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Understanding hybrid journalism: the emergence of the jinfluencer phenomenon

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Abstract. This theoretical study explores the emerging phenomena of “jinfluencers” (influencer journalists) and their disruptive impact on the contemporary journalistic scene. The research examines how these digital-native communicators are using social media platforms to spread news and information, offering a substitute for well-established traditional media channels, with a focus on Romania’s changing media landscape. Through the development of distinctive personal brands that appeal to particular audiences and their frequent independence, our research addresses the ways in which jinfluencers have established themselves in Romania’s media landscape. Using a theoretical framework, the paper investigates the fundamental elements driving this trend, such as the changing nature of conventional news outlets, the democratisation of information via digital platforms, and the changing public views of influencer relatability and trust.

Keywords. jinfluencer, digital media, media trust, social media journalism.

Introduction

More than 17.3 million Romanians were actively utilising social networks, and over 18 million had internet access as of January 2024 [1]. In addition to radically altering interpersonal relationships, this digital revolution has changed Romania’s entire sociopolitical environment. Because social media platforms allow individuals to become opinion leaders and content creators through their own posts, they have become effective “propagation engines” for citizen journalism [2].

With 9.05 million Romanian users, Facebook continues to dominate the market, but new platforms – especially TikTok, which saw 410,000 downloads in April 2023 alone – are catching up quickly [1]. Digital communicators working at the convergence of influence and news now have more options due to the diversification of platforms. Once uncontested, traditional media outlets are now up against a new breed of digital-native communicators that use the special affordances of these platforms to reach audiences who are becoming more and more dispersed.

The 2021 data demonstrates that the Facebook page *Știrile Pro TV* is the most popular news source in Romania [3], illustrating the digital shift and the need for established media to compete with independent communicators who are establishing their voice on current events. The rise of the jinfluencer is a phenomenon that challenges traditional journalism as younger

Romanians turn to YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. This phenomenon deserves a more thorough theoretical analysis.

These journalists-influencers represent a significant disruption in Romania's media ecosystem, filling voids left by traditional news organisations through distinctive personal brands that resonate with specific audience segments. As our case study will demonstrate, these digital innovators operate at the nexus of knowledge, influence, and strategic narrative construction, employing relatability and authenticity to build trust with audiences that traditional sources struggle to match. The Romanian context provides particularly fertile ground for examining how these *jinfluencers* are reshaping public communication and transforming the dissemination of news and information in the digital age.

1. Theoretical aspects

The jinfluencer is the outcome of fusing the influencer's persona with the journalist's personality, fusing the journalist's traditional duties (information, investigation, and objective reporting) with the engagement and relationship-building strategies unique to influencer communities [4]. These content producers may be influencers who have embraced journalistic standards in their reporting or journalists who have established a robust social media presence. The idea of a "jinfluencer" arises when journalists, like influencers, use social media platforms to develop parasocial connections with online audiences in addition to providing information [5].

Jinfluencers redefine the idea of a "credible source of information", offering a mix between the professional rigor of journalism and the emotional and personal connection that influencers create with their audiences. Thus, we highlight two relevant ideas in characterizing jinfluencers: a) journalistic expertise – which refers to the professional skills and standards of traditional journalists, such as the abilities to research, to analyse facts correctly, to observe journalistic ethics, and to convey information in an unbiased and carefully researched manner; and b) the personal authenticity of influencers – influencers are known for their genuine parasocial relationship with their audiences [6]. Their authenticity and personality make them perceived as more approachable and candid than traditional news sources.

1.1.1. Differences between traditional journalism and influencer journalism.

The manner information is produced and distributed is one of the primary distinctions between traditional journalism and the journalism "practiced" by influencers. A strict critical sense and meticulous verification of facts before publishing are hallmarks of the traditional journalist. The journalist is in charge of ensuring that the information supplied is accurate and impartial, and sources are verified from several angles [7]. On the other hand, influencers frequently function without these official limitations, producing and disseminating content quickly without going through stringent validation procedures, which implies that their work reflects their own beliefs rather than in-depth study [8]. On the contrary, research on lifestyle journalism has revealed that its practitioners seek to offer the following kinds of information: motivation and useful advice; news that can be used in daily life; leisure and entertainment-oriented content; helpful advice and tips; and attempts to offer examples or role models in life [9]. Thus, influencer journalists also focus on personalized content focused on deepening the parasocial relationship, whereas the traditional journalist is not necessarily interested in being 'liked' by his/her audience, but rather being guided by impartiality and aiming for objective reporting of facts.

