

Bendix Hügelmann

## Between Professionalisation and Perplexity

Social media in the 2021 Bundestag election campaign

### AT A GLANCE

**Social media means simultaneity of action and reception. This significantly increases the pressure on candidates for political office: there is practically no room for error when dealing with one's own public image. Social media was therefore a key factor conditioning success in the 2021 federal election. Although parties and politicians have recognised the relevance of social media in principle, when it comes to resolute and professional implementation, they have, however, failed as yet to have fully grasped the importance of social media, as the 2021 election campaign has shown.**

Social media has established itself as a form of political communication. The campaigns in the 2021 federal election have demonstrated this with varying degrees of forcefulness. The communication effort made by the political parties and politicians has increased across all channels, in some cases considerably, compared to 2017. This is not only reflected in the intensity of use, but also in the organisations themselves. The divide between digital and analogue communication, which was problematic in the context of the 2017 campaigns, seems to have been for the most part bridged in 2021, at least when it comes to party strategists. At the same time, however, it also became apparent that not all levels of party democracy are keeping pace with the demands of the digital transformation in equal measure.

With regard to competence in the implementation of digital communication measures and strategies, the first fissures are appearing at different levels of organisation: While digital competence has been expanded and strengthened at party headquarters, it is up to the candidates' teams in the constituencies to meet the requirements of a digital and modern election campaign. While it is true that the parties provide support in order to build up human resource competencies in constituencies, it nevertheless became apparent during the

Bundestag election campaign that not everything that is technically and conceptually possible and appropriate could be implemented evenly across different organisational levels. This is mainly due to the fact that the demands placed on candidates, which go hand in hand with use of the appropriate channel of social media, have increased considerably. The largely voluntary structure of candidates' teams in the constituencies may be starting to run up against constraints. In order to avoid a digital divide within the parties, capacities in this area need to be expanded even more in the future.

### DIGITAL BROADSIDE?

Social media communication during the election campaign mainly took place on the familiar platforms, i.e. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In addition, new channels and forms of communication such as TikTok were tried out in scattered cases. Live streaming formats such as Twitch or AudioOnly content still played a minor role in this election summer. The following five general observations can be made with regard to the relevance of social media in the 2021 federal election campaign.

#### 1. THE RELEVANCE AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA HAS CONTINUED TO GROW

This election summer has brought one thing very clearly to light: In a thoroughly digitised public media sphere, there is virtually no room for error for the top candidates anymore. The theoretical possibility that every situation in the election campaign can be captured by image or video and introduced into the discourse in real time means that, in very practical terms, moments in which a leading candidate steps out of character have a direct impact on the overall perception of the party, the candidate and the campaign. This involves less specific occasions as such, but rather the consequential effect in the reception of corresponding events: The scene showing Armin Laschet in the area devastated by the flood smirking in

the background while the German President was speaking is emblematic of this development.

Although Laschet expressed his remorse several times in front of an audience of millions, the picture remained part of the public image of the CDU campaign until the end.

Of course, it has already been the case in earlier election campaigns that candidates are latently in the public eye. However, due to the increased speed with which opinions are created in digital discourse, the pressure on candidates is also growing. This requires a high level of confidence in dealing with one's own image and the role associated with it. Nevertheless, and this is particularly attributable to Twitter, there is no longer any possibility for candidates to step outside this public role without being seen. Every conversation at the campaign stand, every seemingly casual encounter in the election campaign thus latently moves further north than would have been the case just a few years ago. This simultaneity of action and reception is not only attributable to social media - it also had a significant impact on the 2021 election campaign.

## 2. INFLUENCERS, POLITICAL CONTENT AND VIRALITY

Influencers still played a rather subordinate role in the 2017 federal election. Apart from individual YouTube formats, there was little overlap between the creator scene and the political scene. In the 2021 election summer, the situation was different, for two reasons: First, prior to the election, a number of public figures spoke out in favour of a specific election recommendation. An election appeal of this kind was nothing new in principle, but this showed the relevance that Twitter in particular played for the broad resonance of the “#DiesmalGruen” (“ThisTimeGreen”) campaign. Secondly, in the weeks leading up to the election, YouTuber Rezo published a three-part video series critical of the actions of the federal government in recent years. After the YouTuber had already dealt very critically with the CDU in the spring of 2019 with the so-called “DestructionVideo”, the videos had a significant media response before election day. This was of course also mirrored by the reception on the popular social media platforms. The associated virality of political contributions from a hybrid media spectrum is thus something that for the first time developed a noteworthy relevance in this election campaign.

