Dog Stories in the Digital Age

Dogstagrams as Digital Tales of Becoming with Companion Species

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of *dogstagrams* on the social media platform Instagram. It argues that online posts of dogs are digital stories of companion species relations, as defined and explored by Donna Haraway. The discussion shows how these images present different narratives akin to the human-dog relationship to form a significant part of the canon of dog stories in the current Digital Age. The various narratives told by the *Dogs of Instagram* include self-representing stories, anthropomorphic stories, domestic stories, adventure stories and stories of companionship, manifesting various aspects of the complex canon of the human-dog relationship and the broader conversation regarding anthropocentrism, nonhumanism and agency in companion species relations. In turn, the paper also indicates how *dogstagrams*, as digital stories, not only recount and remember companion species relations, but also actively participate in the human-dog relation by promoting and relearning a sense of responsibility and community.

KEYWORDS

Dog stories, Instagram, social media, companion species, becoming with

INTRODUCTION

> 'Dogs of Instagram say a hundred delightful things without actually saying a word...'
>
> (Wender 2019)

In *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, Donna Haraway (2003) explores the phenomenon of companion species with a specific interest in dog stories. She uses tales about dogs, such as evolution stories and training stories, to help understand the relation that is companion species (Haraway 2003, 25). Haraway's notion of companion species embraces storytelling in order to narrate, analyze and (re)learn our relationships with dogs. For Haraway (2008, 178), 'stories re-member'. Similarly, Erica Fudge (2007, 37) explains that dog stories are vital in contemporary society, since 'the stories told about dogs, we might argue, are never really about dogs at all, they are always about humans'. Supporting Fudge, literary theorist Karla

Armbruster maintains that 'because of our ancient, intimate relationship, dogs can tell us a great deal about ourselves [...] dogs—both real and textual—tap into all our complex feelings' (2018, 7). In other words, dog stories form an important part of contemporary society since they tell us about the human-nonhuman relation as well as analyze the complexities of being human.

By exploring dog stories in her seminal text *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) and its re-examination in *When Species Meet* (2008), Haraway formulates the notion of companion species. For Haraway, companion species relations describe the kinship of different species, who are joined together as significant others. In other words, as significant others, companion species are connected to each other in the signifying flesh (Haraway 2008, 97) and live together in loving relations, within which species respond and take care of one another (Haraway 2008, 93). According to Haraway (2003, 5), the specific relationship between human beings and dogs is a prime example of companion species.

Prior to companion species, Haraway formulated the notion of the cyborg in her significant—yet somewhat controversial—essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), which establishes her notion of the post-gendered, human-technology hybrid figure of the cyborg. Haraway's cyborg is a liminal creature of both reality and science fiction that is simultaneously machine and organism becoming one. In the conceptualization of companion species, Haraway, although consciously moving away from the cyborg figure (2003, 5), does not lose sight of the important role technology plays in the human-dog relation. In *When Species Meet,* Haraway (2008, 4) further extends the notion of 'becoming with' to explain the entwined relation between humans, dogs as well as technology in companion species. Haraway (2008, 4) sees 'becoming with' as a never-ending process, a particular way of being in relation to dogs and technology. That is to say, in the dog stories of companion species, dogs, technologies and humans are constantly 'infolding' towards one another, blurring the boundaries between 'lapdogs and laptops' (Haraway 2008, 10).

Throughout this paper, I argue that within the context of the Digital Age, another form of telling and re-membering stories of dogs occurs on the technological platform of social media. Since technology is embedded within companion species relations, the technology of social media images depicting human-dog relations adds another coat to the companionship stories of humans and their dogs. Thom Van Dooren et al. (2016, 10) explain that stories of species relations extend beyond personal encounters into the online realm, which shares a constant stream of virtual companion species narratives. Accordingly, I argue that the prominent feature of content relating to dogs in the digital sphere, specifically on social media, tells stories and manifests Haraway's notion of companion species online. That is to say, this paper identifies how digital dog stories

not only recount companion species relations, but also become active participants in exhibiting the narratives of human-dog relations. The digital medium of these stories adds an additional layer to visual storytelling that is instantaneous as well as material, since we can interact and respond to images visually and in a tactile manner. Thus, I argue that digital dog stories become a key manifestation of the infolding between technology, human and animal in contemporary society, while showcasing a type of storytelling where a narrative is represented as well as actively shaped by technology.

In what follows, I start my reading of how the human-dog relation entangles with technology to tell stories of companion species relations by specifically focusing on the digital encounter of companion species on Instagram. It is no secret that in contemporary society millions of people share stories of their dogs on various online platforms to such an extent that online images of dogs have become a global phenomenon. On Instagram specifically, images of dogs have been labelled *dogstagrams* (#dogstagram) and form part of a virtual community referred to as *Dogs of Instagram* (#dogsofinstagram). Analyzing the digital image of the *dogstagram* and its connoted companion species narratives is my point of departure to examine how the online realm allows us to tell stories of companion species. My analysis of *dogstagrams* as digital dog stories includes a brief contextualization of the phenomenon. I then provide an analysis of *dogstagrams* by means of computational methods in combination with a close hermeneutical reading to make sense of the stories of dogs online and actively contribute with regards to companion species.

