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GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION ON INSTAGRAM IN THE LIGHT OF TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM – EXAMPLES FROM GERMANY

Abstract

The article examines government communication on the Instagram against the backdrop of the theory of technological determinism. In light of this theory, communication technologies determine communication (hard determinism) or create new communication opportunities that are not a necessity (soft determinism). The aim of the article is to explore government communication on the Instagram using German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Auswärtiges Amt*) as an example. Drawing on linguistics and media studies and using multimodal analysis, the authors check whether Instagram forms of expression, trends and viral formats have penetrated government communication about important national and international issues. Drawing on Magdalena Makowska's multimodal analyses, the authors analyze the multimodality of government posts on Instagram. The conclusions from the qualitative analysis may become a contribution to further quantitative explanatory analyses and considerations on the role of platforms in contemporary society, not only at the local level but also at the national and international level.

Keywords: technological determinism, government communication, Instagram, platformization

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Introduction

Both media studies and linguistics have shown great interest in the influence of social media on modern languages and communication (Klimova, Pikhart, 2019; Floreddu, Cabiddu, 2016). It has been proven that social media affect consumer perceptions (Schivinski, Dabrowski, 2016), knowledge sharing (Razmerita et al., 2016) and writing skills (Klimova, Pikhart, 2019), to name just a few.

Particular attention is paid to the impact of social networking sites (Farmer et al., 2009), which not only sustain existing social relations (Boyd, Ellison, 2007) but also enable new relations (Bucher, 2015), that may stay solely online. Such online relations are sustained thanks to computer-mediated communication and regulated by platforms' algorithms (Bucher, 2012). Social networking is perceived as communication (r)evolution (Coyle, Vaughn, 2008). Another reason for scholars' particular interest in social networking sites is their popularity or even ubiquity. For example, in early 2025 Instagram had 1.74 billion users (Kemp, 2025), TikTok – 1.59 billion (Backlinko Team, 2025), and Facebook 3.07 billion (Kumar, 2025).

There is an ongoing discussion on how social media, especially social networking sites, affect modern communication. Research so far has tackled, among others, such issues as crisis communication (Abbas et al., 2021), health communication (Shi et al., 2018), political communication (Perloff, 2021) or youth language (Page et al., 2022; Stæhr et al., 2022). In this article we focus on government communication on Instagram, defined as social networking site (Moore, Craciun, 2021) and platform (Van Dijck et al., 2018), in the light of technological determinism.

Literature review

Among several approaches to human-technology relations, technological determinism focuses on the interconnections between prevailing modes of communication and the defining structural and cultural characteristics of a given society (Burnett, Marshall, 2003). It often convinces about technological regime, in which civilizational and cultural progress is subordinate to technological progress. Technological progress understood in this way remains beyond human influence, is unstoppable and often leads to disastrous yet inevitable consequences for humanity (Russell, Williams, 2002).

In the general discussion on technological determinism two types of this approach are recognized: hard and soft. Hard determinism states that technology has a total power in shaping society. New means of communication force social change on completely passive users, determining their culture, socio-political structure (Innis, 2007). Technology forces social change, because medium not only “carries” the message, but it is the message itself (McLuhan, 2004). This explains

why there are media appropriate for given messages, for example important issues are not discussed via phone or SMS. Technological determinists also point out that technology may function independently from the social system, and it aims at its own autonomy (Postman, 2004).

Soft technological determinism does not agree with the concept of the inevitability of new technological solutions. As Paul Levinson (1999) contends, technology should not be viewed as the direct cause of certain outcomes, but rather as the enabling condition without which those outcomes would not have been possible. Technology is enabler rather than imposer.

This division was further developed in the literature. The meta-analysis conducted by de la Cruz Paragas and Lin (2016, p. 1531) revealed four types of approaches to technological determinism (TD):

1. The functionalists: TD at its core is premised on an objectivist view of reality in which definitions exist external to individuals.
2. The radical structuralists: Technology serves as the infrastructure within which people interact with the caveat that its new and emergent forms are mutable and facilitates radical change in societal rituals and practices.
3. The radical humanists: Despite the inherent positivism of TD, there are those who believe that individuals can subvert these predeterminations. By empowering individuals on their own and through the features of design interfaces, TD then becomes a subjective affair.
4. The interpretivists: Similar to radical humanists, interpretivists see society's relationship with technology as subjective. However, the focus of their discourse is not so much radical change but the understanding of social ordering.

