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Investigating Media Populism Worldwide

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ABSTRACT

Growing evidence suggests that news media significantly contribute to disseminating, endorsing, or merely increasing the visibility of populist rhetoric. While a large amount of literature has focused on the type and volume of news coverage provided to populist actors and parties (populism through the media), there is more scarcity of knowledge regarding the media's orientation towards populism (populism by the media), partly due to a lack of systematic comparative evidence. To address this shortfall, we introduce a novel, large-scale comparative dataset, the Media Populism (M-POP) expert survey (including a website and a ShinyApp). This survey provides metrics for media populism across 38 national and subnational contexts globally, thereby offering an empirically grounded evaluation of the primary theoretical interpretations of media populism. In the article, we detail the dataset, evaluate the advantages and drawbacks of using an expert survey method, and conduct a systematic analysis of the determinants of media populism, particularly focusing on its right-wing manifestation, to validate our metrics. We then explore two empirical applications of the M-POP dataset in a comprehensive comparative manner, tackling key questions in political communication literature: the interplay between media populism and tabloid journalism, and the correlation between individual populist sentiments and media populism.

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Comparative data; expert survey; media populism; news media; Tabloid; political communication

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, populism has become a pervasive concept in political science and communication. Addressed as a political phenomenon, populism has been argued to influence several aspects of democratic regimes (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Urbinati 2019). To date, academic research has been devoted to studying political aspects related to populism, mainly focusing on parties and leaders' ideological positioning (e.g., Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), voters' attitudes and preferences for

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populist parties (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hameleers and de Vreese 2020; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Tsatsanis, Andreadis, and Teperoglou 2018), as well as communication strategies enacted by populist parties and leaders (Cranmer 2011; Engesser et al. 2017; Hawkins 2009; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Meijers and Zaslove 2021; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). When treated as a form of top-down political communication, populism has been shown to affect citizens' behaviors, such as political mobilization and online engagement (Blassnig et al. 2019a) and voters' attitudes as well (Hameleers and Fawzi 2020).

Partially related to this aspect is the investigation of *media populism*, namely, the presence of populist claims and arguments in the media (Krämer 2018; Manucci and Weber 2017; Waisbord 2018). Regarding this topic, scholars have mainly focused on the type and amount of media coverage given to populist actors and parties (populism *through* the media). Relatively little research, to date, has empirically addressed how media outlets directly employ populist styles, themes or rhetoric in their coverage (what is usually called populism *by* the media, see, Blassnig et al. 2019a; Wettstein et al. 2018). The scarcity of these studies lies in the empirical and theoretical challenges in measuring the concept, especially when the aim is to assess it by employing a large-scale comparative approach. Media populism is not a stable characteristic: it can occasionally be present in the editorial line of a media outlet, but can sometimes be a customary journalistic rhetoric, repeatedly used as a communication way (Engesser et al. 2017, 365).

This article aims at investigating the extent to which news outlets cover political news by relying on the key elements of populist rhetoric (Reinemann et al. 2017). To do so, we introduce an original large-scale comparative dataset, the Media Populism (M-POP) expert survey, which provides measures of media populism – defined as the employment of populist elements directly by the news media (de Vreese et al. 2018; Engesser et al. 2017; Krämer 2014) – in 38 national and subnational contexts around the world. The survey measures to what extent the key dimensions of populism – in particular, people-centrism and anti-elitism – are present in the most relevant news outlets worldwide. We also focus on the theoretical frameworks that guided the data collection, devoting particular attention to arguing the positive and negative aspects of an expert survey approach with respect to standard approaches (above all, quantitative content analysis). Additionally, we employ the M-POP dataset to assess descriptively the determinants of media populism, and, finally, we use M-POP data for investigating topical research questions in the political communication literature, such as the comparative assessment of the relationship between media populism and tabloids and the correspondence between individual populist attitudes and media populism (representing those results also an indirect way to test for the face validity of our data).

Media Populism: Concepts, Definitions, and Measures

Although being *per se* a contentious concept (see Hunger and Paxton 2022), most scholars agree on a minimal definition of the concept of populism (with few exceptions, see Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019): populist discourse relies on the clear-cut juxtaposition between the "pure people", meant as a homogeneous and virtuous community (Mudde 2004), and the "corrupt elites" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Populism combines the positive characteristics of the people with the denigration of their enemies, "the elites", who are depicted as incompetent, self-interested, and assumed to

conspire behind the people's backs (Panizza 2005, 16–17). A further aspect of populism, argued by part of the literature, is the exclusion of the outgroups: people's values, identities, and rights are considered to be endangered also by the action of a series of "outgroups" that would receive preferential treatment by the elites (immigrants, LGBT+ people, welfare recipients, Roma communities and other specific social groups not considered as "part of the people", see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Canovan 1999; Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000). Building on this general conceptualization, the literature is rather aconsensual when it comes to the definition of *right-wing* populis; a commonly accepted framework for identifying right-wing populist movements and rhetoric is characterized by the emphasis on nativism, authoritarianism and exclusion (Betz 1994; Rydgren 2007; Mudde 2004). In contrast, the definition of *left-wing* populism, which often revolves around socio-economic grievances and systemic critiques, is more controversial among scholars. This divergence of views among scholars is evident in the literature, both theoretically (March 2017), and, consequently, in terms of operationalization of the concept. Moffitt (2016) and Aslanidis (2016), for instance, emphasize the difficulty in identifying a coherent and widely accepted definition of left-wing populism.

