



# Post-Election: Facebook-Reaction-Analysis

*What about Silberstein?*

**BY** Jakob-Moritz Eberl, Petro Tolochko, Hyunjin Song, Tobias Heidenreich, Fabienne Lind, Rachel Edie, Sebastian Galyga, Esther Greussing, Jana Bernhard, Gregor Rettenegger, Veronika Wenninger, and Hajo Boomgaarden

## FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:

**Dr. Jakob-Moritz Eberl, MA**, Research Associate / [jakob-moritz.eberl@univie.ac.at](mailto:jakob-moritz.eberl@univie.ac.at)  
**Univ.-Prof. Hajo Boomgaarden, PhD, MA**, Professor of Methods in the Social Sciences

T: +43-1-4277-49917  
<http://compcommmlab.univie.ac.at/>  
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# Post-Election: Facebook-Reactions-Analysis

*What about Silberstein?*

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Bernhard, Gregor Rettenegger, Veronika Wenninger, and Hajo  
Boomgaarden

*University of Vienna, Department of Communication*

*Computational Communication Science Lab*

*@CompCommLab*

On October 3rd 2017, we published a preliminary [report](#) on users' reactions to front-runners' Facebook postings during the latest Austrian election campaign (#nrw17). By "reactions", we mean the emoji-like icons resembling emotions. Facebook offers the reactions such as "Love", "Haha", "Wow", "Sad" and "Angry".

In the previous report, we analysed user reactions to lead candidates' posts during the first weeks of the Austrian election campaign. Such reactions, so we believe, are triggered by emotional cues, which candidates may deliberately use in their campaign communication. It turns out that user reactions clearly differ across candidates.

In short, we found that of all reactions received by Kern (SPÖ) and Lunacek (Greens), "Love" was the most common. Although Kurz (ÖVP) triggered a significant amount of "Love" reactions as well, he also focuses on more negative issues (e.g., crime), leading to higher shares of "Sad" and "Angry" reactions. Strache (FPÖ) takes his job as opposition leader seriously,

in that he predominantly incited "Angry" reactions, most of which are driven by posts on the topic of immigration. Pilz's (PILZ) decision to leave the Greens seems to have led him to a quasi-equal share of "Love" and "Sad" reactions. Finally, Strolz (NEOS) set himself apart from other candidates by inciting a high share of "Haha" reactions.



Facebook reactions

This analysis has shown us that the use of Facebook reactions can be traced back to different emotional triggers, which in turn are part of different campaign strategies by candidates. Some candidates aim for mobilization through optimism, others focus on anger and anxiety. Some seek to provoke direct negative emotions towards other candidates or parties, while others focus on policy. This is only to mention a few of the differences this preliminary analysis has shown.

We got a lot of positive feedback after publishing our preliminary results. The most common question, however, was: **“What about Silberstein?”** (i.e. the revelation that a former SPÖ consultant [may have set up two Facebook groups](#) that were publishing racist and anti-Semitic content in the aim of damaging the ÖVP and FPÖ campaign, which eventually got the SPÖ a lot of negative media coverage). Since the period of analysis for our first report had ended before the Silberstein affairs were brought to light, we weren’t able to say anything about how this incident affected reactions on the Facebook pages of lead candidates - or if it would have even made an impact at all. This is what we will try to get to the bottom of in this present report.

## Can we even know if Silberstein has affected Facebook reactions of users?

First off, a non-trivial disclaimer: it is impossible to prove a counterfactual. This means that we cannot know how reactions on Facebook pages would have turned out if there had been no Silberstein and dirty-campaigning revelations. We don’t know – and will never know – if there would have been more “Love” and/or less “Angry” reactions for Kern.

However, what we can do is take a very close look at the dynamics of user reactions for each candidate just before and after the Silberstein affairs, and try to identify any unusual spikes in reactions that could be tied to the Silberstein case. The first newspaper articles uncovering the story were

published on September 30. Considering this, one could expect a spike in “Sad” or “Angry” reactions for candidates denouncing the alleged dirty-campaigning strategies of the other candidate(s). While our previous analyses have shown that reactions are mainly used as a tool to amplify the emotion the candidates are triggering with their postings, critical readers still suggested that reactions may also be used against the candidates. This is a very important point, and in that case, one would expect an increase in “Angry” and “Sad” reactions for the leading candidate from the SPÖ, Christian Kern.

