Populist disruption and the fourth age of political communication

Lone Sorensen [iD]
University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Abstract
This paper argues that understanding populism as a communicative process and contextualising its modern forms in relation to our current political communication environment improves our understanding of how it grips citizens. The paper identifies the disruptive communicative practices of modern populist politicians as characteristic of a digital media-dominated fourth age of political communication in extension of Blumler's account. It explores the reaction of the current wave of populism against institutional norms of political communication and its recognition and construction of a perceived disconnect between public representatives and citizens. The paper identifies three aspects of modern populist communication that, through this oppositional positioning, erode institutional communication in the fourth age: a populist pragmatics of disruptive symbolic action, an ontology that sees directness as the only means of breaching the divide between appearance and reality in politics, and an epistemological stance that replaces expertise with authenticity. These constitute an injection of grassroots communicative forms into institutional politics. The result is the exposition but also deepening of the lopsided efficacy of the fourth age whereby citizens feel inefficacious in relation to institutional politics but increasingly able to participate at a grassroots level.

Keywords
populism, authenticity, political performance, ages of political communication, disruption, social media

Democratic citizens inhabit a seemingly uncertain world, today characterised by uncertainty as to which information sources to trust in the high-choice media environment available to many and uncertainty as to the true nature and opinions of image-conscious and seemingly insincere political leaders. Populist narratives deride establishment

Corresponding author:
Lone Sorensen, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, UK.
Email: l.n.sorensen@leeds.ac.uk

politicians for their media-hungry dissimulations. They tap into many people's suspicion and desire for the more substantive forms of democratic engagement that digital media promise but rarely deliver. With an apparent commitment to saying things as they are, populists often communicate through symbolic circumventions of established channels of mediation. They thereby signal directness in an age concerned by the distorting influences of political representation and mediation. The confluence of the current populist zeitgeist and the changing media ecology therefore draws attention to the focus of populism's meta-political narrative on the elite's mediated political communication practices in recent decades.

This narrative concern signals a shift in political communication in which populist disruption plays a key role. This becomes apparent when modern populism is set against the backdrop of recent changes to the media ecology and its intersection with politics. I therefore address the question of how populist communication ties into the logic of the modern age of political communication. I argue that modern populist meaning-making practices can be read as a subversion of institutional political communication. Modern populist disruption exposes the communicative relationship between establishment politicians and citizens as inadequate. By contrasting it with more direct grassroots forms of communication, such as social media mobilisation, it highlights the discrepancy between elite rhetoric and citizens' lived experience. And it brings the latter into institutional politics by introducing authenticity as the primary source of legitimacy in political communication. The current populist zeitgeist thereby occupies a unique position in the current age of political communication.

I approach populism as a communicative process. Communication scholars (Blassnig et al., 2019; De Vreese et al., 2018; Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2018; Sorensen, 2021) have sought to bridge perspectives on populism that classify it as an ideology (most notably Mudde, 2007), a discursive logic (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; Laclau, 2005) or a political performance (Moffitt, 2016). Most of these perspectives agree on the core features of populism: the articulation of a unified people in relation to a heartland (Brubaker, 2020: 49; Laclau, 2005) and as a deserving silent majority (Canovan, 1999: 5) who are endowed with common sense; an elite or centre of power portrayed as opposed to and actively depriviledging the people (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2007) and threatening their way of life (Brubaker, 2017: 362–64), evoked through a sense of crisis (Moffitt, 2016); populist politicians' self-representation as one of the people (Brubaker, 2017; Canovan, 2005; Ostiguy, 2020; Taggart, 2000), an outsider inside institutional politics; and disruption as a means of signalling non-compliance with and illegitimacy of institutional or elite-driven norms (Aiolfi, 2022; Bucy et al., 2020; Moffitt, 2016; Sorensen, 2021).[1] In many right-wing forms of populism, the othering of the elite is accompanied by nativist or otherwise illiberal othering that strengthens the populist storytelling logic and that played a decisive role in the election of Trump and in the UK referendum on leaving the EU.

The specific contents and forms of these features of populism both depend on the socio-political context of a given populism and its position on the left-right spectrum. Communication scholars therefore argue that populism's variability points to the importance of the *process* of constructing populist ideas and imbuing them with meaning – discursive signification (Laclau, 2005) and storytelling (Nordensvard and Ketola, 2022).

