Political Storytelling on Instagram – Key Aspects of Alexander Van der Bellen’s Successful 2016 Presidential Election Campaign

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Abstract

Political campaigns are regarded as increasingly significant influences on election results. Yet, the important visual dimension of campaign communication is severely under-studied. Against this background this paper presents first results of a case study on visual political storytelling during the Austrian presidential elections 2016. The latter provided an interesting case for the analysis of Austria’s changing political (campaign) landscape. Referring to this several important factors can be named: (1) the diversification of campaign media/contents and the growing importance of online campaigning, (2) an increased visualization of campaign communication, and (3) an amplified use of storytelling strategies for campaign messaging.

This paper draws from an ongoing interdisciplinary research project (duration February 2017 to January 2018)\(^1\) and addresses the strategic use of Instagram in Austria’s 2016 presidential election campaigns. Based on a comprehensive visual analysis of 504 Instagram posts from independent candidate Alexander Van der Bellen, this contribution reconstructs key aspects of visual storytelling on Instagram and identifies relevant image types. It sheds light on the visual aspects of recent political communication via social media.

Keywords

Instagram; Political Communication; Presidential Election Campaigns; Social Media; Visual Imagery; Visual Storytelling; Visual Strategies

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\(^1\) The research project conducts a comparative cross-media analysis of visual campaign communication and aims at reconstructing recurring visual patterns, tracing their use in political storytelling and identifying their strategic functions for the presidential campaigns. Drawing on a visual content analysis of diverse campaign media – ranging from traditional political posters to online content – the project attempts to make a novel contribution to the debate about the modernization and professionalization of political campaigns in Austria. Main emphasis is put on the different ways political stories are conveyed visually. Visual storytelling in political communication relies on a wide range of concrete strategies such as the publication of biographical books, the inclusion of family histories or biographically relevant settings and locations in the campaign narrative, or the use of photo flashbacks within the context of the campaign. Visual storytelling can be seen as the use of diverse types of visuals on social media platforms with the aim to craft a graphic story.
1. Introduction: Professionalization of Campaign Management – The Example of Austria

Election campaigns take place under constantly changing conditions. According to van Dijck and Poell (2013, p. 4, cf. also p. 7), as well as Bennett & Iyengar (2008, p. 723), the logic of social media “blends with ‘established’ mass media logic, while also adding new elements and transforming already existing mechanisms”. Following Jenkins (2006), Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013), Lilleke (2014), and Strömbäck and Kiousis (2014), political communication research differentiates between three stages of modernization in election campaigns: premodern, modern and postmodern campaigning (Keim & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 309). The entire process is characterized by the convergence of “technological, institutional and social framework parameters” (ibid., p. 308), The current, still developing postmodern stage is marked by specific organisational, substantive and technological developments such as digital storytelling (Alonso, Molina, & Porto, 2013, pp. 371f.) and the “expansion of transmedial storyworlds” (Ryan & Thon, 2014). Storytelling has boosted the interest of scholars from various social and cultural science disciplines over the past decade (cf. Hunt, 2015, Kaavori, Lashley & Creech 2017, Polletta & Lee, 2006; Ryan, 2014, Schnur Neile, 2015.). Polletta et al. (2011, p. 110) point to the “contemporary fascination with stories” and elaborate on “storytelling in policy, politics, and protest” (ibid., pp. 118-122.). Hunt (2015) states that “an inevitable part of political rhetoric relies upon telling stories”. The latter help potential voters to relate to rather abstract political ideas (ibid.) as well as political candidates: “People connect with candidates ... the same way they connect with books and movies; they simply won’t engage without a good story” (Weber 2016).