More specifically, I employ a variety of digital humanities methodologies accumulated in a digital humanities project to analyze *dogstagrams* and *Dogs of Instagram*. Digital humanities is a mode of scholarship that derives from the digital shift in society and occurs at the intersection between digital technology and humanities disciplines. My digital humanities project, entitled *Insta-dog*, utilizes the full spectrum of digital humanities, using computation to analyze and visualize *dogstagrams*, as well as study *dogstagrams* as digital entities to explore their possibilities and influence on the meaning of the human-dog relation. In doing so, I immerse myself as a scholar in the digital representations and extensions of the conversation surrounding companion species online. To view the digital computing platform please visit: www.instadogproject.com. My analysis is based on the results and findings of the *Insta-dog* platform in conjunction with my own hermeneutical reading of *dogstagrams*. This discussion refers, for the most part, to the multi-scale digital analysis presented in its entirety through the *Insta-dog* digital humanities project. The website also includes portions of texts which have been added in this paper. Additionally, I also layer this discussion with my own hermeneutical reading and experience of particular

dogstagrams. In doing so, the ensuing discussion is an entangled computed and hermeneutical contact zone of what *dogstagrams* and the *Dogs of Instagram* reveal.

THE *DOGSTAGRAM*: NARRATING THE HUMAN-DOG RELATION

Visualizing stories of the human-animal relation—specifically the human-dog relation—is an age-old phenomenon, most prominently portrayed through art, photography and cinema. Ever since the first prehistoric paintings on cave walls, man has drawn out his relation with animals (Aloi 2012, xxi) and, notably, canines (Sutton 2017, 92). Evidently, the depiction of animals and dogs in the visual realm has shifted alongside our alternating understanding of the human-animal relation and animal subject (Berger 1977, 18). As humans we have recorded, mirrored and expressed our relation to dogs throughout history through images, including art and photography.

Ensuing the dog in art, picturing the dog through the medium of photography is also a vital manner of telling the story of the human-dog relation. Merritt (2018, 8-9) explains that the development and popularity of the camera coincide with the change of thinking surrounding the human-dog relation from anthropocentrism to nonhumanism. The shift between anthropocentrism and nonhumanism refers to an important argument prominent in current Anthropocene research regarding species relations and environmental studies: a consideration for multispecies and nonhuman relations, where humans and nonhumans are constantly 'becoming with' one another in significant otherness, highlighted by Haraway's companion species. This so-called turn towards 'nonhumanism' occurs in response to the age-old western human exceptionalism argument, where human beings are seen as the most important entities in the world (Haraway 2008, 164). That is to say, photographs of dogs 'speak as much about the history of photography as they do about man's and dog's evolving relationship' (Merritt 2018, 8). Currently, taking photos of dogs has become the most prominent (and for some a somewhat obsessive) manner to capture the human-dog relation. I maintain that what the history of the dog in visual culture emphasizes is that humans are inclined to *picture* their stories of their companion species. Hence, we can learn about the human-dog relation by examining such instances.

In the context of both the Anthropocene and the Digital Age, it is well known that the realm of the visual has also transformed into the digital (Mirzoeff 2015, 18). Accordingly, any image or artwork mediated, shared or looked at on a digital platform is a different entity or medium in its own right: 'What we see in the [digital] photograph is a computation ... *It is a way to see the world enabled by machines*' (Mirzoeff 2015, 18, emphasis added). Parallel to the evolution of the image into the digital era, the specific image of the dog seems also to be computed into its own digital

version. The human pursuit of telling stories about dogs is amplified on social media platforms, which allow us to share digital stories of our human-dog companionship instantaneously. To rephrase Mirzoeff's explanation of the digital nature of visual culture in terms of companion species: *the popular digital image of the dog is a way to see the human-dog relation enabled by machines.* This means that images of dogs on social media are an example of a Harawayian contact zone, where humans, dogs and technology meet.

Sharing digital images of dogs prominently manifests on the social media platform Instagram. The everyday popularity and pursuit of photographing dogs is then also digitized, since people now instantly share pictures of their dogs via Instagram on a regular basis. Thus, *dogstagrams* capture, recount and compute the everyday doings of companion species. Tifentale (2014, 13) argues that Instagram is an archive of the human's process of becoming in society. Extending this idea, *dogstagrams* on Instagram can therefore act as a type of archive for the human and dog's process of a Harawayian 'becoming with' one another. Consequently, the digital image resonates because it carries with it, intensifies and makes visible the long philosophical history and complex narratives surrounding the human-dog relation.

However, recent theoretical pursuits on the digital image, as well as social media platforms, maintain that these technological integrations in society do not only act as amplified archives. Rather, they are simultaneously active participants in shaping our relations and interactions. Following W.T.J Mitchell's (1995) iconic question: 'What do pictures want?', as well as Mirzoeff's (2015) understanding of an 'image-dominated network society', Du Preez (2018, 17) shows that images 'are not only signs of human communication but rather events, encounters and openings for meaning-making'. Accordingly, *dogstagrams* do not just signify the human-dog relation, but also produce new meaning when we engage with them.

Notably, the very first image posted on Instagram by Kevin Systrom (co-founder of the social network) on 16 July 2010 was an image of a puppy looking up at the camera with the caption 'test'. In the image, the dog's owner, Kevin—whose foot is also seen in the digital photo—presumably holds the camera, taking the picture. The puppy, now a full-grown Golden Retriever, still often features in Kevin's Instagram feed. Following this initial post of Kevin's dog, in contemporary times dogs have become some of the most popular subjects on the platform. Thus, *Dogs of Instagram* are not only noteworthy digital accounts of companion species, but also a growing global entwinement of technology, culture and identity, or *technoculture* (Penley & Ross 1991).

