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Politicians' social media usage in a hybrid media environment

A scoping review of the literature between 2008–2022

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, politicians and political parties have increasingly adopted various social media as political communication platforms. While the research on the topic has provided valuable knowledge about politicians' use of these platforms and the immediate effects, the literature has mainly studied the usage in isolation from their broader communication with citizens. This article provides an overview of the emerging literature that examines politicians' social media usage in a broader context. Through a scoping review of 49 studies published between 2008 and November 2022, the study identifies three main themes and seven subthemes in the literature and calls for more research to build more robust knowledge across different study contexts. In particular, the review emphasises a need for more longitudinal and qualitative perspectives to assess how politicians navigate between competing media logics in a hybrid media environment, how the new reality impacts them, and whether it alters their communication with citizens over time.

KEYWORDS: political communication, social media, politicians' cross-media strategies, hybrid media system, scoping review, hypermedia campaign

Introduction

The emergence of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have provided politicians and political parties new ways to connect with the electorate, and they increasingly adopt and use these platforms for political communication. This development and its possible democratic implications have received much scholarly attention within political science, communication studies, and computer science (see, e.g., Enli & Moe, 2013; Enli, 2017; Jungherr, 2016b). Often, social media are praised for their democratic potential because they enable politicians to communicate more directly and openly with citizens, without journalists as intermediaries. Other veins of research, on the other hand, have emphasised that the emergence of these new platforms merely reinforce “politics as usual” (Farkas & Schwartz, 2018: 21), and that in practice, politicians do not utilise social media for dialogue with citizens (Farkas & Schwartz, 2018; Kalsnes, 2016). Some studies have even pointed to possible negative democratic implications of the development, for example, that the logics and affordances of social media platforms might incentivise politicians to communicate in a more polarising way as well as increase the spread of misinformation (see, e.g., Enli, 2017).

The existing literature on the topic has provided valuable knowledge about politicians’ usage of social media platforms and the immediate effects of this use in the form of comments, likes, reactions, and shares. However, the literature has mainly studied politicians’ usage of social media in isolation from their broader communication with the electorate, that is, the part of the communication that pertains to other communication platforms such as traditional media (see, e.g., Bode & Vraga, 2018; Chadwick, 2017). As emphasised by Jungherr (2016a: 359), the focus on “the exceptional and the transformative [...] leads researchers to neglect how digital tools are used by established political actors under unexceptional conditions”. To be able to better assess the democratic implications of politicians’ adoption of social media as political communication platforms, and whether it changes their communication with the electorate more broadly, it is important to insert the findings into the context of their broader communicative practices.

Against this backdrop, this study is inspired by the call made by Chadwick (2017) to apply more holistic approaches to the study of political communication in current hybrid media environments, that is, the “need to integrate the study of older and newer media in politics, and to develop holistic approaches that help map where the distinctions between older and newer matter” (Chadwick, 2017: xi). Whereas Chadwick was concerned with the media system as a whole,¹ in this study, I mainly focus on a subset of the hybrid media system, namely politicians and the interactions between social and traditional media in their communication. The current hybrid media system is, according to Chadwick (2017), more complex, because it contains a larger variety of media than previous systems, and the logics of traditional and new digital media increasingly interact, creating new hybrid communication logics.² Politicians face this new complex reality when they communicate with citizens, but our knowledge of how they navigate

between competing media logics, how it impacts their communicative practices, and the possible implications for the communication between politicians and citizens is still limited.

While there is today a growing body of literature on politicians' usage of social media in connection with their broader communication with citizens, this literature is interdisciplinary and fragmented, and we currently lack an overview of recurring themes, methodological approaches, and knowledge gaps. To ensure further advancements, this article provides such an overview and presents the results from a scoping review of the existing literature. The study's aims are twofold: 1) to provide an overview of recurring themes and methodological approaches in the literature, and 2) to identify knowledge gaps and suggest ways to advance our knowledge in the future.

Methods and data

Review methodology

The results presented in this article originate from a scoping review of the existing literature conducted in the fourth quarter of 2022, with 15 November 2022 as the cut-off point. As indicated by the name, scoping reviews aim at defining “the scope [...] of a body of literature on a given topic and giv[ing] clear indication of the volume of literature and studies available as well as an overview [...] of its focus” (Munn et al., 2018: 2). Where classic systematic reviews revolve around answering specific research questions through systematic evaluations of existing knowledge, the aim of a scoping review is broader, in that its aim is to provide insights into overall themes and knowledge gaps in a group of literature. Therefore, scoping reviews often function as stepping-stones for more narrow, systematic reviews and are particularly valuable in a study such as this, where the literature is new and would benefit from “scoping” to ensure further advancements (Dacombe, 2018; Munn et al., 2018).

