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DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität Marburg

Finding a Visual Voice

The *#Euromaidan* Impact on Ukrainian Instagram Users

Karly Domb Sadof

INTRODUCTION

> *The one who tells the story rules the world.*
> —Hopi Proverb

It was the last of the difficult days. The troops were too close. Sasha[1] followed the line of burning tires. There were a lot of people, gas and fire. He wanted to remember this moment. The moment when he felt no fear.

Everyday Sasha would wake up to look at the news feeds. He'd call his friends who were at Maidan during the night. He'd go buy food and clothes; and bottles to fill with Molotov. From about midday till daybreak they were there. Trying to help.

It was the night of the final fight between the government forces and the people of Maidan. When Sasha, like a tortoise, kneeled next to his friend cowering under a shield.

He looked up and saw a guy raising his hands as he jumped into the most dangerous zone. Sasha raised his own hands. Snap. The moment was captured, hashtagged and uploaded. Now the world would see. *#євромайдан #euromaidan*.

Sasha is not a photojournalist; Sasha is not even a photographer. Sasha, 21, is from a small town in the western part of Ukraine called Kolomyya. In 2010 he moved to Kiev to attend University. He enjoys taking photos of himself and his friends, and posting them on *Instagram*[2], a photo-sharing social network. However, when the people of Kiev filled their city's Maidan Square to oust their government and demand their country more closely integrate with the

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1 | Names have been changed for privacy and security purposes.

2 | Instagram was founded in 2010 as a photo-sharing social network to be used solely on mobile phones.

European Union in late 2013 and early 2014, Sasha's photos took on a different feel. He began to post images showing the revolution. His feed—the stream of photos from others he followed—also changed. Soon "selfies" were replaced with pictures of Molotov cocktails, girlfriends became protestors, sunsets changed to flames.

The visible impact of the Ukrainian revolution on *Instagram* was noticeable both within Ukraine and abroad. The American magazine *Esquire* featured a series claiming to show "thirty-two real photographs of how normal, everyday life changed in a matter of days." The photo essay was both applauded and criticized for using *Instagram* images as data points to reflect the social and visible changes in Kiev. It was shared nearly 800 times on *Twitter*, and yet Michael Shaw, the publisher of the visual politics and media literacy site then called *BagNewsNotes*[3], called it "photo exploitation." Shaw accused *Esquire* of "data-mining" and, to prove a point, produced a cartoon turning the *Instagram* users into caricatures.

As an avid *Instagram* user and photo editor for the Associated Press—one of the largest global newswires—I found this series of images fascinating. Was this first-person journalism? Do these images document cultural change in real-time through the eyes of those who are impacted? Or do these diptychs visually exploit their creators? Do the images catalog an actual change in behavior? Or could the same be done with any *Instagram* feed? Perhaps, most significantly, what is the role of *Instagram* in these peoples' lives? And has that changed?

Like all social networks in Web 2.0[4], *Instagram* relies heavily on the concept of "produsage" as coined by Axel Bruns (2008) in his book, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond, from Production to Produsage*. "Produsage", according to Bruns, describes the active nexus of "collaborative creation" in the digital sphere. *Instagram*, capitalizes on the desire of its users to engage and create—their "produsage." The name *Instagram* even implies these dual functions. While taken instantaneously, with or without the addition of a "filter", (a digital effect modeled off of different analogue cameras and film types), the images are also shared within the mobile application: a visual telegram of sorts.

This latter function is what separates *Instagram* from other photo manipulation apps. More than just photo-editing software, *Instagram* builds a community: central to the logic of the app is its ranking system of "liking", its ability to geographically connect through location-tagging, and its intent

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3 | In 2015 the website changed its name "Reading The Pictures".

