



Who Pays Latter-day Saint Influencers?

Bloomberg assembles real facts into a misleading frame, turning ordinary media work into evidence of covert religious influence.

By [C.D. Cunningham](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA

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Bloomberg's headline makes its point pretty clearly: "Influencers Are Being Paid to Spread the [Mormon Church's](#) Gospel."

A typical reader will understand that headline to mean that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is paying popular social media personalities to preach to their followers while presenting those messages as spontaneous expressions of personal belief.

It's a serious accusation. And one certainly worthy of journalistic coverage.

Latter-day Saints may not fully realize this because they would expect the algorithm to show them influencers of their own faith, but Latter-day Saint influencers have large audiences, and they appear in many news feeds. The desire to understand why that is could certainly motivate an enterprising journalist.

But Bloomberg misses the mark on this story.

Bloomberg's promotional language reinforces the interpretation of its headline, claiming that the Church operates an influencer-marketing apparatus and owns several advertising agencies with influencer operations. And the article describes these Latter-day Saint influencers as increasingly difficult to escape.

The problem is that none of what Bloomberg implies is actually happening. And rather than scrapping the story or shifting it to one supported by the evidence, Bloomberg forges ahead with the story it wanted to exist.

Let me be clear, Bloomberg doesn't make up facts in the story. More insidiously, it leads its readers to a conclusion that the facts don't support. There is no system in which the Church purchases personal testimonies from influencers or dictates what content creators post on their personal profiles. Sponsored posts are only on the Church's official account, making sponsorship questions moot.

Instead, Bloomberg assembles a collection of substantially different activities and arranges them beneath a headline that doesn't really apply to any of them, then asks the reader to imagine a conspiracy that doesn't exist and for which it has found no evidence.

The McCune Institute contacted Bloomberg repeatedly to address some of these shortcomings, but Bloomberg did not respond.

What is the Church's Relationship to Influencers?

Ten years ago, the Church experimented with paying influencers for testimonials, much as other brands do. But in 2018, it decided against the practice, presumably because the nature of religious belief is more personal than how one feels about consumer brands that frequently use influencer marketing.

That is basically the answer to the question that Bloomberg asks. The Church briefly paid influencers who posted to their own accounts but has not done so for eight years.

Instead, the Church uses its own advertising agencies to produce its own social media posts. And it hires those with experience in social media to write, film, perform in, and edit those materials.

This should surprise no one. And it certainly does not show that the Church is paying for influencers' testimonials. [More than half of Gen Zers](#) want to be content creators or influencers, and many are. Obviously, companies hiring people with experience in social media will be hiring people who already have social followings.

What is happening with Latter-day Saint influencers is something much less controversial: they are religious people who sincerely believe in their religion. And this means they are motivated to share their faith spontaneously, without payment. Some are also willing to help the Church when asked to film in Church-produced content for pay. But the payments typically amount to a few hundred dollars, and the content appears on Church platforms, not the influencers' platforms.

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If Bloomberg wanted the audience to believe that the Church was secretly funneling money to influencers in exchange for content, it would have found an example. It would have found advertising copy that was passed off as personal conviction. But it didn't.

Instead, Bloomberg used the language of paid endorsement to describe evidence of a commissioned production. Just because a professional videographer, podcaster, musician, writer, or actor already has an audience does not mean every job that professional accepts is payment for an endorsement.

A fair headline might have said that the Church hires content creators to produce its own social media content. That's accurate. "Influencers are being paid to spread the gospel" suggests something entirely different: manufactured testimonies portrayed as authentic. And predictably, that is exactly how users on [social media](#) understood the article.

Influencer Events

Many content creators, including Public Square Magazine, regularly discuss The Church of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Church sometimes communicates with those content creators, especially when there is something that it hopes to publicize.

For example, two weeks ago, the Young Women General Presidency held a reception for content creators to discuss the upcoming September changes to the Sunday curriculum.

We were previously invited to similar Church Educational System events that provided helpful starting points for researching and writing articles on subjects we already wanted to discuss at Public Square.

Frankly, I believe we would neglect our duty if we declined opportunities to attend events to build relationships with key Church leaders in order to provide the best information to our readers.

It is best practice for journalists to maintain warm, ongoing relationships with those in their reporting niche. Presumably, this would also extend to content creators, who don't have all the same kinds of ethical obligations as journalists.

We have an article coming out soon about the changes in September. That article is better because we were able to hear directly from senior Church leaders about their thoughts on the changes.

But the Church doesn't direct what we publish. There is no quid pro quo. There is no compensation that depends on what we write. We are entirely editorially independent. To the extent that our content supports or aligns with messaging from the Church, it is because our editors and writers are sincerely aligned and believe it is the best, most accurate information to provide.

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The events the Church hosts with content creators are, in essence, press conferences for content creators rather than traditional journalists.

Bloomberg implies that by keeping contact lists for these creators, the Church has a relationship with them that isn't editorially independent. Bloomberg should know better. The Church's PR practice of maintaining the contact information of relevant content creators in its niche is de facto in every reasonably well-organized institution. I have a list of journalists who write about the Church, but it certainly doesn't mean they are on my payroll or that I have any influence over what they write.

Compare this to local newspapers. I once spent a day in a newsroom of a large city paper. That morning, it had published an article about the "worst places to work" in the city based on social media comments.

As you might expect, many of the largest businesses in the city appeared in the article and were also advertisers for the paper. Before restaurants stopped serving breakfast, the article was taken down.

Whatever tenuous, minor third-party financial arrangements are made for one-off work between the Church and content creators, they pale in comparison to the day-to-day influence money has on journalistic coverage. In fact, the larger question may be why Bloomberg thought there was a story here at all.

Bloomberg Should Know Better

The line of criticism that Bloomberg pursues here is one that requires great care.

A common form of anti-religious propaganda portrays a wealthy religious minority as secretly coordinating with financial institutions, media outlets, charities, public figures, and others to manipulate society.

For example, the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) explains that much antisemitic sentiment comes from a conspiracy theory about a fictitious Jewish body supposedly plotting global control. And the Anti-Defamation League identifies the related trope that [wealthy and powerful Jews](#) operate behind the scenes to control countries, media, and public events.

The lesson from this history is not that journalists should never report on money, actions taken in secret, or religious institutions. The lesson is that this kind of [reporting](#) should not be done via insinuation, because religious minorities can be especially susceptible to readers inserting insidious motives into the blanks the author leaves open.

Imagine an article that opened by saying Jewish influencers were “moving in.” Imagine that it focused on institutional wealth and attempted to tie that wealth to those influencers by deliberately conflating distinct acts.

Editors in such circumstances should ask whether the story had actually demonstrated coordination or instead merely pulled together a list of unconnected things onto a corkboard for conspiracy theorists to have at it. Throwing things at the wall to see what sticks is not the kind of journalism a respectable outlet should be publishing. Bloomberg’s writers might argue that they didn’t say anything that wasn’t true. Sure, but it predictably made people believe things that weren’t true.

This pattern is how religious [bigotry](#) often operates in respectable outlets. It seldom announces itself as hatred. Instead, it implies, suggests, blurs distinctions, and then trusts the audience’s own prejudices to finish the job.

About the author



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