Based on this idea, we looked at the change in shares of “Angry” and “Love” emotions before and after October 30th. One might have expected the share of “Love” reactions to decrease for Kern and the share of “Angry” reactions to have increased. Opposing changes could have been expected for the other candidates. However, election campaigns are of course more complex than that, and we were unable to find a clear pattern matching these assumed reactions for the time before and after the Silberstein revelations (see Figure 1 below). While for Kern, the share of “Love” reactions increased more than for any other candidate in the last weeks of the campaign, his share in “Angry” reactions diminished as well. One reason would be that in-party supporters and out-party opponents are reacting to this event quite differently (i.e., increasing support from in-party supporters, and increasing criticism from out-party opponents), therefore “net” changes in those reactions might not have changed after all, in consequence of the Silberstein revelations. Another possibility is

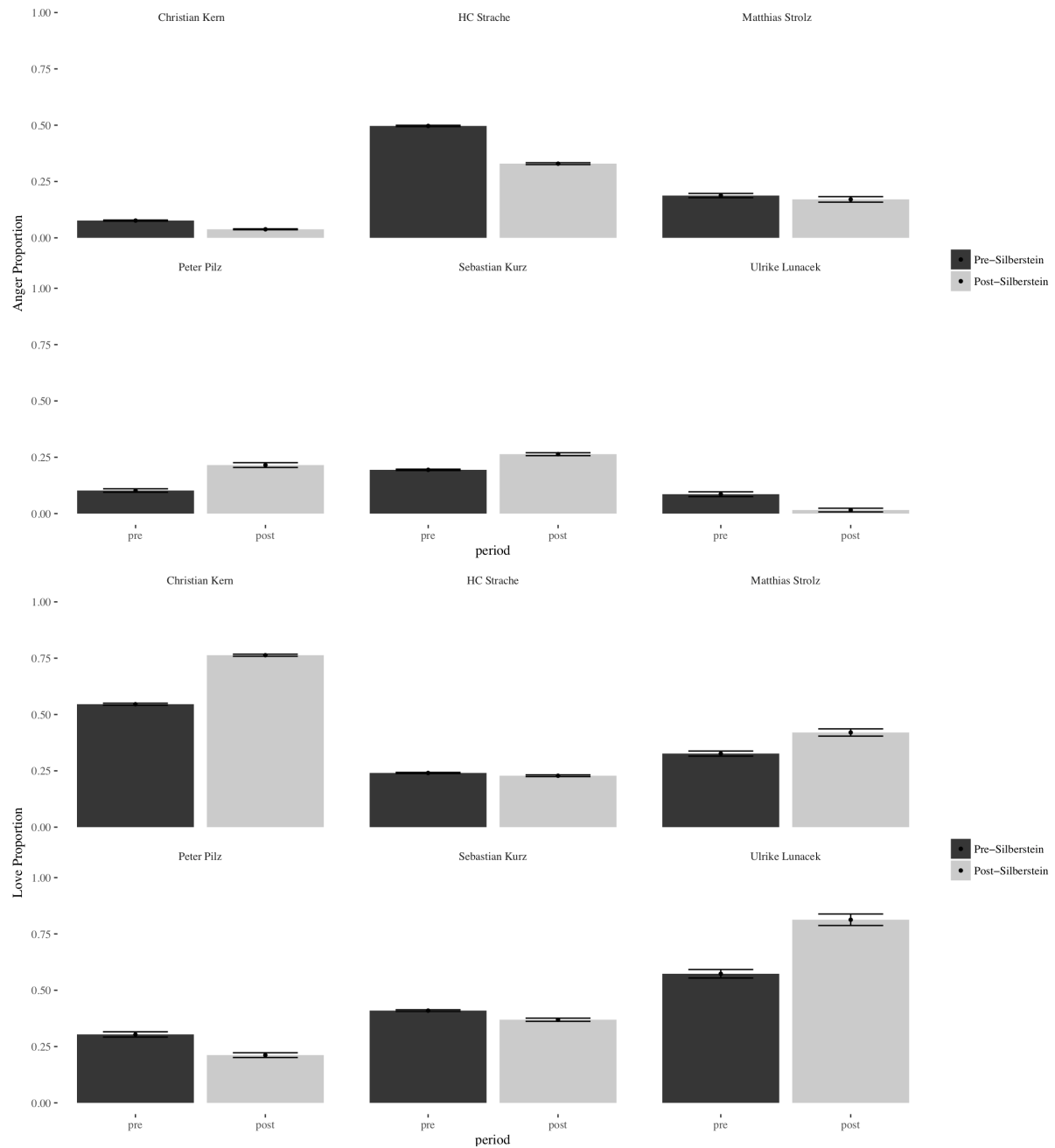


Figure 1: Love and Anger Proportions before and after Silberstein



that Facebook reactions are actually mirroring the emotions candidates trigger with their postings, and that they are not used against the candidates. The last possibility is that candidates attack each other based on the Silberstein affairs. While such emotional reactions should be classified as being aimed at the target and not at the originator of the attack, such classification is more simply said than done. The fact remains that users cannot disclose towards whom (the originator / the target) their emoji reaction on Facebook is actually directed.

As you may imagine, getting to the bottom of this is not an easy task, and uncovering the exact nature of emotional reaction dynamics requires far more rigorous analysis. We will therefore have to take a closer explorative look at how user-reactions changed over the course of the campaign...

## Facebook reactions and campaign dynamics

Shown in Figure 2 below are the absolute numbers of the different reactions to the candidates posts during the election campaign. We downloaded all contributions (posts and shared posts) from the Austrian parties' leading candidates' Facebook pages, as well as related statistics on likes and reactions dating back to the day snap elections were called, using Facebook API, as we did for our last preliminary report. The Social Democrats' Christian Kern (SPÖ), the People's Party's Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP), the far-right's Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ), the Greens' Ulrike Lunacek (Greens), the

Liberals' Matthias Strolz (NEOS) as well as the populist-left candidate Peter Pilz (Liste Pilz) brought it to a total of 2,322 contributions and 360,762 reactions in the period from May 12th to October 15th, 2017, 5pm.

