The Complexity of Populism

New Approaches and Methods

Edited by Paula Diehl and Brigitte Bargetz

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Amplifying Opportunity Structures for Populism

Mojca Pajnik

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Introduction

In the last two decades, academic debates about populism have visibly intensified. Numerous definitions and approaches to populism have been developed. Despite their differences, they share a common attitude to populism as a characteristic of an unstable, disordered society, a prompt to challenge and change, emerging when there is a strong sense of crisis (Taggart, 2004, pp. 275–276). Populism involves several factors, such as the political crisis manifested in a decline of the traditional party system, rising public discontent, and economic crisis due to the negative influence of globalization trends on work and income (de la Torre, 2010). Many democracies today are experiencing legitimacy crises, as political parties have become 'hollowed out' by pressures related to globalization and social fragmentation (Mair, 2013). There has been a regression in democracy on a wider scale as a consequence of multiple crises that weaken the governance mechanisms that regulate excesses such as inequality and the neglect of collective needs (Crouch, 2019). In *Post-democracy*, Colin Crouch (2004, p. 116) shows how democratic structures are becoming empty and classical political leadership is declining, giving centrality to commercial speech. In this situation, a growing disenchantment with democracy and populism does not come as a surprise.

In this chapter, I argue that within this post-democratic condition, the populism of political parties and their leaders is closely intertwined with the media (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Mazzoleni, 2008; Krämer, 2014; Pajnik & Sauer, 2017). Considering the outline of this book, in this chapter I address communication as a political dimension affected by populism as it is identified by the editors (Diehl & Bargetz, this volume) and examine the role of media. Specifically, I rely on those conceptualizations of populism that recognize the institutional, structural, and policy changes in the media system as pivotal to understand the flourishing of populism and media populism in contemporary societies (Krämer, 2014; Freedman, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). Globalization, commercialization, digitalization, and datafication have been accompanied by 'policy failures' to address the reshaping of media institutions. These trends obstruct classical ideals of democratic communication, citizenship, and equality and, more importantly, facilitate populism.

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Research on the relationship between media and populism has mostly looked into 'media populism' as a political strategy or as a style of communication and analyzed how media accommodate or possibly circumvent populist speech (Moffitt, 2016; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018; Zulianello, Albertini, & Ceccobelli, 2018). This chapter contributes to conceptual and methodological debates on populism by shifting the focus to structural changes in the mediascape in recent decades. I argue that it is necessary to analyze the material conditions of media development—both traditional and online media—as creators of opportunity structures for populism in order to better grasp the interrelations of populism and media. Therefore, I propose a scale-sensitive analysis of the communicative dimension of populism, engaging with macro, meso, and micro levels of the hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013) in post-democracy. The macro level concerns transformations of media governing and ownership, the meso level pertains to the role of affects in journalistic practices, and the production of populist content is the focus of micro-level analysis and reveals the opportunities for populist communication. Methodologically, multi-scale analysis exposes the transformation of mass media conditions in recent decades in order to show where these developments comply with populism or where they have made it easier for populism to flourish.

Media Transformation and the Effects on Populism

While the first age of political communication (1940s–1950s) was a time of strong political institutions which enjoyed fairly easy access to mass media, the second age of televised communication (1960s–1980s) (Blumler, 2001) and the third age (1980s–1990s) characterized by the proliferation of information channels within the mass media brought increasing pressure by political actors on media, and vice versa, increasing influence exerted by the media on political performance. The contemporary 'fourth age of political communication' (since the 1990s), related to the Internet and digitalization trends, reinforced the interchanging relations between the media and the political field in the rising digital environment where traditional media coexist with various Internet platforms and social media (Blumler, 2001, pp. 201–204; Chadwick, 2013). As argued by Jay Blumler (2001), a pivotal characteristic of the contemporary age is the rise of 'populist political communication', a 'new-found populism', which is a 'product of increased competition for attention in which political and media actors are pressed to seem more audience-friendly' (p. 203).