Moreover, Systrom's post reveals a dog looking at the smart camera (or at his owner holding the device) and is subsequently also looking at the viewer of the image through the Instagram interface. As we look back through our screens, we meet the gaze of the dog. In doing so, the digital image requires the viewer to consider the dog's possible story of being, or then the marginalized narrative of the dog. In turn, the viewer also sees a dog lying at his owner's feet, reminiscent of the dog as a historical anthropocentric symbol, waiting with loyalty by its owner's side, looking up in response to his (notably technological) call. Here we are also reminded that it is the elevated human in control of the telling of the visual story of the pictured dog. Finally, the architecture of Instagram allows human users to interact with this digital version of the dog. We are invited to *touch* the screen (or perhaps the dog) to communicate our appreciation for the post (and perhaps by extension the dog and its owner) and become part of the network of other *responding* users. Consequently, the digital image resonates because it carries with it, and intensifies, aspects surrounding the human-dog relation, such as the question of the animal mind, touch and response. Additionally, the *dogstagram* opens up a space to create new stories and new ways of thinking about dogs that are instant, visual and tactile.

At the same time, the image reminds us that digital dog stories and *dogstagrams* are narratives typically told *by* humans *about* dogs. In this instance, the Instagram posts can be thought of as stories about the marginalized animal—those who do not have a human voice. However, the agency of the dog remains complex and questionable in these images (as my analysis throughout this paper shows). Are the dogs' stories diluted, overridden or emphasized by the human voice on social media? Or are these stories a blurring of the boundaries between the human and dog as companion species and, as a result, a blurring of the marginalized and elevated voice? Who is allowed to tell these digital dog stories and share images of dogs, if the dogs cannot decide for themselves? I address these questions throughout my analysis, identifying how *dogstagrams* enforce human agency, as well as the possibility of telling the stories of the marginalized nonhuman. More importantly, through the digital humanities project accompanying my analysis, I encourage the reader to view the images discussed throughout the paper online. Since I do not wish to assume authority over the dogs that form part of the study—in fact I wish to encourage the agency of the nonhuman voice—it is perhaps best to not feature the images within this publication.[1]

From this brief reading of the first example of a *Dog of Instagram*, it becomes evident that we should not only be asking how *dogstagrams* reflect companion species, but also questioning what stories *dogstagrams* tell. Or more specifically, what meaning do they add to our current

understanding of human-nonhuman relations? Additionally, with whom does agency lie in the picturing and posting of these narratives?

Methodology: computing the computed image

For the purpose of understanding what it is exactly that *dogstagrams* do, or what meaning they convey, I explore the digital terrain of these images and their associated networks by embarking on a digital humanities project. New media theorist Lev Manovich (2001; 2011; 2014) provides helpful guidelines and documentation on how to conduct such a digital humanities project that incorporates a 'big optics' approach. Crucially, Manovich (2011, 9) maintains that any computer-assisted examination of massive cultural data sets requires a 'distant reading' of computed patterns as well as a 'close reading' by a human, to make sense of these patterns. For Manovich (2011, 9-10), the ideal digital humanities project combines 'human ability to understand and interpret ... and computers' ability to analyze massive data sets using algorithms we create'. Hence, Manovich's ideal application of digital computing methods requires a multi-scale or mixed-methods approach. I utilize such a multimodal approach to create the digital humanities project *Insta-dog*. More specifically, I employ a variety of digital humanities methodologies accumulated in a digital humanities project to analyze *dogstagrams* and the *Dogs of Instagram*. The digital humanities project utilizes the full spectrum of digital humanities, using computation to analyze *dogstagrams* as digital entities to explore their possibilities and influence on the human-dog relation. In doing so, I immerse myself as a scholar in the digital representations, extensions and conversations surrounding companion species online.

My mixed-method approach includes:

1. An immersion into the digital world of *dogstagrams* by means of a long-term personal learning process, engaging, exploring and experiencing *Dogs of Instagram* in order to gain an understanding of the particular phenomenon.

2. Extracting a data set of publicly available *dogstagrams* from Instagram by means of a storage utility and downloader specifically designed to extract public data from the platform.

3. Using a pre-trained computer vision API to process a large data set of *dogstagrams* to classify these images into categories and supply analytical information regarding the image, including optical character recognition (OCR), labels and properties.

4. Processing the information supplied from a human horizon, identifying labels significant to the human-dog relation and visualizing the identified labels.

5. Assembling visualizations, theoretical research, as well as distant and close readings into a complete and impactful platform for viewers to explore.

Findings: different types of *dogstagrams*

The digital analysis of *dogstagrams* results in various computed tags or labels that provide a preliminary overview, albeit broad, of typical content captured in posts about dogs on Instagram. Thereafter, I process these tags by means of a close (human) reading, where I explore their narratives, identifying common trends, coherences and patterns that stand out or group together. Based on these identified patterns, alongside a theoretical reading of companion species, I identify categories to decipher the digitized stories of dogs on Instagram, including self-representing, anthropomorphic, domestic, adventure, as well as companionship *dogstagram*. In what follows, I unpack the dog stories told by the identified types of *dogstagrams*.