Populism is then a gradational phenomenon in which situationally given ideational content is a feature of, and is given form through, communication rather than being intrinsic to a person (De Vreese et al., 2018: 426). The performance of ideas responds to and incorporates commonly perceived, context-specific meanings about the elite's abuse of power from citizens who feel politically inefficacious. Populism therefore attains its power by tapping into and enhancing existing grievances and feelings of political disconnect. It reorganises these meanings into a morally infused meta-political narrative, fuelled by the evocation of crisis, of elite representation as illegitimate and unresponsive to a silent majority. This crisis in turn justifies the very disruption that exposes and constructs it (Sorensen, 2021: 52).

Despite the increased appreciation of populism's communicative qualities, especially its use of digital media, little attention has been paid to how populism both responds and contributes to political communication more broadly. Three dimensions of populism – its pragmatics, ontology and epistemology – elucidate its complex relationship to the political communication environment: populism's expressive practices of disruptive meaning-making (pragmatics), its claims about political reality and the nature of the people as a collectivity (ontology), and its repudiation of official sources of knowledge in favour of authenticity (epistemology). In the remainder of this paper, I theoretically explore these three dimensions of populist communication by drawing on conceptual developments outside media and communication studies, including philosophy, political theory and cultural sociology. First, however, I situate populist communication in relation to the fourth age of political communication as developed by Blumler, Kavanagh and colleagues. I thereby aim to understand modern populism's attraction in isolation from nativism and hope to inspire new questions of populism's communicative practices, its relationship to the political communication ecology and its communication-specific narrative.

The third and fourth ages of political communication

In Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) canonical characterisation of three ages of political communication, they described political communication in the first age, following World War II, as 'subordinate to relatively strong and stable political institutions and beliefs' (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 211). By the third age, beginning in the 1990s, this situation had been replaced by media abundance characterised by five main trends: the intensified professionalisation of political advocacy; increased competitive pressures; populism; diversified audiences and platforms and targeted communications; and changes in how people receive politics (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 213–225).

Blumler (2013) delineated our current age as a fourth age of political communication characterised by the role of digital media. He defined it by further communicative abundance, interconnectedness, hybridity and other forms of complexity that leave its actors in a high-choice but uncertain environment. While new media technologies enable direct communication, the continued professionalisation of political communication in the fourth age rarely improves the link between political representatives and citizens as might happen through genuinely open listening, dialogue or deliberation (Blumler and Coleman, 2015). Instead, it often relies on aggregate measures of public opinion and

impression management, which has intensified with the demands of the internet. Impression management is now multidimensional and directed at not only mediating institutions but also the multiplicity of other online actors.

As a result, the political communication ecology has split into two levels – an institutional and a grassroots level (Blumler, 2013). These intersect in most citizens' daily lives as people stay informed on institutional politics and also participate in political talk and action, often online. However, the two levels are distinguished by different participatory dynamics and rhetorical styles, different views of political reality, and different foundations for perceived veracity and trustworthiness. In other words, their pragmatics, ontologies and epistemologies are distinct. While digital media enable citizens to better communicate with each other and participate in non-institutional politics in a variety of ways, citizens feel less able to connect their political agency with the institutions of governance. Citizens across Europe, the US and Canada feel that they are no longer able to duly influence the political process (Bene and Zsolt, 2020; Eurobarometer, 2019: 37; Hansard Society, 2019: 11, 13; Wike and Schumacher, 2020: 19).[2] As a result of these dynamics, the fourth age is characterised by what Blumler termed 'lopsided efficacy' (2013, not paginated).

The perceived lack of government responsiveness has been connected to populist support (Mair, 2013; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018) in both causal directions (Rooduijn et al., 2016): discontent fuels populist voting but is also enhanced by populism. Moreover, populist voters' attitudes to how establishment politicians present themselves and interact with citizens (i.e., to political communication) are an important reason why citizens vote for populist parties (Kefford et al., 2021: 10–11). The discontent with establishment politics that has increased in scope and intensity in recent decades is connected to the perception that the polished and rehearsed performances that politicians present through the media are a mere front. We now find citizens valuing authenticity and decrying its lack in politics (Valgarðsson et al., 2021).

