

SCROLLING TOWARDS SILENCE

Social Media, Cognitive Overload
and the Attrition of Democratic
Representation

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Drawing on research in:

Cognitive Load Theory & Organisational Psychology

Sweller (1988); Bakker & Demerouti JD-R model

Information Manipulation & Harassment of Local Leaders

Trijsburg & Costello (2026), Australian Resilient Democracy Network

Psychological Well-being of Parliament Staff

Yong — APR Vol 40 No 1 (2025)

Parliament in the Age of AI and Deepfakes

Turner — APR Vol 40 No 2 (2025)

The Paper's Central Claim

Social media is not merely a communication tool for parliamentarians — it is a daily, high-intensity workplace hazard that systematically consumes the attentional, cognitive and emotional resources on which effective democratic governance depends.

01

A structural risk

The volume of digital engagement demanded of modern parliamentarians — constituent correspondence, monitoring commentary, managing disinformation, defending against abuse — constitutes **chronic attentional & emotional depletion**.

02

An uneven burden

Women MPs — particularly those under 40, from minority backgrounds or in opposition — face a qualitatively different threat: **targeted, gendered & racialized online violence** that is **deliberate in design & democratic in consequence**.

03

A solvable problem

Parliaments can embed prevention and **psychological protective strategies** — **for individuals, offices and the institution** — that enable MPs and staff to remain effective and present, protecting the quality of thinking democracy depends on.

From Tool to Hazard

Reframing social media as a workplace risk

Cognitive Load Theory · Attentional Depletion · The Digital Demand

The Theoretical Lens: Cognitive Load Theory

Sweller (1988) — three types of mental load incurred when using our working memory where complex reasoning happens

Intrinsic Load

The inherent complexity of the task itself — legislating, deliberating, representing. This is irreducible. It is the work of democracy.



Examples:

- Policy analysis
- Speech preparation
- Committee deliberation

Germane Load

The productive cognitive effort that builds schema and expertise. This is what we want MPs to be doing. Learning, growing, connecting ideas, getting better at doing the work of democracy.



Examples:

- Parliamentary debate
- Constituent learning
- Policy synthesis

Extraneous Load

Cognitive effort generated by poor task design or irrelevant information. Social media creates an enormous, chronic extraneous load — crowding out the other two.



Examples:

- Social media monitoring
- Disinformation triaging
- Abuse management

Key: Social media does not just add to MPs' workload. It crowds out the cognitive capacity needed for the intrinsic work of democratic governance.

A Day in the Life: The Digital Demand on MPs and Staff

WHAT DIGITAL DEMAND LOOKS LIKE

Constant

Triaging constituent correspondence via social media DMs, email, tagged posts

Reactive

Monitoring online commentary for mentions, criticism, potential crises

Defensive

Identifying and managing coordinated disinformation about self or party

Protective

Screening and filtering abuse before it reaches the MP — staff absorb it first

Strategic

Maintaining authentic presence across multiple platforms simultaneously

After hours

No clear off-switch — abuse and commentary continues outside business hours

THE COGNITIVE & EMOTIONAL COST



Attention residue

Even brief task-switching from complex work to monitoring social media leaves cognitive traces that impair subsequent deep thinking



Ego depletion

Self-control and conscious effort rely on finite mental resources that are depleted by high-volume, emotionally charged content moderation



Emotional labour

Staff screening abuse absorb psychological harm before it reaches MPs — an invisible occupational burden not captured in job descriptions



The attention extraction economy

Attention is the commodity platforms sell — Meta and X derive ~90% of revenues from it (Newman 2026). Compulsive checking is a designed outcome, not a personal weakness



Decision quality

Depleted attentional resources directly impair the quality of complex policy reasoning — the core function of elected office

PART TWO

Not Noise. A Coordinated Silence.

