International Journal of Communication 20(2026), Book Review 1422–1424 1932–8036/2026BKR0009

Emma L. Briant and Vian Bakir (Eds.), **Routledge Handbook of the Influence Industry,** New York, NY: Routledge, 2025, 403 pp., $345.00 (hardcover).

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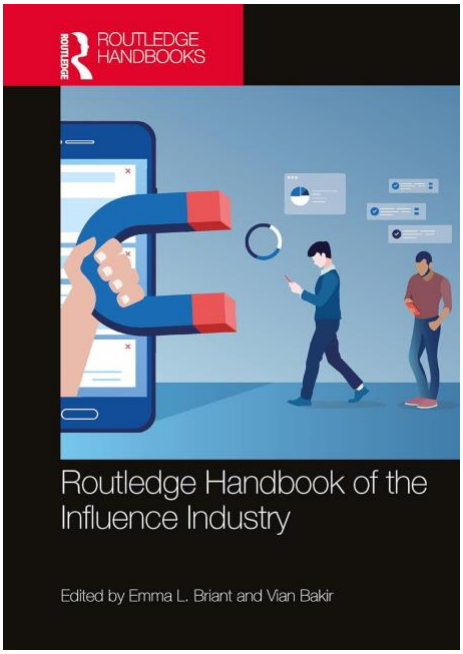

The 2010s and 2020s have been a time of intense interest and worry about online influence operations and their impact on society (Ruiz, 2023; Siegel, 2026). Concerns about online influence began with the Islamic State's social media propaganda in the mid-2010s and quickly spread to worries about Russian social media campaigns, psychographic manipulation, and public health misinformation. Over time, the specific concern about influence operations has given way to a broader set of worries about informational and psychological manipulation online. Governments and NGOs have responded to this challenge with a range of efforts to try and tame the spread of mis- and disinformation and eventually moved toward taming the power of technology altogether, as seen in the recent efforts to ban teenagers from social media entirely (Malik, 2026). Too often, these efforts to rein in technology have focused too narrowly on combatting "disinformation" while ignoring the broader economic and societal infrastructure that enables influence campaigns.

In the ***Routledge Handbook of the Influence Industry***, Briant and Bakir offer a refreshing intervention into these debates by framing their account around the ecosystem that they term "the digital influence industry"—which enables cyber influence operations in the first place (p. 7). Briant and Bakir escape the trap of writing solely about "disinformation" and offer a more nuanced account of deception that is attuned to the various ways that even true information can be used deceptively (p. 21). In doing so, the handbook offers a much richer account of the hazards of influence than the litany of descriptive studies about mis- and disinformation campaigns that have proliferated over the last decade from organizations such as the Atlantic Council and Center for Countering Digital Hate. By rooting their accounts of digital influence in broader discussions about surveillance capitalism, Briant and Bakir have created a unique work that is attentive to the harm of influence operations and the political economy of digital services (Zuboff, 2019). Unlike previous works on digital influence, such as *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Benkler et al., 2018) or *Mindf*ck* (Wylie, 2019), which focus on case studies of digital influence in U.S. politics, the handbook takes a global view and illuminates the economic superstructure that powers digital influence operations.

The editors take the reader on an engrossing tour of the chaos generated by the digital influence industry in countries around the world through 10 different case studies of the digital influence industry in action. The editors make their mission to escape the Anglocentric focus of previous scholarship on influence

clear from the outset, and they succeed brilliantly at this, with rich case studies about Nigeria (chapter 8), the Middle East (chapter 8), and Latin America (chapters 14 and 15), which are attentive to the societal forces at work in each case. Chapter 16, which untangles how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) uses misinformation to spur riots to deepen divisions in Indian society and create demand for the BJP's authoritarian agenda among the nation's Hindus, is particularly interesting because of the light it sheds on the interplay between ethnic politics, technology, and democratic backsliding. Nicolas Cull's chapter on South Africa's global influence campaign during apartheid provides a fascinating look at the pre–digital influence industry and sets up interesting contrasts for the other cases in the book, which take place after the beginning of surveillance capitalism.

What sets Briant and Bakir's work apart is their deep investigations of the political economy of digital influence as part and parcel of the larger infrastructure of surveillance capitalism. The commercialization of deceit is evident throughout the volume, beginning with James Forest's discussion of "digital influence mercenaries" (p. 68) who conduct malicious online activities for profit in chapter 5. In chapter 13, we see a concrete example of digital influence mercenaries in action, analyzing how the organization Humanitad monetizes conspiracy theories on social media to sell alternative health products. Chapter 11 expands our understanding of the interconnections between surveillance capitalism and the digital influence industry by conceiving of major tech platforms and would-be manipulators as a "deception supply chain," which enables geopolitical influence campaigns (p. 167). Across the volume, Briant and Bakir skillfully integrate their discussion of the influence industry with wider discussions of surveillance capitalism. In doing so, the editors have created a book of interest not only for the narrow subset of academics focused on digital influence but also for journalists, policy makers, and students who are interested in digital freedom and the political economy of technology.

The *Routledge Handbook of the Influence Industry* makes the moral stakes of the subject matter exquisitely clear. Chapter 17, written by Dr. Briant, offers a tour de force statement of the stakes involved in the digital influence industry, weaving together powerful arguments about rights, inequality, and the future of democratic governance. In doing so, Briant makes a powerful case for the book's academic project and transforms a niche academic discussion into something with impressive and even vital stakes. Chapters 18 and 19 deeply engage with the tricky ethical question surrounding influence operations by looking at ethical practices (or lack thereof) in the public relations industry and military information operations. These three chapters add critical moral depth to this analytical book and pave the way for further considerations of digital influence operations by other scholars.

The key weakness of this work is the paucity of solutions that it offers. Chapter 21 attempts to offer a solution by discussing the possibility for "personal information management systems" to offer consumers more control over their own data and how this data is monetized. However, the authors quickly acknowledge that this solution is unlikely to come to pass because of the tech industry's interest in preventing such a solution from being implemented. Chapter 22 further notes that advancing technology may quickly render regulatory solutions obsolete. One wishes that the volume would have spent more time engaging with existing solutions for countering digital influence operations such as fact-checking and labeling. There is already a rich literature on these solutions that the book could have profited from engaging

https://doi.org/10.65476/c9rgbr09

with, and I found myself wishing that the authors had weighed in on these interventions (Morrow et al., 2022; Walter et al., 2019).

Overall, the *Routledge Handbook of the Influence Industry* is a substantial field-shaping reference work. Briant and Bakir successfully reorganize the conceptual architecture for understanding modern propaganda, and they make the infrastructure of digital influence legible for scholars working across research traditions. The volume is an essential reference for students, scholars, and policy makers in sociology, journalism, political science, and communication studies.

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