Crosscurrents Special Section: Media and the Populist Moment

MEDIA CULTURE &SOCIETY

Social media and populism: an elective affinity?

Media, Culture & Society
2018, Vol. 40(5) 745–753

DOI: 10.1177/0163443718772192
journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs
SAGE

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Abstract

Since the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, an intense debate has developed around the connection between social media and populist movements. In this article, I put forward some theses about the reasons for the apparent 'elective affinity' between social media and populism. I argue that the match between social media and populist politics derives from the way in which the mass networking capabilities of social media, at the time of a 'mass web' involving billions of people worldwide, provide a suitable channel for the mass politics and the appeals to the people typical of populism. But this affinity also needs to be understood in light of the rebellious narrative that has come to be associated with social media at times in which rapid technological development has coincided with a profound economic crisis, shaking the legitimacy of the neoliberal order. This question is explored by examining the role acquired by social media in populist movements as the people's voice and the people's rally, providing, on the one hand, with a means for disaffected individuals to express themselves and, on the other hand, with a space in which disgruntled Internet users could gather and form partisan online crowds.

Keywords

Corbyn, individualism, neoliberalism, online crowds, Podemos, populism, Sanders, social media, Trump

In the aftermath of Trump's election news media, commentators argued that social media was decisive in his narrow victory over Hillary Clinton. Various factors said to have favoured Donald Trump's digital prowess, allowing him to defy all expectations and

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become the 45th president of the United States, were discussed by analysts. Some focused on the incendiary style of his tweets often concluding with emotionally charged exclamations such as 'Sad!', 'Very Sad!', 'So Sad!', 'Bad!', 'Be Honest!', 'I WILL FIX IT!' and the way they roused rabid Internet crowds. Others pointed to the role played by social media as conduit for 'fake news', deliberately false news reports used in negative campaigning against Hillary Clinton. Others still highlighted the support lent to Trump by infamous data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica to identify strategic niches of the electorate to be targeted by Facebook ads.

While the effective extent of social media contribution to Trump's victory is still open to debate, what matter is that this is not an isolated case but part of a broader trend. Social media savviness has in fact been a characteristic of many other populist movements and dark horse candidates, both on the Right – for example, Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Marine Le Pen's Front National – and on the Left – from Bernie Sanders campaign in the United States to the rise of Podemos in Spain and Jeremy Corbyn's impressive performance in the 2017 UK elections. What we are witnessing across these diverse phenomena is what could be tentatively described as an 'elective affinity' between social media and populism: social media has favoured populist against establishment movements by providing the former a suitable channel to invoke the support of ordinary people against the latter. What makes social media such a propitious space for the rise of populist movements?

In this article, I put forward some theses on the affinity between social media and populism. I argue that media have offered a channel for the populist yearning to 'represent the unrepresented', providing a voice to a voiceless and unifying a divided people. This match between social media and populist politics derives from the way in which the networking and mass outreach capabilities of social media provide a suitable channel for populism (Gerbaudo, 2014). However, this partnership also needs to be understood in light of ideological factors, and the transgressive and rebellious posture that has come to be associated with social media at times in which rapid technological development has coincided with a profound economic crisis shaking the legitimacy of the neoliberal order.

We shall explore this tendency in the context of opinion-building and movement-building, examining the role acquired by social media as the people's voice and as the people's rally, respectively. On the one hand, the design of social media as self-publishing platforms where ordinary people can express themselves has provided a suitable venue for populist movements to rally anger against what they denounced as the 'pro-establishment bias' of mainstream news media. On the other hand, the aggregative functionalities of social media, embedded in its algorithmic architecture and 'filter bubble' effects, have allowed disgruntled individuals embracing ideas regarded as improper by liberals to find each other and form online crowds. These crowds have played a crucial role in supplying militant support for anti-establishment candidates.

