Solo, Group, or Team Effort? Work Dynamics of Parliamentary Offices for Parliamentarians' Political Communications

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Abstract

Parliamentary assistants (PAs) to parliamentarians are recognised as a critical part of the parliamentary machinery. Despite their relevance in supporting parliamentarians' work, the literature has shown little interest in them or their practices. Even less is known about the dynamics within parliamentary offices, or how PAs and their interactions shape parliamentarians' political communication. The mediated character of parliamentarians' public communication (e.g., on social media) is very often not even acknowledged. This article aims to address a research gap by exploring PAs' work arrangements and interactions and how these shape parliamentarians' political communication. The article utilises a comparative approach, focusing on Scotland-based Members of the House of Commons (MPs) and Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). Fifty-three interviews with former and recent PAs and M(S)Ps were conducted and analysed to illuminate the "black box" of parliamentary offices' inner workings. The article will address the following research questions: (a) How do parliamentarians organise communication-related tasks among their employed assistants? and (b) How is social media embedded in the political communication work processes of M(S)Ps' staff members? This article identifies three approaches to creating political communication in these offices (solo, group, and team effort). The findings suggest that the implications of utilising these approaches are far-reaching, affecting individual learning and professionalisation processes, agency, workload, staff turnover, and even the office's capacity to perform. The study also shows that M(S)Ps' parliamentary offices are remarkably similar in terms of organisation, challenges, and overall setup.

Keywords

communication practices; group effort; House of Commons; parliamentary assistants; parliamentary offices; parliamentary staff; political communication; Scottish Parliament; social media; team effort

1. Introduction

Parliamentary assistants (PAs) work for individual parliamentarians; they research, provide policy briefings, arrange meetings, organise the diary, plan events, undertake casework, communicate with constituents, and handle media requests (Lettrari, 2020; McKee, 2023; Pegan, 2017). Their increasingly important role is closely tied to the increasing complexities of legislators' duties and responsibilities. This is reflected in the significant rise in Members of the House of Commons' (MPs) annual staff allowance in the UK House of Commons from £8,000 in 1981 to £236,170 (MPs outside London) and £252,870 (MPs from London) in 2023 (cf. Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, 2023; Ryle, 1981). The budget designated to MPs' and Members of the Scottish Parliament's (MSPs) staff is about 70% (House of Commons) and 60% (Scottish Parliament) of the budget allocated to other legislative staff (such as clerks). Despite PAs' importance for the parliamentary capacity of their respective legislatures, there is very limited knowledge of their roles, political influence, practices, and work routines. In the British context, this is partly due to the flexibility and autonomy afforded to parliamentarians: they are comparatively free to determine salaries, enter into contracts (e.g., full-time and part-time), and allocate tasks and responsibilities to their staff as they see fit (McKee, 2023). Consequently, it has even been challenging to determine the actual staff numbers of PAs employed by MPs (Otjes, 2023), due to the combination of high staff turnover (McKee, 2023) and the aforementioned freedoms of MPs and MSPs to recruit and manage their employees. More recently, parliamentarians' treatment of their staff and the underlying (lack of) managerial professionalism have been discussed in broader public debates and inquiries into the (mis-)treatment of PAs by their employers (Sawer & Maley, 2024).

The limitations of the literature on PAs are problematic, not only because of their substantial contributions and support to parliamentarians, but also because of their role as the interface between the (individual) parliamentarian and the wider public and media. Constituents usually do not have direct contact with their elected representatives (Blackwell et al., 2019), but if they get in touch with their office (e.g., by email or on social media), it may not always be possible for them to identify whether they communicated with their elected representative or with one of their staff members (Sabag Ben-Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2021). Communication between individual constituents and their respective representatives is, at best, rare, and usually mediated by their PAs (e.g., by drafting columns or Facebook posts) and third parties (e.g., journalists). However, the mediated character of parliamentarians' communication is often not even acknowledged (Lev-On et al., 2017). Considering that communication on behalf of parliamentarians potentially impacts constituents' perceptions and attitudes, the question of communication ownership and PAs' influence is crucial: Parliamentarians' communications, created by their staff, contribute to the politician's public image. This is particularly relevant in political systems where voters can vote for individual candidates, since voters' "personal vote" would be shaped by their staff members' communication efforts rather than the parliamentarian's communication. Therefore, it is essential to establish who has ownership and control over the parliamentarians' communication output.

To date, the political communication practices and routines within parliamentary offices (e.g., drafting speeches or press releases) have been largely neglected in scholarly debate (Lev-On et al., 2017; McKee, 2023). Given the increase in MPs' staff allowances, which enable them to employ several staff members, even the interactions among those PAs themselves can affect communication output. This article aims to bridge this gap by examining the dynamics and arrangements of parliamentary offices in relation to political

communication. It explores how PAs involved in communication-related tasks interact and how those interactions shape communication output. The article will also examine how the utilisation of social media is integrated into the arrangements surrounding parliamentarians' political communication efforts. The findings demonstrate that it is not just the individual PA's work that matters, but also the office's working arrangements and the interactions fostered among staff members.

