

Corona: New Contents and Chronologies

Abstract: For many people, the corona pandemic meant staying at home and cutting short on social contacts. What was left was the communication on social network services (SNS). However, as many people could not leave their homes, the typical content based on photography and videos had to change. By looking at randomly selected Instagram accounts, the article identifies various reactions to the crisis. Besides crisis-related postings, there was more focus on the individual, especially more close-cut self-portraits. Further, there was more focus on certain activities, among them creative work and yoga, which could be understood as a strategy to cope with the situation, yet, the posting of such photographs could be, at least in the case of yoga, counterproductive as the practice gets reduced to its visual aspect. Further, the chronology of the photographs was more discontinuous than before: People were sharing memories, but also used older pictures to create more variety, to show the synchrony of various identities, or to follow their stream of consciousness.

Keywords: Social Media, Instagram, Photography, Visual Studies, Corona, Crisis

Short before the so-called “Corona crisis” reached Germany, the Rhineland celebrated carnival just like every year and people listened to the traditional carnival hymns. Most of them have a slightly melancholic melody, and there is a certain melancholy in carnival itself: it is a short festival that will soon be over and will be followed by Lent. This was never as blatant as 2020 due to the corona crisis. “EnLeevensaat, die stirvuschnell nit us” – “a lifestyle doesn’t die out so soon” and “Jo et bliev, bliev, blievhee, wie et wor” – “Yes it stays, stays, stays here as it was” sings the carnival band “Miljö” about the life in Cologne, one of the most carnivalistic cities in Germany.

However, does this still apply in 2020? Everyday life in Europe had changed a lot when COVID-19 reached the continent. The streets were empty and social life was mostly limited to telephone, messenger services, and social media. In this article, I look at the social media, more precisely, Instagram postings of 50 people during the beginning of the corona crisis from 14th of March 2020 to 14th of April, a time, in which social isolation was demanded in many countries all over the world.

Looking at Social Media

Social media are omnipresent, maybe during the crisis more than ever, and their impact has been frequently proven, be it with regard to the processing of information (Roesse 2018), to politics (see Shirky 2011), or fashion (see Colliander and Dahlén 2011). As it seems, social media reflect, favour, or generate certain dynamics, modes of communications, and understandings of the world. Therefore, and due to their accessibility, social media are said to be “an unmatched resource for research” (Miller 2014, 1).

According to Jan Kietzmann et al., social media serve various functions: they help to show presence, to share content, to build relationships, to communicate identity, to engage in conversations, to form groups, and to work on individual or group-related reputation (see 2011, 243). Aqdas Malik et al. provide an overview of previous studies and show which factors underlie the use of SNS, including affection seeking, attention seeking, disclosure, entertainment, habitual past-time, information sharing, social influence, and social interaction (see 2016: 132). Following J.N. Sheth et al.’s categories of values influencing the consumer choice behaviour, Petri Hallikainen distinguishes among others the social value (if the user acquires value from associating with certain social groups and maintains one’s social images through the platforms), the emotional value (if desired emotions are aroused), and the epistemic value (if the use makes more curious, provides novelty or knowledge) (see Hallikainen 2015: 12). Giuseppe Riva et al. link the usage of social media to the way they are able to satisfy various categories of needs using Abraham Maslow’s categorization (see Riva 2016: 7f.). Even though Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is quite debatable, they can show that starting from safety needs, the categories can all be served by social media.

All these thoughts show that the usage of social media meet many needs, among them needs that might be extremely important in times of crises, e.g. safety, social, and self-actualization needs.

Given the tremendous exposure of social media today, it is assumable that we are in the midst of a new communication landscape – and given the tremendous effect of the corona crisis, it just seems all too useful to look at their relation.

Looking at Photographs and Videos

If one is interested in how the situation affects people’s personal life circumstances, pictures seem to be a very interesting medium to look at, as the pictures we take and share tell a lot about ourselves and are often

selected on purpose to communicate identity: personal photography and videography are closely connected to the inner core, they are tools that help to build and express identity (see van Dijck 2008:58), or, in the words of Ada Hannah: "All photographs can be viewed as self-portraiture." Many scholars have described a "general incompleteness of today's tendentially fragile or precarious (post-)modern patchwork identity (Ferchhoff 2011: 107) which makes identity work particularly necessary. In the following, it is mostly referred to photography as it is the more used medium on Instagram.

