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No Interaction on Swedish political parties' Instagram accounts

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How do political parties use Instagram – a platform that is centred around images – when engaging in interaction with their followers on the platform during election campaigns? To find answers to this question, Uta Russmann and Jakob Svensson examined Swedish political parties Instagram accounts during the 2014 national elections. A particular focus is on the deliberative potential (in a Habermasian understanding of the term) of Instagram. The results are similar to findings from other social media platforms: Political parties hardly used Instagram to interact with their followers, and the few interactions taking place did not contribute to deliberation. Interaction and deliberation is thus not enhanced by the images on Instagram.

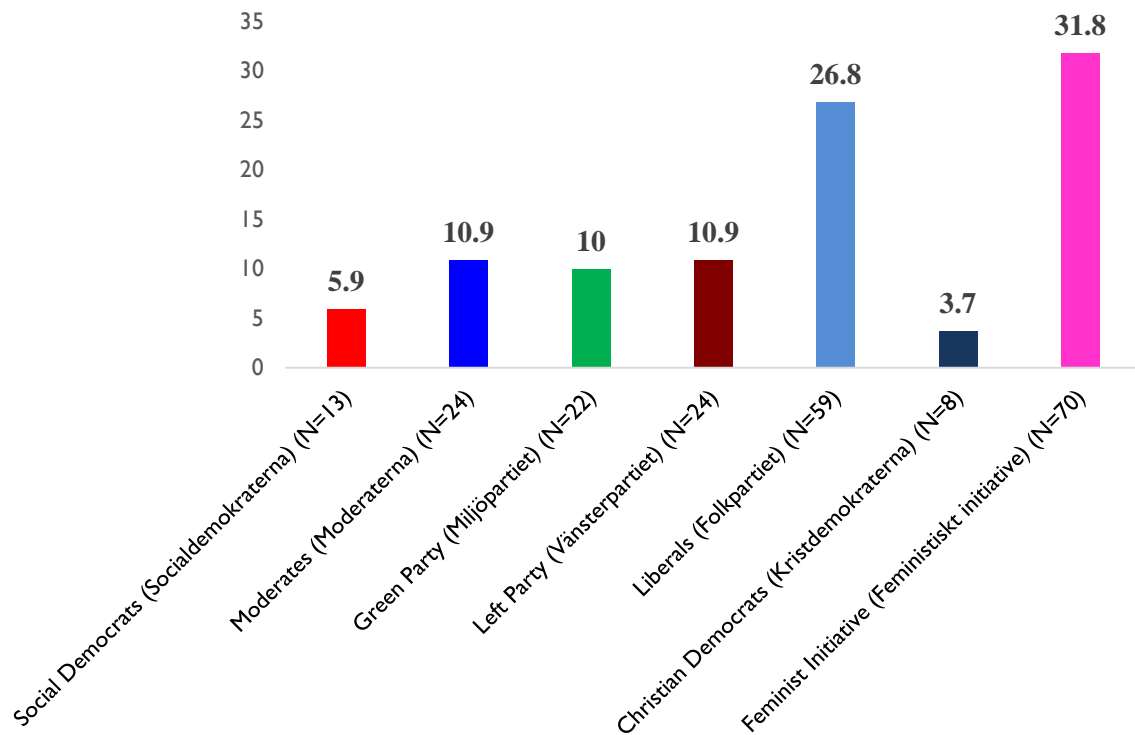
Instagram was the new social media platform in the 2014 Swedish national elections. At the time 28 percent of the Swedish population was already active on Instagram. In our study, we set out to explore the first attempts of political parties' use of Instagram. In the month before the elections (Election Day: 14 September 2014), and thus during the 'hot phase' of the campaign, the seven major Swedish political parties published 363 postings (pictures and videos) on their Instagram accounts. We conducted a quantitative content analysis of a sample of postings by political parties (N=220), including their captions and the first three comments. Due to limited resources, we were not able to analyse all 1864 published comments during the time of analysis. We consider the first three comments as the most important as these are shown when opening a posting. In total, we analysed 414 of the published comments.

Research in the field of visual communication (see, for example, Barthes, 1977, Fahmy et al., 2014, and Schill, 2012) has found that images are more effective than text in gaining and increasing viewer's attention. Images may serve an agenda-setting function and make persuasive arguments, dramatize policy, appeal

emotionally and also help to build the candidate's image and create identification; thus, clearly playing 'a foundational role in the political communication process'. In particular, images influence affective and emotional reactions of (potential) voters. Recipients remember visual information much better than verbal or textual information. Furthermore, it is argued that images that also use text (e.g., captions) may even be more effective in communicating messages, because images aid to convey intended meaning and thus facilitate interaction. It therefore seems that images change (the effects of) political communication.

One of the main attractions of social media platforms (to politics) is their affordance of interactivity. Social media have been hailed for empowering citizens, providing more and better government information, for enabling online public debate, and bringing more participation to decision-making processes. Hence, our aim was to examine how political parties use Instagram for interaction when election campaigning: what kind of interaction takes place on the parties' official Instagram accounts and do content-related characteristics of the images have an influence on interaction or not?

Figure I. Sample of postings by political parties (in %, N= 220)



Note: A full sample is given for all analysed parties with the exception of Feminist Initiative as their posting activities were considerably higher (213 postings in total) than those of the other parties.

