RETHINKING MEDIATISATION

Populism and the mediatisation of politics

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The presidency of Donald Trump is surely the most highly mediatised presidency that has ever existed in the United States. Trump became a public figure as a reality TV star and tabloid media celebrity. Like many populists, he was an outsider without support from the organisational structures of a political party and had little in the way of a traditional campaign organisation, but was able to mobilise popular support by stealing the media spotlight and by exploiting social media, particularly Twitter. As president, he spends huge parts of his day watching television and tweeting, relies more on television for information than on intelligence agencies and other expert sources, relies heavily on the advice of media personalities, and is far more concerned with political theatre than with details of policy. Trump has ‘always scripted his presidency like a reality show’, as one news article put it in the context of reporting on Trump’s briefings during the coronavirus crisis, where he insisted on taking the central role more often delegated to public health officials (Karni 2020).

Trump’s rise to power can be seen as a step forward in the process of the ‘mediatisation of politics’, which has been an important focus of scholarship since the turn of the century. This is true in general of populist leaders and movements: that they depend centrally on the media to obtain and to exercise power. In this sense, the rise of populist politics in much of the world can be seen as reflecting a ‘radicalising [of] the mediatisation of politics and political communication’ (Mazzoleni 2014, 44).

Yet Trump, like most populist leaders, is constantly at war with established media institutions, and his rise is often seen as reflecting and threatening to deepen their decline from a central place in the communication process. Mediatised populist politics does not fit well into the traditional narrative about the mediatisation of politics, and in order to make sense of it, we need to rethink mediatisation in important ways. We need to make the concept more complex and also to historicise it and to make it comparative. We should move away, that is, from thinking of mediatisation as a kind of unitary, homogeneous process, like the old concept of modernisation, and to think comparatively about its varying and changing forms, including, specifically, forms of mediatisation of politics. Recent literature, to which I will return in the concluding section, has already moved in the direction of rethinking the concept, and the case of populist politics underscores the importance of the issues raised in that literature. I will develop this argument here, working from the case of Donald Trump in the United States but bringing in numerous
other examples as well, including, particularly, from Latin America, which has a long history of populist politics on which there is a large body of scholarship.

**The mediatisation of politics**

Stig Hjarvard (2013, 3) defines the concept of mediatisation in this way, in one classic conceptualisation:

> The media acquire greater authority to define social reality and condition patterns of interaction . . . Media have become an integral part of other institutions’ operations, while also achieving a degree of self-determination and autonomy which forces other institutions . . . to submit to their logic.

The classic literature on the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni 1987; Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999; Meyer & Hinchman 2002; Strömbäck 2008), which is probably the most strongly developed domain of mediatisation literature, is based mainly on the history of Europe in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. In this period the commercial press and television grew in power, displacing the party press that was once central to political communication. New forms of critical professionalism in journalism developed, which assigned to the journalist a more active role in reporting and interpreting the news. One manifestation of this change, which was central in my own work on US television news (Hallin 1992a), was the shrinking of the average soundbite in television over a 20-year period. This represented a broad change from an era when television news transmitted the words of political leaders with little editing or interpretation to one in which they cut those words up to weave them into narratives and interpretive frameworks, which they would articulate for their audiences. Forms of marketing based on the use of the emerging media became increasingly central to politics.

These new practices displaced to a significant extent the forms of politics centred around the political party, trade unions, and other social groups and their base organisations, producing a shift, as Manin (1997) put it, from ‘party democracy’ to ‘audience democracy’, in which personalisation, dramatisation, and image were increasingly central, and politics centred increasingly on the marketing of particular leaders to a mass public rather than on negotiation among parties representing social groups, interests, and ideologies.

