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Right-wing populism, media and political scandal

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Introduction

By sending out short, provocative messages, Donald Trump has successfully exploited social media, especially Twitter, and set journalistic news media agendas. In many Western European countries, right-wing populist politicians have bypassed mainstream media by making similarly provocative statements, which can be and are termed ‘scandalous’. Even if the intersection of right-wing populism and political scandals has been eye-catching, particularly in the twenty-first-century’s liberal democracies, scandalology has paid only little attention to the issue, remaining more focused on traditional forms of political scandal, such as the sex, power and financial scandals defined in Thompson’s (2000, 120–123) seminal work.

In this chapter we discuss how radical right-wing populist movements have become entangled in and exploited political scandals in their communication. The focus here is on European and American liberal democracies in which nativist right-wing populist parties or politicians have gained remarkable success in elections and politics during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These parties and politicians have emphasized nationalist approaches and created several public scandals by explicitly attacking immigrants, refugees and other minorities with comments and behaviour that denigrates and marginalizes them.

The relationship between right-wing populism and the media is complex but the turn towards a so-called ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2013) – in which traditional news media is linked in multiple ways to online and social media – makes the situation even more complicated. As political scandals are always ‘mediated events’ (Thompson 2000, 60–61), understanding the different logics behind politics and the media in this hybrid environment is essential if we are to understand the pattern of scandals connected to right-wing populism in the twenty-first century.

Scandalology and right-wing populism

The connection between scandals and populism has been reported by several scholars, some even arguing that the creation of a scandal is one of the key communication strategies used by right-wing populists, who intentionally provoke to gain increased and significant media attention in liberal news environments that are generally hostile to their perspectives and opinions. Thus, they make their underdog position a typical communication strategy (e.g. Stewart et al.
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2003, 230–232; Mazzoleni 2008, 55–57; Wodak 2015, 19–20). Ruth Wodak (2013, 32–33) has called this the ‘right-wing populist perpetuum mobile’, that is the continuation of public sensations, provocations and scandals through which populist actors try to manipulate the public sphere to set agendas and gain attention from news media. Donald Trump fits into this model as do European right-wing populist leaders, such as Jörg Haider and Geert Wilders (see Wodak 2013; 2015). Furthermore, populist actors exploit political scandals linked to established political players to argue that the political elite is corrupt and thus no better than them (e.g. Stanyer et al. 2017).

Even if scandalous provocations have been inherently linked to right-wing populist communication, actual scandalology as well as populism studies have paid little attention to these affairs. Scandals seem to be a side path in populism studies, which tend to focus on the overall dimensions of scandalous populist communication (e.g. Aalberg et al. 2017) or style (Moffitt 2017) – or on more precise themes, such as populist discursive or rhetoric strategies in various communication forums (e.g. Sakki & Pettersson 2016; Hatakka et al. 2017). However, not many empirical analyses focus on the specific political scandals linked to right-wing populist actors. An exception is Wodak (2013; 2015), who has studied the discursive strategies used by Jörg Haider (1950–2008), the leader of Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), and those of other European populist right-wing movements that have exploited political scandals in their twenty-first-century campaigns. In addition, Herkman (2017) has analysed political scandals linked to Danish, Swedish and Finnish right-wing populist parties. Herkman and Matikainen (2016) also studied the role of social media in a Finnish political scandal caused by an MP of the populist Finns Party in 2015.

At least two explanations can be found for this lack of research. First, the sensationalist and scandalous dimension of right-wing populism is so obvious that it is taken for granted rather than seen as a genuine research subject. Scandals linked to right-wing populist actors are therefore not seen as an interesting empirical research topic. Populism studies have instead concentrated on political scientific rather than sociological or communication approaches, thus directing research towards political systems, party politics and ideological studies – which reduces interest in topics like scandals. Second, scandalology has traditionally concentrated on ‘serious’ political scandals connected to key political power-holders, such as presidents, prime ministers or other decision makers, with the focus being on power, financial and sex scandals that have removed power-holders from their positions. Generally, right-wing populist actors have not attained such positions, and scandals linked to them derive from their own provocations rather than revelations made by journalists or other political players.

There are also differences that obviously derive from political contexts and media systems. In the Anglo-American context, a liberal media and a two-party electoral system have made political scandals historically more common than, for example, in North and Central European ‘democratic-corporatist’ countries with strong traditions of public service broadcasting and consensual multi-party decision making (cf. Hallin & Mancini 2004). This may direct scandal analyses in the Anglo-American context more towards ground-breaking political scandals than to populist sensations, which are considered rather normal in political life (cf. Thompson 2000; Garrard & Newell 2006; Entman 2012). In the Nordic countries political scandals are a quite recent phenomenon, becoming common only in the late twentieth century due to the increasing commercialization and liberalization of the news media – in which the media has more eagerly than before ‘scandalized’ politics (Allern & Pollack 2012).

