



Uneasy self-promotion and tactics of patience: Finnish MPs' ambivalent feelings about personalised politics on social media

Mona Mannevu 

University of Turku, Finland

Abstract

This article examines Finnish politicians' ambivalent attachments to social media – specifically Facebook and Twitter – in candidate-centred, personalised politics. The analysis draws on 20 semi-structured interviews with members of parliament (MPs) to investigate the tactics of adaptation and adjustment politicians develop in a work setting that precludes digital detox. To investigate the MPs' contradictory feelings, the analysis builds on cultural and media theory to contextualise the porous border between the personal and the political that exists on social media. The analysis revolves around four interconnected themes: uneasiness of self-promotion, Facebook's ordinariness, Twitter as a necessary evil, and tactics of patience MPs utilise when they encounter various forms of online harassment. The article suggests that in parliamentary research, social media should be considered an ambivalent social glue that holds things together rather than merely a platform for self-promotion.

Keywords

ambivalence, Facebook, Finland, parliament, social media, Twitter, work

Corresponding author:

Mona Mannevu, Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (TIAS), University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, Turku, Finland.

Email: mmmann@utu.fi

Introduction

‘It gives you a feeling of inadequacy and you can’t trust anyone ... but at the same time, it feels wonderful to see how much support you get from strangers,’ stated a Finnish member of parliament (MP) about the role of social media in parliamentary work. These ambivalent feelings about using social media platforms – specifically, Facebook and Twitter – were a recurrent theme in the interviews I conducted with 20 MPs in the Finnish Parliament in the winter of 2018–19. The aim of my research was to investigate stressors in parliamentary work, but the interviews revealed that MPs’ uneasy feelings about candidate-centred, personalised representation are often connected to new requirements of social media. According to recent parliamentary research, social media has indeed increased the pressures of political work on the demand side (Flinders et al., 2020). Yet these pressures are rarely analysed within the framework of cultural and media theory.

This article provides a window to the contemporary Finnish political culture with a focus on MPs’ ambivalent attachments to social media platforms. These attachments, in sum, are replete with contradictory feelings, especially because social media platforms confound the fine line between the personal and the political. To understand the MPs’ mixed feelings about social media, I follow media theorists Susanna Paasonen (2021) and Tero Karppi (2018), who have investigated the ambiguous ways social technology punctuates and organises everyday rhythms, emotions and sociality. As visibility is the biggest asset a politician can have, MPs cannot opt out of using social media; these platforms are essential for building a professional profile. However, the interviewees’ relationship to social media is ambivalent, and it both pulls them towards empowering connections and pushes them away from unpleasant situations (see also Lehto and Paasonen, 2021).

The analysis is inspired by Lauren Berlant’s (1997, 1998, 2008) work on current forms of intimacy in the public sphere and investigates the colourful array of feelings the interviewed MPs experience on social media platforms. I employ Berlant’s work in the analysis to understand how portable devices and platforms operate through contradictory desires that arise when people want to be ‘known and incognito’ (Berlant, 1998: 285). The concept of the intimate sphere is often connected to Jürgen Habermas’s (1989 [1962]) theorisations on the traditional dynamics between domestic and public spaces, but here, it relates to Berlant’s theorisation that ‘the present tense is radically different from the “intimate sphere” of modernity’ (Berlant, 1997: 4) owing to its focus on intimacy and feelings that flourish in proximity to the political (Berlant, 2008: 2). In personalised politics, the connective practices on social media reframe intimacy when they arise more from feelings, intensities, character issues and personal virtues than from explicit political activity or ideology.

While Berlant’s theorisation of American intimate publics is not directly applicable to research on Finnish parliamentary work, it provides an analytical tool for scrutinising how social media function as a platform where MPs negotiate their attachments to their work, constituents and party. In a similar vein, media scholars Anne Soronen and Anu Koivunen (2022) have investigated the effects of new forms of intimacy on social media on Finnish creative workers’ sense of professional agency, personal lives and

social relations. To do so, they have developed the Berlantian notion of intimacy and proposed the concept of platformed intimacy to investigate ‘the idea of intimacy that consists of meaningful attachments and imagined presences of others while also being enabled and constrained by platform infrastructures’ (Soronen and Koivunen, 2022: 4). From this perspective, social media platforms should be considered ambiguous sites of community building and belonging, rather than merely platforms for self-promotion.