To sum up, most scholars concur that a minimal definition of populism primarily includes people-centrism and anti-elitism, with varying degrees of agreement on outgroup exclusion (see, for instance, Hunger and Paxton 2022; Roodujin 2019). In addition, there is still an ongoing debate about its interpretation as an ideology (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Stanley 2008; Taggart 2000), a political strategy (Weyland 2001) or a style of communication (Aslanidis 2016; de Vreese et al. 2018; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016; Moffitt and Tormey 2014).

To date, three distinct manifestations of populism have been mainly addressed by scholars. First, populism expressed by political parties and leaders is investigated by analyzing electoral manifestos, political discourses, and parliamentary activities (e.g., Cranmer 2011; Engesser et al. 2017; Hawkins 2009; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Second, the spread of populism among citizens, studied through opinion surveys to assess determinants of populist attitudes and populist voting behavior (e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hameleers and de Vreese 2020; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Tsatsanis, Andreadis, and Teperoglou 2018). Third, the relevance of populism within the media, which is usually addressed through content analysis of media coverage, in order to assess the role of media outlets as both source of populism and communication channel by which populists can spread their messages (e.g., Akkerman 2011; Blassnig et al. 2019b; Bos, Van Der Brug, and de Vreese 2010; Bos and Brants 2014; Rooduijn 2014; Salgado et al. 2022; Wettstein et al. 2018).

While the first two branches of the literature have a consolidated tradition in terms of operationalization, empirical research framework, and findings, the third has been developed more recently from the seminal articles of Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and Reinemann et al. (2017), which shed light on the role that the media have in widening the appeal of populist political actors. Esser and colleagues (2017) have systematized the relationship between populists and the media, by distinguishing between two different paths. On the one hand, the media can contribute to spreading populist parties' stances by offering a platform for populists' visibility. This *populism through the media* pattern is closely connected to the idea of a convergence of goals between media logic and populists' strategy (Engesser et al. 2017, 369; Mazzoleni 2008, 54–55) which

contributes to creating – intentionally or not – a favorable setting for populism (Mazzoleni 2014). On the other hand, *populism by the media* refers to the active promotion of populist stances directly by media organizations and journalists (Engesser et al. 2017). This media-generated populism directly refers to the employment of the key elements of populism in journalists' and pundits' rhetoric, in order to promote people's virtues against elites' blame (Mazzoleni 2014). This perspective has been also called "media populism" by Mazzoleni (2003) and Krämer (2014). In particular, Krämer (2014, 48) defines "media populism" as the use by news media actors and outlets of "stylistic and ideological elements" typical of populism. *Media populism* refers thus to the activities of journalistic organizations that intentionally and independently implement strategies based on various representations of the dichotomy between the virtuous people and corrupt elites. Furthermore, when journalistic organizations intentionally focus also on hostility toward specific outgroups, this phenomenon can be defined as *right-wing media populism*.

Quality and Tabloid Journalism Toward Populism

Journalism plays a crucial role in filtering and disseminating information, and influencing the public perception of reality (Luhmann 2000). This role becomes increasingly salient when it comes to populist rhetoric: journalism has the capacity to modulate – amplifying or moderating – populist narratives, shaping public understanding of these movements and their ideologies. Further, intended as gatekeepers of the public opinion marketplace, the media also enable fringe/newer political actors to reach an audience that is larger than their resources would ordinarily allow (Bos, Van Der Brug, and de Vreese 2010; Ellinas 2010). Emerging populist actors, thus, often received critical coverage in the mainstream media and favorable coverage in the popular press. Empirical evidence suggests an association between a media diet dominated by tabloids and the endorsement of populist and anti-immigration views (Diehl, Vonbun-Feldbauer, and Barnidge 2021; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017; Müller et al. 2017). However, the differences in news coverage between tabloid journalism and quality journalism are less pronounced than theoretically anticipated.

