Populism as media and communication phenomenon

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Introduction

In this chapter I argue that media and communication studies contribute to understanding key aspects of populism, including its tense and problematic relationship to democracy. Central dimensions of contemporary populism, including its causes and consequences for democratic politics, cannot be properly understood without addressing media and communication issues (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, and De Vreese, 2017).

To analyze the relationship among populism, media, and communication, some basic conceptual ground-clearing is necessary for the simple reason that these concepts are semantically thick and remain the subject of longstanding squabbles. Running the risk of oversimplification, it is possible to define media and communication in relatively succinct manner. “The media” refers to organizations, technologies, and platforms that produce and distribute content to large publics, including news, information, fiction, entertainment, and personal. “Communication” refers to forms of expression and social interactivity by which individuals and societies exchange ideas and values and develop a sense of individual and collective self. In contrast, it is exceedingly difficult to define populism in similarly terse terms. We continue to lack a consensus definition, as this volume amply demonstrates. In fact, it has become de rigueur to acknowledge the wide diversity of definitions, perennial ambiguity, and confusion surrounding the concept of populism. The concept has been used loosely to characterize political phenomena across time and regions that, at least at a superficial level, are remarkably different, including the party that championed the nationalization of railroad and communication systems and opposed Wall Street in the 1890s in the United States, Latin American parties and movements that condemned the oligarchy and imperialism, contemporary right-wing, anti-European populism obsessed with immigration, headscarfs, and burkinis, and US president Donald Trump obsessed with himself.

Populism as a communication phenomenon

What do different forms of populism have in common? To discuss populism as a media and communication phenomenon, it is necessary to recognize populism essentially as a political
strategy and a discursive frame – a way of conceptualizing and communicating politics for strategic purposes rather than a particular set of ideological or policy proposals. Media scholars have defined populism as a “political communication style” (Mazzoleni, Stewart, and Horshfield, 2003) that conceptualizes and frames politics. For Jagers and Walgrave (2007, p. 322), populism is “a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to speak in their name.” In this regard, Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) influential work is particularly helpful. Although Laclau’s approach is not grounded in communication theory, it advances an essentially communicative perspective on the nature of populism grounded in Althusserianism and structural linguistics. Laclau views populism as a political logic that articulates “the popular” by unifying demands against the existing order. Populism produces the existence of “the people” – the basis of democratic politics, and by doing so, it constitutes “the political.” Populism gives existence to “the people” by interpellating “the popular.”

Populism is fundamentally a language that champions “the people,” denounces elites, and transcends common ideological categories. Populism views “the people” as the central actor of politics, and demonizes the elite in its different manifestations. Just as Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan affirmed, “Enough is enough, sovereignty belongs to the people,” Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez stated, “Here I am standing. The people should order me, I know how to obey. I am a soldier of the people, you are my boss.” In the aftermath of Trump’s successful presidential run, an exultant Viktor Orban stated, “We are moving back to reality, which means [respecting] the views of real people and what they think, how they approach these questions – not to educate them, but accept them as they are, because they are the basis of democracy.” Populism conceives “the people” – what UKIP leader Nigel Farage often described as “ordinary,” “little,” “real,” “decent” people during the “Brexit” campaign, as the pure and noble embodiment of democratic politics, the true manifestation of the collective soul.

The discursive construction of “the people” is inseparable from the articulation of “the elites” as the Other. A hallmark of populist discourse is an anti-systemic narrative. Populism fulminates against “the system” which is construed in multiple ways. The system can be capitalism or liberal democracy, the elites and special interests who benefit from the current order, the dominant political parties, the bourgeoisie, the oligarchy and transnational capital, metropolitan elites, and/or minority and immigrant populations. President Viktor Orban called Hungarians to fight the failed “Brussels’ elite.” Geert Wilders declared, “Unfortunately, Dutch political elites suffer from the fatal arrogance of thinking they know better than the people.” In his inaugural speech, Donald Trump said, “For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth.” France’s Marine Le Pen characterized the result of the Brexit referendum and Trump’s victory as the “awakening of the people against oligarchies.”

What underpins these statements is the notion that the political and economic elites as well as “Others” (e.g. immigrants, foreigners) control the system for their advantage against “real” popular interests. A “rigged” system is illegitimate because it does not benefit “the people” who are the “ultimate source of legitimacy” in politics (Canovan, 2005, 80).