4 | Web. 2.0 refers to the internet's change to emphasize user-generated content which can take many forms. Including reader comments, blogs, social media etc. Previously Web. 1.0 featured few content creators and most users only consumed the World Wide Web, but didn't engage.

to forge relationships with its users through “hashtagging.” As Bruns (2008) writes, “The arrival and gradual embrace of produsage clearly has the potential to significantly reshape our existing cultural, commercial, social and political institutions” (2008: 400). Seeing this potential, *Facebook* purchased *Instagram* in April 2012 for one billion USD. The community has since grown to host about 200 million monthly active users. According to the company, these ‘produsers’ upload roughly sixty million photos daily.

A search for “євромайдан” or “euromaidan” on *Instagram* on February 18, 2014—at the peak of the protests in Maidan—generates 85,120 photos. Most of these posts are from within Ukraine; some came from Ukrainian nationals abroad, as well as others sympathetic to—or outraged by—their cause. However, for Sasha, and his many cohorts *Instagram*-ing from within the square, *Instagram* was more than just a way to commiserate virtually. These individuals were documenting the events around them; so much so, that professional journalists who flocked to cover the story were using their “grams” as a way of locating action. As Bruns writes:

> Produsage-based citizen journalism is the first step towards restoring access to the public institution of journalism for a wide range of citizen-turned producers breaking open the commercial (and political) lock on the journalistic industry, as it has been established during the late stages of industrial capitalism. (ibid., 96)

From January 2014 to April 2014 I studied these “citizen-turned-visual-news-produsers”, their use of *Instagram,* and how the revolution impacted their practice within the application. My research aims to dig deeper than *Esquire’s* “data points”. Melanie Green (2008), a social psychologist whose research focuses on the power of the narrative to change beliefs, writes, “when consumers lose themselves in a story, their attitudes and intentions change to reflect that story” (ibid: 5170). In striving to understand these individuals on a holistic and comprehensive level, my research explores this phenomenon. How does the dissemination of storytelling impact the individual? And how, in turn, does this pattern change during a big story like the 2014 Ukrainian revolution? What could have encouraged these image-makers to document their days on *Instagram* in the first place?

METHODS

My approach to understanding the impact of the Ukrainian revolution on users of *Instagram* was strictly ethnographic. As Tom Boellstorff (2012) writes in his book *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds A Handbook of Method,* ethnographers “aim to study virtual worlds as valid venues for cultural practices seeking to understand both how they resemble and how they differ from other forms of culture" (2012: 1). Thus *Instagram* became my field site, its users became my tribe. We connected virtually, despite being based in New York City and nearly 7,500 km from most of my informants in Kiev. I was able to observe their actions within this digital realm and to participate by documenting my own life. I was able to contact my informants by commenting on their photos and connecting with them over *Facebook Chat*[5] and *Skype*. Through extensive interviews I was able to learn about each individual's local context and personal experience with *Instagram*. From my own personal experience, I was able to relate to those I was studying.

In addition to relying on both passive and participant observation, together with interviews and questionnaires, I engaged my research with previous anthropological literature regarding cell phones and photography. In her article *Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media*, anthropologist Enid Gabriella Coleman (2010) writes, "To grasp more fully the broader significance of digital media, its study must involve various frames of analysis, attention to history, and the local contexts and lived experiences of digital media—a task well suited to the ethnographic enterprise" (ibid: 489). *Instagram* is a new virtual realm and not much anthropological research has focused on its users. Mobile phones have been around for a while and long since grasped the attention of ethnographers. In her study *Mobile Media in the Asia-Pacific* Larissa Hjorth (2008) writes, "By studying the mobile phone we can gain insight into many of the cultural processes that constitute contemporary everyday life (ibid: 5). My research attempts to build upon this understanding of the cell phone as a conduit for culture and how it is now challenging the modes of visual media production.