Three-phase literature search

To ensure a transparent and systematic methodology, the scoping review for this article was conducted in three phases. The first phase was an exploratory literature search. The search was conducted manually and involved searching for literature in peer-reviewed journals that have 1) published influential political communication research in the past (see, e.g., Kleis Nielsen, 2014) and 2) represented different research disciplines, due to the interdisciplinary nature of the literature. Specifically, the following journals were searched for relevant articles in a five-year period prior to the review, with 2015 as the starting year: the core journal *Political Communication*; the more interdisciplinary journals *Information, Communication & Society* and *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*; the general communication journal *Journal of Communication*; the comparative journal *The International Journal of Press/Politics*; the political

science journals *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *The American Political Science Review*, *The American Journal of Political Science*, *European Journal of Political Research*, and *European Political Science Review*; and the Nordic journals *Nordicom Review* and *Scandinavian Political Studies*. In addition to this, literature that I came across while researching for a broader research project was included (examples are D’heer, 2018; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013).

The main aim of this first phase was to gain initial insights into the literature and identify keywords to be used in a more systematic literature search in the second phase. As the literature is still in its infancy and lies at the intersection of different research disciplines, the identification of keywords that would enable more systematic literature searches was a key step in ensuring that the most important studies were covered in the review. In total, 58 articles were identified in the first phase.

In the second phase, the keywords identified in phase 1 were used to perform a systematic search in EBSCOhost, which is a collection of databases from different research disciplines and which is suitable for a literature search on an interdisciplinary research topic such as this. Subsequently, supplementary searches were conducted in the databases Web of Science and Scopus to identify key studies that were not collected via EBSCOhost. In both cases, a Boolean search technique was applied. The initial phase revealed that the literature often referred to Chadwick’s theory of the hybrid media system, Howard’s theory of the hypermedia campaign, or used variations of more empirical concepts, such as “intermedia” or “cross-media”, to indicate that the study included several media. In addition to this, the studies either referred to politics or politicians and political parties in general, or specifically to election campaigns. Accordingly, the following search phrase was used: (hybrid media OR hybrid-media OR hypermedia OR intermedia OR cross-media OR cross media) AND (politic* OR campaign* OR election*). The search templates varied between the databases, and the search was conducted on an abstract level on EBSCOhost; on a topic level on Web of Science (including title, abstract, author, keywords, and the metric “Keywords Plus”); and for title, abstract, and keywords on Scopus. Only English-language literature from scholarly journals and books in the period 2008–2022 was included in the search. The timespan was limited to this period because social media became widespread political communication platforms during this period, following Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008.

In total, there were 319 hits on EBSCOhost after duplicates had been removed from the search. The title and abstract of all records were screened, and out of these, 20 additional articles were selected for further assessment. On Web of Science and Scopus, the title and abstract of respectively the 100 most relevant and the 100 most cited articles were screened, and nine new studies were identified. The number of new studies identified through the searches on Web of Science and Scopus was relatively low, and more than three out of four articles that were assessed as relevant had already been identified in previous search steps (Web of Science: 79%, $n = 22$; Scopus: 89%, $n = 24$). This was considered a sign of saturation and that the most influential studies had already been covered by

the search. Finally, a more general search on “social media” and (politic* OR campaign* OR election*) was conducted on EBSCOhost, Web of Science, and Scopus to identify significant contributions to the literature that utilised other theoretical and empirical concepts than the ones included in the original search string.³ From this search, 13 new articles were identified.

In the third step, a careful full-text screening of the studies identified in steps one and two was conducted ($n = 100$ unique contributions). I elaborate on the more specific screening criteria in the following section, but overall, I followed best practices in the screening of the literature and assessed both the thematic relevance and methodological quality of each study (Fink, 2020). After the full-text screening, the review included 49 studies (see Supplement 1 for a complete overview of the studies).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In the screening of articles, three inclusion and exclusion criteria were used. First, the review included studies of politicians’ usage of social media set in the context of their broader communication with the electorate by either 1) comparing politicians’ usage of social media with their communication via traditional media and possible interactions between the platforms in their communication, or 2) examining the broader role, or function of social media in politicians’ communication. Therefore, articles that focused solely on politicians’ usage of social media without further contextualisation of the usage were not included in the review (examples are Larsson, 2015; Pineda et al., 2022).

Second, studies which examined the role and use of social media platforms from a mainly citizen- or journalist-oriented perspective were considered outside the scope of the review (examples are Marchetti & Ceccobelli, 2016; Ohme, 2019; Splendore & Rega, 2017).

