It is now fairly uncontroversial to argue that Western democracies are in the midst of something of a ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004). This is particularly the case in Western Europe, where populist actors, particularly on the right of the ideological spectrum, have made significant inroads in terms of both electoral success and impinging on the political ‘mainstream’ (Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn 2016). Part of the reason that is often offered for this shift in the zeitgeist is the rapidly changing media environment, whereby the changing relationship between media and politics, as well as the rise of new media forms, has weakened citizen trust in politics and expertise, and thus abetted the rise of populist actors. Yet this taken-for-granted assumption is surprisingly under-analysed: for a pairing that seems obvious and ripe for investigation, there is relatively little written on the relationship between populism and media in the political science literature, even in the context of Western Europe, the region that has arguably had more coverage in terms than other parts of the world in terms of populism in the academic literature over the last two decades. As Aalberg and de Vreese (2017: 3) recently noted, ‘this sparsity is surprising since the populist zeitgeist, as signalled by Mudde (2004) more than a decade ago, was in part seen to be caused by the media’s preference for, and receptivity toward, populist actors’.

There are many possible reasons for this situation. The first is that studying media is something of a moving target – and has become even harder to pin down in recent years, given the rapidly shifting and accelerated media landscape. The second is that the proliferation of different forms of media has made it difficult to decide where to place one’s analytical focus when attempting to understand its relationship with populism – newspapers, television, radio, online or elsewhere? The third and perhaps most important reason is that the relationship between media and populism is not easy to parse, particularly in terms of causality: how does media coverage affect populism? Does populism affect media? What are the shared tendencies between populist and media logic? And where does media populism end, and political populism begin?

This chapter seeks to answer some of these questions, and to shed light on the complicated relationship between populism and media in Western Europe. It proceeds in four main sections. The first section examines the relationship between populist actors and ‘old’ media in Western Europe, particularly focusing on the role of newspapers and television. The second
section then examines what the rise of ‘new’ media – and especially the prominent role of social and digital media – has meant for populists.1 While these two sections focus primarily on ‘political populism’, the third section switches its focus to ‘media populism’, considering populism by and through media. The chapter closes by drawing these insights together and arguing that we are witnessing something of a ‘hybridization’ of populist political communication in Western Europe, in which we will not be able to distinguish populist actors who are easily located in the ‘old’ or ‘new’ media, but instead, will use a combination of such media channels to appeal to ‘the people’.

Western European populism and old media

When political scientists use the term ‘the media’2 when discussing its role in the rise of populism, they are usually referring to the forms of mass media that are generally considered part of the ‘traditional’ or ‘old’ media, like print media (newspapers and magazines) and broadcast media (television and radio). There are obvious reasons for doing this – such media are more easily accessible, more easily analysable using well-established methodologies, and traditional media still plays an extremely important role in mediating political news to citizens as well as establishing the ‘official’ or ‘accepted’ narrative of political events. In focusing on the ‘media’ in this regard, the extant literature usually deals with two main questions: how has ‘old’ mass media coverage affected the success of populists, and how do populist actors use or interact with mass media in Western Europe?

Answers to the first question are somewhat inconclusive. There is widespread agreement that mass media coverage is important when it comes to populist actors’ electoral chances: a number of comparative studies have found that populist parties are ‘more likely to thrive in those political contexts in the which the media is willing to grant [them] exposure’ (Ellinas 2010: 7), something that is particularly imperative for populist parties that may be newer, smaller or have less resources than other parties. Relatedly, those populist parties or actors that are less electorally successful are likely to receive less media coverage (Aalberg et al. 2017). None of this is particularly surprising, and is likely applicable to all parties: without media coverage, a new or small party is unlikely to do particularly well electorally, given that media is one of the key ways that people learn about or are socialized into parties, while an electorally insignificant party is also unlikely to receive much media coverage (unless they have some other ‘newsworthy’ feature or character).