There were key limitations to my research. I do not speak Russian, meaning all of my informants had to speak some level of English. While English is taught in most Ukrainian schools, the English-speaking Ukrainian diaspora is notably a more educated group with a strong western kinship. This constraint, in conjunction with my dependence on technology for communication and research, meant that the Ukrainians I interviewed were most likely of a certain economic status. Another important limitation of my work was my inability to travel to the region during this time. In contrast to the traditional analogue anthropologist, my own geographic position—in relationship to my subjects—significantly distanced me from them as much of my research occurred in the digital landscape. I attempted to overcome these obstacles by concentrating purely on the culture within *Instagram*. Thus my research singularly examined this tribe of *Instagram* users within their native digital realm and virtual dialect.

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[5] | In April 2014 after this study was completed, *Facebook Chat* became a separate Facebook owned and operated mobile application: "*Messenger*".

This narrow scope—while controlled—allowed for a deeper focus in the digital domain, but isolated my informants and myself from all other environmental and geo-political influences.

THE DATA

Part I: Creating a Virtual Self in a Visual Vernacular

Fundamentally my research found that my informants used *Instagram* as a process of forming their own identity and communicating this virtual self to a broader visual community. As Lev Manovicch and Nadav Hochmann (2013) write in *Zooming Into An Instagram City: Reading the Local Through Social Media*, "*Instagram* signifies a new desire to creatively place together old and new—local and global—parts and wholes—in various combinations." This so-called "new" desire capitalizes on photography's ability to always synthesize time and place. As Susan Sontag (1977) writes in *On Photography,* "Cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is available to record what is disappearing" (ibid: 15).

While images have always "been worth a thousand words," the ability of *Instagram* to locate each image in relationship to its producer and viewer allows for a more sophisticated, intimate, and inherent ease in communicating visually. During my interviews on *Facebook Chat,* photos would be inserted into the conversations frequently. When interviewing Julia, 24, from Ismali, a town in the Odessa region of Ukraine, I found that Julia would often include photos to explain a point. When I asked her age she showed a picture of herself with a birthday cake. She showed me a photo of herself in Washington DC when explaining where she mastered her English skills, and so on. Likewise, another contact posted photographs to illustrate his actions: in a conversation with Igor, 21, from Dubrovica in the Ukraine, Igor had to break off to take his dog out. He quickly followed up with a photo of himself walking his dog and, when he was back at his computer and ready to resume the conversation, he snapped a photo of himself there too.

The idea of constant visual communication is quintessentially 21st century. With the creation of cell phone photography, images have become the vernacular of the virtual world. *Instagram* even launched "*Instagram Direct*" in December 2013 as a way of allowing its users to send visuals to one another privately. This new component may have been initiated as way for *Instagram* to compete with social media rival, *Snapchat*[6]. However, more importantly, this recently added component of the application emphasizes the intimate visual connection *Instagram* has formed with in its own community. Whether it is by sending photos directly to another user, or holding one's own memories and others in your hand, the intimate nature of *Instagram* is evident. While users can send photos to supplement text in other messaging services, like *Whatsapp*, in *Instagram*, visuals drive the conversation.

The interface of *Instagram* also helps to convey this atmosphere of familiarity. As Hochman and Manovich (2013) write, "*Instagram*'s photos resonate with more personal, "authentic" experiences that chronicle the world in a way that resists the time and place represented by larger impersonal corporate documentation efforts." Even the concept of time, which is generally considered a universal experience, is personal within *Instagram*. Every time I asked one of my informants when they joined *Instagram* they replied, "X number of days ago." While the variable changed, this formulaic response remained a consistent answer amongst respondents. As Hochman and Manovich state "The time element is always user–centric and its measurement is relative between the present moment of launching the application and the original date of creation. The interface strongly emphasizes physical place and users' locations." Further, when searching for past photos with my informants we had to scroll through their feeds prowling for images. There is no internal search function. Once we found the desired photo, when asking when it was taken, the answer would always be "X number of days ago" as the app would describe.

Although the language of "X number of days ago" as opposed to "January 17" may not have a real bearing on an individual, the notion of the self is more present in the former expression of time. "Days ago…" infers a direct relationship with the *Instagram* users current and past selves. That was one instant; this is another. When these instants are strung together, what do they create? A feed? Or a chronicle of a life lived? As Anna—27, from Kiev—described it. "I don't plan to take my pictures. It's just in the moment. From when I live the moment or share a moment with the people and things which are with me."