**Populist politics**

Central to most analyses of populism is the idea that populism articulates the world of politics around a polar opposition between the people and an elite or power bloc that is seen as blocking popular sovereignty. In some versions this elite is seen as aligned with an out-group – immigrants, for example, or a minority ethnic group – which is also understood as hostile to the values and interests of the people; this is partly what distinguishes right-wing from left-wing populism. In Laclau’s classic discussion of populism (2005), populist politics arises when ordinary politics based on negotiation among diverse interests in society – based on what he calls the ‘logic of difference’ corresponding, in one form at least, to Manin’s party democracy – breaks down, and parties and other institutions are no longer able to satisfy popular demands. Politics then shifts to the ‘logic of equivalence’, in which diverse grievances and demands come to be seen as all equivalently representing the oppression of the people by the elite.
Because these grievances and demands are diverse, populist movements rely heavily on ‘empty signifiers’, in Lacanal’s terms (see also Yilmaz 2016), symbols that lack particular referents and thus can represent the diversity of specific demands and of ‘the people’ as a whole. Very often, this symbolic role is served above all by the figure of the personalised leader. Personalised, charismatic leadership may not be characteristic of populist politics in all cases; we can probably say that certain social movements – Occupy Wall Street, for example – are populist movements without any such leader. Nevertheless, populist movements that persist and that come to power typically are organised around a leader who is seen as representing ‘the people’. These leaders typically are outsiders, not connected with the established political parties and without a history of participation in the process of bargaining among elites (Levitsky & Loxton 2013), though again there is some variation, as, for example, established political leaders may sometimes adopt elements of the populist style of politics. Populist movements therefore depend heavily on the ability of the leader to maintain a direct connection with the mass public that represents the base of the movement, and for this the media are essential.

**Populism and mediatisation**

Trump got elected. But TV became president.

James Poniewozic (2019, 240)

Berlusconi is not just the owner of television channels, he is television.

Paolo Mancini (2011, 21)

Up to a point, the standard narrative about the mediatisation of politics certainly applies to the rise of populist leaders like Trump. Trump rose to power, despite the hostility of the existing organisation of the Republican Party, by building a relationship with voters through the media. He became a public figure as a media celebrity, building his public presence by cultivating a relationship with tabloid newspapers in New York and with television, becoming the star of the reality television programme, *The Apprentice*, and a regular on Fox News. During the primaries, he succeeded by dominating the media agenda, hogging the spotlight to push past a large field of more traditional Republican politicians; then, during the general election campaign, he constantly drew attention to himself with controversial statements which not only made him the centre of the story even on media generally hostile to him (Mahler 2017; Watts & Rothschild 2017) but also had the important effect of focusing coverage in the traditional media on the primary issues around which Trump’s appeal was based, particularly immigration and conflicts with Islam/Muslims (Faris et al. 2017). This pattern is seen widely with other successful populist leaders: they rise to power to a significant extent by attracting media attention, performing well in front of television cameras; know how to create a persona that resonates with codes of popular culture; speak colloquial language and identify themselves with the aspirations of ordinary people; understand the importance of symbolism; and understand what draws audience attention, which often involves transgressive behavior and the generation of conflict. The ability to grab media attention is almost always an element in the rise of populist leaders, across a wide range of global contexts. Mancini’s (2011) account of Berlusconi’s rise in Italy; Peri’s (2004) of the rise of Netanyahu in Israel; and accounts of the rise of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, who agreed to give up a coup attempt in 1992 in return for the right to make a television address to the nation, tell closely parallel stories of mastery of the idiom of popular media, particularly of television.
In a broader sense, we could also say that media, particularly but not exclusively commercial television, played a key role in preparing the cultural ground for the emergence of populist leaders (Manucci 2017). News media have become more ‘populist’, in a loose sense of the word, over the years, emphasising the point of view of ordinary people more extensively, presenting themselves, as Djerff-Pierre (2000, 257) shows for the (relatively restrained) case of Swedish television, as a ‘representative/ombudsman of the public’ against elites and institutions; personalising and emphasising subjectivity and emotion; and blurring boundaries between news and popular culture (Baym 2010). They have also taken a more adversarial stance towards elites and presented both those elites and established institutions in more negative terms.

Some media advanced much more specifically populist agendas, in the sense of the term that is usually used in discussing politics: that is, they have articulated a view of the world centred around, as Klein (2000) puts it in relation to the German Bild-Zeitung (see also Krämer 2014), a narrative of the people versus the power bloc. In the US case, Trump’s populist appeal can be traced back as far as the 1960s New York Daily News (Pressman 2019) and was really articulated in its present form by Fox News before Trump came along and rode it into political office – but we will have to come back to the role of Fox, because it is in part there that we have to begin to confront some of the contradictions of applying the traditional understanding of the mediatisation of politics to populism. In the case of Venezuela, years before Hugo Chávez came to power,

the media began to echo the frustrations of the population, becoming more active in the reporting of denuncias of corruption. The majority of media corporations assumed an open position to all kinds of information, denuncias [roughly, accusations] or analyses that confronted [the political] leadership, marking the beginning of a battle that pitted the media against the government, the institutions of the state, the political parties, and ultimately the ruling class.