Allern and others (2012) compared political scandals in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland between the 1970s and the 2000s and discovered that the norm transgressions behind the scandals have turned from the misuse of power and finances towards unacceptable talk or
Right-wing populism and the media logic

Populism has been called ‘chameleonic’ and ‘vague’ as a term and is hard to define because it has been linked to very different ideologies and movements – be they right-wing or left-wing, democratic or authoritarian, urban or agrarian (Canovan 1999; Taggart 2000). However, key features are repeated in almost all definitions of populism, namely the central position of ‘the people’ in behaviour during the 2000s. The tendency was even accelerated in the early 2010s (Allern & Pollack 2016). Herkman (2018) indicated that the obvious reason for the change was the increase in scandals linked to the region’s domestic right-wing populist parties, especially in Finland and Sweden, when they enjoyed remarkable success in that decade’s general elections, therefore becoming more established players in their political fields. The provocative statements of the populist politicians were – during that time – scandalized more widely than before.

Since many of these scandals derive from inappropriate statements, they can be linked to the idea of ‘talk scandals’ formulated by Ekström and Johansson (2008). However, Herkman (2018) has argued that, despite many similarities, scandals linked to right-wing populist parties often differ from ordinary talk scandals because they originate not from the media’s active role but from the intentional provocations of populist actors themselves. Secondly, scandals linked to right-wing populists can also be caused by unacceptable behaviour, such as making Nazi gestures, and not just by provocative talk. Thirdly, the risk of the legal consequences in scandals linked to right-wing populism is common but almost non-existent in talk scandals. Therefore, Herkman (2018) defines these affairs as ‘neo-populist scandals’ – a type of scandal especially common in the twenty-first-century’s Northern and Central European liberal democracies and often created by successful right-wing populist movements.

A typical neo-populist scandal originates from the unacceptable talk or behaviour of a right-wing populist politician who intentionally insults immigrants or other minorities, often via social media forums. Liberal mainstream media and politicians scandalize the event but the supporters of the populist politician create a social media ‘counter-cycle’ in which they accuse political and media elites of conducting a witch-hunt (see Jenssen & Fladmoe 2012). Since most liberal democracies forbid demagogy and hate speech against ethnic, religious or sexual minorities by law, the scandal may result in legal repercussions or facing sanctions. However, the political consequences of a scandal will differ, based on the status of the politician in question. If the populist right-wing movement or politician is in the break-through phase, the scandal may increase their popularity, because their supporters believe that a media hunt represents the viewpoints of a corrupt elite and their excessive liberal opinions. However, if the movement or its politicians have achieved an established position, which is reminiscent of more mainstream political players, the political consequences of the scandal become more serious.

Even if populist actors intentionally provoke an incident, large-scale public scandals are not necessarily what they aim for and they might genuinely arise by accident. Thus, the intentional communication strategy of the ‘right-wing populist perpetuum mobile’ (Wodak 2013, 32) does not always lie behind these scandals – errors or a lack of consideration are equally likely. This is especially true in cases when a populist actor has gained an established position in the political field yet becomes embroiled in a public scandal because of unacceptable talk or behaviour. As Wodak (2013, 29) has indicated, populist actors cannot continue with their populist rhetoric after achieving significant positions of power in multi-party democracies in which they have to collaborate with other political parties. In addition, in neo-populist scandals other political actors need to be active in the scandalizing processes and support the media, which cannot usually sustain a scandal alone (cf. Entman 2012).
its political understanding. There is also usually an antagonistic divide between ‘the people’ and other groups within the population, for example, ‘the elites’, minorities or non-native inhabitants (see e.g. Mudde 2004; Canovan 2005; Jagers & Walgrave 2006). The antagonistic and confrontational mode of populism has commonly been defined either as a style (Moffitt 2017), discourse (Wodak 2015) or ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017).

Here the focus is on radical right-wing populism, in which the antagonism is based on ‘nativist ideology’ that positions non-native persons, ideas and cultures as a threat to the homogeneous nation state (Mudde 2007, 19). Thus, right-wing populism is often exclusive and hostile towards non-native people, languages and cultures, which are attacked by the ‘extreme right’. However, the difference between the two is that populism works in the frame of representative democracy and does not necessarily aim – at least explicitly – towards the revolutionary restructuring of society (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2010; Wodak 2015). Therefore, right-wing populism can be seen as a more legitimate and mainstream form of nativism and nationalism than that of extreme movements.

