

Digital Media and the Rhetoric of Populism

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Abstract:

Digital media have a significant impact on political communication. The rapid evolution in technology, in the way the public consumes media products and participates in the construction of digital media discourse, significantly influences communication and political competition. For European populist movements, digital media offers additional opportunities to assert themselves on the political stage. The rise of populist movements is associated both with the socio-political context marked by crises (economic crises, pandemics, war) and with the opportunities offered by technology and digital media mechanisms. The latest developments, datafication and the growing role of algorithms, raise important questions related to the quality of future democracy.

Keywords: digital media, datafication, social networks, social media, mediatization of politics, populism

The context: globalization and crises

Humanity is going through a period of rapid and profound change, which affects the way we understand social life, communication structures and political values. These changes do not have a single cause, they are rather a complex of political decisions, economic processes and technological developments that together lead to changes similar to the disintegration of the “old world” under the impact of the industrial revolution.

Globalization is the major process of the last decades, which has favored the unprecedented interconnection of the world in economic and cultural networks. Of course, the circulation of ideas, people and goods is the rule, not the exception in the evolution of mankind. However, globalization refers to the extent and speed of interconnection, favored by political decisions (democratization, opening up borders, human rights), economic developments (freedom of trade, development of multinational companies), culture promoted by the consumer society (film, music, clothing industry, ‘coca-colonization’ and fast-food industry), the standardization of education (through the standardization of school and university curricula, the ubiquity of the English language and digital technology) and the spectacular evolution of digital

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technology (Held, McGrew, Glodblatt, Peratton, 1999; Rodrick, 2018). The changes are so profound that in recent years the issue of redefining the role of nation-states and the systems of legitimacy of political power has been raised (Ghender, 2018).

Globalization, understood as an unprecedented interconnection on a global scale, has many benefits and opportunities, from easy access to goods and services to the imposition of values such as democracy and human rights as an international standard. On the other hand, rapid changes are likely to generate anxiety and fear (Rodrick, 2018). Many people see their traditional lifestyle, cultural or national identity, jobs threatened. Others accuse the exploitation and unfair distribution of profits of globalization. Fear of the effects of globalization has provided significant growth potential for anti-system, nationalist or populist political movements.

Populism: “true people” vs. “corrupt elite”

In a strong statement, Cas Mudde (2004) announced the “*populist Zeitgeist*”: populism has become a mainstream ideology in Western democracies in the last decades. The collapse of traditional left – right cleavages in old and new democracies along with economic and pandemic crises provided new opportunities for populist movements with a wide range of characteristics across different political cultures. At the heart of the populist approach is the radical distinction between “*corrupt elite*” and “*the people*” (Mudde, 2004: 543). The main features of populist movements are the claim that they are the only true representatives of the people, the tendency to identify or invent an “*enemy of the people*”, the anti-elitism and the anti-establishment rhetoric, and the hostility to pluralism (Müller, 2017). Populists present themselves as political currents started from the citizens in order to refresh democracy.

For Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018: 3), populism is:

a general, abstract concept about politics and society that is open to a diverse set of more concrete political ideas and programs, depending on both national and historic contexts. The core features that distinguish it from other ideologies are: (1) the centrality of the idea (or of the ideas) of the people, around which populists try to create a new social identity among citizens in order to unite them and generate a sense of belonging to an imagined community; and (2) the construction of ‘the others’ as counterparts taking the form of elites and/or out-groups against which the people affirm their preeminence.

Populist movements claim to be fighting for the sovereignty and the empowerment of the “*the true people*” (Deiwikis, 2009; Müller, 2017; Cox, 2017). In populist rhetoric, “*the people*” is a concept with

many meanings, related to a social class, a national or ethnic group, imagined as homogeneous, always opposed to privileged groups (politicians, multinational companies, rich people, immigrants, minorities). The populist rhetoric is chameleonic, changeable and malleable, this is why it manifests itself differently depending on the political culture and the specific context of each political system. In Western democracies predominates right-wing populism oriented against immigrants and minority cultures. The context that favors this type of populism is related to economic crises and the fear of people losing their jobs or cultural identity. In Eastern Europe and Latin America, left-wing populism is predominant, directed against economic elites and foreign multinational companies. In this case, populists blame foreigners and corrupt elites for poverty and backwardness.

News ecosystems and datafication

Internet technology has evolved rapidly in recent decades, passing from Web 1.0 (web sites, few content creators and top-down model of communication), accessed from desktop to Web 2.0 (social media, growing interactivity, user-generated dynamic content and interoperability), accessed from smartphones, heading to Web 3.0 (growing role of database and algorithms in connecting information and knowledge, semantic web, artificial intelligence), accessed from more integrated devices.