(Tulio Hernández, quoted in Samet 2019, 125)

Poniewozic (2019), in his account of Trump and television, makes a broader argument about the way in which television, not merely through news reporting but in its entertainment programming, prepared the way for rise of Trump as a transgressive character.

**Contradictions**

Other aspects of populist political communication, however, do not fit so easily into the standard narrative. Most obviously, while the standard narrative of the mediatisation of politics focused on the growing importance of centralised mass media organisations and of an increasingly autonomous profession of journalism, populist leaders typically attack these institutions, challenge their legitimacy, and exploit new forms of media – today, above all, social media (for Trump, it is Twitter; for Bolsonaro in Brazil and Modi in India, often WhatsApp) – to circumvent them. These patterns have long histories in populist politics. Juan Perón, the Argentine populist of the 1940s–1950s, wrote (Conducción Política, quoted in Ruiz 2014, 262):

When we carry out a civic act, it is enough for us to speak to the whole country by radio and not a single Argentine will remain unaware of what we have to say. Before this was impossible. Today we do it in a minute. Before, it required six, eight months, a year. . . . Thus it was that we defeated our adversaries clinging to the old forms of committees and of transmission through intermediaries, who were the political caudillos.
In the U.S. case, immediately after Trump’s election, there was a lot of speculation that the age of the professionalised legacy media was, finally, over. That turned out to be exaggerated, as many legacy media enjoyed a revival after Trump took office, both in terms of audience and in terms of their centrality to the flow of information. The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, and other prominent media organisations have enjoyed growing audiences and been full of investigative reports and inside accounts of the Trump administration. Clearly, they are still seen as the place to go for those who want to get a message into the public sphere. Nevertheless, Trump does not depend on them to reach his base, and in this respect, the emphasis in the classic literature on the mediatisation of politics on the growing autonomy and power of media institutions seems not to capture much of what is going on in this new form of mediatisation.

A second and, of course, related issue with applying the standard narrative about the mediatisation of politics to populist politics has to do with the politicisation of media and the role of partisan media. An important part of Manin’s (1997) argument about the shift from ‘party democracy’ to ‘audience democracy’ in the 1960s through the 1980s had to do with the rise of ‘catch-all’ media, whose audiences crossed political party lines and thus made it possible for political leaders to market themselves to individual voters without regard to party. Laclau (2005), at the same time, argues that one of the things populism does, for better or for worse, is to revive politics. And certainly in the US case, one of the most important developments of the Trump era is a significant repoliticisation of the media. Trump’s relationship with his base depends not only on social media but also, probably even more importantly, on a new set of right-wing populist media organisations which defend him, give him a platform, and help to mobilise his supporters, the most important of which is Fox News. Partisan media have also emerged on the left, though much of the legacy media have tried to maintain their identity as non-partisan. Nevertheless, patterns of media use and trust in media have definitely become politicised in the US in ways they were not for many decades, from about the mid-twentieth century (DiCamillo 2017; Pew Research Center 2014). This, again, is very common, in different forms, in populist politics; in the Latin American case, periods of populist rule are typically characterised by ‘Guerras mediaticas’: media wars in which all of the media are essentially divided into political camps, for and against the populist leader (Avila & Kitzberger, 2020).

In some cases, we might interpret populism as a reimposition of political influence over the media. And, in this sense, populism could be said actually to reverse the mediatisation of politics, even if populist leaders may make heavy use of media channels to reach the public. This interpretation is persuasive particularly in cases in which a populist leader is able to consolidate power and to win the ‘guerra mediatica’, as Hugo Chávez eventually did in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán did in Hungary, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did in Turkey (Yesil 2016).

Donald Trump has not been able to impose control over most of the media, though he has strained their ability to stand apart from partisan alignments. It is worth looking more closely, however, at his relationship with Fox News because this raises interesting questions about how to conceptualise the new forms of mediatisation that are emerging in the context of populist politics, including questions about the key concepts of ‘political logic’ and ‘media logic’.