2. PAs: The Hidden Communicators Behind Parliamentarians' Communications

While there has been an increased interest in PAs (Hermansen & Pegan, 2023; Lettrari, 2020; McKee, 2023), this area remains under-researched (Otjes, 2023). The available literature is often focused on the United States Congress (Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017; Shepherd & You, 2020) and the European Parliament (Hermansen & Pegan, 2023; Pegan, 2017). The literature on PAs in other contexts, such as Canada (Dickin, 2016), Germany (Lettrari, 2020), Israel (Lev-On et al., 2017; Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020), or the UK (Dale, 2015; McKee, 2023), is relatively limited and sometimes even outdated. Given that the European Parliament and the United States Congress have far more resources, research focused on them arguably has limited transferability. Research on PAs' role in parliamentarians' political communication is even scarcer; only a very few attempts have been made to explore their routines and practices (notable exceptions: Fisher, 2014, 2017; Lev-On et al., 2017; Sabag Ben-Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2021; Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020).

Particularly relevant is the research undertaken by Sabag Ben-Porat et al. (2020) and Lev-On et al. (2017) on PA's role in communicating on behalf of Knesset MPs on social media (i.e., Facebook). Both articles draw attention to the mediated nature of online communication, challenging the perception of social media as a platform for direct communication between politicians and citizens. They differ from most of the available literature, which focuses on politicians' social media use without acknowledging its highly mediated character (Baxter et al., 2016; Peng, 2021). Lev-On et al. (2017) explored the factors shaping the process of creating social media posts. They particularly highlight the time- and labour-intensive nature of these communication efforts, suggesting that this may lead to the emergence of PAs whose roles are explicitly dedicated to social media management and communication. Interestingly, Sabag Ben-Porat et al. (2020) find that communication-related skills and experiences are rarely considered in the hiring process for PAs, even though they are a primary responsibility. This finding is mirrored in McKee's (2023) findings, noting that MPs' staff have limited work experience. Necessary skills and experience are usually acquired on the job rather than being prerequisites for entering the role.

Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig (2021) examined the impact of structural factors on MPs' engagement in social media communication. They found that contextual factors are particularly important, shaping MPs' involvement in communication processes and their task delegation. Trust has also been identified as a determinant of the PA's autonomy in social media management in the US context, mirroring earlier research on the role of trust in the relationship between elected representatives and their staff (Abbott et al., 2020; Dale, 2015). However, it is worth noting that the outlined literature does not provide a comprehensive view of political communication practices and interactions. In particular, engagement with media representatives, drafting press releases, speechwriting, blogging, writing columns, and giving interviews has attracted too little attention. It also fails to discuss whether and how different political communication practices, routines, and activities are managed and integrated. For instance, it is unclear whether and how interactions with the mass media (e.g., requests from journalists, writing columns) align with work processes for political

communication on social media on behalf of the parliamentarian. Political communication, in this context, refers primarily to communication that is directed to the wider public, such as speeches, publicly available messaging on social media, interacting with media stakeholders (e.g., local journalists) to promote news coverage of the parliamentarian (or the causes they support).

While parts of the available literature examine PAs' activities (McKee, 2023), it remains unclear how communication-related tasks are integrated into the relevant workflows of parliamentary offices. This is problematic, as rising staff budgets for parliamentarians enable MPs to employ small teams of assistants, allowing them to delegate a broader range of tasks, e.g., in the UK (House of Commons and devolved legislatures) and Germany (Lettrari, 2020; McKee, 2023). Unsurprisingly, the staff's interaction with those performing delegated tasks attracted little debate (notable exceptions include Lettrari, 2020, on the German Bundestag). To the author's knowledge, little is known about PAs' interactions in political communication processes undertaken on behalf of parliamentarians, due to the absence of systematic investigations on this topic. This is particularly problematic, given that the quality and preferred means of communication for UK MPs vary, depending on their priorities and interest in media engagement and political communication. Consequently, organisational arrangements within those offices are characterised by a comparatively high degree of flexibility (Dale, 2015; Flynn, 2012). That said, while parliamentarians are flexible in their staffing arrangements and recruitment, the staff allowance can only be used for activities that need to be performed by the parliamentarian to fulfil their responsibilities as elected representatives (Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, 2023; Scottish Parliament, 2023). However, spending on dual-use activities that support M(S)Ps' efforts to fulfil their duties as legislators and are advantageous for their re-election campaigns is not prohibited. For example, Carman and Shephard (2007) found that MSPs tend to locate their constituency offices to support their electoral endeavours strategically.

