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Local politicians in the age of new media

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This paper discusses the impact of new media on local politics and politicians in a highly digitalised and advanced democracy. Through case studies and interviews of elite representatives in three Norwegian municipalities, the paper's ambition is to gain further understanding of the use of new media at the local political level and how new media influence and shape the role of local political representatives. To this aim we engage with established literature on new media use in campaigns and as self-promotion, as well as literature on new media and democracy. The main findings are that the use of new media, particularly Facebook, is widespread, hardening the political debate, and especially straining for younger women. Moreover, new media contribute to the "professionalizing" of political communication as they require more strategic thinking around messaging and engagement. While they have in some ways contributed to bringing local representatives closer to the citizens and provided valuable information, they have also produced "echo-chamber" effects. In sum, new media provide challenges and opportunities that may impact one's willingness to stand as a representative and contribute to creating new "types" of local politicians.

KEYWORDS

social media, new media, Facebook, local government, politicians

Introduction

The impact of new media¹ on national political representation has been studied extensively and from different angles. We are now in an era with "social media elections" (Enli, 2017) where new media are used by politicians as an arena for political marketing, self-promotion (Bellström et al., 2016; De Paula et al., 2018), identity construction and self-presentation (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Pearson, 2009; Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Citizens are empowered vis-à-vis the politicians in the many-to-many interactions facilitated by new media (Ellison and Hardey, 2014, 36). It is known that new media have had a decisive role in presidential and prime minister election campaigns (Enli, 2017; Stier et al., 2018), and that new media have been important in major policy choices like Brexit (Hänska-Ahy and Bauchowitz, 2017). Moreover, new media challenge the boundaries between private and public (Enli and Thumim, 2012) and have become a

¹"Social media" and "new media" are used somewhat synonymously in the literature. This paper applies "new media" to mean social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, for online communication.

stage for harassment of politicians, where women are more targeted than men among those highly visible (Rheault et al., 2019). Hence, new media impact the behavior and work of political representatives at the national level.

Nevertheless, while local government is an important subject for the study of new media, traditions of citizen participation at the local level (Mossberger et al., 2013) mean we know less about how local politicians experience its impacts. There is little knowledge about the “routine” uses of new media by local politicians and to what extent they invade local representatives’ work in cities at the outskirts of the national political agenda. Accordingly, new media’s impact on local political representation represents a knowledge gap. As local political representatives are closer to the citizens, less professional and focus on local matters, we assume that their use and experience with new media is different from the negative impressions provided in the literature. This is some of what we explore throughout this paper.

The paper is based on empirical material from North Norway, part of a country currently located in the vanguard of the global information society (European Commission, 2022) and named the world’s most democratic country in 2020 (Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, 2020). Thus, the paper contributes with knowledge about local political representation in a highly digitalised and democratic society away from the agenda setters and media in the national urban center. Norway has a culture that guarantees citizens explicit accessibility to the administrative system; there is much transparency, citizen participation, and user democracy (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014).

Norway is a decentralized unitary state with strong democratic traditions. The public sector is one of the largest in the world, and per capita income is high (Christensen, 2003). Norwegian municipalities have, compared to municipalities in most other nations, a prominent position in the wider government structure and a high degree of autonomy (Ladner et al., 2016); they are vital to the provision of public services and have an important role in implementing welfare state services (Baldersheim et al., 2017). At the local level, the local council is the ultimate decision-maker. The influential political executive board is, however, thoroughly involved in the decision-making process and consists of prominent local representatives and local party leaders. The paper builds on interviews with such executive board representatives to examine three overall objectives:

1. To what extent do local representatives use new media, and what media do they use and for what purpose?
2. What opinions do local representatives have concerning the impact of new media?
3. Do new media contribute to local representatives becoming closer to the citizens?

By examining these issues, the paper contributes with knowledge concerning the impact of new media on local political representation. Moreover, as this is a study of nearly all elite local representatives in three different city governments in North Norway, we can compare and discuss whether contexts and social variables have any impact on how new media influence and shape the role of local politicians. The chosen comparative variables are municipality size, political parties, gender, and age. Methodologically, the paper departs from a qualitative explorative method using data from interviews with 24 (out of 32) representatives from the political executive board of three city municipalities in North Norway.

The paper commences with a brief discussion of challenges for political representation and a review of existing research on new media and political representation. It then proceeds to account for the materials and methods applied. The results from the study are discussed related to three issues: a) what new media the local representatives use and to what extent they use it, b) what opinions the local representatives have of new media, and c) whether the local representatives find that new media contribute to local politicians becoming closer to the citizens. The paper concludes by discussing how political life in the age of new media alters the role of elected representatives by highlighting how new media contribute to creating new “types” of local representatives.

