**Smileys Without Borders. A Critique of Transboundary Interaction Between Politicians, Journalists and PR practitioners on Social Media**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the article is to contribute a critical theoretical understanding of cross-professional relations on social media, focusing on politicians, journalists and PR practitioners. It is well known that these professional groups establish personal and close relations in offline contexts, but more attention needs to be paid to the role of social media. Here, it is argued that, in the context of digital media use, semi-private chatting, humor, and mutual acknowledgment, including the use of likes, smileys, heart symbols, etc., are evidence of a “neoliberalization” of cross-professional relations. The underlying idea is that the common practice of self-branding undermines representations of professional belonging and exacerbates the blurring of professional boundaries. The critical conceptualization of such “transboundary” interaction between politicians, journalists and PR practitioners, which is guided by a cultural-materialist approach, includes the presentation of examples deriving from the Swedish Twittersphere, and suggestions for empirical research.

**Keywords:** Politicians, Journalists, PR practitioners, Social media, Cross-professional relations, Twitter, Transboundary interaction, Critical theory, Neoliberalized logics, Individualization, Flexibilization

1. **Introduction**

In many countries, politicians, journalists and PR practitioners are becoming ever more “inextricably linked”(Lewis et al. 2008, 2), thereby contributing to a convergent (Deuze 2007) and hybrid (Chadwick 2013) communication sector. The primary causes of this development might vary from nation to nation. Common important factors are the power balance between the public and private sector (Garsten et al. 2015), the character of the media sector/system (Hallin & Mancini 2004) and/or the political culture (Schohaus et al. 2016, 4–5). In Sweden, which will serve as a national example in this article, the expansion of commercial media, media management, and the PR industry (Garsten et al. 2015) in recent decades has led to fewer barriers between politics, media and PR in the workforce. In Sweden, but also elsewhere (O’Donnell et al. 2016; Macnamara 2016, 133), many unemployed or freelancing journalists are moving to the field of PR (Tyllström 2010). Politicians too are increasingly finding the PR business a lucrative option and therefore migrate to the commercial sector (Tyllström 2010), but the traffic might also go in the other direction (Allern 2011; Garsten et al. 2015). A growing number of professionals with “ex”-prefixes are becoming important agents of convergence culture, be they ex-journalists, now active in PR; ex-PR practitioners, now active in politics; or “both/and” practitioners who are active in several fields simultaneously. The latter might involve freelancers doing both traditional journalism and PR, or communication consultants working both for a political party/organization and a PR firm.

A possible positive consequence of this development is the increasing number of “reflexive” professionals who have the ability to understand “the other side” and possess large networks. Simultaneously, from a democratic point of view, there is a need to problematize the deepening of social ties across professional fields and its undermining of boundary work (Revers 2014; cf. Chadwick & Collister 2014), i.e. articulations of difference and distance between the professional fields. The stronger the social companionship between actors in politics, media and PR, the thinner the line between professional and unprofessional behavior (Revers 2014) in which the relations might become *“too cozy”* (Lewis et al. 2008, 2). Democratically speaking, what is at stake is the maintenance of each profession’s unique duties or roles in society, which involves the following forms of boundary work:

* *The boundaries between politicians and journalists*: To be able to do their jobs properly, these two professional groups need to collaborate (Davis 2009), which is often described as the source-journalist relationship (Gans 1980). But as politicians and journalists both aspire to the badge of foremost representatives of democracy as well as of the public, they must keep the “tug of war” (Gans 1980) going by standing in opposite corners of the ring. Otherwise, their relations might appear like a joint (elite) culture and too much of a buddy system (Berglez 2016).
* *The boundaries between politicians and PR practitioners*: In the current times of extreme mediatization and quick results, politicians are increasingly dependent on PR advice and PR campaigns. But to be able to uphold the democratic dialogue with the grassroots, they also need to signal their distance from PR practitioners who are recruited from, or interwoven with the private sector and thus different corporate interests (Garsten et al. 2015).
* *The boundaries between journalists and PR practitioners*: Due to the business crisis in the media sector, media houses, including their editors/journalists, become increasingly dependent on material and pitches from PR firms, which is paving the way for “churnalism”, i.e. content based on combinations of editorial and PR-based material (Lewis et al. 2008; Jackson & Moloney 2016). However, to obtain credibility in the eyes of the media consumers, and to continue to be associated with “homemade” editorial content, journalists need to articulate professional autonomy and distance towards PR practitioners (Macnamara 2016).
  1. **The focus of this article**

