Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm
Election influencers on TikTok

Strategic utilisation of the short video format during the 2022 election campaign in Sweden

Abstract: In an increasingly fragmented digital media ecology, political actors constantly experiment with new formats, styles, and collaborations in order to reach specific segments of the citizenry. In this struggle, new and emerging platforms are explored as venues for political campaigning. This chapter explores how two political parties, the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats, utilised the short video format on TikTok during the 2022 election campaign. The chapter presents an analysis of the strategic relationship between influencers and political parties, exploring how TikTok's short video format impinges on how political messages are designed and communicated. The results highlight the performative aspects of political communication and point to how influencer politics can build on very different logics of authenticity work, using influential users and their followers as a gateway for political campaigning.

Keywords: TikTok, election campaign, influencers, political communication

1 Introduction

As a result of an increasing platformisation of digital political communication (Gorwa, 2019), political actors compete for attention and impact in a digital ecology saturated by information. Due to this competition, new platforms are continuously explored as venues for political messages and campaign efforts, where political actors experiment with new formats, styles, and contents. In this respect, contemporary political communication mirrors the development in the online advertising industry, where political messages are tailored along the line of marketing logics (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). Following this development, social media platforms also constitute venues for so-called influencers; users that accommodate both "ordinariness" and a kind of celebrity status or digital micro-celebrity on a platform (Arnesson, 2024). Influencers are mainly known for their role as advertisers for commercial businesses promoting products as well as increasing "brand awareness" for commercial gain (Carter, 2016). However, similar performative practices can be used for packaging and "selling" political messages (Harff & Schmuck, 2023; Kissas, 2022), and influencers can potentially constitute a "third space" for

political communication in social media, impacting the attitudes of their followers (Suuronen et al., 2022).

An example of a new and increasingly influential social media platform is the video-sharing app TikTok, known for spearheading the short video format. While much research on politics and social media has focused on platforms such as Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram, less attention has been paid to the utilisation of TikTok by political actors in election campaigns. TikTok has become one of the most popular platforms worldwide and is known for its entertaining user-generated content, featuring videos with particularly young users dancing, lip-syncing to music, or performing various talents. TikTok is characterised by a short video format that is tailored to fit production and consumption patterns of mobile devices. Even if TikTok is still not a major venue for political party communication, it is used extensively for spreading political messages and it has increasingly attracted the attention of political actors and their professional communication strategists. An important backdrop to this development is the rapidly increasing user fragmentation. TikTok has been pointed out as a potential venue where particularly young citizens can be reached by political messages. This demographic group is not to any large extent available on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter/X (cf. Cervi et al., 2023).

Similar to other platforms, TikTok is home to a myriad of influencers whose content has a greater reach than that of ordinary users. Influencers can incorporate social and political engagement in their communicative repertoire, for example, by raising awareness of climate change or human rights issues, or by endorsing particular parties or political candidates (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022). This engagement can reflect social and political commitments, but it can also strengthen the brand qualities and social capital of influencers. From that perspective, socio-political engagements of influencers can be understood as a form of "authenticity work" (Arnesson, 2024; Banet-Weiser, 2021), a necessary component utilised in order to stay relevant and trustworthy in the digital public sphere. Simultaneously, audiences are "increasingly aware that authenticity is performative, that is, not something you have but rather something you do" (Arnesson, 2024, p. 1470). Thus, there are credibility and authenticity risks attached to the performed social and political engagement of influencers. Political influencers can be already established individuals on a platform, who take positions on, or sides in various political issues, but the definition can also include political actors who adopt advertising strategies used by influencers, for political purposes.

This chapter presents an analysis of the relationship between influencers and political parties, exploring how TikTok's short video format was utilised during the Swedish general election campaign of 2022. The aim is to highlight the performative aspects of political communication on a platform that is characterised by en-

tertainment, performance, and play. We seek to understand how the structural opportunities and constraints of TikTok's short video format – its "platform features" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) – impact the way political communication is produced by political actors. The chapter illustrates this phenomenon through a qualitative analysis focusing on multimodal features (texts, music, visual elements, settings, tonality, etc.) of Swedish campaign videos.

