

## **Campaign Comics: The Use of Comic Books for Strategic Political Communication**

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Political parties have long used comic books in their political campaigns. Whereas both ideological and political messages in comics as well as the social and political commentary in editorial cartoons have received vast scholarly attention, comic books and their use for strategic communication are rarely addressed. Thus, this article discusses the use of comic books in political campaigns and analyzes the mass media discourse on comic books used in the 2010 election campaign in Vienna, Austria. Results show the actors in the coverage put special focus on the violent and xenophobic content of the comics. Although these types of content gained much attention, the media failed to discuss the suitability of comics for political purposes.

*Keywords: comic books, election campaigns, political campaigning, political advertising, politainment, public sphere*

In the 2010 Viennese City Council and District Council election campaign, two parties used controversial comic books as means of political advertising to spread and promote their political messages. Against the background of the voting age having been lowered from 18 to 16 years, this may be interpreted as a political campaigning strategy intended to reach the relatively narrow segment of young voters by using messages more closely related to their life-worlds. Both comic books employed strategies of negative campaigning by harshly attacking political rivals and vilifying their character traits and physical appearances. At the same time, the unconventional and humorous features of the comic books allow for an easier distribution of political messages. While the entertaining character of the message is highlighted, the political intentions become less obvious.

A vast literature exists on ideological and political messages in comics (e.g., Dorfman & Mattelart, 1976; McAllister, Sewell, & Gordon, 2001; McKinney, 2008) as well as on the social and political commentary in editorial cartoons (e.g., Conners, 1998, 2005, 2010; Edwards & McDonald, 2010; El

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Refaie, 2009), but comics explicitly used for strategic political communication have yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. Comic books have been employed during several political campaigns; for example, by Bill Clinton (1996), Obama (2008), Merkel (2009), Putin (2011), the European Commission (2010), and Poland's European Union presidency (2011). Comic books and political cartoons are just one category of the huge variety of campaign messages (Conners, 2005). They are characterized by a particular visual rhetoric of persuasion that expresses opinions and accusations. At the same time, they present political messages in a (primarily visual) entertaining and humorous form (Conners, 1998, 2005), partly hiding the political and ideological content. As such, political comics are an example of the blending of popular culture, entertainment, and politics into "politainment." Humor is an increasingly important feature of contemporary political communication (Conners, 2010), and empirical evidence suggests that if political messages are delivered in a humorous way, argument scrutiny may be reduced (Young, 2008). Moreover, the use of comics in electoral campaigns may attract media attention and coverage, thus providing free publicity for political parties. Hence, they may stimulate public debate, in particular if they employ negative campaign strategies that attack political opponents (e.g., Lau & Rovner, 2009; McKinnon, Laid, Murphy, & Acree, 1996; Ridout & Smith, 2008).

This article first discusses the use of comic books in strategic political communication against the theoretical background of (visual) politainment and, second, examines the media discourse on two comic books used in the Viennese mayoral election campaign of 2010. We begin by describing the two comic books and briefly review previous studies on the media coverage and effects of negative campaigning and advertising, putting special emphasis on humorous content. This study employs a quantitative content analysis of the media discourse in Austrian newspapers. The main focus of analysis is on the media debate, particularly the uttered concerns about the use of comics in political campaigning.

### **(Visual) Politainment: Comics and Politics**

The increasing amount of visual elements in political communication is explicitly considered to be a symptom of a trend toward politainment—that is, "the blending of politics and entertainment into a new type of political communication" (Nieland, 2008, p. 3659). Politainment is a result of both the increasing mediatization (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2010; Krotz, 2007) and professionalization of contemporary politics (Blumler & Gurevich, 2000; Nieland, 2008; Papathanassopoulos, Negrine, Mancini, & Holtz-Bacha, 2007; Strömbäck, 2007). Although empirical evidence suggests that the convergence of politics and the entertaining features of popular culture can promote political matters (e.g., Baum & Jamison, 2006; Van Zoonen, 2005), critical positions refuting this argument prevail (e.g., Nieland, 2008; Young, 2008). The prominent use of visual elements in the mass media has shifted political communication from a formerly "logocentric" to a primarily "iconocentric" mode of communication, which is referred to as the visualization of politics (Knieper & Müller, 2004). Hofmann (2006, p. 158) summarizes the main arguments of critics of the use of images for political communication: First, images are considered elements of entertainment that are consumed without much thought. Second, they are assumed to be too simple to represent political issues or decision. Third, even though images are messages undergoing a process of construction and design, they are perceived to be concrete and realistic and can thus be used easily for ideological purposes. Pictures in general, but especially visuals used for political purposes, even seem to hold a

mysterious power that makes them harmless and persuasive at the same time (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2011).

Mahrt (2008/2009) focused on the role of comics for young people's civic education and examined comics that clearly explore political themes. Because comics present political issues in an entertaining way, Mahrt considers them elements of politainment (Mahrt, 2008/2009, p. 119). Faust and Shuman (1971) emphasize that, even though comics are produced for entertainment, they also transmit ideology. The authors observe that "it is often difficult to determine whether the producers regard entertainment or the transmission of ideology as more important" (p. 195). Similarly, McAllister et al. (2001) mention two reasons for the importance of focusing on ideological issues in comic art: To begin with, the "nature of comic art makes the form ideologically interesting" (p. 4), because words and images are combined in a unique way. The result is a complex, polysemic message that allows for multiple readings. While the messages in comics can be quite implicit in nature, the storytelling devices applied (such as captions and speech balloons) may express particularly explicit statements. Moreover, it is important to focus on ideology in comics due to their social significance: "Although often comics are dismissed as the insignificant 'funnies,' they are also highly ego-involving for many readers, children and adult" (p. 4).