3. Scotland as a Typical Case?

Scotland is particularly suitable for studying the role of PAs. Broader trends, such as mediatisation and professionalisation, that could potentially affect their work and those found in other developed democracies, have been identified in the Scottish context (Downs, 2012; Schlesinger et al., 2001). There have also been several investigations into Scottish parliamentarians' utilisation of social media platforms during and outside campaigning periods, indicating that this means of communication has been well established but is often underutilised and limited to broadcasting messages rather than interacting with constituents and voters (Baxter & Marcella, 2013; Baxter et al., 2016). However, the findings may be dated and require further investigation to determine whether the results remain valid.

Besides mirroring increasingly important developments in political communication, Scotland offers a unique opportunity to study the impact of different mandate types (list and constituency mandates) associated with the Scottish electoral system (mixed-member proportional representation; MMP) on political communication processes and associated staffing arrangements by MSPs. Adding to this, the Scottish political system allows for comparing the influence of arrangements of parliamentarians of a sub-state parliament (MSPs) with parliamentarians of the national parliament (MPs), as well as different types of electoral systems (FPTP vs MMP) on parliamentarians' staffing arrangements.

One potential difference in the political communication processes in M(S)Ps' parliamentary offices may stem from different approaches parliamentarians take to seeking votes (i.e., party-vote-seeking and personal-vote-seeking). The literature (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Crisp et al., 2007; Poole, 2019) suggests that party-vote-seeking behaviour is more likely in proportional electoral systems, whereas personal-vote-seeking behaviour is more common in majoritarian and plurality electoral systems. While ongoing debates about these approaches usually focus on electoral campaigns, they can arguably be used to understand broader political communication efforts by parliamentarians. For instance, Carman and Shephard (2007) noted that list MSPs tend to target individual constituency seats to become constituency-based MSPs. This approach also suggested that other contextual factors, such as political culture, may play a significant role. Arguably, this behaviour mirrors a tendency towards a Westminster-type understanding of their role, preferring constituency-based mandates over list mandates, which aligns with Lundberg's (2014) findings on the tensions between list- and constituency-based MSPs. However, the list mandate may cause PAs to focus on national issues relevant to the wider electoral region or party to secure a favourable place on the list and promote party votes. This may shape work arrangements compared to those of the more "local" parliamentarian with a constituency mandate.

The aforementioned tensions between constituency-based parliamentarians and those elected through a regional party list underscore the disparity between the initial intention to establish a distinct political system in Scotland from Westminster ("new politics") and the limitations of such an endeavour. Scholars largely agree that it failed to achieve its ambitious goals of making politics in Scotland more consensual and less adversarial (Lundberg, 2014; Mitchell, 2010). Consequently, exploring how different institutional arrangements, electoral systems, and broader systemic factors influence work dynamics in parliamentary offices at the individual level could contribute to the "new politics" debate with a unique angle, while also yielding findings transferable to other contexts.

4. Solo, Group, and Team Effort: What Is the Difference, and Why Does It Matter?

Although little is known about the interplay between PAs of the same office, in principle, several types of arrangements concerning communication-related tasks are possible. Those arrangements will centre on the extent to which communication tasks are allocated among staff members, the parliamentarian's involvement, whether communication processes are fixed, and how staff interactions influence those processes. This article aims to address those questions by trying to answer:

    (a) How are communication-related tasks organised among PAs employed by parliamentarians?
    (b) How is social media embedded in the political communication work processes of M(S)Ps' staff members?

To understand and distinguish among possible arrangements, this article adopts the debate over group versus team differences as an analytical framework. There has been substantial discussion in the literature about whether groups and teams should be distinguished. Emerging scholarly opinions can be clustered into three schools of thought: Authors like Kozlowski and Bell (2003) use both terms synonymously. In contrast, scholars such as Spector (2012) argue that teams are a distinct type of group; hence, they share the outlined characteristics but also possess features beyond those characteristics that set them apart from other group subtypes. Unlike the aforementioned two schools of thought, Katzenbach and Smith (2015) argue that groups and teams are two distinct concepts. While they agree that both concepts share similar

characteristics, they emphasise that their differences, such as the quality of interaction among group members compared to team members, are more significant. Consequently, they characterise groups and teams as different types of collectives.

The analytical framework of this article utilises the differentiation between groups and teams put forward by Katzenbach and Smith (2015) and approaches both concepts as ideal types. The empirical realities of different parliamentary offices may approximate a group or team, but are unlikely to exhibit all the characteristics of a group or team. Instead, the working arrangements in parliamentary offices are expected to occupy a position in the continuum between a group and a team, featuring characteristics of both.