Jane Mayer (2019) closed a widely read popular article on Trump and Fox by writing that Trump ‘has something no other President in American history ever had at his disposal – a servile propaganda operation’. Although it is widely known that there are tensions within Fox News often between the journalists who produce the news broadcasts and the commentators whose shows are the core of Fox’s audience appeal, by most accounts, Fox’s content does revolve mainly around the defence of Trump. Its fortunes and Trump’s seem inextricably tied at
this point. In this sense Fox does look like a form of state TV and could be seen as a case of the reimposition of political control over an important part of the media. But Mayer’s article isn’t really consistent in supporting this ‘state TV’ interpretation; in many cases, it seems to suggest that the direction of influence actually goes the other way: that we have in Trump more of a TV state than state TV. Much of the reporting on the Trump presidency suggests as much; this is partly what Poniewozic means in writing that ‘TV became president’. Trump relies heavily on Fox and its commentators for both information and advice. (He once said, appearing on the morning programme *Fox and Friends* and explaining how he knew his lawyer’s payments to women for their silence were not criminal acts, ‘I watch a lot of shows. Sometimes you get pretty good information watching shows’ (23 April 2018)). Many have noted that Trump’s tweets seem driven much of the time by what he is watching on Fox News. Often his policy decisions seem to be as well. One of the most dramatic cases was during the government shutdown of 2018–2019, when he had made a deal to reopen the government, only to back out when it was criticised on Fox and in other right-wing media. At a deeper level, it was largely Fox News that created the particular populist discourse that Trump then appropriated. ‘Fox news programs’, as Peck (2019, 90) puts it, ‘have helped articulate the various political positions and identity groups of the conservative movement onto what Laclau terms a “chain of equivalence”’. It did this, Peck argues, by reinterpreting social class in cultural terms, presenting itself as the champion of the ‘working class’ by embracing cultural identifications seen as anti-elite and connecting this cultural identity to a set of conservative policy positions and political antagonisms – anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment, resentment of minorities and multiculturalism, economic and political nationalism, hostility to government regulation, and a pro-business ‘producerist’ economic ideology.

So maybe the role of Fox is an example of mediatisation after all. But is Fox News really a media institution, or is it a political actor? This brings us to a key conceptual issue. The literature on mediatisation has always depended on drawing a distinction between media logic – an idea first articulated by Altheide and Snow (1979) – and the logics of kinds of institutions which, in classic formulations of the concept of mediatisation, are obligated to ‘submit’ to media logic. As Strömbäck and Esser (2014) point out, however, there has always been considerable ambiguity in defining both of them. It seems clear that in the case of Fox News, they are really fused into a kind of hybrid logic that cannot be understood either as the imposition of a separate ‘media logic’ onto politics or the other way around. Roger Ailes, the original president of Fox News, was a television producer who managed Richard Nixon’s 1968 presidential campaign. That was a clear sign of mediatisation: the fact that Nixon hired a television producer to run his campaign, rather than a traditional party politician. But Roger Ailes always had a political agenda and was as much a political entrepreneur as a media one. And Fox News, in Peck’s account, succeeded by combining innovations in the aesthetics of television news, including tabloid style and an emphasis on opinion, with political innovations in the form of the populist discourse described earlier; it was simultaneously a form of media marketing, building a market niche through political identity, and a form of political action, remaking the American political right.

Media logics and political logics have historically been closely related. Balzac once described press as ‘the word adopted to express everything which is published periodically in politics and literature, and where one judges the works both of those who govern and of those who write, two ways of leading men’ (quoted in Ferenczi 1993, 28). Max Weber described the journalist as a ‘type of professional politician’ (Gerth & Mills 1946, 99); this was in the context of making an argument in ‘Politics as a Vocation’, about politics as leadership of public opinion, taking public stands, and trying to create majorities around particular visions of where society
Rethinking mediatisation

Populist politics is clearly mediatised politics. But its forms of mediatisation, even if they may have roots in an earlier history of mediatisation of politics, are quite distinct in many ways from those conceptualised in earlier scholarship, and they require us to think about mediatisation in more complex ways. I would like to conclude by making five points about this reconceptualisation. None of these is a new idea; recent literature on mediatisation in general, and the mediatisation of politics specifically, has already moved considerably towards more complex conceptualisations in all these ways. Reflecting on populist politics, in the specific case of Donald Trump and more generally, helps to demonstrate the importance of this rethinking.