Self-representing *dogstagrams*

To say that *dogstagrams* are a means of self-curatorship is perhaps stating the obvious, because, in its most basic form, social networking has become a means of expressing and representing ourselves virtually to others (Kreiss 2018, 16). While the idea of curating the self through (visual) media did not originate in the Digital Age, scholars assert that social media has intensified, expanded and increased the notion of self-representation (Enli & Thumim 2012; Kreiss 2018; Rettberg 2017; Van Dijck 2013;). Yet, it seems that the network of the *dogstagram* has proliferated self-curatorship even further, as humans now also use the dog to represent and express themselves online.

Tiidenberg and Whelan (2017, 141) explore various visual self-representations that are 'not-selfies', where people share, tag and view images of animals online (amongst other things) as a practice of self-expression. They argue that the flow of images on social media that are not of the self still represent 'people's experienced, relational, human selves' (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017, 151). In other words, 'a picture of not-me is a picture of me', or in the context of the *dogstagram*: a picture of a dog is a picture of the self (Tiidenberg & Whelan 2017, 151). In other words, just as the human inquiry into the animal subject usually reflects back to the human self (Wood 2004,129), so too the digitally curated image of a dog reflects back to represent a narrative about the human who posted the image.

For example, account holders use images of their dogs to express their moods after a tough spinning class or long Monday. Notably, the dogs did not engage in these typically human activities, yet their pictures are used to convey the human account holders' feelings. Tiidenberg and Whelan argue that such images 'are heightened in terms of their communicative function precisely because they are "of" the people that took them or communicate on their behalf, in ways that can be, locally, more profound and direct than self-portraits' (2017, 152). That is to say, Tiidenberg and Whelan speculate that these images communicate and connect to other users more effectively than an image of a tired human after a long Monday or a sweaty person post spinning class may have. In this way, we use the image of a dog to talk to others and tell stories of ourselves with others (Hamada in Wender 2019).

Similarly, Mort (2019, 93) maintains that people tend to use their dogs in Instagram posts as extensions or even substitutes of themselves, because it is a 'safer' option. Mort explains that a dog in an image seems more authentic than a person, because posting an image of the self on Instagram (for example a selfie) is often associated with boasting or vanity. As a result, viewers might respond more favorably to a post of a dog than a post of users themselves, which can result in bonding in lieu of envy (Mort 2019, 93). In a similar way, Caple (2019, 436) maintains that Instagrammers use images of dogs to distance themselves from serious matters, while still expressing their feelings thereof. Perhaps this could explain why Systrom chose to picture his dog in the first ever image posted to Instagram. As an initial test, Systrom was treading into uncharted waters and did not know what the reception of the post on the new platform would be. Possibly an image of his dog was a safer option—distancing himself from the image, while still conveying a message about himself in a relatable manner.

According to Mort (2019, 92-93), the tendency of Instagrammers to think of dogs as more authentic than humans is rooted in the anthropocentric narrative that dogs lack a sense of self. That is to say, people anthropocentrically perceive dogs as less self-conscious than humans, hence there is a sense of 'unselfconsciousness' in images of dogs posted by humans. In this way, *dogstagrams* that are self-expressive mimic the human-centered canon that only humans show signs of self-awareness. Equally important, *dogstagrams* of self-representation highlight how an encounter with the animal being typically returns us to the question of what it means to be human.

Anthropomorphic *dogstagrams*
The notion of expressing human experiences through images of dogs on social media reaches a peak when *dogstagrams* no longer just express human sentiments, but actually modify the dogs in the images to mimic humans. A large amount of *dogstagram* content is labeled as dogs dressed

in human clothing or performing human activities, such as doing household chores, shopping, working or even getting married. Based on these posts it is clear that anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* are increasingly popular on Instagram.

In anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* dogs are humanized, since account holders project human social practices onto their dogs. These images resemble the humanized animal commonly narrated in popular culture and dog stories, where the animal becomes a signifier of human beings and which literally present the dog in human form. Notably, in anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* the dogs are not necessarily always an extension of the human account holder. Instead, they are anthropomorphized to represent habits of people in general or even societal stereotypes—to such an extent that the image and caption often seem to be presented from the humanized dog's point of view, or, said differently, posted by a human-speaking dog. As a result, at times, anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* border on satirical, ironically commenting on and drawing attention to aspects of contemporary human society.

Some anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* quite literally emphasize the idea of the anthropomorphic dog by presenting a dressed-up and posed dog, alongside a human dressed in a similar way. In these anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* the dog becomes a mirror image of the human, turning the contemporary myth that dogs resemble their owners into a visuality. Here, the viewer is entertained by the story of a dog being human-like as well as the figure of the dog embodying human stereotypes and, as a result, we (as viewers) become aware of our own human characteristics and thoughts.

Comparably, anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* featuring a human and their mirror-image dog not only serve as a parody of contemporary society, but also point out human characteristics and thoughts to the human follower. In my reading, the images ironically highlight the *differences* between human and dog, albeit based on their outer appearances and not inner beings. Although the human and the dog are dressed the same, they are simultaneously juxtaposed. The viewer is eminently aware that they are separate and markedly different entities—stressed by the awkward (or even goofy) appearance of the dog in human clothes in comparison to its human counterpart. That is to say, a clearly anthropomorphic *dogstagram* attempting to equalize human and dog paradoxically accentuates the differences between human and dog.

