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Normy w komunikowaniu retorycznym
Norms in rhetorical communication

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Politicians' privacy management in social media as a tool for shaping ethos
Zarządzanie prywatnością w mediach społecznościowych jako narzędzie kształtowania etosu

Abstract

The concept of privacy in relation to public figures is linked to the development and ubiquity of mass media. In times before photojournalists, paparazzi and social media, the private and public spheres functioned separately, with no insight provided into various aspects of users' lives. In the age of mediated reality, skilful management of the boundary between the private and the public can be an effective persuasive tool in the realm of ethos. Furthermore, persuasive objectives are evolving, as are the rhetorical principles that govern the development of ethos. In this article, I analyse how leading global politicians use the concept of privacy in public communication. The discussion focuses on types of private information disclosed, the effectiveness of such communication strategies and their impact on achieving persuasive goals, particularly the effective shaping of a positive public image.

Koncepcja prywatności w obszarze wizerunku osób publicznych wiąże się z rozwojem mediów masowych i ich wszechobecnością. Sfery: prywatna i publiczna funkcjonowały odrębnie w czasach, gdy nie było fotoreporterów, paparazzich oraz mediów społecznościowych, umożliwiających wgląd w różne aspekty życia jego użytkowników. W czasach rzeczywistości zmediatyzowanej umiejętne zarządzanie granicą pomiędzy tym co prywatne i publiczne może być skutecznym narzędziem perswazji w obszarze etosu. Co istotniejsze zaś, zmieniają się cele perswazyjne, a z nimi – normy retoryczne, dotyczące konstruowania etosu. W artykule analizuję, w jaki sposób czołowi politycy o zasięgu światowym operują kategorią prywatności w komunikowaniu publicznym. Rozważania koncentrują się na rodzajach ujawniania sfery prywatnej, na ocenie skuteczności takiej strategii komunikacyjnej oraz jej wpływu na realizację celów perswazyjnych, w tym w szczególności na skuteczne kształtowanie pozytywnego wizerunku publicznego.

Key words

ethos, privacy, public image, social media, politicians
etos, prywatność, wizerunek publiczny, media społecznościowe, politycy

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Politicians' privacy management in social media as a tool for shaping ethos

Introduction

Today, the term "privacy management" is primarily associated with options, settings, and preferences on social media platforms. Coined in the field of new technologies, the term refers to issues related to personal data protection, communication technology design, privacy policies and regulations, and behavioral targeting. These include access options to the information, selective content sharing, and parameters for building groups of both immediate and distant recipients. They also inevitably lead to associations with big data.

Privacy, however, in its original meaning, is a series of personal rights attributed to a human being: the right to exclusivity, separateness, secrecy and solitude (Warren, Brandeis 1890), freedom to control information about oneself (Kohler 1907), the right of an individual to withdraw from society and social practices (Altman 1977), civil liberty and human dignity (Schoeman 1992).

Nowadays definitions of privacy in that meaning can be found in many popular dictionaries: the quality or state of being apart from company or observation (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), the condition of being private or withdrawn; seclusion (Collins Dictionary), a state in which one is not observed or disturbed by other people (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries). Seclusion, privateness, solitude, isolation, separateness, solitariness, lack of disturbance are only some of the enumerated synonyms for privacy (Merriam-Webster, Thesaurus Plus).

Named and defined, privacy is a relatively new component of the catalogue of human rights (the cited definition from a Harvard Law Review article, from 1890, famously known as "a right to be let alone," is the first in history), although it can be found in ancient times as one of virtues, a component of *ars bene vivendi*, mentioned by Ovid in Tristia: *Bene vixit, bene qui latuit*. Until the rise of mass media, privacy was the attribute of very few individuals, whose achievements in various fields and

whose fame reached beyond the spheres of direct communication. Since then, the development and transformation of privacy have accelerated, driven by changes in the media landscape and technological advancement. Moreover, today, privacy applies to all individuals using communication media and is most often considered in terms of the security of identity and personal data, hence the popularity of this approach, mentioned at the beginning.

In this article, however, I will address the category of privacy shaped by increased public exposure, which in the social media era has become an attribute of all users (both active and passive), as opposed to what is publicly available and presented. Maintaining the separation of these spheres guarantees the security of public communication. For years, the ability to set this boundary was also seen as a marker of proficiency in determining appropriate communication distances and was even identified with professionalism. The increased level of discomfort associated with violating these boundaries was clearly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the majority of the professional lives of various groups of employees moved online. At the same time, while connecting via technology, we physically remained in our private spaces, where elements of our non-work lives (children, pets, household clutter) uncontrollably encroached on the sphere of professional interactions, causing significant stress and distraction (Luebstorf et al. 2023).

Currently, in an era of increased mediated communication, beyond the private--public divide, attributes of communication such as transparency, openness, and accessibility have become crucial as a counterweight to privacy and discretion. These concepts, in turn, allow for a direct connection between privacy and public image and its shaping.

Norms related to presenting fragments of private spheres to the public are changing dynamically with the specificity of new media. Similarly, the boundaries between what is private and confidential and what is made public are constantly shifting in mediated communication, to the point of so-called social exhibitionism (Leksy 2014). However, thanks to social media, privacy has undoubtedly become a permanent element in shaping the ethos[1] of public figures and an indispensable element in building communities and reach: The more open users are, the more they gain, e.g., in terms of building social capital (Belleghem, Eenhuizen, Veris, 2011). Situating privacy within the construction of politicians' credibility, I refer to the Aristotelian concept of ethos, according to which "an orator must not only ensure that his argument is convincing and credible, but also accessible for its own presentation and appropriately oriented to the judgmental concern of the listener."