Disruptive communicative tendencies enhance the uncertainty of the fourth age. These trends are uneven, build on past post-politics, and coexist with contradictory movements towards neoliberal consensus and strengthened deliberative ideals. Yet they have recently surfaced in some of the world's most influential democracies, including Donald Trump's US and Britain's Brexit campaign. They include more widespread, more violent, and more disruptive forms of contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Political leaders are using disruptive means of identifying with (and thereby constructing) the public, such as bad manners, flagrancy and blame attribution (Hameleers et al., 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Mondon, 2022). Political news consumption is disrupted by practices of spreading disinformation, not only by foreign agents but also by democratically elected leaders (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). And public trust in official sources of knowledge has shifted to concern with personal, subjective forms of truth, often mobilised by populist leaders (Van Zoonen, 2012). These different pragmatic, ontological and epistemic forms of disruption are grassroots means of performing the authenticity that people feel institutional politics lacks: where a political system suffers from a crisis of legitimacy, the disruptive violation of norms are perceived as authentic (Hahl et al., 2018). The next section elucidates populism's disruptive pragmatics as meaning-making practices that erode the norms of institutional political communication to generate such authenticity.

Populist pragmatics: The performance of disruption

Cultural pragmatics is concerned with how behaviour can convey meaning rather than simply be a means to achieve an end (Alexander and Mast, 2006: 2). A politician may walk out of parliament to convey his disgust, rather than because he is going somewhere. We can read populist practices as such symbolic acts that derive meaning from cultural tropes (walking out as a trope of protest), established political norms (MPs should engage in parliamentary debate), and the immediate social situation of the performative act. I argue elsewhere (Sorensen, 2021: chp 9; see also Aiolfi, 2022) that specifically disruptive symbolic action is an essential (but not sufficient) criterion of populist communication. Political performers are usually confined by established norms and other restrictions of social power (Alexander, 2006: 36). Political disruptive performances are meaning-making practices that make these norms and restrictions explicit by transgressing them. Populist disruption distinguishes itself from other forms of political disruption, such as in activism, civil disobedience or terrorism, in three respects. The first is its unique positioning. Populist disruption adopts grassroots forms – vernacular modes of speech, dress and behaviour that grate with institutional expectations. But unlike activist forms of disruption, the populist performer is positioned within the institutions they disrupt. The populist disrupter is the outsider-on-the-inside who draws attention to their interloper status by displaying its contrast to institutional norms.

This allows the populist to perform 'being their authentic selves'. Authenticity, the second distinguishing feature of populist disruption, is characterised by the seemingly anomalous qualities of being itself performed (Alexander, 2006: 54–57) and functioning as a moral ideal (Taylor, 1992: 15–16; Trilling, 1972). This combination of moral and performed qualities means that authenticity has become 'a strategy in its own right' (Enli, 2016: 133) in attempts to build trust between politicians and the public (Pels, 2003). In the case of populist disruption, authenticity is not only a moral performance of being true to oneself but also of identifying with the people in doing so. I discuss these respective forms in the context of populism's epistemology and ontology below. Rather than adapt to the norms of institutional politics, populists transform any limiting restrictions upon the performance of their authentic personas as one of the people into resources that feed their political narrative. They present norms of formal talk as the intentional stifling of the free speech of ordinary people. Norms of truth-telling based on expertise are a form of cultural and intellectual control. Political norms thus become the objects of the disruptive performance; the outcome is the authentic breaking loose of the bonds these norms create on behalf of 'the people'. For this reason, transgressive forms of speech such as illiberal or nativist-populist forms of hate speech should be seen as a dual commentary: in their populist form on the 'politically correct' speech conventions that populists breach through apparently authentic political incorrectness and in their nativist/illiberal form on the minorities or other groups they subject to abuse.

