Perspectives on Populism and the Media

Avenues for Research
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One might almost write a parody of introductions to publications on populism and the relationship between populism and the media (at least coming from certain lines of research): The concept of populism is ill-defined and controversial but somehow involves the distinction between “the people” and the elite; populism is on the rise—the usual examples being Trump and Brexit—or there is a “populist Zeitgeist;” populism is a threat to liberal democracy; populists are skilled communicators, on the screen, by instrumentalizing the press, and by their particularly effective use of online channels.

Concerning the problem of defining populism, it has, of course, some relevant implications to define populism either as an ideology, style, discourse or frame, but for most purposes, researchers should simply pick one. Many arguments have been made in favor of the various definitions, and it seems that lengthy discussions of the concept of populism itself and the corresponding literature all too often still replace the development of substantial theories.

However, concerning these assumptions often found in introductions of texts on populism, I would also insist on a number of caveats. Populism is often defined with regard to the distinctions it makes or the antagonisms it creates. It is often said that populists can make “vertical” and horizontal” distinctions (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) between the people and elites, but also between the people and outgroups. However, the notion that exclusion of outgroups is “horizontal” can appear somewhat euphemistic. In the case of right-wing populism, this tends to confirm the ethnopluralist line of argument that parts of the radical right have developed to set themselves apart from the most openly racist and white supremacist ideologies: that they do not assume a hierarchy among cultures and ethnic groups but simply want to keep them separated. In reality, right-wing populists mostly do not strictly adhere to the idea that migrants and “their culture” are on par with natives. And even in the absence of any hints to the superiority of the ingroup, full citizens (even if they are sometimes members of declining classes or disadvantaged in other ways) with voting rights are opposed to
non-citizens without the same rights, sometimes illegalized and often poorer. The clientele of right-wing populists is thus comparatively privileged and profits from the exclusion of foreigners from their country’s wealth and welfare system and the cheap labor of others abroad (and, even if they may be disadvantaged in other ways, supporters of right-wing populism mostly do not share the discrimination that members of minorities already face, even in the absence of discriminatory communication and measures by right-wing populists). It would therefore often be more adequate to call the kind of exclusion or antagonism inherent in right-wing populism “downward” instead of “horizontal” (as Casullo, in this volume, does when she describes populist politics as “punching upwards” and “downwards”).

Even if we aim to reconstruct how right-wing populists frame some of the distinctions inherent in the worldview as “horizontal,” we have to make sure not to uncritically commit ourselves to this description, which is questionable from a perspective of social theory. This can also be true of the “vertical” antagonism constructed in different types of populism. Certainly, those identified as elites by populists tend to be more privileged and powerful than many others. However, populist communication is not always in line with how a more nuanced analysis of social structure would define elites. For strategic or ideological reasons, populists may consider some groups to be powerful and antagonize them even if their members do not actually belong to the most privileged and influential groups in society. For example, journalists who belong to certain minorities are mostly not part of an absolute cultural elite, even if they work for major outlets. However, right-wing populists may depict and attack them as allegedly powerful propagandists with a presumed agenda that seeks to prioritize minorities over the majority of ordinary and decent native people and with an almost absolute cultural hegemony. Scholarship should neither simply adopt this definition of an elite nor the simple assumption of a liberal hegemony. Instead, it should carefully analyze the resources and power of actors and the struggles over symbolic dominance, the anti-populist stance of many mainstream media but also the continuities between influential discourses and populist ideologies and the powerful backlash against an assumed liberal hegemony.

That people voted for Trump and Brexit out of an anti-establishment and nativist motivation is as true as it is true that they had many other reasons and followed traditional cleavages and party affiliations. More populist politicians, movements and measures may be found in Chavism and Hindu nationalism, the politics of the Orbán government or the Polish PIS party and their behavior towards the judicial branch, the media, uni-
versities, etc., or, if one remembers, Berlusconi or Haider. Or, speaking from a perspective of the West or Global North, if we look a bit further, we find that people on Chinese social media have appropriated a right-wing populist discourse in an astonishingly prototypical, albeit somewhat paradoxical way (Zhang, 2019).

While most of the above actors would not use the label “populist” for themselves, there have been theoreticians of populism and activists that have actually embraced the concept (Iglesias, 2015; Mouffe, 2018). Even if one ultimately believes that even the most well-intentioned populist politics will lead into illiberalism, authoritarianism or flirts with dangerous nationalism, one cannot simply brush aside all attempts to establish a systematic conception of populist democracy. In the present context, I would consider these affirmative conceptions of populism as a borderline case because they use the idea of populism reflexively and reflect on the contingency of the construction of “the people” instead of essentializing the popular will. I will focus on the more anti-pluralist, authoritarian varieties of populism.

Engesser et al. (in this volume) follow a complementary logic in their analysis. They explain the use of populism—in a somewhat thinner but substantial, ideological sense—by political actors in the media and by journalists themselves in terms of a country’s political culture, in particular the prevalence of authoritarian attitudes. Furthermore, they include context factors at the organizational level and the level of the news story.

And maybe criticism of the definitely less tolerant, emancipatory and egalitarian types of populism should not only be based on abstract arguments concerning their compatibility with liberal democracy, as important as they are. An encompassing criticism should also point to actual actions of such populists and the consequences of their rule, for example, the real restrictions of the freedom of expression or of the independence of the jurisdiction. For example, Just and Crigler (in this volume) analyze populist paths towards authoritarianism, in particular the attacks on the free press and the courts, which ultimately undermine the whole constitutional structure. Holtz-Bacha (in this volume) further explores the restrictions of media freedom enacted by populists and discusses the findings and explanations that point to a correlation between populism and infringements of media freedom.

A more complete picture would include the merits and failures of economic populism, the discrimination inherent in welfare chauvinism and ultimately, the experiences of minorities under right-wing populism and those types of left-wing populism that cling to certain inequalities. Whether in power or not, right-wing populists in particular incite hatred,
violence and suppression, which can be easily forgotten if one does not keep in mind what “illiberalism” actually means in practice. In a second step, these consequences can then be related to claims of exclusive representation, the essentialist definition of the “people,” etc. However, such consequences should maybe be attributed to the nativism, racism, sexism, classism, etc. of populist actors rather than to a populist conception of democracy alone.

The idea that populists are skilled communicators often seems rather tautological: If they are successful, at least according to some standard, then they must be good communicators. First, they are not always successful. They may have the most social media followers, appear frequently on television, or they or their allies may even own media conglomerates. However, this does not necessarily lead to political success, to vote shares that are proportional to the likes and shares or to the airtime, and populist governments are sometimes quite unstable.

Second, how can these alleged communicative skills be defined and their effects be separated from external factors? The clientele is often more enthusiastic than people affiliated with other parties once the issues owned by the populists are present in public discourse and the debates sufficiently emotionalized (which is not only achieved by the populists themselves but often with crucial support by political opponents and the media). Some political milieus feel empowered by the existence of populist leaders and parties who speak to long-existing grievances and thus reinforce the communicative effort of these actors via interpersonal and social media communication or collective action such as demonstrations.

Third, it can be easier for populists to communicate publicly than for other political actors. They often campaign based on one or a few issues. They can be more provocative than others who have traditionally sought to avoid controversy because they appeal to more moderate parts of the public and to voters who value a more decent and civilized style or simply to more diverse segments of the population with diverging attitudes.

Finally, some explanations of the communicative and political success of populists are overly techno-determinist (Hatakka, 2019, p. 15). They neglect the social-structural preconditions and existing predispositions, the middle-term discursive opportunity structures and the communicative activities of the followers of populists, the general political and overall culture, the strategies of competitors and the traditional media in favor of a fascination for bots, paid targeted advertising or filter bubbles. This is not to say that these new socio-technical structures are irrelevant. They act as multipliers of communicative efforts if an enthusiastic clientele can easily join, if communicative strategies fit the functionalities of major social me-
dia platforms, and if campaign funds can at least be converted into exposure if not electoral successes, bypassing the traditional media.

As I deconstructed some typical theses on populism in this introduction to the introduction to this volume, I already pointed to alternative perspectives that at least complement existing ones. The whole volume aims to add more perspectives to the study of populist communication. In the remainder of this introduction, the title of this volume, “Perspectives on Populism and the Media,” will be elaborated on a bit further. First, scholarly discussions of populism will be reviewed with regard to their contributions to a communicative understanding of populism. This will also allow the authors of the individual contributions to dispense with lengthy discussions of definitions and basic approaches.

A second part reconstructs the perspectives of social actors in different fields and the perspectives of populists on these fields. This may contribute to an explanation of the conflicts arising between populists and non-populist political, media or academic actors.

1. Scholarly Perspectives

Although it has become a cliché by now, it is to a certain degree correct that research on populism has been dominated by discussions about the definition and in particular about the genus of populism. Scholarly perspectives on populism also differ with regard to the role of communication and the media. While research in the field of media and communication obviously emphasizes this aspect (to the degree that it can be overly media-centric), large parts of the literature, notably in political science and sociology, neglect the communicative aspect of populism or address it at a very abstract level. In the following, different perspectives on populism are briefly reviewed, and the (possible) role of the media is discussed.

Definitions of populism can be roughly classified into four categories:

First, as ideology—a concept that has otherwise rarely been used in mainstream communication research! Of course, it is not meant in a radically critical way. But it is used in a more substantial way than just, for example, as a variable measuring someone’s position on the left-right axis. The use of the concept of ideology emphasizes the content of beliefs and communication—what is being thought and said about society, social groups, politics, etc.
If literature on ideologies is cited, research based on this perspective on populism usually refers to Freeden (1996; 1998), who follows a morphological approach to ideologies. In particular, he uses the concept of “thin ideology” adopted by many scholars in this tradition (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). Ideology is analyzed as a structure of related concepts. In the case of populism research, the elements are often emphasized over the structure, leading to a rather additive instead of relational understanding of populism. It is then typically defined as the combination of anti-elitism, people-centrism or popular sovereignty, homogeneity of the people and often exclusion of outgroups. In a strictly additive logic, these elements could be combined freely, leading to subtypes of populism defined by specific permutations (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

In Freeden’s original logic, ideologies define contested political concepts such as “freedom,” “equality,” etc. in their specific way by relating them to other concepts. In this perspective, ideology is a constellation, not a list of concepts. Applied to populism, popular sovereignty (which is a concept common to many ideologies) has to be understood in a specifically populist way, by relating it, for example, to ideas of elite rule, a homogenous people and thus a predefined popular will, the exclusion of outgroups, and vice versa. And we would have to ask whether and how a specific populist ideology or all populist ideologies define concepts such as freedom, the rule of law, equality or the public sphere, and how the populist understanding of popular sovereignty is different from conservative, liberal, socialist, etc. ones.

Ideational approaches to populism have the advantage of working at different levels of attitudes and communication (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017): personal worldviews of political leaders and ordinary citizens, communication by politicians, journalists and ordinary social media users, etc. A clear and predefined list of ideological elements makes populism easy to measure reliably and comparably by means of surveys and content analyses.

The downside of this rather formal conception is that it may make populism appear more static, consistent and explicit than it can be in individual cases (and the media may contribute to the idea of a unitary and widespread populism by using this category indiscriminately). Studies in this tradition acknowledge the “fragmented” communication of populism (Engesser et al., 2017). However, the approach is more suited to assess the general prevalence of populism in the political field, in populations or in the media than to analyze specific worldviews, the specific meaning given to different concepts and the nuances of communicative style. Furthermore, this approach treats populism as something that is given and mainly
transmitted, not constituted in communication (see Hatakka, 2019, for a critical assessment of this communicative approach). In some cases and for certain purposes, it may be a good approximation to treat a specific variety of populism as consolidated (e.g., the type of right-wing or left-wing populism prevalent in a country in a period of time and held in a similar way by substantial parts of the population and certain main political actors). Under different circumstances or when other research interests are pursued, such an ideal-typical and static approach would be inappropriate. Then, the dynamics and the performative character of discourses have to be considered.

Second, as discourse. The discursive approach is most often associated with the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2018), who have analyzed the general logic of populism by which historically contingent unfulfilled demands in populations are articulated in a way that treats them as equivalent with regard to an antagonism between the people and the elite.

Authors following the discursive approach have also emphasized the role of anti-populist discourses and how not only “the people” but also “populism” is an empty signifier that can then be used by technocratic, neoliberal, etc. elites against democratic demands, equating populism with right-wing populism, irrationality, irresponsibility, radical euroscepticism, etc. (Stavrakakis, 2014). Goyaerts and De Cleen (in this volume) add to the analysis of anti-populist discourses by providing new insights from an empirical analysis, by reflecting on the role of the media in democracy and by highlighting the connections between media, political and academic discourse about populism.

Even proponents of this perspective on populism have criticized its highly formalized conception, which has even been emptied further by Laclau to the degree of becoming coextensive with any form of democratic movement (Stavrakakis, 2004). Stavrakakis (2004) therefore recommends striking a balance between a formal and an “ontic,” more substantial conception of populism which allows for the analysis of specific meanings in political struggles and to grasp the emotional intensity and redemptive character (Canovan, 1999) of populist politics, which can be absent from other movements that function according to a logic of equivalence in the broadest sense.

Hatakka (2019) specified the populist discursive logic with regard to the media, actors, and communicative practices that contribute to the constitution of chains of equivalence. In particular, he acknowledges the contribution by critics who, for example, scandalize racist remarks by politicians of
populist parties. If the parties or their leadership do not strictly distance themselves from the remarks, or if parts of the base insist that they should own up to them, their implications become part of the chain of equivalence underlying the populism of that party. Thus, not only party officials but also journalists, fringe parts of the party base that, for example, organize themselves online, critical civil society activists, etc. can contribute to what a populist discourse constitutes as legitimate demands of “the people.” He emphasizes that “a distinction must be made between what populist parties or organizations try to communicate and what their communication articulates after the communication has gone through a series of discursive negotiations in the public sphere” (Hatakka, 2019, p. 35).

Third, as style. Style is a concept that may readily come to mind when talking about communication. We might think about styles of speech, styles of writing, appearance and manners. Style has been defined very differently in populism research. One perspective actually emphasizes this aspect of habitus, (gendered) bodily performance, leadership style, ritual and symbolic action (e.g., Casullo, 2019; Filc, 2011; Moffitt, 2016) or language, rhetoric and argumentation (e.g., Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019; on the different aspects of style, see also Ekström, Patrona, & Thornborrow, 2018).

For example, Campus (in this volume) analyzes the commonalities and differences between female populist leaders. Some but not all present themselves as the “mother of the nation.” Those who emphasize motherhood can thus soften their “tough” policy and conform with traditional gender roles. Other roles, Campus argues, such as the “everyday celebrity,” are open to male and female populist leaders.

Another perspective defines style more abstractly as a general logic or form of political practice, as discussed above with regard to the discursive approach. A performative perspective that combines both approaches to discursive style (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) reminds us that political communication is not only descriptive or evaluative in a strict sense but also constitutive—an aspect often overlooked in traditional research on political communication. The claim to represent some political entity (such as “the people”) is neither a description nor an opinion but the attempt to assume a certain role and to be recognized for this role, and it contributes to the constitution of that entity, its recognition as a meaningful category and as a unity—as something one can belong to—and to defining who belongs to it and who does not. The question is then by what communicative means that can be achieved and when it is successful and unsuccessful.
Stylistic approaches may risk overemphasizing the form or politics and neglecting policy, as difficult as it may be to distinguish between the two. For example, populists might manage to define different economic policies in terms of the basic antagonism between the people and the elite. However, economic and social policy may be a breaking point for some populist movements, in particular those on the political right. They cannot completely escape established cleavages; citizens may demand a clear position on such issues, and the media may criticize them for their unclear position. Other left-wing populist movements or governments clearly define themselves and seek legitimacy through their economic and social policy (see Casullo, in this volume, on such discourses).

Fourth, populism as a strategy is often discussed as another approach. However, although this approach may seem natural in the field of populism and the media, it is often not elaborated very explicitly. As one of the exceptions, Weyland (2001) describes populism as “as a specific way of competing for and exercising political power” (p. 11), rather opportunistic in terms of policy but a strategy that strives for the support of unorganized masses by means of highly personalized leadership.

Another understanding of populism as a strategy seems implicit in studies that seek to quantify the amount of populism inherent in the communication of mainstream parties. Some ways of referring to the people that are measured as an element of populism in such studies are not necessarily comparable to the illiberal and anti-pluralist construction of a popular will.

Nevertheless, it is certainly not completely wrong that, out of opportunism, some mainstream politicians have styled themselves as outsiders to the political establishment and legitimized their positions in terms of what ordinary people want instead of through abstract criteria. Furthermore, turning “old-fashioned” right-wing extremism or socialism into right-wing and left-wing populism has certainly benefited many parties and politicians. However, it is not always completely clear whether this is the result of an explicit strategy that has been actively pursued by party leadership.

The concept of strategy implies a certain amount of calculation and a lack of commitment to the content of communication. But insights into the actual beliefs of actors or into processes of strategy formation are rare, and studies based on observations in party headquarters, interviews of decision-makers or strategy papers would be fruitful. (Similarly, we cannot be sure whether concepts of “fake news” or the distinction between misinformation and disinformation are completely adequate if we cannot assess the actual belief of communicators.) We might therefore also opt for concepts that are based less on intention and beliefs and more on communication,
such as the concept of discourse (as discussed above) or framing (Aslanidis, 2015)—or “ideology” if it stands for what is being communicated.

In the light of the strengths and shortcomings of the different approaches, it may also be useful to differentiate between varieties of populism that are conceived more and less adequately by the different perspectives: 1. a “banal,” strategic or tactical populism, in particular among politicians of established parties, that somewhat essentializes the democratic foundation of some policy or their overall work and seeks to profit from diffuse distrust of elites by claiming that the politician is not really part of the establishment; 2. a populism that emphasizes the populist logic over specific policies: the process by which different demands can be articulated to form a popular opposition to elites or by which a popular will can be constituted and expressed most directly, in particular via new online tools (“technoplebiscitarianism,” Gerbaudo, 2014; see also Hartleb, 2013); 3. a highly personalized populism that emphasizes the direct and affective relation of a charismatic, eccentric, entertaining, provocative or otherwise extraordinary leader with the people; and 4. a populism defined by its particular hostility towards certain elites and outgroups in which the populist element as such may be overshadowed by other ideological aspects such as nativism or nationalism (on the differences and connections between these and populism, see Betz, 2017; de Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017), reactionary opposition to liberalization, etc.

The media can play different roles for each type: 1. as the ordinary platform for political communication on which the tactical populism can be performed; 2. as alternative platforms for a popular movement or even the essential basis for what is considered as a new democratic practice; 3. as channels for the seemingly direct contact between the leader and the people, and 4. as actors that are at the same time instrumentalized to draw attention to one’s radical agenda and antagonized as “enemies of the people,” or as institutions that have to be controlled in a new authoritarian political order.

2. Perspectives in Society

Apart from the diversity of academic perspectives, another pluralism of perspectives can be found outside the field of research. Different actors or communicative acts view or construe society differently, sometimes in line with populist antagonisms, sometimes in clear opposition to them.
Although some effort has been put into the classification of parties and political leaders as populist or non-populist, or the measurement of their degree of populism, we will not review these sometimes controversial attempts here. We will only note that researchers have increasingly also considered further groups of actors or communicative practices as potentially populist. Complementing the analysis of the supply side, populist attitudes in the general population have been analyzed (for an overview and comparison of measurements, see Bergman, 2019; Castanho Silva, Jungkunz, Helbling, & Littvay, 2019). However, ordinary citizens do not only form their opinions or worldviews and vote accordingly or not; they also communicate publicly and via different media channels themselves. In particular on social media, but also in letters to the editor and on other platforms, they can express themselves in populist ways. However, researchers have mostly focused on social media communication by parties and political leaders and have relatively neglected other types of organizations, more informal associations (such as in online forums, Hatakka, 2017) and the online practices by ordinary citizens, in particular if they go beyond formalized reactions such as likes and shares (Krämer et al., in prep.).

Most importantly in the present context, the role of the media as populist actors has been increasingly explored theoretically and empirically. It is essential to distinguish different ways in which the media can be populist or contribute to the success of populist movements or the cultivation of populist attitudes and worldviews. Otherwise, discussions can be fruitless if one side focuses on one dimension of the relationship, and another side has other dimensions in mind (Krämer & Schindler, 2018). For example, media outlets or individual journalists may evaluate populists and populist politics very critically while at the same time reproducing the populist framing of issues. They may act as populist representatives or mouthpieces of the popular will themselves or simply cover populists' actions extensively due to their news value.

Similarly, the relationship between populism and popularity, the popular and the majority of the population has to be treated in a sufficiently nuanced way. Some specific types of populism thrive on entertainment and celebrity. This is, for example, certainly an aspect of Berlusconism and Trumpism. An elective affinity has also been assumed between populism and certain popular media formats such as talk shows or the tabloid press. However, this relationship has not always manifested at a quantitative level; applying formal, “thin” definitions of populism, it is not necessarily more frequent in these formats (Akkerman, 2011; Rooduijn, 2014, but see Wettstein et al., 2018). Still, it can be argued that certain ways of performing tabloid journalism and political talk are populist (cf. Krämer, 2014).
Tabloid media can cover the most diverse issues and events from a presumed perspective of ordinary people or of an imagined ingroup and present them as a danger or annoyance without openly expressing a direct antagonism with elites and outgroups. Reports can also simply play into existing preconceptions of privileges of those groups and injustices against “normal” citizens without passing the threshold of what standardized analyses would classify as a “manifest” populist message. Similarly, talk show hosts, among many other styles of moderation, can adopt the role of an advocate of the “ordinary citizen” and demand that guests stick to “commonsense” conceptions of reality.

Thus, there can be an affinity between the popular and populism. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Krämer, 2016), the relationship is not straightforward. Populism is not necessarily popular, and it is not very fruitful to define it as simply any attempt at being popular. Furthermore, popular culture is a highly differentiated category and for many actors and artifacts, it is difficult to find a connection with the core of populism. Conversely, even if we might expect right-wing populists to emphasize traditional and folk culture, the attempts to connect with such symbols of cultural identity have not always been popular (De Cleen, 2016). Other right-wing populists seem to cultivate a popular, rather ahistorical, informal and consumerist instead of traditionalist aesthetic.

Naerland (in this volume) reviews the literature on the relationship between populism and popular culture. Furthermore, he points to an aspect that has been neglected so far: the role of popular culture for identities which then form the basis for the antagonism inherent in populism (see also Campus, in this volume, on further aspects of the popularization of populist leadership).

In general, the aesthetic and symbolic dimension of populism requires further analysis, in particular its relationship with the aesthetic schemata and stylistic predispositions of certain milieus. Some authors have started to integrate the literature on social-structural conditions of the rise of populism and on individual predispositions into their discussion of media effects (Hameleers, Reinemann, Schmuck, & Fawzi, 2019)—however, without considering aesthetic dispositions in the broadest sense. Nevertheless, the vast literature on the relationship between populism and class, gender and other dimensions of social status and on dispositions that may explain people’s affinity to populism (such as authoritarianism) still waits to be synthesized with the literature on the role of the media and discursive opportunity structures, and both lines of research have rarely taken concepts
and theories from cultural sociology into account (see Koppetsch, 2019\(^1\), for one of the few exceptions referring to Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the cultural aspects of social class).

As an important step, Reinemann (in this volume) presents a multi-level model that includes the different ways of processing of populist messages in different channels, based on certain predispositions in a structural context that includes, for example, political opportunity structures and economic and cultural developments.

We may also assume that a right-wing populist milieu has emerged (Krämer et al., in prep.)—a segment of the population with a set of similar social positions, lifestyles and, of course, worldviews. They do not only form a dispersed group with common characteristics but an actual milieu in the sense of a social environment and network of relationships. Its members are not only connected because they tend to live in certain areas, work in certain professions and concentrate in certain families and networks of friends and acquaintances. They can also be related via social media, follow each other and common sources, gather in online groups and forums, engage in typical communicative practices and organize or join further political collective actions. The right-wing populist milieu is thus a political-communicative one in the sense of Weiß (2009). It is also held together by common symbols and aesthetics which, for example, manifest in visual and linguistic styles of social media posts and also account for the perception of right-wing populist politicians as charismatic and authentic (on the construction of authenticity in the performance of populist leaders and movements by means of truth-telling and disruptive performance, see Sorensen, 2018).

Other parts of the population are clearly anti-populist, while some segments probably range in between, sharing a “banal populism:” politically disenchanted, feeling neglected by the political elite, maybe longing for strong political leadership, but without the more radical views of the populists in the narrow sense. In particular, most academics and journalists in many countries certainly do not share (authoritarian and, in particular, right-wing) populist worldviews due to their social background and the socialization in their fields. However, this does not mean that there are no affinities between journalistic practice and populism (as expressed by the

\(^1\) Koppetsch’s work has been retracted due to lacking references. A new edition will probably be published. I also share the strong criticism by Biskamp (2019, see below) and others, but I would nevertheless emphasize Koppetsch’s rather original contribution with regard to a Bourdieuan perspective on populism.
concept of media populism) and between certain academic milieus and populism (such as an affinity towards left-wing populism from non-authoritarian to authoritarian that may be more frequent among social scientists and theorists, a scientistic skepticism towards the deconstruction of gender and other social categories not too different from right-wing populism that is probably more common among natural scientists and engineers, and finally New Right or Alt-Right intellectualism in small parts of academia, etc.).

We should also not forget that many populist leaders have an academic or otherwise rather elitist background themselves. What may be dismissed as just another absurdity in populist worldviews, populists’ acclaim of elitist leaders, actually reveals their understanding of representation. Although it is not without contradictions that politicians with an upper-class background attack “the elites” and imitate certain styles of the popular or rural classes, populist representation is not about representativity but about the perceived extraordinary capacity to intuit, embody and enforce the popular will. What creates this perception is not a characteristic of the leaders themselves but a relationship and performance (as the corresponding approach to populism has emphasized): The leaders able to act in a way that is taken by their followers as a sign of a particular talent or determination by their followers and as a perfect expression of what they feel. This does not only include uncompromising claims and provocative statements which signal the necessary courage and willpower, but sometimes also humor, the ability to entertain, or to earn money (humor is also an important factor in the dissemination, euphemization and normalization of right-wing populist ideologies, see Wagner & Schwarzenegger, in this volume). In the eyes of their followers, this shows that these leaders are clever and ready to do what pleases their audience instead of being distant and arrogant like other elites. The habitus of both the populist leaders and their followers repels other milieus that are then quick to equate populism, popularity, oversimplification, bad taste, etc., sometimes even to the degree that they disregard the actual radicality of the actual populist ideology and focus on superficial style and manners.

The differences between populist and non-populist perspectives create all kinds of tensions and conflicts, which will be discussed in the following section. There is no clear opposite of populism. Neither elitism, liberalism, pluralism nor technocracy are polar opposites of populism in every respect or even cover every non-populist perspective. There are countless ways to see the world from a perspective that is not first and foremost populist. However, a few generalizations may be possible if we oppose populism to the logic and worldviews that are typical in certain social fields.
Due to the unique populist perspective on society and politics, populist and non-populist actors can not only enter into conflict, but this difference of perspective can lead to particular dynamics and reveal blind spots in the respective worldviews.

In democratic political systems, established non-populist parties not only compete with populist ones for votes but also with regard to the very construction of the political space in public discourse. Populist parties have to engage in classical party competition if they have not yet been able to transform the system in their favor. And if they have, they will continue to use the communicative frames of traditional competition and campaigning to maintain their democratic legitimacy. However, in the case of the most illiberal populists, it would be quite consistent with their ideology to eliminate political competition, rely on a claim of sole representation and erect a Bonapartist or state-party system legitimized by occasional acclamation. However, in many political systems, populist groups are smaller opposition parties or junior partners in coalitions and therefore have to reconcile their acceptance of party competition with the claim that all established parties are the same and illegitimate. This can lead to internal struggles over collaboration with these parties, but this populist view of the political also poses a challenge to those parties and the media: Do they explicitly or implicitly accept the populist framing which supposes a dichotomy between populist and established parties? They have to reject the antagonisms communicated by populists and insist on a liberal or pluralist consensus while, at the same time disputing the populist claim that they do not really offer voters any real choice and real political alternatives. However, some established actors can break with that consensus, adopt populist communication themselves, normalize the populists and collaborate with them.

Journalists are then often confronted with a similar difference of perspectives—at least if they aim to adhere to the norm of neutral and balanced reporting. They have to decide how they construct the political field and how they deal with populist criticisms of journalism that sometimes amounts to hateful and even physical attacks. Populists often count independent journalists among the elite and accuse them of opposing or misrepresenting the “true” will of the “true” people (a view of the media that can be termed anti-media populism, Krämer, 2018b). Increasingly, not only the journalistic coverage of populists but also the actual perspective of journalists on this relationship is being investigated empirically, both by means of interviews (Stanyer et al., 2019) and in content analyses of jour-
nalistic meta-discourses on that relationship (Krämer & Langmann, in prep.; McDevitt & Ferruci, 2017).

Researchers see their practice as an observation of nature or society conditioned on their own perspectives and methods but usually not congruent with a populist view of society (and maybe of nature). Even the academics who embrace populism as a viable political strategy will take a different perspective on society than most actual populist movements, due to political differences (such as left-wing versus right-wing populism) and because they reflect on the contingency of perspectives and the problem of essentialized views of society and politics. Populists often portray researchers, at least in some fields, as elitist and conspiring ideologues who seek to impose their worldview on the population. For example, scholars in fields as different as climate research and gender studies are accused of indoctrination disguised as research (see Krämer & Klingler in this volume).

Thus, populism presents itself differently from different perspectives—such as a political, journalistic, scholarly, etc. one—and differs from the usual perspectives of actors in those fields. It poses a challenge to them because it also exposes and sometimes exploits the blind spots of the practices in those fields.

In journalism, this blind spot may be the construction of a legitimate political spectrum and the definition of “balance.” The definition of the “sides” of an issue, the selection of speakers and the resulting boundaries of discourse are mostly based on implicit practical rules, and even if they are being discussed internally, we rarely find any public explanations and arguments.

Sometimes, the boundaries of discourse and of the spectrum of “non-extremist” positions are defined rather narrowly, and populists do not always easily fit in. It can then be different for media outlets to justify the differential treatment of populist and other actors, and journalists are not always well-equipped to counter the criticism by populists or free speech advocates.

Sometimes, this spectrum is defined rather broadly, and the argument by more radical actors that they should be present in a pluralist and fair discourse is readily accepted. However, this can lead to a paradoxical situation where anti-pluralist actors can instrumentalize democratic and journalistic norms against journalism and demand more extensive and positive or at least uncritical coverage. Given the chance, the same actors may ultimately strive for strong control of the media. At least, they can sometimes achieve being covered as one whole side in a controversy, with all other political camps representing the other side. This gives them a lot of atten-
tion and power to define the framing of a discourse and the rules of the debate.

Sometimes, the inclusion or exclusion or the equal or unequal treatments of populists also leads to a Trojan horse situation or a sorites (heap) paradox. If parties or politicians gradually change their position or reveal their character over time, (seemingly) non-populist actors can establish themselves in public discourse and the political system, and it is difficult not to cover them the same way as before once they turn out to be more authoritarian-populist. For example, parties and politicians may start off as liberal, conservative or socialist reformers and gravitate towards right-wing radicalism, authoritarian socialism, etc. (this does not mean that isolated malicious actors single-handedly turn parties into right-wing populist ones, but that parties that have been increasingly open to authoritarian populism or related ideologies can continuously shift in that direction, which is often reflected in their leadership at a given point, and that such shifts are sometimes ignored or euphemized by the media for years or even decades) As we are reluctant to say that adding one grain at a time will suddenly turn something that is not a heap into a heap, it will be difficult not to invite certain politicians to talk shows anymore or to radically change the way they are covered because one feels they have become too radical overnight.

Similarly, there is sometimes no clear definition of the neutral ground and normative commitments in journalism, i.e., of those foundations of the journalistic construction of reality that are not treated as controversial and are not covered as opposing claims by different actors that are up for debate. For example, should climate deniers by given the same chance to speak as climate researchers? Should racist worldviews be presented in talk shows like any other position? Is it “objective” to present demands of certain left-wing populists as “radical,” should other actors be cited if they make such claims, or is such a label uninformative and misleading? And is “populist” an epithet or a neutral concept? Some media outlets and journalists have clearly positioned themselves with regard to some of these questions, while many others solve such problems on the spot or do not disclose their general policies with regard to such issues.

Whether journalists are representative of the whole population has sometimes been a concern in research and in the field but has also been addressed by certain populists. In general, journalists are not representative of the respective general population. In particular, neither the social-structural basis of populist movements nor the minorities that some of them wish to exclude are represented proportionally in journalism. This can create blind spots where certain perspectives remain invisible, in particular as
journalism positions itself as “neutral,” not linked to any particular social position.

However, while some critical researchers and journalists have drawn attention to the representation of marginalized groups, right-wing populists are preoccupied with presumed biases against their camp (often connected to earlier discourses on alleged biases of the media against right-wing actors and policies; Major, 2015). Some journalists have also publicly asked themselves whether the success of right-wing populism is due to the perspectives of working-class, rural populations and otherwise “ordinary people” being insufficiently represented in the media. They often seem to imply, for example, that the working class is essentially white, follows heteronormative ways of living, etc., or that “ordinary people” are more concerned or affected by migration than by racism. Some left-wing populists demand the representation of indigenous and other minorities in the media and support community and alternative media, but others only consider the media mainly as mouthpieces or as stages for themselves. Their idea of the media is not about participation or even descriptive representation but mainstream.

Therefore, Holt (in this volume) reviews the discussion about whether right-wing outlets can be called “alternative media,” a term that has often been reserved for more inclusive and emancipatory outlets. However, if we define alternative media strictly relationally, as an alternative to a (perceived) mainstream, then we can analyze and differentiate how they actually react to other media and affect them, how they construct that mainstream, what kinds of criticism they express, etc., as Holt argues.

In research, one blind spot is the closure of controversies, the point of blackboxing (Engelhardt & Caplan, 1987; Latour, 1999, p. 304), and the end of reflexivity. Methods and findings are potentially open to doubt and revision (which is of course one of the Mertonian norms, see Merton, 1942), and procedures of investigation and analysis can in principle be applied to the research process itself (as different schools in the sociology and history of science have shown). However, in order to function, research has to commit itself to certain assumptions that are not being questioned at a given moment, and self-reflection must not lead into an infinite regress. However, despite the seeming clarity of logic, scholarly definitions, the scientific method or other methodological principles, the rules of when and how networks of theoretical assumptions and methodological and epistemological principles are being questioned and revised can never be entirely codified and differ according to contexts and actors.

Populists can then disregard the conventions and the state of research and question and use some of the principles of research against research.
For example, if social scientists and all kinds of intellectuals and cultural authorities discuss and sometimes criticize the motives and interests of others and demonstrate the social relativity of their beliefs, why not scrutinize their motives? And if it is the essence of scientific practice to question previous assumptions, why not doubt all research findings, in particular those with important social and political implications? Right-wing populists, for example, question the validity of research in climate research and gender studies and point to the alleged ideological motives of researchers in both fields (see Krämer & Klingler, in this volume). The problem with this criticism is that it is selective and asymmetrical (it cherry-picks and is not equally self-reflexive and -critical) and does not follow a clear sense of what is fruitful skepticism and of degrees of confidence in scientific findings and assumptions. However, these attacks constitute a challenge for science communication that is then forced to provide explanations which seem to imply that research practices and findings should not be questioned.

We might say that in politics, there is a blind spot concerning the foundations of political legitimacy. Decisions are being made following certain procedures in the name of a population. But why these procedures, and in whose name? And haven't these procedures somehow replaced actual representation and the expression of a common will? Populists ask such questions—or at least imply that there might be a problem—and propose particular answers: It is “the people” that is to be represented (and they point to an actual dilemma of how a definition of “the people” can itself be legitimized democratically, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). Their answer is that “the people” is to be defined as the underprivileged or non-elite and/or an \textit{ethnos} (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). And they would indeed claim that procedures get in the way of real representation.

However, the populists’ answer often misrepresents the sense of those procedures. As far as they fulfill their function, they enable fair representation or constitution of a political will which cannot be reduced to the mere expression of some essential interest of the (ordinary) people or the identification with a political leader that embodies the will of the whole of the people. However, factually, the fairness of the political process is never accomplished as long as minorities can justifiably claim that purportedly universal rights and equal chances are withheld from them and that the seemingly general will excludes their perspective. The answer to this can, again, be populist contestation, but with the risk of essentializing the newly constituted “people” and excluding further groups and demands. This way, populism can empower or exclude minorities from the political process, vindicate their rights or infringe on their rights by creating
unchecked power based on an exclusive or overly generalized claim of representation that negates differences in interests and perspectives.

Like journalism, populism also reveals the contingency of how the political field is usually described. Instead of drawing the traditional distinctions between left and right, populists declare that the established parties are essentially the same, and the main conflict should be between those above and below. They also question the definition of what is “extreme” and “normal” and the neutrality of political rules and procedures that (allegedly) work against them.

Populism, as it were, reveals the aspects of an economic and political system, of other fields and of an overall social order that are often swept under the table or remain unfulfilled promises: The idea of political rule based on the popular will and strong representation; the prospect of stability and prosperity that is supposed to legitimize the combination of capitalism and liberal democracy; the promise of social security, social justice and advancement, of wealth and consumption; meritocracy and the rewards for hard labor. However, some forms of populism also bring ethnocentrism and nationalism, racism and sexism to light that is inherent in overall political culture. If people feel that certain promises have not been fulfilled, they can draw radically opposing conclusions, some of them resulting in very exclusive and discriminatory politics. Populist reactions to such grievances frame them in terms of an antagonism between the ordinary people and the elite.

However, is there a “populist moment” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 9) that can be transferred from one type of populism—exclusive, discriminatory, authoritarian—to a more benign one that surfaces people’s “true” or well-understood and diverse grievances that have only been displaced or projected onto certain scapegoats? Or would a complete conversion of worldviews be necessary, from anti-elitism based on conspiracy beliefs to structural criticism, from exclusive to inclusive solidarity, from conceptions of justice based on inherited status and a person’s productivity to justice based on equality and needs, from ingroup centrism to a centering of perspectives, from resentment to revolt against an economic system or a post-democratic state (Fassin, 2017), etc.? However, populism may make it harder, not easier to develop a well-founded criticism of elites (including those in the media) if such criticism can be mistaken for authoritarian and exclusive populism, and if such populists can feel vindicated by discourses that seek to use some populist moment.

Populist discourses are thus a challenge to political communication, science and intellectual communication, journalism and other fields (for example, to religion as populists often enter into conflict with the estab-
lished churches, the arts as populists may attack an elitist or liberal art world, or even sports if populists claim that some sportspeople are out of touch or use their fame for the wrong political purposes). This challenge cannot always be addressed with the cognitive and symbolic resources of these fields, as populism touches on the doxa (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 147-148) of the respective fields, questions some of the conceptions that usually go unquestioned in those fields.

Koppetsch (2019) has described (right-wing) populism as a heresy against dominant “truths” and views. Despite the criticism of her diagnosis of a cosmopolitan liberal hegemony (Biskamp, 2019, who also strongly criticizes other implications), her use of Bourdieu’s concepts in the analysis of populism is generally rather fruitful. Not only may his theory of symbolic struggle in different fields (with the differentiation between different poles of fields, between orthodoxy, heterodoxy and doxa) allow for a more nuanced view of how dominant ideologies and discourses are (ultimately also more nuanced than Koppetsch’s own analysis). His multidimensional description of social structure (Bourdieu, 1979) also provides useful distinctions between fractions of classes (such as the new and old, or ascending and declining petty bourgeoisie), which may be very helpful to understand the social-structural causes of populism and appeal of populist discourses to different groups (and thus resolve some of the controversies surrounding its social-structural basis and the role of cultural versus economic explanations).

Finally, Bourdieu’s theoretical analyses on representation and the constitution of political entities (e.g., Bourdieu, 1981a; 1981b; 1984; 2001) may also be helpful in the analysis of populist politics and communication.

4. Paradoxes of Populist Communication

The populist perspective on society is one that claims to view it from below, in a critical manner, uncorrupted by power and free from the indoctrination by the ruling elites and their spokespersons and propaganda channels. However, populism not only reveals some of the conflicts and paradoxes inherent in present social structures but has paradoxical implications itself, in particular in its more illiberal and anti-pluralist forms.

Populists sometimes make use of arguments that appear constructivist or relativist or resemble ideological criticism: Others act the way they do because of their cultural background, their elite status or because they are ideologically indoctrinated. These populists, in contrast, are critical, free
thinkers and authentic rebels, beyond the mainstream. However, these attitudes turn out to be rather asymmetrical. The organized skepticism is not directed against one's own worldview; the contingency and performativity of one's claim of representation are not reflected. Evidence is cherry-picked, and reasoning is motivated by the desire to confirm or defend one's ideology, ignoring contradictions and changing commitments (for example, using the “lying press” and “fake news” as source as long as some information fits one’s worldview, Holt & Haller, 2018). Criticism sometimes descends into generalized mistrust and conspiracy theories brought forward from an absolutist perspective.

At other times, statements are kept strategically ambiguous (Hatakka, Niemi, & Välimäki, 2017; Wodak, 2015), and the most controversial commitments and offensive statements are avoided: One is just asking questions, starting a debate. And who would be opposed to asking critical questions and open debates, in particular in journalism?

If, however, these attempts are being rejected and criticized, populists often claim an underdog position and victim role. Even governing politicians, extremely wealthy individuals or those in privileged positions in the established media such as editors in chief or columnists maintain that they are being oppressed, never oppressors, and that through the suppression of their voice it is the voice of ordinary people that is being suppressed.

Authoritarian populists exhibit a tactical (or—according to the most charitable interpretation—unintentionally paradoxical) relationship with liberal and pluralist norms. While they tend to deny the pluralist and liberal preconditions of a democratic process, they appeal to such norms when they are themselves concerned or if it fits their strategy and ideology. For example, right-wing populists claim that their freedom of expression is being restricted, that they are not represented fairly in the media, that they are the true protectors of minorities such as Jews or of gender inequality against Islamic antisemitism or Arabic patriarchy (on such paradoxes, see, e.g., Farris, 2017; Krämer, 2018a; Moffitt, 2017). Fawzi (in this volume) relates three dimensions of certain anti-pluralist populist ideologies—anti-elitism, homogeneity of the people and exclusion—to populist criticism of the media. She emphasizes how populists turn normative expectations towards the media against them and that this amounts to a use of double standards in a strategic attempt to generally delegitimize the media.

Given that the distinction between the people and others is very sharp and that all power and all rights ultimately have to serve only one group, authoritarian populist ideologies as such do not seem to imply any restrictions to othering, exclusion and antagonism. If populists claim to have the highest democratic legitimacy, that they represent everyone except the peo-
ple's actual enemies, are there any criteria inherent to their ideology as to what means are not justified by their ends? This leads us again to the question of populist practice—not only the discursive and governmental practice of populist leaders but also of ordinary followers. Can we discern any clear norms of what is legitimate political action? What motivates and what restricts more extreme and even violent behavior?

Every ideology has its corresponding political practice (or we may even define conceptions of the “right” political practice as part of ideologies), ranging from revolution, direct democracy, civil disobedience, the election of representatives, buying organic and fair-trade products, to paramilitary training. This includes mediated practices: studying Marxist political magazines, creating memes, reading a conservative newspaper, trolling and “owning the libs” on social media, establishing and following social media accounts for demonstrations, sending messages to elected officials or forwarding chat messages with racist jokes to relatives. But what is the practice of populism? Apart from the performance of leaders with their different styles, the practice of followers may only be, in the most extreme case, to wait for such leaders and to elect and acclaim them. For many, political agency and efficacy are experienced and often (re-)discovered through the actions of leaders or organized movements but may not be exercised in other ways. At least for certain types of populism, the political practice of its adherents would then be the culmination of representative democracy: to let oneself be represented in the most emphatic way, without a sense of real difference between the representatives and the represented and without the need for the latter to act themselves.

Frank (2017) criticizes this Schmittian idea of identity and emphasizes the enactment instead of the representation and delimitation of the people. However, his example of agrarian populism with its cooperative and deliberative practice, its political education and creation of institution is rather atypical if compared to the recent varieties of populism this introduction focuses on. Nevertheless, his article is one of the few that focuses on the practices of citizens.

However, some followers are more active for various reasons, including a situation where they feel that their anti-elite, anti-establishment and possibly also anti-outgroup attitude is not really represented by any leader, movement or party, or that they are not yet sufficiently potent. Populist parties and movements also organize demonstrations and protest, and right-wing populist citizens engage in all kinds of online activities, liking and sharing posts by parties, creating new material and sometimes also attacking opponents and members of minorities. Haller, in this volume, synthesizes the main strategies of right-wing populist online communication,
including the strategies of involvement and mobilization. At least in the case of right-wing populism, this level of activity is somewhat at odds with the ideology that has been combined with the populist antagonism: conservatism (Siri, 2015). This ideology would ideal-typically be associated with a tempered approach to politics, a (petty-) bourgeois style, an appeal to traditions, trust in authorities and the defense of the status quo, not with street protest and rebellion.

The right-wing populist citizen is forced, as it were, by the decline of order and of the nation to become active instead of simply working honestly, enjoying the fruits of one’s labor and everything else one is entitled to, simply conducting oneself well and entrusting one's representatives with everything else. In principle, however, right-wing populist citizens would probably prefer to consume the political performance of their “true” representatives and not to lead a life that is politicized throughout but live “freely”—unrestricted, for example, by environmental regulation, “political correctness,” etc. Only the way of life of the others has to be strictly regulated.

The authoritarian attitudes and prejudices against outgroups can lie dormant in better times. In times of a perceived crisis, even of a final battle against the demonized elites and racialized outside threats, some citizens’ conservatism has to become rebellious, and the authoritarian and discriminatory attitudes are activated. These citizens may then also join forces with those right-wing groups that align their lifestyle more strictly with their ideology, such as the more völkisch, fascist, neo-nazi, new right and/or religious-conservative movements. Together, they form a coalition of a populist extreme right.

Thus, the political practice of populism may be characterized, somewhat paradoxically, as vicarious political action, possibly mass protest, offline and online acclamation, and vernacular creativity but usually not the politicization of the whole way of life (Krämer et al., in prep.).

5. Implications for the Scholarly Perspective

What do the above remarks imply for a scholarly perspective on (authoritarian and particularly exclusive) populism? This academic perspective cannot simply reproduce the perspective of a majority that is not affected by discrimination, of an elite that can adapt to or resist authoritarian policies more easily, or of a liberal elite that looks down on the popular base of some populist movement. Furthermore, researchers should not simply reproduce the distinctions made by populists (e.g., between the people and...
the elite, between “cultures,” those constituting a group of “workers” that do not encompass women, migrants, people of color, etc.). They should only reconstruct these distinctions in interpretive analyses but analyze the positions of actors according to carefully constructed, specifically social-scientific concepts.

The analysis of the relationship between populism and the media should not be confined to one single perspective and not be biased by unreflectingly sticking to one. Instead, this field of research should reconstruct, relate and explain different perspectives: populist, non-populist and anti-populist; majority and minority; different milieus and different fields (journalism, politics, etc.).

There is another choice of perspective that can also be very consequential when studying populist communication. Elsewhere, I have made the argument that we commit ourselves to the truth and falsehood of messages when we should not and do not commit ourselves when we should (Krämer, in prep.). While in the careful reconstruction of populist worldviews and in studies on the processing of messages, our judgment on their veracity cannot play a role for epistemic reasons; we should be skeptical towards certain proposed solutions to the problem of “fake news” that do not explicate a concrete understanding of what is true and of how we can know something to be true. Nevertheless, this argument allows for a wide variety of perspectives on populism and disinformation or “fake news” (see Corbu & Negrea-Busuio, in this volume, who explore the affinities between populism and the use of disinformation, such as the reliance on Manichean worldviews and stereotypes and their strongly emotionalizing character, and the contribution by Haller).

Concerning the more specific perspectives on populism and the media, we have already made some progress towards more theoretically informed analyses that do not simply depart from some conception of populism and then engage in rather ad-hoc arguments. However, we have not yet used the full potential of communication theory, social theory, social psychology, political theory and other approaches in order to theorize the relationship between populism and the media.

A comparative political economy of populism and the media might establish different models of their relationship and explain populist media policy and the structure of populist media outlets in terms of political, economic, social-structural and other factors. Possible models include media corporations owned by populist leaders or their close allies, independent private corporations whose outlets support populist leaders and parties or engage in their own type of media populism, populist control over public broadcasters, and populist alternative media outlets and social media chan-
nels with their different forms of funding such as small or large donors, subscriptions or advertising. Readers may associate these models with different countries and their political, media and economic system but also with historical phases, different interests and strategies, etc.

Furthermore, research on populism and particularly in relation to the media remains largely ahistoric. Not only transnational but also historical comparisons can contribute to a broader basis for analyses, and recent development can be explained in terms of political and social history but also the history of ideas or discourses. A history of populist ideas would also include populist ideas of history (Krämer, 2019): For example, the relationship between right-wing populism and history ranges from mere conventionalism that mostly centers on the status quo and a common way of life that is seen as threatened (driving diesel cars, eating pork, etc.) via an appeal to tradition as something that is handed down from a vague and idealized or imagined past (the way Christmas is being celebrated, the intact nuclear family, etc.) to single strategic references to history (it seems that while right-wing populists in Germany emphasize that German history is more than National Socialism, they mostly talk about there being too much talk about National Socialism) and to revolutionary conservatism and elaborate theories of history (such as ideas of Western decadence or encompassing histories of Islamization—ideas that are, however, to be found more often in the new right than in common right-wing populism).

In terms of the content and form of populist communication, the perspective may be shifted from its core elements to a more differentiated analysis of the actual ideologies held and communicated by specific actors. Various researchers have already started addressing populist communication on a broader range of topics: not only immigration but also social and economic policy, environmental policy, cultural policy, gender, etc. (as some of the contributions in this volume also demonstrate).

Most analyses of populist communication remain logocentric, whereas visual styles or symbolisms are analyzed more rarely. This leads to at least two perspectives that should be adopted more frequently: the analysis of the actual performance of populist actors in terms of their appearance and the staging of events, often with the aim of creating appealing images in the media, and the investigation of the use of visual and audiovisual material as a part of populist media content, in particular online. For example, the use of memes and comic strips by right-wing populist parties and non-organized groups has been analyzed (Brantner & Lobinger, 2014; Lobinger, Venema, Benecchi, & Krämer, in this volume, Wagner & Schwarzenegger, in this volume). However, many facets of visual populist
communication or visual coverage of populist actors have remained un-studied.

But maybe most importantly, despite accumulating research, we still know rather little about the political and particularly mediated practice of ordinary citizens with populist attitudes. What does it mean practically to be a populist citizen? We are still waiting for a fuller picture of online and offline practices beyond voting behavior and hate speech and beyond core elements of populism. The attitudes and ideologies held by ordinary citizens are increasingly studied in relation to different factors. However, two important bodies of literature still wait to be connected: research on the communicative and social-structural factors.

Finally, we often do not so much lack a normative standpoint as we need more elaborate normative arguments that explicitly address media and communication, journalistic practices and the structures and limits of public discourses. Most research is justified by a diffuse concern about populism as a threat to democracy and good governance, and to minorities —thus often by a centrist or liberal anti-populism.

The normative debates that mainly happen outside the field of research on populism and the media should be informed by a perspective that includes the media and the public sphere and that does not only abstractly relate populism to communication or discourses but to specific mediated practices. Whether scholars opt for a discursive, participatory, agonistic, etc. conception of democracy, this positions should take political communication into account and, conversely, have implications for their normative views on discourses, journalistic practice (right down to specific journalistic norms and routines) and media policy, including the governance of online platforms.

Thus, how we understand populism has political implications—and practical implications for communicators. For example, one sees a liberal center that is threatened by populism and both sides and a journalism that is threatened by illegitimate populist criticism while trying to be objective and balanced, even in the coverage of the populists. Or one demands a type of journalism that establishes equivalence between all legitimate demands in the population and takes the side of the people instead of the elites. Or one focuses on the often unacknowledged continuities between established ways of doing journalism and certain types of exclusive populism and tries to establish a more inclusive and representative journalism, or acknowledges the dangers of blanket anti-populism. Or one may emphasize the role of citizens and participatory structures that go beyond reactions to what professional communicators have produced.
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Krämer, B. (in prep.). *Stop studying “fake news” (we may still fight against falsehoods in the media)*. Unpublished manuscript.


The relationship between populism and the media can be described as rather paradoxical. On the one hand, the media are often cited as a relevant factor in the rise of populism in modern democracies. They provide favorable opportunity structures for populist actors and cover them and their issues comprehensively. A populist logic that includes provocative and negative statements and often focuses on a charismatic leader is highly compatible with the logic of news production (Esser, Stepińska, & Hopmann, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2014). On the other hand, we can observe very harsh and fundamental media criticism by populist actors. US President Donald Trump constantly condemns the media for being biased and accuses them of reporting “fake news” and being “the enemy of the people.” In Germany, politicians from the populist Alternative for Germany party repeatedly criticize the media. Supporters of the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) movement have titled the mainstream media as the “lying press” and violently attacked journalists during their demonstrations. And Hungarian prime minister Victor Orbán has restricted freedom of the press. In sum, these examples illustrate a huge effort by populist actors to delegitimize journalism and its institutions.

Even though these examples relate to current cases, media criticism in general is not a new phenomenon. Politicians often express negative attitudes towards the media and distrust journalists (Brants, de Vreese, Möller, & van Praag, 2010; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). They tend to react to negative media coverage with hostility and accuse the respective media outlets of being biased against them. Moreover, with regard to the citizens, a large part of many Western societies also does not trust the media and expresses various points of criticism. Consequently, there is a large body of research on media criticism both on a theoretical and on an empirical level that dates back several decades (Chomsky, 2002; Goldstein, 2007; Watts et al., 1999). Especially, the Frankfurt-school and other critical scholars (e.g., Bourdieu, 2001) have largely focused the media’s role in society.

Media criticism can be differentiated in terms of internal media criticism by the media themselves and external media criticism voiced by scholars, political actors or citizens. The latter has often come along with a
political leaning. While left-wing actors criticize, for instance, the “capitalist system media” and their “neoliberal propaganda,” right-wing actors attack the mainstream media’s “left or liberal bias” (Ladd, 2012; Smith, 2010). Within the research on the hostile media phenomenon, it has been shown both for political actors (Matthes, Maurer, & Arendt, 2019) and citizens (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) that the more left- or right-wing oriented they are, the more biased they perceive the media to be.

Such media criticism in general is an important element in democracies, as it ideally fosters a critical reflection on the journalistic routines, journalistic norms and values, its democratic functions, or its quality criteria. There are indeed numerous developments in the media landscape that can be observed critically and evaluated problematically, such as commercialization (McManus, 2009) or tabloidization (Mackay, 2017). Thus, assessing which media criticism is justified and which is not is rather difficult. It clearly becomes problematic and worrisome when it is generalized, completely unfounded or anti-democratic, e.g., containing hate speech. Scholars observe a fundamental change in the way such criticism is expressed today by becoming more prominent and more hostile (Krämer, 2018a; McNair, 2017). In 2018, according to Reporters Without Borders (2018), press freedom decreased the most in European countries (although they respect press freedom in general the most). The organization states that political actors in both opposition and government increasingly express anti-media hate speech, which may prepare the ground for violence against journalists. In several cases, these actors belong to parties that can be classified as populist. In contrast to normative media criticism, their form of criticism is often strategic, as it aims at achieving particular interests of specific groups of society. On the other hand, populist media criticism has a genuine democratic and participative character by pointing out the lack of representation of interests of some segments of the population (Neverla, 2019).

This chapter seeks to shed light on this populist media criticism by theoretically analyzing the relationship between the dimensions of populism and negative attitudes toward the media. It is the aim of this analysis to extract the genuine populist element of media criticism. The chapter will include the perspective of both populist political actors and citizens, but will focus on the latter. It will present the major points of criticism of the media and the places where this criticism is voiced. With the use of the term “media,” this chapter refers to established, professional media and does not include criticism of social media, alternative media or citizen journalism. The latter media outlets are, however, relevant when dealing with the venues where criticism of the established media is voiced. The following
reflections mainly refer to Western democracies but might also be applicable to other cases.

Finally, this paper will focus on right-wing populism due to its current rise in many Western democracies and its challenge for the media (Wodak, KhosraviNik, & Mral, 2013). Left-wing populist media criticism differs with regard to several points of criticism, e.g., their understanding of the media’s role in society or their definition of populists’ ingroups and outgroups, which are thus neglected in the following.

1. Defining Populism and Populist Attitudes

In recent years, scholars have followed the idea that populism cannot only be analyzed on the political supply side, but also as an individual-level characteristic in the form of an attitude on the demand side (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012; Rooduijn, 2014a; Schulz et al., 2017). While the understanding of populism as a discourse strategy or communication style is fruitful in many contexts, this chapter mainly follows the ideational approach of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), as it allows the analysis of populist attitudes empirically, both on the supply and demand side.

The different understandings of populism can mainly be traced to different contextual conditions (Priester, 2012); they fundamentally differ when analyzing populism, for instance, in Latin America, the U.S., or Europe. Due to these large differences, the following reflections need to focus on a geographic region and will mainly be applicable to the current situation in Europe. They follow the understanding of populism as a (thin) ideology that consists of several subdimensions. In a populist ideology, the political elite are accused of depriving the people of their sovereignty and exploiting democracy for their personal goals. They are portrayed as a detached, corrupt and self-serving group that is antagonistic to the people (Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). This vertical exclusion has been labeled anti-elite populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Another central part is the reference to the people, which is at the core of a populist ideology. Crucial here is that the people are depicted as a pure, virtuous and homogenous group. This constructed ingroup of the people is contrasted in a horizontal opposition to “the others” (anti-outgroup populism). Some authors see the exclusion of an outgroup as part of an additional right- or left-wing ideology (Schulz et al., 2017); others argue that “the others” are a constitutive part of populist ideas (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömback, & de Vreese, 2017), because the construction of a homogeneous people is
mainly possible by emphasizing an opposition between “us” and “them”. The definition of the outgroup further determines the understanding of the “people,” for instance, as a class or nation (Brubaker, 2017; Mény & Surel, 2002). A right-wing populist ideology understands “the people” as a culturally or ethnically homogenous ingroup whose will should be implemented in favor of the outgroups’ interests, as they do not belong to “the people.” Individuals that agree with these populist ideas can be labeled populist citizens (Jacobs, Akkerman, & Zaslove, 2018; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). The chapter will refer to these three dimensions of populism in the following analysis: homogeneity of the people, anti-elite and anti-outgroup attitudes.

2. Populist Media Criticism

Recent studies have shown that citizens’ attitudes and preferences are more consistent than previous studies have suggested. Citizens do not necessarily recognize a higher-order connection between different social domains; however, they tend to think in terms of broad ideas of how they function and how they are connected (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). Thus, it can be assumed that citizens tend to evaluate society and its institutions in congruence with their political worldview. In our case, this means that populist attitudes should influence how citizens evaluate the media’s role in society and the media’s performance and vice versa. In this process, all populist dimensions can be regarded as a relevant initial point. Thus, the following section will present how anti-elite attitudes, the perception of a homogenous people, and right-wing anti-outgroup attitudes are related to criticism of the media.

2.1 Anti-Elite Attitudes

A populist ideology contains an anti-elite stance that also includes the media. Populists perceive the media as being part of the establishment and neglecting the people’s interests. They often tend to disregard the media as a crucial part of democracies but evaluate them as enemies (Esser et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Krämer, 2018b). Such attitudes are summarized under the term anti-media populism, which describes an attitude that perceives a great divide between “bad and corrupt journalists” and “the good people” (Fawzi & Krämer, under review; Krämer, 2018b). Jour-
nalists are portrayed as detached from the people and do not serve the public’s but their own or the ruling elites’ interests. This is also reflected by the term “Lügenpresse,” which assumes that the media – together with the political elite – purposely lie to the people. “Lügenpresse” was first used at the beginning of the 20th century, but experienced a revival recently due to its increased usage by far-right actors. Great attention was given to the term by the PEGIDA movement, which repeatedly referred to it during their weekly demonstrations.

![Diagram](https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845297392)

**Figure 1. Populist narratives on the media-politics-people relationship**

The populist perception of the media-politics-citizens relationship (see Figure 1) is based either on the narrative that the media are controlled by the political elite and advocate in favor of them, or that the hegemonic media support the interests of the political elite with their coverage, or that both the media and politics actively conspire (Krämer, 2018b; Fawzi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2018). All three explanations are founded on the notion that politics and media are not independent of each other; they give different reasons for that. The first explanation considers politics as actively influencing the media; the second assumes a rather voluntary adaptation of the media to politics. The media do not adhere to their professional standards and do not maintain the necessary professional distance and, consequently, do not fulfill their watchdog function. The latter explanation (which is usually only claimed by rather extreme actors) assumes a joint collaboration of media and politics (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). In any case, populists suppose that both the media and politics together betray the people.
According to populist ideology, this results in an uncritical media coverage of the ruling elite. Failures and grievances of the political elite are said to be swept under the carpet by the media.

In contrast, populist actors see themselves as treated the opposite. They criticize the media for covering populists unfairly and excluding them from the spectrum of legitimate positions. The media would jump at any lapse and, thus, populists accuse them of using double standards (Haller & Holt, 2018; Krämer, 2018a). Many populist actors, such as Donald Trump in the U.S., Marine Le Pen in France, or Alexander Gauland in Germany, express these accusations. In this context, however, they do not mention their often-used strategy of self-scandalization to receive (negative) media coverage, which allows them to portray themselves as victims of the media (Haller, 2015).

