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Balancing Acts: The Communicative Roles of Cabinet Ministers on Social Media

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Abstract

Despite an upsurge in social media studies, little is known about how cabinet ministers balance their multiple professional roles—as ministry heads, cabinet members, and party politicians—on social media platforms. In this article, we first develop an analytical framework, grounded in the principal–agent theory and earlier research on political communication, that differentiates between cabinet ministers' different communicative roles as well as different communicative purposes on social media. Second, we add to the growing literature on government communication and social media by applying this framework to analyze Norwegian cabinet ministers' social media communication. The data is based on a manual content analysis of 1,062 Facebook posts and an expansion of this data using machine learning to cover all the Facebook communication of all ministers from the Solberg cabinet (2013–2021). Based on almost 20,000 posts, the results indicate that social media caters to ministers' needs both as party politicians and as heads of ministries, as Norwegian cabinet ministers use social media in two key ways: to inform as ministry heads and to brand themselves as party politicians. Further, we find that private self-personalization increases audience engagement. The results suggest that social media accentuates the party-political dimension of the cabinet minister's role, thereby indicating potential consequences for government communication, cabinet unity, and decision-making that warrant further exploration.

Keywords

cabinet ministers; Facebook; government communication; personalization; political communication; political parties; self-personalization; social media

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1. Introduction

In March 2018, the Norwegian minister of justice, Sylvi Listhaug, of the populist Progress Party, resigned from her position following strong criticism of a Facebook meme she had posted. The meme accused the opposition Labor Party of prioritizing the rights of terrorists over national security—a particularly sensitive claim, given that the Labor Party had been targeted in the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011. The image of masked Al-Shabaab terrorists was accompanied by a caption encouraging followers to "like and share." The post drew widespread condemnation, and the opposition highlighted that a minister of justice should always act as a minister of justice. Even Erna Solberg, the Conservative prime minister, and her coalition partners distanced themselves from Listhaug's remarks. After first refusing to do so, Listhaug eventually apologized in parliament. However, the apology proved to be too little, too late: Listhaug chose to resign before the opposition could initiate a vote of no confidence.

The Listhaug case was a specific scandal that led to a rare ministerial resignation and is, therefore, not representative of ministers' communication on social media in a more general context. However, it illustrates how social media enables politicians to directly communicate with the public, bypassing traditional mass media (Chadwick, 2013; Kreiss et al., 2018; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013). While such bypassing has gained much attention in the research literature, the Listhaug case also highlights a challenge for cabinet ministers that has received less attention: they operate within multiple professional roles that shape their communication. Ministers are expected to act as leaders of their ministries, as public faces of their policy sectors, and as representatives of the government as a whole. At the same time, they remain party politicians, engaging with party leadership, supporters, and core constituencies. These overlapping roles create tensions in ministerial communication, particularly on social media, where role expectations are blurred.

A growing body of literature explores the social media communication and related audience engagement of members of parliament (Metz et al., 2019), party leaders (Magin et al., 2024), and political parties (Russmann et al., 2024). However, the implications of self-personalization on social media for cabinet ministers remain underexplored. In particular, existing research has yet to fully capture how ministers balance their different professional roles—as ministry heads, party politicians, and private persons—and communication purposes—whether to inform, engage, or promote—on social media.

In this article, we make two main contributions to the literature on political communication and social media. First, departing from the common distinction between professional and private self-personalization, we develop an analytical framework based on the principal–agent theory, thereby distinguishing between ministers' different communicative roles (e.g., ministry head, party politician, private person) and purposes (e.g., informing, engaging, promoting) on social media. Second, we apply this framework in a study of Norwegian cabinet ministers' Facebook communication. Specifically, we examine which communicative roles are most frequently adopted by cabinet ministers on social media, how these roles relate to communicative purposes, and how these patterns shape audience reactions. Analyzing audience reactions, such as likes, shares, and comments, enables us not only to provide insights into which roles and purposes resonate with the public but also to have a deeper appreciation of what trade-offs ministers face in navigating these roles.

Manual content analysis of selected ministers' Facebook posts was performed over one year, complemented by an expansion of this data based on machine learning to cover all ministers from the Solberg cabinet (2013–2021). In total, almost 20,000 posts in the eight-year period are included in the analysis.

2. Cabinet Ministers and Social Media

The introduction and increasing importance of social media have given politicians new opportunities in their communicative efforts to address a wide range of different audiences (e.g., Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Stier et al., 2018). Before the rise of social media, politicians were at the mercy of journalists when seeking to reach an audience (e.g., Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Social media platforms have enabled politicians to communicate directly with the public, unchecked by traditional mass media (Chadwick, 2013; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013). For politicians, social media communication encompasses, first, the communicative *role* they depart from, and second, the main *purpose* (objective) of the communicative effort. We elaborate on these two aspects below.

2.1. The Communicative Roles of Cabinet Ministers

The opportunities offered by social media are related to the increasing personalization of politics (Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2012). The increased attention on individuals in politics has been a key development in established democracies since the latter half of the 20th century. The personalization of politics involves the processes in which individual leaders are foregrounded and promoted at the expense of collective institutions, such as parties and cabinets (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Personalization processes have been traditionally linked to media's coverage of politics and both manifested in and reinforced by media logic (Langer & Sagarzazu, 2018). Recently, departing from the affordances of social media, scholars have introduced the concept of self-personalization (Magin et al., 2024; McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2019; Russmann et al., 2024). This concept comprises both private and professional dimensions and denotes how politicians themselves engage in personalization through the internet and social media (Metz et al., 2019; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010).

In this article, we build on the distinction between private and professional self-personalization on social media, and we argue that the professional dimensions of politicians' communication on social media are multilayered. By drawing on the concept of role expectations, we suggest that politicians engage in professional communication not only as professionals in a generic sense but as actors navigating multiple, occasionally conflicting, role types. This role-based self-personalization perspective enables a more nuanced and detailed understanding of politicians' self-personalization on social media. The theoretical underpinnings for the multiple roles of cabinet ministers can be found in the principal–agent theory, according to which actors are described as agents acting on behalf of a principal (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). Here, parliamentary democracy is considered a chain of delegation and accountability, ranging from voters, parliaments, cabinets, cabinet ministers, to civil servants (Bergman et al., 2000). From this perspective, cabinet ministers first act together with their fellow ministers as collective agents, with the parliament as the principal. Second, cabinet ministers are individual agents with the prime minister, the cabinet, and their own party constituencies as principals. Third, cabinet ministers are principals for the administration they lead (Miller & Müller, 2010). As a result, these configurations can lead to multiple, sometimes competing, role expectations. Self-promotion as a ministry head and champion for a given policy sector

might be important to a cabinet minister, but if they are perceived to be overlooking the party line or their local party base in the process, a future party-political career may be difficult to pursue. Equally, the preferences of the cabinet as a whole (or the prime minister as an individual) may diverge from those of the minister's party. In coalition cabinets comprising several parties, such opposing role expectations are almost inevitable. The principal–agent theory underpins most coalition governance studies, and these various formal roles have been emphasized in previous studies on cabinet ministers:

> [Cabinet ministers] are the legal heads of their respective ministries and thus administrators and specialists. They are generalists by virtue of their membership in the cabinet and their participation in the collective decisions reached in that forum. Finally, they are partisans in the sense that they represent their particular political parties in the cabinet and in their own ministries. (Strøm, 1994, p. 45)

For the purpose of this study, we distinguish between the various roles and, thus, the self-personalization strategies of cabinet ministers as ministry heads, cabinet members, party politicians, individual politicians, and private persons.

2.2. The Communicative Purpose of Political Actors

The second aspect of political actors' social media strategy relates to their communicative aims. Note that although such purposes are arguably closely related to roles, we consider purposes as theoretically and analytically separate from roles. Cabinet ministers can have different aims, objectives, or purposes for their social media communication, regardless of which professional role they assume. Theoretically, from the perspective of the principal–agent theory, the purposes stem from the inherent information asymmetry in the relationship, as agents need to communicate to the principals who hold them accountable for their actions (Gailmard, 2014). As emphasized by Ceron (2024), social media creates new public spaces that can reduce information asymmetries, both by making it easier for agents to disseminate information and for principals to monitor it (thereby reducing both reputation costs and monitoring costs).

Empirically, there is an established body of literature on the social media strategies of presidents, party leaders, and members of parliament. Politicians use social media to broadcast information and communicate with core voters (Bode & Dalrymple, 2015; Small, 2011), to collect information and inputs (DePaula et al., 2018; Grusell & Nord, 2012), to bypass traditional media and set the agenda (Kreiss et al., 2018; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013), and for branding and reputation management (Ekman & Widholm, 2015; Marland et al., 2017). Certain politicians simply use social media because it has become so commonplace: It is a trend and they have jumped on the bandwagon (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Larsson, 2013; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). Based on this earlier research, we emphasize "informing" (e.g., providing information regarding policy), "communication" (e.g., encouraging discussion), "mobilizing" (e.g., urging followers to take action), and "branding" (e.g., messages with the objective to portray the ministry, cabinet, or party, politicians, etc. in a positive light) as the essential purposes or objectives for political social media communication. Table 1 sums up the different communicative roles and purposes of politicians' social media use in this study's analytical framework.

Table 1. The communicative roles and purposes of cabinet ministers.

Communicative roles	Communicative purposes			
	Informing	Communicating	Mobilizing	Branding
Ministry head				
Cabinet member				
Party politician				
Individual politician				
Private person				

Previous research suggests that different roles can manifest themselves in communicative practices through which different purposes are emphasized. In their study on campaign communication on social media, Karlsen and Enjolras (2016) identified two key dimensions: a party communicative dimension for creating involvement and mobilizing supporters, and an individualized communicative dimension that focuses on increasing visibility among party colleagues and exhibiting their personal side to different constituencies, including party members and activists, to ensure their future career in the party.

Building on this, certain communicative purposes may be more closely associated with the different communicative roles of cabinet ministers. Principal–agent theory implies that ministers must communicate to demonstrate alignment with the interests of multiple principals, which might entail different types of communicative purposes. As party politicians, they are expected to signal loyalty and dedication to their party leadership and local party base. Simultaneously, in their role as ministry heads, they bear a formal obligation to convey impartial and informative messages to the general public.

Nevertheless, while certain communicative purposes may align more naturally with specific communicative roles, as already stated, we treat roles and purposes as analytically distinct. Their relationship is an empirical question rather than theoretically given. How cabinet ministers' social media activity reflects different communicative roles and purposes is empirically explored below. To guide the analysis, we formulate the following research questions (RQs):

> RQ1: Which communicative roles and purposes are most prevalent in cabinet ministers' Facebook posts?
>
> RQ2: How do the different communicative roles relate to the different communicative purposes?

2.3. Audience Reactions

To capture the interactive dimension of social media communication, we incorporate audience reactions—likes, shares, and comments—into our analytical framework. Social media platforms have a number of opportunities to make audiences engage with content (Moe et al., 2016). The interactive nature of social media enables audiences to provide immediate feedback for published information (Metz et al., 2019). Audience reactions on social media are frequently used as descriptive indicators of reach, popularity, or engagement. Studies typically assume that higher numbers of likes, shares, and comments indicate greater visibility or resonance, and relate this to the types of posts, topics, formats, or platforms (e.g., Metz et al., 2019; Peeters et al., 2022; Russmann et al., 2024; Tønnesen et al., 2023).

Reactions can also be conceptualized as part of a communication loop to understand how politicians interpret and adapt to audience reactions. From a principal–agent perspective, agents pay attention to such feedback due to the reciprocal nature of the information asymmetry. Agents lack knowledge regarding how principals rate their actions (before rewards and punishments are handed out—for example, in elections), and content that leads to reactions will arguably encourage further communication in the same vein. Building on this literature, we treat reactions not only as popularity metrics but also informal signals of resonance with particular role–purpose combinations, thereby enabling us to examine not only which messages gain engagement but also the communicative trade-offs ministers face in their pursuit of attention, legitimacy, and responsiveness. Thus, we formulate a third and final RQ to guide our analysis:

> RQ3: Which communicative roles and communicative purposes create most audience engagement?

3. Research Context

Norway is a parliamentary democracy with a multiparty system characterized by strong political parties (Allern et al., 2016). Parties hold a dominant institutional position in the parliament, with high levels of party discipline and centralized control over legislative activity (Narud et al., 2014), and dominate election campaigning (e.g., Karlsen, in press). Consequently, the Norwegian political system is widely regarded as party-centric (e.g., Allern et al., 2016; Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015). However, individual politicians also get a lot of attention in the news media and focus attention on themselves—something that is also true for cabinet ministers (Figenschou et al., 2017; Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015). Balancing these two considerations, Norwegian politicians across the party spectrum use social media in ways that are both individualized and party-centered (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).