At the organisational level, “a growing degree of professionalization of campaign staff and the adoption of a market logic” (Keim & Rosenthal, p. 311) contribute to a steady rise in election campaign costs and a permanent campaign-ready mode (cf. also Grossmann 2009, Holtz-Bacha 2016, pp. 1253f. and p. 1258, McNair 2016, p. 509, Negrine et al. 2007). The presentation of political aims and messages is outsourced to specialized organisations and actors outside the political field (Holtz-Bacha 2016, p. 1255). Classical marketing methods to identify and address target groups are frequently used (Keim & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 312) and “can best be observed in election campaigns because of the increasing communication efforts whenever the share of power is at stake” (Holtz-Bacha 2016, p. 1256).

At the content level, these changes result in a “meticulous selection of election campaign topics and a more precise target group orientation“ (Keim & Rosenthal, p. 312). A stronger personalization of politics and political communication (cf. Boumans, Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2013, Garcia, 2014, Karvonen, 2009, Kriesi, 2012, McNair, 2016, Van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer, 2011) supports the “growing centrality of the individual” (Balmas & Sheafer, 2016, p. 944) in postmodern election campaign management. Along with “centralized media personalization (or concentrated visibility)” (ibid., p. 945), a shift from topic-based to personality-based campaigns also affects the visual presentation of politics (Keim & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 313, Van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer, 2011). Furthermore, the increasing influence of non-political topics tends to blur boundaries between the political and the non-political. Holtz-Bacha et al. also stress this “shift in emphasis from the political to the personal sphere” (2014, p. 156). This finding is particularly relevant for a strongly personality-influenced vote like the one for the Austrian Federal Presidency.

At the technological level, easily accessible online platforms provide new means of campaign management (cf. van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Social networks allow campaigns to circumvent
the presentation logic of the media and to initiate campaign communication directly without using the traditional channels of mass media (Keim & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 314).

Alexander Van der Bellen’s inauguration on 26 January 2017 was preceded by an emotional election campaign. This campaign lasted almost a year and may be considered extraordinary, not only due to some organizational circumstances – the annulment of the run-off by the Constitutional Court on 1 July 2016 and the postponement of the run-off election date from 2 October to 4 December 2016. It was also marked by increased modernization and professionalization. This included, inter alia, an extension of communication channels and, along with it, a diversification of target group messages. The campaigns of the run-off candidates in particular, Norbert Hofer (Austrian Freedom Party/FPÖ) and Alexander Van der Bellen (independent), relied on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram to directly address target groups and to set the discussion topics for traditional media. The combined use of traditional election campaign materials and more modern methods made it possible to disseminate varied visual productions, which not only showed the candidates’ understanding of the presidential function, but also brought to light some of the underlying societal concepts and were eventually aimed at presenting the candidates as authentic and distinct personalities. Van der Bellen’s campaign made use of a comprehensive transmedia storytelling strategy aimed at amplifying the reach of campaign messages through synergistic use of multiple social media accounts and analogue media (e.g. political posters). The transmedia strategy made it possible to present the campaign story across multiple platforms where each channel made a distinct contribution.

This paper uses the expansion of communication channels in the 2016 election campaigns for the office of Federal President as a starting point for an analysis of Instagram as a campaign channel. The candidates presented themselves using a variety of visual imagery on this platform. Van der Bellen’s Instagram account serves as an ideal case study because it presented “new” and “old” campaign media in the format of a visual diary. This empirically-based contribution provides an in-depth visual analysis of the strategic self-presentation of the successful candidate. It first examines how the incumbent Federal President presented himself on his Instagram account during the campaign cycle; in which situational moments and contexts he was shown; and which interactional patterns were used the most in order to comprehend the form and frequency of visual portrayals. The second aim of the study is to examine which strategies the candidate pursued in his choice of visual imagery. The analysis covers the different categories of visual imagery that were posted on Instagram including photographs, graphics, animated graphics, image-text combinations, and short videos. The aim of the study is to gain information on the “selection and portrayal routines“ (Grittmann, 2012, p. 135) of the strategic visual communication of a political actor in an election campaign. The study covers the period of almost twelve months, from 1 January to 4 December 2016.