However, the interesting related question when it comes to populist actors and parties revolves around the tone of mass media coverage. Is all publicity good publicity when it comes to populist actors? Or does negative publicity actually harm populists at the voting booth? The answers to this question have been debated by a number of scholars in Western Europe (Curran 2004; Koopmans and Muis 2009; Bos et al. 2010), and results are mixed. In perhaps the most systematic work on populism and media in Europe, the edited collection Populist Political Communication in Europe (Aalberg et al. 2017), the editors argue that their case studies show that negative media attention does not seem to affect many populist parties at the polls – in fact, in some cases, like in Sweden and Switzerland, it has even helped populist parties. Here, ‘the positive effect of increased visibility appeared to have trumped the negative effect of the tone of the coverage’ (Esser et al. 2017: 366). In the latter case, Albertazzi (2008) has argued such negative coverage from media has allowed the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) to paint mass media as being part of ‘the elite’ while presenting themselves as the unfairly criticized voice of ‘the people’ – a framing device that is used by populists across Western Europe. In terms of media relations, this benefitting in despite of – or even partly because of – negative coverage might be one
of the things that separate populist parties from their more ‘mainstream’ brethren, although as noted, it does not necessarily operate in all media and political environments.

In this regard, Mudde has argued that the mass media should be seen as both a ‘friend’ and a ‘foe’ of populist radical right parties in Western Europe (Mudde 2007: 249). It is a friend in that it can prime an audience with a sympathetic public agenda for populists (by, for example, running stories on the threat posed by immigration or by making calls for tougher law-and-order), thus opening up something of a ‘discursive opportunity structure’ for populist actors (Koopmans and Muis 2009). It can also be a friend in that it can play a large role in the legitimization of populist parties, where they are framed as part of the ‘mainstream’ and thus as palatable and acceptable, as opposed to being painted as pariah parties. At an obvious level, this can be seen in outright partisan support for populist actors – such as the unanimously positive coverage of Jörg Haider of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) by Austria’s main tabloid, Die Krone, in the 1990s, or the cheerleading for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) provided by British tabloid, The Daily Express (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 114–115). Yet on a less explicit level, it can also be seen in more subtle framing of populist actors, in which they are presented in otherwise ostensibly ‘non-partisan’ coverage as ‘a regular political adversary . . . “one of us”’ (Hellström and Hervik 2014: 463) by the mainstream press, as was the case of the Danish People’s Party (DF) in the mainstream Danish press. Yet the mass media can also be a foe in that they are often openly hostile and cynical about populists. Indeed, as part of the aforementioned edited collection on populist political communication, Esser et al. (2017) found that mainstream media in Europe is generally outwardly critical towards populists, as they are framed (whether correctly or not) as a potential threat to democracy. This is particularly the case in terms of the allegedly more respectable ‘quality’ print press rather than tabloids, although a number of studies have shown that tabloids can also often be hostile to populists, as in the case of Germany (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 114–115) and the Netherlands (Akkerman 2011).

It is worth noting that the first part of this ‘friend or foe’ relationship is not particularly reciprocal: populists in Western Europe almost always claim to hate ‘the media’. Indeed, this is so pronounced that Jagers and Walgrave (2007) go so far as to code for it in their measurement of populist as a communication style. This brings us to our second question: how do populists interact with mass media? ‘The media’, as noted above, is here perceived a homogenous entity that is the tool of ‘the elite’ that marginalizes common sense, misrepresents the views of ‘the people’ and spreads propaganda – or, as it has been recently termed in a unique rhetorical twist, ‘fake news’. An example of this can be seen in the Alternative for Germany’s (AfD) former chair Frauke Petry calling German newspapers the ‘Pinocchio Press’ (Rohbohm 2015). This framing has also seen journalists being frozen out of media access to events and coverage of populists: an example of this targeting of mass media as hostile came in January 2017, when the ‘Freedom for Europe’ meeting held between members of the AfD, Front National (FN), Party for Freedom (PVV) and the Northern League (LN), banned major German media outlets, including the national broadcaster ARD, from reporting on the meeting due to these outlets having ‘failed to meet journalistic standards in past reporting’ according to the meeting organizers (Europe of Nations and Freedom group, quoted in Connolly 2017). A similar practice has also been used by the FN against television program Quotidien and online investigative site Mediapart, both of which the party has called ‘militant’ (AFP 2017) in their opposition to the FN. Perhaps the most extreme example of Western European populist attacks on (hostile) press come from Silvio Berlusconi, who sued several Italian and international media sources for libel. Only when populist actors are given positive coverage – or their own show or segment – is it seen as a break or victory for the ‘truth’. Indeed, while we usually associate populist
politicians having their own media outlet with the populist presidencies of Latin America (Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and Ecuador’s Rafael Correa both having had their own television shows), it is certainly a phenomenon in Western Europe as well. A number of populist actors are able to balance their political duties with significant media demands in this regard. Despite being a UKIP MEP, Nigel Farage hosts an hour-long talkback radio show, The Nigel Farage Show, four nights a week. Podemos’ Pablo Iglesias is also an adept media host, coming to public prominence in Spain as a host of current affairs chat show, La Tuerka, which he still appears on. Since early 2013, Iglesias also hosts Fort Apache, another panel show on politics, for the Iranian state-run Spanish network HispanTV. Meanwhile, the SVP parliamentarians Ulrich Schlüer and Roger Köppel split their time between politics and giving favourable coverage to their party in the nationalist newspaper Schweizerzeit and conservative Weltwoche, of which they are respectively the editors (Esser et al. 2017). A number of populists have also ‘come from’ the world of media, including Sweden’s Bert Karlsson, who was a record company executive before forming New Democracy (NyD) in the early 1990s, and Italy’s Beppe Grillo, who was a famous comedian before venturing into politics.