Materials and methods

Challenges to political representation and new media merits

Understanding representation is linked to definitions of democracy. From a deliberative perspective, one aim in electing politicians is that they make decisions for the common good of society through the exchange of arguments. Legitimate decisions are made when different views are represented in discourse, and the decision-makers can reach a decision by evaluating arguments. Feedback from citizens should be formulated in the public sphere and lead back to political institutions (Habermas, 1994; Weigård, 1995). Another perspective, highlighted in economic models of democracy and consistent with the theoretical tradition represented by, among others, Dahl (1956), Downs (1957), and Schumpeter (1943/1994), emphasizes the representation of different interests.

Legitimate decisions are those that best match citizens’ preferences with representative’s choices. Electoral systems are intended to secure a best possible match, but political parties may also work as intermediaries. Citizens can give feedback through elections after evaluating politicians’ performance, and it is expected that representatives are responsive to changes in citizens’ preferences. Regarding responsiveness, the deliberative model of democracy emphasizes representatives’ accessibility in

communicating with the electorate, whilst the economic model emphasizes the importance of being well-informed about the electorate's needs and preferences. Hence, closeness to citizens is important in both views. Norwegian municipalities have a long tradition of combining elements from both approaches to democracy with a prominent role for political parties and a political organization that emphasizes deliberation.

Regardless of the perspective, representation is a vital part of any democratic governance system. Representing “means acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin, 1967/2009). In 1972, Hanna Pitkin argued that “in modern times, almost everybody wants to be governed by representatives (...) every political group or cause wants representation and every government claims to represent.” Today, these claims are challenged by a growing body of research that suggests that people are disillusioned by politics, politicians, representatives, and representation (Hay, 2007; della Porta, 2013; Tormey, 2015; Stoker and Hay, 2017). Another challenge is that interest groups distance themselves from the idea of representational politics and that speaking and acting for others are replaced by direct action, such as Twitter and Facebook mobilization and boycotting. In local governments, the council's representative role is further challenged by a decline in electoral turnout in local government elections and falling party membership (De Groot et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, there has been – and is – a strong belief that new media and digital technology can promote democratic development and democratic processes. Compared to traditional mass media driven by profit-based companies, the development of new media and digital technology has created new, varied, and open spaces with easier access and low thresholds for participation. Major movements, like those in the Arab countries and Hong Kong, and protests, such as the yellow vests in France, were based on communication through digital platforms (Cohen and Fung, 2021). Such movements have also transcended state borders and obtained a global reach, due to technology and the universality of new media platforms. Carrying out experiments on democratic innovations, inspired by deliberative democracy, were made possible by new tools for communication (Fiket et al., 2014). Moreover, during the early years of digital technology, there was a strong belief that new media would empower people, encourage the exchange of ideas and opinions, and strengthen spaces for deliberative democracy by diverse arguments and broader participation (Bernholz et al., 2021). Hence, new media, if used as described here, have potential merits for local representation and democracy.

Representation in new media literature

While there is limited research on the impact of new media on local political representation, there is relevant to this study an emerging body of research on how new media

impact political representation and government politics. This literature can be broadly grouped into two broad categories. First, a growing literature focusing on *new media use in elections and self-promotion*. Within the literature on new media and election campaigns, one strand is concerned with the historical development of digital campaigns (e.g., Howard, 2006), where the 2008 Obama campaign is considered the first “social media election” (Enli, 2017). As such, this is a new phenomenon within the broader literature on political behavior. The level of presidential campaigns' professionalization is also discussed (e.g., Kreiss, 2014). The literature on elections also addresses the level of interaction with voters through new media campaigns (Stormer-Galley, 2000), where key findings show differences in political communication between new media platforms (Stier et al., 2018) and that platforms' design features influence the political actors' communication strategies (Bossetta, 2018). While candidates tend to share much of the same content across different new media platforms (Bossetta, 2018), there is a particular focus on Twitter usage within the literature on new media use in elections (Vergeer, 2015; Jungherr, 2016). Overall, it is argued that Twitter is overrepresented in studies of network communication (Enli, 2017).

It is furthermore found that new media are used primarily as an arena for political marketing and self-promotion (Bellström et al., 2016; De Paula et al., 2018) and contribute to the personalisation of politics. Among these contributions we find an emphasis on the extent to which campaign strategies focus on personal attributes such as leadership, competence, credibility and morality and their willingness to disclose their personal life, i.e., the most common reputational assets for local political leaders. Moreover, through framing, a story can be told in a way that favors certain ideological positions (Goffman, 1974; Gamson et al., 1992; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Such frames can highlight certain aspects of a given topic, making connections that can promote certain interpretations and evaluations favorable for the candidate (Entman, 1993). It is also worth noting additional insights into politicians' “routine” uses of new media services (e.g., Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014) – a body of research to which this article seeks to contribute.