The overwhelming effects of technology and the Internet on human behavior have been the subject of numerous interdisciplinary studies. Psychologists have defined a new field of interest, cyberpsychology, and are studying the effects of internet on the human brain, on the construction of identity and behavior in society (Katzner, 2018). The research of social scientists is complicated by the very rapid evolution of technology and the way people use the internet. However, we can already distinguish between “digital natives”, the generation that grew up connected to the internet, and “digital immigrants”, those who have adapted to the life in network on the go (Aiken, 2019). Views on the influence of the Internet on human psychology range from concerns about “*digital dementia*” (Spitzer, 2020) to more balanced approaches that require adaptation to a new reality (Katzner, 2018; Aiken, 2019).

In the field of communication, new technologies and digital media have changed the way news are produced, received and understood. CW Anderson (2016: 412) theorized the concept “news ecosystems”, since:

news production no longer takes place within any one organizational center of production but has become increasingly dispersed across multiple sites, different platforms and can be contributed to by journalists based in different locations around the world or on the move”. He defined news ecosystems as “the entire ensemble of individuals, organizations, and technologies within a

particular geographic community or around a particular issue, engaged in journalistic production and, indeed, in journalistic consumption.

Anderson pointed out that studying news ecosystems is not a strategy only for the digital age, but now it is more relevant because the boundaries of news production are “*blurring online*” and the “*news travels extremely quickly across digital space.*” Anderson’s concept is inspired by biology: the approach sees no meaningful distinction between the natural and technological world, and does not place the human at the center of media system.

Andrew Chadwick (2013) suggested the concept “*hybrid media*” in order to understand the mass media and the new digital media into an indissoluble whole. The new reality implies more complex relations between media, politics and citizens (Esser, Pfetsch 2020: 6). The focus is on the message diffusion across digital and physical space, “activating particular nodes (human and non human) along the way. The overall perspective is simply different, focusing more on traveling news and informational items rather than on constellations of organizational actors distinguished by their rough technological type” (Anderson, 2016: 419). Anderson argued that digitization changes the dynamics of news but there are also other factors of major importance to be considered: journalists, activists, public relations workers.

Digital media ecology is a mix of old and new media, across different platforms. “Viral” posts on social media have often as a starting point broadcast media. Users usually alternate between social media (Facebook, Instagram), traditional media, smartphones (Whatsapp, Telegram), texting and other forms of information sharing (Tufekci, 2014: 509).

Social media broke with the sender-receiver asymmetry and the role of gatekeepers and established interactive relations with the public. The “*new media logic*” refers to new rules of production (more individualized forms of media production), distribution (the logic of virality, popularity) and usage (social media platforms are bound less to geographical criteria and more to communities of peers and like-minded others) (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2018: 3). Mazzoleni and Bracciale wrote that in the network media logic, populist leader’s linkage with their constituencies is entirely disintermediated, the production of contents is free from being filtered by journalists.

Changes in communication are well captured by the concept “*mediatization of politics*” – the process of convergence between media logic and political system. In the classical model of communication, political actors generated messages filtered and intermediated by mass media. Mediatization of politics model is characterized by the dynamic interaction between political actors and mass media: political actors need

to adapt to the media logic, generate messages taking into account the preferences of the public and the reaction of the media. Mediatization refers to a process in which media became increasingly influential and integrated into society, distinct from the more neutral concept of mediation, which refers to communication through media. For Strömbäck and Esser (2014: 246), mediatization of politics is “a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors has increased”. They identified as essential features of the mediatization of politics 1. a long-term and dynamic process; 2. the essence of mediatization is increasing importance and influence of media; 3. mediatization affects all parts of politics; 4. many of the media-related influences may be indirect rather than direct, and result from how political actors adapt to the media. For Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018: 8), the indicators of mediatization of political communication are the individualized form of populist communication via social media, its popularity-gearred inclination, its disintermediated nature and its fostering like-minded communities.

Technology brings unprecedented opportunities to gather data, information about people's behavior and preferences. Everything we do online creates a digital identity that can be tracked and analyzed. This new reality, described as “*datafication*”, opens up huge opportunities for micro-targeting using algorithms. Datafication seems to be the main feature of web 2.0 and web 3.0. Guerrero-Solé, Suárez-Gonzalo, Rovira and Codina (2020: 5) observed that “the datafication of people's interactions with and within platforms has expanded to almost every corner of social reality” and the growth of “big social media big data”.

