

Picturing the Party: Instagram and Party Campaigning in the 2014 Swedish Elections

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Abstract

This article explores Swedish parties' activities on Instagram during the 2014 elections. Understanding party campaign communication as highly strategic, that is, communication to persuade and mobilize voters in order to win the elections, we ask whether Instagram was used to (1) broadcast campaign messages, (2) mobilize supporters, (3) manage the party's image, and (4) amplify and complement other campaign material (i.e., hybrid campaign use). With this study, we follow previous studies on the use of digital communication platforms in the hands of campaigning political actors, but we direct our attention to a new platform. We conducted a content analysis of 220 party postings on Instagram, collected during the hot phase of the campaign. The result shows that the platform was mainly used for broadcasting rather than for mobilization. The image the parties were presenting leaned toward personalization with a strong presence of top candidates in their postings. Top candidates were primarily displayed in a political/professional context. Finally, half of the analyzed postings showed signs of hybridized campaign practices. The presented findings give a first glimpse on how political parties use and perform on Instagram.

Keywords

Instagram, political parties, visual communication, online campaigning, Sweden

Introduction

The utilization of communication platforms by campaigning politicians has a long history, from telephones in the 1896 US presidential campaign (Jones, 1964) to presidential candidates' mastery of radio (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) and television (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970). The visual medium of television is arguably still the most important platform for campaigning politicians and their parties (Towner, 2013). Political actors seem to appreciate the significant role visuals play in constructing political images (Schill, 2012).

Since the early 2000s, there is an increasing academic interest and hype around digital communication platforms in election campaigns, which really kicked off after the 2008 Obama campaign (cf. Costa, 2009; Larsson & Svensson, 2014). Since then, the use and expected effects of digital communication platforms in election campaigns have been studied extensively and in different contexts (e.g., Anduiza, 2009; Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014; Gustafsson, 2012). Twitter seems to be the platform that has caught most of the scholarly attention (e.g., Goldbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Grusell & Nord, 2011; Jackson &

Lilleker, 2011; Svensson & Larsson, 2016; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2011). This is mainly due to the ease of harvesting tweets for quantitative analysis (Bruns & Liang, 2012).

In this article, we follow this tradition of studying the use of digital communication platforms in the hands of campaigning political actors. But we direct our attention to another platform: Instagram. Instagram is different from other social media such as Twitter in that it rather revolves around uploading pictures than disseminating text-based messages. This brings us back to the role of visuals in political communication. Despite the enduring centrality of television in election campaigns (as mentioned above), "[t]he visual aspects of political communication remain one of the

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least studied and the least understood areas” (Schill, 2012, p. 119; see also Marland, 2012). But visual communication is emerging as a field of communication science. It aims at explaining production and distribution (as well as reception) processes in contemporary political contexts (Barnhurst, Vari, & Rodrigues, 2004; Müller, 2007). However, most research on visuals in political campaigns revolves around advertisement (Rodriguez, 2016). We do know, though, that visuals play a significant role in constructing a general image of a campaigning political actor (Parmelee, 2003; Schill, 2012). Indeed, it is important for political actors to manage their mediated visibility carefully (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). Visuals have a strong impact on viewer’s attention, and they can create persuasive arguments (Schill, 2012).

In this article, we focus on the Instagram picture as well as its captions, that is, how the party has textually tagged, labeled, or described the picture. This is thus different from the existing literature on visuals in the field of political communication, which primarily focus on how political candidates and parties are visually framed by the mass media (e.g., Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012; Nagel, Maurer, & Reinemann, 2012). Our interest lies in the strategic use of Instagram by political actors during an election campaign. Hence, this is also different from studies of semiotic structures of imagery (Barthes, 1957) or iconographic analysis as found in more “classical” studies of visual communication. Political campaigns are different in that they are highly strategic, that is, communication to persuade and mobilize supporters in order to win the elections. And here, research has suggested visuals could have an impact: “Visuals are assumed to have a strong influence on attitude formation and public opinion, as well as on political motivation, participation and action” (Müller, Kappas, & Olk, 2012, p. 311). When it comes to motivating participation and action during a campaign, political parties target key audiences such as core party supporters as well as the mass media (Holbrook & McClurg, 2005). In the (to our knowledge) only other study on the use of Instagram during elections, Eldin (2016) concludes that the platform was useful to reach younger voters in the 2015 Bahrain elections.

