



Consensual or conflicting encounters? Finnish politicians' digital lives and platforms as spaces for agonistic pluralism

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, both public and academic discourse have taken a pessimistic view of the relationship between social media and politics. It has been argued that platformed politics fosters ideological and affective polarization, resulting in deeper divisions within Western democracies. By analysing the experiences of 34 Finnish politicians through media diaries and interviews gathered and conducted in 2020, this article highlights the conflictual and affective nature of politicians' digital work. Using emotional and affective labour as an analytical lens, it argues that platforms are, however, spaces for agonistic pluralism. Contrary to the prevailing scepticism, the analysis shines light on affectivity and underscores its revitalizing potential, as evidenced by politicians' constant assessment of democratic ethics and their attempts to manage relationships with platforms and different audiences. Consequently, the article addresses the limitations of normative aspects of agonistic theory.

KEYWORDS Social media; agonistic pluralism; politics; affect; conflict

Introduction

Discussions regarding the influence of social media platforms on human agency and interpersonal relationships are often accompanied by profound anxieties. From privacy concerns to social engineering, 'manipulation', and internet incivility, the critiques of platform power illustrate the immense forces that digital media services have set in motion in cultural life. By the notion of platform power, we refer generally to the operating principles of social media platforms through

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 13 August 2024; Accepted 12 June 2025

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which tech firms have arguably shaped political communication and political culture (e.g. Bossetta, 2018; Knuutila & Laaksonen, 2020), as well as influenced human sociality more broadly (van Dijck, 2013). In light of this development, public reports and research papers have highlighted the growing role of impoliteness, harassment, and polarization in today's politics (IPU, 2016; Kawecki & Kekkonen, 2024; Saresma et al., 2020). Meanwhile, there remains no doubt that platforms are central spaces for political communication and publicity. To be seen as credible agents of democracy, those working within and for representative institutions must be visible on social media. There is a certain sense of crisis regarding how to address these deep dissonances.

Delving into the experiences of Finnish politicians, we use agonistic pluralism (Connolly, 1995, 2004, 2005; Mouffe, 1993, 1995, 2013) as a framework for understanding the ambiguous implications of the platformization of politics (Fast & Enli, 2024; cf. Bossetta, 2018; Nelimarkka et al., 2020) for political life and Western democracies more broadly. As a poststructural theory of democracy, agonism highlights the role of political conflict and subject formation rather than focusing on idealized conditions for deliberation (Norval, 2014, p. 71). In contrast to deliberative democracy theories prioritizing rationality, dialogue, and consensus, we argue that platforms are agonistic spaces: what are often empirically associated with these virtual arenas are affectivity, pluralism of values, conflict, and the importance of group identities.

Our empirical research material consists of 34 politician interviews and 10 media diaries situated around the ordinary digital lives of our participants. At the time of the interviews, 22 of these politicians were serving as members of parliament. The remaining 12 interviews were conducted with young and aspiring politicians who were, for instance, serving as municipal politicians or involved in political youth organizations. Ten politicians in this group kept media diaries.

While theorizing agonism, the study partakes in research that considers the shift social media platforms have introduced into everyday political work. By their own account, politicians are driven not only by the obvious aim of gaining visibility through social media (e.g. Enli & Skogerbø, 2013) but also by the desire to build more personal and meaningful relationships with citizens (Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018; Mannevu, 2020). Furthermore, politicians highlight the practical benefits of social media that enable pleasant ways to receive feedback and gain public endorsement (Ross & Bürger, 2014, pp. 54–55). These self-reported desires can be viewed with scepticism, however (see Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018, p. 232), as politicians' actual communicative practices frequently differ from 'idealistic ambitions of enhanced democratic dialogue' (Flinders et al., 2020, p. 266). Digital platforms are indeed used more often to broadcast and publish

information than to engage with constituents (e.g. Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Williamson, 2009).

Politicians have also raised concerns about their personal well-being regarding strict time pressures, heavy workloads, and the vitriolic environment. Studies conclude that the instantaneous nature of social media renders politics ubiquitous (Flinders et al., 2020), making it difficult to switch off from political work, as there is a constant need to stay on track and avoid being viewed as inactive (Fast & Enli, 2024; Hokkanen et al., 2021). In Finland, MPs have even voiced a need to be approachable and sentimentally sensitive to citizens' individual concerns (Mannevu, 2020, pp. 420–422; cf. Isotalus, 2017, pp. 86, 215).