Let us first try to get a better idea of how campaign dynamics may influence user reactions to candidates' Facebook postings. Notably, for each candidate, peaks in particular types of reactions can be identified over the course of their campaign. They are sometimes tied to external events connected to the candidates. For example, a peak in "Sad" and "Love" reactions can be identified for Peter Pilz in late June, this can be explained by his leaving the Greens party after having lost an internal election at the Greens' party congress (see Peak F). This peak is mirrored by a peak in "Love" reactions for Ulrike Lunacek around the same time, as she was elected leading candidate for the upcoming elections (see Peak M). Sometimes these peaks are genuinely caused by a candidate's communication on social media as well. For example, the peak in "Angry" reactions in mid-August, which was triggered by Sebastian Kurz demanding stronger punishment for sex-offenders while linking to a tabloid article about a child molestation case in Austria (see peak I and Posting #1).

More generally, one can also observe an increase in positively connoted reactions such as "Love" and "Haha" towards the last weeks of the campaign. This increase is particularly visible for Kern, Strolz and Lunacek, and is in line with more general findings in political science. Indeed, as elections draw nearer, it is reasonable to believe that individuals are more mobilized by campaign communication (Cho, 2013) and, thus, pay

close attention to political messages both online and offline.

## Before and after Silberstein

Now, what we are actually interested in is whether or not the Silberstein revelations impacted user reactions on candidates' Facebook postings, and if so, how. To investigate this, we will look for spikes in particular reactions around the time of these revelations (as described above). The dotted vertical line in each candidate's graph (Figure 2) marks September 30th, i.e. the day of the Silberstein revelations.

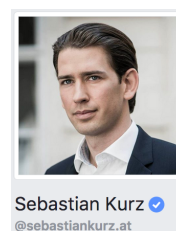


We will start off with Christian Kern, who was directly involved in the scandal. The revelations insinuated that he was leading a dirty campaign against his rivals Kurz and Strache; even going as far as to propagate anti-Semitic and racist content via anonymous Facebook groups. One could expect such revelation to turn some of his supporters against him or at least for them to be disappointed by him. They might show their disappointment through “Angry” or “Sad” reactions to his posts. However, right after September 30th, there are three peaks that are at least partly related to the case of Silberstein and its aftermath. Two of them are comparatively small peaks in “Love” reactions and the third is a peak in “Sad” reactions – In fact, the

highest peak concerning “Sad” reactions during Kern’s whole campaign (see Peaks A). Shown in Posting #2, Kern tries to downplay the Silberstein revelations. Without mentioning even the name of the former campaign associate, Kern admits that his campaigning has been flawed, and argues that electoral decisions should be made based on policy issues after all.