In this article, the particular role of *social media* in accelerating and deepening social ties across professional boundaries is analytically examined*.* There is a need for scholarly work that pays attention to how social media, where the above-mentioned “team-switching” phenomenon/culture is highly visible, brings politicians, journalists and PR practitioners ever closer. While, for example, Vobič et al. (2016) and Waters et al. (2010) focus on cross-border activities in a more traditional sense, thus primarily analyzing digital exchanges of a strictly work-oriented kind, this contribution instead intends to concentrate on the overlapping sociability dimension and how the use of digital communication tools exacerbates “socially integrated relations” (Davis 2009, 210) across professional fields. In offline contexts, such relations are associated with “going for drinks and dinners” (Revers 2014, 48) with actors from the “other side”, or developing friendships across professional borders. Due to the democratic importance of boundary-drawing practices among representatives of politics, journalists and PR, a critical theoretical perspective (Fuchs 2014a, 2014b; Marwick 2013) is needed. To be more precise, what will be focused on is how the “socially integrated relations” become part of social media’s “neoliberalized” logics (Phelan 2014). It will be argued that cross-professional intermingling on social media tends to reinforce an individualization and flexibilization of professional belonging as well as of the very meaning of “being professional” (cf. Ekman and Widholm 2015; Hedman 2015; Olausson 2017). In this context, network theory’s optimistic understanding of digital media (Castells 2009; Cardoso 2012), which is often applied in social media research, needs to be contrasted with cultural materialist notions of the neo-Marxian kind, which instead pay attention to how symbolic articulations/exchanges at the micro-level, such as everyday interactions on social media, are dialectically intertwined with (capitalism-driven) material and economic developments at the meso and macro levels of society (Fairclough 1995, 2009; Phelan 2014; cf. Berglez 2006).

The purpose is thus to contribute a critical theoretical understanding of cross-professional relations on social media, involving politicians, journalists and PR practitioners. More precisely, the contribution lies in theorizing what will be referred to as *transboundary interaction,[[1]](#footnote-1)* *i.e. the practicing of “socially integrated relations” that, in contrast to boundary work, testify to a weakening of professional boundaries*. First, the intention is to focus on how transboundary interaction is shaped by existing socio-technological conventions in the use of social media. This is complemented with detailed examples of how Swedish politicians, journalists and PR practitioners go “transboundary”, centered around semi-private exchanges, humor and mutual acknowledgment. Thereafter follows a critical theorization of how the transboundary interaction is embedded in economic and material (neoliberal) processes in society, and its potential consequences for the relations between politics, journalism and PR in the longer term. The article concludes with a section focusing on the usefulness of the concept of transboundary interaction for empirical research.

1. **How transboundary interaction is embedded in socio-technological conventions of**

**everyday use of social media: some examples**

A considerable number of studies show that the relations between politicians, journalists and PR practitioners are characterized by practices and patterns of sociability. For example, despite the inbuilt “tug-of-war” rationale of the politician-journalist relationship, it is also “human” (Revers 2014, 46), involving “personal relations” (Davis 2009, 210), “love-hate” relationships (Davis 2009, 209), “tango” (Gans 1980; Strömbäck & Nord 2006), mutual “trust” (Larsson 2002) and cultural identification (Berglez 2016). Furthermore, despite journalists’ inbuilt hostility towards PR practitioners (Fredriksson & Johansson 2014), their relationship might also be a “close” one (Schohaus et al. 2016, 2; cf. Waters et al. 2010), in which the two parties are hardly “strange bedfellows” (Macnamara 2016, 119). The most consensual relations among politicians and PR practitioners are probably to be found in cases when the former recruit the latter for strategic advice and/or campaigning (Garsten et al. 2015). However, what is suggested here is that the offline intermingling practiced in lobbies, workshops, press conferences, events, political festivals (Wendt 2012; Östberg 2013), and so forth is not only increasingly being transferred to social media, but that digital technology can potentially make it *flourish*. In this respect, what facilitates relaxed socializing across professional borders is social media’s collapse of professional/public and private/personal contexts (Marwick & boyd 2011):

On social media… we act in various roles (as friends, citizens, consumers, workers, colleagues, fans etc.), but all of these roles become mapped onto single social media-profiles that are observed by different people that are associated with our different social roles. This means that social media like Facebook [or Twitter] are social spaces in which social roles tend to converge and become integrated in single profiles (Fuchs 2014a, 77).