Instagram is a social media platform that allows its users to upload pictures (and videos) themselves. Instagram was launched in October 2010, and the service rapidly gained popularity. In April 2012, it had over 100 million active users worldwide (DesMarais, 2013) and over 300 million as of December 2014 (Fiegerman, 2014)—outperforming the often-researched platform Twitter. Compared to Facebook, Instagram is still behind, but according to Findahl (2014, studying Swedish social media use), this is due to older age groups just recently having discovered Facebook. A recent study shows that Instagram continues to grow faster than both Twitter and Facebook (Knibbs, 2014). We can thus conclude that also from a social media perspective, it is important to include Instagram when studying digital communication platforms, here in election campaigns.

In this article, our focus is directed to Swedish parties’ Instagram postings in the 2014 elections. Why study the 2014 Swedish elections? Internet penetration in Sweden is very high (94.8%, see <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm>, accessed 9 June 2015), with 81% of Swedes (aged 9–79) using Internet daily (Nordicom, 2014). The level of social media penetration is also high in the country (Nordicom, 2014). Among the social media platforms used, Instagram is clearly on the rise. About 28% of the Swedish population aged 12 and older regularly uses Instagram and 17% of them even on a daily basis (compared to 23% of the Swedish population aged 12 and older using Twitter regularly and only 6% of them being on Twitter daily; see Findahl, 2014). Hence, the Swedish 2014 elections took place in a social media-savvy context in which Instagram practices had been established among at least some parts of the electorate (mainly younger voters), and therefore, we assume parties were eager to adopt this platform to their social media campaigning toolbox (a kind of *jump-on-the-bandwagon* mentality; see Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). The 2014 Swedish elections were among the first elections in which political parties used Instagram as a campaign tool. This provides us with an opportunity to examine the first attempts of political actors to use Instagram.

We focus on parties’ use of Instagram. In a party-based democracy like Sweden (Arter, 1999), campaigns have a party-centric view. In comparison, in candidate-centered electoral systems, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, on which most studies in the field focus on (see Larsson & Svensson, 2014), campaigns are highly individualized (Plasser, 2009). And although some scholars have argued that in party-oriented Western European democracies the importance of politicians (and specifically of top candidates) has increased and—at present—there is a trend toward personalization of party (and media) communication (e.g., McAllister, 2007), elections in Sweden are still largely party-oriented.

Before attending to the Swedish setting and the design of the study in more detail, we will first outline the theoretical framework. To our knowledge, there has only been one previous study on the use of Instagram in elections (Eldin, 2016); hence, this study essentially is exploratory (in the sense that we explore uncharted terrains). This does not imply that we approach political parties’ Instagram use purely inductively. We do consider theoretical papers and empirical studies on the use of other social media platforms in election campaigns. Having worked in this field ourselves, we have identified strands of research that (in our opinion) have to be considered when exploring Instagram. In the next section, we will focus on these discussions out of which we then draw our research questions.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

In this article, we ask the question how political parties in the 2014 Swedish national elections used Instagram. It is

apparent that the aforementioned 2008 Obama campaign has served as an inspiration and example for political actors around the globe (cf. Costa, 2009). Much of the support for Obama and the electoral engagement was initiated by and staged with the help of social media. However, given people's rather limited use of social media for political purposes, subsequent studies in the field have suggested that the influence of social media use in election campaigns on electoral participation and opinion formation is rather limited (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2008; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). The question that scholars then have asked is why political actors use social media for election campaigning? Although the supposed outcomes of social media campaigning might be questioned, most approaches to social media use in election campaigning fall under what can be labeled as strategic communication. In this article, we thus solely focus on how Instagram is used as a strategic political communication tool. Research from other social media platforms suggests that Instagram is used in four different ways: (1) to broadcast election messages, (2) to mobilize supporters, (3) to manage the party's image, and (4) to amplify and complement other campaign material. Each of these functions is discussed in more detail in the following.

