



Introduction by
Scott Guthrie

INSTAGRAM BLACKOUT

HOW INVISIBLE STATS WILL CHANGE THE
WORLD OF INFLUENCER MARKETING



INTRODUCTION

BY SCOTT GUTHRIE, INFLUENCER MARKETING EXPERT

Instagram is the current powerhouse platform for B2C influencer marketers. The image-led platform boasts a billion monthly active users. According to Global Web Index, and captured in Mary Meeker's [Internet Trends 2019 report](#), Instagram is the fastest growing social media platform by daily usage. There are [500 million daily active Stories users](#). [Sixty per cent of users](#) seek out and discover new products on Instagram. Small wonder then that [brand collaborations have grown 44%](#) in the past year.

Instagram, however, is not content to rest on its laurels; the Facebook-owned app is on a charm offensive with brands. [Branded Content Ads](#) now enable advertisers to promote influencers' posts through the brand's company Instagram feed just like they would any other advertisement.

Checkout, an ecommerce feature currently in beta mode, empowers users to buy the products that catch their eye in posts straight from the app. There are talks of adding 'shopping bags' to the site as well, where users can hold items in a cart.

Instagram is courting influencers, too, through the rollout of 'Creator' accounts. These offer influencers more in-depth analytics including follower growth insights plus the ability to filter direct messages. It is also trialling the combination of the [Checkout feature with Creator profiles](#).

High-fives all-round? Attaining a billion monthly users suggests that customers are happy. Checkout and branded content ads are



designed to keep brands happy. Creator accounts and influencer access to Checkout are aimed at keeping creators happy, too.

But, as growth flattens at Facebook, its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has been forced to look elsewhere for advertising revenue to prop up the business. Eyes are now focused squarely on Instagram. The photo-sharing app contributed less than \$5bn to Facebook in 2017. Income nearly doubled in 2018. eMarketer has forecast revenue will exceed [\\$25bn in 2021](#).

Creator accounts and branded content ads appear, on the surface, to be putting community first but it is surely more about cash than community. The next step will be to kill off organic reach. Just as Instagram's parent, Facebook, did with brand pages.

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While branded content ads currently provide brands with an opportunity to boost influencer content to their pages, what if that opportunity becomes an obligation? What if the only way to reach your intended audience is via paying to boost your content?

Creators, too, usually negotiate additional fees with brands for use of their content on other activations. Rolling branded content ads into one fee removes this extra revenue stream.

Instagram charges brands a selling fee calculated as a percentage of each transaction via Checkout. At launch, this percentage will be minute. Once this ecommerce initiative is fully rolled out, replacing brand-owned ecommerce sites, what is to prevent this percentage charge from creeping up?

Regulators are ratcheting pressure on the platform to take the mental health of its users more seriously. Earlier this year Instagram tested hiding the 'like' tally posts receive to assess whether this would help ease social pressure.

Removing the like counter permanently would kill social proof. Though it may encourage more meaningful engagement. Influencer fraud would diminish – resonance measurement would be forced to shift from vanity metrics towards intent and impact metrics.

The test was to hide, not remove, 'likes' however. Influencers would

still be able to see the tally (no doubt if they switched to a creator account). Brands would be able to see the tally, too, via Brand Collabs Manager.

Who knows what Instagram's head, Adam Mosseri, is planning. We do know that China's social media monolith, WeChat, already allows users to send money and to make purchases straight from the app. We do know that the drive towards ecommerce places Amazon in its sights. We also know that while at Facebook, Mosseri was in charge of the newsfeed and oversaw organic reach on brand pages being squeezed to near zero.

If you do not own the platform on which your livelihood depends then you are only one Terms of Service change, one algorithm update, or a handful of outages away from oblivion. As American futurist Alvin Toffler once reasoned, 'If you don't have a strategy, you're part of someone else's strategy' (and chances are they simply won't care about you).