These dynamics, along with the particularly long-standing role of social media in Finnish political campaigning (Carlson & Strandberg, 2012; Strandberg et al., 2024, pp. 72–73), can be linked to specific features of the Finnish electoral system, which is highly personalized and competitive: individual candidates are voted for as opposed to collective party lists, and competition is further increased by a high number of candidates who are generally not ranked by parties internally (von Schoultz & Strandberg, 2024, pp. 2, 5–6). Furthermore, Finland's multi-party system and political culture emphasize consensus decision-making and the interlink between citizens and the state (e.g. Luhtakallio, 2012; von Schoultz & Strandberg, 2024), which enhances certain aspects of social media use. For instance, platforms like Instagram offer a means of delivering 'personal snapshots' that go beyond traditional journalistic genres that conventionally focus on family or love life (Paatelainen et al., 2023, p. 43), which might further advance the significance of relatability in Finland (see Ylöstalo, 2025). In conclusion, Mannevu (2022) argues that in Finnish political culture, MPs have an uneasy and ambivalent relationship with social media: platforms are certainly important, an 'ambivalent glue' holding things together, but many conflicting aspirations make their use exhausting.

To connect this backdrop to agonistic theories, we utilize the concepts of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]) and affective labour (Hardt, 1999) to understand how emotions are managed and, consequently, to understand the role of (inter)subjectivity within democratic practices. Hochschild uses the concept to show how emotion is used and exploited in today's cultural and working life. This results in individuals having to handle their own and other people's feelings, which more broadly affects 'our very capacity to feel' (p. 21). Hardt's concept comes from a different direction to highlight broader changes in capitalist production that stress labour's immateriality and a kind of self-valorization. Lazzarato (1996, p. 136) argues that capitalism incorporates one's personality and subjectivity into value production, especially in informational cultures (see Gregg, 2010). Through this conceptual terrain, we emphasize how emotion and

subjectivity are central in platformed politics and, as such, that platforms should be understood as agonistic spaces. The research questions animating this study are as follows: 1) How do politicians' everyday digital lives reflect the agonistic role of platforms—and the challenging relationship between agonistic democratic theory and Finnish political culture? 2) Why and how is agonistic democracy a particularly complex democratic theory within the platform economy? Next, we present our understanding of agonistic democracy through Mouffe and Connolly and discuss agonism's relation to platformed political culture.

Agonism and social media

By stressing the intrinsic role of pluralism, agonistic democracy theories highlight the necessity of difference and the value of conflict as constitutive elements of democracy (e.g. Norval, 2014, pp. 69–71; Wenman, 2013). As a poststructuralist democracy theory, agonism thus distances itself from the proceduralism of deliberative understanding (Norval, 2014, p. 71), and it does this by criticizing deliberative theories for having a blind spot for 'the political' itself in their reliance on expert knowledge and rationalization (Mouffe, 2013, p. 3). This means that in a functional democracy, conflict should be cherished and others' viewpoints tolerated, while the contingent grounds on which different identities form and operate are appreciated.

Connolly (1995), writing from a post-Nietzschean and Foucauldian perspective, develops his general idea of agonism through a critique of the politics of normalization and transcendentalization. He asserts that naturalizing tendencies—especially fundamentalism in all of its forms—easily lead to 'converting differences into modes of otherness' (p. xxi) or even demonization (p. 34). Mouffe shares Connolly's sentiment in her pessimistic view of what she views as today's 'technocratic post-politics' (Wenman, 2013, p. 181). She highlights how an 'illusion of consensus' (Mouffe, 1993, p. 11) may have severe effects by ignoring the existence of deep ideological differences. Both Mouffe and Connolly see that contemporary forms of extremism, such as religious fanaticism or the rise of nationalism and the far right, illustrate failures of Western democracies which are marked by normalization and rationalization. These defects serve as calls for a pluralist imagination.

There are, of course, key differences between theorists of agonism. Mouffe is more invested in the dilemma residing within the current liberal democratic praxis and its institutions, which she finds ill-equipped to handle antagonisms in a constructive (agonistic) way (e.g. Wenman, 2013, pp. 119–122). Connolly draws less attention to institutions and places importance on civic virtues. He argues that subjects should develop an 'ethic of care' and that this is done by

making one's faith—that is, ideological views—open for contestation by thawing out 'frozen perspectives, to identify arbitrary threats to difference created by the dogmatism of established identities' (1995, pp. 27–28, 40). In this sense, Connolly wishes for people to be curious about others' ideas while underscoring the role of subject formation in democratic processes. The two different yet similar approaches to agonism offer important insights for today's platformed politics and its implications for politicians' subjective accounts within Finnish political culture. While operating on somewhat different levels, both institutional and personal, they are able to pave the way for understandings that, on the one hand, view social media as an infrastructural facilitator of politics, and on the other, focus on interpersonal negotiations of democratic ethics within this mediated infrastructure.