Social media communication, including the transboundary kind of interaction, tends to intensify practices of impression management in which users are seeking to make a positive impression on others (Papacharissi 2011). The “integrated single profile” mentioned by Fuchs above is an idealized one, chiseled out through the strategic and creative use of *discourses, genres and styles* (Berglez 2016). Discourse, i.e. “a particular way of constructing a particular (domain of) social practice” (Fairclough 1995, 76) involves, for example, the articulation of professional, lay, economic, political, commercial, popular, or educational discourses; genre concerns “semiotic ways ofacting and interacting” (Fairclough 2009, 164) such as chatting, debating, making small-talk, storytelling, providing infotainment, etc.; while *styles* are more detailed accounts of how various genres and discourses become “realized” through a humorous, formal, informal, ironic, etc. style (Fairclough 2009, 164). Below, transboundary interaction and its application of discourses/genres/styles will be exemplified[[2]](#footnote-2) with material deriving from the Swedish Twittersphere[[3]](#footnote-3). Three conventional forms of social media interaction will be presented, namely semi-private exchange, humor, and mutual acknowledgement. The examples include different cross-professional constellations, more precisely journalist–PR practitioner, politician–journalist; politician–PR practitioner, or all three professional fields represented simultaneously.

**2.1 Transboundary interaction and semi-private exchanges**

Semi-private exchanges involve private (but not entirely private) discourse characterized by a personal style of tweeting. In the first example, PR practitioner Jonas Moran (@promemorian), an ex-journalist with previous connections to politics and the Social Democratic Party, is congratulated on his birthday by his spouse (@stinamorian) who herself has a background as both a politician and journalist:

Tweet from @stinamorian:

Today @promemorian turns 44. Hurray for my husband today! 23 February 2016

Tweet from @promemorian:

A glamorous start to the birthday celebrations @Stockholm-Arlanda Airport Terminal 5. Link to Instagram photo.

This, in turn, renders congratulations from different directions:

Tweet from: @MatsAosv (Undersecretary in the Social Democratic Party):

Congratulations!

Tweet from: @NiklasNrdstrm (Councilor in Luleå municipality, former leader of SSU, the youth section of the Social Democratic Party, and former PR consultant):

Congratulations old friend

Tweet from: @AlexVoronov (journalist and political editor at the liberal newspaper *Eskilstuna-Kuriren*):

Congratulations @promemorian!

Tweet from @Carolindahlman (political editor at the liberal newspaper *Kristianstadsbladet* and also PR consultant and communication expert):

HURRAY for you today

The above congratulations are all in accordance with conventional social media behavior, in which users with social ties text nice things to each other. However, as the congratulatory acts primarily derive from a networked, elite-oriented assemblage (Reese 2016), what crystallizes is the overlapping and converging conditions of the Swedish communication sector, in which professionals in politics, journalism and PR appear as an informal, joint culture/group. Personal exchanges about professional life, especially those generating identification across professional fields, might give a similar impression. The below example resembles a chat at a bar after work between the ex-politician and former Press Secretary of the Conservative Party, @kentpersson, who is now working for the global PR and communication firm Burson-Marsteller, and @hannaolasson, a news editor of the leftist tabloid *Aftonbladet*:

There’s a Springsteen documentary in Agenda’s time slot. Now that’s what I call knowing your audience. [Agenda is a weekly political TV show on SVT (Swedish Public Service television), traditionally broadcast on Sunday evenings at 9 o’clock] 27 March 2016

Reply from @kentpersson:

@hannaolasson easy choice :) it’ll be to watch the Boss :)

The remaining conversation:

@kentpersson Agenda’s being preempted, so you won’t miss anything :)

@hannaolasson All the better. I’m so on top of things nowadays :)

@kentpersson Sounds great

Although they represent contrasting professions and different ideological/political “camps”, they share an interest in the TV program Agenda, an essential source of information for both an ex-politician/PR-practitioner and a news editor, and have a point of mutual identification in the various tribulations of professional life. The latter is demonstrated above through @kentpersson’s implicit discovery that, since leaving politics for the PR sector, he no longer keeps an eye on certain things, such as the fact that Agenda was preempted on TV, thus indicating that nowadays he lives a less stressful life. He never actually intended to watch Agenda, preferring instead the documentary about Bruce Springsteen [“easy choice :) it’ll be to watch the Boss :)”] which is replied to with a sympathetic “Sounds great”.