The second category includes contributions with a particular focus on how new media are used by the local government to *promote participation and democracy*. A basic idea is that new media may strengthen local democracy by improving possibilities for public debates, more active involvement, and greater transparency (Bertot et al., 2012), as well as boost democracy and empower citizens to gain an impression of public opinion (Gayo-Avello, 2015; 10). New media can also strengthen the citizen's role and bridge that with their more visible role as consumers. To that end, Graham (2014) explores the use and perceptions of new media as a communication tool in local governments. According to her findings, new media is highly regarded as a beneficial communication tool that promotes dialogue and engagement and is unconstrained. However, a

UK-based survey by [Ellison and Hardey \(2014\)](#) illustrates that local governments have not used new media for strengthening democracy but rather to inform residents. These authors argue for the use of new media “to facilitate reciprocal, many-to-many interactions of the kind that new media have made progressively more feasible” ([Ellison and Hardey, 2014, 36](#)).

The foremost concern in the literature on new media and democracy is that new media have given rise to “echo chambers” and that these are likely to cause political polarization and extremism (e.g., [Hong, 2016](#); [Sunstein, 2017](#)). Access to, and knowledge of, technology is found to be a hurdle, and new media represent challenges as they demand resources, time, and staff ([Graham, 2014](#); [Gayo-Avello, 2015, 10](#)). Moreover, it is noted that discussions on new media lack strong and coherent arguments, leaning more toward humor and goofiness ([Gayo-Avello, 2015, 10](#)). In other words, new media are less a tool to promote democratic dialogue and capture public opinion and more an entertainment platform.

Deliberative democracy serves as an ideal for much though surrounding new media’s potential for strengthening democracy. In a review based on experiments with online deliberation, [Strandberg and Grönlund \(2018\)](#) nuance the possibilities for reaching the ideal of decision-making by arguing and cast light on three challenges. One challenge is inclusion and representativity, where opinions are presented and given attention in discussions. A second challenge is if – and how – it is possible to secure real discussion by facilitation on platforms where participants often claim anonymity. Thirdly, although there are many examples of online deliberation and how they may be designed, another challenge is the weak connection to real life democracy. However, little is currently known about if and how new media affect deliberative elements in local politics. It might be that local politicians regard new media as a deliberative arena where they can improve the exchange of ideas and opinions, engage in deliberations, use it as a tool for information about issues and become closer to citizens ([Ellison and Hardey, 2014](#)). This notwithstanding, they can also use it as an arena for political marketing and self-promotion ([Bellström et al., 2016](#)) and experience that they operate in an echo-chamber where the boundaries between the private and public are challenged ([Enli and Thumim, 2012](#)).

The Norwegian local government context

Norwegian local governments have (with few exceptions) an aldermanic system and organizational form wherein political positions are assigned among key political parties according to their strength in elections. The main political executive board in local government is assigned in such a collective way and normally enjoys substantial delegated power from

the municipality council. Accordingly, it has been taken for granted that the local government system favors consensus and cooperation, rather than political competition, conflict and bargaining among municipal politicians (e.g., [Larsen, 2005](#); [Bjørnå and Mikalsen, 2015](#)). That said, the local politicians represent political parties and are motivated by political ambitions and re-election. They are therefore also inclined to articulate ideological positions and conflicting interests in ways that can be detrimental to the consensus style of politics. This aligns with the abovementioned theoretical tradition represented by, among others, [Schumpeter \(1943/1994\)](#).

Representatives in the main executive board of Norwegian municipalities constitute what one might describe as the local political elite. Their success depends on how they manage a balance between collaboration and individual success; and how successful they are in implementing policies, identifying strategic problems and solutions ([Lockert et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, their success also depends on how well they simultaneously balance a multitude of legitimate (and sometimes conflicting) values, goals, considerations, and stakeholders’ interests ([Christensen et al., 2009](#)). Lastly, executive board representatives’ success depends on their management and change of municipal and community identities, attitudes and values and how they handle internal conflicts ([Bjørnå, 2021](#)).

Empirical material and data analysis

Three city governments located in North Norway have been selected to examine the impact of new media on local politicians: Bodø (population of 52,852), Tromsø (population of 77,399) and Harstad (population of 24,785). In all three local governments the Labor Party holds the mayor’s office and the Center Party the deputy mayor role. Local politics has a vital impact on the area, with the distance from the capitol and national media making local debates and media important. All three municipalities have debated the organization of welfare services, infrastructure, and large development projects, with new media utilized in each case, and the similar political structure of the municipalities makes comparison possible.

