

# POPULISM, MEDIA AND JOURNALISM:

an introduction to the special issue



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## 1 A media-relevant definition of populism

The political phenomenon known as populism has a long history, dating to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and scholars and practitioners have identified many different ways of doing populist politics (Quattrocchi-Woisson, 1997). Populism occurs in societies undergoing rapid transformation and facing substantial uncertainty, in which new social groups — and some existing ones — seek to establish legitimate and favourable positions for themselves (Germani, 1971).

At the most fundamental level, populism is a radical critique of elitism, based on the people's right to decide on the issues that affect them. As such, populist discourse has an intrinsic democratic component, one that seeks the enlargement of the public sphere and direct exercise of power by the majority. In this context, existing

institutional settings are construed as elitist (Laclau, 2008). At the same time, populism is a cleaving political dynamic, separating a moral “us” — the people — from an evil “them”, to be removed from the polity.

“The people”, “us” and “them” are empty signifiers, the enunciator being the one to determine the actual content of this opposition according to context and conjuncture in a focused attempt to contest social hegemony and redistribute political resources (Laclau, 1989; Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021). Thus, populism does not have a strong ideological component, being, instead, a discursive way of engaging in politics (Armony, 2002; Tant, 2021). Expressions like “right-wing populism” or “nationalist populism” convey the intersection between populism and any number of ideologies (Dufour, 2021).

Populism and its antagonistic perception of existing democratic institutions become salient political phenomena when a political system is incapable of responding adequately to populist criticisms. When such institutions fail to integrate such demands or offer legitimacy to new or existing social groups, populism may precipitate a profound political crisis, marked by intense polarization, in which not only political personnel —“them”— are strongly condemned, but the institutional framework as a whole is called into question as unresponsive to “the people” and therefore corrupt and expendable (Mudde & Kaltwaaser, 2018; Fernandes et al., 2021).

In addition to being anti-elitist and polarizing, populism is also anti-pluralist. Once defined, the nature of “the people” serves as a quick and easy criterion to identify who properly belongs to the polity and who does not. The moral nature of its appeal to “the people” imbues populism with an unwavering ethic of conviction (Dufour, 2021). As a radical discourse, it disregards its own internal contradictions and treats nuances as attempts at diversion. By using social media as its platform, contemporary incarnations of populism consolidate this feature, both by placing a strong premium on short, incontrovertible assertions and by creating “bubbles” that stimulate single-mindedness and the exclusion of dissent (Troude-Chastenet, 2018; Mangerotti et al., 2021). Populist tweets generate more online engagement than tweets featuring other kinds of appeals (Cassells, 2021). Even online news articles in mainstream media relaying a politician’s or a journalist’s populist statement generate more comments (Blassnig et al., 2019). In addition, there is evidence that exposure (rather than self-selection)

to social media can increase the likelihood of supporting a populist radical right-wing party (Schumann et al., 2021).

Because of its discursive nature, the media have always been a *sine qua non* contributor to the extension of populism in mass societies (Pessey, 2014). However, as the articles in this special issue show, the current critique of elitism has broadened to include traditional media and journalists (Hameleers, 2020) — as well as scientists, intellectuals and even artists — as “them”, thereby designating these categories as prime targets of criticism and blame, together with politicians.

While populism has always proposed a metanarrative of democracy (Laclau, 2008), contemporary forms of populism have gone beyond being metapolitical to including a strong meta-journalistic component (Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021; Tant, 2021). The present institutional crisis thus includes political structures, traditional media groups and their vehicles, but also established knowledge gathering and diffusion procedures, thus enlarging the systemic threat populism poses (or proposes, as seen from a different normative angle) to new social fields.

For contemporary media and journalism, populism goes beyond a critique of the establishment-as-elite to questioning time-honoured values and practices. On the one hand, populists attack the core values of journalism as a profession, such as moderation, fact-checking and reporting neutrality, as being elitist restrictions on popular knowledge and demands. On the other hand, they take advantage of the expansion of web-based social exchange platforms to circumvent traditional vehicles and to mobilize new frames to cover events while imposing new topics on the public agenda — sometimes by promoting a “de-mediatized” communication with their audiences. The current iteration of populism’s radical morality and its irreconcilable clash between “us” and “them” are imbued in these frames and agendas (Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021).