Yet neither “the people” nor “the elites” (or “the system”) is defined a priori in populist discourse. Both terms are quite vague – they are “empty signifiers” (Laclau, 2005; Ménÿ and Surel, 2002) open for interpretation and definition. In this perennial flexibility to understand both actors according to unique circumstances lies the ideological flexibility of populism as well as its persistent confusion. They are defined within specific contexts by which certain demands are brought together under the concept of “the people” according to different political actors and ideologies. Given the vagueness and fluidity of its central tropes, populist discourse can be mobilized for different and even opposite purposes. This is why populism is not an ideology,
but rather a vision of politics according to “the people” are virtuous and righteous and in opposition to elites who are antithetical to popular interests, identity, and voice.

Right-wing movements define “the people” as “ordinary folk,” “the nation,” and “patriots” against the dominant elites represented by liberalism, leftist parties, the media, universities, and national and international organizations that champion globalism, cosmopolitanism, foreign interests, and “others” groups (from racial minorities to immigrants) (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015). In contrast, leftist movements typically understand “the people” as workers, peasants, immigrants, and other groups in the “popular camp” against “the elites” represented by economic/financial powers, the oligarchy, the media, and international capital (Waisbord, 2014).

Populism’s binary conception of politics has no room for nuances in the characterization of “the people” and “the elite.” It sees both as homogeneous actors. All possible internal differences are insignificant within a conception of politics starkly divided in two sides. Populism does not deal with nuanced understandings of the formation of political subjects across multiple variables and conflicts. Any differentiation inevitably undercuts its stark, simplified view of democratic politics that underpins populism’s core beliefs. Populism’s discursive construction of politics and actors are simplified, idealistic notions rather than tangible, real representations of reality. They are rhetorical narratives rather than accurate descriptions of politics (Mudde, 2004).

In summary, populism is a communicative strategy that articulates political actors and defines politics as a matter of irreconcilable interests between two actors. Such rhetoric is a defining trait of populism, regardless of other factors – ideology, type of leadership, policies, and so on. What binds together different historical and contemporary forms of populism is a discursive frame (Aslanidis, 2016), no matter its many incarnations, ideological prescriptions and changes, and particular contexts.

This definition of populism sets the basis for comparative, cross-national studies of a political phenomenon that otherwise has important differences in terms of ideology and policies.

The elements of populist rhetoric

Rhetoric is a sure tell-tale sign of populism. If someone talks like a populist, it must be a populist. Populist rhetoric is characterized by an agonistic, anti-systemic narrative about politics, and a transgressive language.

The binary discursive construction of “the people” and “the elites” articulates populism’s agonistic conception of politics. No reconciliation or compromise between political actors is possible insofar as those camps are in constant, inevitable conflict. Compromise and accommodation are unconceivable given that the essential opposition between “the people” and “the elites.”

The roots of the conflict depend on the ideological wrappings of populism. For left-wing populism differences are grounded in socio-economic and national interests. Conflict is embedded in the social inequalities shaped by and perpetuated by capitalism. Capitalism and global order engender distinct and opposite camps: the popular-national against the elites linked to global transnational forces. In contrast, for right-wing populism, the binary nature of political discourse responds to social differences grounded in economics, nationality, race, ethnicity, and language. Overcoming such differences contradicts the established, correct order or, a former version of it that has been changed, displaced, upended by the elites.

Yet both ideological articulations of populism believe that the conflictive nature of politics cannot be overcome. Consensus is false and unrealistic for it presumes that social and political differences can be settled or negotiated. This is impossible for it disregards the basic inequalities
underlying democratic politics. Instead, agonistic politics is the true essence of democratic politics. It is a logical outgrowth of social orders built upon difference and exclusion.

Another element of populist rhetoric is that the current order needs to be cleaned by the “pure” people, including the leader, who are excluded by the current establishment. Although not all forms of populism are represented by political outsiders, there is more than coincidence in the proximity between populism’s grand promises to overturn the system and the political status of novice candidates and politicians. They resort to a discourse that combats “the system” and portrays themselves as truly “anti-political outsiders” ready to overturn conventional practices and power hierarchies. Certainly, not all populists are political outsiders in the sense of political newcomers without any experience or participation. Several examples of populist parties, such as Argentina’s Peronism or France’s National Front, have been a fixture of political systems for decades. Yet they have continued to rely on a similar trope—the notion that they are positioned outside the system, unencumbered by dominant interests, and therefore are able to shake up the system. In this sense, populism is a form of protest politics that discursively expresses discontent with the current political order as put in evidence by the rhetoric that derides “professional politicians” and the elites for benefitting from the current political order. Because they are not bounded by rules and commitments like “establishment” and “professional” politicians, they are free, or so they say, to shake up “the system” and implement changes against the will of dominant elites. Populist outsiders promise to reestablish politics upon new foundations.