Across these historic periods, political actors' communication has been mediatized. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz (1999) define 'mediatization' as 'the permeation of media with politics and of politics with media', referring to the different degrees to which media and political logics interact and one tries to prevail over the other. Mediatization has left political actors trying to adapt to media techniques, and conversely, it has been pushing the media to shape newsworthiness in line with the interests of the political elites. The fourth age of political communication has increased the complexity of information and news systems so that they no longer entail a 'single logic' but 'multiple media logics' that operate

simultaneously (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, pp. 246–247). Hybrid media systems are fluid and transitory (Chadwick, 2013), with several logics interacting to different ends. Nowadays, political elites intensively communicate online, directly engaging with potential voters and operating to circumvent gatekeeping structures of traditional media (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Hallin, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). Contemporary media systems are characterized by ever-evolving digital and networked communication technologies that are increasingly integrated into, and often disrupt, existing forms of media and political practice. Novel technologies integrate both inherited and innovative practices while established actors like political parties take them up in their operations, resulting in more hybrid media contexts and products.

Hybridity is often characterized by situations when the media reproduce political parties' messages, which then 'spill over' from online media into the agenda of political decision makers (Pfetsch & Bennett, 2013, p. 12). The impact of Trumpian rule-by-tweet has been reflected as a new type of undemocratic political power that is becoming a substitute for political debate (Couldry, 2017; Hallin, 2018). Possibilities for debate where political actors face arguments in a public discussion to come to decisions and which have historically been intended to enhance democracy seem to be shrinking in this time of technological advancement. As a consequence, hybrid media systems have provided increased opportunity structures for shaping and disseminating populist messages (Ernst, Esser, Blassnig, & Engesser, 2019; Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017, p. 365).

Mazzoleni et al. (2003) argued that the new era of 'neo-populism' of the political field was a result of the emerging underdog communication by political parties on the one hand, and of the decline of critical media reporting on populist politicians and their ideas on the other. Accordingly, media is 'complicit' in this process by virtue of their extensive attention accorded to populist politicians, thus contributing to their legitimization (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 55). Populist politicians have the potential to attract audiences since they use simplified rhetoric, present themselves as ordinary people ('one of us'), adopt entertaining performances, and create spectacle (see the discussion on the communicative dimension of populism in Diehl & Bargetz as well as Diehl, this volume). As a consequence, they are of interest to the media in their competition for audiences and market shares. These characteristics of populist communication have intensified with digitalization and increased use of social media.

Instrumental 'Megamedia': Economizing and Politicizing the Media Sphere

Given the rising trends of media privatization and commercialization, which have intensified since the 1980s, the media sphere has been shifting from the legacy of informed argument toward emotional dramatization and 'infotainment' (Thussu, 2007), where information is reduced to simplified slogans to catch the attention of audiences. Increased digitalization and the recent rise of datafication and algorithms have contributed to what Barbara Bennett and Lance W. Pfetsch (2018)

describe as 'the breakdown of media system coherence' (p. 249), which has resulted in a situation where many media agendas are shaped across monopolies of internet platforms. Populist politicians have seized the opportunity of these structural changes that produce, in the words of Gerbaudo (2018), an 'elective affinity' (p. 746) between populism and social media. To add to this, populists rely on the complicity of the disrupted media sphere and do not just adopt affective discourse and rhetoric to popularize their ideas, but may also change the institutional structures of communicative fields, professionalism in information production, and journalistic norms.

In this section, addressing the macro-level analysis of media transformation, I argue that material and structural processes of media development are crucial layers to be considered in the analysis of populism and the media. Analyzing media concentration, the Forbes Global 2000 list from 2021 shows that Comcast was America's largest media conglomerate, in terms of revenue, with Viacom CBS, The Walt Disney Company, and Discovery, Inc., completing the top four. The situation is similar in Europe, where the major players in the media landscape include Bertelsmann AG, Lagadère, Axel Springer, Scandinavian Broadcasting System, Central European Media Enterprises Ltd., and FUNKE (former WAZ), which monopolize television and radio broadcasting and newspaper and magazine markets, including book publishing (International Federation of Journalists, 2005). Trends of excessive media concentration have been identified as the rise of 'the megamedia' (Alger, 1998), that is, the dominant dozen of media conglomerates that own the global media market, and since the 2000s also most popular Internet platforms and social media. Robert W. McChesney (1997) has analyzed trends of a market-driven approach to understanding the media, and the rising deregulation of the media sphere that has accelerated globally since the 1990s, as 'a threat to democracy'. Ever since, the rising Internetization, datafication, algorithmization, the growth of telecommunication companies, and the success of right-wing political leadership have only added to the 'threat'.