Empirical studies concerning the relationship between platformed politics and agonism have often revolved around Mouffe's and Connolly's similar concerns with adversary/enemy and agonism/antagonism distinctions. For instance, Marichal and Neve (2020) note, analysing a gun control hashtag on Twitter (today's X) sparked by the 2018 Parkland secondary school shooting in Florida, that the tweets with the most engagement were likely to be antagonistic. On the other hand, Salter (2022) observes that within the context of New Zealand and relating to a welfare policy debate on Twitter, the majority of the tweets could be classified as agonistic, defined as being 'open, or civil, in that they offer a clear political argument or idea as their primary focus, which can be responded to' (p. 1940). Jane (2017) studies debates between men's right activists and feminists. She takes the most critical stance towards the normative usefulness of agonistic theory, as social media data, in particular, make it difficult to assess whether there is 'respect' for the political opponent (p. 468).

In the next section, we introduce our analytical lens more closely. Beforehand, we will briefly elaborate on our initial argument regarding platforms as agonistic spaces. The proposition itself is not new, as there have been attempts to address what are considered the uglier effects of social media, such as trolling and vitriol (McCosker, 2014) or the phenomenon of 'post-truth' (Farkas, 2020), in line with or in favour of agonistic principles. Some of these lines are hard to agree with: many contemporary conservative forms of mobilization and disinformation, both flourishing on social media, revolve around fundamentalist claims and othering, demonstrating what Connolly (1995, p. xxi) warns against.

However, there remain convincing indications as to why platforms can be viewed as agonistic. First, platforms facilitate conflict and affectivity. By infrastructurally increasing affect (e.g. Knuutila & Laaksonen, 2020), platforms can carve out differences. This mitigates the availability of consensual or technocratic practices and, as such, renders expression of emotion culturally acceptable,

which may foster political participation (see Ward & Tavits, 2019). In this sense, affective polarization—the (negative) feelings and attitudes partisans have for the out-group (Iyengar et al., 2012)—is not necessarily contradictory to agonistic ideals. Second, social media conversations are part of a hybrid media system that shapes power relations by allowing a diverse range of actors, even non-elite participants, to partake in the discourse (Chadwick, 2017, pp. 73–74). Here, the distance between representatives and citizens may narrow, paving the way for the democratic intersubjectivity essential to agonism (Forester, 2014). Third, the emergence of difference happens not only through affectivity but also in how platforms facilitate connectivity (e.g. van Dijck, 2013, pp. 12–13). This may not just render group affiliations more salient—it has also been noted that politicians may purposefully connect with out-group individuals to combat presumed ‘filter bubbles’ (Hokkanen, 2022, p. 110).

Data and methods

The broad aim of this study was to capture the everyday digital lives of politicians. While studying the mundane, the objective was also to understand how Finnish politicians experienced and gave meaning to their profession and actions within a platformed political culture overshadowed by various anxieties. To achieve this, we recruited different groups of politicians for qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The first group consisted of 12 young, aspiring, non-MP politicians (aged 23–33 years), who were, for example, serving as city councilors or in political youth organizations. In addition to municipality and organization websites, young politicians were searched for using Hokkanen’s social media networks and knowledge of the field, as well as through the Finnish Broadcasting Company’s digital election service. No politicians from the Finns Party, the Swedish People’s Party of Finland, or the Christian Democrats participated in the study, despite our repeated attempts to contact them. Our research initially began with this group of young politicians. Ten of the participants also kept media diaries for 7 to 10 days prior to the interviews. The gender distribution in the dataset was even.

The second group included 22 Finnish Members of Parliament. Similar to the first dataset, we were interested in MPs with a presence on social media but aimed to recruit both ‘heavy users’ and those who appeared less active. We took notes of MPs’ social media profiles, which, at the time, mainly included Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, in our attempt to recruit MPs as broadly as possible, while also staggering invitations to further ensure diversity. MPs from all parliamentary parties, except for the smaller parties Christian Democrats and Movement Now, participated in the study. In these interviews, we asked the MPs about their daily

habits, experiences, views of different platforms and how they are controlled, strategic use and effective political communication, as well as about issues of harassment and the resources offered for the representatives' digital work. This group consisted of 14 women and 8 men. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for inclusion in the study.

This workflow was a vital part of the larger project because the initial diaries enabled us to learn about the everyday digital lives of the politicians by allowing the participants to voice what is important for them (Gibson et al., 2013). Furthermore, the diaries that were given to the researcher before the interviews helped us design interview questions that would not stem from prior theory, our assumptions, or natural social media data, allowing the participants to have more influence over the interviews (Spowart & Nairn, 2014). Identifying key issues and relevant topics let us shift attention to aspects that would most likely be important for both groups regardless of their differences.

In the present article, we approach our research material through Norval's (2014, p. 76) criteria for agonistic democratic engagement, which she draws from Mouffe. Norval provides a list of five points, of which we find three empirically useful: (1) respect for the rules of political engagement, (2) respect for one's political 'enemy'/adversary, and (3) recognition of difference as ontological. Unlike Wenman (2013, p. 182), who finds that Mouffe's agonistic model stresses 'a need to construct order, unity, and authority', Norval thus emphasizes a subject's relation to others in her reading of Mouffe.