A more extreme version of how Western European populists use old media is presented by Silvio Berlusconi. While Berlusconi did not host his own television or radio show, his influence on the Italian media was (and remains) vast. His company, Mediaset, owns three of the seven major television stations, and Berlusconi was accused of interference with the national broadcaster RAI whilst Prime Minister. As a result, he has been the target of criticism by Reporters Without Borders on a number of occasions (Reporters Without Borders 2009), and Ginsborg (2004: 10) has called his case ‘the most ambitious attempt to date to combine media control and political power’ (although it is fair to say that the more recent example of Trump likely ‘trumps’ this case thirteen years later). Keane has lumped Berlusconi together with another media-magnate-cum-populist, former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, as problematic examples of ‘pathological reactions to monitory democracy’, and argued that their ‘vital priority is executive control of political communication’ (2009: 766). While examples of this are rarer in Western Europe than compared to Central or Eastern Europe, where cases of political success and media ownership from populists like Romania’s Dan Diaconescu or the Czech Republic’s Andrej Babiš are more common, they speak to the porous relationship between populism and media.

### Western European populism and new media

If academic study of the links between populism and old media in Western Europe is somewhat unsystematic and sparse, this is even more so the case for the links between populism and new media. New media has opened a number of opportunities for populist actors, and several populists in Western Europe have taken advantage of social networks, the ubiquity of mobile devices and the turn to the more interactive ‘Web 2.0’ in novel and effective ways. While this is most obvious in the cases of the ‘technopopulism’ (Deseriis 2017) of the 5 Star Movement (M5S) and Podemos (PODE), these changes have also affected populist actors less associated with the internet and digital media. At least three main changes for Western European populists can be identified in this regard: a shift in their mode of communication for not only reaching but also mobilizing and organizing ‘the people’; a potentially wider audience for populist actors that stretches beyond national boundaries; and the emergence of more segmented and partisan online ‘news’ sites that provide favourable coverage to the Western European populist right.
Let us take these shifts in turn. The first is that Western European populists are no longer as reliant on traditional media for coverage of their representative claims: they are now able to reach their ‘people’ in a far more ‘direct’ way – and in a much cheaper way, as well – through social networks like Twitter or Facebook. It is evident that some of the most prominent populist figures in contemporary Western Europe are quite effective at this – on Twitter at the time of writing, Geert Wilders has 950,000 followers, Nigel Farage has 1.12 million followers, Marine Le Pen has 2.1 million followers, Pablo Iglesias has 2.27 million followers, while Beppe Grillo has 2.52 million followers. Indeed, Wilders, Farage, Grillo, and Iglesias’ number of followers dwarf those of the Prime Ministers of their respective countries – only Le Pen is out-‘followed’ by the French President, Emmanuel Macron. While the number of a populist actor’s Twitter followers doesn’t automatically equal political power – if this were the case, pop stars Katy Perry and Justin Bieber would be the most powerful people in the world – the fact that the majority of these populist actors can garner a substantially larger following on Twitter than those who run their countries is indication at least of the reach afforded by the platform, especially to those who may be operating in a hostile media environment, as discussed above. In short, while it may have once upon a time been possible to deprive populist actors of the ‘oxygen of publicity’ by cutting them off from traditional media coverage, this is simply impossible now. The proliferation of online platforms that connect populists with their ‘people’ without the mediation of traditional media has offered previously unimaginable opportunities for connection in this regard.