The main method of data collection for this study was interviews – which is suitable for obtaining information about how local politicians perceive communication through new media and how it affects their role. We interviewed 24 representatives from the executive boards, i.e., the leaders in municipal politics. The total pool of executive board representatives in the three local governments comprised 32 individuals. Five representatives declined to participate, and we were unable to interview the mayors because of their high workload associated with an upsurge in the Covid-pandemic. As the executive councils are weighted according to the distribution of elected seats, our material covers representatives from

different political parties. The three municipalities are quite similar with respect to party dominance: the Labor party and Center party (agrarian party) had the mayor and deputy mayor roles, and a majority were part of a red-green alliance. A variety of political parties (six-eight) have members in the executive boards, and as such they represent a broad Specter of views in the respective municipalities. The executive boards are evenly distributed according to gender.

The interviews lasted around 40 min and were recorded by video through Microsoft Teams and afterwards transcribed. Interviews were conducted in Norwegian and then carefully translated into English. Ethical considerations were taken, and the project has been approved by a Norwegian Government Agency (NSD/Sikt); no names or sensitive information is revealed. Note that this study comprises politicians' perspectives, and the emphasis is on the usage and outcome of new media from the local political representatives' point of view – not how it is perceived by the public. Study respondents were asked questions intended to uncover how and to what extent they use new media: which platforms, what they choose to communicate, whether they answer questions from the electorate, and whether the communication and discussion of politics is different from more traditional ways of engagement. Moreover, we raised questions concerning how they evaluate the outcome of new media, namely whether it has: made them more “thick-skinned”; contributed to a closer relationship with the electorate and their opinions; and provided them with a sense of control over their messages.

Our study relies on a qualitative-explorative approach using a multiple-case study method (Yin, 2014). Given the lack of former studies, this design allowed us to explore and develop better understandings of local politicians' views, experiences, and opinions. The semi-structured interviews enabled us to explore the personal experiences of the participants with a focus on the research aims, which in turn enabled us to discuss contextual and social differences, here selected as the differences between municipalities, political parties, gender, and age. However, while our data indicate certain findings, this study is not necessarily representative for the impact of new media on political representatives in other Norwegian local governments. We have studied representation in medium-large local governments in North Norway, and it might be that studies of, for instance, political representation in very small municipalities would provide other findings.

Results

The results will be presented according to the overall topics of interest, hence addressing a) the use of new media b) opinions of new media, and c) whether it contributes to closeness to the citizens.

Use of new media: The chosen platform, how much local politicians use it, and in what way

Our first finding is that 90% of the local representatives in the chosen sample are familiar with new media and experienced users, with Facebook as the favored alternative. The Facebook users mostly utilize their private profile, but five (of the 24) also have a “page” for their political person, i.e., some possess expertise and consciousness about new media. However, most of the local representatives mix their private and political profile on Facebook. About 30% of the informants also use Twitter and Instagram, but to a much lesser degree. As one informant expressed it: “The grown-ups use Facebook, the others also use other platforms”, i.e., politicians over fifty tend to stick to Facebook, while the younger ones also use other platforms. This impression is, however, not entirely accurate as several of the over fifties use Instagram. However, the few representatives below thirty preferred other new media platforms over Facebook. Lastly, one representative from a political party on the left used YouTube prior to the fall 2021 national election, and the youngest representative in the sample used TikTok.

While there was no significant variation found when comparing the three municipality groups of representatives' use of new media, there was variance between the different political parties in the attention new media received. The parties with a national voter turnout of more than 20% (Labor and the Conservatives) had a strong focus on their local party page with strategies for how to handle election campaigns. While none of the representatives received help from the administration on how to handle Facebook, the largest parties have an “especially interested and capable” local representative assigned this task. These Facebook “capable persons” usually develop the page and take the role as administrator and encourage party fellows to follow up certain debated issues. This is an informal position, without dedicated funding for administrating new media. Smaller parties (i.e., those with a national voter turnout of less than 10%) did not have such resources and leaned on the national party organization for input and help. However, help from the party was primarily given prior to national elections.