Regarding the degree of interrelation between political messages and entertainment in juvenile comics, Mahrt (2008/2009) distinguishes three types of comics: First, some comics occasionally use political concerns or politically motivated issues to generate new narratives, but they are not primarily produced for political purposes. Examples for this category of comics are Obama's cameo appearance in Marvel's 2009 *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Issue 583; Szasz, 2010) and John F. Kennedy's 1963 appearance in *Action Comics* (#309) (Colton, 2009). Second, comics might explicitly be produced to convey politically motivated lessons, such as, for example, *Andi*, a comic publication by the Interior Ministry of North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, which is aimed at preventing young people from adopting a right-wing political attitude. The third category embraces comics that highlight the impact of politics on everyday life (e.g., *Persepolis*).

Recently, comics representing a new form of interrelation between political content and popular culture have emerged. In these, political actors are the main protagonists, or political issues are the main story frames. In 2008, IDW Publishing presented two comic-biographies of Barack Obama and John McCain entitled *Presidential Material*. Similarly, in May 2011, a comic was published depicting Vladimir "Super-Putin" fighting against terrorism and zombies that demand for more democracy. In both cases, the comics were not produced by the politicians themselves, but by public relations experts and artists. Still, it remains unclear how independent the producers of these political comics actually were.

The next section presents the campaign comics used in the Viennese election campaign in 2010. They belong to the second category—that is, comics that are explicitly produced for political purposes. Similarities can be identified regarding the format of the comics (single comic strips framed by a longer verbal text) and their explicitly ideological purpose.

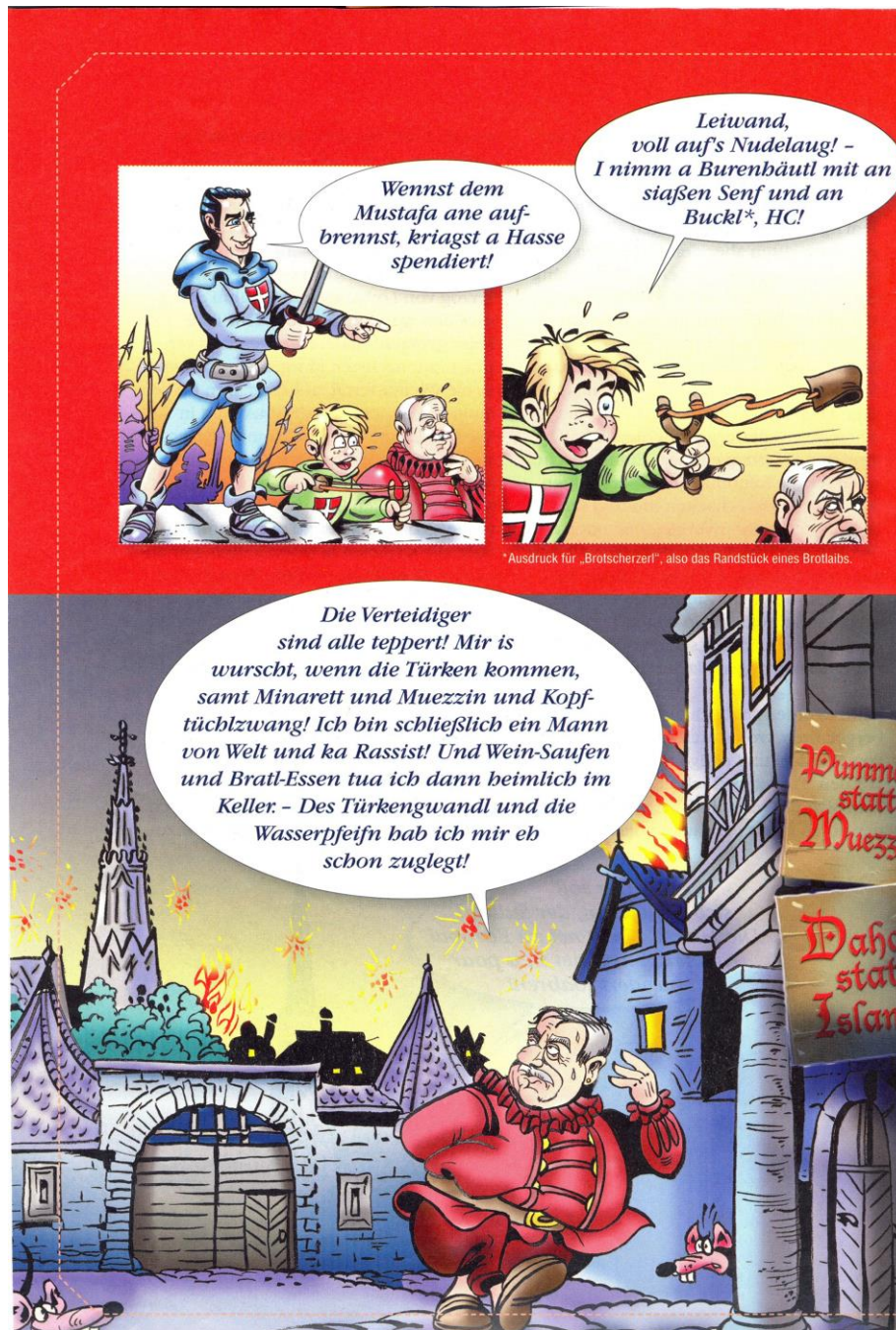
### **Campaign Comics in the 2010 Viennese Election Campaign**

The Viennese City and District Council election took place on October 10, 2010. It was the first Viennese election after the voting age had been lowered from 18 to 16. The Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) gathered 44.3% of the votes and lost its absolute majority of seats in the Vienna city parliament (-4.8%). With an increase of 10.9%, the right-wing populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) scored second place in the election, gaining 25.8%. The People's Party (ÖVP) gathered 14% of the votes—with a loss of 4.8%—and became the third-strongest force. The Green Party made a close fourth-place finish with 12.6% (-2%). This section presents the campaign comics of both FPÖ and SPÖ and discusses the parties' previous politainment strategies directed at young voters.