* 1. **Transboundary interaction and humor**

In Holton and Lewis’s (2011) pioneer study on journalists’ use of humor on Twitter, journalists were to a great extent found to be “’trying to be funny’ – making humor one of the most common forms of Twitter use” (Holton & Lewis 2011, 12). Humor, which is assumed to attract more followers and create a larger network, is then also a common way of communicating across professional fields. In the first example, Oisín Cantwell (@osinincantwell), reporter at *Aftonbladet*, exchanges “funny” tweets with PR practitioner Carl Melin (@CarlMelin) about dressing styles, in which the humor seems to consist of inside jokes (“your aesthetics limit you”, etc.)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Do I dare buy a shirt with pattern consisting of beautiful birds? Note, am pathologically conservative when it comes to clothing. 11 March 2017 | Opening tweet by @osinincantwell. |
| @osinincantwell a shirt should be light blue, white, or blue-and-white striped. Anything else is an abomination (or casual shirts, like Hawaiian) | Reply from @CarlMelin |
| @CarlMelin your aesthetics limit you | Reply from @osinincantwell |
| @osinincantwell no my conservatism reflects well upon me | Reply from @CarlMelin |
| @CarlMelin You’re confusing conservatism with lack of imagination. Not an entirely uncommon syndrome. | End of exchange, which concludes with an obligatory “like” from @CarlMelin |

Table 1: Transboundary interaction and humor

This kind of “cross-border” humor seems like a way to occasionally “ease the pressure” and distance oneself from professional roles and obligations, as well as to amuse a Twitter “audience” (Crawford 2009). The genre, which could be termed “homemade infotainment”, might include visual elements, with the users publishing and commenting on photos. The below example begins with a tweet from @JohanIngero, formerly a Press Secretary for the Christian Democratic Party, but now strategic communicator for the center-right think-tank Timbro. The tweet contains a comment about a news magazine cover (Photo 1) depicting the Director of SÄPO (Swedish secret police) underneath a couch:

@JohanIngero:

Excuse me, but how the heck could SÄPO agree to a photograph like this? 4 March 4 2016

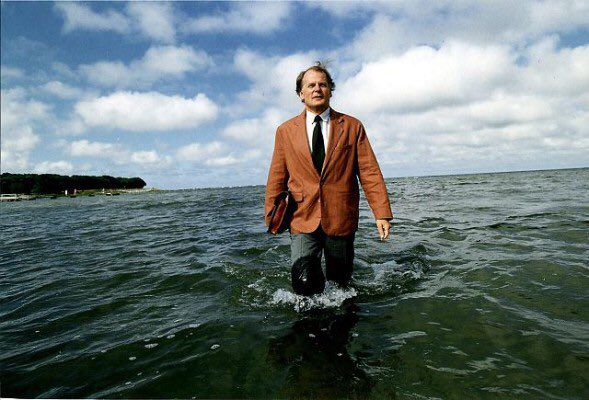


Photo 1 Photo 2

The tweet is soon followed by another “awkward” photo (2), published by @TomasRamberg, a leading domestic reporter at SR (Swedish Radio). It shows the former political leader of the Swedish Centre Party, Olof Johansson:

@TomasRamberg:

If Olof Johansson could agree to this, then…

@JohanIngero’s reply humorously refers to Johansson’s retirement from politics.

@TomasRamberg He disappeared shortly after…

This exchange is followed by journalist @TomasRamberg’s publishing of two more photos depicting two former leaders of the Christian Democrats, Alf Svensson, dressed in swimming trunks (photo 3), and Göran Hägglund (@goranhagglund) (photo 4), the latter serving as a comical follow-up to the former. Photo 4 is explicitly addressed to PR practitioner @JohanIngero, who once worked as Göran Hägglund’s Press Secretary, leading to an ironic discussion about the photo’s promotional value.

Tweet from @TomasRamberg:

@JohanIngero I can hear from your tone that you’re the one who sold them on the idea

[](http://www.google.se/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwirt-KZ47zOAhWF1SwKHfWgDlkQjRwIBw&url=http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/0002/11/alf.html&psig=AFQjCNEbySAGriQcYwoei9wbiowKqRWKNA&ust=1471122146798607)



Photo 3 Photo 4

The photos then give rise to a playful chat about who is most physically fit and the difficulty of staying in shape, with new conversation participants dropping in, also from outside the politics-journalism-PR domain. After a while, @goranhagglund himself, who is now a PR consultant and thus an ex-politician, delivers the following good-natured tweet:

@TomasRamberg @JohanIngero @LidmanLidman Alright then, let's get back to work!

The above tweets, not least the one by @goranhagglund, give the impression of a virtual shared office space, transcending central Stockholm’s different media houses, PR agencies, political headquarters, etc., thus breaking drown their institutional walls and allowing for funny messages and exchanges across professional borders.