In practice, this framework means that we focused on sections where politicians discuss and write about how they perceive their own and others' behaviour in a platformed environment, how they address the political opposite and experience mediated confrontations, and finally, the ways in which they consider ideological differences and, often, their attempts to bridge these differences. However, we refrain from assessing whether our participants practice democracy in agonistically ideal ways. This setting allows us to address our research questions, which seek to understand how politicians' everyday digital lives (ambivalently) reflect the agonism of platforms, and why and how agonistic democracy is a particularly complex democratic theory within the platform economy.

We deepen our analytical grasp by utilizing emotional and affective labour as conceptual tools in a close reading of our material. In her analysis of emotional labour, Hochschild (2012, p. 7), for instance, considers flight attendants who suppress their feelings to 'produce the proper state of mind in others' when providing customer service. According to Hochschild, emotional labour is done at the surface level but begins to affect workers' subjectivities more deeply. By operating within this conceptual terrain, we can better understand the embodied aspects of platformed politics that Connolly (1995, p. 13) finds vital for the

agonistic model. Furthermore, paying close attention to emotional labour supports our research setting, which does not seek to offer a definite answer to the role and possibilities of platforms as agonistic spaces but rather to understand the frictions they introduce to the traditionally consensus-driven Finnish political culture.

In what follows, we move to the empirical analysis of the research material. As we have organized our material according to the three criteria of agonistic engagement presented by Norval, we start by looking at how matters pertaining to the rules of political engagement reflect agonism. In the second section, we analyse how politicians address their relationships and experiences with their political opponents, and in the third section, how they discuss ideological difference.

Respect for the rules of engagement

While Finnish political culture is traditionally marked by consensus-seeking and less pronounced ideological differences, politicians' discussions of their everyday digital lives reveal how today's attention economy carves out affectivity and difference. Instead of merely discussing their instrumental use, many talked about platforms' atmospheres and 'conversational cultures' and emphasized how standing out is dependent on the expression of confrontational ideas and the use of snark ('*kärkkäys*') in political messaging. Our participants expressed concern that this infrastructure threatens what they perceive as a desirable democratic ethos, which is why many felt it necessary to manage how they engage with the platforms and other users. Their emotional labour thus illustrated not just the importance of conflict and its manipulation but also the work that goes into cultivating mutual respect within platformed politics. In this sense, agonistic relations and the simultaneous 'constitution of democratic subjectivity' (see Norval, 2014, p. 71) become a defining element of platformed engagement.

I've been trying to maintain this sort of approach since the election, a kind of, could it be described as matter-of-fact policy or something like that. I'm not even aiming for any kind of boldness. . . . I try to think about how it can still attract attention. A kind of bland message just doesn't really reach people. It's a bit of a double-edged sword. (MP, interview)

If you're abrasive, you'll get abrasive comments, but if you're kind of semi-neutral, you won't, like, you won't really get as much attention to gain sufficient support. (YP, diary)

And the more analytical, contemplative, and genuinely matter-of-factual it is, whether it's a video or a text, the worse it always spreads. (YP, interview)

The quotes above show how politicians discussed their views of the relationship between tone and social media reach. In the diary excerpt, the young politician

summarized their general problem with the situation by noting how snarky users get attention, while neutral posts remain unnoticed. During the following interview, they also mentioned avoiding being a ‘Trump-type loudmouth’ (*‘öyhöt-täjä’*). In turn, the MP in the first quote provided a more ambivalent perspective, using the notion of a ‘double-edged sword’ to describe this paradoxical context where politicians, after all, also need visibility.

These accounts highlight how political actors are led to reconsider the Finnish matter-of-fact ideal (Isotalus, 2017, p. 125) in the new era of media where the platform economy simultaneously demands other qualities. However, instead of being unidirectionally influenced by platform power, various forms of emotional labour are present. Not only do politicians balance content in ways that garner attention by evoking a certain kind of response in others (Hochschild, 2012, p. 7), but they invoke vague (other internet users) or distinct reference points (Trump) and evaluate the morality of their own communication through these figures. Conflict and passion are addressed both materially in one’s own media practices and immaterially by thinking through one’s mixed feelings about the controversial setting, which has no simple solution, as agonistic relations are both a standard circumstance and something to be carefully managed.