First, we assess a collaboration between the Swedish Left Party and a group of specific influencers, popular within a very delimited segment of the citizenry, namely immigrant youth in the suburban areas of larger cities. Here we analyse a case where social media influencers are used as communicative proxies for a political party. In the second case, we assess how political actors of the Sweden Democrats manage the short video format, utilising communicative styles and aesthetics emanating from commercial influencers in order to promote the party during the election campaign. For ethical reasons the users/influencers have been anonymised.

2 Communication, celebrity, intimacy and influencer politics

Dissolving boundaries between politics and media is a central feature of the contemporary hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) and online communication has become an integrated element of political actors' strategic and routinised daily practices. This implies that political discourse is produced, packaged, and distributed strategically on a broad array of digital platforms and social media services in order to reach various sections of the electorate. As many scholars have pointed out, the adaptation of political discourse to various platforms has had vast consequences for the development of political communication.

It has been argued that politics has become increasingly individualised, personalised (Metz et al., 2020), professionalised (Davis, 2019), and affective (Boler & Davis, 2020), and also converged with some of the characteristics of celebrity culture (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a). Moreover, the diverse set of social logics characterising digital media platforms, including their algorithmic infrastructure and socio-technical features, impact the way political messages are tailored and curated to maximise impact. For example, communication strategies from the public relations (PR) and the advertising industries, such as micro-targeting and narrow casting, are becoming increasingly visible in political communication too (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014).

The performative aspects of political actors are indeed not new to the digital age, they can be traced back to the advancement of commercial television (van Zoonen, 2005). In particular, the advent of the *politician as celebrity* or *politicians in celebrity contexts*, during the television era, illustrated among other things by politicians' presence in light-hearted popular and commercial television shows, reveals an important shift towards what has since then become normalised appearances of political actors (cf. Street, 2010; Eriksson, 2010). Within the post-mass communication age, or what Strömbäck and Kiousis (2014) define as the "postmodern" phase of political campaigning, political actors appear in, and indeed cast themselves, across a various set of self-performative and self-personalised identities and roles.

We have previously referred to this phenomenon as a "performative turn" in political communication (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a). This turn is marked by a broader process of political "celebritisation" where staged connectivity with various actors and contexts plays a significant role in the social media practices of politicians (Ekman & Widholm, 2014, 2017b). Thus, political actors navigate a vast set of roles and identities, and can, when suitable, adapt to the characteristics of celebrity culture. They can be "attractive objects in themselves" (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a), and on TikTok, the combination of both (visual) intimacy and (cultural) sociability are fundamental performative features. Intimacy is organised around a performed relationship between the influencer and the audience, realised through a set of mediatised multimodal techniques, enabled by the socio-technical features of the platform (Abidin, 2021). Sociability is realised through a set of discursive techniques that produce the political influencer as a trustworthy and authentic source of (political) information.

Intimacy and sociability are also organised around the audience capacity to identify with the influencer, but simultaneously distinguishing the specific qualities that characterise the influencer as an unordinary or extraordinary user. Thus, the platformed presence of the influencer builds on a combination of "performed intimacy, authenticity and access" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Intimacy and sociability also entail highly affective dimensions, which underpin user engagement on social platforms. The distribution practices of social media content rely on emotive work that goes into sharing, circulating, commenting, liking, reacting, etc. in user networks (Paasonen et al., 2015). This implies that political content needs to adapt a range of emotive resources in order to gain attention in the information flows on platforms such as TikTok. Moreover, the political influencer is a person that can combine the specific performative elements that characterise a social media platform with a political message and equally construct a sense of trustworthiness. The specific features of the short video format are key to understanding the way political (and other) influencers appear and perform.

3 The short video format in strategic political communication

When TikTok emerged as a global platform for video-sharing, it distinguished itself from other video platforms such as YouTube, with a focus on a short video format, produced by ordinary users. The essence of videos on TikTok is moving visual communication enhanced by multimodal experimentation and user performance produced with, and consumed on, mobile phones (Hase et al., 2023). The consumption pattern of TikTok videos is very rapid and builds on scrolling through feeds facilitated by powerfully tweaked recommendation algorithms. TikTok videos compete for the viewer's attention within a very brief attention span, and thus need to capture the viewer instantly in order to obtain the user's interest. The strong focus on music and (bodily) performance also make TikTok different from other video platforms. In this respect, TikTok has established a niche that has forced some of its competitors to develop similar platform features, reflected in the development of short video formats such as Instagram and Facebook "Reels" and "Shorts" on YouTube (Abidin, 2021).

