

# Instagramming

## Instagram's Media Practices

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### 1. Anecdote

On January 4, 2019, an unspectacular picture appeared on Instagram. Nothing could be seen other than a brown egg in front of a white background. Only the caption provided any type of directions: "Let's set a world record together and get the most liked post on Instagram. Beating the current world record held by Kylie Jenner (18 million)! We got this". Including the hashtags "#LikeTheEgg #EggSoldiers #EggGang," the post received over 50 million likes by the beginning of February 2019, setting an Instagram world record that it still holds today<sup>1</sup>.

When an egg becomes world record-setting, it shows how clearly the use of Instagram differs from other photographic practices. It is not the content of the image that informs us about its extraordinary quality but its being embedded into a logic of outdoing that is inherent in the platform's structure of use. Eugene, the nickname given to the egg shortly thereafter, does not look any different than other eggs. It does not show anything special; it does not share any exciting experiences. It also does not turn to its fellow eggs to show off its attractive shell. What Eugene offers, however, is a call to a competition for likes that has become detached from the aesthetics of the image, from its orientation and expressiveness. In this way, the egg seems to both subvert and confirm the media practice of Instagram. On the one hand, the randomness of the image diverges from the function of a photo service

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1 Dan Thorne: „Egg photo breaks Kylie Jenner's record for most liked image on Instagram". In: *Guinness World Records*, online <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2019/1/egg-photo-breaks-kylie-jenners-record-for-most-liked-image-on-instagram-554801>.

that supports and drives the optimization of visual self-presentation. On the other hand, Eugene also engages in a type of influencing that makes use of precisely those competitive mechanisms that constitute the platform's logic of media use. The fact that an egg was able to rise to Instagram stardom is largely due to the fact that it had nothing to communicate beyond its presence of Instagram.

## 2. Etymology

Instagram is the name of a photo-sharing app developed by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and released in October 2010. It evolved from its predecessor application Burbn, a mobile check-in app which the founders named after their favorite drink. In the course of a readjustment that expanded Burbn's functions to include photo sharing, its developers decided on a new name: "We renamed because we felt it better captured what you were doing—an instant telegram of sorts. [...] It also sounded camera-y."<sup>2</sup>

The neologism "Instagram" is made up of "instant" and "telegram," its "camera-y" ring deriving from an abbreviation of "instant camera." Both elements of this portmanteau refer to a media use that is characterized by speed, compression and compactness. "Telegram" and "instant camera" are, in turn, portmanteaus that described new media from the moment they were coined. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term "telegram," made up of the Greek *tele* (far away) and *grámma* (writing), to being in use since 1852.<sup>3</sup> As a term for a message transmitted through cables, the word refers to a media technology that enables the rapid transmission of short communications; with its adoption into everyday usage, the expression also describes an elliptical, clipped style of writing ("telegram style"). Following "telegram," other neologisms came about in the nineteenth century, among which one can already discern a link to instant photography: "Later formations suggested by this word are the hybrids *cablegram* for 'cable telegram,' *pistolgram* for an instan-

2 Somini Sengupta, Nicole Perlroth, and Jenna Wortham, "Behind Instagram's Success, Networking the Old Way," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2021.

3 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), s.v. "telegram."

taneous photograph.”<sup>4</sup> The term “instant camera” emerged in the 1940s<sup>5</sup> and describes a camera that chemically develops a print immediately after shooting and ejects it as a finished product. The advantages of taking photos with analog instant cameras, such as the handiness of the devices, the independence from photo laboratories and developing times, and the quick availability of the images, have been largely adopted or replaced by digital smartphone photography. An obvious reference to the analog instant camera can be seen in the Instagram app through the use of an instant camera logo<sup>6</sup> as well as the adoption of a characteristic square image format reminiscent of the cropping of Polaroid photos.<sup>7</sup> Like the term “telegram,” the neologism “Instagram” has been adapted to create several further portmanteaus. Both the prefix “insta” (e.g. “instafood,” “instamood”) and the suffix “gram” (e.g. “foodstagram,” “travelgram”) are now in use.<sup>8</sup> This trend toward neologisms has been reinforced and driven by hashtags used to tag uploaded images.