It varies how much the individual representatives use new media, and whether they consider this to be burdensome. Some are “all in” like those with a political page, while others are “all in” on their personal page. Then again, we find that three were reluctant to engage and post on Facebook. They explained it with “I do not have the energy”, “It becomes too much” and “I do not want to”. Some of the other respondents mention that they are reluctant to post something political on Facebook because it can result in several hours of replying, which they do not have the capacity for; it would require them to be “logged on all day round” meaning that their “job as a

politician never ends". There were no significant variations in use between the representatives of the different municipalities, nor between representatives from different parties. Most of the representatives characterized themselves as average users of new media, and a frequent comment in interviews was that "I should have done more". This finding indicates that it has become normatively expected to be involved in new media for local representatives.

As to the representatives' engagement through new media, we have categorized this into four groups: a) party politics and political information, b) private information, c) critique of opposition, and d) a mix of these forms of communication. Twelve informants note that they share party politics and use new media as a communication channel to spread information about the party, in addition to the services and projects of the municipality. Five used new media to share private information, while another five aimed to mix the categories. Thus, as noted by De Paula et al. (2018), new media is not only a democratic tool for information sharing, input seeking, and government-to-citizen interaction; it is also a tool for self-representation, symbolic acts, and marketing. Overall, new media is mostly an information channel. Nearly all representatives, with two exceptions, are reluctant to use it to criticize opponents, but many find these platforms useful for correcting misconceptions about issues. Here there is a noted difference between the political parties: the smaller fringe-parties are described as more "aggressive" on new media platforms than the larger parties. One respondent contends that politicians themselves, and not only "internet trolls", contribute to a more destructive debate in comment sections.

On that note, nearly all respondents avoid engaging in comment sections on Facebook. Common reasons given were that "it does not contribute to a constructive debate", "because people have made up their mind beforehand", or that "they [the people writing on Facebook] have "tunnel-vision" and are not willing to change their minds". New media are further described a channel for "those who scream the loudest", an echo-chamber, thus contributing to driving the public debate in a more enraged direction. This finding shows that local representatives do not find that new media are good arenas for democratic debates. However, not all respondents using new media reply to direct inquiries, serious questions or questions from people who appear to be interested in a constructive dialogue about an issue they are genuinely engaged in.

Perspectives on the impact of new media

Two topics are devoted particular attention concerning the *impact* of new media engagement for local representatives. Firstly, the extent to which new media have impacted the representatives as persons. Secondly, whether new media impacts how representatives engage in debates.

New media's impact on the representatives as persons

In general, new media affect the representatives as persons. Only three of the 24 representatives (one from each municipality) said they were unaffected. All of them said that they knew it affected most fellow representatives. Comments were along these lines: "I become cynical, I am named offensive things", "I have had to digest a lot of provocative comments", and "It is straining". Respondents express that they have become more "tough skinned", and that, while they have always known that people disagree with them, it is now out in the open as direct feedback on new media platforms.

As stated by one representative: "The way from someone's irritated thoughts to publication has become very short", and a vast majority of those interviewed feel that they must "take it" and become more self-critical. Moreover, a recurring concern was that the many personal attacks, harsh language, and hurtful characteristics are difficult for friends and family. Findings from a national survey show that 39% of the representatives are exposed to personal attacks (Ipsos, 2019). Representatives with children or teens find this especially challenging. As one said: "I strongly dislike that my wife, children and friends are harmed by what is posted."

To this point, there is clearly a combined gender and age gap, where middle aged men are less exposed to hatred on new media platforms than younger women. A majority of those interviewed said that women were treated worse and "were more hurt from the comments than men" and that it affects them to see how other political colleagues are treated in new media. Eight of the 24 representatives interviewed say they know someone who has thought about or withdrawn from politics at least partly because of how they were affected by things unfolding in new media. One male stated he is on a break from Facebook, as "it became too negative". Two women under 45 made their husbands read commentaries because they "could not stomach it." Only two representatives were explicit that new media was not a burden: one middle-aged man and the youngest representative.

This suggests that younger women are personally more negatively affected by new media than men. In this respect we find no differences between representatives in the different municipalities. However, in other respects there do seem to be differences between parties. The interviews suggest that representatives from fringe-parties (e.g., the parties on the far left and far right) were more exposed to cruel comments on new media. Statements from informants were that: "the net-trolls seem to be after the environmental party (small fringe party) and what they say is truly a shame. I feel so sorry for these politicians." This was regarding a development project about road-taxes. "It is difficult for women in our party (large fringe party on the right) as reactions to immigration become personal attacks." Thus, immigration is also a heated issue for parties, even in rural areas as the cases in this study show. "I

commented on salmon farming and the responses became a sewage” (representative from small fringe party on the left). The representatives from larger parties are to some degree instructed by the central administration regarding what not to post on new media to avoid personal attacks, and their representatives did not inform about “personal attacks”. The main impression, however, is that the harassment of politicians is common at the local level, and that new media have a negative personal impact on many young women.