Recipients, as is repeatedly stated, have astonishing trust in photography, they are inclined to believe in what photographs show: "The epistemically special character of photographs is revealed by this fact: we are inclined to trust them in a way we are not inclined to trust even the most accurate drawings or paintings" (Cohen and Meskin 2010: 70), even though by now everyone knows that photographs can be staged and retouched – in short: heavily manipulated. Yet, especially "image-based platforms" such as Instagram "have the potential to ameliorate loneliness due to the enhanced intimacy they offer" (Pittman and Reich 2016: 155), which is made possible by getting insights into somebody else's (supposedly "real") life. At the same time, the own pictures usually reach far more people than in most real-life situations. These recipients often do not react, some click on the heart symbol ("give love"), and even fewer leave comments.

The postings are usually designed to result in "likable content": "Fellow photographers seem to approve of pictorial qualities, and not to be concerned about aiming a critical or political statement" (Tiftental and Manovich 2018: 176). It is often particularly enlightening to look at people's portfolios or accounts – here, they design their homes in the respective medium, and this is how they represent themselves. Looking at these accounts, one sees parallels to private photo albums: Jorgen Christensen et al. observe that "the selection of photographs structures the memory of personal lives, and snapshots construe history and reality. This construction of personal history is characterized by exclusion. Only a few, if at all any snapshots depict the workplace and colleagues. It is a history of life as leisure" (Christensen et al. 2015: 72). Unlike private photo albums, social media content is far more public, either accessible to everyone as in the sample, or to a selected group which can by far exceed the family members and circle of friends. Therefore, it can be tempting to confuse the private and the public sphere when using social media.

However, this does not necessarily imply a loss of control: "In social networks the physicality and immediacy of a real body is replaced by a virtual body consisting of a number of partial images and context: a disembodied head, a torso and legs in a bathing suit, and so on" (Riva 2016: 10). This fragmentation enables more control and consequently more chance for a successful impression management. Yet, Riva et al. also notice that external intervention such as comments or the use of tagging can easily modify the way other members of the network interpret the identity. Thus, using social media can mean both: being more in control of the representation of one's identity and eventually losing control over it.

Research Framework

Whenever looking at social media, it is inevitable to explain the respective personal network and its peculiarities. For this study, I created a new Instagram account that did not have any connections to my actual network. I chose Instagram, as the network is focused on visuals, especially photographs and came up with a sampling method that tries to avoid distortions and filter bubbles (see Pariser 2011).

To start my network, I searched for city names of large to medium-sized cities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and The Netherlands and followed people, who included these names in their nicknames or descriptions. I chose cities from these countries, as they are relatively comparable, sharing similar languages and the Corona crisis went on in a relatively similar way, even though restrictions were not everywhere the same comprehensive.

Yet, including a city's name only gives a tendency and does not really tell where people are from or spend their lives, but as the Corona crisis and the restrictions affected many countries, I guess the situation was still relatively similar. It might be a specific sample, because it is unnecessary to include the name of one's city, thus, the people in my sample might be more connected to their cities than others. As stated above, it is also not clear whether the persons live in the respective cities or not and if they do, the sample is more focused on people from cities than from rural areas, even though people from rural areas might affiliate with a city in their area to make themselves easier to locate. However, city life was more affected by the regulations due to the Corona crisis than rural life, therefore, the tendency to focus on cities makes sense.

For ethical reasons, I chose to only follow profiles that do not require a request, thus profiles that are visible to everyone anyway. Furthermore, I did not follow profiles that posted less than once a week on average, that were very business oriented, belonged to politicians, were devoted to one singular topic, e.g. only to drawings made by the person, only to his or her shop, her band, her pet etc., or had more than 200,000 followers, as the research interest rather refers to usual people than to celebrities. The limit of 200,000 followers can be viewed as arbitrary. However, I chose it based on my previous experience with Instagram and my

personal networks: Among most people with less than 200,000 followers, Instagram is apparently not a main job / occupation. Yet, there were people with as little as 8000 followers who had nearly every post marked as a paid advertisement, which I consequently unfollowed. With these criteria I wanted to achieve a sample of people whose topic is their own life in its various facets.