Populism in a digital era

Populism is the most hotly debated issue in contemporary politics, a question that has in recent years attracted an enormous amount of commentary both in academia and in the media (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007; Judis, 2016; Laclau, 2005; Muller, 2016). The

rise of manifold populist phenomena, Trump and Sanders in the US, the 5 Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain, Le Pen in France and Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, has led many to argue that we now find ourselves in a 'populist moment' or 'populist zeitgeist' (Mudde, 2004), a historical phase dominated by the rise of populist formations that pose a challenge to the neoliberal order. This populist moment is an ambivalent phenomenon that manifests itself on both the Right and the Left of the political spectrum, with groups pursuing radically different visions of society, yet appearing to share common populist traits: a vocal anti-establishment attitude, the opposition to some key tenets of neoliberal ideology and the claim to representing ordinary people. As it was noted by Jill Lepore on the *New Yorker*, 'the people who turn up at Sanders and Trump rallies are wed, across the aisle, in bonds of populist unrest' (Lepore, 2016).

If we are to capture the nature of this transversal populist logic and explore the current digital manifestations of populism, we need to go beyond the reductive and pejorative understanding of populism that has common currency among mainstream commentators. Populism has become a catch-all label to refer to all those political phenomena considered to be dangerous, irrational and demagogic; populism as a politics that appeals to the basest sentiments of the populace makes impossible promises and panders to imaginary fears (Taggart, 2002). While this definition no doubt captures some aspects of populist right discourse represented by the likes of Trump and Farage and their xenophobic rhetoric, it does not address the root causes behind this surge and the failings of the neoliberal system that have engendered widespread discontent. Furthermore, it ignores that populism can also adopt emancipatory and progressive aims, as exemplified by the rise of left-wing populism in the United Kingdom, the United States and several other countries, since the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis.

Key for a perceptive understanding of populism is the work of Ernesto Laclau, who argued that populism is a political logic that involves an appeal to the entirety of the political community against a common enemy, and in particular against unresponsive political elites (Laclau, 2005). This unifying appeal can take differing forms according to the political orientation of a given movement. In the populist right, it tends to take highly exclusionary and xenophobic forms, whereby the people is constructed in opposition to migrants and ethnic and religious minorities. In left-wing populism instead, the unity of the People is constructed via the opposition against immoral privilege, as embodied by greedy bankers, rogue entrepreneurs and corrupt politicians accused of exploiting ordinary people (Gerbaudo, 2017: 96–97).

This populist logic seems to have found a propitious space on social media. Bartlett et al. (2011) have shown how populist movements can use social media as a means of recruiting disaffected citizens. Engesser et al. (2017) have highlighted the fact that social media provide an amenable venue to channel typical populist themes such as 'emphasizing the sovereignty of the people'; 'advocating for the people; attacking the elites'; 'ostracizing the others'; and 'invoking the heartlands'. In my own work, I have argued that the interactive features of social networks and the informal voting system embedded in their architecture have provided a means to further the plebiscitary views of populist movements (Gerbaudo, 2014: 56–57) and that populist movements as the 5 Star Movement and Podemos use digital media to propose a bottom-up recuperation of popular sovereignty (Gerbaudo and Screti, 2017).

Despite these preliminary analyses, we are still far from a convicing explanation of the affinity between social media and populism. This trend, in fact, continues to appear a bit of an enigma. First, populism has long been considered typical of backward societies struggling to deal with modernisation and urbanisation, namely, agrarian populism in the United States and urban populism in Latin America. Conversely, social media is a phenomenon of advanced 'high-tech' societies, thus making the affinity between them and populism somewhat incongruous. Second, social media has usually been seen as expressions of hyperindividualism, and thus much more in line with neoliberalism and its cult of individual autonomy and spontaneity, than with the communitarian spirit of populism. However, when approaching these two trends more closely, it can be seen that matters are more equivocal than might appear at first sight.