Moreover, right-wing populists perceive journalists to be too liberal, left-wing oriented and “green.” Most journalists indeed do not represent the general population and, in particular, populist citizens in terms of sociodemographic factors and political attitudes – which actually should not be a problem as long as media coverage is not biased accordingly. Moreover, journalists are highly educated and often part of the intellectual elite (Hanitzsch, Steindl, & Lauerer, 2016). Thus, populists might not only feel neglected by the political elite but also do not feel represented by journalists or media coverage. Populist actors tap into this dissatisfaction and depict themselves as the most able to directly implement the people’s will (Rooduijn, 2014b). They claim to have a moral monopoly over the representation of the people and their true interests (Müller, 2016). This claim is based on a normative assessment and not on empirical evidence. Populists pretend to naturally know the true will of the people, which they perceive as being suppressed by the media (Müller, 2016). Thus, from their point of view, the media are not a legitimate intermediary between the people and the political elite (Dahlgren, 1995) due to a lack of representation and not communicating the people’s real interests. Populists criticize that, especially, the liberal media purposely conceal issues from the public that would confirm the populist worldview but censor in the name of “political correctness.” In contrast, critics of populism refer to the large compatibility between media and populist logic and state that populists receive too much media attention, for instance in talk shows. Content analyses in several European countries show that right-wing populist actors and parties receive a large amount of media coverage but are not overrepresented. Both populist and non-populist political actors receive mainly negative media coverage; however, populists are evaluated more negatively (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018). Regardless of the causes of
this, it might explain the negative media evaluations, as populists perceive their preferred political parties as being incorrectly and unfavorably portrayed. Based on a German representative survey, Fawzi (2019) indeed showed that mainly the anti-elite dimension goes hand in hand with negative attitudes toward the media.

In this context, it is important to concretize the term “the media,” as populist media criticism might have specific media outlets in mind when talking about the media. First, it is plausible that the media’s role as political actors matters. Some media outlets promote populist ideas and support populist actors and parties in their coverage themselves, which has been labeled media populism (Krämer, 2014). Consequently, it can be assumed that the main objects of populist media criticism are rather those “mainstream media” that cannot be classified as populist. Second, a useful distinction can be made between “quality media,” which includes public broadcasting but also national or local newspapers with a focus on hard news and tabloid media, respectively, commercial broadcasting, whose style of political coverage is usually more soft-news oriented (Bird, 2009). Public service broadcasting often serves as an ideal-typical media enemy of populist actors due to its structural proximity to the state (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). A natural alliance has been observed in particular between tabloid media outlets and populism (Mazzoleni, 2014). Tabloid media are often more focused on news values such as negativity or personalization and present themselves as taboo breakers, advocates of the ordinary citizens, and opponents of the ruling elite, which overlaps a lot with the populist logic (Wettstein et al., 2018). It is therefore assumed that they cover populist actors and their issues more intensively and in a more positive way, while quality newspapers, and in particular public service broadcasting, are said to have a more critical stance towards populist actors (Esser et al., 2017; Krämer, 2017). Content analyses in ten European countries did find a more pronounced media populism in tabloid and commercial media (Wettstein et al., 2018; exception: Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2010). In line with these considerations, it has been shown that citizens with populist attitudes tend to prefer tabloid media, respectively, commercial TV and entertainment content, to quality media (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Schulz, 2018).

2.2 Homogeneity of the People

Populist media criticism also stems from the perception of a homogenous ingroup. Based on this perception and the fact that the media often report
negatively and skeptically about populism in many European countries, populists disagree with the depiction of their ingroup by the media but criticize a biased and unfair coverage. They blame journalists for being detached from the people, as the media do not understand their problems or do not even care for them but only for their own interest. These evaluations might also lead to the already described portrayal of the media as an illegitimate and non-representative institution that is suppressing the true will of the people. However, all these points of criticism are based on a very specific populist understanding of the people that only includes their respective ingroup and excludes all individuals who belong to the horizontal or vertical outgroups. This assumption of a homogenous people is clearly anti-pluralistic. Consequently, pluralist media coverage that includes a large spectrum of positions, actors and issues contradicts the populist worldview. Normative expectations towards the media presume balanced, diverse and impartial media coverage (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014; McQuail, 1992). Interestingly, if the media do not meet the populist expectations with regard to representation, populists usually do not call for censorship but refer to these journalistic norms and quality criteria. They call on the criteria of accuracy and completeness and accuse the media of violating these norms (Engesser et al., 2017; Fawzi, 2019; Krämer, 2018a). Thus, paradoxically, although being anti-pluralist themselves, they accuse the media of not being pluralist and objective (Moffit, 2017). From a populist point of view, truth or factuality cannot be traced to a diversity of ideas but on the alleged common sense or attitudes of the ordinary people from the ingroup. A populist worldview does not allow for other standpoints; they are seen as a result of an incompatible culture or an ideological bias (Krämer, 2018a). Right-wing populists in particular do not accept that other ideologies can represent the common interest: “Strictly speaking, freedom of expression, as they conceive it, is the freedom of ingroup members to express the will of ‘the people’ without being censored in the name of political correctness and to claim the preferential treatment which they believe that it deserves” (Krämer, 2018a, p. 142). Populist media criticisms consequently only point out a supposed bias against their ingroup; they will not address any media bias against their outgroups.

These perceptions of media bias and non-representation of their ingroup can explain the overall negative evaluation of the mainstream media’s performance by many populists. Individuals who do not perceive the mainstream media as an objective information source and as collaborators with the ruling elites, and do not feel represented by the media, will not assess the media as a citizens’ mouthpiece or political watchdog. Consequently, Schulz et al. (2018) showed that a populist worldview goes hand
in hand with hostile media perceptions. And a Pew research study (2018) in eight countries as well as a study from Fawzi (2019) confirmed that populist citizens are less satisfied with the media’s performance, trust the (quality) media less and ascribe to the media a less important role in society than do non-populist citizens.

2.3 Anti-Outgroup Attitudes

The exclusion of outgroups is a core element of the right-wing populist ideology and usually refers to ethnic or religious minorities such as refugees, immigrants or Muslims. Populists try to establish the image of a society in crisis and depict outgroups as a threat to the ingroup and responsible for the constructed crisis. They refer to a “heartland” (Taggart, 2000), an emotional construction of idealized, past times where the will of the people is implemented and populists’ outgroups are marginalized.

These anti-outgroup attitudes also reflect the anti-pluralistic character of populism, which is again incompatible with pluralistic media coverage. The exclusion of a specific group of society contradicts the normative expectation that the media should include a wide spectrum of actors and interests in their coverage. Moreover, the media, in particular, public service broadcasting, are supposed to include minorities and discriminated groups in their coverage to secure the social integration of all citizens. Populists also turn these normative expectations against the media. In line with their criticism of the political elite, they also accuse the media of favoring outgroups over the ingroup by too-positive reporting, concealing possible negative events relating to the outgroup and purposely misinforming the public on negative impacts of immigration (see Figure 1). Moreover, they perceive that the media understate criminal acts committed by immigrants (Krämer, 2018a). Thus, in Germany, for instance, they demand the media to always report the ethnic background of perpetrators of criminal or terrorist acts (Haller & Holt, 2018). Although the German press codex clearly states that the media should generally not report the background, populists interpret this as deliberate deception of the public and tend to ignore this paragraph. In Germany, this debate has indeed put pressure on the media, which in the end resulted in editing the press codex. The new paragraph now states that the ethnic or religious background should only be mentioned in case of a “well-founded public interest,” which has been criticized as a rather wooly formulation.

In addition, populists claim that while pro-immigration positions receive a large amount of attention, anti-immigration positions do not get
access to media coverage as they are boycotted or censored. While Muslims would be granted a “victim status,” anti-immigrant actors would immediately be depicted as “Nazis” (Figenschou & Ihlebak, 2018; Holt, 2018).

Moreover, populists tend to be subjected to a specific version of the actor-observer bias in this context. They expect the media to attribute criminal acts committed by members of their ingroups to individual motives, while acts committed by outgroup members attributed to their cultural or ethnic background (Krämer, 2018a).

3. Where is Populist Media Criticism Voiced?

After presenting the main points of criticism that populist political actors and citizens express towards the media, this section briefly points out in which channels populist media criticism is voiced. Focusing on publicly expressed criticism, social media have gained an important role. Previously, citizens were mainly able to voice their dissatisfaction in interpersonal discussions or letters to the editors, which posed a major hurdle for participation. Today, users can easily voice their opinions in blogs, in the comment sections of mainstream media’s social media pages, or on their own social media profiles, e.g., on Twitter. Studies have shown that user-generated content contains both populist attitudes (Hameleers, 2019) and media criticism (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2016; Schindler, Fortkord, Posthumus, Obermaier, & Reinemann, 2018). Populists actors in particular use social media intensively to attack the mainstream media (Engesser et al., 2017; Haller & Holt, 2018; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Donald Trump’s Twitter posts, in which he regularly assaults the media, accusing them of lying and spreading fake news, are a prominent example. Although social media allow politicians to circumvent the traditional media as gatekeepers, political legitimacy is still mainly possible to establish via mass media. Thus, populists usually attack only those media that hold a conflicting political position while promoting those with favorable media coverage.

Moreover, the media themselves take up the criticism; for instance, they have reported intensively on the “Lügenpresse” accusations (Denner & Peter, 2017). Hereby, the media increase their range and might promote such anti-media populist attitudes themselves. However, they also have the possibility to classify and counter them and provide background. Nevertheless, at least with regards to the Lügenpresse accusations, a profound discussion did not take place. Denner and Peter (2017) rather found an unreflective coverage of these accusations in the German mass media.
Finally, alternative media are an important source of populist media criticism. There exist different understandings of alternative media, sometimes also called partisan media. Here, the term is used for those media outlets that state to challenge the hegemonic power of the established media as well as their journalistic authority (Atton; 2008; Fuchs, 2010; Holt, 2018). Alternative media often put a large focus on media criticism as well as criticism of the ruling elite (Fuchs, 2010; Holt, 2018). They want to offer counterstrategies and alternative information, although taking a very clear position themselves. With regard to their points of criticism, they claim at increasing diversity of the media market, covering the real interest of the people, broadening the too-narrow mainstream opinion corridor and thereby expressing large distrust in the media elite. The more extreme sites clearly aim at replacing mainstream media (e.g. Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). With regard to their political standpoint, alternative media often position themselves as opponents of the political establishment and share a very clear anti-immigration position (Holt, 2018). Consequently, many right-wing alternative websites can clearly be classified as populist media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). This is also because right-wing populist movements tend to rely more on alternative than on mainstream media (Larsson, 2017) and use them to promote their worldviews.

4. Discussion

This chapter has shown that a populist worldview is clearly connected to a negative evaluation of the media’s role in society, and both populist citizens and political actors tend to express very harsh and comprehensive criticism of the media. This stems from their perception of the people as a homogenous group, their anti-elite and anti-outgroup attitudes.

In contrast to media criticism in general, populist media criticism does not seem to aim at a reflection of journalistic norms and quality criteria but rather at delegitimizing the media (Lischka, 2019). Consequently, Neverla (2019) argues that the term criticism is actually misleading, as populist media criticism often lacks factual arguments that can be theoretically refuted. Populist media criticism is rather “anti-enlightening, anti-democratic and anti-pluralist” and thus not critical (Neverla, 2019, p. 12). Several of the major points of criticism contradict each other, and it should be kept in mind that attack is not criticism. It is very plausible to assume that populist media criticism goes hand in hand with media cynicism, which can also be described as a generalized distrust that perceives all media as untrustworthy at all times.
Thus, an urgent question regards the effects of such populist media criticism, as they may have major implications for society and democracy. Research has shown that politicians’ media criticisms can increase the public’s perceptions of news bias (Smith, 2010) and decrease their trust in media (Ladd, 2012). As user comments can influence individuals’ perception of public opinion and their own attitudes (Zerback & Fawzi, 2017), this might also be the case for media criticism voiced by populist citizens in social media. However, empirical evidence of the effects of populist actors’ and citizens’ media attacks (especially with a longitudinal perspective) and their mutual relation is needed. What happens if the public is constantly exposed to populist media criticism? Are populists successful in their attempt to delegitimize the media and influence their electorate accordingly? One can assume that this might be an explanation of the observed polarization between social groups that trust and distrust the media. At least in Germany, studies indicate that both groups are increasing, while the group of uncertain individuals is shrinking (e.g. Ziegele et al., 2018). Based on empirical findings that there is a large overlap between populist and distrustful citizens (Fawzi, 2019), one could assume that the anti-media rhetoric of populist actors resonates among populist citizens, while it backfires among non-populist segments.

Furthermore, populist media criticism may have major effects on the media themselves. Due to their intentional provocations, which have been labeled as a strategy of self-scandalization (Haller, 2015), populists receive large amounts of media coverage (Wodak, 2013). Nevertheless, populists often depict themselves in the role of victims. It is a very difficult task for journalists to find a balance here, and they actually are in a “no-win’ situation” (Wodak, 2013, p. 32). When reporting about right-wing populism, journalists are often criticized by non-populist actors for giving populists too much attention, reproducing the right-wing narratives and further disseminating them. In contrast, populists criticize the same coverage as not balanced, impartial or too negative. And if the media decide not to cover the provocations and scandals produced by populists, the latter accuse them of censorship and neglecting them. The media need to be careful that these constant attacks on their professional norms do not put them on the defensive, as this might lead to even more coverage and attention by populist actors and ideas and to a mainstreaming of right-wing populist positions. This has already taken place, according to some critics, as populists often manage to frame debates in their desired way and maintain successful issue ownership (Wodak, 2013). Moreover, direct attacks against journalists, e.g., online hate speech can have severe impacts on journalists personally and on their coverage itself and create a worrisome and dysfunc-
tional climate. Journalists who report about demonstrations by populists such as PEGIDA are more and more experiencing threats of violence and even physical attacks. Moreover, they regularly become the targets of hate speech in online user comments (Chen et al., 2018; Obermaier, Hofbauer, & Reinemann, 2018; Post & Kepplinger, 2019; Ziegele & Quiring, 2013).

Despite this critique of populist media criticism, it has the potential to point to some major problems in terms of the media’s role in society and performance, and some aspects of it should definitely be taken seriously by the media. If several members of the society feel that they cannot really participate, and their interests are not heard by the traditional media or perceive that the media’s reality has nothing to do with their own everyday life, it is journalists’ task to reflect on these perceptions, on their selection of issues and actors in their news coverage and, thus, on their social and political functions in democracies. However, it is also journalists’ task to point out when populists attack liberal democracy, checks and balances and freedom of the press by trying to delegitimize the media. Moreover, they should refrain from falling for the provocations and self-scandalization of many populists due to their high news values.

Media criticism is an important part of a democratic society; however, it should be well-founded and constructive and should aim at improving the media’s performance. A populist media critique that is generalized and lacking arguments for their viewpoint might prevent necessary and profound criticism.

References


Populist Communication in the News Media: The Role of Cultural and Journalistic Factors in Ten Democracies*

Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Florin Büchel, Martin Wettstein, Dominique Stefanie Wirz, Anne Schulz, Philipp Müller, Christian Schemer, Werner Wirth & Frank Esser

The recent success of populist movements in democratic countries over the world has renewed academic interest in the phenomenon of populism and its driving forces. Special attention has been given to Western democracies, which have seen the formation of a populist block in the European Parliament in 2014, the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and the unexpected political success of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) as a right-wing populist party in the German general elections in 2017.

The role of the media in promoting populist ideas has been investigated by several large-scale research projects. These have been based on the assumption that news coverage is crucial to successful populist agenda-setting (Walgrave & de Swert, 2004) and to public promotion of a populist communication style (Mazzoleni, 2008). Numerous recent studies—mainly in single countries or indiscriminately across countries—have investigated what populist communication in mass media entails (Krämer, 2014; Aslanidis, 2018), in what contexts it appears (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Blasničk et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2017, 2019; Wettstein et al., 2018a), and how it may be assessed in cross-national settings (Esser, Stepińska, & Hopmann, 2017; Wirth et al., 2016).

While these studies have greatly enhanced our knowledge of populist movements, their communications, and the media’s role in promoting their issues and ideas, two problems have remained largely unresolved. First, since most studies only focus on single countries, the relative prevalence of populist communication across different countries is difficult to assess. In order to develop a comprehensive, comparable, cross-national picture of the prevalence of populism in mass media, a common research

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instrument must be applied. Second, most studies have focused on political opportunity structures—such as actors (Blassnig et al., 2018), issues (Ernst et al., 2019), and the political system (Decker, 2012)—to explain the prevalence of populist communication. With the notable exceptions of mediatization (Mazzoleni, 2014; Wettstein et al., 2018b), platform affordances (Ernst et al., 2019), and professional role orientations (Maurer et al., 2019), little attention has been paid to cultural and journalistic context factors that promote populist communication in the news.

In this chapter, we seek to fill this gap with data from a large-scale media content analysis of political news in ten countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and the US). We aim to investigate the role of cultural, organizational, and story-level context factors that may promote populist communication. We intentionally do not focus on such context factors as electoral success of populist actors or the ideological overlap of media outlets and populist movements. Instead, we explore other factors—namely authoritarian attitudes, market orientation, and opinion journalism—that are largely independent of the political reality but may nevertheless increase the chances of populist statements being included in news coverage.

1. Theoretical Background

Populism has always been considered a “notoriously vague term” (Canovan, 1999, p. 3), and various definitions have been used at any given moment. However, many scholars agree in regarding populism as “thin-centered ideology” (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 408; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3; Hawkins et al., 2018; Kriesi, 2014, p. 362; Mudde, 2004, p. 544; Rooduijn, 2014, p. 727), built on the fundamental antagonism between the ‘good’ homogenous people and the ‘bad’ (also homogenous) elite. While the people are regarded as the ultimate sovereign, the elite are seen as betraying the people and depriving it of its legitimate right to exercise power.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Key Message</th>
<th>Underlying Ideology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elitism</td>
<td>Discrediting the elite</td>
<td>The elite are corrupt.</td>
<td>The elite are accused of being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, etc. The elite are called names. The elite are denied of having morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blaming the elite</td>
<td>The elite are harmful.</td>
<td>The elite are described as being a threat/burden, as being responsible for a negative development/situation, or as having committed a mistake or crime. The elite are described as not enriching or not being responsible for a positive development/situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detaching the elite from the people</td>
<td>The elite do not represent the people.</td>
<td>The elite are described as not belonging to the people, not being close to the people, not knowing the people, not speaking for the people, not caring for the people, or not performing everyday actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People-Centrism</td>
<td>Stressing the people’s virtues</td>
<td>The people are virtuous.</td>
<td>The people are bestowed with morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, etc. The people are absolved of being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Praising the people’s achievements</td>
<td>The people are beneficial.</td>
<td>The people are described as enriching or being responsible for a positive development/situation. The people are described as not being a threat/burden, not being responsible for a negative development/situation, or not having committed a mistake or crime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stating a monolithic people</td>
<td>The people are homogenous.</td>
<td>The people are described as sharing common feelings, desires, or opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoring Sovereignty</td>
<td>Demonstrating closeness to the people</td>
<td>The populist represents the people.</td>
<td>The speaker describes himself as belonging to the people, being close to the people, knowing the people, speaking for the people, caring for the people, agreeing with the people, or performing everyday actions. The speaker claims to represent or embody the people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demanding popular sovereignty</td>
<td>The people are the ultimate sovereign.</td>
<td>The speaker argues for general institutional reforms to grant the people more power (by introducing direct-democratic elements or increasing political participation). The speaker argues in favor of granting more power to the people within the context of a specific issue (e.g., elections, immigration, security).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denying elite sovereignty</td>
<td>The elite deprive the people of its sovereignty.</td>
<td>The speaker argues in favor of granting less power to the elite within the context of a specific issue (e.g., elections, immigration, security).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Even though populism hardly occurs in its pure form and is often enriched with additional ideological elements (such as nationalism, liberalism, or socialism), all populist actors share this Manichean notion of a fight of the virtuous people against the evil elite (van Kessel, 2015). Therefore, following the rationale of Wirth and colleagues (2016), we focus on this common core of populist ideology when investigating populist communication in the news across different national contexts. Specifically, we argue that populist actors, in their effort to publicly voice their ideology, rely on a set of populist key messages that stem from their worldview. These messages convey the three core concepts of populist ideology: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and the desire to restore public sovereignty (Table 1).

Within this framework, populism can be expressed through three different key messages that attack the elites: Populist actors may discredit the elite, blame the elite, or accuse it of being detached from the people. People-centrism can be expressed through four messages: the populist actor may demonstrate their own closeness to the people, stress the people’s virtues, praise the people’s achievements, or affirm a monolithic people. Finally, restoring sovereignty is comprised of two messages: demanding sovereignty for the people, or denying the elite’s sovereignty (see Table 1).

1.1 Discursive Opportunities as Analytical Framework

Following the framework of discursive opportunities (Gamson, 2004; Koopmans & Olzak, 2004), we argue that cultural, political, and systemic structures may favor specific discursive messages. Previous research on populist communication has mainly focused on its association with political factors and has found that political actors (Blassnig et al., 2018, Wettstein et al., 2018a), the occurrence of issues taken on by populist actors (Ernst et al., 2019), and a country’s acceptance of populist parties (Wettstein et al., 2018b) affect the prevalence of populist communication.

In this chapter, we take a different approach by investigating cultural and journalistic opportunity structures at different levels. We argue that a news story is created in the cultural context of a given society, the organizational context of the news outlet, and the functional context of the story genre; consequently, we investigate the role of conditional factors on all three levels. Namely, we explore the prevalence of authoritarian attitudes, the market and opinion orientations of media organizations, and the news story genre as possible opportunity structures for populist communication. While all three factors are not directly associated with populism or the po-
political system, they have previously been identified or suspected as being potential driving forces of populist ideology or communication (Esser et al., 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Wettstein et al., 2018a).

1.2 Populism and the Prevalence of Authoritarian Attitudes

In cross-cultural research, a variety of cultural values have been found to shape the way members of a culture think and work, at least to a certain degree (Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart & Appel, 1989; Schwartz, 2006). Most of these cultural values are closely associated with specific social values and political orientations, which makes them unlikely opportunity structures for populism in general. However, authoritarian attitudes, the primary exception, have not only been found to be connected to both right- and left-wing ideology but have also been explicitly linked to populism in the past (Dix, 1985; Mudde, 2007; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Pettigrew, 2017; Rensmann, 2017; Vasilopoulos & Lachat, 2018).

Scholarship on authoritarianism began in the aftermath of the Nazi regime in Germany (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Arendt, 1951; Fromm, 1941), and it experienced a recent revival when the third wave of democratization gave way to a period of (re-)authoritarianization (Brownlee, 2007; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005). Over time, the research perspective has shifted from psychoanalytical (Adorno et al., 1950) to behavioral (Altemeyer, 1981, 1996) to social-psychological (Duckitt, 1989; Feldman, 2003; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005, 2009).

Authoritarian attitudes consist of three core dimensions: conformity, obedience to authority, and outgroup aggression (Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010; Funke, 2005; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011). They become more salient in situations where individuals with a respective predisposition perceive a threat or crisis and look for a strong leader (Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). Both populism and authoritarianism involve homogeneous in-groups, conformity among the people, and united resistance against threats.

While authoritarian’s obedience dimension seems at first glance to be incompatible with populism’s anti-elitism, this contradiction dissolves when we consider that populists are not generally opposed to obedience but demand that the rightful sovereign takes control. They advocate obedience to the rule of the people and to strong, charismatic leaders that are
frequently encountered in populist movements (Mudde, 2004). Moreover, authoritarians are not automatically blindly obedient but “can and will rebel under certain circumstances” (Mudde, 2007, p. 23), in particular when facing “questionable authorities” and “leaders unworthy of respect” (Stenner, 2009, p. 143).

We argue that the prevalence of authoritarian attitudes presents an opportunity for populist communication in the news, especially when the population is disappointed by the authorities or sees traditional norms as being threatened by the rise of progressive values. Journalists are regularly confronted with the attitudes of the populace: reporters interact with their sources, and journalistic stories are produced with regard to anticipated audience interest, which can vary across countries (Obijiofor & Hanusch, 2011; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). For journalists, the prevalence of authoritarian attitudes is a component of the external framing conditions that influence how they perceive and make sense of the world; it influences their interpretation of news situations and consequently their decisions on news selection and reporting (Esser & Strömbäck, 2012).

Journalists may respond differently to higher levels of authoritarian attitudes in a country. The literature on role orientation suggests that some journalists are more focused on audience desires, while others see themselves more as pedagogues and guardians of democracy (Hanitzsch, 2011). In the context of this paper, some journalists may promote populist messages to cater to authoritarian attitudes, while others may feel a strong need to criticize and deconstruct these messages in order to counter a narrative that is potentially harmful to liberal democracy. However, it is likely that both groups of journalists will engage more with populism in their coverage when authoritarian attitudes are more widespread in their country.

Hypothesis 1: The higher the prevalence of authoritarian attitudes among the population of a country, the higher the prevalence of populism in the press.

1.3 Populism and Market Orientation

On an organizational level, journalists work for media companies that pursue certain editorial and business strategies. Based on the theory of mediatization, Mazzoleni (2003, 2008, 2014) argued that market-oriented newspapers are more likely to report populist claims, either because they are deliberately complicit with populist actors or because they seek to draw the
attention of their readers by engaging in strong and simplified language. In contrast, upmarket newspapers may be expected to reflect the values and views of the elite; thus, they may take an elitist attitude towards the government and engage in active resistance against populist actors – either by covering them critically or ignoring them.

However, empirical evidence for this line of thinking is rare, as multiple studies have failed to show that mass-market newspapers provide more favorable discursive opportunity structures for populist actors (Akkerman, 2011; Bos et al., 2011; Herkman, 2017; Rooduijn, 2014; Wettstein et al., 2018a). Partially supporting Mazzoleni’s assumptions, other studies have established that evaluations and presentations of populist actors are slightly more favorable in the popular press (Herkman, 2017; Wettstein et al., 2018b) and that mass-market newspapers feature more blame of elites in interpretative stories (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2019).

Stronger evidence for organizational context factors was found for opinionated weekly magazines, which are susceptible to blending political information with popularization elements (Umbricht & Esser, 2016; Wettstein et al., 2018a, b). Their tendency to feature populist content is primarily explained by their publication schedule and opinion orientation, which support a more forceful, more colorful, more interpretative, impact-oriented style.

Following these arguments, despite the absence of strong empirical support, we assume that both the market orientation and the opinion orientation of newspapers offer opportunities for populist communication. Specifically, we expect mass-market newspapers and weekly magazines to feature more populist content than upmarket newspapers.

Hypothesis 2a: The extent of populism in the mass-market press is higher than in the upmarket press.

Hypothesis 2b: The extent of populism in the weekly press is higher than in the daily press.

1.4 Populism and Opinion Orientation

Newspaper stories can be categorized into straight news items, opinion-based items, and illustrative news items, an intermediary category that blends news with analysis and dynamic reporting features. News items are characterized by “inverted pyramid writing, balanced reporting, emphasis on verifiable facts and attributed sources, a detached point of view, and the separation of the news and editorial functions of the news organization”
Opinion-based items consist of editorials, op-eds, and commentaries, which give the authors more freedom and allow for greater levels of advocacy, criticism, partisanship, subjectivity, and interpretation (Salgado, Strömbäck, Aalberg, & Esser, 2017). Illustrative news items, such as interviews and investigative reporting, take an intermediate position between straight news and opinion-based news in terms of journalistic freedom (see also Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010).

Since populist key messages are strongly evaluation-focused and are based on blaming the elite and giving the people a voice, they require an editorial choice to include opinionated claims in a story. These requirements are most likely met in opinion pieces, where readers, editors, or guest authors are allowed to voice their opinions on politics. In addition, stories that offer additional context and interpretation are more likely to contain populist key messages (Blassnig, 2018; Hameleers et al., 2019).

Finally, we assume that the as-yet unsupported suggestion that populist content differs between mass-market and upmarket is partially owed to opportunity structures on the level of the individual story. Upmarket newspapers may also engage in populist communication in commentaries and editorials, even if they refrain from doing so in straight news reporting. However, in mass-market newspapers, commentaries are rare (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008) and populist content may be included in general coverage, as mass-market newspapers “defy an easy distinction between opinion- and information-oriented journalism” (p. 70). We therefore expect an interaction between the opportunity structures on the organizational and story levels.

Hypothesis 3: The extent of populism in straight news stories is lower than in opinion-based and illustrative news items.

Hypothesis 4: The effect of the story type is stronger in upmarket newspapers than in mass-market newspapers.

2. Method

We conducted a semi-automated content analysis of news coverage on the issues of labor market and immigration by the leading press outlets in ten Western democracies (Austria, Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States) in periods outside of general elections.
2.1 Sample

On the country level, our selection of the democracies was guided by three theoretically important contrasts. In terms of political systems, we included majoritarian (FR, UK) and consensus (AT, CH, DE, NL) democracies (Lijphart, 2012). In terms of media systems, we considered liberal (UK, US), polarized-pluralist (IT, FR) and democratic-corporatist (AT, CH, DE, NL, SE) countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In terms of party landscape, we analyzed countries in which populist parties received relatively little electoral support (below 5%) in the last national election prior to our analysis (UK, US, DE) as well as countries in which populist parties had achieved 10 – 30% of the vote shares (SE, AT, CH, PL) (Wettstein et al., 2019).

Within each country, we selected two leading upmarket daily newspapers and two dominant mass-market daily newspapers. In countries where paid-for and free mass-market newspapers are equally important, we included one representative of each type. We chose two free papers in France and Italy, while we chose two paid-for papers in Germany, Poland, the UK, and the US. Finally, we also considered the two most important opinionated weekly news magazines in each country except for Italy and Sweden, where we had to restrict ourselves to one opinionated weekly news magazine for technical reasons (see Table 2).

We focused on the press coverage of two policy issues that were likely to trigger nationwide political debates and attract statements from both left-wing and right-wing populists: the labor market and immigration. For each issue, we constructed a search string that we validated in a series of pretests before applying it to the Lexis/Nexis and Factiva databases.

To minimize the influence of special events on the press coverage, our investigation lasted for a period of fifteen months, from March 2014 through May 2015. As this procedure provided us with a vast quantity of news stories (N > 150,000), we drew a randomized sample of roughly 14% of stories from all press outlets (N = 20,278). Within this initial sample, we processed only those news items that contained one or more statements on domestic labor market or immigration policies (N = 9,326).
### Table 2: Sample of Press Outlets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Market sector</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Market sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upmarket daily newspaper</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mass-market daily newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Left-leaning</td>
<td>Right-leaning</td>
<td>Kronen Zeitung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Presse</td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>Süddeutsche Zeitung</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Le Monde</td>
<td>Le Figaro</td>
<td>20 Minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Repubblica</td>
<td>Corriere della Sera</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Volkskrant</td>
<td>NRC Handelsblad</td>
<td>Telegraaf</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Gazeta Wyborcza</td>
<td>Rzeczpospolita</td>
<td>Super Express</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Times</td>
<td>Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dagens Nyheter</td>
<td>Svenska Dagbladet</td>
<td>Aftonbladet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tages-Anzeiger</td>
<td>Neue Zürcher Zeitung</td>
<td>Blick</td>
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</table>

Note: a Market sector plays a marginal role in the country’s media landscape. b Not available due to technical reasons.
2.2 Units of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the statement made by a speaker in a news item concerning one or more target actors or issues. The speaker could be any named source that was quoted directly or indirectly in the text; the author of the text was also treated as a speaker when they made statements concerning target actors or issues. Target actors were individual or collective actors about which a speaker may make a remark, evaluation, or descriptive statement. Important target actors for this analysis were ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ as abstract collectives. Statements concerning these actors were used to identify anti-elitism and people-centrism key messages. Statements concerning target issues could either be solely focused on the issue or could be linked to target actors. The latter was used in the coding of messages about restoring popular sovereignty when they were linked to the elite or the people, stating that the target actor should/should not have the power to act or decide on the issue.

Table 3: Reliability Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Key Message</th>
<th>Percent agreement</th>
<th>Brennan and Prediger’s κ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Elitism</td>
<td>Discrediting the elite</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blaming the elite</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detaching the elite</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People-Centrism</td>
<td>Stressing virtues</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Praising achievements</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stating a monolithic people</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrating closeness</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoring Sovereignty</td>
<td>Demanding popular sovereignty</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denying elite sovereignty</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Type</td>
<td></td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Test among 76 coders on news item level (N = 32)
A team of 76 skilled and intensively trained coders attained acceptable levels of reliability on all coded categories. The average Brennan-Prediger kappa (Brennan & Prediger, 1981) across all key messages was .83 (see Table 3). All coders were required to pass an initial reliability test (five news items and 137 statements) before being admitted to the coder pool. In addition, a concealed reliability test (32 news items and 382 statements) was conducted during regular coding sessions.

2.3 Measures

Media and story characteristics. Media outlets were characterized prior to sampling as upmarket, mass-market, or weekly newspaper (see Table 2). The type of story was coded manually during the content analysis. Coders decided whether a story is straight news, a report/analysis, an interview, or a commentary or letter to the editor.

Populist key messages. We operationalized each of the nine populist key messages with a broad set of categories, which are detailed in Table 1. These variables can be regarded as formative measures, meaning that a message is not required to be internally consistent in order to be reliable or valid (Diamantopoulos, Riefler, & Roth, 2008). The presence of a message was coded for the statements of each speaker.

Authoritarian attitudes. We build upon Feldman and Stenner’s (1997) well-established approach by operationalizing authoritarianism as an individual attitude towards child-rearing styles, which is independent of political orientation and related concepts like nationalism, xenophobia, populism, and intolerance (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005). For this data, we relied on the fifth wave of the World Values Survey (2005-2009), which included all countries in our sample except for Austria and which asked the question: “Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important? Please choose up to five.” We recorded the percentages of individuals who selected obedience and disregarded independence, using this number as an authoritarian attitude index ($M = 17.0\%$; $SD = 37.6\%$).
Findings

A first glance at the frequencies of populist key message occurrence reveals that one in five stories (21.7 %) contains at least one populist key message (see Figure 1). Messages attacking the elite are approximately twice as frequent (15.1 %) as messages in favor of the people (7.9 %). Messages aimed at restoring public sovereignty are very uncommon (1.1 %). Only a small proportion of stories feature both people-centrism and anti-elitism (1.8 %), and messages from all three dimensions only appear in 12 coded stories (0.1 %). A comparison among countries shows that French and Italian newspapers feature high levels of people-centrism, while Polish, Dutch, and British newspapers display a higher degree of anti-elitism. The newspapers of other countries, particularly Germany, contain relatively low levels of populism (see Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blaming the Elite</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>0.0013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denouncing Elite</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>0.0012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion of Elite</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Anti-Elitism</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>0.0016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievements of People</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtues of People</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to People</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolithic People</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>0.0010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any People-Centrism</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>0.0011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanding Sovereignty for People</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denying Sovereignty to Elite</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>0.0012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Restoring Sovereignty</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Populist Key Message</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>0.0018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Dimensions</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>0.0006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Dimensions</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Prevalence of populist key messages. Bold frames indicate aggregation of all individual messages belonging to this dimension. Due to overlap of individual messages, aggregated scores are not equal to the sums within the dimension.
Our hypotheses seem to be confirmed in a preliminary one-way ANOVA testing the effects of independent context factors. At the national level, the occurrence of any populist key message in the news is higher in countries with a high prevalence of authoritarian attitudes ($r = .784; p < .05$; Figure 2). However, the correlation of authoritarian attitudes with individual key messages was not significant. On an organizational level, we find that up-market, mass-market, and weekly newspapers only marginally differ in their affinity for any populist style ($F (2, 55) = 2.504; p < .1$). However, they do differ in the extent of anti-elitism ($F (2, 55) = 4.482; p < .05$), with weekly magazines being the most anti-elitist, followed by quality newspapers (Figures 4 and 5). On the story level, owing to the large number of articles, we find that the influence of story type on populist content is significant but weak ($F (3, 59928) = 355.1; p < .001; \eta^2 = 0.17\%$).
Figure 3: Relation between the percentage of people indicating preference for authoritarianism and the prevalence of populist key messages in each country (r = .78).

Figure 4: Prevalence of people-centrist and anti-elitist key messages in individual news outlets.
Figure 5: Raw comparison of the occurrence of populist key messages across different media genres and story types. The percentages indicate the proportion of stories featuring messages belonging to each dimension of populism.

Figure 6: Interaction of organizational and story-level context factors.
Note: Estimated means and standard errors for the prevalence of populist communication, controlling for authoritarianism, are displayed.
In order to investigate the influence of the combined opportunity structures on the populist content of a story, we included context factors from all three levels in an analysis of variance calculated at the level of individual stories. In order to test Hypothesis 2a and 2b independently and to test Hypothesis 3 as proposed, we computed three dummy variables for mass-market, weekly, and interpretive stories (as a comprehensive counter-category to straight news) and accounted for the interaction of these factors. Authoritarian attitudes are used as a covariate in the model.

The results confirm Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that authoritarian attitudes have a significant effect on populism in media coverage when organizational- and story-level factors are controlled for ($F(1, 55493) = 1089.8; \eta^2 = 1.9\%$). On the organizational level, weekly newspapers are slightly more populist ($F(1, 55493) = 44.87; \eta^2 = 0.1\%$), whereas there is no effect for mass-market newspapers ($F(1, 55493) = .01; n. s.$), confirming Hypothesis 2b but not 2a. Hypothesis 3 is confirmed, as straight news items feature fewer populist key messages than interpretive stories ($F(1, 55493) = 212.1; \eta^2 = 0.4\%$). Although there is a significant interaction between mass-market type and story type ($F(1, 55493) = 132.516; \eta^2 = 0.2\%$), the direction is not as hypothesized, with the effect of story type being stronger for mass-market newspapers than other newspapers (Figure 6). This finding directly contradicts Hypothesis 4.

4. Discussion

The findings show that populist communication is prevalent but not dominant in political news in Western democracies. The analysis further demonstrates that populism manifests in fragmented ways. The dimension of restoring sovereignty is rare, and combinations of all three dimensions are even rarer. This is not implausible, as journalists are not likely to offer actors the space and opportunity to formulate their complete ideological standpoint in each article. Rather, it is to be expected that populist actors only manage to push one or two populist key messages past the “journalistic gatekeepers and filter mechanisms” (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1122) in stories on current political affairs. However, this does not mean that the reporting of populist key messages is inconsequential because it is infrequent and fragmented: as field and laboratory research has shown, even small doses of fragmented populist messages may affect readers’ awareness and judgments of populist claims—mostly by reinforcing pre-existing attitudinal patterns (Müller et al., 2017; Wirz et al., 2018).
Still, it was surprising that the dimension of restoring sovereignty was extremely rare in the investigated stories, indicating that hardly any actors, not even known populists, explicitly deny the elite’s right to power or demand more power for the people. This finding seems incompatible with the notion that this dimension is as meaningful to the concept of populist attitudes, as anti-elitism and people-centrism (Schulz et al., 2017). However, since the demand to restore public sovereignty requires a discussion based on democratic theory, it can be difficult to include it in short statements on political issues. This dimension might occur more often in party manifestos or press releases that provide the necessary space; meanwhile, in daily news coverage, it might be easier to refer to the unfit elites and the virtuous people and merely imply a demand for more power to the latter.

The fragmentation of populist communication aside, we find clear evidence for the influence of cultural and journalistic context factors on the frequency of populist communication. On a national level, authoritarian attitudes proved to be a strong predictor of populism in the press. Although authoritarian attitudes in a country explained only a small part of the variance of populist messages within individual news stories, we found the attitudes to be strongly linked to the aggregate frequency of populist key messages. This suggests that journalists working in countries with high levels of authoritarian attitudes assign higher newsworthiness to populist messages and find more reasons to include them in their stories (preferably those that provide an opportunity to offer interpretation and opinion). In countries with more authoritarian attitudes across the general public, the media gates are more permeable to populist statements, regardless of whether journalists or politicians are the originators of these statements, or what evaluation they give these statements.

Our findings at the organization level do not support Mazzoleni’s (2003, 2008, 2014) hypothesis that mass-market media are complicit with populist actors while upmarket media act as protectors of the elites. Rather, our findings correspond to the results of a recently published study of a multi-country comparison that showed no confirmation of a greater populism affinity by mass-market newspapers (Maurer et al., 2019). We find that a press outlet’s editorial line is a better predictor of how much populism it features compared to the press outlet’s market orientation.

However, it should be noted that these results neglect the ideological leanings of individual mass-market newspapers, which may provide an opportunity structure for populist parties. Some mass-market papers endorse populist parties because of ideological proximity (e.g., the right-wing tabloid Die Kronenzeitung in Austria), while other mass-market newspapers may adopt a pro-government stance for the same reasons. A good example...
of the latter is the German tabloid Bild, which abandoned its anti-government stance under former chief editor Kai Diekmann and which displays extraordinarily low levels of populism in our sample. Likewise, some upmarket newspapers (such as Le Figaro) take their watchdog function very seriously, which results in relatively high levels of populism. As this study focused on non-political opportunity structures, ideological nuances in both mass-market and upmarket newspapers have been lost in the aggregation. Therefore, our conclusions only refer to the opportunity structure the market orientation of a newspaper may present, regardless of its political leaning.

The current analysis further reveals that the extent of populism is higher in the weekly press than in daily papers. This may be because weekly news magazines tend to run longer formats and to package political stories in a more interpretive, impact-seeking fashion. Moreover, since opinionated weekly magazines address readers who seek original story angles and value opinionated journalism (Esser & Umbricht, 2014), these outlets might have more leeway in interpreting political issues and processes and evaluating political actors. Daily newspapers, in contrast, seek to appeal to a large, diverse audience and may therefore be more restrained in their evaluations (Esser & Umbricht, 2014).

Finally, we found that the type of news story also affects its populist content: opinionated news items exhibit more populist key messages than straight news items. This is hardly surprising, as populist key messages require space and journalists’ willingness to include opinions and evaluations in a story—conditions that can hardly be met in straight news items. Contrary to expectations, however, we found that mass-market newspapers are not more prone to include populist key messages in their straight news items: rather, we found that the levels of populist communication in straight news and opinion items are higher in upmarket and weekly press. Surprisingly, it is the mass-market press that is more likely to keep populist communication out of straight news items and restrict it to opinion items.

5. **Limitations**

It must be noted that the country sample of this study was restricted to Western democracies; the question remains of whether the findings can be generalized to other regions of the world—such as South America, Asia, or Africa, where authoritarian attitudes are more widespread (Hadiz, 2016; Dix, 1985) and where populist movements are also gaining influence. We also focused on the coverage of press outlets, neglecting TV stations, on-
line news, and social media. Moreover, we did not consider how populist key messages are interpreted, contextualized, and evaluated by the journalists. Finally, we only analyzed explicit claims that reflect populist key messages and cannot infer about the actual motives or ideology of the speakers.

Given these limitations, our results can only be applied to the populist key messages in press coverage in Western democracies. However, within this segment we were able to show that cultural and journalistic opportunity structures strongly influence the way newspapers talk about political issues and where journalists allow populist communication to occur.

6. Conclusion

The contribution of this study to the field is fourfold. First, we showed that populism is a moderately common phenomenon in the press outlets of Western democracies and that newspaper readers are exposed to it during normal times in small but nevertheless potentially effective doses (Müller et al., 2017; Wirz et al., 2018). Second, we found empirical evidence of a relationship between authoritarianism and populism on the national level, which may inform future research on both concepts. Third, we demonstrated that press outlets’ editorial lines matter more than their market sectors when it comes to predicting the frequency of populist key messages in their news coverage. This finding may require a thorough reconsideration of Mazzoleni’s (2003, 2008, 2014) long-standing hypothesis on ‘accomplices’ of populism and ‘paladins’ of the established order. Fourth, we concluded that populism can be found more frequently in niches outside the mainstream straight news items in upmarket press outlets: more beneficial opportunity structures are offered by weekly magazines and opinion-based story formats, where more space and editorial freedom are provided.
References


Media, Anti-Populist Discourse and the Dynamics of the Populism Debate

Jana Goyvaerts & Benjamin De Cleen

For anyone following the news, it seems as though populism is everywhere. It is everywhere, in the sense that populist politics seem to have become a permanent feature of the political landscape in many parts of the world. But “populism” is also everywhere in the sense that the term “populism” has become ubiquitous in media coverage of politics. These two levels are obviously connected, but it would be too simple to assume that the growth of journalistic references to “populism” would be a mere consequence of the rise of populist politics, or that journalistic coverage of such politics as “populist” would not have any impact on the prevalence and success of populist politics.

As the other chapters in this book show, there is a sizable body of research on the relationship between media and certain kinds of political actors or political behaviors considered populist. The focus has mainly been on how media have covered populist politics (Aalberg et al., 2016; Bos et al., 2010; Moffitt, 2018), and how these populist politicians use the media (Stanyer et al., 2016). Some work has also been done on the populism of the media, how media have criticized the “elites” and claimed to speak for “the ordinary people” (Krämer, 2014). Our aim in this chapter is to inquire into the politics of the media’s use of the signifier populism. That is, we want to shift attention from the much more commonly asked questions about the relationship between media and populist politics – as a phenomenon – to questions about the media’s use of the term “populism.” How do media use the term “populism,” and what meaning does the term acquire? What role does populism play in contemporary journalistic vocabulary? Why does this matter? What political and normative positions underlie media discourse about populism? And how can we approach and explain the nature as well as the ubiquity of media discourse about populism?

In exploring and formulating questions about the politics of media discourse about populism, we can draw on some existing empirical analyses of how media use the term populism, but such analyses are few and far between (Bale et al., 2011; Brookes, 2018; Herkman, 2016, 2017). In dis-
cussing the politics of the signifier populism in media, our argument also links up with a growing body of work that – often building on a post-structuralist discourse-theoretical framework – analyzes the historical development of the concept (Bjerrepoulsen, 1986; Jäger, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2017b), studies anti-populist discourse (Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2017a; Taguieff, 1998), and reflects on the broader mechanisms behind the intensity and nature of discourse about populism in politics, media and academia (De Cleen et al., 2018; Glynos & Mondon, 2016; Herkman, 2017; Katsambekis, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2017a).

To further strengthen our discussion and identify the areas worthy of further research, we conducted an exploratory discourse-theoretical analysis (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007) of references to “populism” in Flemish mainstream media coverage of the 2014 regional, federal and European elections. The intensity of discourse about populism (both in its left-wing and right-wing forms) in that period, in combination with the fact that Belgium had both national and European elections, made this period a particularly suitable moment for analyzing the dynamics of the media’s use of the term populism. We collected all articles – news articles, analyses, editorials, op-eds – containing the word ‘populist’ or ‘populism’ in the seven Flemish daily newspapers, from two months before the elections until one month after. This resulted in 137 articles1.

We start with a discussion of the main results of the existing empirical analyses of media use of the term populism, confirmed by our own analysis: the predominantly negative connotation of ‘populism’ and the flexibility of the term concerning the nature of populism, and the issues and actors seen as populist. We then connect these findings to broader reflections on the political and democratic role of journalism found in media and communication studies and situate media discourse about populism in the literature on anti-populism. In the following section, we go beyond the ideological dimensions of discourse about populism to inquire about the logics that underlie the nature and ubiquity of references to populism, and that connect media, political and academic discourse about populism.

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1 The articles were collected with Gopress Academic, a digital database for all Belgian newspaper articles, through a keyword search for the words “populist” and “populism.” We included all Flemish daily newspapers, including 3 broadsheets (De Tijd (11 articles), De Morgen (30 articles) and De Standaard (48 articles)), 2 popular/mid-range newspapers (Het Laatste Nieuws (11 articles) and Het Nieuwsblad (12 articles)) and 2 regional newspapers (Gazet van Antwerpen (11 articles) and Het Belang van Limburg (10 articles)).
1. Media and the Meaning of Populism

Mainstream media remain one of the main public spaces in which meaning circulates. Any analysis of the struggle for the meaning of populism needs to include media institutions and professionals as producers of discourse about populism, but also how media function as a sphere in which competing political and other actors attempt to have their own discourse reproduced. Media are not a neutral arena in which all political actors and discourse have the same chances or are treated the same way, but an arena governed by ideological-political preferences and more structural media logics.

Journalists and the voices featured in their work are generally not very fond of populist politics; that much seems clear from the abundance of negative press populism has gotten. Or rather, and this is not necessarily the same, when the term “populism” appears in mainstream media, it is predominantly a label for phenomena considered problematic (even if journalists’ and other voices in media might be much more supportive of certain kinds of politics that could also be considered populist). What exactly, then, is populism, however, is less clear, the term being applied to a broad range of phenomena in the political field and well beyond.

1.1 Populism is a Bad Thing

If there is one thing the few academic studies focused on the uses of the term “populism” in mainstream media show conclusively, it is the overwhelmingly negative and pejorative connotation of the word (Bale et al., 2011; Brookes, 2018; Herkman, 2016, 2017; see Karavasilis, 2018, for an analysis of the uses of populism in right-wing alternative media). Bale, van Kessel and Taggart (2011) were the first to examine the use of the term “populism.” In the article, Thrown around with abandon? Popular understandings of populism as conveyed by the print media: a UK case study, they examined how the terms “populism” and “populist” were used in British newspapers between 2007 and 2008, looking at who and what issues were labeled populist, how and where. Their analysis shows that while “populism” was used for a wide range of politicians and issues, the usage of the term was mostly pejorative.

Juha Herkman (2016) arrived at similar findings in his article, Constructions of Populism, Meanings Given to Populism in the Nordic Press. Combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative frame analysis, he identified five frames in coverage of populism during a number of parliamentary
elections in the Nordic countries in the early 2010s. These frames are: the nationalism frame (populism as emphasizing national traditions), the nativism frame (similar to nationalism, but more focused on the exclusion of ethnic-cultural others), the empty rhetoric frame (populism as a political style of making empty promises aimed at appealing to the people), the political movement frame (populism as a more neutral description of a group of political movement), and the voice of the people frame (a positive frame that sees populism as the voice of the people). Herkman found that the term populism was not used very frequently in the period he studied, but that this usage was largely negative. He also shows that the meaning of “populism” and the way the term is applied to certain parties and not to others depends on national political contexts, even in relatively similar political systems like the Nordic countries.

Stephanie Brookes’ (2018) more recent analysis of journalistic use of the term “populism” in the US and Australia during the 2016 elections confirms the consistently negative connotations of the term. More explicitly so than the works mentioned above, Brookes also reflects critically on the politics of how journalists speak about populism. She concludes that “the ‘populist’ label operates [...] as discursive shorthand for unease about change” (p. 1263) and as a label for actors considered to “pose a threat to democratic politics and established systems because of their unwillingness to follow convention[s] about what it is appropriate to do (and how to do it) in the sphere of formal politics; how to interact with other politicians, political professionals, the news media and citizens; what it is appropriate to say and where to say it” (Brookes 2018: 1264).

“Populism,” that is, does not merely have a negative connotation; the term is used to criticize, delegitimize, question. Despite significant local differences (Herkman, 2017), we find indications of this across different political and journalistic contexts. In the US, “populism” was used to delegitimize Donald Trump as a political candidate who did not fit journalists’ expectations of a presidential candidate. In the Australian context, mainly independent and smaller parties were labeled populist, the label used to place them “outside the boundaries of political business as usual” (p. 13) and to not have to take them seriously, Brookes (2018) argues. In the UK, “populism” was used for very divergent topics and people, but one of the common denominators was that it was systematically used for political actors on the other side of the political spectrum. “Populism,” Bale et al. conclude, “is a term, which tends to be reserved for the political ‘enemy,’ which implicitly seems to turn it into a term of abuse, even if it is not unambiguously used in a negative way” (Bale et al., 2011: 127). And in the Nordic countries, populism was mainly used to refer to supposedly empty
political promises or linked to nationalist or nativist programs (Herkman, 2016: 156).

Our own small analysis of Flemish newspapers confirms these conclusions. In most articles, the term “populism” or “populist” was used in a profoundly negative and critical manner. Of the 139 analyzed articles, only a handful used populism in a neutral way. There were only two articles where its meaning could be considered positive. One of these was an interview with Chantal Mouffe – speaking out for a left-wing populism – but even here, the journalist clearly defined populism much more critically than his interviewee (Eeckhout, 2014). There was no real difference between the different newspapers. We also noticed that there was very little difference between political and journalistic discourse; politicians that were quoted referred to populism in the same negative ways, mostly accusing political opponents of being or acting “populist.”

1.2 Populism is Many (Bad) Things

While populism has a predominantly negative connotation, what exactly the problem is with populism, who is a populist and who is not, or indeed what populism is, is far less clear. The term, so it seems, is thrown around with abandon, as Bale, van Kessel and Taggart (2011) write. They conclude that populism is used to criticize a wide variety of politicians and issues across the political spectrum. Herkman (2016) came to similar conclusions in his analysis of the Nordic press, as did Brookes (2018) in her work on the US and Australia. Our own analysis confirms this flexibility with which populism is used: the 137 articles we found through our “populism” keyword search came from different sections of the newspapers and concerned a variety of topics. Most articles were related to politics, both national and international. But the term populism also appeared in articles on very different subjects, for example, culture and the arts, where it usually refers to artistic work that is seen as, and usually criticized for, aiming to please large audiences.

All analyses show that within the context of politics, populism, while usually not explicitly defined, has a variety of meanings akin to the variety of meanings it has in academic debate: ideology, style, strategy, discourse, rhetoric, and so on. These could be grouped, roughly speaking, in two main categories: a) populism as something done by parties across the political spectrum (even if more regularly by some than by others): a kind of rhetoric, discourse, style, way of doing politics, or formulating policies, and b) populists as a particular group of (mainly radical right and to a less-
er extent radical left) parties with a populist ideology and a consistently populist style of politics (as in category a).

What exactly makes a political act populist is not always clear, but it mainly refers to (a combination) of simplification, emotionality, demagogoy, aiming to please people, and antagonism – all of these characteristics seen as antithetical to what appropriate democratic debate and good policy is supposed to look like. The term populism is used to criticize a rhetoric or political strategy that is considered simplifying, often used in combination with other adjectives such as vulgar, irrational, generalizing, emotional, simplistic, and superficial, as opposed to a rational, complex, reasonable, nuanced, and civilized discourse (see Krämer, 2018: 455; Mudde, 2004: 542; Taguieff, 1998: 7). The word, as Brookes (2018: 1263) writes, is “used to identify (and often express dismay about) the importation of the logics, discourse and technologies of cultural populism and ‘everyday emotion’ into the realm of formal politics.” This is closely related to what Herkman calls the “[populism as] empty rhetoric” frame, the frame most frequently used in his analysis of the Nordic countries. Populism here refers to, neutrally put, “a political style that appeals to people through a down-to-earth rhetoric” (Herkman, 2017: 152). In practice, the term, Herkman says (and our analysis confirms this), is mostly seen as something negative, as trying to appeal to people by over-simplifying or making false promises, akin to demagogy, sometimes also related to irresponsible policy-making.

The underlying idea usually seems to be that populist rhetoric is strategically designed to appeal to voters by pleasing them in ways that are detrimental to good policy and the quality of democracy. This defense of democracy is multifaceted; populism is seen as a threat to a) pluralism and the rights of minorities, when populism is equal to “a frontal attack on the weakest groups in society” (Brinckman, 2014), b) technocracy and decent, fact-based policy, for example when populism is seen as demagogic and contrasted with “hard work based on objective insights” (Eyskens, 2014), as well as c) moderation, rational debate and consensus-oriented politics, where populism is seen as conflictual.

More than ten years ago, Kantola found that in the Financial Times, “the problems of the political system are often seen to lie within the irrationality of the electorate and framed in terms of irrational populism and nationalism” (Kantola, 2007: 203). While there is variation in how the media relate to the role of the people in a democracy, such a critical perspective on populism as a way to appeal to people is common.

When, for example, Prime Minister of Thailand Yingluck Shinawatra was removed from office, a journalist said of her (and her brother’s) ad-
ministration, “the middle class deemed he had taken populist measures to conquer the hearts of the farmers, without helping the country structurally” (Hancké, 2014). These kinds of “populist” policies and proposals are typically placed in opposition to what is supposed to be good for democracy: rationality, responsibility, public good, courage, and respecting the complexity of policy matters (see Stavrakakis & Galanopoulos, 2019). In the Belgian context, this became clear when former Christian-Democratic Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene passed away. In the articles discussing his political legacy, a fellow Christian-Democrat politician said, “he was not a populist but worked based on objective insights and always had an eye for the public well-being” (Vidal, 2014), and a journalist called him someone who “showed backbone and courage. He was not destined for populism” (Geudens, 2015). In an opinion piece in De Tijd, Ganesh (2014) wrote that “traditional politicians should remind the populists who does the hard work in politics; most politics is necessarily drudgery.”

Populism, our analysis confirms, is also used as a term to denounce the rhetoric that goes “against a particular ideal of what [journalists] consider civilized discourse” (Krämer, 2018: 455). The label “populist” is used to refer critically to “streetfighter” language (NN, 2014) or strongly antagonistic rhetoric against competing politicians. For example, when liberal politician Didier Reynders linked the absence of liberals in government to child abductions in the 90s, one journalist wrote, “the disgusting statement of Didier Reynders illustrates that poujadism or populism is by no means shunned” (Castrel, 2014).

Whereas the label “populism” is commonly applied to politicians across the political spectrum, it is also used to designate a particular group of parties. Rather than merely acting in a populist fashion, these populists are considered to have a populist ideology and a program that is inherently simplifying and antagonistic. Populism as a label for a political family usually refers to radical right-wing parties and is used in close connection to nationalism, Euroscepticism, nativism, and racism (see Herkman’s (2016) “nationalism” and “nativism” frame). Such usage of populism often refers to a political force that is profoundly upending the existing political landscape. One politician wrote in an opinion article that “the void left behind by the comatose state of the traditional ideologies, is easily replaced by populism and nationalism under pressure of political market thinking” (Eyskens, 2014). Here and elsewhere, populism is sometimes diagnosed as the symptom of a profound crisis of traditional politics, but at the same time considered a dangerous and retrograde development. In these cases, journalists tend to consider legitimate the demands and frustrations of the people who voted for these populists and nationalist parties. For example,
in an opinion piece on the outcome of the elections in De Morgen, we can read, “[t]here is a big group of people who miss the connection with the multicultural society and globalization. (…) The current populism and nationalism function as a ‘smoke signal’ for a real societal failure and point to the importance of a significant correction to the current political-societal system” (Loobuyck, 2014).

Looking at media references to populism, it seems that the term populism has become part of the standard vocabulary of journalists – or that it has been for a long time but is now more frequently used. It is often used in passing, without much reflection, in articles about a wide range of topics (Bale et al., 2011; Herkman, 2016), but almost always to criticize populism, even if often without much elaboration, typically as some kind of threat to democracy – itself a multifaceted term. In this regard, to make a slightly forced parallel with Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism,” one could argue that media use of the term populism is characterized by something that could be called “banal anti-populism,” an anti-populism that is not avidly ideological or even consciously present. “Banal nationalism,” Billig argues, “is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (Billig, 1995: 8). Following this line of thought, “banal anti-populism” is not about journalists making strong claims that populism is the ultimate threat to democracy, but rather them casually assuming this is the case and confirming it by throwing in the word populism regularly.

At the same time, some use of the term populism is anything but banal, in Billig’s sense. Indeed, the concept of populism has also been the subject of much explicit debate, with articles dedicated specifically to the phenomenon of populism, typically taking “the rise of the populists” or “the populist revolt”2 as the starting point. We have also seen a relatively high degree of meta-reflection on “populism” in media; explicit reflections on what populism means, often combined with reflections on the ubiquity of the term itself (much like academic debate). A telling example here is the selection of populism as word of the year by, to name one outlet, The Financial Times in 2014. The Guardian’s series on “The New Populism” started in November 2018 (in collaboration with academics), is probably the most high-profile sustained coverage of populist politics. Far from banally dismissing populism, this kind of media coverage explicitly reflects on pop-

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ulism as a concept and very explicitly delivers a critique of populism as a threat to democracy.

1.3 Media as Watchdog of Democracy?

While also used in other contexts, the term populism is mainly used in media to signal a range of related threats to democracy. When journalists use the term populism, it seems, they are playing their role in protecting democracy. But what is this role? The liberal normative perspective on media sees media as crucial players in democratic and pluralistic societies. Media, they argue, should be a provider of information that represents the diversity of interests and perspectives present in society so as to allow citizens to make informed decisions. They are also seen as a watchdog, monitoring and holding other powers (politicians, government, the judiciary system) accountable (see Carpentier, 2005: 202; McQuail, 2010: 168; Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2015: 1044-1045). The critical tradition of media and communication research has criticized this pluralist perspective, highlighting that rather than representing the diversity of viewpoints, media themselves play a role in hegemonic struggles – and has stressed that media rather, or at least also, play “a collaborative role whereby media owners, editors and journalists align themselves with the interests of the establishment and the powers that be” (Cammaerts et al., 2016: 2). One aspect of this, as Stuart Hall argued, is that “[i]t is not the vast pluralistic range of voices which the media are sometimes held to represent, but a range within certain distinct ideological limits” (Hall et al., 1978: 61). Moreover, media can also play an active role in delegitimizing and criticizing certain ideologies and political actors (Cammaerts et al. 2016). For example, “the labelling of one position as ‘extreme’, and another as ‘moderate’ and the promotion of the latter as the most ‘reasonable’ is highly ideological, it promotes the status-quo definition” (Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2015: 1046; also Dahlberg, 2007: 834).

This rough sketch leads us to important questions: What is it media are doing when they are using the term populism to criticize certain kinds of politics? Are they being critical watchdogs of democracy? Or are they protecting the status quo? Sometimes one, sometimes the other? Or are perhaps these two positions not entirely incompatible?

For the purposes of understanding what media are doing when they use the term populism to criticize certain political actors or actions as detrimental or unfit to democracy, a particularly helpful framework is offered by Daniel Hallin. He (1984, 1989) describes the journalist’s world as being divided into three different “spheres,” each having its own journalistic
standards. The first one, which could be visualized as being at the heart of three concentric circles (see Allan, 2010: 82; and Hallin, 1989: 117), is the “sphere of consensus.” This covers issues and events that are not seen (by journalists and presumably by large parts of society) as controversial. Examples are the coverage of a “royal baby” or of the world football championship. Journalists cover such topics, Hallin argues, without much critical distance, even defending consensus values. From a more critical-ideological perspective on media, it could be said that such forms of journalism contribute to the legitimacy and hegemony of certain institutions and belief systems, for example, the monarchy or the nation-state.

Beyond this sphere of consensus lies the “sphere of legitimate controversy.” In this sphere we find the different viewpoints about societal issues that are considered within the boundaries of what is legitimate. Coverage of political debates and election races between mainstream political parties is the most typical example here. This is the sphere in which the central journalistic principles of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance are at work. This is also the sphere and the kind of coverage that the liberal democratic model of journalism refers to; objectivity, impartiality and balance are necessary to ensure fair coverage of what is considered relevant in society at that moment in time, to allow public debate, and, in this regard, function as a “mirror of society” (Allan, 2010; Entman & Wildman, 1992; Raeijmaekers & Maeseele, 2015: 1045).