Third, I decided to mainly focus on studies from Europe, US, Canada, and Australia, because the review revealed that research conducted in these study contexts had similarities in their thematic focus and to a greater extent studied the hybrid aspects of communication from politicians’ perspective.

Analytical approach

As mentioned, the aim of this article is to identify recurring themes, methodological approaches, and knowledge gaps in the literature. To obtain these aims, my analysis was conducted in three steps. In the first step, the main themes and subthemes in the literature were identified through a thematic-inspired analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After familiarising myself with the literature, themes and subthemes were coded inductively based on the introduction and research questions, aims, or hypotheses in the sampled studies (for detailed information on how the literature was coded, see Supplement 1). In the second step, the overall methodological approach (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, i.e., studies that combine qualitative and quantitative methods) and more

specific research methods used in the literature (survey, interviews, documents, ethnographic methods, or theoretical contribution) were coded. As a part of the second step, the link between themes and methods in the literature was examined as well to assess whether some themes would benefit from perspectives from other research methods. In the third and final step, a tentative analysis of developments in the research’s thematic focus and use of research methods over the 15-year period was conducted.

Results

The review consists of 49 studies in total, of which the majority are published in interdisciplinary scholarly journals placed at the intersection between political science and media and communication research. The studies are published throughout the 15-year period but with a larger density of publications in the second half (for detailed summary statistics, see Tables S1–S3 in Supplement 2).

In the analysis of the literature, three main themes were identified. First, many studies examined how various social media platforms are used by politicians, political parties, or political advisors on these actors’ behalf. However, whereas many studies focus solely on social media, this body of literature studied the phenomenon in a broader context by relating it to politicians’ wider communication with citizens. The second main theme is linked to the first one but is centred on similarities and differences in the usage of social media among different groups of politicians and how they weigh these platforms compared with traditional media and other means of communication. A third vein of studies explored the possible broader effects of the emergence of social media on politics and political communication. Within each of these main themes, two or three subthemes emerged. The themes and subthemes and the studies constituting them are displayed in Table 1. I elaborate on each of the subthemes in the subsequent subsections.

TABLE 1 Themes and subthemes in the literature

Themes	Subthemes	Studies
1) Social media usage by politicians (in context)	a) Politicians’ cross-media presence	Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017; Hong & Nadler, 2012; Kovic et al., 2017; Kruikemeier et al., 2018; Neihouser & Ouellet, 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2017
	b) Variations in the communicative content across different media	Bode et al., 2016; Borah et al., 2018; Filimonov et al., 2016; Fowler et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2018; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Mendes & Dikwal-Bot, 2022; Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013; Steffan & Venema, 2020; van Dalen et al., 2015

	c) Perceived importance and role of social media in politicians' broader strategies	Bor, 2014; D'heer, 2018; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Giasson et al., 2019; Guðmundsson, 2016, 2019; Guðmundsson et al., 2019; Jung-herr, 2016a; Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Kreiss & McGregor, 2022; Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018; Lilleker et al., 2015; Magin et al., 2017; McGregor, 2020; Paatelainen et al., 2022; Park & Suiter, 2021
2) Variations in politicians' social and traditional media usage	a) Equalisation versus normalisation	Bode et al., 2016; Fowler et al., 2021; Guðmundsson, 2016, 2019; Kruike-meier et al., 2018; Neihouser & Ouellet, 2022; Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013; Steffan & Venema, 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017
	b) Social media in populist communication	Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016; de Vreese et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2019; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Postill, 2018; Suiter et al., 2018
3) Broader effects of the emergence of social media in politics	a) Effects on the political output (i.e., how politics and political communication is conducted)	Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; D'heer, 2018; Fisher et al., 2018; Giasson et al., 2019; Grusell & Nord, 2020; Guðmundsson et al., 2019; Jost, 2022; Jungherr et al., 2020; Laube, 2020; Ridge-Newman, 2020; Schäfer, 2021; Serazio, 2015; Vaccari, 2010
	b) Effects on the political outcome (i.e., on political support, electoral results, etc.)	Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017; Borah et al., 2018; Hong & Nadler, 2012; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Kovic et al., 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017

Comments: Table 1 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes identified in the literature and the studies which formed these themes. A study can appear more than once if it addresses more than one theme.