Broadcasting

In order to understand the strategic use of Instagram, both its interactive affordances (what is often referred to as the "social" of social media) and its *broadcasting* function (or *spreading* function to use Jenkins, Ford and Green's (2013) account of social media) have to be considered. Whether political actors use social media in an interactive or broadcasting manner has been a subject of much debate. Most studies have demonstrated that political actors do not respond to messages posted to them on social media such as Facebook (e.g., Rußmann, 2012; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). In Sweden, political actors primarily used Twitter to broadcast information during the previous national elections in 2010 (Svensson, 2012). Similarly, a study of US congressmen observed that most of their twittering revolved around information on their positions on issues, opinions, and facts (Goldbeck et al., 2010). In relation to this, social media are often discussed with regard to their viral quality, that is, potentially allowing content to spread fast across interlinked personal networks (Anduiza, 2009), in particular, as social media allow political actors to target specific voter groups. Hence, the question that arises is whether Instagram—just as other social media platforms—is primarily used to spread campaign messages.

Mobilization

In election campaigns, the use of social media is not just about spreading information on the party and its top candidate(s), their actions, and positions; campaigning

parties also want to mobilize supporters to go to the ballot and vote. Moreover, they try to encourage supporters' "efforts to involve another actor in the goals and objectives of the campaign" (Foot & Schneider, 2006, p. 23). Williams and Gulati (2012) investigated social networking sites and found that they can also effectively mobilize voters. Especially in countries like Sweden with a large rural population, being able to mobilize broader groups of supporters in far more places all over the country is a great advantage for the campaign. The question thus arises whether parties use Instagram to mobilize supporters or not.

Image Management (Personalization)

Campaign officials also seek to manage the audience's impression of the party. In the field of political communication, Goffman's (1959) work on how individuals seek to manage what impression they give to others has been influential when understanding political actors' use of social media (e.g., Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Stanyer, 2008). A study from the United States and the United Kingdom showed how digital media were used as *front regions* for political actors presenting themselves to the electorate (Stanyer, 2008). Simply by being online, politicians are conveying the message that they are up-to-date (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Campaigning political actors thus turn to social media to present an attractive image to their constituents and to decrease what has been described as the psychological distance between themselves and their potential voters (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Vergeer et al., 2011). Studies conducted in Sweden confirm these findings (Svensson, 2012). This is related to the much-discussed trend of personalization of politics to which social media use has also been linked (see Hermans & Vergeer, 2013). Research has shown that campaigns increasingly focus upon the personality of top candidates as the "communication of messages requires a messenger" (Plasser, 2009, p. 25): It decreases the complexity and increases the credibility of a message (see also McAllister, 2007). Specifically, offering a glimpse of private moments of a politician can help the voter to identify with her or him. Managing the public image and reputation of a party thus seems to be an important campaign strategy in times when both the number of partisan identifiers and the strength of party identification are decreasing (McAllister, 2007). Therefore, the question arises whether Instagram is used to manage a professional or personal image of the party and its politicians and whether top candidates are highlighted when political parties use Instagram.

Hybridity

It becomes apparent in the discussions above that social media platforms have been conceived of as providing opportunities for campaigning political actors to communicate (i.e., primarily spreading information) without having to rely

on traditional media outlets (e.g., Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). However, research has shown that social media are used to amplify messages that emanate on other platforms (not seldom the mass media; see Svensson & Larsson, 2016). The discussion of such hybrid forms of communication has only recently gained resonance, not the least due to Chadwick's (2013) book on the *hybrid media system*. And here, the visual focus of Instagram matters since managed visuals can promote a subject to the viewer that, for example, has been published in a newspaper (Marland, 2012). The question thus becomes whether we can discern such hybrid uses within the platform, that is, whether references to other media platforms and/or campaign instruments in the parties' Instagram postings can be identified.

In political parties' Instagram posting practices during an election campaign, these four major functions are important to explore. In other words, this study investigates the use of Instagram by political parties in the 2014 Swedish elections focusing on the following research questions:

1. Is Instagram embedded in Swedish political parties' strategic communication processes in terms of *broad-casting* information to the supporters?
2. Is Instagram used by Swedish political parties to *mobilize* supporters?
3. Is *image management (personalization)* a strategy employed by Swedish political parties on their Instagram accounts?
4. Is Instagram involved in *hybrid* campaign uses?

Background: Swedish Politicians Online and the 2014 Swedish Elections

Before providing detailed operationalization of our variables based on the research questions above, we will give some background knowledge on the setting: Sweden and the 2014 elections.