Zeynep Tufekci (2014: 505) wrote about social media big data and their impact on human behavior:

thanks to digital technologies, more and more human activities leave imprints whose collection, storage and aggregation can be readily automated. In particular, the use of social media results in the creation of datasets which may be obtained from platform providers or collected independently with relatively little effort as compared with traditional sociological methods.

Now, marketers can observe social phenomena at a previously unthinkable level, for the author cited the emergence of big data analyses “has had impacts in the study of human behavior similar to the introduction of the microscope or the telescope in the fields of biology and astronomy: it has produced a qualitative shift in the scale, scope and depth of possible analysis” (Tufekci, 2014: 505).

Politicians and professional marketers can use huge database (ideas, reactions) to send different messages to different members of audiences, in accordance to their preferences. Political marketing today

means the use of computational methods to win elections, data-analysis techniques and the construction of accurate algorithms. Of course, the effects of these trends on the quality of democracy are a controversial issue. Marketers say that the general interest is well served, since people's preferences matter, they are taken into account in the most serious way. On the other hand, skeptics consider citizens a hopeless victim of algorithmic manipulation campaigns and the microtargeting based on datafication a threat to democracy.

Social media are considered “increasingly powerful curators of news and political content” (Edgelrly, Thorson, 2020: 189). The logic of social networks like Facebook (algorithms included) encourages personalization and fragmentation of media audiences. Edgelrly and Thorson (2020: 189) wrote that “platform-initiated changes to algorithms and newsfeed features can open, or close, the floodgates of visitors to news media websites; the social actions of digital media users are increasingly tracked and turned into data for use in shaping future content visibility – and to classify users for sale to political advertisers”. Also, they observed the “increase in datafication”, “the process by which our social actions are translated into data for use in algorithmic prediction and behavioral tracking”.

Datafication is at the very heart of social networks business logic: provides free services in exchange for personal data, offered for processing to the advertising industry. Recent developments, which increasingly assert the role of algorithms (understood as simple mathematical models that provide criteria for sorting and distributing information) and datafication are a dream come true for marketers. As they intuited very well, through the use of algorithms and big data, they can learn more about human behavior and preferences than people know about themselves. Of course, this new reality raises important issues, including the concern that the digital space, apparently characterized by openness and freedom of information and expression, can become a space for soft control and manipulation. Using big data, a small number of people can build and manipulate algorithms to control the flow of information on an unprecedented scale. That is why public institutions like governments or EU are working harder and harder for a legislative framework that ensures the transparency of how social networks work.

Digital media, fertile ground for populist movements

Digital media changed the rules of political communication and provided a wide range of tools to political actors and marketers. The changes in political communication are so profound that we can talk about the emergence of a new political culture, characterized by low trust

in institutions and political apathy, the erosion of left – right political competition pattern, the decline of traditional political parties, growing electoral volatility and the emergence of new political leaders.

Infotainment has become a central feature of contemporary mass media, making unclear the boundaries between information and entertainment. Political debate is focused more on personalities who highlight their human stories than on governing platforms or political ideologies, since the logic of online digital media boosts the already highly personalized political communication.

Online media provide political as well as media actors with more direct connections to the people, which is consistent with populist claims to represent, advocate, and speak on behalf of the people. Blassing, Ernst, Büchel, Engesser and Esser (2018: 5) wrote that “the role of the media is crucial to understanding populist communication as well as the rise and success of recent populist political actors”. They rightfully observed that both the internet and populism have been regarded as potential correctives as well as potential threats to democracy.

The relationship between the media and populism is complex, we can distinguish between media populism and populism by the media. Mass media can be a gatekeeper of populist messages, can neutrally disseminate populist messages or they can oppose and criticize populist actors (Blassing, Ernst, Büchel, Engesser, Esser 2018: 2).

Populist actors rely both on critical and supportive visibility assured by journalists. Mass media can assume three roles in the mediatization of populist actors: gatekeepers, interpreters, and initiators. A cross-national study on this issue shows that

both media factors (e.g., tabloid orientation) and political factors (e.g., response of mainstream parties) influence the extent and nature of populism in the media. Although newspapers in most countries do not overrepresent populist actors and tend to evaluate them negatively, we still find abundant populist content in the news. Several media outlets like to present themselves as mouthpieces of the people while, at the same time, cover politicians and parties with antiinstitutional undertones (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, Wirth, 2018: 476).

Blassing, Ernst, Büchel, Engesser and Esser (2018: 5) pointed out that online news strategy is strongly influenced by readers due to direct feedback (in the form of likes, shares, comments).