## 3. PARTY INFLUENCERS ARE HERE TO STAY

Another social media phenomenon complements and is changing the political discourse, namely the growing relevance of party-related influencers. These are usually younger sympathisers or members who, through their own communication work, build a bridge between party politics and young people interested in politics. Influencers close to the party hold enormous potential for recruiting new members, mobilising party supporters, the party's ability to engage in discourse in the digital space and, last but not least, building digital competence in individual state/district groups and candidates' teams.

Be it Lilly Blaudszun for the SPD, Nora Zabel for the CDU or Christian Storch for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen: What all

three have in common is their ongoing commitment to their own party in digital discourse (Twitter) and their positioning as a political figure (Instagram).

## 4. PERSONALISATION CHANGES POLITICAL COMMUNICATION FROM THE GROUND UP

Instagram was able to establish itself as a permanent fixture in political communication in this 2021 federal election. Whereas in 2017 the platform was still being used for uninitiated trial and error by individual candidates' teams, in 2021 the image service enjoyed widespread popularity. The advantages of Instagram are obvious: the focus on images gives candidates the opportunity to play a significant role in shaping their own image. Instagram makes it possible to supplement the public image with additional, private components in order to communicate political content on a more personal level. From a strategic perspective, the concurrent development of a personal political brand is a worthwhile endeavour: Political candidates thus become advertising ambassadors for their parties, without interested users having to take a detour via party accounts. This trend toward personalising politics will further influence internal party selection procedures and the overall perception of politics in the coming years. The ability to build up one's own community and to accumulate political capital through it will be one of the decisive competences of future politicians. This was already evident in the 2017 federal election, when Christian Lindner led the FDP back into the Bundestag through the heavy use of personalised communication.

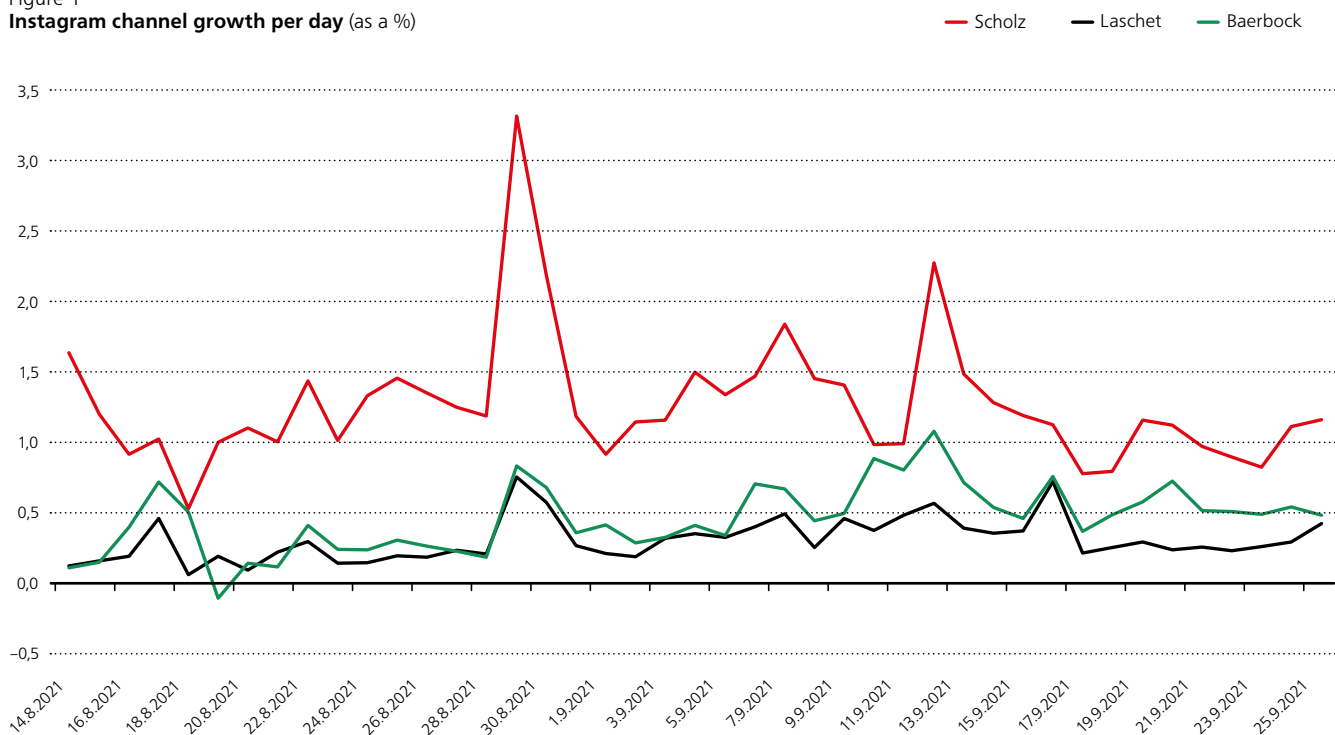
Nevertheless, broad professionalisation in the use of Instagram has failed to materialise. This platform shows very clearly just how crucial poise in dealing with one's own image and self-assuredness in public appearances are for success. The digital divide between established top-level politics on the one hand and “simple” candidates on the other is already visible on Instagram.