Beyond this sphere of legitimate controversy, Hallin writes, “lie those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard” (Hallin, 1984: 21-22). Journalists do not cover issues, actors or behaviors considered to be located in this so-called “sphere of deviance” according to the rules of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and balance. Rather, such actors and views are either ignored or covered in such a way as to stress their deviance from what is legitimate, turning journalism into a “boundary-maintaining mechanism” (Hallin, 1986: 117). Terrorism, for example, is covered in such a way.

Of course, there are gradations within these spheres, and “the boundaries between them are often fuzzy” (Hallin, 1986: 117). Furthermore, there are major variations between different journalists and media as to what kind of issues and actors end up in these three spheres. From a societal-ideological perspective, nevertheless, it is relevant to ask whether there are significant overlaps across media as to the topics and actors that are placed in each of the three spheres.

Looking at how media use the term ‘populism,’ it seems that indeed there are. It seems that despite important differences, across mainstream
media the label ‘populism’ is used to draw and maintain the boundary between what is legitimate and what is deviant in terms of democratic politics (Krämer, 2018). As Brookes writes, “the ‘populist’ label was consistently used to signal concern about the incursion of objects and actors that did not belong in formal politics” (Brookes 2018: 1264). Peter Baker is also spot on when he writes, in an insightful long read article in The Guardian’s series on “the new populism,” that “the media framing of populism almost always sounds like a discussion about the margins: about forces from outside ‘normal’ or ‘rational’ politics threatening to throw off the balance of the status quo” (Baker, 2019).

The term populism, indeed, is used to position certain political parties outside the boundary of legitimate controversy, as well as to position outside this boundary certain acts by actors otherwise considered to belong in the sphere of legitimate political contenders. The former points to media functioning as protectors of established ways of doing politics and aligning with established political actors against “populist” contenders. At the same time, the fact that mainstream parties do consider populist parties’ success to be the result of problems with traditional politics, the fact that mainstream politicians are also criticized for their populism, and that media consider certain elements of their behavior to be undesirable from a democratic perspective, implies that we cannot just conclude that in their discourse about populism, media are “aligning with the powers that be.” While this is partially true, it would also be a misleading oversimplification. It seems media are at least also defending a certain model of democracy against actors and acts that fall outside that model and might threaten it, whether these are established political actors or outsiders. Nevertheless, in defending a certain model of democracy against populism (one made up of a combination of pluralism, minority rights, moderation and good policy), it seems media are largely part and parcel of a much broader anti-populist boundary-maintaining mechanism that is also hegemonic in political and academic circles.

2. Media and Anti-Populist Hegemony

Media use the term populism to cover a wide variety of politicians, issues and parties, though consistently in a negative and accusatory way. Competing views on how to deal with populism notwithstanding, the meaning of populism as a threat to democracy, in media, seems to be barely open for contestation. There is almost no hegemonic struggle over the term’s meaning, pointing to a certain degree of closure around the meaning of pop-
ulism in mainstream media. In its negativity and in its flexibility, as well as in the centrality of concerns about democracy, mainstream media’s usage of the term populism bears a strong resemblance to mainstream political discourse about populism as well as mainstream academic work on the topic. Of course, some politicians who denounce their opponents for their populism are themselves called populists by journalists (and by their own political opponents), but if anything, this provides further proof of the negative and flexible nature of discourse about populism.

Some more significant differences exist between journalistic and academic discourse. Even though media have been the stage of reflections about the nature of populism, there is much more sustained discussion of what populism is in the pages of academic journals than in the pages of newspapers. This is hardly surprising, of course, given the nature of journalism and academic work, not to mention the fact that it would be hard (and probably undesirable) for journalists to match the seemingly never-ending conceptual discussions about populism between academics.

Still, even if academics continue to disagree about the nature of populism (discourse, ideology, style, etc.) and about its relation to democracy (threat, corrective, both), the conceptual debates have fed into an increasing academic consensus about populism’s core characteristics – the opposition between the people and the elite and the claim to speak in the name of the former. This definition is also commonly used in journalism (and politics), but the flexibility and vagueness of the term populism, the use of a more vulgar, anti-populist rejection of “empty rhetoric” / demagogy and the overlaps between populism and nativism and the radical right (De Cleen, 2017; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017b) remain much higher in journalism (and politics) than in academic work, although still found there as well.

A more striking difference between journalism and academia is the much weaker presence of pro-populist voices in mainstream media compared to the relative weight of such voices in favor of populist politics (or at least critical of the outright dismissal of populism) in academic circles, especially on the left – with Chantal Mouffe as the most prominent current example. It is likely that such alternative voices in favor of populist strategies can be heard more commonly in alternative media, especially on the left, but this remains to be analyzed.

The resemblance between journalistic, academic and political discourse about populism might not be very remarkable. Why, indeed, would journalistic discourse about populism be substantially different from political or academic discourse? If anything, it is to be expected that there are strong connections between three closely interconnected producers of discourse...
about politics. And why would shared political and normative assumptions about populism as a threat to democracy be any more surprising? Indeed, the opposite would probably be more surprising. Still, surprising or not, these similarities raise some important questions about the relationship between journalism, politics and academia, and about media’s role in a broader anti-populist discourse that can be found across different spheres.

2.1 Anti-Populism

“Anti-populism,” as Moffitt (2018: 5) argues, is “the default position for the academy, and as a result, its ‘naturalness’ makes it somewhat invisible and seemingly unworthy of explicit study.” As Moffitt’s own article indicates, this seems to have changed at least partly. Used by Taguieff (1998) and Knight (1998) over 20 years ago, the term anti-populism is increasingly being used by academics and other intellectuals to criticize what they consider to be the mainstream anti-populist position, but also to turn this anti-populist position into an object of analysis in its own right. These scholars, usually, “have come from outside the ‘mainstream’ of populism studies” (Moffitt, 2018b: 5), typically from the left (e.g. Jäger, 2017; Kim, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2017a) but also sometimes from the right (e.g. Furedi, 2017). Recently, some scholars associated with the “mainstream” of populism studies have also remarked on the importance of anti-populism, extending their critique of the “moralizing” and antagonistic nature of populism to the anti-populist position (see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1683).

This populism/anti-populism antagonism, some have argued, takes up a truly central role in contemporary politics, and any understanding of the current conjuncture should take both into account in relation to each other. Stavrakakis et al. (2017a: 12), for example, claimed that “[p]opulism is inconceivable without anti-populism; it is impossible to effectively study the first without carefully examining the second.” What we see happening in this kind of work is that discourse about populism is turned into an object of analysis, an endeavor with obvious relevance to our aims in this chapter and to which this chapter aims to contribute.

Reflections on anti-populism have typically focused more on political and academic debates than on media, but have considered media to be important actors in the maintenance of anti-populist hegemony. Some work reflects more substantially on media, even if this is not always based on systematic empirical analysis of media coverage (but see Cannon, 2018; Kara-
In any case, what is clear is that media discourse about populism needs to be considered in the context of the broader discursive struggle over the meaning of populism and the dominance of anti-populist discourse.

The starting point for most of the work on anti-populism – work that tends to be decidedly anti-anti-populist – are the assumptions that: a) there is a hegemonic anti-populist position, b) anti-populist discourse performs an important political-ideological function in the exclusion and delegitimization of certain political alternatives and in defense of the status quo, and c) this anti-populist position is problematic from a democratic perspective.

One of the major points of contention, for the critics of anti-populism, is that mainstream anti-populism – by presenting politics as a struggle between populists and non-populists – lumps together left-wing and right-wing populist alternatives as one single populist threat to democracy (Cannon, 2018: 486; Zúquete, 2018: 419). This, the critics argue, is unfair toward left-wing populisms that are inclusive (as compared to the exclusionary nature of radical right populism), but are delegitimized as undemocratic through their association with the radical right (Stavrakakis et al., 2017a). What is attacked here is the so-called horseshoe theory of politics, which holds that the extremes on the left and the right meet or even converge. Burtenshaw and Jäger (2018), for example, sharply critiqued The Guardian’s 2018-19 series on “the new populism,” arguing that the newspaper’s focus on populism per se “reaffirm[s] the laziest tenet in the liberal worldview: horseshoe theory.” That is, The Guardian’s focus on populism, they argue, leads it to consider to see “in the anti-Roma marches of Hungarian post-fascists Jobbik and the anti-gender violence demonstrations of Spanish leftists Podemos essentially the same thing” (Burtenshaw & Jäger, 2018). Such an approach is considered misleading and normatively problematic, “as it irons out and obscures important distinctions in programmatic intent within the different instances being labelled populist” (Cannon, 2018: 486).

At the same time, it has been argued that the focus on the radical right’s populism deflects attention from what is truly problematic about these parties: their nativism and authoritarianism (and the radical right politics increasingly adopted by mainstream parties). Also, even if the term populism is used in a derogatory fashion, it is still a euphemism compared to ultra-nationalism, far right, racism, fascism, and authoritarianism (Akkerman, 2017; Moffitt, 2018b; Mudde, 2017a, 2017b; Rydgren, 2017; Ziegler, 2018). Worse even, while much of the mainstream discourse clearly stands in opposition to the radical right and to populism, their use of the term...
populism sometimes inadvertently confirms the radical right’s claim that they are indeed “the representative of the people” (Moffitt, 2018a; Mondon, 2013, 2017; Mondon & Winter, 2018; De Cleen, Glynos & Mondon forthcoming).

It has been argued that the debate between anti-populists and anti-anti-populists (the analysts and critics of anti-populism), is essentially one about what democracy is and should be (Moffitt 2018b; Karavasilis, 2017; Taguieff, 1998; Cannon, 2018; Stavrakakis & Galanopoulos, 2019; Miró, 2018): “the question of populism, then, is always the question of what kind of democracy we want” (Baker, 2019). The anti-populist side of the debate – dominant in mainstream media, politics and the academy – tends to present populism per se as a threat to liberal democracy. An explicit and influential example of such a position is Mudde’s (and Rovira Kaltwasser’s) definition of populism as a “a thin centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté general (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004: 543; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). As this definition shows, critiques of populism tend to be focused on populism’s anti-pluralism – populists’ claim to speak in the name of a “homogeneous” people, and the associated lack of respect for individual rights and minority rights – as well as its closely related moralism.

The anti-anti-populists tend to disagree with these criticisms of populism – especially when applied to the populist left – while seeing these problems as inherent to the radical right’s nativism and authoritarianism rather than to populism per se. They also criticize liberal democracy for being insufficiently democratic (an argument found in Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) and Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) as well, arguing populism can also be a corrective to democracy). They criticize the liberal component of liberal democracy for leveling out democratic debate and neutralizing contestation and disagreement (for example, D’Eramo, 2013; Mouffe, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2018) – an argument underlying, for example, attacks on technocracy. “What for anti-populists constitutes a fear – the erosion of the liberal pillar of liberal democracy – is, conversely, a hope – the revival of the democratic pillar – for anti-anti-populists everywhere” (Zúquete, 2018: 431).

If conceptual debates about populism are, at their heart, debates about what democracy is and should be, our analysis and literature review show that media overwhelmingly align with the so-called anti-populist side of that debate, predominantly viewing populism as a threat to liberal democracy.
Critics of anti-populism have also argued that through anti-populists’ focus on populism, “‘populism’ becomes the crisis, rather than the underlying issues that have led to it, and the solution deemed simply to get rid of the ‘populist’” (Cannon, 2018: 494). Critique of populism, that is, is seen as a lightning rod that diverts attention away from real problems with liberal democracy. Whereas this might be the aim of some anti-populist rhetoric, it is certainly not true for all critiques of populism (see, for example, Mudde’s work on the problems with contemporary mainstream politics). Looking at media, this statement also lacks nuance, as mainstream media – while typically defending liberal democracy against populism and rarely formulating radical critiques of societal structures – do in fact often tend to see populist political parties and movements as the result of a crisis of democracy and spend quite some effort diagnosing the problems with mainstream politics.

As Moffitt (2018b) shows, there is also a more sociocultural dimension that underlies anti-populist critics of (mainly right-wing, but also left-wing) populism. Ostiguy’s (2009, 2017) work on populism/anti-populism as revolving around a low/high distinction is particularly incisive here. That is, going beyond ideological positions, negative discourse about populism is about positioning oneself with regard to “ways of being and acting in politics” (Ostiguy, 2017: 77): the “manners,” ways of speaking and acting that are appropriate to politics. “Defence of the high,” Ostiguy writes, “is certainly the key feature of the much-understudied phenomenon of anti-populism” (Ostiguy, 2017: 75). Looking at what we know about media’s use of the label populism for emotional, irrational, antagonistic appeals to the people, it seems that media tend to align themselves with the sociocultural high and use the term populism to describe and often denounce the sociocultural low ways of doing politics, a critique that becomes part and parcel of the defense of democracy against populism.

2.2 Beyond Ideology

Most work reflecting on discourse about populism in the media (and in politics and academia) has either been rather descriptive or has approached uses of the signifier populism from an ideological perspective, pointing out how the term populism is used to dismiss contenders of the liberal democratic center. Crucial as these ideological dimensions are, we must also look beyond ideology to fully grasp media discourse about populism and media’s relation to the broader societal discourse about populism.
We also need to consider the more formal or structural dynamics of the debate about populism (and the struggle between populism and anti-populism). This opens up a number of questions of a very different nature. Academic attention for these dynamics has been scarce, but a number of promising perspectives on the dynamics of discourse about populism and the particular role of media therein have been formulated, even if usually not developed in much detail.

The notion of “populist hype” opens up interesting avenues of inquiry. Glynos and Mondon (2016) have argued that the “populist hype” in media coverage oversimplified and homogenized the “meteoric rise” of right-wing populism across Europe. They argue that media (but also academics and politicians) exaggerate the significance of the populist phenomenon and characterize it in apocalyptic terms. While their original article is largely focused on the ideological dimensions and uses of this hype, the notion of hype opens up questions about how and why the signifier populism became so omnipresent, not only because of ideologically motivated attacks on populist politics from mainstream political actors, journalists, and academics but also because of logics inherent to the political, journalistic and academic field and the ways they interact (see De Cleen et al., 2018). Is it possible that the ubiquity of discourse about populism is, in part, a matter of hype? And what is the role of media in that hype? This certainly does seem an avenue worthy of further consideration.

In a sharply titled article, Must We Talk about Populism? Cannon (2018) criticizes not only the ideological uses of the concept of populism to discredit alternatives to mainstream politics but also warns about the negative impacts on academic research of the resonance of the concept of populism in media and politics. Translating Herbert Gans’ reflections on the concept of underclass, he argues that the resonance of the concept of populism in media (and politics) – with academics “being flattered when journalists use their terms (or their interpretation of terms)” (p. 484) – makes populism into a concept that misses scientific sharpness and lacks the capacity to create new ideas and findings.

A related but different perspective on the interactions between academic and media (and political) discourse on populism can be found in the work of Jäger (2017) and Stavrakakis (2017b). They draw on Anthony Giddens’ concept of double hermeneutics, a notion that points at the mutual interactions between social science concepts and the concepts used in the broader society. “Social scientists [...] tend to shape the very objects they propound to observe” (Jäger, 2017: 13), their concepts impacting on the self-understandings, discourse and practices in that society. This, in turn, sparks academic reflections that now are, in fact, analyzing societal dis-
course that has integrated academic reflections and concepts. This notion of double hermeneutics points us to complex interactions between academic, media and political discourse about populism, with these different kinds of discourse feeding into each other in a never-ending loop of (meta-)reflection, interpretation and inspiration.

Another potentially fruitful avenue of research here is to approach competing discourse about populism as part of one and the same “bubble,” as Péter Csigó (2016) has called it. This “neo-popular bubble,” he argues, is made up of academics, journalists, politicians and other professional producers of discourse about “the people” who speculate on what it is the people think and want and about how they relate to politics, but end up referring mainly to each other. While Csigó’s argument is not specifically focused on populism, his approach to politics via a parallel with financial speculation/valuation bubbles raises a number of intriguing questions for our understanding of the nature and frequency of media discourse about populism and its relation to academic and political discourse and practices.

What this points to is that the use of the term populism by media, while at first sight a minor issue, is not a trivial matter. Not only does talk about populism have important ideological dimensions, but there are also very intricate connections between media, political and academic discourse about populism that are not driven by ideological intentions but do have profound performative effects. Talking about populism means approaching politics from a specific angle, reading the current political conjuncture in a particular manner, formulating populist and anti-populist strategies based on that reading, constructing and reproducing political cleavages on that basis, and then interpreting those through the lens of populism all over again. Media are but one player in this house of mirrors, but in a mediatized society like ours, they are central to understanding the nature as well as ubiquity of discourse about populism – as producers of discourse about populism and as one of the central reference points of all the others talking about populism.

3. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to shed light on media’s use of the signifier populism. Our literature review and our own small empirical analysis showed that the term populism is predominantly used to express concerns about the negative impact of these politics on democracy; the term populism is by and large used to warn against threats to democracy. Bearing witness to the term’s flexibility, the “populist threat” ranges from
racism and ultra-nationalism to antagonistic rhetoric and demagogy. We then contextualized this use of populism in broader reflections on media’s position in democracy, showing how their criticism of populism can be seen as an exercise in drawing boundaries around what they consider legitimate democratic politics, an endeavor largely based on a defense of liberal democratic pluralism and democratic rights and rational and moderate public debate. The normative evaluation of these practices, we argued, is not straightforward and depends on one’s view of democracy and one’s position toward left-wing and right-wing populisms. On the one hand, media use the term populism to question radical right politics and defend the quality of democratic debate. On the other hand, the term populism could be considered a euphemism for radical right politics, one that also has the effect of legitimizing such politics as representing the voice of the people. Moreover, the term populism tends to lump together as equal threats to liberal democracy left-wing and right-wing populisms that, beyond their populist positioning, have diametrically opposed visions of society.

We then connected our findings about media discourse to broader insights into the nature of anti-populist discourse that seems to dominate not only media but also politics and the academy. Moving beyond the descriptive character of most existing analyses of media use of the term populism and beyond the political-ideological concerns dominating most of the work on anti-populism, we then turned our attention to other kinds of logics and mechanisms that might underlie media discourse about populism and its relations to politics and the academy.

To understand the nature and impact of media discourse about populism we need to consider the multifaceted and multidirectional relations between media, politics and academia – ideological and other (and, vice versa, our chapter also shows that populist politics and the debate about populism would indeed constitute a most relevant case to explore these connections). While this is stating the obvious, much work remains to be done to properly understand these connections.
Looking at the above visualization of the three main producers of discourse about “populism,” it is clear that the most effort, by far, has gone into reflections on the meaning of the term populism in academic discourse about populism. These are center stage in the ongoing conceptual discussions between academics, in more or less explicitly normative positions, and in the meta-reflections on the political dimensions of academic discourse found in the work on anti-populism and critical conceptual histories of populism. It is also in the latter that we find more sustained analyses (and a few dedicated empirical analyses) of politicians’ discourse about populism and, to a lesser extent, of media’s use of the term. While there is critical work on media’s anti-populist discourse, what is missing from much of this work is substantial reflections relating media’s discourse about populism to the kind of insights about media’s relations to politics and democracy found in communication, media and cultural studies. Our chapter has indicated some directions here, but this certainly deserves a more thorough treatment. The same can be said about the relations between media and the academy – an analysis, indeed, that could produce welcome and necessary critical self-reflection on the ubiquity of populism in academic work across the social sciences and even beyond.

Beyond the conceptual discussions typical of academic work, most of the work reflecting on discourse about populism is focused on ideological factors and normative debates about democracy. Important as this might be, we hope to have shown that to understand discourse about populism, we cannot limit ourselves to the political-ideological. We also need to look at other kinds of logics – media logics, academic funding and publishing logics, and so on. We need to sometimes consider much more mundane motivations for speaking about populism: popularity and resonance, wanting to be heard and have an impact, inspiration, following trends. And we need to consider the general discursive dynamics of debate, where all participants in the debate about populism contribute to the growing prominence of a particular term in public debate about politics. This is not despite, but in fact because of competing ideological and conceptual positions toward populism – competing positions propelling the debate forward and allowing the participants in the debate to feel they are participating in a debate even when they are not often talking about precisely the same thing.
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Putting the Screws on the Press: Populism and Freedom of the Media

Christina Holtz-Bacha

When Freedom House published its 2016 annual report on the status of press freedom in the world, the organization pointed to "press freedom's dark horizon" (Dunham, 2017, p. 3) while referring to the fact that freedom of the press worldwide deteriorated once again and reached its lowest point in 13 years. Presenting its 2017 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (2017) evoked a similar picture with an "ever darker world map." The rogue states are well known. Each year we find the same names at the end of the lists ranking almost 200 countries according to their scores on the press freedom indices: North Korea, Eritrea, Cuba, and the countries of central Asia that were part of the Soviet Union until they became independent in the early 1990s. These are autocratic and dictatorial regimes with a tight grip on their citizens, denying them human rights and civil liberties. What is new and possibly more frightening is the finding that the quality of democracy and of press freedom has also been changing recently for the worse in established democracies. This is where populism comes in. Its recent rise has been identified as a factor driving this development.

The illustrations that adorned the cover of Freedom House's annual reports in the last years showed caricatures of the notorious predators of freedom of the press. In 2016, those were North Korea's Dear Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un; Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a former high-ranking military officer and minister of defense; Turkey's President and former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan; Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro, who was minister of foreign affairs and vice president under President Hugo Chávez; and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. They appeared in the illustrations in the company of the Chinese Dragon and a dark figure symbolizing terrorist threats to freedom of the press. On the cover of the report published in 2017, the Russian, Turkish, and Venezuelan leaders found new companions in the persons of Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić; the leader of Poland's ruling party PiS (Party of Law and Justice), Jarosław Kaczyński; Bolivian President Evo Morales; and Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines. All of them were shown riding
wolves baring their teeth and circling a small crowd of journalists who were flying the flag of the Free Press but looking a bit forlorn. On the sidelines, not yet riding a wolf, stands U.S. President Donald Trump meditatively contemplating the scene.

Showing Trump in a group of autocratic rulers and thus alluding to the US as a potential enemy of press freedom fits the pessimistic tone of the report's introductory chapter on the status of press freedom in the US (Abramowitz, 2017, p. 1). Against the background of an overall decline of freedom of the press in the world, the chapter ascertains that the US was never before as much in the public debate on the issue as it was in 2016/17, and this is very much due to President Trump's attitude towards the media. However, even though the US once again dropped in the global ranking as its score worsened, climbing from 21 in 2015 to 23 in 2016, the country's system of checks and balances nurtures the hope that the US will keep its status as one of the freest media systems worldwide (Abramowitz, 2017, p. 1; Freedom House, 2016; 2017).

The president of the United States of America, an entrenched democracy priding itself as being the embodiment of freedom, shown in the company of autocratic leaders and observing with interest how journalists are cornered and bullied, not only reflects the status of freedom of the press in the US. The picture also symbolizes a changing attitude towards the role of the media in democratic regimes. The US is just one prominent example of how respect for freedom of the press is dwindling. What was once a figurehead of democracy can no longer be taken for granted.

The diagnoses of the last years were clear and unanimous: Freedom in the world is declining, and the state of democracy is a matter of serious concern. Old certainties no longer apply. Even the US, for long time a symbol of freedom and a haven of stability, is slipping. According to the eleventh edition of the Democracy Index drawn up by The Economist Intelligence Unit for 2018, there are only 20 full democracies among 167 countries in the world (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019, p. 2). Another 55 rate as flawed democracies, a category that encompasses a variety of countries and regimes and now also includes the US, which dived under the threshold for full democracy in 2016 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019, p. 10). Even Western Europe, the region with the second-highest regional score behind North America, currently features six flawed democracies (out of 21 countries). Most of the flawed democracies reach an acceptable score for the electoral process and pluralism but show weaknesses in the functioning of the government, political participation, and political culture. The scores for the state of civil liberties in flawed democracies are mixed, ranging from 9.12 (out of 10) in countries such as Chile,
Portugal, and Taiwan to below 4.0 in countries close to the threshold of authoritarian regimes such as Iraq, Palestine, and Gambia, and as low as 2.35 in Turkey (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019, pp. 36-37).

These numbers reflect a creeping decline of democracy that has been going on for some time. When The Economist started the democracy index in 2006, it recorded 28 full democracies (Kekic, 2007). Just two years later, the report stated, "The spread of democracy appears to have come to a halt" (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008, p. 1). The hopes sparked by the wave of democratization in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Iron Curtain were soon dampened. The transformation from authoritarian to democratic systems was bumpy and not without resistance, and it remained incomplete. A quarter of a century later, we witness a reverse development sobering the optimism that spread with the expulsion of the autocratic leaders in Central and Eastern Europe.

One of the reasons for the beleaguered status of civil liberties even in democratic countries is the recent rise of populism in Europe and the US. In the key findings of its 2019 report, Freedom House explicitly points to populism as one reason for the decline of press freedom even in established democracies (Freedom House, 2019, p. 1): "This is not because journalists are being thrown in jail, as might occur in authoritarian settings. Instead, the media have fallen prey to more nuanced efforts to throttle their independence" (Freedom House, 2019, p. 2). The direct connection that Freedom House makes here leads to the question of the relationship between populism and democracy and its ramifications for freedom of the media.

1. Populism and Democracy

Views on what populism means for (liberal) democracy are ambivalent. On one hand, populism is regarded as an invigorating and mobilizing element of democracy. On the other, populism is seen as a danger to democracy. Leaving aside here Mouffe’s approach that regards the current "populist moment" as an opportunity for overcoming the neoliberal hegemony and calls for a left populism that takes up the demands of the people against those that sustain the neoliberal order (Mouffe, 2018, ch. 1; 2019), the former position mostly builds on Canovan (1999). She posits that populism is an unavoidable consequence of tensions inherent in the democratic system and populist mobilization, following democracy therefore "like a shadow" (p. 10). Along these lines, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) point out that populism can prompt other political actors to take up issues that they have neglected so far but feel they should deal with in order not...
to lose the votes of people for whom these issues are important. Some studies (e.g., Anduiza, Guinjoan, & Rico, 2019; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Immerzeel & Pickup, 2015; Webb, 2013) also suggest an increase of different kinds of political participation stimulated by populist movements, either by successfully mobilizing their own clientele, or even former non-voters, or by stirring those who oppose populist ideology, thus making headway against its further spread. For instance, the Democracy Index 2018 concludes that for the first time in three years, the overall democracy index stagnated, neither showing progress nor a decrease, despite a growth of discontent with the functioning of government and the decline of civil liberties. The deterioration of these indicators was compensated for by an improvement of the overall score for political participation measured by variables such as number of women in parliament, voter turnout, party membership, and participation in demonstrations. To a certain extent this can be regarded as a consequence of populist anti-establishment mobilization (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019, p. 7).

In contrast to the position that regards populism as a warning signal, there are many voices asserting a deterioration of democracy by populism. This perspective mostly derives its arguments from the defining attributes of populism, first and foremost populists' claim to speak in the name of the people and to be the only ones who know and represent the true will of the people. The claim to sole representation of the people, who are conceived of as homogeneous, therefore disregarding minorities, exhibits an exclusionary character that is anti-pluralistic and thus anti-democratic. Moreover, populists distrust the rule of law and the constitutional intermediary institutions that provide for a system of checks and balances because they "limit the capacity of 'the people' to exercise their collective power" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 207).

In an empirical study with an international perspective, Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, and Gran (2019) assessed the relationship between populism and four different models of democracy. Based on the ideational approach and with reference to Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), they defined five populist ideas and tested the effects of populist rule in Latin America and Europe on an electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian model of democracy. The analysis covered 24 years from 1995 and 2018 and included 289 tenures in 47 countries, 28 populist and 246 non-populist presidents or prime ministers (Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, & Gran, 2019, p. 15). Overall and with no differences for left and right populist rule, the study found negative effects on the electoral, liberal, and deliberative model of democracy and was not able to assess a positive relationship with the participatory and the egalitarian model. Well-established demo-
cracies seem to be less affected by the negative effects of populist rule than are weak democracies (Ruth-Lovell, Lührmann, & Gran, 2019, pp. 24-25). These findings corroborate the expectations of those researchers who fear deteriorating effects of populist rule on liberal values and constitutional checks and balances. However, the study is limited to populist rule and does not cover the influence of populists in opposition roles.

2. Targeting Media and Journalists

In modern liberal democracies, civil rights and liberties are guaranteed in the constitutions. Freedom of the press emanates from freedom of expression; therefore, some constitutions do not mention press freedom explicitly. In addition to guarantees in the national constitutions, some supra-national agreements and treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN; Article 19), the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe; Article 10), and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union; Article 11) also include safeguards for civil liberties. Civil liberties are individual rights that a government cannot change. However, the long list of cases that, for instance, the European Court of Human Rights had to deal with in connection with Article 10 demonstrates recurring breaches of freedom of the press by the state even in well-established democracies (Council of Europe, 2007; Vorhoof, 2014).

Whereas historically the fight for freedom of the press was directed towards the state and constitutionally established as a negative right against the state, other actors play roles that can lead to infringements of press freedom as well. Many of the factors that have an impact on the quality of freedom of the press are, for instance, reflected in the variables used for the indices compiled each year by organizations such as Freedom House and Reporters without Borders. Not all the variables are equally accessible to measurement and are therefore left to the subjective impressions of the experts whom the organizations draw on for grading. The short assessments of the situation in individual countries that Freedom House presents, in addition to the rankings, therefore often mention singular events or developments that provide more background. As referred to at the beginning of this chapter, the surge of populism repeatedly appeared among the factors that contributed to the erosion of freedom of the media even in established democracies in the last years.

Political actors of every hue have an interest in achieving and staying in power. Despite the ascent of social media that allow for direct and unfiltered contact with citizens, political actors still seek the big stage of the tra-
ditional media for addressing the electorate. Particularly during election campaigns when power is at stake, political actors intensify their efforts to get their messages into the media unaltered and to their advantage. The growing tendency to permanent campaigning and the blending of governing and campaign mode further extends the inclination towards influencing the media well beyond the pre-election period. According to the established criteria of news selection and due to the overall relevance of their decisions for all citizens, those in power enjoy a better chance of being covered by the media than newcomers and outsiders who need specific strategies to garner the media’s attention and compensate for the lack of those news factors associated with incumbency and government office.

If populism is made responsible for the decline of freedom of the press, the question is, what distinguishes populists from non-populists in their attitudes towards and their dealings with the media? After all, all political actors are dependent on the attention of the media and strive for favorable coverage of their activities. Therefore, if populists differ from non-populists in their approach to the media, these differences should be rooted in the populist ideology and populists’ specific strategies vis-à-vis the media.

Experience shows a negative correlation between populism and press freedom. The academic basis for general conclusions regarding the influence of populists on freedom of expression and of the press, however, is more than meager. There are some studies on the countries of Latin America, among them countries where (left) populists came to power and how they dealt with the media (Kellam, 2018; Kellam & Stein, 2016; Kitzberger, 2012; Waisbord, 2011; 2013). In Europe, Hungary and Poland have received special attention because these countries have fallen sharply in recent years in the democracy and press freedom rankings due to their populist governments’ attacks on the constitutional courts and the media (Csaky, 2018, pp. 5-9; Giannakopoulos, 2019, pp. 15-16; Schenkkan, 2017, pp. 9-11). However, general conclusions about the consequences of populist rule for freedom of the media can only be drawn to a limited extent from those studies. As mentioned above, there are also several studies that incorporate indicators of freedom of expression and of the press into scales that measure the quality of democracy (Ruth-Lovell et al., 2019). Again, insights into the various forms of influence cannot be obtained from those studies. What we are missing are analyses based on large datasets that allow for juxtaposing the impact of populist and non-populist rule on freedom of expression and of the press, of populists in government and in opposition, and comparisons across countries. Only large-scale analyses that cover left- and right-wing populism, as well as different regions and political sys-
tems, would allow for generalizations about the relationship between populism and press freedom.

Kenny (2019) recently presented an empirical study that comes close to meeting these requirements. Based on a concept defining populism as "the charismatic mobilization of a mass movement in pursuit of political power," Kenny (2019) posits that populist parties have a particularly strong incentive to undermine freedom of expression and to control the media due to the way they are organized. Their internal structure is characterized by a charismatic leader, and populist parties are therefore highly personalistic. Even though populist parties continue to rely on mass mobilization, they nevertheless need the mass media to connect with their supporters. As Kenny (p. 2) further argues, unlike leaders of more institutionalized parties, populist leaders cannot rely equally on party membership, civil society organizations, or clientele linkages for mass mobilization, and therefore they strive to control the media. Due to the personalistic structure and their prominent positions, populist leaders are less constrained by their parties' interests compared to leaders of non-populist parties. Populists put their personal political life first and care less about the long-time survival of their parties, which are in turn interested in keeping the institutional balance that restrains governmental power.

In his study using data from 91 countries for the years 1980 to 2014, Kenny (2019) tested the association of populist rule and the decline of press freedom. Seven variables were available to measure infringements on freedom of the press: government censorship of the media and of the Internet, representation of a wide range of political perspectives, harassment of journalists, self-censorship of the media, media bias against the opposition or in favor of the government, and the extent to which the government respects freedom of expression and the media (p. 7). Except for Internet censorship, all correlations were statistically significant, demonstrating that populist rule is indeed negatively associated with press freedom. These findings are robust even when using an ideational conceptualization of populism and the dataset of Ruth (2018) that refers to populist rule in Latin America from 1979 to 2014 (Kenny, 2019, p. 12).

The quantitative studies on the relationship between populism and indicators for the quality of democracy mostly refer to populist rule and thus do not capture how populists in an opposition role or extra-parliamentary populist movements relate to the media. Populists in power have wider opportunities for directly impinging on the media than do those in an opposition role because they can take legislative actions to transform the media environment. There are many examples of media reforms and the restructuring of the media market that were driven by populist leaders. This
is particularly the case in the Latin American countries with their presidential systems, but by now it can also be observed in some European countries where populist parties hold a majority in parliament and are part of the executive. Measures include concentration rules, (partial) takeovers of media companies by the state or the leaders’ cronies, nationalization, influencing appointment to key positions in media companies, and withdrawal or re-direction of state funding.

Whereas the consequences of new media laws are mostly accessible for measurement, the systematic assessment of more indirect but not necessarily subtle strategies that are supposed to curb the media is more difficult. In this case, we are left with everyday experiences and observations. However, taken together they reveal patterns in the relationship between populists and the media.

One such pattern concerns general attacks on (mainstream) media and another, more specifically, on individual media and journalists. U.S. President Donald Trump’s tweet cannonades labeling the East Coast media as fake news and declaring them the enemy of the American people are legendary. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), an NGO based in the United States, analyzed the tweets Trump released since January 2015 when he entered the campaign until January 2019 and found that about 11 percent targeted journalists and the news media (Sugars, 2019). Over time, Trump’s media-related tweets shifted from singling out individual journalists and newsrooms during his campaign to more general verdicts on the media as a whole after he took office. Since his inauguration, a majority of his tweets have targeted the media as fake news and denounced them as an enemy of the American people (Sugars, 2019).

In a similar vein, the right-wing PEGIDA movement (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident) in Germany revived the term Lügenpresse (lying press) that derives from folkish-German and National Socialist ideology and was taken over by the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). In another version but with the same meaning, then AfD party leader Frauke Petry spoke of the Pinocchio press (e.g., Herwartz, 2015). Like fake news, the term Lügenpresse spread internationally, and accusing the press of telling lies became a common reaction to critical reporting. In Italy, in view of uncomfortable reporting, ministers of the then coalition government of Lega and M5S (Five Star Movement) suggested measures such as the reduction of state support, which would strike at the financial foundations of the press (Migge, 2018). Angered by critical newspaper coverage, the White House canceled subscriptions to the New York Times and the Washington Post and pushed other federal agencies to terminate their subscriptions as well (e.g., Grynbaum, 2019).
As part of what the AfD also likes to call *Systemmedien* (mainstream media), the party particularly targets public service broadcasting that is regarded as belonging to the corrupt elite and accused of serving government interests. Like the AfD, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which takes a similar stance on public service broadcasting, attacks the financial basis of the public corporations and calls for the abolishment of what they refer to as *Zwangsgebühren* (compulsory fees). Boris Johnson, leader of the British Tories, questioned the financing system of the BBC following a clash with the broadcaster in which the politician denied the BBC an interview (e.g., Das Gupta, 2019; Hughes & Nilsson, 2019).

Financial cuts have become a common tool for tightening the strings on public service corporations and putting them on a leash. Allern (2019 and personal communication) describes how the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) pressure for financial restrictions on Swedish public broadcasting and stronger control of its programs. "Fascinated" by the developments in media policy in Poland and Hungary, the Sweden Democrats are also inspired by the example of Denmark, where in 2018 the then Liberal Conservative government, with the support of the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), drastically reduced the budget of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR). As a result, DR had to dismiss numerous employees and close some channels. In a neoliberal approach and because of their new political alliance with the Sweden Democrats, the Swedish Conservatives (*Moderaterna*) and the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*) now argue for the same policies.

In Italy, apart from attacking journalists generally as the "the worst brood," calling them a "red gang," and lumping them together with the judges and prosecutors of the country, then Interior Minister and Lega Chief Matteo Salvini drove changes among the personnel in top positions in the public broadcasting corporation RAI (Schlamp, 2018).

In addition to those measures that affect the structure of the media system, restrictions on journalistic work and attacks on individual journalists serve to silence critics and undermine their credibility. Again, the U.S. president provides several examples of this strategy. Overall, since Trump took office, the number of White House press briefings dwindled until they vanished completely in the course of 2019 (e.g., Phelps, 2019; Yourish & Lee, 2019). Trump’s press secretary put the blame for this on the White House correspondents themselves because they had used the press conferences for becoming famous (Flood, 2019). Among others, this reproach was addressed to Jim Acosta, the CNN White House correspondent whose accreditation had been withdrawn after a controversial back-and-forth (e.g., Baker, 2018). Only about two weeks after the incident in early November 2018, a
court ruled that Acosta would retain his approval (e.g., Grynbaum & Baumgaertner, 2018). Acosta (2019) published a book titled, *The Enemy of the People*, that contained an account of, as the subtitle says, "a dangerous time to tell the truth in America."

After the court decision, the White House announced rules to ensure orderly press conferences, and the president pondered reducing his public appearances (Grynbaum & Baumgaertner, 2018). To avoid uncomfortable questions and critical coverage, Trump also blocked people from following his Twitter account. However, a court ruled that his action violated the Constitution because he also used Twitter for government purposes, and the people should not be excluded from this debate (e.g., Savage, 2019; Schneider & Polantz, 2019). The sensitivity of the U.S. president to criticism is also evident in the exclusion of Bloomberg journalists from his campaign appearances since Michael Bloomberg made his candidacy for the 2020 presidential election public (e.g., Oprysko & Calderone, 2019).

Singling out individual journalists by name, denigrating their work, and attempting to intimidate them are not within the purview of the U.S. president. In Austria, Armin Wolf, a prominent journalist of the public service ORF, was caught in the crossfire by the FPÖ because of his confrontational interviews, and they repeatedly demanded his dismissal (e.g., Al-Serori, 2019). In Germany, a journalist of the public service WDR received death threats after a critical TV commentary on the AfD (e.g., Huber, 2019).

3. **Conclusion**

"One thing Donald Trump would like is freedom from the press" (Edsall, 2018). This statement reflects the U.S. president's attitude towards the media, but it is probably something most political actors would subscribe to as well. The watchful eye of a free press and its critical scrutiny of political decisions are uncomfortable for those in or on the way to power. Therefore, complaints about the media and unfavorable, biased, and exaggerated coverage are common, particularly in election campaigns. However, populism goes beyond the usual lamentation about the media to the extent that press freedom has come under severe pressure, which raises the question of whether it can still fulfill its democratic role.

In democratic systems, a free and independent media is among the institutions that establish and control the boundaries of power. Claiming to represent the people and to speak in the name of the people, who are constantly betrayed by the corrupt elite, implies populism's distrust of those
institutions that provide for checks and balances. Where populists have the legal resources, they restrict the media or bring them under control; where they cannot easily change the law, they de-legitimize the media and denigrate those who work for them. The verbal attacks aim to undermine the credibility of the media, an important basis for their democratic function.

The attacks seem to have an impact. The Reuters Institute's 2019 Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2019) shows that in many countries trust in news is eroding (pp. 20), while in only 6 out of 37 countries a majority of people agree that the news media monitor and scrutinize the powerful (p. 52). In Germany, a poll on the reputation of various professions (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2019) showed that journalists and politicians have lost considerable respect in recent years. Both groups traditionally ranked at the bottom of reputation scales, but now 25% and 42% of the respondents, respectively, said they had more respect for journalists and politicians in the past (p. 5). Negative changes were highest for AfD and among those with a party preference for The Left (Die Linke) that also ranks as (left-wing) populist on international lists of populist parties (p. 27). These findings fit with what Freedom House contends in its 2018 "Nations in transit" report: "The U.S. administration’s ongoing denigration of the media has reinforced the sense in Europe that politicians no longer need to treat journalists with respect" (Freedom House, 2018, p. 2).

And there is more. In a recent critique of Trump’s attacks on the media in general but particularly on individual journalists, the executive director of the New York Times "accused Donald Trump of putting his reporters’ lives at risk by subjecting them to personal abuse and describing them as ‘enemies of the people’" (Waterson, 2019). In fact, online harassment of journalists with "threats and insults on social networks that are designed to intimidate them into silence" (Reporters without borders, 2018, p. 3) has become a worldwide problem and can have chilling effects.

In a speech asking, "When does populism become a threat to democracy?", Diamond (2017) contends that this happens "when it is culturally exclusionary (not to mention racist); when it yields to its hegemonic pretensions, exhibiting contempt for pluralist notions that intrinsically respect differences and opposition; and obviously when it seeks to restrict basic freedoms of the press, association, and so on" (p. 6). He warns of a "process of creeping authoritarianism" (p. 7) that may unfold once populists come into power. Among the twelve steps he identifies in this process, one is demonizing the opposition as illegitimate and unpatriotic; a second is undermining the independence of the media, and another is taking control of and politicizing public broadcasting (Diamond, 2017, p. 7). The many attacks on the press that we register in countries where populists rule indi-
cate that populism is becoming or has already become a threat to freedom of the press and thus to an important pillar of democracy.

References


Populism: The Achilles Heel of Democracy

Marion Just & Ann Crigler

In Greek, democracy simply means “people rule,” while demagogue means “people leader.” Early political thinkers such as Plato were concerned that leaders might pander to the majority by making extravagant promises. Later, political theorists, like Edmund Burke and the American Founders, echoed the concern that the majority might oppress the minority (who are wealthy) with unreasonable taxation or cheapened money. The American Constitution was written to make it difficult for such leaders to come to power. Contemporary theorists are not as concerned about the minority rich, and instead worry about the majorities and the loyalty of populist leaders who are uncommitted to the democratic enterprise (Galston, 2018; Mounk, 2018). As such, this chapter describes the conditions for contemporary populist leaders to emerge and their potential dangers posed to democracy, independent of their ideological bent. We consider the threat from populist leaders who have no ideology or program other than naked ambition. We describe such leaders as “faux populists.”

1. Origins

Historically representative democracies, or majority-based systems of democracy, handicapped the people by restricting voting and other institutions to discourage the formation of broad majorities. Even as those restrictions faded, majority preferences have often been unfulfilled by democratic institutions. The thwarting of the majority provides the opportunity for a leader to champion the popular cause and give voice to the people.

Populist leaders generally project the view that society is bifurcated into “the real people” and an evil enemy. Ideological left-wing populists identify the enemy as the moneyed elite or business, while right-wing populists often embrace exclusive nationalism rather than pluralism (de Vreese et al., 2018; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). A key concern about populist leaders of any orientation is whether or not they will abide by the essential elements of democracy beyond majority rule, such as liberty, equality, and the free exchange of ideas (including a free press). Some populist leaders
have taken advantage of the open systems of democracy to establish plebiscitary regimes (as did Louis Napoleon) or electoral authoritarian regimes, as threatened today in Turkey and Hungary.

To protect democracies, most theorists endorse the need for an informed citizenry, on the assumption that knowledgeable voters will protect democratic institutions. Such an expectation depends on the media system. In contemporary democracy, the news media are crucial to providing citizens with essential political information, including assessments of the qualities of populist leaders. Almost 200 years ago, the theorist Alexis de Tocqueville noted that a key to liberal democracy is an active press. He argued that “nothing but a newspaper can drop the same thought into a thousand minds at the same moment,” which made democratic political action possible (Book II, Ch. 6, 1889/1997). The media system continues to this day to make it possible to form majority preferences (i.e., the ability to identify like-minded others). With modern technology, accessible information is virtually cost-free, which should bode well for an informed citizenry.

Publishing freely, however, is not synonymous with reporting factually. The press in many countries in Europe and Latin America has a partisan orientation. The US press was mostly aligned with parties in the 19th Century, while partisan influence has waxed and waned since then. Populists rely on specific mass media platforms (radio, television, and the partisan press) to gain public attention. Now the Internet, with its vast resources, is fertile ground to grow many varieties of partisan news and these, in turn, make it possible for populist candidates to spread their messages without large capital investment. A partisan press, if taken to an extreme, creates a climate of “you have your facts and we have ours,” which has the potential to spread like wildfire. The unreliability of factual claims is detrimental to democratic trust in media and curtails the media’s ability to monitor and defend democratic norms. For that reason, we identify the nature and practices of the press system as a key factor in countering authoritarian populism.

How interests and movements organize in politics depends on the political system itself. In representative systems, parties are the primary means of organizing the public politically and especially electorally. In some parliamentary systems, parties can encourage loose coalitions to form a majority government, as is the case in the Dutch system. Other party systems may discourage coalition uniformity and emphasize divisions, or even cause extreme polarization, bringing effective government to a halt. Populist leaders can take advantage of failures in the party system to exploit the frustrations of the majority.
Amitai Etzioni characterized populist leaders as “demagogues who appeal to the masses in emotive terms,” who attack institutions with simple solutions to difficult problems (2019, p. 4). In this essay we contrast left and right-wing populism, with what we call “faux populists” who are not committed to any ideology or set policy position, but instead are committed to maintaining their personal power. Faux populists are opportunists. Faux populists use policies as rhetorical instruments to achieve power.

Authoritarianism may be embraced by a populist leader of the right or left or even by a faux populist. Leaders can morph from one kind of populist to another. Populist leaders may become so enamored of power that they are willing to do anything to preserve their control. They may transform the institutions of the state so that it is no longer an effective democracy but rather a vehicle of oppression of a targeted racial, ethnic, or religious minority (Harms et al., 2018). Populism thrives on the idealization of the people, but it usually requires a specific enemy to mobilize supporters. The primary indicator of the rise of authoritarian populism is an attack on the sources of criticism and information, such as free media and academic institutions.

The road to populist power in democracies is paved by a system’s failure to achieve the goals or preferences of the majority. Jean-Marie Le Pen employed slogans like, “The voice of the people,” or “We say what you think!” to equate himself with the people (Mudde, 2018). President Barack Obama’s slogan “Yes, we can!” is an example of democratic populism, arguing for policy changes. The rhetoric of populism is on the rise among Western democratic leaders as chronicled by Paul Lewis and colleagues at The Guardian (2019). While populist rhetoric has been rampant in Latin America, other nations around the world have embraced the language of populism, if not the policies. The Guardian categorized even Theresa May in Britain and Donald Trump in the U.S. as “somewhat populist” (but not Angela Merkel or Tony Blair). Populist leaders sometimes use vulgar language, to emphasize their connection to the mass of people. Michael Signer, former mayor of Charlottesville, VA, and author/lecturer writes that, “critics think demagogues hurt themselves politically by violating the standards of polite society, they’re doing the opposite: They’re doubling down on an unorthodox but potent politics” (Signer, 2019).

Populism is often combined with a “host ideology (Mudde 2004). Left-wing populism identifies class as the major dividing line between the majority and minority, with business on the side of the wealthy. In right-wing populism, some version of national ethnic group identity or religious na-
tionalism is a common denominator of “the people.” Many right-wing populists oppose new immigrants who do not look or speak the same language, arguing that they diminish national “purity.” Minorities are an easy target for political bullies to use as scapegoats when an economic situation compromises the security or expectations of members of the majority group.

The current concern about the impact of populist leaders on democracy stems from the tendency of authoritarian populist leaders to mobilize the majority against minorities and to weaken legal and constitutional obstacles to their goals. Populist leaders (regardless of whether they are on the authoritarian right or authoritarian left) attack the laws, procedures, and norms that hinder their legitimacy. In particular, democratic protections of individual liberty come under attack. As Yascha Mounk writes: “In countries from Venezuela to Hungary, attacks by populists on independent institutions and the rule of law ultimately erode the conditions for free and fair elections to such an extent that populist leaders cease to be effectively constrained by the will of the people” (2018, p. 99).

The rise of authoritarianism is often subtle, occurring as a sliding away from democratic norms in pursuit of majoritarian goals. These goals may be an assertion of nationalism at the expense of minorities or the promotion of the poor against personal or corporate wealth. In this chapter, we examine an authoritarian populist of the left, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, several from the right, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Viktor Orban of Hungary, and other European authoritarian populists in various stages of institutionalization, and a faux populist, Donald Trump of the United States. In each case, we emphasize the attacks on constitutional structure and the media system, as well as other kinds of critics.

3. The Case of Venezuela

The populist leader of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez represented a typical class-based movement. Chavez, himself, whose rhetoric The Guardian studies places at the highest end of the populist scale, rose to power on the promise to use the country’s vast oil wealth to fund major social programs. The poor flocked to his cause and he was democratically elected with the support of his popular party and movement. He convinced his supporters at home and abroad that his Bolivarian movement was successful in redistributing wealth. It is important to note that “Chaveznomics” was not without its detractors, as critics have pointed out that economic benefit to the poor following the Cuban model did not yield the kind of success the
government claimed. Rather, some economists have argued that the improvements on most measures tracked the rise of oil prices (Rodriguez, 2008). The government used command economic policies, especially food price controls, to maintain the impression of progress. Unfortunately, when oil prices fell, the population expressed its displeasure with the illusion of progress at the ballot box. The opposition attempted to seize power by a coup (encouraged by the national and international oil interests), which only served to escalate Chavez’s wrath and counter-attack. He succeeded in revising the constitution to remain in power.

This is a common story. Leaders often project their own interests onto the public interest. They see threats everywhere and build defenses. In Chavez’s case, the external threats were real. The U.S. was opposed to his socialist regime and Chavez found friends among authoritarian states such as Russia. His anti-American stance shored up his popularity when the economy began to fail. At that point Chavez and his international allies refused to surrender. Chavez began his leadership as a democratic economic populist and became an authoritarian nationalist to maintain power. His story is a cautionary tale. Populist typology is not immutable. The desire to hold onto power, coupled with unanticipated changes in the environment can transform a populist leader of one kind into another. Following Chavez’s illness and death, he was succeeded by the much-less popular Maduro regime.

Among laws passed to strengthen the government, the Chavez regime particularly targeted the media. It is important to recognize that prior to Chavez’s rise, the media were dominated by pro-business, anti-populist forces, which were heavily involved in an attempted coup. The Chavez government established countervailing government-controlled media and required all channels to carry his weekly addresses and other government content. Most of these public media could not compete with the established private channels, but the government supported a variety of locally based and community-oriented outlets. The Internet was largely untrammelled and has been an area in which the highly partisan conflict in Venezuela has played out. The Venezuelan example highlights the difficulties a populist regime may have in overcoming an imbalance of media resources and attempting to provide fact-based news in a deeply divided political society. The pre-Chavez media were not trusted to provide unbiased political information. After the Chavez revolution and the establishment of state media, the public could choose their version of events, but the possibility of an objective press retreated further as the economic and political situation collapsed. Another lesson of the Venezuelan case is that the his-
torical media system shapes how populist leaders seek and consolidate power.

4. The case of Turkey

With an eye to joining the EU, Turkey was a fairly robust democracy. During the early years of the 21st Century, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) rose to power in 2002 under a system of “tutelary democracy” in which a collaboration of military and high-level, secular-republican elites shaped democratic competition (Aytaç & Elçi, 2018). In 2003, campaigning as the true representative of the people, many of whom were religious Muslims, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became Prime Minister. He had gained populist credibility when he had taken on the incumbent elites by reciting a pro-militant Islamic poem. He was imprisoned (and barred from politics) for 10 months in the mid-1990s (Aytaç & Elçi, 2018). As a result, Erdoğan began his populist push to power expressing values of majoritarian democracy and direct connections between leaders and citizens while also expressing suspicions of secular elites. In the post-2011 period, as Erdoğan consolidated power and subdued other elite institutions, Turkey’s chances of joining the EU diminished and his populist us/them appeals shifted to anti-Western messages conveyed through media outlets increasingly controlled by Erdoğan’s supporters.

Erdoğan and the AKP used a number of techniques to advance their “populist” goals and restrict opposition. They employed tactics including legislation, referenda, regulatory oversight, economic pressure, control over media ownership and management, favoritism in appointments to public media positions, allocation of government advertising accounts to supporter controlled media, limiting access to government officials, and, finally, intimidation of and violent attacks on journalists. Through public referenda, constitutional amendments were passed to strengthen the executive branch’s power over the other branches of government. Legislation reduced press freedom through more restrictive penal codes and anti-terrorism measures that criminalized certain content including making “denigration of Turkishness” illegal (which was open to different interpretations) and dissemination of terrorist propaganda (Somogyi, 2018). For example, these revisions were used to prosecute and intimidate journalists who wrote critically about Turkish security forces or covered activities of the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK). Over the years, hundreds of journalists have been tried and imprisoned. Legislation also increased the oversight and regulatory powers of the Supreme Council of Radio and Television,
which has used licensing and fines to shut down or censor opposition media. Erdoğan and his supporters have also used considerable economic pressure to control media coverage. In 2009, for example, the Doğan media group was charged with tax evasion and fined $3.4 billion, which forced them into a protracted legal battle and the sale of two of their newspapers and a TV station (Baydar, 2015). By 2016, Doğan was sold to a holding company owned by supporters of Erdoğan. Even before the attempted coup and subsequent state of emergency declaration, the president had total control over a media sector that was already dominated by state interference. The expiration of the state of emergency in July 2018 had not seen any restitution of press freedom (Schenkkan, 2018).

5. The Hungarian Case

The democratic Hungarian regime was preceded by a Soviet-style authoritarian government, including a government-controlled press. The successful overthrow of the communist regime restored freedom of the press and of the academy. The Hungarian American financier George Soros established a new university to promote the freedom of ideas. Hungary is a case of creeping authoritarianism, often backed by electoral imprimatur. In fact, Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg (2019) identify “electoral autocracy” as the most common form of authoritarianism today. The researchers argue that democratic elections bring authoritarians to power and continue to shore up that power with periodic returns to the polls. The actual freedom of those elections is threatened by restrictions on the press and threats to the opposition (Fisher & Taub, 2019).

Viktor Orban came to power democratically, pursuing a nationalist form of right-wing populism. The rise of his neo-fascist Fidesz Party emanated from the failure of the preceding liberal democratic regime to preserve the economic status of the middle and lower classes and benefitted from the existential threat of non-European immigrants (Becker, 2010). Orban emphasized the role of the Hungarian Church and closed the borders to immigrants, which were popular measures. He proceeded to strengthen his authoritarian regime by suppressing the press, reorganizing the courts, and disbanding the new university, and most notably, by instituting a new constitutional regime, which can only be amended by a super-majority. Andrew Bozoki and Daniel Hegadus (2018) describe the Orban “hybrid” regime as “illiberal, anti-pluralist, homogenizing populism” (i.e., monism), which has derailed democracy in Hungary. Like Poland, the Hungarian regime is situated in the European Union and its major par-
ty was in coalition with other European People’s parties, including the German Christian Democratic Union. Its continued membership in the EU and its participation in a European party group, gives the regime some cover in terms of its democratic credentials. Recently, however, Orban’s Fidesz Party was suspended from the group. There is no doubt that Hungary has become an authoritarian populist democracy, with none of the institutional protections of minorities associated with liberal democracy.

6. Weakening of Other European Democracies

The situation in Hungary is the most egregious example of democratic backsliding in the E.U. Poland is not far behind, considering the recent replacement of Constitutional Court justices and revision of the Court’s powers. Poland was eventually reprimanded by the EU. In Italy, the Five Star populist party came to power and threatened to take the country out of the EU. The Movement was outvoted by another right-wing party in the 2019 European elections and is now facing a resurgence of the left. In France, the Yellow Vest movement and Marie LePen’s National Rally/ National Front are on-going threats to the Macron government and the stability of the liberal order in France. All of these movements in Europe have a common theme of populist rejection of non-European immigration. Despite the ominous rise of right-wing populists, the European Parliamentary elections saw improvement on the left.

7. The Case of Donald Trump in the U.S.

The U.S. has also experienced a rejection of immigration, although the perceived threat is attributed to Latin America rather than Africa. Donald Trump rode the immigration issue to the White House in 2016. The slogan of his candidacy was “Build the Wall,” i.e., on the U.S. southern border with Mexico. He additionally promised that Mexico would pay for the wall and was wildly popular with a particular segment of the electorate. The media described Trump as a populist. During the nominating phase to the election, Trump had “populist” competition from a left-wing populist candidate, Bernie Sanders, running in the Democratic Party. Sanders lost the party nomination to Hillary Clinton. For a time, however, the U.S. presented an unusual example of competing populist ideas and candidates, one class-based (Sanders) and the other, we argue, a faux populist, with a
nationalist agenda (“Make America Great Again” and “America First”). It is difficult to categorize Trump with right-wing populists, although he has a strong commitment to business interests and has appointed mostly corporate leaders and lobbyists to his cabinet. During the election, Trump supported several left-leaning economic positions including lower drug prices and an improved national health care policy, as well as infrastructure investment. Once in office, he did not ardently pursue any of these economic populist measures, but vigorously pursued his anti-immigrant agenda, along with business-oriented policies such as weakened government regulation over industries and the environment, and huge tax reductions for businesses and wealthy individuals.

With Trump’s lack of experience in politics, the press initially regarded him merely as a celebrity candidate rather than a serious contender. Trump did not receive the kind of press scrutiny given to insider candidates such as Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio or Hillary Clinton. Trump had no political record for the press to critique and he stone-walled inquiries into his businesses. During the primary season, Trump made controversial remarks, as populists generally do, which made him the focus of press attention (Mazzoleni, 2003; Wettstein et al., 2018). Candidate Trump ignored norms of political discourse and launched personal attacks on his Republican opponents and the media itself. These attacks resulted in even greater news coverage (Just, Crigler, & Hua, 2018). Trump was a media goldmine from a commercial perspective. In fact, Leslie Moonves, then head of a leading U.S. broadcast network, said of the Trump candidacy: “It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS” (Weprin, 2016).

When Trump became the Republican nominee, the press was obliged to cover him extensively. It is impossible to underestimate the difference between Trump’s running as one of the two major U.S. party candidates vs. running as a minor party candidate (such as the 2016 Green Party candidate, Jill Stein). Trump would have been frozen out of political consideration had he run as a third party candidate, but as the Republican standard-bearer he had the attention of all of the media. In addition to the news media’s laser-like focus, he had a built-in megaphone on the pro-Republican Fox News outlet (Grossman & Hopkins, 2019). Fox News in the U.S. is essentially a mouthpiece for political conservatism and the Republican Party (Mayer, 2019). Fox network has a loyal audience consisting of about one-third of the electorate who rely on it exclusively. Forty percent of Trump voters watched Fox (Mitchell et al., 2017). Minor party candidates in the U.S. did not have the news outlets promoting their candidacies to the public, nor did they even appear in candidate debates.
In addition to Fox, Trump was a dominant figure on Twitter; one could almost say that Twitter was made for him. He naturally spoke in slogans, easily adapted to the character-limit of Twitter. Although social media can be a channel for direct communication between candidates and the public, most people are not active on Twitter. The platform draws its power from the large base of verified journalist-users. Reporters monitor the Twitter messages of politicians and campaigns and write about them. What politicians say on Twitter can quickly be conveyed to the audience for mainstream news. News coverage of candidates, however, tends to skew negative.

From the beginning of the campaign, Trump attacked journalists and their coverage of him. An analysis of 2016 news content showed that Trump received the lion’s share of the coverage (Patterson, 2016). Even his tweets received far more media coverage than those of his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, despite the fact that she tweeted more frequently than he did (Just, Crigler, & Hua, 2018). Trump was newsworthy in every medium. While he received massive coverage, media attention for Trump was overwhelmingly negative (as was the coverage of Clinton). During the campaign and again as president, Trump threatened to “open up the libel laws” so that he could sue the press for its reporting about him. In a public Cabinet meeting carried by the TV networks, he argued “Our current libel laws are a sham and a disgrace and do not represent American values or American fairness” (Grynbaum, 2018). Trump complained that the reported size of his rallies and of his inauguration crowd were too low. Over time, Trump escalated his attacks, calling the media “the opposition party” and describing news organizations as “the enemy of the American people” (Grynbaum, 2017). At his rallies, Trump restricted the press to a penned-in area at the back of the venue and called on the audience to vilify the journalists present. On some occasions, reporters were physically attacked.

Trump employed intimidation and ridicule of the press, as well as withdrawal of access. He favored Fox News with interviews and praised their coverage. Trump paid his lawyer to squelch a story about his marital infidelity that had been sold exclusively to the National Enquirer in a process known as “catch and kill,” i.e., buying the rights to a story and then intentionally not publishing it (ProPublica, 2018). His bad press in pursuit of his treatment of applicants seeking asylum at the U.S. Southern Border resulted in strict monitoring of journalists covering the story, even resulting in reporters being searched and detained for questioning (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018; NPR, 2019). The government instituted a secret database of names of journalists, lawyers, and advocates for asylum seekers (NBC News, 2019) and harassed them when they traveled.
Trump’s attacks on the free press are accompanied by attacks on other democratic institutions. He targeted the judiciary when it overturned his executive actions, particularly in relation to his anti-immigration policies. His attacks on the courts elicited a rare response from Chief Justice John Roberts of the U.S. Supreme Court. Trump had characterized a judge who ruled against him as a Mexican (even though he was a U.S. born citizen) and another as an “Obama judge.” Roberts particularly took issue with Trump’s assertion that judges were partisan (although people across the political spectrum suspect that judges have a political ideology that is compatible with the president who appoints them, at least at the time of appointment). Roberts schooled Trump in the concept of the independence of the judiciary. Trump responded by insulting the Chief Justice. Trump has attacked the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit as a “disgrace,” claiming that “In every case that gets filed in the Ninth Circuit we get beaten” (Liptak, 2018). Trump’s remarks are quite telling. He sees every encounter as a personal success or failure and every critique as a personal attack (Just, Crigler, & Hua, 2017). It helps to explain why his attacks on institutions, such as the courts and the press, are so personalized. He even refers to his critics as “Trump haters,” which is a meme he adopted from Fox News.