New media’s impact on strategic communication and participation in debates

This section examines whether and how new media influence communication in politics and their participation in debates. To that effect, nearly all respondents claim new media have contributed to hardening the public debate, which is largely ascribed to the fact that “people can say anything hidden behind their computer.” The discourse has become livider, and there is a lower threshold for using nasty language. For example, in the discussion about a new tourist center, the “development camp” and the “environment camp” played out their arguments on new media platforms. Another example of mobilization through new media is elderly health care, which has caused heated discussions in two of the municipalities. Hence, communication through new media is “unfiltered, more direct, and you get an instant response.” Either in the form of “likes” or by negative comments and feedback.

Communication through new media is described as entailing a form of self-censorship, necessitating more carefully constructed formulations because things are easily taken out of context and misinterpreted. Nearly 75% of the respondents using new media find it very important to think carefully and strategically about how to formulate themselves on new media. Comments were along these lines: “You have to be smart, you cannot say the things you would when in the office, as things are taken out of context.” “You must think strategically on how the platform functions, how you are to use it, and your message. People do not read long stories.” New media platforms are not considered suitable to disseminate large and complex issues that need explaining in detail.

Eleven of the respondents were particularly aware of the need to “behave strategically” on new media and spend much time weighing their words to prevent issues and comments being taken out of context or framed in a way other than intended to avoid “scandals”. As one of them said, there is a “battle for attention”– and while these platforms provide the opportunity to control what you write, it does not allow for control over how this is perceived.” Nevertheless, about 25% of the respondents were relaxed about communication on new

media: they just engaged and communicated. Here, we could not find that contextual matters such as gender, age, municipality, and party affiliation had any impact.

Two positive sides of new media, according to the respondents, are that they offer arenas for representatives to promote issues they are engaged in and present their own versions of a story. Not all of them use these opportunities, but they agree that these are two of the main merits of new media. While the findings in our data support the argument by Larsson and Skogerbo (2018) that local or regional politicians find traditional channels such as local newspapers more important for political attention, local representatives often use new media to correct and contextualize how the local newspapers have referred them.

Do new media contribute to local politicians becoming closer to the citizens?

This section presents results pertaining to the third topic of interest: whether the local representatives find that new media contribute to local politicians becoming closer to the citizens. Traditionally, the link to followers is important for elected politicians (Barberá et al., 2019). In our study, twelve (of 24) representatives state that new media bring them closer to the citizens, while five are unsure and one states that they rather contribute to greater distance between representatives and citizens. The remaining respondents did not have an opinion on this issue. The five who are unsure express that while it is possible to reach many people, they perceive that they can become “trapped in an echo-chamber” and closer to those who are already in their network or other politicians, making it difficult to reach new voters. However, there is a difference between the municipalities in this regard, where nearly all representatives in the smallest municipality consider themselves as having become closer to the citizens by using new media platforms. They emphasize what is summed up in the following quote: “I have been active in local Facebook groups, and these have kept me updated about arrangements, what locals care about, and enabled a useful exchange of information”.

Through Facebook in particular, local politicians are provided the opportunity to take note of the public mood and issues that citizens are dissatisfied with. However, as described by one representative, this is “for better and for worse”. On the positive side, new media make it easier for the citizens to reach out to representatives, including groups that do not have other means of political influence or engagement. Political representatives on their end, can receive direct feedback on which issues matter the most to voters and what they should work on. As mentioned, this is particularly the notion among representatives from the smallest municipality.

“I absolutely feel that I become closer to the citizens through social media. Today we have fewer and fewer mass meetings, and social media makes me feel close to what people think about policies.”

Nonetheless, the echo-chamber effect is a concern. Five of the respondents noted that Facebook posts are not necessarily representative of peoples’ opinions, and that they perceive the communication to be mostly to “their own” people in their network. As described by the politician cited below:

“Facebook is an echo-chamber, and it is difficult to start factual political discussions. Social media requires strategic communicative skills, to get through with your message. Posts and comments are interpreted out of context, which makes the debate uninteresting.”

This is a known pitfall of communication through new media platforms: the formation of “echo chambers” creates polarized communities with a particular perspective, separated from external discourse (Sunstein, 2017). Moreover, the one representative who perceives that new media distance political representatives from citizens states:

“I am of the perception that social media contributes to distancing me further from the electorate. When someone has made up their mind about an issue, it is impossible to get through with facts and there is no point of discussing with them on social media.”

To summarize, around half of the local representatives find that new media – and especially Facebook – has brought them closer to the citizens; it has made them more able to know what is going on locally. The other half finds that new media make them closer to those who are already in their network.