Katzenbach and Smith (2015) identify several dimensions to differentiate groups and teams. They characterise leadership in a group as fixed, whereas teams would approach leadership more flexibly (i.e., situational adjustments and rotation). Evaluating the configuration of leadership roles in political communication within the context of parliamentarians' offices will also help clarify the extent of parliamentarians' involvement or leadership in communication efforts, or whether leadership is delegated to PAs. The greater flexibility teams typically feature is mirrored in their goal-setting process, which would be characterised by deliberation and collective decision-making. In contrast, group goal-setting is typically conducted by the designated leader, who may or may not consult with members of the work collective. Another critical dimension for differentiating groups and teams is accountability for work output within the work collective. In groups, contributions by individual members of the collective are identifiable; individuals are therefore accountable for their work output. In teams, the whole team is accountable, while the individual's accountability is limited. Consequently, teamwork is characterised by a joint effort, while groupwork is the sum of individual members' efforts. Another critical dimension addresses the stability of roles within groups and teams: fixed roles are characteristic of groups, while relatively flexible roles are typical of teams.

The conceptualisation of the differences between groups and teams helps to understand the quality of interaction within parliamentary offices for communication-related tasks. For instances where communication-related tasks are highly centralised and almost exclusively undertaken by one PA, the "solo effort" category has been added. This category is to be understood as an ideal type as well, like groups and teams. Consequently, in practice, even the "solo effort" might include some form of interaction with other parliamentary office staff members, which can directly or indirectly contribute to communication-related work.

To conclude, the categories of solo, team, and group effort will be applied to analyse PAs' activities on political communication-related tasks. While differentiation between groups and teams is used when more than one person is assigned to those tasks, solo effort refers to arrangements with a single designated communication officer. Overall, those ideal-type categories will be distinguished to determine the quality of interaction between involved PAs and the embedding of communication-related activities in the communication efforts (e.g., compartmentalisation of responsibilities versus integrated approach).

5. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design with exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive elements. I conducted 53 semi-structured expert interviews with former and current PAs and parliamentarians between

August 2019 and June 2022. Several sampling strategies (Bogner et al., 2014) were employed to ensure broad representation of interviewees from different parties, parliaments, mandate types, tenure, seniority, age, and gender, including staff from front and backbenchers. Existing private contacts were initially used to access interviewees. Thereafter, I emailed each parliamentary office in Scotland, asking whether PAs or M(S)Ps would be willing to participate. After conducting the first interviews, newly established contacts with interviewees and already-known contacts were used to distribute the call for participants.

The main challenges encountered were typical for interviews with experts and political elites. Hence, I adjusted my approach towards potential participants and utilised different sampling strategies to mitigate accessibility and ethical problems (Bogner et al., 2014; Bryman, 2012). Interviewees have been informed in advance and shortly before the interview about the purpose, scope, and details of this research to obtain their informed consent; they were also offered confidentiality and anonymity for their accounts. In this article, interviewed parliamentarians were anonymised using two letters (e.g., Interviewee CA), while interviewed PAs were quoted using one letter (e.g., Interviewee O). References to parliamentarians that could be used to identify interviewees were anonymised using a letter-number combination (e.g., K1's diary). The research project successfully underwent the ethical review process at the researcher's home institution, providing further assurance to interviewees that their data would be handled with discretion. Participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw at any time, providing them with additional protection (Lancaster, 2017). The interviews were conducted in a setting most accommodating to participants, and different formats (in-person or online) were offered. The duration and timing of the interviews were adjusted to meet the needs of the interviewees (Bogner et al., 2014). To increase the accuracy of the information collected from the interviews, I decided relatively early in the fieldwork to reach out to former PAs, as they are less constrained by work relationships with their former employers.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission. I employed qualitative content analysis to gain insight into their accounts (Gläser & Laudel, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, during the interviews, notes were taken to document key processes and main factors discussed, which informed the coding of the interviews in later stages. The coding has been undertaken in stages 2 and 3 of the analysis using NVivo. In the second stage, I utilised the notes I made during the interview and initial coding to identify relevant categories and themes. In the third stage, I revised the coding and the initially identified themes and categories by utilising the analytical framework of differentiating solo, group, and team effort.