Perhaps most frightening for democracy, Trump has also attacked other agencies and processes, including the U.S. Constitution. Trump has attacked his own national security advisors as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In a response to the FBI/Department of Justice investigation into Trump’s suspected collusion with Russia, Trump tweeted a request for an investigation of the Obama FBI/DOJ for “surveying and infiltrating” his campaign “for Political Purposes” (sic; Cost, 2018). He has questioned the Congress’ constitutional power of governmental oversight. Critics have noted his disregard for the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom inherent in his attempts to ban Muslim immigrants from entering into the U.S. and his hints that mosques should be shut down. The Courts overturned his various immigration bans until he came up with one that included two non-Muslim nations—North Korea and Venezuela—so that his immigration ban could pass constitutional muster. Trump is notably unfamiliar with the Constitution and has displayed his ignorance on many occasions (Liptak, 2016). For example, he referred once to the 12th Article of the Constitution, which does not exist (Milbank, 2018).

No doubt, among the most serious of Trump’s challenges to American democracy so far is his declaring a national emergency to get the funds to build a wall on the Southern border. A state of emergency has been a precursor to historical autocratic seizures of power. By invoking emergency
powers, Trump threatens the exclusive Constitutional power of the House of Representatives to initiate tax bills and authorize funding (Tribe, 2019) — a concept the U.S. inherited from Britain. Although many presidents have declared emergencies, these have been restricted to war, civil war, or other imminent disasters. The president not getting his way on policy is not a national emergency, although it appears to be for Trump. (It is significant that the invocation of a state of emergency removes all protections of individual liberty and eliminates other centers of power at the discretion of the executive. Power is then transferred to the president.) Trump succeeded in shutting down the government to pressure Congress to fund his wall, but in the end he was forced to retreat.

8. Conclusion

Populists come in all ideological flavors, including no ideology at all. The threat of populists to democracies is that they may undermine liberal democratic institutions and become authoritarians. We argue that the first and key indicator of a slide towards authoritarianism is an attack on centers of criticism, especially the press, but also on the judiciary and the academy. Unfortunately, the press cannot be relied upon to constrain authoritarian populist leaders. The partisan press is no safeguard, because the leader's preferred press functions as a propaganda outlet. The commercial press may contribute to the rise of populists because the norms of newsworthiness can actually propel populist leaders to the forefront. Populists make good “copy,” i.e., they are newsworthy because they break with traditional styles and norms of political discourse and so qualify as new, surprising, or different. Because they rage against “enemies” of the public, and they create conflict, which is one of the most common news tropes. Furthermore, populist leaders are impassioned and they employ emotional language (Etzioni, 2019, p. 4) that connects them with their audiences, making them even more newsworthy. Scholars find that novelty, conflict, and drama are some of the key—though not necessarily beneficial—aspects of newsworthiness (Graber & Dunaway, 2018).

Some researchers argue that when populist leaders emerge in democracies, the press singles them out for negative coverage, as was the case for Hugo Chavez (Dineen, 2012). The opposition parties may also take extraordinary measures to remove populists from office, which occurred in both Venezuela and Argentina. The argument is that populist leaders attack the press and opposition parties in reaction to their anti-populist actions and not from the outset. We are not convinced that this is the case.
In the U.S., at least, the norms of independent journalism encourage intense scrutiny of all candidates for office and the coverage overall tends to be negative. When candidates attack each other in an effort to win voters, the news media emphasize the conflict to attract the audience. One study found that candidate tweets that attacked other candidates were the most likely ones to be quoted in newspapers (Just, Crigler, & Hua, 2018). Increasing political polarization is a guaranty of increased conflict among political parties or party groups and conflict is played out in the press. While political polarization has many negative effects, perhaps the most dangerous is that it may lead to legislative gridlock. When societies are unable to solve their most urgent problems democratically, they provide the essential conditions for both populist leaders and authoritarian government. One of the cruelest examples from the historical record is the declining ability of the German Weimar Regime to rule by legislation. Gridlock made it impossible to deal with the Great Depression when it arrived. The Weimar government was ruling essentially by decree for many months before Hitler seized power. After the 1933 Reichstag Fire, Hitler convinced President von Hindenburg to pass a special order for state security, which eventually led to the Enabling Act, tragically handing power over to Hitler. The lesson for people today is that extreme political polarization in the face of economic privation is fertile ground for proponents of extreme ideologies, including personal autocratic figures. William Galston (2018) argues that in order to fight an authoritarian breakdown of democracy, we must “restore the ability of liberal-democratic institutions to act effectively.” This is a tall order.

Solving the effectiveness problem means tackling the polarization that results in gridlock. One of the culprits in polarization is a partisan news system. It is important, therefore, to expose propaganda, both foreign and domestic. By the time the government takes over the media altogether, it is too late. The judiciary, the academy and the press are the barriers to authoritarian rule. The press, in particular, can publicize authoritarian moves on the part of the executive and help to organize resistance. The watchdog role of the press in free systems is essential to identify deviation from democratic norms that may be invisible to the public. Citizens have to be reminded about the dangers and threats to democracy, such as interference in the courts, restrictions on voting, changes in voting procedures, and attacks on the independence of the judiciary. Partisan news, which is in the pocket of the executive, will not have the necessary integrity to carry out these functions.
We may like to believe that the commercial press is a complete protector of democratic actions. As we have seen, however, in the American case, a commercial press can easily be high-jacked by a colorful populist with authoritarian tendencies. The more “newsworthy,” i.e., different from the norm, the more a populist leader will be the focus of news, expanding the leader’s popular support. Furthermore, a commercial press, which is preoccupied with “newsworthiness,” will eventually cease to report “old” news. If, for example, a leader promotes a “big lie,” the same lie will not make news after the first several instances. Even the commercial press may not challenge obvious improbable pronouncements, such as “Mexico will pay for the Wall,” in fear of being accused of taking sides in a partisan debate. That is one reason why a commercial press during elections prefers to report “the horserace” rather than evaluate the policy proposals of each side. The commercial press is also in awe of election results and other indications that the public is on the side of the authoritarian leaders. This is also one of the reasons why semi-authoritarian systems continue to hold elections, as in Hungary, Poland, and Venezuela. Populist authoritarians seek the imprimatur of electoral outcomes to defend their regimes and also to dominate the press.

For a long time, partisan divisions in the electorate promoted even-handed coverage in the commercial press. Wire services and large newspapers and television networks cannot afford to alienate large segments of their audiences, so they maintain a neutral stance. At some point, however, an audience can readily be found by catering to one side or the other, as Fox News discovered in the US. Fox News, in turn, gave rise to the left-leaning cable network MSNBC in the U.S., which also found a liberal audience. In fact, on at least one occasion during the Trump presidency, MSNBC drew a larger prime time audience than Fox News (Knight, 2018). A partisan press and the partisan Internet contribute to a lack of faith in the press. It is no surprise that many people on the left and right distrust the press as a whole because what they believe to be true is not reflected in a local news outlet. Unless the public can trust the press, journalists will be powerless to defend democracy.
The free press is necessary to secure democracy. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter” (Jefferson, 1787). When the press is under attack, it is essential to promote solidarity among journalists and media outlets. When authoritarian populists go after a particular press critic, rival journalists and media across the political spectrum must support those under attack. Making common causes across the political spectrum preserves the political system where the press can flourish. We can hope that journalists can see what de Tocqueville called, “self-interest rightly understood.”
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Populist Communication and Media Wars in Latin America

Caroline Avila & Philip Kitzberger

Populism has been studied in a variety of countries within different political contexts, but it is in Latin America where this political feature is almost endemic. Scholars have taken an interest in Latin America’s populists (Block, 2015; de la Torre, 2010; Kitzberger, 2018; Waisbord, 2014; Weyland, 2003) and have contributed to a description and some understanding of the relationship between populist leaders and media institutions. This feature of populism is of particular interest in a region with complex and highly politicized media systems.

Populism is a concept immersed in controversy, and academics have yet to achieve a consensus regarding its definition (de la Torre & Arson, 2013). Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to offer a definition of populism, it is necessary to establish what we understand as populism in order to refer to its specific communication practices in Latin America.

Rovira Kaltwasser (2015), in explaining the emergence of populism both in Europe and in the Americas, suggested working with a minimal concept that defined populism as a thin-centered ideology to be able to apply it in comparative analysis. To this purpose, he proposed the consideration of an ideational approach based on the concept by Cas Mudde (2004, p. 543), who defined populism, “as an ideology that conceives a society separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: 'the true people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' where politics is the expression of the will of the people” (emphasis in the original). De la Torre and Arnson (2013) agree with Mudde (2004) that some of the central characteristics of populism, whether it is considered a form of government, a discourse style, or a political representation, revolve around the divide between “the people” and “the oligarchy.”

In this context, a personalized and charismatic leader becomes a facilitator of populism (Mudde, 2004), since the direct unmediated relationship between the leader and the masses bypasses or marginalizes institutional channels of intermediation – a characteristic that has been fundamental in the emergence of populism, particularly in Latin America (de la Torre & Arson, 2013; Knight, 1998).

Ernesto Laclau (2005), in his seminal work, identified the reasons and elements inherent in populism defined as a “form of political construc-
tion.” In his explanation of the rise of populism, he noted that, for the construction of “the people,” a discursive link is required to unify and represent existing unmet popular demands. This “equivalential chain” follows from tracing an internal frontier that differentiates these demands from the institutional order. While Laclau does not argue that personal leadership is a defining feature of populism, in his view, leaders can and often constitute the “empty signifiers” that establish and express the people as a unity. In this sense, the leader basks in the affection of the people in direct proportion to how he or she constitutes and represents the popular will.

This process of symbolic representation explains the need for caudillos or leaders to use their charisma to build and represent the popular will. This effort is mainly a communication process that manifests itself in elements characterized as features of populism in the literature. These include the personalization of the charismatic leader, the Manichaean and polarizing discourse, the appeal to the people through the frequent use of direct communication without the intermediation of journalistic institutions, the ability to mobilize the masses, and permanent public exposure (de la Torre, 2007, 2010; Freidenberg, 2007). In fact, populist governments are recognized, among other things, for their prevalent use of constant and direct communication (Kitzberger, 2012; Waisbord, 2014).

Latin America’s political history is filled with governments categorized as populist. Between the decades of 1930 and 1960, the governments of Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador were the main exponents of classical populism that arose as a response to the differences generated by migration from the countryside to the city, industrialization, and other features that accentuated the existing social gap (Weyland, 2001). While a wave of military governments in the region interrupted this process, the populist movement reemerged in the 1980s and 1990s with the governments of Fujimori in Peru, Menem in Argentina, and Bucaram in Ecuador. In the last decade, a rebirth of radical-national populism has emerged in the governments of Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Cristina Kirchner, and Rafael Correa (de la Torre, 2010).

1. The Media Factor and Political Communication Culture in Populist Contexts

The media as an institution play a key role in the political environment because they build or produce news, interact with politicians, and affect, along with being affected by, political processes at different levels (Hallin
& Mancini, 2004). According to Mazzoleni, Stewart and Horsfield (2003), this is called the “media factor.”

When analyzing the “media factor” in the populist experiences that emerged in Latin America, it is important to emphasize that the Latin American context has connotations that are different from European or North American models. In their comparative work on media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004) included a high level of political parallelism between media and political parties as one of the dimensions that defined the polarized pluralist model of the media systems of Italy, Spain, and France. However, de Albuquerque (2012) questions the use of this model when political cleavages are not fully defined. Given the lower weight of political parties in the system of political intermediation, the media take part in this role but are driven by their own logic and interests. In such contexts, media assume a “moderating role” in which they act as political agents, not as representatives of political partisan views, but claiming to “represent national interests in a more legitimate way than the political parties and even the formal political institutions” (p. 93).

While de Albuquerque attributes this feature to the Brazilian media system, it also describes, despite differences and nuances, other Latin American media systems. Since the 1980s, with political parties and political institutions steadily losing credibility and media institutions experiencing a process of expansion and conglomeration, the latter increasingly disputed the representative claims of the political institutions. By the end of the 1990s and the eve of the populist tide, the media institutions were widely perceived as key political power players across the region.

To complete the picture of Latin America’s media systems, these trends must be seen as coexisting with media patrimonialism. Waisbord (2014) described the development of the political economy of the media in Latin America as based on the consolidation of communication systems with a strong private presence, constant state intervention, and weak community media. Factors such as the informality in the processes of broadcast licensing or the existence of favoritism and patronage networks allowed those that exercised political power to maintain a hold on media power. Although the Latin American media system is comprised mainly of private commercial entities, the collusion with established political power, whether by the renewal of concessions, the granting of credits, import permits for newsprint or equipment, etc., has been a feature in the region. This explains the strong ties between media groups and traditional political and economic power groups and has been key to understanding the government-media confrontations during the latest wave of left-wing populist governments.
In order to analyze the relationships between populist leaders and the media, we follow a model of populist communication\textsuperscript{1} that builds on the process of constructing a “people” described by Laclau (2005), based on the symbolic representation of the popular will embodied by the leader. This operation of political construction calls forth a radical intervention in the media system. The leader draws a line, a political frontier – in Laclau’s words – that opposes the \textit{de facto powers} represented in some private media owned by strong economic groups, to the public interest incarnated in a government legitimized by a mobilized mass.

2. \textit{The Populist Communication Model}

Political communication in populist governments comprises three components: the political system, the media system, and the communication strategy. The model of populist communication used in this chapter identifies these three components and describes how they interact. We will focus on government relations with the media system and how the communication strategy interacts with the leader, the media, and the people.

The process of becoming a populist leader involves establishing a frontier that divides society into two camps, the “people” and the elite.” Therefore, populist political communication strategies permanently confirm the frontier. In this division, the established actors of the political system and the media system have mostly fallen on the side of the confronted “elite.”

In Latin America, the rise of leftist-populist leaders to the presidency has occurred in the context of a crisis or collapse of traditional political parties. Thus, while still present in party organizations, in these new scenarios, the political opposition suffers from a weakened position in the electoral and legislative arenas. This implies that oppositional voices increasingly resort to the mainstream media, already critical of government, to gain access to the public sphere. This oppositional convergence reinforces the incentives of populist leaders to attribute the traditional media institutions to the role of enemies.

\textsuperscript{1} The model was presented at the International Communication Association annual conference as part of the doctoral research of Avila (2018).
2.1 The Media System

As previously discussed, the elitist character of media systems played a significant role in the emergence and propagation of populism. Private, for-profit media historically dominated Latin American national media systems, whereas community and public media have been marginal, at best. The radical populist governments' strategy of confronting and publicly antagonizing members of the private media has called for the creation or strengthening of state-owned and private media whose newsrooms and voices aligned with the government to counter the oppositional critical media narrative.

Simultaneously, populist leaders require permanent public exposure, for which their media skills and direct forms of communication are relevant. This makes them both a medium and a message (Rincón, 2016); consequently, the voice of the President and his or her acts of direct communication constitute another component of the media system.

Additionally, populist political communication, in which the existing media order is questioned as undemocratic, calls for radical media policy reform agendas that incorporate new stakeholders through the legal recognition and regulation of community and market alternative media that make up a small part of the model (Kitzberger, 2012).

Thus, the communication model in a government with populist traits involves a communication strategy with a radical intervention in the media system. The model considers, as a variable for analysis, the level of accommodation between the media and the government, in a continuum that ranges from adaptation to opposition. Therefore, the more the government controls the editorial agenda, the more the media will be part of the controlled media system (greater accommodation). On the other hand, if more opposition and conflict is manifested in the relationship, the media will be part of the external media system (lesser accommodation).

With this criterion, populist communication shapes the media system on four fronts: the external media system, the alternative media system, the owned or controlled media system, and the direct communication system. Figure 1 summarizes the elements that comprise this model of analysis of government communication with populist traits.
The external media system is comprised of the private media, whether traditional or online, that have been identified by the government as adversaries. These media are generally owned by large business groups with ties to the political elites. In this context, by intervening as political actors, the media play a fundamental role in populist communication since they embody the opposition. As they assume this role, they reinforce the polarized relationship with the populist leadership.

In the external media system of Figure 1, the communication strategy is focused on permanent conflict. That is, conflict arises from different factors (ownership of the media, corporate interests, and journalistic frames, among others). Governments, seeking to influence the construction of the news agenda, take advantage of legal resources such as obligatory quotas of information dissemination and replications or rectifications, or by simply not giving any public statements or interviews to critical media, etc. in order to exercise pressure on the external media system.
Media located at the center of the adaptation-opposition continuum that are not associated with large conglomerates and receive minimal pressure from governments, form the alternative media system (Figure 1). Some of the community media with a long history in the region are part of this segment. They obtained legal recognition from the new regulations promoted by countries such as Argentina, Venezuela, and Ecuador, where a portion of the radio spectrum for this form of communication has been reserved. In some respects, their presence is a consequence of the preexisting demands to democratize communication and facilitate access for marginalized voices, which have been part of the discourse of populist governments on communication regulation. Government communication interacts with this alternative media system through the permanent monitoring and delivery of audiovisual products as part of its network of dissemination.

The owned or controlled media system refers to a group of media whose relationship with the government is closer to the adaptation of the editorial agenda with official interests as a result of government influence. The relationship is exercised through the inclusion of political allies on executive boards, advertising and operational financing, the creation of new official media, and in some radical cases such as Ecuador, the seizure of media. It includes privately owned preexisting media, fueled with state resources and editorially aligned with the government, government-controlled newly created and/or preexisting public media, and official or government outlets. The strengthening of this controlled media system is fundamental, given the need felt by the populist leadership to intervene in the media system. On the one hand, they must make use of media logic in order to reach the population with their discourse. On the other hand, they must also respond to the conflict instigated against the external media. Populist communication intervenes both in news production and regular programming through the distribution of news content material and audiovisual products, the inclusion of allied voices in editorial pages, interviews and opinion programs, broadcasting of official events, imposition of broadcast, financing the production of attack programs, or responding to political criticism and audiovisual productions in general. Populist governments seek a more controlled communication system that allows them to better articulate and frame their messages, bypassing the filters of the mainstream media (Kitzberger, 2012).
3. Evidence from Latin America

3.1 Ecuador

Ecuador’s media system was mainly comprised of owners from the private sector, particularly family groups and banking holdings. In 2007, when Rafael Correa won the presidency, four family groups held the majority of the media audience in the country. Very soon, Correa’s government had to struggle with hard criticism from journalism and mainstream media, particularly because of his decision to call for a plebiscite. The government started a radical intervention in the media system by creating and strengthening public media and co-opting some private media (Aguirre & Avila, 2020). At the end of the process, after Congress passed a restrictive media regulation, there were around four TV stations with a combined audience share of 26%, some radio stations, particularly Radio Pública, and two newspapers, all of them controlled by Rafael Correa’s government (Avila, 2017; Checa-Godoy, 2012; Jordan & Panchana, 2009). It was important to hold on to control of this media conglomerate because it helped to maintain confrontation against the private media that represented the *de facto* powers or the enemy of the people.

The external media of Ecuador, according to the populist communication model, is comprised of six family groups that still kept control of media companies. Among these are the Alvarado Group with Ecuavisa (national TV station), Vistazo (magazine) and other media products; the Perez media group, owners of Diario Universo, Radio City, and Diario Súper; the Mantilla Group and Telglovision, which are still shareholders of Diario El Comercio, Diario Últimas Noticias, Radio Quito, and Radio Platinum, etc.; the Granasa group has two newspapers, and Plural TV, and is related to Egas group, owner of Teleamazonas (national TV station), and some magazines. The combined TV audience reached by the external media system corresponds to about 43% (Obitel, 2015; CORDICOM, 2014; Avila, 2017).

These two media (external and controlled) were in permanent confrontation; the editorial position of one group was usually the opposite of the other group. For the purpose of populist communication, this confrontation was an unavoidable strategy. It served to identify those political actors related to some private media groups labeled as the enemy of the people. Rafael Correa sued Diario Universo for an editorial that accused him of committing a crime against humanity as he was rescued from being kidnapped during a police revolt denounced as a political coup. Every Saturday, during a weekly broadcast radio and TV program called “Enlace
Citadano,” Correa accused journalists of being political actors for misinforming and serving a political agenda from the opposition. There is ample evidence of the permanent conflict between the private media and Correa’s populist government, which has been described in studies by various scholars (Avila, 2016; Checa-Godoy, 2012; Cerbino, Ramos & Orlando, 2013; Punin & Rencoret, 2014;).

3.2 Argentina

Throughout the 1990s, liberalization policies in Argentina led to the formation of a concentrated media system characterized by cross-media ownership and the formation of a few large media conglomerates. However, as in Brazil and Mexico, one became the dominant player. The Clarín Group expanded from publishing and broadcasting to a cable TV and internet provider, news agencies, audiovisual production, and to soccer transmission, among other interests. The group became one of the country’s leading economic conglomerates. Since 1999, it has been financed through international capital markets. Its undisputed ascendancy in the public agenda and opinion formation has been made possible by its multiple popular outlets and its prestigious news media’s capacity to act in a coordinated fashion, headed by its newspaper and 24-hour news channel. (Kitzberger, 2017; Mastrini & Becerra, 2006; Schuliaquer, 2017; Sivak, 2015).

During Nestor Kirchner’s term in office (2003-2007), despite some tensions, the government maintained a relationship of mutual accommodation with the Clarín Group. It was in 2008, with the election of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to the presidency, and in the context of a conflict with agricultural producers unleashed by a hike in export taxes, that the government shifted to an open confrontation with the Clarín Group and other established private news media. The government deployed all its political resources with the ultimate aim of radically altering power relations in the media sphere, in other words, of crushing Clarín’s dominant position (Kitzberger, 2017; Sivak, 2015).

By 2009, a new Audiovisual Services Law was passed. The legislation mainly addressed plurality and diversity through structural regulations aimed at reversing media ownership and audience concentration via bans on cross-ownership, limits on broadcasting license numbers, and subscriber caps for pay-TV services, among other policy mechanisms. Under such rules, the Clarín Group and other organizations, albeit to a lesser de-
gree, would be forced to divest a number of assets.\textsuperscript{2} Simultaneously, the government bought the transmission rights for first-division soccer from the national football association to broadcast games on free-to-air television. In doing so, the government overturned the long-standing exclusive possession of these rights by a pay-per-view channel co-owned by Clarín, a key resource in the expansion of the group’s business operations. Additionally, the government unblocked the distribution of cable licenses and reduced official advertising in Clarín’s outlets, which fueled new private and state pro-government media (Kitzberger, 2017; Schuliaquer, 2017; Sivak, 2015).

3.3 Venezuela

By the end of the 1990s, Venezuela’s media system exhibited a fair amount of concentration in the different types of media, but with few vertical links. Three family-owned newspapers dominated the national scene (El Nacional, El Universal, and Últimas Noticias) representing 60\% of circulation, while, separately, three private television networks (Venevisión, RCTV, and Televen) controlled 75\% of the audience share (Cañizález & Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Mastrini & Becerra, 2006). From the outset in 1999, Chávez’s relationship with the mainstream media was tense. However, it was after the April 2002 putsch attempt, encouraged by some of the main media owners and backed by one-sided coverage from most mainstream media outlets, that the populist leader deployed aggressive policies to radically reshape the media landscape. Preexisting state-owned national radio and television stations were revamped (VTV and RNV), two new national state-controlled television stations were created (Vive TV and TVes), and a regional news network was launched, only to mention the main state-owned media-outlet expansion. Oppositional private media operations were progressively restricted. Venevisión’s owner opted to depoliticize programming, while RCTV’s more confrontational stance ended in the nonrenewal of its broadcast license in 2007. Newspapers suffered from restrictions in newsprint supply, and a 2004 sanctioned “Radio and Television Responsibility Law” set strict content regulations. Meanwhile, community media that had backed Chávez during the coup received legal recognition and public funding on a discretionary basis. (Kitzberger, 2010)

\textsuperscript{2} Clarín resisted the law’s enforcement by filing judicial complaints.
4. The Direct Communication System

A direct communication system allowed to bypass journalistic intermediation is perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of the populist communication model. The official spokesperson, as previously mentioned, is the ruler. Therefore, the direct communication system facilitates permanent public exposure through regular communication spaces, accountability events, site visits, meetings of ministerial cabinets in rural areas, staged events, etc.

Although the confrontation with traditional media and the control of broadcast systems is an old practice in classical populism, Venezuela installed a different form of permanent and direct communication through weekly programs broadcast by radio and TV stations (Kitzberger, 2018). This form of constant exposure allowed the ruler to saturate the public sphere with his presidential voice (Waisbord, 2014). These programs were the perfect space to emphasize the conflict against the “enemy” usually identified by critical media accused of sustaining a political agenda.

Live programs like “Enlace Ciudadano” (Citizen Link) in Ecuador or “Aló Presidente” (Hello, President) in Venezuela are examples of such direct communication. Despite the mediation by the simultaneous transmission on television and radio, the effect this kind of show produces is the image that the leader is accountable to the citizenship (on a weekly basis). This sense of closeness can also be identified by the use of social networks, especially on Twitter, which has become a type of balcony 2.0, a new scenario in government communications.

It is in these close spaces of communication where it is possible to reaffirm the charisma and the personalization of the leader, who takes advantage of his or her power of communication to appeal to the masses and garner support for strategic decisions. The discursive style used in the direct communication system seeks the confrontation and Manichean polarization that is a characteristic of populism. It constitutes a form of exerting pressure on the opposition through the mobilization of supporters.

Regarding their strategies of direct communication, and in contrast with Correa or Chávez, the Kirchners did not experiment with regular broadcasting. Instead, they systematically resorted to controlled events in order to have an impact on non-controlled media. Ceremonies, inaugurations, or official visits developed into a routine device for delivering unmediated messages (Kitzberger, 2010). Cristina Kirchner progressively resorted to “cadenas” (mandatory broadcasts) and to the use of online media to deliver unmediated messages (Waisbord & Amado, 2017).
The agrarian conflict also triggered the Kirchners to go public with a discourse that framed the “dominant media” or the “corporations” as the real and unelected power that sides against the “people.” This depiction of the media gradually developed into a cultural war fought on screens, in papers, and in news media. In addition, an expanding circle of allies, popularized academics, and media-critical discourses deconstructed the ideological, corporate, and journalistic biases in dominant media narratives on a daily basis. The most successful of these communication devices was a daily television show, called “678,” aired on public television (Kitzberger, 2017). On the other side of the scenario, private mainstream media (especially Clarín’s multiple outlets) became systematically oppositional and framed the government as an authoritarian populism that threatened Argentina with becoming like Venezuela, restructuring the media system in terms of an external pluralism with polarized traits (Schuliaquer, 2015).

5. Conclusions

The central thesis of this chapter is that a populist government initiates fundamental changes to the media system. Thus, in these types of governments, media relations are handled with a confrontational strategy. This conflict is not only a response to the critics but has its roots in the historical capture of media ownership by a sector of the socio-economic elites with strong ties to political power. In Latin American populism, this confrontation derives from a radical media intervention explained in this chapter, with the creation or reinforcement of public media and the control of its newsroom.

Radical intervention in the media system, along with the changes in the communication structure and the direct communication strategy, allow the reinforcement of the closeness of the leader to the population. This, in turn, satisfies the goal of populist communication, which is to boost the ability of the leader to keep the supporters mobilized (Weyland, 2001) and to counter the mainstream media’s oppositional agenda and narrative. This chapter refers to the communication of the governments of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. A radical intervention in the media system was evident the moment these governments became interpreters of the communication process and called for the democratization of voices. The argument was used to justify this intervention in the media system with the construction of government-controlled media. The counterpower that this controlled media system offers reinforces the polarization and conflict. This
political environment keeps the people active, which provides public support to the populist leader.

5.1 Consequences for the Media and Political System

As the so-called left turn seems to be receding in Latin America, the scenario has radically changed in the region. The three populist leaders left power, and their communication strategies are discontinued. Arguably, since Chávez’s death in 2013, Venezuelan politics stepped over the regime threshold and backslid into authoritarianism. In Argentina, the kirchnerista successor candidate lost against Mauricio Macri, leading a center-right anti-populist electoral coalition governing the country since 2015. Meanwhile, in Ecuador, Correa’s successor candidate, Lenin Moreno, won the presidency in 2016, but almost immediately broke with Correa, now the government’s main opposition leader. Moreno realigned the government around center-right conservative and pro-market parties and other political anticorreísta groups.

In the post-populist government contexts of Argentina and Ecuador, a polarized political communication process subsists, however, under new circumstances. The populist–anti-populist cleavage still structures important aspects of the national media systems. The previously confronted journalistic outlets controlled by the main players in the private commercial media sector persist in their anti-kichnerista and anti-correísta editorial stances. With leftist-populist governments out of office, journalists and media voices aligned with them withdrew from the state-controlled outlets and newsrooms that depended upon the private allied news media that either disappeared or realigned pragmatically. The new incumbent governments significantly reversed many of the populist media policies, for example, reforming the bequeathed media regulatory laws, and re-approached the traditional private media owners previously confronted. The pro-populist perspectives lost standing in free-to-air television and in the mainstream press. While diminished, a polarized external pluralism subsists in the media system since they regrouped – and eventually reorganized considerable audiences – in niche media like 24/7 news channels, smaller legacy or digital-born newsrooms, some broadcast or streaming radio outlets, alternative-sector media and, especially, through the social media. In the opposition, both populist leaderships regularly use their Twitter or Facebook accounts as direct communication devices through which they keep denouncing the biases and anti-popular interests hidden behind the mainstream media’s news coverage.
Bolivia’s Evo Morales is the only remaining leftist populist in the presidency still playing a game of competitive electoral democracy. The region seems to have somewhat tilted to the right. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro’s election constitutes a new case of populist confrontational political communication, but this time, the governmental appeals that divide society into two antagonistic camps, in which the established media are placed on the side of the people’s enemy, respond to right-wing frames that see not the upper strata of society, but cosmopolitanism or “cultural Marxism” on the antagonist’s side. In that, the Brazilian populist political communication mobilized by Bolsonaro and his more ideological entourage resembles more the Bannon-Trump line than the Latin American recent wave of the populist left.

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Populist Online Communication

André Haller

The rise of populism in many Western societies is strongly connected to a confrontational political communication style that differs from the issue-based debates of traditional parties. Populist parties and politicians have become a part of media coverage and the political communication research agenda. Besides classical public relations measures, such as press releases and demonstrations, online platforms, especially social network sites, are widely seen as important communicative battlefields in the 21st century. One of the key questions in research on populist communication is how digital infrastructures contribute to the success of populist politicians and movements. This chapter summarizes major findings in the field of populist online communication and particularly focuses on right-wing populism, although many findings are applicable to left-wing populism as well. The text will present theoretical basics of the online practices of populists and empirical findings on the role of digital instruments in populist communication in a comprehensive literature review. At the beginning, populists’ main strategies and tactics in online environments are highlighted. The chapter explains the role of digital communication platforms in the strategies of populist politicians, parties and movements and will then present specific functions of populist online communication. Afterward, populist alternative media is described, and it will be argued that these new actors in the political discourse promote the rise of populist online communication by producing counter-public spheres and re-framing current political topics from a populist standpoint. In addition, studies show that these partisan media are a transnational phenomenon and build strong connections with populist politicians and parties. The next chapter then analyzes the use of online platforms by regular internet users. Results of user-generated populism on social media, as well as different usage patterns are presented. The text closes with an analysis of recent topics in communication and media that are connected to populism. Since digital disinformation, i.e., “fake news,” as well as the role of social bots in online discourses are connected to populist online communication, both are crucial in this chapter.
1. Populist Online Communication: Main Strategies and Tactics

This chapter discusses the strategies and tactics of populist online communication. After explaining the main functions of the internet for populist actors, a description of the influence of populist media channels, often designated as alternative media, on the internet will be given. The chapter then shifts its focus towards the reception and active production of populist online content by users.

1.1 Strategies of Populist Online Communication

In general, political websites fulfill four functions for producers and visitors (Foot & Schneider, 2006). These functionalities of websites can be applied and extended to social network sites of politicians. Contents on websites as well as on social media accounts have the purpose to (1) inform users about political ideologies, topics and political personalities. In mediatized political discourses, this function must be expanded to the strategic role of politicians’ communication for journalism. Tweets, posts and other texts online not only serve to inform followers but also to gain the attention of journalists. Tweets, Facebook posts and Instagram photos are increasingly implemented in journalistic coverage to illustrate individual political statements. Furthermore, journalists use social media content to present more or less valid “statistics” on dominant public opinions regarding certain issues (Beckers & Harder, 2016). The PR function of social media posts is particularly important for populist actors, as their communicative style aims at classic news factors in media. A study on the coverage of the social media posts by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton shows that Trump’s aggressive Twitter messages attracted high media coverage (Fürst & Oehmer, 2018). Political online communication furthermore tries to (2) involve and integrate users. Direct communication like chats and replies on discussion boards or comments sections by political actors are useful to get closer to voters. However, these new forms of interaction give users the chance to actively participate in discussions in a dialogic way. Although populist actors rarely take part in online discussions, user engagement is a way to show symbolic support for populist actors (Krämer, 2017). A third function is (3) to provide links to further content. Hyperlinks to videos or press releases are a strategic way to lead users to further political information. The aim of populist online communication is to build a virtual environment of main websites, social media pages and audio-visual sites to distribute a homogeneous ideology separating “the people” from social out-
groups and “corrupt” elites. Particularly in campaign times, but also during legislative periods, political actors try to (4) mobilize users online (e.g., sharing posts, signing a petition) as well as offline (vote for a party, take part in a demonstration, participate in canvassing). In addition, the mobilization function of websites can also be applied to social media platforms where users can show their support through online actions; high engagement numbers, such as likes and shares, contribute to an increased visibility in online discourse. High numbers of followers and social media engagement can furthermore lead to media coverage about the follower power, as a study of the 2016 US presidential election suggests (Fürst & Oehmer, 2018). Classical media use tweets, soundbites and social media posts to illustrate coverage of populist parties and politicians as well as to report on new scandalous content by populists. Recent empirical case studies show transnational connections between populist actors with the aim to mobilize right-wing movements in different countries and to achieve common political goals, such as anti-migration policies or the removal of laws against hate speech. Transnational populist coalitions, furthermore, strategically plan and carry out online activities to influence public opinion, particularly before elections (Davey & Ebner, 2017).

Key factors in populist communication are macro-, meso- and micro-level variables which increase or limit the potentials for populists. Situational factors on the macro-level include the state of the economy, migration and other recent crises. Structural factors include historical or cultural developments and characteristics of the political and media system. On the meso-level, online media are used as information sources and instruments to express demands and opinions that can subsequently influence politicians. On the other hand, the availability of online media leads to an active use of these platforms by populist actors (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2016). Consequently, online media and platforms play a major role in strategic populist communication as well as the news consumption of citizens. Krämer (2017) identifies five functions of online communication that are characteristic of populist communication:
(1) The construction and preservation of populism’s main idea – a strong relationship between populist leaders and a homogeneous entity (Krämer, 2017, p. 5; Mudde, 2004), often constructed as “the people” or, less focused on classes, “the heartland” (Taggart, 2000, p. 95). The main aim is to separate groups of individuals defined as political and societal elites from the constructed “heartland.” Comparative analyses show that appeals to “the people” are common in many politicians’ social media communication (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). In online environments, populist leaders mostly use top-down messages to disseminate their concept of antagonism and forego discussions with supporters and critics. The functionalities of social network sites can tighten alleged ties between populist leaders and citizens: Users can express their support through formal manifestations such as shares or likes. Informal expressions of approval can be made in textual or visual form by commenting on the posts of populist players. However, it is likely that operators of populist social media sites sort out critical comments to create the impression of high approval (Krämer, 2017). The strategy is to “invite the whole people to express their identification with the movement by simple, formalized technical means without regard to further differentiation and diverging opinions among the population” (Krämer, 2017, p. 7). Analyses of the German General Election 2017 reveal that these attempts were successful; the right-wing AfD and left-wing Die.Linke received the most formal expressions on their Facebook pages in terms of likes, shares and overall engagement (Haller, 2017; Haller, 2019; Lucht, Udris, & Vogler, 2017).

(2) Online exclusion of social outgroups in the populist discourse (Krämer, 2017, p. 7). Both organized (parties, movements) and unorganized (individual users) populist players use online media to draw a distinction between “the heartland” and specific social groups labeled as outgroups. Social outgroups are mainly defined by origin, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, appearances, political attitudes, or cultural preferences. Populists try to connect these groups to deviant or harmful behavior in order to underline their core argument that an antagonistic relationship is existent. Content analyses show that left-wing populists tend to attack economic elites, whereas right-wing politicians build antagonisms towards established media and practice exclusion against social groups (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). In practice, right-wing populists use websites to refer to “anecdotal evidence” (Krämer, 2017, p. 7), for instance, of negative events such as interactive maps showing alleged or real crime cases involving migrants. Even though this strategy is constitutive for populist communication, the
use of digital media instruments “such as databases and interactive maps seem to provide particular credibility to right-wing populist claims as they purportedly demonstrate that the threats are omnipresent and systematic evidence justifies the fear of outgroups” (Krämer, 2017, p. 8).

(3) “Establishing equivalence and elaborating the worldview” (Krämer, 2017, p. 8). It is a strategic problem in populist ideology and communication that right- and left-wing populist parties are often limited to a few political fields due to their programmatic foundations. Populist players, therefore, try to develop their ideological frameworks further towards other political topics by using online communication “to use the same frames to interpret any upcoming event and issue” (Krämer, 2017, p. 8). Thus, the social media posts of populist actors contain fundamental political ideas, such as liberty connected to alleged threats, e.g., immigration and Islam. An elaboration of populist ideology takes place in offline environments, such as conferences and books, but is also conducted on online platforms. Populist parties and politicians are using communication channels strategically and focus on target groups: “As in other social and political movements, right-wing populist actors distinguish their communication according to purpose and audience” (Krämer, 2017, p. 9). In online practice, populists often use typical styles of popular internet communication such as memes or gifs. A great example for the effective use of a meme is “Pepe the Frog,” which was “colonized” (Pelletier-Gagnon & Pérez Trujillo Diniz, 2018) by the US alt-right movement and used during the 2016 US presidential election as a sarcastic symbol (Lobinger, Venema, Krämer, & Benecchi, 2019).

(4) “Developing a right-wing populist lifestyle and identity” (Krämer, 2017, p. 10). A further function relates to the potentials of online platforms to strengthen the attitudes and worldviews of users. It is believed that social media algorithms and populist alternative media services can amplify existing political views. Besides manifold news sources, users “seem to increasingly adopt symbols that serve to express their identity” (Krämer, 2017, p. 10). The “Pepe the Frog” meme is an example of a symbolic use of hijacked visuals. Other symbols often connotated are national symbols, such as flags or catchphrases, like the German “Einzelfall” (“single case”) referring sarcastically to crime incidents. Krämer (2017) points towards a possible spillover effect when the appearances of user profiles in social media may become more attractive to others. Online populism, constructed in a social process by populist actors, users and intermediaries with their technological infrastruc-
tures, may then become an everyday phenomenon and contribute to a normalization of right-wing concepts. There is also evidence that the development and maintenance of a right-wing identity in online communities leads to a transcultural distribution and adoption of these ideologies (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2016).

(5) Bypassing mass media barriers (Krämer, 2017, p. 11). Krämer (2017, p. 11) describes the evasion of established media by populist online communication as a “meta-function,” which fulfills two further functions. First, populists can communicate directly to users via their internet channels without being filtered by journalists. Populist parties, therefore, not only use classical social network sites but also develop their own media channels as cases in France, Italy, Norway, Great Britain, and Norway illustrate (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2016). Second, populist actors’ boycott of “mainstream media” is a symbolic gesture to underline their position against hostile media. Online communication, particularly on social network sites, also brings along practical problems; the power of digital distribution is limited by intermediary platforms such as Facebook, Google or Twitter and their algorithms, which determine the visibility of contents. Although algorithmic distribution offers strategic advantages for populists, e.g., targeting communication in sponsored posts, online platforms may restrict direct communication approaches. The bypass function of online communication is furthermore limited in terms of reach; many traditional media companies have high numbers of followers on social media, which results in a dominant journalistic position in distributing content. In some cases, scandalous online messages by populist actors may become part of the media coverage as its content, mostly on migration or religion, and fits the media logic, in particular “conflict framing” (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2016, p. 372). For organizational purposes, online media is used to organize and manage social movements. Populist groups no longer depend on spectacular and staged events to be part of media coverage. Instead, these movements use social media sites to distribute information on new demonstrations or other forms of protest (Krämer, 2017).

The findings above show similar usage patterns of online platforms by populist actors and other politicians. However, populist online communication particularly uses social media and symbolic communication to establish populist online lifestyles in order to strengthen the position of populists. This complies with the main populist communication strategy,
which aims at a homogeneous entity of people and argues against elites and social outgroups.

1.2 The Role of Populist Alternative Media

As discussed above, most populist movements and politicians share hostile attitudes towards established journalism and large media organizations because they are defined as an integral part of “the elites.” This ideological point of view is deeply rooted in media skepticism, which can be described as a “subjective feeling of alienation and mistrust toward the mainstream news media” (Tsfati, 2003, p. 67). Populist media skepticism is not only limited to feelings “that journalists are not fair or objective […] and they do not always tell the whole story” (Tsfati, 2003, p. 67) – it can also include outright hostility towards established media. The “liar press” shouts of right-wing populist protesters in Germany during the PEGIDA rallies illustrate this frontline. Marginalized social groups (or groups considering themselves as marginalized) typically employ different strategies, such as demonstrations or panel discussions, to establish counter-public structures for their demands. In the aftermath of the societal transformations of the 1960s, which were dominantly influenced by leftist movements, many alternative media outlets appeared in Western societies. Alternative media are media projects on the micro- and meso-level of social movements and focus on partisan interests of these groups and individuals (Wimmer, 2013). The aim of these journalistic ventures was to overcome the hegemonic structures of mainstream media and political elites and foster participatory elements in journalism (Beywl & Brombach, 1982; Holtz-Bacha, 2015; Weichler, 1987). An ideological key concept of alternative media producers were the ideas of Gramsci (2012, reprint), who was one of the leading communist activists in fascist Italy. The main concept is that political ideas and ideologies are fundamental to rule and control a society (Bates, 1975). In alternative media concepts, counter-publics are an instrument to fight against hegemonic structures. Alternative media producers use counter-publics to reframe published information by hegemonic players in alternative discourses (Atton, 2015; Krotz, 1998).

Partisan media projects on the right side of the political spectrum are visible in public discourse and apply the same concepts as left-wing alter-

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1 PEGIDA (“Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident”) is a right-wing protest movement in Germany.
native media (see Holt, 2019, in this volume). A study by Holt (2016) shows that these publications must be understood as alternative media because they produce counter-publics for the right-wing sphere and consequently serve similar purposes like left-wing projects. Political communication research underestimated and neglected right-wing media as alternative communication channels for movements and parties (Atton, 2006; Downey & Fenton, 2003), although platforms like Breitbart, The Daily Caller, The Gateway Pundit (US) and PI News, and Compact Magazine (Germany) have a high reach and may have an impact on democratic discourse.

Alternative media in the populist sector are particularly operating on the internet. Cheap, efficient and simple ways of production and distribution in online environments fostered the rise of populist media and led to a downfall of printed alternative media (Holtz-Bacha, 2015). Besides easy access and simple ways of distribution, populist alternative media serve various other purposes. In the US, alt-right media are playing a central role in the production of counter-collective memory referring to right-wing ideology (Wasilewski, 2019). A study of Finnish counter-media websites reveals that these platforms offer possibilities for system- and agenda critics as well as for users who search for entertaining content (Noppari, Hiltunen, & Ahva, 2019). Comparative studies discover a transnational exchange of knowledge and mutual financial support by alternative platforms (Davey & Ebner, 2017).

Populist platforms on the internet are increasingly influential in political communication and at the same time in ideological and cultural discourses (Nagle, 2017). Recent data on the use and popularity of alternative and partisan news sites from the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report show that major populist sites like Breitbart, Infowars, Daily Caller, The Blaze (all right-wing) and Occupy Democrats (left-wing) are well-known in the US and are also used on a weekly basis. We also observe rather high numbers of weekly users in Sweden, the Czech Republic and Spain (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). In the German context, Storz (2015) showed that a right-wing “full supply” (p. 7), including daily news sites, newsletters, blogs and video channels, is offered to the public. Right-wing populist media in Germany might be successful because they offer topics and actors that are excluded from traditional media, like migration and identity (Storz, 2015).

Holt (2018) offers a theoretical approach for the investigation of right- and left-wing alternative media, which is based on Capoccia’s (2002) concept of “anti-systemness” parties. Following the theoretical conception, alternative right-wing media can be distinguished according to “ideological anti-systemness” and “relational anti-systemness” (Holt, 2018, p. 53). Me-
dia services can be characterized as ideological anti-systemness players if they communicate a high level of antagonism towards established media: “Obviously, this represents a quite extreme position and would in relation to media mean a vision of a completely different media system” (Holt, 2018, p. 53). If right-wing alternative media are connected more strongly to the public discourse, they can be defined as relational anti-systemness media. Alternative media, leftist and rightist, can be classified in a 2x2 matrix. Possible positions in the matrix can be: “anti-system alternative media” (ideological and relational anti-systemness), “irrelevant alternative media” (ideological but no relational anti-systemness), “polarizing alternative media” (relational but no ideological anti-systemness), and “not anti-system media” (no anti-systemness) (Holt, 2018, p. 53).

In addition to the general use of the internet by populists described above, social-networking attempts between populist politicians and alternative right-wing journalists are visible. Based on findings in the US and Germany, a qualitative study shows strong relationships between political and journalistic players on the right. Favorable interview situations for politicians of the German right-wing populist party AfD, exclusive access to the White House for alternative media, and recruitment of former right-wing journalists as political consultants point at a “symbiotic interdependency” (Haller, 2018) between the alternative-journalistic and right-wing populist sphere.

The success of populist alternative media may vary in different national contexts. In most cases, these platforms do not have sufficient resources for journalistic investigations and a broader offline distribution infrastructure. This leads to a paradoxical dependency on media coverage by established journalism (Haller & Holt, 2018). It is obvious that alternative news sites are not as professionalized as larger media companies. However, public attention for these alternative news sites is high, and some of them reach massive numbers of users. It was also shown that there are traces of a symbiotic relationship between partisan and alternative media sites and populist politicians and parties. These sites have to be seen in a broader communicative populist mindset, and they

“reflect the wider populist and anti-establishment movements that are sweeping Europe. Many set out to present an alternative to mainstream media, which they see as part of a corporatist or politically correct consensus. For the most part their reach remains limited, but high awareness suggests that their perspectives have been noted by the public and by mainstream media.” (Newman et al., 2018, p. 23).
Populist communication is not limited to politicians and partisan media services but also occurs in the form of user activities on the internet. A plethora of digital platforms, such as social network sites, discussion boards, newsletters, and comments sections of traditional media, leads to miscellaneous opportunities for users interested in politics. In theory, the internet was expected to serve as an emancipatory infrastructure to establish counter-publics and include more people in political discourse (Müller, 2008; Müller & März, 2008). Despite the technological potential of the internet to establish open discussions, participatory elements and a pluralistic variety of issues and opinions, online services struggle with extremism and fanaticism (Klein, 2017).

In addition to open communication platforms, such as discussion boards, many closed areas like Facebook groups are used to articulate populist ideologies or organize protests (Krämer, 2017). For instance, the German right-wing populist movement PEGIDA was founded by members of a Facebook group and still mobilizes via those platforms. Hameleers (2019) analyzed user-made populism in Dutch Facebook groups by conducting a qualitative content analysis. User messages in the investigated groups are analogous to the findings by Krämer (2017); three out of four communicative patterns refer to the main populist communication strategy (appeal to the people, antagonism to elites and exclusion of outgroups). Hameleers (2019) shows that users (1) express their affiliation to the Dutch people, which is constructed as the leading political principle. In many cases, symbols, such as pictures and videos, are used to strengthen the community of Dutch people. Symbolic content is used to distinguish the ingroup from outgroups by showing positive aspects and relating to “better” past times. The second pattern consists of (2) fundamental distinctions between the ingroup and societal elites. The central narrative is that the will and demands of ordinary people are not represented by political elites who are blamed for acting solely for their own advantages. References to elites are accompanied by angry statements against specific political actors in many posts. Similar to the function of producing a sense of belonging to an ingroup, users often post symbolic content such as cartoons. Hameleers (2019, p. 11) points at possible offenses in user commentaries that sometimes reach “beyond the borders of freedom of speech, shift to hate speech and online incivility.” The communicative (3) exclusion of social outgroups is a third pattern of populist online communication by ordinary users. In the analyzed groups, many users posted excluding content against immigrants and refugees. Culturally-centered statements contain xenophobic attitudes,
whereas economically-centered posts focus on welfare chauvinism. The analysis also shows left-wing opinions aiming at rich citizens and a “culture of greed,” which would be “responsible for augmenting the gap between the ordinary people and the extreme rich minorities” (Hameleers, 2019, p. 11). The contents of the posts contain aggressive and hostile statements that dehumanize foreigners, e.g., by describing them as animals or pollutants. Aside from these results, a fourth pattern of (4) counter-populist posts was identified. Although most of the posts contained populist communication patterns, resistance against these dominating opinions is also visible in the groups. Especially populist assumptions dividing society into in- and outgroups were contested by critics. All in all, the idea of a homogeneous Dutch society is re-produced and re-confirmed in the investigated groups. Online behavior must not be separated from actions in real-life. Populist expressions online “may fuel negative sentiments towards refugees and migrants in real-life and may strengthen people’s opinion that most other Dutch people share these ideas” (Hameleers, 2019, p. 15). The study shows that the main populist communication strategy, i.e., the exclusion of social outgroups like elites and minorities combined with appeals to “the heartland,” is not only produced by populist politicians but also created by normal users in social media environments. It is challenging to analyze these user-made texts, as many social media groups are not open to the public. However, it is likely that a plethora of further online services offer platforms for populist discourses besides the investigated Facebook groups.

In the Finnish context, further usage patterns of visitors of counter-media websites were identified (Noppari, Hiltunen & Ahva, 2019). Based on qualitative focused interviews with users, the study shows that people are using populist counter-media sites for different reasons based upon their attitudes towards established media. Three ideal types of populist media users were identified (Noppari, Hiltunen, & Ahva, 2019, p. 29): (1) System skeptics have ideological and even revolutionary attitudes and are likely to engage with populist alternative media and produce their own content on online channels. (2) Agenda critics are less ideologically driven but often share or produce counter-media content. In their worldview, journalism is a crucial instrument for social change, and counter-media websites are corrective tools to expand media agenda. (3) Users who are “casually discontent” often find “legacy media journalism unreliable and lacking in some respects” (Noppari, Hiltunen, & Ahva, 2019, pp. 31-32) and therefore using alternative online news for entertainment or to satisfy their curiosity. The results indicate a variety of motivations for the reception of populist alternative media and relativize populist online communication. Particu-
larly, the third group of users is generally open for a dialogue with traditional journalists and, thus, may be integrated in a reasonable exchange of thoughts.

2. The Role of Algorithmic Communication

The previous chapter introduced main strategies of populist online communication. The debate about populist communication on the internet is strongly connected to recent communicative phenomena concerning the manipulation of the electorate in different countries. This chapter will, therefore, show the relevance of two main topics in the public debate about populist communication styles: digital disinformation/social bots and political (micro-)targeting.

2.1 Digital Disinformation and Social Network Bots

The debate on “fake news” reached a new level after Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential election and the success of the Brexit referendum. Discussions about the rise of a “post-factual”/”post-truth” age in political communication emerged. Waisbord (2018, p. 29) assumes a strong connection between post-truth and populist communication: “While populism fulminates against the false ‘truths’ perpetuated by elites, it embraces the notion of ‘popular truth’ as the innate wisdom of ‘the people.’” Against this theoretical background, populist post-truth communication is an expression of collaborative feelings (or feelings that are defined as commonly shared). Varying views on certain political issues are an integral part of democratic societies. However, in populist communication, the alleged “people’s will” is often constructed and accompanied by a fundamental mistrust of elite institutions such as the media. Populist actors often even deny facts to foster mistrust among their followers against social institutions. The term “fake news” is, depending on which political side evaluates it, two-fold; populist politicians often declare unfavorable and critical media coverage “fake.” In that perspective, “fake news” can be described as a “label […] to delegitimize news media” (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 2). On the other hand, strategic communicators, such as politicians, parties or alternative media sites, intentionally produce disinformation, which can be defined as a genre (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). In addition to the po-
political relevance of disinformation, the term “fake news” can also be applied to humorous and satirical content (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Online environments offer “fertile conditions” (Waisbord, 2018, p. 31) for populist actors to spread disinformation because of a fragmented high-choice media landscape and technological opportunities and effects such as filter bubbles. Social media platforms, in particular, allow a fast and simple reception of information by users. In the 2016 US presidential election, fake information on the internet and its impact were analyzed by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017). Although social media were a central but not the most important information source for Americans, fake news stories favoring Donald Trump were disseminated 30 million times on Facebook. The study also reveals that people tend to believe fake news stories when the content favors preferred candidates. Strong and segregated ideological social networks strengthen the likelihood of believing these stories (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The ongoing discussion on digital disinformation and measures against it may lead to contrary effects. Results of a study by van Duyn and Collier (2019) indicate that elite discourses on fake news may favor media distrust and the dissemination of fake news messages. Thus, research as well as the public debate on disinformation, especially in campaign times, should be well-balanced in terms of effects and functionalities.

A further phenomenon in political communication is the use of social bots, i.e., software that simulates human online behavior such as sharing posts, creating new texts or even interacting with human users. Although online bots are mostly used for non-ideological purposes, they are also programmed for strategic political communication. These bots often operate in social network sites because of the high user numbers and try to influence the public agenda or simulate support for specific politicians and parties (Ferrara, Varol, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2014). Although no widespread activity of bots was recognized, there are indications that bots were particularly implemented and used by right-wing actors in the case of the German National Election 2017 (Neudert, 2017; Pfaffenberger, Adrian, & Heinrich, 2019). Before the US election 2016, Bessi and Ferrara (2016) showed that tweets supporting Trump were posted more often than tweets favoring Clinton, and this could lead to a biased evaluation of the candidates due to false sentiments in online environments. A higher number of tweets may contribute to a higher visibility of a candidate. However, social media is only one part of the integrated communication plans of a campaign. Hence, the described effects could be overestimated. Concerning the Brexit campaign, Bastos and Mercea (2017) revealed a bot network comprising 13,493 profiles that tweeted mainly information favoring the
Brexit. The authors highlight that botnets could be repurposed in other campaigns for manipulation. These examples show that social network bots may be an effective instrument in political communication strategies of populists, particularly during campaign times.

2.2 Political (Micro-)Targeting

A further topic discussed in communication and political research as well as in the broader public are techniques using data about voters. During and after the 2016 US presidential election, possible data breaches on Facebook were at the center of the debate. The consulting firm Cambridge Analytica claimed that it used psychological data on millions of US citizens to send out pinpoint messages to voters. It remains unclear which data was processed, how accurate the Cambridge Analytica models were, and what effects psychometrical targeting can have.

Political microtargeting (PMT) has been widely used in modern democracies for many years. The underlying concept of PMT is to identify auspicious groups of voters and individual voters as target groups in the campaigns. PMT is “a strategic process which is geared towards addressing persuadable or mobilizable voters with tailor-made messages while ignoring others” (Kruschinski & Haller, 2017, p. 2). Target messages are, after the statistical processes of modeling (Castleman, 2016) and clustering, sent out by using door-to-door campaigning (Nielsen, 2012), personalized phone calls, and sponsored advertising on online platforms. The fact that some voters are excluded from campaign information is, ironically, analogous to one of the central strategies of populist politicians, the exclusion of social groups from public debate and participation (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). It is self-explanatory that all parties running a professionalized campaign use PMT strategies. From a strategic point, PMT is of great importance for populist parties for the following reasons: (1) PMT helps to bypass journalistic filters both in offline as well as in online campaign activities. Detailed data on voters help populist campaigns target promising households in their canvassing and telephone campaigns and avoid “useless” visits. In online environments, PMT is used to carry out tailor-made posts to auspicious users who are likely to vote for the party or can be mobilized. Contrary to classical PR work, sponsored advertisements are more effective than other communication measures. Specific target groups, such as younger persons, can be targeted directly by populist campaign headquarters. Consequently, data-based targeting could lead to a “confirmation of right-wing populist worldviews due to automated selective exposure to ide-
ologically consistent content” (Krämer, 2017, p. 13). (2) The use of PMT in sponsored posts on social media fits the attention-centered usage patterns on these platforms. (3) PMT is, compared to classical advertising in mass media such as television and newspapers, cheap and efficient. This is an advantage, especially for smaller and new parties arising from populist movements. Populist parties might use political online targeting to reduce campaign costs and, at the same time, enhance the effectiveness of their messages.

The discussion on disinformation on the internet and data-based targeting efforts shows that both phenomena are strongly connected. Emotionally designed fake messages, which are distributed with the help of algorithms, may increase polarization (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Hence, further research should focus on the role of data-driven microtargeting in the online toolkit of populist movements and politicians.

3. Conclusion

This chapter showed major functionalities and effects of populist online communication and recent digital phenomena linked to populist communication. Populist actors, politicians, and parties as well as social movements, use online platforms to construct and maintain a symbolic relationship between populist leaders and a homogeneous entity (“the people”). This connection is fueled on the content level by communicating main political issues such as immigration or crime or by introducing and reframing other topics referring to alleged misconduct by elites and social outgroups. Populist online communication furthermore excludes social outgroups and tries to establish a virtual populist lifestyle, primarily by producing and distributing symbolic texts like memes or video clips. A further function is the production of counter-public spheres to bypass traditional media, for example, by addressing users directly.

It was also illustrated that populist alternative media is produced to build up counter-public structures, especially for core voters and sympathizers. Empirical data shows that alternative online media incorporate media skepticism and media criticism as well as anti-system ideologies in far-right spheres. Right-wing media producers construct alternative populist frames of recent political topics and try to establish counter-collective memories in inner-cultural discourses. There are close bonds between populist online media and populist actors. Politicians use alternative media platforms to distribute their political standpoints and put up a symbolic front against established media.
New strategies and instruments in strategic online communication, such as data-driven microtargeting and social network bots, may be central in populist campaigning. Low costs of targeting techniques on social media sites and the potential to bypass traditional media are crucial advantages for populist communication. Particularly, the dissemination of disinformation may be fostered by digital instruments. Recent debates on privacy rules and the influence of consulting companies in data-driven campaigns show the importance of further research on technological transformations in political communication.

References


Populism Meets Fake News: Social Media, Stereotypes and Emotions

Nicoleta Corbu & Elena Negrea-Busuioc

Two major political events of 2016 (Brexit and the US elections) have profoundly changed both the political establishment and the global media landscape. Brexit, especially the Leave campaign, and, to an even greater extent, Trump’s surprising victory, have ever since fueled numerous debates over the role social media had in spreading the populist rhetoric. Apparently, “the year 2016 is indeed the year of the populist, and Donald Trump is its apotheosis” (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 190). Not only has research shown that social media were instrumental in securing Trump’s election (Benkler et al., 2017; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Oliver & Rahn, 2016), but Trump himself acknowledged that social media “helped him win” (McCormick, 2016). Thus, Trump undermined the efforts of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to downplay the role this social media platform played in the 2016 US elections and admitted that Twitter and Facebook are “great forms of communication […] that get the word out” (McCormick, 2016).

Furthermore, intensive social media campaigning has revitalized scholarly debate over politically oriented misinformation in and by the media. Social media are an ideal medium for populist politicians to expose their views and reach out. However, the combination between populist discourse and fake news, to use the less accurate, but more popular term, seems to be dynamite. A recent study (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018) has shown that online fake news consumption scored high among Trump supporters and that the fake news they were exposed to was overwhelmingly pro-Trump. The source of some misinformation may have been the President himself, since he “can generate more political nonsense in an hour than most of his rivals can produce in a year. Trump’s versatility in generating half-truth, untruth and outright spectacular mendacity borders on genius” (Ball, 2017, p. 10).

This chapter attempts to shed light on the relationship between two phenomena on the rise in today’s society: populism and fake news. We delineate the superposition between the two concepts, focusing on media populism and online disinformation, as proxies which foster interconnected ef-
fected in the online political environment. Even though the scope of both populism and fake news is broader, we believe that focusing on their (often combined or similar) effects in the political context allows us to further discuss the social (often) negative implications of these two phenomena. To this end, we discuss the intricacies between media populism and online disinformation following three types of arguments. First, we examine the dramatic changes in the media environment that helped spread both populist arguments and various types of disinformation to an unprecedented degree. Second, we argue that both concepts feed into one common ground: the Manichean distinction between “us” and “them,” which is the inner core of populism and at the same time the context in which people appropriate news that is counterfeit to various extent; when content confirms people’s opinions, attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices about a subject, people make the subject matter their own, and it becomes “true” (Bârgăoanu, 2019). Third, both phenomena find fertile ground in social media and tabloid media and are subject to viralization and persuasion effects due to the high level of emotionality they elicit online.

There are theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that populist actors are prone to using misinformation and that they often become victims of argumentative fallacies (Bergmann, 2018; Blassnig et al., 2019); for this reason, some scholars recommend that “corrections of populist-originated misinformation and disinformation then should be done in a matter-of-fact way, ideally provide substantial explanations, and use sources that are close to populist positions ideologically” (de Vreese et al., 2019, p. 244). However, it is not our intention here to discuss mis- and disinformation in the populist discourse, but rather to point out the intersections of the two phenomena about which there is general consensus among researchers and journalists regarding the negative social effects and detrimental implication for democracy (Stanyer et al., 2019; de Vreese et al., 2019). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to shed light on the production of fake news as a social media-related phenomenon; however, we are aware of the need to investigate and address the roots of the false content online. We believe this dimension to be the most challenging part of the “fake news” equation. However, in this chapter, we aim to explain the mechanisms that feed into the success of populism arguments and fake news, as we believe they share some interesting similarities which may allow a comparable approach in the future.
1. The Spread of Populism and False Information in the New Media Landscape

It is beyond the purpose of this chapter to delve into the vivid debate about what populism is; however, we should delimit the boundaries within which we place our discussion. Populism has been defined as either a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004), political style and rhetoric (Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016), a strategy (Barr, 2009), a frame (Aslanidis, 2016; Caiani & della Porta, 2011), or a zeitgeist (Mudde, 2004). In this paper, we focus on a different dimension of populism, namely populism in the media, which has been previously theorized (Esser et al., 2017; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008, 2014) or empirically analyzed (Akkerman, 2011; Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2011; Engesser et al., 2016; Rooduijn, de Lange & Hawkins, 2010; Maurer et al., 2019). All dimensions of populism are connected by the Manichean distinction between the good “us” and the evil “them,” the people versus various out-groups (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

The concept of media populism has been discussed in various terms; researchers often distinguish between populism by the media and populism for (sometimes referred to as through) the media. The former refers to populism propagated by journalists and media organizations (Esser et al., 2017) and largely overlaps with the concept of media populism (Krämer, 2014). The latter taps into the media’s tendency or capacity to become a platform that gives a voice to populists, often distributing and amplifying populist messages of political actors (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 73).