Apart from questions of media visibility and the tricky relationship this has with the matter-of-fact politician ideal, our participants discussed the ways in which they connect to other people on the platforms. In this sense, engagement pertains to relationships between users and platforms, as well as between users who interact with each other on the platforms. Politicians’ accounts of their digital everyday lives made it clear that social media conversations contain affective pulls and conversational genres that may grip the politicians along. Perhaps surprisingly, the politicians also acknowledged and admitted this in different ways. When asked about effective political communication, one MP quickly criticized the interviewer for asking a difficult question. They continued to break down their communicative objects and repertoire, highlighting various audiences. The MP remarked that if ‘the audience is, for example, people from Youth of the National Coalition Party, the objective of my communication is to make their thinking subject to ridicule in a gentle way, so that it’s hard for them both to defend it and to set against me’.

This expression is interesting in terms of agonistic pluralism, as what could be considered a conflict between radically opposing views is reduced to ‘gentle ridicule’. It connects to what Gregg (2010, p. 253) views as a grievance of the information era, in which subtle online snark, cynicism, and expressions of ‘professional cool’ are symptomatic of the pressing affect of alienation in white-collar subjectivity. This also pertains to the broader production logic of affective labour as it aims to engender ‘social networks’ and ‘forms of community’ through the

creation and manipulation of affect (Hardt, 1999, pp. 95–96). Such practices also illustrate how a normative sense of respectful engagement remains a distant ideal because, much like plenary sessions, platformed politics are always performed *for an audience* and under highly *imbalanced settings*. Indeed, the MP above, and others we spoke to, stressed how the receiver of a particular comment is usually less important than the audience. In this sense, ‘clever remarks’ and ‘fucking with people’ (*‘nokkeluudet ja vittuilu’*), as one MP pessimistically described it, are ways to position oneself, seek recognition, and cultivate networks as part of the public nature of platformed labour.

In a related way, another MP admitted being occasionally rebellious, remarking, ‘if vulgar commenting happens, with pigs I speak the language of pigs, so I usually get involved in that too. I also give back. . . . but whether that’s mature behaviour or not is debatable [laughs]’. Even though the metaphor ‘language of pigs’ can be seen as a way to both evade and agonize over one’s responsibility, it illustrates a profound shift in Finnish politics where conflictual relations become more pronounced, as do the emotions attached to these conflicts. The MP later clarified that they do not want to ‘give power to those who spew nonsense’, which highlights their desire to challenge the uneven dynamic where only one side can utilize contemptuous language. Depending on the viewpoint, this is a matter of breaking the expected ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 2012) of a representative or a way to foster democratic intersubjectivity where value resides in all kinds of engagements. Furthermore, as a young politician emphasized while sympathetically addressing their peers’ behaviour, even if they did not fully agree with their actions: ‘in the past . . . the party define[d] what constitutes ethical behaviour, but today, that responsibility falls entirely on the individual . . . and even in a very short time frame too’.

In conclusion, our material demonstrates that platforms infrastructurally and organically incite political conflict. While demonstrating the prevalence of agonistic relations, this also poses the question of what ‘respect for the rules of engagement’ would look like in this emerging environment, in which multiple contradictory tendencies are at play. When considering agonistic conduct and desirable forms of engagement, a close reading of our material also shows the pervasive effects of what engagement on/with platforms does. In their diary, one young politician wondered whether they truly found sex workers’ rights important—a matter they had recently written about—or whether they were just using this talking point to gain personal visibility. Here, as Hochschild puts it, politicians are ‘led to ask about [their] present feelings: Am I acting now? How do I know?’ (2012, p. 48). Hence, as a platform’s economy enables the quest for personal visibility as politicians shuttle from one topic to another in fleeting ways, this circumstance also introduces a constant sense of self-doubt.

As a form of ‘reflexive selfhood’ (Illouz, 2007, p. 19), it aligns with Connolly’s (1995, p. xvi) idea of critical responsiveness: ‘To alter your recognition of difference, therefore, is to revise your own terms of self-recognition as well’.

Respect for enemy/adversary

There are sensible people there, and then there are all kinds of trolls and the sort following behind. (MP, interview)

A key feature of agonism involves distinguishing enemies from adversaries. This highlights the role of respect for the adversary if we wish to define a relationship as agonistic. While the previous section analysed the work behind thinking through engagements with platforms and other users—in terms of the content and form of political messaging—politicians also spent much time discussing their views of political opponents inhabiting these spaces and the emotions provoked by their looming presence. In this section, we argue that, in multiplatform political work, the normative enemy/adversary distinction becomes difficult or secondary. While Connolly’s theory embraces curiosity towards all kinds of ideas, something platforms certainly enable through their possibilities for political confrontation, politicians also voiced how the messiness of social media evokes a feeling that almost everything can be suspect and every encounter has the potential to develop undesirably.

