

Social Media as a Catalyst of Populism: The Mutual Empowerment of Platforms and Populist Communication

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Abstract. Drawing on Müller’s definition of populism as an ideology opposing a pure “people” to a corrupt “elite”, this paper examines how contemporary social media environments act as catalysts of populist communication. Rather than treating social media platforms as neutral tools or populism as a purely offline phenomenon, the paper argues that they form a system of mutual empowerment. Platform characteristics—disintermediation, real-time data feedback, and algorithmic personalization—invite emotional, simplistic, and adversarial information, which populist actors further refine through communication strategies. At the everyday level, low-quality “fast-food” content, online hostility and an atmosphere of fear and anxiety encourage users to seek emotionally satisfying slogans instead of critical debate. Information cocoons and misinformation then help stabilize populist framing as “common sense” on social media. Finally, the commercial logic of the “attention economy” and the growing strength of populist parties has reinforced these dynamics. The paper concludes that understanding this mutual empowerment is crucial for improvement on platform governance, media literacy and the system of democratic consultation and dialogue.

Keywords: Populism, social media, mutual empowerment, information cocoons, misinformation.

1. Introduction

According to Müller, populism is an ideology that portrays politics as a moralistic confrontation between a one-sided, radical “people” and a corrupt, pejorative “elite”, with leaders claiming that they are one and only representation of the people’s will [1]. In recent years, populist parties and leaders have gradually moved from the political fringes to the mainstream center in many regions around the world. Some of them have not only won regional or national elections, but have also reshaped party competition, political agendas and patterns of polarization. As Vachudova notes, populist parties on the economic left and cultural right have accelerated the decline of traditional mainstream parties by intensifying competition on new issues [2]. Therefore, populism has become one of the most popular topics to focus on in contemporary political science study.

On the other hand, the rise of social media has profoundly changed how political information is produced and received. Platforms such as Facebook, X, and TikTok allow political actors to bypass traditional ways of political communication, building highly personalized figures, and get in touch

with people directly and informally. In the same time, social media platforms seem to favor these kinds of contents, especially when they are emotional and simplistic. Therefore, populist communication methods are somehow overlapping with the logic of social media.

This article will examine how social media can act as a "catalyst" for populism by analyzing the role that social media plays in the promotion of populism, and consider what consequences this may cause, along with providing some practical suggestions.

2. Literature review

Existing research on social media and populism can be divided into several trends. The first part of work highlights how online communication is becoming increasingly emotional and hostile. Studies of online anonymity show that users are more likely to use rude, aggressive language and display open hostility in discussions [3]. Other authors argue that sensational and pessimistic posts create an "atmosphere of fear and anxiety", and elicit higher levels of angry, hostile and extreme emotional reactions [4,5]. Building on this, scholars such as Casullo and Hopster describe digital politics as a form of "real-time emotional theatre," where authenticity, anger and intimacy replace careful argument and critical reviewing [6,7].

The second trend focuses on the characteristics of online communication itself, such as echo chambers, filter bubbles and information cocoons. Hiaeshutter-Rice stresses that exposure to diverse viewpoints is crucial for democratic citizenship, while algorithmic mode can trap users in one-sided environments that hinder compromise [8]. Pariser's notion of the "filter bubble" similarly warn that recommendation systems and like-minded clustering may stabilize populist "us versus them" views [9].

The third group of studies examines misinformation, hybrid media and data-driven communication. Flew and Iosifidis argue that the hybrid media system blurs boundaries between news, professional commentary, and fake news, personal views. This lowers the threshold for what counts as accountable, reliable and believable information. Although users often rely on engagement metrics as a shortcut for credibility, which makes it easier for fake news, one-sided fragmented information and memes that are entertainment-oriented to circulate [10]. Populist actors take advantage of this communication environment by strategically packaging their words with inflammatory slogans and sensational images, simplified messages through constant monitoring of audience reactions, which is what Guerrero-Solé calls "data-driven populism" [11].