In the Norwegian cabinet, a cabinet minister heads a given ministry assisted by one political adviser and two to four state secretaries (Askim et al., 2016). It is common to give one of these actors specific media tasks; these actors are responsible for coordinating with the ministerial communication staff, preparing the minister's speeches and media appearances, and advising the minister on the handling of urgent media issues. Across the 16 ministries, communications units have notably expanded over the last two decades—from 50 communication experts in the mid-1990s to approximately 120 in 2016 (Kolltveit, 2016). These communications units sit beneath the ministry's top political and administrative levels, but somewhat adjacent to the standard hierarchical pyramid. The communication experts themselves are civil servants (i.e., they are not politically appointed), and, as with other nonpartisan civil servants, they are expected to act professionally and remain party-politically neutral (Figenschou et al., 2023). As there is no single cabinet spokesperson, communication initiatives are the prerogative of individual ministers and ministries, although the prime minister's office remains informed and lends help when needed. There have been few formal guidelines on social media use in the government (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020; Figenschou, 2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs became the first ministry to use Facebook in 2009 (Figenschou, 2019); now all ministries and ministers have Facebook accounts. This has resulted in a division of labor, where the communication unit is required to update the ministry's Facebook account, and political advisers are required to update the minister's Facebook account without help from nonpartisan communication experts. However, in reality, some cooperation exists—for example, sharing pictures of the minister.

4. Data

The data used in the content analysis is from the Solberg government, a coalition government led by Prime Minister Erna Solberg from 2013 to 2021. The government was led by the Conservative Party, with three other parties alternating between roles as coalition partners and external support parties during this period. The Solberg government was formed after the September 2013 elections as a minority coalition of the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, with formal support from the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party. The Liberal Party joined the government in January 2018, followed by the Christian Democratic Party in January 2019, thus creating a majority coalition. In January 2020, the Progress Party withdrew from the government but continued to support it in the Storting.

We first performed a qualitative coding of the Facebook accounts of eight ministers' Facebook posts, which were publicly accessible at the time of data collection (autumn 2021), between January 2019 and January 2020. In this period, the government consisted of all four parties. Ministers from the four coalition parties were strategically selected to maintain the gender balance and to ensure that ministers from all parties were represented. All posts in the one-year period were collected using Facebook's tool for researchers, CrowdTangle. All 1,061 posts were manually coded with the help of research assistants. In the manual coding, the research assistants both considered the text of the posts and the associated images to decide the posts' communicative roles and purposes.

The manual coding served as the basis for training a sentence transformer finetuning (SetFit) model (Tunstall et al., 2022) to recognize the roles and purposes in the posts of all the ministers in the Solberg cabinets. In the training of the model, we excluded manually coded posts with images and included the posts that only contained text. It is important to note that most posts with images ($n = 6,613$) contained text as well. In our dataset, posts with photos contain a mean of over 400 characters of text, which is approximately two-thirds of what posts with only text have (~640), but more than both posts with links (~310) and videos (almost 270). This was necessary because the SetFit model cannot process images and the hand-coding was based on both the images and the text. Thus, training the model on text from posts with images could introduce noise, as the texts do not include everything that served as the basis for the coding. This is a limitation in our data, as images are considered helpful and suitable for conveying self-personalization (particularly to depict private settings; Metz et al., 2019). The trade-off is that with the selected strategy, we could cover far more posts than manual coding made possible. SetFit is a model that fine-tunes sentence transformers to be able to recognize different classes of text. This makes it possible to train models with less annotated data than what was possible earlier (see also Laurer et al., 2024). We used the Norwegian National Library's sentence transformer (NB-SBERT-BASE; Braaten & Kummervold, 2024) and, because our classes are nonexclusive (one post can have multiple roles/purposes), we trained one SetFit model for each class. We utilized 515 of the coded posts, which did not include images, to train each of the models and tested the resulting models on 100 posts. After training the models, we classified the content of the remaining posts from the Solberg government. Overall, the data consists of 18,921 posts.

4.1. Measures

In total, 1,061 posts were first coded according to five roles and four communicative purposes. As mentioned, we treated roles as analytically separate from purposes, although they appear together in the

same posts. As the examples in Table 2 illustrate, the Facebook posts could contain several roles and purposes. The operationalization of roles is based on the analytical framework developed above. Posts coded as "ministry head" were thematically linked to the sector or depicted activities related to their official duties. Posts coded as "cabinet member" focused more on the government as a whole and often included references to decided or implemented policies, occasionally related to policy areas beyond the minister's own portfolio. Posts coded as "party politician" explicitly mentioned the party or its policies. Posts coded as "individual politician" did not indicate any clear party affiliation or ministerial position. Finally, posts coded as "private person" dealt with activities or topics unrelated to the politician's professional role. Further details on role coding are presented in the Supplementary File (Table A2). With regard to communicative purposes, posts coded as "informing" primarily broadcasted factual messages to the public, such as "Today, the cabinet has launched…" Posts coded as "communicating" sought public input or encouraged discussion, often including questions such as "Do you agree?" Posts coded as "mobilizing" urged followers to take action, promoted campaigns, or encouraged engagement through hashtags, likes, and shares. Posts coded as "branding" aimed to portray the ministry, cabinet, or party in a positive light or included negative content regarding political opponents (see Table A3 in the supplementary File for a detailed codebook).

Table 2. Coding examples of communicative combined roles and purpose.

	Role	Purpose	Post content
Example 1	Party politician	Branding and mobilizing	"Very happy that more people will join in the fight for the Progress Party's policies of lower taxes, more roads and fewer tolls. If you agree with us, I hope you will join the team!" Facebook post by Siv Jensen (Progress Party), Minister of Finance
Example 2	Ministry head; cabinet member	Informing and branding	"The government's policy is working! The strong growth in the Norwegian economy is a result of the government's economic policy, according to the IMF. We will continue to build the country and create a sustainable welfare society." Facebook post by Siv Jensen (Progress Party), Minister of Finance

Overall, 20% of the posts were coded with more than one role. This ambiguity could potentially cause coder bias. However, a random 12% sample of the manually coded dataset was manually recoded by a different coder, yielding a high intrarater reliability rating (Cohen's Kappa) of 0.91, which Landis and Koch (1977, p. 165) rate as "almost perfect."

