

POPULISM

AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE MEDIA AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS?

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the return of populism in the Western world has stirred a growing interest in various fields of knowledge. Together with Political Science, International Relations and Sociology of Politics, studies in political communication and journalism, media and technology have also contributed to a more thorough and intricate understanding of populism. These studies have analysed the rhetorical style of populist politicians and of those who, while not fitting this category, nevertheless make use of populist communication strategies. Other lines of research examine the use these politicians make of social media in order to improve their visibility and engage with their (potential) voters. Complementary surveys detail the connection between media consumption and voting for populist parties, as well as the influence of news coverage on the electoral success attained by these parties whose ideology is sometimes deemed vague and unclear while others understood as strategic and pragmatic. Although the debate over conceptual clarification is not exhausted, scholars agree that populism, on behalf of the “people”, challenges norms, values and institutions of mainstream politics. The populist discourse is structured around a moral, relational and causal antagonism between “good people” and “those others who are guilty” of all of the ails that plague society. Those others are the elites, portrayed as untrustworthy, and/or immigrants and ethnic or cultural minorities. The claims brandished against

ABSTRACT

In this essay the neoliberal morphing of Western media is debated. This transformation has turned them, even if unwittingly, into accomplices of populist political projects as well as of populist communication strategies. If this complicity is easily explained by economic factors, the essay aims at debating the role of the new neoliberal cultural logic in the reconfiguration of the media as a democratic institution. Hence, the paper argues that the expansion of a neoliberal ethos within the media industry represents both a reversal to the social responsibility tradition of the media and an opportunity for populism to be spread as an ideology. In turn, this change leads also to the adoption of populist communication strategies within mainstream politics.

Keywords: news media, populism, technology, political communication.

RESUMO

**POPULISMO:
UM INSTRUMENTO
DOS MÉDIA
E DAS PLATAFORMAS
DIGITAIS?**

Este ensaio debate o modo como a reconfiguração neoliberal dos

média ocidentais os tem tornado cúmplices, ainda que involuntários, de projetos políticos e estratégias de comunicação populistas. Se essa cumplidade é facilmente explicada por razões económicas, neste ensaio pretendemos refletir sobre a institucionalização de uma lógica cultural reconfiguradora do projeto democrático dos média. Deste modo, o ensaio argumenta que a expansão de um *ethos* neoliberal na indústria dos média representa um recuo para a tradição de responsabilidade social e, simultaneamente, uma oportunidade para a propagação do populismo enquanto ideologia. Por sua vez, esta mudança instiga a adoção de estratégias de comunicação populistas pela política *mainstream*.

Palavras-chave: jornalismo, populismo, tecnologia, comunicação política.

better understand populism, it is crucial to understand the logic of the media, insofar as former is also a “product” of the symbolic activity of the latter.⁷

The relationship between the media and populism is the starting point of the present essay, which focusses on the scope of action of the media, namely how the neoliberal reconfiguration of Western media has increasingly rendered them accomplices, if involuntary, to populist political projects and communication strategies. While that connivance is easily explainable through economic reasons, in this essay we wish to reflect on the institutionalisation of a cultural logic with the power to reconfigure the democratic project of the media and which, albeit unintentionally, benefits populist projects and performances.

According to Wendy Brown, the rationality of the liberal market became prominent in all spheres of society, insofar as it has hallowed out democratic structures and processes⁸. Representative institutions have been stripped of their substance as the power and dynamics of democracy gradually withdraw from democratic arenas to small circles comprised of political and economic elites, which more often than not operate outside and beyond democratic scrutiny. Even if to varying extents and in different scales across democratic states, this process constitutes what Colin Crouch describes as the road towards post-democracy⁹, and that is why Brown argues that political theory needs to “mourn liberal democracy”¹⁰. Natalie Fenton e Gavan Titley, on the other hand, as well as Sean Phelan and Simon Daws, claim that Brown’s concept of mourning has implications for idealism concerning the media, that is, it should be used to revise the normative values and standards that characterise the media as a key institution in

these foes tend to take on the following shape: politicians make decisions that are detrimental to the interests of common people, and international institutions should have less influence over national decision-making. The “other” steals jobs from native workers, takes the blame for all crimes, is held responsible for the insecurity experienced within society and faulted for the degradation of traditional values.