As in the past, technological changes in the media are associated with the current bout of populism. Despite political promises and academic illusions of enlarging the public sphere while preserving its open nature and its rational approach, the democratization of new media supports has in fact meant the enlargement of publics, but the concentration of recognized enunciators. Even more than before, the control of social media techniques helps translate media image into political charisma (Gingras, 2009; Hudelot, 2018).

With the abating of the digital divide in access to social media platforms, populist leaders are now able “to communicate without filter” with their supporters. While populist logics often rail against pluralism and critical thinking, the actual interactive possibilities offered by new technologies limit the dialogical nature of the movement. Social media populism thus replicates the radio populism of the 1940s and 1950s and the television populism of the 1980s and 1990s (Neveu, 1995). As with other forms of charismatic domination, social media populism simultaneously stimulates and depends on top-down, acritical, quasi-magical perceptions of leadership (Weber, 1972 [1922]).

Despite its usefulness in explaining intense social, political and media change, not everything is populism. To maintain a meaningful concept that actually describes a social phenomenon, it is important to stick to a clear and demanding definition, even as we recognize the need to adapt it to evolving situations. This is one of the main objectives of this special issue.

## **2 Media, journalism and politics in times of populism**

As discussed above, the new iterations of populism are inextricably associated with institutional crises, broadly described as crises of representative democracy. However, as also noted, beyond the political system, the media system faces steep challenges arising from the transition from a traditional system dominated by large, integrated, privately-owned conglomerates to one in which web-based new media, articulated around largely decentralized and unregulated social networks, are salient. Brandishing alternative sources of legitimacy, populists openly question the structures and practices of the current media system.

In this context, the acute perception of multidimensional and permanent exclusion — from the political institutions of representative democracy and their decision-making processes, but also from representation in media content and from the framing and agenda-setting processes that build this content (Tant, 2021) — has strengthened the re-information phenomenon. Under this trend, new and alternative sources of information receive greater credibility than traditional ones, believed — not entirely without reason — to obscure social debates in favour of profit and privilege (Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021).

The multiplication of alternative and social media advocating re-information has created a dispersed, albeit networked environment — the re-infosphere — in which it is possible to completely shut out traditional voices, silencing elite preferences, scientific results, fact-based reporting and critical examination of issues in one fell blow (Ribeiro, 2020). Re-information has been key to the emergence of post-truth, a situation “in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford English Dictionary, n. d.).

As a result, the media — particularly, but not exclusively new and alternative media — can become an instrument of populist mobilization, giving a strong voice to anti-elitism and anti-pluralism through post-truth, conspiracy theories and fake news, establishing them as potent political factors to be reckoned with (Mangerotti et al., 2021; Figeac et al., 2019). Competition in a globalized, neo-liberal economic environment has meant that all media types have become involved in this dynamic (Troude-Chastenot, 2018).

The media’s mediation of the public sphere has come under stress through the multiplication of vehicles and platforms and through the apparent blurring of the transmitter-receiver distinction. Originally unrelated to populism, the idea that new media (especially web-based social media) are vectors of media system democratization that can give voice and political clout to heretofore excluded or oppressed groups has gained wide credence (Daoust, 2017; Duguay, 2019). While largely contested in academic circles, populist discourse has integrated this idea, using it as proof of its radical democratic nature and of the illegitimacy of any “elitist” attempts at containing or regulating it (Richaud, 2017; Aubin, 2018).

Challenging the traditional media’s hegemony has also led to questioning its discursive authority. While the creation of alternative discourses is part of the process of contesting hegemony (Fraser, 1995), post-truth and the re-infosphere have led to the normalization of extreme discourses (Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021). Abusive, even violent rhetorical associations are legitimized through cathartic narratives that appeal to disabused citizens’ feelings and emotions (Mangerotti et al., 2021). In this discursive environment, manifest contradictions are ignored and even encouraged as controversial devices. Just like traditional populism, social media-based populism has little ideological content, serving as a vehicle to both extreme right leaders (Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Donald Trump in the US) and

extreme left ones (Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France) (Tant, 2021).