Consequently, contrasting ideas, soft technological determinism which posits that technology enables rather than dictates societal outcomes, and technological inevitability (hard TD) which states that we succumb it, leave a window for science to study STS (refers to Science, Technology, and Society). This nuanced perspective has led to various interpretations of technological determinism, ranging from objectivist views of technology's core function to more subjective understandings where human influence and interpretation play significant roles (or not) in shaping its impact. At this place it is worth to remember as Sally Wyatt (2008) said: "Technological determinism is still here and unlikely to disappear".

Technological determinism has been critiqued as overly narrow in scope, lacking historical context, and insufficiently nuanced in analysis (Chandler, 2002). However, as noticed by de la Cruz Paragas and Lin (2016), introduction of new communication technologies forces scholars to "revisit" technological determinism. However, de la Cruz Paragas and Lin (2016, p. 1529) use the phrase "communication technologies such as the Internet". Having regard to the different possibilities available to users on individual platforms, we claim that in times of platformization

(Nieborg et al., 2022), each platform should be discussed separately in terms of what communication technology it enables. For example, one may/may not:

- reuse and remix others' content using platform's tools;
- leave a like/dislike or other virtual reaction;
- write a comment, multimodal or solely verbal;
- livestream;
- create own profile group audience according to privacy settings; etc.

Therefore, each platform may or may not reflect specific aspects of technological determinism. According to this assumption, in this article we focus on Instagram communication.

Each social media platform has its own unique blend of style, grammar, and logic, which together create a new genre of communication. The literature uses the term vernacular platforms (Gibbs et al., 2014), meaning what is normal and everyday on a given platform; this "ordinariness" is created by the technical capabilities, architecture of a given medium, and the habits and behaviors of users. In other words, what kind of photos/videos/graphics should be published, how to describe them, how to respond to them, how to interact with other users, what is typical behavior, and what will sound and look inappropriate or false. In the case of politicians' posts, firstly, the comments are usually not very numerous, and secondly, they usually do not lead to developed discussions. It is worth noting that these observations concern political communication and official accounts of public institutions (Kampka, 2020).

The literature so far has established that politicians (ab)use hashtags. Östin and Lindgren (2024) suggest that politicians may either support the central message of a hashtag, reinterpret its meaning to align it with their party's ideology, or interact with it by challenging or undermining its original intent. Research in this field established term "political hashtag" (Rho, Mazmanian, 2020) and "political hashtag trend" (Weber et al., 2013).

Referring to government communication it is needed to dip into some theory about governmental/political marketing. Government communication is defined as the aims, role and practice of communication implemented by executive politicians and officials of public institutions in the service of a political rationale, and that are themselves constituted on the basis of the people's indirect or direct consent and are charged to enact their will (José Canel, Sanders, 2012). This broad definition encompasses communication from prime ministers, presidents, mayors, and local/regional governments, but excludes legislative deliberation, judicial functions, and public sector institutions focused on service delivery like the National Health Service.

Government communication inherently involves a principle of "publicness," characterized by a public institutional setting and a claim that government operates based on public consent. While some government communication can be private (e.g. personal content of officials), its institutional setting is fundamentally

public. Scammell (1995) points out that political marketing can improve the quantity and quality of information flow from the electorate to parties and candidates, “thus making them more sensitive and responsive to voters’ needs”. This responsiveness, extended beyond campaigning, could be seen as a key aspect of government communication – ensuring that governing bodies are attuned to public needs and communicate effectively with specific segments of voters, which perfectly suits to communication on Instagram. Social media hashtags are used in political promotions (Jamil et al., 2019), but they also serve pragmatic functions in diplomatic exchanges, e.g. being used as tools for criticism or alliance-building (Mohammadreza Mortazavi, Zandi, 2025). However, while a hashtag on Twitter organizes the topic of discussion, hashtags on Instagram are much more likely to build the context of a given photo.

Materials and methods

Trying to diagnose whether Instagram’s vernacular determines the design of government communication, we have applied the case study approach. The decision to focus on Instagram was dictated by the fact that discourse studies related to social media are conducted mainly from a multimodal perspective, but they are dominated by analyses concerning X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook, while Instagram as such has not been the subject of much attention so far. Due to the explorative nature of the research, we have decided to conduct a single case study, which can provide vital contributions to theory-testing in social sciences (Ulriksen, Dada-lauri, 2014). Our studied case is the German ministry of foreign affairs: *Auswärtiges Amt*. The decision to choose this particular institution was dictated by two facts: the German institution was chosen because one of the authors of this publication is a Germanist, while the choice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs resulted from the fact that they wanted to check whether informal tools such as social media are also used in the communication process at the international level, which is rather associated with the official language and formal style.