Despite the differences among media systems in Europe and beyond (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), in recent decades development trends in the media have supported the commercial and consumer-oriented model of communication, generating types of journalism and journalistic practices that adapt to and tend to reproduce populist communication characteristics. These include simplification of social issues, constructing social divisions, and praising ordinary people over the elites.

According to Des Freedman (2018), concentration of power by monopolistic and oligopolistic media giants, owning traditional mass media and digital empires such as Facebook or Google, the rise of tabloidization and commercialization of the media, and downplaying the importance of media law and regulation are not incidental but essential to the growth of populism. Freedman (2018) argues that the visibility of right-wing populists was enabled by 'compliant' media outlets and unregulated digital platforms. If Mazzoleni (2008) understands media 'complicity' in populism zeitgeist as excessive attention of the media to populist politicians, the recent work of Freedman (2018) has importantly pointed to the structural and policy level of media change as a so far neglected yet essential element that helps to understand the flourishing of populist politics.

Freedman (2018) has treated the structural analysis of media populism as a 'policy failure' (p. 606), and has identified four specific failures: (1) the failure to tackle concentrated ownership; (2) the failure to regulate tech companies; (3) the failure to safeguard an effective fourth estate; and (4) the failure to nurture independent public service media. Classical research on media pluralism and diversity (McQuail, 1992) confirmed long ago that concentrated ownership reduces media diversity, produces uniform content, and accelerates the growth of tabloid media formats, which are then increasingly exploited by populist politicians (Freedman, 2018). Further, long-lasting non-regulation of online communication, supporting the ideology of a free flow of information, enabled the concentration of market power by giant owners such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, who have offered low-cost communication and have been exploited by populist leaders in their attempts to establish direct and unregulated contact with voters (Freedman, 2018, pp. 605–611).

This development, however, can be situated within a tendency that had already been identified in the 1960s: a shift from a debating public to a consumer public, which occurs when market laws governing the sphere of commodity exchange colonize the sphere reserved for people's acting as a public. 'Instrumental reason', related to the development of modern forms of capitalism (Horkheimer, 2004 [1974]), pushed for economic rationality that became a predominant social strategy of governance. In the media sphere, this brought the development of a rising media model subjected to the logics of efficient production, and oriented toward goals of profitability. Media have drifted away from the normative social ideals related to their social responsibility role that defines the media in relation to the public good, citizens' communication rights, and general well-being (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963). Today, one could argue that global information ownership networks have thus been 'instrumental' in transforming citizens into individualized targets of the market and political forces. Simultaneously, the developments around the 'media policy failure' (Freedman, 2018) accelerated populist strategies of a light-style speech formation and information sharing that works to attract voters as consumers.

In the new hybrid media ecology, traditional media and journalistic professionalism are no longer central to the flow of information in the way they were through the last decades of the twentieth century. Media is now a fragmented structure in which partisan and social media in particular have grown (Hallin, 2018, p. 20). Recently, the concept of a 'networked media logic' (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1244) has been proposed to capture how online media change political communication, and how political parties adapt to digital media platforms. Networked media logic operates fluidly and flexibly, collects and connects information nodes, and it stipulates, for example, that it is not enough for politicians to maintain social media profiles, but that it is essential to constantly push for popularity, to befriend people, engage with them directly, seeking to gain maximum attention and as many linages as possible. As such, online political communication has become 'disintermediated', and content flows among like-minded network users, which is a different situation from that of mass media and their gatekeepers (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, pp. 1248–1249; Suiter, Greene, & Siapera, 2018).