With regard to the machine coding, most of the fine-tuned models reached "moderate" levels when tested against the 100 test posts. We report Kappa, F1, precision, and recall in Table A2 (in the Supplementary File), and the models' performance is comparable to both similar models (Laurer et al., 2024) and more data-intensive models (Widmann & Wich, 2022). The different roles have a Kappa ranging from 0.49 to 0.6 ("moderate"), except for individual politician with a Kappa 0.02 and recall of 7. This role was excluded from the analysis. For purposes, informing and branding only achieved "fair" Kappa values of 0.20 and 0.27 respectively, mobilizing had a "moderate" Kappa value of 0.55, and communicating had an "almost perfect" Kappa value of 0.83. The Kappa values reflect the consistency between manual and machine coding. In addition, we provide figures based only on the manually coded posts (see Supplementary File). As the figures

reveal, the main empirical patterns regarding the roles are mainly the same. However, the discrepancies are more pronounced regarding purposes. Here, the machine coding overestimates the amount of informing and underestimates the amount of branding. This is mainly the case for posts containing images (see Figure A6 in the Supplementary File). Of the machine-coded posts, 9% were not coded as having a purpose by the models. Similarly, 28% of the posts lacked a purpose. We recoded all the posts with images that we had coded but excluded from the training data. For the roles, the Kappa values ranged from 0.61 and 0.54 for ministry head and party politician, respectively, and 0.14 and −0.02 for cabinet minister and private person. For the purposes, the Kappa values were lower, ranging from 0.40, 0.37, 0.29, and 0.00 for communicating, mobilizing, informing, and branding respectively.

In the empirical analysis presented in Section 5 we distinguish between four communicative roles (cabinet member, ministry head, party politician, private person) and four communicative purposes (informing, communicating, mobilizing, and branding).

The corresponding metadata from the Facebook posts was obtained and used to investigate the effect of role and purpose on reactions. To measure consequences in terms of reactions and comments, we used a measure to identify whether a post received more reactions and comments than the average for the politician who authored the post. More precisely, we divided the number of reactions of each post by the mean number of post reactions for that politician. This is expressed in the following formula:

$$\text{Fixed reaction score} = \frac{x}{\sum \frac{x_i}{n}}$$

Here, x is the number of observed reactions on the Facebook post in question, x_i is the number of reactions on the i-th post, and n is the total number of posts for that politician.

We ran ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with the fixed reaction score as the dependent variable and with the different roles and purposes as the independent variable. In addition, we controlled for the number of characters in the post and for the number of characters squared. We also replicated all analyses using only the manually coded data (see Supplementary File, Figures A1–A4).

5. Results

The empirical analysis is structured based on the RQs and the analytical framework developed in Section 2: First, we investigated communicative roles, then communicative purposes, and then the two combined. Second, we analyzed how communicative roles and purposes relate to social media reactions.

As Figure 1 shows, Norwegian ministers appear to assume two equally important communicative roles in their social media communication. Both the roles of party politician and ministry head are present in almost 35% and a slightly over 40% of the Facebook posts. They communicate less frequently as cabinet members (12%) and private persons (11%). Note that the shares add up to more than 100% because several roles can be present in the same post. These main empirical patterns are similar for the manually coded material (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File).

Figure 2 shows that Norwegian cabinet ministers clearly communicate for different purposes. In the main bulk of analyzed posts, cabinet ministers use Facebook to inform (82%). Moreover, 68% also use social media for

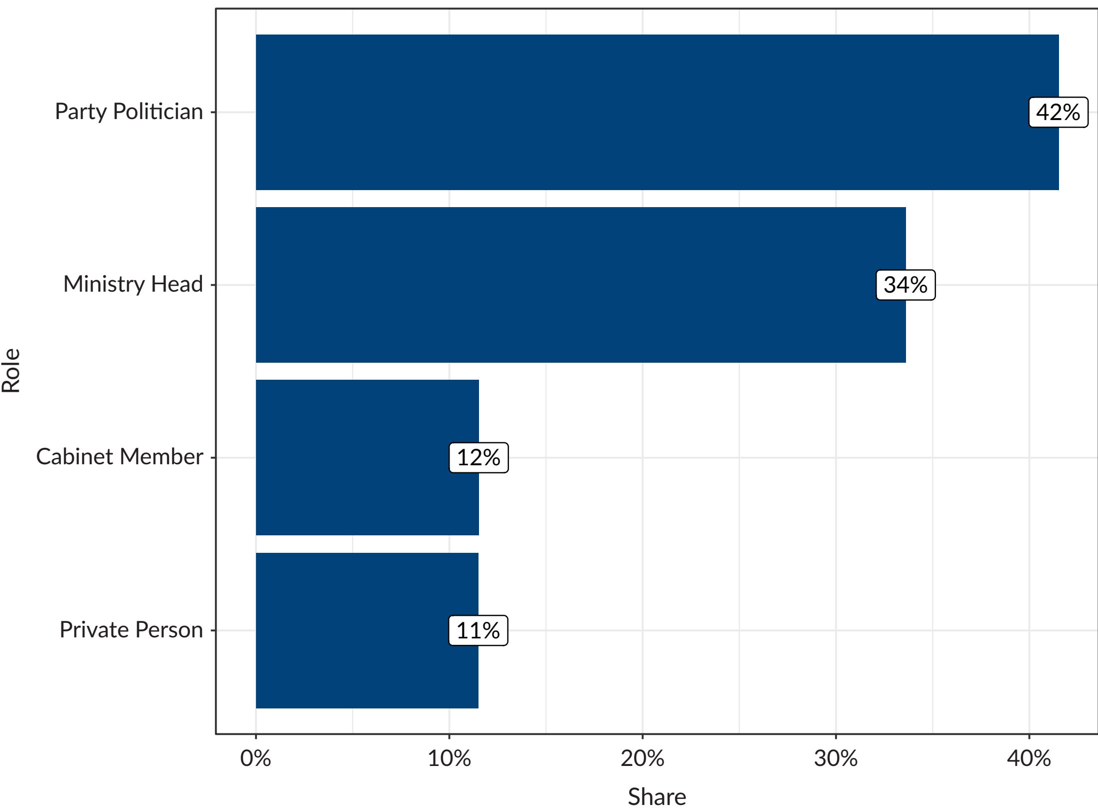

Figure 1. The communicative roles of cabinet ministers on social media: Shares of total posts.