In this article, I apply the idea of social media as an ambivalent glue that holds things together. MPs’ actions on social media are often scrutinised as planned, rational strategies. In personalised politics, however, feelings are not the opposite of thoughts but are central to the attachments formed within and to loosely organised publics on social media. In the intense quest for visibility, affective intensities and the desire to connect merge with the logic of (in)attention ecologies. The uncontrollable side of social media thus overcomes the subject–object relationship: ‘“I” am only attentive to what *we* pay attention to collectively’ (Citton, 2017: 17). Consequently, (dis)connections – though sensed and felt individually – are not private but exemplify moments in which individuals become *dividuals* (Deleuze, 1992) whose existence is split between online and offline (Karppi, 2018: 34). For the MPs, social media platforms enable them to navigate, adapt, improvise and sense potentialities and intensities.

Starting from these premises, this article examines how the MPs understand and locate themselves as (in)active users of social media, and how they relate to the possibilities and conditions set by Facebook and Twitter. The article begins by reviewing the contextual background of the research and providing an overview of the interviews with a brief methodological note. The subsequent analysis revolves around four interconnected themes arising from the data, which I term uneasiness of self-promotion, Facebook’s ordinariness, Twitter as a necessary evil and tactics of patience MPs utilise to handle troubling encounters on social media. Finally, I conclude my analysis by reflecting on why it is important to theorise and analyse MPs’ ambivalent feelings about social media also in the context of occupational health.

Interviewing politicians

Widespread attention to debates on self-branding and the rise of new technologies has made flexible work cultures a popular research topic in cultural studies. Politicians, however, are seldom considered (low-paid) precarious workers, and thus they remain an under-researched group of ‘aspirational labourers’ (Duffy, 2016). Nonetheless, politicians have similarities with knowledge professionals or social media influencers, who appreciate, invest in and promote ‘the human capital that is me’ (Feher, 2009: 30). While critical cultural studies have discussed how entrepreneurial work cultures operate through anxious and neurotic subjects (e.g. Loveday, 2018), politicians’ emotional and temporal investments in their work are rarely discussed or analysed. Like cultural and knowledge workers, MPs ‘acknowledge the potential relationship between social media presence and job opportunities’ while also finding this ‘to be a source of anxiety’ (Soronen and Koivunen, 2022: 14). Analysing these feeling states requires a qualitative methodological approach, preferably accompanied by anonymised interviews.

Interviews may initially seem too personal and anecdotal, but when generalised, they exemplify something shared in both the social and the structural (Paasonen, 2021: 25).

In the winter of 2018–19, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with MPs in the Finnish Parliament, located in Helsinki. The parliament is a fairly small working community with 200 members who belong to parliamentary groups and who are elected for a term of four years from 13 electoral districts in an open list electoral system.¹ The cabinet of Juha Sipilä, from 2015 to 2019, was a centre-right coalition formed by the Centre Party, Finns Party and National Coalition Party. In 2017, however, the Finns Party split in two when 20 MPs, including Finns Party ministers, formed their own group, the Blue Reform, which continued to support the ‘wobbling’ three-party coalition (Palonen, 2018). The division of the Finns Party was caused by internal disagreements between the ‘old’ centre-left populist tradition and the ‘new’ anti-immigration faction, which is known for mobilising supporters through online communities (Hatakka, 2017). Despite the drama, the government was sustained almost until the end of its term: Sipilä dissolved the cabinet a month before the April 2019 elections due to a failed market-driven healthcare reform. In the 2019 elections, the power relations changed again, and Finland consequently gained publicity for its centre-left coalition government led by a 36-year-old woman, Social Democrat Sanna Marin. In these elections, the Blue Reform failed to win seats, while the Finns Party was quite successful.

While the rise of populism and the aforementioned anti-immigration faction is an important research topic relating to social media, it is outside the scope of this analysis, which focuses on MPs’ reflections about their daily uses of social media. When I recruited the interviewees, my primary aim was to analyse the stressors in parliamentary work, and I used these data previously to investigate productivity imperatives in the Finnish Parliament (Mannevu, 2020). In the interviews, I asked very general questions, for example, about the role of social media in the MPs’ work, which platforms they prefer and whether they have encountered hate speech. In selecting the interviewees, I took the government–opposition dynamic into consideration and recruited half of the 20 MPs from the government and the other half from the opposition.² Fewer than five interviewees had been elected recently, more than half had experience in leadership positions and six had worked as ministers. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised, after which I began analysing the recurrent topics and contradictory ways the MPs described their feelings about their work. As social media proved to be one of the MPs’ main stress factors, I determined that this topic required a more nuanced investigation.