From the perspective of the networked media logic analysis, we can stipulate that it is the networked condition of contemporary mediascapes that is reinforcing populist communication; I argue that the dynamic information cycles in decentralized online platforms create 'new opportunities' (Chadwick, 2013, p. 6) or 'favorable opportunity structures' (Ernst et al., 2019) for populist mobilization. Recent research has confirmed that political leaders use online structures to circumvent traditional media, reshaping their political strategies so that they are particularly prone to personality and feeding the emotional identification of the voters by offering moralist rather than programmatic emphasis (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2017; Zulianello et al., 2018). Referring to Herbert Schiller (1976), who emphasized that the technologies are generally reliant on the struggle over power, we could argue that these trends have played well for the power structures, and populist politicians have been using the networked media strategically, as an efficient tool for exercising political domination. For example, Donald Trump's 2016 victory can be understood as a manifestation of such domination by playing on morality where Trump used online platforms and right-wing press to mobilize a large number of people, to the surprise of many traditional media, their journalists, and publics (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 249).

The growing electoral success of right-wing populist politicians worldwide has produced new vulnerabilities for all media, and especially public media. The latter not only operate under the increasing pressure to accommodate populist speech, but are also increasingly facing denunciations that they are a redundant 'elite' working against 'the people', that they are biased, fake, etc., by right-wing populists. These accusations even accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021).

Recently, we have witnessed in Slovenia how the right-wing government (in power from March 2020 to April 2022) has exercised its control by adapting media laws to serve its own purposes, influencing governing boards, limiting finances, reviewing and criticizing the press, publicly denouncing and insulting journalists, etc. (Splichal, 2020). Such tendencies of political control over media were recognized by the seminal work of Siebert et al. (1963) as means of an authoritarian media system, where 'complete control' over the media is exerted by various mechanisms such as appointing the editors, issuing directives for media content, and reviewing and criticizing the press (p. 31). These developments can also be understood in the context of the propaganda model of media development that, according to the classic work by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988), includes various strategies exerted by the ruling political forces. These strategies include the government's production of 'flak' as a means of disciplining the media, regularly assailing, threatening, and correcting them (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 28), which accelerates the production of populist hegemonic news.

I have shown in this section that the instrumentalization of the media by self-proclaimed 'truth-givers' and 'defenders of the people' results in an increased pressure on the media from dominant market and political forces. This, however, is only one part of the picture. As assumed by authoritarian and propaganda media

model theories, instrumentalization may also result in changing journalistic professional routines and practices as I aim to show in the following section, devoted to the meso-level analysis of the communicative approach to populism.

Affective Governmentality: Accommodating Populism in Changing Journalism

Understanding the economization and politicization trends in the media and opening it to populist political communication constitutes the first layer of emphasis on opportunity structures for populism while the second layer addresses the meso level of the organizational structures in the media that are discussed in this section, followed by the micro-level analysis below, pertaining to discursive features of media populism. In this section, I first discuss the tabloidization of media. Second, I address the changing journalistic professionalism and journalistic routines, and third, I consider the labor conditions and social-economic statuses of journalists, all affected by digitalization that resulted in journalists losing their role as primary agenda setters and gatekeepers. Analyzing these elements, I argue, is essential for understanding why and how media engage with populism.

The macro level of economic and political transformations of the media and the internet analyzed earlier have pushed for the development of media formats that are increasingly tabloid-like and feed the media reporting on conflictual topics for which a marketing judgment prevails that they will attract audiences (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 277–279). Tabloid formats, social networking sites, forums, and blogs push for the changing of the public sphere, which is more and more decollectivized, subjectively experienced, and serving to enhance the resonance of the political discourses with the affective personal lifeworlds of the public (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016, p. 48). A proliferation of online platforms and digital information networks created 'filter bubbles', producing a disrupted, disconnected, and divided public sphere (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, pp. 245–246; Gerbaudo, 2018, pp. 746–750). These circumstances have made it harder for journalists to be able to address the polarized bubbles by traditional professional journalistic standards, aimed to facilitate an informed public discussion characterized by diversity, civility, and fact (Waisbord, 2018).