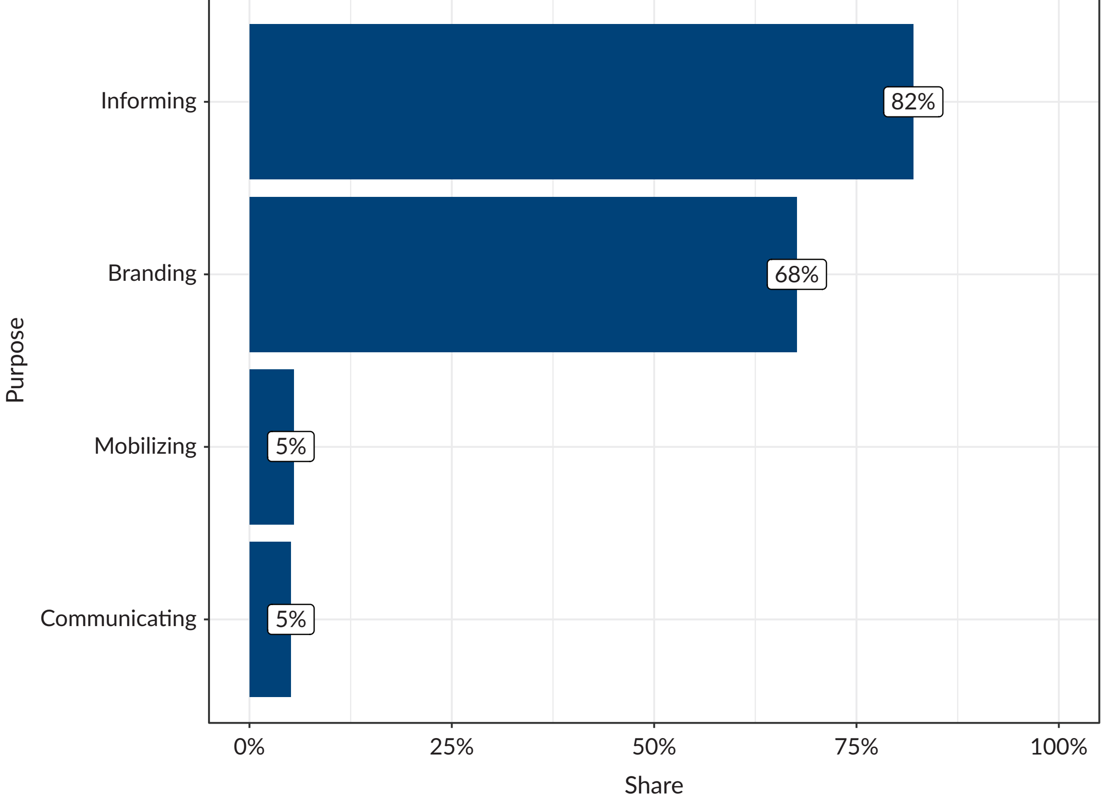

Figure 2. The communicative purposes of cabinet ministers on social media: Shares of total posts.

branding. As evident from Figure 2, the purposes of mobilizing (5%) and communication (5%) are much less prevalent. Here, the empirical patterns deviate somewhat based on manual or machine coding. In the manually coded material, branding is the most common purpose (80% for branding vs. 68% for informing; see Figure A2 in the Supplementary File).

Combining the roles and purposes in Figure 3, it becomes evident how the two are related. Across the three professional roles, informing is most prevalent, ranging from 89% to 98% of the posts. Only as private persons, the purpose of informing is markedly lower (64%). Another clear pattern is that the level of branding greatly varies across roles. When communicating as a ministry head, branding plays a smaller part (67%). However, when acting as a party politician, branding becomes even more prevalent than informing (93% for the former compared to 90% for the latter). Further, the communicative role of a cabinet member follows a similar pattern as that of a ministry head, although branding is somewhat more common in this case (86%). In summary, while

Figure 3. Social media use by communicative role (%).

cabinet ministers primarily use social media for informing across different communicative roles, branding is most strongly associated with their role as party politicians. Moreover, communicating is related more strongly to the role of party politician and cabinet member (9% and 8%, respectively, compared to 4% when appearing as a ministry head). Overall, the different roles appear to be clearly related to the communicative purpose on social media.

Communicative roles and purposes may differ across party lines. Figure 4 displays the percentage of posts associated with each communicative role, grouped by party affiliation. A general pattern emerges: Cabinet ministers across all parties are more likely to adopt the roles of party politician and ministry head compared to private person and member of government. However, a few noteworthy differences exist, particularly in the proportion of posts in the roles of party politician and ministry head. Ministers from the Progress Party are more inclined to adopt the role of party politician and less inclined to adopt the role of ministry head as compared to ministers from other coalition parties. They are also somewhat more likely to assume the role of a member of government. In contrast, Conservative Party ministers more frequently adopt the role of private person. The ministers in the Liberal Party and Christian Democratic Party exhibit similar patterns, generally revealing lower proportions across all roles compared to the ministers in the Progress Party—except in the role of ministry head. The tendency of Progress Party ministers to communicate as party politicians aligns with a common strategy for newly governing parties: to simultaneously present themselves as both in power and in opposition.