1. In this article, I base my work on the concept of ethos, understood as the image of the sender (shaped both by what they said and by how the recipient perceives their behavior and the circumstances of their statement) (Maingueneau 2014).

Research field and material

Since privacy is currently an aspect of every public image, it cannot be escaped or invalidated, and its use for shaping the image is limited to decisions on the degree of disclosure or protection of privacy, or manipulation of facts from the private sphere so that their perception meets the intentions of the creator.

The most obvious association with privacy in the context of building the ethos of public figures is the image of celebrities or internet creators rather than politicians. For the former, the appeal of the private sphere is built on a contrast to the widely known, staged, media-driven, and usually elusive, hidden private image.

Although audiences are aware of the fact that the public image of actors, artists and presenters is created (often a collage of many different images), they are also curious about "what they are really like." Interestingly, audiences derive gratification from both the realization that a celebrity's private image resembles the media image and the dissonance of discovering that offstage and on screen, a given person bears no resemblance to the characters portrayed. Both scenarios constitute a confirmation of authenticity. And the observers need this, even though this trait and the entire image it constitutes influences them solely in the sphere of providing entertainment and, possibly, artistic experiences (which, however, are not as significantly influenced by authenticity).

Consumers of new media, are accustomed to this approach to privacy in media portrayals. They expect the disclosure of private information, accept its publication as the norm, and rarely consider it as a crossing of the line between private and public. It is often impossible to recognize that it is a matter of a certain tension between what is revealed, public, and what is kept private, discreetly concealed. Walking this delicate line of balance has a huge impact on how people perceive their image on social media. And its conscious and skillful use in everyday communication allows us to achieve various persuasive goals in accordance with the sender's intention.

For simplicity and to avoid confusion among numerous definitions, I propose viewing the private sphere for the purposes of this analysis as those activities and reflections of politicians that are not directly related to their office. While family-friendly or demographic policy issues fall within the professional interests of a minister or president, they do not necessarily require legitimization in the form of demonstrating one's parenthood. Similarly, an official visit by a head of state to another country is part of the ruler's duties, but accompanying them to such a situation by a family or partner, or even having them, is not.

Like all categories of public figures, it is obvious that famous politicians also utilize privacy in shaping their public image, especially to create the *persona* (Horton, Wohl 2006). But what specific persuasive purposes are served by

references to the private sphere in their case? What exact spheres of privacy do they operate within, and how does their private life manifest itself in their publications? Which topoi and archetypal figures are mobilized to enhance their image while avoiding the risk of deliberate "image warming"? These research questions informed an analysis of content published on the official social media channels of selected global political leaders, with particular attention to the strategic deployment of elements of privacy in the construction of public image. For the purposes of this study, 114 posts published on the official Facebook profiles of world leaders were examined, encompassing both linguistic and non-linguistic modes of communication. The key to their selection was first-person narrative and content containing both official and informal information. Among these, I identified profiles whose publications refer to the non-professional sphere. Facebook was chosen as the research source because it remains a leading social media platform[2]. This medium has paved the way for other social media platforms through its innovative content architecture and user data delivery algorithms. It delivers content in the form of a stream of dynamic notifications tailored to user preferences based on complex algorithms (Pałasz 2019).

The 36 excerpts analyzed come from the posts published January–June 2025 on Facebook's official channels of (alphabetical order): Andrzej Duda, Marine Le Pen, Emmanuel Macron, Sanna Marin, Zoran Milanović, Viktor Orban, Petr Pavel, Evika Silina, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Alexander Stubb, Justin Trudeau, Donald J. Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky. I also analyzed the information contained in the Facebook "visiting cards", which serve as a concise introduction the politicians to the public.

While some of the aforementioned politicians explicitly refer to the private sphere of their lives, others merely allude to it, or even leave its existence to the imagination of their audience. For this reason, it was not always easy to pinpoint content relating to the private sphere. In those cases where this was difficult, so the message about the privacy was not direct, one can infer greater skill in shaping their public image. The ideal is to skillfully weave information from their private lives into their professional image so that the whole creates a coherent picture. In the case of politicians, reminiscences from their private lives (friendship, pets, care for the environment and social environment) serve to convey the values on which their actions are based. They are intended to build a sense of consistency in the politician's beliefs and actions and reinforce their ethos as a righteous, noble person, engaged in strong social ties and supported by their commited surroundings (family, friends). Specific persuasive goals depend on the politician's status, professional and political activity, and the level of social extroversion.

2. Most popular social networks worldwide as of February 2025, by number of monthly active users, 2025, statista.com (access 10.12.2025).

Analysis

Based on identified content I have identified several main persuasive goals that guide the disclosure of elements of politicians' private lives or allude to them. The analysis of private life encompasses, among other things, interpersonal relationships and participation in social life in specific, non-public roles (father, husband, friend). Individual traits and preferences (related to personality, not office) also have a private nature, such as demonstrating self-determination, intellectual independence, and expressing personal views and opinions. I will analyze these elements using specific examples from the publications of these politicians.

One of the most common ways to connect with the private sphere is to showcase family life by posting a photo with a loved one, naming the relationship with that person, and/or mentioning the loved one. This type of posting aligns with Erving Goffman's social roles theory: by playing different roles, depending on who the audience is, people, in this case, politicians, use "impression management" to present themselves to others just as they hope to be perceived (Goffman 1959).

