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CHAPTER 7: THE POPULISM–MEDIA SYMBIOSIS: CONCEPTS, ISSUES, EVIDENCE

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Introduction[1]: Overall Context

The media are playing an unprecedented and crucial role in the success of the wave of populism currently sweeping the globe. Modern populism is facilitated by conditions of what Keane (2013: 1) calls "a revolutionary age of communicative abundance … [that is] structured by a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices". Fundamental changes to media regulation coupled with innovations in media technologies, not least the internet, mean that media have become embedded in all aspects of everyday life. New media technologies have opened up a profusion of communicative spaces for a variety of political and media actors and citizens. At the same time, the traditional party system is in decline, or perhaps renewing itself (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley 2016). Many citizens are increasingly disillusioned with the lack of authenticity in mainstream politics and seek out marginal and less institutional political voices. Worldwide, populists have been able to capitalise on these conditions.

In media and communication studies, the changing media environment has created at least three concurrent preoccupations. First, the increasing intrusion and power of the traditional mass media – chiefly television, radio and the press – in relation to politics have fostered a focus on the media's ability to define reality. Political institutions are increasingly adapting their operations to the norms and practices of the media to maximise their chances of getting their message across to audiences unscathed (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). The media in turn scrutinise this practice, and the cycle of mutual influence between the media and politics is serving to engender mistrust of politicians' authenticity (Coleman 2011).

[1] I am indebted to Jay Blumler, Katrin Voltmer and Katy Parry for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.

Second, developments in new media technologies—especially web2.0 and social media platforms—have fomented a questioning of the role of technology in disseminating political content. Research in this area queries the way online technologies privilege certain actors according to different criteria from those of traditional mass media. Such dynamics have in turn raised interest in a third area of study connected to the role of audiences[2] vis-à-vis new media technologies. This includes audiences' susceptibility to misinformation, especially in the face of algorithms that filter content so that users are largely exposed to information that reinforces or polarises existing views. Yet audiences are conversely seen as increasingly active in interpreting, shaping and creating political content. All three areas of study are concerned with changing aspects of the otherwise well-established process of 'mediation' whereby the media substantively intervene in the problematic process of communicating 'reality'. They hinge on processes that reside in the *institutions* of the mass media, media and communication *technologies*, and *audiences* (Silverstone 2005: 189).

A key position in the emerging body of literature on populism's relationship to the media maintains that recent changes in media systems and technologies, and in the media's relationship to politics, may be contributing to populist success (Aalberg and de Vreese 2016; Esser et al. 2016). Populists, it is argued, have a certain affinity with the media despite their well-known antipathy towards the mass media and mediation in general. Only recently have comparative studies and more comprehensive theoretical frameworks begun to place populism

[2] To avoid confusion about the terms 'reception' and 'consumption', Thumim (2012: 63–69) argues for the use of the term 'audiences' in both new and traditional media in the context of the mediation process, even where audience engagement goes beyond active involvement with the media in processes of interpretation to include content production, circulation and recontextualisation.

in the context of broader changes in the media environment. What general trends can we identify in populism's ability to negotiate the treacherous process of mediation so successfully and to retain an aura of authenticity where mainstream parties often fail?

This paper takes a communication-centred approach to populism as its starting point. It first outlines this perspective. While it touches on populism by the media and among citizens, its primary focus is populist politicians and their efforts of negotiating the mediation process. The paper therefore goes on to discuss one of the most influential recent general theories in communication studies, mediation, as a framework for conceptualising the link between populist politicians and the media. Finally, it inspects a substantial body of research literature for its conceptual abundance, divergences of approach and gaps needing attention. The review maps the literature to the aforementioned sites of mediation – media institutions, technologies and audiences – to specifically consider how close we are to answering the question of how populists negotiate the process of mediation.