Just as in the previous elections in 2010 (e.g., Karlsson, Clerwall, & Buskqvist, 2012), all parliamentary political parties had a Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube presence. Instagram was launched after the elections in 2010, and hence, it was used for the first time as campaign instrument in the 2014 elections. Karlsson et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of parties' use of social media during the 2010 elections and found that the activities on parties' social media presences were heavily concentrated on the weeks running up to the elections (cf. Larsson, 2011). Taking a close look at political parties' use of social media in Sweden, Gustafsson (2012), who performed focus group interviews with party members, shows that party members mostly obtain a Facebook account in order to discuss politics with other party members and to receive information from the party itself. Grusell and Nord's (2011) study of political parties' use of social media during the previous elections in 2010 concluded that social media were not yet mastered by

political parties and not yet integrated in party communication strategies. As described above, today, 48% of the Swedish population uses social media regularly, and Instagram is on the rise, although it remains unclear if and how much of its use is for political purposes.

So, what did the political landscape look like in the 2014 elections? The ruling conservative alliance consisting of the *Moderates*, the *Christian Democrats*, the *Liberals*, and the *Centre Party* faced an opposition of mainly *Social Democrats* and the *Green Party*. The Social Democrats and the Green Party had expressed their interest of ruling together, and the *Left Party* supported this attempt. These three parties formed the so-called red-green alliance. The polls up to Election Day predicted a majority for the red-green alliance and a possible parliamentary entry of the left-leaning *Feminist Initiative*. On Election Day, the Feminist Initiative did not reach the threshold level of 4% to get into parliament (they ended on 3.2%). The red-green alliance while receiving more votes than the conservatives (43.62 vs. 39.43%) was not able to secure the majority in the Chamber. Besides, the nationalistic party, the *Sweden Democrats*, more than doubled their support (from 5.7% to 12.86%).

Data and Method

Data

The data for this study come from a content analysis of political parties' Instagram accounts of the last 4 weeks of the 2014 Swedish national elections (Election Day: 14 September 2014). An Instagram *account* is defined as the user's page, here the political party, including all posts. Each *post* includes a picture or video that has been uploaded by the political party and additionally can include (but it does not have to include) a caption and comments. The *picture* or the *video* is the non-textual element; the *caption* is how the party has textually tagged, labeled, or described the uploaded picture or video; and *comments* are text-based information by any user (i.e., the political party or other Instagram users). Only pictures and their captions are part of the analysis, and all videos and comments have been excluded. Hence, the unit of analysis is the single picture with or without captions on the Instagram account of a political party, that is, the information that has been uploaded by the party only. We refer to it as *posting*.

The empirical data include 220 postings of the following parties: Vänsterpartiet (Left Party), Socialdemokraterna (Social Democratic Party), Miljöpartiet (Green Party), Moderaterna (Moderates), Kristdemokraterna (Christian Democrats), Folkpartiet (Liberals), and Feministiskt initiativ (Feminist Initiative). The Centre Party did not publish any pictures 4 weeks prior to Election Day and the Sweden Democrats did not give (us) access to their (private) Instagram accounts. Therefore, these accounts have not been included in the sample.

Table 1. Sample of Postings by Political Parties.

Political party	Number of postings		Sample %
	N	N	
Social Democrats	13	13	5.9
Moderates	24	24	10.9
Green Party	22	22	10
Left Party	24	24	10.9
Liberals	59	59	26.8
Christian Democrats	8	8	3.7
Feminist Initiative	213	70 ^a	31.8
Total	363	220	100

^aThe sample consists of one-third of the published pictures during the period of analysis. Every third picture has been coded. The order of the parties follows the turnout in the 2014 Swedish General Elections.

Table 1 gives an overview of the sample. A full sample is given for all analyzed parties with the exception of the Feminist Initiative as their posting activities were considerably higher than those of the other parties. (Every third posting of the Feminist Initiative was included in the sample, thereby resembling the largest full sample of a single party.)

Method: Coding Procedure and Measures

The content of each Instagram posting was coded on a variety of indicators including formal criteria and content-related characteristics. Formal criteria included the coder identification number, the identification number of the posting, the party's name, and the date of publishing of the posting. For each unit of analysis, the following content-related variables were coded in order to investigate the strategic use of Instagram: *broadcasting* and *mobilization*; to examine image management, the variables *personalization*, *visibility*, *perspective* as well as *privatization* were coded; and for analyzing hybridity in the postings, all *references to other campaign instruments* were coded.

The variable *broadcasting* refers to postings that transmit information on political opinions, positions, statements, and performances to the voters. Pictures are used as broadcasting instrument, if the distribution of information is in the center of the picture. Typically, the parties published images that showed election posters or ads.