However, most of the work focuses on each separate field. Studies on online hostility, echo chambers, misinformation, platform affordances, and populist leadership often run in parallel rather than in dialogue with one another. As a result, people know a lot about specific mechanisms, but less about how they interact to create a broader, mutually reinforcing relationship between social media and populism. This paper aims to address that gap by bringing these strands together and analyzing how platform design, content logic and populism characteristics jointly contribute to the "mutual empowerment" between social media and populism.

Understanding how social media catalyses populism is important for both academic research and political practice. Populism is no longer a marginal phenomenon but an innegligible issue in modern politics, and social media has become one of the main streams where citizens are involved in politics. If social media systematically favors emotional, antagonistic messages, then the quality of public discourse in civil society is deeply affected at a very fundamental level. As a result, studying this "mutual empowerment" between social media and populism helps explain why extremism, polarization, anti-elitist narratives and so on spread so easily, while more professional, rational, critical political voices are struggling to gain visibility. The paper connects debates on echo

chambers, misinformation and populism politics in a more integrated way, contributing to the discussions on platform governance, media literacy and democratic consultation and dialogue [12].

3. Analysis

This section analyzes how social media and populism reinforce each other at three interconnected levels. First, it examines how social media platform features, disintermediation, real-time data feedback, and personalization appeal to populist communication styles, and how populist actors adapt themselves to them. Second, it discusses about everyday "fast-food" content and user behavior, showing how emotional, low-quality posts, information cocoons and misinformation normalize populist framing. Third, it explores the commercial logic of social media, arguing that the attention economy and the populist style of communication create a structural "mutual empowerment" between social media and populism.

First, at the level of political communication, social media and populism are interactive with one another instead of as separate phenomena. Populist discourse does not merely "use" platforms from the outside; It develops within the fundamental logic of social media and is a response to that logic. At the same time, social media is not neutral platforms that mechanically transmit whatever users want to say. Their design, algorithms and metrics actively select, rank and filter content in ways that systematically favour some certain styles over others. Hopster describes this configuration as a set of "populist affordances": Weakening of gatekeeping, a preference for sensational and emotional messages, the encouragement of short, personalized posts, and the constant measurement of audience reactions [7]. These affordances leave space for narratives of "the people" against "the elite", increasing the popularity of communicators who like to use simple, antagonistic wording.

The disintermediation of political communication is a central element in this process. Platforms such as Facebook, X and TikTok make it possible to bypass the filtering mechanisms of news media and political parties, presenting information in an unedited, "direct from the source" format [10]. Political actors increasingly address followers as if they were speaking in a private chat rather than in a formal public sphere. This encourages a style of communication that is informal, personalized and emotional. Casullo describes this environment as "real-time emotional theatre": political messages are staged as performances of closeness, using selfies, behind-the-scenes clips and everyday language to create a sense of intimacy [6]. Sharing on social media platforms, such as timelines, stories, and live streams, encourages this form of performance and encourages viewers to respond immediately through likes, comments, and shares in the absence of responsible in-depth reflections.

Populist discourse fits this theatrical structure particularly well. Emotional tone and frequent first-person narrative, have been shown to trigger more online populist engagement than ideological content itself [13]. Since the one of the core claims of populism is the unified, morally pure "people" against distant and corrupt "elite", during the disintermediated communication on social media, this claim can be performed by binding communicators and followers as "we" in a colloquial, intimate tone, and contrasting their daily struggles with the alleged privilege of politicians, bureaucrats or experts.

Social media provides a stage for this performance; through social media, populist communicators argue daily, using populist logic, who should be counted as the people, who are the enemies of the people, and how they are the true representatives of the people. The relationship is not simply one of use, but of adaptation: social media logic drives communicators to pursue immediacy and emotionality, and populist narratives are themselves built around these elements.