A Communications Approach to Populism

The criteria and dynamics of mediation that shape populist meaning relate to its communicative dimension. Approaching populism from a communications perspective implies a shift in focus from *what populism is* to *what it does* and *how it does it.* In other words, the concern is less with issues of definition and classification of the phenomenon, which I only briefly engage with here (for a detailed discussion, see Heinisch and Mazzoleni in this volume), and more with questions of process and practice. Such an approach investigates how populist ideology is naturalised, the role the media play in this, the extent to which the undertaking succeeds and the conditions under which it does so.

Classifying Populism

Given the concept's contested nature, the definitional problem nevertheless has to be considered. A brief consideration of the dualism between stylistic and ideational classifications

of populism may illuminate the perspective of populist communication. While most scholars see definitions of populism as an ideology and a style[3] as mutually exclusive, ideational and stylistic definitions largely home in on the same core characteristics. Populists identify *the people* as a morally decent "silent majority" (Canovan 1999) that constitutes the totality of the community but reduces their multiplicity of disparate demands and interests (Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004). They portray *the elite* as immoral and opposed to the people (e.g. Aalberg et al. 2016; Jägers & Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2007) and themselves as *one of the people* and as able to restore *sovereignty* to the people through their enlightenment (Abts and Rummens 2007; Canovan 2005). In addition, populists signal their outsider status and the illegitimacy of institutional or elite-driven norms through *disruptive performances* (Bucy et al. 2020; Moffitt 2016; Sorensen 2021, 2018) that *evoke a crisis* (Moffitt, 2016; Taggart, 2000).

The classification as ideology or style differs chiefly with respect to the types of phenomena in which these characteristics are observed and the importance ascribed to style or ideology in political mobilisation more generally. Ideological approaches contend that populism's ideational content inspires action and resides in populist actors. The morally informed and binary relationship between the people and the elite is central to populism's ability to mobilise latent constituent attitudes. The types of people designated by the ideas of the people and the elite vary across different political and cultural contexts. Yet minimal definitions suggest that populist actors fill these core ideas with meaning by adapting them to a given culture and host ideology (see e.g. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Stylistic and performative approaches hone in on the same characteristics but are more concerned with their form of articulation, such as the use of informal language to denote an ordinary people (Ostiguy 2020), or with the constitutive nature of performances that bring that

[3] Other approaches include the categorisation of populism as a discourse, a strategy and a political logic.

which they denote into being (Moffitt 2016). Performance here involves a process of symbolic meaning-formation (Moffitt 2016: 38; Alexander 2006) that becomes the object of study. Such perspectives upon populism see performance and style as the means through which populism gains traction and mobilises its constituents and as an important factor in not only the transmission of ideas but also in the shaping of their meaning.

Populism as a Communicative Process

From a communications perspective, both classifications have merit as both ideology and style are integral parts of the communicative process (see also de Vreese et al. 2018; Engesser et al., 2017; Sorensen 2021: chap 3). Empirically, the core characteristics of populism clearly manifest themselves in both stylistic expression and ideas, in the form and content of a communicated message. Communication science dictates that ideology cannot be communicated without style. And style in and of itself contributes to the formation of meaning; it is not a neutral vehicle in the transmission of an ideological message. Putting communicative process at the forefront of our investigations explains why both classifications have resulted in almost identical definitions and queries what part each of these dimensions plays in the manifestation of populist meaning. It has two further advantages: to explain populism's contextualism and to understand its relationship to the media.

Contextualism has proven to be a stumbling block in comparative studies of populism. The content of a given populism's ideas and the manifestation of its style often differ from those of other populisms. This has complicated the definitional debate. Yet a certain communicative process of meaning-making is shared across very different contextual manifestations, from left- to right-wing forms of populism in both established and transitional democracies (Sorensen 2021: chaps 3 and 6). This is the process through which ideas attain manifest form through stylised articulation. It involves the construction of meaning on the basis of a given set of cultural resources and in response to particular conditions of social power.

Common perceptions of, attitudes to, and feelings about politics in a given political culture form the resources that give meaning to populist ideas. These ideas are then performed through the disruption of a given set of institutional norms in a morally essentialist fashion. On the basis of this communicative process, different populisms emerge from the nuances of contextual conditions. These populisms share the practices of delegitimising elite forms of representation and, in the course of disrupting the established order, performing a claim to disintermediation. In response to allusive relations between citizens and elite representatives in democracies around the world, the communicative process of populism makes the path between citizens and populist representatives appear more direct.