Findings

Example of a posting from the Feminists: 'Soon we move in to the Parliament. We are close now'



So far, Swedish parties have adopted Instagram to their social media campaigning toolbox very differently. Two parties, the Feminists and the Liberals, uploaded more than one posting per

day whereas the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats uploaded very little, altogether 21 postings. Based on these findings, we assume that the development process of Instagram resembles the one of Facebook and Twitter in political communication. We expect that political actors will become more and more active on Instagram over time. Interesting in the results is that the Feminist, the only party that was not represented in Parliament, also was most active on Instagram apparently trying to gain traction by using the new social media platform. The party also posted 41 comments of which 29 were related to a follower comment thus indicating reciprocity.

Following the Feminists, the Greens commented six times during the last four weeks of the election campaign. Not a lot of

interaction, but at least all six comments were responding to followers.

Example of a posting from the Greens: The picture shows one of their spokespersons preparing for a run in the Stockholm region.



Larger parties such as the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats, and the Centre Party hardly made use of Instagram. This seems to underline social media as most attractive for so-called underdogs, i.e., that less established parties with less resources are more dependent on social media platforms and thus more prone to explore their affordances.

One of the rare examples of a posting from the Christian Democrats: The picture shows the Party Leader next to a wasp, the mascot of the tabloid Expressen.



We were also interested whether the few interactions contribute to the exchange of relevant and substantive information about politics (i.e., deliberation). As shown in Table 1, political parties generally added a caption to their uploaded image, but the majority of them were only displaying trivia and nonsense or only a plain encouragement (without

intrinsic value). For instance, the Feminists posted 'Here we are in the midst of preparing for a little election night party' and '@forsberge #votemared his grandmother! #vote pink'. Just the Social Democrats tried to give information of intrinsic value in most of their very few postings/captions.



Example of the Social Democrats, in which they talk about politics: 'The School Results. The Government promised to raise the results in schools. Now our results fall the quickest in the OECD. We want to invest more than double than the right-wing Government in schools'.



Also the follower comments (66.7 percent) did not contribute much value to the political discussion (without intrinsic value). Followers posted negative messages such as 'Bullshit' and

Table I. Interactive and deliberative potential of parties' postings

	Captions with intrinsic value*		Captions without intrinsic value*		Followers comments**	Party Comments**	
	N	%	N	%		Total	Related to followers
							comments
Social Democrats	10	76.9	3	23.1	107	1	1
Moderates	8	33.3	16	66.7	185	0	0
Green Party	11	52.4	10	47.6	166	6	6
Left Party	9	37.5	15	62.5	200	0	0
Liberals	14	23.7	45	76.3	35	0	0
Christian Democrats	3	50	3	50	11	3	2
Feminist Initiative	33	47.8	36	52.2	1160	41	29
Total	88	40.7	128	59.3	1864	51	38

cheered up their candidate by posting ‘good luck in the debate’. Another 20.3 percent of the comments only consisted of emoticons (in which followers mainly expressed encouragement). Just 13 percent of the analysed comments contributed to an exchange of essential information.



Example of a follower comment with intrinsic value on the Instagram account of the

Moderates: ‘Great read and finally! the new conservatives and the alliance make sure to communicate this outside of DI. Make also sure to communicate this among Alliance sympathizers - it's a little ‘yes we can!’ The road is here now, focus - the Alliance for continued trustful leadership of Sweden, and how to get there? I believe that it is based on trust. DI give you facts that speak to your favour - take the opportunity to influence and create even more confidence in your policy! Here we go, and it's yes we can!’



We were also interested whether certain characteristics in the visuals enhance interaction and, if so, also interaction of deliberative style. The answer is no. But let’s have a closer look at these findings. We focused on four characteristics:

- *Broadcasting* (referring to postings that are used to spread a political party's stances on issues);
- *Mobilization* (referring to whether a posting *calls for action* or not);
- *Perspective* (referring to the perspective from which the image is taken such as being an official (clearly staged) image, or a snapshot/selfie (more spontaneous)); and
- *Personalization* (referring to whether a posting is used to manage the political party's professional or personal image).

Whether a posting is rather broadcasting or not, neither influences the amount of comments by followers nor their deliberative nature. A posting attracted no or hardly any follower comments when it was *not* mobilizing. About 80 percent of the postings with no follower comments and about 63 percent of postings with up to ten follower comments were coded as rather *not* mobilizing. Less attractive to followers are also snapshots/selfies: 78.6 percent of the postings with no follower comments were a snapshot/selfie and 15.9 percent had an official context (8.9 percent were coded as not applicable). Snapshots/selfies are usually made to appear not planned and informal. For followers of a party account they may seem not official and professional enough to spur a discussion. But postings attracted follower comments when they were rather *not*

personalized – all postings that attracted more than 50 follower comments were identified as rather *not* personalized. Images that are rather *not* mobilizing, rather personalized, and/or a snapshot/selfie also counteract deliberation. It seems that images that are focusing on a single person and look spontaneous appear too casual and are seen as less beneficial to support party stances and ideological messages. The number of follower comments increases when a posting is rather *not* personalized. However, follower comments to *not* personalized postings often have *no* intrinsic value to the political discussion. Maybe here the counterpart (a visualized person) is missing to whom followers can 'talk' to and whom they expect to react. This also suggests that parties rather interact with supporters who are more interested in cheering than in deliberation.

To sum up, whether politicians like it or not, today they are more visible and they need to manage their visibility. Studies have shown that politicians are aware of the central role of visuals (see, for example, [Lobinger & Brantner, 2015](#) and [Schill, 2012](#)). How political actors will implement Instagram in the future should continue to be studied. Our study reveals the first steps of political parties with Instagram. It will be interesting to see what happens next.

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on the authors' [recent article](#) in International Journal of E-Politics.



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