Populist politicians take on, therefore, the role of spokespersons for the people, embodying their frustration, anger and outrage. To that purpose, they employ emotion-suffused language relying on slogans and tabloid-style. This discursive strategy earns them visibility, marks the political and media agendas and draws the attention of the citizens.

Populist politicians need the attention of the media, and the media need political players willing to help them deliver on their promise of emotional high-energy news.

This is why Gianpietro Mazzoleni states that, in order to

shaping the democratic character of society and the related concepts of public sphere, freedom of speech and pluralism¹¹.

Thus, our essay argues that the structural changes underway in democratic society form the basis of the political and cultural reconfiguration of the media. The expansion of a neoliberal *ethos* in the media industry represents a backward step for the tradition of social responsibility and, at the same time, an opportunity for the propagation of populism as an ideology. This change, in its turn, urges the adoption, by mainstream politics, of populist communication strategies. Phrasing it differently, in a time of social, political and technological transformation, this essay reflects on the characteristics, contingencies and constraints of contemporary communication, highlighting the rise of populist strategies that are becoming a master frame of political communication.

With a view to developing our core argument, the essay is structured in three parts. We begin with a reflection on the neoliberal context that prompted the reconfiguration of the media and steered them away from democratic liberal tradition. This process gave way to an economic and civic crisis that nourished an *ethos* no longer directed towards public interest, but towards the logic of digital culture, which has put the media in a vulnerable position in the face of new strategies of populist communication. In the second section of this essay, we shall dig deeper into media reconfiguration in the perspective of politics, namely its strategies for adapting to the logic of the media over time and how the current context connects with populist communication strategies. In the final thoughts, we observe how social and technological disruptions in contemporary societies help us understand why populism has become more and more an instrument for the media and digital platforms.

THE PROCESS OF POLITICAL AND CULTURAL RECONFIGURATION OF THE MEDIA

Throughout the past few decades, a vast body of literature has emerged to explain why Western media no longer play a role commensurate with the requirements of an established democracy. Globalisation, trading, marketing, concentration of ownership and cross ownership, business models and the internet, together with digital intermediaries, were acknowledged as dominant forces explaining the changing media landscape in the neoliberal context¹².

When the sector's business model was already on the verge of a breakdown, the marketing and concentration of property fuelled an outpouring of news centred on entertainment and market-oriented. This hampered the production of news, which traditionally reflected a variegated, plural, judicious and high-quality agenda crucial for democracy. At the same time, the movement played a role in exempting the media from their duty of accountability and social responsibility.

The model of the press as the fourth power, forged in the Western world during the 18th century, established the freedom of the media as one of the most important pillars

in a solid democracy. Under the aegis of this notion, journalism embraced a number of vital political responsibilities in society, namely serving and protecting the interests of the common citizens against political abuse of power – transgressions that undermine the foundations of democratic regimes¹³.

If, for a long time, this understanding was by and large taken as granted in well-established democracies, in the past decade, media freedom and independence have gradually been drawn into a downward spiral, following the trends observed in liberal democracies. According to Freedom House's reports on freedom in the world, democ-

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racies are suffering a decline in political rights and civil liberties, even in countries with a decade-long track record of democratic rule¹⁴.

Freedom of the press is increasingly under attack by the polarisation of the political landscape, by the establishment of populist governments and the rise of parties belonging to both ends of the political spectrum (far-right

or far-left). The capacity of these rising forces to influence institutional agendas, namely those of political parties and mainstream media is also contributing to undermine the foundations of democratic regimes.