These are most often members of the immediate family, such as the wife of the President of Finland (Suzanne Stubb), who was mentioned several times on his official channel and also appears in photos, parents (Viktor Orban posted a photo with his mother on his birthday), or children (Trudeau and Schwarzenegger wrote about their sons, Viktor Orban mentions his grandchildren). These efforts foster interpersonal bonds and close relationships, which are associated with family members and engaged relationships. Because family and interpersonal bonds are universal values, appreciated by the majority, these family-based efforts allow audiences to identify with the politician presenting his family life as "one of them", with similar values and worldview. This is a clear reference to the Everyman archetype, one of many. This type of communication is also an opportunity to showcase personal successes—such as marriage, lasting relationships, and intergenerational bonds.

The image of a person who embraces family values is warm, engaged, and appears authentic and complete by showcasing aspects of life beyond just professional work. At the same time, it draws on interpersonal skills acquired through personal life experiences, not just by formalized knowledge and education. It thus strengthens the shaping of the politician's ethos on the levels of arete, and incidentally, also in the sphere of eunoia, through the kindness and respect with which they treat those close to them and them with whose they share such intimate moments of joyful life. By communicating in this way, politicians establish so-called para-social interactions (Horton, Wohl 2006).

In some cases, mentioning loved ones in politicians' publications was a direct reference to the celebrated occasion, bringing to mind promotional activities known

in brand communication as real-time marketing (Kotler, Armstrong 2018), meaning messages tailored to the occasion (and, in rhetorical terms, fulfilling the rhetorical principle of novelty). Viktor Orban excels in such activities. His profile features photos of his loved ones, primarily in the context of holidays and occasions, for example, a photo with his mother on his birthday, with a personal caption from the Hungarian Prime Minister: "I never understood why we celebrate those who have a birthday and not those who gave birth to us. Thank you, Mom!"[3], or with his grandchildren and a wry caption for Father's Day: "Father's Day. Being a father is good. But being a grandfather is the best." The slightly humorous tone of captions can work to the politician's advantage as an attempt to demonstrate distance from the social roles they perform. It also mitigates the excessive pomposity associated with celebrating celebratory occasions, which have become a pretext for posting about personal privacy.

What is important is not only what and who, but also how it is presented on Orban's profile. The intended positive effect is undermined by the visual aspect: the composition of the photos and their graphic processing. Carefully matching the publication to the occasion, staged scenes (the mother's embrace, the bouquet – it is not at all obvious who is giving them to whom in this photo), and the standardized, formulaic graphic design of the photos with the Prime Minister's logo likely spoil the intended effect of naturalness and authenticity. The photo with the mother is also undoubtedly staged and posed. Orbán, on the other hand, failed to capitalize on the potential of the family scene – he looks directly into the camera, not at his mother, who is cuddling him.

All of this makes the publications on these occasions resemble election leaflets more than photos from Viktor Orbán's family album. Instead of a warm, family-oriented man, the resulting image suggests a politician adept at using social media, coolly calculating. Posting photos of loved ones seems utilitarian, while

3. All translations by the author.

his true intentions (calculated to generate positive feedback and applause) seem to be: initiating a connection with the recipients of his content, evoking emotion and, positive associations with him. It seems that the goal of lifting the veil on Viktor Orbán's private life is intentional and clearly defined. His ambitions as an active politician include maintaining a key political position or transitioning from his current position to another, equally influential and prominent one. Therefore, he requires electoral support and recognizes that, within the contemporary celebritization of politics, this support increasingly depends on eliciting the sympathy of observers.

A less direct way to draw audiences' attention to their family relationships is, instead of publishing photos of them, for politicians to cite the achievements of people close to them and describe their successes. Content framed this way focuses on the individuals described, not the writer. From this perspective, it is more beneficial for shaping the politician's ethos, as they speak not about themselves but about their child, speaking from the perspective of a father. The communicated, often explicit, intention of such publications is to express pride, joy, and other positive feelings associated with their loved ones' achievements, rather than using their stories as part of their own success story. However, the positive image-impacting effects of politicians using this type of narrative are numerous, including highlighting the abilities and successes of a relative (good genes!), yet the father-son relationship is merely mentioned and not the main reason for the publication. At the same time, the politician's ability to deeply feel noble emotions, such as pride, joy, and admiration, as well as the ability to dedicate the audience's full attention to their son, rather than playing the main role, is emphasized.

The emotions displayed are also aligned with those of other social media users: by expressing pride and joy in their children, which are the feelings widely shared by parents across cultures, politicians mobilize the *everyman* archetype.They thus gain competence stemming from experience (phronesis), and citizens-observers are more likely to hand power over to those who know our daily worries and joys firsthand and who share the same, profound values (principles of similarity, commitment, and competence).

Justin Trudeau alludes to the role of fatherhood in a demonstrative way: he considers this social role crucial and lists it first on his Facebook profile: "Father, former Prime Minister of Canada." This lends the profile a certain pathos and seriousness, unlike the humorous description and appeal on Arnold Schwarzenegger's profile:

> Former Mr. Olympia, Conan, Terminator, and Governor of California. I killed the Predator. I told you I'd be back. Sign up for my newsletter and join my positive corner of the internet: arnoldspumpclub.com.