While often displaying an anti-modernist and 'misoneist' vein, many populist movements in history were also informed by a modernising and innovative drive. For instance, Charles Postel (2007) has argued that the People's Party in the United States, far from simply rejecting technological developments of the Second Industrial Revolution, aspired to a more beneficial version of technological innovation than the rapacious one offered by railroad tycoons. Commenting on Latin American populist movements, sociologist Alain Touraine (1981) has argued that populism is 'a modernizing movement, but it resists stoutly against the dispossession of peoples and territories dominated from afar by a distant master' (p. 20). The same comment can also be made about contemporary populist movements which often claim that the establishment is made of dinosaurs out-of-sync with the present technological era. Contemporary populists are the product of a tumultuous era marked, on one hand, by deep economic crisis that is affecting large sections of the population, significantly worsening their living conditions, and, on the other hand, by rapid and highly disruptive technological innovation, which is redefining the way in which people communicate, work and organise. The combination of these two trends has opened a window of opportunity for populist movements to appeal to electorates that are both digitally connected and politically disgruntled.

In regard to the second question, it can be argued that the hyperindividualism dominating social media has led to a condition of atomisation that is ultimately conducive to the populist logic which is centrally concerned with fusing atomised individuals in the collective body of the people. As Angela Nagle (2017) has argued, it is precisely the transgressive individualist culture of the 1960s and 1970s, which has deeply informed digital culture, what has surprisingly turned into a weapon for right-wing populist movements. These movements have managed to hijack this transgressive spirit as a means to rally disgruntled individuals against PC (politically correct) culture.

To explore these trends, we will proceed in two steps. First, we will look at the way social media has come to be perceived as the voice for the underdog and the unrepresented in opposition to mainstream news media and how this narrative has served populist movements. Second, we will look at how social media provides means of 'crowd-building' rallying politically disaffected individuals around evocative symbols and leaders and against common 'enemies of the people'.

Social media as the people's voice

If social media has come to provide a suitable channel for populist appeals, it is first and foremost because of the way in which it has come to be understood as a platform for the

voice of the people in opposition to the mainstream news media, accused of being in cahoots with the financial and political establishment. This narrative harks back to the discourse of 'Web 2.0' which emerged after the dot.com bubble burst in 2001 and conceived of the 'social web' as a space in which ordinary people and 'amateurs' could express themselves directly, by-passing broadcasters and journalists and all other 'unnecessary mediators'.

This narrative was evidently highly problematic, not least because the social web was also a corporate web and has been rapidly controlled by gigantic capitalist companies such as Google and Facebook, whose profit-driven agenda seems to have little to do with ordinary people's interests. Nevertheless, it is cannot be denied that social media has also supplied a channel for individual expressions and for constituencies who were previously marginalised, allowing them to express themselves without the intermediation of news media.

The reputation acquired by social media as the people's voice needs to be understood in connection with the criticisms of mainstream news media. News media have experienced a considerable fall in trust since the economic crisis (Carr et al., 2014). According to the Pew Research Center (Barthel and Mitchell, 2017), only 18% of Americans have a lot of trust in national news organisations. Mainstream media have reacted to attacks on their authoritativeness by decrying them as manifestations of political irrationality and populism. However, growing popular hostility to established media sources stems from their signal failure in predicting the 2008 crisis, an event that put media in the role of the 'the watchdog that didn't bark', to cite David Starkman (2014). A growing section of the population has come to perceive mainstream media (MSM) as agents that respond to the agenda of their super-rich owners and their political allies, rather than to the real needs and interests of the public (McChesney, 2015). What we are facing here is what could be termed as a 'crisis of authority' engulfing MSM, to refer to the term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1971: 275–276) to describe the loss of legitimacy of the Church and other traditional institutions in the interwar period.

This distrust towards news media goes a long way to explaining why the heavy barrage of criticism levelled by MSM outlets against populist politicians from Donald Trump to Jeremy Corbyn has often backfired. If anything, these attacks seem to have provided such politicians with a reputation as valiant anti-establishment mavericks. Furthermore, it also provides some explanation as to why it was so easy for Donald Trump to deflect the accusation of having used fake news websites to his own advantage, deploring large mainstream news media as CNN for being themselves purveyors of fake news.

