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Digital populism and disinformation in *post-truth* times

Abstract

This article presents an attempt to understand the relationship between digital populism and *post-truth* politics. At first, we will try to understand the fuzzy semantic category of populism. Next, we examine the growth of right-wing populism in Europe and its main characteristics. Finally, we analyze how the current model of networked communication, particularly direct communication, and the anatomy of digital social networks, become a fertile field for the dissemination of populist rhetoric, articulating the concept with the modern mechanisms of disinformation and falsification of reality.

Keywords
Digital populism, disinformation, *post-truth*.

1. Populism: a state of the art

The term "populist" is almost always used to describe a wide range of political actors, parties, and movements, from the left to the right, which structure their political strategy around a dualistic and simplifying conception of social reality. A semantic category of multiple variants, populism manufactures a Manichean discourse on social reality, based on the popular will to achieve power and to combat an enemy of the people, generally identified with the elite. It thrives in countries facing a crisis of the party system, with a low civic and democratic culture, or in countries that, although they have developed a stable party system, have failed in the process of mediation between politics and citizens, generating feelings of reprobation towards the dominant political class, nicknamed the elite or the caste.

In fact, populism has become a prominent theme in the contemporary political scene. A phenomenon of different manifestations and variants, it can arise in the ideological spectrum of the left or the right, just as it can have different contents depending on the establishment against which it is mobilized (Canovan, 1999, p. 4; Moffit & Tormey, 2013, p. 381). A significant aspect of populism is personalism and the figure of a charismatic leader. This leader, presented as a messiah, usually asserts himself before the masses as the savior of the country, establishing an emotional connection with the electorate that expects a catharsis of the political system and the solution of unsatisfied social demands (Laclau, 2005). The "quintessence" of populism is popular mobilization based on personal attraction, since populist mobilization manages to assert itself as "the personification of the people:"

> By developing a personalistic electoral vehicle, without being linked to a strong political organization, the populist leader can present himself as a clean agent, fit to be the voice of the 'common man', since there are no intermediaries between him and the people (Mudde & Kaltawasser, 2017, p. 61).

As an ideology, populism arises in combination with other dense ideologies (*full ideologies*), sometimes so heterogeneous among themselves. The political scientists Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser are two of the main references for the ideational approach to populism,

defining the concept as: "a low-density ideology that sees society as ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the pure people versus the corrupt elite, and that politics should be the expression of the *volonté général* of the people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 18). Thus, populism lacks an ideology of its own, incorporating elements of other ideological currents, often quite dissimilar to each other:

> Unlike dense or total ideologies (e.g., fascism, liberalism, and socialism), low-density ideologies, such as populism, have a limited morphology, which appears necessarily tied to –and sometimes even juxtaposed– other ideologies. In fact, populism is almost always presented in conjunction with other ideological elements that appeal to a broader public (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 19).

Already in the work of Ernesto Laclau we find the conceptualization of populism as a particular logic or form of political discursiveness. According to the Argentine author, populism is a "political discursivity" that refers or points to democratic demands antagonistic to the institutionalist system dominated by administrative logic:

> by populism we do not mean a type of movement - identifiable with a particular social base or ideological orientation - but a political logic. All attempts to find what is specific to populism in facts such as membership of the peasantry or small landowners, or resistance to economic modernization, or manipulation by marginalized elites are, as we have seen, essentially wrong: will always be overtaken by an avalanche of exceptions (2005, p. 150).

The Argentine theorist argues that the centrality of the "people" as opposed to an external element that obstructs its objectives (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020), is a minimal and defining element of populism, even if the concept is a "vague" or "imprecise" signifier" (Laclau, 2005, p. 67). Laclau claims, however, that it is precisely the vague or empty character of the expression "people" that makes populism such a powerful phenomenon:

> populism presupposes the division of the social scenario into two domains. This division presupposes the presence of some privileged signifiers that condense around themselves the signification of an entire antagonistic field (the "regime," "the oligarchy," "the dominant groups," etc.) for the oppressed. Which of these signifiers will acquire this articulating role will obviously depend on a contextual history (2005, p. 114).