Media’s declining commitment to facticity, accuracy, and objectivity and the increasing shift toward sensationalism, immediacy, and emotionality (Bakir & McStay, 2018) are essential features of the current (new) media ecology, which favors not only the spread of populist discourse but also the proliferation and intensification of false content. This is much more visible in social media, which has become embedded with (sometimes malicious) mechanisms of quick dissemination and amplification of attractive content, such as populist messages and counterfactual information. Moreover, in the online space, “the boundaries between senders and receivers are blurring” (Hameleers, 2018, p. 2178), which fosters a never-ending process of going back and forth with populist arguments, either agreeing or disagreeing with an initial populist statement. At the same time, the social media environment might enhance the thin nature of populism in the sense of fragmentizing its elements across posts (Engesser et al., 2017) and platforms. Thus, various “pieces” of populism (i.e., key elements, such as popular sovereignty, pure people, corrupt elite, and dangerous others) form a giant puzzle that could be even further developed by artificial
means, such as bots and cyborgs (human users who employ software to automate and amplify their social posts, according to Kramer, 2017), which are, arguably, very effective means to spread information in the online environment.

The rapid transformations of modern communication technologies make it easier for people to share a common social media bubble with people holding similar attitudes, which, over time, leads to the consolidation of online communities in which a certain ideological content is echoed, a phenomenon known as the echo chamber effect (Garret, 2009). Fragmentation and polarization are consequences of social media’s inner logic that allows “like-minded” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) people to connect and share their similar worldviews. Such like-minded people are often motivated by the emotional content of their echo chamber to uncritically accept and reaffirm what is presented to them. The uncritical absorption of content circulating in the social media bubble increases the risk of feeding people with false information that is difficult to correct or dismiss. In addition to increasing polarization (Törnberg, 2018), echo chambers favor selective exposure to misinformation, where large amounts of fake news are consumed by relatively few people (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). As Lazer et al. (2017) remark, once embedded in the echo chambers, fake news can be used to amplify prejudice, to assign blame, to inflate emotions, and, quite frequently, to “harden the us-versus-them mentalities” (p. 5).

Fake news and any other types of mis- or disinformation are information disorders that pollute the information ecosystem (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The 2016 US elections brought the term “fake news” into the spotlight, thus sparking a growing scholarly interest in the dissemination of false information in social media. Fake news stories had widely circulated during the 2016 US elections (Silverman, 2016), and many people reported in post-election surveys that they believed the information promoted on fake news sites to be true (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Some studies showed that fake news website production and consumption during the US presidential elections were overwhelmingly pro-Trump and that social media platforms were instrumental in directing people to fake news websites (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018, pp. 10-11). These findings are consistent with other research suggesting that social media helped cultivate, directly or indirectly, public support for populists in the US elections (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017) and with the more general claim that social media give populists a platform to articulate and disseminate their ideology (Engesser et al., 2016).
There are many shapes that false information can take (see Wardle, 2017, and Tandoc et al., 2018 for fake news typologies); however, it seems that online circulation and reception is crucial to fake news (Bounegru et al., 2017). In this chapter, we mainly refer to politically biased fake news (manipulated content in Tandoc’s typology) and to politically counterfeit information (fabricated content), as we believe that these types of information are most prone to negative social effects, while being both accepted and spread easily in the news media environment.

The connection between populism and fake news does not reside solely in their similarities; even though they share some common traits, mostly they intersect in some of their avatars in the political environment. In other words, some “species” of both media populism and fake news feed into the same kinds of arguments, and sometimes largely overlap. We will further discuss various types of populist and fake news content in order to explain the very mechanisms that make them appealing to large masses. We argue that the most persuasive populist arguments appeal to people’s own biases (including political ones), attitudes and stereotypes, all meaningful in a highly polarized media environment, which also explains why people get captive in the same type of arguments of politically biased fake news. We believe that, arguably, the fake news most susceptible to being spread and “swallowed” without much critical thinking is politically manipulated and fabricated content.

When trying to make distinctions and put order into the “messiness” of populist communication, Hameleers (2018) proposes a typology of populist messages, considering vertical and horizontal oppositions and sender-versus-receiver sides of communication. In this chapter, we focus on the sender’s (or producer) point of view when discussing the types of populist arguments and types of fake news disseminated through the media, and on the receiver’s point of view when trying to explain the mental mechanisms that help people accept and/or spread these types of content. From the sender-side point of view, vertical types are related to people’s enemy that threatens from above, i.e., elites (political, economic, cultural) that deprive people of their rightful benefits. The author discusses four categories of populist messages: antiestablishment, antieconomic elites, antiexperts, and antimedia (p. 2174). Of these four types, often the antiestablishment arguments find their way into what has been called the manipulated content type of fake news. Basically, this type of false content scores relatively low in facticity and high in the intention to deceive (Tandoc et al., 2018) and is often used to increase political polarization and radicalize opinions. This type of purposely elaborated content aiming at misinforming people goes easily uncontested and unverified by the receivers. One possible explana-
tion is that political partisans, like sports fans, “have a strong tendency to process political information in a highly biased way that tends to confirm their preexisting ideologies and prejudices” (Somin, 2013, p. 124). In other words, people overvalue information that supports their prior views, opinions, and beliefs, while largely undervaluing or ignoring facts that contradict them. Much in the same way populist arguments are often well received as they address people’s own values, opinions, or views (sometimes frustrations) on specific political matters. Research on exposure to political misinformation (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018) has shown that people do not fact-check suspicious news stories they read online. Hence, it is not surprising that fabricated content about particular groups and individuals, about politicians and political parties contributes to the development and consolidation of political misperceptions, i.e., flawed judgments about political facts.

From a horizontal point of view, the out-groups that threaten the “good people” are often immigrants, ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, and sometimes welfare state profiteers (for right-wing populism) or the minority of the extremely rich (for left-wing populism), thus accounting for three more types of populism: in-group superiority, exclusionist populism, and welfare state chauvinist populism (Hameleers, 2018, pp. 2175-2176).

Moreover, the online context, especially social media, fosters all these types of content, with one additional feature: because the sender side in social media is often not a media outlet, but rather individuals, “people who express themselves in populist ways may be primed by the populist responses of others” (Hameleers, 2018, p. 2181). This type of circularity is shared with the fake news phenomenon; the sender and receiver sides of communication are almost interchangeable in the social media environment, which does not necessarily mean that they actually become producers of fake news. However, more often than not, people get trapped into the arguments about one (counterfactual) piece of information, and they often forget to question its truthfulness, thus priming responses legitimizing the content. This is the same kind of mechanism that perpetuates populist arguments in the social media. In addition to uncritically approaching the content offered, people are also “biased information-seekers” (Lazer et al., 2017, p. 6) who tend to trust information coming from a familiar source whose opinions confirm their existing (political) views. From this point of view, it is highly relevant that ordinary people become not only involved in discussions, thus forgetting to question the sources, but they also become nodes of further spread of the information that caught their attention. In a following section of this chapter, we will discuss the role of emotions in this process. Furthermore, when processing political informa-
tion, especially political misperceptions, people are rather driven by directionally motivated reasoning than by accuracy motivations, and this processing is based on affective evaluation of politics (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017, pp. 9-12). Directional motivations are often shaped by cognitive biases. People tend to prefer congenial information (i.e., confirmation bias) and to dismiss information that contradicts their preexisting views (i.e., disconfirmation bias), which is to say that “people’s interpretation of factual information depends on whether the information reinforces or contradicts directional preferences” (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017, p. 12).

To sum up, populist arguments and fake news share a number of features embedded in the very fabric of the (social) media; they make use of sensational and emotional arguments (we will discuss emotionality in a following section), they overlap especially in the context of political information, which is often biased (and thus, to a certain extent, counterfeit) in populist ways, and they are augmented by specific mechanisms of social media platforms.

2. Blame and Stereotypes as Facilitators of Populist and Counterfeit Information

Populism has been linked to blame and stereotypes (in short, to judgments) in various ways, of which effects are the most notable. Populist messages are, by excellence, built on blaming others (various out-groups, as discussed in the previous section). This type of attribution of responsibility related to various social groups (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Iyengar, 1994) has been proven to lead to effects on stereotypes (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015; Corbu et al., 2019; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017) and blame attribution to various social categories (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017b; 2018). At the same time, both stereotypes and blame have been extensively studied as independent variables. Blame, being at the core of most populist arguments, has been intrinsically analyzed as an independent variable in virtually all populist effects studies (for overview of the literature, see Andreadis et al., 2019; Corbu et al., 2019; Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2017a; 2017b; 2018). Stereotypes have been shown to generate negative attitudes and prejudice (see the integrated threat theory of prejudice: Stephan et al., 1998; Ybarra & Stephan, 1994). These types of effects are of interest for this chapter as they are explained by cognitive mechanisms that we believe play an important role in the way people accept misleading content as legitimate. To show this connection, we rely on schemata theory (Brewer & Nakamura,
1984), which provides the ground for the modern approaches to understanding how stereotypes work. The stereotyping process is believed to function in two stages: association and activation, which generate implicit, and respectively, explicit stereotypes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Greenwald et al., 2002; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). The first stage refers to the automatic process of activating nodes (concepts) and links (associations) in the memory (thus being inevitable) to retrieve information leading to implicit stereotypes. The activation stage “moves” stereotypes into consciousness, which implies that people express judgments overtly (Greenwald et al., 2002; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). The media role in the activation of stereotypes is often explained within the priming framework, which provides arguments about how regular exposure to stereotypes presented by the media can lead to building stereotypical memory traces (Arendt, 2013, p. 830). Populist communication has been shown to enhance stereotypes toward various out-groups in different contexts (Corbu et al., 2019). In fact, as in the case of “blame,” there is a vicious circle that fosters negative stereotyping; media stereotypes – “mass-mediated depictions of social groups that are repeatedly paired with specific attributes” (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015, p. 179) – form, in time, memory traces that could be subsequently quickly activated by sometimes even short exposures. At the same time, the “pictures in people’s heads” (Lippmann, 1922/1965), especially in the social media environment where the sender and receiver of the communication content are often interchangeable enhance and amplify the stereotypes generated by the (social) media. Thus, these pictures become so much embedded in the “common knowledge” or schemata of the audience (Ramasubramanian, 2007, p. 251) that they are subsequently primed by the weakest media stereotypes.

We argue that a similar mechanism applies to fake news: it is credible exactly because it resonates with prior stereotypes in people’s minds; the more a media content resonates with the cognitive schemata of the audiences, the less critical the audience is, and the more credible is the news created using these stereotypes. At the same time, blaming the (political, most of the time) elites resides at the core of both populism and politically biased information, which is in fact manipulated content, respecting facts to a certain degree, but using journalistic frames to show some political actors, or parties, or institutions in a favorable light, while largely blaming their opponents. The highly polarized media environment, both traditional media outlets (fostered by people’s selective exposure mechanisms) and social media (fed by people’s own echo chambers and by algorithm filter bubbles), provide a debate arena where the responsibility and conflict
frames dividing political actors into heroes or scapegoats often feed on the very stereotypes that people hold of various vertical out-groups.

While it may be argued that the technological changes affecting information flows in the age of social media could have some positive individual effects, such as individual attitudinal stability leading to individual certainty and security, there is growing evidence for their negative societal effects (Geschke et al., 2019, p.145). Societal fragmentation and polarization erode the democratic processes of decision-making by undermining conflict resolution (Sunstein, 2017). To reach a society-wide consensus, it is necessary to encourage diversity of opinions and beliefs, to listen to people expressing different opinions, and to engage in dialogue with them.

Filter bubbles minimize exposure to information that contradicts previous opinions held by people and challenge their individual attitudes (Pariser, 2011). Through echo chambers and filter bubbles, misinformation in social media enhances the radicalization of opinions and fuels group polarization. With no conflicting incoming information, such echo chambers are likely to mobilize “like-minded” people to engage in politics, to assign blame to various social categories and to propagate stereotypes related to out-groups. Furthermore, increasing group polarization often triggers inflammatory and discriminatory views to be treated as facts, which makes them credible and trustworthy. Growing radicalization and polarization also contribute to strengthening the self-perception in opposition to “them.”

Studies measuring the effects of fake news are still rather scarce (see, for example, Van Duyn & Collier, 2019), with the exception of political satire and parody that are some of the avatars of this particular phenomenon and that have been largely analyzed previously (Balmas, 2014; Brewer, Young & Morreale, 2013; Littau & Stewart, 2015). Nonetheless, we argue that politically biased fake news that manipulates content as opposed to fabricating it (Tandoc et al., 2018) is more prone to produce effects. Totally fabricated content, scoring high on the deceitfulness scale might backfire. Therefore, often skewed in radical ways, but not necessarily counterfeit political arguments used by populist actors are one of the many facets of the general term of “fake news,” a feature to fear much more than its “poor relative,” i.e., grossly fabricated content.

Summing up, the success of politically biased type of fake news could be explained by the fact that people largely resonate with schemata, stereotypes and judgments in their minds, which makes them less prone to critical thinking and more willing to accept media content by virtue of cognitive response to persuasion (Greenwald, 1968). At the same time, most of the stereotypes related to political life or economic and political elites are
fostered, fed, and amplified by populist communication. People appropriate these stereotypes to such an extent that they become “true” precisely when individuals recognize them in (correct or counterfeit) media content. Moreover, people’s need to fight a common enemy, to divide the social order into “us” and “them” to have a sense of belonging to a particular social group, has many implications for the polarization of both media and society.

3. The Role of Emotions in the Dissemination and Amplification of Populist Messages and Fake News

Populist political communication is considered to have an “extra ingredient” i.e., enthusiasm, which “draws normally unpolitical people into the political arena” (Canovan, 1999, p. 6). However, enthusiasm is not the only engine that makes populist messages more appealing than their non-populist counterparts. Emotionality, in general, is theorized to be embedded into populist communication in the form of many discrete emotions (Demertzis, 2006), which have been proven to be elicited by populist cues in communication and to mediate effects of the persuasiveness of a message (Wirz, 2018). Many discrete emotions have been linked to populist appeals, but fear and anger are often studied as very powerful emotional responses to people being depicted as powerless in their power struggle with the elites (Betz, 1993; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a; Rico, Guinjoan & Anduiza, 2017; Wirz, 2018). Of these two, anger is the discrete emotion that is easily elicited by the very Manichean tendency of populist messages to split society into two antagonistic groups and, at the same time, to play the moral card of offended ordinary people (Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017, p. 449). Morality pervades populist messages as the preferred out-group of this type of communication is “the culprit elite” in contrast with “the good people.”

Generally, emotions are considered to trigger various types of reactions (Gross, 2008; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). In the new media environment, dominated by a chain of reactions, this is a key element for news content going viral and being subject of vivid debates. Both populist communication and various types of fake news that use sensational features are subject to viralization and emotional persuasive appeals. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue, “the most ‘successful’ of problematic content is that which plays on people’s emotions, encouraging feelings of superiority, anger or fear” (p. 7).
Emotion is what draws people to echo chambers. The affective and provocative nature of much of the false content disseminated and co-created in echo chambers makes people who are exposed to it emotionally antagonized and outraged (Bakir & McStay, 2018, p. 6). The highly emotional content circulating within the walls of echo chambers also helps consolidate the perception of an in-group identity, which leads to growing fragmentation and radicalization. People often jump into heated debates that sometimes become inflammatory and insulting. The magnetism of affective content makes people more receptive to false content, which they accept uncritically.

In addition to emotionality, echo chambers also impact the virality of dis- and misinformation. Admittedly, gathering people with similar worldviews together suffices to affect the virality of content that resonates with their views (Törnberg, 2018, p. 17). Fake news has, arguably, higher chances to go viral in segregated online communities. The presence of clusters of users sharing similar worldviews may be sufficient for misinformation to thrive, “as virality increases with network homophily” (Törnberg, 2018, p. 18). Contrary to expectations, the disappearance of the gatekeeping role performed by the media has not fostered an overt arena of communication in the Habermasian sense but instead has opened up a space for fake news to thrive and to favor segregation and polarization (Törnberg, 2018; Bergmann, 2018). At the same time, the new “hybrid media systems” foster propagation of fake news (for more elaborate conclusions regarding the hybrid media environment, fake news and populism, see Taylor et al., 2018).

However, there are studies that found no support for partisan echo chambers (Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2016; Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2011; Weeks et al., 2016), or that suggest that “previous work may have overestimated the degree of ideological segregation in social-media usage” (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker & Bonneau, 2015, p. 1531). This “trench warfare” (Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk & Enjolras, 2015), however, seems to also reinforce existing views and beliefs (Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk & Enjolras, 2015), as both selective exposure and confirmation bias (that are at work in shaping people’s reinforcing beliefs in any context) play an important role in the consumption and spread of information (Del Vicario, Zollo, Caldarelli, Scala & Quattrociocchi, 2017). Thus, it is still subject to debate to what extent echo chambers or “trench warfare” play a role in the viralization of content in online communities.

Moreover, it has been argued that “reliance on gut feeling rather than on rational facts and deliberation is seen as a key factor in the success of populist parties” (Wirz, 2018, p. 1116). Similarly, people’s receptivity to
misinformation and their evaluation of false content as trustworthy are affect-laden (Lazer et al., 2017). Rational evaluations of fake news, such as fact-checking, do not actually lead to successful outcomes (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). As is the case with political misconceptions, corrections applied to misinformation trigger a “backfire effect” where they actually increase misconceptions and consolidate people’s original beliefs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Lazer et al., 2017). What seems to matter is not how much fabricated or manipulated content fake news actually is but how realistic people perceive it to be. Studies on fake news effects have shown that people’s perception of fake news as realistic rather than exposure to it impacts positively on attitudes of inefficacy, alienation and cynicism toward politicians (Balmas, 2014).

To conclude, emotionality is a core component of political communication and of populist discourse, in particular. Fear and anger are frequently discussed as strong emotional responses to populist messages. While there are rather few empirical examinations of the role played by emotions in the creation and spread of fake news, some studies suggest that the emotionality of the echo chambers is what brings and keeps people together even when fed with false information. People are less interested in seeking out the truth or in rationally evaluating the content they digest. Instead, they seem to rely on their perception of fake news as realistic and on their affective evaluations when making judgments about politics.

4. Conclusions

This study explores the juxtaposition of two phenomena that have recently gained visibility and popularity across various fields, political communication included: populism and fake news. We draw on existing scholarly work in the field to advance our three-pronged arguments that support a connection between the propagation and efficiency of populist discourse and online misinformation. While previous studies (Benkler et al., 2017; Engesser et al., 2016; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Oliver & Rahn, 2016) have demonstrated “an elective affinity” (Gerbaudo, 2018) between populism and social media, a similar link between populism and fake news is currently gaining ground (see, for example, Bergmann, 2018; Taylor et al., 2018). However, we consider that such a connection is still lacking both theoretical and empirical strong support. However, we envisage three points of intersection between the two phenomena that we discuss here, and that could open future avenues for research on populism and fake news.
The first juxtaposition lies in the way in which both populism and fake news exploit the new media context generated by the transformations in the information ecosystem fostered by technological developments. The changes to media logic that include the shift from accuracy, facticity and objectivity to immediacy, rapid circulation and emotionality provide a fertile ground for the propagation of both populist messages and misinformation. Social media favor the dissemination and amplification of false attractive content, sometimes at the expense of content that is newsworthy and true.

The new media consumption patterns have become increasingly dominated by ‘news snacks’ (MacArthur, 1993; Meijer & Kormelink, 2015; Molyneux, 2018), which provides a fertile ground for people’s laziness; they look for shortcuts, accept opinions that do not contradict their views, and reject those that are different. This change benefits both populism and fake news since both thrive when polarization and radicalization are high. The echo chambers where people surround themselves with information that is aligned with their own worldviews and reduce their exposure to conflicting ideas are ideal for propagating populist messages and misinformation.

Another crossing between the two phenomena under scrutiny in this chapter resides in blame attribution and stereotype consolidation. Substantial research on populism effects has shown that populist messages significantly impact stereotypes and blame attribution to out-groups. Similarly, assigning blame and propagating stereotypes seem to be dominating features of online misinformation. Echo chambers are likely to display a mobilizing effect on people holding similar opinions who engage in politics and assign blame to various social categories (frequently to out-groups) and help propagate stereotypes of the out-groups. People are not concerned with the truth value of the content they are given; instead, they often treat inflammatory, discriminatory and even offensive views as facts, which makes them credible and trustworthy, thus feeding into their latent stereotypes and biases. Moreover, as far as the arguments provided in the news largely consolidate people’s own stereotypes, prejudices and attitudes, they make these arguments their own, not questioning their truthfulness any longer.

Finally, populism and fake news connect at the level of the emotional appeal of their content. Emotions are embedded in populist communication, with emotionally loaded populist messages triggering anger or fear-related responses in people. People’s confidence in and receptivity of misinformation are consequences of affective evaluations rather than rationally motivated choices. Fact-checking and corrections applied to misinformation...
tion seem to backfire and lead to increasing misconceptions and consolidation of people’s initial views.

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Populism and Alternative Media

Kristoffer Holt

1. Introduction

An area that has been researched quite extensively during recent years is the relationship between media and populism (Aalberg et al., 2016; Krämer, 2018). Controversial populist politicians like Jair Bolsonaro, Nigel Farage, and Donald Trump and their special relationship with the news media often serve as examples due to the mainstream media’s fascination with them and because they never seem to cease feeding the media’s appetite for scandal and sensation. There has been less work done on the connection between populism and alternative media. It is clear that populist politicians receive substantial support from various alternative media outlets like Breitbart News Network in the US and from organizations working through social media like the Non-Partisan School Movement in Brazil (Escola Sem Partido) (Romancini & Castilho, 2019). Most research, however, tends to focus on the relationship between mainstream mass media and populist politicians and how the news media plays an important role in laying the ground for populist rhetoric (Aalberg et al., 2016; Krämer, 2017, 2018). There is less research on the link between populism and alternative media, though the link is quite clear in some cases. This chapter explores this link.

Right-leaning populist alternative media have certainly made an impact on public discourse in many countries (Heft, Mayerhöffer, Reinhardt, & Knüpfer, 2019; Sandberg & Ihlbaek, 2019; Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömback, & De Vreese, 2016; Haller, Holt, & de la Brosse, 2019). Strikingly often, these alternative media combine criticism of liberal immigration policies with anti-elite messages, including harsh criticism of mainstream media which are often described as being backed by the corrupt elite (Holt, 2019; Binder, 2015; Nygaard, 2018). This form of populist distrust in traditional media is striking (Fawzi, 2019), but the connection between populist actors and the established media is more complex than simply the opposition between alternative media and the mainstream. Political actors depend on publicity (Mazzoleni, 2014), and in turn the media have much to gain from covering scandalous and sensational events and
pronouncements made by populist politicians such as Donald Trump (Lawrence & Boydstun, 2017), creating a relationship of mutual dependency. But in this chapter, I aim to focus specifically on the alternative media of the right-wing populist brand and their role in our current media landscape.

The most relevant question to explore in relation to this topic is, How do alternative media affect the political climate and the surrounding media landscape? It is clear that they have become important players in the realm of opinion formation and culture in general (Sandberg & Ihlbæk, 2019; Holt, 2019; Nagle, 2017). Outspoken distrust and criticism of the mainstream media is today routine among populist actors—in politics as well as in alternative media—throughout the West. The idea is that the mainstream media withhold or thwart reporting on information that might be sensitive in light of a politically correct agenda. But what does research tell us at this point about what effects it has from a larger perspective? In the following, I will try to outline what can be learned from current research. But first, let us further clarify the concepts.

2. Conceptual Confusion

When discussing “alternative media,” especially when it comes to populist right-wing examples, there is much confusion as to what is actually being debated, what classifications to use (especially in terms of ideology), and whether it is proper to talk about right-wing media as “alternative” media at all since some argue that it constitutes a contradiction in terms (“right-wing” is then automatically considered to be on the side of the “status quo” and “alternative” to signify a “pro-change” position) (Holt, 2019). It is no secret that research on alternative media has, to a high degree, historically been inspired by Marxism in general and Antonio Gramsci and his analysis of hegemony in particular. From that perspective, alternative media has been construed as a force of empowerment for voices that are often socially and culturally marginalized and have trouble getting their message through to large audiences (Fuchs, 2010). The phrase “mainstream media” was from the beginning an expression of a radical left-wing and critical view of how the media influences people’s worldviews. Researchers who have studied media and activism often describe alternative media in idealized terms as an expression of an ideal type of plebeian or subaltern public formation (Atton, 2015; Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpentier, 2007; Lievrouw, 2011; Pajnik & Downing, 2008).
Historically, “alternative media” has signified an ideal that provides ordinary citizens and marginalized groups a platform for building movements and from which to give voice to the voiceless (Atton, 2015; Fuchs, 2010; Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpentier, 2007; Lievrouw, 2011; Pajnik & Downing, 2008). A clear focus in research has been directed towards activist use of alternative media from a critical perspective (Fuchs, 2010; Penney & Dadas, 2014). According to Marxist thought, there must be a superstructure upheld by cultural institutions such as universities, the media, and organized religion. This superstructure provides people with a rationale for not rebelling against perceived mismanagement, injustice, or oppression. This notion is outspokenly founded on distrust of the political, economic, and intellectual/cultural elite in capitalist society, and the critical perspective has highlighted the role of the media in the maintenance of a mass culture that aims to legitimize the capitalist system. (Coyer, Dowsmunt, & Fountain, 2007).

However, scholars have been hesitant to analyze populist criticism of the mainstream media using the theoretical work coming from the critical tradition in which the mainstream media is seen as an important tool that the ruling class can use to create “false consciousness” (Bates, 1975). Researchers have rarely conceptualized right-wing populist criticism against what is described as elitist and politically correct mainstream media according to such narratives. Instead, it is notable that other terms such as “junk news,” “fake news,” and “disinformation” are often employed when referring to right-wing populist alternative media (Hedman, Sivnert, & Howard, 2018). Although such labels most certainly hit their mark on many occasions, it is important to take the labeling seriously and to be careful not to paint oneself into a corner that will be tricky to get out of (conceptually speaking). Noppari, Hiltunen, and Ahva (2019) describe what they call a larger discourse of a “post-truth narrative” that is often combined with moral concern over the audience’s media literacy. Right-wing populist media is then described as a threat because it has the potential to mislead citizens using descriptions of reality that are described as hateful, fake, extremist, or simply vulgar: “Within this narrative, media users who consume partisan online content have stereotypically been labeled as misguided and as having insufficient media literacy” (Noppari, Hiltunen, Ahva, 2019, p. 23-24). The problem inherent in such a perspective is, of course, that the label tends to be applied even before the research is done, often based on evaluations of source rather than content and strikingly often without studying the user perspective (Holt, 2019).

A number of recent studies acknowledge that right-wing alternative media should be analyzed along the same theoretical lines as, for example,
left-wing alternative media. Clearly, the stated reason for alternative media (left or right) is based on the perception that the mainstream media do not represent some perspectives or actors fairly. Even in countries with a strong public service presence in the media (Norway, Finland, and Sweden, for example), this perception is widely articulated in alternative media (Figenschou & Ihlbæk, 2019; Holt, 2019; Hiltunen, Noppari, & Ahva, 2019; Nygaard, 2019). Therefore, alternative media theoretically serve to accommodate people who experience this sort of treatment. (If they are correct or not in this perception is another question). The point is that alternative media, including right-wing populist alternative media, is probably best understood as a phenomenon that signifies a reaction to something that is perceived to be wrong; they exist in relation to something that was there before them.

3. Alternative Media and Populism—the Relational Approach

In accordance with the above statement that alternative media publish alternative narratives that go against the mainstream, they can be seen as primarily “reactive” or “relational” (Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019; Haller & Holt, 2019). By virtue of their reactivity, alternative media then affect other media and the general debate in various ways, often in a manner that makes manifest existing cultural, political, and religious opposition and polarization. This is often taken as proof that they cause and further fuel polarization, however, this is not necessarily the case since it might actually be a case of expressing views that are already present in the larger population. This is, however, an issue that needs to be studied more closely before certainty is merited. In some cases, alternative media express extreme and hateful content, while at other times, they do not. Therefore, it is important to not rush to judgment and instead to analyze each case carefully before applying labels of extremism (Holt, 2018). This general stance can be detected in much recently published research, and the results provide inspiring lessons about this relatively new and, as it seems, expanding phenomena. In the following, I will describe some key findings from such current research.

In order to discuss an “alternative,” it is impossible to ignore the question of to what it is an alternative, and in the case of alternative media, this must always be something that can be defined by terms such as “mainstream media” or “legacy media,” in any case, something that denotes the idea of a powerful and somewhat uniform media environment where news and views are produced and disseminated according to largely predictable
patterns—thematically as well as ideologically—and in which there is limited tolerance for views that fall outside of what is considered the norm, or as Hallin puts it, outside the sphere of “legitimate controversy” and therefore doomed to the “sphere of deviance” (Hallin, 1989; Figenshou & Ihlbæk, 2018). A number of recent studies have employed this “relational” approach in analyses of right-wing populist alternative media. The relational approach takes as a starting point the view that alternative media in general are best understood as “(self-) perceived correctives of ‘traditional’, ‘legacy’ or ‘mainstream’ news media in a given socio-cultural and historical context” (Holt, Figenshou, & Frischlisch, 2019). Alternative media are thus understood as self-appointed and self-described “correctives” engaged in a struggle against mainstream media outlets over how to describe the world and what topics and perspectives are to be considered salient in public discourse (Haller & Holt, 2019; Heft, Mayerhöffer, Reinhardt, & Knüpfer, 2019; Holt, 2019; Sandberg & Ihlbæk, 2019). Their alternative qualities can be observed on different levels: on the “micro level” by publishing alternative content and by relying on alternative content producers; on the “meso level” through alternative publishing routines and alternative organizational structures; and finally on the “macro level” by standing outside the established press and thus constituting a counterpart to the mainstream news media (Holt, Figenshou, & Frischlisch, 2019).

From such a perspective, the alternative quality of alternative media comes from a sense of being in opposition to the mainstream, which is presumed to present reality to citizens in a hegemonic way that excludes and mistreats certain perspectives and voices (Rauch, 2015). The mainstream media, seen as a powerful entity in society, is therefore a necessary one, serving the role of the other that one must position oneself against. From an analytical perspective, what is most important is to not determine who deserves to fly the “counter hegemonic” banner. Rather, the focus should be on finding the most productive ways of understanding how alternative media affect public discourse in the present media landscape: “Media of different positions that promise to oppose what they see as dominant, influential and agenda setting news media that shape the world-views of citizens in a way that they don’t agree with and therefore seek to counter” (Holt, Figenshou, & Frischlisch, 2019).

An example of a study that has this starting point is Sandberg and Ihlbæk (2019) who analyzed links shared on Facebook during the 2018 Swedish election campaign and found that right-wing alternative media had a comparatively high visibility on Facebook: a total of 28% of the sample of shared news on Facebook originated from these sites, and the level of interaction and engagement caused by such shared links was similar to...
that brought about by links from mainstream news providers. This analysis is interesting, since it not only says something about populist strategic use of social media (which is fairly well documented by now and not unique to populist actors); it also implies that the narratives circulated by such actors resonate among large groups of people, and that they might be interpreted as actually providing talking points, news and views that are shared by many, not expressed elsewhere in the media landscape. Again, more research is needed to investigate this relationship.

In a Norwegian content analysis of 600 alternative online outlets, Figenschou and Ihlbæk (2019) took a closer look at media criticism published on the most important right-wing populist alternative media in Norway. Their results specifically focused on the different positions from which the mainstream media are criticized and how the criticism is legitimized. This study clearly sees the emergence of alternative media on the right as a reaction against the existing mainstream, and media criticism itself can thus be understood as an expression of that reaction. The authors identified different positions as making critical assessments of legacy news media or journalists. For example, criticism could be stated from the position of someone who has personal experience of being a victim of unfair or biased treatment by journalists or editors. In other cases, the focus is more on factual knowledge and correcting journalistic narratives and statements. As the authors note, these observations are helpful for understanding the appeal of these publications.

Nygaard (2018) studied Scandinavian “immigration-critical alternative media” qualitatively with the aim of describing the journalistic voice in the texts they published. An important finding from this study is that the aim behind these alternative media seems to be relatively similar in the different Scandinavian countries. Although their politicians have dealt quite differently with the immigration issue, the baseline in the disseminated messages seems to be a common focus on “convincing the public that the Scandinavian societies have become unsafe due to increased immigration, and that the political elite and the criminal justice system are to blame” (p. 1). At the same time, Nygaard shows that there are large differences between the countries, where the Swedish sites tend to report on news in a more descriptive fashion compared to their Danish counterparts, who instead employ more normative judgments, and Norway, whose position is somewhere in between that of Sweden and Denmark. The results establish the relational nature of these alternative media while at the same time demonstrating contextual differences that are crucial to understanding how they interact and influence their respective media environments.
Heft, Mayerhöffer, Reinhardt, and Knüpfer (2019) conducted a comparative analysis of right-wing alternative media’s role in the “digital news infrastructures” in six countries (Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, UK, and US). The study devotes substantial attention to the notion of context and shows that the specific characteristics of each digital news infrastructure will affect the way in which alternative media operate and in turn how they affect the media landscape. In Sweden and Germany, for example, the mainstream media clearly have an outspokenly “critical stance toward far-right and right-wing populist positions” (p. 8), and therefore the “supply of and demand for right-wing news is most likely to rely on alternative modes of news production and dissemination” (p. 9). In contrast, Great Britain already has an established news infrastructure that includes dissemination of right-wing news and perspectives. In relation to population, Sweden displayed the largest number of right-wing alternative media, while Great Britain had the lowest number. Sweden and Germany also score higher than the other countries when it comes to audience demand. The results therefore suggest that countries in which there is a notable “marginalization of right-wing views and positions in media and politics” (p. 20), the likelihood increases that right-wing alternative news infrastructure will become more active and popular and also more strongly established as a voice in public discourse. This tendency is also proposed by von Nordheim, Müller, and Schepppe (2019) who analyzed the German context specifically. In their study, they compared the right-wing publication Junge Freiheit to the most influential mainstream newspapers in the country with a focus on how the immigration issue was reported on during the crisis of 2015-16. While the established press tended to contextualize the German case by situating it within the larger EU perspective, Junge Freiheit focused more on the German setting. Furthermore, von Nordheim, Müller, and Schepppe (2019) analyzed what Junge Freiheit wrote about the “mainstream media” specifically in order to study how this publication positions itself against other actors. The results are telling, and they echo findings in other studies (Holt, 2016; Haller & Holt, 2019): they show that Junge Freiheit often writes about news that has already been reported in the mainstream press.

In other words, while much has been assumed about the audience of populist right-wing alternative media, there has in fact been very little research done. Jennifer Rauch (2015) has done some pioneering work that includes the audience of right-leaning alternative media. Her research highlights, among other things, the fact that readers tend to seek out media that provide perspectives they think are missing in mainstream news reporting. One of the questions of most relevance, that of size (of the audi-
ence), is notoriously difficult to answer. Newman et al. (2018, 2019) have begun to include questions about usage of alternative and partisan media in the annual *Digital News Report*. The results are very interesting and show readership in terms of usage during the last week as well as awareness of alternative brands. In Sweden, for example, the biggest right-wing alternative media reach about 10% of the population, while in Brazil the biggest alternative brand, “O Antagonista,” reaches 19% a week. The most interesting and common result from all countries studied is that many more are aware of these brands than actually use them. In the US, for example, 22% of the population typically use alternative news during a week, but awareness of, for example, *Breitbart News Network*, is at 44% of the population.

In a study from Finland, Noppari, Hiltunen, and Ahva (2019) present one of few studies focusing on the audience of right-wing alternative media, or “populist counter-media” in their terminology. They interviewed 24 users of what they call “populist counter-media (PCM)” websites in Finland. Their results point to three different types of motivation among users of these sites. First, there are the “system sceptics” who express dissatisfaction and animosity towards the political system as well as the media. Second, the authors identify a group called “agenda critics” who are more specifically critical of how reality is represented in the news. The third category is the “casually discontent,” signifying occasional users who are looking for diverse gratification such as entertainment or information. This study is particularly relevant since it sheds light on the fact that media consumption is an individual choice and that use of and engagement with content from right-wing media is not something that people generally stumble across accidentally, but is rather the result of an active and conscious choice of the particular alternative media. More research along these lines comparing across countries and cultures would further increase our understanding of the audience of alternative right-wing media.

4. Concluding Remarks

Right-wing populist alternative media has been one of the most debated pieces in the puzzle of explaining the recent rise and success of right-wing populism in countries throughout the world. Much has been written along the lines of trying to link the emergence of online populist right-wing alternative media to the greater notion of junk news or disinformation. Alternative media, especially in the online world, represent powerful platforms for the formation of “counter publics” (Leung & Lee, 2014) and provide good examples of what is often referred to as “echo chambers”
(Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) through algorithmic power employed by big tech “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011) which are often described as causing polarization, division, and hostility. But implied in such explanatory models for the success of populism is that it must be because people are somehow misled on a large scale by false information and propaganda, that they become misguided in their political preferences and as a result start supporting right-wing populists (Howard & Bradshaw, 2018; Lewis, 2018). Although the existence of such entities as troll armies, disinformation, and bots is undeniable, the hypothesis that this automatically transforms large groups of citizens into right-wing populists is a somewhat weak model of explanation, mostly because it underestimates and almost disqualifies large groups of people from being able to make independent decisions. In today’s high-choice media environment, it seems rather that pre-existing political attitudes determine engagement with media products, a phenomenon observable, for example, in practices of “selective sharing” (Shin & Thorson, 2017) and the very selective nature of exposure to disinformation, where it has been demonstrated that a very small part of the population account for the bulk of the traffic at so-called “fake news sites” (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). Furthermore, research has recently problematized the effect on content diversity that is actually caused by algorithms (Nelson & Webster, 2017). The idea that fake news or alternative media have caused many to embrace populism overstates the effect that media consumption has on individuals’ political preferences, at least in comparison to how media scholars usually describe this relationship. But mostly it clouds the view by making it possible to avoid asking questions that can be perceived as uncomfortable for various reasons, for example: Why does the sharp criticism of the mainstream media seem to resonate so well with large numbers of the population in some countries? What is the substance of this criticism, and is there anything to it? What motivates people to become engaged in debates and news available in alternative media? In order to answer such questions, it is necessary to go beyond pre-determined explanatory models and to be open to unexpected results. The relational approach that I have described in this chapter provides good examples of how this can be done and also how it is helpful for understanding alternative media in relation to populism.

Another question that will be necessary to deal with in the future relates to the changing nature of the relationship between alternative and mainstream media. Linda Kenix has written about this relationship and characterized it as a converging spectrum, but she states that the tendency seems to be towards alternative media adopting more and more mainstream practices: alternative media “which have historically been created in explic-
it opposition to the mainstream, are increasingly drawing from mainstream practices to gain visibility in a crowded media market” (Kenix, 2011, p. 187). As pointed out by many more since then, especially in relation to populist alternative media, in the phase after populist politicians gain power (e.g., Breitbart News Network after Trump’s victory in 2016), the question is raised of how long it will be relevant to talk about them as alternatives. The media landscape in post-2016 US, for example, remains largely divided, but there are clear tendencies for outlets that were previously identified as alternative media, such as Breitbart News Network and The Daily Wire which started out as clearly articulated alternatives to the mainstream, to more and more become household names even among established media.

The near future will be very interesting indeed in terms of how the relationship between alternative media and mainstream media develops, how the relationship between alternative media and populist politicians will unfold, how the media industry on the whole will manage, and how the mainstream media will position themselves in relation to the ever growing range of alternatives.

References


The Missing Link: 
Effects of Populist Communication on Citizens

Carsten Reinemann

1. Introduction

A few years ago, scholars reviewing research on the effects of populist messages on the individual painted a rather dark picture: studies were scarce and confined in their scope, and the knowledge produced was rather limited. Comparative effects studies—crucial to understanding an international phenomenon like populism—were almost completely missing from the literature, and evidence relied on a small set of studies from a few countries (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömäck, & de Vreese, 2017). This situation has changed in recent years, as communication and political science scholars have begun to concentrate on the communicative processes involved in populist communication, applying concepts from media/communication effects research to the phenomenon of populism and using the methods toolkit from political communication studies (see also Rooduijn, 2019; Sengul, 2019).

This enormous expansion of research activities seems to be explained not only by the successes of populist actors across the globe, but also by the notion that the individual-level psychological foundations of populist success will remain unclear unless scholars take “a look at the way citizens select, perceive, process, and interpret [populist] messages” and consider “the way these perceptions are moderated or mediated by (…) citizen predispositions” (Reinemann, Matthes, & Shaefer, 2017, p. 381). This supports the idea that the individual-level mechanisms of information processing and persuasion provide an often-missing link between real-world circumstances, political actor and media activities, and the individual-level outcomes that researchers are commonly interested in—most importantly, voting behavior.

An increasing number of theoretical and empirical studies argue that populist messages from politicians, news media, or fellow citizens can have significant effects on voters’ emotions, cognitions, opinions, and behaviors (see Hameleers, Reinemann, Schmuck, & Fawzi, 2019). Some scholars even hold the view that populism’s electoral success cannot be truly ex-
plained without considering how populism is communicated, how the media cover populist political actors, or how the media themselves apply populist framing in their coverage (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Sengul, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to review the theoretical concepts and findings pertaining to the use, reception, and effects of populist communication messages, as well as to their psychological underpinnings. In the following section, populist political communication and its elements will be defined. In the subsequent section, a multi-level integrative theoretical framework for the study of populist communication effects will be discussed, which provides the context for the individual-level effects model that will be presented in the third section. The concluding section will highlight some avenues for future research.

2. The Elements of Populist Political Communication

In the study of the effects of populist communication, it is necessary to first define and identify its core elements. In that respect, scholars have primarily examined the ideational substance or content and the stylistic features of populist communication. Furthermore, in order to understand the distribution of populist messages (which is key to its effects), this chapter will also look at the various sources containing and spreading populist messages (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann & Stanyer, 2018).

Regarding populism’s ideational substance, consensus seems to be growing around certain basic elements, which may be reflected in political positions and communicative messages (see also Krämer, 2018). The first element is the focus on an allegedly homogenous people that is claimed to be suffering, neglected, or disadvantaged. Putting these ‘ordinary people’ first is the most fundamental perspective of populism, and it is reflected in what scholars have called “people-centrism” or “heartland framing” (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2007). Consequently, populism highlights the importance of ‘the people’ as an in-group, fosters identification with this in-group, and makes the in-group and its situation the key point of reference in political discourse (e.g., Mény & Surel, 2002; also Laclau, 2005). Although such focus on a specific in-group identity (“us”) can be a powerful unifying tool in an otherwise fragmented modern society, many scholars see this focus as problematic, because it carries with it the roots of intergroup conflict and lends itself to illiberalism (see Abts & Rummens, 2007).
In fact, aspects relating to intergroup conflict are the second element that is often regarded as a key feature of populism. With a focus on anti-elitism and/or anti-out-group stances, populism propagates a view of society in which societal grievances are mainly traced back to groups of ill intent, reducing issues to questions like “Who benefits?” and “Who is to blame?” (e.g., Krämer, 2018). As a result, the political elites (e.g., “the establishment”) and/or out-groups (‘them’, e.g. refugees, minorities, artists, journalists, the wealthy) are portrayed as being fundamentally opposed to the in-group and its interests. No matter how different these groups may seem, they can be regarded as functional equivalents in that they represent the actors viewed as responsible for the decline, suffering, and neglect of the “real” people.

In terms of the style of populist communication, several scholars argue that populist communication often uses strongly negative and emotionalizing messages that constitute a crisis narrative (e.g., Moffitt, 2016; Moffit & Tormey, 2014). This narrative often paints a very dark picture of the status quo and tells the audience why they should be worried and why they should look for someone to blame; after all, if no crisis exists—be it more real or more imagined—it becomes unnecessary to search for a scapegoat. In order to be able to create an impression of imminent crisis, populists are said to be especially prone to using simplistic, divisive, dramatizing, and emotional messages, along with a rhetoric that is intended to bridge the gap between populist communicators and their audience (e.g., direct, colloquial, vulgar language; Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017; Krämer, 2014; Maurer et al., 2019; Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck & de Vreese, 2017).

On the whole, populist communication is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, involving a combination of ideas and positions resulting in different kinds of populism, including empty, anti-elite, anti-out-group, left-wing, and right-wing (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Reinemann et al., 2017a). Moreover, populist communication is a gradual phenomenon, because its various elements can be more or less important in the ideology, positions, and communication of various actors. Furthermore, the very core of populism involves framing seemingly crisis-ridden political issues in terms of intergroup differences, intergroup blaming, and intergroup emotions. This aspect distinguishes populist actors from other ideologies that dominate modern-day democratic political discourse (e.g., Reinemann et al., 2017a; Hameleers et al., 2018; Hameleers, Reinemann, Schmuck, & Fawzi, 2019).
3. A Multi-Level Model of Populist Communication Effects

Why are the aforementioned elements of populist communication especially successful in persuading voters, and under what circumstances? Scholars have only recently started to develop communication-centered models to help answer these questions. In this section, we first refer to the general multi-level heuristic model by Reinemann et al. (2017a; 2019b) and then to the more specific individual-level effects model by Hameleers et al. (2019) in order to illustrate why this line of thinking might be a valuable addition to our understanding of populism.

Reinemann et al. (2017a; 2019b) placed the processes of individual (socio-)psychological effects into a broader context of a multi-level heuristic model that conceptualizes populist communication more generally. The model distinguishes: (a) real-world societal circumstances (macro level); (b) communicative activities of political actors, mass media reporting, and interpersonal communication among citizens (meso level), and (c) citizens' individual practices of selecting and processing the information they encounter (micro level). In the model, patterns of individual-level effects of populist communication in a given context depend on the interplay of these various factors and levels of analysis (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A multi-level model of populist communication effects (based on Reinemann et al., 2017a; 2019b)
Generally, explanations of the rise and fall of populism distinguish demand-side factors from supply-side factors. The latter constitute the *opportunity structures* that benefit or damage populist actors. Analytically, these structures can be situated at any and all levels of political systems (international, regional, national, sub-national). In terms of the demand-side factors, research particularly cites economic and cultural developments as drivers of populist success, due to their potential to change the minds of citizens who might then speak out, express their views in polls, and vote differently (e.g., Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018; van Kessel, 2013). Demand-side factors are often conceptualized at the contextual macro-level, since they influence societies as a whole. This is also the case in the model by Reinemann et al. (2017a; 2019b), although the latter model also highlights that these macro-level circumstances must be perceived by individuals in order for a “demand” for populist politics to be produced.

Generally, the case concerning macro-level influences is that populist arguments will be more effective in contexts and situations in which perceptions of threat, insecurity, and deprivation are supported by real-world problems and grievances or by fast-moving and profound societal changes (e.g., Elchardus & Spuyt, 2016; Gest, Reny, & Mayer, 2018; Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018; also Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018). For example, economic crisis might cause real economic suffering and insecurity among the citizens of the affected countries or regions (e.g., Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2016; Otjes, Ivaldi, Jupskas, & Mazzoleni, 2018); immigration may trigger feelings of cultural and economic threat; and establishing equal opportunities for formerly/currently underprivileged groups may induce fears of losing privileges and becoming disadvantaged (e.g., Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018). Importantly, it is not only the perception of a personal, individual threat that may be important, but also the perception of a threat to one’s in-group (Berning & Schlueter, 2016).

In addition to economic and cultural factors, previous successes of populist parties and low levels of trust in social institutions (including the news media) have also been discussed as relevant macro-level factors contributing to populist success (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018). Where populist political parties or media are successful, the audience may get used to populist narratives; consequently, populist positions may be normalized, and the backfire effects of once-controversial statements may be reduced. Moreover, frequent repetition of populist crisis narratives may lend credibility to populist arguments and reality constructions, due to truth effects (e.g., Koch & Zerback, 2013). In addition, high levels of distrust in institutions may provide fertile grounds for populism; in contrast, it is harder to por-
tray elites as a threat to society if a lot of people trust institutions, as populist anti-elite messages are not likely to resonate with the overall image of the “establishment” (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2019). These and other macro-level factors can help explain why specific populist message elements may prove effective in some countries but not in others, as well as help identify the reasons for regional differences between (for example) Eastern and Western European nations (e.g., Andreadis et al., 2019; Corbu et al., 2019; see also Minkenberg, 2017).

However, from the perspective of political communication, a direct link between actual macro-level conditions and citizen perceptions is not self-evident, and the model sheds light on the fact that citizens do have direct experiences with such phenomena as economic crises or the influx of refugees. In addition, individual impressions of societal situations are formed on the basis of information provided by political actors (politicians, parties, movements, etc.), news media, and fellow citizens (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2018). Political actors might be able to reach citizens directly and without filter via advertising, public speeches, party manifestos, or their own online media channels (websites, social media, etc.). More often, citizens will encounter populists’ messages in news media coverage. Although journalists might critically comment on populist actions and positions, this spread of populism through the media will increase its visibility and might even inadvertently lend legitimacy to their positions (Esser, Stepinska, & Hopmann, 2017). In addition, news media might even engage in populism by the media or media populism if they use populist frames in their reporting and commentary (e.g., Krämer, 2014; 2018; Esser et al., 2017).

Finally, fellow citizens may also be an important source of populist messages, especially in this period of the growing importance of social media (e.g., Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017; Krämer, 2017). It is the importance of these networks and the interpersonal communication occurring on them that may partially explain the effects of neighborhood contexts on voting for right-wing populist parties (Berning, Evans, Gould, Hartevelt, & Ivaldi, 2018). Because of the mediated character of social information, actual real-world conditions may diverge from how political actors or the media portray them, and due to media and communication effects, perceptions and evaluations of the economy, elites, or other groups may consequently diverge from the facts as well (e.g., Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016; Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018; Lischka, 2015; see also Cacciatore et al., 2014).

The multi-level model, then, highlights the fact that citizens may be faced with or look for populist appeals and framing in various mediated and non-mediated contexts and in a variety of national and regional set-
tings. This variety is also reflected in the empirical analyses that try to determine the effects of populist appeals. The spectrum of independent variables ranges from real, direct appeals of populist party advertising (e.g., Schmuck & Matthes, 2017) and real media coverage of populist actors and parties (e.g., Berning, Lubbers & Schlueter, 2019) to made-up content in which populist appeals come from non-political actors (e.g., Andreadis et al., 2019). On the one hand, this model is an advantage because processes and mechanisms can be cross-validated across different kinds of stimuli. On the other hand, this model poses a risk because the comparability of findings may be jeopardized—to say nothing of the problem that the definitions of populism, populist framing, and populist appeals may still vary.

In terms of design, research has taken a huge step forward in recent years, and our knowledge of populist communication effects now comes from a range of studies, including combinations of longitudinal content analysis and panel surveys (e.g., Berning, Lubbers, & Schlueter, 2019) as well as large-scale cross-country experiments (e.g., Hameleers, Andreadis, & Reinemann, 2019). Studies have also started to integrate macro- and micro-level variables into their investigations of populist communication effects (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018), and although most studies examine the effects of the specific individual elements of populist communication (e.g., blame attribution, stereotyping), other studies investigate the potential effects of combining those appeals (e.g., Andreadis et al., 2018). Furthermore, researchers do not only consider effects among the general population but also take specific groups into account, like young people or immigrants (e.g., Schmuck, Matthes, & Paul, 2017). Finally, researchers have also begun to not only investigate populist messages from the perspective of their effectiveness but to also dig into the mechanisms of what kinds of messages and strategies might reduce support for populism (van Spanje & Azrout, 2018; van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018).

4. An Individual-Level Model of Populist Communication Effects

When focusing on the various paths in the multi-level model, researchers often need more specific models to identify the concepts necessary to investigate and explain the related processes. For example, scholars will need concepts from journalism studies to explain how the media select and frame populist messages in their coverage, and they will need concepts from audience and effects studies to explain how citizens select and process populist messages and the effects thereof. Very recently, Hameleers et al. (2019) have suggested a model that identifies citizen predispositions that...
are particularly related to populism; relevant message characteristics (described above); the psychological mechanisms that come into play; and various kinds of emotional, cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral effects populist communication may cause. Theoretically, the model integrates research from various concepts, including selective exposure, motivated reasoning, social identity, cognitive priming, stereotyping, and blame attribution (Figure 2).

![Diagram of an individual-level model of populist communication effects (based on Hameleers et al., 2019)](https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845297392
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5. Predispositions

The model starts with citizen predispositions, as research has shown time and again that a compatibility of recipients’ predispositions with sources, messages, and issue-contexts is crucial to the selection, processing, and effects processes of communication. This is also true in the context of populism: demographic factors, relative deprivation, in-group attachment, populist attitudes, and the informational and media ecology of citizens have been shown to be the most important—at least in the European context, where most of the quantitative studies reviewed here originate (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2019).

In terms of demographics, citizens most affected by modernization and globalization are especially susceptible to populist messages (e.g., Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018), but the interaction between real-world situations, populist message supply, and voting may be rather complex (e.g.,
Rooduijn, M., & Burgoon, B., 2018). Generally, less-educated citizens who perceive themselves (often accurately) as particularly vulnerable to economic and cultural change are strongly attracted to populist narratives (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). As far as their economic situation is concerned, findings for Europe do not suggest that populist voters are generally less well off than the voters of other parties; instead, they seem to be afraid of future losses, in both economic and cultural terms (e.g., Rooduijn, 2017; Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018). This fits well with findings showing that perceptions of relative deprivation, which often go along with such fears, also provide fertile ground for populist appeals (e.g., Gest, Reny, & Mayer, 2018; Spruyt, Keppens, & van Droogenbroeck, 2016).

Relative deprivation describes the belief that others are favored and better off, which ties in well with anti-elite narratives arguing that the elites prioritize the needs of out-groups at the expense of native and/or ‘ordinary’ people (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a; Kriesi et al., 2006; Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018). Research has shown that citizens feeling relative deprivation are especially likely to select messages that use populist blame-framing (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018), and a recent large-scale internationally comparative experiment has provided evidence that the level of relative deprivation decisively influences how persuasive populist appeals are (Bos et al., 2019). Moreover, the populist focus on the ingroup is more successful among people who feel closely attached to this group—for example, those who have a strong affiliation with their country or ethnicity (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a).

Demographic characteristics and their ensuing experiences may also strengthen populist attitudes, which in and of themselves make it more likely for citizens to be attracted to populist narratives and framing, along with the media outlets carrying these messages (Castanho, Jungkunz, Helbling, & Littvay, 2019). In fact, citizens with stronger populist attitudes tend to more often trust and use news media that are themselves more populist in their content and style (e.g., Fawzi, 2019; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017b; 2017b; Schulz, 2019). At the same time, these citizens also tend to regard mainstream media as hostile towards their own views (Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that people who are already politically cynical (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013) and hold populist attitudes seem to be most susceptible to populist appeals (e.g., Müller et al., 2017).
6. Mechanisms

Although populist communication is often considered to be particularly effective, the literature lacks detailed conceptualizations of the inner workings of its effects. Hameleers et al. (2019) have only recently developed an elaborate model based on the idea that populist messaging is a kind of social identity framing. They argue that a combination of cognitive priming, stereotyping, and blame attributions dominates the processing of populist messages.

First, populist messages trigger cognitive priming, making in-group cognitions and attachments more salient and increasing the likelihood that these cognitions and attachments influence further information processing and decision-making. Second, populist messages can activate and strengthen both positive in-group and negative out-group stereotypes, growing the perceived distance between the recipient and the out-group (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). Third, populist blaming of elites and out-groups impact how citizens attribute blame, which is critically important to how citizens perceive politics (e.g., Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Marsh & Tilley, 2010; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011).

7. Types of Effects

On the individual level, scholars typically recognize cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral communication effects. These may trigger further micro-level effects among fellow citizens (e.g., via political talk) or may cause effects on the meso- or even macro-levels of society, when the news or political parties react to changing attitudes, protests, polls, or voting behavior. For example, populist messages blaming elites may motivate citizens to protest against ‘the establishment’. This may have further consequences by affecting other citizens’ perceptions of the legitimacy of governing parties, influencing news media coverage, and causing parties and their members to change policy proposals or even resign.

In terms of cognitive effects, populist communication may affect perceptions of the state of the country, the functioning of politics, the opinion climate, potential in-group threat, one’s own position in society (relative deprivation), and perceptions of political self-efficacy (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018; Krämer, 2014; Reinemann et al., 2017a; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). Although only some of these effects have been investigated specifically in relation to populist messaging, they can be seen as crucial to explaining the success of populist communication, because crisis perceptions

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provide the very basis for blame attributions and eliciting negative emotions towards out-groups, thereby providing the necessary motivation for action and voting behavior (e.g., Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017).

In terms of emotional effects, populist communication may lead to anxiety and fear by portraying a situation as an almost hopeless crisis. In addition, out-group blaming may elicit negative intergroup emotions like anger and fear (e.g., van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). However, despite their presumed importance, emotions have largely been neglected in quantitative empirical studies of the effects of populist communication. One exception is a recent study by Wirz (2018), who provides evidence that populist cues cause emotional responses that drive the persuasiveness of populist appeals (Wirz, 2018; see also Wirz et al., 2018). At the same time, we are not aware of studies that have tried to examine the question of whether populist communication may also generate positive feelings of pride, joy, hope, or satisfaction among citizens who have felt overlooked and now feel that their voices are heard and their sentiments are shared by others (e.g., Taggart, 2000).

In terms of attitudinal effects, research has already demonstrated negative effects on stereotypes and blame attributions—which can be seen as attitudes, due to their evaluative character—for immigrants, Muslims, and the wealthy (e.g., Corbu et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017a; Schmuck, Matthes & Paul, 2017). At the same time, positive portrayals of the in-group may have a positive effect on the image of one’s in-group and may foster in-group attachment (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Krämer, 2014). In addition, several recent studies have shown that populist attitudes are not only an important prerequisite for effective populist narratives, but that they are also affected by those messages (e.g., Andreadis, Cremonesi, Kartsoundidou, Kasprowicz, & Hess, 2019).

In terms of behavioral effects, recent research has provided some evidence that populist social identity framing and resulting perceptions of threats to the in-group can mobilize citizens to political action (e.g., Bos et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018b; also Hameleers et al., 2019). In addition, media use is also likely to be affected, with citizens using attitude-consistent sources such as tabloids or alternative media (e.g., Fawzi, 2018). Moreover, populist blame-framing may suggest that removing the ruling elites may be necessary, increasing the likelihood of citizens voting for populist parties (e.g., Andreadis et al., 2019; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017c). Finally, studies show that the visibility of populist parties and their issues in the news media increases support for them—but these effects, important as they may be, are probably not specific to populist parties (e.g., Berning,
Lubbers & Schlueter, 2018; Bos, Lefevere, Thijssen & Sheets, 2017; Vliegenthart, Boomgarden & van Spanje, 2015).

8. Conclusion

This chapter reviewed theory and empirical findings regarding the circumstances and mechanisms through which citizens may be affected and persuaded by populist communication. After defining populist communication and its elements, a multi-level model (Reinemann et al., 2017) and an individual-level model (Hameleers et al., 2019) of populist communication effects were discussed, together with the empirical evidence that gives credence to the claims made in recent theoretical accounts.

All in all, recent studies show that the degree and types of individual-level effects of populist frames and messages depend heavily on both the (national) context in which they are situated and on the predispositions of audience members. Not everyone is easily swayed by populist appeals, as no populist communication is universally effective. Instead, its effects are conditional upon the audience it encounters and where this audience is located (e.g., de Vreese, Reinemann, Stanyer, Esser, & Aalberg, 2019). Findings suggest that populist messages are most effective with citizens whose experiences and predispositions neatly fit into populist narratives. To put it differently, especially in times of crisis and social change, populist communication manages to switch the focus of attention, to center in-group sentiments, and to capitalize on the human tendency to look for someone else to blame. However, because of their controversial character and their strong reliance on intergroup blaming and emotions, populist narratives may also cause strong boomerang or backfire effects among citizens holding opposing views. This co-occurrence of persuasive and backfire effects may be a key problem to populist communication, as it results in increased political polarization, which runs counter to the idea of democratic consensus building (e.g., Stroud, 2010; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018; Müller et al., 2017).

The discussion of the evidence made it clear that predispositions become relevant in the phase of media and message selection; they make it more likely that people encounter or turn to populist messaging in the first place. Some scholars argue that the processes used by populist messages to affect political attitudes primarily rely on trait activation or schema theory (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2019). This means that even though persuasive effects may be relevant, citizens’ populist attitudes, negative
stereotypes, or political participation are not necessarily created by populist messaging but are rather primed and activated by those messages.

Another factor to be considered is the resonance of populist communication with real-life opportunity structures. On the macro level, for example, this suggests that populist communication blaming economic elites should have the strongest effects in countries where an economic crisis is looming; populist communication blaming immigrants should have the strongest effects in countries struggling with migration; and where populist parties hold a strong presence in public discourse, populist narratives and positions may be normalized, reducing boomerang effects and giving legitimacy to populist positions. In such countries, populist messages may more easily activate schemata of populist framing. However, the connection between national, real-world situations and populist strategies is not always easy and straightforward. For example, populists may be able to invoke fears of certain out-groups in countries where these groups are not even present, by citing the example of other countries (e.g., in Poland or Hungary). At the same time, due to their specific political cultures, some countries may be more resistant to certain kinds of populism, even if real-world situations may indicate otherwise (e.g., Portugal in the economic crisis). This points to the importance of refraining from over-generalizing across countries and of taking national contexts seriously.