Theoretically, tabloid journalism is often aligned with a direct and sensationalist approach to populist topics. Tabloids typically present stories in a provocative manner, leveraging populist narratives to capture reader attention. This journalistic style frequently emphasizes conflicts, controversies, and the emotional aspects of stories, aligning with populist rhetoric and reflecting an intent to resonate with the "common people" against elites. Topics such as democratic disillusionment and immigration are often framed in a way that oversimplifies and polarizes complex issues (Krämer 2014; Mazzoleni 2008; Wettstein et al. 2018). However, empirically, the debate remains unresolved: the findings are less definitive than one might expect, with various authors noting small differences in the coverage of populism between tabloid media and quality media (i.e., Akkerman 2011; Hameleers and Vliegenthart 2020; Rooduijn 2014; Wettstein et al. 2019). In contrast, quality journalism is generally considered more reflective and analytical toward populism, with notable examples of counter populism (Borriello 2022; Nikisianis et al. 2019). More often, populist narratives are integrated into broader discussions that examine the causes and consequences of social and political phenomena. The quality press may express sympathies for populist ideologies or topics in editorials and

commentaries, but in a way that tends to be more contained and less provocative than in tabloids (Brown and Mondon 2021; Krämer 2018).

To sum up, irrespective of whether we are dealing with quality or tabloid journalism, we can identify two mechanisms that might lead journalists to engage in media populism: the first refers to a convergence between media outlets and populists produced by their common emphasis on sensationalism, with particular reference to scandals and negative or socially threatening events (Mazzoleni 2008). Enhancing the coverage of these types of news "naturally" increases the likelihood of engaging in a populist-like type of communication. The second mechanism relates to the outlets' ideological outlook and conduct: journalists and pundits, in this regard, are actively willing to adopt a populist stance, leading to an outcome in which the news media can be identified as populists themselves (Mazzoleni 2014; but see also Wettstein et al. 2018).

The M-POP Comparative Dataset

Measuring a phenomenon such as media populism poses significant methodological challenges. In general, when addressing the study and measure of media contents, Quantitative Content Analysis (QCA) has represented a quite common strategy. QCA is a set of techniques that allows to measure concepts by quantifying the content of specific discursive/linguistic elements in texts or media. It involves a human analysis and coding of textual materials to derive statistical patterns and identify trends, providing insights into the distribution of specific themes or rhetoric. Specifically, QCA has been seen as the gold standard for studying media populism (see, for instance, Blassnig et al. 2019a; Wettstein et al. 2018). However, the practical implications of conducting a QCA across multiple countries, languages, and media outlets are not without limitations. The first limit is based on the relatively reduced number of contexts that can be employed. To make the QCA procedures economically and materially feasible in the face of a huge number of documents that might be theoretically analyzed, previous literature has been able to consider a maximum of 10 European countries, without focusing on extra-European contexts (see Wettstein et al. 2018). Second, previous studies employing QCA were forced to analyze only a subset of topics (such as labor market and immigration policies) and types of outlets (mainly newspapers) to be able to make feasible, economically and practically, the analysis (see Wettstein et al. 2019). These two limits pose a possible issue of the generalizability of results.

Against this background, we argue that expert surveys offer several advantages that make them a valid and reliable alternative to QCA when dealing with a topic like media populism, especially in a large-scale comparative fashion. The advantages of expert surveys reside in their ability to leverage the nuanced understanding and critical knowledge of selected experts, who ought to be equipped with a holistic and broad understanding of the matter under investigation, across various countries. This method allows researchers to fully tackle the complexity of the subject, recognizing that an individual immersion in a specific cultural, political, and media landscape, combined with the common theoretical background shared with other academics, provides them with a level of insight that is sometimes difficult to encapsulate within a quantitative coding scheme. Moreover, expert surveys offer practical benefits, including reduced cost and time burden relative to QCA. The task of coding thousands of media articles across numerous countries

and languages is both labor- and resource-intensive for translation, inter-coder reliability testing, and data processing. By contrast, expert surveys can tap into existing knowledge, with the potential for rapid turnaround and scalability across countries. This enables researchers to achieve a broader geographical scope than is typically feasible with QCA. Additionally, expert surveys are not medium-bound - that is, they do not simply reflect the nature and content of specific materials coded (a.g., via a QCA), but can provide a holistic and all-encompassing measure.

Of course, expert surveys are not without challenges. Key among these is the subjectivity inherent in the data they produce. Experts' views can be influenced by individual biases, and the absence of a standardized metric can introduce variation in ratings. Summarizing, both QCA and expert surveys have merits and drawbacks. But the ability to capture the richness and context-specific nuances of media populism, coupled with the practical benefits of scalability and efficiency, make expert surveys a valuable tool in the case of large cross-national research on media populism. This is not to dismiss the relevance and value of QCA, but rather to advocate for methodological pluralism, acknowledging that different approaches may be better suited to different research contexts and questions. For comparative analysis across a broad range of countries, expert surveys can be thus seen as a viable and valuable alternative to QCA.