In the author's perspective, populism should be understood as a "political logic" (2005, p. 117) which invokes the supremacy of popular sovereignty, its political authority, against the administrative elites that have disappointed the expectations of the people. Laclau proposes the concept of social demand as a "minimum unit" for the occurrence of the populist political phenomenon. While the institutionalist discourse is dominated by the administrative logic that understands the demand as an individual request that may or may not be satisfied by the system, the populist discourse operates in an equivalential logic of articulation of unsatisfied and heterogeneous demands. The demands of the population initially flourish in isolation. If the system satisfies the initial demands, the problem ends there. But if the demand remains unsatisfied, individuals may realize that there are other equally unsatisfied demands, promoting an "articulation of unsatisfied demands" that affect different population groups. If the political system does not have the capacity to absorb all the demands, a "relationship of equivalence of unsatisfied demands" is established and a widening gulf separates the institutional system from the population, "germinating populism in an embryonic form" (2005, pp. 98-99). The articulation of unsatisfied demands –i.e., the accumulation of petitions, claims, social exclusions, by the population against the political system– generates an antagonism and a social space between "us-people" and "them-political power."

Thus, we already have two clear preconditions for populism: (1) the formation of an antagonistic internal border separating the "people" from the power; (2) an equivalential articulation of demands that makes the emergence of the "people" possible." There is a third

precondition that does not really emerge until political mobilization has reached a higher level: the unification of these various demands –whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a vague feeling of solidarity– into a stable system of significance (Laclau, 2005, p. 99).

Other theoretical-empirical analyses interpret populism as a "political style" centered on a performative repertoire used to create a relationship between the people and the political subject. It is a conception centered on the communicative strategies of political leaders, particularly on the discursive elements that make possible the polarization between "us" and "them," between the "pure people" and internal or external enemies, and on the direct communication strategies used (Canovan, 1999; Moffitt & Tormey, 2016).

In this sense, populist communication consists of an anti-establishment or anti-elite evocation and "celebration" of the pure people of the heartland, an "imagined community" where, according to the populist discursive construction, the "pure people" reside (Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2011, p. 187). Generally, the rhetoric used by populist leaders focuses on the perception of a state of crisis in need of repair. Therefore, the populist discourse is dramatized and performed by a discursive repertoire that appeals to a tension between antagonistic blocks, "friend" and "enemy," the people and the elites or out-groups, through a simple, direct language, the language of the "common man." It is important to note that the dichotomous division between "pure people" and the "others," identified as internal or external enemies of the "pure people," symbolically divides society into two groups. However, it should be noted that the category "others" does not always correspond to the elites of a country, since it can refer to "immigrants," "ethnic minorities," religious groups, economic or political elites and other social groups that provoke feelings of rejection in a given social context and that are, at some point, held responsible for social problems by populist rhetoric.

If the symbolic division of society into two homogeneous but antagonistic groups is a necessary condition for the identification of populism, as is the criticism of the elites, political scientist Jan-Werner Müller adds another that we feel it is important to emphasize: *antipluralism*. In Müller's view, populists, when in government, manifest three aspects: they seek to appropriate the state apparatus, resort to corruption and to "mass clientelism" –exchange of material benefits or bureaucratic favors in exchange for the political support of citizens who become "clients" of populists– and systematically strive to suppress civil society, justifying their behavior with anti-pluralistic attitudes, claiming that they alone represent the people. The author considers that populism is a danger to democracy, especially because the threats come from within democracy. The political actors who constitute the danger speak in the language of democratic values: "The danger is populism: a degraded form of democracy that promises to do good under the highest democratic ideals ('Let the people rule!')" (Müller, 2017).

Also Pappas considers populism to be a threat to contemporary democracies. According to the author, in order to be classified as populist, a party or politician must have two antagonistic characteristics: it needs to demonstrate loyalty to democracy and, also, to defend non-liberal tactics. In other words, populism is almost always labeled as illiberal, but sometimes it places itself in the democratic camp, especially because it adopts the electoral process to conquer power. Pappas considers populism as "democratic illiberalism," –i.e., populism is always democratic, but never liberal. The author believes that contemporary democracies face various types of adversaries composed of political parties or movements that are defined by their opposition to one of the three pillars of post-1945 European politics: democratic representation; a gradual process of further European integration; and political liberalism.

> I call anti-democratic to the enemies of democratic representation, the enemies of European integration, as nativist and the enemies of liberalism, as populist (Pappas, 2017, p. 18).