Finally, obvious gaps still remain in our knowledge of the effects of populist communication. For example, the long-term, cumulative impact of populist narratives on social norms and values and on the cohesion of society have not been much investigated. To be sure, recent studies point to the dangers of political polarization that come with sometimes extreme forms of out-group blame and fear appeals (e.g., Müller et al., 2017). The more negatively the situation is portrayed, and the fiercer the attacks on elites, and the darker the picture painted of out-groups, the harder it may be to reconcile populist and non-populist narratives and positions. As the current situations in the United States and elsewhere show, this kind of polarization can develop into an existential threat to democratic policy-making and to the unity of a nation (e.g., Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Hopefully, understanding the mechanisms of populist communication effects can help to counter this threat before it is too late.
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Female Populist Leaders and Communication: Does Gender Make a Difference?

Donatella Campus

1. Exceptional Cases or a Varied Group?

As regards female underrepresentation, populists seem to be in line with other party families: male leaders outnumber women. Nonetheless, in recent years, a handful of women have assumed leadership roles in populist parties. A look at the literature shows that the relationship between gender and populism has been analyzed from different perspectives (for an extensive review and discussion, see Abi-Hassam, 2017), but, so far, not much research has been devoted to the specific traits of female populist leaders and their communication. This chapter consists of an exploration that will be based on the available studies and the analysis of a few cases.

In Europe, perhaps the most remarkable example of a woman leader of a populist party is Pia Kjærsgaard, who left the Danish Progress Party in 1995 and founded the Danish People's Party, which is considered a member of the populist radical-right party family (Jungar & Jupskas, 2014). In comparison to the Progress Party, the People's Party adopted a different organizational model, which implied the strengthening of the party leadership. By doing so, it was able to present itself as more mainstream and become a government supporting party (Pedersen & Ringsmose, 2004). Kjærsgaard was then regarded as “the charismatic leader creating the party and has undisputedly been the party leader since” (Pedersen & Ringsmose, 2004, p. 12). She dominated the People’s Party until 2012, when she stepped down and passed the mantle of leadership to her designated man-in-waiting, Kristian Thulesen Dahl (Meret, 2015).

Another long-term female leader is Norwegian Siv Jensen, who became the leader of the Progress Party in 2006. Since 2013, she has been the Minister of Finance in a government coalition led by the Conservative party. The Progress Party has been described as a neoliberal populist party for its criticism of the public sector and the state apparatus but has also developed radical positions on immigration (Carter, 2017). The communication and rhetorical skills of its leaders (Jensen and her predecessor Carl Ha-
have been considered as important factors for the party’s success over time (Jupskas, Ivarsflaten, Kalsnes, & Allberg, 2017).

In France, the populist radical right-wing party Front National (renamed Rassemblement National) has been led by Marine Le Pen since 2011, when she replaced her father, Jean-Marie. She reached her maximum visibility in the 2017 presidential election when she competed in the second ballot and lost to Emmanuel Macron. Le Pen promoted a process of dédiabolisation (de-demonization) of her party (Dézé, 2015; Shields, 2013), with the aim of making it appear less extreme and radical (for a general assessment and a discussion of the real content of the FN’s change under Marine Le Pen, see Crépon, Dézé, & Mayer, 2015; Perrineau, 2014; Shields, 2013). In Italy, Giorgia Meloni leads Fratelli d’Italia, a right-wing party she co-founded in 2012\(^1\). In 2016, Meloni ran for mayor of Rome in an election eventually won by another populist woman, the candidate of the Five Star Movement, Virginia Raggi. In the 2013 and 2018 national elections, Fratelli d’Italia formed part of the center-right coalition.

If women populist leaders seem to be concentrated in right-wing parties and movements, however, there are also prominent female politicians in leftist populist parties and others without a clear ideological characterization, such as the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau (Barcelona en Comú), or those of Rome and Turin, Virginia Raggi and Chiara Appendino (Five Star Movement).

Outside Europe, the present analysis will be limited to only a few instances that are particularly pertinent for their communication and the media coverage they received: first, Sarah Palin, who was the Republican vice-presidential candidate in the 2008 US elections and for whom “gender was a defining element” in the mediated discourse about her candidacy (Harp, Loke, & Bachmann, 2010, p. 291); second, Australian Pauline Hanson, whose political rise was described as a “media event” since the huge media coverage helped her to launch her party (Deutchman & Ellison, 1999). Finally, albeit very different from the other cases taken into consid-

\(^1\) In my selection of European populist leaders, I followed the party classifications by Kessell (2016) and Mudde (2017). The only exception is Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d’Italia, who is not included in their analyses. I decided to include Meloni’s case because her communication style appears not very different from that of Matteo Salvini’s, leader of the League, a party commonly considered as populist. Moreover, the analysis of 2018 electoral party programs has emphasized the proximity of the Fratelli d’Italia to the League (http://www.cattaneo.org/2018/02/06/che-programmi-avete-per-le-elezioni/).
eration for chronological and contextual reasons, Eva Peron’s image-building appears to be particularly relevant to the issue being discussed.

Through the analysis of the communication of the above-mentioned leaders and politicians, the chapter intends to advance some hypotheses and provide evidence for further research. In particular, two main aspects will be discussed: first, the question of whether populist women leaders present some common characteristics that can be assumed as the core of a “female populist image;” second, how women leaders deal with the communication strategies preferably employed by populists. In particular, the chapter will discuss the implications of the popularization of politics for women, which is an important aspect of contemporary political communication.

2. The Image of Female Populist Leaders

As observed by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014), populism can be leaderless and, therefore, strong leadership cannot be taken as a defining attribute of populism. It is a fact, however, that many populist parties are led by a prominent man. As Taggart (2017, p. 165) observes, new populist parties tend to be characterized by “strongly centralized structures with charismatic and personalized leadership as an integral component of their institutional development.” As a consequence, women assuming the leadership have to deal with a pre-existing model of the “strong leader” that is typically associated with masculine values (Meret 2015; Moffitt, 2016; Norocel, 2010) and, in its populist incarnation, merges together the classical populist discourse with a very personalized communication.

The emphasis on the strength, influence and power of the male leader may encourage a more or less explicit adoption of the metaphor of the patriarchal family, according to which, the chief executive or the head of a party is portrayed as a strong figure that is supposed to lead the nation as well as a traditional father leads his own family. This aspect of populism is particularly evident in Latin America (Conniff, 1999; Kampwirth, 2010), but examples can be found in Europe as well. For instance, in examining the case of Romanian radical right populism, Norocel (2010) highlights the occurrence of the metaphor of the “strict father” who protects and disciplines the people.

Also in a specular way, populist female leaders may choose to project the image of “the mother of the nation” (Abi-Hassam, 2017). The most glaring and perhaps unattainable example is Eva Peron. The wife of the Argentinian President Juan Domingo Peron could be regarded as one of the
cases well-described by Conniff (1999, p. 199) in his book on Latin American populism: “National leadership metaphorically mirrored familial relationships.... The president was father, the first lady mother, and the citizenry the children” (quoted by Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 33). The status of Eva Peron, however, transcended her role of presidential spouse. As a truly charismatic figure, Evita became a mythical “Mother of Argentina” (Taylor 1979, p. 75; Zanatta, 2009, ch. 9) who incarnated the symbols of Peronism. “Her influence depended on her all-enveloping aura more than on specific actions affecting particular political situations, despite the fact that the Peronist press of the time offered reports on her activities of particulars of personages, organizations, schedules, gifts, and honors. Eva defined the tone of Peronism as a movement even more than as a party” (Taylor, 1979, p. 77). In this sense, Eva Peron was so much in charge of reinforcing the identification bond with the people that her personal consensus became an important resource for the accomplishment of her husband’s political projects. Significantly, Juan Peron continued to use her image even after her death (Weir, 1993, p. 163).

In evaluating Eva Peron’s experience, however, it should be taken into consideration that her special status as a high symbolic figure with no formal power allowed her to avoid any possible prejudice against a woman holding the top executive office. Thus, her public function did not challenge the traditional ideas about the role of women in the Argentinian conservative society. “Eva’s position in the nation exemplified the position of the ideal woman in the home. She, on her level, like the housewife on hers, assumed a role as the chief agent responsible for the transmission of the values which uphold society as a whole” (Taylor, 1979, p. 76). “She ‘made politics a legitimate activity for women’ but as an extension of women’s traditional family responsibilities” (Navarro, 1983, p. 30, quoted by Weir 1993, p. 163). By contrast, the image of a woman that exercises formal powers is different. So what about “the mothers of the nation” that lead parties and governments?

In more recent times, Pia Kjærgaard is an example of the assumption of a symbolic maternal role by a populist leader. As mentioned before, she was an influential politician, co-founder and long-time leader of the Danish People’s Party. In an extensive analysis of her leadership, Meret (2015, p. 94) observes that “perhaps the most evidently gendered construct is the

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2 On this point, Weir (1993, p. 163) suggests that the subsequent wife of Peron, Isabel, “benefited from the legacy of Evita and, at the same time, was limited by this legacy in her efforts to exercise formal power.”.
The carefully shaped image of *Mamma Pia* allowed Kjærsgaard to reconcile her gender with a resoluteness that was consistent with the stereotype of the strong populist leader but could make her appear as too strict and domineering (Meret, 2015, p. 93). Consequently, the risk of looking too aggressive could be reduced through a counterbalancing image according to which she embraced her followers, as they were members of a metaphorical family.

Motherhood also appears a crucial element in the image-building of other female populist leaders. Pauline Hanson, the founder and leader of the One Nation Party, a radical right populist party (Mason, 2010; Moffitt, 2017), claimed that the Australian people were their children (Moffitt, 2016, p. 66). She referred to her being the mother of four children to stress that she was an authentic person, provided with a common sense that juxtaposed her to the establishment (Betz & Johnson, 2017, p. 71). In her case, the maternal role was also part of the narrative of “the fish and chip shop lady” (Hanson had run a shop like that) that urged a return to old traditions and values of the historical community (Mason, 2010).

If not all women leaders become “mothers of the nation,” so transcending the personal experience to assume a symbolic role, at least proving to have maternal credentials can help to soften a too-tough image. A leader that promotes a radical right-wing agenda, including anti-immigration policies, law and order, etc., may benefit from also showing some tenderness, especially if her aim is to become more acceptable to the political mainstream (Mudde, 2016). Marine Le Pen is a good example of the use of such a strategy. Her attempt to “de-demonize” the Front National has been inextricably linked to her own image-building (Campus, 2017). Le Pen insisted on presenting herself as a family woman, a daughter who in early years faced discrimination for the radical political positions of her father, and a mother who had the experience of raising children after the divorce (Boudillon, 2005; Matonti, 2013). The Italian right-wing leader Giorgia Meloni uses social media to post about her role as the mother of a young daughter, as highlighted by Moroni (2017) in her analysis of Meloni’s Instagram account. At the same time, she acts as a champion of family sup-
port policies, which were the first issue mentioned in Fratelli d’Italia’s 2016 electoral manifesto\(^3\), and as a defender of traditional families in opposition to same-sex marriage.

An interesting case of a complex interplay of feminine and masculine images is Sarah Palin’s 2008 campaign (Harp et al. 2010). Palin presented herself as a “hockey mom” whose political engagement was motivated by the desire to protect her children. On the other hand, she “framed her(self) as tenacious and direct as a pitbull” (Beail and Kinney Longworth 2012, 85). Therefore, motherhood became an asset for making her toughness less controversial. As observed by Harp, Loke and Bachmann (2010, p. 304), “Typically, women politicians who show traditionally understood masculine traits like toughness and assertiveness are framed as harsh and lacking femininity, as seen with Hillary Clinton. Palin is celebrated for her toughness while she and the mediated discourse remind news audiences of her femininity and ‘appropriate’ female role.”

Since all the cases mentioned above refer to the populist right in its different nuances, one should ask if such an emphasis on the maternal role may depend on ideological orientations. Indeed, on the right side, it is true that portraying the female leader as a family woman may be a way of making a powerful woman more acceptable in contexts where a conservative approach to gender roles prevails over liberal feminist values. What Meret (2015, p. 97) observes regarding Pia Kjærsgaard may be extended to other cases of right-wing populists: “Her image has contributed to the strengthening of specific, heteronormative gender roles that are made meaningful through traditional family values that continue to emphasize representations of the woman as caregiver and mother.” However, generalization cannot be pushed too far without taking into account country cultural differences; as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser highlight (2015), for instance, populist discourse is less masculine in Nordic countries than in Southern Europe, while in South America leftist populists can be patriarchal and traditional in their view of gender roles.

In the cases of leftist or centrist populism, the emphasis on the maternal role could be interpreted in a different way. For instance, the exhibition of motherhood by the mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, who went to the first

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\(^3\) https://www.fratelli-italia.it/programma.pdf.

\(^4\) She joked about it in her speech at the Republican Convention. “You know the difference between a hockey mom and a pitbull? Lipstick” (Beail & Kinney Longworth, 2012, p. 85).
council meeting with her seven-year-old son (and let him sit at her place)\(^5\), may suggest a parallel with those Democratic candidates that, in the 2018 American midterm elections, appeared with young children in their arms in their electoral ads (some of them breastfeeding). In such cases, presenting themselves as “moms running for office” was seen by commentators and political analysts as a way of projecting authenticity and stressing their outsider status (Chira, 2018; Neklason, 2018). Traditionally, both those objectives are among the priorities of populist politicians, who refuse to mingle with the establishment, and claim to be close to the people.

To sum up, this short review suggests, first, that the model of the “mother of the nation” may be seen as a female version of the populist charismatic leadership, as shown by Peron and Kjærsgaard. However, evidence is too limited to argue that it could become the predominant model. Moreover, it should be stressed that this model is not exclusive, since several not populist leaders, like Angela Merkel, have been portrayed as mother figures\(^6\). Indeed, the model of the mother of the nation is quite flexible and adaptable to different cases and personalities; as emphasized by Schwartzenber (1977, pp. 89-94), it should be remembered that it does not always project positive values such as benevolence and care, but can also incarnate the domineering side of the “archaic mother.” The populist version of it, therefore, can be regarded as just one of the possible declinations.

The second observation is that, especially as regards the populist right, references to the maternal role can soften the toughness of radical right-wing policies and make a female leader appear more in line with a traditional and conservative view of women in society. This might explain why some populist leaders insist on their identity as mothers in their self-presentations. In light of this, one can conclude that gendered constructs of motherhood and a focus on private life may be functional to the image-building of populist female politicians. There may be exceptions; for instance, for the unmarried and childless Siv Jensen, the private life had a minor role in the shaping of her public image, which is more characterized by other dimensions, such as her education, background and dedication to work. Nonetheless, she also represents herself as a woman with close family ties (Meret, Siim & Pingaud 2017, p. 140).

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\(^6\) On Merkel, see Steckenrider (2013). For a general discussion of the model of “mother of the nation” see Campus (2013, pp. 62-64).
3. Female Populist Leadership and the Popularization of Politics

By definition, populist leaders legitimate themselves only if they prove to be on the people’s side in juxtaposition to the ruling elites. Communication is therefore employed to show that the leader belongs to the people, is “one of us.” The convergence between popular culture and politics (Van Zoonen, 2005) or popularization of politics (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009) may become a crucial resource insofar as it makes “politics ‘popular’ by using the styles and platforms associated with popular culture” (Street, 2015, p. 1196). The field of the possible applications of “pop politics” is a large and heterogeneous “media environment defined by the collapse of previous distinctions among once-differentiated genres, social practices, and discursive fields. In this environment, politics and popular culture, information and entertainment, laughter and argument, the real and the surreal have become deeply inseparable” (Baym, 2007, p. 373).

Along this line of reasoning, the popularization of politics is intended to refer to the broadly defined world of entertainment. Van Zoonen (2005, p. 4) makes a tentative list of possible aspects that may interplay with politics: soap operas, popular music, fandom, talk shows, gossip, romantic genres, movies, and television series. Through such types of genres and formats, which are accessible to ordinary people, citizens experience politics in an unconventional way. It allows them to see politics as a more familiar activity that can attract their curiosity and offer some forms of enjoyment. Television has been regarded as the main driving force because of its capability to provide the mass public with a powerful imaginary (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009, p. 14); however, in more recent times, the Internet has also become a very suitable medium for this purpose.

It should be clear that the popularization of politics might involve all sorts of politicians, not only the populist ones. As well explained by Street (2015, p. 1196), “The popularization of politics is also associated with populism in the sense that it is intended to create and reach a new, or at least a broader, political constituency, one that is typically alienated from or opposed to the dominant political class. It may also be populist in terms of style or mode of address. But again, the two ideas of populism and popularization do not neatly overlap. Politics may be popularized without be-

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7 Also quoted by Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009, p. 14).
8 In this sense, popular culture is linked to entertaining. However, as Van Zoonen (2005, p. 8) observes, the two concepts are not interchangeable. In particular, in other disciplinary traditions, the definition of popular culture may embrace aspects that are not taken into consideration here.
ing populist because ‘populism’ may be understood as a particular political form or ideology. Other forms and ideologies are as capable of popularization.”

Although different and independent phenomena, nonetheless, it could be argued that popularization may reinforce the anti-establishment discourse that is typical of populist communication. This is especially true when the genres and formats involved in the process are represented as opposite to some “elitarian” cultural forms. But the most interesting and fruitful use concerns the leaders’ image-building. Since the populist leader must appear as one of the people, or at least very close to the people, the sense of intimacy generated by the popularization of politics becomes instrumental in dealing with the apparent conundrum of contemporary leadership, here well explained by Van Zoonen (2005, p. 82): politicians’ “appeal is simultaneously built on the impression that they are ‘just like us’ (a regular guy) and thus deserving to represent us and on the idea that they must be more special and capable than ‘we’ are and therefore also justifiably representing ‘us.’” In other words, when it comes to populist leadership, “extraordinariness must be tempered with ordinariness” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 56). In fact, a communication adopting the “pop” codes and, in particular, aiming at portraying political celebrities like members of the star system, offers a coherent way of managing this intrinsic contradiction insofar as it projects an image of leaders as human beings. Pels (2003) observes that media exposure produces an effect of “familiarization” (p. 58), and modern media celebrity has a sort of “household” dimension (p. 59). In other words, a notion of leadership that embodies entertaining culture may contribute to a convincing populist narrative since it conciliates the emphasis on the leader’s persona with the magnification of the people’s values.

But how to balance celebrity and normality? Wood, Corbett and Flinders (2016, p. 582) argue that nowadays, “celebrity politicians want to promote an image that they are 'normal' or 'just like us' as opposed to one in which they are clearly 'different' and insulated from common life challenges.” Therefore, besides the more traditional model of the superstar celebrity, Wood and colleagues suggest conceptualizing another and different type: “the everyday celebrity politician,” which can account for recent

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9 Accordingly, not only populist rhetoric about culture can be a strategy to emphasize the proximity to the people, but, as well illustrated by de Cleen (2016), also a means of deligitimizing criticism and opposition coming from artists and intellectuals, labeled as parts of the “cultural elite.”
examples of celebrity politicians. In terms of their communication strategies (Wood et al. 2016, p. 586), the everyday celebrity politicians are characterized by a spontaneous and authentic self-presentation that emphasizes friendliness and openness and does not hide inevitable flaws and limitations.

Popular formats help populist leaders to forge and diffuse a coherent narrative across a large spectrum of channels and propaganda activities. Populists have always resorted to television as a privileged channel of communication, allowing them to become visible and well-known to large audiences. From Umberto Bossi, former leader of the Northern League, to Pablo Iglesias, Podemos’ party leader, a variegated group of populist politicians have acquired their popularity through TV appearances. In addition to traditional forms of televised politics, today, soft media and entertainment talk shows play an increasing role in political communication (Craig, 2017; Lawrence & Boydstun, 2017). Prominent politicians are protagonists of the popular press, such as photo-news and gossip magazines, women’s magazines, etc. (Ciaglia & Mazzoni, 2015; Dakhia, 2008). Last but not least, social media have become an ideal platform for the popularization of politics, as politicians have the opportunity to narrate themselves in a context of apparent authenticity.

There is a growing agreement on the fact that the Internet provides populist actors with opportunities for personalized communication (Engesser, Fawzi & Larsson, 2017). Facebook, in particular, is considered a good platform for populist communication (Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser, 2019). Consistently, one should expect that populist leaders are fond of Facebook, which is seen as a true popular medium. For example, this seems to be Siv Jensen’s line (Jupskas et al. 2017, p. 59). According to Larsson (2014), she is very popular on Facebook, being among the Norwegian political actors enjoying the highest medians of likes and shares per Facebook page post. But if Facebook suits populist leaders well, how do they use it? According to Zulianello, Albertini and Ceccobelli (2018), actually, a large part of the contents posted on Facebook does not contain the classical themes of populist communication, such as references to people, antielitism and non-elite out-groups. It is worth noting that the most “populist” leader is Marine Le Pen, for whom 20.4% of posts include at least one element of populist communication. Rather, “leaders often use Facebook simply to communicate their presence on a radio or TV show, to

10 Iglesias (2015, p. 17) himself illustrated the process in an article published in “New Left Review”.

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share pictures of a campaigning event or to share clearly personalized content related to their persona that pertains to the popularization and personalization of politics rather than to populist politics” (Zulianello et al., 2018, p. 447). Previous research by Ceccobelli (2017) investigated the level of “pop” content of a great number of political leaders (populist and non-populist). According to his results, the average rate of popularization is 20%, confirming Facebook’s suitability to styles and formats of popular culture. Even if it has received less attention so far, Instagram is also a promising platform to engage in those forms of communication, implying a focus on the leaders’ personal sphere (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Therefore, one should expect an intensification of its use by populist leaders as well.

Drawing on the hypothesis that the popularization of politics is an asset for contemporary leadership and is highly functional to populist propaganda, let us concentrate our attention on women populist leaders. Are they inclined to adapt to this trend as well as their male colleagues? What platforms and instruments do they preferably use? The first observation is that the display of habits and emotions and, more in general, the disclosure of facts and details of everyday life should suit female politicians. In principle, women are usually credited as being more able to create intimacy through their narratives (Tannen, 1990); therefore, this aspect of communication may be a powerful tool to create an identification bond with citizens and appear “one of them.”

Marine Le Pen has exhibited her love of cats and a passion for gardening (the latter was among the topics discussed on the TV program Une Ambition Intime, a format in which politicians were interviewed exclusively about their intimacy and private life). Giorgia Meloni uploaded Instagram videos where she cooks traditional dishes and recommends the use of made-in-Italy ingredients, so pursuing the goal of adding a dose of nationalism in a context where she appears as an ordinary woman instead of a political leader. Overall, her performances on social media are characterized by the adoption of a “language of normality” (Moroni, 2017), according to which the leader shares his/her private life with followers.

In general, it could be said that the desire to appear normal, ordinary, “one of us” is common to both sexes. It could be interesting, however, to investigate, in a more systematic way, whether differences still perpetuate traditional gender roles. Both women and men can be involved in a process of intimization (Stanyer, 2013) that implies the disclosure of details of family life or romantic affairs into the mediated sphere. It should be remembered, however, that the implications of showing a mother caring for her children are different from posting pictures of a male leader with his
family. As mentioned in the previous section, focusing on the parental role has special value for women. In some cases it can help, especially for those belonging to a conservative party, reconcile possible contradictions between women’s political ambitions and traditional female roles. In other cases, it may become a powerful message of change, as young mothers are supposed to have different perspectives about politics and, often, being outsiders, to be different from the establishment. In short, the processes of intimization regards all politicians, but they may work differently for men and women.

Finally, evidence can be provided that female populists use formats of popular culture as an inspiration source for their propaganda materials. Marine Le Pen’s 2017 presidential campaign is a good example of a communication based on references to popular codes and narratives. Her campaign leaflet was clearly inspired by the covers of women’s magazines; her electoral poster, “Choisir la France,” features Le Pen half sitting on a table, in an unusual pose for a political leader, but surely transmitting a gentle and feminine image. Her official campaign video adopted a more emphatic style, starting with the candidate on a cliff, wind blowing through her hair; nevertheless, such an almost heroic representation, reminiscent of a Hollywood movie trailer, was balanced by a certain dose of intimacy, with mentions of her family life and maternal role.

If Le Pen needed to build an authoritative and well-polished image that might reinforce her presidential ambitions, other female populist politicians are more inclined to use pop codes in a more humorous and spectacular way. For instance, this is the case with Ada Colau, the mayor of Barcelona, who was elected with the support of a group of parties and movements, including Podemos. Research on Podemos’ communication has highlighted that its style is “anchored in appeals to, and identification with, the people through words and images together with an antielite narrative” (Sanders, Berganza, & De Miguel, 2017, p. 254). Campaign videos, such as the one in which Pablo Iglesias performs very ordinary actions like putting clothes in a washing machine (Sanders et al., 2017), or the electoral manifesto presented with the graphics of an IKEA catalog, can be regarded as perfect examples of the use of popular symbols and formats at the service of the anti-establishment narrative. Colau appears perfectly in line with this style of communication, as well shown by a campaign video featuring her playing the guitar and singing to the beat of a rumba evoca-
Concluding Remarks and Future Research

This chapter has analyzed just a few cases of populist leaders in a not-systematic way. Its goal has been to provide evidence for some hypotheses that need to be tested and may suggest new research avenues. First, the analysis of the communication style of a number of women populists has highlighted some gender-specific characteristics that differentiate them from male populists. In particular, the most salient trait is the exhibition of the maternal role. It would be improper to say that this aspect is a populist peculiarity, given that all types of politicians may emphasize motherhood as an essential part of their public image. It is true, however, that especially the leaders of the populist right may need to soften their appearance to counterbalance their radical positions, so reducing possible dissonance between toughness and the stereotype of the caring women. In other words, it can be advanced that the so-called “privatization of politics” by the media (Holtz-Bacha, 2004) can help populist women in a particular way. Aside from this aspect, however, the popularization of politics by women populists appears quite similar to that of their male colleagues. The role of the “everyday celebrity” is currently available to both men and women; appearing close to the people is necessary for all populists, independent of their gender.

Second, the cases of Eva Peron and Pia Kjærsgaard have also shown that female populist leadership may be framed in terms of “the mother of the nation.” As discussed before, this is not a populist-specific aspect; actually, it is a model of leadership that is frequently adopted by women in power. Are populist leaders more prone to incarnate such a role than other female leaders? Because of the small number of cases, it is difficult to give a conclusive answer; only with an increase in the total number of women populist leaders would it be possible to see if there exists a prevalent model. It can be advanced, however, that such a symbolic projection may represent the female version of that patriarchal style of leadership associated with

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12 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wB6NDWKDyKg. I am grateful to Karen Arriaza Ibarra for attracting my attention to this video during her presentation at the conference “New populisms' political communication,” Institut des Sciences de la Communication, Paris, June 26-27, 2015.
some male populist experiences. Or, at least, it consists of a way of solving the dilemma for which “the style of populist female leaders is also a reflection of the contradiction between social traditional values and public life” (Abi-Hassan, 2017, p. 9). In other words, through the emphasis on the metaphorical mothering of the leader, female protagonism in the public arena may appear more acceptable and coherent with the populist radical right’s conservative beliefs. In any case, the gendered construct of motherhood as a part of the image-building suggests the need for what Meret defines as “a re-reading of charismatic leadership in the light of the complex dialectics between public and private, and femininity and masculinity” (Meret, 2015, p. 102).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that comparative studies of female populist leaders, their communication and media coverage are still rather scarce. Perhaps the main problem is the limited number of women that have assumed the lead role in populist parties. However, as shown by some exceptions, such as the studies on Kjærsgaard, Jensen and Le Pen by Meret & Siim (2015) and Meret et al. (2017) and the analysis of Palin and Jensen by Mason (2010), surely carrying out comparative research on female populist leaders is needed to expand our knowledge. Similarly, a more systematic comparison between populist and non-populist politicians on some given dimensions could help identify specific populist traits. Thus, scholars should be encouraged to pay attention to a list of topics that deserve to be more investigated: how women leaders use some specific instruments or platforms; how women leaders are covered by the media; and how a party’s communication evolves when the mantle of leadership passes from a man to a woman (or vice versa).

References


A Bad Political Climate for Climate Research and Trouble for Gender Studies: Right-wing Populism as a Challenge to Science Communication

Benjamin Krämer & Magdalena Klingler

1. Introduction: Why Populism, Gender, and Climate?

Gender studies and climate research, it would seem, are two very different fields with different epistemological foundations, methodologies, formal objects, institutional structures, and habitus of researchers. Yet, there is a group of people who believe that these fields share several important commonalities, are even part of the same endeavor. Right-wing populists attack them for being, at best, unfruitful and blinded by similar ideologies. Even worse, they accuse both gender studies and climate research of being part of a conspiracy that seeks to undermine traditional ways of living. These populists also question whether the two fields represent true “science.” For example, in their 2017 party manifesto, the German AfD demands the nation’s exit from the Paris Agreement of 2015 and an end to so called “gender-ideology,” which they deem to be unconstitutional. Their criticism is ultimately directed towards the respective academic fields. Climate research is characterized as an uncertain endeavor, and the evidence for climate change is questioned. In addition, gender studies are discredited as dubious, not only being described as an instrument of so-called “gender-ideology” but also as being falsified by other research fields such as biology and evolutionary psychology (Alternative für Deutschland, 2017).

When discussing right-wing populists’ attacks on climate change and gender studies, we are faced with the old problem that—apart from “research”—there is no single term to denote all academic activity systematically striving for knowledge independent of the object, method, and epistemological foundation. For instance, the English term “science” usually denotes the natural sciences and related fields. The German concept “Wissenschaft” is more inclusive; in addition to the natural sciences, it takes the humanities into account (Hansson, 2017). In order to cover fields that are as different as gender studies and climate change, we will use “science” in
the broadest sense, including the natural and social sciences, engineering, as well as the humanities (see Schäfer, Kristiansen, & Bonfadelli, 2015).

We consider right-wing populism to be one of the most important challenges for science communication today as the populist criticism is extremely fundamental and harsh, even including personal attacks on researchers. And while these attacks may seem to come from fringe groups, right-wing populist politicians and voters—sometimes in alliance with other actors and interests—may form a blocking minority or even—in some countries—a majority when it comes to research funding or political action in favor of climate protection and gender equality. Furthermore, right-wing populists’ views are not completely detached from the social mainstream even when they are clearly in the minority. Instead, there is a continuum between the two in terms of certain widespread constructions of gender or the insistence on resource-intensive lifestyles. For example, while general support for renewable energy is part of the political mainstream, right-wing populists are clearly opposed to such transformations and thus seem to be outside this mainstream (Lockwood, 2018). However, many politicians and citizens are reluctant to implement more radical measures against climate change. And while right-wing populists’ “anti-genderism” may be particularly radical, many outside their base probably would not fully subscribe to the perspective of many approaches in gender studies.

2. Ideology-Based Rejection of Science

Before we start our analysis of ideological factors determining right-wing populists’ reactions to climate research (or climate change) and gender studies (or gender as a concept and its potential political implications), we will contextualize this discussion with regard to the literature on ideology-based rejection of science, in particular concerning these two fields.

Despite the scientific consensus on the anthropogenic causes of climate change, several societal groups deny its existence. These people and groups are often referred to as climate change skeptics, and they can be further differentiated into subgroups (Rahmstorf, 2005). Among many other factors, existing research highlights the connection between climate skepticism and conservatism (Hamilton, 2011; McCright & Dunlap, 2010, 2011; Poortinga, Spence, Whitmarsh, Capstick, & Pidgeon, 2011), and sometimes right-wing populism (Gemenis, Katsanidou, & Vasilopoulou, 2012; Hamilton & Saito, 2015; Siri, 2015), which we define essentially as a conservative ideology itself (see below for a more detailed discussion). How-
ever, a majority of studies that seek to explain climate skepticism treat ideology only as a variable that positions individuals on a continuum from the political left to the right or with regard to a few broad categories such as “conservative,” “liberal,” and so on.

Moreover, studies show an overlap between right-wing populists and other conservative movements (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). In recent years, some authors have begun to point to right-wing populists’ ideology as an explanation for their climate skepticism (Lockwood, 2018). However, to date there has been little effort to explore this connection in much detail. Authors like Fraune and Knodt (2018) investigated the connection of the ideological core themes of right-wing populism with the opposition to new energy policies. Still, the similarities between right-wing populists’ attacks on several distinct scientific fields have not yet been taken into account. Such a perspective ultimately allows for more generalizable explanations.

Therefore, right-wing populists’ attacks against gender studies will be discussed in the following chapter with regard to their ideological basis. Since the early 1990s, a campaign led mainly by the Catholic Church has attacked gender studies, claiming the field’s insights threaten the traditional family. While at the beginning the campaign was not very prominent, this changed with a general rise of right-wing populists in Europe connected to this movement (Berbur, Lewandowsky, & Siri, 2014; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). The movement’s opposition to gender studies and related fields is captured by their use of concepts such as “anti-genderism” and “gender ideology.” These terms among others are used by right-wing populists to denote several related but distinct fields and phenomena such as gender studies, gender mainstreaming, and feminism (Hark & Villa, 2015). Despite the conceptual as well as structural differences, right-wing populists mostly consider them to be part of one homogenous movement (Kováts, 2018). Research to date has predominantly seen anti-gender campaigns as an alliance of conservative actors (Graff, 2014; Grzebalska, 2016; Lang, 2015); however, the specific role of right-wing populism fueling this ideology-based rejection of science has received comparatively little attention.

In addition to the emergence of such ideological and strategic coalitions whose members and discourses are present in the traditional media and the public space from time to time (see, for example, on the issue of climate change, Boykoff, 2013; Gavin & Marshall, 2011), new networks of actors and channels have arisen online. Beyond the established intellectual and scientific fields, new hubs and celebrities of anti-genderist discourses and climate skepticism have risen to prominence. Some of the protagonists
have academic credentials but are usually not recognized in the fields of gender studies or climate research. Their prominence is mainly based on the success of their blogs, YouTube channels, or social media accounts; however, this can lead to appearances in the traditional media, on campuses, and on other platforms. In addition, this discourse is reproduced in myriads of posts and comments on social media by non-prominent users.

All these alliances, as well as social and online networks, are of interest for academic research in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of right-wing populists’ anti-science sentiments. However, the scope of this chapter is to gain deeper insights into the ideological foundations of right-wing populists’ rejection of scientific fields. Thus, we will focus on the aspects of populists’ ideology underlying this hostility against gender studies and climate change. We seek to interpret these attacks based on an understanding of right-wing populism as an ideology with specific elements such as traditionalism and anti-elitism (which we will explicate in more detail below). Furthermore, we argue that right-wing populism implies an “epistemology” of its own, i.e., a conception of what constitutes knowledge (and what does not) as well as ideas about legitimate and “productive” activities that contribute to the welfare of the people as right-wing populists define it. After reconstructing the right-wing populist view of the two fields of research, we discuss the implications for these disciplines and their potential reactions.

2.1. Populist Epistemology

Is right-wing populism an anti-science, post-truth ideology as several authors (cf. Harsin, 2018; Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018; Verloo, 2018) seem to suggest? We would argue that it is more complicated than that because right-wing populists in their ultimately paradoxical criticism of science acknowledge certain aspects of scientific epistemology. We live in an era where truth matters more than ever, where many are obsessed with defining truth (Farkas & Shou, 2018). Certainly, the authority of institutions that have been considered arbiters of truth is contested. However, actors in different camps (including right-wing populists) insist on the veracity of what certain authorities consider to be facts (which does not exclude tactical lies that are being spread, for example, via social media for political gains, but it would be implausible to consider right-wing populists as pure opportunists, political cynics, skeptics, or nihilists and to reduce their communication to mere propaganda tactics).
Epistemology constitutes the study of justified true beliefs (Steup, 2005) and thus of the foundations of what is considered knowledge. It appears that right-wing populists have adapted a number of seemingly incompatible practices for justifying their beliefs. For example, right-wing populists have a tendency towards a decomplexification of rather complex issues like environmental problems (Stegemann & Ossewaarde, 2018). This is also mirrored in their epistemology. Right-wing populists often appeal to common sense (Brown, 2014): truth is apparent, simple, concrete, and anecdotal, as well as natural and traditional (Priester, 2007). Some authors argue that this appeal to common sense is derived from populists’ more general appeal to the people (Rose, 2017). As the people are righteous and upstanding, they are more trustworthy than experts and institutions of knowledge production. Consequently, experiences of people and everyday-life knowledge is considered most legitimate (van Zoonen, 2012). Rose (2017) argues that this has epistemological consequences as seemingly undistorted and unmediated knowledge of the ordinary citizen is considered true knowledge: “to see is to know” (p. 314). Saurette and Gunster (2011) characterize this emphasis on tangible everyday-life knowledge in populist rhetoric as “epistemological populism.” In this sense, common people are actually more reliable than academic elites and more capable of recognizing the truth. This does not mean that right-wing populists put ordinary people’s voices at the center of their communication—they merely appeal to common sense and the allegedly shared perspective of the people in their often rather top-down approach.

However, this forms only one aspect of right-wing populists’ epistemology. At the same time, they incorporate seemingly scientific knowledge, complex explanations, and empirical data in their knowledge base. These dimensions of right-wing populists’ epistemology constitute “counter-knowledge” based on a counter-expertise that is intended to appear objective (Ylä-Antilla, 2018). Still, this counter-knowledge is rarely presented in the same form as knowledge from scientific fields. It is mostly informal and presented in blogs, videos, or printed magazines instead of imitating scientific publications (while certain radical right-wing think tanks also issue publications with an academic appearance, but mostly on other social and [meta-]political issues).

Thus, in the discourse of right-wing populists, truth can be abstract, hidden, and even scientific. Not only are highly abstract social entities and developments postulated (such as “the people,” ethnicities, and cultures, as well as the social trends and sophisticated plots that right-wing populists assume exist around these entities). The “hard” natural sciences are also pitted against gender studies: the biological “fact” of two and only two
clearly distinguishable sexes, their mutual attraction, and their influence on the behavior of men and women are assumed to contradict the claims of gender studies and to render their entire perspective completely baseless. “Clear” and “precise” statements in the natural sciences are opposed to jargon—and even deliberately obfuscated but ultimately nonsensical talk—in the humanities and social sciences. By claiming that researchers only pursue their studies and make certain claims because of their self-interest or their own ideological beliefs (Castanho Silva, Veggetti, & Littvay, 2017), right-wing populists even seem to acknowledge that science can be socially shaped and constructed. Finally, right-wing populists turn norms of science against science: if science is supposed to be based on organized skepticism, climate researchers cannot simply refer to a consensus and brush aside doubts; their findings must be constantly questioned.

However, this worldview is ultimately asymmetrical: Truth reveals itself only to the unideological right-wing populist observers who identify certain research as part of a political conspiracy and the result of a closed belief system. This aspect will be treated in more detail in section 2.3. Still, if right-wing populists diagnose a socially determined false consciousness or accuse researchers of self-serving false claims, these conclusions are not open to the same type of methodical skepticism. They rest on a type of reasoning that, in turn, does not systematically reflect on its own social conditions and biases, such as cherry-picking those results of research that support one’s own claims and essentializing the seemingly self-evident nature of things. As Forchtner, Kroneder, and Wetzel (2018) found, right-wing climate change deniers often claim that they simply articulate obvious truths and sometimes even use irony to emphasize that the left is irrational, lacks common sense, and is incapable of recognizing the most obvious facts.

2.2. Traditionalism

In addition to right-wing populists’ general epistemology, several aspects of their ideology can be identified that foster their rejection of certain scientific fields. One relevant component of right-wing populists’ ideology is their traditionalism. Right-wing populism follows a tradition-based conception of the identity of the people. This traditionalism ranges between conventionalism and an appeal to the cultural roots of the people. It includes the nostalgic recalling of the more or less recent past, or of a long-ago golden age, that is not yet lost but is threatened by modernization processes as well as the growing complexities of daily life (Priester, 2007). Es-
especially in situations where the status quo seems threatened by elites, right-wing populists appeal to their cultural heritage and feel patronized (Priester, 2012). Furthermore, their conventionalism can be understood as the preservation of established and otherwise unquestioned habits and norms of everyday life. Consequently, right-wing populists advocate for sticking to traditions, the status quo, and the usual way of life. The traditionalism of right-wing populists is then associated with their ideology-based rejection of scientific fields like climate change and gender studies.

One reason that right-wing populists’ traditionalism fuels their rejection of gender studies is that the latter aim at dissolving seemingly natural categories of biological gender (cf. Degele, 2003). Consequently, right-wing populists perceive gender studies as an attempt to corrode existing gender roles (Lang, 2015) as well as a manipulative attempt to destroy traditions and family values (Hankisky & Skoryk, 2014). According to Paternotte and Kuhar (2017), the war on gender contains a “nostalgia for a lost golden age, where everything was simple and genders were what they looked like” (p. 14). In order to protect traditional family values, right-wing populists denounce relationship models and family visions that deviate from the norm. Hence, they are willing to form alliances with other conservative and religious actors (Lesch, 2017). Interestingly, a paradox emerges in right-wing populists’ rejection of gender studies and related conceptions. This is especially the case in situations where right-wing populists’ traditionalism competes with other core ideological concepts like nationalism and anti-immigrationism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Here, right-wing populists are willing to form alliances with otherwise adversarial groups like feminists. For example, in order to attack Muslim men, right-wing populists confederate themselves with feminist subgroups (Farris, 2017; Meret & Siim, 2013, de Lange & Mügge, 2015; Vieten, 2016).

In addition, climate change research and respective policies are perceived by right-wing populists as a threat to existing traditions, societal norms, and values. Climate change is a global phenomenon demanding far-reaching and immediate changes in societal and individual behavior (Oreskes, 2004). Research has shown that climate change denial by conservative actors is determined by their resistance to the solutions proposed to combat the phenomenon (Campbell & Kay, 2014) and is thus a reaction against changing societal conditions (Krange, Kaltenborn, & Hultman, 2019). Consequently, right-wing populists may deny climate change due to structural reasons as large numbers of their supporters work in polluting industries (Lockwood, 2018). Bechtel, Genovese, and Scheve (2017) show that such employment-related interests significantly predict climate change related behavioral intentions. Those individuals who work in polluting in-

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dustries are less likely to support environmental protection. Thus, right-wing populists may perceive environmental protection as an ultimate threat to their jobs and livelihoods.

However, a recent study by Farstad (2017) shows that parties’ positions on climate change are best explained by their respective ideology, their ideological positions on issues like economics and their policy preferences. This again may hold true for right-wing populists as climate change is a global phenomenon threatening conventional ways of living. In order to combat its catastrophic consequences, calls are frequently expressed for individual adaptation resulting in changes in existing conventions and habits (see Gifford, 2011), making climate change prone to right-wing populists’ attacks.

Their criticism is motivated by possible implications of the findings of climate research that are sometimes expressed by researchers themselves but sometimes are only spoken of in other arenas such as politics and journalism. If attacks on the epistemic foundations of climate research are sometimes, but not always, published in a more academic or intellectual style, the practical implications are more often addressed in a more polemical tone and in more informal messages. Right-wing populist communicators, including politicians, media personae, and ordinary citizens, then accuse climate scientists of politically motivated attacks on customary ways of living in social media posts, comments, speeches, interviews, and so on: *These eco-Stalinist pseudo-scientists want to ban cars, steaks, and other perfectly normal and traditional parts of our everyday culture.*

While the reluctance to change behavior and the perceived economic consequences may in part explain right-wing populists’ climate change skepticism, more deeply rooted aspects of conventionalism and traditionalism also seem to fuel their opposition towards the field of climate research. As has been pointed out before, several studies show that a conservative ideology is a significant predictor of climate change denial. Furthermore, study results by Hamilton and Saito (2015) indicate that right-wing populist groups like Tea Party supporters are even less likely than Republicans to believe in anthropogenic climate change. Despite certain overlaps, there seem to be several differences between classical conservatism and right-wing populism regarding climate change perceptions. Thus, right-wing populists’ conservatism and traditionalism seem to make them even more prone to attacks against climate research.

For example, right-wing populists’ opposition towards environmental protection varies according to the targets of protection plans. As study results indicate, right-wing populists are not hostile towards all aspects of environmental protection (Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2015; Forchtner et al.,...
2018). Based on their nationalism, an imagined homeland forms a relevant aspect of right-wing actors’ ideology that can ultimately foster conservation behavior. Right-wing populists attach value to certain places and landscapes as they form the local basis and symbols of “the people’s” identity. Taggart (2000) refers to this (imaginative) locality as the “heartland” implied in right-wing populist worldviews. Consequently, right-wing actors including populists differentiate between local and global conservation. Thus, these actors often support local conservation initiatives while rejecting global climate change as a phenomenon (Forchtner & Kolvraa, 2015; Forchtner et al., 2018). This result, however, is of little surprise as right-wing populism is per se a nationalist ideology; therefore, national interests are at the core of their worldview, while supranational institutions and policies in general are perceived as a weakening of the respective nations and a threat to their traditions and sovereignty (Zaslove, 2008).

2.3. Anti-Elitism and Conspiracy Theories

Anti-elitism is another central aspect of right-wing populists’ ideology. It implies that corrupt and malicious elites are suppressing the righteous people and are hindering the implementation of the general will (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000). Furthermore, these elites, including groups like environmentalists and feminists, are seen as capturing the political process with corruption and special interests (Taggart, 2000). Consequently, this anti-elitism is a relevant component of right-wing populists’ anti-genderism and climate change denial. Two explanations are possible. First, science and the scientific community are perceived by right-wing populists as being part of the elitist circles that control society. Scientists as well as science in general are thus perceived as part of the elitist structures in society that oppress the ordinary citizen. Second, both gender studies and climate change can be connected to predominantly liberal and left-wing societal groups (e.g., feminist groups, environmental nongovernmental organizations) even if many researchers emphasize the separation between science and activism (while right-wing populists tend to deny that the separation is actually upheld). Thus, right-wing populists can interpret demands that they ascribe to the scientific fields as coming from special interests occupying the political process.

In line with this, several authors note that gender studies are perceived by right-wing populists as part of an agenda of liberal elites manipulating members of the public (Harsin, 2018; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). For example, right-wing populists perceive gender pol-
icies as ideologies imposed by gender studies and implemented by global elites and supranational institutions like the European Union, ultimately posing a potential threat to Western societies (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). Likewise, belief in climate change and support for climate protection can be interpreted by right-wing populists as an elitist phenomenon. Studies investigating the roots of climate change skepticism more generally show that climate skeptics criticize an elite that, according to them, is willing to sacrifice people’s livelihoods as well as their actual lives over abstract scientific findings on climate change (Anshelm & Hultman, 2014). In addition, those who believe in climate change are often depicted by their opponents as a religious and cult-like group, identifying belief in climate change as the special interest of fanatical groups of people imposing their beliefs and will on ordinary citizens (Jaspal, Nerlich, & van Vuuren, 2016; Nerlich, 2010). Consequently, Lockwood (2018) argues that right-wing populists also perceive climate change scientists as a minority group whose special interests capture the political process.

In line with this, right-wing populists’ worldviews are often associated with conspiracy theories. As has been pointed out before, conspiracy theories of right-wing populists can be defined as counter-knowledge par excellence that forms a substantial part of their theory of knowledge (Yla-Antilla, 2018). Castanho Silva et al. (2017) found that holding a populist worldview is associated with several sub-facets involving conspiracy theories. This can be explained by the compatibility of populists’ vision of controlling elites with the structural aspects of conspiracy theories more broadly (cf. Campion-Vincent, 2007). Furthermore, holding a general conspiracist ideation is linked to climate change denial (Lewandowsky, Gignac, & Oberauer, 2013a; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013b). Especially in the context of climate change, several conspiracy theories exist that can thus be utilized by right-wing populists. Following the argumentation of these theories, climate change is a conspiracy by scientists to gain money and power with the aim of changing society (Douglas & Sutton, 2015; Nerlich, 2010; Soentgen & Bilandzic, 2014). In line with this, a study by Forchtner et al. (2018) found that right-wing actors accuse climate change accepting actors of intentionally inventing a catastrophe for financial motives and as part of (left-wing) conspiracies.
2.4. *An Ideology of Productivity*

The relationship between populism in general—and right-wing populism in particular—and economic policies is a complex issue that cannot be discussed here. However, as already noted above, previous literature has found that climate skepticism can be explained by perceived costs of solutions, perceived threat to jobs in certain industries and, on the ideological level, by economic liberalism (Campbell & Kay, 2014; Cann & Raymond, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2013a, b). Thus, along with climate change skepticism challenging the epistemic basis of the phenomenon, we have already mentioned a version of climate change skepticism that rejects on an economic basis the solutions and policies associated with climate change prevention (Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014). Not all right-wing populists are strictly economically liberal, although they mostly support the general principles of a capitalist economy. Some favor a certain level of social protection against market forces and against foreign competition and do not clearly position themselves on the classical economic left-right axis (Rydgren, 2007). Furthermore, we would argue that, independently of their position with regard to economic liberalism and the welfare state, right-wing populist parties may entertain other more fundamental conceptions of worthwhile activities, productivity, and merit (that may then explain the adherence of some right-wing populists to economic liberalism while also being compatible with other policies). Unlike other forms of populism that aim to represent the economically disadvantaged as such, right-wing populism tends to blame and exclude individuals and groups of people whom it considers an economic burden because they do not contribute to the wealth of the people, or they illegitimately compete for social benefits that they do not deserve. This often implies the idea that ordinary (native) people are hard-working and honest (and therefore deserve a certain solidarity), while elites are unproductive and parasitic outgroups threatening the productivity and competitiveness of the nation (Betz, 1993; Guardino & Snyder, 2012).

Measures for climate protection and regulations in favor of gender equality (or any research on inequality)—in particular if they are implemented unilaterally—may be seen as just another elite project that threatens the wealth of one’s nation and redistributes this wealth to underserving minorities. We may also speculate that this conception of productivity and competition in right-wing populism also has a certain stereotypically male connotation. If men are associated with production and woman with reproduction (Lang, 2015), then everything that has to do with gender can be associated with a loss of virility and productivity and with unjustified
privileges for less qualified and productive women in fields where they should have a “natural” disadvantage. And any form of research like gender studies or climate research that, in the view of right-wing populists, does not lead to technological advances or to other increases in productivity is considered useless if not counterproductive. For example, when Viktor Orbán’s government decided to phase out programs in gender studies, they not only criticized the discipline for being ideological and unscientific, but also claimed that there are no relevant occupations in the labor market for graduates.

3. Conclusion: Reactions in the Scientific Fields

Right-wing populists consider gender studies and climate research to be unproductive, even parasitic, elite projects that are contrary to common sense and—at the same time—unscientific. They believe that this elite conspiracy undermines the traditional way of living, and they see it as more political than many researchers would define it. Activities in the two disciplines are defined not so much as activism but as a top-down attempt to fundamentally change society. Thus, right-wing populists appeal to the status quo and present power structures in a way that is largely antithetical to the perspective of the majority of scholars: the populists criticize the rule of politically correct, feminist, etc., liberals or leftists in place of a patriarchal system; they focus on the powerful interests of the renewable energy industry and of climate researchers themselves instead of on a system that is still very much dependent on fossil fuels and dominated by corresponding interests and actors or by structural conservatism and path dependencies.

The main aim of our contribution has not been to outline any strategies of how researchers should communicate and react to the attacks from right-wing populists but to understand the ideological basis for this questioning and these denunciations, which is key in combating phenomena like climate change skepticism (Hobson & Niemeyer, 2013). However, we will shortly reflect on the general possibilities and the different potentials of the two fields to address these attacks.

Traditionally, scientists have been advised to customize their messages to the specific worldviews of different skeptical target groups and to use existing beliefs as a starting point to argue against views that are incompatible with established scientific findings (a “jiu-jitsu strategy”; Hornsey & Fielding, 2017). However, respective targeting strategies in general as well as in the context of right-wing populism have to be designed extremely
carefully in order to avoid intensifying societal polarization (Hine et al., 2014) by normalizing, legitimizing, or even implicitly confirming parts of the worldview.

Some have argued that right-wing populists’ rejection of climate research and gender studies is mainly a strategy used to introduce new audiences to other right-wing populist issues and ideological elements (e.g., immigration and nativism; Forchtner et al., 2018; Lang, 2015; Grzebalska, 2016, 2017) and to form alliances with different groups of actors (Farris, 2017; de Lange & Mügge, 2015; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). If this were the case, the answer would be to reveal this strategy instead of addressing the seemingly deep-seated convictions concerning gender and climate. However, right-wing populists’ climate skepticism and anti-genderism as well as the delegitimization of climate research and gender studies should not be reduced to a mere tactic. It is always difficult to judge the sincerity and strength of convictions, but our analysis of ideological factors driving right-wing populists’ anti-science rhetoric indicate that the rejection of certain types of scientific practice and knowledge is probably based on ideology and thus connected to the core of right-wing populism.

Still, it can be an important strategy to undermine the actual—or the not too unlikely—alliances by communicating with other groups that may form coalitions with right-wing populists or entertain similar beliefs on gender and the climate but that are more moderate in their discursive strategies and more open to real dialogue.

If the aim is not only the containment of right-wing populism as a political force, in particular with regard to ecological and gender issues, or as a discriminatory practice but also to change right-wing populist worldviews, this is a challenging task that is not at the core of science communication. However, a small subgroup of right-wing populists, maybe with an academic background, may be open to arguments concerning, for example, the nature of the evidence for climate change, the biological complexity of sex, or the cultural and historical variability of conceptions of gender.

The ability of the two fields discussed here not only to immediately respond to attacks but also to reflect on the underlying reasons and on the implications of the criticism probably depends on their own epistemological and social foundations. The established epistemology of the natural sciences separates the social context and practices of the production of knowledge from what is considered the actual methods of inquiry and from the documentation of the methodology and findings. Those with a “science war” mentality would even claim that the social analysis of science introduces a dangerous relativism or produces mere nonsense (on the science wars, see, for example, the contributions in Ashman & Baringer, 2001;
Ross, 1996). Other natural scientists accept this type of analysis as a distinct perspective that does not question the validity of research in the natural sciences. Still, these disciplines themselves, including climate research, do not provide a conceptual framework that would directly lead to an understanding of right-wing populist criticism nor to counterstrategies against such attacks. Even if researchers acknowledge the necessity of science communication and political involvement, these are external to the logic of their fields. Based on their own logic, they can only repeat the claim that there is a consensus that is fact-based and refer to what, by their own standards, counts as evidence.

Gender studies, in contrast, can and did make the opposition to their concepts and practices an object of research and systematically discussed strategies to counter such attacks. At least some of the heterogeneous theoretical frameworks in the field allow for such (self-)reflexivity. The structure of some approaches is similar to or even inspired by theories that can, within themselves, understand and explain opposition to themselves or their practical or political applications. However, the criticism still poses a number of challenges because the field is directly confronted with other, mostly scientistic epistemologies and with its sometimes ambivalent relationship with activism (Pető, 2016).

Right-wing populism will certainly continue to pose a challenge not only to the fields analyzed here but also to research on science communication. It should be taken into consideration not only at a strategic level but also as a factor in public debates and mediated communication about science and its implications.

References


South American leftist-populist governments engage in rapid and significant economic downward redistribution; critics mention that the redistribution of income to workers and the poor, through measures which range from setting higher wages to handing out direct and indirect subsidies, is very narrowly aimed at building short-term electoral support for a populist president.¹ More sympathetic views underscore that the gains in poverty and inequality reduction brought about by them tend to be substantive and that their voters belong to overlooked and excluded groups (Heidrich & Tussie, 2008). This chapter is not concerned with the effectiveness of the social policies favored by populist governments, but with the way in which they seek to legitimatize them through discourse. Rather, it works on two dimensions. In the first, I will show that the populist discourse on the matter does in fact frame social policy in terms of universal rights and citizenship; themes of retribution and redemption are always also present and in tension with them. I will analyze the links between populist discourse and social policy in one of such governments: that of the former Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.²

¹ The economic definition of populism has achieved hegemonic status among economists, who denounce the fiscal unsustainability of such policies, which is usually expressed as high inflation and fiscal deficit (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991). Of course, political scientists prefer to believe that populism is a political, not economic, phenomenon. Moreover, the essential connection between populism and redistribution does not hold for all of its versions but only for the left-leaning ones; right wing populists do not distribute income, or do it upwards. Also, some left-populist governments have a tight control of the macroeconomic variables, for instance, Evo Morales in Bolivia.

² Cristina Fernández de Kirchner governed from 2003 to 2015; she succeeded her husband, Néstor Kirchner, who was president from 2003 to 2007. After his death in 2010, she was reelected in 2011 and governed largely on her own. It is my claim, however, that her case can be extrapolated to the other three most recent populist presidents of South America: Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and Rafael Correa of Ecuador. These three presidents, plus Néstor and Cristina Kirchner of Argentina, made the expansion of social expenditures a cornerstone of...
In the second dimension, I will show that the combination of ideological tropes and the construction of a peculiar form of syncretic discourse had two aims: to build a large base of support with the use of targeted tropes and to try to foresee and preempt media criticism of the new social policies. In Argentina, social expenditures are routinely framed by the media as irresponsible, unsustainable profligacy which is wont to enlarge “fiscal deficit.” Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was fond of combining populist forms of discourse with a more technocratic, heavily state-centered defense of public policies (Casullo, 2019, p. 110). In the case under study here (the Universal Sons and Daughters Subsidy or AUH in Spanish), President Fernandez’s explanation of the new policy were not, in fact, very populist at all—they tried not to antagonize particular social groups and underscored the fiscal rationality of the new policy. However, the mainstream media and the main opposition parties framed it as just another iteration of “fiscal populism,” aimed at buying out votes, using hard-earned tax-payers dollars to reward undeserving the poor, and enlarging the “fiscal hole” of the Argentine state. These findings fall in line with recent research on the topic of media and populism which states that media and social communicators do more than just “reflect” how populist a politician is, but they rather have a considerable degree of agency in choosing to depict, or not depict, certain figures as populists.

1. South American Populism and Social Distribution.

The left-wing populist governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina dedicated significative resources to distributive social policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. These policies included investments in education and public health, expansion of public works with a view toward creating employment, and the creation of conditional cash transfers programs (CCTs) such as Bono Juancito Pinto and Bono Juana Azurduy (Bolivia) and the Asignación Universal por Hijo (Argentina) targeted toward school-aged children and their mothers (Arza 2018; Nagels, 2014). Argentina implemented a substantive expansion of social security by expanding the right to a state-paid pension to virtually every adult over their presidencies. Their policies and discourses were similar, if not identical (Casullo, 2019; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011, pp. 14-16).

I have chosen this translation instead of “Universal Children’s Subsidy” to highlight how the official name underscores the fact that children are somebody’s sons and daughters (“hijos”).

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65 years old; this policy was specially targeted toward women who had never worked outside their home and was a recognition of the economic value of domestic work. (Lustig, Pessino, & Scott, 2013) In Ecuador, Rafael Correa’s government also implemented several programs aimed at pregnant women, mothers and children, such as the Bono de Desarrollo Humano (Human Development Bonus) (Araujo, Bosch, & Schady, 2016; Reinhart & McGuire, 2017).

Poverty and inequality did indeed fall in South America during the decade and a half of leftists’ tenure; while it is often said that the improvements in the standards of living were purely a result of the export boom, there is evidence to sustain the claim that higher social policy investments led to higher drops in poverty and inequality (CEPAL, 2018; Lustig, Pessino, & Scott, 2013). On the whole, the macroeconomic effects were mixed; Evo Morales in Bolivia achieved remarkable macroeconomic stability, with high growth and low inflation, while the Chavismo in Venezuela ended up with some of the worst economic indicators in the world and oversaw a dramatic decline in the quality of life of the country’s inhabitants. Argentina and Ecuador navigated between these two extremes.

This chapter does not try to evaluate the effectiveness of their social programs or their fiscal sustainability. Rather, its objective is to understand the way in which left-wing populist discourse talks about social issues like inequality, poverty, social justice, and social rights, and how these types of discourse lend legitimacy to the actual actions of the state bureaucracy. The argument will be that left-wing populists choose to legitimize these policy interventions by deploying a type of discourse that hybridizes a classical left-wing language of class and universal rights with a right-wing tradition that centers on compassion, private virtue and philanthropy. Populist discourse combines tropes from these two ideological “worlds,” but it does so in a unique way. I have identified three characteristics that are particular to populist discourse on social policy: they are “punching upwards” in terms of social antagonism; they reject class cleavages and emphasize the unity of the people; they both negate and reinforce the tension between the spheres of rights, work, and family, and they fall back onto a gendered vision of poverty. They do so, partly, hoping to preempt accusations of fiscal profligacy and irresponsibility by opposition figures and media. However, this strategy is only partially successful, and, as will be seen later, the discourse is tensioned from within by the way in which it hybridizes and combines tropes and ideologies; these tensions often translate into the social policies themselves which can develop in a fragmentary or contradictory fashion.
2. Populist Communication and Social Policies

The most recent wave of left-wing populist governments of South America came to power in the aftermath of the social and economic crisis brought about by the implosion of neoliberal reforms of the previous decade. The final years of the twentieth century were defined by the realization that the embrace of privatization, deregulation, and liberalization (often called the “Washington Consensus”) (Roberts, 2003) did not bring about widespread prosperity in South America; during the nineties, unemployment, poverty and inequality had risen in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Argentina, even though their GDPs had grown sporadically during that time. The worsening of the standards of living caused the appearance of protest movements across the region; the escalation of protests and state repression led to a state of “permanent crisis” that had an impact on these countries’ political party systems. The traditional or centrist parties were seen as bipartisan partners in the implementation of a policy of seemingly perpetual “structural adjustments.” They could not or would not represent the widespread social dissatisfaction; this in turn created an opening for charismatic outsiders that promised to end the state dismantling, alleviate poverty, and “punish” the proprietary elites through heavier taxation and regulation (Casullo, 2019, pp- 184-85).

A wave of left-populists coming to power began in 1998 with Hugo Chávez’s victory in Venezuela. Néstor Kirchner, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and Fernando Lugo followed. These presidents were elected in part thanks to their promises to put in place more robust social policies geared toward reducing poverty and inequality that were at the very core of the contract between populist leaders and their followers. These themes, however, were not invented by the populist governments out of nothing. In most cases, as authors such as Garay or Velasco have shown, the demands for stronger distribution and heavier regulation and taxation predated the newly elected populist government; they had been central to the anti-neoliberal social movements of the nineties, which not only fought against wider macroeconomic policies but also against market-, NGOs- or philan-

4 Such as the “Piquetero” movements of unemployed workers in Argentina, the “Cocalero” or Coca-growers movement in Bolivia from which Evo Morales jumped to politics, or the “Sem Terra” movement of landless peasants in Brazil. Massive protests took place in Venezuela during the Caracazo, in Bolivia during the so-called Water and Gas Wars, and in Argentina in 1995 and 2001. These various protests and riots were met with state-led repression that caused dozens or even hundreds of deaths.
thropy-based targeted social policies and for more universal rights-based ones (Garay, 2017; Velasco, 2015).