Theme 1: Social media usage by politicians (in context)

The largest theme in the literature is politicians' social media usage and how they integrate the platforms into their broader communicative practices. Within this theme, three subthemes emerged. First, a group of studies explored politicians' presence on social media and in traditional news media in different communicative contexts; henceforth in the article, I refer to this as "politicians' cross-media presence" (see Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017). A second group of studies analysed the content of politicians' communication on social media and if (and how) it varied from their communication via more traditional media outlets. Third, several studies examined the perceived importance of social media in politicians' wider communication strategies and the role that these new media fill in their political work. The latter two subthemes have some resemblances in that they both focus

on how politicians use social media. However, whereas the subtheme on the variations in the communicative content across different media focuses on the *content* of politicians' communication, the subtheme on the perceived importance and role of social media in politicians' broader strategies explores the use from politicians' perspective and is concerned with their *perceptions* of the platforms.

Subtheme 1a: Politicians' cross-media presence

The studies in the first subtheme were conducted in a variety of study contexts but are mostly European studies, based on Twitter data, and in an electoral setting (for details, see Table S4 in Supplement 2). The main thematic focus in this stream of literature is whether there is an association between politicians being present on social media and in traditional news media. In this context, politicians' social media presence is often measured as the number of posts they share or public mentions of them on the platforms. Their presence in traditional news media is measured by how often they are quoted or mentioned in newspapers and the like (see, e.g., Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017; Hong & Nadler, 2012).

Across different study contexts, most studies found a positive association between politicians' presence on social media and in traditional news media, meaning that politicians who are highly present on social media are more likely to be present in traditional media as well, and vice versa (Hong & Nadler, 2012; Kruikemeier et al., 2018; Neihouser & Ouellet, 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Blach-Ørsten and colleagues' (2017) study was the only one to find an overall negative association where politicians with high Twitter presence are less present in the news media. They found a positive association for only a smaller group of politicians, which they termed "hybrid media politicians", that is, "politicians who have an above-average [...] presence on Twitter and in traditional news media" (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017: 342).

Some studies within this subtheme have pointed to political resources and status being an important specifying variable in the association between social and traditional media presence. These studies found that the association is stronger for politicians with a higher status, such as party leaders, thus indicating that these politicians are more likely to convert their presence on social media to a traditional media presence, and vice versa (see, e.g., Kruikemeier et al., 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Subtheme 1b: Variations in the communicative content across different media

The studies in subtheme 2 have been conducted in many different country contexts and include a larger variety of social media platforms than the previous subtheme, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. However, they have all been conducted in an electoral context (see Table S5 in Supplement 2). The studies within this subtheme focus on the communicative content of politicians' communication across traditional and social media and are slightly more manifold in their thematic focus. Several studies explored politicians' framing

of their social media posts and whether they utilise a more negative or positive framing thereon than when they communicate via more traditional media outlets, such as political television advertisements or campaign posters. Often, a temporal dimension was included in the design as well to examine whether the framing changes during the course of an electoral campaign (see, e.g., Bode et al., 2016; Fowler et al., 2021; Steffan & Venema, 2020).

Another key thematic focus within this subtheme is the political issues that politicians address on social media compared with traditional media and whether their political issue agenda is similar across different media (see, e.g., Bode et al., 2016; Kang et al., 2018). In continuation of this, it is also widely discussed in the literature whether politicians use social media to communicate about political issues at all, or if they utilise the platforms for other purposes, for example, to display a more personal side of themselves and to create closer bonds with voters (see e.g. Bode et al., 2016; Borah et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2021; van Dalen et al., 2015). The results are somewhat ambiguous and seem to be dependent on the study design and context. For example, Bode and colleagues (2016) found that politicians use Twitter and political television advertisements to address different kinds of political issues, and they only found a small overlap between politicians' issue agendas in the two media (Bode et al., 2016). The study context was the US Senate elections in 2010. In contrast, a study conducted by Kang and colleagues (2018) in the context of the 2014 US Senate elections concluded that there is a moderate overlap between Senate candidates' issue agenda on Twitter and in political television advertisements.

However, there seems to be some agreement in the literature that politicians frame their communication to the electorate more positively on social media and put less emphasis on political issues than when they communicate via traditional media outlets (Bode et al., 2016; Borah et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2021; van Dalen et al., 2015).

Subtheme 1c: Perceived importance and role of social media in politicians' broader strategies

The studies in the third subtheme have been conducted in a variety of national contexts, mostly utilising data on the political uses of Facebook and Twitter, or social media as a common concept, and they are primarily based in an electoral setting. The thematic focus within this subtheme is twofold: 1) how important do politicians perceive social media platforms to be with regard to reaching their strategic political goals compared to more traditional means of communication, and 2) what are the more specific roles that social media fill in politicians' broader communication strategies? In the literature, there is broad consensus that social media have become an integral part of politicians' communication with the electorate in recent years (see, e.g., Giasson et al., 2019; Guðmundsson et al., 2019; Lilleker et al., 2015). However, this does not mean that these new media have replaced more traditional means of communication with the electorate. On the contrary, traditional news media remain a very important, if not the most impor-

tant, communication platform for politicians. Even though the importance of social media in politics is on the rise, many studies found that politicians still perceive traditional news media to be more important means to reach strategic goals (see, e.g., D'heer, 2018; Guðmundsson, 2019; Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018; Lilleker et al., 2015; Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013). Despite this, social media are still widely used for political communication.