Reporting characterized by personalization, dramatization, and emotionalization has been challenging the traditional standards of journalistic professionalism bound to ideals of distance and objective critical reporting, and has increased journalism that aims at directly targeting the people (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016, p. 53). News in general has become more personal and engaging, appealing to the emotions of audiences in the competition to capture their attention. News professionals are increasingly pushed to produce emotive appeals and manufacture them on social media, and in addition they have to compete with situations where their work is blended into digital mobile devices of the dispersed public that uses them not only for news consumption but also for shopping, sports, music, dating, gaming, etc. (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 2). We argue that these meso-level changes in how media operate in the push from print and broadcast to the digital, along with the

parallel growth of information and news networking websites, make media more prone to voice populist communication.

Several studies thus far have shown that populist communication is more likely to be reproduced in the commercial, tabloid, and digital media than in the quality print media or public television (Mazzoleni, 2003; Akkerman, 2011; Suiter et al., 2018; Wettstein et al., 2018), because tabloids are more intent on appealing to the masses (Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 8). The assumption that tabloids are more populist than quality papers is also based on the observation that media differ among themselves in terms of their attitude toward the political parties (Akkerman, 2011). Quality media pursue the principle of neutrality to a greater extent, and as such are more in harmony with the social and political status quo while tabloids have less close relation with the political mainstream (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 279). Therefore, tabloids are found to be more inclined than the quality press to criticize the establishment, and to align more closely to ordinary citizens (Wettstein et al., 2018, p. 491). Benjamin Krämer (2014) refers to 'tabloid populism' to describe forms of journalism that appeal to popular sentiment, presenting themselves as voices of the people, operating to address people's real concerns (for the populist constructions of the people and the elite, see de la Torre, this volume).

Despite these differences, the quality media sphere has also not avoided the populist bias. Populist media communication that merges dramatization, that is, the rhetoric of urgency and catastrophe, emotionalization, and a bar jargon (Mancini, 2015) has thus spread across media formats and outlets. According to Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004, pp. 277–278), the media in general have shifted their focus to ordinary citizens; they have changed their style, they put more emphasis on simple language, light and bright writing, shorter stories, extensive use of images, etc. Generally, media focus on messages that they themselves think are likable by the public, that is, political scandals, believing in the power of messages related to corrupt politicians betraying the hard-working people (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 278–279). A 'tilt away from informed argument and extended rationalism' (Blumler & Coleman, 2013, p. 148) and a move towards promoting 'infotainment' (Thussu, 2007) has been selling types of news that are dependent on charismatic authority and which favor emotional and visual connection between presenter and viewer, much more than the 'dispassionate' presentation of facts (Hallin, 2018, pp. 21–22).

Trends of personalization of politics have intensified and amplified since the era of televised communication, with populist leaders presenting and selling their own personal attributes to the audience in the digital media environment. For populist politicians, social media such as Twitter and Facebook are developing as an alternative to 'the elite press', where they can sell their ideas and images of themselves, by one-way communication, bypassing the mainstream gatekeepers (Waisbord, 2018, p. 230). In addition, populists capitalize on the 'filter-by interest dynamic' embedded in the algorithmic architecture of networking sites that exacerbate social divisions, favor polarizations of the public, and limit attention to content that conforms with populism-related ideologies, simultaneously banning alternative voices (Gerbaudo, 2018, pp. 746–750).

Otto Penz and Birgit Sauer (2019) speak of 'governing affects' in post-democracy, and use the Foucauldian theoretical perspective on governmentality to delineate how affects partake in governing processes of the state and also the workplace. Working environments have witnessed transformations toward service societies that are structured around measuring and allocating attention. I argue that affective governmentality is a useful framework to understand how digitalization has changed the organizational and occupational context of media, how it has affected journalistic work, and how it has contributed to the opportunity structures for populism.

The Cartesian dualism in journalism, juxtaposing the objective and the subjective, reason and emotion, has been challenged in the past when scholars began examining news creation processes, media values, and routines (Schudson, 1982; Zelizer, 1993) while recently, the challenges of the digitalized mediascape brought forward news that is increasingly becoming more personal and engaging, and more prone to voice populism. The hybridization of media systems has brought calls for the 'normalization' of emotions and affects as a legitimate dimension of journalism (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 4), exploring their potential for engaging the dispersed publics (Bas & Grabe, 2015). These affective practices are more or less distancing themselves from the inverted pyramid reporting ideal, pointing to the need to 'reinvent journalism' (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 4) by connecting objectivity and emotionality to form meaningful ties with the community, pushing forward journalism as an 'interpretative community' (Zelizer, 1993), potentially also taking into account citizens' news blogs and citizens' journalism practices.