The Instagram platform makes it possible to upload, edit, and share digital photos and, since 2013, videos. The term “instagramming” stands for the use of this platform. The *Macmillan Dictionary* provides the following definition for the verb “to instagram”: “to take a photo and post it on the social network Instagram.”<sup>9</sup> *Wiktionary* notes a further definition: “1. To post an image to Instagram. 2. To digitally manipulate a photograph using filter effects.”<sup>10</sup> This addresses the app’s central feature, namely the ability to edit a photo with preset graphics filters. Using the photo platform Instagram is therefore not just about publishing, but also and above all about modifying images.

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4 Ibid., s.v. “-gram.”

5 Cf. Christopher Cumo, “Polaroid Camera,” in *Historical Dictionary of the 1940s*, ed. James Gilbert Ryan and Leonard C. Schlup (London: Routledge, 2015), 305–306.

6 While the first logo used in 2010 even more explicitly hearkened back to an old Polaroid camera, depicting the entire camera, this design was changed in the following years. Since 2016, the app’s logo is made up of a minimalistic symbol, only showing a lens and a viewfinder but not the earlier, more clearly defined instant camera.

7 In 2015, the limitation to one format was replaced by several additional formatting options. Now, one can also post photos in a “landscape” or “portrait” orientation. Instagram’s typical square image format nevertheless remains the default format setting in the app.

8 See Ágnes Veszelszki, *Digilect: The Impact of Infocommunication Technology on Language* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 45.

9 *Macmillan Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan Education, 2009), s.v. “instagram.”

10 *Wiktionary, The Free Dictionary*, s.v. “Instagram.”

### 3. Contexts

The use of Instagram has been characterized from the beginning by the use of filters that the app's software offers as default settings. In the early days of Instagram, retro filters, which made posted images look like photos from analog instant cameras, were especially popular. These filtering practices digitally simulate aesthetic characteristics such as a lower contrast, faded colors, and grainy outlines; in other words, features that call to mind candid snapshots and unelaborate production conditions, such as are typical of Polaroid photos.<sup>11</sup> While Instagram images processed in this way may invoke the visual appeal of Polaroids, they also stand in marked contrast to the practices of analog instant photography. Polaroid photos are primarily distinguished from other photographic images by their materiality and haptics; one cannot, for instance, easily paste them into photo albums due to their characteristic weight and thickness. Additionally, analog instant cameras only ever produce a single print, that is, each photo is always one of a kind. Whereas Polaroid photos are distinguished by their irreproducibility and limited manipulability, Instagram images are the exact opposite: they are always open to being edited, shared, and duplicated. Thus, when aesthetic surface effects from older image technologies are imitated by "instagramming," the differences between old and new media use become all the more overt:

What is colliding here is, on the one hand, an aesthetic reminiscent of the contingency of analog photochemical apparatuses, one which is supposed to rescue smartphone photos from a digital flood of images through a process of alienation in order to give them a supposedly lost aura of uniqueness and, on the other hand, the process of injecting captured photos into the stream of that same flood of images and incorporating them into the logic of a digital media economy.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of how Instagram is used, the "instant," in the sense of a rapid photographic process, has shifted from the analog shutter release to digital

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11 On aesthetic practices in instant photography, see Dennis Improda, "Do (not) press. Sofortbildfotografie in Alltag, Kunst und Wissenschaft. Grenzverläufe ästhetischer Praktiken," in *Ästhetische Praxis*, ed. Michael Kauppert and Heidrun Eberl, 199–234 (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016).

12 Dominik Schrey, *Analoge Nostalgie in der digitalen Medienkultur* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2017), 263.

editing. The point is no longer that the picture is immediately available but that it can be immediately altered. In this sense, Instagram's default filters form the basic medium-specific premise of "instagramming". "Instagramming" does not presume that an image is beautiful but that it can always be made more beautiful.