For political actors, the short video format facilitates the expression of political messages through music, storytelling, a variety of emoticons, and through the re-mixing of other actors' content. On TikTok, users can choose music from a library or upload their own tunes, enabling the production of sound memes, and dance and lip-syncing practices that characterise the content on the platform (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). The incorporation of music in political communication is not new, but has long served as a cultural marker to political campaigning (Street, 2013). Since the short video format leans on emotive self-presentation strategies, often channelled through intimate, playful, and humoristic ways, these become important for political actors as well (e.g. Metz et al., 2020). Political actors need to adopt elements of these multi-layered performances of personalisation that dominate the format, in order to attract the attention of users. The specific features of the short video format can steer political actors toward the same playful participation, role plays, etc. that dominate the content, and current research suggests that this is reflected in how individual politicians use TikTok through personal "politainment" and brand-building (Cervi et al., 2023; Vijay & Gekker, 2021).

As illustrated above, the short video format offers a broad range of creative semiotic resources. For example, built-in resources such as emoticons, stickers, and text layers can be used to visually construct a multimodal message. The communicative practices also include the adaptation and circulation of popular video memes, where users can add new meaning as the content migrates between different users and contexts (e.g. Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The circulation of the

short video on TikTok is primarily centred on algorithmic systems that prioritise creative and collaborative practices over the number of followers a particular user has. For example, the collective feature of content production of TikTok is illuminated by the central role of re-mixing and replication of other users' content. Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue that "imitation" is a fundamental principle guiding user behaviour on the platform. In order to highlight the performative aspects of political communication, including how influencers are used strategically in terms of short video production, we ask the following three research questions: (1) How were the aforementioned features of TikTok's short video format adopted by political actors during the election campaign? (2) How were emotive elements used in order to establish connectivity to users? (3) How were political discourses adapted to the specific features of the short video format and the wider characteristics of influencers on TikTok?

4 Case one: Influencer politics by proxies

Within the final month of the Swedish general election in 2022, the Left Party (a socialist, feminist, and ecological party) announced a collaboration with a group of local social media profiles. The project, named "Powered by Vänsterpartiet", involved five creators living in so-called "vulnerable communities", a term used by the police since 2015 to label segregated and socio-economically disenfranchised communities with large immigrant populations. According to the Left Party, the aim was to "allow the creators to use their creativity and tell about their reality". The participants were selected through applications that focused on five themes: "Power, future, place, microphone, and home". The selection considered the "level of creativity, inclusion of artistic styles, storytelling and content that evoked emotions" (Vänsterpartiet, 2022). The collaboration resulted in four short videos, published on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter/X, each video featuring and/or produced by one or two of the local profiles. One of the profiles is a known influencer while the others included a comedian, a creator, a film maker, and actors. The party launched separate accounts for the campaign on TikTok and Instagram, but also disseminated the videos on their various party platforms and channels. The collaboration was the first one of its kind in Sweden, where an established political party paid social media influencers/creators to produce content for an election campaign (Törner, 2022). In total, the four videos have received 287,000 views and 9,025 interactions (likes, shares) on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube combined (as of September 2023), comments were closed on all platforms.

4.1 The collaboration videos

The first published video features a female "influencer" from a Stockholm suburb. The video is one minute long and called "Marginalised". The video starts with a rhyming monologue with soft mellow music in the background. The influencer is seated opposite a young man on the grass outside an apartment building, they are facing each other. It is sunset and soft swaying green trees are visible in the background. The female then turns away from the man and faces the camera, and her monologue starts. The video then shifts to a new scene and a beat is added to the music. The monologue continues but now as a more traditional rap, and the two persons are now positioned on an electric scooter with the female driving slowly through the community. The video ends with a zoomed-out image of the two persons leaving on a bridge. The image then fades and displays a dictionary explanation of the word "Marginalised". At the end, white text on a black background reads "Election day is 11 September. Use your voice. Vänsterpartiet.se".