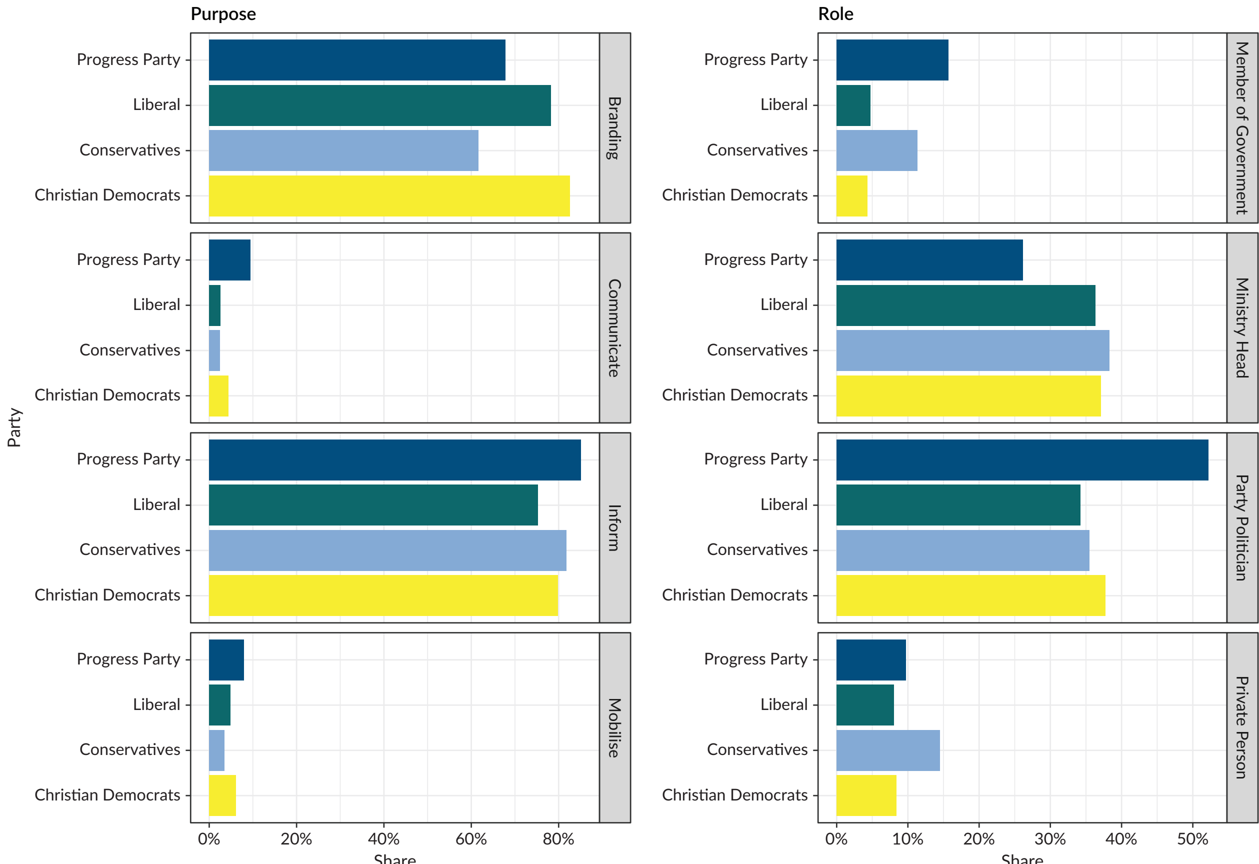

Figure 4. Shares of roles and purposes across parties.

With regard to purposes, cabinet ministers from all parties mainly provide information in their Facebook posts. However, ministers from the Progress Party, more often than ministers from the other parties, communicate and mobilize. Further, ministers from the two small parties, the Liberals and the Christian Conservatives, are more prone to post on Facebook for branding.

Figure 5 depicts the effect of communicative roles (left) and communicative purposes (right) on user reactions (shares, comments, and reactions). The dependent variable is the fixed reaction score, defined as the number of reactions divided by the mean number of reactions for that individual minister (see Section 4.1). In the left-most panel, we plot the estimates for the four different roles, with 95% confidence intervals as the lines. Only the role of a private person has a significant positive effect. The estimates indicate that a post in which the minister assumes the role of a private person receives 18 percentage points more reactions than a post in which the minister does not assume that role. In addition, posts in which the minister assumes the role of a party politician are estimated to receive four percentage points more reactions (although only significant at the 90% level). The estimates for posts in which the minister assumes the role of cabinet member or ministry head are both negative, indicating that such posts receive fewer reactions by 12 or 14 percentage points than other posts. Turning to the purposes of the post in the right-most panel, posts made with both the purposes of communicating and mobilizing receive more reactions. The estimate for posts with a branding purpose is indistinguishable from zero, while posts with an informing purpose receive fewer reactions by nine percentage points.

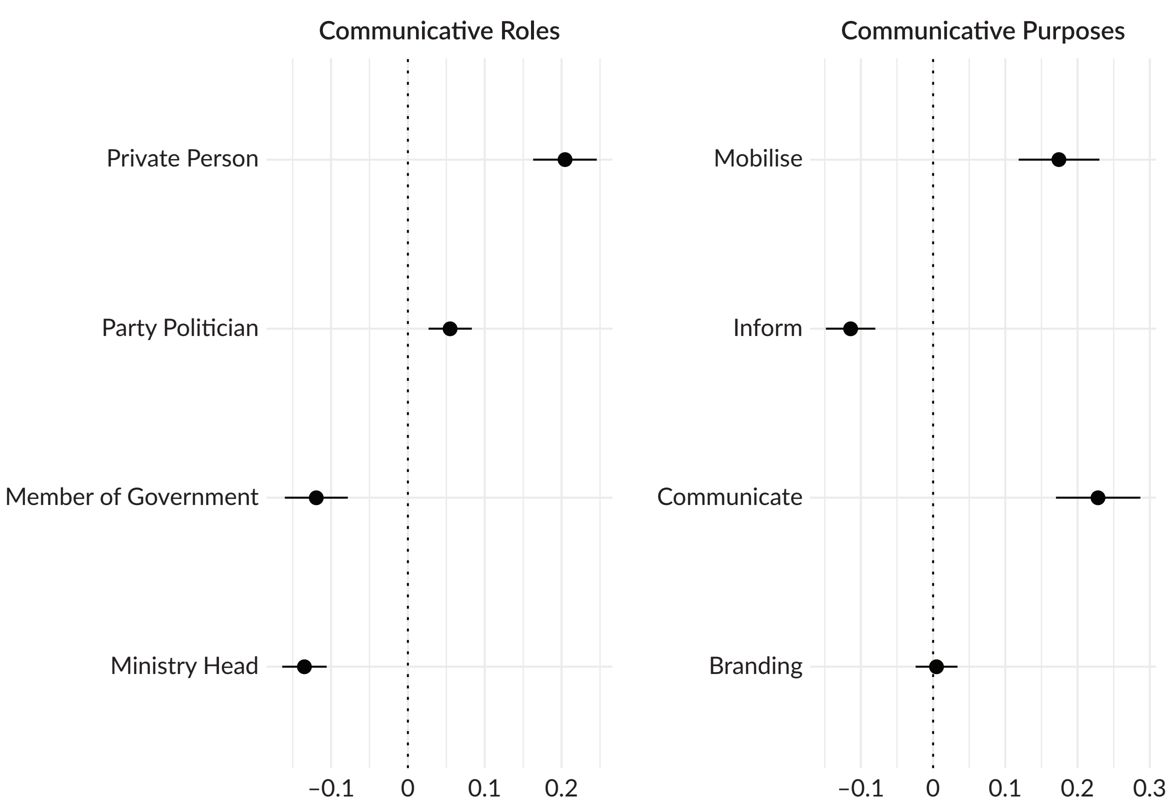

Figure 5. The relationship among communicative roles, communicative aim, and reactions (OLS regression). Note: The dots represent *b*-coefficients and the lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 6 plots the estimates from the full model that includes all the communicative roles and purposes. The estimates are similar to the two separate regressions (Figure 5), with informing posts having fewer reactions and posts where the minister assumes the role of a private person receiving more reactions. However, in this model, the estimate for informing posts is only significant at the 90% level and, in addition, posts in which the minister assumes the role of party politician are not significantly different from other posts.