* 1. **Transboundary interaction and mutual acknowledgment**

A widespread feature of Twitter and other social media is mutual acknowledgment, in the sense of making positive comments about other professionals’ actions. Acting generously toward others is potentially good for one’s reputation, and might serve strategic interests in terms of relationship management and network building. The two tweets below exemplify the very conventional way of delivering acknowledgment across professional borders. Journalist @miaodabas, known for moderating political web seminars about different topics, receives praise from PR practitioner and ex-journalist @paulronge (first tweet) and ex-Political Secretary of the Conservative Party and PR practitioner @kentpersson (second tweet):

@MiaOdabas super sharp and very interesting. You really capture the issues of the day! 17 December 2015

Starting the day with #smartasamtal where brilliant @miaodabas is leading the discussion 29 January 2016

The next example begins with journalist Patrik Oksanen retweeting a tweet about himself. The original tweet contains news about his receiving a prestigious prize. In the retweet, he adds some text himself, giving thanks for all the congratulations. This prompts more congratulations from different directions, including from the leader of the Swedish Center Party, Annie Lööf:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A fabulously enjoyable eveningBottle With Popping Cork on Twitter Twemoji 2.2.3 Thanks for all the congratulations 9 March 2017  Retweet: @DagensOpinion The award for Editorial Writer of the Year goes to Patrik Oksanen, political editor at [the newspaper] Hudiksvalls Tidning and editorial writer for [online media company] Mittmedia. | Patrik Oksanen’s (@patrikoksanen) tweet about the prize ceremony and following party, is embedded in a retweet of news magazine @DagensOpinion’s tweet about his award. |
| @patrikoksanen Extremely well-deserved. Warmest congratulations to Sweden’s sharpest pen and penetrating analysis and investigation! | Congratulatory tweet to Patrik Oksanen from politician and minister Annie Lööf(@annieloof), praising Oksanen’s qualities as a journalist in superlative terms. |
| @annieloof Thanks! Red Heart on Twitter Twemoji 2.2.3 | Reply from Oksanen, which in turn is liked [:-)]by Annie Lööf. |

Table 2: Transboundary interaction and mutual acknowledgement

Mutual acknowledgment across professional fields might just as well take the form of positive feedback on skills that have nothing to do with traditional professional competencies. In the final example, Niklas Svensson, a journalist at the tabloid *Expressen* known among other things for his interviews with politicians during parliamentary election campaigns (see Olausson 2017), appraises a media appearance by Ebba Busch Thor, leader of the Christian Democratic Party. More precisely, he applauds Busch Thor’s appearance on *Så ska det låta!*, a popular prime-time television show on Swedish public service television, based on the Irish format *The Lyrics Board*, in which celebrities compete in an entertaining music quiz and perform on stage:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Smart move by @buschebba to appear on #SåSkaDetLåta, Wouldn’t surprise me if the Christian Democrats gain a few points in the next poll. 5 Feb 2017 | In the initial tweet, journalist Niklas Svensson praises Busch Thor’s appearance from a political marketing perspective |
| @niklassvensson it’s worth a try anyway :-) | Svensson’s tweet generates a humorous response fromEbba Busch Thor: |
| @buschebba Fantastic singing, to say it againThumbs Up on Twitter Twemoji 2.2.3 | Reply from Svensson, who changes the topic and instead delivers positive feedback on Busch Thor’s vocal performance, together with a “thumbs up” symbol |
| @niklassvensson thanks :-) | Positive and friendly reply from Busch Thor |

Table 3: Transboundary interaction as mutual acknowledgement

1. **A critical theoretical understanding of transboundary interaction between politicians, journalists and PR practitioners**

To begin with, a critical theoretical perspective on the above-exemplified forms of interaction should be viewed as a critical response to the transparency thesis, which is associated with network theory (Castells 2009; 2011a; 2011b; Cardoso 2012). Network theory stresses, among other things, digital technology’s ability to generate symmetric relations through a “culture of sharing” (Cardoso 2012). In the digital age, networked collaboration is becoming customary, with transparency as a key value and practice. An active open stance on the part of individuals, institutions, organizations and businesses, towards each other and towards society as a whole, is supposedly rewarded in the form of more competitive businesses and more confident consumers/citizens. According to Manuel Castells (2011b) “transparency is no longer just a ... virtue ... but an imperative tactic if the aim is to stay clear of disrepute” (Castells 2011b, 11). Thus, this theoretical perspective seems to suggest that cross-professional relations which were previously restricted to hidden back-stage activities and spaces are now, due to the cultural power of networked “sharing”, forced out into the daylight, thereby becoming a (transparent) front-stage phenomenon (cf. Thompson 1995). Twitter and other social media platforms are viewed as public stages from which actors/users disclose how the everyday relations between politicians, journalists and PR practitioners work “in reality” like “authentic” behind-the-scene documentaries.