A few days later, Kern goes on the offensive. First, he condemns the media for running a “smear campaign” against him (Posting #3). Note that, again, he is not referring to Silberstein in particular. He then shares a video of his wife, also accusing the media of harassing her, and publishing false stories about her (Posting #4).

Kern reframes the alleged wrong-doings during his campaign, calling it a media “smear campaign” against him and his wife. Thus, instead of being disappointed by his campaigning, his supporters show solidarity with him and his wife through “Love” and “Sad” reactions.



Sebastian Kurz, as one of the main targets of the dirty campaigning by Tal Silberstein’s team, reacted on the eve of the revelations by posting the newspaper article without any additional commentary. Though this article triggered some “Angry” reactions among supporters (see Peak K) – they were most probably targeted at the rival Party (SPÖ) and not Kurz him-

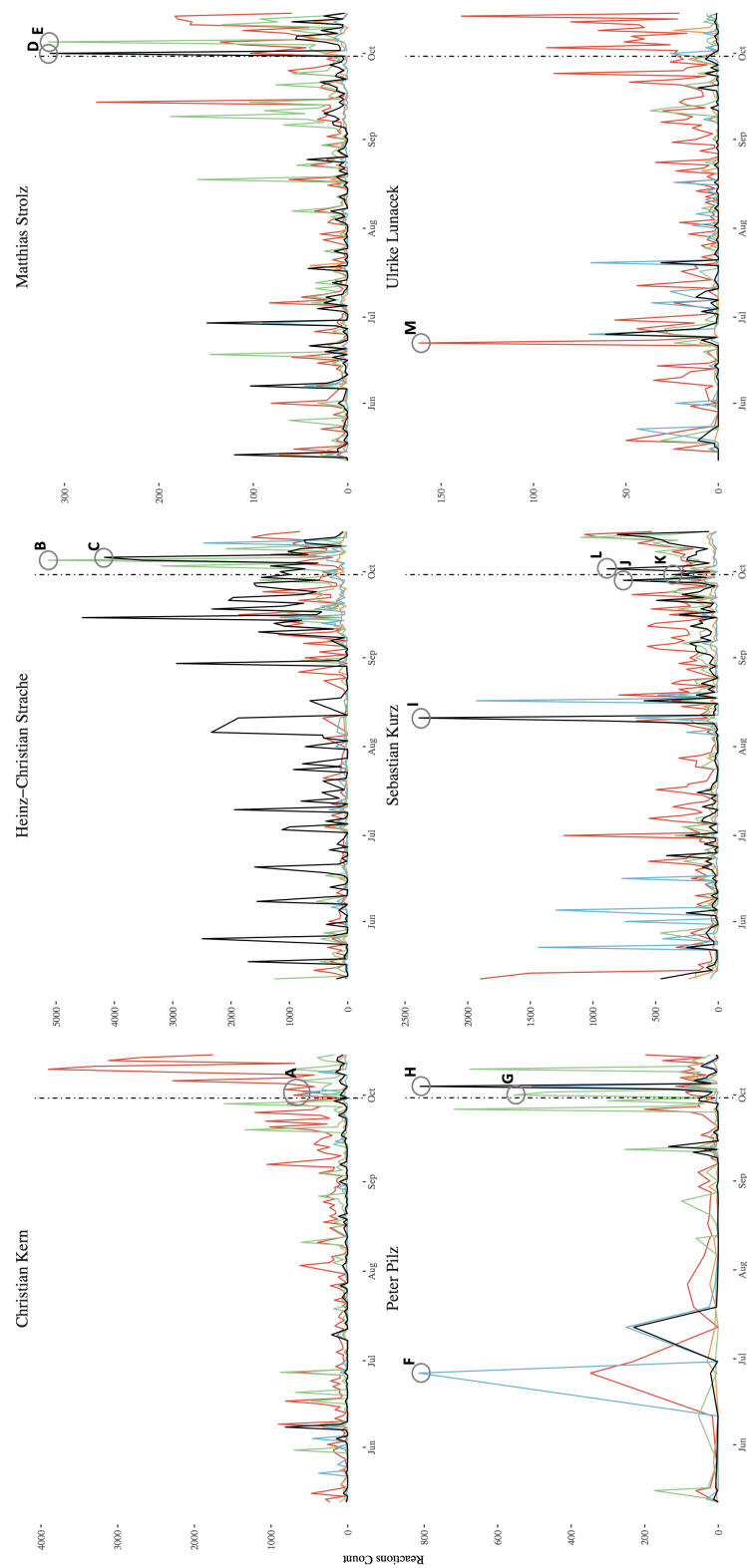
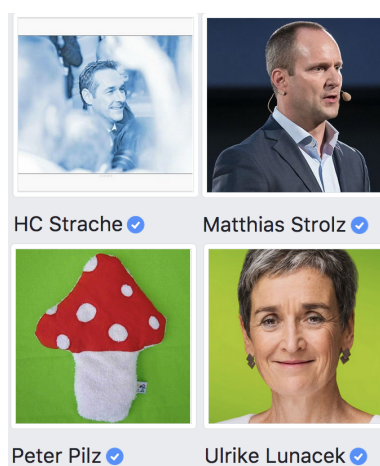