#### ***The FPÖ Campaign Comic Sagen aus Wien***

At the end of September, during the peak of the election campaign, the FPÖ circulated a controversial 55-page comic book entitled *Sagen aus Wien* (Viennese legends). The comic book was sent to all 550,000 households in Vienna. It consists of nine episodes, retelling legends that refer to the history of the Austrian capital, Vienna. Every episode contains a double-columned verbal text about the legend and an accompanying comic panel featuring illustrations and speech balloons. The verbal text in the comic panels is written in Viennese dialect. Despite the fact that the comic book contains verbal stories and comic panels, the latter may be read and understood independently from the verbal text.

This article particularly focuses on the first episode, "The Second Siege of Vienna 1683." The comic panels feature FPÖ party leader Heinz-Christian Strache as hero-character "HC." The legend (in the verbal text in columns) retells the Ottoman siege of Vienna of 1683. In the comic, the hero HC urges a young boy to attack "Mustafa" with a slingshot (see upper panel in Figure 1), the name being a reference to the grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire, Kara Mustafa, who led the siege (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011).



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**Figure 1. The "Mustafa" scene and the depiction of Vienna's Mayor Häupl as drunken coward in the FPÖ comic *Sagen aus Wien*, p. 10.**





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**Figure 2. FPÖ comic Sagen aus Wien, pp. 8–9.**

The episode featuring the siege was the most controversial part of the comic book, and it stimulated much public debate. Outcry immediately after its publication focused on the book's linking the Second Turkish Occupation of Vienna in 1683 with contemporary issues. In its campaign, the FPÖ blamed the city's crime rate on "professional gangs from Eastern Europe" and "immigrants unwilling to integrate." The comic addressed these current integration issues by placing them in the context of the historical event and concluded: "Turkey doesn't belong to Europe! Not now and not in a couple of hundred years!" (see Figure 2). Bringing the siege of Vienna to the present, the story proclaimed a new "battle for the city." In the episode, the city's mayor, Michael Häupl, (and the SPÖ) is personally attacked and held responsible for current societal problems, particularly those concerning integration. Throughout the comic book, he is depicted as a coward and opportunistic drunkard (see lower panel in Figure 1). Furthermore, the comic deals with hidden Nazi symbolism: For example, the depiction of the superhero resembling Strache is reminiscent of depictions in the anti-Semitic National Socialist paper *Der Stürmer* from 1935 (see, e.g., Brickner, 2010; Odehnal, 2010).

Because of its provocative content, the comic book gained massive media attention and gave rise to debates in both traditional and new media. The present analysis will show that, in terms of media attention, it was a highly successful campaign effort. However, the *Sagen aus Wien* comic was not the first attempt to borrow genres from popular culture for the promotion of political content. The FPÖ had been using comics for political purposes for several years. For example, "HC-Man" comic strips were published in the party's newspaper and website, and a comic book entitled *The Blue Planet: HC's Fight for Freedom*

*Against a Centralized EU* was published in 2009. In further attempts to win young voters, the FPÖ even recorded rap songs (Norman, 2006). When Strache presents himself as the rapper "HC," he wears sunglasses and a hooded sweatshirt to demonstrate his closeness to the young target group and its life-worlds.

### **The SPÖ Campaign Comic Mr. X**

In response to the FPÖ's comic, the young Social Democrats handed out and mailed a comic entitled *Mr. X*. The comic is a roman à clef, and the characters are easily assignable: In the story, the hero named "Mr. X" beats up Nazi zombies that threaten life in Vienna. FPÖ strategist Herbert Kickl is portrayed as the evil "Meister Kackl," leader of the zombies, who is directing the android marionette called "Heinrich" (see Figure 3).



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**Figure 3. Portrayal of H. C. Strache as a remote-controlled zombie in the SPÖ election campaign comic Mr. X, p. 25.** Retrieved from [http://www.wien.spoe.at/sites/default/files/mrx\\_comic.pdf](http://www.wien.spoe.at/sites/default/files/mrx_comic.pdf)



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**Figure 4. Fatima and Mr. X rewriting the virus in Mr. X, p. 25.**



Kackl is portrayed as owning a couple of "brain-dead and remote-controlled" androids that look like H. C. Strache. He feeds them special software infected by a dangerous virus that is programmed to destroy all friendships on Facebook by turning users into brain-dead Nazi zombies. To infect Vienna's citizens with the Nazi virus, one android, called Heinrich, performs the "terror-rap" (a reference to Strache's previously recorded campaign rap songs) in front of a big crowd. Mr. X and the heroine, Maria Fatima, try to stop him. To reprogram the virus, Mr. X steals the disc with the software and calls the mayor of Vienna, who looks like the real mayor, Michael Häupl, for help. Indeed, the mayor knows the code, and Mr. X and Fatima destroy the virus (see Figure 4). During the android's performance, the intended lyrics filled with hatred are substituted by words that delegitimize the political positions of the FPÖ.

The comic has many references to the life-world of adolescents, particularly with regard to the increasing and natural use of media in everyday life. For example, Fatima possesses a "tiPhone," a taser that looks like an iPhone. Furthermore, she is searching for Heinrich on Facebook and Google and uses Facebook to fight the Nazi zombies. Finally, the comic's readers are called upon to join the Facebook campaign against Kackl and the evil.

The comic, with a circulation of 60,000 print copies, was handed out to young voters in clubs, around schools, and in comic shops, and it was sent via postal mail and was published on Facebook. By portraying H. C. Strache as an insane zombie, it drew harsh criticism. In the same election campaign, the famous cartoonist Gerhard Haderer supported the SPÖ. He produced 13 *Fliegende Blätter* (flying leaflets) themed "Haderer für Häupl." The comic strips show everyday situations and aim to express that inciting people by populist means is not expedient, thus forming a clear counterstatement against the communication techniques employed by the FPÖ.