Yet new media has not only afforded populists a way of connecting with their ‘people’ – it has also served, in some cases, as a vehicle by which to organize and mobilize followers. The most prominent case of this is Beppe Grillo and the M5S. The M5S’s roots can be traced to Grillo’s blog, launched in 2005 which called for his supporters to organize offline local meetings through the meetup.com platform. These culminated in large events entitled ‘V-Day’ in 2007 and 2008, and the M5S was officially launched in 2009 (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). Since then, the M5S has used online voting for candidates as well as the decision of which group to join in the European Parliament, and its political rhetoric has revolved heavily around messages of cyber-utopianism and the democratic promise of the web (Natale and Ballatore 2014). Podemos has also fashioned itself as something of an ‘online’ populist movement/party, having used online voting platforms for the selection of their executive committee and their European MPs. It has also used Reddit as a virtual ‘Plaza Podemos’ for online conversation – to the extent that initial media attention called Podemos ‘the world’s first Reddit party’ (Blitzer 2014) – and has experimented with participatory platforms such as Loomio, an online decision-making platform, to gauge the opinions of their members (Frediani 2014). One can also think of the ‘transnational populist’ movement DiEM25 (Moffitt 2017; Panayotu 2017), headed by former Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis, which has similarly used online forums to build community, and lists contacts and links to individual Facebook groups for what it terms ‘DIEM Spontaneous Collectives’ in countries across Europe, stating that their aim is to combine ‘physical meetings at Town Halls (where Coordinating Committees eventually emerge) with digital “platoons” of DiEM25 members doing their bit to promote our Manifesto’s goal’ (DiEM25 2016b). Even if such platforms are only used by a small number of constituents – as Gerbaudo reminds us, ‘[t]hese are undoubtedly all interesting experiments. But they are still small group phenomena that involve only a core of activists’ (Gerbaudo 2014: 84) – they still help to maintain the appearance of closeness, immediacy and intimacy between populist leaders, movements and followers.

While these attempts to tap into the ‘logic of connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) enabled by social media might be expected in these prototypical cases of ‘online
populism’, what is perhaps more surprising is that more traditional and established populist parties who are not particularly associated with digital politics have also somewhat attempted to follow suit. Esser et al. (2017: 377) point to the FN’s professional online presence, the FPO’s turn to web media as its main channel of political communication, the British National Party’s reliance on the web, and the Norwegian Progress Party’s adoption of Facebook ahead of all other Norwegian parties as evidence of this. Similar comparative research by UK think tank Demos profiled the Facebook followers of a number of Western European populist parties, finding that many of these followers’ political activism was not merely online, but also extended into the ‘real world’ as well (Bartlett et al. 2011). There is also the key example of Geert Wilders using online channels of distribution to share his anti-Islam film, Fitna, which caused a great deal of outrage in the Netherlands: it was released via video-sharing website LiveLeak, and despite being taken down due to threats to LiveLeak staff and copyright violations, has since been re-uploaded on numerous video-hosting sites. The point here is not that all populists are now moving online, but rather that the distinction between ‘old media’ and ‘new media’ populists is becoming far more permeable, with the rise of social and digital media offering opportunities for new and established populists alike. While of course one form of mediation has replaced another here – shifting from the mediation of the traditional mass media to social media platforms – the novelty of social and digital media in this case for populists stems from the ability it gives such actors to present themselves as being ‘directly’ in touch with ‘the people’.