The third characteristic of populist disruption is its concern with establishment political communication practices and norms. Populism is not only a 21st century phenomenon, but it is historically contextual. In its modern form, it speaks to the tension between media management fatigue and a participatory imaginary (Mede and Schäfer, 2020: 5–6). Modern populist disruption purposefully and symbolically grates with the

streamlined and professional communicative practices of establishment political leaders in the fourth age. It is a symbolic act that reveals the very contingency and contestability of these norms. Upon winning the European Parliament elections in 2014, UKIP MEPs turned their backs during the opening ceremony in Strasbourg. This act served the purpose of denouncing what UKIP presented as a scripted, strategically choreographed and manipulative media ritual (UKIP, 2014). The elite's 'hollow words' were 'strategic oration', then-leader of UKIP Nigel Farage complained (Farage, 2014).

Populist disruption's breaking of the fourth wall of establishment political communication and exposition of politics *as performed* is a meta-performance insofar as it is itself performed. Its gate-crashing grassroots forms are relative to and intentionally reactionary against the modern communicative norms of the elite. By highlighting the discrepancies of the institutional and grassroots levels of political communication, populist disruption enhances the lopsided efficacy of the fourth age that Blumler described. Its narrative feeds into a climate of declining citizen engagement in institutional politics and a withdrawal from each other of citizens and politicians (Koch et al., 2021: 3). The disruptive logic of populist pragmatics exposes, dissects and thereby reshapes the media logic that pervades mainstream political communication.

The third age of political communication saw politicians increasingly rely on professional communication specialists and create "must-see" political spectacles and events that defy media intervention, aiming to take them directly to the people, unmediated by editors, producers, and reporters' (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 216). In the fourth age, politicians rely on digital media to elude gatekeeper intervention. Yet in both attempts at directness, a different form of mediation distorts representatives' perceived relationship to citizens: their obviously staged performances and image management. Populist performances of authenticity constitute a claim to not perform – despite the performed nature of authenticity. They achieve this through identification with the people, for example through informal vernaculars that are disruptive in institutional settings and simultaneously characteristic of participatory media (Howard, 2008). Such consistency suggests they are being their real selves. I next turn to the sense of directness engendered through the ontological form of this authenticity.

Populist ontology: The lie of political reality and the embodiment of the people

Political epistemology queries what we can hope to know about reality. Political ontology establishes what is actually out there to know about. Political ontology can then be understood in two related senses: the nature of reality and the nature of being (Hay, 2011: 462). The nature of reality for example concerns the distinction between appearance and reality – does reality simply *appear* to be real? Questions of the nature of being relate for example to the existence of social entities – can collective actors such as 'the people' be said to exist, and how do representatives embody such entities? Populism's position on these questions manifests through its pragmatics of disruption, which turns the public demand for a closer connection between citizens and representatives into an ontological concern, through two performative moves. The first is to undermine the identity of, and reality constructed by, elite representatives. In populist ontology, democracy

requires directness for citizens to breach the divide between appearance and reality. Populism's second move is therefore to symbolically enact such directness. Here the perceived directness of social media plays a key role.

The first way in which populists portray the disconnect between the elite and citizens as ontological is in their delegitimisation of the political reality evoked by the elite in public communications. In the populist narrative, the media management practices of institutional politics, disguised as democratic engagement, distance people from, rather than enable, power because they give people a false foundation on which to make democratic decisions. In the 2016 US election, for example, Trump dismissed Clinton's address to the audience in a debate as 'all soundbites'. Populists themselves, often by recourse to digital media, insist on not succumbing to the 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow, 1979) whereby the elite adapt their communications to suit the media's newsmaking processes. During his presidency, Trump's tweets functioned as an ongoing symbolic act, a commentary on the too-intertwined nature of legacy media and institutional politics. At the same time, the tweets still fed content to legacy media; they disrupted media-politics relations and shifted the locus of control and the authority to represent political reality (Carlson, 2021).

Populism's delegitimisation of the elite is also ontological in the second sense of relating to being. Elites are disconnected from 'the people' because of who they are. This creates a failure of communication that speaks directly to the two-layered nature of the fourth-age political communication ecology. Boris Johnson's buffoonery is a satirical rendering of the British elite's detached ontological status: in the UK, the majority of public representatives are now from the same social class, have attended the same private schools, and have increasingly dissimilar life experience from those they represent (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020: chp. 5). Johnson's clownish role personifies the-outsider-on-the-inside who assumes a shared perspective with the outsider audience on the elite's ridiculousness in its cultural isolation. In the fourth age of political communication, web2.0 has not been used by establishment parties to overcome this divide through interaction with voters (Magin et al., 2016), and party identification is historically low (Blumler, 2013). Populists aggravate this situation with accusations of the elite living in a bubble that does not enable them to experience or understand the lives of their citizens.