The gendered & racialized dimension of online political violence

Women MPs · Minority Representatives · Deliberate Design

The Evidence: Gendered Online Violence at Scale

76%

Women MPs worldwide report experiencing violence, versus 68% of men — intimidation from the public is rising online and offline (IPU, When the Public Turns Hostile, 2026)

88%

Women holding or seeking office experienced online abuse linked to political involvement. (Women for Election's 'A Threat to Gender Equity & Democratic Representation' report, August, 2026)

63%

Women parliamentary staff in the Asia-Pacific reporting psychological violence; 36% report sexual violence. Staff are inside the blast radius (IPU, 2025)

60%

Women MPs in the Asia-Pacific targeted online via hate speech, disinformation, image-based abuse or doxing — the highest rate in any IPU regional study (2025)

What makes this qualitatively different for women:

Nature

Sexist slurs, body shaming, rape and death threats, sexualised deepfakes. Not just uncivil — a distinct category of gendered violence.

Targeting logic

Women MPs active on gender equality and violence against women are specifically singled out — the most active voices silenced first.

Intersectionality

Minority backgrounds compound abuse — gender, ethnicity, age, politics. Openly queer candidates receive markedly more personal, identity-based abuse (Stephenson et al. 2025).

Perpetrators

IPU regional studies find perpetrators include male parliamentary colleagues as well as the public. The threat often comes from within.

Not Incidental Noise: A Coordinated Silencing Strategy

THE MECHANISM OF SILENCING

STEP 1

Target selection

Women MPs most vocal on gender, climate, immigration or minority rights are identified and prioritised for coordinated campaigns.

STEP 2

Volume flooding

High-volume, sustained abuse exploits cognitive load limits — forcing the target and their staff into constant defensive monitoring.

STEP 3

Content contamination

Deepfakes, doctored images, false quotes attributed to the target erode credibility and force defensive public statements.

STEP 4

Withdrawal

Targets self-censor: reducing social media presence, avoiding contentious topics, restricting public appearances — the abusers win.

STEP 5

Exit and deterrence

Targets leave politics. Others observe and are deterred. The pipeline narrows — precisely where diversity matters most.

Evidence of Deliberate Design

- Campaigns are coordinated across platforms simultaneously — not isolated incidents
- Timing clusters around policy votes, committee hearings, and election periods
- AI-generated content and bots amplify reach far beyond organic networks
- Global anti-trans and climate denial networks target local representatives with scripted messaging (Trijsburg & Costello 2026)
- Deepfake pornography specifically used to humiliate and discredit — targeting women's bodies as political weapons (Flynn et al. 2022; Turner 2025)
- 65% of Australian women in public office have experienced or witnessed AI-generated abuse; 98% expect AI to make it worse (Women for Election 2026)

What Democracy Loses: The Pipeline Argument



The attrition evidence:

26% UK councillors unsure about or not re-standing, cite possible abuse or intimidation as a factor — LGA Debate Not Hate (2025)

40%+ US local officials less willing to re-stand due to threats; 50% for women – Bridging Divides Initiative (2024)

64% Australian women in office who say abuse makes them less likely to stand again, seek higher office, or encourage other women to run — Women for Election (2026)

50% Tasmanian Councillors who won't re-stand attribute this to toxic community behaviour – LGAT, 2025.

Parliament as Workplace

The institutional context — what the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model reveals

Staff Wellbeing · The JD-R Framework · Accessibility and New Vulnerabilities

The Parliamentary Workplace: Two Compounding Issues

BENT
PSYCHOLOGY

THE MEASUREMENT GAP (YONG, APR 2025)

Using the JD-R model, Yong (2025) found that the NZ Parliament's annual staff engagement survey:

- ✓ Measures job resources well — leadership, autonomy, psychological safety (8 questions on leadership alone)
- ✗ Contains NO measures of job demands — workload, time pressure, harassment exposure, stressful events
- ✗ Contains NO direct wellbeing outcome measures — job satisfaction, general wellbeing not asked
- Social media management as a job demand is entirely absent from the framework — invisible in the data

If we cannot see the demand, we cannot address it.