When the new governments took hold of the state apparatus, social policy itself became much more politicized; during the previous fifteen years, the presidents and government agencies had at the same time acknowledged the rise of poverty and explained it largely through indirect causes, such as the lack of social capital or lack of marketable labor skills. In line with this, governments largely opted for market-based, targeted, means-tested social programs, which were spearheaded by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and several development foundations and agencies (Andrenacci & Soldano, 2006; Casullo, Caminotti, Schillagi, & Tempesta, 2003). These programs combined minimal last-resort assistance with job training.

Once in power, however, the left-populist governments opted for a more openly political discourse when talking about social and economic topics. Distributive policies were presented as something more than simple technocratic problem-solving; they were framed as moral retribution to long-suffering social groups, as evidence of the popular control of the state, and as proof that the state, not the market, was the proper agent of distribution and welfare. The state bureaucracy took an almost heroic meaning, as it was the only actor able to achieve social justice; therefore, all these new social programs were designed and implemented directly by state bureaucracies (whether new or old). The question that interests us here is, What conceptual framework do populist presidents use when talking about social policy? The public legitimation of such policies was done using an idiosyncratic blend of discursive tropes and frames. The finding of this chapter is that they chose a hybrid framework, composed as a mix and match of tropes and frames from more traditional left and the right-wing discourses.

3. Populism: A Fourth World of the Welfare State?

Just to simplify my argument, the starting point of the chapter will be the classical classification of the “Three Worlds of the Welfare State” by Gosta Esping-Andersen (1990). In that text, Esping-Andersen talks about the “liberal,” “social-democratic” and “conservative-corporative” frames for conceptualizing and legitimizing distributive policies. I want to focus on two crucial differences between them: the different ways in which the holder of the welfare benefits is defined (citizen/consumer/worker), and the social
sphere in which the benefits are adjudicated or distributed (political institutions/markets/work).\textsuperscript{5}

In the social-democratic paradigm, the political sphere is the realm in which distributive priorities are set; thus, benefits are defined as rights that are politically defined, politically adjudicated and universal; the holder of the benefits is the citizen, irrespective of his or her state of deprivation. In the liberal paradigm, the ability to accrue higher degrees of social welfare is thought to depend on the market, and the agent upon which the benefits are conferred is the consumer; or, to be more precise, welfare occurs to the consumer as a positive externality of their market transactions. The welfare effects of market transactions come from the automatic balancing of supply and demand; politics does not hand out rights or “entitlements” directly but creates “systems of incentives” to influence markets. Finally, in the corporate paradigm, the benefits are associated with the sphere of work, i.e., each person’s position in the production process and thus the worker is the benefit holder. In this last case, for instance, health insurance, pensions, paid vacations, and other rights are dependent on one’s position as a worker; very often, different classes of workers and owners receive different or “proportional” benefits.

Governments that come to power with a more or less clear programmatic stance often position themselves in one of these “worlds” to explain and justify social policies, and they use the language, metaphors, and narratives associated with them. Social-democratic politicians usually use a language that is based on the notion of rights; typically, they seek to implement social policies that are universal, and they do not make them conditional on a person’s state of deprivation and need. Officeholders that espouse a liberal, or better yet, neoliberal ideology opt for market-based solutions—when these do not exist or they are politically unpalatable, they opt to have the state partner with NGOs or private philanthropic associations. Corporatist policies channel state benefits to workers, oftentimes by bringing to the table labor unions and business sectors; a person’s ability to become the recipient of a given benefit is dependent upon her or his position in the production chain.

However, South American populists employ discourses that jump from one “world” to the other. They construct their own “tradition” from the

\textsuperscript{5} Esping-Andersen’s trichotomy of welfare can be considered overly simplistic and somewhat outdated. However, his basic categorization is still useful as a heuristic device to understand political discourses in South America, which are usually conducted in simplified, anachronistic and emotion-laden ways.
act of hybridizing and creation. While their discourses on poverty, inequality, and social policy in general can be said to be “leftist”; its features set it distinctly apart from the “classical” social-democratic left. Rather, they tend to favor ideological hybridization, and they can mix and match leftist and right-wing traditions with impunity. This hybridization is nowhere more clear than in the realm of social policy. The discourse of South American left-wing populist governments cannot be classified squarely into one of the previous ideological camps, but usually deploys tropes from all of them, along with some new ones.

It is important to begin by noting that the discourse of these governments is overall recognizably leftist. They single out and antagonize the same social actors that the left usually does: financial, business, landowning oligarchies, banks, the US government, and technocratic elites. This is made even more clear by comparing them with the so-called right-wing populisms, which can be said to direct their social antagonism in a very different direction: they choose to punch downwards, by singling out as adversaries disadvantaged social groups such as migrants, ethnic minorities, indigenous people, and women. The “punching-upwards” populisms take the fight, so to speak, to the economic, cultural and social elites. I have called the governments or movements that engage in a constant antagonization to the upper classes “punching-upwards populism” elsewhere (Casullo, 2019, pp. 120-21). While these governments do not lack a discernible ideological bent, it is true that its expression does not follow a classic “programmatic” model.

The broader policy goals of South American populists also loosely align with the social democratic tradition; in broad terms, they want to tax the

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6 Many authors would, however, argue that right-wing populists also “punch upwards” and are anti-elitist since they attack the elites for letting migrants in, subverting traditional lifestyles, etc. While it would be impossible to develop the argument here fully, I believe it is important to distinguish between the way in which populists antagonize the political elite (the casta, the partitocracy, the “Washington swamp”) with the way in which they construct and antagonize a social Other, which is the true target of their animosity. The social Other might be located upwards (bankers, international financial organizations, landed oligarchs) or downwards (migrants, ethnic populations, feminists, religious minorities) (Casullo, 2019, pp. 120–123).

7 That is why it is almost impossible or useless to make ideological analysis of South American populisms by reading party manifestos, which either do not exist or are completely irrelevant. Ideology is defined by the public, living words of the populist leaders, which “name” who the adversary of the people is in a moment-to-moment, flexible way.
rich more heavily and use the resources to fund redistributive state-run programs. But there are important differences in how they define these objectives, how they talk about them in public, and how they seek to legitimize them politically; these differences have to do with their rejection of class-cleavages, their ambivalence in defining the right-holder as citizens, workers, or poor people, and the constant use of the “virtuous mother” trope. I will analyze four dimensions of the left-populist discourse on social policy: punching upwards, rejection of class-cleavages, citizens vs. the people, the tension between citizen/worker/family and the use of a gendered rhetoric.

4. Populist Rejection of Class-Cleavages: The Poor as Citizens, as Workers, or as Mothers?

To begin with, there is a crucial difference between populist and programmatic leftist discourse in regard to how to speak about class. As should be obvious, left-populists are very reluctant to speak in terms of class, not only in the Marxist sense or even in a sociological, functional one. As has been noted before by Mudde, among others, the idea of the unity of the people is central to any populist discourse; the people must be whole, and factional division is the enemy (Mudde, 2004). However, these governments can be said to be “of the left” because they antagonize the same groups that the left does, broadly speaking. I have said elsewhere that it is preferable to speak of “punching-upwards” populisms than “leftist” ones. These governments “punch upwards” by antagonizing elite groups related to big business, agriculture, media, or finance; it is important to note that they do not single them out as a class.

First, the antagonism is less structural than moral. It is not that the bourgeois class is determined to be against the people, but they have chosen to do so. Because the oligarchy has become traitorous to the people, but it is not sociologically or teleologically determined to be so, populists never lose hope that maybe not all of them are immoral, or they can be convinced to see the error of their ways. From Juan Domingo Perón on, leftist populists combine an antagonization of the upper classes with a plea to them to understand that it is their actual best interests to be their ally.⁸ (They never seem to succeed in convincing them, however.)

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Because of this ambivalence, populists do not want the elimination of this elitist social Other, nor do they think it is possible. They need it “eternally,” as the Other against which to create and reaffirm (“forever”) the identity of their movement. And, finally, left populists are not anti-capitalist, at least, not all of them and not completely. They do not object to the capitalist class per se; in fact, most South American left populists view themselves as the true architects and pilots of economic development. What they do object to is the action of a few immoral capitalists who take advantage of their vast resources to plot against the people. There are many examples of this logic at work. For instance, populists do not nationalize the press; they criticize it virulently and ad hominem. Modernizing populists do not expropriate the landed oligarchs; in left-wing populism, they tax them to the helm and insult them, but they do not seek their political or economic elimination.

Because it is simply impossible for South American populists to justify the expansion of social policies by using full-throated, class-based, social-democratic tropes, the resulting discursive strategy must resort to using and combining different definitions of who belongs to “the people” and is, therefore, due its fair share of retribution.

The populist discourse on social policy fluctuates between anchoring the legitimacy of the distributive policies in the rights of the citizens vis a vis the rights of the workers, and the rights of the mothers, in the case of women. This ambivalence is rooted in the very idea of the unity of the people, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. The citizen is individual by definition, and all citizens are equal, so to speak. But the very notion of “the people” presupposes a collective, or at the very least a “solidarity chain” (Laclau, 2005, p. 69) of collective groups; the collective, it is something different and of a higher order than the individual. Oftentimes, the right to the particular benefits being granted by the state is thus connected to the individual’s participation in a collective of a “higher” moral order. Thus, anti-poverty policies are often framed in terms of “workers’ rights” or “mother’s rights” and not of universal citizens’ rights.

5. The Poor as Citizens, as Workers, or as Mothers: The Case of Argentina’s “Asignación Universal por Hijo”

The constant and subtle displacements between the citizen/worker/mother as the proper right-holder are put into stark relief by the history of the Argentine subsidy to infants. While some proto-social policies were implemented before him, much of the Argentine welfare state (such as it was)
was originated or expanded during Juan Domingo Perón’s government. Even before him, however, Argentine policymakers were concerned with the need for furthering population growth (or immigration) to provide workers to a labor market that was close to full employment for much of the twentieth century, so some tentative social programs were put in place during the thirties and forties by the conservative governments, hoping to lure more workers. However, Perón greatly expanded social policies. His first government (1945-1955) created some universal programs (free and universal public education, including making public universities free, free and universal public hospitals), but most of the expansion of rights and benefits was done using the corporatist model. Social benefits were made conditional on work, and unions were a close partner of social welfare.

So strong was the corporatist model that all the governments between 1955 and the late seventies continued or even expanded it. (This, while Peronism was banned.) Social rights, such as pensions, health insurance, paid vacations, and severance benefits, were made conditional to the individual’s position as an employed person. The “worker” was broadly defined in discourse as a male, able-bodied and, of course, heterosexual home provider and _pater familias_. One of the elements of the corporatist package of worker’s benefits was the child’s subsidy, which was paid to the father of any child of school age. La “Asignación Familiar” or “Family Subsidy” was received as a supplement in the worker’s regular monthly paycheck, not as a state subsidy to be paid directly to the citizen. A consequence of tying the perception of the benefit to work was that unemployed or informally employed people did not receive it, irrespective of how many children they had. As explained by Andrenacci and Soldano (2006), this was largely not seen as a problem, for as long as the labor market was robust, Argentina was close to full employment and the majority of the population was paid through the formal system. Even though it was never framed as such, the system was close to being _de facto_ universal.

But the Argentine labor market underwent dramatic transformations as de-industrialization and the erosion of the formal labor markets began in the late seventies. After a coup-d’état in 1976, a debt crisis of 1982, and a hyperinflation in 1989, employment and informality rose dramatically. By the mid-nineties, over one-third of workers had become informally employed—after the economic crisis of 2001-2002, this figure reached fifty percent. When Néstor Kirchner was elected in 2003, unemployment was over twenty-two percent, and almost half of Argentine workers did not have rights to paid vacations, paid maternity leave, state pension, or any subsidy to their children. During the first four years of Néstor Kirchner’s administration, when the economy grew and the employment rate recovered, he
tried to recreate the old Peronist developmental formula that relied solely on job creation for welfare; however, while unemployment fell dramatically during the commodities-boom years between 2003-2007, informality did not shrink at a comparable pace. In fact, during the twelve years of Kirchnerist rule, it was never lower than thirty percent.

And, to make matters worse, the financial crisis hit Argentina in 2009 and the commodities bubble burst, and unemployment began to rise again. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner then implemented several counter-cyclical economic and social measures with the goal of stimulating the economy. Among them were two redistributive programs that amounted to the largest expansion of social expenditures in decades. They both signified somewhat of a break with the Peronist corporatist model and an advancement toward something new. The first expansion was the “Moratoria Previsional” or “Social Security Moratorium;” it made it possible for people that had been employed in the informal sector or were housewives or domestic workers to have access to a state pension. This program expanded pension coverage to over ninety percent of the population over 65 years old. (This program was advertised as “Jubilación de Amas de Casa,” or Housewives Pensions, and was presented as a recognition of the economic value of domestic work; it tied into the gendered narrative of AUH, which I will discuss later.) The second one was the “Asignación Universal por Hijo,” or Universal Sons and Daughters Subsidy. The program was launched in late 2009; it was designed as a complementary system to the Family Subsidy (it was directed toward children and paid the same amount of money per capita) but was specifically targeted to unemployed or informally employed mothers. I will focus on the latter, because the discourse used to sell it to the public is a perfect condensation of the populist hybridization when discussing poverty and social rights.

6. The “Asignación Universal por Hijo”: From Corporatism to .... All of the Above

The AUH, or “Asignación Universal por Hijo” (Universal Sons and Daughters Subsidy), was a cornerstone of President Fernández de Kirchner’s first presidency. She clearly saw it in this way; notably, she chose not to pass a bill through Congress for this program; instead, she signed an executive order and then she personally announced the new program using a “cadena nacional” (special televised announcement). She meant to underscore the centrality of her own decision-making process; later, the success of the AUH was one of the central elements of her 2011 presidential campaign.
As I will try to show, the new program and the discourse that was developed to explain it was a partial break with the corporatist model of classical Peronism, yet it was not a full embrace of the social-democratic universal model. President Kirchner’s discourse in fact tries to combine several spheres of meaning by using a language that refers to universality, markets, work, family, and motherhood at the same time and in different combinations.

The hybridity is plainly present in a speech given by the former Argentine president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, when she announced an ambitious expansion of the anti-poverty child-subsidy program, called “Asignación Universal por Hijo” (Universal Sons and Daughters Subsidy). In the speech in which she announced the new program, she acknowledged that informal workers did not get the “regular” work-based subsidy and that this situation had to be remedied. She could have opted for universalizing the perception of the subsidy to every child in the country (thus effectively ending the preexisting program) in a fashion compatible with the social-democratic paradigm, or she might have opted for a targeted, means-tested program, compatible with the neoliberal one. But she chose neither, opting for a discourse that tried to combine elements of both, in typical populist fashion.9

One might come to the conclusion that Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was in fact abandoning the corporatist model of the welfare state for good and moving into one based on universal policies, but that would be wrong. On the one hand, she claimed that the new system represented the “universalization of the System of Basic Subsidies.” Some beneficiaries would be paid “directly, in this case” (that is, directly from the state to the beneficiary10), while others would receive the supplement “indirectly” 11 (with their regular paychecks), but, on the whole, nobody would be excluded. Yet the reader also finds out that the system is not, in fact, universal, because workers whose income exceeds a certain amount cannot receive it; the argument is that “those of us who are so immensely lucky to be able to provide for our children with everything they deserve (...) those

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9 All the quotations are excerpted from the discourse in which Cristina Fernández de Kirchner launched the AUH on October 29, 2009; the exceptions are the paragraphs in which she speaks specifically about the mothers collecting the funds. Those were excerpted from a speech given on May 23, 2013.
10 The new AUH beneficiaries would have to register online, then the state would open a free savings account in the national state-owned bank.
11 “Por eso hay una universalización del Sistema de la Asignación Básica en forma directa en este caso, o indirecta vía del pago de impuestos de los que más poder adquisitivo tienen en una sociedad.”.
of us who have money, we do not need the AUH.”¹² The program falls short of universality, but it is not targeted and means-tested either, because it excludes only the very rich. (The same thing happened with the Social Security moratorium.)

At the same time, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner affirmed her government’s commitment to upholding and improving the labor markets, claiming that the children’s subsidy would not interfere with the market hiring practices and would not act as a disincentive for parents to enter the labor market—an argument that has been a mainstay of the anti-populist business sectors of the country for at least a century. (She argues that “the broadening of the family subsidy to unemployed and informally employed sectors, who make less than minimum wage, will not compete with the labor market, which is a common complaint of business sector against social welfare.”)¹³

We can hear in her words echoes of the old Peronist corporatist rejection of a clear class-based antagonism, and yet another iteration of the classical Peronist trope aimed at trying to convince the Argentine business sector that a more progressive social policy is, in fact, good for them. The overall project of Kirchnerism is defined in her speech as “creating well-paying, decent jobs” and “to add value to our (national) production, to have more industries, more firms, more shops.” These are the two first layers of meaning that the discourse is trying to combine: social justice based on a universal concept of citizenship, and a unitarian/corporatist ideal in which all the social sectors are the winners and none is the loser. Moreover, the spirit of this discourse is not antagonistic but pedagogical: trying...

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¹² “Obviamente que esto no puede ser para los hijos de aquellos que tenemos la inmensa suerte de poder darles a nuestros hijos todo lo que ellos merecen y todo lo que se les ocurre y tienen ganas. Los que tenemos dinero, no necesitamos asignaciones familiares, esto está muy claro.”.

¹³ “En este caso, la ampliación de la asignación familiar a los hijos de desocupados y de sectores de la economía informal que perciban menos del salario mínimo, vital y móvil tiende de la misma manera no a competir en el mercado laboral quitando mano de obra, porque en definitiva lo que pasaba muchas veces con los planes sociales, y se quejaban del sector empresarial, es que no se conseguía mano de obra porque querían seguir con los planes sociales; (...) nuestro proyecto que es lograr trabajo decente para todos los argentinos que es, no tengan dudas, el único instrumento para combatir y erradicar la pobreza. Las sociedades que han alcanzado desarrollo y crecimiento social, ha sido porque han podido generar puestos de trabajo muy bien remunerados y un sistema de seguridad social que ha cubierto a todos los sectores, y hacia eso vamos.”.
to explain to the business elites that providing generous welfare to the workforce is not contrary to their interests and can, in fact, further them.

To these three layers of meaning already present, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner added another one. Advancing children's welfare, the universalization of welfare, being pro-business but also avoiding regressive transfers to the richer sectors were mentioned as objectives. On top of that, another—heavily gendered—narrative was added that emphasized the role of mothers as virtuous defenders of family and situated poverty in the private sphere.

The policy itself was aimed at advancing the welfare of the poorest children. An additional requirement was added: twenty percent of the yearly total of the AUH would be put in an escrow account and paid at the beginning of each school year, provided that the parent gave proof of school attendance for the previous year and attendance to medical controls and vaccinations.14 This requirement could be construed as paternalistic since it seemed to give the impression that the parents of the children needed to be almost coerced to comply with the school requirement.15 The AUH, moreover, explicitly linked children with motherhood and gender. I will quote Cristina Fernández at length:

The payment of the AUH will go to the mothers. This is something that does not have to do with gender, or with any feminist position … it has to do with the fact that we receive a lot of complaints on behalf of women whose husbands have abandoned them, have left, and still continue to collect the family subsidy. I am not speaking against men, it’s just things that happen in life. So, what happens? We want the AUH to always go to the mother, except in those cases when a judge has granted the children’s custody to the father. The mother will always cash the subsidy, except in those cases when there is a court order. This is a matter of absolute justice.16

14 “A punto tal que por eso hemos ideado el sistema de que se cobre todos los meses el 80 por ciento de la asignación, se deposite ese 20 por ciento y esa suma total, que creo que alcanza algo así como 180, se paga en marzo cuando se inicia el ciclo lectivo correspondiente al acreditar que se ha cumplido con el ciclo lectivo anterior.”.

15 While the “old” system still requires the periodic presentation of school records, the vaccination and health care controls requirements were only imposed on the children with AUH.

16 “El pago de la AUH a las madres… bueno, esto es todo un tema que no tiene que ver con género ni con ninguna posición feminista, sino que tenemos muchos reclamos, por parte de mujeres, que por allí el marido las abandona, se va, sigue co-
The radical ambiguity and polysemy of populist discourse on issues of rights is perfectly on display here. On the one hand, it is claimed that the new children’s subsidy will achieve the near-universalization of rights while using an egalitarian framework of social justice; on the other, the discourse at other times reinforces the old frame that ties children’s poverty to motherhood and, while claiming to protect mothers, reinforces the notion that children are mainly the responsibility of the mother. It also situates the “problem” squarely in the domestic sphere and, by choosing to keep the structure of two separate “systems” of welfare (one tied to the formal employment of any of the parents, one targeted directly to poor mothers) instead of simply merging the two into one simpler system of direct transfers, ended up reinforcing anti-poor sentiments embodied in the common criticism that poor women “get knocked up on purpose” (“se embarazan por el plan”) in order to cash in on their children. However, and as a final point, the policies which were implemented in Argentina achieved a high degree of popularity and institutionalization, as shown by the fact that the neoliberal government of Mauricio Macri (CFK’s successor) upheld them while reducing overall public expenditures.

7. The Media Reception of the Shifting Frames of Populist Discourse

The ambivalence and polysemy of populist discourse can be found in almost all of the public rationales for social and gender policy. While all the left-populist governments can boast of having had substantive impacts on poverty and inequality, it is important to analyze their specific policies in isolation, because there is a difference between “pro-poor,” “pro-women,” and “pro-equality” policies (Dingler, Lefkofridis, & Marent, 2017, p. 352). Governments that take pride in their leftist orientation have ended up upholding maternalizing and patronizing definitions, while rightist governments nimbly deploy some elements of the liberal discourse on rights and the feminist discourse on gender to justify xenophobic or regressive policies (Borchorst & Siim, 2002).
A consistent finding is that left-wing populisms have expanded social expenditures and, as said, can claim important successes in the fight against poverty. However, the way in which they framed these issues had two clear limits. First, as described here, they did fall short of using an unambiguous frame of rights, universality, and class. Second, they often fell back into a moralizing view of the most vulnerable groups that sought to imbue them with intrinsic moral virtues. Social policy discourse was infused with a patronizing and maternalizing ideology that assumed that women are intrinsically virtuous because of their role as wives and mothers and ends up demanding of them abnegation, sacrifice, and self-effacement (Dingler, Lefkofridis, & Marent, 2017, p. 349) while at the same time claiming that they are the true agents of development and the true leaders of their communities (Dingler, Lefkofridis, & Marent, 2017, p. 350). It is therefore unsurprising that these shifting discursive frames are translated into contradictory or multi-layered social policies that claim to be at the same time universalistic, corporatist, and maternalizing.

One possible explanation for the “multi-frame” approach is that populists presidents try to develop a kind of sui generis “catch-all” discourse, trying to appeal to different interest groups and ideologies; there is something in there for everybody, from classic Peronists to more social-democratic centrists. It is clear that Cristina Fernández de Kirchner wanted to present this policy as not just a handout to poor people but as a reasoned and sustainable new public policy. She even incorporated tropes of the more conservative, Catholic charitable tradition focused on mother and children. The addition of a conditional requirement for obtaining the benefit (sending the children to school and doing an annual medical check-up and vaccination) hedged closed to the neoliberal paradigm that wants to keep social assistance focused on the “deserving” poor.

As stated in the opening paragraphs, she was clearly trying to make a preemptive defense of her position, maneuvering against possible charges of clientelism and fiscal recklessness. She was also trying to come out as more technocratic than populist. However, that is not how her efforts were read by the media. The day after the launch, Clarín, the most-read newspaper of the country, chose this headline: “An announcement that was demanded by different sectors. Cristina launched the subsidy for sons and daughters and unleashed the controversy”17 (Clarín, 10/30/2009, emphasis added); Clarín added: “The Church and the opposition parties hailed

17 “UNA MEDIDA QUE ERA RECLAMADA DESDE DISTINTOS SECTORES. Cristina anunció la asignación por hijo y se desató la polémica.” Link here: https:/

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the new policy but demanded more consensus.” The day before that, *(La Nación)* (the second most-read newspaper) chose to publish an interview with a prominent opposition figure, Elisa Carrió, who criticized the new policy on the grounds that it was “a deal cast with the worst union leaders to keep the poor as slaves.” *(La Nación, 10/29/2009).* TN, the highest-ranked cable news channel, argued that the new benefit would “foster political clientelism” and that it would be funded by “taking money from retirees’ pensions.” *(TN, 10/29/2009).* So widespread was the criticism that only one year later, Ernesto Sanz, one of the most prominent opposition politicians, argued that the “AÜH money gets lost into the drugs and bets gutter.” Conversely, the media started to discuss the possibility that poor women were getting pregnant on purpose to cash in on the subsidies. This claim became so widespread that it was debunked by, among others, Chequeado, the largest fact-checking organization in the country. Source: [https://chequeado.com/mitos-y-enganos/hay-mas-embarazos-por-la-auh/](https://chequeado.com/mitos-y-enganos/hay-mas-embarazos-por-la-auh/).

So, to sum up: even as Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was trying to shift the frames used for legitimizing her social policies, the largest media conglomerates were having none of it. The reception to the expansion of social welfare was met with almost universal media hostility, even though this policy was immediately popular with voters. The antagonism did not only travel from the populist president to the media, but also from the media to the president. This finding is in line with recent research that indicates that media must not only be treated as a dissemination tool of pop-

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20 Source: [https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/nota-65348/](https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/nota-65348/).

21 So much so, in fact, that government of President Mauricio Macri, who won the elections in 2015 with anti-populist messages, kept the subsidies in place and even expanded the universe of beneficiaries slightly (see Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017).
ulism but also “a producer of populism in itself” (Chatterjee-Doody & Crilley, 2019, p. 73). The constant shifting of frames employed by South American populists might be an attempt to respond to the fact that, as Chatterjee-Doody and Crilley argue, “Media actors exert their own agency, and processes of interaction and circulation between them have a substantive influence on the discourses that shape social conditions” (Chatterjee-Doody & Crilley, 2019, p. 74). At the same time, can it not be the case that if anything a leftist president will do on the social policy front is going to be immediately labeled as extremely populist, there are strong incentives to just become more populist? Media and leaders seem locked in a relation of mutually reinforcing antagonism.

References


Populism and Popular Culture: The Case for an Identity-Oriented Perspective

Torgeir Uberg Nærland

Why should scholars and students of media and populism care about popular culture? I will start this chapter by offering three initial motivations for such an interest. The first motivation concerns scale: a significant proportion of the media content circulating in the public sphere can be labeled popular culture, be it in the form of music, TV series, film, or comedy. Popular culture makes up a substantial part of people’s media diets—perhaps more so than news and political communication. The sheer scale of the circulation and consumption of popular culture should thus incite interest among researchers of media and populism.

The second motivation concerns sense-making. Different forms of popular culture engage citizens with narrativized accounts of the world and the relations within it—often with considerable emotional intensity. In this way, popular culture offers citizens the means to make sense of the social and political world and their place within it. Such sense-making, and the social and political imaginaries it feeds, is fundamental both to how citizens navigate the world of politics and to the strategies by which politicians appeal to citizens.

The third motivation concerns the nature of politics. Politics and entertainment are intertwined. Politicians draw upon features of popular culture when addressing voters and may even have a background in entertainment. The media’s framings of politicians and political issues may draw upon tropes from popular culture, be it through dramatization or spectacle. Voters’ connections to politicians may take the form of fandom, a mode of appreciation with origins in popular culture. In this way, popular culture becomes significant to how populist politicians can appeal to people’s sensibilities and the success with which they forge ties to voters.

As this chapter will highlight, an emerging but small body of literature offer insights into how popular culture matters to populism. Diverse in empirical scope and theoretical framing, this body of research offers valuable insight and basis for further exploration. The first objective of this chapter, then, is to chart and discuss this body of research as well as to indicate how these efforts can inspire further research. To my knowledge, no
works as yet have been published that attempt to bring together and systematize this literature. A notable exception is de Cleen and Nærland’s (2016) special issue on expressive culture and right-wing populism in Europe. However, whereas this previous effort mainly concentrated on the relationships between populist parties and music, this chapter is wider in scope; it aims to take into account a wider variety of genres and to mobilize emergent perspectives on populism in order to illuminate a wider spectrum of connections to popular culture.

The second objective of this chapter is to outline what I argue is a critical yet neglected area of inquiry: popular culture’s role in citizens’ sociopolitical identity formation. Populism is conceptualized in differing ways, including as ‘thin’ ideology (Mudde, 2004), as logic (Laclau, 2005), as discourse (Panizza, 2005), as style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) and as strategy/organization (Weyland, 2001). While these approaches differ in emphasis, they nonetheless broadly agree on the basic constitutive dimension of populism: the antagonistic relationship between the monolithic ‘people’, the elite, and various outgroups. Thus, a central task for communication researchers has been to explore the various ways in which the media contributes to or facilitates this antagonism. The main foci have been political actors (and their communication with supporters); media organizations (as platforms or actors); or citizens as targets for populist messages, together with their media preferences and political attitudes (for overview, see de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018). In this chapter, I argue that through appeals to identity, popular culture plays a key yet significantly overlooked role in fueling people-elite antagonisms.

In this article, I first clarify what I mean in this chapter by popular culture, then briefly outline existing research on popular culture and politics in general. In the next section, I focus on populism, where I chart and discuss the existing literature that deals explicitly with popular culture in relation to populism. I organize these contributions into six key perspectives, each highlighting a distinct take on how popular culture matters to populism. I end this chapter by outlining and qualifying what I call an identity-oriented perspective on popular culture and populism.
The interactions between popular culture and populism have only started to gain attention the past ten to fifteen years. However, there is rich and longstanding tradition that elucidates the significance of popular culture for politics in a broader sense. This body of research shows that popular culture matters to politics in a multitude of significant ways, ways that research on populism has only started to take into account. In the following, I will briefly outline the key strands of this tradition and indicate their relevance to the study of populism.

First, there is need to specify what is meant by popular culture in this chapter. Popular culture has been conceptualized in a number of ways (see Raymond Williams, 1983). In influential contributions from cultural sociology and cultural studies, popular culture is typically conceptualized as ‘a way of life’. Mukerji & Schudson (1991, p. 3), for instance, define popular culture as “…the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population.” While such an inclusive understanding of popular culture is valuable for situating popular artifacts and practices in social life, for our purpose, the notion of popular culture must be narrowed down.

This chapter focuses on expressive popular culture. Expressive culture (Burstein, 2014) designates how ideas, emotions, or identities are expressed aesthetically through works of art and culture. Thus, this chapter focuses on such forms as music or TV series, while cultural practices like skateboarding or beer-brewing fall outside the scope of inquiry. Furthermore, this chapter is primarily concerned with mediated popular culture—forms of popular culture, from drama to music, that engage citizens through their circulation in the mediated public sphere.

One influential strand of the literature centers on the ideological ramifications of popular culture and its uses. This strand can be traced back to Plato and his call to abolish music in the republic, due to its subversive effects on the youth. In the last century, the ideological perspective came to be succinctly articulated in the works of Frankfurt School writers, such as Adorno (1973), famously arguing that cultural industries reduce their audiences to passive dupes for domination. Through the lens of cultural studies, popular culture was later positively reinterpreted to be valuable as a resource for ideological resistance, not least through subversive subcultural practices (e.g., Hebdige, 1979).

A second strand in the literature emerges from cultural studies: popular culture and identity. Here, a number of writers (e.g., Frith, 1997; Storey, 2003) have emphasized how popular culture and its consumption consti-
tute an important source for the formation of both individual and collective identities. This work has primarily been concerned with the significance of popular culture for identity categories, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, or class. As I will argue, this strand also offers a valuable perspective on how citizens develop sociopolitical identities. This is a theme I will return to in the last section of this chapter.

A third strand emphasizes how popular culture embodies and, through the media, circulates discourses of social order, gender, race etc. (e.g., Brooks, 1997). As I will show in the literature review, this is a perspective that has been taken up by scholars of populism, who argue that popular culture becomes the site for a discursive struggle over the meanings of key notions, such as ‘the people’, ‘the elite’, and ‘the popular’.

Whereas the previous strands center on themes such as domination, identity, and meaning, other strands have situated popular culture more concretely within political action. A rich body of literature documents the centrality of popular culture in social and political movements (e.g., Eyerman & Jamison, 1998), in political subcultures (e.g., Futrell, Simi, & Gottschalk, 2006), for mobilization and protest (e.g., Garofalo, 1992), and as a platform for political agendas (Street, Hague, & Savigny, 2007). As I will highlight, these interests resonate with the extant literature on populism and popular culture.

Other strands of the literature have emphasized the civic importance of popular culture. Starting from theories of deliberative democracy, scholars (e.g. Gripsrud, 2009; Nærland, 2015) have shown that popular culture is integral to public discourse, sometimes serving as material for political opinion- and will formation. Other work has focused on the role popular culture have for people’s ability to function as citizens. Work informed by the notion of cultural citizenship has shown how people’s use of popular culture is important to their sense of civic belonging, civic passions (Hermes, 2005; Street, Inthorn, & Martin, 2013), and their ability to make political judgments and reflections (van Zoonen, 2005). Other work informed by the notion of public connection (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010) show how citizens’ consumption of popular culture may forge both weak and strong orientations towards the sphere of politics (Nærland, 2018). This body of literature is relevant to the study of populism because it highlights the importance of people’s use of popular culture for their engagement with and navigation within the world of politics.

In parallel, a strand of research within the political science literature has employed quantitative methods to survey links between cultural consumption and ‘hard’ variables of political engagement, such as voting or partici-
pating in organized politics. In his landmark study *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) concluded that people’s increased time spent on entertainment constituted one important reason for the decrease in both civic participation and social capital in the United States. Other empirical work from the same tradition give nuance to this declinist narrative with regard to both audiences’ values (Besley, 2006) and type of entertainment (Hooghe, 2002; Shah, 1998).

2. A Roadmap of the Existing Research

A growing yet still-small body of literature focuses explicitly on the intersections between popular culture and populism. The contributions within this body are diverse; they vary in terms of theoretical perspective, national context, and the forms of popular culture under scrutiny. In the following, I organize these contributions into six key perspectives, each highlighting a distinct take on how popular culture matters to populism. These are: popular culture as political communication, as political narrative, in discursive struggle, as political style, as socio cultural appeal, and as part of public discourse.

Neither the contributions included here nor their thematic organization are exhaustive in terms of all possibly relevant studies or all the ways in which popular culture can matter to populism. Rather, the aim of this review is to highlight key efforts and the perspectives these entail, and thus provide a roadmap to the existing terrain. Moreover, this review addresses studies and perspectives about the role of popular culture for populism. As indicated in the previous section, a number of efforts have explored neighboring issues, such as the role of popular culture in fascism, the extreme right, or subcultures. Such topics fall outside the scope of this review.

2.1 Popular Culture as Political Communication

This perspective emphasizes how popular culture itself can function as an aesthetically enabled means of political communication. In the existing literature, a few studies have explored the role of popular culture in mobilization, either for or against populist actors or organizations. In Hungary, Szele (2016) explores the aesthetics of Nemzeti Rock (national rock), a genre that he shows as having a close connection to right-wing populist politics. Szele shows that Nemzeti Rock has proven to be an effective
means of mobilizing for the radical right party, Jobbik (The Movement for a Better Hungary). His study (2016, p. 9) finds that, as a genre, Nemzeti Rock “expresses the main tropes and ideological themes of the political radical right—such as nativism, heroic masculinity, and populism.” Szele further points out a seemingly-paradoxical feature of popular music that works in the service of right-wing populism: the insistence on being simultaneously both a popular phenomenon and a counterculture.

Other works have looked at the role of popular culture in mobilization against right-wing populism. In Norway, I have analyzed how hip hop music can function as an aesthetically enabled form of anti-populist political communication (Nærland, 2014). Musical and lyrical analysis highlights how the hip hop aesthetic (beats and rapping) is particularly suitable to giving shape to political articulations, and also to anti-populist sentiments. In other work (Nærland, 2015), I have shown how hip hop music, through mass appeal and media circulation, functions as a vehicle for engaging populist politicians and others in public debate.

2.2 Popular Culture as Political Narrative

This perspective highlights how popular culture can circulate narratives that promote populist worldviews. As already argued, all popular culture has an inherently ideological dimension. Works of popular culture—be they film, music, or television drama—are always imbued with narratives of the social and political world. By naturalizing certain values, relations, or arrangements, these narratives work to both promote and counter populist world views. In the U.S., Grindstaff (2008) argues that the circulation of such narratives was part of a concerted political effort to construe liberal culture as radical, uppity/elitist, and immoral:

It is a feat of *popular culture* when conservative ideas are considered populist and liberalism is successfully branded as a threat to everything “real” Americans hold dear. Politicized narratives—about politics and the economy, about the environment, about the “war on terror”—have to be “tried on” and then “sold” to ordinary people, and popular culture is crucial to this effort. (Grindstaff, 2018, p. 2017, original emphasis)

This argument resonates with Krämer’s (2014) conceptualization of ‘media populism’. Krämer highlights how the media may itself promote populism by constructing in- and out-groups, by constructing antagonistic relations to elites, and by appealing to moral sentiments. As Krämer notes, these are
also possible features of the forms of popular culture that circulate in the media. In a survey of Dutch citizens’ media preferences, Hamerleers, Bos and de Vreese (2017) found that populist voters consume tabloidized and entertainment-based media diets and self-select media content that articulates the divide between the “innocent” people and “culprit” others. However, as of now, systematic scrutiny of how different forms of popular culture may promote populist narratives is lacking, as is systematic scrutiny of how the production and circulation of these narratives are embedded in the political economy of the media. Both these issues, and their interrelation, are important areas of future inquiry.

2.3 Popular Culture in Discursive Struggle

This perspective emphasizes how popular culture is a site for the struggle over meaning and value in ways that are important to populist politics. From a discourse theoretical perspective, de Cleen (2009) has shown how popular culture becomes important as the focal point for discursive struggle about notions, such ‘the people’ and ‘the popular’. As he points out, such notions are key to constructing the antagonistic people-elite relation that characterizes populist narratives. De Cleen demonstrates how populist actors, artists, and the media engage in rhetorical contestation over the meaning and value of these key notions.

As several authors have highlighted (de Cleen 2009; Nærland 2016), popular culture may also fundamentally challenge the antagonistic people-elite narratives evoked by populist actors. Popular culture—be it hip hop music, comedy, or soap drama—can be widely popular and commercially successful and can appeal to audiences through an inclusive aesthetic. Therefore, when popular artists express anti-populist sentiments, they cannot easily be dismissed as an elite inherently hostile to ‘the people’. This strategy of dismissal has, in contrast, been highly successful when artists associated with high culture issue critique against populists (for an example, see Nærland, 2016). This brings attention to a significant, overarching aspect of the relationship between popular culture and populism. Although in very different ways, both popular culture and political populism claim to have a rooting in ‘the popular’ – that which attends to the tastes and sensibilities of most people (de Cleen & Carpentier, 2010; see also Krämer, 2014 for a discussion of this argument). The success of populist parties partly stems from their claim to represent the popular. Thus, when critique against populism is issued from within popular genres such as hip
hop, comedy or soap, it represents a real challenge to people-elite narratives, or more precisely, the credibility of such narratives.

2.4 Popular Culture as Political Style

This perspective emphasizes how elements from popular culture are incorporated into the style and performances of populist actors. Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014) conceptualization of populism as style offers a starting point for elaborating on this perspective. In their conceptualization, populism should not only be understood as an ideology or as a type of arrangement, but as “a ‘political style’, a repertoire of performative features which cuts across different situations that are used to create political relations” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 394). Populism-as-style clearly assumes a role for popular culture. At the most basic level, popular culture background may serve as the source of celebrity for politicians, providing them with a stage for their endeavors. Moreover, the style and performance of populist politicians may draw upon features of popular culture, such as film, music, or wrestling.

In a similar vein, the ways in which the media frame populist politicians and their activities may draw on tropes from popular culture, such as dramatic spectacle or well-known film narratives. Moreover, voters’ appreciation of politicians may take the form of fandom, which we know from the consumption of popular culture (Dean, 2017). These dynamics can be seen at play in the case of celebrity populist politicians. As John Street (2019, p. 3) writes:

[C]elebrity politicians like Trump acts as stars, whether of reality television, rock music or film. They do not just resemble stars, they are them. This is evident in how they are represented, how they perform and how their ‘fans’ respond to them.

Thus, as an ingredient of populist style, popular culture may in this way become important to how populist politicians address voters and the success to which they both ‘represent’ them, appeal to their cultural and social sensibilities and, ultimately, make collective identifications as ‘the people’ come into being.
2.5 Popular Culture and Sociocultural Appeal

This perspective emphasizes how strategic appeals to cultural tastes and sensibilities are a potent means of forging connections to voters. Ostiguy’s (2017) sociocultural approach to populism offers a starting point for elaborating on this perspective. Ostiguy emphasizes how the high-low dimension of politics is key in mobilizing antagonistic schisms between ‘the people’ and elites. By ‘flaunting the low’ through coarse, less-sublimated, personalistic style, populist politicians deliberately appeal to voter’s ‘low’ sensibilities. The ‘low’ is in turn constructed in opposition to the ‘high’ sensibilities of the elites.

Culture, high and low, constitutes a key source for such appeals. For one, culture offers stylistic and performative input (consider, for instance, Donald Trump’s evocation of wrestling jargon or Rodrigo Duterte’s self-staging as action movie ‘hardman’). Importantly, people’s taste for culture is a prime marker of the low and high. As forcefully demonstrated by Bourdieu (1984), culture is inscribed with social hierarchies and arguably constitutes the most important site for social distinction and for social boundary-making. Ostiguy (2017, p. 79) points out that this sociocultural component of populism is in fact “a politicization of the social markers emphasized in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu in his classic work of social theory on taste and aesthetics.” Thus, from this perspective, strategic appeals to cultural tastes become a potent means to forge connections to voters and ignite or fuel people-elite antagonisms.

In Norway, I have in previous work (Nærland, 2016) argued that such taste appeals have been instrumental to the right-wing populist Progressive Party’s (FRP) evocation of people-elite narratives. The FRP has consistently sought to align themselves with artists and cultural practices of low culture (e.g., dance bands and caravan parks), and simultaneously rail against the artist and art forms commonly identified as high culture. Consistent with both Moffitt and Tormey’s emphasis on style and Ostiguy’s emphasis on sociocultural appeals, FRP politicians have been able to nurture what I have called a ‘charisma of spectacular commonness’. One telling example of such charisma-building was when the FRP politician Jan Simonsen suggested that the National Theatre should be converted into a disco.
This last perspective emphasizes how (popular) culture becomes a focal point for public discourse involving populist actors and issues of importance to their agenda. In Belgium, de Cleen (2016) has shown how culture may take center stage in populist parties’ efforts to mobilize people-elite divisions. Based on comprehensive case studies of public discourse about anti-populist concerts and theater, de Cleen found that the right-wing populist party Vlaams Bloc/Vlaams Belang’s (VB) rhetorical strategies had mixed merits. De Cleen found that the VB’s ‘positive’ populist strategy of trying to associate with popular Flemish artists and genres had only limited success; yet, in contrast, the VB’s ‘negative’ populist strategy of denouncing artists critical of the party as part of the elite was instrumental in delegitimizing the critique. De Cleen further argues that the VB’s rhetoric about culture was central to constructing the antagonism between “on the one hand the anti-Flemish and multiculturalist political, cultural, media, and intellectual elite and on the other hand the people and the radical and exclusionary Flemish nationalist VB as the party of the people” (de Cleen, 2016, p. 69).

In Norway, several studies have highlighted how the field of cultural policy has become a site through which populist politicians can mobilize people-elite narratives. Characterized by the rhetorical trope ‘the cultural elite’, the Progress Party (FRP) has conjured images of the state-financed cultural sector as being decadent, parasitical, and out of touch with the tastes of ordinary people. A recurring claim has been that artists operating within the sphere of high culture do not produce anything relevant to most people, yet still drain public budgets. However, as shown by Hylland (2011), in Norway, cultural policy has been neither a prioritized policy field for the FRP nor an area in which they have had much actual impact. All the same, their cultural policy is alongside their immigration policy, arguably the issue that has drawn the most extensive and aggressive critique from other parties and actors. As Hylland (2011, p. 51) points out:

On the one hand, FRP has represented the most visible and loud opposition to a cultural policy that (in Norway) is to a large degree marked by consensus. On the other hand, FRP’s stance on cultural policy is most often made visible by an almost unanimous criticism.

Thus, cultural policy has constituted a rhetorical arena in which the FRP has distinguished itself from the other parties and where the FRP has positioned itself as being in line with the opinions and tastes of ‘the ordinary
people’. This Norwegian case highlights the symbolic potency of culture as a means to evoke antagonistic people-elite narratives.

2.7 The Need for Further Research

As outlined in this review, the existing research on popular culture and populism includes a range of perspectives and illuminating cases. Each of these perspectives warrants further research, in regards to both specific national contexts and different forms of popular culture. However, a number of important issues remain unexplored. One such issue is how entertainment and popular culture are used as part of populist campaigns, and political communication more broadly. Another issue is the role of popular culture in social media communication between populist politicians and voters. Likewise, the relationship between media ownership, populist actors, and the narratives promoted through popular culture stands out as an important area of future inquiry.

However, one issue emerges as both particularly urgent and largely overlooked: the role of popular culture in forging collective and individual identities. As I argue in the next section, the people-elite antagonism that fuels populism is a matter of social identifications and antipathies, and popular culture is a catalyst for such identifications and antipathies. In the next section, I outline and qualify what I call an identity-oriented perspective on popular culture and populism.

3. Popular Culture and Populism: An Identity-Oriented Perspective

My fundamental argument is that popular culture constitutes a key yet overlooked source of the social identifications and antagonisms that fuel populism. Through popular culture and entertainment, citizens engage with value-laden representations of the lifestyles, experiences, and worldviews of themselves and their significant others—including political and cultural elites and various outgroups. Therefore, we should direct systematic attention to citizens’ experiences of popular culture and how such experiences affect their sociopolitical identifications and antipathies. In the following, I first make the case that identity matters to populism. Thereafter, I highlight how media in general, and popular culture in particular, plays a key role in forging and energizing sociopolitical identities. I conclude this
section by suggesting empirical research strategies that employ this perspective.

3.1 Populism and Identity

The question of identity is implicit to most understandings of populism. As established by early theorists of populism (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969), the antagonisms between the ‘people’, the ‘elite’, and outgroups intrinsic to the populist imaginary (Müller, 2016) rely on matters of social identifications and antipathies. This understanding is reflected in recent populism research, including Panizza’s (2017) stress on voter identification practices as well as Melendez and Rovira Kaltwasser’s (2017) research on political identity formation. Likewise, social identity theory is essential to research on affective polarization (e.g. Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Ostiguy’s (2017) sociocultural approach to populism places questions of identity at center stage. Explaining how populist politicians forge ties to voters, he argues that social and political identity are intertwined:

[M]anners, publicized tastes, language, and modes of public behavior do become associated with, and even defining of, political identities. In such cases, social identities with their many cultural attributes interact with political identities. (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 80)

All these contributions imply that identity is integral to populism, albeit in various ways. Whereas identity is a feature in political projects of all colors, I argue that it is nonetheless particularly pertinent to populism.

A number of scholars now point to identity as a chief explanatory factor for the ongoing populist surge. In his book *Identity*, Fukuyama (2018) argues that at the heart of the global populist insurgency lies a ‘politics of resentment’. This resentment, experienced by large segments of people, is fueled by collective experiences of misrecognition—the negative affirmation of a group or person from the surroundings. Horschedl (2016) and Bude (2017) both argue that collective experiences of displacement bolster the anti-elite sentiments that are central to the populist surge. This line of thinking is supported by an extensive body of empirical research on the sociodemographics and attitudes of voters of populist parties (for an overview of the research, see e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Reinemann, Matthes, & Shaefer, 2017). This research has found that populist voters are more likely to have low socioeconomic status, to hold fears of social decline, and to feel injustice and indignation. From this perspective, Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck and de Vreese (2017, p. 19-20) note that
Populism is closely related to the basic human need for belonging, where-in populism as an ideology essentially fulfills its followers’ needs for community building.

Moreover, there are distinct affinities between the concept of populism and the concept of collective identity. Consider for instance Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000, p. 19) non-controversial definition of collective identity as “the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders.” If the definition expressly stated a belonging to ‘the people’ and an antipathy towards outsiders like ‘the elite’ and immigrants, this definition would fit quite a few of the populist movements we are currently seeing in Europe and beyond.

3.2 Media, Popular Culture, and Identity

In the field of media scholarship, the electoral success of populist parties and politicians has led to a renewed interest in questions about identity and media representation. Couldry (2010) connects the populist surge to a crisis of ‘voice’, in which considerable segments of the people lack the capacity to make narratives about their own lives. In the context of journalism and news, Kreiss (2018) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) argue for redirecting attention to matters of identity. In the context of entertainment, Hesmondhalgh (2017) argues that a key contributing factor to the anti-elite Brexit mobilization was the media’s failure to adequately represent the white working class. Mounting empirical evidence suggests that anti-elite identifications are connected to mis- or non-representation in the media. In Norway, Figenschou, Eide and Nilsen (2018) have found a steady decline of coverage of working-class actors from the 1960s through the present day. In the context of both news and entertainment, Jakobson and Stiernstedt (2018) have documented systematic mis- and non-representation of working-class citizens in Sweden. In genres like reality TV, many studies have found that working-class participants are often humiliated, ridiculed, and presented as inadequate (e.g., Skeggs & Wood, 2011; Eriksson, 2015). Thus, as vehicles for representation, popular culture and entertainment emerge as a key symbolic condition for the formation of anti-elite identities.

A vital question, then, is how audiences experience such media representations, and how these experiences matter to their sociopolitical identifications. The relationship between identity and the consumption of popular
culture remains a longstanding concern in audience research and especially in cultural studies. Douglas Kellner offers one often-quoted account of this relationship:

Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of ‘us’ and ‘them’. (Kellner, 1995, p. 1)

How citizens experience works of popular culture as constructing an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, and how such identifications transform into the ‘ingroups’ and ‘outgroups’ that constitute the populist imaginary, emerge as a critical yet overlooked topic in our understanding of the relationship between media and populism.

3.3 An Identity-Oriented Perspective: Avenues for Further Research

I argue that we need to commit serious attention to how audiences experience popular culture and how these experiences affect their social identifications and antipathies. I suggest that marginalized citizens—whether socio-economically or -culturally—are of particular interest in this regard. Exploring these citizens’ media experiences would provide specific insights into the role of popular culture in igniting, energizing, or bolstering people-elite antagonisms—and conversely, how such experiences can also counter or ease such antagonisms. This task calls for both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods can provide systematic knowledge about the relationships between socioeconomic background, cultural consumption, and attitudes, while qualitative methods—whether ethnography, interviews, or focus groups—can explore citizens’ experiences of popular culture and how such experiences are integrated into their life-worlds.

Finally, I argue that the concept of recognition (Taylor, 1994) offers a key theoretical lens through which we can understand the media experiences discussed above. As shown by Maia (2014) and Nærland (2017), popular culture is an important source of the (mis)recognition of sociopolitical identities. Citizens experience popular culture as mirroring their world-views and lifestyles in ways that valorize their identities vis-à-vis others, engendering feelings of either belonging or rejection. Hence, recognition
emerges as a key inroad to understand how media experiences affect people-elite antagonisms.

References


Humor in political communication has always been about more than bringing fun and entertainment to serious matters. Humor can help to popularize one’s positions or stultify divergent opinions. It can also help to win the hearts of the masses and to wound the image as well as chances of opposing candidates or factions. Especially in the witty guise of satire or parody, humor has long been a channel for voicing critique against social and political elites, as well as for making the hidden truths and impertinences of political normality visible. In that light, “Satire is capable of intervening in social conditioning and enlivening democracy” (Hill, 2013, p. 333). Likewise, political humor is regarded as “helping teach us how to think about political issues and... to understand our role as citizens” (McClennen & Maisel, 2014, p. 31). Therefore, “Scholars should not assume that democracy needs only the right forms of serious public discourse” (Hariman, 2008, p. 248). After all, popular, entertaining means of political expression are also needed in democracies, not only to keep interest in democracy alive but also to make political processes and the abstract implications of policymaking accessible and understood.

According to Haugerud (2013, p. 19), as a form of political humor, satire has effects that “are typically difficult to trace,” though there “can be little doubt that satire can reshape political imaginations in ways dictators and other leaders have long found threatening, and ordinary citizens have found inspiriting.” Whereas the radical or reformist potential of political humor continues to be debated, it has become widely acknowledged as vital to the political imagination and how people make meaning of politics in their daily lives (Haugerud, 2013; Street, 2011). It is thus no wonder that humorous criticism, polemic diatribes, and uncompromising rants are increasingly prominent in the toolboxes of populist political communication and activists, though they are by no means exclusively bound to the populist realm of communication.

In this chapter, we present a perspective on populism and the media focusing on the uses of political humor, especially satire, as a sociable means of spreading invectives and populist worldviews, which normalizes opaque
positions in public discourse or mainstreams them (Cammaerts, 2018; Munn, 2019; Önnerfors, 2017; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018; Wodak, 2018). We develop our argument for the perspective in three steps. First, we describe characteristics of humor as a lubricant or combustive agent for populist communication and highlight the strategic values of using humorous content to cloak political messages. We also elaborate upon why edgy, dark humor can serve as a powerful vessel for disseminating and propagating bigotry, racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and various other forms of hate (Billig, 2001). Humorous media content enables the spread of worldviews and, at the same time, allows audiences to dissociate from it and its potentially offensive character. Second, we discuss the extent to which features of humorous populist communication align neatly with features of digital culture and the dynamics of online realms and communities. Third, departing from there, we address ways and formats of spreading populist humor, especially in digital media environments, by focusing on memes in particular. We conclude the chapter by highlighting some themes with ample potential as to be used in populist humor and satire as well as illuminating how populist humor is fueled by references to popular culture, current affairs, and history.

1. Humor as the Populist’s Glue: Why Humor and Satire are Ripe for Populist Purposes

Using humor to facilitate the dissemination of populist messages and catalyze populist rhetoric is not a new phenomenon. On the contrary, mobilizing edgy humor and irreverent jokes in public speeches or mediated debate has been a longstanding part of populist communication strategies, the most recent iterations of which appear in social media posts. Those humorous expressions, often disguising calculated transgressions of boundaries, help to entertain responsive crowds at speeches and social media followers alike, as well as to stimulate intensive reporting about what was said and its fallout. In those cases, having cloaked offenses as attempts at humor allows discrediting any criticism as an oversensitive reaction by all-too-politically correct nitpickers who won’t let a harmless joke be just that: a joke.

Whereas political humor, even for populists, does not necessarily rely on media coverage, media reports about attempts at humor, either affirmative or critical, help to amplify the reach, potential impact, and attention that such humor enjoys. As researchers have addressed, in the interplay between populist political communication and the media’s responsiveness to
populism (Krämer, 2014; Phillips, 2015), controversial humor provides a prime example of how populist communication strategies can exploit media populism and the logics of the attention economy to their benefit. However, once shared, the original incident or content forms only a part of the communicative dimension of (populist) political humor, because “political humor, wit, satire, parody, and the like is accompanied by periodic commentary,” including reportage on roasts, reviews of comedy or cabaret acts, letters to the editor, or other contemporary forms of user expressions (Hariman, 2008, p. 248). In that sense, making a joke or witty commentary is often just the spark that ignites a broad media fire.

Current means of communication in digital media environments make it easier for citizens, (political) activists, and everyday media users to participate in circulating certain types of messages and in producing or modifying satirical content. That shift, from having to rely on traditional mass media outlets and institutions to being able to engage in decentralized, participatory content production, has opened up possibilities for creating and sharing one’s own satirical content, particularly in ways that circumvent the filters, controls, and critiques of professional media production (Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F., & Büchel, F., 2016; Ernst, N., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Blasnig, S., & Esser, F., 2017). Among such means of content production, social media platforms are often used and available to use for disseminating alternative or populist political positions, for they have the potential to allow straightforward participation and direct forms of communication (Krämer, 2017). Because digital spaces of communication are thus heavily occupied by the communicative efforts of right- and left-wing political groups (Downey & Fenton, 2003), populist parties and groups have established their own social media satellites (Schwarzenegger, 2019) and formed a discursive parallel universe for direct communication with their supporters. By extension, as populists around the world seek to govern media space (Block & Negrine, 2017), they increasingly employ popular communicative strategies such as humor and entertainment to criticize political, media, and economic elites and, in the process, position themselves against an alleged establishment or mainstream. As a consequence, activist groups from the far political left to the radical right can readily be seen using humorous cartoons, memes, caricatures, and the like to assert as well as conceal their political goals (Doerr, 2017; Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018).

The blatant use of humor by the populist radical right (Betz, 2018), especially in Western societies, continues to perplex academic communities. One reason is the established tradition in research on media and communications, as well as in other fields, of conceiving satire and witty political
commentary as the domain of progressive political groups. Indeed, accord-
ing to some normative conceptualizations, satire is intrinsically progres-
sive, for it gives voice to the politically powerless and oppressed, a classic
segment of the population imagined to be associated with the left. Several
scholars have thus called for a normative assessment of political satire that
appraises its quality according to its pro-democratic effects (Hill, 2013;
Holbert, 2013), and in such normative understandings, right-wing populist
satire would not be conceivable. For the same reason, most communica-
tions studies on political satire have focused on its potential to affect posi-
tive social change at the micro level (e.g., on political attitudes, knowledge,
participation, and engagement) and macro level (e.g., on the public agenda
and on the assertion of alternative political interests). In line with that argu-
mentation, established legacy media satirists are commonly called “so-
cio-critical authorities” (Behrmann, 2002; Simpson, 2003) and “opinion
leaders” in public political discourses (Crittenden, Hopkins, & Simmons,
2011). In some contexts, especially among younger people, satirical media
content is even ascribed greater credibility than classical journalism and
viewed as a trusted, valid source of political information (Feldman, 2007;
Harrington, 2011). As Hill (2013) has observed, a major function of satire
is providing counter-narratives that “challenge a culture’s predominant
sense-making strategies,” which makes the satirical mode an “important
and dangerous weapon for questioning established power structures,” pre-
cisely “because it is capable of creating new insights through the use of hu-
mor” (pp. 328–329).

Particularly within authoritarian regimes across the globe, political
satire has been conceptualized as giving a voice to the powerless and en-
abling various forms of political protest. As a more or less subtle form of
art, political satire has the power to criticize aspects of the political estab-
ishment by concealing its actual political purpose. Research on political
satire as a vehicle for political protest and social change has been investi-
gated in countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Belarus, Ukraine, India, Iran,
and Lebanon (El Marzouki, 2015; Ibrahim & Eltantawy, 2017; Kumar,
2015; Miazhevich, 2015; Punathambekar, 2015; Rahimi, 2015; Riegert &
Ramsay, 2012). By providing counter-narratives and counter-discourses to
dominant political narratives conveyed by the allegedly “mainstream” me-
dia, satirical content, especially memes and parody sites on the web and in
social media, are regarded as subversive measures of fighting suppressive
regimes that seek to silence their citizens. Thus, the significance of political
satire as a “vital communicative form” (Punathambekar, 2015, p. 400) for
activism and its “politically subversive effect... [for] social movements glob-
ally” (Kumar, 2015, p. 235) has been emphasized time and again. Miazhe-
vich (2015, p. 422) has even identified “grassroots political satire” as manifesting a “counter hegemonic force.” At the same time, though, satire in democratic Western societies, especially democratic ones, has mostly been observed through an affirming lens. Nevertheless, satire stands as a mode that enjoys special, far-ranging freedoms in terms of expression and in using means of expression that may be deemed offensive or politically incorrect in other contexts. In societies that permit the art form, however, political agendas and their contents can be artfully disguised by using political satire as a trusted, well-informed mode of communication. Beyond that, because humorous, entertaining content appeals to people susceptible to populist communicative strategies (Hameleers et al., 2017), and hence provides a breeding ground for the political objectives of radical activists. After all, digital communication practices and strategies are not bound to certain agendas, and right-wing activists and other alternative groups can easily mobilize satirical strategies to articulate their political messages and slogans.

Despite its immense popularity and widespread use in research, the concept of satire has been described as “notoriously difficult to define” (Yang & Jiang, 2015, p. 216). Nevertheless, a plethora of definitions are readily available, from which three general components of political satire can be identified: criticism or attack, indirectness or play (which can include a humorous style), and reference to a norm or ideal (Brummack, 1971). Beyond that, Simpson (2003) has conceptualized satire as a triadic discursive practice, in which a satirist communicates the critique of a satirical object—the satirized—to an audience—the satiree—with the ultimate goal of winning the audience over to his or her side.

For the same reasons, regardless of confusion about whether they qualify as satire or not, humorous critical interventions using the forms and styles of satire can also be seen as a perfectly fitting means for (right-wing) populist communication. Although an authoritarian, oppressive regime may not be in power in a Western democracy, populist communication strategies propagate the delusion that such might eventually be the case. Most commonly, populist strategies, regardless of their political orientation, comprise the narrative of an oppressed people set against an oppressing establishment (Engesser et al., 2016; Krämer, 2017; Wodak, 2017). Block and Negrine (2017, p. 183) have identified, for example, a “bullying” anti-establishment rhetoric by which populist actors deliberately take an outsider position. In so doing, populist groups assume the position of the powerless and of the oppressed underdog who has to fight against the established system or else advocates for those deprived of their rights by corrupt elites. Thus, in the praxis of populist communication, antielitism,

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people-centrism, and the restoration of allegedly lost sovereignty due to the ill intent of elites together constitute the essential pillars of right- and left-leaning political populism (Ernst et al., 2017). In the same process, a collective group identity and sense of belonging to a community are formed by the accumulated images constructed of the enemy (Wodak, 2017), which, in the case of right-wing populists, often manifests in uninhibited animosity against foreigners and immigrants, who are at odds with the nostalgic ideal of a better past (Betz & Johnson, 2004; Menke & Schwarzenegger, 2016). Along those lines, five prominent populist strategies can be identified—emphasizing the sovereignty of the people, advocating for the people, attacking elites, ostracizing others, and invoking the heartland (Engesser et al., 2016)—all of which can be effectively pursued via irreverence, lampooning, and mockery on and off the internet.