### **Political Advertising and Negative Campaigning**

Although plenty of studies and publications have addressed political advertising, political campaigning, and the media's election campaign coverage (for an overview, see, e.g., Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Trent & Friedenberg, 2008; for Austria, e.g., Plasser, 2012), research is still needed that focuses on the media's coverage of political advertising. Above all, this applies to the European research landscape. U.S. studies primarily focus on the coverage of political TV ads in media's ad watches (e.g., Kaid, McKinney, Tedesco, & Gaddie, 1999; Lau & Rovner, 2009; Min, 2002; Ridout & Smith, 2008) and on the effects ad watches have on audiences (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1996; Min 2002; Pfau & Loudon, 1994). However, in many Western European countries, TV ads are of minor importance for political advertising. In Austria, for example, the public service broadcaster ORF is legally prohibited from airing political ads. Private broadcasters have a comparably low market share, which is why campaign managers place little emphasis on television spots (Lengauer & Hayek, 2012). Political advertising in traditional print media still accounts for the largest portion of the budget for paid media in Austria. In the 2008 national election campaign, the parties spent around 90% of their paid media advertising budget on print media. In addition to print ads, political posters dominate Austrian election campaigns. In past campaigns, the parties allotted up to 40% of their overall advertising budgets to posters (Lengauer & Hayek, 2012).

Austrian political parties frequently employ strategies of negative campaigning in their political advertising (Plasser, 2012), such as the FPÖ and SPÖ did in their comics in the 2010 election campaign. Negative campaigning means to attack political opponents by referring to negative aspects of them (see, e.g., Brettschneider, 2008; Lau & Rovner, 2009). However, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of negative campaigning is contradictory. In a meta-analysis of 111 studies on the effects of negative political campaigning, Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) conclude that:

Research literature does not bear out the idea that negative campaigning is an effective means of winning votes, even though it tends to be more memorable and stimulate knowledge about the campaign. Nor is there any reliable evidence that negative campaigning depresses voter turnout. (p. 1176)

An experiment by Klimmt and colleagues (2007) investigated the effect of humor in negative political advertising. They found that the combination of entertaining elements and negative advertising strategies may have positive effects for the campaigning party. Humorous negative print ads affect voters' evaluations of the ads and their perceptions of candidates. However, the strongest effects were found among supporters of the attacking party, while the ads were markedly less effective for undecided voters.

Negative campaigning has important implications for journalistic coverage as well, as negativity is a guiding journalistic news selection criterion, and negative campaigning strategies meet the "attention logic" of the mass media (Brettschneider, 2008). As a result, politicians gain more publicity and mass media attention if they attack their opponents (Kepplinger, 2000). Previous studies support these findings: For example, Lau and Rovner (2009, p. 287) showed that, while the proportion of negative TV ads in U.S. presidential election campaigns remained stable between 1998 and 2002, the newspapers' coverage of negative ads increased. Similarly, Ridout and Smith (2008) found that negative and comparative political TV advertisements in U.S. Senate campaigns are more likely than positive ads to be covered by newspapers.

Ever since political ads became important means of communication between political actors and the electorate, journalists have taken an active watchdog role in scrutinizing advertisements (McKinnon et al., 1996; Ridout & Smith, 2008). "Such an analysis, journalists say, is part of an obligation to provide a picture of political reality other than the one that candidates place before the public" (McKinnon et al., 1996, p. 66). As McKinnon and colleagues (1996) and Kaid and colleagues (1999) contend, journalists may help to create a better informed electorate if they cover ethically suspect categories of advertisements. However, the experiments on the effects of ad watches (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1996; Min 2002; Pfau & Loudon, 1994) show rather contradictory findings.

Against this background we deem it relevant to analyze the discourse created by the comic books in journalistic news media. Therefore, we follow a public discourse approach and focus on the discussion about the comics in newspapers.

### **The Dual Role of Media in Public Spheres**

Functioning democracies are dependent upon a well-informed citizenry, and in contemporary societies voters rely on mass media to get information about politics and political issues (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2011). The current trends of segmentation and fragmentation notwithstanding (Blumler & Gurevich, 2000; Iyer, Soberman, & Villas-Boas, 2005; Strömbäck, 2007), the importance of the mass media as forums for the public sphere and the essential role of the latter for democracy are hardly disputed (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002). From a public discourse perspective, media are considered as mediators or conveyors for statements, claims, and opinions of different actors and actor groups, which try to place their problem definitions and resolutions (see, e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Journalists not only are conveyors of other positions but can make their own statements and thus act in a dual role (Statham, 2006).

The way the media cover politics and election campaigns in particular influences the voting decisions of the electorate (Druckman & Parkin, 2005). However, media coverage is biased, because media “highlight certain issues, frame events in particular ways, and portray candidates in varying lights” (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1030), and the amount of biased media content may grow in the future (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). From a normative perspective, media and journalists should commit to social responsibility, and political coverage should be accurate, balanced, fair, objective, and truthful (McQuail, 2010). Furthermore, the media are expected to serve as a public arena for the exchange of ideas and opinions, presenting perspectives from diverse actors and groups.

The Austrian journalism culture is classified within the north/central European or democratic-corporatist model of journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), where journalists perceive themselves primarily as “detached watchdogs” (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 487). On the one hand, they clearly reject embedding their own evaluations, beliefs, and prejudices in objective news reporting. On the other hand they act as watchdogs of the government and other political and economic elites (Hanitzsch, 2011). Thereby they highlight the political information function of journalism and support the motivational potentials of journalism—that is, motivating people to participate in political discussion and activity. Journalists belonging to this journalism culture primarily provide commentary in opinion-oriented genres of journalism (e.g., editorials or commentaries) and avoid it in objective news articles (Djerf-Pierre, 2008).

The current analysis takes this dual role into account and investigates the statements of all actors—whether journalists, politicians, experts, or other actors—that contribute to the debate on the election comics in the media coverage.