This paper builds on previous studies while placing special emphasis on the visual component of storytelling. Political storytelling generally relies on a wide range of strategies to shape personal and political narratives. Such strategies comprise references to biographically relevant settings and locations, family histories, and the use of personal photos within the context of the campaign (e.g., so-called throwback photos on Instagram). On the grounds of its innovative focus on the reconstruction of relevant visual patterns included in political storytelling and the shaping of campaign narratives, the case study contributes to advancing the state of the art in the field of political communication research.
While adding to the steadily growing scientific literature on the strategic function of social media platforms in election campaigns (cf. Emmer 2017 pp. 81f. and pp. 85ff.) - which started in the early 2000s after being boosted by the successful campaign of Barack Obama in the USA (Keim & Rosenthal, 2016) - the paper also reacts to a request for research to be conducted on the role of visibility and imagery in political communication processes (cf. Schill, 2012). This research gap must be taken seriously in the light of a growing shift of communication into the so-called “visual web” which gives particular privilege to visual forms of communication in social networks and is increasingly oriented to image-specific creative means. In an article on Instagram analyses, Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver (2016, p. 48) therefore declared the visual aspect to be a central topic of social media research. Recent developments in cognitive science have also put the visual and language aspects on equal footing (Ryan & Thon, 2014, p. 10). While previous studies (e.g., Holtz-Bacha, 2014) have already discussed the fact that “(p)olitical messages are communicated (in) oral, written and visual language” (McNair, 2016, p. 506) and provided, for instance, quantitative findings such as the presence of different political actors in photographs, qualitative approaches to the analysis of visual imagery and strategies have not yet been applied to a sufficient extent. This paper aims at increasing the existing literature by a qualitative-interpretative discussion of the visual dimension of social network communication.

2. Research Framework, Corpus, and Methodological Design

Researching the use of Instagram as a tool in political communication is a relatively recent phenomenon. The platform began to operate in 2010 and has constantly gained in popularity since then. It is currently one of the fastest growing social networks. The photo-sharing app has been counted among the most famous social networking sites worldwide with over 700 million monthly active accounts as of April 2017, and has ranked number seven in terms of active users (de.statista.com, 2017). The app allows users to add filters to pictures and videos and to distribute them on the platform and in other social media. Instagram users can follow other users and search, comment or like other people’s photos. Instagram, which became part of Facebook in August 2012, has constantly been upgraded with new functions such as the introduction of the photo card tool, which is able to sort Instagram photographs by place of origin; the integration of the Stories feature, which permits the creation of video or photo sequences that are only visible for 24 hours; and recently the introduction of new face filters. Since May 2017 location stories and hashtag stories help users find stories relating to individual interests (instagram-press.com, 2017).

In 2012, The Heritage Foundation (heritage.org, 2012) asserted that politicians had become aware of the communicative power of Instagram:

“By jumping into already-buzzing communities such as Instagram, political leaders can harness fresh energy by getting personal and taking advantage of possibilities to connect with both influential personalities and everyday Americans” (ibid.).

In the US presidential election campaign in the same year, both Barack Obama and his opponent Mitt Romney made use of the app “to give citizens a different, behind-the-scenes look at what you might not see on other platforms” (ibid.) and to directly address different target groups.
“The praise that Instagram has received as political communication tool has tended to focus on how it provides politicians with a concise, direct method of sharing their message and enhancing their image, and how it helps citizens feel personally connected to government and its leaders” (Glantz, 2013, p. 695).

Filimonov, Russmann and Svensson (2016), respectively Russmann and Svensson (2017) have studied the use of Instagram by political parties in the 2014 Swedish election campaign, which was one of the first in which political parties actively used Instagram as a campaign channel (ibid., p. 2). The authors differentiated between four central functions of Instagram as a strategic campaign tool. (1) It serves to disseminate campaign messages, (2) it helps to mobilize voters, (3) it is used for image management, and (4) it amplifies and complements other campaign channels (ibid., p. 3). Glantz (2013, p. 695) highlighted Instagram’s potential for bringing action to political communication. He also considers Instagram “more useful for helping politicians and political organizations connect with citizens who already support them, than for converting people to new political positions...”).