2. Falling on the Fertile Ground of Digital Culture: Populists’ Strategic Uses of Humor in Online Environments

The web is a funny place, in more than only one sense. Although real, genuine fun can be found and had on the internet, a host of confusing, bewildering, even disturbing activities are happening online at the same time. According to Milner (2013), digital culture is “undergirded by a ‘logic of lulz’ that favours distanced irony and critique.” That culture, Milner (2013) explains, often works at the expense of core identity categories such as race and gender to afford participatory collectives the opportunity for detached, dissociated amusement at others’ distress (cf. Makhortykh, 2015; Phillips, 2016). In such a culture of lulz, much of the humor found in as well as produced and shared by online collectives is willfully absurd and offensive. That trend becomes most visible in the subcultural practice of trolling, defined as “using humor and antagonism to rile angry responses and shift the content and tone of the conversations” (Milner, 2013, p. 66). According to Phillips (2019), trolling overlaps with the “nebulous discursive category of internet culture,” which is imagined as being characterized by “overwhelming irony and detached, fetishized laughter.” In sum, following Highfield (2015), we can thus maintain that not everything that happens online is political or aimed at anything other than being fun but at the same time in digital culture “the trivial and political can be easily combined.”

In that sense, the populist political humor that we discuss in this chapter is not exceptional. On the contrary, it neatly amalgamates with cultural practices and communication patterns that have been established apart
from political communication and cannot be subsumed as the work of populists, radical activist groups, or dubious subcultures alone. As mentioned, on the internet populist political communication can find a communicative culture, one that allows derogatory humor for diverse communicative ends, including political agitation, to thrive. At the same time, populist communication is also not exceptional in online media environments but might instead be banal and hence familiar, just as anything else once deemed harmless and fun, and thus be able to easily hijack communicative practices (Phillips, 2019). Understanding the banality of populist online humor could therefore be key to understanding the success of such populist communicative strategies.

In current publications concerned with right-wing populism in Western societies, a perceived rise of controversial, populist dark humor has been heralded as the “recent reactionary turn” (Tuters & Hagen, 2019) in web (sub)culture or as an “extremist turn of the Trump-era internet” (Phillips, 2019). For that reason, Phillips (2019) has argued, the web is no longer a fun place, because it is ostensibly populated with far-right extremism, conspiracy theories, information pollution, and media manipulation. However, was the internet truly a fun, funny place until the alleged turn? Phillips (2019) has helped to clarify that such accounts are characterized by ahistorical presentism and overemphasize the mythologized harmlessness of the so-called “fun” to be had online in the past. The rise of controversial, polarizing humor is thus erroneously discussed as a recent phenomenon, for “exclusionary laughter” (Phillips, 2019) has characterized the internet and meme culture since their advent. Moreover, he writes, a twisted sense of irony, parody, innuendo, and mockery are key elements of digital culture and digital sociability:

The ability to disconnect from consequence, from specificity, from anything but one’s own desire to remain amused forever, kept the ugliness that was always tucked into the folds of internet culture nebulous. At best, it kept the nastiest bits “just”-ed away—at least for the people who got to pick and choose what got to be fun. For those whose identities were targeted and corroded by all that ironic, arm’s length laughter, or whose personal and professional lives were under constant threat, often for the sin of not being a white man in public, the ugliness of the forest wasn’t so easily obscured by the fun of the trees. People tend to see the things that have the potential to harm them. (Phillips, 2019)

Nevertheless, few studies to date have focused on the use of political satire and humor by right-wing activist groups (e.g., Doerr, 2017; Lobinger et al.,
In contribution, we here discuss four modes in which the motivations and tactics of using humor as a communication strategy for populist activism online play out. Although the modes were identified based on studies focusing on right-wing populism in Western democratic societies, they are applicable, at least in principal, to all kinds of populist communication in various contexts.

The first one is in fact not separated from the other three, but still shall be named. The first mode is amplification: using humorous, irreverent means of expression online to increase the reach of and attention to populist frameworks and worldviews. Amplification can boost the visibility and circulation of supposedly funny content and, in that way, allow content to cross boundaries from far-right online enclaves into broader public perception. Second is the mode of adaption, in which political topics are disguised in memes or other humorous web content for the purpose of making political commentary in the guise of a common element of digital culture. Doerr (2017) has investigated the use of adaption in cartoon images ridiculing foreigners by far-right activists in order to forge transnational alliances against immigrants. Among her conclusions, she writes, “With the growing importance of digital and social media, visual images represent an increasingly attractive medium for far-right political entrepreneurs to mobilize supporters and mainstream voters in the context of increasing polarization and widespread fears of immigrants and refugees” (Doerr, 2017, p. 3). Added to that, Weidacher (2019) has investigated the use of sarcastic memes in discourse about the so-called “refugee crisis.” Both studies reveal that populist agitation can dwell and bloom in digital media spaces as well as adapt to its surrounding culture and use the logics and cultural practices typical of digital realms.

For a third mode of populist strategies in online environments, we have identified the appropriation of cultural artifacts and objects. Examining a prominent case in point, Lobinger et al. (2019) reconstructed the journey of Pepe the Frog from being an amusing, harmless internet meme without any political implications to becoming a mascot of the alt-right movement and even a Nazi symbol. In the process of appropriation, Pepe was deprived of his initially innocuous role in digital communication and can no longer be used without triggering references to the self-proclaimed alternative right in the United States. Decontextualized from its original meanings and re-embedded in right-wing agitation, cultural objects such as Pepe become appropriated, and by hijacking symbols and digital objects for political use, populist communication can build upon the previous popularity and familiarity of already established cultural artifacts.
Last, the fourth mode is attraction. Humor in general, satire in particular, and memes as forms of humorous communication allow (right-wing) populist groups to attract users and citizens to their content and, in turn, their political mind-sets. In a paper presented at the 2018 ICA conference in Prague (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2018), we analyzed practices of attraction as “digital political activism in disguise” as well as described links between far-right populist political parties and right-wing satire shared via social media pages and groups. By scrutinizing content on as well as contributors to Facebook pages for groups from Germany, Austria, the United States, and Canada, all ostensibly practicing satire but in fact clearly promoting right-wing politics, we could identify close personal links or continuities between meme sharing and online political outlets more explicit in their topical dedication as well as radicalism. Thus, the same people were partly responsible for the “funny” content as well as the more serious far-right populist communication and purported “analysis and commentary” about current affairs. Whereas the fun content was supposed to attract users to the page or facilitate its own circulation, the commentaries often furnished links to the political platforms, blogs, and groups. Elsewhere, we have described that interrelationship between published content ostensibly supposed to be fun and user comments upon the content as discursive ensembles, which at times propagate populist and extreme positions only when paired (Schwarzenegger & Wagner, 2018).

Attracting users to populist communication and worldviews via edgy humor has been identified as a potentially important access point to a “pipeline of radicalization” (Munn, 2019). In that pipeline, the act of attracting individuals to potentially radical content is described as “redpilling” (Lewis & Marwick, 2017), a reference to the 1999 film The Matrix, in which the protagonist is given the choice to take either a red pill and discover the truth or a blue pill and remain in a manipulative sleep. The term redpilling is also used as shorthand for far-right radicalization, and in far-right circles, one is considered to have been redpilled when he or she starts believing in a truth counterfactual to mainstream belief. Typically, such beliefs take root about a specific topic or experience and spread from there. The doubleness (Highfield, 2015) of humor that is experienced as dark, edgy, and transgressive can be an important catalyst for redpilling. “Irony provides plausible deniability, a key benefit for alt-right initiates within a contested and highly controversial space. Intentions are shrouded online. The distinction between seriousness and satire becomes vague and uncertain” (Munn, 2019). Topinka (2017) has described the dynamic of how hateful humor also allows hiding in plain sight and winkingly dissociating from offensive content. Moreover, while hiding in the open, the
cloaked nastiness of such humor can promote a sense of belonging to a community of connoisseurs who alone can decipher the humorous content accurately. Although humor may obscure the malicious intent of some posts, it does not operate with a difficult-to-break code or jargon accessible only to a core ingroup but instead allows identifying the message, feeling adept, and being privy to somewhat secret concerns.

According to Munn (2019), humor and irony play vital roles in normalizing populist as well as radical political agendas and frameworks. Discussing far-right radicalization as an exemplary case, Munn (2019) explains:

By themselves, concepts like the supremacy of the white race or the solution to the “Jewish Question” are too blunt, too forthright. While red-pillers pride themselves on having uncovered the harsh race-based reality, for those at the beginning of this journey, such overtly racist beliefs are repulsive. This ideology needs to be repackaged in the visual vernacular of the Web: animated GIFs, dumb memes, and clever references. The idea tumbler of the Internet provides the perfect environment for image or language play, for absurd juxtapositions and insider jokes. Impish and jocular, such practices trivialize and thus normalize racism and xenophobia.

Following that clarification, we can again observe how populist political humor in digital media environments is nothing extraordinary but can nevertheless make strategic use of established cultural artifacts and codes as well as embrace them for political purposes. Memes and provocative humor shared online can thus leverage the visibility of agitating content (Lewis & Marwick, 2017), as a result of which “memes are posted, adapted and reposted, being seen again and again” (Munn, 2019). According to Munn (2019), the normalization of certain types of content is followed by a cognitive phase of acclimation, in which “the sheer volume of right-wing content and the velocity at which it is posted ensures that each claim and counterclaim can never be individually assessed”: “Acclimation to one stage establishes a new cognitive baseline for what is acceptable,” Munn (2019) states, which transforms potentially radical political content from a “noticeable glitch to an environmental default.”

As the next and final step down the “pipeline of online radicalization,” Munn (2019) names the dehumanization of others, which legitimates more extreme stances following a “memetic antagonism nebulous othering” (Tuters & Hagen, 2019). It is important to note that engaging with toxic online humor is neither unavoidably contagious nor an inevitable precursor to radicalization or the adoption of a far-right (or far-left) mind-
set on the way to becoming susceptible to political manipulation. However, being attracted by humor with a populist political intention can guide individuals down pathways toward populist communication as well as normalize a certain style of insensitive, belligerent communication as the background of public debate. It should also be observed that research on the uses of humor in digital cultures and contexts of populist communication makes it uncomfortably clear that offensive content is often considered to be funny not despite of but because of the fact that it is offensive, dark and sometimes even openly hateful. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that some users participate in digital communication partly because they have ghoulish goals or, following Quandt (2018), are wicked actors with sinister motives and despicable objectives in communicating with others online. In our view, it is thus vital to comprehend the consequences of redpilling, not only concerning its influence on the composition and potential reconfiguration of the media and information repertoire of individuals but also on (digital) political communication culture at large.

3. Forms and Formats of Populist Humor: The Prominent Example of Memes

So far, we have argued that humor in general and satire in particular, as combustive agents and lubricants of populist communication, seamlessly connect with so-called “internet culture,” which often demonstrates the use of dark irony, silliness, and parody as approaches to understanding any serious topic, including political ones. According to Highfield (2015), the parody or mockery of all kind of matters and important topics for the sake of fun has become part of the fabric of internet culture. From a more general perspective, Hariman (2008) has argued that “parody and related forms of political humor are essential resources for sustaining public culture” (p. 248).

Even so, in what topics and forms does edgy political humor typically manifest? The short, simple answer is that nearly everything can become a topic that is lampooned or made into an object of political humor. After all, and as mentioned, not everything online intended to be fun is about politics, though the topics typical of particular accounts can easily relate to political topics. For an example Ferrari (2018) has discussed the fraudulent fake accounts and practices of individuals engaged in political faking, as an activist intervention in which users impersonate politicians in order to criticize their politics (Ferrari, 2018). Although such fake or parody accounts can be read as humorous, even and subversive political interventions. However, depending on who uses the mechanism for what goals, in so do-
ing gradually draws a thin line between critical intervention versus political agitation. In other words, fake accounts can be a means of online populism but does not have to be. Vice versa, parody accounts can be a stimulating resource for public debate and diversified online discourse; however, they can also be stealth vessels of political malice. In general, parody accounts represent an inventory of social media environments; though topical political content may not form the majority of a parody account’s tweets, the posts can appeal to a wider audience and attract more attention than everyday tweets (Highfield, 2015). While not all parody accounts remain relevant or attract large audiences, their continued presence on the internet reinforces the popularity of humor, play, and silliness online, including as devices for presenting topical comments (Highfield, 2015).

According to Highfield (2015), Western politics—particularly UK and US politics, though such emphasis may be due to the sample and approach used—ranks among the major topics of parody accounts on Twitter aside from popular culture and celebrity news, and all three topical realms are often linked. More somber news topics, however, were not identified as a dominant part of regular parody accounts on Twitter (Highfield, 2015). That circumstance may identify accounts that use parody as an active strategy to propel serious and somber topics or to critically comment on political or cultural elites.

Even more significantly than being a culture of parodies, online digital culture is a memetic one, in which humorous political memes enjoy ever increasing attention (Bülow & Johann, 2019). In general, memes reuse, modify, and reinterpret content from popular sources. In the context of political communication, they are seen as a means of political commentary and are widely discussed for their potential to promote emancipatory political participation in the digital sphere. In that context, they often are considered to be an increasingly widespread form of “vernacular creativity” (Milner, 2013) or “vernacular criticism” (Literat & van den Berg, 2017) making “ordinary voices” visible, being easily circulated means of political participation, articulation and persuasion (Shifman, 2014). When used by political populist groups or radical activist ones, the humorous expression of hate and political propaganda are exactly what make it easier to swallow the “bitter pill” (Pérez, 2017).

Because internet memes continue to be dismissed as mischief, nonsense (Katz & Shifman, 2017), or a harmless, funny online phenomenon, they conceal their political potential to amplify, adapt, appropriate, and attract to populist voices. In that way, visually communicated humor can become a highly efficient but also difficult-to-criticize tool for conveying controversial topics (Shifman & Lemish, 2011, p. 253). Memes often use a technique
that can be described as “calculated ambivalence” (Engel & Wodak, 2009)—that is, when a controversial visual text conveys ambiguous messages and thus becomes open to multiple readings that can subsequently be used to reject any responsibility for a misunderstood message. The lack of an explicit propositional syntax for the comprehension of memes may actually be one of their fundamental strengths when containing images used as a means of political propaganda (Hawhee & Messaris, 2009; Messaris & Abraham, 2001).

Political memes also often use metaphors, which prompt “an audience to compare two unlike images and laugh at the comparison,” which requires users to “understand both images of a comparison, and consequently, the images used must be easily understood” (Dagnes, 2012, p. 17). In turn, that dynamic can contribute to the sense of belonging and the formation of a community, as described above, because individuals who know how to decipher a metaphor tend to feel that they share a skill or trait that differentiates them from others. The feeling of belonging to and being accepted by a community can be even more important for participating in online communities and digital practices than the actual topics or content through which communities bond. In a recent study, Schwarzenegger (2020) found that when asked why they use certain media, users of purportedly “alternative media,” but in fact populist media, frequently referred not to political orientation but to the sense of belonging and the coziness of the communities they find around these media and their affiliated discussion forums or social media groups.

Although nearly every topic can be lampooned and addressed in an overly ironic way in digital cultures, memes typically reuse, remix, and reframe content from a pool of cultural references, and the same is true for their use in populist communication. We have already discussed the strategy of appropriation of cultural objects, which is an especially common motive in using memes, whose very nature is to be decontextualized and recontextualized in a new thematic setting. In other work, Wagner, Schwarzenegger, Brantner, and Lobinger (2019) have analyzed the cultural reservoirs that right- and left-wing political groups from Germany, Austria, and the United States refer to in their social media communication. Among their results, they found that memes originating from typical pools of memetic culture, with references to popular culture (e.g., superhero franchises, Star Wars, and games), current affairs, and history, had been used by left- and right-wing populists alike. In many instances, multiple topical pools had been combined—for example, ascribing to historical figures such as Hitler or Stalin, either of which frequently appears in media from both political camps, superhero powers or illustrating the Russian
Revolution in Star Wars fashion as “Tsar Wars”). As a field of reference, history was especially mobilized for propagating populist agendas. Wagner et al. (2019) found that strategies of using the past include the reinterpretation or revisionism of historical events and the re-evaluation of historical figures and personalities. On top of that, downplaying historical events by relating history to current events was another strategy, as was dramatizing current events by relating them to dramatic events from the past.

History is often used to project an idealized past that must be defended or restored—in the case of far-right groups, via conservative, restorative, anti-liberal politics. World War II (Makhortykh, 2015) is central to many historical references, albeit not such that, for instance, the radical right emphasizes the Third Reich, which would be too obvious and trivial. On the contrary, memes shared by right-wing populists frequently refer to the values and virtues that Allied soldiers represented in their fight to free Europe, now claimed to lie on the altar of liberal politics. Common threats to the once-safeguarded Europe can readily be seen in a so-called “Muslim invasion” following the right-wing extremist narrative of the Great Replacement. Memes can also juxtapose the virtues of the past with today’s hedonism and decadence, represented in homophobic tropes. In terms of historical personalities, however, references are typically made to oppressive figures, either as a threat or an ideal, not to positive historical figures, and history in general is cast as a boogeyman for the purposes of fearmongering.

4. A Populism of Lulz: The Dark and Light Sides of Humor

In all sorts of populist political communication, humor, satire, parody, and irony allow individuals to espouse particular views, normalize certain ways of thinking, and articulate critiques under the protective cloak of “calculated ambivalence”—that is, sharing a position while denying identification with it. In this chapter, we have sought to clarify that types of political humor are building blocks of democratic discourse and take many forms beyond the realm of populism. Whether lampooning events and persons or making irreverent jokes serves democratic ends or is used for populist demagogy remains a question about the gradual difference or communicative intentions pursued with a particular communicative act. At the same time, wit, parody, and over-the-top comparisons as means of expression cannot be prohibited for use by legitimate political groups. Sharing their particular sense of humor or political orientation can’t define whether their attempts on humor are legitimate or not.

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From our perspective, the arguments presented here suggest different avenues for future research. For instance, from a normative standpoint, much of what comes in the guise of ironic critique may not qualify as satire or gregarious political humor but as agitation and defamation. More conceptual and empirical work is needed, however, to elaborate upon the differences and commonalities between either form of political humor. Normativity is important for providing orientation and evaluating the potential impacts and consequences of particular uses of humor. After all, positive political campaigns as well as malevolent agitation both amalgamate efficiently with general features of digital culture. Thus, following Quandt (2018), research cannot be guided only by its aspiration for positive humor on “the light side” and to vilify the temptations of “the dark side.” Instead of focusing exclusively on either side, it is important for researchers to understand how media users and citizens make sense of both sides while navigating digital space and to comprehend the shades of gray that come to color their political views.

When discussing pathways to online radicalization, researchers have recently stressed the role of platforms and their algorithms—for example, YouTube’s role in directing users into increasingly more extreme spheres of communication and confronting them with politically radical content. Although the role of platforms and their technological affordances clearly form an important part of the conversation, looking for only “the devil in the machine,” so to speak, will barely illuminate part of the picture. The broader topic, as we have tried to make clear in this chapter, should be how a “populism of lulz” resonates with everyday media lives as part of an everyday digital culture which is part of our nowadays social habitat.

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Pepe – Just a Funny Frog?
A Visual Meme Caught Between Innocent Humor, Far-Right Ideology, and Fandom

Katharina Lobinger, Benjamin Krämer, Rebecca Venema & Eleonora Benecchi

In 2016, a frog became one of the most famous “faces” in the debate on right-wing, sexist and hate-inciting communication. “Pepe the Frog,” a cartoon character created by Matt Furie in 2005 that later turned into a popular online meme, became a subject of heated debates when the Alt-Right and white supremacy movements began to increasingly use it for their purposes. The controversial meme received broad public attention during the 2016 US election campaign, a campaign that was characterized as the “most-memed election” so far (Heiskanen, 2017).

Already, this brief introduction to Pepe’s “biography” underlines the complexity of the Pepe the Frog phenomenon, a challenging and polarizing digital object which, at the same time, is a rich resource for understanding how social media users engage with cultural products on different digital platforms. Pepe is a prototypical example of such a digital object, as it demonstrates the ambivalent nature of online participation, creativity, and fandom; it uses and transforms visual symbolism, and, most importantly in the present context, it has become politicized due to its association with right-wing ideologies. This political layer of a meme shows how right-wing ideologies with and without an emphasis on populism are expressed, overlap and cross-fertilize online. Pepe is just one example from a whole nexus of far-right memes that are often born in a non-political realm, inspired for instance by popular culture (such as the blue and red pill from the film *The Matrix*) or historical references (such as the battles of Thermopylae or Tours), but are occasionally appropriated for political purposes.

In this chapter, we discuss the case of Pepe from various theoretical angles. Aiming to provide a multidimensional and differentiated perspective, we seek to bridge approaches from fan studies, online communication, visual communication, and political communication. Using the example of Pepe, we discuss selected aspects that we consider essential for furthering the understandings of the complex entanglement of current online popular (sub)cultures, politics and (right-wing) ideologies. These aspects in-
clude the contexts of circulation of memes among communities (which we conceptualize as fan communities), platforms and mainstream media, and the subversive strategies of demarcation and interpretation within user communities that refer to different varieties of right-wing ideologies.

Particular emphasis is put on the visual form of memetic communication and its implications for meaning-making, criticizing, offending and defending. So far, definitions of hate speech (see, e.g., Herz & Molnar, 2012) have mainly focused on the textual level, in terms of written or spoken language. The example of Pepe the Frog, however, prototypically illustrates that degradation and inciting communication must also be discussed when occurring in visual form (see Lobinger, Venema, Krämer, & Benecchi, 2019, for a more detailed discussion of the problem of visual hate speech and related normative challenges concerning Pepe).

When it comes to the classification of the “Nazi frog” and its supporters, we witnessed a lack of critical debate about who contributed to the transformation of Pepe for which reasons. In the media coverage, the corresponding users were generally put into a “basket of deplorables” (Hillary Clinton). However, the perspectives of fan studies and research on far-right ideologies—as different as these traditions may be—underscore the need for a more differentiated approach that is sensitive to the various and often subversive strategies of demarcation as well as to the ambivalent interpretations by different groups of users that contribute to the memetic diffusion of Pepe for different reasons.

Engaging with Pepe the Frog in research is also linked to several, quite complicated (and also ambivalent) ethical considerations. In the following, our reflections and decisions, but also our struggles, are made transparent. Usually, reflections like these are to be found in the conclusion and discussion section of papers. However, we argue that ethical reflections regarding the analysis of divergent and bigoted visual communication are essential and should frame the whole theoretical and empirical work.

First of all, reproducing problematic visual expressions (such as racist memes), even in critical research, risks amplifying and therefore contributing to the circulation of these visual symbols and arguments, potentially contributing to the normalization of these expressions (Phillips & Milner, 2017). One solution might be not to examine discourses of this kind at all. But this would make it basically impossible for researchers to engage in interventions and thus to actively participate in the public debate on controversial issues. In our view, ignoring them can thus not be the answer. Then, the problem of amplification is particularly challenging for qualitative visual analysis that needs to delve into the visual characteristics and aesthetics of visual discourses and usually needs to show the examined vi-
visual objects to guarantee transparency within the analytical process. For the aim of this paper, we decided to take a middle path. To avoid contributing to the circulation and amplification of single problematic memetic elements, we will not reproduce Nazi Pepe memes. We will instead just depict the “original Pepe” and provide a detailed critical verbal description of Pepe and its many uses instead.

Second, a further ethical risk is to overlook the polyvocality of a memetic discourse (see e.g., Milner, 2013a). We want to underscore that—of course—we condemn racist, xenophobic and sexist utterances. But considering elements like Pepe problematic elements does not mean that they are all the same. Rather, a closer examination of the heterogeneous (visual) voices and the different uses of Nazi Pepe is needed to advance knowledge about these practices. We believe that this differentiation is necessary to identify counter-strategies and to allow for detailed criticism that addresses the various problematic and antagonistic issues instead of stigmatizing and stereotyping all users and usages. In the discussion of the case, we will thus pay particular attention to different voices and meanings within the memetic expressions related to Pepe the Frog. In order to achieve this, we will discuss the case from various theoretical angles.

The paper starts with an overview of the development and transformation of Pepe from its creation in 2005, to its use in the 2016 US election campaign, its death in 2017 and to the tentative efforts to resurrect the frog and its positive image. Subsequently, we discuss why the visual features of Pepe made it a successful meme and how the visual mode at the same time helps to shield problematic uses from criticism. We then discuss the meme from the perspectives of political communication (in particular concerning far-right ideologies) and fan studies—two complementary perspectives that, taken together, allow for deepening the understanding of the different practices and strategies behind the use of symbols like Pepe.

1. **Meme History. How Pepe the Frog Became a Hate Symbol**

“Pepe the Frog” was created by Matt Furie in 2005 as an anthropomorphic “peaceful frog-dude” for the comic series “Boy’s Club.” In early 2008, a comic in which Pepe pulls his pants down to his ankles to urinate and his characteristic phrase “Feels good man” were popularized on the image-board 4chan (see figure 1). It was this reaction image that started the memetic spread of Pepe.
One of the most successful reaction memes to the original Pepe drawing in 2008.

In 2014, Pepe was increasingly shared through profile pages on the main social media platforms; on June 13, the Tumblr blog “PepeTheFrogBlog” was created, followed by the “Pepe the Frog” Instagram profile on July 23, and a Facebook account on December 7. Pepe also got its own subreddit /r/pepethefrog for content featuring the frog character. In sum, Pepe circulated within diverse contexts, communities, and online groups, acquiring new and heterogeneous layers of meaning. Many variations of the meme became rather esoteric, resulting in the phenomenon of so-called “rare Pepes” (ADL, 2016). This variety of uses underscores the importance of situating examinations of the uses and meanings of the meme in its respective contexts.

Pepe the Frog was gradually connected to a Nazi and white supremacy iconography on the controversial /r9k/ board on 4chan. Together with the association of Pepe with Trump, Pepe also found its way into mainstream media. And it is at this point that /r9K/ users started to spread Pepe memes on Twitter under the hashtag #FrogTwitter.

The first association between Trump and racist Pepe is registered on July 22, 2015. The picture shows Pepe with a Trumpian hairstyle “overlooking a fence at the U.S.-Mexican border holding back sad Mexicans” (Know Your Meme, 2016). The Malaysian artist Maldraw published the image in the 4chan board /pol/ (Politically Incorrect). From the categorization itself, it is apparent that the artist was well aware of the political implications of the visual juxtaposition.

Figure 1. One of the most successful reaction memes to the original Pepe drawing in 2008.

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“Pepe-Trump” reached its full popularity in October 2015, when Donald Trump tweeted the image with the slogan “you can’t stump the Trump” and connected it to the video parody “Can’t Stump the Trump (Volume 4)”. From this point on, the Alt-Right movement adopted Pepe as a symbol. The media corroborated this interpretation, which culminated in the publication of an article in The Daily Beast titled “How Pepe the Frog became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right symbol” (Nuzzi, 2016). The article included an interview with Twitter user @JaredTSwift, identified as an “anonymous white nationalist,” who asserted that there was a “campaign to reclaim Pepe from normies” by creating antisemitic illustrations of the frog character. However, the development and spread of “Nazi Pepe” are far more complex than it appears from this description. Indeed, on September 14, The Daily Caller published an interview with @PaulTown and @JaredTSwift in which they admitted that the claim that Pepe was intentionally transformed into a white supremacist symbol by the Alt-Right movement—an argumentation that was then taken up by mainstream media—was based on false information they had spread.

This self-disclosure was accompanied by a mockery of the reaction. This mockery was particularly amplified on diverse subreddits (/r/cringe, /r/politics, /r/OutOfTheLoop, /r/KotakuInAction, /r/4chan, and /r/The_Donald). Redditors accused politicians, especially Hillary Clinton and the mainstream media, of failing to understand the Pepe meme and its dynamics. A brief intermediate summary of this criticism could read as follows: “no single group or ideology has ownership of the Pepe meme” (Klee, 2016). In September 2016, an article published on Hillary Clinton’s campaign website described Pepe as a symbol associated with white supremacy and antisemitism and denounced Trump’s campaign for its supposed promotion of the meme.

Despite attempts to “save Pepe” from a right-wing political affiliation, Pepe’s path towards the Alt-Right and white supremacists’ roots and imaginary proved to be inevitable. So much that on September 19, one of the strongest public voices against the connection of Pepe and white supremacists, Louise Mensch, founder of the news and commentary website Heat Street wrote: “Hillary Clinton is absolutely right, ‘Pepe’ meme is antisemitic” (Mensch, 2016). Indeed, by September 26, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) had added Pepe the Frog to its list of hate symbols even though they acknowledged that many Pepe the Frog memes are not bigoted in nature (ADL, 2016). All controversy notwithstanding, it must not be forgotten that Pepe also continues to be an innocent and funny meme in many other places on the web.
There were many efforts to reclaim Pepe, such as the legal battle carried forward by Pepe’s creator Matt Furie, who, with the help of his publisher Fantagraphics, issued several takedown notices against Alt-Right commentators he accused of stealing his work (Furie, 2016). Furie also launched a #SavePepe hashtag campaign to create and share positive images of the frog. Despite the participation of the ADL, diverse media and parallel positive hashtag campaigns such as #RainOfFrogs, these efforts were unsuccessful. Indeed in 2017, Matt Furie decided to “kill Pepe,” publishing a comic strip on his Tumblr in which Pepe is shown lying in a casket at his funeral. Furie included a link to an article on Comic Book Resources that declared the character’s demise (Manning, 2017, see figure 2) but later announced Pepe’s resurrection to counter the ongoing appropriation of Pepe by extremists.

Figure 2. Pepe the Frog is laid to rest. Image by Matt Furie / Tumblr

2. Memes and Visual Creative Political Participation

Pepe the Frog is a very successful meme in terms of circulation and adaptation and needs to be discussed with respect to previous uses of memes for political participation or political and social critique (see the analyses of e.g., Milner, 2013a; Mina, 2014). Later on, memes have been defined as digital items that are not just passed on and shared, but that are remixed, altered and thus produced or co-produced by multiple users (e.g., Shifman 2013, 2014). Memes are an increasingly widespread form of “vernacular
creativity” (Burgess, 2006; Milner 2013b; Miltner, 2014) or “vernacular criticism” (Literat & van den Berg, 2017) that makes “ordinary voices” (see e.g., Burgess, 2006) visible. Indeed, they were discussed as emancipatory examples of political participation in the online sphere, in particular, related to issues of sexism (e.g., in #distractinglysexy) or opposition to capitalism (“We are the 99%” and “Occupy Wall Street”). But memes are also very popular for the expression of hate on the web, and several platforms like 4chan have become arenas for the creation, exchange, and spread of hate memes (Hine et al., 2017).

Usually, the power of memes lies in the links that are created between the single element and the broader memetic narrative. Intertextuality is thus a key aspect of remix and meme culture (Miltner, 2014). To be identified as being a part of the same meme, the single elements need to share recognizable common features or aesthetic commonalities, which can be a certain visual style, a recurring motif or a topic expressed in similar manners or with similar keywords. By creating intertextual references to existing memes (Miltner, 2014) and the platforms on which they are disseminated, users can express and perform their belonging to these communities and their values.

Memes represent a form of vernacular online communication that needs to be addressed from a perspective of visual communication research. Usually, memes are not only highly visual (Milner, 2013a) but also humorous (Shifman, 2012), and this combination might lead to the underestimation of memes. This is particularly relevant in the field of political participation online. Memes are wrongly or superficially described as just “nonsense” (Katz & Shifman, 2017), mere “internet funnies” or “something funny on the web” (Brantner, Lobinger, Stehling, 2017), which disregards the power and the capacity of communicating ideologies in a way that is at the same time highly efficient and difficult to grasp. This challenge is not a new one; it has just surfaced again in the recent wake of increasingly visual and humorous forms of online communication in the political context and in discourses about sexism and misogyny. For example, Shifman and Lemish (2011, p. 253) have shown that popular internet humor is a “powerful vehicle for naturalization of so-called ‘universal’ stereotypes about gender differences.” And particularly when presented in humorous ways, radical, aggressive or even brutal contents are partly masked and made (more) acceptable (Turton-Turner, 2013; Förster & Brantner, 2016; Potter & Warren, 1998).

Pepe – Just a Funny Frog?
The abovementioned problem is complicated when problematic worldviews are expressed in visual form. Due to the associative nature of the visual mode (see e.g., Müller & Özcan, 2007) and the “lack” of a propositional syntax, claims that are expressed in visual form are considered to be vague and ambiguous, and thus also open to various conflicting readings. This makes visual claims and arguments difficult to verbalize and to criticize. Hawhee and Messaris (2009) argue that the lack of an explicit propositional syntax might thus actually be one of the strengths of images when used for persuasion as the vagueness and polysemy of visual communication is also a challenge to criticism. This does not mean that arguments cannot be made visually and those visual arguments cannot be examined in detail. Rather, Richardson and Wodak (2009) suggest offering several interpretations that can be made based on visually presented claims and arguments. This also means focusing on how and with which strategies these positions are communicated visually. Moreover, they argue that contextual information is essential for understanding the different readings that can be created. Based on this analysis that acknowledges ambivalences, plausible interpretations might be differentiated from less plausible ones. In the case of Pepe, this means that not only the visual contents need to be examined to unveil the implicitly and associatively made visual arguments. This approach also requires a detailed examination of the contexts of circulation, intertextual references to other meme elements, the used platforms and also the accompanying verbal information.

To challenge the classification of Pepe as hate speech, it has also been argued that images cannot constitute hate speech because they do not possess a propositional syntax and a sufficiently precise grammar that would allow for such a classification. This claim is based on the abovementioned problematic assumption that images cannot make arguments. We argue that expressions of racist or misogynist views should not be able to escape moral criticism by simply referring to a logocentric definition of hate speech. Just as the meaning of language ultimately lies in the practices of its use and the conventions of signification, a visual symbol also receives its meanings from the historically evolving usage. And Aikat (2006) argues that hate symbols are particularly powerful because of their ability to convey meaning, intent, and significance in a compact, immediately recognizable form. Paradoxically, part of the “power” of visuals thus lies in the fact that they are so difficult to grasp verbally and to make “explicit.” Research conducted by Mina (2014) illustrates how activists use multimodal memes to slip censorship. The activist messages were embedded and hidden within...
in representations of cute cats and in amateur media expressions. Similarly, the message of showing Pepe as a grinning Jew in front of the destroyed World Trade Center appears to be “softened” or masked when expressed in a visual and humorous way or when combined with pop-cultural elements. Pepe the Frog is thus an example that shows how racist ideology and conspiracy theories can be embedded and associatively integrated into funny memetic communication.

The combination of visuals and humor has also been powerful in the context of offline media, and we can learn a lot from these examples. For example, Brantner and Lobinger (2014) have examined comic books that were used for strategic political communication during an election campaign in Vienna, Austria. In these comic books, political opponents were visually represented as drunken cowards, as cocaine-consuming Nazi zombies, and migration topics were put in context with the Turkish Siege of Vienna. Journalists, experts and scientists criticized the comics harshly. The main criticism was that the comics were inciting violence, that they were promoting xenophobia and that they were using negative campaigning strategies and depicting political opponents in unfairly offensive ways.

A closer look at the arguments by the politicians responsible for the publication of the comic books reveals an important similarity with the case of Pepe: Their defense strategy was to portray the criticism as not valid or as exaggerated by denying the ideological power of innocent and funny comic portrayals and by arguing that it was just a form of “controversial humor” (Franks, 2011). Quite similar arguments can be found for countering criticism relating to Pepe (see below).

Here, visual research is challenged and needs to better explain that visually expressed arguments can also be extracted and be subject to critique. Otherwise, there will be no remedy for masking ideological claims with visual elements and humor, and funny memes can continue to make hate lovable, to aestheticize racism by using and remixing seemingly innocent visual elements from pop culture with right-wing ideologies (Stanovsky, 2017).

In the case of Pepe, the underlying discriminatory worldview can only be uncovered by analyzing the related contexts and practices that have contributed to establishing its conventional—albeit not exclusive—meaning.
From a political communication perspective, we may ask how we can understand the creation, modification, and sharing of a meme as a form of political practice that reveals a particular ideology. For the present purpose, we simply define ideologies as systems of belief concerning the current and ideal state of society and the practical implication of these diagnostic and utopian views (see e.g., Mannheim, 1929).

White supremacy, the Alt-Right (Neiwert, 2017), the New Right (Nouvelle Droite, Neue Rechte, etc., Griffin, 2000; Weiß, 2017), and right-wing populism (Betz & Johnson, 2004; Wodak, 2015) are different, yet intersecting and historically partly interconnected ideologies and movements of the extreme right that have recently joined forces in their support of the presidency of Donald Trump. Equivalents, however, can also be found in other countries. The underlying ideology is based on the conception of “the people” as a culturally, ethnically, racially and/or religiously homogeneous community which is to be protected from hostile outgroups. In the populist varieties of right-wing ideologies, it is also assumed that “the people” is governed by a corrupt elite that has lost its representative legitimacy (see De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017 on the discursive construction and articulation of these two oppositions). Advocates of this worldview then demand the restoration of the people’s sovereignty and the forceful implementation of its will. Other representatives of right-wing movements hold a more elitist view of their role in society. They consider themselves a right-wing avant-garde whose function is to slowly shape discourses and persistently work towards a national awakening while, at present, the general population is deluded by the liberal and left-wing propaganda of the ruling elite.

An understanding of these interpretational patterns associated with right-wing ideologies facilitates an interpretation of certain practices involving Pepe the Frog. In the following, we will show how they correspond to these worldviews, most particularly with those by the Alt-Right and by right-wing populists.

These ideologies assume that free speech is no longer guaranteed due to the exaggerated political correctness that comes with a “censorship” of right-wing discourses by mainstream media and politicians, social media corporations, and other elite groups (Cammaerts, 2018). If right-wing discourses are categorized as “hate speech,” then combining and spreading memes such as Pepe the Frog with extremist symbols can be presented as an act of resistance, in particular by supporters of the Alt-Right.
Radical right-wing actors often make use of strategic ambiguity in their public communication (Wodak, 2015, pp. 12-13). Supporters can decode the message in a radical way, but this interpretation can also be denied, in particular, if the messages are based on polysemic visual symbolism, as discussed above. Representatives of the political mainstream or minorities are then criticized as being overly sensitive and unable to cope with criticism and contradictory opinions. Similarly, anxious and contemptuous reactions to Pepe are ridiculed and described as an overreaction, underlining this with the cynical argument that the frog is just an “ordinary” cartoon character or a humorous visual element that cannot be taken seriously.

In what they consider to be a struggle for hegemony, some right-wing movements have not only appropriated some of the concepts and strategies of the left (such as the concept of hegemony itself) but also lifestyle elements and cultural symbols. Likewise, taking Pepe away from the “normies” and re-defining a seemingly random figure into a symbol of extreme ideologies (Neiwert, 2017) constitutes a demonstration of power and the success of such appropriation strategies. Thus, Pepe is both a “normal” cartoon character and an extremist symbol, a strategically or almost cunningly ambiguous icon.

However, it may be argued that it has not been selected completely at random. Certainly, the extreme right has also tried to appropriate historical figures of “the West” (in particular those who can be constructed as fighting against enemies of the “Occident,” such as Charles Martel or the Spartans) and use more recent cultural symbolism to affirm their freedom and will toward truth (such as the abovementioned “red pill” from the film *The Matrix*). However, those who post images of Pepe seem to identify themselves with an ugly, male frog who pulls down his pants to urinate, saying, “feels good man.” We can interpret this as the expression of an internet subculture that celebrates the “loser” and the joy of provoking others. These two traits have partly merged with the Alt-Right movement and its anti-feminist, misogynic and anti-minority discourse and iconography. Just as some on the political right have adopted pejorative labels, such as “deplorables,” and transformed them into a source of pride, the identification with Pepe might be another way to paradoxically affirm and celebrate one’s social and political status as an outsider who is both superior and a (positively connotated) “loser.” At least, members of this subculture can feel empowered by the victory of Donald Trump and their momentary victories in the acts of trolling.

Hine and colleagues (2017) particularly underscore the difficulties in distinguishing hate speech from sarcasm or forms of “trolling.” Internet “trolling” is a term that refers to “any form of abuse carried out online for
the pleasure of the person causing the abuse or the audience to which they are trying to appeal” (Bishop, 2013). Trolling prototypically underscores the ambivalence of online behavior (see e.g., Phillips & Milner, 2017). Often, trolling is used for the description of online behavior with “playful or at least performative intent” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 8). This complicates attempts to criticize and contest divergent expression. Regarding Pepe, this means, first of all, to be careful not to put a label on certain cases of online behavior too fast. Instead, it is important to closely examine the single practices and address their “underlying tone, behavioral and aesthetic characteristics” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 8).

“Trolling” often has a connotation of provocation for its own sake without any real conviction that could be conveyed. However, in the case of Pepe, the distinction between authentic political messages and pure provocation partly breaks down: that this type of provocation works and should be possible is the political message.

5. Fan Scholarship

If we observe the media and public reaction to the neo-Nazi incarnation of Pepe the Frog, we are inevitably confronted with negative stereotypes of obsessive and radical behavior. In particular, people who transformed Pepe into a “Nazi Trump supporter and Alt-Right symbol” are labeled as “fans” of white supremacy and political figures perceived as an incarnation of radical and extremist ideas, such as Donald Trump (Nuzzi, 2016). The analysis of these communities of people usually stops once they are labeled by using a generic and negatively connoted version of the term “fan.”

This labeling obscures the fact that even inside fan communities, behaviors and participatory practices are manifold and complex. Not all members of the fan community of Pepe are members of a far-right community, and the ethnic community that is constructed by far-right ideologies is not coextensive with the community that can understand and appreciate the meaning of Pepe as a meme and an object of fandom.

The tendency of the media to portray mainly the “dark side” of fandom is well documented (Bennet & Booth, 2016, Van den Bulck et al., 2016), and it took quite some effort in the field of fan studies to dismantle the automatic association of fandom with pathology (Jenson, 1992). As summarized by Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007), the second wave of fan studies specifically addressed this tendency to pathologize fans by focusing mainly on the pleasures and upsides of fandoms. Even though the third wave of research also addressed different or overlooked types of fans, such
as anti-fans and non-fans (Gray, 2003), there is still a certain degree of caution in giving attention to fans of challenging objects. While occasionally problematic fans have been subject to analyses, they are often framed as “excluded, bullied, murderous, and lost” (Hari, 2004).

Pepe the Frog is an excellent example of a controversial object of fandom, and it helps to raise a series of crucial and overlooked questions about our role as both researchers of popular culture and participants in the same communities and cultures we are investigating.

We cannot simply characterize all fans of problematic objects as problematic people because the online practices of these people do not necessarily translate or inform their identity. In his exploration of the Columbine massacre fandom, for instance, Rico (2015) discovered that problematic fandom was, in fact, comparable to other more conventional fandoms: they showed similar online behaviors, characterized by a high degree of productivity and a willingness to share materials connected to the fan object; their interactions inside the fan communities showed positive traits, such as a tendency to support one another and protect the community from external attacks. By observing the Reddit communities around Pepe, even in its more controversial incarnations, we can recognize the same traits described by Rico (2015) concerning the Columbine fandom. Indeed, Redditors often mocked politicians and media for failing to understand the Pepe meme and its uses within the online community. Chen (2012) also noted that “nothing brings a fandom together better than their weird passion being mocked by outsiders.”

In his analysis, Rico (2015) also showed that the type of fan behavior that has been labeled as “controversial” or even “dark” may sometimes be rooted in attention-seeking rather than in genuine interest. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the Nazi controversy around Pepe the Frog. As already discussed, the basis of The Daily Beast report responsible for launching the idea that Pepe had been transformed into a white supremacist symbol by fans and members of the Alt-Right movement was fabricated by two Twitter pranksters. This behavior resembles the one described in Phillips’ (2011) analysis of trolling Facebook memorial groups (RIP trolling); individuals may participate in the problematic Nazi Pepe fandom to be a part of something that incites reactions from the public.

Fan studies have always attempted to avoid making moral judgments about why people behave in particular ways, aiming instead to understand the contexts of practices. This approach could help to understand how and by whom Nazi Pepe was created and spread, as it sensitizes for the perspective and motivations of those involved in the creation and circulation of controversial versions of Pepe the Frog. When talking about controversial
fan objects, we should also take into account the existence of fans who enjoy problematic content, such as Nazi Pepe memes, but have a hard time reconciling it with their values.

Moreover, we also need to acknowledge that there is a dark side of fandom. This has been established in the seminal studies by Chen (2012), who examined the fandom surrounding James Holmes, the Aurora movie theater shooter who killed 12 people, and by Rico (2015), who studied the fans of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who murdered 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

A thorough analysis of practices involving Pepe across platforms and political (or apolitical) contexts may reveal the activities in which it receives its specific meanings as well as the commonalities between “dark” and other forms of fandom: the time and effort spent with the object of fandom, including the collection of artifacts (more recently including digital ones such as “rare Pepes”) and the rejection of certain ways of appropriating and exploiting the object of fandom; the pride of being an expert of the (growing) popularity of the object; the sense of community among fans and the feeling of being misunderstood by the larger public.

Studying problematic fan communities should not be interpreted as a defense of these fandoms. Rather it should be intended as a means to expand the analytical focus of studying participatory practices and as a fruitful approach towards a detailed analysis of extremist and other problematic groups. Pepe the Frog in its Nazi incarnation is a crucial expression of digital culture and online fan culture specifically because it obliges us to question our current selection of cases we are keen to explore.

6. Conclusion

In our attempt to understand the phenomenon of Pepe the Frog and its political and normative implications, we have discussed it as a particular entity—a meme—and as a part of corresponding practices of online visual political expression and as an expression of a specific group of ideologies. We argued that one cannot simply escape the criticism of communication acts as hate speech by referring to their visual character. As visual communication research and its long tradition have shown continuously, images acquire and convey meaning due to their own “visual logic” and in specific ways. However, we acknowledge that the openness and polysemy of the visual mode challenge nailing down problematic uses. We have demonstrated that Pepe is not a completely arbitrary symbol but that the original figure itself and the way it has been appropriated fit with certain right-wing

Katharina Lobinger, Benjamin Krämer, Rebecca Venema & Eleonora Benecchi

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ideologies in which alleged “censorship” plays an important role and provocation for its own sake, and political statements tend to become indistinguishable.

A political communication perspective demonstrates how, departing from a single symbol, whole worldviews can be unfolded, as varying and contradictory as they may be—populist or ultimately elitist, self-deprecating and supremacist, building a fan community while excluding many that are part of a constructed ethnic and political community. However, this brings the problems of how to decode the political meaning of non-verbal symbols and how to evaluate creative memetic practices (that often carry positive connotations in scholarly discussions) if they become subversive in a way that contradicts those norms and values that we as academics cherish.

We also challenged the stereotypical media portrayal that automatically characterized users producing and circulating Nazi Pepe memes as fans of a white supremacist ideology. A fan study perspective, devoted to in-depth examinations of the communities in which the controversial incarnations of Pepe are produced and circulate, helped us put this simplistic media portrayal into question. This is highly important for the task of interpreting Pepe in the different contexts of its use. When studied through this perspective, controversial objects, such as Nazi Pepe, can be a rich resource of knowledge on the dynamics and terms of online fandom and digital culture in itself.

Concluding, we can say that these are challenging times for communication studies, particularly for research in visual communication, if we consider that the visual form is increasingly used for strategically masking bigoted and problematic arguments and messages. As we have shown, the “vagueness” of the visual mode and its genuine meaning-making features are strategically used to convey problematic messages, and at the same time—and even more interestingly—the visual features are used for defending these messages by pointing to the seeming incapacity of visuals to make arguments in general. In our view, this is something the field of visual communication research and communication research in general needs to tackle and discuss to provide expertise in how to counter these defense strategies and to provide a visually informed lens on ethical and moral issues of current communication phenomena. Moreover, conceptual terms such as “hate speech” also need to be applied to and defined for the visual mode of communication.

We are fully aware that the present analysis raised more questions than it answered. But we hope to have contributed to raising awareness of these subtle strategies and tactics. The complex questions we discussed are only
some of the many challenges that come with the need to shape and develop common ethical and moral frameworks for our everyday communication in networked societies in which the many different forms of visual and verbal, online and offline communication are closely intertwined.

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Abstracts

**Populist communication and media wars in Latin America**  
Caroline Avila & Philip Kitzberger

This chapter analyzes some of the communication strategies that populist leaders in Latin America utilized during their period as presidents. To accomplish this, we applied a populist communication model in order to describe the role of communications in Latin American populist governments. The first part of the chapter explains the theoretical model that identifies communication practices of populist governments and differentiates them from other forms of political construction. Aside from the discourse style, populist leaders call for a radical intervention in the media system. They seek to build their own (or controlled) media system in a confrontation with the external media system, which is identified as the opposition. In this context, direct communication assumes radical importance to consolidate the saturation of the public sphere through the presidential voice and to reaffirm the process of symbolic representation between leaders and their people. The second part of this chapter analyzes examples from Ecuador, Argentina, and Venezuela during the governments of Rafael Correa, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and Hugo Chavez respectively, in order to identify particular features that could be understood as a populist communication strategy. The chapter finishes with a consideration of the implications of this particular form of government communication with regard to its influence in both political and media systems.

**Female populist leaders and communication: does gender make a difference?**  
Donatella Campus

The chapter discusses the specific traits of the communication of female populist leaders. Drawing on the analysis of some prominent cases like Pia Kjærsgaard, Marine Le Pen and others, the chapter focuses on two questions: first, if populist women leaders present some common characteristics that can be assumed as the core of a ‘female populist image’; second, how women leaders deal with the communication strategies preferably employed by populists. In particular, the chapter discusses the implications
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for women politicians of the convergence between politics and popular culture.

**Populist discourse on distributive social policies: Are the poor citizens, workers, mothers?**
*María Esperanza Casullo*

South American leftist-populist governments engage in rapid and significant economic downward redistribution; critics mention that the redistribution of income to workers and the poor, through measures which range from setting higher wages to handing out direct and indirect subsidies, is very narrowly aimed at building short-term electoral support for a populist president. More sympathetic views underscore that the gains in poverty and inequality reduction brought about by them tend to be substantive, and that their voters belong to overlooked and excluded groups (Heidrich and Tussie 2008). The chapter is not concerned with the effectiveness of the social policies favored by populist governments, but with the way in which they seek to legitimate them through discourse. It works on two dimensions. In the first one, it shows that the populist discourse on the matter does in fact frame social policy in terms of universal rights and citizenship; themes of retribution and redemption are always also present and in tension with them. I will analyze the links between populist discourse and social policy in one of such governments: that of the former Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina. On the second dimension, it shows that the combination of ideological tropes and the construction of a peculiar form of syncretic discourse had two aims: to build a large base of support with the use of targeted tropes, and to try to foresee and preempt media criticism to the new social policies.

**Populism meets fake news: social media, stereotypes and emotions**
*Nicoleta Corbu & Elena Negrea-Busuioc*

This chapter aims to shed light upon the intricacies between two phenomena with profound social implications on the rise in recent years: populism and fake news. We argue that there are not only similarities between the two, but they are inter-connected deeply, especially in the new, ever-changing media landscape. First, we examine the new media ecosystem, which provides fertile ground for both phenomena to emerge and spread. Then
we show that both fake news and populism feed on the same Manichean
distinction of “us” versus “them” to some extent, relying heavily on stereo-
types and blaming various groups to make people more receptive to specif-
ic content. On the one hand, populism has been shown to enhance posi-
tive stereotypes about the “common people” and negative stereotypes
about various out-groups, as well as to enhance blame attributions to out-
groups. On the other hand, we argue that fake news is successful, to the
extent that it confirms/amplifies people’s own stereotypes, judgments, and
attitudes, which makes them less concerned about the truthfulness of the
content they consume on a daily basis. Finally, we discuss the role played
by emotions in the success of both populism and fake news in the social
media environment.

Populist communication in the news media: The role of cultural and journalistic
factors in ten democracies
Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Florin Büchel, Martin Wettstein, Dominique Stefa-
nie Wirz, Anne Schulz, Philipp Müller, Christian Schemer, Werner Wirth &
Frank Esser

The recent success of populist movements in most Western democracies
seems to coincide with a surge of populist communication in the news. In
this context, research has focused both on the question whether populist
communication in the news presents an opportunity structure for populist
movements and vice versa. In this chapter, we argue that the focus on po-
litical conditions favoring populist communication may be too narrow, as
there may be additional cultural and journalistic context factors that favor
populist claims in public affairs coverage. Using data from a large-scale
content analysis in ten Western democracies, we identify opportunity
structures for populist communication on a national and organizational
level, as well as on the level of individual news stories. We find that the
prevalence of populist communication is generally low in political news
and mostly occurs in fragmented form with only one or two core ideas of
populism represented in one story. The share of populist key messages is
higher in countries with high prevalence of authoritarian attitudes, in
opinion-oriented news outlets, and in opinionated stories.
Right-wing populist media criticism
Nayla Fawzi

This chapter presents an analysis of right-wing populist media criticism. It theoretically reflects on the relation between the three dimensions of populism – anti-elite populism, homogeneity of the people and excluding populism – and attitudes towards the media. It shows that populists tend to include the media in their anti-elite stance and perceive the media to collude with established politics and together betray the people. In contrast, they criticize the media for an unfair and too negative coverage of populist parties and actors. Populist media criticism also stems from the perception of a homogenous ingroup which contrasts a pluralist media coverage that includes a large spectrum of positions, actors and issues. This also holds for anti-outgroup attitudes. Consequently, populist tend to portray the media as illegitimate and non-representative institution that is suppressing the true will of the people and that is favoring populist outgroups over the people. Such media criticism is often voiced in social media by populists, but alternative media are also an important source of populist media criticism. The chapter points out the strategies that populist make use of, e.g. how they turn the normative expectations against the media and their practice of double standards. In sum, the analysis shows that populist media criticism does not seem to aim at a reflection of journalistic norms and quality criteria but rather at delegitimizing the media due to its anti-democratic and anti-pluralist character.

Media, anti-populist discourse and the dynamics of the populism debate
Jana Goyvaerts & Benjamin De Cleen

This chapter inquires into the politics of the media’s use of the signifier populism. We shift attention from the much more commonly asked questions about the relation between media and populist politics – as a phenomenon – to questions about the media’s use of the term ‘populism’. Based on a literature review and a small empirical analysis of references to ‘populism’ in Flemish mainstream media, we show that the term populism is predominantly used to express concerns about the negative impact of populist politics on democracy. Bearing witness to the term’s flexibility, the ‘populist’ threat ranges from racism and ultra-nationalism to antagonistic rhetoric and demagogy. We then relate this use of ‘populism’ to broader reflections on media’s position in democracy, showing how their
criticism of ‘populism’ can be seen as an exercise in drawing boundaries around what they consider legitimate democratic politics, an endeavour largely based on a defence of liberal democracy and of rational and moderate public debate. We then connect our findings about media discourse to broader insights into the nature of anti-populist discourse that seems to dominate not only media but also politics and the academy. Moving beyond political-ideological concerns dominating most of the work on anti-populism, we finally turn our attention to other kinds of logics and mechanisms that might underlie media discourse about populism and its relations to politics and the academy.

**Populist online communication**  
*André Haller*

This chapter focuses on the relationship between populist communication and online media. The aim of the paper is two-folded: It analyzes the role of the internet for the (1) strategic communication of populist parties and politicians as well as for (2) citizens with or without populist worldviews. The text will first introduce main strategies of populist players in online environments. It is argued, amongst other things, that online media are used to create and preserve a strong bond between populists and their audience as well as to bypass mainstream media barriers to communicate directly to the public. The next chapter shows the role of populist alternative media on the internet which are a recent phenomenon worldwide. Populist alternative media are noted by users as well as by mainstream media which may hint at a transformation of public discourse. Afterward, the reception of populist worldviews by ordinary users is discussed. It will be shown that online platforms are often used as ideologically closed discussion rooms. The last part of the text highlights the particularities of algorithms in online communication and investigates recent issues connected with populist communication: digital disinformation, social network bots and political (micro-)targeting. It is argued that the rise of internet platforms and new technologies may contribute to the success of populist online communication.
Populism and alternative media
Kristoffer Holt

One of the areas that has been researched quite extensively during recent years is the relationship between media and populism. There has been less work done on the connection between populism and alternative media. It is clear that populist politicians receive substantial support from various alternative media outlets. Most research, however, tend to focus on the relationship between the massmedia mainstream and populist politicians, and how media plays an important part in laying the ground for populist rhetoric to be successful (see Aalberg, et al., 2016; Krämer, 2017; 2018). There is less research on the link between populism and alternative media, though the link is quite clear in some cases. In this chapter this link is established and explored in light of recent research trends that try to understand, especially contemporary right-wing populist alternative media, while somewhat struggling with a body of theory and previous research primarily developed to understand left-wing alternative media.

Putting the screws on the press: Populism and freedom of the media
Christina Holtz-Bacha

Along with a creeping decline of democracy, freedom of the press is deteriorating worldwide and has come under pressure in mature democracies as well. One of the reasons for the beleaguered status of civil liberties even in democratic countries is the recent rise of populism in Europe and the US. In fact, the populists' anti-elite stance, the claim to represent the people and populism's exclusionary character imply populism's distrust of those institutions that provide for checks and balances, among them the media. In consequence of this antagonism, populists have developed several strategies to rein in the established media and influence their reporting, which ultimately limits freedom of the media and thus an important pillar of the democratic system.

Populism: The Achilles heel of democracy
Marion Just & Ann Crigler

This chapter describes the conditions for contemporary populist leaders to emerge and the potential dangers they pose to the institutions and practice of democracy as they seek greater authority. Populist leaders (regardless of
whether they are on the authoritarian right or authoritarian left) attack the laws, procedures and norms that hinder their legitimacy. In this chapter, we examine an authoritarian populist of the left, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, several from the right, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, Viktor Orban of Hungary and other European authoritarian populists in various stages of institutionalization, and a faux populist, Donald Trump of the United States. In each case, we argue that an early indicator of a slide towards authoritarianism is an attack on constitutional structure and the centers of criticism, especially the media system, but also the judiciary and other kinds of critics. The press plays an essential role in combating the rise of authoritarian leaders by performing its watchdog function and identifying deviations from democratic norms—such as interference in the courts, voting restrictions, or undermining the legitimacy and independence of the press. This is a tall order for the press when it depends on market survival in a polarized partisan environment.

A bad political climate for climate research and trouble for gender studies: Right-wing populism as a challenge to science communication
Benjamin Krämer & Magdalena Klingler

Right-wing populist movements, parties and politicians have emerged as a challenge to established political forces and more recently to various academic fields. The validity of scientific findings or even the legitimacy of whole fields of research has been questioned by right-wing populist actors. Climate research and gender studies – two otherwise very different areas – are among the fields most attacked by right-wing populists. This contribution theorizes the challenges right-wing populism poses to these fields of research. We discuss the commonalities between climate research and gender studies that make these profoundly different fields a preferred target. In order to understand the critical reactions, we relate criticism of these fields to the ideological core of right-wing populism. In our conclusion, we also briefly discuss how the different structures of these two fields shape their possible response to right-wing populist criticism.
Pepe – just a funny frog? A visual meme caught between innocent humor, far-right ideology and fandom
Katharina Lobinger, Benjamin Krämer, Rebecca Venema & Eleonora Benecchi

The cartoon character Pepe the Frog is an ambivalent symbol in the controversial debate on right-wing, sexist and hate-inciting communication. Part of its complexity lies in its visual character. To better understand the visual meme Pepe and its uses, this paper provides an overview of the development and transformation of Pepe from its creation in 2005, to its use in the 2016 US election campaign, its death in 2017 to the tentative of reestablishing its positive image. In order to disentangle the many meanings and normative implications, we examine Pepe from different but interconnected research perspectives, bridging approaches from fan studies, online communication, visual communication, and political communication. On the example of Pepe, we identify communication and demarcation techniques that we consider essential for understanding the complex entanglements of current online popular (sub)cultures, politics and ideologies.

Populism and popular culture: the case for an identity-oriented perspective
Torgeir Uberg Nærland

Popular culture is part of the social and political fabric of society. Yet the relationship between populism and popular culture has hitherto received only scant attention. This chapter first reviews the extant research that deals with the role of popular culture for populism. It identifies and outlines six key perspectives, each highlighting a distinct take on how popular culture matters to populism. These perspectives are: popular culture as political communication, as political narrative, in discursive struggle, as political style, as sociocultural appeal, and as part of public discourse. Second, this chapter makes the case for an urgent yet neglected perspective on how popular culture matters to populism: the role of popular culture in energizing sociopolitical identities. It argues that we now need to direct attention to how popular culture matters to the social identifications and antipathies that feed the people-elite antagonism inherent to populism. By focusing on identity, this chapter argues, we can attain a better understanding not only of how popular culture matters to populism, but also of the relationship between media and populism in general.
The missing link: Effects of populist communication on citizens
Carsten Reinemann

An increasing number of studies argues that populist messages may have considerable effects on voters’ emotions, cognitions, opinions, and behaviors. Against this backdrop, the chapter reviews theoretical concepts and findings pertaining to the use, processing and effects of populist communication as well as their psychological underpinnings. The chapter starts from defining populist political communication and individual communication effects, presents a theoretical model that situates populist communication effects in a social identity framework, and reviews findings from various studies, before concluding the chapter and discussing avenues for future research.

A populism of lulz. The proliferation of humor, satire, and memes as populist communication in digital culture
Anna Wagner & Christian Schwarzenegger

Humor has long been a vessel of voicing critique against social and political elites making visible the hidden truths and impertinences of the political normality. With digital media platforms on the rise, populists from the far political left to the radical right use various forms of political humor on social media to disseminate their worldviews while at the same time concealing the radicalism of their political goals. In this chapter we identify four different modes of populist online activists using humor as a communication strategy in digital media: 1) Humor is used for the purpose of amplification to increase attention for populist stencils; 2) political topics are translated in the guise of memes or funny stuff on the web in the practice of adaption. 3) Cultural artefacts and objects are coopted by populists resulting in an appropriation of humorous content. 4) Humor is used to increase attraction and entice supporters for their political goals. Along these lines, we elaborate that populist political humor is not exceptional, but that populist political communication can thrive in digital culture, where derogatory humor for diverse communicative ends is quite banal. We argue that understanding the banality of populist online humor can be key to understanding the success of such populist communicative strategies.

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