

Do you actually know who the influencers are or is your influencer marketing a joke?

 By [Walter Pike](#)

27 Jan 2015

[Amanda Sevasti](#) is a well-known commentator on all things digital and a judge at the [Bookmark Awards](#) for 2015. She's been sharing her judging experience on Twitter...

Key amongst all the interesting, insightful and amusing comments was this one:

“ *The same bloggers / influencers used again and again. I think we have a shortage in SA. [#judgingbookmarks](#)-
Amanda Sevasti (@AmandaSevasti) [January 22, 2015](#)* ”

I think Sevasti is expressing a real concern with this tweet, and I thought that I would explain how I see it.

Firstly, I feel Sevasti is absolutely correct... except it's not that there are no influencers in South Africa, it's that the people the award entrants are using as influencers are just not influencers. If the entrants are using the same influencers over and over again, then they are not using the real influencers.

I have the answers, if you're now asking 'Why not? Who are the real influencers then?'

Revealed: The real influencers

Starting at the most obvious point - individuals cannot possibly hold a position of influence of multiple disciplines. How many people do you know that have a similar amount of credibility or influence over a commentary on rugby and classical ballet, for example, or can pronounce on political violence and photography with the same degree of credibility? It's possible but unlikely.

So without any further analysis, we can reject any simple number, such as an individual's Klout score, out of hand. It's simply impossible for the same people to hold the same level of influence over all possible categories.

What is influence, though?

Let's define 'influence' as an individual's ability to affect other people's thinking and behaviour or their ability to spread ideas.

You can't just use advertising-thinking suitable for broadcast era media and apply it to social media. The measure is simply not transferable.

Audience is not the measure

The most naive error would be to simply equate someone's number of followers with influence. I hope nobody is still doing so. That is straight from old school advertising measures and equating reach and opportunities to see in and offline environment with a social environment. Even newspapers look at current circulation and TV programmes at viewership of that current programme. It's not the same thing at all to equate this to the fact that once, sometime in the past, someone liked my page and never returned to it, or that someone followed me on Twitter and may possibly have seen my tweet in a timeline that has thousands passing by.



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Follower numbers are very easy to game. You can also buy followers and obviously it is of seriously little value that I have a huge stream of inactive followers in Bangladesh when judging my influence in the Cape Town theatre scene.

So then, is it about engagement? As it's defined as an interaction between two social media actors or a piece of content, it's part of the globular figures you often see. Yes, in principle, it's important but also very easy to game.

The same goes to amplification. Who cares whether the actor has managed to get a motivational quote by Winston Churchill shared and retweeted when you are actually involved in marketing a wine brand? It isn't a measure of the influencer, it's a measure of the content.

So now what? How then do you find influence?

The first step is to define the field where you hold influence. I often call this a social object. It's the reason why people are there in the first place - what they are talking about. [In a recent article](#), I analysed the conversation around Zelda la Grange on Twitter. That analysis looked at those who commented and interacted on the topic of 'Zelda la Grange' and nothing else. I am willing to bet you that few of the Bookmark Awards entries that Sevasti was remarking on had key influencers on that list. The ranking of the influencers that I put forward purely based on Klout score have also got no relationship to the standard metrics.

[Please read my article on #ilridewithyou](#), a massive story in December 2014, as an example of this. Not only did the lady who started it only have 540 followers, but one of the most influential people in the social conversation measured by 'betweenness centrality' over a certain time period, was @MahrukhBashir who only had 53 followers and a disappearing Klout score.

So step one is to define the topic or conversation that you looking to influence.

Social Network Analysis

The second step is to use science and proper social network analysis tools to analyse the participants in the conversation and their role in that particular conversation. I will illustrate by using network diagrams, with each dot representing a person in the conversation, and each link a connection or interaction between them established during the course of the discussion.

By doing that, you can establish:

The social actor's *closeness centrality*. This is a measure of how connected a person is in a cluster. The easiest way of understanding this is by thinking of degrees of separation. These are people who are interacting with people close to them. They are usually the central person in a local cluster and are useful in disrupting information in that cluster. They are

influential in their clusters. In the diagram below, they are represented by the red dots.



[click to enlarge](#)

The brokers

We can also establish the very important idea of who the bridges are, or who links one cluster to another. We call this betweenness centrality. These are incredibly important actors in social networks. In some cases, they are the only way that a thought can move from one cluster to another.

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[click to enlarge](#)

In the case of @MahrukhBashir in the #illridewithyou example, she obtained her influence by betweenness centrality. This means she spent her time linking groups, so she created a connection between groups that would otherwise have been a cluster isolated from the rest of the discussion.

The power of the social media bridge

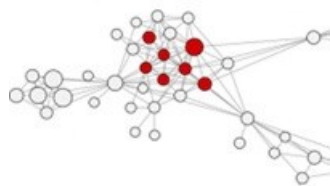
To explain this in a different way, let's use an example of two social actors with a high closeness centrality, dominating two different clusters. They may have each 10,000 followers and 1,000 interactions in that conversation, but they are preaching to the choir, there is no potential for the message to leave the cluster and reach the other cluster.

A person placed between those clusters, with potentially only 2 followers - one in each cluster - is a bridge, the only way that an idea in cluster A can get to cluster B and reach 20,000 people (A+B). This bridge therefore has huge influence, provided by her position in the network or her betweenness centrality. In the second diagram these people are represented by the red dots. These are the brokers and, arguably, the most important actors. See below:

The big deal

A third measure is the degree to which social actors are connected to other social actors. This, incidentally, is the underlying theory of how Google ranks websites by how many other websites connect to them. A person may be important if other important people connect to them

We also determine credibility using this metric. We assume that an article referred to in other articles is more influential than one that is not. Often the position that celebrities have in a conversation, it's also called eigenvector centrality. It may appear to be paradoxical, but they often have low influence in a particular conversation or in local networks or almost no brokerage potential. Think of an aloof CEO with no connectivity with his peripheral employees. See below:



[click to enlarge](#)

This understanding must be combined with an understanding of the type of content shared and the credibility of the social actor. But that's a different topic, which I will cover at another time.

So, all taken into account, I agreed with [Amanda Sevasti](#) and answered her tweet by stating that the problem stems from them just not knowing how to identify the actual influencers.

It's encouraging to me that this question is being raised over and over again within my strategy consulting practice and during the Q&A sessions of my talks, and even more encouraging is that the answer is available.

“ RT [@AmandaSevasti](#): The same bloggers / influencers used again and again. [#judgingbookmarks](#) - Walter Pike
([@walterpike](#)) [January 23, 2015](#) ”

So, in summary: influence is not determined by number or followers, or any other singular, easily manipulated score that set out to proclaim influence. Instead, it is determined by a scientific analysis of the actual conversation, discovering how the participants in the conversation is clustered and the discovery of the social actors with high centrality. I have only highlighted the top three measures involved, but they really are sufficient to take your game to a completely new place.

If you aren't already doing this, you actually don't know who the influential ones are, especially if you're using the same people time and again, campaign after campaign for different markets, different categories and different topics. That's the clue. It's not that we have a shortage of influencers, we mostly just don't know how to identify them.

ABOUT WALTER PIKE

Walter has decades long experience in advertising, PR, digital marketing and social media both as a practitioner and as an academic. As a public speaker; Speaks on the future of advertising in the post - broadcast era. As an activist; works in an intersection of feminism & racism. He has devised an intervention in unpacking whiteness for white people. As an educator; upskilling programs in marketing comms, advertising & social in South, West and East Africa. Social crisis management consultant & educator. Ideaorg founder

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