Abstract

The recent years have exceedingly witnessed an ascent of leaders and movements worldwide that ostensibly reflect a certain ‘populist’ sentiment. In this connection, the world’s transforming political landscape has, in the past two decades, seen populist parties constitute parliaments based on an anti-elite, anti-corruption rhetoric – a new form of what is supposedly democracy. The rush towards energetic authoritarian ‘solutions’, purportedly people-centric, demonstrate wide ranging consequences from war (Russia, Turkey); ethno-religious ‘purification’ (India, Hungary, Myanmar); magnification of presidential powers and the corresponding abandonment of civil rights and rule of law in China, Rwanda, Venezuela, Thailand and the Philippines. These only constitute some of the telling examples. This paper intends to examine the evolution of populism vis-a-vis the ways in which it is increasingly being impacted by digital technology. One way in which I will approach this is through a brief study of the history of populism to explore its specific order or pattern of communication. This can inform ways in which digital technologies are shaping new structures and bringing hitherto absent dimensions to this age-old political/social phenomenon. I am motivated to explore the relationship between network society and political manipulation and investigate, if such a relationship at all exists, whether it is veiled in a garb of ‘populist inclusivity’. This study has three inter-related steps. In the first, I would attempt to formulate a working definition of populism. Secondly, I shall trace the evolution of populist propaganda and investigate if it is underscored historically by a common rhetoric. Finally, I attempt to demonstrate how digital technologies shape popular politics in recent times and impact the nature and content of publics’ discourses, foregrounding a complicated nexus in performing propaganda politics.
Keywords

populism, social media, politics, manipulation, propagandization, democracy, political communication

1. Introduction

In the 2014 general election Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) successfully unseated the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), after ten years, on the basis of a nation-wide overwhelming majority. His party tapped into an anti-elite, anti-incumbent, public sentiment to convince voters that his government would bring ‘acche din’ (good days) back in India and that everything would be picture-perfect thereafter. This victory was foregrounded by an aggressive campaign portraying Modi as a ‘messiah’ of the common people, claiming he would bring development to every average, frustrated Indian. Modi’s ascent can be attributed to what Hall (1979: 172-186) terms “authoritarian populism”. This is a particular kind of conservative politics characterized by polarizing ‘helpless’ commoners against ‘crooked’ elites. Modi, a ‘strongman’ followed by nearly 43.1 million people on Twitter, drew explicit distinctions between ‘true’ Indians and their ‘enemies’ – between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – constructing an authentic ‘people’ against outsiders (Gudavarthy 2018: 2-10); in this case, he pitted Hindus against Muslims. The election in India is possibly a microcosm of a recent global phenomenon in the rise of populist leaders or movements, be it Brexit, Donald Trump in America or the polls of Hungary and Austria, referendums in Greece, Italy, and political change in the Philippines. They appear to have one common pattern – the rise of populist frontmen and politicians.

The notion of populism itself is not new, and can be traced, as some argue, to the end of the nineteenth century with Narodinki in Russia and the formation of the People’s Party in the United States (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2013: 32-35). Populism’s simultaneous spread and growth needs critical attention internationally (Cox 2017: 10-20). Furthermore, in the present time, it is inextricably entangled with broadcast and print media in the international political scene (Taguieff 1995: 9-43). This makes it exigent to interrogate the role of digital media in pushing ‘pro-people’ agenda and forming public opinion. In this context, “telepopulism” is a term that Taguieff (1995: 9-43) had coined in the nineties for a new kind of populism catalysed by television media and “adapted to the needs of television mediatization and liable to orientate all the typical classes of populism”. This possibly needs critical scrutiny in the context of the digital age. In its time, Taguieff claims, a phenomenon of ‘video-politics’ provided public
legitimization to certain controversial political figures by enhancing their visibility. However, some have also questioned the claim of its singular or dominant impact. Most people were exposed to politics only until there was no cable television in the West. Eventually, with the rise of cable television, people inevitably chose entertainment over political news (Morozov 2011: 59-62).