Although Trudeau's description is not as frivolous, the invocation of the role of fatherhood gives it a warm and more personal touch than formal business cards like "Official social media page of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán," "Former Prime Minister of Finland," or "President of the Republic of Finland." The latter, however, are standard for politicians' introductions on Facebook profiles. A presentation like Trudeau's is a striking exception and indicates the hierarchy of roles with which the politician identifies. However, it appears to be a deliberately established self-presentation strategy following Trudeau's resignation and (temporarily?) retreat into the political shadows. Given the loss of voter confidence, limiting his professional activity and focusing on building audience sympathy seems a deliberate decision. The former Canadian prime minister is attempting to achieve this by appealing to fundamental values. Focusing audiences on everyday matters, reflections, and emotions may help distract them from Trudeau's political failures.

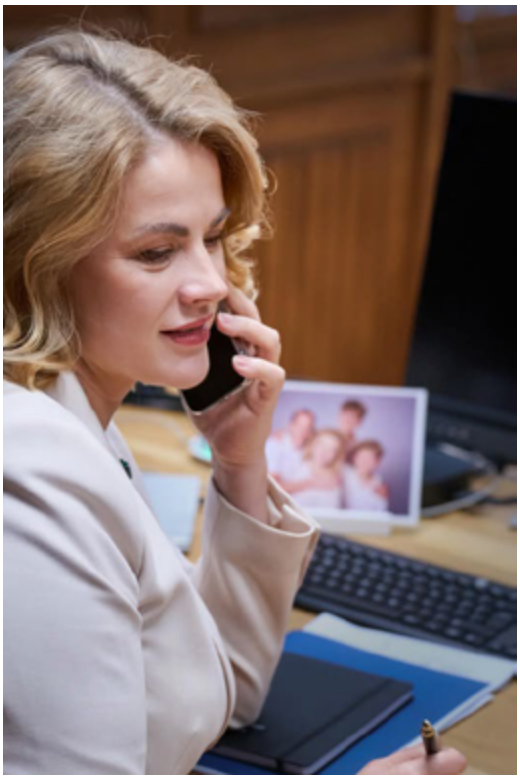
The fatherhood leitmotif is also regularly used on his profile by ex-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger. His style seems well-suited to the publication's channel and audience. In the face of the end of his political career his political and social activities are secondary topics for them. Posted content and audience reaction indicate that this group is largely composed of fans of Schwarzenegger's film career, but as an actor, Schwarzenegger is also no longer as active as he used to be; his efforts are now focused on business, social activities and building his potential as an influencer. It is therefore not surprising that the personal reference, which supports the broadcaster's image potential, refers to a reflection on the series in which the politician's son starred. In his post, he tagged the official profile of his son, Patrick Schwarzenegger, alluded to his screen success, and also jokingly referred to intimate scenes with him, noting the familial resemblance.

> I was so pumped to take a break from filming to celebrate @patrickschwarzenegger at the White Lotus Season 3 premiere.
> What a show! I could claim to be surprised to find out he has a nude scene, but what can I say – the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Don't miss it this Sunday – trust me.

The nature of this publication suggests it may be a paid advertisement (although Facebook markers contradict this), but its content also positively impacts the image of both men. Perhaps the primary purpose of Schwarzenegger's publications about his son's career, over and above self-presentation, is to support his "reach" in social media.

Parenthood also appears as a topic in a post by Latvian politician Evika Silina. However, it plays a certain role as a "negative space" in the publication. She writes about values related to family and interpersonal bonds, thus using the universal topos of the family in her social communication and without emphasizing her own family status:

> Heartfelt congratulations on the International Family Day!
> Today, let's appreciate the most precious – the people who love us, encourage us, and are there for us in both happy and sad moments. The circle of closest people may be different for everyone, but it is important to feel safe and heard.
> The family is the foundation of society and the source of the strength of the country – it is there that belonging, values are born, and the next generation is raised. Let's appreciate our closest people and strengthen our common foundation every day.
> May this day be filled with gratitude and family love!



The publication contains general, politically correct statements ("may be different for everyone") and platitudes ("the family is the foundation of society and the source of strength"). It is noticeable that Evika Silina is striving for universality and inclusivity in this way. The publication is depersonalized, rather lofty tone, characterized by pathos-based persuasion, is inconsistent with the topic at hand. There is no reference to personal feelings or relationships, and no close person appears – Silina has not taken advantage of the opportunity to build her credibility on personal experiences. The communication style is reminiscent of the preamble to a political platform, rather than a personal statement about fundamental values. It can be assumed that the lack of personal tone and content in the publication was caused by an attempt to achieve a professional image of a person focused on acting for the benefit of society, on great ideas, instead of on the "small" matters of private life.

The context of the other posts on Evika Silina's official profile is also significant. They primarily feature photos and reports from official visits, meetings, flag--waving ceremonies, and official celebrations, in formal uniforms, accompanied by equally formally dressed, respectable individuals. The "business card," or short profile description, is also very formal: "Prime Minister of the Republic of Latvia."

However, what in the above post is important is the relationship between the content of the post and its visual representation. A certain dissonance is caused by addressing a private issue: family and family life, and speaking about it in generalities, without personal references, examples, or any indication of belonging to one's own family. The emphasis on Evika Silina's private life is subtle and present only in the visual layer. The photograph illustrating the publication was

taken in circumstances similar to those of other photos on Silina's profile: in a formal suit, at a desk, likely in the office where the Prime Minister performs her professional duties. However, she smiles warmly while talking on the phone, and in the background, a framed, blurred photograph can be seen on the desk. It shows two adults and two children, embraced by their parents. This discreet *preatermissio* is a subtle reference to the private sphere, which – as it can be seen from information available online – is the plane of personal success. The Latvian Prime Minister is a wife and mother of three children. Such references could be a source of valuable life experience and evidence of the "real-life" skills that allow a given politician to gain public trust. It is also an opportunity to highlight commonalities with the audience, identifying with them (*eunoia*), and attempting to gain their favor (*captatio benevolentiae*). Despite this, personal themes are not extensively explored in Evika Silina's publications. Why the politician did not decide to take such a step remains a matter of speculation.