While this "user-centric" concept of time was seemingly created to construct a more natural experience, personally—as an anthropologist and journalist—this has been a struggle. It means that when I'm scrolling through my own feed or finding my informant's images it can be particularly challenging to figure out when exactly an image was taken or when an event happened. If something was shot 72 days ago---well, that is useless. My general reaction is usually: " Really?! That long ago?!" The passage of time can be a shock. Perhaps, in reality, I am not using *Instagram* correctly. After all, as the name suggests, *Instagram* emphasizes the instant. As Hochman and Manovich (2013) observe, “This sense of a temporality is established not only by *Instagram*’s filters or time presentation, but also by its instant photo sharing function.” Even images not shared in the “instant” are classified differently in the app as “latergrams” or “throwbacks.” And while this can be irritating for me, as an anthropologist and journalist hunting for facts, the real result is a greater personal connection amongst *Instagram*’s users. My informants trust that images are uploaded shortly after being shot unless otherwise stated; in return, the app breeds a communal understanding of intimate simultaneity.[7]

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[6] | A photo messaging service whose producers, according to the company, out number *Instagram*'s by sharing 700 million photos daily, as of May 2014.

There is a particular level of self-awareness that occurs during intimacy. In *Instagram* this visual intimacy leads to the creation of a new virtual self. Russell W. Belk (2013) writes in *The Extended Self in a Digital World:*

> [A] difference from the pre digital age is in the extent to which we now self-disclose and confess online, transforming the once semi-private to a more public presentation of self. This is also evident in the more shared nature of the self which is now co-constructed with much more instantaneous feedback that can help affirm or modify our sense of self. The aggregate self can no longer be conceived from only a personal perspective and is not only jointly constructed but shared, that is, a joint possession with others. (Belk 2013: 490)

In *Instagram* this new digital self is both the emergence of a more public self, and one that is directly dependent and shaped by others.

The construction of the more public self starts with the creation of an *Instagram* ‘handle’—the internal naming system within the application. My informants generally chose handles that related to their actual name or their nickname. Additionally, many chose to use a name they had given themselves on other social media platforms as a way to link the accounts and create a virtual self that extended beyond *Instagram* into *Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr* and beyond.

Vadim, 38, is one such user. He was born in Berdyansk in the Zaporozhye region of Ukraine and moved to Kiev 6 years ago. His handle of Иммигрант13 translates to “Immigrant13” and is the same nickname he uses on his *Google, Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts. About 10 years ago Vadim was considering a move to Canada with his family, but at the last minute they decided they didn’t want to leave their home country and instead chose to remain in Ukraine. During that time, he was given the nickname “immigrant” by some of his friends and in return he decided to use it on all of his social profiles. Vadim describes himself as an active social media user and our conversations took place over *Facebook Chat, GChat,* and *Instagram.* This ability to link his profiles helps to create his robust virtual identity and digital self.

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[7] In 2016, Instagram changed to include a more algorithmic representation.

Another way many of my informants created their digital identity as a more public version of the 'self' was by taking pictures of themselves in a variety of situations; self-portraits not normally in the public sphere. These images, more frequently known as "selfies," have become such a huge global phenomenon on social media that the Oxford English Dictionary nominated "selfie" its word of the year in 2013. According to language research conducted by the Oxford English Dictionary, the frequency of the word "selfie" in the English language increased by 17,000 percent from 2012 to 2013. In their article *Mobile Phones and Community Development: A Contact Zone between Media and Citizenship,* Gerard Goggin and Jacqueline Clark (2009) write:

> Mobile phones have developed a particular relationship with people, their bodies, and their lives. Mobile phones have become a personal, even intimate technology. They certainly were a domestic technology, even more so than 'personal' computers, laptops, or many other household, digital, or ubiquitous computing devices. (Goggin/Clark 2009: 586)

Therefore, if phones provoke a physical and visceral reaction, perhaps it is only natural that the growth of cell phone photography coincides with a rise in the amount of images taken of the body.

