For celebrities and influencers, these are challenging times. Deprived of the stage, publicity opportunities have inevitably dwindled. Forays on to social media have been met by a tough crowd. So much so, that a flurry of editorials has diagnosed a pandemic crisis for the world of celebrity.

“No one’s looking at you anymore,” said The Times. “There is no good celebrity content right now,” cried Vanity Fair. The New York Times called it “a swift dismantling of the cult of celebrity.”

Certainly, there have been a few high-profile missteps. As stars opened up their homes and lives to the world, it has underlined the gulf between ‘us and them’ and made relatability a challenge.

Ellen DeGeneres’ joke comparing lockdown to jail sparked a backlash, delivered as it was from her Beverly Hills mansion. Multi-millionaire Pharrell Williams’ tweet asking followers to contribute to a coronavirus fundraiser was met with scorn (and a video clip of a Lego guillotine). Most notorious of all, actor Gal Gadot’s earnest celebrity sing-along to John Lennon’s Imagine on Instagram spawned a host of
brutal parodies. Strangely, the musical fundraiser is a crisis tactic that has previously served celebrities well. Not this time.

In a similar way, big name influencers have struggled to connect with their audiences during the pandemic. The usual displays of luxury or privilege seem distasteful at a time when inequalities are so exposed. Some have even found themselves falling into the same privilege trap as celebrities, like fashion blogger Arielle Charnas, who was censured for allegedly using connections to get herself tested for coronavirus, despite not meeting official criteria.

As our former idols struggle to hit the right note, recognition is building for a different kind of role model. Stoic, selfless and dare we say, workaday, the new heroes are those putting themselves in harm’s way to keep life moving: health and care workers, delivery drivers, checkout operators, cleaners and refuse collectors.
Witness the clapping rituals for frontline workers and carers that have swept the globe, starting in Wuhan, China and then spreading to Italy, through Spain, France, Britain, from Israel to the United States, Brazil and beyond. Magazines such as TIME, Glamour and Grazia have shifted models and movie stars to one side, making doctors and nurses their cover stars. We’re even seeing the rise of the healthcare influencer, as many build profiles on social media. @mikiraiofficial, a pediatric nurse from San Francisco, has rapidly built a TikTok following of more than a million.

Capturing the popular sentiment, British street artist Banksy recently left a new piece in the foyer of Southampton General Hospital honoring NHS workers. The work, named ‘Game Changer,’ features a small boy playing with a nurse action figure in mask and cape, arm aloft in superhero pose. Underlining the new definition of hero status, we see Batman and Spiderman toys languishing in a nearby waste bin.
Street artists the world over have been similarly inspired, with murals depicting health workers as saviors and superheroes appearing on the walls of global cities from London to Amsterdam, Jakarta to Melbourne. Toy manufacturer Mattel has even launched a range of action figures dedicated to frontline workers under the banner #ThankYouHeroes. A generation of children will likely grow up with very different aspirations as a consequence.

Many brands are paying tributes in their communications too, including Olympic sponsor Toyota which this month launched its Heroic Medal social media campaign acknowledging the contribution of “the front line heroes” and symbolically awarding each of them a gold medal.

Scientific experts advising governments are even developing unlikely cult followings. In the US, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr Anthony Fauci, has inspired a cottage industry of themed merchandise, from fridge magnets to donuts emblazoned with his face. Britain’s Professor Chris Whitty is the subject of an explosion in fan art on Instagram, while epidemiologist Professor Sotiris Tsiodras was recently named most popular Greek in a survey, with an approval rating of almost 95%.

At a time of crisis, it seems we find our inspiration in everyday greatness, from those who are making a visible and worthy contribution. But what does this mean for the future of influence and celebrity?
In many ways, the pandemic has merely accelerated a trend that was already building. In the Future 100: 2019, we reported on Instagram backlash, which saw brands tiring of fake followers and ‘sponcon’. And in this year’s edition, we saw glimpses of a new wave of influence that stands for something, has substance and genuinely inspires: from teen activists to gen Z creatives, from gamefluencers to female athletes.

![Time's Heroes of the Front Lines]

Wunderman Thompson Intelligence spoke to Justin Bolognino, founder and CEO of experience company Meta, who believes that the pandemic will hardwire us to demand greater authenticity from our role models.

“I think what’s most extraordinary about what we’re facing is that it’s going to essentially sift out a lot of the inauthenticity,” says Bolognino. “When something like this happens, we suddenly have newfound superpowers to perceive authenticity; to perceive bullshit; to perceive what’s truth and what’s not. That’s optimistic, but hopefully this catalyst advances us culturally.”

Undoubtedly, we have not seen the last of celebrities or influencers. But, in the future, they may need to serve up more than mere star power to capture our attention. As James Nord, founder of influencer marketing company Nohr, explained to PR Week recently, “It will be less about the influencers who say, ‘Look at me, look at my glamorous lifestyle, don’t you want that?’ and more about influencers who give advice and help people to improve their lives.”

**The new influencers**

by JWT Intelligence - Thursday, May 14, 2020

[https://intelligence.wundermanthompson.com/2020/05/the-new-influencers/](https://intelligence.wundermanthompson.com/2020/05/the-new-influencers/)