6. Findings I: Communication as Solo, Group, and Team Effort

While interviewees often described working arrangements in parliamentary offices as idiosyncratic and flexible, they commonly characterised communication-related tasks as team effort. Typically, interviewees evidenced this by outlining that several PAs would contribute ideas and elements to communication outputs (such as press releases or Facebook posts), or by being involved in proofreading and editing. One of the interviewees, a case worker to an MSP, described such an interaction:

> Sometimes [colleagues] will [ask], "Is there any casework that is maybe newsworthy?"....Other times...I am...researching...stuff like that, I can easily say to the rest of the team, "Here's what's happening. Here is how we can promote it." (Interviewee O)

It was common for interviewees, particularly those working for MSPs, to note that there was no clear designation of a communication officer in parliamentary offices, highlighting the informality and flexibility of the role. For MPs and MSPs alike, it was not unusual to assign communication tasks ad hoc, considering their PAs' workload and availability. However, on balance, communication tasks were allocated based on staff's pre-existing experience and (presumed) familiarity with the topic:

> R1 has…two full-time staff…myself and my colleague…and if it is [issue 1 related], which is part of R1's portfolio, it tends to be [colleague] that will write it. If it's [issue 2 related], it'll be myself….And then there is a series of sign-offs and proofread [sic] before we post it. (Interviewee R)

Typically, PAs collaborate on communication tasks, though only to a very limited extent. Very often, there is an identifiable lead on a specific task; other staff members have a supportive function, e.g., proofreading and providing ideas. The recurring theme of task allocation based on perceived competence, leading over time to relatively fixed arrangements, also indicates a tendency to approach communication tasks within the staff collective as group work rather than a joint effort. However, the emphasis on the flexibility of these arrangements—it "tends to be" the colleague rather than a clear designation—and the extent of the proofreading adjustments undertaken by PAs may alter the original text beyond linguistic modifications, transforming the character and angle of the communication. In those cases, which have been frequently mentioned in interviews, individual accountability is replaced by shared accountability, characterising a team effort rather than a group effort.

In issue-based campaigns that require additional communication effort, PAs' interplay may also become crucial to the final shape of the communication output. Interviewee M noted that in the context of a specific campaign, communication-related tasks were dispersed, requiring collaboration and joint effort by staff members:

> [T]he [prominent issue] survey [and] subsequent campaign…took everyone, so we had the office manager…getting diary appointments that T1 could speak to people involved with the companies that provide the…infrastructure, we had interns…help[ing] us [to] get the stuff out…and help[ing] [to do] local press….There's not really anything that we do that is 100% a solo effort. (Interviewee M)

Whether this office has a group arrangement for communication-related duties also depends on the degree of integration among staff members' activities. The example describes the integration of a formally designated communication officer into a group project that aimed at advancing the M(S)P's policy priorities. The M(S)P provided the aims and objectives of that project, and tasks were allocated based on experience and skill sets. The work on this specific project involves group work with individual accountability, a larger number of participants, leadership by the parliamentarian, and fixed roles. However, the interviewed PA noted that projects like this are comparatively rare, accounting for only a small proportion of parliamentary offices' communication. Consequently, at large, this office still tended to organise communication as a solo effort, given the concentration of communication-related tasks on one PA. While campaign involvement is part of the role, responding to parliamentary business and issues arising in the constituency accounted for most of the communication-related work. Therefore, describing this PA's role as a solo effort rather than a team or group effort would be more accurate, even if his role includes elements of group effort (due to integration into wider campaigns and projects).

Some M(S)Ps conduct long-term campaigns on matters they are interested in (e.g., housing) and invest significant resources in them. When those long-term campaigns account for a substantial proportion of the communication output and require PAs to dedicate considerable work time, communication-related duties often qualify as either group or team efforts. Interviewee F provided an example of how the campaigning-related tasks have been divided and coordinated between colleagues in her parliamentary office:

> X1's involved in several campaigns....[Prominent issue] caused quite a lot of severe injury, [affected individuals] who've been left in terrible condition....We'll work with journalists, [another PA] will send...freedom of information inquiries, letters to the government...and if it were...issues that we want to get on social media, or...put that in a graphic or put that in a video, we would work together to see...how best we get the message across. (Interviewee F)

The interviewee described their parliamentarian's campaign, identified the different tasks that needed to be done, and explained how they contributed to the communication output. The various activities during this campaign were integrated and linked rather than compartmentalised or detached. These activities, such as conducting freedom of information inquiries, were directly related to the communication efforts. Consequently, the communication should be considered a group or team effort, as the output resulted from coordinated activities within the parliamentary office. PAs responsible for drafting the output depended on these activities in the communication process.

Overall, group work is a dominant form of organising work within the parliamentary office, and there has been no indication that the arrangements between MPs and list MSPs or constituency MSPs differ significantly. This is, insofar, surprising, since list MSPs are—in theory—responsible for much larger areas, which should have impacted the organisation of the offices. However, list MSPs from medium and large-sized parties (i.e., Conservatives, SNP, Labour) tend to shadow selected constituencies in their work. Those constituencies, as noted by Carman and Shephard (2007), are targeted seats by those list MSPs to challenge incumbent constituency MSPs. Consequently, the electoral system has a minimal effect on the internal organisation of parliamentary offices in the Scottish context—list MSPs tend to behave and communicate like constituency MSPs.