Anthropomorphism not only reflects in the pictures and captions of *dogstagrams*, but also in the network of *Dogs of Instagram*. Evident in the usernames of these images, several accounts on Instagram are created and dedicated solely to specific dogs. Users then post on such accounts only about their dogs or 'on behalf of' their dogs. In other words, the very act of imagining and posting

as a dog 'Instagrammer' is a manner of projecting the human ability to use social media onto dogs. Some Instagram accounts dedicated specifically to dogs become commercial commodities, since account holders get sponsored to post or advertise products. Thus, in these anthropomorphic *dogstagrams*, the dog used to satirize human influencers on Instagram ironically now also becomes the Instagram influencer.

These anthropomorphic images also result in an emotive response from viewers. Cultural theorist Eliza Steinbock (2017, 63) reasons that part of the appeal of pictures of animals online is based on the sentimental response it creates in users. Steinbock (2017, 63) argues that the sentimental response is the result of 'mass culture's longstanding affair with cute objects colliding with access to contemporary user-generated digital media'. According to Steinbock (2017, 64), images with a 'cuteness' aesthetic (as is often the case with images of dogs, puppies, cats and kittens) evokes an affective response of sentimentality, joy, delight and endearment in users. Accordingly, *dogstagrams* have an emotive effect on viewers.

Adding to the mix of the affective responses of *dogstagrams*, Steinbock (2017, 63) mentions that the cuteness response also 'recursively loops into the banality of violence'. Here Steinbock refers to images that are cute, but also inappropriate with regards to enforcing animals to become a visual spectacle or commodity (of, for instance, anthropomorphism) for the sake of a cute response. For example, a recent anthropomorphic trend in *dogstagrams* shows dogs sitting with their heads against a wall with captions claiming the dogs are feeling 'guilty' about unruly behavior. Closer inspection reveals that dogs often sit with their heads against walls when they are anxious, scared or have severe neural damage. Such behavior requires immediate medical intervention (Waglabs 2019). That means that these *dogstagrams* allow dogs to suffer for the sake of a social media story. Steinbock (2017, 63) argues that the interplay between violence and cuteness highlights the tension between response and responsibility when looking at images online.

Similarly, in *When Species Meet*, Haraway (2008, 46) comments on the rate at which dogs are commoditized in contemporary society: 'We have no shortage of proof that classic rabid commodification is alive and well in consumer-crazy, technoscientifically exuberant dog worlds'. Haraway (2008, 47) renders the 'capitalist technoculture in the early twenty-first century' as the guilty party for turning the dog into an anthropomorphic product. In particular, Haraway (2008, 47-52; 53-55) refers to dogs as consumers in the ever-growing pet food industry, pet insurance and dog medical services, as well as dogs as commodities in dog breeding lines, dog cloning, genetic manipulation services and dogs as workers. After the analysis of the anthropomorphic

dogstagram it is clear that the dog is also commodified 'in flesh and in the sign' (Haraway 2008, 47) in the technoculture of social media in contemporary society, where the 'marginal' dog is exploited by the dominant human for profit. In this way, it can be argued that *Dogs of Instagram* illustrates a key part of Haraway's (2014) 'Capitalocene', which demonstrates a critical look at the pursuit of profits while disregarding the environment in the Anthropocene. For Haraway, the 'Capitalocene' highlights the role of hierarchy in the human-nonhuman relation (Grear 2017).

With regard to dogs as commodities, Haraway (2008, 62) asserts that although the dog as a product is an anthropocentric pursuit (which calls for concern), in the companion species relation dogs subjected to commodification can simultaneously add value to the technoculture society. In the event of anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* that turn dogs into commodities, perhaps we can argue that they add value by allowing viewers to recognize vices, beliefs and practices of contemporary human society. In turn, the anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* that humanize dogs are significant, because—paradoxically—they also emphasize the irreducible differences between humans and dogs, highlighting both the voice of the human and the dog.

Domestic *dogstagrams*

Representing the canon of the dog as domesticated animal, several *dogstagrams* also depict the domestication of dogs. Domestic *dogstagrams* recount typical processes or activities associated with the training of dogs or dogs obediently living alongside their human owner's way of life. Thus, domestic *dogstagrams* become an ultimate depiction of the human practice of pet keeping, showing domestic customs such as walking dogs (on a leash), feeding dogs, dog grooming and dog toys.

Parallel to the theoretical understanding of domestication as a mutually beneficial relationship that could be reciprocal (Cassidy 2007, 12), these images are not depictions of dominating behavior. Instead, they show engaged processes of domestication, such as walking or training dogs for specific activities. For instance, the account @mollythenewfie often showcases the process of training Newfoundlands in water rescue and drafting. In these posts, the owner explains that water rescue and pulling are beneficial for Newfoundlands, showing how their domestic and breed (hi)stories include the capacity and instincts for such activities.

The posts about training dog behavior can become snapshots or easy-to-follow directions for controlling dog behavior in a domestic setting, as human owners share their own experiences and directions. Consequently, domestic *dogstagrams* are also anthropocentric stories; since the posts assume to know what dogs want and how to achieve wanted dog behavior in specific human terms. In this regard, domestic *dogstagrams* also pose a threat to dogs, since viewers and followers

of such posts can develop unrealistic expectations for their own dogs—perhaps forcing their dogs to behave in a certain manner or do a certain activity, because 'dogs on Instagram do it'.