This tendency toward optimization inscribed into the app fundamentally applies to the ability to portray each object that can be photographed but especially to the self-presentation of the users, which is regulated by filtering practices. In this sense, the communication made possible by Instagram is also notably different from older forms of exchange and self-depiction via photographic images: "Back then, a form of communication occurred when you would take out your photo album to show to your circle of friends. Now, however, communication (in terms of its media) is permanently present as a dually contingent construction and re-construction of a trans-Fordist practice aimed at the marketing of oneself with the use of any and all aesthetic means."<sup>13</sup>

Each type of "instagramming" is embedded in an image frame that subjects photos to a rating system immanent in the platform. Both the number of likes and the communication made possible via the comment function provide information about the medial usability of the images. The platform environment forces the comparison with other users, whose success indices align the image messages in a competitive manner. Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich characterize this dynamic of its usage as "competitive photography" and define their orientation as follows: "The main feature of competitive photography is likability."<sup>14</sup> The term "likability" is understood to mean the connectivity for feedback mechanisms by means of which use-specific approval ratings become visible and measurable. The neologisms "instagrammable" and "instagrammability" are based on this expression. While one of the main Anglo-American dictionaries, the *Merriam-Webster*, has already included the adjective *instagrammable*,<sup>15</sup> it has not yet accepted the noun *instagrammability*.

13 Wolfgang Hagen, Wolfgang, "'Being there!'. Epistemologische Skizzen zur Smartphone-Fotografie," in *Bildwerte. Visualität in der digitalen Medienkultur*, ed. Gundolf Freyermuth and Lisa Gotto (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 126.

14 Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich, "Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self," in *Exploring the Selfie. Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, ed. Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 173.

15 *Merriam-Webster* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2021), s.v. "Instagrammable."

In common English usage, the term is primarily used in an economic context.<sup>16</sup>

As a designation for the market value of a product or service, the term *instagrammability* refers to the image's characteristics to be relevant for use on Instagram, that is, its compatibility with the platform's inherent economic principles of evaluation. This refers to a logic of the commodity that is inscribed into the app, which establishes the value of an image in terms of its chances at economic success. Not least through the business of *sponsored posts*, "Instagram represents a marketplace for commodities that, with the help of images—especially in the form of image-based narratives, autobiographical in tone, as well as fictional worlds of so-called 'influencers'—are advertised and are therefore also considered an 'image economy.' In keeping with the iconic primacy of communication, images on Instagram, in a sense, function as currency."<sup>17</sup> It is therefore not surprising that references to the use of Instagram are often found in marketing guides whose recommendations relate to business-optimizing 'best practice' models.<sup>18</sup> The "best practices" of "instagramming" are, therefore, processes that use the offer of a platform in the sense of a corporate culture oriented toward growth, implementing it as a type of augmentation of attention that becomes quantifiable through likes and the number of followers. In this context, then, the photographic act of "instagramming" is related to a media marketplace that manages the allocation of images as economic resources.

#### 4. Fluctuations

On January 18, 2019, another image of Eugene, the world-record-setting egg, appeared on Instagram. This time, a small crack, hardly visible, could be seen at the top left. Every few days, further images followed which showed more and more cracks on the egg's shell. On February 3, 2019, a video that shows

16 See for example an article in *The Independent* on the marketing function of Instagram for the tourism industry: Rachel Hosie, "'Instagrammability': Most Important Factor for Millennials on Choosing Holiday Destination," *The Independent*, March 24, 2017.

17 Katja Gunkel, *Der Instagram-Effekt. Wie ikonische Kommunikation in den Social Media unsere visuelle Kultur prägt* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 33–34.

18 See for example Andrew Hutchinson, "New Study Looks at Latest Instagram Best Practices, Including Hashtag Use and Caption Length," *Social Media Today*, November 28, 2018.