Instagram pictures of politicians as material copies, which are the basis of immaterial images, can be used “as first indicators for an approximation to the study of images” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 36). However, the use of Instagram in political communication and as a means of staging a political personality and as a form of image management has not been sufficiently studied. According to Marion G. Müller and Stephanie Geise (ibid. p. 32) staging may be defined as “a public exhibition of a work, event, person or object”. Associated with the staging of a politician are presentation techniques in order to “make it appear visually before an audience...and to provide it with a corresponding visual interpretation frame” (ibid.). In professional political communication efforts, strategic stagings as “consciously shaped reality” (ibid., p. 34) have growing influence on the production, selection, and dissemination of visual material in creative terms, which helps candidates appear in a positive light. Stagings are primarily used to consciously shape intended images (ibid., p. 35, cf. also McNair, 2016). Image here refers to “a mental construct of an object or person, which is generated in the mind of the recipient on the basis of consciously or unconsciously perceived (media) images, facts, associations, experiences or judgments” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 35).

The production, selection and distribution of visual imagery in terms of image management by politicians may thus help to shape “the image of persons or groups of persons, their behaviour and lifestyle as well as their character traits” (Grittmann, 2012, p. 128). In this context, it should be noted that images as a “visual picture” (Müller & Geise, 2015, p. 35; italics in original text) “are not objective, unequivocal and comprehensive, but subjective and, hence, ambiguous, selective, and often stereotyped and unconscious” (ibid.).

As was shown by communication scientist Elke Grittmann (2007) in her study on political photo-reporting, the visual presentation of political action is condensed to a comprehensible image repertory, which is constructed by “selection and, thus, attribution of meaning” (Grittmann, 2012, p. 142). This observation applies not only to journalistic photo-reporting, but also to the strategic self-representation of political actors. Among the photo motive groups that are typically highlighted, we find formal or informal speech, official encounters with other politicians, meetings, talks or the staging of closeness to citizens (ibid., pp. 142-144).
From the research framework outlined above, the question arises of how Alexander Van der Bellen used his Instagram account during the 2016 election campaign, and which strategically used image types prevailed?

The material basis (corpus) of this paper is composed of all of Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram posts during the election campaign. A post refers to multimodal imagery (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and is meant to include entries in different formats. Van der Bellen’s account (instagram.com/vanderbellen), which was created for the election campaign, recorded 504 entries between 8 January 2016 (first entry) and 4 December 2016 (last entry on election evening). Since his victory, Van der Bellen’s account has continued to serve as the official account of the Federal President. The unit of investigation for this study is the individual Instagram post, i.e. a combination of photo, graphic, animated graphic, image-text combination, screenshot or short video and caption, and concomitant hashtags, if any. Comments by users were not evaluated, as the focus of the research was on the strategic self-portrayal of the presidential candidate and not on the public’s reception.

The total corpus of 504 Instagram posts was screen-captured and archived. It was then evaluated using the method of iconographic image type analysis (cf. Grittmann & Ammann, 2011). This is a triangulation process which combines the qualitative iconographic-iconological approach of art history with the quantitative content analysis of the social sciences (ibid., p. 165). While it was originally developed for the analysis of photo-journalistic routine jobs and selection criteria (ibid., p. 167), the image type analysis may also be applied to material from politicians’ strategic visual communication to make statements on routines and selection criteria in the choice of pictures. The image type analysis follows a two-step approach: where conclusions on “patterns and strategies are drawn, a quantitative approach is required whereas the analysis of meanings and symbols calls for a more qualitative procedure” (ibid., p. 165).