Another regular component of the populist rhetoric against “the system” is a language that falls outside the conventions of legitimate, mainstream discourse. It is a rhetoric that upends the conventions of decorum, civility, and diplomatic language. Populist leaders resort to colorful, uncivil, undignified, emotional, “frank” language. They use blunt, crass, direct, harsh, emotional, colloquial language—that supposedly reflects the “people’s voice” in contrast to the artificiality of conventional language that “masks” elite interests. They have a penchant for mentioning “the unmentionable” by bringing up taboo topics in the context of mainstream politics (Fochtner, Krzyżanowski, and Wodak, 2013), such as wealth disparities, media concentration, poverty, and other issues. Populist politicians praise everyman’s language against intellectual pretensions (Canovan, 1999; Moffit and Tormey, 2014). They frequently present their discourse as the way “real folk” talk in contrast to, what populists argue, is the language of intellectuals, professional politicians, and elites. Certainly, not every politician who commonly uses homespun, improper, and/or harsh language is a populist. Populist language is more than a form or style of communication yet it provides a window into a particular conception of politics.

Reflecting its self-appointed status as anti-political outsider, populism uses a transgressive language to condemn “the system” and its beneficiaries. It talks about subjects that are not commonly discussed in mainstream politics, and uses linguistic forms (words and expression) that are not typically in political discourse. The “unspoken” subject refers to topics that populism believes are not mentioned or discussed because dominant interests are dead against bringing them up for open, public debate. Leftist populism denounces “the system” for maintaining silence about wealth gaps, exploitation, capitalism, the collusion between moneyed and political elites, and the machinations of the powerful to maintain the status quo. Instead, right-wing populism takes issue with “the system” for championing “political correctness,” downplaying nationalism and patriotism, and praising liberal-leftist ideals (Guardino and Snyder, 2012)

**Populist critique of the media**

Separate attention deserves a common element of populist rhetoric: the constant criticism of “the media.” Populism exhibits, what communication scholars call, the “hostile media”
phenomenon – the perception that the media are biased against one’s convictions and ideological preferences. The media are construed as a central component of “the system” as in Rafael Correa’s constant diatribes against the “mercantilist press,” the Kirchners’ accusation of “multimedia generals,” and Donald Trump’s characterization of the press as “the enemy of the people” in reference to the opposition media and “the corporate media” allied with his election rival Hillary Clinton. During the 2017 French election campaign, Le Pen said: “[The media] take the moral high ground, pretend to only analyze the facts and then shout about the freedom of the press as soon as you criticize them.”

The media are characterized as a single, unified institution – the staunch allies and protectors of established powers. Indeed, populism generally sees itself as a victim of the media’s complicity with the system, especially when it is defeated in electoral contests or fails to achieve intended political and policy goals. It inevitably attributes its lack of success to media coverage, whether minimal or negative coverage of the “popular” forces it represents. Instead, when triumphant, populists attribute the victory to the power of the “people’s voices.”

In the populist mind, the quality of news coverage and the depiction of “the people” in various forms of content stands as conclusive evidence of the alliance between media organizations and dominant elites. In populism’s view, the media reinforce the current order, distort reality, and ignore popular voices. The claim made by news organizations to be balanced and evenhanded is discarded as a mere pretense that masks their deeply embedded political, economic, and social goals.

Left-wing populism blames structural factors for the media’s anti-populist stance. Concentrated media ownership, the conservative sympathies of media owners, and intertwined business interests with large companies explain the media’s anti-popular slant. In contrast, right-wing populism commonly singles out the ideological sympathies of media workers (from leftism to multiculturalism) and the ties between media organizations and intellectual, elite actors as responsible for why the media unanimously stand against the people.

**Media and populist politics**

Despite growing scholarly interests in the relationship between populism and the media, we still do not have sufficient evidence to draw categorical conclusions. Several important questions still lack convincing answers. Are the media instrumental in the rise of populism? Are there certain aspects of the media that contribute to populism – editorial standing, preference for certain content, anti-system reporting, appetite for conflict over consensus, focus on personalities over organizations and ideas? Are media organizations editorially identified with populist causes the catalysts for populist movements? Or are the media just the platform for the expression of sentiments that undergird populism?