2. Populism, Media and Spectacle

Today the relationship between media, politics and society has changed significantly. Political interests are seen to converge with commercial media’s propensity to display and a public’s appetite to consume drama. This marks a massive shift from the press merely being an apparatus to provide information, ideas, and debate concerning issues of public significance in order to promote a democratic public sphere. In the news, spectacle of popular, polarizing leaders has been posited by some as a win-win deal for everyone in the room, simultaneously as propaganda and entertainment; as the media attracts eyeballs and politicians can spread their messages far and beyond (Mazzoleni/Stewart/Horsfield 2003: 3-10). Communication of leaders with the people was, however, mediated through televising: “the most important emerging factor of populist ideology” (Albertazzi /McDonnell 2008: 6; Reinemann et al. 2017: 14; Taggart 2000: 91). Going further, this is relevant to understand modes in which mass media has enabled direct channels for political figures to interact with people (Krämer 2014: 42-60).

Innovations in technology and social media have had a significant impact on democracy globally. Technology has empowered citizens to amplify their voices and hold governments accountable. But it has also enabled politicians and governments to seep into the ecosystem, bypassing traditional media organisations, through new modes of communication and participation. With populist ideology antagonizing elites versus the people, the Internet in recent years has allowed the expression of the general will of the common people, with more voice and space to actively steer the political system and its activity (Mény/Surel 2002: 1-21; Mudde 2004: 542–563; Rooduijn 2014: 726-744). As a result, in a very short time, the general question of the influence of the Internet on international politics has shifted to what its extent of penetration is and, furthermore, through what means. Digital media gathers pace in usurping every aspect of contemporary and future onlife (Floridi 2015: 95-98) with its immense potential to gather infinite amounts of data and allowing users to express themselves in a variety of ways using written words, sounds and images (Schjetjer/Tirosh 2018: 1-3). This makes it urgent to investigate its possible ramifications on opinion-formation and political trust-making.
As such phenomena witness an unprecedented surge across nations, ideological ambivalence often makes it difficult to pinpoint a specific kind of people who populists want to actually represent. Nonetheless, although apparently ambiguous and multifaceted, constructing a working definition of what populism is, becomes necessary. These relate to both its content and outputs. Several interrelated strands of thought, to an extent, are helpful to synthesize such a working definition, for the purpose of this discussion. First, the term populism is inseparably linked to the word populus—the people—from which it partly derives its meaning. Secondly, it is closely connected to the adjective 'popular', with which it shares an operative logic (Heinisch et al. 2017: 21-25). Third, different connotations based on social and cultural contexts can help to posit it “as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be polarised into homogeneous and antagonistic camps – the pure commoners versus the corrupt elite. Such polarisation is embodied not only in its content but also its outputs. These outputs, argue that politics (or democracy) should express the volonté générale (general will) of the people (Mudde 2004: 543). Furthermore, populism operates through rhetoric (Cranmer 2011: 286-307; Jagers/Walgrave 2007: 319-345) and a non-intellectual or non-nuanced binary (is or is not!) frame (Caiani/della Porta 2011: 180-202). Vis-à-vis its front men, it embodies particular political styles (Kaçar, 2017: 179-180), or strategies (Barr 2009: 29-48), who privilege the languages and origin of such general will. Finally, in a historical sense, populism is associated with class and caste divisions and elite-vs-non-elites. Consequently, it has had an enduring connection with ‘heartland’ politics, where ‘common’ people feel betrayed or exploited by ostensibly liberal values of elites in larger cities (Mastropaolo 2017: 59-72). For the discursive position that follows, we can define populism through the aforementioned attributes but embedded in specific social contexts. Today, it can be grasped by the concept of opportunity structures because of the Internet’s significance and the fragmented ways in which such politics is communicated today through social media.