According to the literature within this subtheme, social media fill a number of different roles in politicians' broader communication strategies, among the most important ones including the following: Politicians use social media as one of many platforms to spread political messages to the electorate; display a more personal side of themselves and strengthen their bonds with potential voters; communicate freely without journalists as intermediaries; raise money for political campaigns; experiment with different communicative strategies and get direct responses from citizens on the effects; promote political messages on other media; obtain presence in the traditional news media through contact with journalists on social media; and gain knowledge on the public's current state of mind (see Table S6 in Supplement 2).

Theme 2: Variations in politicians' social and traditional media usage

Variations in the composition of media that politicians use for communication with the electorate are another important theme in the literature sample. The analysis reveals two subthemes. First, a group of studies examined whether political backbenchers – that is, politicians with low status (Ernst et al., 2019) – use social media to communicate with citizens more than politicians with higher status, due to the accessibility of these platforms. A second vein of studies analysed populist politicians' use of social media and whether these platforms play a more profound role in their broader communication with the electorate than for other groups of politicians.

Subtheme 2a: Equalisation versus normalisation

Within the first subtheme, most studies were conducted in a European context and were based on data from a wide range of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, and all but one were conducted in an electoral setting (see Table S7 in Supplement 2). Thematically, the studies focused on the composition of media political backbenchers use to communicate with the electorate in comparison with politicians with higher status, and whether these politicians are more inclined to use social media because of accessibility reasons. The studies are all – directly or indirectly – linked to the ongoing scholarly debate about the equalisation and normalisation hypothesis. It is well-known that politicians have unequal access to traditional news media, and it has been debated whether the Internet constitutes an alternative platform on which political backbenchers can communicate their political messages (the equalisation hypothesis) or whether it contributes to reproducing, and even rein-

forcing, existing inequalities between politicians (the normalisation hypothesis) (see, e.g., Fowler et al., 2021).

The literature within this subtheme linked the debate to the field of social media and explored whether these media contribute to a process of equalisation or normalisation in light of politicians' broader communication strategies. The findings are ambiguous in that some studies have pointed to a process of normalisation (Guðmundsson, 2016; Kruikemeier et al., 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017), while others have found that social media have an equalising effect on existing differences between politicians (Fowler et al., 2021; Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013; Steffan & Venema, 2020). The varying findings may be due to different study contexts, but also variations regarding how political status is measured. In the studies, political status was operationalised in different ways, including the size of politicians' campaign budgets (Bode et al., 2016), the age of the political party or politicians (Guðmundsson, 2016, 2019), politicians' list position (Kruikemeier et al., 2018), or their newsworthiness (Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013).

Subtheme 2b: Social media in populist communication

The literature within the second subtheme is more theoretical in nature, and not all studies pertain to a specific empirical context. The studies analysed Facebook or Twitter data or focused on social media as a common concept. Thematically, the literature is concerned with whether and why social media are of particular importance for populist politicians but set in the context of their broader communication with the electorate. Several of the studies emphasised that social media play a more profound role in populist politicians' communication (see Table S8 in Supplement 2). According to Ernst and colleagues (2019), the central role of social media platforms in populist communication should be seen in light of the populist ideology, in which people-centrism and scepticism towards the societal elite constitute core elements (Ernst et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, they emphasised that social media enable populist politicians to communicate directly with the people without traditional media – which are considered to be entangled with the societal elite (Ernst et al., 2019) – as an intermediary. While there is a connection between social media and populist politicians' communication, however, several studies also stressed the importance of not exaggerating this link. The reason is even though populist politicians are sceptical of traditional news media, they are still dependent on them to spread their political messages more broadly (de Vreese et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2019; Postill, 2018).

Theme 3: Broader effects of the emergence of social media in politics

The effects of the emergence of social media on political communication and politics are a third theme identified in the literature. Within this theme, the analysis revealed two subthemes. First, a vein of studies examined the possible influences of social media on the political *output*, here defined as how politicians'

communication and politics are conducted more broadly. Second, a group of studies is concerned with the effects of social media on the political *outcome*, that is, how the composition of media in politicians' communication with the electorate impacts their electoral results and support among voters.