Attacks against MSM are a common feature of many online conversations connected with populist movements, as are invitations to people to share alternative news items, based on the persuasion that the MSM 'does not want you to know the truth'. On the Right, such opposition to mainstream news media discourse is often expressed in attacks against political correctness and the authority of experts. Brexit advocate Michael Gove famously went on record for saying that people in the United Kingdom 'got tired of listening to experts' in a televised debate. On the Left instead, what is attacked more frequently is not expertise as such but the 'neoliberal doctrine', that is, the free-market ideology that has dominated world politics for the past 30 years.

The crisis of authority of mainstream news media provides an opening for new actors to enter the space of news and opinion-making. Populist movements have often been

preceded by the establishment of alternative news channels, which set the psychological conditions for the ensuing electoral mobilisation. The most notorious example is undoubtedly *Breitbart*, a news site well-known for its incendiary opinion and news items. *Breitbart* has become a platform for the alt-right, from which the hardcore of support for Trump's election campaign originated. Its influence was demonstrated by the fact that, after the elections, its former executive chairman Steve Bannon, was appointed as White House Chief Strategist. *Breitbart* has been characteristic of much right-wing populist media, by spewing hatred against women and Muslims, as well as flaming rhetoric against 'globalism' and 'political correctness'. However, also left-wing movements have nurtured their own populist media. The launch of Podemos in Spain, for example, was prepared by the online TV channel *La Tuerka*, in which many of the key leaders of the Indignados/15-M movement discussed political issues and criticised establishment politicians. *La Tuerka* characteristically presented itself as the 'voice of the citizenry', against the news media responding to the 'caste', a term used by Podemos and the 5-Star Movement in Italy to refer to political and financial elites in thrall to neoliberalism.

Social media as the people's rally

Social media has favoured the rise of populist movements also because of the aggregation logic embedded in its algorithms and the way it can focus the attention of an otherwise dispersed people. Social media discussions have provided gathering spaces where the 'lonely crowds' produced by the hyperindividualism of neoliberal society could coalesce, where the atoms of the dispersed social networks could be re-forged into a new political community, into an 'online crowd' of partisan supporters.

It is significant that in the era of the Internet and social media the crowd is making a surprising comeback in political and social discourse. The online crowd is evoked in a number of expressions, such as 'crowd-sourcing', 'crowd-funding' or debates about the 'wisdom of crowds' (Surowiecki, 2005), underlining in the positive the new possibilities for mass collaboration available online, and in the negative to describe the action of trolls and the explosion of 'shitstorms' that have become an hallmark of online election campaigns. The formation of these crowds is made possible by the algorithms of social media and its aggregative capabilities.

One example of these aggregative capabilities is the so-called 'filter bubble' effect (Pariser, 2011), which tends to focus the attention of users only on those contents matching their interests. This filter-by-interest dynamic and the 'economy of attention' associated with it can favour a polarisation of public opinion because of the way it restricts users' attention on content that conforms to their existing ideological standpoints while insulating them from alternative views. The systemic political implications of this filter bubble trend are worrying because they can exacerbate social divisions. However, from the standpoint of populist movements, filter bubbles can have a mobilising effect, favouring the formation of online crowds of like-minded individuals who, while sharing no prior associational link, hold similar opinions.

Another element of social media algorithms that tends to favour the formation of online crowds is the so-called 'network effect', namely, the tendency that makes highly connected nodes likely to become even more connected. In the context of social media,

this is seen in the way in which timeline algorithms tend to favour instantly popular content – those posts that attract a high number of reactions in the few seconds and minutes since their publication. Wael Ghonim, the administrator of the Facebook page Kullena Khaled Said that was pivotal in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, suggested that this effect leads to a 'mobocratic' tendency which tends to favour 'sensational content that more eyeballs will turn toward' (Gardels, 2016). This may explain why the most outrageous propaganda channelled by Donald Trump via his personal Twitter account managed to attract enormous public attention, often diverting the public eye from more serious kinds of content.