Indeed, affective governmentality does not manipulate people but 're-organizes everyday life, mobilizes, and, at times, disciplines people's attention, volition, mood, and passion by placing them in the service of specific political agendas and thereby attempt to obtain people's consent', as Brigitte Bargetz (this volume, p. 83) argues in line with Lawrence Grossberg. This points to the political potential of emotions, albeit ambivalent, which has been articulated by feminist media scholarship (e.g., Meehan & Riordan, 2002), arguing for journalism development beyond the reproduction of dichotomous world views. Still, with reference to the concept of affective governmentality, we can see how the 'affective turn' in journalism (Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, 2020) may serve as an opportunity for populist communication that is distanced from the historical models of an informed public discussion, when journalists are increasingly using affective techniques such as addressing the public by personalization and infotainment. The perspective of affective governmentality helps us understand how the recent affective turn actually works to increase the virality of emotional appeals used by populist political leaders, feeding their demand of getting closer to the people. If a detached rational professionalism was part of the media industry of the twentieth century, the expectation of emotionally engaging the audiences is emerging as a new paradigm, which works to support the emotional strategies of governing social relations in the twenty-first century (Peters, 2011).

Therefore, responding to market pressure and the affective structures of the working environment, mass media tend to develop routines and conventions that

largely support the economically and politically motivated model of media development that primarily reproduces the social reality of hierarchical power relations (Schudson, 1982). For example, in a previous analysis we have shown that journalists tend to internalize the journalistic routines that are intermeshed with commercialization trends and populist communication and to reproduce visions of the information program as infotainment (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2022). We found a pronounced subordination of the professional to the hegemonic expectations that journalism should feed market demands for audience maximization and political demands of populist representation. Analysis also revealed particularities of the organizational structures and work routines when journalists reported about the rising unprofessionalism, decision-making that is based on personal preferences, and other trends of de-professionalization such as the rise of citizens' news blogs and social media that reflect an affective structure of the workplace governmentality.

Another factor that points to affective governmentality in journalism are journalists' working conditions and their vulnerability. In the media field, the domesticated precarization of work as a dominant work model was a consequence of various trends, such as concentration of media ownership, power hierarchies instructing media production and consumption, and commodification of international communication. There has been increased de-standardization of journalists' work, with self-employment prevailing as an employment option in circumstances when, especially in privately owned media, regular employment is not even available (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2022, pp. 9–10). All these processes, accompanied by a considerable reserve army of mostly young, highly educated workers, have led to the increase of flexible jobs and general insecurity in the media industry. Relatedly, the affective governing structures are redefining the media as creative industries, leading to the assertion of 'entrepreneurial working subjectivities' that, according to Rosalind Gill (2014), are based on the notions of individualism, meritocracy, and egalitarianism. Entrepreneurial subjectivities establish mental and normative legitimization of media, in which work is intensified in space and time, also through new technologies that transform the worker's potential accessibility into a normative demand for his or her unlimited availability (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2022). Media development trends have created work conditions in which journalists' obligations have been amplifying through new forms of 'digital labor' (Scholz, 2012).

The attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001) of the media requires that journalists, apart from working on their stories, also engage to increase their sales. Journalists are required to write shorter versions of stories for the Internet portals of their media outlets, to be active on Facebook and Twitter, to boost the virality of their writing, attempting to generate the interest of the dispersed public, etc. An extensive (affective) engagement of journalists online, taking on work tasks originally intended for public relations, thus feeding the needs of the attention economy, makes journalists inclined to reproduce populist communication. The affective governance in journalism stimulates the use of the affective techniques and emotional appeals by journalists that, in the need to perform digital/creative labor in increasingly precarious work conditions, devalues the role of journalists as relevant agenda setters. Populist politicians tap into these developments, using

them as opportunities to circumvent journalistic professional ideas and bypass journalists and traditional media, increasingly exploring the benefits of unmediated communication online.

