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AOC DATA:

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/bryan.wood1370#!/vizhome/AOCData/Sheet1>

**Ocasio-Cortez’s Instagram is a Model for Presidents**

*By Bryan Wood*

Word Count: 1,022

WASHINGTON — Instagram could be the most important social media tool for 2020 presidential candidates to engage voters leading up to the election, according to a 2018 Congressional Research Service report.

From 2015 to 2017, Instagram was the quickest adopted social media platform for members of Congress, according to a CRS report from 2018.

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Although the CRS declined to comment on their recent report, “Social Media Adoption by Members of Congress,” other digital gurus agree that Instagram’s features inherently garner more attention.

Will Francis, a social media expert based in London, says that the platform has three ways viewers can find marketed content, which makes it difficult for them to avoid. He points to the Instagram newsfeed, highlight bubbles, and stories.

“It’s really all about the highlights and stories as the strongest feature right now because no other platform is using them the same way as Instagram,” Francis said. “The stories are direct and more exciting than just regular ads.”

Other social media apps have adopted the stories feature where users can post a series of 10 second slides. It’s become most helpful for candidates to explain otherwise inaccessible processes of government, a strategy Ocasio-Cortez often deployed on her Instagram.

The most up-to-date social media accounts are closely modelled after Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s, D-NY. Her advice is clear, which is that “genuine” engagement is most important to increasing viewership and interest in a candidate.

Earlier this year, Ocasio-Cortez appeared on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert who asked her about her connection to social media as the youngest Congresswoman in history and whether she’s shared advice to older members of the House.

“I gave them more of my general theory and approach to social media,” said Ocasio-Cortez. “So I said, rule No.1 is to be authentic, to be yourself and don’t try to be anyone that you’re not. So don’t try to talk like a young kid if you’re not a young kid, don’t post a meme if you don’t know what a meme is. That was literally my advice. And I said don’t talk like the founding fathers on Twitter.”

Ocasio-Cortez became a star politician in 2018 when she launched the strongest campaign Democrat incumbent Joe Crowley had seen over his 20-year career as a New York house of representative. She combined digital and in-person strategies to defeat her seemingly unstoppable opponent.

Today, Ocasio-Cortez has over 3 million followers on Instagram and posts stories almost daily ranging in topic from growing house plants to work days in the U.S. Capitol.

Analyzing her account activity makes it clear that voter engagement is less about the frequency of posts, a trend before the midterm elections, and more about shaping a presence online that matches the values of the candidate in person.

In the months leading up to the midterm elections last year, Ocasio-Cortez steadily increased her engagement by number of comments, views and likes per post. From September to December 2018, she increased engagement by 62 percent. On average, her posts received 229,000 likes per post and her top photo was commented on over 6,000 times.

The most she ever posted, 10 times in one month, was in September 2018. The fewest ever was in December when she only posted twice. December, however, was when she saw the highest engagement rate.

“In the past, we in social media used to think that number of posts were supposed to catch a user’s attention,” said Francis. “That’s changed in the last couple of years as we see a trend of quality over quantity.”

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“At a time when transparency is key to audience engagement, digital teams are looking for new ways to explain political concepts and processes for the public to better understand what we do,” said Wyatt Larkin, the current digital director for Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va.

Since starting as digital director for Warner, Larkin says he’s significantly increased the senator’s social media engagement using Ocasio-Cortez’s advice. He’s produced explainer stories and featured locations and community members within Warner’s jurisdiction.

He points to other considerations important to his job, including but not limited to time of post, quantity of posts in a day, and aligning posts to special events.

Last week on the anniversary of D-Day, Warner posted a black and white photo of U.S. soldiers on the beaches of Normandy. The post has 480 likes and 8 comments, slightly above average for his account.

**[EMBED:** [**https://www.instagram.com/p/ByXzv9iF\_qp/**](https://www.instagram.com/p/ByXzv9iF_qp/)**]**

Larkin says social media staffers on the Hill primarily use Instagram to garner “genuine engagement” from their digital audience.

“By genuine,” Larkin, also a former communications director on a Virginia “blue wave” campaign for Elaine Luria, explained, “I mean that the candidate needs to stay true to themselves as a person.”

But, he explained, the form of storytelling is so new that him and others in the same position are struggling to define “genuine engagement” and how to create guaranteed trends out of uncertain observations.

Although he’s improved Warner’s overall social media presence, the last few months have been difficult. Since April of this year, Instagram engagement has dropped 45 percent, which he attributes to being out of an election cycle.

Either way, Larkin says that he’s still experimenting. He only used Twitter, a conscious decision not to use Instagram, when he was the communications director for Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Va., in 2018.

“I wanted to stay true to the candidate and the district,” said Larkin. “Virginia’s second district isn’t young, nor is it very tech-savvy. Instagram just wouldn’t have made sense.”

Social media has come a long way since 2016 when Hilary Clinton received criticism for posting a Snapchat story “just chillin’ in Cedar Rapids.” Voters and non-voters alike struggled to find that post genuine.

Age might not be the most determinant factor, however, in the 2020 election. The youngest 2020 democratic candidate, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, has 629k followers. The two oldest, Sen. Bernie Sanders, D-Vt., and Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., have 3.3 and 1.3 million followers, respectively.

Because of mistakes in the past and tech-savvy candidates like Ocasio Cortez, the Hill is catching on to the social media craze.