Therefore, influencers, who frequently lack formal journalistic training, are motivated by the desire to become well-known and create an online community, whereas journalists are

motivated by the quest for truth and possess specialised professional training. Influencers are also urged to provide content frequently, which may have an impact on the calibre and veracity of the information they offer. However, because they engage directly with their audience, a sizable portion of online content providers are seen as genuine and trustworthy [10]. In this sense, perceived authenticity can compensate for a lack of journalistic rigor in the eyes of the audience. Influencers build a closer relationship with their audience as they not only inform but also shape behaviours through direct recommendations. In contrast, traditional journalists have a clear separation between themselves and the subject of their reporting, whereas influencers are often perceived as part of their community, which gives them a different kind of authority.

Nevertheless, even conventional journalists use social media, particularly to build and promote relationships with their readers. They frequently create a “personal brand” that is relatively distinct from their workplace, which enables them to amass social and financial capital. This suggests that individuals are gaining more power in the journalism sector than organisations [11, 12]. This demonstrates that in order to stay relevant and connect with younger audiences, conventional journalists must adjust to new technology and digital trends. In contrast, the influencer journalist is frequently a digital native who picks up new trends and content forms fast.

The amount of money earned is another distinctive feature. Media companies pay journalists for their work, but influencers make money through affiliate marketing, brand collaborations, and the sale of their own goods and services. In this regard, internet platforms have also begun to play a significant role for traditional journalists, who utilise them for personal branding in addition to work-related duties like sourcing, information monitoring, and news distribution. Journalists specifically seek to boost their economic and social capital through this individual self-promotion, which makes the organisational framework of news-making in journalism less relevant [11]. Focusing on the individual level thus enables an examination of the discursive practices through which journalists and newcomers draw the boundaries of what journalism is and who can be called a journalist.

Lastly, it is important to remember that journalists should act as information gatekeepers by offering an unbiased and critical viewpoint on current affairs. Influencers establish a personal connection with their audience and frequently share their subjective viewpoints, which affects internet users’ impressions and purchasing decisions. Consequently, the rise of jinfluencers is a hybrid strategy where these conventional lines are blurred, producing media personalities who blend relationship-building, influencer-style presentation, and journalistic information-gathering. This convergence brings up significant issues regarding editorial independence, bias transparency, and the changing nature of media literacy in a digital world where people are increasingly getting their news from people they identify with rather than from reputable institutions.

1.1.2. *The rise of the jinfluencers.* According to Zellizer [13], journalists have historically been a part of an “interpretive” group that served as a social mechanism and granted them the cultural authority to report on news for society. They distinguished themselves from other social groupings by deciding, by consensus, what was pertinent and noteworthy.

However, the idea of information democratisation has emerged with the advent of the Internet. Any type of information can now be created and disseminated by anyone in a broad and nearly uncontrollable environment. Additionally, the function of the journalist is being replaced not only by citizens who occasionally post information online but also by people who build their own reputation, audience, and identity within their local community [14]. They can

be seen as online influencers who keep their followers engaged by regularly posting news about their personal lives, their professional endeavours, and specific topics that lie at the nexus of their interests and those of the general public. In addition to the emergence of a vast number of content creators who sometimes call themselves journalists, sometimes not, the democratization of information also brings with it the removal of the intermediary filter between the sources of information and the public that used to be held by journalists. The increased accessibility of information leads the public to reach primary sources, data and documents directly, paradoxically feeding the illusion of being informed [15].

The battle for the public's attention is becoming more intense as a result of the transformation and delivery of free information through many sources. Because of this, journalists must put in more effort to gain public attention online by switching to platforms that require them to provide more than simply news. To be prominent, journalists are putting money into their personal brands and using brand-specific strategies. The way a journalist or media figure expresses themselves by fusing social, behavioural, and visual characteristics from their personal and professional lives is known as their personal brand. It involves communications with co-workers, competitors, and the general public that are all crafted to project the intended image. Stories, quotations, images, and texts on a variety of subjects are used to construct the personal brand, which paints a cohesive picture of the individual's personality, communication style, opinions on social issues, sense of humour, political position, and professional accomplishments [16]. Journalists gain fans, boost their market value, and frequently become independent contractors by disclosing personal and professional facts. Journalists can be considered influencers, or jinfluencers.