Measuring Media Populism Through Expert Surveys

In political research, expert surveys have been employed to measure a wide array of phenomena, from party policy positions (e.g., Benoit and Laver 2006) to features of democracies and regimes (Coppedge et al. 2021). Populism scholars too have relied on experts to measure the degree of populism of political parties (Meijers and Zaslove 2021). The M-POP survey asked experts to assess the main relevant news outlets in their country (for a total of 344 outlets).[1] The survey was administered between June and July 2021. Invited experts are scholars affiliated with a university or academic research center who normally deal with journalism/media studies or populism. Overall, we contacted 2,801 experts in 42 national and sub-national contexts, and we collected answers provided by 469 experts in 38 contexts, with an average response rate of 17%.[2] Usually, a minimum threshold of 5 respondents per country is considered as acceptable (Huber and Inglehart 1995, 76; Laver and Hunt 1992, 37; Ray 1999). As concerns our data collection, all the countries met this threshold, with the exceptions of Albania, Belgium (French language), Estonia, Serbia, and Slovenia, which are covered by only 3 or 4 respondents. According to Huber and Inglehart (1995, 76), the threshold of 5 responding experts can be lowered to 3 raters with the caveat that the resulting data are keen to draw only tentative conclusions. A thorough discussion of the experts' selection process, summary statistics of the dataset, as well as reliability measures and comparability issues, is available in the supplemental materials.[3]

In this study, we chose to employ a "streamlined" approach by using the minimal number of items possible to measure media populism: we ask the expert to report their evaluation of 7 characteristics of the outlets (for about 10 relevant national outlets). This approach actually sacrifices the breadth and depth of information obtained, as a more exhaustive set of items might capture a fuller spectrum of media populism's facets. However, this approach offers two critical advantages. Firstly, it yields a compact survey, making it more palatable to our target group of respondents – busy academics

– thereby improving response rates. Secondly, a more focused questionnaire, by virtue of its brevity, enables respondents to concentrate more accurately on the questions at hand. This approach might lead to more precise responses, enhancing the quality and reliability of our data and avoiding survey fatigue among the respondents.

To measure media populism, we follow the aforementioned "minimal definition" in the literature (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Taggart 2000). We operationalize media populism as a multidimensional concept based on people-centrism and anti-elitism. In addition, we add a simplified operationalization of outgroup exclusion for assessing right-wing media populism. We decided instead not to include the left-wing variant due to the lack of agreement on its theoretical and empirical definition. The questionnaire administered to the experts was thus organized around a set of items asking the experts to evaluate the orientation of the most relevant news media outlets concerning people centrism, anti-elitism, and outgroup exclusion. The experts' ratings were measured using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 6 (very much). Experts were also allowed (in each question, for each outlet) to answer with a "Don't know" when they feel they do not have the necessary expertise to answer the questions.

People-Centrism

In the common conceptualization of populism, the praise of people's virtues relates to an "us versus them" rhetoric, in which the "us" represents the people and "them" includes the enemies of the people. The people are seen as a homogeneous whole and regarded as essentially flawless. In this vision, populist actors claim to voice the wisdom of the common man (Taggart 2000). Building on this literature, we are interested in measuring whether and to what extent news outlets support this kind of view, emphasizing the "will of the people" and ordinary people in their political news. In the expert survey questionnaire, the experts are asked to answer the following questions referring to the main media outlets in their context of expertise:

> P1 – Thinking of the following news outlets, how much is the "will of the people" positively emphasized when reporting about political news?
>
> P2 – Thinking of the following news outlets, how much are ordinary people positively emphasized when reporting about political news?

Anti-Elitism

According to the populist narrative, the "people" are threatened and/or betrayed by the elites, the establishment ruling the country, namely, a composite group including politicians, intellectuals, experts, journalists, and economic/financial powers. They are accused of colluding against the people, abusing their power to deprive the citizens of their sovereignty and prerogatives (and possibly favoring outgroups, rather than protecting the rights of the common people). Elites are also commonly accused of being corrupt, irresponsible, selfish, and detached from the people. Such anti-elite rhetoric could also be employed by news outlets in their political reporting. We were therefore interested in capturing whether and to what extent the establishment is portrayed as ruining the country, or as driven by selfish interests. The items capturing this facet are the following:

E1 – Thinking of the following news outlets, how much is the establishment described as ruining the country when reporting about political news?

E2 – Thinking of the following news outlets, how much is the establishment described as self-interested when reporting about political news?

Outgroup Exclusion

As stressed above, outgroup exclusion is sometimes seen as a further facet characterizing right-wing populism. Just like elites, outgroups can assume different forms and are blamed for endangering social harmony. As a result, they need to be excluded in order to preserve the people's homogeneity and virtue. Outgroups targeted by populist politicians include immigrants, the LGBT+ community, and Roma people. Because of the aforementioned choice of limiting the number of items proposed, we chose to focus on this particular aspect as an indicator of the broader phenomenon.[4] Therefore, we operationalize outgroup exclusion by basing it only on immigrant exclusion (without focusing on other targets). This could be seen as a limited operationalization of the facet and leads to a characterization of populism which is definitely right-wing. However, immigration has become one important explanation for the success of right-wing populism, at least in contemporary democracies (e.g., Arzheimer 2009; Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Kaufman 2017; Otto and Steinhardt 2014; Shehaj, Shin, and Inglehart 2021). Experts were thus asked to assess whether and to what extent immigrants are portrayed as undermining society, or as improper beneficiaries of the welfare state. The list of items inserted in the expert survey reads as follows:

O1 – Thinking of the following news outlets, how much are immigrants described as worsening our society when reporting about political news?