The material is first grouped by recurring photo motives, which in turn are categorized according to types of images. The latter differ from photo motives in terms of their degree of abstraction. They reduce the meaning of individual photo motives to their central message (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 170) and therefore also condense complex political contexts. Since according to Grittmann & Ammann (ibid., p. 170) individual image types need to be homogeneous internally and heterogeneous externally, photo motives with the same implicit statement are grouped together on the basis of generalized commonalities (ibid). In multimodal Instagram posts, the accompanying text provides important indications for categorizing the material. The development of image type categories requires an in-depth knowledge of the photo material available (ibid., p. 169) and is oriented around the process of the iconographic-iconological approach developed by Erwin Panofsky in the 1920s and 1930s. This approach is based on a three-step procedure: a pre-iconographic description, an iconographic analysis and an iconological interpretation (cf. Panofsky, 1972; pp. 1-17). This contribution specifically refers to the process of iconographic analysis. After type formation, the photo material is quantitatively measured and interpreted by iconographic means. This permits the drawing of conclusions as to the “selection and production routines and the interpretation frames, ideas and ideologies transported by images” (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011, p. 171).
“What is essential is to interpret the dominant idea of the event or topic examined, which is transported throughout the entire photo material and the individual image types: which types prevail and what is their significance?” (ibid., p. 175).

However, the formation of image types in the present paper is not exclusively inductive but orients itself towards the scientific literature on strategic visual communication of political actors (cf. Grittmann, 2007; Grittmann, 2012; Müller, 1997).

3. Selected Results of the Image Type Analysis

During the study period, Alexander Van der Bellen’s account was regularly updated, listed entries chronologically and organized its posts around campaign events. This gave Instagram the function of a visual diary, which documented campaign activities and pointed out upcoming events (e.g. press conferences, debates, and site visits by the candidate, cf. Figure 1) or new articles in the fan shop. Van der Bellen’s Instagram strategy made use of the full spectrum of visual imagery by posting not only photos and videos, but also graphics and animated graphics in the corporate design of the campaign and regularly used text and hashtags to provide context.

Figure 1: Van der Bellen on Tour, posted on 6 April, 2016

The following image types appeared on Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram account:
Table 1: Quantification of image types on Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram account

The image type “Campaign” includes visual imagery that shows the candidate in campaign-related activities and presents information that is relevant to the campaign (e.g. survey results) as well as advertising material (e.g. posters, articles from the fan shop, etc.). It also comprises the collection of supportive declarations signed by voters, the distribution of campaign material, speeches delivered at party rallies, or posts of survey results. Van der Bellen’s account staging underscored his election campaign staff and his good standing with young supporters and volunteers. Further, Van der Bellen’s campaign pointed out the release of new posters or announced public debates or performances (e.g. the “Presidential Rave 2.0” in August 2016).

The image type “Media work” comprises visual imagery which shows the candidate during interviews or press conferences, or at events organized by media representatives (e.g. panel discussions). Among these are studio settings, the presence of cameras and microphones, and talks with journalists. This image type suggested an ongoing media interest.

The image type “Fan contact” may be used to define and emphasize target groups. It includes photo material showing the candidate as he mingled with people from various segments of the population, where everybody in the picture was engaged in a conversation or posing for a photo or taking a “selfie” with the candidate. A further image type is “Fan Art”. Relevant photo material shows gifts received from fans and stages the gift presentation to express the candidate’s popularity with constituents. Van der Bellen, for example, received heart-shaped gingerbread with an inscription, a photo of a cat sitting beside Van der Bellen promotion stickers (in August 2016), or a photo of a dog with a Van der Bellen bonnet (in November 2016).

The image type “Call to Action” comprises visual imagery which explicitly invites users to support the campaign in various ways. A call to action usually comes in a text format which may be inserted in the picture as a quotation or integrated in the accompanying text. In Van der Bellen’s campaign, special graphics or animated graphics were produced in the
corporate design of the campaign to ask users to volunteer, to participate in public events, to make donations, or to cast their vote.