The political discourse is centred on the experience of marginalisation and discrimination, including not being listened to, and it comprises an appeal to those in power, to start listening (e.g. Galpin, 2022). The monologue is also texted in yellow, centred in the shot. The video could be understood as an example of the spoken word genre adapted to a social media platform, and incorporates some of the features common to the short video format such as storytelling, added music, text, and performance (Kaye et al., 2022). The latter is realised through the bodily presence and movements of the two actors, first, more intimate in the grass, and then in public riding a scooter. The video constructs two central social relations, first with the viewers ("us"), and then to the subjects of power ("you within power, time to take responsibility"). This symbolic connectivity (Ekman & Widholm, 2017b) rests on the shared experiences articulated in the monologue, including emotions of neglect and not being listened to, thus stressing the experience of social marginalisation shared by the influencer and the (possible) viewers (Galpin, 2022).

The second video is called "Living with prejudice" and starts with the camera zooming in from above on the housing estates of a known Stockholm suburb, accompanied by a hip-hop tune. The music quickly fades out and the image shifts to two young males located in a corner shop. The mood is humorous and the two males are packing crisps and other snacks, while talking to each other. The dialogue is centred on leaving the suburb and moving to another place outside the so-called "vulnerable communities". One of the actors claims he has a contact on Facebook that can get them two apartments outside "orten" (slang connoting suburb and usually referring to so-called vulnerable communities), they only need a bank mortgage and an electronic bank-ID. He asks his friend to swish

(an electronic system for money transfer) him cash. His argument is that a potential move would mean that they will no longer suffer regular inspections. He then turns to two females standing by the counter to confirm that his idea is good. They look at him with contempt and say, "do you think you will blend in with them … you will be searched wherever you go and anonymous witnesses will follow you". One of the females interrupts the conversation (about swishing money to this and that), by saying, "vote correct – that's all". The two men then decide that the best thing is to vote in the election, but perhaps also to obtain the necessary money to move. At the end, the same message as in the first video is displayed.

The short video is a sketch comedy, common to the short video format on TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022), where serious issues such as regular police visitations and suspicions aimed at random young black men are blended with a humorous but realistic everyday dialogue. The use of an up-tempo hip-hop song in the intro is key to catching the viewers' attention, and a common feature on the platform. The indoor setting resembles a local minimarket/corner shop, distinctive for immigrant suburbs. The video relies on an affective humoristic performance, including body language and the idiosyncratic dialogue between the two young men, with the additional sarcastic interactions by the two females. The short video could be seen as a typical comedy skit. The comedy format is also key to the storytelling practices, where the message is embedded in the humorous delivery (Cervi et al., 2023), and within the repetition of certain key elements (the lack of money, "swishing", the need for change). The video constructs a familiar scenario, but at the same time specific to a certain socio-demographic space. This connectivity is simultaneously created by the familiarity of the physical space and the underlying political discourse – that racial profiling and unprovoked harassment against black citizens prevail even if you move outside vulnerable suburbs (e.g. Galpin, 2022). The short video carries the political message through an embedded structure of humour (Abidin, 2021), including the sarcastic "truth" delivered by the much wiser female characters at the end.

The third video, called "179:an", is named after a bus route passing through several so-called "vulnerable" suburbs in Stockholm and features three young persons with immigrant background sitting inside a bus. Two young men and a young woman are chatting in a light-hearted manner about graduating school. The young woman then receives a phone call from her mother, who is stressed and appears to search for the younger brother of the woman. The woman tries to call her brother, but only gets to his voicemail. Here the mood changes as she starts to look stressed. Suddenly the sound of police sirens appears and a blue light flashes in the window of the bus and reflects on the face of the increasingly worried woman. She leaves a message on the voicemail, urging him to stop hanging around the pizzeria. She hangs up and one of the young men on the bus asks her if something is wrong.

She replies that it concerns her brother and that she needs to get off. In the next sequence we see the young woman running on the street as she receives a phone call. She stops and answers, and the voice of a man appears at the other end of the line – her younger brother. He asks why she and their mother have been trying to reach him, and why they have left him so many messages (all performed in an idiosyncratic style). She asks, with a distressed expression, where he is, and he replies "I'm playing football with my friends". She takes a relaxing breath, as she understands he is ok, and lowers her phone. The finishing sequence has a low background noise added, and at the very end the sound of a minor chord from a string instrument fades out. The video then ends with the same text message as the other videos.