The Interplay of Populist Communication and Ideology Through Discourse

Finally, in order to get a full picture of media opportunity structures that have enabled populism, we emphasize in this section the micro level, referring to discursive populist features that, as argued here, work at the intersection of discursive features and ideology. Whereas the existing research has largely ignored the economic and political forces and their attitude to the media as decisive factors that contribute to the amplification of populist voices discussed earlier, more attention has been given to the micro, discursive level of media populism. Research has analyzed, for example, how in a hybrid mediascape populist politicians exploit social media for their direct communication to voters, how they use personal action frames to mobilize the masses, and how the media go along with the populist currents by presenting politics through a game frame (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Suiter et al., 2018). Another strand of literature has analyzed how mass media, print and TV, circumvent or, alternatively, amplify populist voices. This research considers the conceptual differentiation of populism by the media and through the media (Esser et al., 2017; Suiter et al., 2018, pp. 398–399); *populism by the media* refers to media that engage in their own populism, that is, media appear as actors who generate populist discourse while *populism through the media* refers to media amplification of populist voices—media amplify and report populist voices to follow specific goals—as they may expect higher ratings when reporting populist statements, particularly by charismatic leaders. In this regard, the media can contribute to 'favorable opportunity structures' for the public expression of populist actors' views (Esser et al., 2017, p. 370).

To theorize the occurrences of populism in media speech formation, populism is treated as a discourse emerging from the interplay of populist communication (Moffitt, 2016; Aslanidis, 2018; Pajnik, Sauer, & Thiele, 2020; Pajnik & Ribać, 2021) and populist ideology (Mudde, 2004). Cas Mudde (2004) wrote in his influential approach that populism is a 'thin-centered ideology' that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' (p. 543). Several theoretical contributions (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Aslanidis, 2018) agree that populism as a discourse rests on three core antagonisms: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Othering, the latter being an especially visible feature of populist and, more specifically, right-wing ideology (Mudde, 2007; see also the chapters by de la Torre and Diehl on the complex phenomenon of populism, this volume).

In right-wing populism, however, people-centrism manifests itself through references to the ethnic majority, with emphasis placed on the good virtues of ordinary people, a 'real sovereign' (Aslanidis, 2018, p. 1255). The terms are often used to refer to the people as 'us', citizens, voters, taxpayers, and consumers

(Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). People are 'our' people and the state is our homeland, nation, or country. An ethno-centric vision of the people is central, and 'the people' are also morally virtuous and culturally superior (Brubaker, 2017). *Anti-elitism* finds expression through references to the holders of power who allegedly abuse people's sovereignty (Aslanidis, 2018, p. 1255). They may be political elites (parties, governments, and individual politicians), the state (the state administration), the media (media elites, journalists), the representatives of the EU, the economic elites, intellectuals, and so on (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The elites are portrayed as harmful, alienated from real-life problems of the people, and as groups that pursue their own interests. The third trait of populism, *Othering*, is manifested as a mechanism of separation, of distinguishing between us and them, the majority and the minority (ethnic, religious, gender minorities), where 'they' are presented as a threat to the majority (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 324).

The empirical analysis based on news content of media outlets across ten European countries (Wettstein et al., 2018, p. 479) has proved that journalists may engage in people-centrist or anti-elitist media populism; they may provide populist actors with opportunities by presenting their ideas as legitimate and by fueling anti-elitist or anti-group sentiments. This was also confirmed by our analysis of press commenting on the refugee crisis in Slovenia, where we found that both journalists of the tabloid newspaper and the broadsheet paper visibly used the othering antagonism, pointing to the 'incompatibility' of migrants with the majority population (Pajnik & Ribać, 2021). It is in this 'serving role' that the media tend to reproduce 'banal nationalism' that Michael Billig (1995) famously defined as popular expressions containing divisions such as 'our people', 'our prime minister', and 'domestic versus foreign'. Such nationalisms are influential because they are constantly reproduced in the media, are of almost subliminal nature, as argued by Billig, and as such attract attention, and also contribute to the thriving of illiberal political forces in and beyond media.