Instagram is the current powerhouse platform for B2C influencer marketers, savvy communicators and creators alike would be wise to have a back-up plan in the event that their best interests were no longer served on it.

BLOGGER VIEW

VICTORIA MAGRATH, [INTHEFROW](#)

I've always been very aware, especially since the collapse of Vine, that holding your business name and brand on an external social media platform is a risk. To base your livelihood, income and brand solely across platforms you don't own, is a huge gamble in an ever-changing industry like ours. My blog offers me the chance to upload editorial content that continues to belong to me, while offering my brand a secure consistent base for growth and development. I am a blogger first and foremost and my website remains my priority, especially when it has remained such a positive place to create content in comparison to more anonymous places on the web.

As for changes on Instagram, I feel really positive about them and that has a lot to do with the possible removal of likes across the platform. Once you let go of the fear of the dreaded algorithm and equating your self-worth to 'likes', your focus can return to creating great content.

I don't think the changes will have a huge impact on brand collaborations and relationships, as demographics will most likely remain unchanged and brands will always have access to a creator's numbers via back end analytics too. In the end though, any changes that put the focus back on talented creators and the content they are sharing with the platform as opposed to numbers, will always be positive in my books.



Victoria has written about about this issue in length on her blog - [read more here](#).

PR VIEW

JO BROMILOW, DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIST, PUBLICASITY

Looking at it positively, this could actually drive better creative and counsel from agencies – with the removal of vanity metrics we'll see an end to the tribal nature of 'liking' that can often happen on larger accounts, and instead mean that consumers will only engage with content – good, well-designed, highly engaging and valuable content created by skilled creative teams – they deem good in a vacuum, without the influence of how many others like the photo.

Looking at it optimistically, this could help encourage the more genuine audience relationship that brands want, as well as a better in-app experience for users that will lead to better in-app dwell times, fueling Instagram revenue from advertisers.

That's the optimistic view. Many others could miss out as a result of this, most notably micro-influencers. On losing this upfront metric, brands will have to dig a lot deeper to see the engagement numbers of these individuals and could be reduced to judging based on the look of their feed, meaning the great engagement numbers that most micro-influencers use to get ahead of the macro-influencers will be out of the picture. This may see a shift in the power balance between influencer, agency and client, which may in turn see a rise in influencers going straight to brands or, as we've already started to see, setting up their own agencies to cut out the middle man.

Naturally, that's problematic for any agency that includes influencer marketing as a core part of their strategic offering.



But agency integration has been the norm for years now as comms becomes more unified. There's always room for more at the table. I would expect a rise in agencies that market their services as connecting brands and content creators (rather than just straightforward influencers), and I'd also expect Instagram to launch its own version of that agency.

With Instagram's usage figures at an all-time high, this next play to convert those numbers to financial ones – and the readiness of agencies to weather this next step in the move back to pseudo-private social networking – was inevitable.

BLOGGER VIEW

JO MIDDLETON, **SLUMMY SINGLE MUMMY**



Jo Middleton

I think the changes to Instagram are a great idea. What often happens is likes get artificially boosted by bloggers being in pods or groups, which is not what Instagram should be about. If the public stats go then it will take the pressure off everybody.

But I can't see it dramatically changing the relationship with brands, if they want to see the stats then I imagine you'll be able to show them as the creator, which is the same now with Facebook and Twitter, or with my blog. And if brands start asking for more – more stats or more work – then that's only a good thing as far as I'm concerned. I like it when brands push me to be more accountable because it makes me better at my job.

People are under an illusion that their Instagram account is something they own; they don't. If Instagram stops working, gets hacked or the platform decides to close your account then that's it for you, there's no control. I would never abandon it completely, but I think it's a risky strategy to put all your eggs in one basket.

Also, as a parent, I think it's only a good thing as there's way too much pressure on children to be popular in a certain way and hiding this information will make that better.