Populism is, according to the author's thinking, a threat precisely because it can lead to the decay of liberal institutions and the consolidation of an illiberal system, as well as having a contagious characteristic, since the emergence of a populist party tends to lead other parties in a country in a populist direction. Populism, which is the counterpart and negation of political liberalism, is the most threatening adversary. It thrives where political institutions, especially the rule of law and safeguards for minority rights, are weak and where polarization and majoritarian tendencies are strong. In such environments, populist parties must achieve power through elections and even re-elect themselves (Pappas, 2017, pp. 37-38).

As we can see, populism is a polysemic term, whose origin goes back to revolutionary movements that took place in the middle of the 19th century in Russia, against the privileges of the nobility, and in the United States, at the end of the same century, with the formation of the so-called People's Party (*The People's Party*). It is an imprecise category that has been used both to characterize political movements that claim to return power to the people, fighting against the elites ("We are transferring power from Washington DC and giving it back to you, the people," Donald Trump emphasized at his inauguration as 45th President of the United States)[1], or to refer to the socialist policies of the so-called left turn in Latin American politics. Thus, for the reasons explained above, it is more appropriate to speak of populism due to the malleability and porosity of the phenomenon. In the European context, populism is often associated with extremist, nationalist, anti-immigration, and Eurosceptic movements. Indeed, despite being a term frequently used in partisan struggles and in the media field, its topicality and ambiguity call for a sharper discussion. Despite ideological differences, contemporary populisms of right and left share the same agonistic and conflictual vision of politics, a friend-enemy, people-elites binary perspective, the understanding of the people as a "unified political subject," and a "unified political subject" (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 23), and a problematic relationship with the principles of liberal democracies, such as the plurality of identity formation and political action and the existence of a public space open to negotiation and the formation of a public opinion built on discursive and egalitarian bases.

2. Far-right, nationalism and Euroskepticism: the growth of populism in Europe

In the last decades, some democracies have faced intense challenges and conflicting internal forces that, in many cases, have had consequences in shaping the political spectrum of these countries. Indeed, populism, due to its characteristic porosity, flourishes in new social movements or partisan organizations that defend nationalist or nativist causes, or xenophobic attitudes against the so-called out-groups in quite significant sectors of society. And, as can easily be seen, the implementation of economically austere policies in several European countries, together with the migratory crisis caused by the wars in North Africa and the Middle East, have accentuated specific forms of populism related to more radical political manifestations. Some of these movements, categorized as belonging to the far right, are inspired by conservative and reactionary ideologies, advocating public policies or opinions that are generally ignored or even silenced by governments, political parties, and the hegemonic media (Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 4).

They are movements or political parties that address themselves directly to the "pure people," claiming a political legitimacy that comes from the nativist "people" and national identity. In France, the Front National of Marine Le Pen is running "*au nom du peuple*"; in Italy, Matteo Salvini, of La Lega party, seeks to combat immigration by putting the Italian people first ("*prima la nostra gente*"); in Spain, Santiago Abascal's party, VOX, proposes to combat the promotion of ideological views and suppress aid to illegal immigrants; and in Portugal, André Ventura of the Chega party condemns the opening of European borders to immigrants and

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[1] Part of Donald Trump's speech against the establishment, exalting the status of the people of the *heartland*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkNcelgx_ZM.

calls on the Portuguese to fight against Islamism. In general, far-right populist movements tend to concentrate their strategy on a few issues, but socially controversial issues with low public perception, such as immigration, national security, criminality, and political corruption. The exploitation of issues that arouse emotions in the electorate, the exploitation of social problems that generate alarm among the population, the mobilization of resentment against immigrants, or the defense of strong "law and order" policies, are the most common themes of the recent "populist moment" of the far right:

> In response to frustrations with the effects of old and new transformations in European politics and society, especially European integration and immigration, far-right populist parties have emerged across the continent, albeit with varying levels of electoral success. These parties combine populism with two other ideologies: authoritarianism and nativism. The first of these refers to the belief in a strictly regulated society and is expressed in an emphasis on matters of law and order; the second refers to the notion that states should be inhabited exclusively by elements of the native group (the nation) and that the non-native elements (foreigners) are a threat to the homogeneous nation-state (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 50).