O2 – Thinking of the following news outlets, how much are immigrants described as taking advantage of the welfare state when reporting about political news?

Additionally, as a further point of substantive interest, we asked our experts to locate the outlets on a standard 1–10 left-right scale (giving also the possibility to define news media as "unaligned"). The wording was the following:

LR - Many people use the terms "left" and "right" when they want to describe the political orientation of media outlets. Thinking of the following news outlets, where would you place these on this scale?

From Variables to Facets of Populism

Research on populism – both at the individual level on populist attitudes (i.e., Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012) and at the level of political supply (i.e., Meijers and Zaslove 2021) – has shown that populism can be measured indirectly through a set of items that correlate among each other and refer to an underlying construct. Following this approach, we might also consider media populism to be a latent construct, consisting of the two/three dimensions discussed above. Table 1 shows the results of a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) on the mean scores of the experts' assessment of the six items that operationalize media populism. The PCA has detected three factors with eigenvalues higher than 1. Results of the factor loadings (obtained

Table 1. Factor loadings of the principal component analysis. The analysis shows a three-component structure.

Variable	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3	Unexplained variance
People 1			0.62	.17
People 2			0.78	.11
Anti-elite 1	0.70			.04
Anti-elite 2	0.70			.04
Outgroup 1		0.70		.05
Outgroup 2		0.70		.04

Factor loadings under .4 are blanked. Factors rotation (PROMAX).

with a PROMAX rotation) show that the six variables, as predicted, scale on three components: one for people-centrism (P1, P2), one for anti-elitism (E1, E2), and one for outgroup exclusion (O1, O2). These variables can be used either as measures of individual facets or combined into an additive index to represent media populism (P1, P2, E1, E2) or right-wing media populism (P1, P2, E1, E2, O1, O2).

As Table 1 shows, the six variables scale particularly high on their factors (with factor loadings equal almost always to 0.7). In addition, the unexplained variance of the variables is particularly low, further evidence of the fact that the three factors are reliable.[5]

M-POP Dataset: Main Features

The survey produced two datasets. The first, the outlet-level data, is the main source for researchers who want to use the expert survey. Each row of the dataset represents an outlet in a given national/sub-national context. The dataset collects the name/unique code of the outlet, the number of experts that answered in each context, the name/unique code of the context, the aggregated measures of populism, and the left-right placement of the outlets. The dataset includes additional features of each outlet: the "media type" of the outlet (whether press, radio, TV, or solely web), the ownership (whether private or public), a manually coded tabloid/mainstream dummy (for newspapers only), the official website of the outlet, as well as its Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram account, a manually-coded variable indicating the foundation year, a variable indicating the level of trust in each outlet in the general population (manually-coded from the Reuters Digital News Report 2021),[6] and several contextual variables indicating the share of far-left, far-right, government, and opposition populist parties in each national context.

The second dataset, the experts' dataset, is an anonymized version of the "raw" survey, and it is useful for replicating the reliability analyses or producing alternative aggregation procedures. The two datasets, together with a complete codebook, are available at https://mpop-survey.org. In addition, we developed a ShinyApp (*M-POP Explorer*) that facilitates immediate readability of the populism scores resulting from the expert survey (see the M-POP Explorer page of the website).

Application and Preliminary Findings from the M-POP Dataset

In this section, we aim at applying M-POP data to research questions that still lack large-scale comparative evidence. The aim is to show how M-POP data contribute to providing

novel, theoretically sounding, empirical evidence. At the same time, this empirical evidence serves to provide face validity of the data itself, enhancing its overall value for analysis and interpretation.

Correlates of Media Populism

A first, introductory way to explore the M-POP expert survey and its relationship with other theoretical constructs is to detect the main predictors of media populism using the score of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and outgroup exclusion as dependent variables at the news outlet level. We thus fit three linear multilevel models (one for each facet), in which media outlets are nested into national/subnational contexts. As independent variables, we relied on characteristics that might be correlated with the three facets of populism: (a) the type of the media outlet (whether a press, TV, radio, web outlet), which has been proved in literature as a prominent dimension in the relationship between populism and the diverse media types (i.e., Bos and Brants 2014; Engesser et al. 2017); (b) the share of populist parties that ran in the most recent national election in the country, assuming that a greater success of populist parties and actors in a given context will make media outlets more prone to mirror such narratives within their own political reporting; (c) the ownership of the media outlet (whether public or private), since populists have been found more likely to target public media in their rhetoric (Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020); As additional control, we add (d) the left-right placement of the outlet (reported by the experts); (e) the foundation year; (d) the trust in the outlet by the general public measured by the Oxford Digital News Report 2021.[7]

