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Digital populism.

How the Web and social media are shaping populism in Western democracies

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In the last few decades, populism has become central both to the public and the scientific debate in most contemporary democracies. While many interpretations have considered «the age of crises» (Moffitt 2015) characterizing these years as the main responsible for populist actors' success (i.e. the Great Recession, Europe's refugee and migrant crisis and the long-standing crisis of representation), another aspect deserves to be considered. This is the role of the digital media environment that, in a few years, distorted completely the relationship between politicians and their constituencies, fostering new spaces and forms of political communication and citizens' involvement in politics (Chadwick 2017). Several authors pointed out that populist communication seems to be favoured by the proliferation of digital media and populists have been described as particularly suited to the logic of digital media (see, for example, de Vreese et al. 2018: 5). Nevertheless, the concept of 'digital populism' is far to be consolidated and several questions have still not been fully addressed. These include: What digital populism is exactly? Why it matters? Does the digital environment affect and modify the nature of populism? Or is it the same old story performed and told on another medium? Do citizens interact in a peculiar way with populists online? This chapter aims to answer these questions through a review of the existing literature, and to provide new lines of inquiry for future research.

1. Digital populism: searching for a definition

Among scholars of populism, it is quite widely believed that digital communication – especially the high level of penetration of social media and mobile devices – has played a key role in the rise of populism in contemporary democracies (Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler 2011; Moffitt 2016; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017). This does not mean that there is agreement on the definition of digital populism, nor its implications. All in all, this strand of literature still appears underdeveloped and the phenomenon has been only partially analysed so far.

As regards the definition, there is not consensus even on the label to give to the phenomenon. On the one hand, terms like ‘online populism’ (Hameleers 2020a), ‘web-populism’ (Anselmi 2018), or ‘cyber populism’ (Gerbaudo 2017) have been employed referring to the impact of the Internet on populism, in general. On the other hand, scholars have focused their attention on the alleged ability of the so-called Web 2.0 and especially social media to enable new forms of political interactions between politics and citizens. In this context, terms such as ‘populism 2.0’ (Gerbaudo 2014; Moffitt 2018) or ‘social media populism’ (Bobba 2019; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella 2021) have been used to stress the close relationship between populism and the new digital environment. For this chapter, I opted for an expression already used in the scientific debate: ‘digital populism’ (see for example Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler 2011). Using it in an inclusive way, I consider digital populism as the outcome of the effect of the Web, in general, and of social media, in particular, on the populist practices by politicians, the media and citizens. This includes not only the use of digital channels to perform populism, but also the changes that digital environment has on the very content and style of populist argument.

Populism *per se* is a contentious concept. Nonetheless, most scholars agree on a minimal definition. Populist discourse relies on the juxtaposition of a ‘good people’ with a series of ‘bad elites’. Moreover, in the case of right-wing populists, the people’s values, their identities and rights are considered to be endangered not only by the elites but also by the action of a series of ‘outgroups’ that would receive preferential treatment by the elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2004, 2007, 2014; Taggart 2000; Canovan 1999). While most scholars argue that these elements – the people, the elites and the outgroups – are the *core* of populism, there has been a still ongoing debate regarding whether it should be interpreted as an ideology (Taggart 2000; Mudde 2004, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Stanley 2008), a political strategy (Weiland 2001, 2017) or a type of communication (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2016; Aslanidis 2016; de Vreese et al. 2018).

Although no author has focused in detail on the features of digital populism with respect to these approaches, in all the three strands of literature different aspects affected by digital populism can be detected. Regarding the ideological approach, some authors have pointed out that the Internet has made possible a new centrality of ‘the people’ and a redefinition of the balance between the people and the elite (Momoc 2018; Biancalana 2014). In particular, studying the origins of the Five Star Movement in Italy, Biancalana (2014) noticed that the Internet provided useful and essential elements to the populist ideology of the Movement. In particular, its ideological discourse relied on a series of opportunities provided by the Internet, namely (a) the process of disintermediation (citizens can interact with anyone without the need for parties, trade unions, journalists, etc.); (b) the uselessness

of a leader (citizens can take all major decision together); (c) the possibility of establishing a ‘true’ democracy (the citizen becomes the state).