Populist disruption, in contrast, engenders ontological identification. It adopts vernacular forms of communication that at once accentuate the elite's distinctness from the people and negate the distance between citizens and populist disrupter (Urbinati, 2019). I have elsewhere referred to this performance of self as one of 'responsive authenticity' (Sorensen, 2021: 143–146). It constitutes a claim to the unmediated channelling of the people's needs and wants through the embodiment of the people (Casullo, 2020). Populist ontological identification is often performed technologically by harnessing platform affordances and digital aesthetics, for example through purposefully amateur digital campaigns that encourage participatory media creation and other forms of feedback and public participation online (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). Though claims to substantive two-way interaction may only be symbolic (Waisbord and Amado, 2017), such performances beckon spectators to become participants in 'dramas of authenticity' in which authenticity is not simply a quality of individuals but of a perceived social connection

between leaders and followers (Kennedy and Kolb, 2016). Responsive authenticity then resides in a 'reality-shaping function with and for others' (Kennedy and Kolb, 2016: 319) that engender new identities in which people recognise themselves.

Political performances of identity through in- and out-group self-representation signal 'identity ownership' of fuzzy, prototypical identities (Kreiss et al., 2020). The form of embodiment depends on the given populism's particular (constructed) silent majority and its discontents. Nativist populisms like Farage's or Trump's performatively construct (incorrectly (Mondon and Winter, 2019)), and identify with, their voters as white, male and working class. Such evocations of the people may be enhanced by strategic exploitation of structures of power such as race, class and gender through othering (Reddi et al., 2021) that transgresses liberal-elitist political norms. In leftwing South American forms of populism, performances of femininity or indigenous identity transgress these same structures of power (Casullo and Colalongo, 2022). Responsive authenticity is thereby a collective performance of being true to the values, feelings and beliefs of a constructed people whilst demonstrating the authority to transgressively invert the social order (Casullo and Colalongo, 2022).

This is only possible through identification with the people, and only if 'the people' is performatively evoked as a unified whole (Moffitt, 2016: 147). In populist ontology, the people are united by reference to common symbols embodied in the populist leader, through their antagonistic positioning in relation to the elite. Populist ontology therefore involves a claim to directly channel the people's inner self, a dismissal of any difference between people and representative. On social media, populist leaders' performances of responsive authenticity can motivate followers to amplify their message, as was the case with Trump's disproportionate online visibility (Zhang et al., 2018). The embodiment of the people through disruptive pragmatics in turn exposes the political reality that mainstream politicians conjure into being as false. We can therefore see the populist embodiment of the people as actively delegitimising the nature of the fourth age establishment political persona and its communicative construction of reality through the very use of digital self-representation that is characteristic of the fourth age. Embodying the people's ordinariness in digital communications – such as Jair Bolsonaro's Instagram posts depicting him as 'merging with the masses' (Mendonça and Caetano, 2021: 222) – is then a pragmatic disruptive act informed by a distinct ontology that is becoming central to the fourth age of political communication.

Populist epistemology: A challenge to expertise and claim to authenticity

Epistemology is concerned with what people can know and how we evaluate the adequacy of knowledge and distinguish between different types of knowledge. Such questions follow logically from those of ontology, which are concerned with what there is to know. If, as per populism's ontological stance, the reality presented through institutional political communication is a false consciousness, what do populists deem we can know about _real_ politics, and how should we evaluate truth claims? This section discusses what I term populist epistemology in relation to the fourth age of political communication. First, I argue that populist epistemology actively delegitimises established sources of knowledge of the institutional

level of political communication, thereby privileging social over establishment media. Second, I suggest that populism encourages the evaluation of truth claims on the basis of authenticity rather than expertise. Authenticity then becomes a core value in fourth age political relationships, but a problematic one.