By exploiting social pathologies or anomalies, such as political corruption, unemployment, criminality and other issues that provoke insecurity and a sense of risk among the population, the new populist movements generally promote a campaign to save the country or to promote a profound regeneration of political institutions. Populism was practically absent from the European political spectrum during the first decades of the post-war period. The consequences of fascism and totalitarianism led Europe to rebuild the foundations of its democracies in a moderate and distrustful manner in the face of the exaltations of political leaders and excessively personalistic and nationalistic leaderships. Indeed, it is only since the 1990s that populist political forces have begun to assert themselves in Europe, especially in response to immigration and to certain effects resulting from the integration of countries into the European project. They are political parties or movements that combine the porosity of populism with nativist and nationalist principles, establishing a division between the members belonging to the nation, the nativists, and the members that constitute a threat to the social balance, the foreigners or immigrants.

> is not surprising, since populism in Western Europe has often been expressed by parties characterised by a nationalism and culturally conservative ideology, and hostility towards immigration and multiculturalism. The European academic literature has therefore also mainly considered populism as an element of the right (van Kessel, 2015, p. 2).

This is the case of the French political party, Front National, created in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen and which contested the second round of the presidential election in 2017 under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, from UKIP, the United Kingdom Independence Party, whose leading figure is Nigel Farage, a supporter of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, and the Italian party Lega Nord, currently La Lega, founded by regionalists from northern Italy and which in the 2018 elections was the third most voted party. In Spain, the recent political party VOX, founded in 2013 by dissidents of the Partido Popular, also imposes itself against immigration, especially Muslim immigration, and charges against the traditional parties, identified with the privileged elite. In fact, in recent decades, national populism has experienced a slow but steady growth in European society, reaching more than 14% of the popular vote in the Old Continent according to the Authoritarian Populism Index.

Graph 1: European electoral support for far-right populist parties.
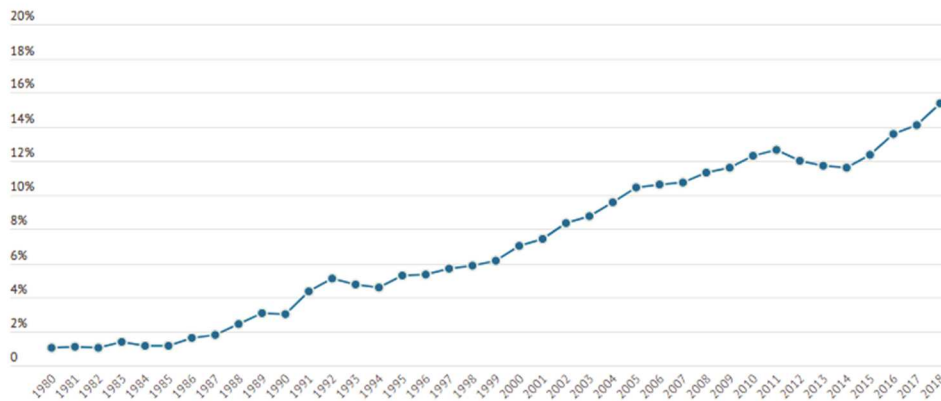
Source: Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index.

The economic crisis of 2008, which led to the implementation of austerity measures, especially in the countries of the South, nevertheless led to the emergence of radical left-wing populist parties such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, La France Insoumise in France and Die Linke in Germany. Indeed, the populist far left has improved its electoral results considerably, especially in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece. These left-wing parties tend to be Euroskeptic, as are the far-right parties, but more for economic reasons than for political reasons, as they argue that the austerity measures implemented by the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund, the Troika, have increased social inequality and poverty in many European countries (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 54).

3. Media populism: collaboration or neutralization of the populist threat?

Some authors have researched how the action of the media, especially the tabloid media, is involved in the emergence of populist movements (Deacon & Wring, 2016; Mazzoleni, 2003). The media tend to give news coverage to events that represent a certain break with the regularity of everyday life, and populist, emotive and disruptive messages challenge the status quo and the pre-established order. By provoking social order and breaking with the homeostasis of the system, populist messages end up deserving wide media coverage, especially when they are a novelty in the political marketplace. Stewart *et al.* suggest that the sensationalist media play a particularly important role in the publicity of a new populist party, engaging, without any "moral ambivalence," with its themes, discourses and values, while the mainstream media tend to ignore the sensational aspects of these parties (2003, p. 225).