From this perspective, populism is fundamentally opposed to all forms of mediation, both political and media related. A communication perspective on populism therefore highlights the role of the media and of mediation more generally in establishing a seemingly direct connection to citizens. But even 'direct' media mediate. Different media technologies invite different communicative styles and norms, but they also have an affinity with certain ideas and imaginaries. As do different media institutions, audiences and contexts of reception, all of which in turn shape meaning. These aspects all form part of the process of mediation that populist communication must inevitably undergo. How does it do so whilst upholding a claim to directness? The following section discusses the concept of mediation as a theoretical framework for reviewing the literature on populism's relationship to mediation.

Mediation

In everyday English, 'mediation' means getting in between, negotiating or resolving disputes, and generating mutual understanding and agreement instead of conflict. However, in the field of media and communication studies, it points to a much more problematic process (Livingstone 2009: 4–5). Here, the term is often concerned with questions of the media's power to shape representations of 'reality'. Rather than a process of clarification, it denotes a more

substantive intervention where what is being dealt with is itself changed by that intervention. This includes how reality is depicted and understood. In the words of Hepp and Krotz (2014: 3), "communication has to be grasped as a process of mediating meaning construction".

The concept of mediatisation goes further by emphasising change over time and denotes an increase in mediation that is taking place with new developments in and of the media (Hepp and Krotz 2014: 3; Livingstone 2009: 7; Strömbäck 2008). In the field of political communication, mediatisation is a process whereby the media become more and more of a political actor in their own right. Increasingly the 'logic' of the media—understood as the norms and routines that govern the media's operations (Altheide and Snow 1979)—is adopted by, and thereby transforms, political institutions (Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Mediatisation is thus a more specific process than mediation. However, analysis of the process of mediation is key to determine how the relationship between 'reality' and political communication is changing as part of the process of mediatisation (Hepp and Krotz 2014: 3–4).

Swanson (1992: 29) breaks down the media's depiction of reality into three distinct aspects, which are here adopted with reference to the overall process of mediation:

> 'objective' political reality (the actual events and conditions that are the referents of journalists' and politicians' representations in campaign messages); 'constructed' political reality (the content of the representations offered by journalists and political leaders); and 'subjective' political reality (citizens' perceptions of political reality, including political attitudes, beliefs, impressions of political leaders, and so on).

These areas of analysis in turn direct attention to the relationships between them, which are open to investigation through different theoretical approaches and objects of study. For example, the relationship between objective and constructed political realities may be investigated from an institutionalist or a materialist perspective (these are elaborated in the following sections), depending on whether the media as an institution or as material technology is conceived as the more important factor in constructing reality in a given context. Media

effects studies, meanwhile, focus on the relationship between constructed political reality and the subjective reality of audiences.

These relationships, then, constitute three sites of mediation: *media institutions* and, for instance, the impact of commercial imperatives on news values and editorial decisions; *media technologies* and the ways in which they shape the production, distribution and recirculation of content; and *media audiences* and their variously active participation, interpretation and interaction with populist content. In new media, the relationships between these actors, institutions and environments are asymmetrical and non-linear: media work "through a process of environmental transformation which in turn transforms the conditions under which any future media can be produced and understood" (Couldry 2008: 8). The following sections go on to review extant literature on populist political communication and its relationship to the media through the lens of these three sites of mediation.

Media Institutions as Sites of Mediation

The role of institutions in the construction of a populist political reality has been considered in studies of the practices of content selection, gatekeeping and framing that emerge from the norms and routines of journalists and other key media workers. Institutional studies have, unsurprisingly, exclusively focused on traditional media. However, recent interventions by social media platform owners in relation to populist content suggest that this is an area of study that is now ripe for expansion. The institutionalist perspective adopted by studies of populism and traditional mass media see institutional practices, norms and routines as shared by the news media collectively as a single institution (Asp 2014; Cook 2006). This institution is seen as wielding collective power in relation to the sphere of politics through media logic. The literature investigates populism's affinity with media logic and its concurrent and somewhat conflicting criticism of the media.

