Interaction on Instagram?
Glimpses from the 2014 Swedish Elections

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ABSTRACT

This article directs attention to the use of Instagram by political parties in the Swedish national elections in 2014. It investigates how political parties used Instagram — a platform that is centered around images — when engaging in interaction with their followers on the platform. Therefore, the article analyses Instagram images including their captions and comments (posts) that Swedish parties published four weeks prior to Election Day. A particular focus is on the deliberative potential of Instagram. The results suggest that not much changes on Instagram compared to other social media platforms: Political parties hardly used Instagram to interact with their followers and the few interactions taking place on parties Instagram accounts did not contribute to the exchange of relevant and substantive information about politics (i.e., deliberation). Interaction and deliberation is also not enhanced by the images.

KEYWORDS

Instagram, social media, interaction, deliberation, online campaigning, political parties, Sweden, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

This article directs its attention to Instagram (see https://instagram.com/). Instagram is an image-centered social media platform that allows users to like, share and comment on user-generated postings. It was launched on 6 October 2010 and it was bought by Facebook in 2012. Since its launch the platform has become increasingly popular. In December 2014, around the time of data collection of the presented empirical study, Instagram had over 300 million users worldwide (Fiegerman, 2014) outperforming the often-researched platform Twitter (Knibbs, 2014). Indeed, Twitter is the digital platform that has caught most of the attention of political communication scholars (e.g., Golbeck et al., 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2014; Svensson & Larsson, 2016; Vergeer et al., 2011), but Instagram is used by more people (for Swedish data, see Findahl, 2014). In September 2016, already 500 million people worldwide (Statista, 2016) used the platform to like, share and comment on photos and videos.

Still, there is very little research on Instagram within the social sciences in general and political communication in particular. A literature review on Instagram, within the largest social science databases from 2010 and onwards, 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). Hence, we need to add Instagram to our studies of online political communication (cf. Fahmy et al., 2014). Especially, as Instagram increasingly gains popularity and is mainly focusing on visuals, we have to widen our focus when studying online political communication and include platforms other than the text-based platforms of Twitter and Facebook.

The present study aims to explore how political parties use Instagram for interaction when election campaigning. 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. Empirically the article is based on the 2014 Swedish elections, which were among the first in which political parties used Instagram during the campaign. These elections provided us with an opportunity to explore the first attempts of political parties' use of Instagram. The results from this explorative study will assist in developing an understanding of the use of visual online communication in political communication in general and provide a basis for future studies on the fast-growing image-sharing service Instagram in particular.

BACKGROUND

Instagram and Visual Communication

Instagram is a platform that is centered on uploading and sharing images and videos that may or may not be textually tagged with a caption and that followers may or may not comment on. In this study postings are delineated from posts: a posting is only the information provided by the poster (i.e., image/video with or without caption) and a post may also include comments and likes from followers. The user's role on Instagram is divided into poster and follower. Posters upload image/videos and followers may comment on, or like (by pressing the digital heart-shaped button next to the image) the image/video uploaded; likes and comments that then become visible to all followers. Recently users also have the possibility to repost another user's posting in their own feed; but this was not a possibility when the empirical material was collected (in 2014). A user account refers to the user (nickname and picture) with all the user's posts.

Given the (growing) popularity of Instagram, this research is important to communication sciences in general. Specifically, as Instagram is different from Twitter and to some extent from Facebook (currently owning Instagram), the two most often researched social media platforms, as it is centered around visuals. Among platforms focusing on visuals, for example, YouTube, Vine, and Snapchat, Instagram is on the forefront; and today, even older platforms increasingly focus on visuals. Research in the field of visual communication has found that images are more effective than text in gaining and increasing viewer's attention (Brantner et al., 2011; Bucher and Schumacher, 2006; Fahmy et al., 2014). Recipients remember visual information much better than verbal or textual information (Paivio, 1971). Furthermore, it is argued that images that also use text (e.g., captions) may even be more effective in communicating messages (Blair, 1996; Schill, 2012). According to Barthes (1977), images aid to convey intended meaning and thus facilitate interaction.

Images in Political Communication

Images have been part of political communication for a long time. Political TV-advertising (Griffin & Kagan, 1996), campaign posters (Hayek, 2011; Vliegenhart, 2012), cartoons (Connors, 2005) and even hand gestures (Straeck, 2008) have been studied (even though, mostly in an American setting). For instance, in their study on US presidential candidates' televised nonverbal communication Banning
Gender Issues in the Diversity and Practice of Public Relations in the UAE
Case Study of P.R. Male Managers and Female P.R. Practitioners
www.igi-global.com/article/gender-issues-diversity-practice-public/55818?camid=4v1a