Our approach was instrumental – we have chosen given case to provide wider perspective on its basis, not due to our interest in the case itself (Mills et al., 2010). We aimed at a typical case (Seawright, Gerring, 2008). The analyzed sample consisted of 50 posts randomly chosen. The posts undergone multimodal analysis equally focused on form and content, and constituting a common field for media studies and linguistics (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2018). Due to the limited format of the research article, not all analyzed sources are discussed in the results section. Several examples are provided to support broader discussion, in a way appropriate for a qualitative approach.

Results and Discussion

Instagram is a social networking site where users can share photos and short videos with each other. These photos and videos can be described by adding hashtags – words or phrases preceded by the # sign, which allow you to quickly find posts on the same topic. As it turns out, the above practice is also used by the German Foreign Office. In this way, the hashtags they use help reach new recipients looking for specific political content, organize content around popular topics, and increase the visibility of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs profile in search results. Although hashtags on Instagram are one of the key elements and you can use as many as 30 of them, as it turns out from the analysis, in the case of posts published by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, their number oscillates on average from 1 to 5 per post. There is no doubt that a hashtag is a kind of link (you can click on the hashtag) that takes you to all the content that concerns the hashtag you have chosen. Thus, clicking on the profile of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs using the hashtags #SafeTravels, #EDSTA, #EDSTA2025 will take you to posts devoted to the topic of safe travel or the first European Day for Safe Travel Abroad. The hashtags #8Mai1945, #Kriegsende, #Kapitulation will take you to the topic of ending the war, and #WorldPressFreedomDay is a link to everything that concerns the topic of International Press Freedom Day. The hashtags used by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs always refer thematically to what is visible in the photo/video or possibly to what is included in the description. Thus, under a post with an LGBT flag in the photo, the hashtag #IDAHOBIT was placed, taking you to all content related to the rights of sexual minorities. The video presenting the report from the conference of 160 Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Defense was accompanied by the hashtags #Bundespolizei, #Peacekeeping, #Frieden, #Sicherheit, #Zusammenarbeit, while the post regarding the Schengen Treaty was signed with #Schengen, #Europa, #Reisen. As the analysis shows, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses hashtags wisely, using a combination of popular and niche ones, experimenting with their number and matching. It focuses on their quality and precise matching to the target group, and also takes care of the quality of the content so that the hashtags are a tool supporting the visibility of the Ministry on Instagram.

Instagram was created as a public photo album – a place where everyone can share photos with a short description. It is no wonder that the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also eager to use the opportunity to publish photos. Political visual communication in social media, including Instagram, opens up new possibilities for reaching recipients and showing them the lives of politicians, as well as administrative employees of the Ministry. On the profile of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we can see different types of behaviors and scenes – professional aspects of political life, the daily work of a politician or employee of the Ministry, media appearances, participation in important events – ceremonies and protests.

These various ways of manifesting the personalization of politics very often accompany the phenomenon of depoliticization of public discourse – it is primarily about shifting attention from ideological issues to matters related to lifestyle. What is also worth emphasizing is that Instagram encourages positive self-promotion rather than attacks on opponents, which distinguishes this platform from Twitter or Facebook.

Our analysis revealed that the attention of the recipient of the posts of the German Foreign Office is attracted by the use of realistic photos, which can serve an important documenting function. This type of multimodal connection works very well to bring closer the figure of one of the politicians. As noted by Makowska (2018), while the sub-level of language takes on the task of informing about fundamental issues, the sub-level of the image provides additional information on what the politicians look like, their (approximate) age, their style of dress, etc. It should be emphasized that among all the images, it is the realistic photos of the human face that have the highest potential to attract attention (Bakhshi et al., 2014), which means that the recipient of the post, who has several photos to choose from, will primarily focus on the one that shows a person (Makowska, 2018, p. 224), in this case a representative of the *Auswärtiges Amt*. Hashtags, widely analyzed in media studies, often in broad quantitative international analyses. When associated with photos of humans, they become a tool for influencing the recipient's memory, who is supposed to associate a person with certain slogans or ideas encoded in the hashtag. The hyperlinked nature of the hashtag allows you to be transferred to a list of posts referring to that idea with one click. In this way, hashtags and photos of faces can, when combined, serve as a kind of Instagram "encyclopedia of people" who support certain ideals or are involved in certain problems. This kind of posts differ from previously described, as they may serve as an independent source of knowledge about a person (in this case – an official) without redirecting to government website. Such a post becomes not only a tool for attracting attention, but also a self-sufficient tool for communicating within the framework defined by Instagram (Instagram's vernacular).