As I promised the interviewees full anonymity, it was fairly easy to recruit MPs for this study. The interviews lasted 40–90 minutes and, to my surprise, the interviewees were willing to talk very openly about personal issues, including their ambivalent feelings about their work. Semi-structured interviews do not offer ‘pure’ access to MPs’ lives, but do give them an ‘opportunity to narrate their experiences, tell us about their beliefs, and explain how they negotiated dilemmas in Parliament’ (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018: 15). In addition, I realise that my guarantee of full anonymity poses limitations for the analysis. As it would be easy to recognise the interviewees from their age, gender, political party and current position, I will not mention these details unless necessary. Providing full anonymity also enabled me to create a relaxed and open atmosphere

in the interviews, which produced rich data concerning the ‘ambivalent, affective power of social media’ (Lehto and Paasonen, 2021: 813) and, for instance, the MPs’ ways of utilising, resisting and negotiating the ideals of self-promotion.

The research focuses on Facebook and Twitter because these were the most popular platforms used by the interviewees at the time of data collection. Thus, the analysis does not consider, for instance, Instagram, which began trending after these interviews had taken place.³ A particularly interesting finding from the interviews is that although the parliamentary office hires approximately 100 assistants to aid MPs in performing their daily tasks, the MPs rarely share their account passwords, and if they do, their assistants simply share pictures or press releases written by the MPs themselves. From this perspective, my research challenges the impression that a Finnish MP would be an example of a political elite that has someone else doing the work of connectivity for them (Paasonen, 2021: 28). Instead, it is plausible to argue that social media paves the way to more personalised representation for Finnish politicians (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018: 50).

As a contextual note, it is worth mentioning that Finland has a highly candidate-centred electoral system, where voters choose among individual candidates from non-ordered party lists. This open list electoral system creates competition within parties, and thus provides incentives for MPs to establish strong attachments with their constituents through all possible means, including social media (Mannevu et al., 2022; Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018). Furthermore, Finnish parliamentary work is much more hierarchical, scheduled and international than people generally realise. Within their parliamentary term, MPs are expected to participate in committee meetings and plenary sessions at the parliament four times a week, from Tuesday to Friday. On Mondays, they often visit their ‘home turf’ (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018: 40) to keep up with regional matters in their electoral district – especially if they do not live there, which they often do. As Finland is a relatively large country with a small population, social media is a welcomed option for MPs to keep their constituents abreast of their whereabouts, thoughts and initiatives. Meanwhile, they can gain national visibility by marketing their ideas, quarrelling with their arch-enemies and competing with their colleagues, or frenemies.

Uneasy self-promotion

Social media has had a significant impact on contemporary forms of ‘promotional culture’ (Davies, 2013; Wernick, 1991), and self-promotion via connective technologies has become an established practice in political life. Previous studies have investigated how promotional culture lays the ground for ‘PR-ized politics’ (Louw, 2010) and the proliferation of public relations (PR) consultancies (Kantola, 2016). In brief, political PR involves a set of strategies for putting a positive spin on selected policies, ideas and persons, and a negative spin on their opposites (e.g. Miller and Dinan, 2008). In the Nordic countries, the emergence of political PR has been framed as problematic because these new ‘storytelling professionals’ (Kantola, 2016) are often ‘revolvers’, moving back and forth across the fields of media, politics and PR consultancy (Lounasmeri, 2018; Palm and Sandström, 2014; Tyllström, 2021).

While a critical analysis of storytelling professionals as semi-insiders in political decision-making is important from a societal perspective, my research on the micropolitics of parliament does not indicate that MPs would faithfully follow well-planned scripts written by spin doctors. Political parties organise workshops on the art of political communication, but MPs have a practical relationship with such training, or one of indifference. For instance, an MP explained that there was ‘some kind of event’ where the social media team ‘told us something’ and ‘I was like, okay, perhaps I should try to utilise these tips’. As such expressions were very typical, it would be an exaggeration to claim that individual MPs are trying to steer public opinion with planned manoeuvres on social media. Quite the contrary: most interviewees described social media as a useful new tool or just a new obligation. Some even gave the impression that if they had another option, they would not use social media: ‘the thing is that I don’t even want to be on social media’. In a highly digitalised society like Finland, it is fair to state that using social media is not a personal choice for those who wish to pursue a career in politics.