Media Logic

Traditional media institutions' mediation of populist content are usually explained by media news values and media logic (Mazzoleni 2008). A number of European studies find that coverage of populism is related to three specific aspects of media logic: the media portraying immigrants in conflict with local culture (conflict framing), presenting elections as strategic games (strategic framing) and focusing on leaders and their personalities rather than policies (personalisation) (Esser et al. 2016: 372). These aspects of media logic all relate to the media's coverage of populist political parties and leaders. A second strand of the media logic argument concerns "media populism" (Krämer 2014), that is, media actors as the intentional originators of populist messages. In the literature on populism, both arguments tend to be tied to distinctions between media types and formats.

Running through the literature on media coverage of populism is a strong suggestion that the commercial logic of some media types has an affinity with 'populist logic'. Mazzoleni et al.'s (2003) comparative research shows that the elite press in a number of countries was more critical and selective in their coverage of populist parties than tabloid formats due to their news value of social importance and closer integration into the elite structure of society (Stewart et al. 2003: 225). The tendency of 'popular' media, such as the tabloid press, talk radio and infotainment TV shows, "to appeal to mass audiences, to crave sensationalism, scandal, conflict, and to voice social anxieties" meant that they "were more likely to offer support to subjects involved in, or initiators of, 'newsworthy' actions" (Stewart et al. 2003: 233). In the Latin American context, the term telepopulism/ *télépopulisme* was coined to account for the easy fit between the news values of television and populism (Schneider 1991; Weyland 2001; for a non-Latin American example, see also Peri 2004). Populist politicians undertake spectacular performances of disrupting established norms and morals (Bucy et al. 2020;

Herkman 2018; Moffitt 2016: 57; Sorensen 2021: Part III) that chime with commercial media logic.

However, the affinity between populist parties' communicative practices and commercially driven media types like tabloids cannot always be established empirically (Akkerman 2011; Bos et al. 2010; Rooduijn 2014; Wettstein et al. 2018). This can be explained by individual country contexts: first, journalistic gatekeepers implement cordon sanitaires established by other parties (Esser et al. 2016); second, the populist party needs to pass a certain threshold of success in the polls before the commercial imperatives of the tabloid press balance out its gatekeeping function (Esser et al. 2016: 366; Stewart et al. 2003). These nuances need further examination through systematic comparative study.

When media institutions do cover populist parties, their interpretive slant is often negative (Wettstein et al. 2018). Yet negative coverage benefits populist parties (Esser et al. 2016: 366), especially where it enables them to push a narrative of 'fake news' or media bias (Ernst et al. 2016; Caplan & boyd 2018: 67). A potential explanation for the complex relationship between populism and elite/tabloid formats may be that the convergence between commercial media and populism is stylistic rather than ideological (Esser et al. 2016: 7); that is, based on charisma and rhetorical style such as simplification and polarising drama. In other words, there could be a convergence between the media's news values and populist style but not between the norms and self-prescribed roles of journalists and populist ideology. Journalists are not populist as they subscribe to professional norms of objectivity and independence that uphold liberal democracy. However, the news values they conform to leave them wide open to populist communication efforts.

The commercial logic of tabloids (Wettstein et al. 2018) and other popular formats such as television talk shows (Bos and Brants 2014; Cranmer 2011), reality television (Cardo 2014), and talk radio (Krämer 2014; Stanyer 2007: 126–131) also result in 'media populism' (Krämer

2014). This notion denotes the media's practice of themselves pushing populist issues, frames and narratives and expressing populist sentiments, such as aligning themselves with ordinary people against the establishment. They can thereby lay the foundation for populist attitudes. The ideology/style thesis, however, needs modification in the case of fringe media. Alternative media, often online, expound populist messages and cultivate a climate that normalises populist ideas and distrust of mainstream media on seemingly ideological grounds (Bhat & Chadha 2020; Holt 2019). While the role of media populism in the construction of populist reality has only just emerged as a topic of research from an institutional perspective, these latter analyses also suggest that the technological and audience sites of mediation deserve attention. Audience involvement becomes media populists' means of demonstrating the people's support, and this is in turn enabled by technologies such as comments and fora on online alternative news sites and the 'talkback' function of listener phone-ins on radio shows.

