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New York Council Speaker Keeps a Low Profile Everywhere but on Twitter

By [KATE TAYLOR](#) MARCH 21, 2014

When [a gas explosion](#) in her East Harlem district killed eight people and destroyed two buildings, Melissa Mark-Viverito, the speaker of the New York City Council, learned of it — within minutes — the way she does most everything these days: on Twitter.

The surest sign of how seriously she took it? Apart from providing the location of a Red Cross shelter, she did not resurface on social media for another 15 hours.



In the days that followed, she gave many interviews, but it was on Twitter that Ms. Mark-Viverito made some of her most poignant, and pungent, remarks.

“Going to bed w/ smoke smell still on me,” she wrote one night.

Two days later, she attacked Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, a fellow Democrat, bitterly contrasting his failure to say anything publicly about the disaster with his outspokenness in opposing liberals like her on other issues:

“Tax 500K + earners=outrageous, hedge fund backed charters=enthusiastic support, raise min wage=not on my watch, #EastHarlemExplosion=SILENCE.”

For every Anthony D. Weiner who succumbs to scandal on social media, for every Cory A. Booker who lives, governs and races to the rescue on Twitter, there are many more politicians whose online presences are a soporific stream of on-message banality, often the work of uncredited aides: a talking point here, a handshake photo there, with links to any flattering mentions.

The [Twitter feed of Ms. Mark-Viverito](#), the city’s second most powerful elected official, is something else: an unfiltered, unruly stream of musings and irritations, rebukes of enemies, cheerleading for allies, scolding of critics, and sometimes loopy observations. When Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey faced stepped-up criticism over the George Washington Bridge scandal, this was the statement she released: “Yiiiiiiiikkkkkkeeeessss!!!”

Her reaction to the confirmation of Patrick Gaspard, a former New York labor leader, as ambassador to South Africa? “OMG!!!”

The antithesis of the handled, packaged politician, Ms. Mark-Viverito composes her missives herself — impulsiveness, eclectic subject matter, adolescent-style syntax, expletives and all.

All of which is not without risk for an ambitious politician seeking to project her authority and gravitas. But when advisers suggested recently that she turn her account over to younger aides, Ms. Mark-Viverito, 44, would not budge, she recalled:

“I said, ‘You are not going to get rid of my Twitter.’ ”

In New York City politics, the spotlight shines hottest on the mayor, and other officials have to fight for attention. Elected speaker in January after eight years on the Council, Ms. Mark-Viverito succeeded Christine C. Quinn, whose loud voice and hammy gregariousness helped elevate her public profile.

But until the explosion in East Harlem put her front and center, Ms. Mark-Viverito was largely unknown even to her fellow lawmakers, who often described her as introverted and reserved.

“She’s very serious and very formal in person,” said **Hector Cordero-Guzman, a Baruch College professor** who lives on East 117th Street and sent the tweet that alerted her to the explosion.

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Her Twitter persona, by contrast, is “kind of jovial, communicative and personal,” he said, adding, “I think it makes her more approachable and totally humanizes her.”

In an interview, Ms. Mark-Viverito said she thought that her posts displayed her ebullient side in a way that was more difficult for her to do in person.

“I don’t know what it is exactly,” she said, likening Twitter to a diary. “It becomes like a friend, and you just open up over time. You’re just like, ‘Oh, hey, look, I’ll share this.’ ”

She shares all day.

Ms. Mark-Viverito, who uses a BlackBerry for Council business, tweets from a personal Samsung Galaxy, often beginning at 7 or 8 in the morning and not stopping until close to midnight.

She follows more than 2,000 other accounts, a range that includes the official Twitter feed of the Dalai Lama and one about her Zodiac sign, Aries. She converses with artists, reporters and academics in Puerto Rico, where she was born and raised, about news there and in New York.

Her interests go far beyond politics: She is as likely to retweet a photograph of the Milky Way (“#speechless”) or the Beatles (“This is way too cool!!!!”) as a dutiful message about rallying in support of the mayor’s policies. (Her audience, though still small in a city of eight million, has doubled since September to more than 8,000 followers.)

Ms. Mark-Viverito, who is single, seldom discusses her personal life. But tidbits can be gleaned.

She watches the Food Network but does not cook much. She skipped this year’s Academy Awards (“#notinterested”). She has an adorable but mischievous orange tabby cat (“#troublemaker”).

When she spent a week in Puerto Rico last month, Ms. Mark-Viverito posted photographs and videos [on Instagram](#). The images were not very illuminating — a palm tree in the sun, sailboats on the water at dusk, a video of chickens in a friend’s backyard.

But they showed, at least, that she was quite capable of taking her mind off New York politics.

“I was just happy to be there, and I guess it was just a way of sharing scenes of a place that I find very dear to me,” Ms. Mark-Viverito said.

But at times her posts can also seem strategic.

In the contentious race for speaker, she was the choice of the Council’s liberal wing and of Bill de Blasio, as the mayor-elect and then the mayor. But some lawmakers hesitated to support her, calling her unfriendly.

As the race heated up, Ms. Mark-Viverito teased one colleague about his fondness for Pilates.

She joked with another, Councilwoman Margaret Chin, that she had tried a folk remedy Ms. Chin had recommended. “Going to kick this cold’s ass once & for all!” she tweeted to Ms. Chin, before adding, “oops sorry” and “LOL.”

At 11 p.m. on Christmas, she congratulated a Council member from Queens on her engagement.

Colleagues saw a charm offensive. Ms. Mark-Viverito insisted that her role had changed, not her personality: Running for and being speaker required much more reaching out. “This is who I am,” she said.

She can also be something of a media critic.

When a host on an MSNBC show recently accused Mayor de Blasio of being “hostile” to charter schools, Ms. Mark-Viverito fired off a scolding “#GetYourFactsStraight.”

She asked NY1 and Crain’s to stop referring to immigrant students who were seeking state tuition aid for college as “illegal.” (“Noted and yes you are right,” Crain’s replied.)

But she can also poke fun at her own image.

When The New York Post [published a rival's claim](#) that Ms. Mark-Viverito had used voodoo against her, she joked: "Darn! My little secret revealed!" And she started using the hashtag "#LaBrujaDelBarrio" ("the witch of El Barrio").

She also retweeted a horoscope post saying an "Aries who lacks enough sleep can be fussy, moody & difficult," adding, "Shhh, don't tell @nypost @NYDailyNews."

If Ms. Mark-Viverito comes across as more relaxed and confiding in a tweet than in an interview, some of her most revealing social-media missives are requests for privacy.

In December, in the frenzy of the speaker's race, she retweeted an article about "12 Questions Childfree Women Don't Want to Hear," adding: "Yup, been asked some of these & not cool."

A few days later, she retweeted a message observing that Aries "need their alone time once in a while."

"Just about now, gracias very much!" Ms. Mark-Viverito typed, adding, "Lol."