Populists often attack legacy media whom they contend cannot be trusted as accurate sources of knowledge. Most famously in recent years, Trump labelled established media channels such as CNN 'fake news', a strategy many other populists have since mimicked. Anti-media populism characterises the fourth age of political communication and its uncertain media environment. Audience loyalty towards television news fell steadily in the competitive environment of the third age (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 217–218). Trust is now rather placed in social networks than traditional sources of political news (Carlson, 2021: chp. 1; Quandt, 2012). Populists' concern is not the fourth age's media abundance, its multiplicity of channels and platforms that give audiences overwhelming choice and 'dumbed down' content and result in audience fragmentation. Rather, narratives of the undemocratic interconnectedness of media and politics drive populist media criticism (Fawzi, 2020: 43; Krämer, 2018) and turn populists from established media institutions to social media in the search for truth (Flew, 2021: 180).

Anti-media populism is part of a master narrative that delegitimises epistemic authorities (see also Krämer, 2021; Mede and Schäfer, 2020 on science-related populism). Since the third age of political communication, expertise has come to play a dominant role in public decision-making (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 211; Coleman, 2018). Yet politicians often use expert evidence, such as statistics, as rhetorical devices (Lawson and Lovatt, 2020). This has resulted in the emergence of 'epistemological suspicion [among citizens] … that claims to truth and knowledge are tied to particular social and material interests' (Van Zoonen, 2012: 56). With the divided levels of political communication in the fourth age, official sources of knowledge have come to be less trusted as truthful representations of reality. Populist ontology's embodiment of the people instead enables a claim to shared experience. What there is to know about reality is therefore a matter of experiential and affective forms of knowledge – that is, the lived experience associated with grassroots politics and shared on social media (Papacharissi, 2015: 109), rather than expertise (Brubaker, 2020: 6; Mede and Schäfer, 2020: 477–478). Populist epistemology thereby repositions epistemic authority in directness, just as populist ontology replaces the mediation of power with a claim to directness.

Populism's second epistemological challenge to institutional political communication in the fourth age goes one step further in delegitimising established knowledge-makers. It shifts focus from the actual truth of a claim (its factuality) onto the truthfulness of the actor (their authenticity) (Fieschi, 2019). This is problematic to politicians whose authenticity is undermined by the seeming distortion to their public communications by a mediating layer of special advisors and image management concerns. Populism's problem with modern political communication is thus not the greater focus on the person of the politician rather than policy. Instead, it is that the politician's true self can only be known if the obfuscating influences of performance and mediation are removed. Populism replaces claims to truth with authentic claims to truthfulness that rely on personal rather than professional qualities and norms. Digital media therefore lend themselves particularly well to the symbolic expression of such an epistemology.

The responsive form of authenticity discussed above is ontologically distinctive; it aesthetically delineates the populist as part of the ontological entity of 'the people' through the performance of and through vernacular forms and platforms of communication. Truthfulness is an epistemic form of authenticity that is self-connected rather than responsive. A self-connectedly authentic politician appears convincing and sincere, as if acting from honest intentions without ulterior motives. In contrast to the elite's apparent lack of authenticity, populists perform their own selves as true to their beliefs, unspun and unpolished. Authenticity in this sense is closely connected with the display of emotion (McCarthy, 2016), which, however staged, has the potential to create bonds of intimacy and make the personal political (Papacharissi, 2015: 109). A populist's performance of self-connected authenticity, whether audiences are aware of 'buying into' performed authenticity or not (Iversen, 2018: 129), can thereby connect macro-level political narratives to micro-level experience. It can make the populist narrative about politics relevant to people by virtue of how it *feels* (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 73–77).

The recourse to feelings and subjective ways of knowing and to the digital media that privilege them is epistemically disruptive of an institutional politics reliant on formal expertise and aggregation. Populist epistemology is therefore also articulated through disruptive pragmatics. It breaks down the norms 'that ground the process through which claims about reality are seen as authoritative and legitimate' (Waisbord, 2018: 20). Yet knowledge claims that would be perceived as dissonant, misleading and false according to established norms of political and factual communication appear truthful and morally right when approached through the lens of authenticity. Populists' frequent invocations of common sense, for instance, rarely stand up to scientific scrutiny but can form part of an authentic performance of being true to oneself where the veracity of claims is irrelevant. Populism's positioning of authenticity as superior to forms of knowledge mediated by official institutions is central to its counterpoising of grassroots communication with the institutional level of fourth age political communication. It performs a claim to epistemic directness by replacing 'spun' and distortive politics with authenticity.