Subtheme 3a: Effects on the political output

The studies within the first subtheme regarding effects on the political output have been conducted in many different country contexts, both within and outside electoral settings, and they were primarily empirically focused on Facebook, Twitter, or digital media as a common concept. A part of the literature within this subtheme adopted a broad perspective and examined whether the emergence of social media induces fundamental changes in the way politics and political communication are conducted by politicians or whether they merely add to an already ongoing development (Grusell & Nord, 2020; Jungherr et al., 2020; Vaccari, 2010). Other studies were narrower thematically and focused on specific aspects of the political work, for example,

1. the possible effects of social media on the organisational work processes within political parties (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Ridge-Newman, 2020),
2. whether the emergence of social media and other digital outlets adds to already ongoing professionalisation tendencies in politics (Grusell & Nord, 2020; Guðmundsson et al., 2019),
3. and how politicians cope with the complexity when they communicate in hybrid media environments (Schäfer, 2021; Serazio, 2015).

Theoretically, the studies drew on different perspectives, but often with a common reference pointing to the theory of media logics (see, e.g., D'heer, 2018; Giasson et al., 2019; Guðmundsson et al., 2019; Jost, 2022). The concept of media logic, often ascribed to Altheide and Snow (1979), can be defined as the "micro-processes [...] whereby routines, priorities and practices of news media are internalized and embodied by political actors" (Fisher et al., 2018: 60). Even though the concept in its origin was linked to political communication via the news media, newer research has applied the concept to social media as well. Here, the focus has been on how the affordances and use cultures on social media impact how politicians communicate on the platforms and elsewhere (D'heer, 2018; Fisher et al., 2018; Giasson et al., 2019; Jost, 2022).

Across both broader and narrower studies, there seems to be consensus that social media do not revolutionise politics and political communication but induce smaller, more incremental changes in the ways they are conducted. Furthermore, the studies have found that it is important to see these changes in a broader political context and in light of other ongoing developments (for details, see Table S9 in Supplement 2).

Subtheme 3b: Effects on the political outcome

Turning to the second subtheme, these studies have been conducted in different countries but were all set during elections. Different social media platforms have been studied, but the majority focused on Twitter (see Table S10 in Supplement 2). The main emphasis within this subtheme is the political outcomes of politicians' broader communication strategies, that is, how the composition of social and traditional media in politicians' communication impact political outcomes. In the literature, the political outcomes pertain to different levels, namely, 1) politicians' popularity on social media in terms of mentions, reactions, or shares of their posts (Borah et al., 2018; Hong & Nadler, 2012; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016) and 2) politicians' electoral results (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017; Kovic et al., 2017). The number of studies within the subthemes are relatively few, and they utilised different study designs. Therefore, it is difficult to draw any general conclusions from them other than that the association between politicians' communication strategies and political outcomes is complex.

Methodological approaches in the literature

Turning to the methods used in the literature, the majority of the studies used quantitative methods ($n = 24$), while a smaller number of studies utilised qualitative methods ($n = 13$) or mixed quantitative and qualitative methods ($n = 6$). The remaining six studies are either theoretical contributions or introductions to special issues. Within these broad methodological approaches, the most used methods are 1) document analyses of politicians' communicative behaviours on social media and in traditional news media ($n = 24$) and 2) qualitative research interviews ($n = 14$) or surveys ($n = 9$) with politicians or their communication advisors regarding their perceptions of social media as strategic communication platforms.

The studies which drew on documents tended to use quantitative analytical approaches. Some studies utilised quantitative content analysis to gain an overview of politicians' cross-media presence, recurring political frames, or the political issues addressed in their communication via different media (see, e.g., Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017; Bode et al., 2016; Borah et al., 2018; Park & Suiter, 2021). Other studies conducted regression analyses of data derived from the documents to examine different kinds of associations, for example, between politicians' status and their cross-media presence (for details on the methods used, see Tables S11–S12 in Supplement 2).

The methods used are to some extent linked to the themes that are studied in the literature. Studies on politicians' cross-media presence and variations in the content of their communication across different media tended to rely on document analyses of politicians' actual communicative behaviours, as is evident in Table 2. In contrast, the studies on the perceived importance and role of social media in politicians' broader strategies were more inclined to adopt survey and interview methods because they thereby gained access to information only the politicians possess. A few of these studies, however, supplemented the survey

or interview results with a document analysis to be able to determine whether politicians' perceptions of social media match how they use them (D'heer, 2018; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Magin et al., 2017). Other themes, such as the equalisation versus normalisation theme, are more mixed methodologically.