The variable *mobilization* measures whether a posting calls for action or not. Postings are mobilizing if they convey an activating, dynamizing, and involving character to politics in general or to the campaign and the election in particular. An invitation to supporters to interact, to take part in a rally, to follow a politician, or to go to the ballot is considered as mobilizing.

The variable *personalization* measures whether a posting is primarily carried by one (or more) single person(s) (i.e., personalized) or whether a posting is primarily carried by

many people or no people are seen in the picture (i.e., not personalized). The most common example of a non-personalized picture is a political poster that has been uploaded. Furthermore, we coded whether a top candidate (i.e., party leader) was *visible* or not (*visibility*).

Privatization. If a top candidate is visible in the posting, it is coded in what context she or he is predominantly displayed. We differentiate between a professional/political context (at a rally, shaking hands, giving a speech, etc.) and a personal/private context (family, hobbies, personal matters, etc.). In addition, we take a look at the *perspective* from which the picture with a top candidate is taken: we differentiate between an official context (clearly staged photos) and snapshots/selfie context (photos that look spontaneous).

Reference to Other Campaign Instruments. A reference to other campaign instruments is given when a directly recognizable and therefore explicit reference to traditional campaign instruments (such as mass media and posters) or new media (such as websites and social media) is established. Neither a group of people talking nor campaign messages adapted to Instagram are considered as campaign instrument.

The Instagram analysis was conducted from a user perspective, that is, pictures were analyzed from the point of view of the voter. The coders were asked to identify all variables for each picture. Three coders were engaged in the coding process. Holsti's coefficient was used to test the inter-coder reliability. Overall, inter-coder percentage agreement for each of these items falls within the acceptable range, with the vast majority at or above 83%, leading to the conclusion that the content analysis in this study is reliable. Lower levels of reliability were found for the variables' reference to other campaign instruments (.72), mobilization (.67), and perspective (.64). Specific reliability statistics as well as the coding scheme are available from the authors.

Instagram Use in the 2014 Swedish Elections

Turning to our findings, we begin by shortly describing overall patterns of the use of Instagram by the political parties before attending to the four research questions.

To start, Instagram was hardly used in the 2014 Swedish election campaign with the exception of the Feminist Initiative and the Liberal Party (see Table 1 in the previous section). At best, political parties posted once a day during the *hot phase* (last 4 weeks) of the campaign. The Feminist Initiative, the most active party on Instagram, posted on average seven postings per day. On the contrary, the Christian Democrats posted a total of eight times during the last 4 weeks of the campaign. However, parties' activities on Instagram were steadily increasing throughout the last month of the campaign. On Election Day, parties uploaded 37 postings.

Table 2. Broadcasting on Instagram by Swedish Political Parties.

Political party	Rather broadcasting		Balanced/ambivalent		Rather not broadcasting	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Social Democrats	84.6	11	15.4	2	0	0
Moderates	79.2	19	8.3	2	12.5	3
Green Party	86.4	19	0	0	13.6	3
Left Party	66.7	16	8.3	2	25.0	6
Liberals	100	59	0	0	0	0
Christian Democrats	100	8	0	0	0	0
Feminist Initiative	82.9	58	4.3	3	12.9	9
Total	86.4	190	4.1	9	9.5	21

$N = 220$, $p = .006$.

Broadcasting

The first research question addressed whether political parties embedded Instagram in their strategic campaign processes in terms of broadcasting information to their supporters. Indeed, the results show that for Swedish political parties, Instagram first and foremost is a channel to broadcast information.

Table 2 illustrates that the majority of all analyzed postings (86.4%) focused on broadcasting information. Parties used their Instagram accounts as a visual pamphlet to distribute the party's statements and positions and to report on their campaign performances. For example, it was common that parties covered their top candidates' participation in debates in the form of announcements, live coverages, or follow-ups. Two parties, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, broadcasted information in all their postings. The Left Party has the lowest score in the variable broadcasting (66.7%); still the vast majority of their postings focuses on spreading information.

Mobilization

The second research question addressed whether political parties embedded Instagram in their strategic campaign processes in terms of mobilizing their supporters. The results show that Instagram was not particularly used as a tool for mobilizing supporters.