Anti-media Populism

Populist politicians' engagement with media institutions goes beyond the adoption of media logic in two respects in which they stand apart from mainstream political parties: vitriolic verbal attacks on mainstream media coverage that complies with the norms and ideals of journalism, and the institutional co-option of the press.

Populists often react to lacking or negative media coverage with verbal attacks on mainstream media that fail to foster critical reflection on the media's quality criteria and ideals. Public mistrust of the news media is not a new phenomenon, but there is a sense that populist politicians in recent years tap into such mistrust more frequently and aggressively (McNair 2017: chap 3). No longitudinal studies establish this empirically, however. Fawzi's conceptual framework of media criticism identifies three narratives within the populist perception of the media-politics-citizen relationship: "that the media are controlled by the political elite and advocate in favor of them, or that the hegemonic media support the interests of the political

elite with their coverage, or that both the media and politics actively conspire" (2020: 43; see also Krämer 2018; Fawzi, 2019). These narratives are reflected in the very few empirical studies of anti-media populism (Hameleers 2020; Sorensen 2021: Part IV). Both these studies establish a connection between anti-media populism and the promotion of non-objective forms of truth. Given the frequent strategic use of anti-media populism in current cases of populism and the potentially severe implications of undermining the media's epistemological role in democracy, further study of anti-media populism across a variety of contextual conditions are urgently called for.

When populists are in power, anti-media populism can go beyond verbal assault. Single-country and regional studies suggest that media in less established democratic contexts are more vulnerable to populist control (see for example Aalberg et al. (2016) for a collection of overviews of east European cases, Mancini (2014) on Berlusconi in Italy, Waisbord (2013, 2018) and Hawkins (2010) on Latin America). Comparative study that investigates the nuances of populist governments' influence on press freedom at a generalised level remains scarce (Holtz-Bacha 2020: 114-115; Kenny 2019). Yet a picture is emerging whereby populists discredit the media to lay the ground for legal restrictions and control where this is possible. Waisbord (2013, 2018) argues that such practices manifest a populist notion of 'media democracy' whereby journalism as an institution should support popular sovereignty, social rights and government programmes rather than a liberal-democratic notion of the public good (Waisbord 2013: 516–517). This analysis highlights the ideological discordance between populism and the institution of liberal-democratic mass media concurrently with the consonance between populist performance and a commercial media logic. The tension between the two is consistent with studies that demonstrate that populists rely on the mobilisation of public opinion – for instance through verbal forms of anti-media populism – in advance of legal changes to undermine press freedom (Conaghan & de la Torre 2008: 270). Such a thesis begins

to explain populism's conflictual relationship to the media as that which distinguishes it from the mediatisation of mainstream politics and from non-populist forms of authoritarianism.

Media Technologies as Sites of Mediation

Populism is also said to be favoured by the mediation processes of new media technologies. With the advent of web2.0, the analytical distinction between mass and interpersonal communication dissolved (Castells 2013) and vastly complicated the process of mediation. Before, the gatekeeping function of traditional mass media was the biggest hindrance to successful mediation of populist content. Populists can now circumvent it online but with much less control of the meaning-making process once content is posted. The, albeit never linear (Couldry 2008: 3; Silverstone 2005: 191), process of mediation becomes far more heterogeneous and hybridised in new media. Networked circulation and recirculation of content (Couldry 2008: 8–10) by a variety of users, their changed role as 'prosumers' (a term that conflates producers with consumers), interaction between traditional and new media formats and institutions in hybrid forms (Chadwick 2013), media usage that can result in highly selective exposure of viewpoints (Klinger and Svensson 2015), and modes of constructing reality that rely on distributing personal and emotional content through personal networks (Klinger and Svensson 2015: 1253) characterise this ubiquitous and interactive form of mediation. An emerging body of literature on populism and new media argues that there is a 'fit' between many of these characteristics and populism.