Figure 2: Facebook reaction distribution over candidates

self. The posting was enclosed by two much larger peaks caused by non-Silberstein related posts (see Peaks J & L)

Peaks J and L (caused by postings #6 and #7, respectively) each got more than twice the amount of “Angry” reactions as the actual Silberstein posting. While the media already seemed very much focused on the Silberstein revelations, Kurz’s supporters reacted much stronger to Kurz’s anti-immigration postings. In Posting #6, he writes that he fears that Austrians would feel like immigrants in their own country. While in Posting #7, he condemns that mosques in Vienna actively prevent the integration of Muslims.



For most other candidates, the Silberstein revelations remained largely un-commented and did not cause many reactions on Facebook. While Strache got a lot of laughter (“Haha”) (Peak B) and “Angry” reactions (Peak C) shortly after September 30th, they were not tied to the alleged dirty campaigning, but rather to the roll-out of their newest campaign spot (see Posting #8), as well as an anti-immigration posting (see Posting #9).

While there were spikes in “Angry” and “Haha” reactions on Strolz’s Facebook page during the first days of October (see Peaks D & E), these were tied to police brutality during the Catalanian referendum and a short sketch from a comedy show, respectively (see Posting #10 and Posting #11).

Peter Pilz was generally very critical of political parties. During the campaign, he even said that he has had [“enough of parties”](#). Yet, Pilz also refrained from prominently addressing the Silberstein revelations on his Facebook page. The peak in “Haha” reactions (Peak G) and the peak in “Angry” reactions (Peak H) in the beginning of October were triggered by a joke he had made during one of the ongoing TV-debates (see Posting #12) as well as another posting, in which he calls out Kurz for not following through on legislation he had promised ([Posting #13](#)).

Finally, although Ulrike Lunacek condemned the alleged dirty campaigning on her Facebook page, none of the peaks in her user reactions are related to the Silberstein revelations.

## Summary

In this series of technical reports, we analysed lead candidates' posts on Facebook during the Austrian parliamentary election campaign of 2017. In the current report, we were interested in whether or not the Silberstein revelations impacted user reactions. While answering this research question is difficult and proving a counterfactual (i.e. a "what if" scenario) is impossible, we took an explorative look at how reactions changed over the course of the campaign, more specifically before and after September 30.

First off, if there were changes in user reactions they wouldn't have affected the overall trends concerning each candidate. For example, Kern still has large shares of "Love" reactions, while Strache mainly gets "Angry" reactions.

Second, our analysis has suggested (albeit implicitly) that aggregate data on reactions before and after the Silberstein revelations will not help illuminate the nature of changes in user reactions. However, the explorative analysis of peaks is an important addition in and of itself, as it uncovers the triggers of emotional outburst on candidates' Facebook pages.

Third, while traditional media were focused on the Silberstein revelations, our analysis has shown that this topic was much less prominent on the candidates' Facebook pages. Even when other candidates criticized the alleged dirty campaigning, it seems that users were not strongly reacting to it. In fact, Kurz's posting about Silberstein triggered much less "Angry" reactions than his postings about immigration. Facebook supporters thus remained focused on

the one issue they already knew, that made them "Angry" before and that they were already used to reacting to.