Given mixed evidence, it would be wrongheaded to suggest a direct causal relationship between media and populism. We cannot affirm that the media single-handedly cause the rise of populist candidates, politicians, and movements. Even if there may be a strong link between specific media and populist insurgencies, it would be incorrect to suggest that the latter are solely the product of the media. The causes of the rise and fall of populism are too complex to draw such categorical conclusions. Because the causes of populism are exceedingly complex, and might not be similar across cases of populism in different regions and time periods, the relationship between media and populism should not be hastily characterized. Also, the fact that the media might have a minimal yet significant difference in the rise of populism and its electoral fortunes, particularly in the context of close and contested elections, should make us cautious about drawing big generalizations about the nexus between the media and populism.
Even if the media alone do not lead to populist insurgencies and political victories, they (or some media, as we discuss below) might have sufficient importance to tilt the balance for or against populism.

We should not make the media solely responsible for the rise of populism. A media or communication-centric explanation is bound to confront the difficulty of being reconciled with the argument that populism is grounded in multiple factors, namely, a situation of political and economic crisis (De la Torre, 2010). Political crisis is manifested in serious cracks or the collapse of the party system, gridlock politics, and widespread public discontent, malaise, and alienation. Economic crisis refers to financial downfall and the negative impact of globalization on jobs, income and opportunities. Moffitt (2015) has argued that populism articulates a sense of crisis. Populist insurgencies express the crisis as they embody a politics of protest featuring a relatively simple way of understanding and tackling the roots of the problems. A more promising line of analysis is to consider several dimensions of the complex relation between the media and populism.

A point is to consider is whether there is a possible affinity between populism and the “mediatization” of contemporary politics. Given the recent upsurge in populism and the contemporary mediatization of politics, it is reasonable to suggest that there may be more than a coincidence. “Mediatization” refers to a process by which a certain realm, in this case politics, adopts central, distinctive elements of the media (Strömback, 2008). Mediatized politics reflects the growing and pervasive influence of the media in various aspects of politics – from the way citizens get information to the performance of democratic institutions. Although populism has existed before the increased expansion of “mediatization” in contemporary politics, it is worth considering whether there are any connections between both processes.

Making a connection between mediatized politics and populism is tempting. It has been suggested that populism is an outcome of the mediatization of politics (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2014). Just as populism generally represents an alternative to dominant party systems and “politics as usual,” mediatization has gradually eroded the traditional boundaries of democratic politics and shifted the rules of political mediation. It has essentially transformed political representation by constantly presenting politics outside the standard political structures of liberal democracy.

To discern the relationship, it is important to distinguish two aspects in mediatization: the media as central platforms for gaining political visibility in the contemporary public sphere, and the prevalence of a particular “media logic” in contemporary politics.

On the first dimension, several populist leaders rose to public prominence by using the media as direct channels to appeal to citizens. They did not come through the ranks of party structures or electoral politics. Think of Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump, and other entrepreneurs-cum-politicians that shrewdly used media appearances to catapult themselves over democratic institutions. Charismatic and media-appealing politicians have used the media to build candidacies, cultivate public support and reach large numbers of citizens. They bypassed classic forms of political intermediation to the point that their political careers are unthinkable without media presence. The problem of this explanation is that, although media visibility seems a prerequisite for any politician or ordinary citizens with political aspirations, it is not obvious that mediatization necessarily favors populists. Not everyone who uses the media as launching pad for political career is a true populist or shares other key components of populism.

On the second dimension, some aspects of populism seemingly fit well the “media logic” – that is, codes that are unique to specific, popular forms of media content such as fiction, news and entertainment. The media logic is characterized by spectacularization, personalization, sensationalism, tabloidization, conflict-centered discourse, and simplified rhetoric – all common features in
populism (Mazzoleni, 2014). One could argue that several aspects of populism match different elements of the media logic. Populism’s view of politics as permanent conflict dovetails with the inclination of news organizations to frame politics and public life in terms of conflict and sensationalism. Also, particular traits of populist leaders are well suited for specific media – whether getting incessant media attention or managing superbly media biases. Just as Juan Perón and Hugo Chavez mastered specific codes of radio, Silvio Berlusconi’s telegenic image fitted entertainment television. More recently, populist leaders such as Rafael Correa and Donald Trump have had a prominent voice on Twitter. They shrewdly used the platform to make news and reach out various constituencies. It seems as if populism’s personalistic leadership fits the personalization of media politics and ably uses social media to disintermediate political communication.