As discussed in the previous section, journalists increasingly address the public more directly, and increasingly make use of emotions to generate the public's direct involvement in the news (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Often, media populism pertains to an affective discourse that constructs 'the people' as something that is to be cherished, loved, and protected against the rule of the 'corrupt elite', and against threats imposed by foreign 'Others' (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Brubaker, 2017; Aslanidis, 2018). In addition, journalists may manipulate their audiences by replicating affects such as anger and fear, which political players use to mobilize negative attitudes toward minorities (Wodak, 2015; Pajnik & Ribać, 2021). Media have the potential to transform uncertainty or fear into anger toward minorities, or vice versa, into concern for minorities. For example, our recent analysis of the reporting of the press on the refugee crisis found that the anti-migration discursive frame was often coupled with fear in the tabloid press while the broadsheet paper more frequently used empathetic communication toward migrants, even though mobilization of negative emotions was not alien to quality press either (Pajnik & Ribać, 2021).

Today, agendas and news content are not only set by the traditional media, but formed at the intersections between the traditional and online media. If both tabloid and quality media increasingly operate to support populist content, this holds true even more so for news networking websites and social media. Recent research has highlighted that social media provide an amenable venue to channel typical populist content such as emphasizing the sovereignty of the people and advocating for the people, attacking the elites, ostracizing the others, and invoking the heartlands (Engesser et al., 2017). Gerbaudo (2018, pp. 748–749) emphasized that if social media have developed into a favorite channel for populist content, it is foremost because of the way in which it has been understood as a platform for the voice of the people in opposition to the mainstream news media, accused of supporting the financial and political establishment. This helps to understand why Donald Trump succeeded in defending himself against the accusations of having used fake news websites, accusing mainstream media of being themselves fake news spreaders.

In sum, I argue that the antagonistic and the affective populist news is a collectively generated pattern or expectation as to what constitutes a news item in the hybrid media environment and how it will be discursively conveyed—it is the structural manifestation of the news culture (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 34). Thus, from a media-centric perspective, inclination to disseminate a populist message does not necessarily originate in populist ideology but in journalistic routines and practices and in the emotional architecture of news websites and social media. Therefore, I suggest understanding populist antagonisms and affects that I have analyzed as the micro level of populism occurrences, as typical traits of populist discourse that is becoming entangled in both offline and online media structures, advancing populist communication.

Conclusions

To better grasp the communicative dimension of populism, this chapter has proposed a scale-sensitive, multi-layered analysis of media hybridity in times of post-democracy, intersecting the macro changes in media governing and ownership structures, the meso-level shift toward affective journalistic routines and norms, and the micro-level production of antagonistic and affective media content. I have argued that challenging populism, and even more the exclusionary and authoritarian variations of populism, increasingly necessitates the reflection of the role of the media that, as I have shown, should not only consider populist media content and communication style but also look at the structural conditions that shape them. Thus far, analyses of populism have not adequately addressed the fact that concentrating media ownership and failures to regulate the media amid rapid technological advancement and constant inflow of new online media formats facilitates populist communication and organization and produces amplified opportunity structures for populism. In this vein, a media-centric analysis to populism should also consider the fact that contemporary affective governing structures are changing journalistic routines toward the promotion of infotainment, and are reinforcing precarious journalism as a business model, which makes journalists increasingly vulnerable to

facilitating the production of populist media content, and populist politicians' affective appeals. I have argued that instrumentalizing and commodifying the media to serve the objectives of market profitability are trends that have made media open to facilitating populist politicians. The hybrid media ecologies that are subsumed to affective governmentality diminish the public responsibility role of the media and substitute it with the 'facilitative role', where the media are expected to serve the elites in power, amplifying their populist communication.

This chapter has unpacked the communicative dimension of populism by focusing on a scale-sensitive analysis of the media sphere, revealing how the structural transformations of the media since the 1980s have accelerated vulnerability of the media to amplifying opportunity structures for populism. In a time of rapid technological advancement, future research of media populism should devote more attention to articulating interrelations of populism and the latest technology trends such as artificial intelligence, algorithms, automation processes, tracking technology, and other digital trends.

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