I’m involved [on Twitter] and update it weekly, but I’m aware that when I post pretty much anything, there sure are plenty of misinterpreters, and it always starts a war. (MP, interview)

People with opposing opinions found that update . . . lots and lots of comments started pouring in, and sure, there were reasonable ones among them, but much of it was a bit misogynistic, and otherwise very inappropriate commenting. (YP, interview)

My own thinking about social media interaction is pretty much negative. I always fear the worst, and I don’t really seem to trust people that much. (YP, diary)

When politicians described their everyday encounters on platforms, especially in relation to Twitter (the most relevant platform for political communication in Finland at the time), they were not highly optimistic about the new possibilities for democratic dialogue (Flinders et al., 2020, p. 266). As a structure of feeling, they *anticipated* (see Koivunen et al., 2024) negativity as the most likely type of feedback, even though political opposition was itself welcomed. While providing the only quote that describes a real episode, the former young politician crucially emphasized that ‘there were reasonable ones among them’. That is to say, comment sections undoubtedly include legitimate actors and viewpoints,

but the dynamic promotes a politics of suspicion. The vagueness of the opposing field and messiness of the feedback made it appealing not to engage or even to withdraw from conversations. One MP pondered, like many others, if ‘I should just have a kind of Twitter communication where I only post a tweet and don’t participate . . . don’t even look at those comments’. Two young politicians noted that Twitter can easily put them in a *bad mood*, while an MP similarly talked about finding themselves in a *good mood* from using Instagram but getting *angry* from using Twitter. Therefore, many found it important to control their emotions by managing what they see and take part in, in an attempt—as one MP put it—‘to protect myself to be able to work, it’s that simple’.

The tendency to seek positivity by managing unwanted content and encounters relates to agonistic pluralism. It echoes today’s debates on ‘safe spaces’ that consider whether people have become too soft or unwilling to withstand difference, signalling that the opponent is considered an enemy rather than adversary. Hence, our participants’ accounts prompt a question as to whether politics—insofar as it considers ‘radical negativity’ (Mouffe, 2013, p. 1) to be central—ought to feel good, given that there exists a tremendous difference in resolutions to areas such as human rights, the economy, and well-being. However, despite the grievances, even those politicians who loath platforms like Twitter and profess to have little respect for *trolls*, *misinterpreters*, *loudmouths*, *troublemakers*, or *the extremes* (the expressions were manifold) stayed on these platforms. One politician remarked that their ‘quality of life would probably be better without Twitter’ while stressing the importance of being reachable—not for publicity or for the sake of re-election, but for democratic principles. Several others, in turn, were ambiguous in wording their feelings. The MP who claimed to get angry over Twitter later said that they use the platform *very eagerly*, while a young politician summarized their discussion relating to Twitter and Jodel—an anonymous social networking app popular in Finland—calling them ‘toxic, but nevertheless tempting’.

It is thus important to note that even though platforms are often used for one-way communication (e.g., Kannasto, 2021; Nelimarkka et al., 2020, p. 6), this does not mean that politicians are altogether unresponsive to others’ presence and viewpoints. Far from simply enjoying the company of likeminded individuals, they indeed need to confront and deal with oppositional views—maybe even more so than before platforms arrived in politics. In the words of a young politician, ‘In response to my tweet, I was particularly irritated by this [politician] who falls under the category of “National Coalition Party members who I follow for the sake of not being completely bubbled, yet who I constantly get annoyed by”’. An MP noted how ‘[o]n Twitter, I might comment much more diversely to people’s updates than on Facebook, because the system supports

conversation between people who think differently. But it also leads to Twitter being the most challenging.’

Navigating these digital encounters aligns with Connolly’s (2005, p. 125) idea of ‘pain in agonism’. Connolly argues that political subjects should remain both invitational and vulnerable to others by opening their faith and by ‘thinking in the company of others’ (2004, p. 511). The politicians’ everyday practices present how platformed political work is conflictual and often insolvable yet manageable through an assessment of emotions and boundaries. As Berlant (2023, p. 3) puts it, ‘the sense of the inconvenience of other people is evidence that no one was ever sovereign . . . sovereignty is the name for a confused, reactive, often not-quite-thought view that there ought to be a solution to the pressure of adapting to “other people”.’

Despite platforms offering somewhat revitalizing adversarial relations, the digital economy also genuinely challenges Finnish democracy. Platforms include actors with obscure usernames and motives, including bots, which led several politicians to underscore the messiness of platformed politics. For instance, an MP questioned the authenticity of particular encounters, while their peer maintained that ‘there are screen names making a racket, and they can reside in like Moscow or St. Petersburg’. A young politician described an event that had taken place in a local Facebook group. They explained how a sense of concern spread within the group after one member alleged that an elementary textbook lacked information about a specific topic, resulting in members of the Facebook group viewing this as evidence of green politics and feminism plaguing elementary school. The participant described how the polemic was resolved after they dug up and sent out pictures of the textbook, proving the original argument false. However, the next day, the discussion was steered ‘towards gays, equality, and the Finns Party’, making the politician completely fed up with the case and with social media more broadly.