3. Populist Political Communication

The surge in populist sentiments, many believe, is connected to the modes of communicating ideas. As it increases over time and in space, understanding communication in relation to populism’s growth is crucial for the social scientist’s rubric. To get to the core of what resonates with people and what does not, firstly the content of what is being said needs attention and analysis. Common to populist communication is reference to ‘the people’ as justifications for its actions “by appealing to and identifying with the people” (Jagers/Walgrave 2007: 4). The vocabulary of populist propaganda, it is often argued, emphasises agitation, vocalising exaggeration, calculated provocations, and intended breach of political and socio-cultural
taboos (Heinisch 2003: 91-130) such as Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) candidates “intentionally provoking scandals” (Schmuck/Matthes/Boomgaard 2016: 85-98), Bharatiya Janata Party in India referring to Congress party President Rahul Gandhi as ‘Pappu’ (coddled and dependent), Hillary Clinton pronounced ‘crooked’ by President Donald Trump, assaults by the left-wing populists of Podemos in Spain or Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro’s ‘I’m pro-torture, and the people are too’.

These recent examples qualify the argument that most populist leaders attempt to speak the language of the common man, designed to align with non-politicians. Street language, simple in its construction, shares affinity with casual, unguarded talks. Aristotle famously said in professing Pathos: “Persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions” (Aristotle 350 BC cited in Ross 2010: 7-12), possibly referring to how politicians’ appeals have, historically, connected with voters’ sentiments rather than logic. Traditionally, however, populist parties were dependent on the media for visibility and reach. This dependence, historically, mirrored their weaker organizational and ideological power compared to traditional parties. So, it was through histrionics and shock that they solicited more time and space and consequently, viewership. The commercial media found stakes in rendering visible populist actors because controversial headlines attract larger audiences (Mazzoleni/Stewart/Horsfield 2003: 3-10). In their attempt to successfully sell political news, the media tended to project the political process as more combative and spectacular, by extension, making it interesting for the audience. It splashed provocative and controversial statements by leaders on front pages anticipating resonance with the anti-elitist and disadvantaged readers.

In this context, the term media populism lends itself to three distinct perspectives: populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism now through the Internet (Esser 2016: 365-380). Populism by the media refers to media organisations designing their content in a way that is inherently populist, when commercial media avoids policy issues and substantive social/cultural problems, instead, highlighting personalities, popularity, glitz, glamour and controversies. Pitting the government against opposition, authoritarian or as a team, the media portrays complex issues of politics in just one binary – winners and losers (Wayne/Murray 2009: 416-433). It is that kind of content – aggressive, controversial, violent but entertaining – that increases the “spreadability” quotient and makes it easier to circulate some kinds of content more than others, that appeal to a community’s motivation for discussing and sharing more (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 4). Populism through the media is a phenomenon that strengthens politicians’ populist messages and propaganda. Mazzoleni calls this “media complicity”, when the media highlights and amplifies these actors’ slogans,
arguments, ideological perspectives and consequently, their public visibility and perceived legitimacy (Mazzoleni 2008, cited in Esser 2016: 4-10). Finally, populist citizen journalism is the third and the most recent mode, beginning when media organizations allow audience members or readers to write populist messages in the form of reader comments on their websites. It’s observed that while elite newspaper organizations’ editorial content maintains a neutral position for or against these populist actors, opening their online editions for readers’ comments can provide a platform for public hatred towards minorities, other disadvantaged communities and also women (Esser 2016: 365-380).

These modes of communication point to how the purported avenue for direct engagement of politicians with their constituencies has revealed problems that were hitherto unforeseeable, especially with the Internet today playing indispensable roles in making or breaking governments across the world. Although an increasing number of citizens uses the Internet to get exposed to government policies, discuss with each other the rights and wrongs of parliamentary actions, contact elected officials and influence their friends and families to think identically, the Internet’s contribution to democracy is open to question. While it has immense potential to expose people to material and information that was inaccessible in the past, it is also true that what is communicated in bulk to the masses is limited to very specific topics and narrow perspectives (Sunstein 2017: 57). As the advancement of digital technologies create abundance of communication tools, citizens are becoming less and less committed to their roles within traditional social structures such as the family, church, trade union and neighbourhoods. As a result, they have been transformed into actors like users, customers and prosumers (Lovink 2016: 16). As the social becomes synonymous to network, it creates a communication landscape that Chadwick (2013: 2-26) calls hybrid, where the mass media and the new digital media merge into a new whole (Mazzoleni/Bracciale 2018: 3). In this era when personal visibility is the new status and power symbol (Keen 2012: 13), the focus is more on how orientation to information is becoming a prominent driver of political activity. The Internet and digital technology’s expansion has somehow changed the rules of political communication. It follows a ‘media-logic’ different from radio, television and print outlets’ sender-receiver asymmetry (Mazzoleni/Bracciale 2018: 3 ). As the job of gatekeepers becomes redundant, because they no longer determine what is being published to the masses and therefore what is to become the public’s social discourse, “hypervisibility” (Keen 2012: 119) has ushered in “network media logic” (Klinger/Svensson 2015 cited in Mazzoleni/Bracciale 2018: 3).
4. The Internet and Populism