Arguing against the network-theoretical perspective, however, one could also claim that the transboundary interaction on social media rather exemplifies a dysfunctional public sphere (cf. Fuchs 2014a). To begin with, whether previously hidden connections across professional boundaries really are now being accessed by wider audiences is difficult to verify. Some backstage relations probably do stay backstage, and never come out into the light of social media. In this regard, a study by Berglez (2016) suggests that Twitter seems instead to generate backstage-*like* conversations, i.e. light versions of off-the-record discourse centered around joking and relaxed chatting, which do not preclude the existence of more sensitive and “secret” backstage conversations in offline contexts.

A second critical point is that the *ideological normalization* of very close relations between actors who ought to maintain a certain distance might lead to cynicism (Sloterdijk 1987) and apathy, and reinforce the feeling of a post-democratic condition (Crouch 2000). Consequently, it could lead to further distrust of society’s central institutions among the public (Rothstein 2005). Even if the everyday chatting across professional borders does not lead to cronyism, or other types of abuse of power, it might nevertheless pave the way for a legitimation crisis (Habermas 1988).

The important background to the above-formulated criticism of network-theoretical thinking is the assumption that transboundary interaction on social media involves a *neoliberalization of cross-professional relations,*[[4]](#footnote-4) i.e. that the activities transcending the boundaries between professional fields more or less stem from “market-based logic and practices, especially logics of market determinism, commodification, individualization, competitive ritual and self-interest” (Phelan 2014: 57). In this context, the idea is not to exchange network-technological determinism (Van Dijk 1999) for historical materialist orthodoxy. On the one hand, the transboundary interactions witness to fundamental sides of human communication, such as the need for sociability and humor. This makes it difficult to say that ironic joking between a PR practitioner and a journalist on Twitter somehow corresponds to neoliberal capitalism and the conflict between capital and labor. But, on the other hand, capitalism still has something to do with it. Sean Phelan’s (2014) perspective of “neoliberalized logic” seems relevant in this case, suggesting that what potentially makes neoliberal processes so powerful is that they might be produced “by social institutions and agents that do not see themselves as neoliberal” (Phelan 2014, 33) and in situations that seem very remote from macro-oriented economic and material processes in society. Consequently, everyday exchanges of jokes and likes across professional fields on social media might be viewed as banal (Billig 1995) and “innocent” forms of interaction and thus insignificant for social research. However, such banal discourse might have a serious impact by serving as a lubricant for macro-oriented structural changes involving the labor-market (the expansion and intensification of a marketized “team-switching” culture) as well as the ongoing “PR-ization of politics” (the convergence of politics and PR) and churnalism (the convergence of journalism and PR).

**3.1** More precisely how is transboundary interaction connected to neoliberal pro-

cesses?

The point of departure is the “economic” dimension of socio-technological conventions of everyday social media use. As is the case with performances on social media in general, transboundary interaction exemplifies how “the ‘reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens) has become an explicit form of labour under post-Fordist capital in the form of ‘self-branding’” (Hearn 2008, 197; Marwick 2013). In this respect, Fairclough’s (1995, 2009) media-theoretical concept, *conversationalism*,is important, suggesting that the above-exemplified creative use and/or combining of discourses, genres and styles for the sake of impression management takes place within a *networked market* where actors primarily *sell* ideas or products; including trying to establish a fan-base, seeking to attract voters, etc. (Davis 2013). However, what seems peculiar about the above-exemplified politics-media-PR interplay is that the self-branding practices also spill over on to and thus involve cross-professional interaction that might seem ethically dubious. Consequently, when a politician is praising a journalist for his brilliant ability to cover domestic affairs (the Lööf/Oksanen example), or when a conservative ex-politician/PR-practitioner and a news media producer of a leftist tabloid reveal their television habits to their Twitter audiences (the Persson/Olsson example), the involved actors seem to calculate that taking part in the buddy-buddy oriented exchange across professional borders is more advantageous for their careers than avoiding it would be.