Discussion

We now return to the overall aims presented in the introduction and discuss central findings related to the use of new media, how local politicians evaluate communication in new media, and whether this contributes to local politicians becoming closer to the citizens.

Firstly, local representatives in highly digitalised Norway use new media extensively, and the use of Facebook as the primary platform for political purposes aligns with findings in the literature (Mossberger et al., 2013; Boulianne, 2016; Larsson and Skogerbø, 2018; Stier et al., 2018). It also informs us that the local representatives are not so Twitter-centered as indicated in some studies (e.g., Enli, 2017). A second finding is that most of the representatives mix their private and political profiles on Facebook, which blurs the line between the private and public spheres. This indicates that local politics is personalized on

new media, and that it matters in a local setting to combine the personal and politics. Pertaining to the question posed in the introduction, concerning whether local representatives exhibit different engagement on new media platforms than national politicians, this finding of a “privatization” of local representatives’ political life through new media indicates a difference between the two levels.

How representatives’ Facebook pages blur the public and private further aligns with the literature on political marketing and self-promotion, which is attentive to the willingness to disclose personal life, personal attributes, and new media as a semi-private space for self-representation (e.g., Bellström et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2018). This “intimisation” and personalisation of politics is, however, not new, nor unfitting for the local setting, as local representatives are expected to develop close relations and hold values that are sensitive to local identities (Bjørnå, 2021). Hence, new media have likely made it easier for the local representatives to introduce themselves to the citizens – a finding which may be more vital for local rather than national politicians.

New media are nevertheless time consuming, and there is a general perception that as a local politician you “have to be on social media”. Even though some have a reluctant relationship to new media, and it is perceived as time and energy consuming, it is not an alternative to opt out. While the larger local parties have set up some informal arrangements for technical help and guidance, the representatives from smaller parties do not have such resources. This again distinguishes local representatives from their national counterparts, as the former’s new media presence and engagement is less professionalized and they have fewer resources for managing this emerging “obligatory” task of local political life (e.g., Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014).

Another interesting note in this respect is that in previous literature the professionalism of political communication has had a particular focus on communication workers (e.g., Pallas et al., 2016), but here we find that the local politicians themselves (and to some degree their party organization) are the main spreaders of the media logic into their work procedures. Hence, the spread of a “media mindset” into a public institution like the local government is not due to the increased influx of professional communicators; rather, it is commonly expected and here a part of the role of – not professional – but local politicians (cf. Baldersheim and Rose, 2005). This resembles the institutional idea that organizations are capturing trends and reforms to demonstrate that they are “up to date” and demonstrate this in a similar way, and that the overall organizational changes become uniform in character over time (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Hence, we are likely to experience a development where a media logic is present in all local governments and expected of all local representatives.

While the representatives in this sample were not particularly into using new media to confront political opponents or actively frame discussions, about a fifth took

initiatives to provide characterization of news that is intended to have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (e.g., Goffman, 1974; Gamson et al., 1992; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). To that end, some appreciate that new media are not under editorial control. However, few of the local representatives used new media to strategically frame messages in a way that favors certain ideological positions, as discussed by, e.g., Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007); they do not appear to stand out as active political strategists. Some use new media to be informed and inform “others” about their viewpoints, i.e., they are less/not all tuned to agency and self-promoting strategies. This differs from what is expected in the “framing” literature.

Concerning whether new media bring representatives closer to the citizens, 50% of respondents state that it does: it allows them to receive more direct feedback and insight into what issues people are engaged in. The downside is that the debate is unfiltered, and the feedback becomes harsher, as expressed by four of the respondents. As such, both critique and harassment have become a part of local politicians’ life because of new media (Rheault et al., 2019). Respondents describe this as challenging for women and younger representatives, which can influence both who considers getting engaged in politics and who remains involved. This aligns with findings in the literature concerning the national political level in the US and Canada (Rheault et al., 2019) and would also be an interesting avenue for further research in the Norwegian or Scandinavian context.

Respondents also point out that when communicating politics through new media they believe that they speak mostly to those who already follow them and agree with his/her view. Thus, the “echo-chamber effect” is present in this regard, and it can be difficult to change someone’s mind. The idea that the echo-chamber effect builds on, however, is social filtering. Social filtering has always existed, and there are some positive effects to it as well. Social filtering is not new to smaller territorial communities and is often perceived as a something that contributes to a common identity. This identity forming aspect appears similar in a virtual community, and a common identity is both necessary and beneficial for a local party that needs to uphold electoral support. Moreover, for the local politicians, being in an echo-chamber might represent a sort of “safe place”, especially when occasionally confronted with harassment; in sum, there are pros and cons linked to echo chambers.