Direct communication of political parties through social media diminishes or even cancels the gatekeeper mechanisms that traditional media have. Online media provides new actors (politicians, influencers) the opportunity to enter the news cycle and to gain audiences: this feature favors populist parties, because it emphasizes the anti-elitist characteristic.

Online outlets of TV channels and newspapers keep traditional logic but are also influenced by network media logic, that is the reason why they are more likely to promote populist messages. As Blassing, Ernst, Büchel, Engesser and Esser (2018: 5) wrote, “this may render online news media more susceptible than traditional print media to populist messages by political or other actors, as network media logic has been described as beneficial for populist communication”.

Social networks like Facebook are the fertile ground for “*counterpublic spaces*”, subsets of public opposed to mainstream ideology, with a support for anti-establishment messages. The social media mechanisms offer to populist politicians and influencers more freedom to attack targets (political parties, public institutions, different groups), mainly because of disintermediation and as an effect of traditional gatekeeper dissolution. Psychologists specializing in evaluating the changes produced in virtual reality have shown that anonymity or the illusion of anonymity eliminates moral barriers and amplifies aggression (Katzner, 2018; Aiken, 2019). Communication on social networks tends to be even more personal and emotional, very suitable for populist style of communication. Social networks offer a great freedom of language, which allows populist actors to use often vulgar language, unfounded accusations, using unverified data to discredit their opponents, exploiting anxieties and fears.

In addition to anti-elite messages, the populist accuses mainstream media of serving the interests of the political establishment. In this context, social media are seen as a democratic agora, freed from censorship. From this point of view, there is a natural link between populist movements and social media: the attempt to re-build direct and participative democracy.

One of the most recent and interesting research topics is related to how big data and algorithms are used in political communication in general and in the construction of populist messages in particular. Guerrero-Solé, Suárez-Gonzalo, Rovira and Codina (2020: 1) theorized “*data-driven populism*”, since the populists “can make use of real-time data-driven techniques to develop successful communicative strategies addressed to mass audiences”. Data-driven populism finds ideal environment in social networks and use network analytics to adapt its discourse to the common shared beliefs and preferences of the public. They pointed out that:

the evolution of media technologies and the popularization of social media have helped populism to develop itself free from many of the constraints of traditional mass media. In particular, social media have allowed populist parties to bypass media institutions and traditional gatekeepers and have given it the possibility to

communicate with citizens without mediation. Since the logics of mass media and network media are completely different in terms of production, distribution or media usage, it may be argued that with social media, populism has entered a new stage (Guerrero-Solé, Suárez-Gonzalo, Rovira, Codina, 2020: 2).

They concluded that political actors have affordable access to public freed from the mediation of gatekeepers “and communication with voters can be done at human level by means of personalization and targeting like-minded others” (Guerrero-Solé, Suárez-Gonzalo, Rovira, Codina (2020: 4). Using “big data”, populism take advantage of computational politics, social media listening and social network analysis.

Conclusion

The rise of populism is linked to socio-political conditions such as low credibility of public institutions and traditional political parties. Populist themes and rhetoric have to some extent infiltrated the agenda of mainstream political parties.

However, the logic of digital media and social media, oriented to controversial and newsworthy content, is a fertile ground for populism. The hybrid media ecosystem emerged under the impact of digital communication is characterized by hyper-mediatization of populist communication.

Social networks are the main tools of the new populism movements all over the world. The populist rhetoric, with emotional tone, spectacular and simplistic content, conflict-oriented messages fit the logic of online communication. Populist movements seem to avoid barriers to protecting the public more effectively and to take advantage of the new trend in technology and communication better than traditional political parties.

Digital communication allows unprecedented processing of personal data through algorithms used by social networks. Big data and algorithms are the new fundamental landmarks of political communication. Populist movements seem well equipped and prepared to use these new opportunities to adapt their versatile and malleable discourse to the preferences of the electorate. Digital populism or data-driven populism are expressions used to describe new assertion strategies in the context of technological change.

The symbiosis between populism and the media represents a central aspect of contemporary democracies. Both populism and digital media, especially social networks, present themselves as corrective to the democratic system. They claim to build a digital agora characterized by freedom of expression and fair representation of ordinary people, removing barriers imposed by corrupt elites. On the other hand, many researchers are concerned about the potential of populist movements to

generate conflict and promote hatred and discrimination. From this point of view, populism is a threat rather than a corrective to democracy.

Facing profound changes in technology and political culture, worldwide democracies must find an appropriate response. The major challenge is to use and control technology to guarantee fundamental freedoms and to improve the quality of democracy.

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