The aforementioned case of DiEM25 also speaks to a second rapid change enabled by the rise of new media for populist actors: ‘the people’ they speak for no longer need to be contained within the boundaries of the nation state. Populist performances can leak across boundaries, with geographical and temporal limits evaporating when it comes to accessing content, meaning that audiences anywhere with an internet connection can watch Fitna or participate in DiEM25’s forums. Indeed, DiEM25 uses its website to proclaim that it speaks for ‘[w]e, the peoples of Europe [who] have a duty to regain control over our Europe from unaccountable “technocrats”, complicit politicians and shadowy institutions’ (DiEM25 2016a: 7). This is explicitly an attempt to construct a transnational populism – ‘a cross-border pan-European movement’ that rather than building up from the nation-state level, instead ‘start[s] at the European level to try to find consensus and then mov[es] downwards’ (Varoufakis 2016: 33), and technology is key to the construction of this cross-border populism. Similarly, but on a more minor level, M5S has also made failed attempts to set up a European-wide M5S (Moffitt 2017). Even Wilders has shown a tendency to use social and online media to speak to and for a wider ‘people’ than those within the Netherlands – he translates many of his tweets into English, uses his website to publish his talks that he has given to groups in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US (again, all in English) warning of how ‘we are in the process of losing our culture, our identity, our freedom’ and speaking of ‘our Western culture’ and ‘our common Judeo-Christian and humanist heritage’ (Wilders 2013).

The final shift to be discussed here is the emergence of increasingly influential partisan online news sites that have not only provided favourable coverage to the Western European populist right, but in some cases, even provided them column space. The most prominent example here is Breitbart News, the far-right news and opinion site now famous due to former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon’s former position as executive chair of the site. Both Wilders and Farage have written a regular column for the website, and at the same time have been covered with breathless admiration from other Breitbart columnists, with Farage being called ‘the greatest British politician since Margaret Thatcher’ (Delingpole 2016) and Wilders being lauded as ‘our proxy – the West was on trial’ (Geller 2011) following his 2011 trial for the incitement of hatred. Other Western European populists have also been praised,
with Bannon expressing support for Marine Le Pen, and having seemingly been in contact with Marion Maréchal-Le Pen – called ‘Europe’s New Rockstar of the Right’ (Lane 2015) by the site – who tweeted in November 2016 that ‘I answer yes to the invitation of Stephen Bannon, CEO of @realDonaldTrump presidential campaign, to work together’. While Breitbart is by far the most well-known of these partisan sites, other similar sites include the British Westmonster (which has run pieces by UKIP’s Nigel Farage and Paul Nuttall, Sweden Democrats’ leader Jimmie Åkesson and former FN Vice President Florian Philippot), headed by Nigel Farage’s former press officer Nigel Heaver and Arron Banks, the co-founder of the Leave.EU campaign; the French François Desouche and Égalité et Réconciliation, and the Italian TzeTze and La Cosa. The latter two sites have come under criticism for reposting content and spreading disinformation from the Russian news agency Sputnik, generally seen as a propaganda source (Bjola and Pamment 2016) – a claim made even more damning given the sites are run by Casaleggio Associati, the technology consultancy that was founded by the M5S’s co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio (and that handles Grillo’s blog) (Nardelli and Silverman 2016). With Breitbart announcing intentions to launch German and French sites combined with the seeming proliferation of ‘fake news’, it is unlikely that the influence and readership of these sites are going to decrease anytime soon. Populists are in a good position to profit from their spread.

**Political populism versus media populism in Western Europe**

Thus far we have focused primarily on what the political science literature usually associates with populism – populist political actors, whether they are movements, parties, or leaders. However, the political communication literature has recently turned to examining populism from another actor – this time from the (usually mass) media. In this literature, the former is labelled ‘political populism’, while the latter is labelled ‘media populism’. Esser et al. (2017) have argued that media populism is used to refer to three distinct, yet interrelated phenomena.

The first is populism *by the media* – that is, when media actively ‘performs’ populism themselves, aligning themselves with or actively celebrating ‘the people’ whilst attacking ‘the elite’. This definition aligns with the work of Krämer (2014: 48), who defines media populism as the use of the

stylistic and ideological elements [of populism] by some media, viz. the construction and favouritism of in-groups, hostility toward, and circumvention of the elites and institutions of representative democracy, reliance on charisma and (group-related) commonsense, and appeal to moral sentiments (thus on an emotionalizing, personalizing, and ostentatiously plain-spoken discourse).