The reason why the family sphere, though successful and full of achievements, is not emphasized by the politician may be, quite simply, concern for the privacy of loved ones. A second, equally important, reason may be the desire to base one's public image primarily on professional and substantive achievements, and much less on personal successes. It is important especially for female politicians and that way of avoiding personal issues may be an element of an image-building strategy based on professionalism, strictly separated from the private sphere related to running a household and caring for children – activities that have dominated women's images for centuries. This may indicate a deliberate establishment of personal boundaries and an effort to maintain separation between the public and professional spheres. In the case of a politician, such boundary management may foster associations with decisiveness and self-determination, while enabling the controlled dissemination of information – features that are central to the image of a professional and effective political actor.

Male politicians readily demonstrate their spouses' shared commitment to their roles and responsibilities. They publish information about their official activities, formal meetings, and so on, maintaining a plural narrative. This emphasizes that they can count on their partner's constant support and that they are, in fact, a two-person team. In this way, they subtly evoke the long-term emotional relationship they are involved in, which implies stability, constancy of feelings, and loyalty - qualities useful for a politician as image elements that inspire trust. Finnish President Alexander Stubb excels in publications illustrating his wife's participation in official presidential events. He writes, for example:

> Suzanne and I are on an official visit to Japan. On Friday, we'll visit Hakui, Tokyo, and Osaka.

> Suzanne and I have moved to Kultaranta, Naantali, for the summer. It is an honor to spend the coming summers in the renovated Kultaranta.

Although the content of the first post, in particular, concerns the official visit, President Stubb refers to his wife by name, thus in the context of a personal relationship, not by their official position (the First Lady). Polish President Andrzej Duda employed a similar tactic: "With great emotion and joy, Agata and I took part in the inauguration of the pontificate of the Holy Father Leo XIV in the Vatican." Petr Pavel writes about his wife: "Today, Ewa and I joined the Czech Cancer Day, which this year focuses on preventing colon cancer. It can be detected by screening, check it out." Here, too, despite the official circumstances, in the role of state representatives, the president's wife was referred to by name. This is not linguistic behavior consistent with international etiquette, especially diplomatic protocol – however, social media posts, even by leading politicians, are governed by different rules. Politicians, therefore, break convention and diminish the etiquette formalism of their image by publicly referring to loved ones and referring to them by their first names: Agata, Suzanne, Eva.

The specific nature of Facebook allows for a smaller communication distance with followers and at least the potential for engaging in dialogue with them. An overly formal tone, associated with official pronouncements, is inappropriate for this communication channel. It remains an open question whether this direct approach, by name, to a partner who, after all, holds an official position, stems from a belief in the validity of the outdated rule that everyone is on a first-name basis online. Regardless of the intention, referring to the wives of heads of state by their first names creates an ambivalent effect. On the one hand, it casts politicians as partners, individuals engaged in long-standing emotional and family relationships, and ensures that their closest relatives are present at important moments. On the other hand, for audiences more sensitive to appropriateness in the behavior of state leaders, this linguistic behavior may seem overly familiar and incompatible with the dignity of office. However, it seems that, as a result, the image of politicians, thanks to these familiar phrases, becomes more accessible and evokes a greater resemblance to ordinary, everyday behavior, and therefore a greater connection with ordinary citizens.

It is not just romantic and family relationships that politicians cite in their official media outlets. The topos of friendship is also a highly popular topic. Its invocation allows politicians to portray themselves as individuals with numerous relationships, at the center of social and societal events, well-liked, attractive, and deeply valued. After all, being called a friend evokes a range of positive associations, such as devotion, loyalty, and a willingness to listen to others. Arnold Schwarzenegger, invoking the topos of friendship, also alludes to values such

as respect for diversity, which leads to associations with the ability to reconcile differences and find common ground—extremely useful in a politician's career:

> I love bringing old friends together! It was fantastic to see my dear friend Tony Blair and introduce him to my brother, @dannydevito.

Justin Trudeau also posted a public "friend" appeal on his social media channel, as a gesture of solidarity with Joe Biden. On the day the media reported the former US president's cancer diagnosis, Trudeau wrote, omitting the official terms: "Joe, I'm thinking about you and Jill today. You've always been a fighter, my friend!" It is not just the fact that he refers to the former US president by his first name that constitutes a reference to the private sphere. The closeness of the relationship is further signaled by the fact that Trudeau addresses both Mr. and Mrs. Biden, demonstrating the social relationships he maintains with both spouses and his close relationship with both. The reference to the private nature of his relationship with Joe Biden is emphasized by the photo of Trudeau and Biden illustrating the post, in which the latter allows himself to touch the former Canadian prime minister's arm. Both faces are turned toward each other, and their facial expressions are meant to indicate the good friendship the politicians maintain.