### **Objective and Research Questions**

As noted, both FPÖ and SPÖ employed strategies of negative campaigning, attacking their political opponents in their political comics. They used a simple good-and-evil dichotomy (hero versus villain character archetypes, respectively) and combined them with humorous elements. This article focuses on the media attention evoked by the comics and examines the actors and arguments of the media discourse to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: On the article level, how are the comic books evaluated in the media coverage?*

*RQ2: Who are the dominant actors (e.g., journalists, politicians, experts, and scientists), and how do they evaluate the comic books in their statements?*

*RQ3: How are the comic books discussed by the media and by the covered actors, and which thematic perspectives on the comics do they provide?*

In particular, we are interested in the following subquestions:

*RQ 3.1. To what extent do the actors discuss the elements of negative campaigning in the comic books?*

*RQ 3.2. To what extent do the actors discuss the use of comics for political purposes and their suitability as conveyors of political issues?*

### **Method**

A quantitative content analysis of news reports about the election campaign comics in German-language newspapers was conducted.<sup>1</sup> The period of investigation started on September 25, 2010, and ended on February 2, 2011. Any media item, whether in Austrian or foreign newspapers, mentioning one of the comics was coded. For sampling, we used the databases Factiva and Wiso. They allowed for a keyword search in the most important Austrian, German, and Swiss newspapers. Thirteen search keywords and keyword combinations were used for sampling.<sup>2</sup> Every media item referring explicitly to one of the comics, both comics, or election comics in general within the period of investigation was captured.

### **Variables Examined**

On the article level, the main topic of the article was coded to determine whether the comic was the main or secondary topic of the article or was just mentioned as a reference. To analyze the overall tone of coverage, the evaluation of the comics on the article level was coded using a five-point scale ranging from one (*very positive*) to five (*very negative*).

**Variables on the statement level.** The analysis on statement level took into account the dual role of the media—either as forums of exchange (that is, as mediators of other positions) or as actors in their own right (speakers for their own position). To identify the main arguments and evaluations in the media discourse about the comics, we coded all individual statements made in each article. Each statement was analyzed in terms of actor type (e.g., politician, journalist, expert), party affiliation (e.g., FPÖ, SPÖ), and evaluation of the comic by the actor. The evaluation was measured with a five-point scale. Additionally, a “special case” category was created for statements that evaluated the comic as “not

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<sup>1</sup> We examined newspapers, because Austria still has a high newspaper readership. In 2010, 74% of Austrians and 60% of the young target group (14 to 19 years) read a newspaper on a daily basis (Media Analyse, 2010), earning Austria 10th place worldwide in the “Readership Countries Hitlist” of WAN-IFRA (Riess, 2011, p. 19).

<sup>2</sup> The keywords were the following: fpö AND comic, spö AND comic, fpö AND mustafa, mustafa AND comic, strache AND comic, wahl AND comic, wien AND comic, “sagen aus wien,” and “Mr. X” (full-text search was carried out with truncation).

negative” without referring to positive aspects either. The statement’s thematic perspective on the comic was analyzed (e.g., xenophobia, incitement to violence) as well. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, the thematic perspectives were inductively generated, resulting in 13 categories. For each statement, up to two thematic perspectives were coded. Finally, the origin of the comic referred to was coded (FPÖ, SPÖ, both comics, or election comics in general).

All articles were coded by a single coder. To gauge the reliability of the coding procedure, a check coder independently recoded 30 (15%) of the articles. Reliability, determined by percentage of agreement, yielded sufficient scores (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002, p. 593) ranging from 100% to 80% (for evaluative tone on the article level.) On the statement level, the percentage of agreement on the identification of the same statements was 89%. The percentage of agreement regarding the coded actor type on the statement level was 100% when the same statements were identified (and 89% overall). Regarding the evaluation of the comics, the percentage of agreement was 76% and 68% overall, which is below the acceptable level of agreement. Due to its subtlety and the fact that the evaluation was measured by scale and is partially discerned intuitively, such variables are difficult to code. Thus, we paid special attention to the coded categories. Closer inspection showed that 88% of the statements that were coded differently were still coded in related categories (e.g., *very negative* instead of *negative*); for the analysis of evaluations on the statement level, we thus reduced the scale from five to three points: *negative*, *neutral*, and *positive*.

## Results

During the period of investigation, 202 articles discussed or mentioned the FPÖ or SPÖ campaign comics, and 181 (89.6%) of them were of Austrian origin. Sixteen articles from German media and 5 articles from Swiss and international print media were identified. All of the examined Austrian daily newspapers and weeklies<sup>3</sup> contained at least two articles, with the leading national quality papers *Der Standard* (19%) and *Die Presse* (16%) covering the comics most frequently. They were followed by the *Salzburger Nachrichten* (10% of all articles) and the mid-market paper *Kurier* (9%). In 2010, newspapers had a readership of 77% in Vienna (Media Analyse, 2010). Hence, it is plausible to assume that Viennese citizens received additional information about the election comics via the press.

To better classify and value the amount of the comic coverage, we sought to determine whether the coverage of the comics was high compared to the coverage of other types of advertising. Because newspaper ads and political posters are the most important advertising elements in Austrian election campaigns (Lengauer & Hayek, 2012), we compared the media’s attention to the comics with the total coverage of ads and political posters. During the investigated period, the Austrian newspapers covered campaign posters in 109 articles; campaign ads were mentioned in 81 articles. This finding suggests that, in their coverage of campaign advertising, the media paid more attention to the two comics than to campaign posters or print ads.

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<sup>3</sup> Except for the free tabloid newspapers *Österreich* and *heute*, all Austrian newspapers are stored in the selected databases.



The content analysis revealed that reports about the FPÖ comic (81.7%) clearly outnumbered those about the SPÖ comic (11.4%). Five percent of the articles mentioned both, and 2% reported on campaign comics in general.

### ***Tone of the Coverage***

To assess RQ1, the evaluation of the comics on the article level was coded, revealing the dominant critical tone of the coverage. The comics were never seen as very positive or positive. On the contrary, 34.1% of all articles concerned with the FPÖ comic judged it as very negative, and 37.2% considered it to be negative (see Table 1). On a scale from one (*very positive*) to five (*very negative*), the FPÖ comic was evaluated with a mean of 4.31 ( $SD = 0.667$ ). In contrast, the SPÖ campaign comic was evaluated as negative in 40.9% of the cases and very negative in 9.1% of the cases. The evaluation of the SPÖ comic had a mean of 3.81 ( $SD = 0.655$ ) and was thus discussed as being slightly less negative.