The growing polarisation of the media, which may be described as a complex blend of political ideology and economic strategy under the neoliberal order, has also jeopardised the freedom of the media and dampened concerns regarding public interest. Burgeoning social polarisation is making room to journalistic projects in line with a rationale of particularism and exclusion, and not acting as a sphere for the representation of diverse ideologic, social and cultural views. The most emblematic example of this type of media is American news television channel Fox News, being one of the first medium to adopt this ideologic-editorial stance, which earned it extensive international visibility. The channel admitted that its work aimed, above all, not at providing information but at corroborating the world views of its viewers. To that purpose, it turned away from journalistic *ethos* – based on equidistance and impartiality – and gravitated towards partisan political fight. As such, it professed to be an interventive political player and contributed to the ideologic sectorisation of American society¹⁵.

In this context of mounting mediatic polarisation, it is important to look upon the situation of mainstream media. If, before the collapse of the US financial system, in 2008, and the crisis that ensued in the euro zone, large media groups were already in dire financial straits, their precariousness rocketed during the great recession. Countless companies, especially those operating in the print media, lost advertising investment and saw their readership plummet, as social media provided access to free information. All this led to a well-known outcome: closure of newspapers, dismissals and reduction

in the number of pages per edition. Surviving publications went on facing hardships that hamper their daily job.

Simultaneously, the development of multiple network communication platforms and the proliferation of countless media organisations gave way to an informational environment that is more intense (the flow of information speeded up and the news services were shortened), more far-reaching (there are more and diversified ways of access to information regardless of the physical location of consumers, exponentially increased by mobile communications) and harder to control by the institutional actors than in the past (each individual may be a solo broadcaster, and the articulation of this possibility with trans-media convergence made the informational environment less controllable)¹⁶.

In this ever more intricate flow of communication, new dynamics and enunciators have emerged capable of launching and putting new topics on the agenda, interfering in the public debate and in the work of professional information media. In the new environment, new contact areas are created between institutions, media and citizens. That is, new traffic conditions that impact the logic of the institutions that produce information and the consumers. Descending communication direction (from media/politics to citizens) and horizontal communication direction (between institutions, as between politics and media) has become indissociable from new dynamics introduced by ascending communication [from individual(s) to the media] and horizontal (between individuals in social media). Therefore, traditional (institutions, media) and new enunciators (individuals, groups, fakes), together build discourses that fuel each other. In this context, the digitalisation of the media and the rising competition between the media, boosted by the emergence of digital native projects and by social media, have prompted changes in values, norms and journalistic codes of practice: editorial orientation tending towards social media; polarisation of media discourse and cheap journalism. This reconfiguration of journalistic *ethos* fostered convergences and complicities – tones, framings, narratives, language – with populist communication strategies. In other words, the growing marketing of the media and the editorial inclination to social media attracted them even further to controversy, to the unexpected and to the deviating. This trend was clearly patent in a statement made by the CBS director in 2016: according to him, Donald Trump's campaign might not have been good for the US, but it was very good for CBS.

Professional news organisations have started to monitor social media because the latter are deemed prime spots for the dissemination of the information produced by the former, to assess the impact of their work as well as to elicit the engagement of readers. These changes have been reflected on news production: conflicts (controversies, contentions and offences), entertainment (soft approach, human interest or humorous) and striking images (sensational or eliciting strong emoticons) are given priority. The dissemination of stories capable of yielding sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other social media are also favoured¹.

Just as journalism in the digital era is susceptible to populist communication strategies, so are the social media themselves. Still in the late nineties, Bruce Bimber wrote: “the internet has the power to restructure political power in a populist direction”¹⁸. Populist discourse, revolving around the people, anti-system and against the elites, reverberates clearly in this journalism directed at and by social media. Populist politicians, moreover, are shrewd newsmakers. They know very well that an antagonistic, mordant and provocative rhetoric style easily attracts the attention of the media. The victimisation and bullying strategies they employ are accompanied by a performance that adheres to a

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media logic: not only do the media amplify their messages, they are also envisaged as powerful weapons of mobilisation for their causes.

In this era of personalised, ubiquitous and invasive communication, social networks have become an essential part of politics,

in close connection with the media and especially with the television. The latter is a key element in today’s elaborate technological constellation, characterised by an informational environment that is at once intense (the flow of information speeded up and the news services were shortened), far-reaching (mobile communications fostered new means of access to information production and consumption) and uncontrollable (politicians have lost the capacity to control media narrative). We shall delve deeper into this and related matters in the next section.