Hence, the parasocial interaction is the distinguishing factor in the influencer-public relationship. The idea of the "opinion leader", in which influencers are seen as experts in a certain subject with the power to mould attitudes and behaviour, is complementary to the idea of the parasocial connection. According to [17], followers of an influencer not only respect the influencer's expertise but also sense a personal and trustworthy bond with them through the parasocial interaction, which increases the effect of the message they transmit. While the relationship is unidirectional, Horton and Wohl [6] defined parasocial interaction as an illusory social experience of the audience with media characters in which people feel familiar and connected to these public figures. In the current context, the parasocial bond becomes even deeper in the digital environment, where the public comes to perceive these personalities as trustworthy due to their constant accessibility and apparent transparency, generating an emotional connection based on empathy and similarity with their personal life or the values they express.

Why, then, do people increasingly trust jinfluencers? First, there is a notable rise in trust in online influencers at the expense of traditional journalists as a result of fundamental changes in the way we consume information. Nowadays, 50–60% of the population gets its news mostly from social media [18], with young people specifically using sites like TikTok. The emergence of influencers has also been aided by a fall in public confidence in traditional media, which is reflected in a rise in criticism of journalists and a general sense of objectivity. The DNR study shows that mistrust of the media has increased from 24% in 2020 to 35% in 2023, with traditional journalists increasingly being criticised. Given the more casual communication style and audience-specific content in this context, it makes sense that influencers offer a more direct and intimate connection, giving social media users enough grounds to believe the content they post and giving them a sense of authenticity.

2. From the newsroom to the platform

Journalists are shifting from producing news for the newsroom to producing content for social media platforms because they want to connect with the public and are inspired by influencers. They are able to engage directly with their audience and freely share their ideas thanks to this. In contrast to the limitations of a newsroom, online platforms enable journalists to create more individualised content. Journalists discover what resonates with their followers through the process of producing material for the internet, ultimately resulting in a customised audience. Furthermore, studies indicate that becoming an active influencer journalist requires more than just personalised material. Increased impact, improved reputation, and more followers result from consistently adding a personal touch [19].

Journalists usually use Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and, especially outside of Romania, X to actively develop their own brands. Jinfluencers are increasingly using the TikTok platform because of its algorithm's ability to quickly spread content to new audiences [20]. The unique features that enable direct audience interaction and provide a sense of instant engagement and connection are characteristic of choosing these platforms over traditional media outlets. As a result, consuming content becomes a collaborative activity. Instagram is a prime example, as it offers a plethora of alternatives for presenting information in a way that is both dynamic and interactive.

- *Posts in different formats.* For example, the carousel format allows uploading multiple images or videos in one post. Jinfluencers can use the carousel to drill down into complex topics, providing multiple insights or additional information in each slide. As the user spends time on each image, the algorithm registers interest and amplifies the visibility of the post, therefore increasing the chance of reaching more people.

- *Stories.* This feature of the Instagram platform allows jinfluencers to create content that disappears after 24 hours, but keeps the audience close by, curious about the news they may miss. Within these stories, the app enables forms of active audience participation through: polls (polls) - a tool to ask the audience's opinion on various news-related topics or to stimulate engagement; reply (reply) – a feature where followers can directly send messages to jinfluencers, fostering two-way communication; add location (add location) – used to indicate where an event happened or to connect the audience with local topics; countdown – useful for prominently announcing important deadlines, upcoming events or new news releases; external link access – allows jinfluencers to send users directly to an external link, such as news articles, interviews or other credible sources.

- *Short videos (reels).* Jinfluencers use these short, dynamic videos to quickly explain the news or summarize the main points of interest. Reels are ideal for making news go viral, thanks to their engaging format and algorithms that favour visibility to non-followers.

- *Instagram live.* This is an invaluable tool for jinfluencers, as it allows them to broadcast important events in real time or discuss news with their audience. Audiences can ask questions live, creating a direct and authentic connection.

Importantly, this platform is always changing to meet the demands of its users and its corporate objectives. As a result, the features that are shown here might vanish or might be replaced by other methods of audience interaction. They are cited in this study as an example in the present time (2025), emphasising the idea of direct audience communication that promotes parasocial relationships and, eventually, an influencer's audience devotion.