**Table 1. Percentages of Evaluative Tone (N = 198) and Mean Evaluation of the Comics (N = 156) on the Article Level.**

Evaluation	Type of comic			Total (%)
	FPÖ comic (%)	SPÖ comic (%)	Both or election comics in general (%)	
Evaluative tone				
Ambivalent/neutral	9.1	22.7	8.3	10.6
Negative	37.2	40.9	33.3	37.4
Very negative	34.1	9.1	25.0	30.8
No evaluation	19.5	27.3	33.3	21.2
<b>Total (N)</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>198</b>
Articles with evaluations (N)	132	16	8	156
Mean	4.31	3.81	4.22	4.25
SD	0.67	0.66	0.67	0.68

*Note.* Means and *SDs* presented in the rows are calculated for the evaluations within the different comics and for all coded 156 evaluations (on the scale from 1 *very positive* to 5 *very negative*, the scale points 1 *very positive* and 2 *positive* were never coded). Differences in the mean evaluation of the different comics showed statistical significance, Anova:  $F(2, 153) = 3.92, p = .022$ ; Missing = 4 (not codable).

These results on the overall media coverage indicate that both comics were perceived as problematic. To examine this criticism in detail, the individual statements made by different actors were coded for each article.

### ***Actors and Evaluations at the Statement Level***

To answer RQ2, we took a closer look at the actors who contributed to the debate as well as their evaluations of the comics (see Table 2). Overall, 199 evaluations were identified. More than three-quarters of the statements were made by either journalists (46.2%) or politicians (38.2%). Other actors whose arguments were presented were private persons (6.5%), experts and scientists (4.5%), the state

attorney (2.5%), and other actor types (2.0%). As shown in Table 2, the results found on the article level can also be detected on the statement level. An overwhelming majority of the evaluations (175, or 87.9%), were related to the FPÖ comic, 20 (10.1%) to the SPÖ comic, and 4 (2.0%) to both comics or election comics in general. Overall, only 5% of the evaluations were positive, 6.5% were neutral or ambivalent, and 74.9% were negative. In 13.6% of the statements, a defense strategy was used in which the comic was evaluated as not negative without, however, referring to positive aspects either.

In general, journalists were the main actors, and they evaluated the comics very critically: All but two journalists made negative judgments of the comics (97.8%). The same applies to statements made by experts and scientists (100% negative) and private persons (84.6% negative). Regarding the journalists' evaluations, the genres of coverage were of interest to us: 89.1% of all journalistic evaluations were made within opinion-oriented articles. Hence, journalists criticized the comics first and foremost in commentaries and rarely expressed their opinions in this matter in fact-oriented news stories. These findings indicate that journalists of the analyzed media follow the quality journalistic prerequisite of separating facts from opinion within news stories (McQuail, 2010). Interestingly, no actor group gave the comics a positive evaluation (with the exception of politicians; see below).

Regarding the politicians in the sample, different observations can be drawn from the analysis. Even though politicians tended to evaluate their own campaign comics positively, negative judgments (regarding the comics of the other party) prevail in general. Moreover, when politicians were confronted with criticism about their comics, they used the not-negative defense strategy. In doing so, they responded to the accusation of either inciting to violence and provoking xenophobia or of employing negative campaigning strategies by depicting competing politicians very negatively (see the results for the thematic perspectives). Yet they did not mention positive aspects of the not-negative comics. As shown in Table 2, this strategy was employed relatively frequently, used in 30.3% of all judgments made by politicians and in 13.6% of the total statements. For example, the FPÖ's Johann Gudenus defended the FPÖ comic, maintaining that it "isn't dramatic at all. It is a historical comic" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 11). Similarly, Herbert Kickl, general secretary of the FPÖ and mastermind behind the party's campaigns, could not find anything bad in the comic. However, both politicians failed to give precise arguments why the comic was not a call for violence (against migrants). Instead, they both agreed that the comic was "not negative" without giving further details.

Of the evaluations by politicians, 13.2% were positive, 9.2% were neutral or ambivalent, and almost half (47.4%) were negative. As stated, these prevailing negative judgments made by politicians typically refer to the other party's comic. In this context, for example, the SPÖ called the FPÖ comic a "brochure of hatred and pure pursuit of people" ("Wirbel über FPÖ-Comic," 2010, p. 28). For Harald Vilimsky, FPÖ general secretary, the SPÖ campaign comic was "bullshit" and not to be taken seriously. He added that it was "a cheap copy of the FPÖ comic" ("Auch SPÖ hat nun einen Comic," 2010, p. A2).

**Table 2. Evaluations of the Comics by Different Actors on the Statement Level.**

Evaluations	Politicians (%)						Actor type					Total %
	FPÖ	SPÖ	Green	ÖVP	Politician total (%)	State attorney (%)	Journalist (%)	Private person (%)	Expert (%)	Other (%)		
<b>FPÖ comic</b>												
Positive	21.9				11.5							4.0
Ambivalent/neutral	18.8				9.8	100.0	1.2					6.8
Negative		100.0	100.0	100.0	47.5		97.6	84.6	100.0	66.7		76.1
Special case: "not negative"	59.4				31.1		1.2	15.4		33.3		13.1
Total (N)	32	10	16	3	61	5	85	13	8	3		175
<b>SPÖ comic</b>												
Positive		33.3			14.3							10.0
Ambivalent/neutral	12.5				7.1							5.0
Negative	87.5				50.0		100.0			100.0		65.0
Special case: "not negative"		66.7			28.6							20.0
Total (N)	8	6			14		5			1		20
<b>Both/election comics in general</b>												
Positive		100.0			100.0							25.0
Ambivalent/neutral							100.0					75.0
Negative									100.0			
Total (N)		1			1		2		1			4
<b>Total statements</b>												
Positive					13.2							5.0
Ambivalent/neutral					9.2	100.0	1.1					6.5
Negative					47.4		97.8	84.6	100.0	75.0		74.9
Special case: "not negative"					30.3		1.1	15.4		25.0		13.6
Total statements (N)	40	17	16	3	76	5	92	13	9	4		199
% of politician total	52.6	22.4	21.1	3.9	100							100
% of total statements					38.2	2.5	46.2	6.5	4.5	2.0		100

Note. Percentages are computed for the evaluations made in the statements by different actors on the different comics and for the total coded statements; the table contains 199 coded statements in 156 articles; for the other articles no statements and evaluations were coded as these articles, just mentioned the comics (see Table 1). In addition, for the politicians and parties the table contains detailed results separated by party affiliation (left columns).