Scholars who view populism primarily as a political strategy have dealt with new forms of engagement and of leadership support through the Internet. In particular, it has been observed that the Internet provides to populists a powerful tool to mobilize their followers, together with traditional channels of political communication (Kriesi 2014: 367). The advent and widespread diffusion of social media platforms over the past decade has provided populist leaders a way to communicate directly and more spontaneously with their audiences (Bartlett 2014), thus contributing to the realization of what Weyland (2001: 14) posited, namely that the populist strategy is realized thanks to a personalistic leader who ‘seeks or exercises the power of government based on the direct, unmediated and uninstitutionalized support of a large number of mostly unorganized followers’.

The strand interpreting populism as communication, for obvious reasons, is the one that has been most concerned with the digital dimension of populism. In particular, Waisbord (2018a) has identified two lines of inquiry directly connected to the Internet. The first questioned whether major changes in contemporary media ecologies, such as fragmentation, polarization and commercialization, can foster populist parties (Kellner 2017). The second one examined whether social media and digital mobilization foster populist communication (Engesser et al. 2017; Enli 2017).

This introductory overview leads us to argue that digital populism is not limited to being a repurposing of old content on new channels. On the contrary, digital media contributed to the rise and evolution of populism in the last decades. In the next paragraph, this will be analysed from the perspective of populist actors, the media and citizens.

2. Three faces of digital populism

The digital era created new spaces for politics (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker 2019). However, populists, more than other politicians, benefited from this new digital environment. Focussing on the three classic actors interacting in democratic systems – politicians, journalists and citizens – it is clear that (i) populist actors have adapted better than others to the digital environment; (ii) the disinformation phenomenon is putting a strain on the journalistic system; and (iii) the potential of the Web is seldom used to achieve political goals, while forms of online incivility and hate speech are increasingly spreading in all major democracies. These three phenomena together seem to contribute to the rise of populism.

2.1 Digital populism and populist actors

Several scholars approached the issue of digital populism from the point of view of populist actors. Here the question is whether populists gain more visibility online than in traditional media, whether, how, and why they behave online differently from mainstream politicians, and whether they obtain greater benefits in terms of citizens' engagement. Although Barack Obama's presidency demonstrated that a politician can be popular on the Internet and social media without necessarily being populist (Postill 2018: 761), his experience seems to be the exception rather than the rule. In the last decade Donald Trump in the US, along with dozens of European populists have shown an 'elective affinity' with social media (Gerbaudo 2018). These platforms allow to bypass the mainstream media, creating a sort of 'going public' (Kernell 2007). However, instead of being an exclusive and exceptional option for a presidential figure, this strategy becomes available to every politician, and a normal way of communication.

It is precisely the simplicity of communicating and interacting with the 'people' in an immediate and low-cost manner that has made social media popular among populists. Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017) have found four different benefits of social media for populists: (a) they provide direct access to the public without journalistic interference; (b) they offer the possibility of establishing a close and direct connection with the people; (c) they foster personalized forms of communication; and (d) they facilitate the construction of political communities through the dissemination of shared values and a sense of belonging. Probably for these reasons, populists are usually more active, namely they interact more on social media, than mainstream parties (Bennett et al. 2020; Ceccobelli, Quaranta, and Valeriani 2020; Larsson 2020).

Moffitt (2016: 63) noticed that the Internet's turn to Web 2.0, social networking and the ubiquity of mobile devices have opened 'many performative opportunities for populist actors to speak directly with and for people'. In his opinion, the real novelty is the multiplication of 'stages', and therefore of opportunities, for populists, to reach their followers. With social media, populist actors are able to overcome the gatekeeping of traditional media: this implies both solving their problem of visibility in the public debate (Mazzoleni 2003, 2008) as well as having a new effective instrument of political organization and mobilization. The case of Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement in Italy is a good example of the relevance that the Internet can have for populists. The Internet has been used by this party to provide visibility to the leader's claims (through the blog *beppegrillo.it*), to organize local offline groups (based on the *meetup.com* website), and to make members select candidates and vote urgent issues through the platform *Rousseau* (Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2015; Mosca 2020). This last function has been also implemented by other populist parties in Europe, like *Participa Podemos* in Spain (Deseriis and Vittori 2019).