The echo-chamber effect and development in the direction of a hardened and “censored” public debate, where certain issues cannot be discussed, is troublesome from a democratic perspective. Those arguing for how democracy can be improved by digital platforms have underlined possibilities for increased debate by reducing the costs of participation and improving the exchange of arguments (Cohen and Fung, 2021). However, in our cases, there seems to be a lack of important elements for an appropriate democratic sphere. Most notably, there seems

to be “thin” type of contact with the citizens through new media. Hence, new media do not enhance an orientation toward deliberations that include a common good and necessary civility where actors are accountable toward each other and listen to each other’s arguments.

This is perhaps unsurprising. While there is a strong belief that new media and digital technology can promote democratic development and democratic processes, participation in deliberative democracy is generally demanding. This is largely due to ordinary citizens having limited engagement in politics, and debates may easily be dominated quarrelsome figures. Facebook is primarily used to promote political views for existing followers (voters), not for genuine deliberations. At the same time, new media have a role in bringing issues into the formal political system and providing the public with influence over which issues are highlighted on the political agenda. Hence, new media seem to be a platform poorly suited to the representative that considers accessibility to communicate with the electorate important (the deliberative model). It is rather a platform just merely suitable for representatives that emphasize the importance of being well-informed about the needs and preferences of the electorate (an economical perspective).

In summarizing the expectation presented in the introduction, that local politicians may exhibit behavior on new media platforms that is different from national politicians, our findings indicate that, overall, they do. Despite the professionalization of local politicians’ communication and engagement with citizens through new media, local politicians use their private accounts for political purposes; they perceive that new media bring them closer to the citizens, although perhaps primarily those already in their network, and they do not appear to be active political strategists. Thus, there is a significant difference between the new media presence and engagement of local and national representatives.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the use and impact of new media through interviews with elite local politicians in North Norway, which is a highly digitalised society distanced from the national urban centre. As such, this study has contributed to filling a knowledge gap in terms of the “routine” uses of new media by local politicians and how new media affect their work and personal life. Some main findings can be highlighted. Facebook is the dominant platform, and local politicians feel obliged to have an online presence. Nonetheless, they also have an ambivalent attitude toward new media platforms – as they experience negative comments and in some cases hatred through these forums. This is a strain for representatives as persons, as well as for family and friends, and particularly for younger women.

This finding contrasts with an assumption that new media are positive for local politicians. In the extreme consequence,

these developments may result in less diversity and skewed representation in politics, where one is left with a homogenic core of thick-skinned people who are willing and able to endure the pressure new media causes. An interesting point of departure for future studies is enquiring whether this is a peculiar finding in our sample, or whether it also is a national and/or international phenomenon. Another enquiry would be to examine whether new media have an impact on the turnover of local politicians.

Our study has cast light on how communication through new media is demanding in many regards, as it has contributed to hardening the public debate and entails a form of self-censorship that necessitates more carefully constructed formulation – because things are easily taken out of context and misinterpreted. A central finding in this regard is that new media cause a “professionalization” of political communication – but local political representatives do not have administrative support to manage their presence on new media platforms. This distinguishes them from national political representatives, and the downside of new media concerning how local representatives’ political online presence impacts their personal life is a key contribution of this study. An interesting point of departure for future research would be to further enquire about differences between the local and national levels – e.g., through comparing the positive and negative effects of new media as perceived by local and national representatives.

In answering the question of whether and how new media have contributed to changing the role of the local politician, the findings of the study indicate an effect. New media have contributed to both hardening the public debate and accelerating the speed of information sharing and feedback. This development can be thought to produce two types of politicians – a finding which is a unique contribution of this study and which could be interesting to examine in other contexts. Our findings indicate that, on the one side, thick-skinned politicians appreciate the platforms new media provide them to express their opinions, and these representatives are generally positive toward new media. On the other side, are those who see new media as negatively influencing both the public debate and their personal life, and who perceive new media as accelerating the conflict potential in politics. While older men are dominant in the first category, we find that younger women are more likely to be included in the second. This finding would be highly relevant to explore in other local and national political contexts. If this is a general issue that is not limited to the setting of this study, it

could have consequences for who becomes involved in and stays in politics, which is relevant for recruitment to political offices and the representativeness of elected politicians.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article can be made available by the authors upon request, without undue reservation. The data will be anonymized.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Sikt–Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

HB has had the main responsibility for the article, its structure, and progress. BS has been responsible for writing out the empirical material, while H-KH has contributed to the theoretical framework. HB, BS, and H-KH have all contributed to the data collection process, literature review, analysis, and discussion and conclusion. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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