While there is a high degree of interaction and relative flexibility in the designation of roles, most interviewees described arrangements in which specific tasks and responsibilities are typically allocated to the same persons and, in some cases, concentrated on a single person. However, significant interactions with staff members are common, blurring the distinction between solo and group efforts and between group and team efforts. It also needs to be noted that interviewees emphasised the relevance of those interactions beyond their immediate contribution to complete communication-related tasks:

> There is camaraderie and friendship among colleagues that certainly doesn't exist in the private sector. Because you have a sort of shared sense of endeavour...you have lots of fun with people who support and believe what you believe in....I have friends now...we haven't worked together for years, [and] these guys are still pretty good friends and those friendships were forged in that environment. (Interviewee W)

Interviewed PAs mentioned those experiences throughout, highlighting that this shared sense of purpose is a motivating factor and adds meaning to the tasks they undertake. Given the very high staff turnover, as noted by interviewed PAs and parliamentarians, interactions have the potential to create bonds among staff that offset problematic aspects of their roles (e.g., high stress, relatively low pay). In this context, it is also worth noting that leadership approaches tend to evolve over time. Interviewees explained that as they gained experience and trust, they were given more responsibility and autonomy. While parliamentarians or their designated deputies (i.e., typically their office managers) are very involved and assume an active leadership role over inexperienced staff members undertaking communication tasks, they usually become less involved over time—provided the communication officers earn their trust. However, interests, political sensitivities, and priorities remain relevant factors that may lead to greater involvement by parliamentarians under particular (but increasingly rare) circumstances. Consequently, communication efforts can often start as a team effort involving the office manager or the parliamentarian. Still, it is envisaged and expected that with increasing trust (and experience), leadership itself is delegated—at least to some extent—to the designated communication staff. The underlying drivers are structural constraints related to parliamentarians' responsibilities and budgetary limitations, which are experienced independently of mandate type, electoral system, or even seniority. Active leadership and involvement are time- and labour-intensive, and therefore problematic; reducing these costs by delegating communication responsibilities and allowing greater autonomy is a solution. Consequently, the M(S)P or their office manager shifts from a proactive leadership role to a more passive one, focusing on monitoring outgoing communication and adopting a less invasive signing-off process.

In this context, it is worth noting that the electoral system did not appear to have a visible impact on staffing arrangements. Furthermore, PAs who were involved in communication-related tasks for MPs and MSPs, when interviewed, explained that they did not find any difference between their approaches based on whether their employers were elected representatives in a sub-state or national parliament. They explained that list MPs (from large and medium-sized parties) shadow constituency MSPs to position themselves as their competitor in the next election. In other words, they behave at large like constituency MSPs, enabling them to challenge the actual constituency MSPs, which mirrors the findings of earlier studies that the differences between the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament are very limited. However, in the case of small-sized parties, the accounts of interviewees indicated an interesting exception with consequences for staffing arrangements and dynamics. In contrast to staff in parliamentarians' offices of larger parliamentary party groups, there is greater interaction among staff in different MSPs' offices. Interviewed PAs explained that they are more inclined to collaborate, e.g., on projects or when opportunities for media exposure arise. An example of this is the "Christmas pack" for journalists provided by Scottish Liberal Democrats. Staff members of MSPs collaborate to develop news stories which they can use to attract media attention during the Christmas period:

> We're aware that [in] the Christmas period...there is less news produced...there's space in the newspapers....So, what we do is every year around October time...we get it together as a big team...we'll research [a couple of stories and do] whatever that requires. Whether it is parliamentary questions, FOIs, letters to ministers, so that by mid-November we have a huge amount of data that we can...turn...into press releases...not every avenue [is] newsworthy...but I would say...50%, enough to create 15 news stories...what we call a Christmas pack which we then send to journalists. (Interviewee D)

The interviewee described not just an expansion of communication capacity beyond the parliamentarians' office, but also a team-based approach that provides PAs with some autonomy in finding and writing up a suitable story. Given that the Scottish electoral system is more proportional than the FPTP system used in Westminster elections, it can be identified as an important factor, as it increases the likelihood of the emergence of smaller parliamentary party groups that adopt collaborative approaches to enhance their ability to attract (party) votes.