Of all 76 politicians making evaluations, 52.6% belong to the FPÖ, 22.4% to the SPÖ, 21.1% to the Green Party, and 3.9% to the ÖVP. Of course, the FPÖ and the SPÖ were the main protagonists in the coverage, because they had to defend their own campaign comics or condemn the other party's comic by which they felt offended. Politicians of the Greens had their say relatively frequently in the coverage as well. This can be explained by the fact that integration issues are at the center of their political program. Maria Vassilakou, main candidate of the Greens, claimed: "Someone who incites little children to throw stones at other people is a case for the state attorney" (Stuiber, 2010, p. 10). The Greens hence brought a charge of incitement against the FPÖ, but the state attorney declared that the comic did not meet the requirement for prosecution for violating § 283 "Verhetzung" ("incitement" against a church or religious group) of the Austrian Criminal Code (StGB, 1974). Another aspect worth mentioning is the virtual absence of politicians belonging to the ÖVP, who made only three statements in which they distanced themselves from the FPÖ comics but made no further statements on other types of comics or strategies.

Not surprisingly, all positive evaluations of the FPÖ comic (11.5%) stem from FPÖ politicians. In 9.8% of the cases, the FPÖ comic was evaluated neutrally—again, all the judgments were made by the FPÖ. Almost half (47.5%) of the evaluations of the FPÖ comic by politicians were negative and were made by the Greens, the SPÖ, and the ÖVP. In 31.1% of the politicians' evaluations of the FPÖ comic, the not-negative strategy was identified. This strategy, again, was only applied by the FPÖ.

Fourteen of the 20 evaluations regarding the SPÖ comic were made by politicians. The same evaluation pattern can be found: SPÖ politicians evaluated their own comic either positively or as not negative, while neutral and the prevailing negative judgments stem from the FPÖ.

To assess RQ3, we examine the main thematic frames of the evaluations.

### ***Thematic Perspectives***

The statements contain 265 different thematic perspectives on either the FPÖ (231 thematic perspectives), the SPÖ comic (30), or on both comics and election comics in general, respectively (4) (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Thematic Perspectives on the Use of Comics on the Statement Level.**

Thematic perspectives	Type of Comic			Total perspectives (%)
	FPÖ comic (%)	SPÖ comic (%)	Both/election comics in general	
Content-related topics				
Incitement to violence	30.7	23.3	25.0	29.8
Xenophobia	13.9			12.1
Anti-Islamism	8.2			7.2
National Socialism, right radicalism	9.1	3.3		8.3
Mockery of other parties/party members (negative campaigning)	4.3	36.7		7.9
Sexism	1.7			1.5
Other	2.2	3.3	25.0	2.6
Legal aspects	10.0	10.0		9.8
Campaign element	6.9	23.3		8.7
Historical link	9.1			7.9
Symbolism and interpretations	2.2			1.9
Tool for reaching young voters			50.0	0.8
Fulfill education mandate	1.7			1.5
Total perspectives ( <i>N</i> )	231	30	4	265
Total statements ( <i>N</i> )	175	20	4	199

*Note.* Multiple coding was possible (up to two perspectives).

More than two-thirds of the thematic perspectives in the articles addressed controversial topics regarding the comics' content, particularly their ideological perspectives such as xenophobia (12.1%), anti-Islamism (7.2%), National Socialism and right-wing radicalism (8.3%), and sexism (1.5%). The aspect of "incitement to violence" was the focus in 29.8% of the coded perspectives. Thus, assessments of the FPÖ comic mostly dealt with the picture in which Strache invites a young boy to attack Mustafa with a slingshot. Ruth Wodak, distinguished professor in discourse studies at Lancaster University, UK, interpreted the FPÖ comics as an incitement to physical violence against minorities (Stemmer, 2010). Similarly, Oliver Rathkolb, professor of contemporary history at the University of Vienna, and advertising expert Harry Bergmann both took a very critical view of the FPÖ campaign comics. Bergmann considered the comic to be inflammatory propaganda of the deepest dye. Rathkolb argued that the comic was close to an offence according to the Law of Incitement and added that the Turkish siege of 1683 had no historical relevance for the year 2010. The historian was thus convinced that Strache had other intentions, such as awaking old prejudices lying dormant (Böhmer & Hacker, 2010).

It is noteworthy that 36.7% of the perspectives on the SPÖ comic focused on the mockery of other parties and thus on the employed strategies of negative campaigning. However, one has to keep in mind that, because of the overall minimal coverage of the SPÖ comic, this issue was addressed in only 11 statements. In these cases, actors primarily concentrate on a comic panel in which H. C. Strache is supplied by a "powder snow generator"—a reference to rumors that the FPÖ politician had been



consuming cocaine. Interestingly, the negative campaign strategies of the FPÖ comic received little media attention. Ten cases (4.3% of the perspectives on the FPÖ comic) were found in which the attack of Vienna's mayor Häupl was mentioned. Overall, only 7.9% of the total perspectives concern the mockery of other politicians or parties (RQ 3.1).

In addition to the assessments of various controversial issues of the comics' content, actors concentrated on legal aspects (9.8%) or referred to the comics as an election campaign element (8.7%). Furthermore, the FPÖ comic's historical links (7.9%) as well as its symbolism and interpretations were mentioned—for example, in relation to Nazi symbolism in the comic (1.9%).