In addition to describing domesticated behavior, domestic *dogstagrams* also depict the dog in a typical homely environment. Dogs pictured on Instagram as a part of a home or household echo how dogs have come to represent the notion of the human idea of home and family in literature and philosophy (Fudge 2007, 37- 38). Thus, the household dog is often described as an object in the home (Rosenblum 1988, 10). Building on this widespread theme of the objectified dog, the domestic *dogstagram* also places the dog as part of the home, as we see dogs on social media sitting on couches, at tables or in Instagram posts about families.

In a particular *dogstagram* account picturing the life of Brim the English Bullmastiff (@brimthemastiff), we can clearly see how *dogstagrams* often narrate the dog as part of the household. The majority of the content on the @brimthemastiff account features Brim, in the house, sitting on his 'favourite' couch, in family photos or chewing on his favorite 'poof' chewable toys. Scrolling through Brim's Instagram account, it becomes evident that Brim is a key member of his household.

In contrast to the anthropocentric understanding of domestic *dogstagrams* picturing dogs as household items, some household dogs (like Brim) seem to be depicted as active participants rather than passive objects. For instance, scrolling through several pictures of Brim seated on his couch, we can anthropocentrically argue that Brim is almost literally 'part of the furniture'. However, owing to the somewhat anthropomorphic captions 'speaking on behalf of Brim', the account presents him with a sense of agency and describes his continuous adventures in the home. For instance, Brim is asked to 'chime in on the morning meeting', including him in day-to-day activities. In this manner, the narrative of the domestic dog in the digital realm simultaneously steps away from anthropocentric, objectified depictions: presenting the dog not only as a family companion, but also as an actor *contributing* to the household.

Adventure *dogstagrams*

For the most part, the *dogstagrams* identified thus far seem to stem from or embody anthropocentric storytelling practices, using the dog as a means of human projection, expression or symbolism, and representing dogs in terms of domestication and anthropomorphisms. Furthermore, the notion that any Instagram post or account involves some form of human agency—since dogs cannot independently post on Instagram—frames the *dogstagram* as a particularly human-dominated action. Nevertheless, my analysis of *dogstagrams* reveals that, in

some cases, the *Dogs of Instagram* can also connote (to a certain extent) an anti-anthropocentric perspective and emphasize the possible being of the dog or the dog's sense of agency.

In contrast to capturing the dog in the human home, several *dogstagrams* capture dogs 'in action' (so to speak) in a natural environment. Pictured within natural landscapes with seemingly no human interference, some *dogstagrams* also attempt to eliminate the human in their imagery and content. Moreover, it appears as if the dog is on an adventure in a natural setting, discovering its environment. In my view, these *dogstagrams* emphasize dogs as nonhumans on an adventure in a nonhuman environment, rejecting the material world of commerce, cities and human activities. Taking a closer look at adventure *dogstagrams*, we find that some of these images not only capture the dog in a natural environment, but also capture the dog in motion or in mid-adventure, depicting its movements and actions while exploring nature. In other words, the images take the nonhumanist point of view a step further, removing the sense of a human posed picture, in that they depict the dog 'in-action' in a natural setting, without any human input.

Such adventure *dogstagrams* follow a long line of similar imagery that attempts to narrate 'the pure and honest being' of the dog (Rosenblum 1988, 78). In other words, these images represent the dog without its human significant other, as a separate entity with its own sense of being. In a typical nonhumanist, agency-giving manner, these images take on the gaze of the animal as the human immerses itself into nature and the dog's world (Rosenblum 1988, 78). Rosenblum (1988, 78) explains that such images often show similarities to the Romantic tradition of depicting people 'facing the infinite mysteries and longings evoked by landscape'. However, within the image we see that it is now the dog that faces the nonhuman environment and the human is left to contemplate the landscape from the dog's perspective. Comparably, *dogstagrams* of dogs adventuring in a natural environment tend to place the dog in an untamed setting, gazing out at its surroundings, allowing the viewer to follow and contemplate its irreducible nonhuman gaze. Mort (2019, 90) explains: 'We feel at once invited into the picture but also excluded, separate from the world the dog and the man have created between them, unable to go to the special places they can reach'.

Akin to Romantic landscape paintings, perhaps it can be argued that adventure *dogstagrams* evoke a sense of the transcending sublime for the viewer, creating an aesthetic of awe, thrill and danger reaching beyond the self when confronting nature. Mort (2019) discusses the phenomenon of Instagram photos of dogs accompanying their human owners on hikes or adventures, pictured in extreme outdoor environments. In these adventure *dogstagrams*, dogs are captured during extreme outdoor activities, picturing dogs on top of mountains or climbing to seemingly

dangerous heights, pursuing the sublime and an unimaginable world alongside their owners. Tromble (2019, 7) argues that the billions of animal videos on the Internet are 'an echo of a lost sublime—the long eons when we were primarily companions or competitors to the species that co-evolved with us'. Following Tromble, perhaps adventure *dogstagrams* can represent the human narrative of the pursuit (or return) towards a sense of the sublime, albeit this time through the safe distance of the image and gaze of their wandering dog—a nonhuman that might bring them closer to an encounter with the wildness of the nonhuman environment.