I started by selecting 50 profiles. During the course of the months, some of them only posted 0 to 3 pictures – even though they had been more active before – whereas others increased their posting frequency.

It was striking that with the setup I chose, I found mostly profiles belonging to women – around two thirds – even though worldwide, there are slightly more men using Instagram (Statista 2020). Men more often had monothematic profiles, e.g. as photographers or athletes, or were administrating the accounts of businesses, e.g. sport shops or restaurants. I estimate the age group of my sample between 20 to 50 years, with a peak around 30 to 40.

Looking at the people active on social media, there is great heterogeneity in the way users are community-oriented and how they enact roles and construct meanings (see Thomas et al. 2013): some are posting a lot, others comment a lot, and some appear to be not very active, yet might follow the postings of others intensely. Of course, some of accounts I followed also used Instagram stories, however, I decided not to take the stories into account because they work differently, enable more sharing of content, and as they disappear after 24 hours, they are not meant to draw a more permanent picture of the account holder's life.

With regard to the older photographs and videos up to March 2020 posted by the people I followed, most of them were usually into travelling, sports, visiting restaurants, museums, or events, showing their family life, their friends and pets, their homes, their stylings, etc., and usually did not post much controversial or political content. Obviously, the "Corona situation" significantly changed their lives and was mentioned at least once by more than 80% of the people, e.g. by using hashtags like #corona or #westayathome.

Thus, it is assumable that typical profiles of people who are mainly posting about their lives must have changed within the time of restriction and it is conceivable that their Instagram behaviour changed as well.

Photo- and videographic Reactions to the Crisis

Looking at the profiles before the Corona crisis, there were clearly more photographs and videos showing events, friends, travels etc. – thus, even at first sight, it is obvious that something had changed, even though this was not the case for every profile, there were a little less than 10% in which I could not detect any change, not even a text or hashtag referring to the crisis.

Scientific literature distinguishes countless strategies how to cope with crises, often focusing on the way people are able to get through it without major problems or developing disorders, thus, on resilience, which is understood both as a trait at the individual and the community level (see Suedfeld 2015: 3). Coping strategies "refer to cognitive and behavioral efforts to modulate internal and external demands appraised as exceeding personal resources" (Smith et al. 2016: 318). Smith et al. identify three strategies as mostly studied: Task-oriented coping, which includes the try to find solutions and the positive reappraisal of situations e.g. as chance or excitement (see Burtles 2007: 2), emotion-oriented coping strategies such as seeking support or emotional disclosure, and avoidance-oriented coping strategies, among them disengaging from stressful situations and seeking distractions. These strategies show similarities to the above mentioned reasons to use social media in general.

As it seems, people used various strategies for their postings during the first weeks of the crisis. Whereas in other networks such as Facebook or Twitter people seemed to share more newspaper or blog articles, official videos, or memes, gave their opinions or posted Corona-related jokes, this was not as much done on Instagram (except for stories) as the platform's design does not encourage sharing content or posting text based content.

Crisis-related Postings

Especially during the first two weeks, there were quite some Corona-related postings, which usually represented the personal concerns, e.g. pictures showing the persons posting wearing face masks, using computers with video conferences, or pictures with toilet paper addressing or making fun of the huge run on toilet paper in the beginning of the crisis. Among these pictures, there were few memes, but the most was own material. Around 30% of the account holders posted clearly crisis-related pictures at least once, and all in all more than 90% referred to the crisis in their hashtags or texts, even if the pictures were not crisis-related at first sight, but e.g. looked like usual self-portraits.

These postings reflected different coping strategies: some were humorous, others worried. In many postings, social responsibility was emphasized and consequently, it was also reassured that the person posting feels committed to it. Some postings related to helping others, at least through the hashtags, matching the fact

that resilience and altruism often belong together, which was previously shown e.g. after the 9/11 attacks (see Suedfeld 2015: 7).