In Western Europe, this can be particularly seen in the ostensibly anti-elite, ‘voice of the people’ line adopted by tabloid newspapers like Germany’s Bild, Denmark’s Ekstra Bladet and the UK’s Daily Mail and Daily Express, in particular their coverage of issues like immigration and law-and-order. It can also be seen in the genre of talk radio, whereby talk radio hosts

purportedly stand above ordinary politics, at some kind of meta standpoint that allows them to judge critically and independently, and then to support the more ‘reasonable’ position. At the same time, they supposedly stand below politics, solidary with common people – advocates and delegates of the masses, legitimized by the plebiscitary mechanism of ratings and the approval of callers.

(Krämer 2014: 50–51)
The second is populism *through* the media. As opposed to the above form of ‘media populism’, which can operate independently of the presence or coverage of any political populism, this specifically refers to the way that media cover, promote and ‘set the stage’ for political populism. The key notion here is that there is some kind of ‘media complicity’ (Mazzoleni 2008: 50) in the success of political populists, or that there are key links between media logic and political logic at this particular historical juncture that favours populist actors. While this *can* be intentional – for example, a tabloid newspaper can openly editorialize in favour of a populist party – Mazzoleni (2008: 54) points out that ‘[t]his convergence of goals between the populist media and populist political movements is normally unintentional’. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Moffitt 2016: 75–76), this convergence of goals is inscribed in the increasingly pervasive spread of media logic taking place under processes of mediatization, whereby values and techniques including simplification, polarization, personalization, stereotypization, emotionalization, dramatization and the prioritization of conflict become more common and widespread in both media and politics. These values and techniques line up effectively with populism’s dichotomization of the political space between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, its denial of expert knowledge, its disregard for ‘appropriateness’ and its general distaste for complexity. While these processes of the mediatization of politics have been going on for some time, they have been accelerated by the rise of digital media, with ‘[t]he newly established online media . . . having a high affinity to populism’s rhetorical persuasion because both aim for the “quick kick/click” with a broad audience’ (Esser et al. 2017: 365).

The third is what Esser et al. (2017: 367) call ‘populist citizen journalism’. What they are referring to here is when news organizations include or open up their stories to populist messages from their audiences, usually in the form of reader comments on websites, thus purportedly directly representing the voice of ‘the people’. As the authors note, this is a way that ‘quality’ media can ostensibly have it ‘both ways’ – ‘newspapers may formally abstain from populism on the editorial level but allow dissemination of populist and even racist discourse through the blogosphere, with the presumed intention of increasing the website’s viewership and profits from the accompanying online ads’ (2017: 371). This is particularly the case when comments are unmoderated and/or anonymous – some comment sections have become so full of racist and hateful vitriol that several major media publications have dropped comments entirely. However, this ‘populist citizen journalism’ also operates in offline media, in genres such as vox-pops, talk radio, talk shows and letters to the editor, where the voice of ‘the man on the street’/’common man’/’the people’ is given the chance to be voiced in the otherwise rarefied and controlled setting of the mass media.

It is unclear how widely these forms of media populism are spread in Western Europe. In some senses, they seem intuitively correct and easily identifiable: populism *by and through* the media, for example, seems to be clear in many countries in Western Europe (see Mazzoleni 2014; Aalberg et al. 2017). Yet some studies have pointed the opposite way: Bos and Brants (2014) actually found ‘a slight decline in media populism’ in their longitudinal study of Dutch media over twenty years, and even found that the main tabloid, *de Telegraaff*, did not display much media populism in the kind we expect from tabloids. Both Akkerman (2011) and Rooduijn (2014) similarly found that there was not a great deal of difference between the ‘level’ of media populism displayed in elite and tabloid newspapers, yet in the Nordic countries, Herkman (2017) claims there is a clear difference in the way that tabloid and quality newspapers cover populist parties. To add to this muddied picture, Rooduijn’s comparative study of opinion pieces in five Western European countries’ newspapers overall argued that ‘public debates in Western European countries have become more populist in the last two decades . . . [and] that a *correlation* exists between the success of populists and the degree of populism in public debates’ (2014: 740).
Until more systematic comparative research of the type exemplified in Aalberg et al. (2017) is undertaken, this might be as strong a claim as we can make about the relationship between political populism and media populism. While it appears that there is some correlation between the two, the directionality of the correlation is unclear, and further research would need to disambiguate the three separate analytical dimensions of media populism to delineate more clearly what is actually meant when speaking of this relationship. At present, the term ‘media populism’ is likely covering too much ground – for example, much of the second dimension of media populism discussed here, populism through the media, seems to be used synonymously with ‘media logic’ or ‘mediatization’, terms that have more conceptual purchase and a longer history (Strömbäck and Esser 2014) and might be more useful in such cases. More so, the different usages of the term collapse the adoption of populism by media (populism by the media) together with the processes that have led to the ‘media complicity’ that favours political populists (populism through the media) and the actual channels of communication between media and their audiences (populist citizen journalism). While media (and its own forms of populism) are key to understanding political populism in contemporary Western Europe, media populism deserves more conceptual attention and disambiguation to do this complex relationship justice.