Eugene breaking appeared on the online portal Hulu. The animated clip included the following text overly: “Hi, I’m the World Record Egg (you may have heard of me). Recently, I’ve started to crack, the pressure of social media is getting to me. If you’re struggling too, talk to someone.” The clip ended with a link to the website talkingegg.info, which contained links to various non-profit organizations that provide counseling for psychological issues. One day later, on February 4, 2019, the video was also published on Eugene’s Instagram account, where it received over 30 million likes within a few weeks.

Eugene’s story shows how quickly the connotations of the term “instagramming” can change. Thus, it is noteworthy that in recent years, there has been a growing number of discourse contributions that have expanded the semantic field of “instagramming” to its classification as an addiction.<sup>19</sup> In this usage, “instagramming” implies that the use of the platform can quickly lead to dependency. Here, the linguistic element “instant” moves toward a negative connotation, since it does not refer to the speed of media technology but to how briefly it gratifies a user’s needs. Meanwhile, a further neologism has developed from the debate on the addictive aspects of Instagram use in the *Urban Dictionary*: *instaddiction*.<sup>20</sup>

In the past few years, a new twist in the discourse on Instagram’s filters has emerged, concentrating on how their ideals of beauty are based on lightness. When African-American singer Dawn Richard uploaded a series of selfies to Instagram in March 2013, it prompted outraged reactions from her fans, who suspected she had bleached her skin using chemical lighteners. When asked by an Instagram user if she had undergone skin bleaching, Richard replied in the comments section: “dawnrichard@deanellw: no babe just pressed the filter button like every other human that has Instagram.”<sup>21</sup> The African-American author Morgan Jenkins then made reference to this incident in a blog post entitled “The Quiet Racism of Instagram” and pointed out how inevitable the lightening of one’s skin tone is within the software logic of Instagram’s filters: “As a woman of color, I wish I could find a filter that

19 See for example German-language discourses such as Britta Schultejeans, “Süchtig nach Herzen, oder: Wie Instagram Abhängigkeit schafft,” *Heise Online*, February 6, 2020 and English discourses such as in Amanda Macmillan, “Why Instagram is the Worst Social Media for Mental Health,” *Time*, May 25, 2017.

20 *Urban Dictionary*, s.v. “instaddiction,” <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=instaddiction>.

21 See Brande Victorian, “When Instagram Filter Goes Wrong: Dawn Richard Is That You?” *MadameNoire*, March 20, 2013.

doesn't light up my skin. [...] Instagram users can choose from over 20 filters, but as subjects, we don't have a choice in how our images are processed once a filter is in place."<sup>22</sup>

Jenkins' observation points us to a media precondition of "instagramming" that is crucial for the platform's processes of standardization and normalization. As a social network, Instagram organizes how images are produced, distributed, and received. This includes the fact that in the saving and sharing of an image, the app applies a set of protocols that aim to conform to predefined settings. Consequently, the filtering of images on Instagram is subject to significant limitations: The software's filter settings are beyond the control of consumers, so users can only follow but not modify the application's allocations. The question of whether and to what degree Instagram's preset filtering processes and algorithms perpetuate racist image practices is part of a current discussion both within media studies<sup>23</sup> and within the company itself.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Counter-Concepts

A counter-movement against the instantaneousness of "instagramming" has developed in so-called "slow photography." This entails a medium practice that has grown as a reaction to the rapid spread of digital smartphone photography and attempts to counter the quick availability and randomness of millions of posted smartphone images with a slowing down of photographic processes. Tim Wu defines the orientation and goal of "slow photography" as follows:

The real victim of fast photography is not the quality of the photos themselves. [...] We lose something else: the *experimental* side, the joy of photography as an activity. And trying to fight this loss, to treat photography as an

22 Morgan Jenkins, "The Quiet Racism of Instagram," *Racked*, July 7, 2015.

23 See Ulrike Bergemann, "Instagram Racism? Ulrike Bergemann über die neue alte Shirley Card," *ZfM Gender Blog*, October 1, 2015, as well as in "Shirley and Frida. Filters, Racism, and Artificial Intelligence," in *Filters and Frames. Developing Meaning in Photography and Beyond*, ed. Katja Böhlau, Katja and Elisabeth Pichler, 47–63 (Weimar: Jonas, 2019).