The materiality of media technologies – media artifacts and the social practices they afford – are accompanied by symbolic forms of meaning-making (see, for example, Lievrouw 2014), for instance through association with technological imaginaries and myths that dominate the environment of mediation on social media platforms. This section considers populism and media technologies in these two intertwined dimensions: the symbolic and the material aspects of technology.

Material Technology

Nearly all studies of the online mediation of populism focus on various aspects of the 'affordances' of social media – the possibilities for action that a media technology or platform gives to users – and the advantages they offer populist politicians. A core argument emerging from this research is that the affordances of social media not only facilitate but also augment populist communication. The recent 'performative turn' in populism studies highlights both a stylistic concord with the 'ordinary' language norms on social media platforms and the construction of authentic personas by populist politicians online through strategic amateurism, emotional display and norm transgression (Baldwin-Philippi 2019; Bucy et al. 2020; Enli 2017; Moffitt 2018; Sorensen 2021: Chap 7-8). Such performances often accompany claims to enable and foreground the agency of ordinary citizens. Yet empirical study demonstrates that these claims are rarely realised as two-way engagement but rather used strategically to bolster populist self-representation (Enli 2017: 59; Sorensen 2021: Chap 11; Waisbord & Amado 2017: 1342-1343).

Other studies identify an ideological affinity between populism and new media technologies that allow populists to connect with the people by circumventing the gatekeeping function of traditional mass media (see, for instance, Van Kessel & Castelein (2016); Engesser et al. (2016); Bracciale & Martella (2017)). Such practices chime with the populist aversion to institutional forms of mediation (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). A related strand of literature concerns web2.0's interactivity features and the rise of so-called 'techno-populism' or 'populism 2.0'. This is confined to a few select parties such as Podemos and Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S). Gerbaudo suggests that populism's demand for direct democracy is translated into a form of digital mass democracy that utilises such affordances of interactivity according to the principle of "one like, one vote" (2014: 80) in digitally savvy forms of populism (see also Casero-Ripollés 2016 and Chadwick & Stromer-Galley 2016 on 'ideologically empty'

parties). Such a form of populism thus avoids not only the intermediary institutions of the media but also of liberal democratic government. In all cases, however, the affordances, norms, imaginaries and audiences of social media mediate populist content in other ways than gatekeeping and editorial control and in ways equally affecting its meaning.

Yet some studies also attribute excessive causality to new media affordances and artifacts in shaping the meaning of mediated populist messages (Krämer 2020: 10; Hatakka 2019: 15; Moffitt 2018). Several comparative studies demonstrate that the implementation of populist communication strategies on social media differ substantially across different national and regional contexts (Groshek & Engelbert 2013; Zulianello et al. 2018) and that affordances are therefore appropriated contextually. Moreover, the complexity of the mediation process and the way it changes the very environment that supports it means that studies are in danger of oversimplifying the relationship between specific technologies and populism. New studies of populism and the hybrid media system (see, for instance, Hatakka 2019; Sorensen 2018; de Vreese et al. 2018) highlight that social media are never used in isolation by populist politicians but form part of broader communicative repertoires that blend media types across different sites of mediation.

Symbolic Technology

In our use of and interaction with technology, symbolic configurations become intricately tied to its material form (Boczkowski and Lievrouw 2008; Silverstone 1999: chap. 3). Couldry (2015), for instance, argues that our collective belief in social media platforms as natural sites of social and collective expression constitutes a "myth of 'us'". In the context of 'populism 2.0', Gerbaudo (2014: 16–17) indicates a correspondence between populist ideology and this 'imaginary' dimension of social media:

> Populism 2.0… incorporates much of the techno-utopianism that dominates current debates about the Internet (see, e.g., Shirky 2008; Mason 2012). It operates with the idea that the Net

> automatically provides a horizontal infrastructure where democracy can flourish… Crucial to the political deployment of such a participatory imaginary of Web 2.0 is an emphasis on the emancipatory character of disintermediation and directness.