The results of these exploratory analyses are shown in Table 2: *ceteris paribus*, the type of outlet is not significantly correlated with the three facets that are drawn from the expert survey. The populist parties' share in the national context, similarly, is not strongly correlated with the populism of the outlets (apart from a small and negative effect on the people-centrism facet). On the other hand, the outgroup facet is positively correlated with the left-right placement of the outlet, meaning that right-wing outlets are more likely to be rated as employing exclusionary views and rhetoric within journalistic coverage. This result provides additional proof of the internal validity of the expert survey measures. Indeed, the experts tend to give higher scores to the outgroup facet when exposed to

Table 2. Correlates of the facets.

	People facet		Elite facet		Outgroup facet	
Indep. variables	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Outlet type (ref. Press)						
Radio	−0.17	(0.39)	−0.04	(0.48)	−0.28	(0.54)
TV	0.13	(0.10)	−0.19	(0.12)	−0.04	(0.14)
Web	−0.15	(0.17)	0.21	(0.21)	−0.17	(0.24)
Populism share in country (std.)	−0.20***	(0.05)	−0.05	(0.10)	−0.03	(0.08)
Left-right placement	−0.00	(0.02)	−0.07***	(0.02)	0.31***	(0.03)
Ownership: Public (ref. Private)	−0.20*	(0.11)	−0.47***	(0.13)	−0.43***	(0.15)
Foundation year (std.)	0.04	(0.04)	0.15***	(0.05)	−0.07	(0.06)
Trust in outlet (std.)	−0.21***	(0.05)	−0.41***	(0.07)	−0.51***	(0.07)
Constant	3.70***	(0.12)	3.59***	(0.17)	1.06***	(0.17)
Observations	229		229		229	
Number of contexts	30		30		30	

Standard errors in parentheses - ***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

a right-wing outlet. While the outlet's foundation year leads to small and non-significant results, the public ownership of the outlet leads instead to systematically lower scores on the three facets, providing further theoretically sounding results that confirm previous literature findings. Finally, the more the general public's trust in the outlet increases, the more we see lower levels of populism. Also, this result is particularly interesting and sound from a theoretical point of view.

Tabloid and Media Populism

An element that is particularly investigated in the literature is the role of tabloid outlets in the media landscape. As argued above, tabloid media are said to foster populist discourse (Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017). The use of populism in tabloid journalism lets these papers appear as the "voice of everyday people." This image helps them connect better with their audience, leading to higher sales and a stronger influence on the readers (Wettstein et al. 2018). However, this style of journalism is not just about representing the people's interests. There is also a relevant financial element involved. Stories that support populist views are usually more attractive to large audiences. They tap into shared feelings, like fear or resentment towards the elite, drawing more readers in. This way of reporting, called "tabloid populism," (Krämer 2014) can contribute to shaping how people view the divide between the general public and the elite.

Previous research has assessed the role that tabloids have in spreading media populism, by using both comparative designs (Wettstein et al. 2018) and case studies. M-POP data allow us to address specific research questions by clarifying, with a large comparative design, whether tabloid news media engage in populist narratives and whether there are differences among the three diverse facets of populism. In order to test this argument with M-POP data, we select press outlets only and we perform a multilevel regression model, equivalent to the one fitted in Table 2, in which, instead of the media type variable, we introduce the aforementioned manually-coded tabloid variable. Results are shown in Table 3: the coefficients indicating the level of populist parties in the country, the left-right placement of the outlets, the foundation year, and the trust in the outlets do not change significantly from the previous models. The tabloid coefficient, however, is positive, big, and significant for all the facets considered. On the one hand, this finding contributes to the discussion on the link between tabloid journalism and populism and confirms, with large-scale comparative evidence, those theories and

Table 3. Determinants of the facets - Newspaper only.

	People facet		Elite facet		Outgroup facet	
Indep. variables	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Tabloid (ref. non-tabloid)	0.40***	(0.13)	0.30*	(0.17)	0.48***	(0.18)
Populism share in country (std.)	−0.20***	(0.07)	−0.03	(0.11)	−0.05	(0.10)
Left-right placement	0.01	(0.02)	−0.08**	(0.03)	0.31***	(0.03)
Foundation year (std.)	0.04	(0.05)	0.16***	(0.06)	−0.07	(0.07)
Trust in outlet (std.)	−0.19***	(0.07)	−0.41***	(0.09)	−0.38***	(0.09)
Constant	3.55***	(0.15)	3.56***	(0.20)	0.96***	(0.21)
Observations	121		121		121	
Number of contexts	30		30		30	

Standard errors in parentheses. ***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

previous empirical studies that highlight the difference with quality journalism. On the other hand, as stressed above, the result can be intended as an indirect measure of the external validity of our data, since they are consistent with the theory and previous empirical studies.