Table 3 shows the dispersion of the 220 analyzed postings by the variable mobilization. Overall, Instagram was not used to call for action and thereby mobilize supporters. However, the results demonstrate that significant differences exist between the political parties. The opposition parties, the Social Democrats and the Greens—that had expressed their interest in forming a coalition—were the ones with the highest number of mobilizing postings. Albeit their numbers are still below 50%, but considerably higher than the numbers of the three parties in the government (the Moderates, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats), all score below 5% when it comes to the level of mobilization. Moreover, the

other two parties in opposition, the Left and the Feminists, were also focusing to a greater extent on mobilizing their supporters than the incumbents.

Image Management

When looking at the variable personalization, it seems that this was a campaign strategy of Swedish parties on Instagram (with the exception of the Social Democrats). Table 4 shows that of all analyzed postings, 67% were primarily carried by one (or more) single person(s). On the Instagram accounts of the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, even (more than) three-fourths of the postings were (rather) personalized. By contrast, three-fourths of the postings published by the Social Democrats were (rather) not personalized. The Green Party and the Feminist Initiative—arguably the most grassroots among the parties in the sample—employed personalization less in their postings than the other parties. Still the majority of their postings were (rather) personalized.

Taking a closer look at all postings that have been identified as being personalized, in 55.1% of them a party leader was visible. Most prominent was *Jan Björklund*, the leader of the Liberals. He was visible in 38 (17%) of all 220 analyzed postings. He is followed by the party leader of the Moderates (and at the time Prime Minister), *Fredrik Reinfeldt*, who was visible in 27 (12%) of the 220 analyzed postings. A typical photo illustrated one of the leaders participating in a public event such as giving a speech at a rally to party supporters.

Annie Lööf, the leader of the Centre Party which did not publish any postings during the month prior to Election Day on their Instagram account, was still visible in 15 postings published on other parties' accounts. Also, *Göran Haggglund* (of the Christian Democrats) and *Fredrik Reinfeldt* (of the Moderates) were to a greater extent present in other parties' postings than in their own pictures. Out of the postings that have been identified as being personalized in about a fourth (22%), more than one party leader was in the center of the picture.

When analyzing image management of top candidates in parties' Instagram postings, also the context they were

Table 3. Mobilization on Instagram by Swedish Political Parties.

Political party	Rather mobilizing		Balanced/ambivalent		Rather not mobilizing	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Social Democrats	30.8	4	7.7	1	61.5	8
Moderates	4.2	1	25.0	6	70.8	17
Green Party	31.8	7	4.5	1	63.6	14
Left Party	12.5	3	4.2	1	83.3	20
Liberals	1.7	1	8.5	5	89.8	53
Christian Democrats	0	0	12.5	1	87.5	7
Feminist Initiative	17.1	12	48.6	34	34.3	34
Total	12.7	28	22.3	49	65.0	143

$N=220$, $p=.000$.

Table 4. Personalization on Instagram by Swedish Political Parties.

Political party	Rather personalized/individualized		Balanced/ambivalent		Rather not personalized/individualized	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Social Democrats	23.1	3	0	0	76.9	10
Moderates	70.8	17	8.3	2	20.8	5
Green Party	63.6	14	0	0	36.4	8
Left Party	70.8	17	0	0	29.2	7
Liberals	79.7	47	15.3	9	5.1	3
Christian Democrats	75.0	6	0	0	25.0	2
Feminist Initiative	61.4	43	1.4	1	37.1	26
Total	66.8	147	5.5	12	27.7	61

$N=220$, $p=.000$.

predominantly displayed in is of great interest. Therefore, we differentiated between a professional/political context such as pictures in which the top candidate is at a rally, shaking hands, and giving a speech and a personal/private context such as pictures in which the top candidate is shown with her or his family and other personal matters or doing sports and other hobbies. The results clearly show that the professional/political context dominated. In 94.7% of the postings in which a top candidate was visible, she or he was displayed in a (rather) professional and political context. A typical photo illustrated one of the leaders giving a speech at a rally to supporters. The majority of the very few postings that display the top candidate in a rather privatized context (5.3%) are of the Green Party displaying their two spokespersons. (Instead of a party leader, the Greens had two spokespersons, a man and a woman.)