As stated above, visibility is also the greatest asset a politician can have, and social media offers a new performance measurement template for evaluating one’s popularity, for example, through followers, likes and shares. While the interviewed MPs understood the potential of social media, they had uneasy feelings about self-promotion. They knew exactly how to get attention on social media and what they *should* do, but these online duties mainly caused ‘presence bleed’ (Gregg, 2011) for the MPs, who were juggling the requirements of limitless work (Hokkanen et al., 2021; Mannevu, 2020). The interviewees often compared themselves to those who are ‘good’ at using these new technologies, and when they explained their strategies for gaining attention, their stories contained self-blame – almost as if they were trying to remind themselves to, for example, take more pictures for self-promotion. These uneasy feelings exemplify the ‘time bind’ (Hochschild, 2000) – a fantasy of oneself as a better person if one only had the time for self-improvement. Some also felt pressure from their party and colleagues: ‘I often hear from my colleagues that my work is not visible enough. Sometimes, I feel that perhaps I should work less and promote myself more. Perhaps that would be better.’

The requirements for self-promotion enforce constant self-surveillance and increase the fear of bad publicity. While the Finnish political culture is personalised, and social media is beyond party control (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018: 49), political parties have whips who do not appreciate unruliness. As an MP explained, there is a rigid hierarchy in parliament, ‘like in an army’, and thus, MPs’ actions and whereabouts are constantly monitored, not only by their constituents and the media but also by their colleagues. Consequently, MPs were particularly dubious about tabloids, which they claimed will do whatever it takes to ‘frame all of us as crooks’, and when they manage to do that, ‘you never have the possibility to correct mistakes’. In personalised politics, “‘character” issues have come to dominate spaces of critique that might otherwise be occupied with ideological struggles’ (Berlant, 1997: 178). For the MPs, these changes materialised in triple pressures from the media, the party and their constituents.

At the same time, social media platforms are filled with expectations of realness. Thus, MPs kept pondering which ‘tactics’ or ‘affective and emotional recalibration’ (Berlant, 2008: 273) they should use to satisfy the contradictory expectations of them to be real and professional. Clearly, it is difficult to decide how to behave in a promotional

culture where one should be interesting, but not too strange and aspirational, without seeming inauthentic or too ambitious. An MP explained:

You have to be afraid all the time that you are in the midst of some kind of scandal. It is really stressful... If we focus solely on individuals, which this kind of personalised publicity leads to, it makes you uneasy when you think about how much you want to share with others. And it is really stressful to tell everyone all the time what an amazing person you are ... or to go on shows like *Dancing with the Stars*, where they would not probably even take me, but I don't know if I would even want to go, because it is like... it is so shallow, it frustrates me. Somehow, we are driven to do this, but at the same time, we drive ourselves to this.

The quote above demonstrates that personalised publicity is experienced as an ambivalent, affective space where MPs are unsure of what exactly they should be doing. Social media influencers have similarly been found to hold conflicting views on how to present themselves as 'real' without being 'too real' or 'not real enough' (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4985). In Finnish politics, personalised publicity seems especially troubling because it intertwines Lutheran values of modesty and hard work with entrepreneurial self-promotion. Politics is often analysed as a stylistic repetition of acts (Rai, 2014), but in the Finnish context, these acts manifest in emotional styles of cool professionalism (Liu, 2014: 96–9), which means that a trustworthy politician is a mature person who is immune, for example, to the lures of promotional culture. Consequently, the MPs seemed almost obsessed with emphasising how 'real' they are or how they are 'not influenced too much by others' – not even by the affective forces of social media. This applies especially to Facebook, as discussed in the following section.

Facebook's ordinariness

After several scandals, especially the Cambridge Analytica data scandal, Facebook is scarcely considered a casual place to meet friends. However, in the midst of everyday routines, social media users rarely bother themselves with the uses of algorithms and other sneaky ways of ensuring user engagement. The MPs clearly perceived the dark sides of data capitalism and attention economies, but their Facebook user experience was not filled with suspicion or detestation but more with 'happy accidents' (Karppi, 2018: 56) – that is, content that produces pleasurable surprises. Likewise, the MPs were striving to produce content that was interesting, surprising and delightful – in other words, not *too political*. An interviewee explained a 'personal philosophy' of focusing solely on 'ordinary life, what you see and hear ... and also about music and movies. But not about politics.' For this MP, the strategy of joyful encounters had proved valuable by resulting in positive feedback and new connections.

These stories about joyful encounters could be interpreted as examples of promotion strategies which are only seemingly citizen-oriented and dialogical. However, in the Finnish political culture, MPs appear regularly in their constituencies, where they speak at or attend various events which are rarely organised by or explicitly linked to their political parties (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018: 46). Finns appreciate the idea

that politicians are 'ordinary' – like any of us – and that they actually meet people and listen to their concerns. An interviewee told me that a local MP can sometimes be 'the last one whom people call when they really need help'. New technologies have not changed this connective logic profoundly, and although Facebook Messenger has partly replaced face-to-face meetings, people still mainly send emails or even telephone their representatives: 'I thought this kind of citizens' helpline thing would have diminished, but it has not.' As another MP explained, online communication is not enough for everyone, but it is okay for some people, 'which is fine, because it saves time for the both of us'.