The symbolic message inherent in social media lends credence to and enhances populists' claims to emancipation of the common people, directness and anti-elitist representation. Such myths are also reinforced by institutional forms of mediation. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, capitalise on ideas of emancipation, democracy and community as part of their marketing strategy (Van Dijck 2013) in a process of mutual cultural shaping between institutions and audiences. Incorporating the role of imaginaries with that of material aspects of technology and institutional influences on mediated populism would be fruitful to theorise the ways in which both populist politicians and audiences interact with populist content in the media ecology.

Audiences as Sites of Mediation

Users and audiences are active interpreters who do not uncritically gobble up mediated content. Rather, they digest information in a contextual and social process (Martín-Barbero 1993), and, using new media technologies, even produce, distribute and recirculate it. Literature on populism and media effects links various opportunity structures and individual predispositions to populist attitudes and support. This is a complex process where we must be wary that "drawing direct inferences from voter characteristics to the communicative processes underlying the success or failure of populist actors is just not possible" (Reinemann et al. 2016b: 381). In recent years this otherwise largely untouched field of study has received apt scholarly attention, and detailed models have been developed to map it. A more qualitative understanding of citizens' meaning-making practices and perceptions of the populist content they interact with still deserves attention, however.

Mapping Populist Effects

Hawkins (2010: 137–65) first demonstrated that urban, poorly educated citizens in Venezuela are not simply passive spectators who are fooled by a populist leader's guileful machinations as mass society theories would have it. They actively and rationally evaluate populist leaders' ability to combat issues of their concern, such as corruption. Since this observation, the populist effects literature has developed at pace. Reinemann and colleagues' (2016a) model of populist media effects distinguishes between the structural and situational context at the macro-level; the communicative practices of politicians, media and citizens at the meso-level; and the influence of individual citizens' experiences, perceptions and predispositions on their information processing at the micro-level. The model thereby suggests that we can compare perceptions of societal developments such as economic crisis, cultural threat and political and media trust as explanatory factors of favourable reception of populist messages across countries. Yet it also cautions against not taking individual country contexts into account.

Such studies have been supplemented by closer examination of the individual-level process. This is most relevant to the audience site of mediation, which considers how audiences contribute to the meaning of the mediated content. Hameleers and colleagues (2019) have modelled this level in detail and identify a range of individual-level factors that influence effects: citizens' predispositions, such as the perception of deprivation relative to an outgroup like immigrants; message characteristics, such as blame attribution; and psychological mechanisms. These moderate cognitive/emotional/attitudinal effects, which in turn moderate behavioural effects.

The institutional practices and values and technological affordances and imaginaries discussed above link macro-level developments and potential populist support moderated by individual-level factors. New work on the intersection between the mediating sites of technology and audiences is beginning to look at trends of misinformation, conspiracy theory

and subjective realities. Indications are that the interplay between social identities and populist polarising communications that entrench and enhance existing divides should be the focus of concern (McGregor & Kreiss 2020). Some such research gaps are being addressed although the intersection between individual-level effects and media technology remains disputed. For instance, there are varying indications as to whether echo chambers are connected to populist attitudes as such (Hameleers et al. 2019) or to a more general rise of polarisation in politics (Dutton & Robertson 2021).

Audience Meaning-Making

The effects studies noted above have gone a long way in mapping the patterns of societal and individual predispositions and their links to populist support. However, they should be complemented by a richer understanding of the meaning-making process occurring in audiences as part of the process of mediating populist content. This demands a constructivist perspective and interpretivist approach alongside the experimental and quantitative efforts of most existing studies.