The sensationalist media often serve as a privileged stage for populist movements, contributing to the dissemination of their messages and guaranteeing a certain "media legitimacy" essential in political disputes against internal and external enemies. On the other hand, and once the media of reference are normally part of the elites of a country, if the populist movement seriously confronts the establishment, the media of reference will be able to "use all the arsenal at their disposal to combat and neutralize the populist threat" (Mazzoleni, 2003, p. 7).

Populism finds more sympathetic media coverage with media prone to infotainment. Populist movements and, above all, the personality traits of political leaders that provoke a certain break with politically correct discourse, are an appetizing journalistic product for the tabloid press, for television talk shows and other products that make up politainment. Personalization, novelization, dramatization and spectacularization of the facts are characteristics of the media logic that are combined with the discursive strategies of pop politics, so used by many populist leaders. According to a study conducted by researchers at

Queen Mary University of London, individuals overexposed to entertainment television programs are more likely to vote for populist candidates (Durante, Pinotti & Tesei, 2019).

Portuguese politician, André Ventura, elected as a deputy for the anti-establishment Chega party in the 2019 elections, is an example of the role of the tabloid media in promoting populist politicians. A sports and justice affairs commentator on *Correio da Manhã*, the channel with the highest cable television audience, Ventura has gained considerable media visibility, also for his controversial comments on television programs and in the newspaper with the highest penetration in Portuguese society, *Correio da Manhã*. In fact, the 2019 elections correspond to the moment when, for the first time, an anti-establishment far-right party breaks into the Portuguese Parliament.

In the relationship of populism to the media, a distinction is often made when considering populism *by* the media (*populism by the media*), or media populism, or populism *through* the media (*populism for or through the media*) (Esser *et al.*, 2017). In the first case, the media explicitly participates in the construction of populism, assuming a critical attitude towards power holders and representing the "common man in the street." In an exasperated and activist way, this would be based on some of the same principles of populist communication by some political actors. In the second case, populism through the media, the focus is less on the media as actors *per se* and more on the content and the programs they broadcast. In this approach, populist actors and ideas receive disproportionate media attention because their focus on negativity, on conflict, on dramatization, resonates well with today's media logic (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020). By providing a forum for actors using populist communication, the media help spread their messages and increase the visibility and legitimacy of these actors (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018, p. 429). As Mazzoleni emphasizes, "the media, intentionally or not, can serve as powerful mobilization tools for populist causes" (2008, p. 50).

However, although we can consider the mainstream press to be closer to the elites and the *status quo*, media populism is not exclusive to the tabloids and the media products typical of the so-called showbiz journalism. In fact, the coverage of political events is influenced by the productive routines (news making) of the media and by the media logic through certain frames or explanatory frames of events that impose a certain definition of social and political movements (Entman, 1993). Both the agenda setting theory and the framing theory attribute to the media a relevant capacity to influence public attitudes and opinions. Thus, when populist rhetoric resonates in the press and in news and commentary on policy developments, it is predictable that frames favorable or unfavorable to that rhetoric will influence the public's perception of populist actors. In the discursive struggle for the establishment of explanatory narratives of social events, two types of frames are generally confronted: populist leaders, challengers of the establishment, try to promote a picture of injustice in need of redress or reform; the challenged authorities or elites, on the other hand, respond with the need to promote respect for institutions, the law and social order (Mazzoleni, 2003).

While populist leaders instigate feelings of indignation, exploring the politics of emotions and sensations, dramatizing social events, and occupying emotional spaces, traditional political institutions and ideologies have some difficulty in coping with the emotional discharges of citizens, especially in times of crisis and social contestation. On the other hand, once the logic of the media was colonized by commercial imperatives, populist leaders acquired the capacity to respond to the dramatization and showmanship impulses of the media. Populist movements seek to adapt their rhetoric to the demands of informative logic, manufacturing facts and speeches with the aim of satisfying certain journalistic values or criteria, such as the rupture of the regularity of daily life and the dramatization of events, adapting perfectly to the commercial objectives of the media industry (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008).