POLITICS AND MEDIA VISIBILITY

As communication evolved, politicians gradually lost control over their own discourse and image and ceased to perceive their action as something outside the media, which would eventually absorb a large part of the management of their visibility. Striving for public support – which structures the legitimacy of democratic politics –, political players have set out on a long path of adaptation to the timings, formats, language and contents of the media.

The incorporation and exploitation of media logics has always been crucial to the exercise and conquest of power. Force, fear or the law have never proved enough to ensure political legitimacy. Politicians need to establish bonds with the community and to nurture a certain symbolic imaginary with their support base. In this process, communication plays a central role.

As such, politicians have adapted to the technological developments introduced by radio (from the decade of 1920), by television (from the decade of 1950), by the internet (from the decade of 2000) and by social networks (from the decade of 2010). These changes required from them continuous learning of the logics of analog and digital media¹⁹, so that traditional political goals could still be fulfilled: to guide public opinion in a

certain direction, to promote specific issues and to garner popularity, as well as the opposite, that is, to undermine opponents and their proposals.

The internet was used for the first time in an electoral campaign in 1992, in the US presidential election²⁰. Later on, with the launching of YouTube (in 2005) and of Twitter (in 2006), and with the opening to the public of Facebook (in the same year), it ceased to be used as a repository, a place where candidacies made available material intended for other electoral stages, and began to be exploited as a social space.

Thus, as early as in the presidential election of 2008, Barack Obama's famous grassroots movement connected online and offline communities, assuring a far superior digital presence than his opponent²¹. By November of 2008, Obama had amassed more traffic on his website, more visualisations on YouTube and more friends on Facebook and online collaborators than John McCain. The engagement of voluntaries in the production and dissemination of content allowed the candidate to release an unprecedented volume of messages and to create the perception of a more genuine, convincing and trustworthy campaign.

More recently, in the US presidential election of 2016, social networks began to assume an unprecedented importance in political communication. Unlike what good practice manuals suggested, Donald Trump's rather unconventional tweets turned out to benefit him, earning him online advertising, digital engagement and media amplification. This strategy enabled him to fulfil a traditional campaign goal²²: to lead the agenda of the media and, consequently, to steal the show from Hillary Clinton.

Besides political content, Trump used the networks to make references to pop culture, to comment on celebrity gossip and to talk about his daily life. By using social platforms in the same way as the average American, he grew closer to the common citizen and the popular preferences. These plain messages were interpreted as conveying authenticity, in contrast to the politically correct discourse of the Democratic candidacy, seen as highbrow and staged.

Social networks gained still another type of political relevance in today's ever more interconnected world, in which digital and physical experiences are increasingly more integrated. The data and metadata collected from Google, Amazon, Facebook and Twitter, but also from mobile phones, computers and credit cards, for instance, came to be regarded as symptoms of people's actual behaviours and states of mind²³. Many aspects of social life, until that point unknown and out of reach, became accessible to third parties. Friendships, interests, trivial conversations, searches for information and emotional responses of pleasure/displeasure were now scientifically quantified and invested with political value. This way, digital sociability ended up generating and industry based on metadata – automated reports concerning who communicates with whom, what about, from which location and for how long.

Used only sporadically still in the US presidential campaign of 2008, big data soon became, in 2012, crucial for understanding the behaviour of voters. Throughout the eighteen months that preceded the election, Barack Obama's team developed predictive

models to produce messages that met the expectations and interests of different segments of voters, to outline tactics and to hone strategies.

In 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal – the unconsented use of millions of data collected from social networks to sway voters into going for Donald Trump in the 2016 election – rekindled the debate on electoral rolls. This is not a new issue: as early as 2000, data collection methods that dispensed with the consent of voters and their right to privacy were already the subject of discussion. Registers relying on commercial databases were exponentially enriched with metadata collected from digital platforms. Interests, connections and affiliations now enabled the development of metrics based on emotions (hopes and fears) and lifestyles.