Ever since freedom of speech and the civic control of political representation have been seen as essential dimensions of liberal democracy, journalistic news media have formed a constitutive element in them (Hanitzsch & Wahl-Jorgensen 2009). Therefore, it is not a surprise that right-wing populist politicians and movements also antagonize and attack established news media with provocative statements in which they often associate them with a ‘corrupt elite’. It is this very tension between right-wing populism and liberal news media that generates the public scandals linked to populist politicians and movements in liberal democracies. This makes it essential to consider the relationship between populism and the media regarding political scandals.

Even if there is obvious tension between right-wing populist agendas and liberal news media, some scholars have remarked that populism fits well with the commercial and journalistic logic of the media which is termed ‘media populism’ (e.g. Mazzoleni 2008; Krämer 2014). The commercial logic of media populism derives from an increasing pressure to produce popular, personalized, moralistic, emotional and antagonistic media content – even on political issues – that encourages populist and scandalous public provocations. A background idea in media populism is that the so-called tabloid media favours media populism more eagerly than the quality media does (Mazzoleni 2003, 8; 2014, 50; Krämer 2014, 50). However, empirical research has indicated no clear link between media type and media populism, instead contextual differences between various political and media systems are stressed (e.g. Bos et al. 2010; Akkerman 2011; Mazzoleni 2014, 50–51).

In addition to commercial media logic, the very ‘watchdog’ idea of news journalism may also emphasize media populism in the sense that it spurs journalists to control power elites and therefore holds the attitude of an anti-establishment free press (Esser et al. 2017). This civic society function implies that journalism should identify with the interests of the ‘common people’ rather than those of the elites. Thus, when combined with commercial pressure, the core ideas of journalism may – without consciously intending to – support the populist antagonism between ‘forgotten people’ and corrupt elites. Certainly, Donald Trump’s provocative and scandalous statements and tweets have been of commercial benefit to US news media, which – after a long period of decreasing audience and productivity rates – has raised sales and interest among audiences and advertisers through their reports and commentaries on Trump (Borchers 2016).

**Social media logic and populist scandals**

The emergence of social media has offered a new environment for populist communication and therefore formed an essential dimension in the relationship between populism and media.
The term ‘social media’ refers to Web services whose form and content are, for the most part, produced by users. Theoretically, the definition of social media encompasses three characteristics (Bechmann & Lomborg 2012, 767). First, communication is de-institutionalized and decentralized despite the centralized ownership of social media services. Second, content is user-based, and therefore the central concept of social media is ‘user-generated content’. Third, communication among social media users is interactive and networked. All these characteristics combine to create the so-called ‘attention economy’ of the Internet, making social media an intrinsic platform for today’s political communication and populism as well (see Engesser et al. 2017a, 1285).

Social media has therefore extended the research of political communication from elite to non-elite actors, especially focusing on three aspects of the Internet and social media (Engesser et al. 2017a, 1284). First, the role of online challengers is stressed. Second, the Internet as an alternative media is investigated. Third, the ways in which the Internet and social media establish counterpublics is analysed. All three aspects help us to understand how social media enables non-elite counteractivity, mostly against established political actors and institutions as well as against legacy media.

The most significant factor of social media is that it is not regulated by media institutions or journalistic gatekeepers. Therefore, social media allow the publication of more personal, sensationalistic and extreme content than legacy media. Furthermore, social media does not serve just the new arena for political communication, it also represents all of the new media logic, which can be called ‘social media logic’. In their synthesis, van Dijck and Poell (2013) emphasize popularity and connectivity as key features of social media logic. Social media platforms have been purposefully designed to promote popularity through the use of likes, shares and contacts. However, popularity and connectivity are also a very fruitful way for right-wing populist communication, which often promotes close connections between people through the distribution of short and provocative content on relatively unmoderated communication formats (Krämer 2017).

When populists urge the bypassing of legacy media, they can, according to Engesser et al. (2017b), exploit social media in five ways: by emphasizing the sovereignty of the people, by advocating for the people, by attacking the elites, by ostracizing others, and by invoking the heartland, which refers to the idealized conception of the community. The analysis of the Twitter and Facebook posts in four countries showed that all these five elements appeared across the posts and tweets, although the elements were generally isolated (ibid.). The main conclusion was that populist communication in social media was fragmented. The practical explanation for this is found in Twitter’s character limitation (previously 140, now 280) and social media’s general tendency towards brief messages. Fragmented communication can also be linked to the populist style and its aim to produce and distribute comprehensible messages.

However, the relationship between populism and social media looks different when different platforms are considered. It seems, for example, that Facebook serves as a more suitable forum for populist communication than Twitter (Ernst et al. 2017). In most cases, Twitter is clearly a more professional or ‘elite’ media than Facebook. Correspondingly, Facebook is more communal than Twitter and therefore helps to construct communities by populist means. In addition, various discussion groups are important platforms for populist communication. However, regarding the use of different social media platforms for populist communication, differences between countries emerge. For example, Twitter in the context of the USA has changed to become more populist due to how president Trump uses it, and the same can be said from the Twitter use of Latin American populist presidents (see Waisbord & Amado 2017).