This video is more complex as it plays on referential knowledge about the situation in the specific area. It implicitly addresses the problem of gang violence and shootings (that has occurred across the suburbs of the bus route). In particular, the mentioned "pizzeria" works as reference for previous fatal shootings in the area (Nilsson, 2018). The video builds on a realistic social dichotomy expressed in the contrast between the joyful relation among friends and the imminent possibility of fatal tragedy. In this respect the video mirrors the reality of parents and relatives suffering from gang-related violence in the area – it also portrays the situation from the perspective of those who live there – and not the dominating representation of violence prevailing in the news. The political discourse is situated far from party politics, as it articulates the stress and vulnerability of ordinary local citizens – thus it produces emotive identification with people suffering similar emotions due to violence in the area (e.g. Galpin, 2022). The connectivity and identification are realised through the experience embodied by the young female and as it highlights the emotive insecurity faced by people in similar communities. The video incorporates features of the short video format, such as drama, bodily performance, and storytelling (Kaye et al., 2022) – the quality also supersedes the usual flow of short videos on TikTok and other platforms.

The final video is called "The Path/Road" ("Vägen"), and focuses on a poetic monologue performed by a woman. The monologue continues throughout the one-minute video and is visualised by constructed social relations in a forest. In the video we see a black woman (possibly the narrator), filmed in a close-up shot and then running through the woods chased by someone unknown. She struggles to make her way through the woods, tripping on a fallen tree bole as simultaneously the words "tripping on prejudices, ignorance and hate" are articulated. In the video several white men in suits turn up, marching through the forest. The woman then exits the forest with a relieved expression on her face and the video shifts perspective. Suddenly she is dressed in a suit, directing two white men in workwear as they help various young persons (with immigrant background) in

the forest. For example, by removing the symbolic fallen tree and aiding persons who have strayed away from the forest path. The video ends with several young people running free, and the camera closes in on the woman's face as she ends the monologue. The clip ends with the aforementioned text message.

This video constitutes a symbolic representation of race relations performed through a poetic monologue including the visual narrative. The political discourse is straightforward, as the video shifts from struggle, vulnerability, and conflict to cooperation, hard work, and freedom. Its simplicity is realised through familiar symbolic performances, such as running/chasing, tripping on tree logs, men in suits, straying off the straight path, and so on. The video conveys an intensity through the combination of the monologue, close-ups on the black woman's face, and the many short and rapid sequences staging social relations. In this respect, it conveys the "intimate disposition" of the short video format (Abidin, 2021, p. 80). The political message is universal and connects to ideals of cohesion and cooperation. This video also includes specific features of the short video, such as drama, performance, and storytelling (including a texted version) – but it also stands out in its artistic style. The affective dimensions are realised through the intimate performance of the woman in close-up shots, addressing the viewer on a personal level (Abidin, 2021).

All four videos explicate a form of political communication that we call influencers as proxy for party campaigning. By paying for content that connects individually narrated messages of marginalisation, prejudice, insecurity, and hope to a specific political party seems to be a novel, but also controversial, phenomenon (Törner, 2022), at least in a Swedish context. The connection between celebrities and politics is old, but we argue that this case reveals a new kind of "influencer politics" that moves beyond existing formats associated with celebrity politics. Even if one of the short videos includes a well-known influencer, the other three videos display the utilisation of creators, film makers, actors, and comedians within a political campaign, in what appears to be novel and exploratory ways. The videos also differ to some extent from the mundane flow of amateur videos on TikTok, since they are professional in style, form, and footage. At the same time, they adhere to several key features of the short video; music, storytelling, humour, body language, and performativity are all familiar elements of the content on TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022). Moreover, the "influencer" aspects of the videos are played down in favour of artistic performance – it is not necessarily centred on the "knownness" of the featured actors, but rather the familiarity of the faces, stories, environments, and visual representations in the videos.