Dasha, 27, from Kiev, loves taking selfies. For her they generally happen when she's had a good day, or is feeling like it could be a good day. From a sampling of 100 *Instagram* posts by Dasha, forty-six could be classified as some sort of selfie, and while some showed her legs, feet and hands, thirty-nine featured her face prominently in the frame. "They are for me," Dasha says, "For when I think I'm pretty." She finds the "likes" encouraging. Dasha's selfies take private intimate moments and project them into both the public and digital sphere. The impact of the intimacy of *Instagram* and the public sphere's influence on the digital self has more than just a physical effect, but a psychological one as well. If Dasha's perception of how "pretty" she looks is dependent on how many people "like" her selfies, it influences her emotions.

Likewise, looking through photos from the past creates a different—and more tangible—understanding of nostalgia then simply relying on the mind's eye. This can also influence a person's understanding of the "now", especially if one is constantly negotiating between the different spheres. Oleg, 25, from Krivoy Rog, Ukraine, says about his own experience on *Instagram*, "any new day, any new place could give you a chance to make the best photo ever." And by "best" he does not necessarily mean his favorite, rather one that is the favorite of others. The *Instagram* community is part of what fosters the development of the digital self. The "liking," the "following" and the "sharing" are all actions (and terms) that help to build *Instagram* as a community shaped by its "produsers." Not only does its community shape *Instagram*, but the community is part of its allure. As Edward Mcquarrie, Jessica Miller, and Barbara Phillips (2013) write in *The Megaphone Effect: Taste and Audience in Fashion Blogging,* "A new kind of consumer behavior has emerged online in the past decade. The Web has made it possible for ordinary consumers to reach a mass audience, to 'grab hold of the megaphone,' to adapt Bourdieu's (1999) metaphor" (ibid: 136).

Julia, 24, was drawn to *Instagram* for this very reason. "I want people to find my pictures," she says. Julia asserts that her photos are often for herself, but more frequently they are aimed at her close friends, relatives, and sometimes even total strangers, with whom she connects with through "hashtagging". Commonly used on other social networks, "hashtagging" is a way of categorizing content based on specific topic. Julia says she uses this method to connect to people with the same interests. For example, when she posts photos of her cat she often tags the photos *"#instaCat"* as a way of showing her cat to other cat lovers. Similarly, when Julia feels like looking at cat photos she will search the *#instaCat* feature to find photos she would not otherwise see. Mcquarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) write, "More consumers now have more opportunities to reach thousands of other consumers than ever before." (ibid: 136). Reaching these thousands of other consumers can be great for cat lovers like Julia, while also creating a sense of comfort for the user.

In monumental situations such as the Ukrainian revolution, this means of categorization had an important and pivotal role to play that extends much farther than looking at cat photos. For example, Oleg found this to be the case when he was photographing the tossing of Molotov cocktails in Maidan Square. "It was really scary," he said, "these comments gave a hope and motivation." For Oleg, his virtual self was created by the community, but also supported by it. As he "hashtagged" his photos to connect him with others in the Ukrainian community, he became a part of not just the *Instagram* community, but of an entire subculture within it. Mcquarrie, Miller, and Phillips state that in some "consumption spheres, consumers are able to grab the megaphone for themselves, without institutional certification or enablement." (ibid: 137). Based on my research, this was the case for *#euromaidan*. Critically, this sense of empowerment and connection occurred because the concept of the virtual self relies so strongly in sharing these private moments with a greater more public community through the virtual vernacular.