The “Background Story” category can be counted among the most interesting image types in terms of the 2016 Austrian presidential election campaign. This category comprises visual imagery which highlights the candidate as a person rather than a political figure, places him/her in an individual, biographical context, emphasizes his/her personal attributes (cf. Balmas & Sheafer 2016, p. 948) and shows the politician’s “private” interests and priorities. This image type particularly supports personalization because it “refers to heightened attention devoted to the personal characteristics and private lives of candidates” (Holtz-Bacha 2014, p.160). On Instagram, background stories with photos showed Alexander Van der Bellen in semi-private moments, or in his youth and early years in so-called “Throwback” photos. As emphasized by his Throwback photos, Van der Bellen gave special importance to his hiking hobby in his staging of mountain landscapes and himself hiking. Van der Bellen is shown in several photos as a child with his parents in the mountains (e.g. Throwback photo in May 2016) or as a young adult with his sister (cf. Figure 2). Hiking in the mountains of Tyrol is closely linked to the Heimat (homeland) motive, which Van der Bellen intensively emphasized and reframed during the election campaign and presented as an inclusive concept.

**Figure 2: Throwback photo of Alexander Van der Bellen, posted on 4 February 2016**

Background stories are used to “normalize” political candidates and to create a feeling of authenticity. Hobbies and other pastimes show aspects of their personality outside the political arena or from before the political career. Van der Bellen was shown as a passionate reader. On one occasion, passing time between two press meetings, he was shown browsing in a bookshop (February 2016) or on a trip from Graz back to Vienna reading a “humorous paperback” (April 2016, cf. Figure 3).
His enthusiasm for Donald Duck was a recurrent theme for Van der Bellen. For instance, on a trip to Brussels, he is shown with a Donald Duck figure (March 2016). Hobbies like solving Sudoku puzzles (e.g. November 2016) or passions like drinking coffee were also staged (e.g. in January, March and June 2016, cf. Figure 4).

Van der Bellen’s interest in soccer was another recurring topic. He attended games in Vienna’s Soccer Stadium (for instance, watching the team of Rapid Vienna in July 2016 or the Austrian national soccer team in October 2016), followed a game on a television screen before an interview (in May 2016) and posed for photos with soccer supporters (e.g. in July 2016 or in October 2016).
The image type “Positioning” includes visual imagery which points to political issues and causes of the candidate, explains his understanding of the role and office, and helps him to position himself on the political scale. By using photo-text combinations, quotations on a variety of topics are highlighted (for instance, on the free trade agreement CETA in October 2016), and the position of the candidate is emphasized. Van der Bellen combined the presentation of new posters with an opportunity to position himself, e.g. in May or in August 2016. In April 2016, he presented himself with a sign that said “I am a feminist.... Because women’s rights are human rights”. 

Image types such as “Meeting politicians” (which showed the candidate together with regional governors or federal ministers either in a conversation or welcome ceremony, or shaking hands), “Discussion” (Van der Bellen was frequently shown in debates with young voters) and “Endorsement” (which showed mostly prominent supporters, e.g. in March, April and May 2016) underscore the political importance of the candidate.

The image type “Family” comprises photo material in which the candidate and his family are presented in semi-private moments, at an event or in a campaign setting. Marion G. Müller (1997, p. 204) points out that the family strategy is usually applied as support for the “common-man image of a candidate” (ibid., p. 204). Alexander Van der Bellen only started presenting himself together with his wife at the onset of the run-off campaign, e.g. while taking part in a hike with journalists in the Tyrolean mountains in August 2016 or going for a walk in the Kauner valley (the Tyrol) in September 2016 and in Lustenau (Vorarlberg) in October 2016. On the day of the election, 4 December 2016, Van der Bellen and his wife Doris Schmidauer posed in front of a red-white-red flag, thanking the audience for their support during the campaign, before going inside to cast their votes.

The visual analysis of Alexander Van der Bellen’s Instagram posts shows an emphasis on specific image types. The salience of these image types allows for the reconstruction of underlying visual strategies: the highlighting of the candidate’s biography (biographic strategy) and his campaign team (team strategy) as well as the presentation of the candidate as a legitimate office holder (incumbent strategy).