In *The Affordances of Social Media Platforms*, theorists Tania Bucher and Anne Helmond (2018, 18) frame social media platforms, like Instagram, as an environment, comparable to a terrestrial (or natural) environment with paths, cliffs, barriers, water and so on. Bucher and Helmond (2018, 18) argue that just as a natural environment affords various ways of existing relative to animals, so social media platforms 'constitute a form of environment too, composed of pathways and features in their own right' that afford ways of existing for human beings (Bucher & Helmond 2018, 19). Accordingly, social media platforms become resources (or then affordances) that create meanings and meaningfulness; their features are 'endowed with different meanings, feelings, imaginings and expectations' (Bucher & Helmond 2018, 2) that result in perceptions, attitudes, expectations and experiences for users—much like traditional storytelling practices.

Bucher and Helmond's explanation of the social media environment is particularly apt in the case of adventure *dogstagrams*, since the human-dog relation is widely dependent on their interaction with the nonhuman environment in which the human and dog encounter and interact. Framing social media as a digital *environment* therefore makes sense in terms of animal storytelling, since the human-dog relation now interacts with and narrates a natural environment *as well as* a digital environment. In other words, telling stories about the human-dog relation on Instagram is also an instrument that reveals possibilities and actions for companion species, namely how digital dog stories form and shape communities, as well as how *dogstagrams* can promote affective responses and ethical practices.

Dogstagrams of companionship

The analysis of *dogstagrams* reveals that a large number of images include two different subjects or species. The photographs' captions attempt to recount companionship or friendship between two subjects. In this manner, the *dogstagrams* tell stories of dogs living in kinship with other dogs, species or humans. They become types of 'stories that matter' (Haraway 2003, 3) in the world we live in, which Haraway (2003, 4) argues are key to understanding and examining companion species. That is, *dogstagrams* can be considered as a way of telling stories about

'becoming with' companion species. Hence, in some instances, these digital stories form part of what Haraway (2003, 17) calls 'doggish scribblings', where the '[l]essons have to be inextricably part of the story'—teaching about the relation between species or how to be with others.

A notable *Dogs of Instagram* companionship follows Cricket, a Golden Retriever, and his companion Larry the Tortoise. In their Instagram posts their owner describes their story. Similar to Cricket and Larry, some *dogstagrams* show dogs interacting with other species as their kin, ranging from ducks and cats to cheetahs. In particular, such *dogstagrams* capturing somewhat unlikely friendships, teach us about co-habiting with others. In most of these stories it is evident that two different species exist in relation to each other, sharing each other's world as well as showing signs of a Harawayian play, love and response when engaging with each other.

Although there are several *dogstagrams* of humans and dogs that, somewhat superficially, express a bond or connection between human and dog, others exist that conscientiously attest to and reflect a companionship where human and dog live with one another, recognize each other as a co-presence and co-shape each other's world. For example, on the account @wafflenugget, account holder Kate Speer posts about her life with Waffle, her psychiatric service dog. Kate (2019) calls herself a 'digital storyteller' and, as a result, her Instagram posts become stories of her relationship with her dog Waffle. Followers witness how Waffle supports Kate, responds to her and aids her in going about her everyday life. We also see how Kate engages with, responds to and cares for Waffle and allows him to explore the environment in his own way. In my reading, the account is a digital story of a companionship where human and dog exist in relation to each other, engaging with the world as separate entities and also 'becoming with' one another by playing, responding and learning from one another. As Kate (2019) perfectly describes, they are a human-dog team, teaching each other their ways.

CONCLUSION

By approaching the *dogstagram* from a digital humanities and hermeneutical perspective, what comes to the fore is not only the different human-dog stories of companion species told in the digital sphere, but also the possibilities or affordances of embedding the human-dog relation in the digital realm. In other words, based on the digital analysis of *dogstagrams*, we not only see what *stories* the digital images portray about companion species, but also what they *do, facilitate or add* to the understanding of the human-dog relation.

The above analysis of *dogstagrams* highlights an important affordance of *dogstagrams*: if social media platforms are 'the playground of the Anthropocene' (Papacharissi 2018, 2), they are also a

contact zone of interactions, encounters and, importantly, connections. According to Papacharissi (2018, 2), social media as a mode of play 'provides the stage for hybrid modalities of expression and connection, linking the individual, separately or simultaneously, with multiple audiences'. In essence, on social media, communities form and connections are established (Papacharissi 2018, 3). Perhaps, stemming from one of the well-known original incentives behind the conceptualization of social media (to establish connection), technology's ability to connect people is a key point of analysis in contemporary society as well as scholarly endeavors (Van Dijck 2012, 141).

José van Dijck (2012, 142) explains that technologies are spaces of connection and communication. Moreover, they are not impartial spaces, but are engineered and constructed to shape connections, link individuals and create communities in society (Van Dijck 2012, 142). The inherent architecture and algorithms of social media platforms are therefore geared towards creating an experience of connection and communities (Papacharissi 2018, 3). In other words, engaging with and sharing dog stories on social media is always already geared towards producing connectivity and community. Hochman (2014, 3) explains that data relations are 'imagined data communities that only potentially and relationally exist', but also mirror aspects of corporeal life in time and place. That means the inherent engineering of *dogstagrams* posted on Instagram (for instance their tags, locations and metadata) already maps out a narrative of community and connection among this digital network of images on social media.