The credibility of the post's verbal content, however, is undermined by its visual context. Although Biden appears to be laughing heartily, his gaze is directed not toward his immediate interlocutor but toward another individual visible in the background behind Justin Trudeau, who is also smiling; additionally, the hands of a further person in the frame are shown clasped in applause. This visual configuration suggests that the laughter does not arise from an intimate exchange between Trudeau and Biden but rather from a public event attended by both leaders while seated side by side. This subtle visual disjunction consequently calls into question the verbal framing of the interaction as evidence of a personal friendship with Joe Biden. The inconsistency between the verbal reference to friendship

and the visual layer of the publication, which, instead of illustrating the private relationship between the two men, depicts a broader, official event intended to imitate intimacy and allude to the social nature of the bond between them, may undermine the audience's belief that the politicians are truly friends. If this were the case, a more appropriate photo could likely have been chosen, illustrating their shared moments in a private setting, perhaps surrounded by their families. This makes it harder to believe that the appeal to the former US president stemmed from Justin Trudeau's sincere outpouring of affection, and was not simply an attempt, through the content of the post, to contextualize a topic widely discussed in the media at the time—Joe Biden's illness. The photograph suggests intentional framing to suggest a closer, more familiar bond between the politicians than the one they actually share. This type of interference with the visuals casts doubt on the sincerity of the poster's intentions.

The sincerity of the intentions is also called into question by another circumstance that undermines the integrity of the post. Although Joe Biden informed a wide audience about his illness through the media, Justin Trudeau amplified this message with his appeal. While he did not reveal confidential information, he also failed to maintain discretion in the matter, for example, by using a private, rather than public, channel of communication to express his support for the ailing president. Maintaining discretion and allowing the other party to save face (i.e., not mentioning or dwelling on the topic and situation that is uncomfortable for them) would seem more appropriate in this situation than publicly expressing sympathy. Additionally, in light of Justin Trudeau's political failures, an examination of the persuasive intentions that accompanied the creation of this publication leads to the conclusion that its main purpose is to improve the image.

Zoran Milanović uses the motifs of "friendship" and "friend" in his communication in a less sophisticated way. Both terms are used explicitly about international relations. They were probably intended as a metaphor for partnerships, mutually beneficial relations between nations and between their heads of state. However, when included in laconic references to official political visits, they have become empty platitudes, clichés that carry neither informational nor associative value: "I spoke today with our Macedonian friends and partners, President Gordana Siljanovska Davkova and Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski (...)"; "I was convinced that Croatia and Norway, despite their geographical distance, are truly friendly countries." This way of narrating international relations, with its numerous references to "friendship of nations," carries negative connotations and is a direct quote from the narrative line of the former USSR[4].

4. Although this may be a cognitive distortion typical of the inhabitants of post-Soviet countries, we have numerous "friendship monuments" there, and the Order of Friendship of Nations was the highest decoration awarded in the years 1972-1993.

Compared to Zoran Milanović's rough exploration of the topos of friendship and friends on social media, Justin Trudeau's reference to a friendly relationship with Joe Biden, despite the aforementioned imperfections, seems discreet and sophisticated.

In the case of Zoran Milanović, the expected effect of his "international friendships" seems to be strengthening the image of a capable, internationally popular politician, which is particularly important for him as re-elected president.

Finnish politician Sanna Marin also used the social element, specifically the association with a casual, friendly outing to a café with a group of women, and the main rhetoric component of the publication is the photo that illustrates it. It shows five women at a café table, smiling and posing– likely during a break from conversation and enjoying cool drinks. The warm, sunny colors of the photo, the women's bare shoulders, floral prints, and vibrant colors of their clothing emphasize the informal nature of the gathering. They evoke a carefree summer afternoon and a casual, relaxed get-together on a private, friendly basis. Similarly, the emoticons accompanying the post depict a blooming flower, a plant, a four-leaf clover, and a ladybug. The only emoticon that does not fit this set is the "checkmark," which signifies the completion of a certain stage, the successful completion of an important task. This is a visual reference to the content of the post – the smiling women in the photo turn out to be politicians involved in the work of the Finnish government. The post is a thank you from Sanna Marin for the fruitful cooperation during the government term that has just ended:

> It was nice to have dinner with the five of us again to celebrate the end of the government term. Warm thanks to all of you, Annika, Maria, Li, and Anna-Maja, for the good cooperation during these years! I believe that this period will remain in the hearts of each of us, and we will remember our journey together many times. And good luck to Anna-Maja in her new challenges as Minister for Education.

Although the publication focuses on influential female politicians and their official work, the presentation reveals the "human face" of these women, exploring ordinariness and engagement in interpersonal relationships, regardless of the importance of their positions or the formal nature of their offices. This is a clear reference to ordinariness, utilizing the topos of the "girl next door," and another example of an attempt to present oneself "closer to the people." This approach suggests a focus on dialogue, informal, honest, and genuine relationships with the environment, and an understanding of the needs of ordinary people. All of this, in turn, strengthens the legitimacy of holding public office and implementing policies on behalf of citizens. This could be crucial for Sanna Marin in building public trust. As a former prime minister and minister, she remains an active political and social activist—and likely aspires to hold an equally responsible office in the future.

Arnold Schwarzenegger refers to another sphere of the life of an "ordinary person" by publicizing the expenditure of private funds for a noble cause. In many cultures, money is a taboo subject; discussing it is inappropriate or uncomfortable. In the case of public figures, famous people, referring to money can be connoted as immodesty, boasting, or flaunting luxury. Talking about money is risky because of the disparity with the audience's economic status. Observers, on the one hand, may spectate the lives of the rich and famous, but on the other, may feel frustrated by the economic gulf that separates them from the observed. Arnold Schwarzenegger openly boasted about making a significant donation to the Los Angeles Fire Department:

> I'm going to lead the way. I'm sending a million dollars of my own money, split between @lafdfoundation, @cafirefound, and @habitatla. I don't like it when companies or rich people ask their fans to make donations for them.
> But I know you want to help. So I had my team design a shirt. 100% of the profits will go to those organizations. The shirt might look familiar - it's based on an LA classic, the knock-off version of me they sell to tourists on the Venice boardwalk, except I can use my image. You can get it at the link in my bio. #lastrong.