Conclusion

The pragmatics of disruption that suffuses populist ontology and epistemology is a claim to directness. It symbolically (but only symbolically) dismantles the distortive features of fourth-age institutional political communication. These are perceived to remove citizens from representatives who do not communicate truthfully, on citizens' terms, in their language and by reference to their experience. Populism's contribution to the fourth age is to bring out and embody this separation between the grassroots and institutional levels of political communication. It imports from grassroots into institutional politics a pragmatics that is disruptive and anti-formal, an ontology of directness that dismisses representation in favour of identification, and an epistemology that is participatory, experiential and authentic rather than reliant on sanctioned epistemic authorities. These are impositions upon institutional politics that in their performance comment upon, expose and dissect the professionalised media-politics relations of political communication in the fourth age.

Specifically, populism offers a meta-performance that enhances the lopsided efficacy that Blumler argued has emerged from the separation of political communication into two layers. It rings to light, attempts to address, but also furthers, the decline in institutional

political efficacy. On the one hand, populist disruption prompts renewal for the better. The mediatisation and professionalisation of political communication have left citizens feeling unable to judge the truthfulness of their representatives. Much decision-making has been delegated to unelected bodies, officials and experts, and citizens feel unheard through institutional channels. Populist ontology's dismissal of distorted representations of reality and populist epistemology's championing of authenticity react against these democratically problematic trends. They thereby address one of the causes of feelings of apathy and distrust in modern representative democracies. On the other hand, populist communication has the potential to transform undirected disaffection into this very apathy and distrust of institutional politics. Its pragmatics refuses to acknowledge the necessity for performance in politics; its ontology undermines established forms of representation; its epistemology discredits rightly sanctioned epistemic authorities. Moreover, it rarely delivers on its promised solution of communicative substantiveness and directness. While it establishes poor institutional listening as intentional, it offers limited evidence for its own use of digital or other channels for this purpose, which rather remain symbolic. How may we harness populism's expository narrative, authentic performance and identification with citizens for improved democratic communication and avoid its pitfalls?

In the fourth age, narrative, authenticity and identity matter more in journalism than traditional notions of 'facts' (Carlson, 2021; Lewis, 2020). Refuting accusations of fakery, and fact checking disinformation are therefore no contest against populism's tripartite combination of anti-media and anti-politics narrative, epistemic authority based on authenticity, and claim to shared experience based on ontological identification. We must acknowledge and address the disconnect between political representatives and citizens that populists expose. Yet we need scrutiny to ensure solutions harness fruitful ways of intersecting the divided institutional and grassroots levels of the political communication ecology. These include channelling the benefits of grassroots practices and opportunities into institutional politics, such as citizens' access to information, high levels of complex and often direct interconnectedness, including between some public representatives and citizens, and vernacular forms of political talk among citizens themselves (Graham et al., 2016), as well as enhanced opportunities for a multiplicity of voices to be heard and to personalise political action frames (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

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ORCID iD

Lone Sorensen 🅳 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3995-2055

Notes

1. Post-foundational approaches based on the work of Laclau have a broader perspective that sees populism as the quintessential political logic and do not subscribe to all of these elements but share the constructivist concern with articulations of 'the people' in opposition to the elite.
2. Hansard report that 50% of Britons say the main parties and politicians do not care about people like them (Hansard Society, 2019, 13) and that Britons have more confidence in the military and judges than in politicians to act in the public interest (Hansard Society, 2019, 2019, 11). In Europe more broadly, 54% of citizens disagree that the interests of people like them are well taken into account by the political system in their country, an increase of 8% since the previous year (Eurobarometer, 2019, 37). Pew Research Center confirms these trends on a global basis where they find a median of 64% of citizens in 34 countries disagreeing with the statement, 'most elected officials care what people like me think' (Wike and Schumacher, 2020, 19).

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