24 See Adam Smith, "Instagram Boss Says It Will Change Algorithm To Stop Mistreatment of Black Users, Alongside Other Updates," *The Independent*, June 16, 2020.



experience, not as a means to an end, is the very definition of slow photography. Defined more carefully, slow photography is the effort to flip the usual relationship between process and results.<sup>25</sup>

If “instagramming” represents a platform-specific type of usage, in which making images focuses on compatibility with rating systems, as well as with follower amounts and like functions, “slow photography” attempts to free the experiential value of photography from this purpose-bound nature. This requires a shift in perspective from product to process. If one shifts the focus from the photograph to the photo processing itself, other forms of medium use come to the fore. The focus is then no longer on the result, but on the process of its creation, no longer on what is finished, but on what is to be finished. In this sense, “slow photography” stresses counter-designations such as the “open-ended” and the “experimental.” This retreat behind Instagram’s highly expedited processes of image editing is associated with a slowing down that also includes moments of interference. Stressing the unpredictability of the image means taking into account the accidental and unexpected, in other words, allowing for those uncertainties that a platform structure built on efficiency tries to exclude at all costs.

## 6. Perspectives

Since its inception, Instagram has greatly diverged from its developers’ initial idea of creating a purely online photo service. In recent years, the functions of the platform have been increasingly expanded so that the media practices of Instagram have also become more flexible and differentiated: “Like other social networks, Instagram is a dynamic system whose hosts are driven by the demand for increasing the number of users and thus also by competition with other services, and that must therefore accommodate the uses and needs of its users and anticipate new uses and needs.”<sup>26</sup> Two trends come to the fore here: the increasing amalgamation of images and graphic elements on the one hand and the divergence from a previous concentration on static photography in favor of an increasing implementation of moving images on the other hand.

25 Tim Wu, “The Slow Photography Movement. What is the Point of Taking Pictures?” *Slate*, January 18, 2011.

26 Winfried Gerling, Susanne Holschbach, and Petra Löffler, *Bilder verteilen. Fotografische Praktiken in der digitalen Kultur* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 51.

With regard to the first trend, it is notable that graphic forms and symbols such as emojis, hearts, or stars on Instagram increasingly appear in the images themselves. Whereas a posted photo had previously been clearly separate from the like-bar and the comments column underneath it, now, an interpenetration of image and text, photo and graphic, can be seen. This combination of once disparate elements is driven by the expansion of features with which one can add numerous effects to an image. This includes, for example, inserting smileys and text elements but also embedding stickers and GIFs. The former limitation of photo-specific filters, which enabled the editing of an image within parameters such as color temperature, brightness, or sharpness settings, is now being supplemented by overlay features that enrich the image with additional information. One can thus assume that this developing trend will increasingly transform the way in which we communicate in and with images: “We can already predict that graphic and photographic aesthetics will continue to mix, primarily with the goal of even more clearly infusing images with a specific emotional quality, elevating them to easily comprehensible symbols or making them so pointed that they even begin to approximate the pithiness of a verbal statement.”<sup>27</sup> Correspondingly, the applications of Instagram could be characterized in the future by a reorganization of image forms, which are shifting away from the ambiguity of photography and toward the unambiguity of an intentionally constructed image message.