In this sense, the MPs considered Facebook a metaphorical market square where people meet, share stories and discuss timely issues. On Facebook, 'contact equals friend' (Gregg, 2011: 88) – someone who might vote for you in the next election but also a concerned citizen with whom a politician would talk in the supermarket. Neither type of encounter, however, saved the MPs from the feeling of being short of time: 'It is such a pity when people want to talk to you and then you have to leave.' Facebook, then, is not solely a place that eats up time; it organises time differently by providing a feeling of maintaining multiple connections for which MPs do not have enough time in person. Sometimes, Facebook may even work as a 'security blanket' (Gregg, 2011: 88) for busy professionals struggling with the constant guilt of not having as much time to meet people as they would like. Although social media platforms increase the number of friends in need, the affective powers of social media can be affirmative when these platforms offer happy accidents or similar 'props that help you get through the day' (Braidotti, 2005: 223).

To understand this ambiguous logic, it is fruitful to analyse ubiquitous network connectivity as the glue that holds things together (Paasonen, 2021: 32). For instance, Finnish creative workers have stated that their main motivation for posting on social media is not self-promotion but the need to maintain and foster relationships with their colleagues (Soronen and Koivunen, 2022: 7–8). While the interviewed MPs expressed full awareness of the societal risks concerning the rise of populism on social media, they indicated that losing a crucial communicative tool that is 'cost-effective' and 'easy to use' is not an option. As campaigns revolve around individual candidates in the Finnish political system, the MPs delineated a common feeling that 'we are just a group of entrepreneurs of ourselves'. Thus, despite all its pitfalls, Facebook provides a platform filled with investments that are both alluring and problematic (Paasonen, 2021: 92). It is no wonder, then, that MPs have such contradictory feelings about the ways they utilise social media for communicative purposes.

When an MP, for instance, posts a picture from a visit to a children's hospital on Facebook so that 'people can like it', there are two sides to the coin: self-promotion and the need to connect with constituents to let them know what politicians are doing with taxpayers' money. Some MPs are more active on social media than others, and interviewees with numerous followers were obviously more eager to emphasise Facebook's usefulness. One interviewee even described Facebook as empowering and 'a way to get out of the bubble' and 'discuss with ordinary people'. According to this MP, 'it enforces the legitimacy of democracy when people have the feeling that politicians

genuinely acknowledge what they have to say'. The interviewee subsequently contrasted Facebook's affirmative psychological effects with Twitter's nastiness:

Ordinary people use Facebook, whereas Twitter is a place for this kind of acerbic elite – a place where people have a lot of political opinions, and then they vomit those on top of each other. On Facebook, there are a lot of ordinary nurses, teachers and Finns from all over Finland ... there, you can sense atmospheres and mentalities that are common and shared.... It is the most important channel to get feedback from ordinary people.

As the quote above explains, for some users, Facebook creates a sense of a public space synonymous with a marketplace. Facebook, then, has phantasmatic elements of 'the common, the everyday and the sense of ordinariness' (Berlant, 2008: 10). During the last couple of years, Facebook has lost its allure and attention has shifted to Instagram, which has become, with its ephemeral Stories feature, the new arena for presenting 'mundane realism' (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4992). In the winter of 2018–19, Facebook was mainly competing with Twitter, even if the MPs described Twitter as a hostile environment. On a positive note, however, one interviewee pondered that Twitter might not be a friendly place, but since it is not too personal, it is better than Facebook: 'I don't like to share anything about my personal life, and Twitter is a good place for that.'

Twitter as a necessary evil

The social media landscape evolves and changes rapidly. In municipal elections in spring 2021, Finnish politicians utilised Instagram in their political campaigns, but in 2018, it was Twitter that had momentum. One reason for Twitter's growing popularity, as one MP explained, was that after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Twitter announced that Facebook had removed the option for cross-posting. As MPs struggle with a permanent time bind, it was practical to 'focus more on Twitter'. Nonetheless, they all seemed to dislike Twitter, sensing 'something in the air' that lures you into exaggerating and quarrelling. As an interviewee confessed, 'Sometimes, I have to remind myself to not try to crush the opponent but, rather, focus on constructive communication.'