As the distinction between the mass and interpersonal slowly fades away, democracy now performs beyond the ballot box, on a day-to-day basis in real time. It is no longer confined to politicians selling their worth once in four or five years and voters taking active interest in politics just then. As citizens become users, and as journalism becomes an avalanche of consumer generated ‘content’ that is built on the web, there is a shift in the infrastructure of media industries. Networked communication makes visible the once invisible work of active audiences in creating value and expanding engagement around media properties (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013: 152). Relentless retweets and shares by a wide array of consumers and interaction between traditional and new media formats facilitate political actors to spread their emotional, personal and direct content through the Internet. As content flows across multiple media platforms, and audiences migrate from one platform to another in search of entertainment, news, information this marks a convergence of technological, industrial, cultural and societal changes in the minds of individuals (Jenkins, 2006: 2) and political actors. In the present time, the media and politicians equally cash in on that amalgamation of social interactions.

The Internet, as an interactive medium, marks a departure from the one-sided communication of traditional media. As a large spectrum of people become active stakeholders in the chain of information selection, this changing landscape has created unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction among political groups and their target audience. Since new media and the Internet are relatively inexpensive, powerful tools for challenging the givens of mainstream or popular culture (Lievrouw 2011: 1f.) are now emerging. However, these were expected to deliver much more than they have in recent years: as a direct medium, providing equal opportunities to individuals to understand and interpret the goings-on in the centre of politics and governance. But most criticisms maintain that the Internet has, in reality, acted as more of a catalyst for populist communication by amplifying leaders’ agendas like ‘conflict framing’ – refugees vs locals – ‘strategic framing’ – when elections are portrayed as a strategic game pitting one against the other – and ‘personalization’ – when the leaders’ personalities become more important than the nation’s political framework and policies (Sorensen 2017: 137-152). In many socio-political and cultural contexts, such as in South Asia, as well as America, where digital media play the role of the most important distributor of news in today’s times, maintaining various social media interfaces with private-public interests and images, has predominated governance and politics (Julier 2017: 15).

As discussed earlier, populist politicians choose colourful language and emotive expressions, in words or provocative imagery, over explicitly stating their motives from an ideological
standpoint. Recent political victories across the world suggest how the Internet is a nodal source of amplifying ‘purported’ virtues of the political actors, for example with the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats emerging as the third largest party with 17.6 percent of votes in September last year, far-right President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro gliding into power in October last year, or the more widely discussed instances of Donald Trump becoming President of the United States. With the Internet as a mode of communication, such agents reflect a common trajectory – the politics of attack. Coarse, insulting and attacking language act as the main ammunition on social media’s political battlefields. Already disgruntled with the traditional media for joining hands with the ‘corrupt establishment’, electorates buy into these anti-establishment, anti-elitist arguments (Jagers/Walgrave 2007: 319-345) on the Internet as the only solution to all their social, cultural and economic problems.

Furthermore, social media platforms are configured in ways that once certain posts have built up an audience, these very ‘popular’ ideas recursively accelerate and multiply. Their embedded systems select and prioritize content by algorithmically translating user activity into ‘most relevant’ or ‘trending’ (Poel/Dijck 2014: 188-201). The politics of algorithms personalizes all our moves and operates as an invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, and stopping us from exploring the unknown (Pariser 2011: 12). In this context, arguments on the Internet’s promise to make the world a fairer place (Keen 2015: 13) seem misplaced at this point in time. Its operational structure engulfs people in black holes of eco chambers, where they only hear echoes of their own voices as narcissistic clones of each other. This perpetuates an illusion of exchanging information, but it occurs within a closed system of uncontested rhetoric, spreading only because the ‘network’ makes it believable synthetically, causing fragmentation and intolerance for counterpoints and what is different or unfamiliar (Sunstein 2017: 57).