It may be argued that the mobocratic tendency of social media described by Wael Ghonim does not necessarily lead to sensationalist and stupefying communication but can also serve progressive political ends. The focalisation and aggregation mechanisms inherent in social media algorithms furnish a fitting instrument for populist movements' efforts to unify an otherwise highly divided people. As Ernesto Laclau (2005) has argued, populist movements often make use of an 'empty signifier', allowing to fuse together disparate demands in a single platform and campaign. They attempt to overcome a situation in which people are fragmented along multiple class and identity lines, trying to make people aware of their common interests and common enemies.

The mobocratic tendency of social media, and the way in which it makes certain contents and leaders acquire a disproportionate visibility, can lend itself to such unifying mission of populist politics. This is seen in the virality acquired by populist memes celebrating the personality of candidates, for example, in the Trump's and the Sanders' campaigns. The personality and celebrity element of social media hereby provides a sort of focal point around which the crowd can gather and millions of disaffected individuals, otherwise deprived of common organisational affiliation, can come together as an online crowd multiplying the power of each of its members.

The most notorious cases of online crowds come from trolling attacks. In her book *Kill all Normies*, Angela Nagle (2017) describes the rabid online raids conducted by disgruntled individuals taking aim at all those people, and women in particular, who they consider to be representatives of a PC culture that threatens to eviscerate their masculinity. A case in point is the #GamerGate incident, an intense campaign of hate speech launched from message boards as 4chan and Gamasutra targeting women accused of betraying the videogaming community and the true ethos of videogamers. Many #Gamergate trolls went on to provide a base of support for Donald Trump's election campaign. A very different mobocratic logic was at play in Bernie Sanders' supporters' use of facebanking, a technique, similar to phonebanking, that involves inviting *en masse* people to attend campaign events publicised on Facebook. Despite the evident differences, what these examples share is the populist use of social media for gathering large numbers of people online in order to turn them into a militant support base and exploit their capacity for online mass co-operation.

We can thus conclude that social media is an object that has slipped out of the hands of their creators. Social media is the product of large Silicon Valley corporations such as Facebook and Google whose support for the neoliberal *Weltanschauung* is indisputable, but which have seen their platforms colonised by political contents and actors that raise a serious challenge to neoliberal ideology. The reasons for this surprising upset lie in the

great discontent that since the financial crisis is prevalent in society, and while being mostly latent in our public space, easily becomes manifest in online discussions. The populist hijacking of social media is steeped in the feelings of betrayal many Internet users hold against the neoliberal establishment and the digital corporations which promised them a world of connection, entertainment and comfort only to plunge them into economic insecurity. The 'amateurs' celebrated by digital gurus, who have seen their jobs being threatened by the economic crisis and the impending automation revolution, have gone on to become trolls, lone wolves who do not stay on their own anymore, but rather go on forming packs of wolves, that is, online crowds preying on all those figures they perceive as being part of the establishment by which they feel wronged.

To say that social media has developed a populist bias obviously does not entail affirming that establishment candidates cannot use social media. More modestly, it indicates that the underlying narrative and dominant value orientation of social media run counter to the key traits of establishment politics, including institutionalism, moderation, formality and the liberal pretence of rationality, and tend to favour populist movements that make no mystery about their antagonism to the establishment and are more able to exploit the suspicion towards authority and elites inherent in digital culture. Interestingly, also establishment candidates sometimes find themselves obliged to adopt populist rhetoric leading to paradoxical cases of digitally savvy 'establishment populists' as Emmanuel Macron in France and Matteo Renzi in Italy. The future will tell whether the populist potential of social media will only favour right-wing populists such as Donald Trump who are currently in the lead or whether a more progressive and hopeful form of populism, such as the one championed by the likes of Podemos, Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, will prevail. What is certain is that social media will continue to be a central arena where the conflict between establishment and anti-establishment formations will play out in the coming years.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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