4. The rise of digital populism

The populist leader usually avoids the institutions of social intermediation, seeking direct contact with the people. Today, populist leaders use direct communication strategies, largely supported by digital communication mechanisms, to appeal to the people without intermediaries. The Internet and the networked communication that characterizes it have led to a decentralization of communication processes, allowing individual poles outside the media and political elites and agents in the field of journalism to disseminate messages that escape the control of traditional mediators. As McQuail underlines:

> The main advantage is easy access for all those who want to speak without the mediation of the powerful that control press content and broadcast channels. It is not necessary to be rich or powerful to have a presence on the World Wide Web (2003, p. 140).

It is a type of communication that, benefiting from the network, can reach an infinite audience but, on the other hand, is within the reach of any individual. The web. 2.0 breaks with the traditional paradigm of gatekeeping, allowing political leaders and citizens to contact each other directly by replicating, in the network communication, messages often to be filtered. Now, each individual can, by dispensing with journalistic mediation, access the public sphere, condition media agendas and topics of discussion and interact in the local and global networks of digital communication that characterize the network society. As Castells emphasizes, "it is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as when a video is posted on YouTube, a blog with RSS links. It is self-communication because one generates the message oneself, defines the possible recipients and selects the specific messages" (2009, p. 88).

Indeed, the communication model of the network has altered the processes and strategies of political communication and the new populist political movements or parties manage it perfectly. Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign illustrates the use of direct communication and the network model by the new populist movements. The Internet was intentionally chosen by the Partido Social Liberal candidate as the main public arena for challenging the Brazilian status quo, that is, the dominant political class and the agenda of the traditional media. If, in a short time, Bolsonaro became the main Brazilian political force, imposing himself in the 2018 elections, the fact cannot be dissociated from the digital culture that characterizes the movement, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, from the exploration of the ethical revolt against the political establishment, especially against the progressive movements of the left. On the other hand, the network functions as a powerful replicator of content produced by institutions, political leaders, professional actors or citizens, stimulating interpersonal communication and the production of viral and memetic content. This means that messages can circulate to an extraordinarily wide audience, and this applies, of course, to unfiltered messages that may have been produced to manipulate public opinion. In this sense, digital populism reveals another dynamic relationship between the media, particularly social networks, and political actors: the manipulation and disinformation strategies used by some neopopulist movements.

The decentralized model of the web 2.0 has become an important tool for political parties, either for traditional political parties, or for new political movements or digital parties, those parties with exponential growth due to digital affordances. However, in recent years, especially after the leak of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which has made public how Facebook user data was used for political propaganda based on disinformation and targeting strategies, several researchers have drawn a parallel between digital social networks, the business model of the web 2.0 and the mechanics of the new populist movements. While some speak of an "elective affinity" between digital social networks and populism (Gerbaudo, 2018; Waisbord, 2018), other authors highlight some special features of social networks that help build networked populist mechanics (Cesarino, 2020; Maly, 2018).

5. Digital populism and disinformation: the "alternative facts" factories

The propagandistic use of the media has always been one of the concerns of political leaders and, therefore, it is not surprising that the media, in particular the so-called new media of the Internet, have become an obscure object of desire for the populist mechanics and political propaganda of these movements. Contemporary populism is staged through a discursive repertoire built on the ruins of the collapse of the traditional legitimacy of representative politics, the decline of ideologies and citizens' distrust of social institutions, including the media. It is in this context that personalist and charismatic leaders emerge who seek to exercise political power, or to have some influence on the exercise of political power, through the unmediated and non-institutionalized support of a large number of followers, followers who nowadays are manifested through digital communication and who replicate network messages that escape the control and framing of traditional media.

While mass media adhere to professional standards and news values, social media serve as a direct link to the people and allow populists to bypass the gatekeepers of journalism. In this way, social media provide populists with the freedom to articulate their ideology and disseminate their messages in an uncontested manner (Engesser *et al.*, 2017, p. 1110).