- Biographic Strategy: Van der Bellen used background stories to draw attention to personal qualities, competences and experiences which qualified him for the office of Federal President. He took his family’s refugee background as the starting point for a story of home and togetherness and anchored this story in the Tyrolean Kauner Valley. However, he also underlined the image of an intellectual and university professor. He browsed books, gave interviews in libraries, solved Sudoku puzzles or showed his coffee cup in front of a stack of newspapers.

- Team strategy: Van der Bellen puts a focus on the presentation of his campaign team, which consisted largely of young supporters. He thereby made the work behind the campaign visible, he emphasized his good relationship with his staff, and he presented his election campaign as a collective effort and, ultimately, a joint success.

- Incumbent strategy: Van der Bellen, in the second half of the campaign after the annulment of the first run-off by the Constitutional Court, acted as if he was already President: he wished pupils a good start to the school year, he attended a national soccer team game, he held a press conference on the National Holiday and delivered a video message in which he recited the words of the federal anthem. Van der Bellen,
with this strategy, presented himself as the legitimate office holder who had won the election once and considered his re-election as a logical consequence.

4. Conclusion and Outlook

Starting from the premise that the production, selection, and distribution of strategic photo material may help to shape political images, this paper examined the use of the social media platform Instagram during the 2016 Austrian federal presidential election. At the center of interest was the strategic use of the platform as a communication channel by the successful run-off candidate Alexander Van der Bellen. Visual imagery on Instagram was evaluated using an image type analysis method, which bundles recurring motives on the basis of their abstract common features, turning them into image types, which are then quantitatively evaluated and iconographically interpreted (cf. Grittmann & Ammann, 2011).

McNair (2016, p. 509) states that “in social networking (...) political actors must be able to use the tools efficiently, conveying an up-to-date, tech-savvy image.” Results show that the Van der Bellen campaign used Instagram as a campaign channel in a professional way. On the account, the entire campaign can be observed with the help of chronological entries and numerous references. This included announcements of events (e.g. start or end of campaign, on site visits, hiking tours with journalists), references to other campaign channels (e.g. Facebook-Livestream), to new promotional materials (e.g. posters or window flags), to new services (e.g. WhatsApp-Service or Selfie App) or to the campaign fan shop (fanderbellen.at). The channel was also used for calls (e.g. calls to sign declarations of support or to collect donations) and served to highlight important statements and quotations. It is also worth mentioning that the central narration of Van der Bellen’s campaign, his reference to the homeland (Heimat), was present in different image types. His hiking tour with journalists in the Kaunertal valley (Tyrol), for instance, was an important element of his media work, but at the same time picked up a central motive of the image type Background Story. Caren Schnur Neile (2015, p. 5) states that in “a logical conception, storyworlds admit no contradiction. Thus if a text rewrites an existing narrative, modifying the plot and ascribing different features or destinies to the characters, it creates a new storyworld, that overlaps to some extent with the old one. While a given storyworld can be presented through several different texts, these texts must respect the facts of the original text if they are to share its logical storyworld” (ibid., p.5). Francesca Polletta and John Lee (2006, p. 718) also accentuate “(s)tories' dependence on a cultural stock of plots” which “enables storytellers to advance novel points of view within the familiar form of canonical storylines”. In this regard, the Van der Bellen campaign did very well.

To summarize, Van der Bellen’s account followed several functions that Filimonov, Rußmann and Svensson (2016) have identified for the use of Instagram as a strategic campaign tool. It helped to broadcast campaign messages, to mobilize supporters, to manage images, and to amplify and complement other campaign material.

Further research in the field of visual political storytelling may help to examine the structuring and weighting of image types on other social media channels, elaborate strategic functions and channel-specific idiosyncrasies, and study visual strategies from a transmedia perspective. In the introductory chapter to the publication “Storytelling and Politics”, Caren Schnur Neile (2015, pp. 1-14) focuses on the importance of tracing transmedia storytelling
which unfolds across multiple media platforms. Further research is needed to understand how political stories spread across platforms and how specific platform affordances influence the ways in which these stories are visually rendered.

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