3. Case studies

In light of the paradigms explored throughout this study, it becomes increasingly relevant to ground the discussion in practical illustrations of the jinfluencer phenomenon. These examples allow us to understand not only how this hybrid identity is shaped across different media systems but also how it reflects local cultural, economic, and institutional pressures. Romania offers a compelling case, particularly through the example of Angela Valeria Carp, a former news anchor who transitioned into full-time content creation while maintaining journalistic rigor. Her trajectory embodies many of the core characteristics we have attributed to jinfluencers: autonomy, audience-centric storytelling, and strategic use of social media platforms to blend information with engagement.

Angela's digital presence, which by April 2025 had amassed over 75,600 followers and 1,657 posts, reflects the integration of news values with influencer aesthetics. Her experience in television and fashion, combined with formal training in both engineering and broadcasting, has enabled her to build a versatile media identity. Though she began her career outside traditional journalism, Angela gradually carved out a space where her voice resonated with online audiences, first through lifestyle and fashion and later through a more structured news project titled #newswithangela. Her content now spans national and international news, wellness advice, and personal narratives, creating a holistic experience that reinforces both credibility and relatability.

In 2023, Angela took this personal branding a step further by launching "Atemporal", her own sustainable fashion brand based in Bucharest. Successful jinfluencers can use their carefully developed audience contacts to extend their influence into economic endeavours, as evidenced by this calculated move from news commentary into entrepreneurship. Angela's current content topics of authenticity and conscious living are nicely complemented by the brand's concentration on locally produced, minimalist designs using natural materials, resulting in a smooth transition between her roles as television personality and business owner. Angela is a perfect example of how a contemporary influencer may go beyond the confines of traditional media through this shift, converting audience trust into a variety of options while preserving the intimate relationship that first set her apart from traditional news outlets.

This multifaceted approach is not coincidental. Actually, this strategy is an adaptive response to shifting audience expectations in the digital sphere. Research in the field [9, 17] suggests that credibility is no longer conferred solely through institutional affiliation, but through perceived authenticity, consistent posting schedules, and interactive community building. Angela's routine (posting news every morning from Monday to Friday) mirrors the discipline of traditional journalism, while her willingness to share personal stories and collaborate transparently with brands positions her comfortably within the influencer economy. Importantly, her efforts are supported by a team, showing that professionalism and emotional labour are key components of her media output, even if they happen outside the newsroom.

The difficulties and opportunities in the jinfluencing industry are best illustrated by Angela Carp's career path, particularly the ongoing need to balance editorial independence and revenue, public duty and individual recognition, credibility and broad reach. Her content strategy, which emphasises consistency, relevance, and emotional resonance, blends factual reporting with an approachable, relatable tone in accordance with audience expectations in the digital age.

As we examine this case study, it is important to recognise that Angela is not an anomaly but rather a member of a growing group of media players who are changing the face

of journalism. Her career path reflects broader worldwide trends in which independent communicators, lifestyle producers, and journalists take on journalistic positions on social media platforms in an effort to reach audiences that are becoming more and more dispersed. This wider phenomenon gains special significance from the Romanian context, which emphasises how digital innovators are filling voids left by traditional news organisations. Examining how jinfluencers function at the intersections of knowledge, influence, and strategic narrative is made easier by Angela's work

Numerous other examples record the usage of emotional connection by Jinfluencers, which is a major factor in their popularity. For instance, Lisa Remillard ("The News Girl") and Sarah Baus, a popular content creator from TikTok, moved away from traditional reporting and began creating relevant, tailored social media content that addressed the issues of their fans. Their work demonstrates the allure of spontaneity, authenticity, and platform-native storytelling – qualities that are difficult for traditional sources to match. According to research from the Pew Research Centre [21], 65% of followers of news influencers say they feel more informed as a result of their coverage because it makes difficult subjects easier to understand.

The changing importance of influencers in public communication is further highlighted by the Romanian context. Carp's transition into a jinfluencer shows how former journalists are redefining journalistic authority in addition to adjusting to new media environments. Influencers like Carp have a crucial role in reducing false information and restoring public confidence in a media landscape that is characterised by cynicism and political manipulation, especially in the wake of incidents like the Romanian presidential crisis in 2024. Her material, which frequently addresses topics that are ignored by mainstream media, is reminiscent of the function of influencers during the COVID-19 epidemic in Finland and the UK, when governments looked to them to connect with "hard-to-reach" groups.

Institutional journalists in the United States can adopt the jinfluencer approach, as demonstrated by individuals such as Sophia Smith Galer and Max Foster. Their success on TikTok, which they attribute to their experimental storytelling and direct audience engagement, shows how journalism and influencer culture are increasingly merging. This hybridity makes it easier for legacy media to connect with dispersed consumers, especially Gen Z. Jinfluencers strike a compromise between journalistic integrity and entrepreneurial flexibility as platforms such as Substack and TikTok offer visibility and monetisation, opening the door for future partnerships between digital producers and conventional channels.