The analysis of the perspective from which the pictures were taken demonstrates an overwhelming preference for pictures that look spontaneous as if made with a mobile phone that had been taken out of a pocket minutes before the picture was posted (58.7% snapshots/selfie context as opposed to 17.3% official context). This may indicate that Instagram, at least to some extent, was approached as a medium that enables transcending the usual forms of visual

communication with its preference for planning (e.g., campaign posters) over spontaneity. This sort of experimenting may also enable supporters to identify themselves with the parties and candidates as politicians show that they follow the same routines in their media usage as their supporters (for instance, by applying the same range of photo filters rather than using professional programs unaffordable for supporters, which used to be the case before the rise of Instagram).

Hybridity

The fourth research question asked to what extent Instagram postings bore any signs of hybrid campaign use. To find an answer to this question, we looked for references to other campaign instruments and distinguished between references to traditional campaign instruments (such as mass media and posters) and references to new media (such as websites and social media) in parties' postings.

The data presented in Table 5 show that in only half of the analyzed postings, a reference to other campaign instruments is made. Specifically, the Christian Democrats, the Green Party, and the Liberals hardly referred to any other campaign instrument in their postings. Parties that made references to

Table 5. Hybridity—Reference to Other Campaign Instruments on Instagram by Swedish Political Parties.

Political party	No explicit reference in the picture to other instruments		Explicit traditional campaign instrument reference in the picture		Explicit “new media” reference in the picture	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Social Democrats	46.2	6	7.7	1	46.2	6
Moderates	41.7	10	54.2	13	4.2	1
Green Party	68.2	15	13.6	3	18.2	4
Left Party	25.0	6	45.8	11	29.2	7
Liberals	67.8	40	32.2	19	0	0
Christian Democrats	75.0	6	25.0	2	0	0
Feminist Initiative	52.9	37	17.1	12	30.0	21
Total	54.5	120	27.7	61	17.7	39

$N = 220$, $p = .000$.

other campaign instruments primarily focused on showing traditional campaign instruments. These included images illustrating posters and election coverage by newspapers, depicting rallies of supporters and meetings with voters.

Three of the seven analyzed political parties, namely, the ruling parties (i.e., the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, and the Moderates), only referred to traditional campaign instruments in their pictures, whereas three of the opposition parties, the Social Democrats, the Feminists, and the Green Party, had more references to the so-called new media in their postings than to traditional campaign instruments. For example, the Feminists published numerous screenshots of Instagram photos in which users were showing their support to the party by adding thematic hashtags such as “vote pink,” the party’s color. The Left Party also used the power of hashtags to invite users to share their stories of unfair treatment by employers and posted pictures with texts that summarized those stories. The Left Party stands out having references to other campaign instruments in three-fourths of their postings. Although the majority of them referred to a traditional campaign instrument, many of them referred to new media as well.

Discussion and Future Directions

This study seeks to contribute to our knowledge about the strategic use of Instagram by Swedish parties during the 2014 elections. As a new campaign tool, its use was still very limited, although parties’ activities increased over the course of the campaign. Similar findings have been reported by previous studies on other social media (Karlsson et al., 2012; Larsson, 2011). The results show that the platform was mainly used for broadcasting rather than for mobilization. The images the parties were presenting leaned toward personalization with a strong presence of top candidates in their postings. Top candidates were primarily displayed in a political/professional context, but leaving an impression that the photos were taken spontaneously. Finally, half of the analyzed postings showed signs of hybridized campaign practices.

In the theoretical discussion, we have emphasized the importance of understanding social media use both out of their broadcasting and their interactive affordances. This study on Instagram is in line with previous research that has pointed out that social media platforms are rather used for spreading information that do not expect a response from followers: Instagram was clearly used as a virtual billboard. However, the focus on broadcasting in the postings does not necessarily neglect all interaction. In this article, we solely examined the posts without their comments (i.e., the postings). But initial observations show that comments were frequent. The more parties interacted, the more followers they had and the more active feedback they received from their followers on their postings and the pictures in particular. We will follow up on this observation in the next step of our research on this material. Research in the field of visual communication has found that visual images are more effective than text in gaining the viewer’s attention (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2011), but text messages are more effective to get the message across to the public. Instagram providing both visual and text might be an effective campaign tool to get the voter to pay (more) attention to campaign messages.