As a suggestion, the existence of transboundary activities needs to be understood in relation to the cultural pressure (or allure, depending on the person) to avoid traditional professionalism and its “impersonal, rationalized procedures” (Holmes 2006, 7), and instead to embrace the vivid self-branding language of social media culture. The use of social skills, empathy, humor, self-irony, etc. in promoting yourself as well as your organization is the universal language of social media, applied by “everyone” irrespective of professional belonging (Marwick 2013). Hence, the above exemplified cross-professional exchange is stimulated by, and/or drawn into, Twitter’s *common market-oriented reward system* about what should be considered good/bad examples of professionalism. According to this reward system, success is not necessarily synonymous with how well one represents or defends one’s professional culture in relation to other professional cultures, but concerns who you *are* as a person (funny, powerful, charismatic, etc.).[[5]](#footnote-5) The individualization of the construction of professional identities in society (Rosa 2003) which, as a consequence, is thriving on social media (cf. Olausson 2017) is characterized by discourse in which the actors/users are not necessarily *being* something (a journalist, politician, PR practitioner) but rather *working as* something (as a journalist…). This, in turn, facilitates personal/informal rather than formal/strict relationships across professional boundaries (Rosa 2003, 19).

At the same time, traditional boundary work (Revers 2014) is still important and highly alive on Twitter and other social media sites. Whether through single posts/statuses or in the context of cross-professional interaction, journalists and politicians do also clearly articulate their different competencies, roles and duties in society (see Olausson 2017); journalists do also demonstrate professional integrity in relation to the PR business (Fredriksson & Johansson 2014); and so forth. Therefore, one can reasonably assume that transboundary activities tend to be “compensated” and thus balanced by boundary work and vice versa (Berglez 2016). This involves the users’ ability, in a Foucauldian sense, to “discipline” their entire public persona as such, i.e. to perfectly combine professional/formal and personal/private communication, including “barely professional” and “verging on inappropriate” contributions. Below, different variants of how boundary and transboundary interaction might be combined are illustrated, imagined as consecutive situations of social media activity:

(A) TRANSBOUNDARY-TRANSBOUNDARY-TRANSBOUNDARY-TRANSBOUNDARY-TRANBOUNDARY…

(B) BOUNDARY-BOUNDARY-BOUNDARY-BOUNDARY-BOUNDARY…

(C) TRANSBOUNDARY-BOUNDARY-BOUNDARY-TRANSBOUNDARY-BOUNDARY…

Politicians and journalists have the most to lose from too much transboundary interaction (A),[[6]](#footnote-6) as this might have a negative impact on their professional authority and status. Option (B), only engaging in boundary work, i.e. ‘You’re a politician and I’m a journalist and let’s remain professional’, etc., exemplifies the ethically safe way of interacting across professional borders, and also tends to provide the actors with authority and symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1972/2003) within the own professional group as well as among the “traditionally minded” citizens. However, it might also become associated with excessive strictness and thus be bad self-marketing. What remains for achieving self-promotional “success” then is (C), i.e. recurrent switching and balancing between boundary and transboundary interaction.

The practices of impression management in the social media landscape are not reducible to economic branding; i.e., they stem not entirely from market capitalism, but from modern society as such and its inherent drive towards ever greater complexity in identity formations (Giddens 1990; Rosa 2003). Nevertheless, mode (C) needs to be understood in relation to neoliberal economics’ “flexibilization of production and the labor processes” (Ampuja & Koivisto 2014, 456). In societies where subjects must adapt with increasing rapidity to changing material and economic conditions of capitalism, *flexible personalities* (Holmes 2006) characterized by “code switching” ability are highly needed. In this respect, public and semi-public figures belonging to the politics-media-PR sector can potentially serve as socio-economic role models on Twitter and/or other social media sites. Clinging solely to old professional boundaries is anti-flexible, while playing, challenging or even breaking them, i.e. intermingling across professional fields with ease and treating digital space as a single common market, generates high flexibility scores. This is indicative of strong communicative entrepreneurship (see Ampuja & Koivisto 2014): the ability to be dynamic, vital, and creative all the time*.*[[7]](#footnote-7)

It might be thought that transboundary interaction is not a problem as long as the relations between these professional groups are still dominated by traditional boundary work. There is no harm, so to speak, with the occasional ironic joke, or personal chat, assuming that the users always make sure to *bounce back* to their basic professional identities and duties. Even if this seems rational somehow, the weakness of this kind of reasoning is the assumption that professional relationships and identities will remain intact instead of silently changing. In accordance with Hegel’s statement about the owl of Minerva, which spreads its wings only at dusk, the effects that ever more micro-acts of the transboundary kind might generate in the future may not become clear to us until afterwards. To use another neoliberal term, an expansion of transboundary interaction on social media risks paving the way for *fundamentally* *deregulated* relations between politicians, journalists and PR practitioners in society.