TABLE 2 Data collection method by themes (N)

	Inter-views	Survey	Docu-ments	Ethno-graphic methods	Theoretical contribu-tion
Politicians' cross-media presence	0	1	6	0	0
Variations in the communicative content across different media	0	1	11	0	0
Perceived importance and role of social media in politicians' broader strategies	9	6	3	1	0
Equalisation versus normalisation	0	4	7	0	0
Social media in populist communication	0	0	2	1	3
Effects on the political output	7	2	3	2	2
Effects on the political outcome	1	1	5	0	0

Comments: N reflects the number of times a data collection method is used in the studies addressing each theme. The total number may exceed 49 because some studies cover multiple themes by using multiple data collection methods. For a comprehensive overview of how the articles were coded, see Supplement 1. See Appendix 1 for source information.

Developments in research, 2008–2022

In this final part of the analysis, I provide a tentative overview of the developments in research from 2008 to November 2022 regarding the thematic focus and research methods used. Generally, there are relatively few studies from the beginning of the reviewed period, and all themes are thus more present in the latter half of the period. With that said, it is possible to identify some developments in the thematic focus of the literature. Research relatively quickly

engaged in examinations of the role and perceived importance of social media in politicians' broader communication with citizens as well as variations in how social and traditional media are used by politicians with higher and lower status (i.e., the equalisation versus normalisation debate that emanated from the broader Internet studies literature). These themes continue to be of interest in newer literature, but more recent studies are to a greater extent concerned with the effects the development may have on the political outputs and outcomes. The subtheme regarding the role of social media in populist communication has also gained more attention in more recent literature.

In terms of research methods, interview and survey-based methods have been used throughout the reviewed period. A few document-based studies were conducted in the beginning of the period, but the method increased in popularity from the mid-2010s going forward. The reason for this is presumably advances in technology which have given researchers new opportunities to collect and analyse larger document datasets from digital media, for example, via various automated methods (for details, see Figures S1–S2 in Supplement 2).

Discussion and conclusion

This study offers insights into an emerging body of literature on politicians' usage of social media in a broader communicative context. Through a scoping review, the study has identified three main themes and seven subthemes in the literature. The largest branch of literature is concerned with the extent to which and how politicians use social media in the context of their broader communication with the electorate. Within this, some studies have examined politicians' presence both on social media and in traditional media outlets, others have explored the content of politicians' communication across different media, and a third vein of studies has adopted the politicians' perspective and is concerned with the perceived importance and role of social media in their broader communication strategies.

A second main theme in the literature focuses on differences and similarities in the composition of media that politicians use for communication and how profound a role social media plays in their communication. Here, two subthemes have been identified. A vein of studies is linked to the ongoing debate about whether social media contribute to a process of normalisation or equalise power relations in politics. A smaller group of studies has been engaged with the role of social media in populist communication.

The final main theme in the literature is the effects of the emergence of social media in politics and, within this, the possible effects on political outputs and outcomes.

While valuable contributions have been made, the review also points to some limitations and knowledge gaps in the existing literature. First, it is still a new strain of literature and findings are often ambiguous across different studies. More research within all themes in different study contexts and over time is thus warranted to build more robust knowledge.

Second, across the different themes, studies were often based on data from electoral campaigns, and more knowledge on the workings of social media in

politics outside elections would be valuable. Elections are important democratic events, but they are also very communication-dense events (Enli & Moe, 2013). The question is whether social media platforms play as profound a role for politicians outside an electoral context and – if so – the roles these media fill in their everyday communication with the citizens they represent as democratically elected politicians. Theoretically, this would also provide additional perspectives on the extent to which politicians are in a state of permanent campaigning (Blumenthal, 1980) or whether their communication differs in an everyday context.

Third, a longitudinal perspective would also be of value for understanding whether social media, and the communication logics that pertain to these new digital platforms, contribute to altering politicians' communicative practices over time. As mentioned in the introduction, it has been debated whether the algorithms governing social media result in more polarised political communication. Even though this is related to politicians' communication via social media, it may also bleed over into their communication via other venues due to the interplay between the social and traditional media agendas (see, e.g., Harder et al., 2017; Su & Borah, 2019).

Methodologically, examinations of differences in measurement and their implications for study results are also warranted. As evident from the account of the normalisation versus equalisation subtheme, the studies reached different conclusions about whether social media entail a process of normalisation or equalisation of power relations in politics. In continuation of this, it is unclear whether this is due to differences in the study contexts or variations in how political status is measured.