5. Conclusion

The body of literature that this discussion is predicated on, even in their different positions taken, is in general agreement on how the Internet and digital communication, in spite of their demonstrated as well as potential vicissitudes, are here to stay. However, the nexus of populist politics with digital communication reveals a gap between societies’ capacity to make positive contributions by deciding and dictating the political agenda meaningfully and what actually occurs. This raises questions on the structures through which digital communication can provide the necessary knowledge that balance populism and substantive democratic politics. The digital revolution, which came into the forefront to decentralize control and
harmonise people (Taplin 2017: 28), has instead created a new kind of political hierarchy that disenfranchises modes of critical thinking and individual consciousness.

In recent years, we have seen several political movements across the world that have been labelled as populist. However, keeping in mind the large differences in political discourses among and within continents, it is important to clarify the different ways in which populism is manifesting itself on the Internet across the world. This paper’s working definition of populism has attempted to navigate the commonalities as well as dissimilarities in populist ideology to a certain extent. This has helped interrogate whether the media and digital communication in political activity actually discerns a ‘popular’ movement on the Internet that truly represents the will of the people, from a mere echo of an unaware or partially-aware majoritarianism. This is relevant and becomes urgent to realize healthy democracies.

On the one hand, finding that these are connected makes it pertinent to ask if prevention of the decay of traditional media organizations – which have had the role of providing critical counterpoints, is necessary. On the other, to what degree it is important to stop filtering information through mediated identities and calculated interactions; and experience freedom, equality and politics in public spheres (Floridi 2015: 5-10), must also be queried. This becomes especially relevant from the analyses presented here that reveal the entanglement of media and digital communication technologies with populist ideologies.

Preceding discussions also demonstrate how, in the noise and shrillness of conflict-based content that interconnects populism and digital media, important social issues can be marginalised. In addition, such noise also reflexively allows misinformation and vendetta politics to seep in and dictate political terms. This makes it important to reflect on whether independent regulatory institutions should compel tech companies, the one-percent monopolists, to develop substantive and systemic ways to accommodate the dynamism and humanism of citizens’ voices outside the majority. As Wu (2011: 22) points out, both investors and inventors are a collective party to deciding and shaping the contours of the future – as “smarts coupled with capital”. He argues that monopolies are akin to centralization of power in how innovation is directed. This is complicated by the claim that some engineers and executives in the Silicon Valley developed these electronic networks with no accountability of future social and cultural impact. This is precisely what allows populist communication to wreak havoc in online space. This is exacerbated when devoid of regulatory scrutiny or if such scrutiny is loosely deployed.

Such findings raise important questions. How would future academic and professional endeavour focus on the structures of societal, scientific, legal and civic instruments to regulate and monitor collaborations between political and technical actors, to prevent the prolif-
eration of one-sided propaganda? This will require a considered judgement on whether some of the demonstrated connections of populism and its persuasive supports embedded in digital communication are desirable or not, to begin with. It will need an acute understanding and explicit acceptance of the value-loaded and non-neutral dimensions of web technologies. The acknowledgement and recognition that the implications of web-driven technologies, beyond their original design and foreseeable intents, have far-ranging consequences in the non-digital realm must become the norm rather than the exception. This is indispensable to safeguard societies’ communities’ and individuals’ substantive freedoms and capacities in the processes of participating in critically argumentative politics and political choice, even within the propagandist connectedness of populism and digital communications.

References


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Short biography of the author

As a former journalist in India, **Rituparna Banerjee** has worked for The Economist Intelligence Unit, The Indian Express and Mint (HT Media Ltd). Currently, she is studying Digital Communication Leadership (DCLead) to understand the interplay between changes and design of digital media technologies on the one hand, and transition in the ways the citizens adopt and use this media in their everyday life, on the other. When not studying, she dreams of becoming a famous detective in her beloved hometown – Calcutta – in India.

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