For some, social media breaks and mundane emotional labour sufficed, as they offered a partial solution. Like the flight attendants studied by Hochschild (2012), who pictured their clients as having a bad day (as opposed to viewing them as simply horrible and bad-mannered individuals) to be able to put on the ‘authentic smile’, a male MP talked about how he protected himself ‘by convincing myself that they are criticizing, bullying, and harassing this product called a “politician”’. Several others, all of whom were women, spoke about occasions that had made them fearful or cautious. Or, in the words of a male MP relating to the experience of a female colleague: ‘a kind of happy, confident, and carefree attitude to life, you’ll never get it back’. The histories of trauma affecting many politicians in their daily media use indicate differences in the emotional stances

available. They make clear that there is not much to glorify in those conflictual encounters that direct politicians away from platforms.

Recognition of difference as ontological

I think [social media] has brought people closer together. But it has also created these bubbles that . . . And maybe because of the logic behind platforms like Facebook as well, what is offered to you, it kind of feeds . . . Well, I don't know if social media can be blamed alone; many developments have taken place in societies. But it has definitely increased polarization and living in one's own safe bubble, leading to bubbles arguing and everything becoming black and white. I find it sad because politics is full of shades of grey. There isn't just one absolute truth. (MP, interview)

The platformed environment and the assumption regarding the increasing prevalence of political polarization (see Kawecki & Kekkonen, 2024, for the Finnish context) create ambiguous grounds for addressing political difference as an ontological aspect of Finnish democracy. While allowing politicians to emphasize the increasing role of political confrontation, the current political context makes it clear that 'passionate identification'—a stance characteristic of agonistic democracy (Norval, 2014, p. 76)—is particularly difficult for politicians to adopt. In other words, platforms incite imaginations that resonate with Mouffe's idea of radical democracy where there is no single truth, but they also encourage politicians to consider confrontations in primarily negative terms, as demonstrated by the expression 'bubbles arguing'. This Finnish idiom reflects a popular sentiment according to which people are increasingly reluctant to have genuine conversations with those who are perceived or suspected to hold differing opinions.

Unsurprisingly, several others underscored the significance of deliberation, instead of stressing or defending their particular political position. A young politician expressed how 'society doesn't develop anywhere if we can't reach compromises', while an MP stated, 'It's not a dialogue if you've decided in advance that something sucks ass (*"on perseest"*)'. While being realistic—a multi-party system requires consensual decision-making—these notions show how in the 'disrupted public sphere' (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018), Finnish politicians find it necessary to do affective labour by positioning themselves as the 'sensible folk'; the silent majority who understand the big picture and find solutions beyond what they perceive as extreme viewpoints (see Koivunen, 2021). In this sense, they set themselves against agonistic perspectives which find no inherent problem in the rejection of others' ideas: 'political questions always involve decisions that require making a choice' and 'the moment of decision cannot be avoided', as Mouffe (2013, pp. 3, 14) argues. However, it needs mentioning that we did not specifically ask politicians about ideological difference. Instead of reflecting

the actual state of Finnish politics, where there certainly are differences, these accounts are likely to stem from today's cultural and political climate, which engenders somewhat utopian ideals.

As we have presented throughout our analytical sections, contestations are always present on platforms despite politicians' efforts to manage them and their will to position themselves as democratic actors who set differences aside and find solutions between polarized viewpoints. However, a few politicians did emphasize the vital role of ideological difference and their own role in promoting it. Based on our qualitative material, these positions were not associated with differences between young politicians and MPs or with the parties they represented. A young politician remarked that 'some people have a different belief system . . . So I can't change their mind, and they can't change mine', while an MP commented, 'I do have some issues where I probably *polarize quite a lot*, such as immigration, but it's something I consider more *as a matter of values*'. Another MP gave a statement that stood out as unique in our material, fully detaching from the ideal of deliberative conduct: 'disagreement drives things forward. That's why I'm annoyed when people say that "it's fighting" or that "someone has upset themselves". I find it to be a necessity in a plural society.'

The two former quotations are interesting, as they both address ideological difference through the notions of beliefs and values. This raises the question of whether values are a domain in which political actors feel that they can legitimately be 'polarizing' within platformed politics. In turn, other issues perceived as less value-laden remain within the sphere of decision-making where rational solutions ought to be discovered—a case both Mouffe and Connolly clearly warn about. At the same time, the increasing pluralization of values—together with the fragmentation of the national public sphere and the diminishing of 'a national sense of a "we"' (Koivunen, 2021, p. 195)—highlight the very profound challenges to consensus decision-making on platforms and beyond. However, as the latter MP above illustrated when describing their relationship with a politically opposite colleague: '[she] has the kind of same nice optimistic sympathy for disagreements, like, we're disagreeing, and *so what* ("*entäs sitte*")'. There is something liberating in giving space for political difference when the opposing party is treated as an adversary who does not threaten one's identity or existence.