Therefore, it could be argued that two dimensions of mediatization offer propitious conditions for populism. The fact that it is difficult to imagine populist leaders without constant, massive media appearances suggests that there might be more than a coincidence between those two phenomena. Yet the nexus is not completely clear. Historically, populism has preceded full-blown mediatization. There were successful cases of populism before the media, specifically their own distinctive logic, dominated key aspects of contemporary politics. Latin America is a case in point. Even during times of stronger party systems and limited media development, populist leaders and movements were common in several countries. Likewise, early forms of populism in the United States, particularly its discursive narrative, preceded the emergence of modern mass media.

Nor is it obvious that mediatization as a structural development changing politics only tilts the balance in favor of populism. We do not have sufficient evidence to suggest that mediatization offers conditions that favor populism more than other political styles. Contemporary politics as a whole, not just populism, is embedded in the dynamics of mediatization. Just because some aspects of populist rhetoric fit well media appetites or prominent populist politicians enjoyed significant media attention and mastered particular media codes, it does not follow that mediatization necessarily leads to populism.

Another issue to consider is whether the growing power of market-based media provides favorable condition for populist politics (Mazzoleni, Stewart, and Horsfield, 2003). As the argument goes, a mix of so-called “down-market” content guided by profit-making goals and conservative editorial positions tills the ground for populist discourse, especially in the United States and Europe. The tabloidization of the media and certain media formats such as the “popular” press and “talk radio” favor content that fits certain traits of populism. So-called “populist media” typically features a simplified view of politics, sensational and coarse language, distrust and frustration with “politics as usual,” praise of “ordinary folk” against “professional” politicians, raging nationalism, and stands on various matters such as immigration, crime, race and religion that closely match populism’s agenda (Cross, 2014; Krämer, 2014). Such content and messages, perpetually offered and hammered by certain media outlets, shape a public opinion receptive to populist discourse (Burack and Snyder-Hall, 2012; Mazzoleni, 2008).

European scholars have found that key elements of populist discourse such “tough on crime”, “Euroskepticism,” and “anti-immigration” resonate with the standard coverage in the “tabloid/populist” media (Ellinas, 2010). Some studies concluded that popular support for anti-immigration candidates closely mirrors the levels of attention given to anti-immigration positions in the news (Boomgaard and Vliegenthart, 2009). Not coincidentally, populist candidates and parties generally enjoy favorable coverage from popular/tabloid news and attract disproportionate support among audiences of those media outlets. Therefore, the “populist” media effectively function both as opinion makers and propagandists for issues and positions unmistakably
associated with right-wing populism (Bos and Brants, 2014). They offer cues that mobilize and influence voting behavior (Sheets, Bos, and Boomgaarden, 2015). Furthermore, such discursive elements and positions eventually made their way into other media as well as mainstream politics.

US scholars have concluded that the consolidation of conservative media into a distinctive and popular “echo chamber” laid the foundations for contemporary right-wing populism (Hall Jamieson and Capella, 2008; Horwitz, 2013). The local and national visibility of populist politicians and politicians, especially since the rise of the Tea Party, is unthinkable without the decades-long presence and popularity of right-wing media – news organizations and talk radio that jettisoned the “professional” conventions of mainstream journalism and embraced in-your-face, no-holds-barred conservatism. Right-wing media have proven to be extremely profitable as they captured an “ideological” audience and legitimized many ideas that used to be on the margins of US politics, including the Republican party. Talk radio and the Fox network have nurtured a distinctive and emotional attachment to right-wing positions on a wide range of issues such as taxation, government, guns, healthcare, race, law and order, and business policies. Issue positions as well as certain language popularized by right-wing media eventually became closely identified with the rallying cries of the Tea Party (Jutel, 2013) and the electoral rhetoric of the 2016 Donald Trump campaign.

The closeness between media organizations and figures (such as Rush Limbaugh and prominent Fox anchors such as Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity) with populist politics can be legitimately considered a case of “media/political parallelism” (Hemmer, 2016). The media are not simply accessory or facilitators of right-wing populism just because there is an affinity between populism and media codes. Rather, they have been indistinguishable from party and ideological politics. What is new is not the presence of right-wing media that explicitly defend core populist ideas. Such media have been features of media systems for decades, but they were generally relegated to the outer rings of the media landscape. What is different is that populism is central to the content of the corporate news media that attracts substantial audiences and advertisers (Guardino and Snyder, 2012). Certainly, to recognize the importance of the connections between market-based, right-wing media and populism does not mean that the rising tide of US populism in the past decades is only explained by media developments.