As Agnieszka Kampka notes, this way of presenting politicians on social media—as engaged in noble causes—is not connected to calling on observers to participate in specific activities. As the researcher writes, "nothing specific is demanded of the viewer" (Kampka 2019). The persuasive goal of such portrayals of politicians is not to highlight important issues and propose real change, but to reinforce the politician's image as a conscious and engaged individual. And most likely, also to evoke a sense of well-being (a characteristic of the phenomenon of apparent activism on social media, so-called slacktivism), who may, after all, support noble action with a like or a laudatory comment.

Time and the possible freedom to manage it are also a crucial aspect of the division into private and professional spheres, specifically the times of day assigned to specific activities. Most people's professional work is carried out during so-called working hours and on weekdays, while weekends and evenings are usually devoted to private time and related activities. Viktor Orbán alluded to this division, emphasizing his commitment to his role and work, even during what should be his private time:

> It's Sunday, but the weekend is spent working. The effects of the Iran-Israel war, which broke out at dawn on Friday, are reaching Hungary.

In this way, Orban not only emphasizes his involvement in state affairs and immediate reaction to key events, but also shows his similarity to an "ordinary person" who also works overtime, works shifts, and sometimes spends his weekends at work.

Expressing individual opinions and views is also a manifestation of the use of the private sphere for image-building purposes. It is often difficult to distinguish these from the official policy. However, a desire to demonstrate personal commitment can be discerned when expressing views on controversial, potentially polarizing topics. Formulating them decisively, in the first person, serves to emphasize their nature and prevent them from being associated with the empty rhetoric, platitudes, and generalities often found in political platforms.

Emmanuel Macron leads the way in expressing opinions formulated in this way. Regardless of whether the declaration of worldview is linked to a specific political event or constitutes a publication unrelated to a socio-political context, these phrases suggest that it represents Macron's personal opinion:

> I welcome this historic decision, which marks a turning point in the protection of the Pacific Ocean and France's commitment to biodiversity.
>
> When pain is resistant to all treatment, when there is no hope, I am all for helping someone die with dignity. Humanity and brotherhood.
>
> I would like the municipal police to be able to work under the authority of the prosecutor in order to be able to make referrals, arrests, and fixed fines for offences.

These statements, although published on the politician's official profile, are couched in the first person to emphasize the personal involvement and private nature of the opinions and views expressed. These statements often concern controversial topics – politeness dictates maintaining discretion regarding one's views on such matters and not disclosing them publicly. Posts like Emmanuel Macron's might therefore be considered inappropriate according to traditional rules of etiquette. However, It is worth noting the different standards that govern communication on social media. Because they are perceived as a source of more direct contact between observers and public figures (than in the case of traditional media), greater openness in expressing views and self-disclosure is expected by the audience. This does not change the fact that, in the case of leading politicians, the aforementioned statements, even if they are private opinions, influence perceptions of their political ambitions and worldview, which may impact the direction of their power. This poses a risk to their image, especially in areas as controversial as euthanasia or the scope of civil liberties. Such manifestations are unlikely to change views on the issues raised, but rather reinforce those already formed, or—more dangerously—alienate those who stumble upon a given publication accidentally, thanks to the Facebook algorithm, and who, based on it, form an image of a politician's communication style—ruthless, one-sided, and closed to dialogue—which is not a desirable set of traits for the modern leader's ethos.

However, it is all too common for Macron, as well as other politicians, to make similar declarations on important topics that seem clichéd, hackneyed statements devoid of substance. However, they are meant to fit into the social context, using the aforementioned real-time marketing principle, and align with events noted in the politician's calendar that are important to his electorate. They do not always address controversial topics. Sometimes they are meant to convey the impression of a personal confession, or to demonstrate a politician's affiliation with, for example, a group of enthusiasts, such as book readers. Macron, for example, thanked on his Facebook profile in a pathetic, lofty way:

> Thank you to teachers, librarians, publishers, bookstores, and authors. Thank you to all who bring words to life, pass them on, awaken vocations, and sustain curiosity. I'm delighted to have been able to open the Paris Book Festival on Friday. This year, it takes us to Morocco, showing us the living brotherhood between our countries, connected by words, history, and future.

Although the verbs used here are in the first person singular, and the content is meant to be a personal joy and recommendation, it feels too strongly associated with political agitation, staged production, and an act aimed at engaging with followers (the publication ends with an invitation to leave suggestions for what to read in the comments; this is a typical *call to action* used on social media to animate and engage the audience).

Macron's unmet persuasive goal as the leader of a major European country, seems to be building an image of a national leader fit for his times: more the leader than the ruler, a politician with egalitarian aspirations. His ethos is not intended to be the image of a valiant conqueror, but rather that of an empathetic leader, a skilled speaker, and a mediator, and probably an eloquent erudite too.