Drawing on Berlant's work on the intimate public sphere, media theorist Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has analysed Twitter as a networked public with affective intensities, forms and textures. On Twitter, streams and hashtags function as 'affective modulators' (Papacharissi, 2015: 118) through which people find their way into politics. This also applies to my interviews: although the MPs were critical of Twitter as a platform that reproduces, remixes and fragments expression, they still utilised these affective modulators. In the contemporary political culture, Twitter was considered as a necessary evil: 'Twitter is important. My understanding is that journalists follow those hashtags ... and then they might take a look at who has written what ... and then they might ask something from you.' This change in political communication has occurred astonishingly fast. Another MP explained:

It happened so fast. At the beginning of this electoral season [2015] journalists actually read press releases, but then Facebook found its place. And now it is Twitter: they take your

tweets and turn them into news... as if they were press releases.... This also means that you have to be prepared for anything all the time. So, yes, it takes a lot of time.

Twitter is unpredictable and time-consuming, but it is also a place filled with potentiality. Unlike Facebook, Twitter is filled with informed spectators of the political game and all its drama, winners and losers. These 'semi-insiders' (Louw, 2010: 12–13) include journalists, academics, economists, union leaders, consultants, influencers and communication specialists. The interviewees explained that everyone knows 'Twitter is a bubble. It's not like ordinary people care what you tweeted.' At the same time, the MPs realised that political journalism intertwines with the attention economy on social media – which they themselves often utilised while criticising it.

Twitter is a textbook example of a social media platform users love to hate. It may be filled with trolls, bots and hatemongers, but it nonetheless has that *something* that keeps people logging on, despite many finding it at the same time to be a source of anxiety. In recent years, criticism of Twitter has increased, especially among top political journalists, who have started to question its exaggerated role in Finnish politics: only 13 per cent of Finns use Twitter, and far fewer of these users are active (Siren, 2020). Some journalists and academics have also publicly announced that they are leaving Twitter, but these naïve quests for liberation through disconnection often do not solve the underlying problems of over-connection but merely substitute one device with another (see also Karppi et al., 2021: 1601). If and when the lure of the platform vanishes, it can be replaced with another, as has happened in the movement from Facebook to Instagram. Nonetheless, current news coverage is awash with columns preaching about the positive effects of digital detox. The stories and thoughts about life with and without Twitter are – of course – then shared and discussed on Twitter.

These 'easy' digital detoxes are repeatedly described as means of better connecting with oneself (Karppi, 2018: 109), but they seem to be targeted at people who are able to opt out (Paasonen, 2016). While deploying different forms of digital detox may be a useful strategy for those who have the resources for it, it is also worth noting that these 'technologies of self' enforce an idea of a resilient and 'responsibilised' subject who is an expert in stress management and time management (Gill and Donaghue, 2016: 92). In politics, as in many other forms of knowledge work, the rhythms of work and leisure are tied together with uninterrupted online connectivity (Paasonen, 2021: 90–5), and therefore, the unrealistic fantasy of mastery over one's time and messages may even increase stress by engendering yet another sense of failure. Instead of evaluating social media according to what *it* does to *us*, it is fruitful to analyse the porous boundary between the subject (user) and the object (platform) (Paasonen, 2021: 16). A crucial question is, then, what kinds of tactics MPs use to secure their ambivalent attachments to social media.

Tactics of patience

In contemporary Finland, there is growing interest in tackling work-related online harassment in its various forms. Yet there has been little research that considers politicians'

well-being from the occupational health perspective. This may change, because recent investigations in the UK indicate that hate speech on social media has ‘a huge psychological impact’ and ‘a chilling effect on some politicians, particularly women’ (Flinders et al., 2020: 256). Similarly, tentative reports in Finland suggest that adversarial relations among political groups have increased intimidation on social media, which often targets women representatives who work on equality and immigration issues (Hokkanen et al., 2021; Knuutila et al., 2019). In addition, Finnish female journalists seem to be subjected to more serious forms of harassment than their male colleagues (Kantola and Harju, 2021: 13). My research supports these findings, but there is considerable variation in the forms of online harassment targeting MPs. While death threats may be part of the job for some, others may never have received any. An interviewee explained:

I get all kinds of feedback. But I have never had a death threat. Now I have to knock on wood... Unfortunately, the world is not even-handed, and perhaps I have survived this because I am a white hetero male who does not have very radical opinions, for example, on immigration, eco-criticism or animal rights. But I have noticed that if you talk about immigration, you can be prepared to get all kinds of annoying shitposts.