5 Case two: Hybrid roles of far-right political influencers

In 2022, the far-right party the Sweden Democrats instigated a new media project entitled "Riks". According to its self-definition, Riks is an outlet devoted to "conservative news provision", and the content is distributed via YouTube but also through other platforms such as TikTok. The content of Riks shares several characteristics with other outlets operating within the growing right-wing alternative media ecology in Sweden (Ekman & Widholm, 2024a). What distinguishes Riks from other outlets, however, is that the channel was produced as part of the communications department of the Sweden Democrats. Hence, party members and candidates do not appear solely as sources in Riks's news. On the contrary, they appear in various "hybrid" roles, as politicians, news presenters, programme hosts, comedians, and satirists (Ekman & Widholm, 2024b). Interestingly, the hybrid performances of Riks's staff can easily be adapted to fit features of other platforms as well. In this analysis, we will therefore show how personalised performative roles derived from contemporary influencer culture are used strategically within the short video format, as a bridge that allows the Sweden Democrats to move content across platforms. We focus on the most viewed postings, and compare videos published on Riks's official account, with those published by programme hosts who operate as influencers on TikTok.

5.1 Viral election videos on TikTok

Riks's official TikTok account (@riksstudios) was created in May 2021, but it was not until a few weeks before the election that it started to post videos on a more regular basis. The account has attracted a limited number of followers (4,200 as of September 2023). During the four weeks leading up to the election, 32 videos were published, most of them short segments where news anchors present stories pertaining to the Sweden Democrats' most central policy areas. Campaign strategies are also in focus, for example, the Sweden Democrats' advertising in the Stockholm metro system, often referred to as "The repatriation train" ("Återvandringståget"), a reference suggesting that migrants in Sweden should book a "one-way ticket" to their home countries.

The provocative style may be different from traditional news, but the visual environment where programme hosts "perform" their role is reminiscent of a traditional television studio. The number of views vary between just over 1,500 for some videos, to 54,000 at the most. A general feature of the videos is that they

lack almost all the characteristics that are associated with the playful aesthetics of the short video format, such as music, text stickers, and emoticons etc. Instead, the videos carry with them a legacy from YouTube, from which they were originally produced. In order to be successful on TikTok, it is important to catch the viewers' attention through performative actions. This involves "stepping out" of a formal professional role, and instead adapting the communication in such a way that it fits the specific platform environment. In what follows, we will therefore provide a number of analytical examples of how such strategies have been put into practice in order to increase the potential circulation of the content.

Our first example includes an account connected to Riks that publishes mainly on issues relating to migration and crime. In contrast to Riks's YouTube channel, the account holder draws extensively on the most central features of the short video format. The political discourses are similar, yet the form differs greatly, since videos utilise music, lip-synching, green screen effects, and textual stickers (Kaye et al., 2022). The number of views during the weeks leading up to the election varied between 10,000 views for the least popular postings, and over 650,000 for the most popular video. The most viral post during the period had the title "Sweden should be good again", a paraphrase of Donald Trump's famous slogan "Make America great again". In the video, the female programme host is miming to the song "It's corn" by Tariq & the Gregory Brothers, wearing a T-shirt with the sign "Stop the Socialists" [Stoppa sosseriet]. "Why do you like corn?", one of the opening phrases of the song, is replaced by a completely different message saying (in Swedish): "Me? I will vote for the SD. Why SD? Because it is SD. A party focusing on security. They want to deport the criminals!". The text and the miming are accompanied by dance moves and body language, anchoring a distinctly critical and negative emotive message to positive vibes in accordance with the happy children's music. This duality between positive and negative emotions in campaigning strategies (Metz et al., 2020) was visible in several other videos during the period as well. One video (121,000 views) evokes a contradiction between worried facial gestures ("Oh lord, yet another shooting, what should be done to solve it") followed by ironic portrayals of a happy, dancing Social Democrat ("The Social Democrats and their youth centres"), alluding to the Social Democrats' non-repressive policies on crime and social integration. The message was accompanied by "The joke is on you", by Icarly Kate, a song popularised by other creators on the platform in various re-mixing contests. Similar communicative contradictions could be seen in videos portraying the aforementioned advertising campaign in the Stockholm metro ("No thank you! I don't use public transportation! The SD train? One ticket please!!!"). The examples evidence that strong emotions and affect are drivers of engagement on the platform, but they are seldomly evoked in pure forms. Paradox-

ically, negative campaign messages seem to be framed also positively or ironically in order to catch the users' attention (Ekman & Widholm, 2024b).