PR VIEW

SARAH EVANS, SENIOR DIGITAL STRATEGIST, BOTTLE



Instagram used to be lacking in meaningful metrics, but as it's an exploding platform for advertising spend, this is rapidly changing (to suit brand's demands to understand performance and demonstrate ROI, and unlock more spend); so likes is now one of many other metrics that can be used to determine success. The trouble is that things like story views, clicks and sales are not metrics that you can gauge from the outside looking in speculatively.

It may mean a more involved conversation where an influencer may have to prove the sorts of engagement stats they're getting behind the scenes before a brand will work with them; more time-consuming for both perhaps, but may result in more considered, meaningful partnerships and content.

Searching for influencers can be a very time-consuming exercise for a brand; they're looking for ones that fit from an ethos point of view, that are a good brand 'fit', have credibility or attributes we'd like to borrow as a brand... but one of the most important questions is how engaged is their audience?

Without likes we may not have as good an understanding of what sort of content gets prioritised in people's newsfeeds, and why. This

'black box' style algorithm could be worrying for both brands and influencers who depend on reach, except that brands are likely to be able to pay their way around this problem more than influencers will.

Likes are very passive – it's very easy to like something, but a comment requires more thought, consideration and demonstrates a much more active engagement with a post or piece of content. Comments could be a great way of seeing exactly how engaged an audience is – are they asking questions, looking for tips, giving feedback – or do they look like bots? There's a lot more nuance and richness in comments sections than any like number can give you. This will make people more thoughtful about the types of content they post: rather than chasing likes, how will their posts generate a greater conversation?

Instagram's ecommerce capabilities are only just beginning; the ability to shop directly from posts has only been available for brands up until now, but when that rolls out to influencers at scale then likes won't be the metrics that matter, it'll be clicks and sales. If an influencer is driving sales, then a brand won't be interested in how many likes their posts are getting. This will create a whole new dynamic between the two which could dramatically change the face of Instagram to a curated, interactive shopping channel.

Overall Instagram's move towards a more positive experience for its users from a mental health point of view seems to be a good thing for users. Likes and follower counts are a distracting vanity metric, so removing them will enable us to see beyond and search for substance. The onus may be on users to curate their newsfeed carefully: your experience on social media is only as good (and healthy) as the accounts you follow, after all.

INDUSTRY VIEWS

JADE JOSELYN, FITNESS INFLUENCER AND INSTAGRAMMER

I think there would be pros and cons to Instagram removing public stats. Influencers and creatives have worked long and hard to build following so that they can work with brands and create an income for themselves doing what they love. However, I do believe that by removing stats brands would be more likely to work with an influencer based on their content and personality alone, which to me would suggest the brand feels the individual represents them in an authentic way and would benefit not only the brand in the long run but also the audience/consumer.



WILLIAM SOULIER, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, TALENT VILLAGE



With Instagram removing a vanity metric such as likes on in-feed posts, both users and brands should hopefully become focused on less tangible metrics, but arguably more important factors such as the quality of the content produced.

The problem is that it's very difficult to measure something like 'quality', and therefore it seems inevitable that brands will shift their focus to the next quantifiable metric such as engagement. By hiding likes on the user's feed, Instagram is giving a chance for content to stand out for its quality and not for its engagement.

Ultimately, with the removal of likes on Instagram already in testing, brands will need to realign their affiliation with the right kind of talent; those who match their values and have the credibility to talk authentically in this space.

BLOGGER VIEW

YAYA ONALAJA-ALIU AND LLOYD GRIFFITHS, **HAND LUGGAGE ONLY**



Instagram is a constantly changing social media platform that, in lots of ways, dictates how, when and at what cost the user sees posts. Personally, we've always seen Instagram as something that a blogger/Instagrammer has very little control over and almost puts you at the mercy of how Instagram want to shape (and make money) from future content.

Their choice on whether or not to display public stats is just one of those examples of changes happening at Instagram that we as users have no say or control about.