Conclusion

In the present article, we analysed Finnish politicians' media diaries and interviews and utilized agonistic criteria to argue for an understanding of social media platforms as agonistic spaces. First, by looking at *respect for the rules of engagement*, we assert that our participants are highly attentive to a democratic ethos, as is evident in their concern that a (media) logic of visibility has become more

important than informative and fact-based political processes. Second, we show that in terms of *respect for the enemy/adversary*, platforms are often obscure spaces that direct attention away from definable political opponents, instead making politicians ponder how the 'disrupted public sphere' can be endured. Third, we demonstrate that, even though Finnish politicians address platforms as spaces of conflict, a position where *difference is recognized as ontological* is less readily available than an ethos marked by consensus-driven dialogue and constructiveness.

We propose that emotional and affective labour are ways to both 'enact' and 'face power' (Forester, 2014, p. 142). This illustrates how platforms invite politicians to constitute their democratic subjectivities (see Norval, 2014, p. 71) instead of merely functioning as instrumental spaces for specific democratic conduct. Furthermore, our analysis highlights the intersubjective (see Forester, 2014) nature of this process. Politicians manage and tolerate the emotional toll of platformed political work, which resonates closely with the Berlantian notion of the 'inconvenience' of others. Sometimes, this leads them to seek ingroup encounters in attempts to cultivate a positive mindset. This raises the question of whether, on the one hand, the current political reality incentivizes the pursuit of more supportive spaces due to the factual prevalence of incivility and disinformation, and, on the other hand, whether legitimate counterpoints might be too readily dismissed as unconstructive. However, while other users are sometimes accused of uncivil and toxic behaviour, Finnish politicians nevertheless continuously assess the presence and input of others. Similarly, by engaging in various political disputes, our participants adapt to and align themselves with highly different democratic actors.

While agonism is a useful framework for understanding platformed politics, its application to empirical material presents some pitfalls. Problems arise when debates take absurd turns in which truth carries no weight—as was evidenced, for instance, by the school textbook polemic above, that, despite our interviewee's efforts, was never resolved. These imbalances relate to Jane's (2017, pp. 470–471) critique of agonism, where the idea of respect for the adversary might risk viewing conflicting opinions as equal, even though only one of them is based on reliable evidence. In other words, while Mouffe (2013, p. 3) is right to point out that, although matters that do not have rational solutions do exist, there remain many disputes that do have such solutions.

Furthermore, the imbalance of emotional experiences highlights that positional differences, especially in relation to gender, should be taken seriously when thinking about Connollian 'pain of agonism' and the implications of intersubjectivity. Wenman (2013) has been critical of Connolly's inattentiveness to historically specific forms of domination, present in Connolly's emphasis on shared existential anxiety and *ressentiment* that direct attention away from

societal inequalities. For instance, while male politicians hardly found harassment an issue for their well-being, many women carefully elaborated on their ways of coping with a platformed reality marked by hatred. This is what Mouffe (1993, p. 46) properly captures in her critique of the ‘generality and universality of the public sphere’, which easily fosters or conceals subordination. In other words, there remains a danger of producing a naïve understanding of the possibilities for cultivating an ‘ethos of respect’ universally. Despite these limitations, agonistic pluralism offers an intriguing perspective for understanding today’s platformed political work by challenging ‘the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power’ (Mouffe, 1995, p. 261).

Our study maps important directions for future research. As platforms increasingly demand affective labour, there remains a need to develop ways to support political actors in an era of media that promotes individualization. This is particularly urgent in small nations like Finland where professional resources are limited. It is also important to acknowledge that our material was collected before shifts in the social media landscape, namely the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk and the installation of the new Trump administration, which influenced how platforms design their services and policies. When Twitter has ceased to exist, and X, along with Facebook, has retreated from responsible content governance, we need more theoretical as well as contextual empirical research. Future studies should continue to assess the possibilities of an agonistic ethos while seriously considering the implications of new forms of platform power.

Acknowledgments

We owe our gratitude to the peer reviewers as well as the editors of the *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* for their insightful and thorough feedback, which helped us develop our article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

A statement on data and code availability

The data are proposed to be archived in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive during 2025.

Ethical statement

This study received a positive ethical statement following an ethical review by the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, Finland (Statement 83/2020). The committee approved the use of oral consent, which was recorded in the audio recording of the interviews.

A declaration of contributions

Hokkanen was responsible for designing the structure and writing the majority of the article. Koivunen refined the argument about platforms as agonistic spaces and developed the idea of approaching digital everyday life through emotional and affective labour.

Funding

This work was supported by the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland under Grant no. 327392.

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