backgrounds should be creating content for people within their own communities or whether they should be using their unique experiences to create stories that resonate with a wider audience.*