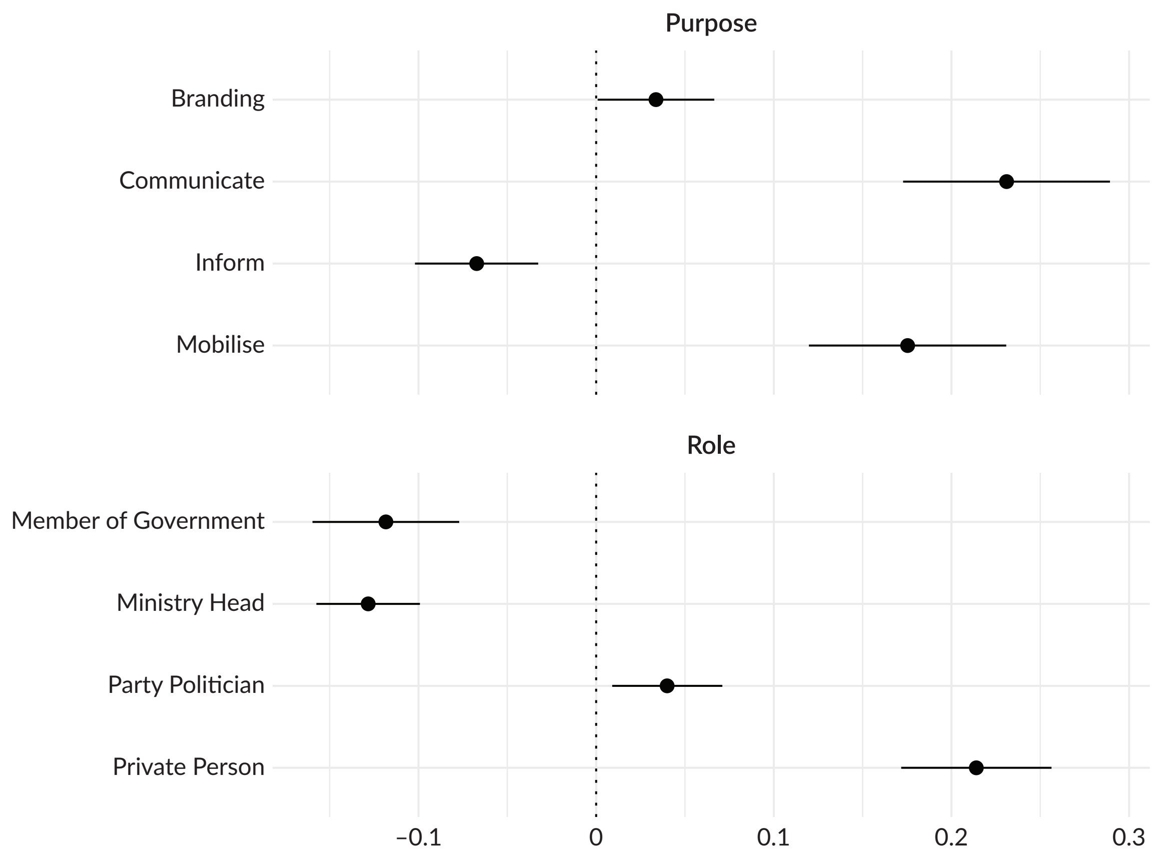

Figure 6. Full model (OLS regression). Note: The dots represent *b*-coefficients and the lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, we review the combined effect, as role and purpose are combined in Facebook communication. Figure 7 presents the predicted values of the interaction effects between roles and purposes. Posts aimed at mobilization tend to generate the most reactions, but only in combination with roles such as cabinet member, private person, or party politician. For all roles, but particularly for cabinet member, posts that seek opinions or encourage discussions (communicate) draw more reactions. Informing, which was important across roles, appears to draw little attention, except for the role of private person. For the role of ministry head, all purposes—except communicating—receive fewer reactions than the average post. When communicating as a cabinet member and private person, branding is a smart choice.

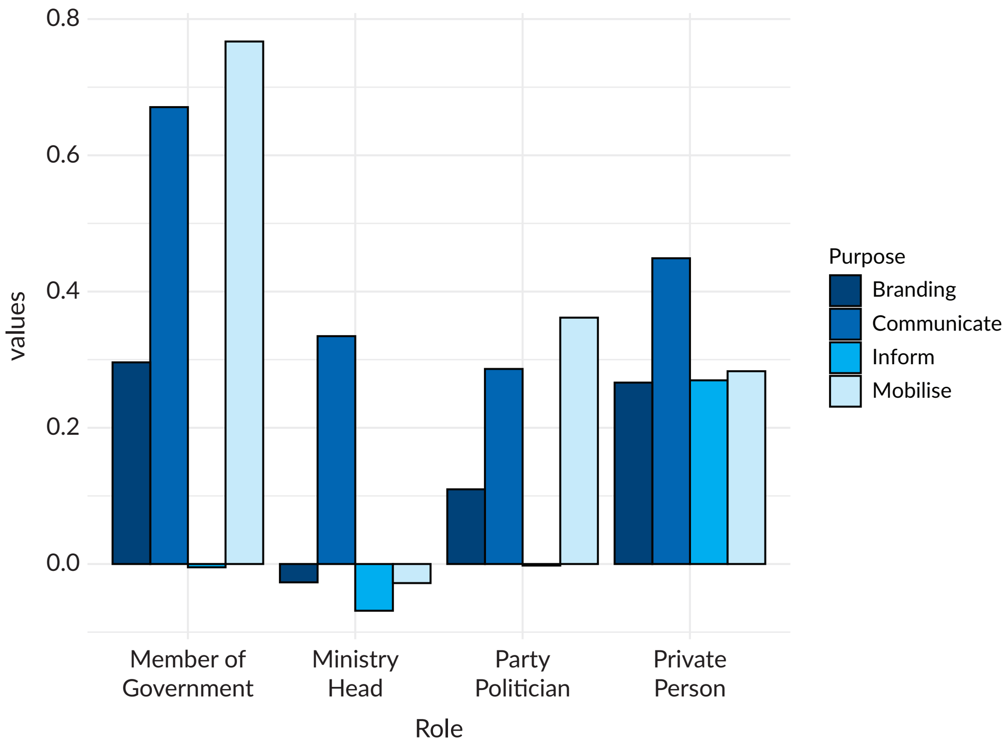

Figure 7. Predicted difference from the mean fixed reaction score for posts with different roles and purposes.

6. Concluding Discussion

The analysis revealed that cabinet ministers primarily engage on social media in two capacities: as ministry heads and party politicians. Rather than balancing party-centered and individualized content (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016), they primarily manage the tension between their ministerial and party-political roles. Additionally, the analysis indicated that the roles of cabinet member and private person are significantly less prominent in social media communication. With regard to communicative purposes, Norwegian cabinet ministers use social media mainly to inform the public and to brand themselves. Facebook is used for communication and mobilization to a much lesser extent.