The incorporation of elements from the private sphere into political communication does not serve to transgress taboos, generate controversy, or engage with sensitive topics. While this strategy is not inherently groundbreaking, it nevertheless represents a form of avant-garde practice within contemporary political public communication. Recalling interpersonal relationships, referring to information about family and friends, and emphasizing the intimate nature of relationships contradicts the essential traits of the political ethos cultivated until recently. A successful figure in this field was supposed to be associated with tenacity, decisiveness, and a focus on goals and action. Reflective publications about caring roles (father, grandfather, family member) instead of leadership roles (leader, opposition member, head of state) do not fit this image. Until recently, political success was associated with winning elections, rhetorically declassifying opponents, and competing for voter support. Meanwhile, the roles from the private sphere, so eagerly evoked in the analyzed publications, show a different face of the determined politician: sensitive, full of care, gentleness and empathy.

These traits also seem to extend to other areas of contemporary politicians' public image, such as a more cautious, gentle expression of opinions and beliefs, and an attitude open to dialogue rather than a striving for a goal. Opinions and views expressed are tempered and expressed in a non-polarizing manner. The goal of such attempts to balance views is to prevent deepening ideological differences among audiences, and most likely also to prevent the politician from attaching a specific label to his or her views. The absence of strongly polarizing content paves the way for the audience to continue following the politician's profile, even if only for those who have reached it "accidentally," via an algorithm. A benefit of digital communication (McKenna, Green, and Gleason 2002) may be support for a politician in real life. Although they are not among the politician's supporters, they may not be discouraged by strongly expressed views that contradict their own. And this, as a first impression, may prove to be invaluable.

Conclusions

Politicians exhibit widely varying levels of awareness and knowledge about how their private sphere functions in shaping their public image. Their ability to utilize this activity in communication with their audiences also varies. Therefore, a wide range of behaviors can be observed: from complete openness on private matters (including family and social connections, personal views, and even sensitive matters) to complete discretion on these topics, with all communication being filled with information related to their professional lives and duties.

All the publication practices described indicate significant changes that are taking place in the anticipated image of contemporary politicians and in the ways of building it. Paradoxically, publications referring to the private spheres of politicians not only reinforce their image as flesh and blood people, "one of us", but also strengthen their expert ethos, and this on various levels. For example, the above-mentioned photos from the profiles of Sanna Marin and Justin Trudeau with Joe Biden confirm the first congruity, when expertise is based on "associating oneself strategically with other experts as well as with other areas of expertise" (Hartelius 2010). But the publications based on privacy fullfil also the fifth congruity: "The more relevant an expert seems to the public, the more powerful she will be" (that is why politicians publishing about their relatives, family, friends may be precepted as competent leaders that live among the people, are surrounded by society and used to listen and talk about the matters that are important for them).

Contamination of public and private sphere gives a kind of synergy to the politicians' ethos understood as a credibility/believability (van Dalen 2020), but also as "the perceived character of a rhetor based on reputation and discourse", in

which ethos is both agentic and non-agentic, found (…) in the things and contexts that surround them (Kjeldsen, Hess 2025).

Regardless of the strategy adopted, politicians use deliberate, intentional means to discuss various aspects of their private lives. Their official channels do not randomly reveal any behind-the-scenes glimpses of their lives or activities. On the contrary, these actions are planned, sometimes carefully orchestrated, and calculated to achieve impact, or at least placed in the appropriate context and with a clear intention.

Privacy is no longer simply an attribute of a public figure's image. It has become the new norm in building a communication strategy, as evidenced by the flexible delineation of its boundaries by politicians. By choosing to utilize it, they want to maintain control over the form, type, and amount of information they disclose. This is not always fully manageable, of course. It is not entirely dependent on the entity it concerns, because the private sphere is an integral part of communication that cannot be eliminated or remain completely hidden. However, utilizing privacy in social media has undoubtedly become a fully-fledged tool for shaping ethos. And it is a difficult art, as evidenced by analyzed attempts to exploit it by politicians and the persuasive (not always high or effective) potential of publications created with this intention. This art is also so difficult because the boundaries between what is private and what is public are currently blurred and not clearly defined. This is partly a result of social media, and partly, as mentioned, the widespread use of technology-mediated communication, a consequence of the pandemic.

Politicians seem to be using privacy tools more judiciously than other internet actors, without social exhibitionism (Mäntymäki, Islam 2014). Unlike most contemporary public figures, they choose the strategy of idealizing their ethos, and not the one that will provide the honest version of their image (Kim, Lee 2010). They also readily "share responsibility" for the presented private sphere, introducing other entities into it: spouses, parents, and children. A strategy that protects their image is showcasing the successes of their loved ones and sharing photographs with them. At the same time, these actions force (albeit with their consent) these individuals to relinquish their privacy in the name of reinforcing the positive image of the politician to whom they are related.

A precisely calibrated balance between privacy and transparency, appropriate to the intended effects, appears to be a necessary condition for generating positive image outcomes. Valuing ethos has no straight dependence on openness (transparency). There are many studies that confirm openness, transparency, and honesty strengthen credibility and trust (Liu 2021, van der Bles et al. 2020), but there are also studies that contradict this relationship (Kjeldsen 2025).

Politicians' communication strategy for managing privacy in social media is based on a work-life blend. This is relevant to the economic perspective on privacy as a market resource: privacy is the result of social costs and benefits. Lack of privacy in exchange for attention (Posner 1978). Politicians' public roles often intersect with matters of public interest, necessitating a balance between personal privacy and the public's right to know.

However, as practice shows, for the good of ethos and cognitive hygiene of their recipients, it is better for the above-mentioned right of public opinion not to be respected than for the right to knowledge to be satisfied with hastily created pseudo--information, staged scenes intended to authenticate the social roles performed and successes achieved in private life, and superficial phrases illustrating the professed values.

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