The interaction, however, is not one-sided. Populist communicators are very "hard-working"; By monitoring the response of the audience, they quickly learn which kinds of content perform well on social media and adjust their performance accordingly. Guerrero-Solé calls it "data-driven populism", which how posts are constantly tweaked based on engagement metrics, audience retention and the sentiment expressed in comments [11]. Emotional slogans, moralized judgments, and hostility against "the enemy" are not only ideological expression, but also practical responses to feedback from the social media platform. Content that generates a surge in likes and shares will be repeatedly mentioned, emphasized, and refined, and unfortunately, this content is often not in-depth and cautious. Simultaneously, algorithms also learn from user behavior, and it is shown that content centered on crisis, betrayal and the moral purity of "the people" reliably generates more engagement. Over time, recommendation systems begin to privilege these patterns, producing a feedback loop in which platform dynamics and populist scripts continually reinforce each other [10].

The second level of mutual empowerment is correlated with everyday, low-quality "fast-food" content. Studies on online anonymity suggest that users are more likely to employ hostile and rude language when they feel irresponsible, which makes discussions more negative and uncivilized [3]. Meanwhile, Costello argues that sensational and pessimistic posts contribute to an "atmosphere of fear and anxiety" in online spaces [4]. In such an environment, the emotional intensity of a post often matters more than its factual accuracy or argumentative strength. For example, some analyses of social media posts have shown that messages attacking political out-groups and expressing moral outrage are substantially more likely to be shared than neutral or policy-focused content [14]. Content that offers simplistic explanation, fierce controversy and expression of moral indignation tends to be more "welcomed" than nuanced analysis. As a result, populist framing suits extremely well to this structure, because they narrow complex political conflicts down into short, affective narratives about "the people" being betrayed by and oppressed by elites and threatened by serious crises and dangerous enemies.

Crucially, users are not just passive recipients of these dynamics. They actually actively participate in them. As a matter of fact, there is a large proportion of people do not log onto social media just to see someone "say out loud" what they already feel or acknowledge, or to find expressions of anger, frustration or pride that resonate with their own experiences, without scrupulous examination on whether the message is populist, biased or even factually correct. In Casullo's terms, digital politics is largely consumed as an emotional performance: followers look for voices that speak on their behalf, not for balanced policy documents [6]. Gustafson and Weinrib argue that this situation leads to massive formations of "individualized charismatic authority", in which sincerity, authenticity and emotional resonance take over deliberation and critical distance [15]. Users nearly obsessively value posts that make them feel genuine and cathartic, even when these posts are simplistic, exclusionary or misleading. From a more theoretical angle, DeHanas similarly emphasizes the charismatic and redemptive dimensions of populism, arguing that emotionally powerful leader-follower relationships help propel populist movements and weaken democratic safeguards [16].

This social media communication environment has profound influences on the normalization of populist framing. When users repeatedly see and share content that reduces politics to one-sided, extreme, and irresponsible emotional expression and confrontation, these patterns become part of the common language of the social media platform. Therefore, populist slogans are no longer restricted to official party channels, they even appear in the forms of humorous, easily shareable memes and jokes [17]. Over time, the line between serious political propaganda and casual everyday conversation has become blurred. What matters most in public discussion is complaints about

politicians, experts or institutions in an entertaining way. Social media and populism thus co-produce a pool in which distrust and discontent of existing political agents, idealization of "the people", and even blind worship of populists, are taken for granted.

Algorithmic personalization and information cocoons further deepen this interaction. Recommendation systems constantly adapt to users' prior behavior, showing more of the content they have previously engaged with. For instance, if someone repeatedly interacts with posts that frame politics as a conspiracy against ordinary citizens, similar messages are pushed more often. Over time, this can draw users into narrow "information cocoons," a variant of the classic echo chamber effect, that traps users inside one-sided content [8]. Pariser's notion of the "filter bubble" highlight how such like-minded clustering stabilizes simple "us versus them" way of thinking by making it hard for users to encounter contents from alternative perspectives [9].