Our second example includes another of Riks's programme hosts who has been even more influential. The account also utilised TikTok's platform features extensively, combining written political slogans with music, dancing, and witty facial expressions (Cervi et al., 2023). The most viral videos, however, had a strong connection to the account holder's role as news presenter. In a video reaching more than 1.8 million views, the news presenter interviews the party leader of the Sweden Democrats, Jimmy Åkessson, asking "some of the most common questions I get from followers". The Riks logo is clearly visible on the microphone positioned in front of Åkessson, accentuating the hybrid position of being both reporter and political campaign influencer. In the video, Åkesson explains that the party's policies will result in a more secure situation for Swedish women, particularly those working with health and social care, as "criminals will be deported", "preferably to a dessert somewhere". While the subjects discussed are distinctly negative and conflictual, the tone is at the same time friendly and happy, illuminating that emotional drivers of political engagement on TikTok are complex and cannot be attributed solely to anger or hatred (Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2023).

However, the most viewed video (1.9 million views) was based on a news story published in Samnytt, an alternative media outlet with close ties to the Sweden Democrats. The video lacks music, but utilises the green screen effect so that the news story article is visible as a background image. The news video tells the story of two criminals – "I don't want to try to pronounce their names" – who are accused of robbing and shooting a man in front of his kids. The scenery is described with extremely provocative language ("such a fucking disgusting crime"), accompanied by written quotes of the robbers derived from the Samnytt news story ("I will fuck you!"). The video demonstrates that discourses can migrate from one side of the right-wing media ecology to another and across platforms (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). However, this process simultaneously requires the adaptation of the message to fit the features of the platform where it occurs. In this case, it involves the utilisation of much more personal and intimate forms of political expression (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). The majority of all postings during the election period had a distinctly more positive appeal, Needless to say, these videos did not obtain nearly as many views.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed new experimental forms of digital political communication that have become significant for "postmodern" campaigning practices, includ-

ing strategies of micro-targeting (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2014). In an increasingly hybrid and complex media system, political actors' struggle for attention propel trialling new formats, styles, and collaborations. This has become particularly evident in relation to the fragmentation of the electorate on various digital platforms. The adaptation of political messages to the short video format on TikTok, a platform populated mainly by young and emerging citizens, mirrors this struggle for attention. As we have illustrated by the two cases, this also includes experimenting with various dimensions of so-called "influencer politics", embedding political discourse within the performances and appearances of lifestyle users, or by using already established users and their social media following as a gateway for political campaigning. In this process political communication has become increasingly performative and intimate, as a way of adapting to the characteristics of social media platforms. In the case of TikTok, this carries various specific traits connected to the way the platform is managed and consumed – for example, through the way music, storytelling, and bodily performances are utilised to convey political messages to audiences/users not exposed to political campaigning elsewhere. Music is often considered to be a specific feature driving engagement within the short video format on TikTok, as influencers can connect with other users by mimicking their performances, re-mixing their content, changing lyrics, or performing ironic lip-syncs. While these features were used extensively, they did not characterise the most viral content. This makes political influencers of the type we have studied here quite specific. Nevertheless, their hybrid positions provide them with a communicative flexibility that can attract large fan bases, which is essential in order to reach out on a regular basis.

The chapter has also shown that influencer politics on TikTok can build on very different logics of authenticity work (Arnesson, 2024; Banet-Weiser, 2021). For the actors in the influencer campaign produced for the Left Party, the authenticity was attached to the shared lived experiences and emotions of citizens residing in so-called vulnerable communities. Here, socio-cultural proximity was key to the affective dimensions of the storytelling and visual representation. These videos also revealed how political discourses can be implicit and artistically performed in a way that differs from traditional political campaigning. At the other end, the authenticity of the Sweden Democrats' videos built on a constructed position of vox populi and mundane ordinariness and on the adaptation of the most characteristic performative features of TikTok. Political messages were designed to fit the everyday flow of performative content. Despite the differences between the two cases, both disclose how political actors strive to manage authenticity, through a complex combination of ordinariness (for identification) and extraordinariness (for attention). Key to platform visibility and impact seem to be a combination of various forms of "performed connectivity", particularly addressed through affective deliv-

ery, including both storytelling and bodily practices (Ekman & Widholm, 2017a, 2017b). Here the interconnectedness between the political actor/influencer and the audience/user is constituted through an interplay of trust and identification. To conclude, the adaptation of political campaigning to new online platforms seems to stimulate experimentation and exploration of political communication in rather unorthodox ways. This points to the fact that political communication strategies are in constant flux as political actors adopt both professional and user-generated practices and formats.

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