THE DEEPPAKE AMPLIFIER (TURNER, APR 2025)

Parliament's own accessibility reforms create new attack surfaces:

- Hours of consistent, front-on footage of MPs — ideal for deepfake training data
- Current Standing Orders regulate accredited media only. Social media is ungoverned.
- SA is the first Australian state to ban electoral deepfakes (2025). Federal bill in progress.
- Deepfake pornography specifically targets women politicians — a form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence
- Once circulated, even debunked deepfakes damage credibility and force defensive cognitive effort

Accessibility and integrity must be jointly pursued — neither can be sacrificed.

PART FOUR

From Diagnosis to Opportunity

Prevention and psychological protection strategies

Individual · Office · Institutional

A Three-Level Prevention Architecture

Embedding protection before crisis — not just responding after harm occurs

INDIVIDUAL

Cognitive load management

Protected time for deep policy work; disciplined boundaries on social media checking; attention hygiene practices that preserve working memory capacity

Psychological first aid literacy

Training in recognising depletion, anxiety and secondary trauma — for MPs and staff who absorb content on their behalf

Proactive legal literacy

Pre-crisis knowledge of eSafety pathways, deepfake legislation, AVO processes — so response time and effort is minimised when incidents occur

OFFICE

Triage and filtering protocols

Systematising who handles abuse content, with what supports, and for how long — preventing indefinite exposure of staff to harmful material

Social media team structures

Distributing digital monitoring across trained roles rather than concentrating it on vulnerable individuals — reducing attentional and emotional load

Wellbeing check-ins embedded in workflow

Regular team conversations about digital load and emotional impact — normalising disclosure before crisis, not only after

INSTITUTIONAL

Measure the demand (Yong 2025)

Integrate job demands — including social media workload and abuse exposure — into annual parliamentary staff surveys alongside existing resource measures

Rapid Response Mechanisms

Centralised institutional support for coordinated disinformation campaigns against members — drawing on Trijsburg & Costello (2026) Holistic Response Model

Deepfake and AI governance

Update broadcasting standing orders to address social media; implement watermarking; lobby for federal deepfake legislation (Turner 2025)

What We Need to Know: The Research Agenda

The evidence base is growing — but critical gaps remain for the Australian parliamentary context

01

What is the actual cognitive load profile of an MP's working week?

We lack baseline data on the attentional demands of parliamentary office — without it we cannot design meaningful interventions. Time-use studies adapted to parliamentary contexts are urgently needed.

04

What interventions actually work at the parliamentary level?

Individual resilience training is well documented. Institutional protective architecture — triage protocols, rapid response mechanisms, AI governance — needs evidence from live parliamentary environments.

02

What do staff who triage abuse experience — and does it transfer to MPs?

Staff are the primary absorbers of harmful content. The secondary trauma literature is well developed outside parliament; almost nothing exists specifically on parliamentary staff. Yong (2025) identifies this gap explicitly.

05

What does the Australian pipeline data tell us?

Trijsburg & Costello (2026) call for a national longitudinal evidence base. Without consistent tracking of who stands, who stays and who exits — and why — Australia cannot understand or interrupt the attrition of diverse representation.

03

Does attentional depletion measurably affect legislative quality?

The cognitive load → decision quality link is theoretically robust but empirically under-tested in legislative settings. Longitudinal studies comparing policy output before/after high-intensity abuse periods would be revealing.

06

How do deepfakes specifically affect the cognitive burden on MPs?

Turner (2025) documents the threat; we now need studies examining the specific attentional cost of deepfake incidents on MPs and staff — distinct from other forms of disinformation — to design proportionate responses.

CONCLUSION

Protecting the Quality of Thinking Democracy Depends On

01

Social media is not a background condition — it is an active workplace hazard consuming the attentional and emotional resources of MPs and their staff at scale. Parliament cannot wait for individual adaptation; it must design systemic protection.

02

The gendered and racialized dimension of this threat is not incidental. It is deliberate, coordinated, and democratic in consequence. Silencing diverse voices is the point — and democracy pays the price in narrowed representation and homogenised thinking.

03

Prevention is achievable. Drawing on cognitive load theory, the JD-R model, and the emerging evidence base on parliamentary workplace wellbeing, this paper identifies concrete interventions for individuals, offices and institutions — beginning with measuring what currently goes unseen.



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