However, the contemporary digital environment – characterised by an intense communication flow, multiple networked platforms and channels – is not controlled by politi-

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cians, and requires a permanent adjustment to the perceptions of voters and to the movements of other political players: parties, journalists, commentators, organised groups present in the most diverse platforms and big tech companies such as Google, Facebook

and Twitter. Real-time monitoring allows for constant adjustment – which may be taken as the next step to what is commonly referred to as “governing with the polls”.

Not only are social networks used by politicians as an instrument for monitoring, connecting and socialising without media filter, they are also wielded to influence the news media: while parties, governments and candidates preserve their interest in traditional mediators, they also conceive their action in line with professional information producers.

However, even if politicians are able to control what they convey through the networks, their communication is nonetheless bounded by platform architecture. Digital architecture structures possibilities, practices and perceptions. Platforms promote emotional, controversial and unexpected statements, which, in their turn, nurture informational strategies susceptible to clickbait. Many politicians learned that, in order to maximize visibility (in the networks and in the media) and message sharing (either in agreement or disagreement), they had to invest in increasingly shorter and simpler statements, and in an aggressive or provocative attitude. This means that filtering algorithms define the rules of message production, dissemination and reception. The operative logics of the digital world reflect new (re)intermediation models that organize the structure of network communication and, for that reason, algorithms should be seen as gatekeepers. Platforms are endowed with agency, that is, they are producers of reality and not mere intermediaries: they mould content, establish online discursive circulation and influence communication flows in the media.

In the network era, some politicians are more adroit than others at making their statements relevant – shared and commented – for digital platforms and for journalists.

They know that extreme statements are usually overrepresented in network feeds and more likely to make the news – which helps explain the emphasis given to Donald Trump’s tweets: his bombastic, defiant and controversial messages summon political/media attention, because they combine several news values. Indeed, this strategy to dominate the news does not ensue solely from his ability to communicate in social networks. In a book published in 1987, *The Art of the Deal*, Trump had already proved he could master that economy of attention the networks were not responsible for creating but surely amplified: “One thing I’ve learned about the press is that they’re always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational the better... If you are a little different, or a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you”²⁴.

Thus has the contemporary populist zeitgeist begotten political leaders such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. They can both be seen as an offspring and a symptom of the social and technological turmoil experienced in contemporary societies.

These leaders have adopted communication strategies that defy values held sacred in a democracy: they openly criticise and threaten the media, they accuse media professionals of being enemies of the people and the great producers of disinformation, and they adopt bullying strategies against the media that challenge them.

Besides voicing an abusive and hostile discourse against the media unaligned with them, democratically elected populist and authoritarian leaders turn to economic (e.g., requesting inquiries by tax authorities) and legal ploys (e.g., threatening with termination of licenses or litigation) to intimidate them. This strategy, while seeking to arouse distrust of independent journalism, also aims to chastise the media they are not succeeding in subduing. On the other hand, besides providing inside information to the media aligned with their politics, they also fund them (for instance, with state advertising and subventions) and grant them legal support (by pushing through favourable regulations).

Albeit less intensively and extensively, Boris Johnson, when he was elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (early 2020), took measures that have heightened tensions between the government and the media. The cause of the escalation lies in changes to procedures established between both institutions. Let us look into a few examples.

With the purpose of curbing access to the government’s daily briefings, these were transferred from the parliament to Downing Street. The journalists that were given admittance, however, boycotted the press conferences, and the editors of the national media protested against this unilateral decision.

Although, traditionally, the first broadcast interview with the Prime Minister used to be granted to a news programme, Johnson opted for a morning programme of the British television.

On the occasion of the official speech of UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, journalists’ access was limited: only one journalist per outlet was allowed to attend, which curtailed the plurality of the coverage of this historical moment. On the other

hand, the speech was not directly recorded by the television channels, but rather by Downing Street communications staff. Indeed, this cabinet, headed by Dominic Cummings (the communication expert that led the Leave campaign during the EU referendum), has hired several producers, photographers and cameramen.