7. Findings II: Work Arrangements for Social Media Communication—Integrated Approach or Afterthought?

The integration of PAs responsible for undertaking communication tasks into other activities of the parliamentary office (such as campaigns) can significantly affect whether the communication is understood as a solo, group, or team effort. Beyond their integration, it also needs to be considered that most interviewed PAs considered themselves as "Jacks of all trades." While some interviewees confirmed that they are responsible for communications, they are also expected to undertake various other tasks (e.g., casework, research). Although those tasks may not directly create communication output, working results can still feed into content-creation processes. Interviewee K outlined the variety of tasks that are expected to be undertaken:

> I usually start with K1's diary….Each appointment needs to have either a background briefing on the person themselves or the stuff that K1's going to discuss….I'll be writing a briefing[s] [for] K1 [and] we'll be doing stuff like…writing questions that K1 wants to raise in the chamber…one to two speeches I need to write for K1 per week. (Interviewee K)

Beyond the circumstantial allocation of communication-related tasks, whether for training or due to workload peaks, interviewees also described how these duties might be permanently divided among several PAs. The division of communication-related tasks has been suggested by the type of media channel (e.g., social media, website, or press), the reach of media outlets (e.g., local media and national media), or the type of content (e.g., specialisation in particular policies), effectively dividing the role of the communication officer into several specialised communication officers. The focus on a specific communication-related task (e.g., speech writing) limits their exposure to other communication tasks. Individual communication officers, under those conditions, have fewer opportunities to learn on the job in areas of political communication entrusted to other PAs. Reducing workload by delegating communication-related tasks to several PAs increases each communication officer's capacity to undertake tasks across different areas.

Interviewees did not always provide a rationale for dividing the communication officer role into several positions in their parliamentary offices. However, workload-related reasons have been given, and the specialisations and experiences of available PAs have been identified as drivers of this division of labour, e.g., (presumed) familiarity with communication platforms:

> As a young person, I often get trusted with the social media stuff….I would often make…suggestions on how to make these things better, how to communicate effectively. (Interviewee N)

While political communication processes are typically integrated into the broader activities of the parliamentary office, such as research and constituency casework, there is a clear emphasis on engagement with local media outlets. For instance, by writing columns or press releases targeting local newspapers. While social media has been noted as an important platform for communication in overall communication efforts, interviewees explained that it is often used to broadcast messages and, with limited resources, to create dedicated content. Interviewees outlined that communication output produced for other contexts (e.g., speeches, press releases) would usually serve as the foundation for content presented on social media. Interactions between PAs have been described as crucial, e.g., the speechwriting usually includes elements that are "shareable," the editing and cutting of short videos (from speeches or events), as well as the (limited) use of analytics, is also often done by several staff members rather than one individual. However, although interviewees noted that parliamentarians increasingly utilise social media to communicate, there is still a tendency to treat it as an afterthought, "recycling" and modifying existing content to suit the needs of different social media platforms:

> There is a quite close connection between press releases and what goes on social media. Slightly more goes on social media….If Q1's supporting a campaign from charity or a non-profit organisation, mostly put that on Facebook, it wouldn't necessarily go out into the media. But generally, everything that goes to the media is recycled and put on Facebook. (Interviewee Z)

The interviewee noted that content that could not be published in local media would be used for social media, while content published by the local press would typically be shared. The aim was to attract journalists' attention to the content and invest substantial resources to achieve this. At the same time, social media has been used to "recycle" content that was not covered by journalists or amplify news coverage that utilised content provided by the parliamentary office. While some parliamentary offices had a PA responsible for social media, very often PAs described an ad hoc allocation of tasks or a team-based approach.

Furthermore, interviewees reported that, particularly, M(S)Ps' Facebook accounts are usually run by PAs with little to no involvement of the parliamentarians. Even the sign-off process was described as more relaxed; PAs noted that the content presented was usually not controversial, such as coverage of the parliamentarian's activities and announcements of surgeries for constituents. At the same time, there was a tendency for parliamentarians to communicate on Twitter themselves, rather than through their staff. Consequently, the leadership and involvement of parliamentarians in content production are largely dependent on the social media platform itself:

> W1 is the only one with access to his Twitter because he thinks even though he trusts us, even though we can sign off press releases and write quotes in his name, he thinks that Twitter is quite an authentic medium. And he writes in his own voice, and he thinks that if somebody else came in to try that, people would know. [H]e's the only one with access to that. He has access to his Instagram and his Facebook, as do [another PA] and I, so the three of us will upload to Facebook and Instagram. Most of the time, it's the staff that do both of those, and he will dip in and out if he's been on a visit, so he's taking photos right away….But otherwise, it's us. (Interviewee X)

Similarly, other PAs described how M(S)Ps use social media to share more personal information about themselves, underscoring the perceived need for greater authenticity, which in turn leads to greater

involvement of parliamentarians on specific platforms. Some PAs suggested that this is also due to social media providing the opportunity of unfiltered self-presentation to prospective voters, indicating a personal-vote-seeking approach.