The increasing function of social media influencers as journalists is challenging the division between creator-led authenticity and traditional media professionalism. One of the most important concerns made by seasoned industry professionals like Liz Kelly Nelson [22] is that the term "influencer" is primarily a marketing term and might damage the journalistic credibility of those performing actual news coverage. For example, V Spehar and Marisa Kabas may be considered influencers due to their preferred platform [22]; nevertheless, they adhere to stringent reporting rules and open sourcing practices. This hybrid identity – a "creator-journalist" or "jinfluencer" – needs new frameworks for accountability, trust, and public perception in an era of algorithmic feeds and betrayed trust. Beyond merely rebranding jobs, it also urges a reconsideration of what it means to inform the public.

Concerns in traditional journalism circles, especially during the 2024 U.S. presidential election, when social creators and podcasters were given prominent media access, underscore a deeper institutional unease [23]. Legacy media must recognise that people today desire information that appears direct and intimate, even if it departs from the polished framework of

traditional journalism. This is particularly relevant in Romania, where people like Angela Valeria Carp have transitioned from newsroom anchors to independent Internet messengers. Carp's journey reflects the American model and demonstrates that the influencer model is a fundamental shift rather than just a passing trend. It works especially well in media systems when confidence and independence have been repeatedly eroded.

Furthermore, the financial viability of the creator economy – which is projected to reach \$480 billion globally by 2027 [24] – raises ethical and potential concerns. While independent creators now have more editorial freedom and stronger ties to their audience, this independence also carries the risk of bias, business involvement, and gaps in supervision. Local newsrooms are beginning to see creators as “trusted messengers” who could promote greater civic engagement rather than as competitors. In a space where platform literacy, ethics, and journalism must purposefully coexist, influencers' ability to mobilise, educate, and even fact-check in real time has demonstrated both their power and responsibility.

Ultimately, rather than replacing more established journalists, the rise of jinfluencers aims to expand the ecology of public information generation. The challenge is in integrating these producers into systems of legitimacy without replicating the rigid hierarchies that initially repelled younger and marginalised viewers. Instead than relying solely on institutional tradition, trust is now built every day through audience interaction, openness, and consistency. This does not imply that journalism is coming to an end, but rather that a new era is emerging. Whether in Bucharest, Washington, or the comment sections of TikTok, the journalism of the future may be powered by smartphones, but it will always be founded on the timeless principles of connection, truth, and accountability.

4. Conclusion

The jinfluencer phenomenon challenges the conventional divisions between journalism, entertainment, and business, hence representing a radical reconfiguration of Romania's information ecology. Our work has shown how these hybrid communicators use digital platforms to craft audience-centric narratives that traditional media frequently finds difficult to match, occupying a special place at the nexus of relatability and believability. This development is not only technological; rather, it reflects a more profound change in the way that authority and trust are established in the digital era.

The Romanian setting provides especially insightful information about how jinfluencers develop and flourish in media landscapes marked by technological change and institutional mistrust. Successful jinfluencers adjust journalistic principles to platform-specific affordances, producing content that strikes a balance between informational value and emotional resonance, as seen by the career path of Angela Valeria Carp. They can create communities instead of just audiences thanks to this purposeful hybridity, which turns passive information consumption into active engagement.

The jinfluencer model makes several key predictions about how news will be disseminated in the future. First, knowledge of parasocial processes and commercial impacts must be incorporated into media literacy, going beyond simple source verification. Second, established media companies must decide whether to adapt or fight; those that adopt aspects of the jinfluencer strategy while upholding fundamental journalistic principles may discover new avenues for significance. Lastly, ethical standards and regulatory frameworks need to change to take into account the special needs of these hybrid communicators who work outside of traditional institutional frameworks.

Instead of being seen as a sign that journalism is dying, the rise of jinfluencers presents a chance to reassess the way that information is shared in society. Understanding the elements that influence audience migration towards these communicators helps us better grasp how the public's expectations are changing for information that is not just pertinent and accurate but also genuine, approachable, and emotionally meaningful. For years to come, the media landscape will be shaped by the concerns raised by the jinfluencer phenomenon, which asks us to think about not just what news is shared but also how, by whom, and through what interaction with the audience.

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