First, and most generally, we need to make the concept of mediatisation comparative and historical. De Beus (2011), in an application of Manin’s analysis of the shift from party democracy to audience democracy, cites as examples of the kinds of political leaders produced by mediatised politics such figures as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. But a conceptualisation that is so broad as to apply to Blair and Clinton and equally to Trump or to Jair Bolsonaro clearly explains too much. We need to move away from treating the mediatisation of politics as a general, unilinear process to conceptualise different forms of mediatisation which exist in different historical periods and in different contexts, varying according to the nature of the political and media system and sometimes also by the particular situation or conjuncture (Strömbäck & Esser 2014).

Second, zero-sum conceptualisations of mediatisation involving the ‘colonisation’ of other social fields or institutions by the media or an imposition of media logics onto those fields, a process in which media gain in power and autonomy while other institutions decline correspondingly, are clearly inadequate. Marcinkowski and Steiner (2014; also Marcinkowski 2014) have made one particularly well-articulated statement of this position, arguing that mediatisation often involves other institutions appropriating media technologies and logics to serve their own purposes and that institutions do not necessarily lose either power or their coherence as distinct institutions by becoming mediatised. Looking back at the mediatisation of politics in the period described in the first generation of scholarship, the zero-sum conceptualisation is too simplistic even for that era. In the case of my own work on television soundbites, for example, a key element of the story is the Nixon campaign in 1968, in which Roger Ailes produced campaign events as television shows, excluding journalists from the set and using the technology of television to bypass the established news media. Television journalists responded to new forms of image-making and media manipulation, initiated in the political sphere, by moving in
the direction of more active and often critical reporting of campaigns. But it is not self-evident that political parties lost their power either to reach voters or to shape political discourse; they learned to use the new practices of television news production to their advantage. Clearly, populist leaders often build highly effective political movements through both the appropriation of media logics and the exploitation of new media technologies and practices.

This leads directly to three related points. One, our third point overall, is that, though it may seem paradoxical at first glance, we need to move away from mediacentric conceptualisations of mediatisation. That is to say, in order to understand the mediatisation of politics or of any other social field, we cannot assume that whatever changes are taking place in that field are purely the product of what is going on in the media field. We need to understand how the dynamics of other social fields drive their interaction with the media and shape the changes that result. 1

The shift from party democracy to new, more mediated forms of politics is influenced by the rise of television and of commercial media generally. But it is also rooted in changes in political economy and public policy, including the rise of the consumer society and the shift away from the growth of the welfare state. And the rise of what Panebianco (1988) called the ‘electoral-professional party’, which turned to new forms of political communication and new types of leadership, was no doubt driven by internal developments within political party institutions as much as by outside pressure from the media system. The growth of political polarisation which is one of the hallmarks of Trump-era American politics is certainly connected to the shift to multi-channel media that is part of the move towards the ‘third era of political communication’ (Blumler & Kavanaugh 1999). But it is also something that political scientists in the US have traced back to political developments in the 1970s, long before those changes in media took place (Jacobson 2001).

Fourth, it is essential to disaggregate our conceptualisation of mediatisation to distinguish its different forms, including, particularly, the distinction between the effects of media institutions and the effects of media technologies. The classic literature on the mediatisation of politics focused primarily on media institutions – organisations like television networks and the shared practices developed as they competed with one another, as well as journalism as an institution. Populist politics, however, draws our attention to the importance of considering also the possibility that other actors may be able to appropriate media technologies in ways that disrupt established institutions of political communication, both on the side of media and on the side of the political system. Media technologies are understood here in the broad sense since something like social media, for example, is obviously not simply a kind of hardware, but a set of communicative practices afforded by the infrastructure of networked digital communication.

Finally, we need to move away from conceptualisations of mediatisation that assume clear boundaries between media and political (or other) institutions and clear separation of their logics. If we take seriously both the idea that other social fields and institutions incorporate media technologies, personnel, and practices into their own structures, what Strömbäck (2008) called ‘premediatisation’ and Couldry and Hepp (2016) have further conceptualised as deep mediatisation, and the idea that other social fields may not so much submit to media logics as appropriate them, then we are likely to encounter many actors and practices that are hybrid in character and, like Fox or Trump or Berlusconi, can actually be media and politics simultaneously.

Note

1 This point is developed in another context in Briggs and Hallin (2016), looking at the mediatisation of health and medicine in relation to the literature in sociology and anthropology of medicine on the process of ‘biomedicalisation’.
References