One issue of debate is whether the media play similarly important roles during the various phases of populist movements (Mazzoleni, Stewart, and Horsfield, 2003). In Europe, some studies suggest that populist parties attracted more media attention during the early phase, particularly from “populist” outlets, than subsequently after they gained parliamentary representation and/or became members of governing coalitions. Media attention became more stable and followed customary parameters in the case of populist parties in Nordic countries (Herkman, 2015).

More than particular ideological community between populism and certain media organizations, journalistic routines and political conditions explain changes in the amount and the content of media coverage. In Britain, for example, the intensity of media coverage of the UK Independence Party was largely due to its political gains and the party’s communication tactics rather than favoritism by the tabloid or elite media. Initially, the media did not show great interest in the party, but eventually it offered more attention (Deacon and Wring, 2016). Although tabloid media is more closely linked to populist discourse, electoral politics are a better predictor of the overall media presence of populism (Rooduijin, 2014). Studies about Dutch populism found no positive relation between the amount of populist rhetoric in the media and the electoral fortunes of populism (Bos and Brants, 2014; van der Pas, de Vries, and van der Brug, 2013). There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that the logic of certain
media organizations benefited populist politics (Akkerman, 2011). The relationship between media and populism is more complex than initially believed.

A third dimension to consider is the relationship between digital media and populism. What is specifically about Internet 2.0 that might be conducive to populist communication? Are populist parties better at capitalizing on the technological affordances of digital platforms to organize and mobilize citizens as well as to articulate and disseminate their message? Are interactive platforms well suited for expressing the kind of citizen frustration with current politics that eventually becomes channeled into populist movements? Is there a direct correlation between the rising fortunes of populism and the growing presence of social media during the past decade (Bartlett, 2014)?

Although no evidence suggests a close connection between interactive platforms and populist politics, some aspects of social media and other interactive platforms seem favorably suited for populist communication.

Online platforms provided alternative media for the kind of populist discourse that news organizations downplayed or ignored either because it was considered too far removed from mainstream politics or too controversial and aggressive for standard news. Although they were located at the margins of media systems during the early stages of populist insurgencies, digital communication in websites, blogs and social media fostered the growth of populist discourse.

Populism’s uncivil, aggressive discourse finds a more suitable environment on the Internet than in the traditional media. Social media offer unlimited opportunities for political discourse unbounded by standards norms of decency and respect traditionally cultivated by quality/elite news media. Ordinary talk on social media is not hamstring by the discursive conventions of mainstream journalism. It pushes the boundaries of accepted political discourse closer to the conventions of “talk radio” and tabloid journalism. It is a realm for freewheeling speech not grounded by the rules of truth-telling or restricted by, what right-wing populists dismiss as, “political correctness.” In the case of left-wing populism, digital platforms offer opportunities for public discourse and engagement outside the mainstream, corporate media. By offering opportunities for alternative communication, digital platforms may provide spaces for the cultivation of populist communication and strategies (Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler, 2011).

Likewise, it can be legitimately suggested that the usage of social media fit populism’s penchant for reinforcing in-group mentality against outgroups. Users’ preferences coupled with the political economy of social media cement homophilic communication and identity-centered communication in digital spaces (Nilsson and Carlsson, 2014). Flattened communication structure among like-minded netizens provides constant opportunities for fostering in-group certainties and demonizing others. Such dynamics reinforce existing convictions and legitimize individual beliefs within ideologically homogeneous groups (Groshek and Engelbert, 2012).

In sum, the literature offers intriguing insights into various aspects of the relationship between media and populism, but it does not offer sufficient evidence to draw general conclusions. Because the approach has been typically idiographic, focused on specific national case studies, we lack comparative, cross-national findings to produce general propositions.

**Populist communication and liberal-progressive democracy**

A final dimension to consider is the relationship between populism, communication, and democracy. This question needs to be placed in the broad debate about the complex and uneasy relationship between populism and democracy.