However, in general, interviewed PAs described that political communication would be just one task among others, and that communication on social media is usually not seen as a priority among communication-related activities. Consequently, there is typically no further investment of resources to recruit or train PAs to undertake relevant tasks. Social media activities are often allocated ad hoc and approached as a team effort with shared ownership and a high degree of interdependence among staff members. Similarly to the overall communication approach, this reflects parliamentarians' priorities and (limited) interests in social media. However, PAs—particularly those who were younger—emphasised the importance of social media and even indicated disagreement with their employer. It is also worth noting that M(S)Ps who appear to invest more staff resources in social media are typically younger:

> I think Q1 and I disagree on how best to do that. Q1, you know, does have a preference for traditional media, so papers and radio. I would rather utilise social media. (Interviewee Z)

This reinforces the finding that M(S)Ps' individual priorities and interests are the key determinants of how communication arrangements are organised. The differences in office structures and communication processes, determined and shaped by parliamentarians, significantly impact the communication output and media management practices of their staff. Those staff members are typically involved in a broader range of tasks, not just communication responsibilities. Those activities and accompanying interactions with other staff members feed into communication processes and content creation. In some instances, there has been no role for a communication officer, but rather ad-hoc assignments to communication-related tasks. One parliamentarian explained that creating the role of a designated communication officer would be problematic in the context of their parliamentary office:

> I don't have anyone who works for me specifically in the area of communications....[My staff members] will do various different elements of the role of being responsible for assisting me in my parliamentary responsibilities. (Interviewee CA)

At large, M(S)Ps' communication tasks are allocated to specific staff members and do not generally utilise team approaches or ad hoc allocation. However, among those communication-relevant arrangements, communication on social media has typically been of secondary importance, reflected in a greater tendency towards team-based approaches and ad hoc allocation.

8. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that parliamentary offices usually organise their communication-related tasks as a group effort. Team efforts were utilised to a limited extent, primarily in campaigns and for creating social media content. However, typically, communication-related tasks are assigned to the same staff members. Communication as a solo effort has been identified among a minority of interviewed PAs, but it has been more frequently used than team efforts. Despite the prevalence of group efforts and solo efforts, parliamentary offices usually foster a more collaborative environment and are characterised by a degree of

flexibility. Consequently, rather than having fixed responsibilities and a clear division of labour, areas of activity tend to blur, and it is not unusual that contributions by several staff members feed into the creation of communication outputs. Therefore, most communication arrangements approximate the ideal types of solo and group effort without meeting all the criteria.

Although PAs highlighted that every office would be differently organised, the findings demonstrate that similar factors shape the organisation of parliamentary offices. Office arrangements are shaped by the M(S)P's preferences, priorities, and practical considerations in a fast-paced and high-stress environment with only limited resources available. The article did not identify any significant or systematic differences in how parliamentarians approach communication, irrespective of party affiliation, mandate type, or whether they are MP or MSP. However, there is some indication that party group size—due to the more proportional electoral system utilised in the Scottish Parliament—and the age of the M(S)P shape their approaches to collaboration with other offices and to staff arrangements for social media communication.

The setup has also been found relevant to PAs' professional development, affecting the quality of communication in parliamentary offices and the leadership dimension. Solo and group efforts provide staff members with reasonably clear task assignments, allowing them to develop their skills through "learning by doing." The exposure to specific communication-related tasks also helps to understand media stakeholders' expectations and how they operate: Solo and group efforts facilitate mediatisation (i.e., adopting and utilising media logic in their work) and professionalisation (i.e., allowing them to collect experience and skills on dealing with particular tasks and helping to learn on the job). As a consequence, increased work experience of PAs and trust in their abilities promotes a shift in the leadership dimension from the parliamentarian (or their deputy) towards the communication officers—effectively reducing their involvement in communication processes.

However, given the high staff turnover and the limited experience and skills of new entrants, offices that utilise solo or group efforts for communication-related tasks are more exposed to problems caused by resigning communication officers. Team arrangements make it easier to replace staff members but more challenging to facilitate "learning on the job," since staff members have very little regular, systematic exposure to communication tasks. The lack of continuity and consistency in quality in communication-related tasks is less pronounced when offices utilise group efforts rather than solo efforts. Still, group efforts make it more challenging to facilitate "learning on the job," since staff members are exposed only to a selected range of communication-related tasks.

The limited interest in having fully professionalised communication experts might be due to competing priorities of M(S)Ps: political communication is essential, but just one task among others, which disincentivises the employment of a dedicated communication officer; this is even more pronounced for communication on social media. This finding is surprising, as it contrasts with the notion that politics is increasingly professionalising and mediatising. It also puts the relevance of social media in the communication arrangements of M(S)Ps into perspective, as they, at large, do not yet prioritise it. However, it is worth noting that communication efforts, particularly social media communication, are—although not necessarily a priority—well-integrated into the workflow and communication practices of parliamentary offices.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

To ensure the anonymity of research participants and the confidentiality of their accounts, the interview data used for this study are not made publicly available.

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