The rapid dissemination of social media communications is also a critical factor in scandals. Many scandals connected to right-wing populist movements begin on social media (see Herkman 2018). After a populist provocation posted on social media, news media react and publish news
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and commentaries on the issue as soon as possible. These news stories cause more discussion and posts on social media, after which the news media publish more news about the scandal and the often fierce debates on social media. This forms ‘the scandal cycle’ and shows the interdependence of news media and social media in political scandals (see Jenssen & Fladmoe 2012).

An example from Finland illustrates the role and the interaction between social media platforms in scandals linked to right-wing populist movements (Herkman & Matikainen 2016). In 2015, an MP of the populist right-wing Finns Party published a Facebook update in which he used the same kind of militant and nationalist rhetoric against multiculturalism that Norwegian mass-murderer Anders Behring Breivik had used. Social media sites became essential players in the scandal, since the whole scandal derived from the MP’s Facebook updates and the affair was actively commented on and constructed via various social media sites. Within social media platforms, Twitter seemed to serve as a forum for liberal views criticizing the MP, whereas discussion forums provided arenas for both liberal and conservative (nativist, right-wing populist) voices. Significantly, the news media also played a crucial role in the scandal by echoing the debate. Hence, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the news media and social media in scandals linked to right-wing populist movements.

In political scandals linked to right-wing populism the interplay between traditional and social media and especially between news media and social media logics is relevant. Scandals can arise from social media, but without the help of news media they cannot become societally significant. Thus, the news media and social media participate in scandal construction and their relationship can be said to be symbiotic. Hence, both social media and news media feed off and inspire each other during a scandal (cf. Rogstad 2016). The construction of that relationship between traditional news media and social media has been called a hybrid media system because older and new media logics compete with but also complement each other (Chadwick 2013, 207). The interdependence between the old and new media logics is obvious, but it is also asymmetrical. Due to this, the influence of traditional news media and social media always depends on the type of scandal and its context.

Conclusions

There seems to be a common pattern in political scandals linked to right-wing populist movements in Western liberal democracies. When these movements are in their ‘insurgent phase’ (Stewart et al. 2003, 219–224), they commonly exploit scandals to gain media attention, but after becoming more established political players they try to avoid public scandals more than they previously did. Toned-down rhetoric and a more considerate political style are parts of the mainstreaming process of these parties. However, the general political atmosphere may also change such that right-wing populism is seen as more mainstream or normalized than before, meaning fewer confrontations between the news media and those making populist statements, therefore fewer serious political scandals concerning populist actors arise. This seems to be true in Denmark, for example, where the nativist Danish People’s Party has had quite an established position for almost the whole of the twenty-first century as an assistant party to conservative minority governments and has not been scandalized as eagerly or as regularly as right-wing populist parties in other Nordic countries (Herkman 2018).

There are also huge country-specific differences in the implications of the scandals linked to right-wing populist actors. For example, Donald Trump seems to be quite self-sufficient – despite the constant scandalizations of the US news media, since he has succeeded in maintaining the populist antagonism between himself as a representative of ‘the forgotten people’ and the news media as a representative of ‘the power elite’ through his tweets – even when occupying
the presidency of the USA. However, this might be because of the fact that the populist style has become an essential dimension within Anglo-American politics in recent decades and the neo-populist scandals linked to Trump have yet to shake his image as a reality television host. If more traditional scandals appear, revealing true political power or economic misuses, Trump’s position may be threatened.

Another aspect of populism may also explain its relative tolerance of public scandals, namely its chameleonic nature (see Taggart 2000). As populism is not tied to any specific ideology, populist actors can successfully change their enemies if necessary. For example, the Hungarian Fidesz Party (Hungarian Civic Alliance) has changed the target of its antagonistic statements from internal political enemies to the European Union and immigrants during the course of the twenty-first century so far, and through those turns it has reached majority rule, allowing Fidesz to strengthen its power by making constitutional and legal reforms and by controlling media institutions. Therefore, it seems that, even if public scandals may serve as one control mechanism against the authoritarian tendencies of right-wing populism, more institutional ‘checks and balances’ will be crucial if the potential imbalances that such populism creates for liberal democracy are to be resisted (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012, 20–21).

Since populism and political scandals are always context-laden, more empirical research is needed to explore the relationship between right-wing populism and political scandals in various liberal democracies. It would also be interesting to study the issue in Latin America, for example, where politics and media systems are quite different to those in North and Central European democracies and where populist leaders commonly employ social media, especially Twitter, as a way to attack their critics – just as Trump does (see Waisbord & Amado 2017). Hence, there is currently an open field for studying political scandals linked to different populisms in different contexts.

References


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Right-wing populism