This is one of the main reasons why we've always prioritised owning our own website. That way, we have total control of our direction and our creativity.

In ten years' time, Instagram will not be recognisable in the format that it currently is, or may even no longer be a thing! You just need to look at platforms such as Myspace or Vine for ways in which platform quickly fall out of favour or have changed in relevancy over the years. This is another key reason why it's always important for us to prioritise our own website.

PR VIEW

DAN STOBBS, HEAD OF SOCIAL MEDIA, BLUESKY PR

Instagram's experiment with hiding likes and follower counts aligns with the wider ongoing movement on social media, which has seen platforms reposition themselves to focus on what Mark Zuckerberg has defined as 'meaningful interactions'. This has seen algorithms, such as Facebook's, prioritise content that generates deeper levels of engagement, such as comments and shares, over likes in the feeds of users. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey recently admitted, 'I don't think I would even create 'like' in the first place because it doesn't actually push what we believe now to be the most important thing, which is healthy contribution back to the network.'

Pros

With the action of liking a post being such a passive form of engagement, it can be difficult for marketers to ascertain whether the content they are producing is being positively received by their audiences, or if they are simply tapping out of habit. The recent story of Instagram influencer Arie who, despite having over two million followers, couldn't sell 36 t-shirts shows how deceptive vanity metrics can be.

Hiding likes should also help put a stop to the rise of paid-for automated engagement tools which, despite being against the Instagram's terms of service, are currently flooding the platform and make it even harder for brands to decipher which interactions are genuine and which aren't.

The removal of likes should also force brands to produce high quality content that resonates with audiences and adds value to their everyday lives. I expect to see far more posts which encourage discussion -



and if utilised correctly this will enable marketers to collect a wealth of qualitative data from their audiences which they can then use to not only inform future content but feed into product development too.

Cons

If rolled out, these changes are likely to have a detrimental effect on Instagram influencers - I can see many brands shifting away from influencer partnerships and redirecting their budget into Instagram advertising due to the transparency and in-depth analysis that Ads Manager provides.

BLOGGER VIEW

CRAIG LANDALE, **MENSWEAR STYLE**

Craig Landale



I think removing public stats is a great idea, especially for today's young teenagers and their mental wellbeing. It would cut out a lot of the black hat techniques on the professional side too. This would mean that brands would work with those who truly create great content rather than those who can get the most engagement.

I personally concentrate on my blog because I own it and I am in charge of my own income and future. I remember when Facebook cut off free organic reach which heavily impacted traffic to business websites. Suddenly you had to pay Facebook if you wanted to reach your audience that you had worked hard to gain.

There's nothing to stop Instagram going down the same route. They're a business and need to make profit, so you can certainly expect it. This is exactly why I concentrate on my blog and my newsletter because its future is in my hands.

THE PR INDUSTRY'S Vuelio MOST POWERFUL DATABASE

The importance of building the right relationships with the right people is a fundamental of PR and communications. Relying on a few visible statistics to determine greatness will only lead to short-term wins, not long-term success.

For PR to survive and thrive in the world of influencer marketing – and not be supplanted by marketing – the industry ultimately needs to go back to its roots. Only by understanding influencers, whether they be bloggers, vloggers, content creators or Instagrammers, and their value can PR see the true benefits of collaboration.

If you're worried about the Instagram blackout, or if you're looking to create new meaningful relationships with successful creators, get a free demo of the industry's most powerful database and start working with new influencers today.

[GET A DEMO](#)

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Our in-house research team works with influencers to create detailed profiles with preferences and even pet peeves

Up-to-date lists

Build lists of the influencers you want to reach and easily target contacts based on sector, interests, topics, location and more

Forward Features

Thousands of searchable editorial opportunities added to every day

Global opportunities

Access contacts and profiles in the UK and around the world

Social influencers

Identify the social influencers who are writing about your topic **right now**