Almost all interviewees connected the reduced gap between criticism and disrespectful speech to the rise of the populist Finns Party in 2011. Nonetheless, long-serving MPs said that they had lived through much more difficult times before social media. They were referring to hardships such as the devastating economic depression of the 1990s: ‘then people were really suffering ... and they had extremely adversarial attitudes towards politicians, which they expressed face-to-face’. In addition, while MPs viewed populism as a problem, many expressed that politics have always ‘been like this ... now it is just visible’. Some stated that ‘previously, politicians have had shit delivered to them in the mail’, while others recalled Finland’s violent political history: ‘in the 1920s and 1930s, politicians really had to be afraid that someone could murder them’. Notwithstanding these remarks, it should be noted that social media has increased the number of hateful messages MPs receive.

The problems the MPs described were not related to individual messages but to the ways these messages seemed to be organised. If an MP, for example, participates in a discussion about gender equality, racism, immigration or hate speech, the next day, their inbox may be full of insulting messages. These concerted ‘attacks’ are not necessarily threatening, but ‘it is sometimes so mean ... that it crawls under your skin’. Thus, the MPs have developed various strategies for dealing with nasty feedback. These ‘tactics of boundary management’ (Lehto and Paasonen, 2021: 820) are quite similar to those used by mothers who participate in heated online parenting discussions, such as humour, the practice of forced empathy and curating one’s online presence. They also resemble the connective practices that journalists use, such as peer support and emotional control, in the forms of calmness, assertiveness and even contacting people who send insulting messages (Kantola and Harju, 2021: 7–12). When replying to insulting messages, MPs would, for instance, reply with a very proper statement: ‘the tone of your message is so mean that I will not continue this discussion’.

While these tactics seem professional and reasonable at first glance, they require time – the scarcest resource MPs have. Therefore, MPs may decide not to participate in certain discussions if they feel tired and overworked. One interviewee confessed:

There are some issues, like the immigrant question, that make you think, I am too tired for all this and I will participate in this discussion later. You somehow protect yourself. Or sometimes, after you have said something, you just block some of the messages because you know what you will find from there. In general, I try to reply to all messages, but sometimes, you just need to make this kind of decision.... First, it was immigrant issues; now, it is also gender equality.

From an occupational health perspective, it is striking how much time the MPs appeared to spend thinking about their online presence and its potential consequences. It is also striking how much ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983) they must undertake to develop a high tolerance for situations that make them feel uneasy or that even crawl under their skin. This also applies to various forms of sexual harassment:

Now, we have all these #metoo campaigns, but I could write a book about those issues. But I am not too sensitive. You can deal with many situations if you just stay cool. I have seen all kinds of things. This one guy keeps sending naked pictures to me on Facebook.... But I don’t care.

While humour and coolness can be considered useful tactics, they exemplify ‘technologies of patience’ (Berlant, 2011: 28) used for dealing with unpleasant feelings. While these tactics can create moments of disconnection, they can also make connectivity manageable and sustain connective capacities (Karppi et al., 2021: 1600). In the interviews, these tactics of patience were described, for instance, as learning to think ‘like, whatever, this is part of the job’, self-improvement by ‘teaching oneself some mindfulness’ or educating oneself about ‘having good resilience’.

When the MPs described these tactics in relation to troubling encounters on social media, they moved back and forth from intimate experiences to societal analysis: ‘It is kind of hard for your psyche, but you know, it is like this for everyone – also for journalists and researchers.’ In this scenario, the attachment to social media platforms is secured by imagining the audience through ‘the impersonality of the structures’ (Berlant, 2011: 125) and distancing oneself from it. Consequently, tactics of patience may turn even death threats into casual events: ‘I get them like three to four times a year’ or ‘Yes, I have had some in the last couple of months.’ At the same time, interviewees underlined that they are in a more secure position than many others because they have the possibility of sending troubling messages to security staff and Finnish Security Intelligence Service for further investigation.

The social media environment intertwines intimacy with visibility and vulnerability, especially when tactics of patience collide with the demands of promotional culture’s ‘visibility mandate’ (Duffy and Hund, 2019: 4997). It would be useful, for instance, for female MPs to convey a good impression of themselves as working mothers, but my interviewees have decided to not to do so: ‘I have never used my children ... to influence people’s emotions.’ Family seems to be the threshold of intimacy that cannot be crossed, even though an MP’s character is evaluated through acts originating from the

private sphere. Some interviewees expressed a desire to ‘protect’ their family from the nastiness of social media work: ‘Yes, there have been some threats towards my [extended] family ... but I can’t tell my parents something like that.’ Troubling connections could also lead to disconnection by proxy: ‘The feedback I have received made my partner feel so uncomfortable that they decided to delete social media accounts ... and we also decided to hide our address.’ Finnish MPs rarely encounter serious online harassment, and some may not encounter it at all, but it is nevertheless plausible that the possibility of online harassment silences some politicians: ‘I don’t care if someone wants to kill me, but if someone says they want to kill my family, it bothers me a bit more.’