The study also shows that Instagram was hardly used for mobilization, although, as outlined above, previous studies have found that social media can effectively mobilize supporters. A mobilization strategy might be missing because Instagram was used for the first time as a campaign instrument, and its use is still marked by “trial-and-error,” especially since parties do not face big communities on the platform, yet. For example, when taking a look at the most active party on Instagram, the Feminists, their postings were rather ambivalent concerning mobilization. While we have not conducted an analysis of the networks, yet, a preliminary observation of the posts of the Feminist Initiative suggests that Instagram was first and foremost a platform for interaction among party members. Hence, there was no need to mobilize those already having joined the party. This raises questions of whether Instagram really is a strategic platform

for campaign communication or rather an intra-party communication platform. Or do we study a platform in which many different contexts and rationales converge, such as campaigning to mobilize supporters, informing and organizing party members, as well as giving supporters a platform to participate in the campaign? These questions need to be further addressed by interviewing the parties on their campaign organization and their targeting strategies in particular. Longitudinal studies could shed light on the main functions of Instagram.

The image management strategy by Swedish political parties on Instagram is characterized by personalization with the exception of the Social Democrats. The non-personalization of the party leader of the Social Democrats might be a conscious strategy, given the turbulences of social democratic leadership during the last mandate. The then-newly appointed Stefan Löfven (now Prime Minister) was coming from the union; hence, skills and practices that are required from political leaders might have been rather new to him. However, this assumption needs to be backed up by qualitative interview data, especially since his background as an adopted child had been explored on other platforms (such as YouTube and in parliamentary addresses). Other parties personalized the campaign to a great extent around the image of the top candidates, mostly in a professional setting. They hardly presented any aspects of their personal life, although such images can make the candidate seem more authentic and more accessible to the voter (e.g., Marland, 2012; Schill, 2012). In particular, the Instagram accounts of the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, and the Moderates almost turned into the party leaders' personal blogs by displaying what they did and whom they met rather than actually informing voters about the party's position on various issues. This confirms previous findings on campaigning political actors concluding that they turn to social media to manage an attractive image in front of their constituents (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Staney, 2008).

The study has also identified that parties' use of Instagram was not particularly hybridized in terms of references on Instagram to other campaign instruments. The ruling parties only referred to traditional campaign instruments, whereas the opposition had more references to the so-called new media in their postings. This might be due to the fact that, in general, the mass media give parties in opposition less attention than the governing parties (e.g., Jarren, 1998); therefore, they focus on social media to directly contact the public and they emphasize these channels on all their campaign platforms. However, when taking a look at hybridization strategy, parties clearly did not make use of the possibilities of Instagram being an Internet medium. This seems to counter recent accounts of hybrid media systems. Instagram was rather used in the same way as traditional campaign instruments, and its specificities were ignored.

Overall, Swedish political parties have more or less neglected the specific functions of Instagram. Specifically,

the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, two of the three parties in government, seem to run a "traditional communication strategy" on the platforms. Both parties only broadcasted information and hardly called for action. Also the biggest party in the government, the Moderates, hardly tried to mobilize supporters via Instagram. About three-fourths of the pictures published by the Christian Democrats and the Liberals were (rather) personalized and (thus) did not refer to any other campaign instrument. Parties in opposition—the Feminist Initiative, the Greens, the Social Democrats, and partly the Left—showed greater enthusiasm for Instagram as they tended to use the potential it offers to a greater extent. Findings on their postings show that they emphasized the mobilization strategy to a greater extent than the ruling parties, and explicit references to "new media" were more apparent. This might be due to their role as opposition parties and a greater need to get potential supporters' attention and mobilize them. In the next elections, research should follow this assumption as two of these former opposition parties, the Social Democrats and the Greens, formed a minority government after the 2014 elections.

With the rise of this picture-centered social media platform and thus the continuing importance of visual communication in politics, citizens more and more learn about politics through visuals. Whether politicians like it or not, today, they are "more visible to more people and more closely scrutinized than they ever were in the past" (Thompson, 2005, p. 42); hence, they have to manage their visibility. So far, studies in political communication have shown that politicians are aware of the central role visual images play in constructing politics and in influencing the impressions of voters (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015; Schill, 2012). How political actors will adopt this knowledge and, moreover, how they will implement Instagram in the future should be investigated by further (longitudinal as well as cross-country) research considering adoption, usage, and performance. A glimpse at the analyzed Instagram accounts after the 2014 election campaigns unveils that Swedish parties are posting quite frequently. The "new" communication instrument seems to have jumped on board, and it does not seem to be a communication instrument only used during campaigns.

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