We questioned the discussion about the use of comics for political purposes and their suitability as conveyors of political issues (RQ 3.2). As it turns out, these aspects were hardly covered in the media discourse, except for some statements by politicians highlighting the education mandate they wanted to fulfill with the comic (1.5%). FPÖ party leader Strache addressed the positive functions of comics for political campaigning and explained that his party used the comic stories for educational purposes—namely, the illustration of historical events: "We have fulfilled an education mandate by seriously confronting Viennese legends. . . . In the comic we pictured a little David who is asked to hit the big Goliath, the Turkish commander Kara Mustafa. It was meant to be funny" (Böhmer & Votzi, 2010, p. 4). In this statement, Strache clearly emphasizes the value of comics for modern campaigning, which explains, as he further argues, why other parties have started to copy the campaign comic strategy. In his opinion, comics are humorous elements that can nevertheless be used to transmit valid information, as, in his opinion, it is the case with historical events here. Comics as tool for reaching young voters were only mentioned twice (0.8%). For example, the SPÖ's youth coordinator, Peko Baxant, who made one of the few positive evaluations, argued that there was no incitement to violence in the SPÖ comic and that comics were "incredibly cool" youth-related products ("SP-Comics mit Strache," 2010, p. 12). He used the word *geil*, a term frequently used in youth culture meaning "wicked" or "cool." With this statement, Baxant emphasized his affinity with youth culture and his fascination with comics as a tool for political campaigning. The other actors, mostly journalists, did not question the medium of comics.

### Discussion

The comic books employed during the 2010 Viennese mayoral election campaign gained much media attention and revealed several thematic perspectives. Throughout the coverage, negative evaluations of both comics prevailed. Above all, the actors referred to the "incitement to violence," which they maintained was found in both comics. They also criticized the comics' ideological perspectives such as xenophobia, anti-Islamism, National Socialism, and right-wing radicalism (regarding the FPÖ comic). The analysis of the thematic perspectives in the media coverage found frequent discussion of the ideological content of the comics. This is in line with previous comic research literature, which is mostly concerned with ideological messages in comics (Barker, 1989; Dorfman & Mattelart, 1976; Duncan & Smith, 2009). Barker even argues that "just about all the main-theories of ideology had been tried out on comics" (Barker, 1989, p. 5).

By critically assessing the comics' controversial content, journalists acted in line with their role as detached watchdogs (Hanitzsch, 2011; McKinnon et al., 1996; Ridout & Smith, 2008) committed to social responsibility (McQuail, 2010). A critical observation of political campaigning also should go beyond the discussion of content and focus on the employed means and strategies. However, the suitability of comics for conveying political messages was rarely discussed. Neither did journalists discuss the role of comics as means of political campaigning, nor did they ask scientific and professional experts to do so. Instead, scientists and experts were consulted regarding the comics' content.

The mockery of other parties—that is, the negative campaigning strategy to attack political rivals—in the comics was a relevant topic only in the rather limited debate on the SPÖ comic. The findings suggest that, with their humorous representations, which voters already know and expect from political caricatures, campaign comics are well suited for degrading and demonizing political opponents without provoking as much controversy as could be expected for typical attack advertising (Lau & Rovner, 2009; Ridout & Smith, 2008). As previous research suggests (e.g., Conners, 1998; Dorfman & Mattelart, 1976; McAllister et al., 2001), cartoon drawings are especially suitable for stereotyping and conveying ideologies. Our results further suggest that, if comics do not cross existing societal and cultural boundaries, they might not be discussed very critically in the media's election campaign coverage at all and hence not cause a broad societal debate. Indeed, as the analysis has shown, the media debate was primarily concerned with the drastic infringements of the FPÖ comic, and the media attention it received far exceeded that given to the SPÖ comic.

Earlier research already established the positive effects on voters of negative campaigning with humorous elements (Klimmt et al., 2007). However, the question of whether and how the analyzed comics themselves had an impact on the Viennese electorate remains unanswered here. Future research should thus interrogate whether such strategies have effects on political cynicism or (young) voters' mobilization, whether they influence voters' perceptions of the campaigning parties and candidates, and whether the comics lead to unintended backlash effects (e.g., Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Roese & Sande, 1993), possibly resulting in recipients' more favorable perceptions of the attacked party. Of particular interest are the possible effects of negative campaigning combined with humor—that is, the effects of the combination of entertaining stories and political messages with the attack of political opponents. Thomas Hofer (2010), political analyst and campaign expert, assumes the entertaining features of comics to take the edge off ruffian, derogatory content that would otherwise not be acceptable in conventional political campaigning. In other words, when combined with humor and entertainment, negative campaigning is much more likely to be approved by voters. As such, the visual characterization of Häupl as a drunken coward and the depiction of Strache as a cocaine-consuming brain-dead Nazi zombie would not be possible in explicit verbal text. This consideration is supported by findings in media psychological research indicating that "humor may be subject to less scrutiny than serious discourse in part because people see it as a different form of discourse altogether" (Young, 2008, p. 134).

The news coverage of comics may contribute to the opinion formation among voters as well. On the one hand, critical analysis of the comics by journalists and media might reduce the likelihood of voting for the respective campaigning party (Min, 2002). On the other hand, media coverage might amplify the message, thus being a helpful agent for the parties (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1996; Pfau & Loudon, 1994;

Ridout & Smith, 2008). To answer these questions, future studies should employ methodological approaches such as experimental designs and interviews.

Initially, the SPÖ comic was posted on the social network Facebook without showing the party logo or any other clear reference to the political party. By omitting the sender of the message, the campaign character of the "old medium" comic was concealed while its entertainment factor was emphasized. The youth coordinator of the SPÖ, Baxant, called it "campaigning efforts, actually, that don't want to be campaigning efforts" (Sommerbauer, 2010, p. 14). This statement can be read as a conclusion for the use of comics in political campaigning: The fact that the ideological message is partly hidden by the entertainment value of comics is common knowledge in comic studies, but one that has not yet reached the current discussion regarding the professionalization of political communication in communication science. Future research on the visualization of politics and political comics should thus give more detailed attention to these aspects.

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