1. **Concluding comments**

Social media research was originally dominated by approaches embedded in network-theoretical optimism about the democratic potentials of digital media technology (see Mandiberg 2012). But, as the social media landscape gradually became colonized by market capitalist interests and logic, involving ownership concentration, issues of surveillance/aggregated content, branding culture, etc., the need for critical research became obvious (Fuchs 2014a; 2014b; Marwick 2013). In this complementary contribution to a critical understanding of social media/Twitter, it is argued that everyday social intermingling between politicians, journalists and PR practitioners – referred to as transboundary interaction – exemplify an emerging “neoliberalization” of cross-professional relations. From a dialectical perspective, it is suggested that transboundary interaction serves as one component among others that together set the stage for the market-driven hybridization (Chadwick 2013) and convergence (Deuze 2007) of politics, media and PR as such.

The transboundary kind of interaction discussed in this article ought to be further tested and studied through systematic empirical studies. Such studies could follow social media users over time, or focus on the complex relations between boundary and transboundary work. Furthermore, there is need for comparisons across nation-states. Are transboundary activities more common in Western countries with relatively small populations, such as Sweden, which are characterized by small distances between elites? To better understand how cross-professional relations work and develop in the social media landscape, it is possible to survey and interview professionals who frequently engage in transboundary interaction online. Citizen studies also seem relevant, i.e. examining ordinary users’ observations of transboundary interactions and their views on it from a democratic point of view. How do different groups of citizens react to the exchange of “cozy tweets” between politicians, journalists and PR practitioners? “Thumbs up” or angry smileys?

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nesseminarium om Almedalsveckan som politisk arena. Stockholm: Södertörns högskola, Institutionen för historia och samtidsstudier, Samtidshistoriska institutet.

1. At the same time, social media tends to generate new forms of professional distinctions and boundaries, for example between those journalists/politicians/PR-practitioners who use social media in their everyday work, and those who don’t (see Hedman & Djerf-Pierre 2013); or between professionals on social media endowed with high status/power and those lower down in the hierarchy (Marwick 2013; Berglez 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The examples derive from different samples, which have been collected on different occasions during 2015–2017 for the research project *The Journalism–Politics–PR Interplay on Twitter: Hybridized, Cross-Professional Relations on the Web*, funded by the Swedish Research Council. As this is not an empirical study, the examples presented do not represent the users’ activities on Twitter in a more general sense. Thus, in this article, the selected users appear only in order to exemplify the different forms of transboundary interaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thus, the social media site discussed in this article is Twitter, which is used for writing short, text-based messages (tweets) and forwarding (retweeting) others’ tweets. With more than 300 million monthly users worldwide, Twitter has become a central digital tool for professionals, not least in the broad communication sector. It is an open, public network that allows users to make connections with (i.e. follow) whomever they want, with each tweet being restricted to 140 characters. An exchange between two or more users might generate longer threads, but shorter exchanges of 3–6 tweets, or very micro-oriented communication with only two tweets (one initial tweet and one reply) seem to be more common. The very limited forms of interaction might generate misunderstandings, thereby exacerbating polarization and antagonism (e.g. Yardi & boyd 2010), but this does not exclude the possibility of very consensus oriented interaction (Berglez 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this respect, according to political economists, network theory becomes a barrier to enlightenment. Network theory tends to highlight the role of the Internet and social media for the generation of dynamic, social transformation and individual empowerment. But, simultaneously, what becomes repressed is how the use of the digital technology is framed by market capitalism and its power relations (Van Dijk 1999). Ampuja & Koivisto (2014) suggest that Manuel Castells’s work “offers a version of information society theory that is compatible with the neoliberal restructuration of capitalist societies” (Ampuja & Koivisto 2014, 456; cf. Holmes 2006, 9; Fuchs 2012). Amongst other things, Castells tends to highlight subjectivities whose networked relations and practices are mainly occupied with innovation and entrepreneurship (Ampuja & Koivisto 2014), thus fitting with the ideal subject of late capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This kind of market-oriented reward system might then either harmonize with or go against existing ethical guidelines for social media use among the different professional groups. While some employers and organizations encourage their staff to practice self-branding with few restrictions, others might apply more restrictive policies (see Vaast & Kaganer 2013). There might also be differences between the professional groups, in which unrestricted self-branding comes more naturally for people in the PR business than for politicians and journalists. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See footnote 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A parallel demand is always to be ready to jump back and forth between employment and unemployment (see, for example, Edström and Ladendorf 2013). See also footnote 4.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)