In principle, counter-publics contribute to the enlargement of the public sphere. However, the contentious nature of populism — anti-elitist, anti-institutional, and anti-pluralist — actually results in a full-blown attack on the public sphere and its values of openness, rational debate and the search for the common good (Habermas, 1992 [1962]; Lits, 2014). As Gino Germani (1971) noted of Latin American populism of the 1940s and 1950s, contemporary, media-based and media-driven forms of populism have not resulted in the inclusion of formerly excluded or oppressed social groups into the polity and its decision-making circles.

Rather, subaltern elites have taken advantage of the political availability of large, unorganized masses in an attempt to overturn the political — and media — system in their favour through vertical forms of mobilization and uncritical deference to charismatic leadership (Fernandes et al., 2021; Mangerotti et al., 2021). The re-infosphere has proved a powerful tool to appeal to “the people” to mobilise resentment about social and political change, economic stagnation and perceived threats to privileges, among other forms of backlash (Mansbridge & Shames, 2012).

Furthermore, under current forms of populism, the trend towards adversarial coverage, in which the media openly question the legitimacy of the political system through systematically negative agenda-setting and framing processes (Guazina, 2011), turns against the media system itself through radical meta-journalism discourses and practices (Tant, 2021). If so far neither the political nor the media system have been overrun (at least in the cases studied in this special issue), giving credence to Pierre Bourdieu’s argument about the primacy of the political field (2000), both arenas are under heavy pressure as the dispute for legitimacy further strains institutions and social bonds through intense polarization (Fernandes et al., 2021; Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021).

Combined with a broader discourse on the democratization of media production, populist anti-elitism has unleashed an open attack on journalism as a profession. The decentralization of mass media production and the transfer of information practices from print-based or broadcast formal vehicles to informal, web-based social platforms has been a blow to the norms, values and practices of journalism, already weakened by economic and technological pressures. The media system’s capacity to report complex issues in a

nuanced fashion has dramatically declined (Pereira, 2020 as cited in Mangerotti et al., 2021). As will be discussed below, another victim of anti-elitism has been scientific debate.

The result is a burning paradox, in which the seemingly impregnable bubble of the re-infosphere coexists with an undeniable expansion of mass communication, both in terms of potential transmitters and receivers as well as in terms of items brought forth to the public agenda and the frames used to cover them. The tensions between a radical democratic discourse and the threatening closure of the public sphere have given this debate an aura of impending doom that the covid-19 pandemic has deeply accentuated (Fernandes et al., 2021).

### **3 Social media populism and the pandemic**

Social media populism emerges in a globalized world, in which communication and transmission of political trends — along with trade and investment — occur at a much greater scale and a much faster rate than before. While all media forms participate in this trend, social media has been a crucial vector in shaping this phenomenon as we observe it today. Therefore, in a context of general dissatisfaction and uncertainty, it is no surprise that social media populism has surfed the global wave (Dufour, 2021). As the articles in this special issue show, regional dynamics in different continents all inform and emulate one another.

A conjuncture — the covid-19 pandemic — gave further impetus to this dynamic, simultaneously bringing the nature of social media-based populism into sharp relief and serving as a sounding board for it. The combination of urgency, uncertainty and institutional crisis — medical as much as political or mediatic — made rumour-mongering during the epidemic an affair of state. Through post-truth, fake news and re-information, populist leaders acquired unprecedented visibility and clout in already troubled public spheres (Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2021).

The covid-19 pandemic stressed another dimension of social media-based populism, that of open and blatant disregard for science and its knowledge creation mechanism. The re-infosphere has decried science as elitism and scientists as elites and has constantly denounced collusion between these and other elites, namely

journalists and politicians (Fernandes et al., 2021; Tant, 2021). The attack on vaccination —which built on a powerful post-truth trend antedating the pandemic— and the promotion of unsubstantiated therapies such as chloroquine, both through official platforms and *ad nauseam* through the re-infosphere, have strengthened social media populism's polarising discourse. Consequently, the covid-19 pandemic has been effectively integrated into the social media populist meta-narratives on politics, media and science (Dos Santos & Moreira Cesar, 2021; Tant, 2021).