Social media like Facebook, Twitter and, more recently, Instagram are therefore the preferred places of populist actors to ‘uncontestedly articulate their ideology and spread their messages’ (Engesser et al. 2017: 1110). In this digital environment, populists have different conducts with respect to non-populist actors. While the difference is not significant in terms of the volume of published messages, citizens’ engagement of populists is consistently greater than that of traditional actors. Larsson (2020: 12) considered the number of likes, comments, shares and reactions in a period of ten years (2008-2018) on Facebook and found that ‘populist actors strengthened their dominance over their non-populist competitors on a year-by-year basis’. These results are not only achieved through claims based on populist elements – people-centrism, anti-elitism and exclusivism for populist right-wing parties. Several scholars have pointed out that populists also share a particular communication style, highly emotionalized and oriented towards conflict. These discursive features are not new in the populist repertoire (e.g. Fieschi and Heywood 2006; Taggart 2000). However, on social media, the simplification and fragmentation of the message (Engesser et al. 2017; Bracciale and Martella 2017), the negative and conflictual tonality (Schmuck and Hameleers 2020; Bobba 2019), the emotionalised blaming attribution (Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017), and the relevance of visual communication (Larsson 2020) are increasingly relevant elements in the populist communication flow, contributing to their online success. Finally, in the ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2017), we know that social media and mainstream media feed off one another in recursive cycles of ‘viral reality’: this contributes to the spread of populism both online and offline (Postill 2018).

2.2 Digital media populism

Nowadays, the ecology of political communication is characterized by a hybrid media environment in which the relationship between politics, media, technology and citizens gives rise to a process of continuous change and adaptation (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). This includes the proliferation of news and information sources; the alteration of the classic information formats; the convergence between mass and interpersonal communication; the emergence of new uses of media; the change in news consumption models, characterized by an increasing user’s self-selection of sources, but also by the algorithmic selection (de Vreese et al. 2018: 4). This information environment favours the phenomenon of disinformation and the spread of fake news. Corbu and Negrea-Busuioc (2020: 193) have convincingly shown that the current media ecology favours not only the spread of populist discourse but also the ‘dissemination and amplification of false attractive content’ and that populism and fake news are highly intersected and overlapped. According to the authors, three features are shared by both phenomena. First, the aforementioned changes in the media environment – including media’s declining commitment to facticity, accuracy, and objectivity and the contemporary

shift toward sensationalism, immediacy, and emotionality (Bakir and McStay 2018) – have spread populist arguments and disinformation to an unprecedented level. Second, fake news and populism rely on similar narrative pattern based on the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ often using the characters of ‘hero’, ‘villain’ and ‘victim’. This is an effective mechanism for both, since it leverages the citizens’ identification and the reinforcement of their previous predisposition, including stereotypes and prejudices about burning issues (Corbu and Negrea-Busuioc 2020: 187-190). Third, social media are perfectly suitable for both populism arguments and fake news since they easily allow quick dissemination and amplification of attractive contents, often going viral (Bracciale, Andretta, and Martella 2021). These contents enter a self-powered cycle between senders and receivers that could be even further fostered using algorithms and bots that create a high level of circulation, influencing the citizens’ information diet (de Vreese et al. 2019: 246).

There are different types of fake news and the terms mis- and disinformation are often used to define this broad phenomenon. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) propose a typology of fake news based on the level of facticity and of the immediate intention to deceive of the author of a given content. Not all the types of fake news are relevant for our purpose, only the politically manipulated contents and the counterfeit information, namely fabricated contents. These contents create information disorder that pollutes the information ecosystem (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) and leads to an informative relativism (de Vreese et al. 2018: 5).