The hybridization of populist political communication in Western Europe

Where is the confluence of populism and media heading in Western Europe? Let us take their separate trajectories first. In regards to the former, populism in Western Europe seems to be on the rise – and if one does not wish to subscribe to such a strong claim, it is at very least in the process of being ‘mainstreamed’, having proven itself to not be a temporary phenomenon, but rather a seemingly permanent feature of contemporary democratic politics in the region. In regards to the latter, the contemporary media landscape in Western Europe (and elsewhere) is in serious flux. Traditional or old forms of media are facing decreasing circulation or viewership, changing modes of consuming news, less advertising profits, and more broadly, less trust in ‘mainstream’ outlets that previously held a fair degree of prestige as purveyors of ‘the truth’. On the other hand, the rise of the internet, ‘fake news’, social networks, on-demand viewing, Web 2.0, the proliferation and ubiquity of mobile devices and more generally a more multi-directional and segmented media landscape has disrupted the media and political landscape irrevocably.

Drawing these two disparate trends together, it is clear that populists have not been immune to changes in the media landscape. We can still, to some extent, identify a divide in Western Europe between ‘old media’ and ‘new media’ populists – the former including figures like Silvio Berlusconi or parties like the SVP, who rely heavily on television, newspapers and the mass media; the latter including M5S, Podemos and DiEM25, whose appeal to ‘the people’ strongly relies on appearing as ‘directly’ in touch with ‘the people’ through online channels. To some extent, this divide appears to be generational as well as ideological, with the old media populists mainly appearing on the radical right, while new media populists tend to appear on the left (or in the case of M5S, as more ideologically ambiguous) (see Bennett et al. 2017).

This old media/new media divide is unlikely to hold for much longer when it comes to populism: the likely trajectory is that these modes of political communication by populists are going to necessarily converge. Populists who have relied on old media – particularly television and talk radio – will unavoidably also have to adopt an online presence, especially if they wish to court younger, more technologically adept voters who are increasingly eschewing television for on-demand viewing or social network platforms. Similarly, we can likely expect to stop
fetishizing ‘online’ parties as somehow novel or unusual – online populist parties like Podemos and M5S (as well as non-populist online parties like Pirate Parties across Europe) are now relatively well-established and have been around for around a decade, proving themselves less as flash-in-the-pan parties and more as parties with electoral staying power. These parties are similarly realizing, however, that online mobilization and communication with their ‘people’ is not enough, and that ‘mainstream’ coverage by traditional media is important in reaching new voters and legitimizing the party in the eyes of those who may not have the tech-savviness, financial resources or internet literacy to engage online. In short, we can expect to see the hybridization (Chadwick 2017) of the political communication of populist actors in Western Europe.

This is very much in line with the argument made by Engesser et al. (2017: 1113), who argue that Western European populists use a hybrid communication strategy in their study of how populism is spread on social media:

On the one hand, they may address the mass media in order to distribute official statements to larger audiences. These messages have to comply with the mass media logic and may be modified by the journalist accordingly . . . [on the other hand] the populists may turn toward social media in order to circumvent the media institutions and journalistic gatekeepers. In this way, the populist messages do not have to follow the news values and are frequently more personal and sensationalistic in nature.

In short, this multi-pronged strategy will likely serve populists well, as it allows them to reach mass media audiences (which will likely be larger) while also addressing their ‘people’ through social media channels. Interestingly, populist messages on social media are increasingly being reported as news in the mass media – something that is most noticeable in the case of US President Donald Trump, but has also been the case in Western Europe for Geert Wilders and Nigel Farage.