Attitudes towards science and the media before the pandemic also color citizens' responses. Those who had low trust in legacy media started turning away from them even more, seeking information in online spaces. While Mede et al. (2021) find that the Swiss are less likely to adhere to science populism after covid-19 than before, they note a stronger impact on those who already had a pro-science stand. The media and scientific community have long been suspect in conspirational rhetoric that finds an echo in populist discourse. The media are portrayed as puppets of authorities seeking to hide the truth (Harambam & Aupers, 2017). For example, during the Zika public health crisis in 2015, the lack of trust in the media fuelled alternative information-seeking behaviour (Kou et al., 2017). Science has been viewed as either a political tool or failing to live up to its objectives of searching for truth and questioning theories (Harambam & Aupers 2015).

The current covid-19 pandemic and scientific expertise have been mobilized by populist leaders in various ways. In Brazil and the US, the risks posed by the virus and its impact were minimized. In Eastern Europe, populist discourse often instrumentalized science (Cyr et al., 2021). For example, the governing Hungarian populist party Fidesz has adapted its discourse to the circumstances of the pandemic in order to blame groups usually portrayed as the enemies of the Hungarian people: minorities, refugees and the EU. Scientific expertise was said to inform decisions, yet it was explicit that those decisions remained the prerogative of political leadership. It was systematically made clear that science was informing and not leading political decisions, which remained anchored in so-called common sense (Bene & Boda, 2021).

While demands for regulating social media have also become widespread, for the time being initiatives in this field are limited to timid and self-interested measures by some — not all — of the private

owners of the various social media platforms and to slow, procedural and *ex-post* trials in some jurisdictions. Beyond the institutional weight of some populist leaders, such as Bolsonaro and Trump having (at least for a time) become presidents of their respective countries, the appeal to radical democracy and to values such as unfettered freedom of expression has slowed institutional reaction, further underscoring the critical nature of the situation. As a result, social media-based populism continues to thrive in an unregulated field, contributing to its reproduction (Mangerotti et al., 2021).

The pandemic itself created a need for information, leading more citizens to turn to virtual networks, increasing the risk of exposure to misinformation, disinformation and populist narratives. Yet, in many countries, people also tuned into legacy media, especially television, even those who were typically less likely to follow the news on a regular basis (Casero Ripolles, 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2021). In many places, the near-daily broadcasting of covid briefings was akin to a media event that structured the day where usual activities were upended by confinement and pandemic constraints (Mihelj et al., 2021). The impact was also felt in newsrooms in various ways; some organizations and journalists adapted, while others saw their reporting capacity significantly curbed by access to sources made more difficult by movement restrictions or by governments using the context as an excuse to limit journalists' capacity to work (Quandt & Wahl Jorgensen, 2021). Journalists also had to rely on government sources more than ever, along with (and sometimes in contradiction with) medical and public health experts (Mellado et al., 2021).

Social media-based populism thrives on the perception of the equal voice provided by new and alternative media and is a serious threat to representative democracy, including its structures and its values, and most notably pluralism. Yet, the articles in this issue point out a crucial contradiction between the potential decentralization of social media, especially in terms of receivers but also transmitters, and populism's dependence on a single, uncontested, charismatic enunciator. Populism, now as before is the affair of resentful subaltern elites seeking access to power, rather than an open field for outsiders intent on deepening and enlarging the public sphere, (Germani, 1971; Mangerotti et al., 2021; Tant, 2021). The long-term consolidation of a social media-based populist polity cannot be taken for granted. Yet, recent developments in certain countries such as Hungary highlight the threat that the combination of populism and strong partisan

competition poses to democracy (Enyedi, 2016), a threat potentially made even more acute in the pandemic context.

In conclusion, the articles in this special issue on populism, media and journalism build on, but also contribute to the extensive literature on the nature and consequences of populism. Among the questions raised are those about the gap between populism's radical democratic discourse and actual practice, the destructive effects of populism on the structure and dynamics of various social fields, the importance of context in determining the actual nature of populist discourse and practice, as well as the role of globalization as it interacts with local context. Anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, polarization, charismatic leadership are not new tropes in studies of populism, yet they gain new tones when their effects on media and journalism are assessed.

All in all, the study of populism in media and journalism raises important questions about its specificity in the context of new forms of communication and connection, how crises can create opportunities for its emergence, and how different political systems engage with, or are resistant to, populist critiques. This special issue contributes to these questions and suggests new avenues for future research.

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