The 2016 US elections have been the political event showing the world the growing phenomenon of dissemination of false information in social media as well as the wider consequences that it entailed in the definition of a post-truth society (Waisbord 2018c). In that campaign, fake news stories widely circulated influencing the climate of opinion, and arguably voters themselves. Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) estimate that, in the last month of campaigning, one in four Americans visited a fake news website. Trump supporters visited fake news websites more than the other voters, and those websites were overwhelmingly pro-Trump. Facebook was a key vector of exposure to fake news and fact-checks of fake news rarely reached its consumers. From a complementary perspective, Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) suggest instead that forms of both passive or uncivil social media use were linked to an increase in the likelihood of support for Trump.

Such a news environment is suitable for populists. Although, to date, there are no studies that testify to the active participation of populist actors in the production and dissemination of fake news, there is no doubt that populists are the ones who benefit most from an information disorder in which factual information is viewed as a matter of opinion, the evidence is neglected and conspiracy theories flourish (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay 2017; Corbu and Negrea-Busuioc 2020; Mancosu, Vassallo and Vezzoni 2017; Hameleers 2020b).

Finally, while populists undermine the credibility of political institutions, fake news and disinformation undermine trust in another key actor in contemporary democracies: journalism. In a context of continuous challenges and pressure for journalism – economic, technological, of credibility – the democratic functions it should play appear increasingly hard to achieve (Waisbord 2018b). In sum, the joint action of populism and disinformation further weakens citizens' trust in the functioning of democratic regimes (Bennett and Livingston 2018).

2.3 Digital populism and citizens

The third aspect of digital populism concerns citizens in their dual role of public and voters. The effects of populist communication and populist news coverage in favour of populist actors have been extensively studied (Esser, Stępińska and Hopmann 2017; Shah et al. 2017; Hameleers 2018). Studies dealing with digital populism and citizens, although still limited, show that a portion of citizens plays an active role in the generation and spread of populist arguments. In addition to publish intrinsically populist content, these citizens take an active part in communicative interactions, for example by expressing themselves in reaction to news coverage or interacting with messages of populist actors on social media. To shed light on the ways in which the digital environment has become a fertile breeding ground for populist ideas, Stier et al. 2020 analysed five European democracies and the United States relying on web tracking and survey data. They found that citizens with populist attitudes, though consuming news from a variety of online sources, show a high propensity to visit hyper-partisan websites instead of legacy press websites.

In this perspective, citizens appear at the same time as targets of and contributors to digital populism and, more in general, to digital threats to democracy (Miller and Vaccari 2020). Whereas we have already addressed the issue of the citizen as a target of populist actors and (mis- dis-) information, two ongoing processes where citizens are key contributors deserve yet to be discussed. These are the generation of populist contents and the spread of incivility online.

As populist messages are popular on social media, it is not surprising that social media are also the place where citizens express their populist views the most. According to Hameleers (2019), Facebook offers a framework of discursive opportunities for citizens to vent their populist discontent and to interact with like-minded others. Focusing on the Dutch case, he found that citizens' populist discourse essentially mirrors populist actors' discourse – mainly relying on anti-elitism and exclusionism – but expresses it with a much higher level of hostility and incivility. Blassnig et al. 2019 move a step further and show that messages containing populism in turn generate populism. Based on a comparative content analysis of online news articles and comments in France, Switzerland and UK, they found that key populist messages from political and media actors in news articles not

only provoke more reader comments but also prompt citizens to use populist key messages in their comments.

A second phenomenon closely intertwined with digital populism and citizens is the online spread of incivility, hate speech and harassment. Ideally, the Internet has offered citizens unprecedented possibilities to access public debate, providing new means for strengthening democratic participation. Actually, a growing number of studies have shown that the environment created by social media in the last decade has provided a powerful stage for the undemocratic voices of citizens (including, but not limited to, populists). Administering a random-quota survey of the German population, Frischlich et al. (2021) found that 46% of the participants who had witnessed incivility in the last three months, also engaged in uncivil participation. This uncivil behaviour is highly associated with digital populism features, namely right-wing populist voting intentions and frequent social-media use.