Three lines of argument can be identified (Panizza, 2005). One position argues that populism is synonymous with democracy because it gives existence to “the people” as the
ultimate sovereign political authority (Laclau, 2005). Instead, other scholars have argued that populism maintains a conflictive relationship with democracy and that it poses serious threats to basic tenets of democratic governance (Abts and Rummens, 2007). Populism’s “antiliberal” features are problematic, namely its thundering hostility to democratic institutions, the division of powers, individual rights, and the limitation of the power of the majority. Just as it rightly assails democratic institutions for many shortcomings, populism also takes ambiguous and, at times, negative standings vis-à-vis central pillars of constitutional democracy. Populism believes that the institutional scaffolding of democracy – the rule of law, political parties, division of powers, free press – is nothing but a pretense of true governance, designed to benefit political, economic, and cultural elites. This vision is crystallized in populism’s trampling of democratic mechanisms, including mechanisms to ensure pluralism, representation and minority rights. Finally, a third position suggests that populism is neither the best expression of democracy nor the enemy of democracy. Although populism stands “on the edge of liberalism” (Arditi, 2007), not all forms of populism are equally problematic for democracy. Whereas some are compatible with liberal democracy, others are not. Just as populism can have democratic effects as it might correct deficits of popular representation, as it champions issues and actors that are typically sidelined, it can also worsen problems of weak accountability (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, 2013).

Within this debate, it is necessary to discuss populism’s uneasy relationship with liberal-progressive conceptions of democratic communication. By this I understand a model grounded in the existence of the public commons (that includes public, private and mixed, legacy and digital media), that facilitate and promote informed public dialogue characterized by civility, diversity, tolerance, reason, and facts. This model historically entailed the guarantee of constitutional rights and institutional settings to catalyze news and public debate. Populism has a troubling relationship with this model of public communication.

This model presupposes communication institutions with degrees of autonomy and inclusiveness. Nothing could be farther from populism’s vision of public communication. Consider its contentious relationship with the critical press. For populism, the press is either the megaphone of dominant elites or the voice of truly “popular” national, patriotic interests, as they call sycophantic journalists and news organizations. Populists often use the trope of “the establishment press” to refuse to hold open press conferences and to castigate specific, critical news organizations. Some populist governments, as in the cases of Chavismo in Venezuela and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, showed disdain for press freedoms and the right to free expression. They persecuted dissidents in the press and the public sphere through myriad tactics – from a raft of new legislation to constant verbal denunciations. They show little sympathy for dissident reporters and citizens who suffered verbal and physical attacks. They supported proto-journalistic offline and online networks aimed at denouncing and harassing oppositional voices. Left-wing Latin American populism promoted media policies that, although were in principle based on communication rights, were intended to reinforce the communication power of governments as well as market and civil society supporters and curb the potential for criticism (Waisbord, 2014).

Populism’s impatience with the critical press accounts for why leaders preferred media management tactics such as broadcast talk shows, rallies, and tightly controlled press conferences. Such tactics allow politicians to avoid exchanges with reporters and citizens who might ask tough, uncomfortable questions. This is why populist leaders have found in Twitter a suitable platform for constant, one-way messaging that bypasses the press in order to reach political elites, reporters, and the public. Populist leaders might not be unique in opting for
managed public appearances as the latter have become a feature of contemporary mediated politics. Yet their inclination for media strategies to avoid criticism is consistent with populism’s distrust and staunch opposition to fundamental press rights.

Another element of populism’s problematic relationship with democratic communication is its narrow view of pluralism and diversity. Populism claims to bring up popular views and demands in the public debate. In some cases, they have actually championed issues affecting the subaltern, such as poverty, human rights, social inequality, jobs, and criticized political and economic elites. By doing so, populism broadens the range of voices, puts the spotlight on issues, and shapes “counter-publics” in contemporary democracies. This is particularly important in the context of media systems tilted in favor of large commercial and political interests and disengaged from the lives of the large majority of the population.

Populism’s Manichean view of politics is ill-suited to address pluralism and diversity. Populism envisions “the people” as a homogeneous body, defined by class, education, nationality, language, and race, rather than as a quite diverse actor in today’s multicultural societies. A totalizing, binary view shapes intolerant positions that reduce diversity to two possibilities – for or against “the people.” Any position not aligned with populism automatically becomes disqualified as the enemy. Populism flatly discredits opposition and criticism by claiming to be the only political force that legitimately speaks in the name of “the people.” It has no room for difference and “otherness” (Abts and Rummens, 2007), an attitude expressed in its tendency to charge outgroups for social ills, constantly divide the world between allies and enemies, and blame scapegoats for its mistakes and misguided policies. Populism’s visceral reaction against diversity is also reflected in its opposition to public media as a space for the recognition and promotion of diversity (Engesser et al., 2016; Horsti, Tittley, and Hultén, 2014). In sum, diversity, a central feature of contemporary societies, is not something that populism is philosophically equipped to address in a democratic manner with communicative actions and policies to make pluralism a central component of public life.