And what of the wider context? Are current trends in the media landscape likely to bolster populist success? Summing up the twenty-four case studies on populist political communication in the edited collection *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, Esser et al. (2017) argue that there are five discursive opportunity structures that currently favour the dissemination of populist messages in Europe. The first is the widespread influence of media logic (including the mass media’s interest in conflict framing, strategic framing and personalization). The second is politically motivated media ownership – particularly when populist actors have a hand in owning media. The third is commercially motivated media ownership (the assumption being that commercial television stations and tabloid newspapers are more likely to disseminate and amplify populist messages than public broadcasters or ‘quality’ broadsheets). The fourth is party issue ownership, whereby media can either intentionally or unintentionally support populist parties by emphasizing an issue they have ‘issue ownership’ over. The fifth is event environment and national issue culture, whereby scandals, crises and political malaise set up a favourable milieu for populist messages (see also Moffitt 2015). None of these discursive opportunity structures seem to be letting up anytime soon: in regards to the first three, media logic is widespread, including in political life; media ownership is becoming increasingly (and openly) partisan; and media ownership is equally at the whims of commercial motivations. In regards to the last two, immigration and law-and-order – two issues ‘owned’ by many populists in Western Europe (Smith 2010) – are continually focused upon by media, often in the context of a crisis, scandal or breakdown. In other words, the discursive opportunity structure in the Western European media landscape looks good for populist actors.
Conclusion

As can be seen, there is nothing straightforward about the relationship between populism and media in Western Europe. What looks on the surface to be a perhaps relatively taken-for-granted question is far more complex when we delve down into it. Numerous questions arise: whose populism are we talking about – political actors or media? What media are we talking about – new media or old media? Is there even anything called ‘the media’ anymore? And what is the directionality of the relationship? While this chapter has not answered all these big questions, it has sought to provide an overview of the literature on populism and media in Western Europe, while also keeping a keen eye on where things might be heading. It first examined what the extant literature on populism has to say about media, focusing on the role of traditional media in populist electoral success, while also examining how populist actors use traditional media. It then turned to the still relatively novel—at least for the political science literature—use of social media by populist actors, examining how populist actors use such media to appear to be in ‘direct’ touch with ‘the people’, sidestepping the mediating channels of the mainstream media, which is construed (perhaps rightly) as being owned and run by ‘the elite’. This section also examined what the rise of partisan news sites like Breitbart has meant for populist actors. The next section then shifted its focus from ‘political populism’ to ‘media populism’, a broad term that takes in populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism. The final section of the paper then argued that we are likely to see the hybridization of populist political communication in Western Europe, whereby the lines between ‘old media’ and ‘new media’ populists become increasingly blurred, and the current discursive opportunity structures for populist actors in the Western European media landscape continue to become more intensified and favourable.

While the relationship between Western European populism and media is complicated, multi-faceted and at times hard to parse, scholars of populism who continue to ignore media do so at their own peril. While we should certainly still focus on the usual material that is used when studying populist actors—party manifestoes, policies, speeches and the like—there is also a need to pay attention to populists’ media presence and strategies, particularly as these increasingly hybridize mass and digital media. Likewise, more studies of how media deals with and covers populist actors are needed, especially in the era of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ politics. In sum, the argument set out by Mazzoleni in the introduction of his seminal co-edited 2003 volume The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis still stands: ‘[a] full understanding of the populist phenomenon cannot be achieved without studying mass communication perspectives and media-related dynamics, especially not without using a comparative approach’ (Mazzoleni 2003: 2). Well over a decade later, we would do well to heed his advice.

Notes

1 While there are now many overlapping categories that can be used to describe the plural types of media in the wider media field—mass media, news media, social media, broadcast media, print media, electronic media, mobile media, online media, digital media and so forth—for the purposes of simplicity I have chosen to divide the chapter between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. While these terms are not without their own problems—see Chun (2016)—they encapsulate many of the categories noted above and allow us a wider rubric to trace what shifts in the media landscape have meant for populism in a relatively clear and concise way.

2 On challenges to the construction of the singular noun ‘the media’, see Couldry (2009).
References


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