Proper reception of the posts of the German Foreign Office requires the recipient to have extensively developed multimodal competences. The physical proximity of both sublevels (language and image) means that a recipients with developed multimodal competence know that, for example, when they see a photo of a colorful LGBT flag in a post, later in it there will appear text dealing with LGBT groups. The image therefore allows for understanding the text before the content that is to be conveyed is fully verbalized (Makowska, 2020). This is especially important when the author of an online post has only a few characters at their disposal, as it allows the image sublevel to take on some of the work and thus relieve the language sublevel. The mechanism of semiotic synergy takes place, consisting in the mutual contextualization of language and image (Makowska, 2020, p. 101). Language, however,

is not only represented in the narrative about the national or international events, but also in hashtags, which may provide context for both image and its description.

A similar mechanism was observed in the post: *Jede Regierung hat die völkerrechtliche Pflicht, die Zivilbevölkerung zu schützen. Aber was, wenn eine Regierung das nicht tut?* [Every government has an obligation under international law to protect civilians. But what if it fails to do so?] (language sublevel) with a photo (image sublevel) showing Black people evacuating from their place of residence. The user will learn what specifically caused the need to evacuate by being redirected to the government website. This particular example shows that despite the limitations of space and thanks to the use of multimodality, a lot of information can be conveyed in one post, which has a chance to interest the recipients and motivate them to continue reading the official message (Makowska, 2020, p. 101). The administrators of the profile do not try to convey all the information in the form of a compressed Instagram post, but use the platform as a kind of promotion of the more broadly described information. It can therefore be said that while Instagram's vernacular influences communication in this case, the hypertext nature of online communication allows the ministry to direct the recipients towards a more traditional, linear description of events.

The multimodality is not determined by Instagram: users may publish pictures without descriptions, videos without sound or text accompanied with blank background (Instagram's Threads serve as verbal "posts", but they require additional privacy permissions and were not covered by this study). In terms of technological determinism, multimodality is rather an opportunity than must – which supports Levinson's idea of soft TD.

In government communication on Instagram, multimodal texts are used in various ways. Another interesting trick is to use an image in a post, and then just a question sentence in front of it: *Wann und wo war die erste Beteiligung der Bundeswehra an einer UN-Friedensmission?* [When and where did German armed forces first take part in peacekeeping action?]. Using the formula of open questions allows for the phatic function to be realized: the recipient of the post feels verbally accosted, talked to, and motivated to deepen their knowledge of a given topic (Makowska, 2020). Here, once again, the physical proximity of various elements, this time linguistic elements, is crucial (Zajc, 1982; Casasanto, 2008). The experience of reading a linear text causes a smooth transition from questions to a link redirecting to other pages, i.e. just like reading a structurally and semantically coherent text (Makowska, 2020, p. 97). This is another format that is not intended to provide comprehensive information, but to redirect users' attention to a problem that is more widely described in official sources. These types of posts serve more as a short, sometimes artistic form of attracting attention. Here, adaptation to the prevailing trends on Instagram is visible, but it does not occur in isolation from the official, linear and detailed information that is posted in an external source. Such cases show the specificity of government accounts on Instagram, which aim

not so much for “likes” and activity on a given account, but for redirects to an official government source. In this way, government communication on Instagram stands out from the broadly understood political one, in which politicians often, like celebrities (Knoblauch, 2025), compete in gaining “likes”.

Instagram has long ceased to be a service whose functionality is limited to publishing the static photographs or illustrations described above. On Instagram, video also plays a key role in engaging participants and building relationships with them. As the analysis shows, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs primarily uses Instagram Reels.