The online community of *dogstagrams* is directly disclosed on various online platforms that have developed from the community surrounding *dogstagrams* and *Dogs of Instagram*. For example, *Dogsof* is a platform that brings together 'a community of almost 4 million dog lovers and photographers, capturing and celebrating moments spent with man's (and woman's) best friend' (Dogsof 2017). *Dogsof* shares stories of dogs via *dogstagrams* on Instagram and promotes awareness about dog adoption and welfare, while connecting dog owners across the globe. The virtual community of *Dogs of Instagram* is, therefore, built on a shared sense of community that involves a ring of responsive communication, stories, meaningful connections and sustained engagements.

Notably, the community of *Dogs of Instagram* does not only manifest online or in a virtual realm, but also generates offline connections, stories and communities. Several dog communities on Instagram have occasional 'meetups', where owners and dogs meet one another face-to-face (or perhaps nose-to-nose). As a result, *dogstagrams* generate an online sense and narrative of

community, but also promote actual offline connections and stories for both humans and dogs (Serafinelli 2017, 20).

Another possible affordance of digital dog stories emphasized in the analysis of *dogstagrams* is their ability to generate response. Haraway (2008, 97) emphasizes that response and responsibility (or response-ability) are key aspects of companion species relations. In particular, Haraway (2008, 97) contends that it is vital to tell stories of companion species relations in order to evoke a response and create awareness in contemporary society. *Dogstagrams,* in their own right, also foster a sense of response. As mentioned, they require the user to respond actively by engaging with their content and establishing connections, and they result in emotive responses in viewers. Additionally, as digital companion species stories, they create awareness surrounding the ethical treatment of, and notably *human* responsibility towards, dogs.

Luckily, *dogstagrams* can also bring awareness of responsible behavior and the ethical treatment of animals. For example, some of the images of dogs as commodities are often flagged by Instagram and other users as abusive, resulting in an investigation being launched against the account holder. Instagram as a platform has also made changes to the network's architecture to fight animal abuse, promote animal welfare and discourage harmful behavior towards animals for the sake of social media. Furthermore, *dogstagrams* teach people about the ethical treatment of companion species, posting content that informs and educates people on animal welfare and possible harmful behavior towards animals (Daly 2017). *Dogstagrams* are also, at times, beneficial to rescue dogs and promoting dog adoption, since the reach of dogs in need of care and loving owners is much greater (Schonfeld 2016). In turn, *dogstagrams* also change the way in which dog adoption agencies approach sharing images of dogs available for adoption. The popularity of images of dogs online has resulted in placing more dogs in loving homes and has led to more community engagement, more volunteers and more donations (Chapman 2018). Thus, *dogstagrams* as digital dog stories can also promote a responsible response to dogs.

In this paper I have examined how stories of the human-dog relation and companion species extends into the online realm of *dogstagrams*. I have provided both distant and close readings of the variety of digital images representing the human-dog relation on the social media platform Instagram. The mixed-method approach to analyzing the digital stories of companion species on Instagram revealed that various types of *dogstagrams* exist, capturing both an anthropocentric and nonhumanist narrative of the human-dog relation and the question of the animal being. For example, domestic and anthropomorphic *dogstagrams* are clear anthropocentric pursuits to

capture and project human ideas onto the dog. Alternatively, *dogstagrams* of companionship and adventure exemplify aspects of an anti-anthropocentric companion species relation.

What became clear from this discussion is that the human-dog relation is not only narrated in the online playground of Instagram, but that companion species relations are also *actively practiced* on Instagram. In other words, *dogstagrams* add an additional layer of meaning to Haraway's companion species in contemporary society and become a way of being with dogs. In addition, such an application of Haraway's companion species and digital analysis of dog stories on Instagram can also be extended to other animals and other social media platforms. Analyses of this kind can discover the various narratives of the important human-animal relation told and participated in by humans—and the unknowing animals—in the Digital Age. Digital dog stories become active stories and (nonhuman) actors contributing to our companion species relations, especially because they evoke a sense of play, affective response and responsibility between Instagrammers, viewers and dogs.

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[1] I thank the editors and reviewers of this journal for raising the point of the all-important conversation concerning who has authority over images of animals, and even more so images on social media. For further discussion of the matter, I suggest turning to Joanna Zylinska's (2017) notion of 'nonhuman photography'. Zylinska (2017:3) places nonhuman photography not as an opposition to human-centric photographic practices in a typical 'human versus machine' narrative, but rather configures it as an *expansion* of technological practices that the human is not part of (Zylinska 2017:5). In other words, Zylinska (2017:4-5) remains mindful of the human input in photography, but also wishes to sketch a multi-perspective that includes the active role of the nonhuman in photographic practices. Interestingly, some apparatuses, such as camera fitting dog harnesses and dog collar cameras, as well as those photographs 'accidentally' taken by dogs, would then fall under the notion of nonhuman photography, since the outcome of the apparatus is photos taken by nonhumans and also shared to social media networks by a nonhuman algorithm, i.e. not by the human but by technology-dog infoldings. These devices give a new voice to the marginalized animal and deserve attention in further research (an endeavor I undertake elsewhere).