Conversely, this does not mean that the three candidates for the chancellorship, for example, practiced personalisation on Instagram in an ideal way. Whether it was Armin Laschet, Olaf Scholz or Annalena Baerbock, what all three had in common was the fact that their profiles only made very timid use of personalisation. Direct interaction with the community via the story function or live formats remained – if at all – the exception. More immediacy would have been desirable here, especially because Instagram as a channel has assumed a hinge function between analogue and digital media. As in 2017, it could be observed that profiles of the top candidates generated more new followers in the context of major media events - such as the three truels. This suggests the hypothesis that Instagram plays a relevant role in the opinion-forming process of younger voters. Interest in one or more candidates is translated into one's own media use in the course of a TV event. Against this background, Instagram appears to be particularly suitable as a channel for follow-up communication and the subsequent development of communities.

## 5. TWITTER SHAPES THE POLITICAL DEBATE FAR BEYOND THE CHANNEL ITSELF

Twitter played a central role in the media interpretation of the election campaign. The spins developed on the platform regularly shaped elements of the reporting. The associated struggle

Figure 1  
Instagram channel growth per day (as a %)



Source: www.politicalinfluencers.de / Dr. Bendix Hügelmann.

for interpretative control over one's own campaign presented the persons in charge on the campaign teams with major challenges. As a result, practically all parties resorted to the same approach, namely targeted influence on the discourse by party members, staff and supporters. This became particularly visible during the three TV truels: In real time, Twitter became the battleground for interpretation of the performance of the three candidates.

From a normative perspective, the role of Twitter is thoroughly ambivalent: On the one hand, the news value on the platform continuously organises itself under the conditions of virality. What was pre-selected as relevant/irrelevant by traditional gatekeepers in the analogue world is now up to the dynamics on the platform. On the other hand, and this is definitely an element of the big picture, politically motivated user groups repeatedly resorted to a strategy of deliberately decontextualized misunderstanding in order to give the respective spin the necessary jump-start on a wave of the greatest outrage possible. At this point, at the latest, the borderline with deliberately produced fake news is at least fluid. It remains to be seen whether and how the democratic parties (want to) restrict this communication technique in future election campaigns.

## FAZIT

In the big picture, one thing becomes evident: the relevance of social media for political communication will continue to grow. The changes and dynamics in the media system outlined above are structural in nature, and social media plays a key role in it all. Nothing of what shaped the 2021 federal election in the media is reversible.

The basic principle of immediacy will endure regardless of individual platforms.

For political campaigns, this means continuing to build up competence, especially with regard to the ability to engage in a dialogue with individual communities. The complexity of the digital media system will increase. Demands on top politicians in the future will adapt accordingly. Regardless of this, in the course of the 2021 election campaign, a completely analogue virtue has presented itself as critical to success: good preparation. In a scenario in which the avoidance of mistakes appears to be the dominant strategy, numerous (unforced) errors were evidently due to inadequate preparation.

## AUTHOR

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