Citizens are not contributing to the cause of digital populism simply by spreading populist arguments. They also play an active role in attacking first-hand those targets identified as enemies of the 'people'. A clear example of this particular kind of digital mobilization has been documented by Waisbord (2020). His research on the online harassment of US journalists clearly showed that journalists are increasingly the target of populist citizens online. This results from the combination of three developments: 'easy public access to journalists, the presence of toxic right-wing and far-right cultures on the Internet, and populist demonization of the mainstream press' (Waisbord 2020: 1038). This last point has been also pointed out by Schulz, Wirth, and Müller (2020) studying people perceptions of the media in France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK. Their findings show that the perception of the media, as hostile actors, growth with the increase of populist attitudes. Similar mobilizations against other minority groups such as refugees in Europe have been detected in social media (Ekman 2018).

3. Populism and democracy in the age of social media

Although there is a long-standing debate on the relationship between populism and democracy, scholars do not agree whether it is a pathological political phenomenon or the most authentic form of political representation. Arguably, Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) provided the most convincing analysis of this ambivalent relationship stressing that populism might well represent a 'democratic corrective' in terms of inclusiveness, but it also might become a 'democratic threat' concerning public contestation.

From this point of view, digital populism is no different, embodying the tension between corrective and threat. This is mainly because populism has become a constitutive element of contemporary democracies and, in its digital format, it is ‘twice hybrid, as it involves the incessant interaction between old and new media as well as between online and offline communication sites’ (Postill 2018: 762). This feature suggests us to consider as a whole both online and offline populism, highlighting the relevance that the digital environment have in social and political practices. Digital media are shaping – or in any case driving – the evolution of current populism. The previous paragraphs showed that this happens at the level of political actors, information systems and citizen involvement: what happens online reverberates offline, producing new contents, interpretations and targets that are reused online in a circular way.

Of course, the Internet and social media are not the exclusive channels used by populists. However, populists, as a matter of fact, have shown a greater capacity with respect to mainstream politicians – with the notable exception of Barack Obama – to adapt quickly and effectively to new logics of communication, interaction and participation. This situation opens up new questions for scholars about the future of digital populism and its relationship with democracy. Three challenges seem to be the most relevant today.

The first one pertains to how the digital frontier is affecting populism. The digital environment is constantly evolving and new platforms with new logics expand users’ ‘platform-swinging’ possibilities (Tandoc, Lou and Min 2019) and push politicians to follow them on these new channels. While mainstream politicians seem less likely to experiment, there have been several recorded cases in recent years of populists using for their communication emerging instant messaging platforms, like Telegram (Urman and Katz 2020), or emerging entertainment platforms, like TikTok (i.e. Matteo Salvini in Italy). This ‘elective affinity’ (Gerbaudo 2018) between populists and social media could lead to perceive populist practices as a normal way to perform politics by non-populist actors, the media and citizens.

The second concerns the technological development of populism. In recent years, it has been documented that populists have benefited from the unscrupulous use of bots and trolls on social media (e.g. Golovchenko et al. 2020; Jamieson 2018). The growing availability of deep learning algorithms for image and video reconstruction and processing exacerbates this issue by providing new potential tools to manipulate messages and create information disorder in the near future.

A final challenge, closely intertwined with the previous one, concerns the construction and perception of political reality in contemporary democracies. Populists are particularly prone to the spread of fake news. And this poses a problem in relation to the question of the ever-thinning boundaries between

what is factual, plausible or false, both within the public debate and from the perspective of the individual.

Noticeably, these challenges do not exclusively concern populism but, more broadly, the ability of politics and democracy to adapt and respond to social demands. Through these challenges, digital populism confirms the ambivalent nature of populism *tout court*. On the one hand, populists exploit the opportunities given by a changing (information) context to gain power. On the other, and in parallel, they expose some open problems of contemporary democracies, offering traditional political actors the opportunity to address them.

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