Focus on the Individual

As already discussed, both photography respectively videography and the usage of social media are tightly connected to a person's identity (Riva et al. 2016: 5). In general, posting self-portraits is very common on Instagram. Yet, for some profiles, there was an increase in self-portraits up to 50% during the observed period and the self-portraits posted often were cut closer, focusing more on the person's face.

The increased focus on the individual did not only refer to self-portraits, but also to pictures showing the own family and pets, the own interior and garden. The home was often presented like a retreat through the texts and hashtags. As typical for social media, identity was communicated through these pictures and in this case, the recipient might get admitted further to the individual's privacy than before. Still, it is assumable that people control the way they present themselves by carefully choosing dresses, make-ups, settings etc. (see Jerrentrup 2018: 113).

For the accounts in the sample, the "own" had always been the main topic, among them the own parties, the own travels, restaurant visits etc. Thus, showing the individual and her things is not a fundamentally new tendency, but just a way of narrowing down the "own", which was probably due to the situation that it was more difficult to produce other content. Social desirability probably also plays a role: Showing photos of social interaction with friends, of parties, travels etc. during this period could have been associated with irresponsibility. A self-portrait or a picture of the own flat's interior consequently was an easy way to generate content. Yet, it should be kept in mind that all this may be a logical step, but it is not a necessity; one does not necessarily "have to" take self-portraits, photograph or film one's own home or family.

Activities

A second change I could notice was an increase of postings related to certain activities such as doing fitness and dancing at home, practicing yoga, reading books, cooking, drawing, painting, taking artsy photographs etc. Of course, these are activities that can be quite easily done at home. In this way, the person posting showed that she remained active, and communicated the discipline to do something useful instead of being lazy, even without social control as in sport groups or at work.

In this context, I would like to highlight two practices: one particular focus was on creative activities. Eleven of the profiles that previously had not shown such activities now showed photographs or videos of them. This is an interesting development in that many creative professions were particularly affected by the restrictions caused by the crisis. Most people, who worked in creative fields, were classified as "not system-relevant" unlike doctors, nurses, supermarket sellers, and educators. Nevertheless, the crisis seemed to favor artistic activity, be it because the creative, e.g. going to the theatre or cinema, was missing in everyday life, be it because of the extra time that many people had now or because it helped them to get a better grip on the situation as illustrated by art therapy. All these aspects were mentioned in the texts and hashtags.

Another aspect is that there was an increase of pictures related to yoga in several profiles, some of them having never shared any postings like this before. Yoga, understood as finding inner peace and a detachment from the outside (see Kishida et al. 2018), does not fit well to the focus on the outside, which photography and videography obviously include. The spirit of yoga is also difficult to capture through images, so that generally two strategies can often be seen: images of yoga in impressive landscapes should bring the spiritual dimension through the reference to nature, or, especially when asanas are shown, yoga is associated with perfect control of the body and presented as a kind of fitness. In the lockdown situation, it was basically possible to go out into nature, but it was more difficult to visit impressive locations. Therefore, the pictures were more frequently taken in the house, the garden, or places that looked like nearby nature. The increase in yoga-related postings can be seen in the fact that the crisis offers the opportunity to concentrate on the inner self and the elementary. They also communicate a positive reassessment of the situation – finding peace through the forced shutdown.

Twisted chronology

The last change I noticed was that more people posted discontinuously, my estimate is an increase of 30%, yet, it is hard to clearly sort pictures regarding this criteria.

There had been discontinuous postings before, i.e. postings that do not follow the actual chronology. It is difficult to estimate how many there are, because as a usual follower, one is not informed about many details. On the basis of some hints, however, one can conclude that there is discontinuity, for example, when noticing duplications of photos, but also when identifying certain contents such as hairstyles or very specific stylings that repeat in an unusual way such as a change from one hair colour or cut to another and back.

Various reasons can be detected that make it useful to post older pictures. First, it enables more variety, which seems to be a value in itself (see Xuenan 2015: 42). Variety implies two aspects: the profile is more interesting for the follower, thus, the discontinuous posting could be done with a focus on the (potential) follower to please him. Furthermore, it communicates something socially desired about the person herself, that she leads an interesting, varied life.