Finally, the literature contains mostly quantitative studies and would benefit from more qualitative perspectives in assessing the democratic implications of the emergence of social media in politics. The quantitative studies have provided valuable insights into politicians' cross-media behaviours and the overall strategic role of social media in politicians' communication as well as variations in how the new media are adopted and used by different groups of politicians. However, there is still much we do not know about politicians' perceptions of the changing media system, their motives for adopting social media, and how the development impacts their political work and relations between politicians and citizens. To shed light on these issues, more qualitative perspectives in future research would be valuable.

Through qualitative interview studies with politicians and political parties or in-depth qualitative analyses of documents, it would be possible to gain further insights into important issues such as the following: Firstly, how do politicians make sense of an increasingly complex media system with competing media logics, and how do they choose the media to use – and to not use – in their communication with the electorate? What is their evaluative process, and how strategically conscious are they of their choices? Secondly, what are the underlying mechanisms behind the link between politicians' presence on social media and in traditional media? From the existing quantitative literature, we know there is a link, but further knowledge on how and why is much needed. This would shed light on the normalisation versus equalisation hypotheses as

well as the interplay between the political and media agendas. Lastly, the existing literature has tended to focus on quantifiable measures, such as “political status” as an independent variable, when differences in politicians’ social media usage are studied. By adding a qualitative component to this body of literature, it would be possible to explore more individual factors influencing politicians’ social media usage, due to the flexible nature of qualitative methods.

The current study is not without limitations, and these should be taken into consideration when the results are used. First, the study presents the results from a broad scoping review and not a systematic one. This review method is suitable for the identification of recurring themes, methods, and knowledge gaps in the literature, but it does not provide an exhaustive list of all available research within each theme. The most influential studies should, however, be included. One should therefore not use the accounts of themes and subthemes provided in this review as a complete synthesis of the existing knowledge, but rather see them as stepping-stones for future research on the topic to build more robust knowledge across different contexts and over time. Second, the search methods used to some extent favour scholarly journals, and contributions such as books and anthologies published via other venues may not be covered by the review. However, the most influential and discussed books are expected to be included in the review since the manual literature search in journals also involved examinations of book reviews. Furthermore, a comprehensive account of the search methods used is provided to ensure full disclosure about the results and what generated them. Third, it was decided to centre the review around studies from Europe, US, Canada, and Australia because of similarities in their thematic focus. This may limit the generalisability of the identified themes, and future studies are encouraged to extend the line of research into other study contexts as well.

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Endnotes

- 1 According to Chadwick, the hybrid media system is characterised by mutual interactions between (old and new) media technologies, their inherent media logics, and a variety of societal actors. The outcome of these interactions has implications for power relations between political actors, the media, and the public in society (Chadwick, 2017: xii–xiii).
- 2 Chadwick (2017: 4) defines media logics as the “technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics”.
- 3 The top 100 most relevant on EBSCOhost and the top 100 most relevant and cited on Web of Science and Scopus records were searched for relevant literature.

Appendix 1

Sources quantified in Table 2

Politicians' cross-media presence

Survey: Van Aelst et al., 2017

Documents: All studies in the subtheme (see Table 1)

Variations in the communicative content across different media

Survey: Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016

Documents: All studies in the subtheme (see Table 1)

Perceived importance and role of social media in politicians' broader strategies

Interviews: Bor, 2014; D'heer, 2018; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Giasson et al., 2019; Jungherr, 2016a; Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Kreiss & McGregor, 2022; Magin et al., 2017; McGregor, 2020

Survey: Guðmundsson, 2016, 2019; Guðmundsson et al., 2019; Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018; Lilleker et al., 2015; Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013

Documents: D'heer, 2018; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Magin et al., 2017

Ethnographic methods: Jungherr, 2016a

Equalisation versus normalisation

Survey: Guðmundsson, 2016, 2019; Skovsgaard & van Dalen, 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2017

Documents: Bode et al., 2016; Fowler et al., 2021; Jost, 2022; Kruikemeier et al., 2018; Neihouser & Ouellet, 2022; Steffan & Venema, 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017

Social media in populist communication

Documents: Ernst et al., 2019; Suiter et al., 2018

Ethnographic methods: Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016

Theoretical contribution: de Vreese et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Postill, 2018

Effects on the political output

Interviews: D'heer, 2018; Fisher et al., 2018; Giasson et al., 2019; Grusell & Nord, 2020; Schäfer, 2021; Serazio, 2015; Vaccari, 2010

Survey: Grusell & Nord, 2020; Guðmundsson et al., 2019

Documents: Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; D'heer, 2018; Jost, 2022

Theoretical contribution: Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Jungherr et al., 2020

Effects on the political outcome

Interviews: Vaccari, 2010

Survey: Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016

Documents: Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017; Borah et al., 2018; Hong & Nadler, 2012; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Kovic et al., 2017