Conclusion

Social media modulates everyday practices, including our representatives’ work. In this article, I have mapped out Finnish MPs’ ambivalent attachments to social media by scrutinising how MPs themselves explain, sense and analyse them. In the analysis, I sought to explain how MPs deal with their uneasy feelings regarding the social media landscape, mainly on Facebook and Twitter. To investigate the MPs’ colourful array of feelings, I have analysed them in the context of increasing personalisation of politics and the porous border between the personal and the political that exists on social media. I have also highlighted that social media is an important tool for contemporary politicians, and as they cannot opt out, they develop tactics of adaptation, adjustment and patience.

The starting point of the analysis was that connecting media and cultural theory with parliamentary research may offer new tools and inspiring ways to understand and conceptualise contemporary politics by moving away from binary divisions and prior assumptions, especially regarding social media. In many ways, MPs are like knowledge and creative workers who struggle with contradictory feelings about self-promotion on social media – ‘a desire to be both visible and invisible’ (Soronen and Koivunen, 2022: 13). Yet the intensity of the MPs’ experiences on social media can sometimes be extreme. Although harassment on social media seems to be a growing phenomenon at a societal level, and is also a concern for academics and journalists, not all of us have to think that someone could kill us due to our profession, like the MP who confessed, ‘Sometimes, when I am really tired, I start to think that, oh fuck – pardon my French – killing me is, like, the easiest task in the world.’

At the same time, the interviews have shown that while the grind of self-promotion and unpleasant encounters with hatemongers cause momentary disconnection, the empowering encounters with constituents allow MPs to rise above these feelings. Indeed, for most of the interviewed MPs, social media is mainly a mundane new task among many unfinished tasks. It is also a crucial tool for communication, and therefore the MPs apply several tactics of patience and strategies of affective management that give them a sense of control amidst a staggering number of contradictions. An interviewee aptly summarised this complicated logic:

You learn to control it.... At first, it was so difficult to accept harsh, anonymous criticism [on social media], but then I realised that this concerns all of us, so I changed my attitude. Clearly, there is always a risk that you will become immune to the feedback, and then you

may miss important criticism. It is really a risk. But it is part of this profession that you get used to all kinds of feedback and learn to focus on the things that are actually important. Sometimes, people really need your help.

Despite their endless patience, MPs expressed some frustration over how discussions on social media complicate local decision-making: 'People fight and complain about everything ... but they never actually try to make a difference.' The MPs nevertheless maintained optimism about social media as part of their work by reminding themselves that they are in this for the greater good: 'I can't leave the world to assholes ... if you don't try to do something, others will decide for you.... Not sure if this is my dream job, though.' Starting from these tiny descriptions, my analysis shows that despite the various contradictory feelings social media trigger, and the problems candidate-centred, personalised representation in promotion culture cause, social media have found their place in Finnish MPs' everyday routines as an ambivalent social glue. Consequently, the role of social media in parliamentary work should also be analysed within the frameworks of occupational health and cultural theory in future parliamentary research.


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ORCID iD

Mona Mannevuola  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2275-3233>

Notes

1. For more information about the Finnish Parliament, see <https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/pages/default.aspx>
2. Of the interviewees, 10 were from the National Coalition Party, Centre Party, Blue Reform and Finns Party (which moved to the opposition in 2017) and 10 were from the Social Democrats, Green League, Left Alliance, Christian Democrats and Swedish People's Party.
3. In 2016, 193 out of 200 MPs had a Facebook account – either a personal or a politician page – and 161 utilised Twitter. Younger and female MPs use social media more than their male colleagues, and 'Green League MPs are clearly the most active social media users', which is also true regarding Instagram. Yet, in general, changes in the use of social media, blogs and personal websites have been rapid (Raunio and Ruotsalainen, 2018: 42).

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Author biography

Mona Mannevuol is a postdoctoral researcher at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (TIAS). Her work has been published in journals such as *Theory, Culture & Society*, *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Sociological Review*. She is one of the editors of *ephemera's* special issue 'Affective Capitalism' (2016) and the PI for the research project 'Communication across borders: Shifting boundaries of politics, science and public relations'.