Media Populism and Citizens' Attitudes: M-POP and Comparative Survey Data

The correlation between tabloid outlets and their levels of populism, measured with the expert survey, begs another question, that is related to the audience of this type of media outlets. Hameleers and colleagues (2017), for instance, by employing a survey in the Netherlands, show that populist citizens tend to have a more "tabloidized" media diet, and, consistently, have a higher propensity to be exposed to "populist" contents (which are more likely to be published by those outlets). This suggestive piece of research maintains a correspondence between the audience ideology – or in this case populist attitudes – and their media consumption. Likewise, Müller and Schulz (2021), by focusing on the German case, emphasize that individuals closer to populist values tend to be more prone to rely on alternative media with affinity with populism (for theoretically similar results, see Schulz 2019; Stier et al. 2020). Summarizing, while the literature provides sound empirical evidence on specific features of media (i.e., tabloidization, ownership), findings on the exposure of populist contents spread by the media and people's populist stances are much rarer and often focused on single case studies.

The M-POP dataset, combined with individual survey data, can serve as an empirical tool for investigating this dimension and testing the association between citizens' populist attitudes and the media outlet's populist orientation. In particular, we aim to extend the evidence of previous literature to a larger number of countries (and, at the same time, to test the external validity of our scores).

To test the association, we employed raw data from the 2019 Oxford Digital News Report. The survey, a CAWI survey administered by YouGov and designed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (see Newman et al. 2019), contained data from 32 out of 38 national and subnational contexts that have been included in the M-POP expert survey.

The comparative survey has been administered to national samples of adult citizens (see Newman et al. 2021 for the details about the survey) and several questions concerning citizens' exposure to TV channels and online/offline newspapers have been asked.[8] The 2019 wave of the Oxford Digital News Report dataset also contains three questions that resonate with the three facets of populism that we have measured by means of the expert survey. In particular, the three questions ask people to evaluate, on a 1–5 Likert scale going from "Not at all" to "Very much", the agreement with three sentences: (1) "The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken" (which can be roughly assimilated to the people-centrism facet); (2) "Most elected officials don't care what people like me think" (anti-elitism facet); (3) "Immigration threatens our national culture" (outgroup exclusion facet).

By collapsing the individual dataset on the media outlet and context level, we produced three variables accounting for the average level of populism (measured on the three facets) of the citizens declaring to be exposed to each specific media outlet, in each national/subnational context, and, in this way, making it ready to be matched

Table 4. First-order correlation between M-POP data and Digital News Report survey data.

	All the outlets	Newspaper only
People-centrism	.33**	.40**
Anti-elitism	.25**	.33**
Outgroup exclusion	.61**	.73**
No. of outlets	262	136
No. of contexts	32	32

***$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

with the DNR data (see Appendix 6 for more information). The first column of Table 4 shows Pearson's correlations between the three facets of populism measured in the M-POP expert survey for each outlet and the average levels of the three facets of populism of people exposed to the same outlets.

As reported in the table, all the correlations are significant to the 5% confidence level, and are quite big in magnitude, with a particularly strong correlation between the outgroup exclusion measured in the expert survey and the same facet measured with survey data.

To give stronger evidence to the association, we can exploit a central characteristic of the data that we employ. On the one hand, besides online/offline newspapers, in the Reuters Institute's survey, citizens were asked to declare their exposure to a list of *TV channels*, while on the other hand, the M-POP expert survey measures, more precisely, the expert-based media populism of *TV newscasts*. As a consequence, we might assume a certain degree of noise produced by the mismatch between the two measures (being exposed to a TV channel does not necessarily mean that an individual is also exposed to that channel's newscast). We can thus expect that, by erasing this possible source of noise (that is selecting only newspapers and removing from the analysis TV newscasts/TV channels), we will be able to assess stronger correlations. The right column of Table 4 shows this pattern, with systematically stronger correlation coefficients between M-POP and the Reuters Institute individual data when only newspapers are tested.

All in all, these analyses confirm the correspondence between individual populist attitudes and media consumption. They provide further evidence that populists tend to be exposed to media outlets that reflect their own populist views. While literature was already firm in suggesting that specific media environments – such as the web or social media – represent a fertile ground for the spread and development of populism, our results offer a large-scale comparative insight into the field of legacy media and their relationship with populism, allowing to distinguish between various outlets and to produce more precise evidence of the relationship.