Another aspect is regularity. This again is based on the fact that “people engage in social relationships with other people with expectations of receiving social rewards from the interaction” (Hallikainen 2015: 10). Posting discontinuously helps to get some regularity, even though one currently might not have time to create new content or might not be in a situation that is visually interesting.

Further, it can be understood with regard to identity: the synchronous aspect of identity treats different identities that exist at the same time (see Henning 2012: 21ff.), which can be illustrated through different pictures that were taken in the past, yet still refer to actual facets of the identity. However, identity also means understanding oneself as a coherent being, which changes over time, but also identifies with what it used to be. Therefore, temporal aspect of identity, the “narrative identity construction” (see Schaupp 2012: 77) also can be reflected in discontinuous postings, sometimes clearly illustrated if people show “before – after” photographs, often accompanied with texts like “myself 10 years ago.”

Moreover, the order might follow the stream of consciousness: “The stream of consciousness – that flow of perceptions, purposeful thoughts, fragmentary images, distant recollections, bodily sensations, emotions, plans, wishes, and impossible fantasies – is our experience of life” (Pope and Singer 1978: 1) and as such, there is an inner coherence in the “stream”, but it does not have to stick to the “outer” temporality.

During the lockdown, some obviously older pictures were posted and highlighted as such – for example, photos of festivals along with the text “summer without festivals”. Probably, this was made obvious as most people either anyway knew that these must be old pictures, or as it could have led to harsh critique if the person would show that he/she is not sticking to the rules.

Portraits of the own person that were posted discontinuously (identifiable by taking a look at the person’s account), were rarely explained with regard to their chronology, but rather accompanied by some other thoughts, by a poem, a proverb etc.

From narcissism to transcendence

“What doesn’t kill us can enlighten us as to just how strong we humans can be” (Suedfeld 2015: 15) – I would have liked to conclude with this quote. However, with my data, I cannot tell whether people grew stronger or not – due to social desirability, self-disclosure on Instagram may not be a reliable source. Furthermore, the “we” does not really fit: as it seems, there is even more focus on the individual than before. Often, this is associated with narcissism and egoism. When criticising society, the self-portrait becomes the symbol of a growing tendency towards narcissism (see Pearlman 2013). Yet, several theorists rather interpret it as an offer for communication (Maleyka 2019:5) or a means of communication (Authenrieth 2014: 52). Whereas for Michel Foucault the panoptic, the prison tower still stood for hierarchy, total surveillance and the loss of identity (see Altmeyer 2016: 44), in our context, the panoptic is perceived in the service of networking and the gain of identity, and the associated visibility is strongly desired by the individual, even or especially during difficult times.

Yet, the focus is still strongly on the individual, even more so during the period of social isolation. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to post things that transcend one’s physical presence by representing meaningful activities such as creative work or yoga. Here, one might come closer to the vision of cyberspace as a spiritual, immaterial sphere (see Lackner 2014: 95f.). While this can be understood as just another kind of focus on the individual, it can also be seen as self-healing. Through the presentation in the social media, one commits to a certain lifestyle, so to speak. One tries to conform to the image one has drawn of oneself, if only because such images usually require follow-ups: a yoga posting seldom comes alone, and with regard to creative work one usually shows the process and the product, as well as the further development. Even more generally, one can see in this the desire for something meaningful, which the ordinary self-portrait obviously does not fulfil sufficiently – the meaning lies therefore not only in the own ego, but in the person’s actions, through which she in turn shapes her identity. The increase in discontinuous postings shows empowerment: the account holder decides for herself in what order she presents moments of her life, what should be current for her and what not.

Here, a creative approach to the framework offered by the medium “Instagram” can be recognized: even if the structure of the account suggests continuity, one does not have to follow it, even if a visual medium tends to disadvantage certain topics, one can still bring them in. During the period of social isolation, Instagram may have helped in a special way to give people a sense of connection and meaningful action. However, it remains to be seen whether such a self-referential medium is generally useful in order to have a positive effect

on the feeling of identity and belonging. “EnLeevensaat, die stirvuschnell nit us”(“a lifestyle doesn’t die out so soon”) – so far, it is not clear, how much the lifestyle and the usage of Instagram will change in the long run.

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