Combining roles and purposes, we find that informing is essential across communicative roles, while branding is strongly related to the role of party politician. Overall, the results support the notion that the cabinet minister position is really where public information meets party promotion and through which multiple roles and purposes are balanced in a delicate manner.

Further, we found that communicative roles and purposes had a clear relationship with social media audience reactions. Audience reactions are few when politicians communicate as cabinet members, particularly with an informative purpose. However, when politicians communicate as private persons, particularly with a branding purpose, there are more audience reactions. As such, our findings tie in with former studies that find that private self-personalization triggers audience engagement, such as likes and emoji reactions (Metz et al., 2019; Russmann et al., 2024).

6.1. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

Theoretically, we contribute a role-differentiated model that moves beyond the binary perspective of professional vs. private presented in earlier accounts of self-personalization (e.g., Metz et al., 2019; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). By connecting the principal–agent theory to social media communication, we offer a framework that links communicative behavior to formal and informal role expectations (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). As per this perspective, self-personalization is not uniform but structured through multiple roles. This theoretical lens enables a more detailed analysis of self-personalization on social media, particularly in systems where ministers must balance both complex formal and informal expectations. According to this perspective, communicative behavior is shaped by competing principal demands, and ministers engage in different types of self-presentation on social media to manage these tensions.

Audience reactions also play a role in this dynamic. These reactions can be understood not only as popularity metrics but also as informal feedback signals. Such reactions are part of a communication loop in which cabinet ministers may adapt their social media communication based on engagement patterns that are interpreted in light of perceived principal expectations. While strong audience responses to the role of private person might incentivize more personalized communication, such adaptations are most likely constrained by institutional expectations related to their roles as party politicians, ministry heads, and members of the cabinet.

This combination of institutional theory with media and communication research provides a useful lens for analyzing political communication on social media and beyond, not only for cabinet ministers but also for other political actors. For example, members of parliament may need to fulfil multiple principal relationships tied to their party leadership, parliamentary committees, the party and voters in their home constituencies, and geographic responsibilities, each of which potentially shapes distinct communicative roles.

Methodologically, we contribute a combination of manual coding and machine learning. Our methodological approach provides a clear advantage by enabling the analysis of all Facebook communication by the cabinet members throughout the Norwegian government's two four-year terms in office.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its clear advantages, the methodological approach employed here also presents several limitations that warrant closer examination. A key issue is the discrepancy between the manually coded and machine coded results. Although the main empirical patterns remain largely similar across methods the machine coding tends to overestimate the amount of informing and underestimate the amount of branding. Some of the observed differences may stem from variation in time periods and shifts in government composition. Notably, cabinet ministers from the Progress Party differ from ministers from the three other parties in terms of their communication. Thus, changes in the composition of the government, as well as going from a two-party government to a three- and four-party government and then a new three-party government, may account for a few of the differences between the results from the hand and machine-coded data. Finally, a closer look at the dataset suggests that the presence or absence of images in posts may also influence the observed discrepancies. Notably, the divergence between manual and machine-coded results is smaller when we only compare posts without images (see Figure A6 in the Supplementary File). With the recent development of multimodal LLMs and other tools that are able to

process both text and images, taking visual content into account in machine coding of social media content is a promising avenue for future research.

This study and its results are based on one cabinet in one country. As such, our findings could be country-specific or even cabinet-specific. The analysis of almost 20,000 Facebook posts provided support for the observation made from The Listhaug case: Cabinet ministers, with formal obligations to provide sober and impartial information, largely communicate as party politicians for branding purposes on social media. In Norway, the amount of party-political communication may be due to the weak centralized control and few written guidelines in this regard; this might be less extensive in other countries with stronger centralized control over communication from cabinet ministers and ministries (Johansson & Raunio, 2019, 2020; Marland et al., 2017).

The strong position of Norway's political parties (Allern et al., 2016) likely increases party-political communication and reduces the need for ministers to focus on themselves. However, in coalition cabinets, social media offers an opportunity to highlight partisan distinctions or even individual ministerial positions within the cabinet. Indeed, even in highly party-centric systems, politicians must cultivate personal visibility, not only to appeal to voters but also to gain recognition and support within the different strata of their own party (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).

Further, the level of cabinet unity across media platforms (including social media) could depend not only on the country and nature of the cabinet (coalition or not) but also on the leadership style of the prime minister. In the Norwegian case, Prime Minister Erna Solberg (Conservative) was accused by opposition parties of being too soft in her response to several high-profile controversies involving ministers from the populist Progress Party—for example, in the Listhaug case mentioned in Section 1. In turn, such a soft stance from the prime minister has enabled a so-called "one foot in, one foot out" strategy. This concept is used in the literature to describe how populist parties can instigate cabinet compromises on core issues while simultaneously preserving their outsider identity through party-political communication (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010; Askim et al., 2022; Haugsgjerd, 2019). Our empirical analysis supports this idea, revealing that ministers from the Progress Party, in particular, often communicated as party politicians while serving as cabinet ministers. Other prime ministers may adopt a stricter, more centrally controlled strategy regarding cabinet ministers' use of social media. While negative experiences from past or current cabinets might encourage future restraint, the use of social media as a party-political communication channel will likely remain a tempting prospect, irrespective of whether ministers represent populist parties.

Future research should explore how the communicative roles and purposes of ministers on social media vary across time, platform, cabinet structure, and political systems. Ministers may adapt their communication styles with experience or as public expectations and news media coverage shift. Platform affordances may also encourage different types of communicative roles. What works on Facebook may differ from Instagram, X, or TikTok. Moreover, role expectations in a single-party government may differ from those in coalition governments. Finally, different types of political systems with varying institutional settings will have different role expectations with regard to party politicians, ministry heads, and private persons.

6.3. Conclusion

To summarize, this study adds to the growing literature on government communication on social media. We theoretically argued and empirically showed that cabinet ministers have various professional functions and that these functions are balanced through multiple communicative roles that are strongly related to different communicative purposes. The constant opportunity for party-political communication from within the cabinet was limited before the advent of social media. Now, cabinet ministers, as part of the central government, can easily combine the dissemination of neutral information to citizens in addition to the promotion of party-political standpoints to core voters. On the one hand, such dual communication can appease supporters and help ease the electoral cost of governing; on the other hand, it can threaten cabinet stability and blur the possibilities of democratic accountability for voters. Such consequences are beyond the scope of this study; however, we encourage future studies to examine both the extent of cabinet ministers' social media communication and its consequences across systems with different degrees of centralization and across cabinets with different types of parties and prime ministers.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All the models from the article are available on Huggingface: https://huggingface.co

Disclosure of LLMs

ChatGPT was used for language editing purposes.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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