

Chapter 32

No Interaction on Instagram: Political Party Use of Instagram in the 2014 Swedish Election Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses a neglected issue within the field of social media and political communication. It focuses on interaction processes on Instagram asking how political parties used Instagram—a platform that is centered around images—when engaging in interaction with their followers on the platform. The focus is on political parties' use of Instagram in the 2014 Swedish national election campaign. This gives an impression of the first attempts of political parties' use of this communication platform. The quantitative content analysis focuses on Instagram images including their captions and comments (posts) that Swedish parties published four weeks prior to Election Day. The results suggest that not much changes on Instagram compared to other social media platforms: Swedish political parties hardly used Instagram to interact with their followers, and the very few interactions taking place did not contribute to the exchange of relevant and substantive information about politics. Interaction and deliberation are also not enhanced by the images.

INTRODUCTION¹

This article is one of the first articles directing its attention to Instagram. Instagram is an image-centered social media platform that allows users to like, share and comment on user-generated postings. The platform was launched on 6 October 2010. Since its launch, the platform has become increasingly popular. In December 2014, around the time of data collection of the presented empirical study, over 300 million

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users worldwide (Fiegerman, 2014) used Instagram to like, share and comment on photos and videos. Since then, the number of users has increased to over 1 billion users in 2018 (Instagram, 2018).

Still, there is very little research on Instagram within the social sciences in general and political communication in particular. When the presented study was conducted, a literature review on Instagram, within the largest social science databases from 2010 to 2016, only resulted in 12 articles in which Instagram appears in the abstract or among the keywords. Only two of these articles discuss the use of Instagram by political actors. One article discusses the Instagram account of the Syrian president Bashar-Al-Assad and how the platform is used to frame the presidency (Holiday et al., 2015) and one article is on the use of Instagram in the elections in Bahrain (Eldin, 2016). Since then Instagram has grasp scholars interest as shown by the slowly increasing number of studies. For instance, Lalancette and Raynauld (2017) investigated pictures on the Instagram account of Justin Trudeau, after he was elected Canadian prime minister, and found that he uses it primarily for mass broadcasting purposes and to reinforce a positive image of himself and his government. Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) show that candidates in election campaigns use Instagram to present themselves as legitimate office holders. In a previous study on the use of Instagram by Swedish political parties (using the same sample and data basis as in this study), the authors have analyzed images including their captions (published by the parties) by focusing on content-related characteristics in order to investigate the strategic use of Instagram (see Filimonov et al., 2016). The findings show that Swedish parties mainly used their Instagram images (including captions) to disseminate information (broadcasting) rather than for mobilizing their supporters. Most often images were personalized, i.e., they focused on one (or more) single candidates. These images show a strong presence of top candidates, who were primarily displayed in a political/professional context (Filimonov et al., 2016). However, so far, no other study in the field of political communication has examined Instagram's potential for interaction. When studying online visual communication the so-called *social* aspect of social media platforms has to be considered. The social in social media often refers to possibilities for interaction, participation and networking. Possibilities, which are underlined by techno-euphoric proclamations of a more democratic media making a truly public sphere come to life.

The present study aims to explore how political parties use Instagram for interaction when election campaigning and what kind of interaction takes place on political parties' Instagram accounts? One of the main attractions of social media platforms is their affordance of interactivity. It is therefore pivotal to study what kind of interaction takes place on official parties' Instagram accounts and whether content-related characteristics of the images have an influence on interaction or not.

Xenos and colleagues (2015) have highlighted that research on online campaigning can benefit from study designs that focus more on *how social media is used* rather than simply on *how much*, the question most studies in the field focus on. To study this, the focus of this article is on the use of Instagram by Swedish parties during the 2014 national election. Using a quantitative content analysis of all parties' postings on their Instagram accounts during the "hot phase" of the election campaign (four weeks before Election Day), the study particularly examines follower comments and the parties' reactions to follower comments as well as the deliberative nature of these interactions in order to understand whether content-related characteristics of the images (and their captions) have any influence on interaction or not.

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