Populism frequently boils down the complex matter of difference to a question of realpolitik – whether certain voices and positions are aligned with its own goals, generally defined by the leader. If they are, then they become part of “the people.” If they are not, then automatically they are attached to “the elite.” Loyalty to and faith on the leader are generally the acid test for the validity of any position (Canovan, 1999). “The people” often becomes a rhetorical subterfuge to determine the legitimacy of positions on the basis of political calculations and objectives. The abstract notion of “the people” becomes a practical ruse for framing issues and actors rather than the source of a moral commitment to democratic pluralism.

Populism’s hostility to democratic communication is also reflected in its constant use of the language of conflict. In its mind, politics is nothing but conflict. No doubt, conflict is central to democracy, particularly in the context of wide political, economic and social inequalities as well as the existence of a wide diversity of views and positions in contemporary societies. Yet a purely agonistic view dismisses the fact that the politics of consensus-seeking through communicative action is also central to democracy. Pure conflict neither generates nor secures public communication and democratic governance. It sharpens divisions and polarization that threaten the stability and inclusiveness of political orders. A conflict-centered position has no room for the endless and challenging search for consensus through multiparty dialogue in the public sphere.

The politics of consensus-building in democracies is linked to efforts to shape “the commons” as a collective space for discussion and negotiation. Recovering common spaces in diverse societies is particularly salient amid today’s fragmented and divisive politics. The viability of inclusive and tolerant democracy demands communicative actions for producing
shared agreements about basic matters. Because democracy demands both conflict and consensus, it requires communicative politics that fosters the affirmation of particular interests against others as well as the search for agreements.

Instead, populism’s illiberal model of communication deepens worrisome trends in contemporary politics: intolerance and social exclusion, aversion to reasoned debate, misinformation and the celebration of post-truth politics. Populism negates the fundamental principles of reasoned and informed dialogue, solidarity and empathy, and consensus-building communication. Instead, it embraces a combative, venomous rhetoric to lash out at opposition forces.

Conclusion

Populism’s penchant for grandiloquent, simplistic narratives to define reality is antithetical to liberal-progressive public communication. Populism jettisons fact-based, reasoned arguments over common affairs. It opposes the politics of expertise in public life – from economics to environmental science, from health to history. It rides on sentiments that distrust science-based expertise. It taps into anger and skepticism against modern science and scientific methods to produce knowledge. It dismisses experts as shills for the elites, especially when they challenge populist truisms. It does not conceive experts as legitimate producers of autonomous knowledge who might contribute to public action by informing debates and correcting ideas and perceptions. Instead, it embraces the notion that beliefs grounded in personal and collective convictions are authoritative and as credible as expert knowledge to define reality and truth. It shamelessly panders to public convictions regardless of whether they are sustained in facts or match real, evidence-proven developments. Fact-producing institutions such as journalism and experts are considered anti-democratic especially when they challenge populist standings. Populism reflects the ascendency of post-truth politics that prioritizes interpretations over evidence, belief over facts, and emotion over reason in public knowledge.

Equally problematic is the fact that populism does not believe in the communication commons as a core space for the formation of public will in democratic life, another fundamental condition of the liberal-progressive model. A democratic public sphere is anathema to its agonistic vision of politics. By embracing an essentialist conception of “the people,” it negates the presence of wide-ranging differences and interests as constitutive of contemporary democracy. It views multiple “others,” defined by socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, nation, language, ideology, race, education, and lifestyle, as enemies rather than fellow members of a political community. Stuck in nostalgic notions of well-defined, binary political actors, populism paints a simplistic and dangerous picture of communicative politics that rebukes the need for engagement and dialogue with difference.

This is why populism is hardly conducive to addressing the current crisis of the communication commons driven by the fragmentation of public life, the commercialization and gradual breakdown of large-scale media, and the proliferation of media spheres articulated around socio-economic differences, cultural sharedness, and consumer lifestyles. With its brand of divisive politics, populism is not only symptomatic of the fraying of the communication commons. It also thrives in a toxic atmosphere of intolerance and impatience with diversity and criticism, and champions a communicative model that exacerbates the balkanization of the public sphere.

References