The cabinet also implemented a new type of press conference in which the Prime Minister answers a number of questions cherry-picked among the lot previously submitted by the media. The various members of the government were advised not to engage in informal meetings with journalists, and their overall presence in the media was reduced. (Like Jair Bolsonaro, Boris Johnson was absent from a number of debates and declined granting certain interviews during the electoral campaign, and those unprecedented refusals did not compromise his victory in the election).

These measures signal a growing trend towards the centralisation of communication. Their goal is to restrict the right of reply and curtail journalists' freedom of action, to increase control over the political narrative and the image of the leaders, to lead the public opinion in a particular direction and to avert attention from issues sensitive to the government.

The urge to restrain the communication flow is accompanied by an opposing motion: the purpose of exploiting the informational stream and speed promoted by the digital context. Falling back on the assumption that excess information must be fought with even more information, computational propaganda taps the features of the digital platforms and uses bots to flood the media ecosystem. The dissemination of a variety of contradictory stories (some of them true, others false) weakens the importance of each one of them, blurs the distinction between truth and lie and fosters confusion between facts and opinion.

The digital ecosystem also enhances new disinformation strategies, namely by means of bots (automated accounts, with no human involvement) programmed to post messages and to interact with users in social networks. This strategy of spreading false information aims at increasing the visibility of certain players and issues, at controlling narratives in the media and in the social networks, at manipulating public opinion, fostering feelings of insecurity and undermining the foundations of liberal democracies.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In contemporary societies, freedom of the media has growingly come under threat by the polarisation of the political landscape, by the establishment of populist parties and their ability to influence the main agendas. Within the past decade, the media, together with liberal democracies, have faced a downward spiral: democracies in general are experience a downfall in political rights, in press freedom and in civil liberties, even in countries where democratic regimes have been in place for decades. On the other hand, social polarisation has paved the way to new media projects operating under the logic of particularism and failing to act as a sphere wherein diverse ideological, political and cultural views are represented. These factors, in combination, are adding

to the reconfiguration of the media *ethos*, that is, they are eroding the media's concern for the public interest.

This has been the starting point for the present essay on the relationship between the media and politics, whose purpose was to dwell on how the institutionalisation of a new neoliberal cultural order capable of reconfiguring the democratic project of the media, even if unintentionally, benefits populist projects and performances.

Whether for ideological, business or cultural reasons, the media and the populist rhetoric exhibit a growing convergence of objectives. Politicians need the attention of the media and the latter need political players willing to fulfil the expectation of emotionally charged news. This convergence of needs helps understanding why the leading media play an important role in the amplification and multiplication of populist messages. It also helps explaining why mainstream politicians and parties make strategic use of populist messages.

In the decentralised, polyphonic and unpredictable contemporary communication context, political vulnerability is ever growing, just like the political investment in communication strategies to deal with an increasingly complex ecosystem. This way, political communication directed at and by social networks has promoted a belligerent culture that downgrades consensus building and flouts the rules of civility. Political trenches ignite media wildfires and ensure a visibility unprecedented in the digital era. This context helps understanding why populist communication is becoming endemic in politics itself: it is no longer possible to speak of opposites (who is and who is not populist), but only of degrees (who is more and who is less, who is all the time and who is occasionally).

If it is a fact that populist politicians need the attention of the media, it is no less true that the latter need political players that enable them to articulate newsworthiness and viral potential. As we have seen, be it for ideological or business reasons or with the purpose of connecting once again with their readers/viewers, increasingly disgruntled with democratic institutions, the media gradually pulled away from more rational and elite-centred approaches to focus on emotional and lightweight content that mostly teases those same elites. This means that the current media ecosystem favours populist politicians and pressures mainstream players into adopting populist communication strategies.

In short, this process of political-media reconfiguration promotes a new populist-tinged public culture that harbours mistrust towards traditional democratic institutions. Integrated in a post-truth ecosystem in which the volume and speed of information has reached a level hardly compatible with informational quality and judiciousness, the various factors discussed in this essay help to understand why populism is being established at once as a new master frame of political communication and as an instrument for media and the digital platforms. 

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