Finally, while Kern had little (perhaps no) other choice than to address the Silberstein allegations on his Facebook page, users did not excessively react negatively (e.g., by using the "Angry" reaction). This has to do with Kern actively reframing the debate and describing himself and his wife as the victims of a media smear campaign. Furthermore, it is an additional indication that Facebook reactions are generally not used to "attack" candidates. Instead, they foremost mirror the emotional appeals the candidates convey in their postings. This alone is an additional reason why we see so little effect of the Silberstein revelations on the candidates' Facebook pages.

In sum, to answer often asked question whether Facebook reactions changed after the Silberstein revelations, we have to say that there is no strong indication to suspect that the Silberstein affairs substantially affected user reactions on candidates Facebook pages. In fact, our analysis suggests that this might just not be the way how Facebook reactions actually "work". Keep in mind, however, that this does not mean that Silberstein did not have an effect on voters' social media behaviour in general, not to mention voting behaviour. Yet, any influences of Facebook pages or posts as well as of newspaper coverage about them are notoriously difficult to measure. While the importance of social media in political discourse is steadily increasing, these and similar research questions will continue to occupy political communication scholars long after this election.



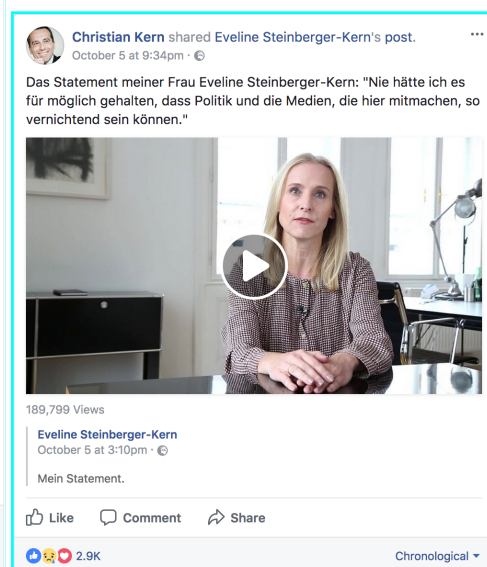
(a) Posting #1: This Posting has been removed from Sebastian Kurz's timeline after October 15, 2017.



(b) Posting #2



(c) Posting #3



(d) Posting #4





(e) Posting #5



(f) Posting #6



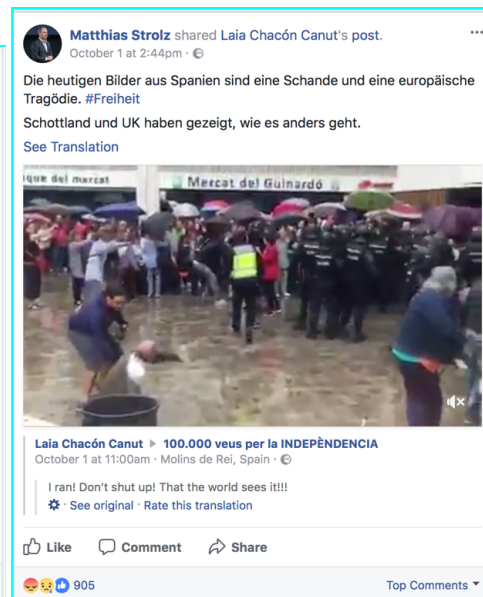
(g) Posting #7



(h) Posting #8



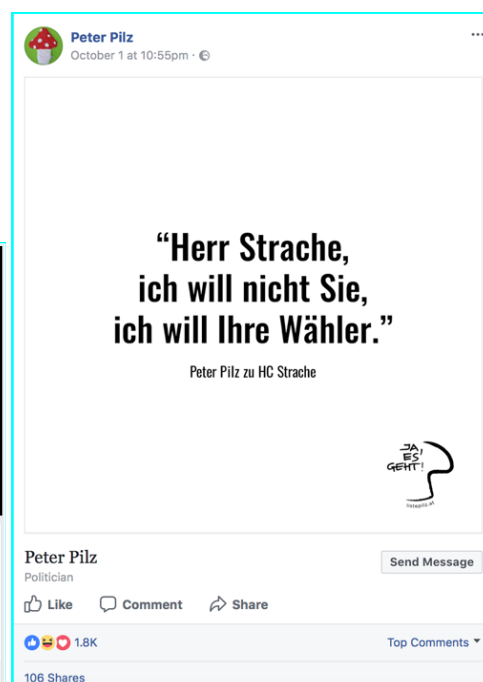
(i) Posting #9



(j) Posting #10



(k) Posting #11



(l) Posting #12