The second developing trend in “instagramming” applies to the increasing integration of moving-image elements, that is, the expansion of the platform with the addition of features that are no longer made up of static, but kinetic, image forms. In the process, the mobilization of the image<sup>28</sup> is expanded on multiple levels: it applies both to the movement within the image (for example, in the “boomerang effect,” which enables the loop-like repetitive fast-forwarding and rewinding of a recording) as well as to the movement between images (for example in the “story” function, with which one can arrange photos or videos into a short series of images). Other moving-image types of “instagramming” include the video portal *Instagram TV* (abbreviated *IGTV*) introduced in 2018, which allows users to upload longer videos, as well

27 Wolfgang Ullrich, “Instant-Glück mit Instagram,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, June 10, 2013.

28 On this type of image mobility, see Lisa Gotto, “Beweglich werden. Wie das Smartphone die Bilder zum Laufen bringt,” in *Smartphone-Ästhetik. Zur Philosophie und Gestaltung mobiler Medien*, ed. Oliver Ruf, 225–242 (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

as the short video function *Reels*, released in 2020, with which users can create 15-second remix clips.<sup>29</sup> The very terms *Story*, *TV*, and *Reels* show how broad the semantic field of “instagramming” has become: It is now no longer exclusively practices of photography that are invoked, but increasingly also modes of production and reception that originate in the field of audiovisual moving image media. Even if the principles of compactness and shortness can still be discerned in the moving forms of “instagramming,”<sup>30</sup> a tendency toward stretching out and expanding them emerges that could be tied to a reinforcement of the serialization and narrativization of “instagramming”.

## 7. Research

Studies on Instagram’s media practices have identified a profound transformation that has both affected the photographic image and is driven by the photographic image itself: “The digital turn, and with it, increased use of location-aware technologies, has yielded innovative image applications and posed new questions about the status and value of the image. These applications rely on algorithmically defined relations between the viewing subject and the world viewed, offering robust alternatives to the visual economies of the past.”<sup>31</sup> Crucial to this is the fact that the use of Instagram is no longer oriented toward an individual, inalterable image but is bound up in the practices and potentials of mobile media engagement.<sup>32</sup> This includes algorithmically operationalized processes of designing, sharing, and communicating that permanently change the medial constitution and the understanding of

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29 Instagram *Stories* and *Reels* are both takes on features that other social networks had previously developed: the *Story* feature is derived from Snapchat, and the *Reels* feature is strongly reminiscent of TikTok.

30 The maximum length for video content in an Instagram feed is 60 seconds, whereas *Instagram TV* allows for a length of 10 minutes.

31 William Uricchio, “The Algorithmic Turn: Photosynth, Augmented Reality and the Changing Implications of the Image,” *Visual Studies* 26, no. 1 (2011): 25. On the implications of the “algorithmic turn,” see further Eivind Røssaak, “Algorithmic Culture: Beyond the Photo/Film Divide,” in *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*, ed. Eivind Røssaak, 187–203 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

32 Cf. Lev Manovich, “The Mobile Generation and Instagram Photography,” in *Between the Public and the Private in Mobile Communication*, ed. Ana Serrano Tellería, 262–278 (New York: Routledge, 2017).

the image. Here, some theoretical approaches assume a newly developing visual aesthetics, which, above all, is regulated and controlled by Instagram's filtering processes,<sup>33</sup> while others read the changing status of the image as a "crisis of representation,"<sup>34</sup> and still others stress the changing social dynamics that are accelerated by Instagram's visual forms of communication.<sup>35</sup> What they have in common is that they conceive of the practices of "instagramming" as an influential part of media usage that is increasingly informing current image cultures. Studies on Instagram in media theory and media aesthetics, therefore, argue for a change in perspective that detaches itself from the fixedness of the photographic object and instead focuses on the modifiability and transformability of the image and its additional operations.

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- 33 Cf. Søren Vigild Poulsen, "Filtered Aesthetics: A Study of Instagram's Photo Filters from the Perspective of Semiotic Technology," in *Multimodality and Aesthetics*, ed. Elise Seip Tønnessen and Frida Forsgren, 258–273 (New York: Routledge, 2018).
  - 34 Cf. Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, "The Digital Image in Photographic Culture: Algorithmic Photography and the Crisis of Representation," in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister, 22–40 (New York: Routledge, 2013).
  - 35 Cf. Elisa Serafinelli, *Digital Life on Instagram. New Social Communication of Photography* (Bingley: Emerald, 2018).