A recent survey in seven Western countries found populist citizens to be highly politically engaged and active in their online search for information (Dutton & Robertson 2021). Such a finding goes against the grain of existing theoretical expectations of quite passive populist supporters (Krämer 2020: 29). In light of the above-mentioned analyses that found populist politicians' use of the affordances of two-way communication on social media to be primarily symbolic, such active citizen's evaluations, interpretations and interactions with populist content and other information demand deeper understanding. How do people attribute meaning to populist ideas in their given circumstances, and how do they arrive at a subjective representation of reality? How do audiences interact with publics constructed by populist politicians? Citizens' meaning-making processes in the creation and circulation of populist content are similarly under-studied. Recent trends of growing media distrust and its connection

with new media technologies and alternative notions of truth that fuel misinformation and conspiracy theory among citizens (Haller 2020; Bailey 2020) still need to be connected to populist communication.

Conclusion

The preceding pages have presented an overview of extant research on populist politicians' synergies with the media organised along three sites of mediation – institutions, technologies and audiences. This mapping of the literature on populism and the media has highlighted the interconnectedness of these sites. Yet it has also brought to light a lack of synthesis of approaches to new and traditional media in the literature on populism and a number of gaps in our understanding of how populists negotiate the process of mediation in their construction of reality. Despite the emergence of conceptual frameworks that integrate new and traditional media, a tendency exists in empirical studies to, on the one hand, view traditional media from an institutional perspective in terms of media logic and its fit with populism and, on the other hand, to view new media from a technological perspective of affordances and the way they accentuate populism. Yet in new as well as in traditional media, institutions and technologies cannot be separated as they interconnect and shape each other. Meanwhile, populists strategically use both traditional and new media in their own hybrid communicative repertoire.

Although such a conclusion is based on incomplete and unsystematic evidence, there are indications that the source of populist authenticity is its ability to maintain consistency between style and ideology in all sites of mediation and to utilise different media in hybrid modes. In institutional sites, the professional norms and self-prescribed roles of journalists are in discord with populist ideology, which has a very different idea of what 'media democracy' ought to be. Yet the media's news values find populist style hard to resist. Especially in media types and genres where such news values trump less commercial considerations, populist style ensures the relatively unscathed mediation of populist ideology, at least when conditions such

as a certain electoral threshold are met. In contrast, we find mainstream politicians laboriously adapting their style to media logic, leaving it ideologically incoherent. It is when the audience finds the performance of style unconvincing, or when they perceive that politicians do not believe their own message, that mistrust develops.

The populist narrative of anti-politics and -media taps into this mistrust. It also insulates populists from criticism and explains their outsider status. It thereby boosts their legitimacy even when institutional mediation is not in their immediate favour. It is the ability to push this narrative that makes the hybrid media system so important to populist success, for in their recourse to technological sites of mediation, populists can make symbolic use of the affordances and stylistic norms of new media to make ideological points, such as the accentuation of their direct connection to citizens and their emancipatory ambitions. While a few digital parties enable use of the affordances that increase citizen agency, such ideological claims often rely on imaginaries that remain unrealised. They do, however, appear authentic in the mediation of a persona that chimes with the norms and myths of new media technologies. In doing so they create a platform for a populist reality that circumvents institutionalised politics and media in its connection to citizens. These citizens themselves become sites of mediation in their evaluation of the authenticity of populist messages. Media effects models map the role of contextual and individual-level factors in the effectiveness of populist communication, but we still lack understanding of audiences' meaning-making process in relation to populist content.

Further questions that a communications approach to populism through mediation theory may answer include, very broadly, how populists approach and mix different media types in the media ecology; how the paradox of proximity and separation inherent in the mediation process—the media's ability to bring us closer together but actually keep us apart—relates to populism's dislike of institutional mediation and promise of responsiveness to the

people; how populism interacts with media culture to become part of our everyday lives and thereby contributes to the growing trend of lifestyle politics; how and whether populists engage with audiences in their construction of 'the people'; how populism interacts with the spread of conspiracy theories and alternative notions of truth in the media ecology; and which aspects of populist ideology and style encourage recirculation and virality in the hybrid media system. Such questions need to be addressed through cross-nationally comparative research that considers macro-level contextual conditions. Answering these and related questions will bring us closer to determining the power populists wield through their negotiation of the process of mediation, whether they are in government or marginalised, and thereby also the power they have over dominant representations of reality.

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