Conclusions

This article's goals were twofold. First, we introduced and critically assessed the main features of a new comparative expert survey to measure media populism – M-POP – which might be useful to populist and communication scholars and practitioners. Second, we aimed at producing original and large-scale comparative empirical evidence concerning the relationship between media populism and some of its most relevant determinants and consequences, both at the media and, indirectly, mass level. We presented the

data-collection procedure and explained the measures that we employed to produce the final dataset. We also tested for the reliability of these measures. Additionally, we have investigated the relationship between the expert survey scores at the outlet level and the demand side (namely, the populist attitudes of citizens being exposed to such outlets), finding strong and significant correlations. Furthermore, we found additional interesting associations that show that the expert-based populism scores are higher when we deal with right-wing outlets and tabloid newspapers. M-POP data confirm on a large empirical scale that tabloids consistently exhibit higher levels of populism across various facets compared to quality journalism. These findings align with existing theories and empirical studies, suggesting that while quality journalism tends to be more reflective and analytical, often integrating populist narratives into broader discussions, tabloids are more direct and sensationalist. This contrast highlights the role of tabloid journalism in amplifying populist claims, emphasizing conflicts, controversies, and emotional aspects of stories. Thus, our study contributes to the ongoing debate by providing robust empirical evidence that supports the notion of tabloids playing a crucial role in disseminating populist discourse, while quality journalism maintains a more moderated and contained approach towards populism.

This survey, however, has some limitations that must be considered when using/approaching the dataset. First, as stressed above, although we strived to test the external validity of the data, we are aware that expert surveys produce measures of difficult-to-measure phenomena, which by definition are approximate. While, for what concerns reliability, literature provides stable techniques to verify the robustness of expert survey results (i.e., Steenbergen and Marks 2007), as pertains to the issue of external validity scholars do not offer a one-size-fits-all solution. Indirectly, we tested the validity of the three facets of populism by comparing them with out-of-the-sample data (the citizen survey included in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019). Further comparative studies on media populism need to be conducted to have more solid, first-hand data to be used as benchmarks. On this particular matter, new and promising avenues are being opened thanks to the application of quantitative text analysis (García-Marín and Luengo 2023) and the deployment of Large Language Models (LLMs) for extensive text annotation tasks (Heseltine and Clemm von Hohenberg 2024), potentially also across different languages The integration of various methods applied to the same topic will lead to more robust results.

A second limitation concerns the definition and operationalization of right-wing media populism. As already mentioned, the operationalization of the key element "outgroup exclusion" as anti-immigration is limited for at least two reasons. On the one hand, immigrants are a typical target of populism in Western countries, but the issue has different levels of salience in some of the contexts included in the survey (such as Turkey, Brazil, Japan, or some Eastern European states). On the other hand, measuring outgroup exclusion by means of anti-immigration items does not consider other outgroups that may be relevant targets of populism worldwide such as the LGBT+ community, Roma people, or welfare recipients.

As stressed above, the M-POP survey is based on a minimal definition of populism. This has two key advantages: it is the one with the highest consensus within the scientific community, and it can be assessed by established operationalizations of the key elements. However, we acknowledge that there are more articulated definitions that, for instance,

allow for the distinction between left- and right-wing populism (i.e., Zulianello, 2020). Future waves of expert surveys should also include items able to capture this heterogeneous dimension, thus making it possible to better assess both the articulation of media populism (left-wing or right-wing) within a given country and to understand the peculiarities of specific contexts (e.g., left-wing media populism in South America).

Overall, the additional empirical evidence that we show in this paper suggests that media populism has become a crucial factor in the structuring of political supply and demand, and, consequently, that political communication scholars should face the challenge of thoroughly understanding and accurately measuring media populism.

Notes

1. See Appendix 1 of the supplemental material for more details.
2. The research is compliant with the Belmont Report and the European General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679. The processing of the personal data has been cleared by the University of [REDACTED]).
3. Appendix 2 discusses the expert selection process and reports the summary statistics of the sample population (number of invitations, responses, and news outlets evaluated in each country). In addition, Appendix 3 and 4 contains an in-depth discussion of reliability measures and how comparability issues have been dealt with, by employing a standard method, that of anchoring vignettes (see Genre et al. 2013).
4. This results in a set of questions that works well for Western Europe – where right-wing populism is fundamentally anti-migrant – but is less effective in countries in which immigration issues are marginal or are presented with different frames (e.g., Turkey, Brazil, Japan or Eastern European countries).
5. The distribution of the three resulting latent variables (produced by averaging the six original variables on the three factors) is shown in Appendix 5 of the supplemental material.
6. As far as TV News are concerned, data on trust are a proxy, as they are only available at brand level (e.g., BBC) and not for each TV news included in the survey (e.g., BBC One News).
7. To facilitate readability of the coefficients, in both Tables 2, 3, the variables concerning the share of populist parties in the country, the foundation year and the trust in the outlet (as measured in the Reuters DNR 2021) have been standardized.
8. The "exposure" was measured by asking respondents if they have seen/read a specific TV channel/newspaper in the previous week. Even if rough, this choice provides a measure of the exposure that people have to such media outlets. More information on the data management on the DNR survey data can be found in Appendix 6 of the supplemental material.

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