The Ministry uses the wide range of editing options for reels: (a) overlays subtitles on the published video; (b) adds special effects, emoticons or photos; (c) implements a soundtrack. In its reels, the Ministry also takes care of the so-called hook, i.e. an attention-grabbing beginning that makes the user stop scrolling and watch this material (Holder, 2022). However, it is worth emphasizing that despite the above, the content presented by German Ministry of Foreign Affairs is always authentic and close to the nature of the profile. As the analysis shows, the Ministry uses reels primarily to show behind-the-scenes work (both of politicians and office workers), publish interviews or reports from various types of business meetings, as well as to bring historical facts closer. Regardless of the purpose of publishing a specific reel, however, all of them contribute to shortening the distance between the video recipient and the institution. The above purpose is undoubtedly served by the videos in which we see the Ministry’s office workers – Elisa and Sarah – riding in the elevator to the canteen for lunch, as well as the reel of coverage of the open house at the Ministry.

In all the posts analyzed (pictures, photos or videos), multimodality plays an important role in creating the message. The combination of linguistic and visual elements creates a compact communication unit, coherent in terms of structure, functionality and semiosis, used to present specific information (Makowska, 2020, p. 100).

However, as Makowska (2018) notes, multimodality understood as the coexistence of different sign systems that share a common space and mutually contextualize each other may pose a challenge both for the creators of multimodal messages and for their recipients. The author of a message using linguistic and pictorial elements must be fully aware that a word combined with an image is read in a new context, while an image that is provided with a verbal commentary may take on a completely new meaning. The proper combination of linguistic and pictorial elements is therefore crucial to ensuring the expected message, while an ill-considered choice of means may lead to disruptions in communication and the reception of the message in a way that is inconsistent with the sender’s intention. A similar challenge also faces the recipient of a multimodal message, who is tasked with reconstructing the meaning of the message delivered using different sign systems (Makowska, 2018, pp. 217–218; Srihari, Rapaport, 1989).

In the case of multimodal texts, it should be remembered that they constitute something more than what directly results from the sum of the semantic potential of the individual components. The recipient must first be aware of the fact that there are certain connections between the elements sharing a given level, and only then must be able to determine the nature of these connections and draw on the knowledge provided to them on different levels and using different measures (Makowska, 2018, pp. 217–218). Understanding multimodal texts on Instagram takes place on three levels: (1) it requires understanding what is expressed verbally, (2) what is expressed visually, and (3) what is created thanks to the interaction of linguistic and visual elements (Makowska, 2018). The recipient must always assess which elements are the actual source of information for them and which have less communicative value, but instead perform, for example, an aesthetic function. While the sub-level of language is usually unambiguous in terms of meaning, in the case of the sub-level of the image, one can speak of much greater freedom of interpretation and a much greater influence of the verbal context in which a given image appears and which directs the way it is understood (Van Leeuwen, 2011; Makowska, 2018, pp. 221–222). Therefore, multimodal communication enabled by, among others, Instagram, carries a risk of misunderstanding – and such risk is something the governments cannot allow (Losh, 2009).

Conclusions

This article set out to explore the relationship between Instagram's vernacular and the specific of government communication, viewed through the lens of technological determinism. By analyzing a sample of posts from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the study confirms that while the platform's affordances influence message design, they do not rigidly dictate it. In this sense, Instagram functions more as an enabler than an imposer – supporting the paradigm of soft technological determinism.

Multimodality emerges as a defining feature of Instagram communication, allowing visual and linguistic elements to operate synergistically in the construction of meaning. However, the effectiveness of this synergy depends heavily on the communicative competence of both message creators and recipients. Improper integration of images and text may lead to misunderstanding, a risk particularly critical in the context of official government communication.

The study shows that the communicative strategy employed by the German Foreign Office aligns with broader governmental goals: posts are often used as attention-grabbing entry points that redirect audiences to more comprehensive and official sources of information. This dual-level strategy – initial engagement via In-

stagram, followed by deeper content through traditional channels – demonstrates an adaptation to platform logic without full subjugation to it.

While Instagram enables creative and engaging forms of public communication, it does not entirely replace linear, text-based dissemination of information. The platform's affordances (such as hashtags, hyperlinks, and visual emphasis) are strategically harnessed but remain subordinate to the broader aim of institutional credibility and public trust. In conclusion, government communication on Instagram reflects a hybrid model in which technological affordances are negotiated rather than deterministically adopted, highlighting the continued relevance of soft technological determinism in the digital age.

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