Misinformation and hybrid media dynamics add another dimension to the mutual empowerment between social media and populism. Flew and Iosifidis argue that the hybrid media system makes it quite difficult to distinguish between professional journalism, commentary and misinformation, for it lowers the barrier to entry for publishing relevant information [10]. Under the attention-driven logic of social media, contents are pushed based on clicks, likes and shares instead of quality and accountability. However, users often see interaction metrics as a shortcut to credibility, but it mostly leads them to simply eye-catching headlines, out-of-context statistics, and visually appealing memes. Therefore, populist communicators learn to exploit this situation by strategically packaging their claims. They combine simplistic slogans with dramatic visuals or emotional wording, along with monitoring ongoing data feedback to refine them [7].

In fact, hybrid media flows amplify these effects to some extent. Populist contents that perform well on social media is often reported by traditional media as "viral" or "controversial". Although these reports may be negative, when they circulate back onto platforms, it actually enhances the popularity of those populist contents, which populists claim it as a proof of the importance of their contents [10]. In short, populist narratives benefit greatly from this cycle: they can originate from eye-catching posts, gain a certain legitimacy by becoming the topics of news media, and then reappear online with an additional "halo" of relevance. Social media and populism thus collaborate in a way of misleading what should actually counts as politically significant. Stories that fit populist frames, such as crisis, betrayal, corruption, victimized "people", are more likely to be selected and repeated across different media.

A third level of mutual empowerment concerns the commercial logic of social media. In the platform economy, populist topics tend to generate more engagement, with controversy, scandal and intense confrontation keep users clicking, commenting and sharing. For companies with business models that rely on advertising and user attention, there are strong incentives to tolerate, and sometimes implicitly encourage, such content. As a result, content moderation is often vague or poorly enforced, not to mention that recommendation algorithms systematically boost posts with high engagement rates. Therefore, this commercial logic of viewing populist rhetoric as a valuable source of traffic, rather than as a potential threat to democratic consultation and dialogue, greatly benefits the spread of populism.

Flew and Iosifidis are the ones that describe this configuration as "mutual empowerment", that is, populist communicators supply attention-grabbing material, and platforms reward them with visibility, data and advertising revenue [10]. The special issue of *New Media & Society* on "Populism in the Era of Twitter" notes this as a "truth shift", in which emotional resonance increasingly outweighs factual accuracy in determining what counts as politically relevant information [18]. Rumors, memes and partisan story posts travel along the same algorithmic rails as

professional journalism. In this context, social media and populism are structurally intertwined, each reinforcing the other's logic of conflict, simplification and permanent mobilization.

4. Conclusion

This article argues that social media should not be merely viewed as a neutral tool for promoting populist messages, nor should it be considered the sole, independent cause of populism. In fact, social media and populism form a dynamic system of mutual empowerment. Platform affordances such as disintermediation, real-time data feedback and algorithmic personalization invite communicators to speak in an emotional, simplified and antagonistic style, where Populist discourse fits this structure well enough to adapt to it through data-driven experimentation and constant performance of closeness to people.

At the same time, the everyday culture of low-quality, "fast-food" content on social media reinforces these tendencies. Anonymous or semi-anonymous environments provide space for hostile and pessimistic expression, and sensational posts create an ongoing atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Under this situation, many users do not primarily search for balanced arguments or verified information, but for emotionally satisfying slogans that express anger and belonging. Then, as for platforms, algorithmic personalization, information cocoons and so on make it easier for populist framing to repeat, stabilize and expand. In addition, misinformation and hybrid media systems further blur the boundary between factual reporting and emotional content, fueling the spread of populism even more.

Finally, the commercial logic of platforms locks these dynamics into place. Populist topics have a structural appeal in the attention economy because controversy and moral outrage can generate reliable engagement. Under "mutual empowerment", Social media gains traffic, while populist actors gain visibility and recognition. In this sense, social media acts as a catalyst of populism: it accelerates, intensifies and normalizes populist communication in people's political lives. Although this does not mean to demonizing all online participation, it does highlight the need for more careful platform governance, stronger media literacy and renewed efforts to protect the space of pluralism, critical debate in contemporary democracies.

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