Part II: The Impact of the Ukranian Revolution

When I asked Julia if she found that *Instagram* helped her connect with the Ukrainian revolution, she replied, "maybe it's better to say that I connected *Instagram* to the revolution." Initially I assumed that we had reached a translation hurdle, so I asked her to explain what she meant. She then elaborated that *Instagram* did not bring her to other people but, by posting photos from the square, other people came to her. In his op-ed in *The New York Times*, Oleksandr V. Turchyno wrote on March 11, 2014 that during Euromaidan[8] "the people of Ukraine proved stronger than a dictator who had been groomed for the role of a puppet ruler." The Ukrainian people's belief in their own power not only fostered the revolution, but also influenced their use of *Instagram* during that time. As Vadim says, "we realized that each of us can be the mouthpiece."

Many of my informants shared this understanding of individual power; notably all of my informants participated in the Euromaidan protests where the individual's power was valued. I tried to find informants with differing opinions but consistently the people using *Instagram* publicly—with geotags and hashtags—were on the same side of the revolution; a revolution that believed in the power of the people as both individuals and as a collective. As anthropologist, Jeffrey S. Juris, writes in his study: *Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere*, "…digital tools facilitated the diffusion of global justice movements and enhanced their scale of operation by allowing activists to more effectively communicate and coordinate across geographic spaces." (2012: 260). With this level of communication and coordination comes a greater sense of the group.

The strong understanding of "community" throughout *Instagram* only strengthens this "group" mentality. As Yana, 43, born and raised in Kiev said, "During this period I made my photos to memorialize this event for my country and to show them to other *Instagram* users around the world." Yana's *Instagram* followers doubled during the revolution, bolstering her own individual sense of power and that of the cause. She commented: "It was a difficult but important period for all the Ukrainians. My photos reflected that with patriotism."

Likewise, Dasha also said she felt a sense of power when her followers started to build up after she started posting photos from Maidan Square. The support she received on social media echoed that which she felt in the square. As Ukranian flags hung from the streets in her neighborhood, so too did they appear in her social feeds. Dasha, lover of eye-shadowed selfies, started to take photos of tires in flames and sometimes even photos of herself in front of such scenes. However, this change in subject matter was not permanent; when the revolution died down she reverted to her old *Instagram* habits. She continued, "Now that everyone has seen lots of bad news and is confused about the new government's actions –we need to see something good-so I chose to take good positive pictures."

Vadim echoed this experience. With over two thousand followers, Vadim is no stranger to *Instagram*. He generally posts images of stunning landscapes at sunrise and sunset and sometimes pictures of his family in these surreal and beautiful scenes. But when asked about the momentary blip in his *Instagram* feeds—where images of chaos replaced his normally serene photos—Vadim said, "When these events happened, even the most conscious Ukrainians had to change their content. You cannot post flowers, when people are dying."

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[8] | The term Euromaidan has come to indicate this period of civil upheaval in Ukraine, which began in November 2013.

Conclusion

During the 2014 revolution, the Ukrainian users of *Instagram* were not only advocates for democracy in their home country, but also used *Instagram* to democratize the production of visual media. In *Mobile Phones and Community Development: A Contact Zone between Media and Citizenship*, Goggin and Clark (2009) write,

> The mobile phone goes further still, along the trajectory of the culturally resonant path of media, playing an important role alongside other convergent and traditional media in bringing new voices, actors, and powerful practices into the circuits of development. (Goggin/Clark 2009: 596)

As the protestors in Maidan square challenged their government, so too did their use of technology challenge the modes of visual media production.

The crisis of representation is evolving into a global battle for self-representation. As Clark and Goggin (2009) state, "There are more mobile phones than fixed-line telephones around the world, and in developing countries, cell phones are often the effective and relatively affordable form of telecommunications access" (ibid.: 585). With the prevalence of photo social networks like *Instagram*, individuals are fighting against the indexical and iconic imagery in their own lives and diffusing the fetishism of photographic production. These Ukranians using *Instagram* from Maidan Square directly became the media producers of the revolution. Thus helping to not only oust their government, but also annihilate the global disparity of visual capital.

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