The risks for democratic communication become evident. By systematically doubting the news, especially when the news questions the populist rhetoric or messages disseminated by these movements, and by contacting "the people" in an unmediated way, directly inducing their propagandistic messages, digital populism often resorts to strategies of disinformation and manipulation of reality. Mechanisms that, due to the preponderance of the digital, decentralized environment and without the mediation of the once "guardians of the public interest," the gatekeepers, seem to have been perfected. Thinking specifically about the digital environment and the types of false content circulating on the web, Wardle and Derakhshan distinguish between "dis-information," "mis-information," and "bad-information." Disinformation can be defined as intentional manipulation of information with the clear intention of misleading the public. In other words, individuals are aware of the false character of an information and disseminate it with the deliberate purpose of manipulating public opinion and causing some kind of damage. Mis-information also refers to false content, as in the case of dis-information, but without the intention of causing harm or alarm. Finally, bad-information includes real information, but disseminated with the clear objective of causing harm to a person or organization, as happens, for example, in hate speeches against certain groups (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Figure 1: Information disorder model in the digital environment.
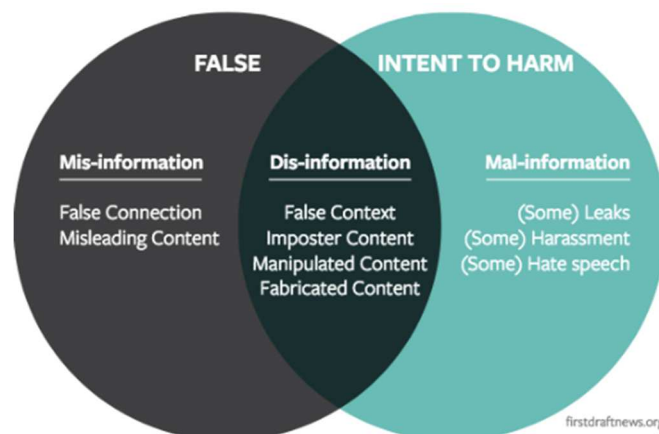
Source: Council of Europe Report.

Observing the referendum that resulted in the process known as Brexit and some recent electoral events, particularly the 2016 American and 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, we note that disinformation and manipulation have become one of the main political communication strategies used by some populist movements. The media, particularly modern digital social networks, are currently a major player in the process of manufacturing and disseminating disinformation tactics that nevertheless become socially accepted facts by citizens, especially by those citizens most emotionally involved with the messages and with populist movements. By enabling direct communication practices that dispense with the traditional mediation of gatekeepers, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or WhatsApp are privileged means of contemporary political communication, allowing the establishment of communication flows between political leaders and citizens, creating horizontal communication networks where all types of information circulate, including information to be filtered, false or distorted, driven by algorithms, and with clear purposes of political instrumentalization.

Different actors in the media, politics or society can disseminate (mis)information without the interference of media elites and journalistic routines such as verification, accuracy and balance. Political actors can use social networks to share their distrust of the media and the institutions of democracy, regardless of the factual basis of their claims. Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Donald Trump in the United States are two influential cases in point (Hameleers, 2020, p. 147).

Digital social networks offer politicians, parties and new social movements the possibility and freedom to disseminate their messages and ideologies. In this sense, contemporary populist movements flourished, on the one hand, in a historical period marked by economic crises and a strong response to these crises, a response that led to the erosion of traditional representative democracies and, on the other hand, in an era marked by the emergence of new technological platforms that altered the way individuals communicate and share their visions of the world. The rise of "digital populism" needs, in fact, to be framed as a product of these transformations that have created the conditions for populist movements to appeal to unsatisfied and digitally networked voters (Gerbaudo, 2018).

On the other hand, and due to the distrust of many citizens in relation to the hegemonic media, social media platforms assert themselves as a suitable channel for populist rhetoric to be heard and for citizens to express their indignation towards political elites and traditional institutions of mediation. Thus, digital media offer populist movements the possibility of using alternative news channels to promote and disseminate an anti-establishment discourse, fostering the necessary citizen mobilization of the populist support base. Alternative news and political discussion channels, such as Breitbart News, co-founded by Steve Bannon, or the fake news site InfoWars, one of Donald Trump's favorite news sites in the 2016 campaign, prove this trend.

Four opportunity structures of Facebook and Twitter foster the potential for populist communication: they offer the possibility of establishing a close connection with the people, they provide direct access to the public without journalistic interventions, they can create a sense of community and recognition among otherwise dispersed groups, and they foster the potential for personalization (Ernst *et al.*, 2019, p. 5).

6. Populism's affinity with *post-truth* politics

Changes in the conditions or in the spaces where politics takes place, transformations in the processes of political mediation, offer, in fact, new opportunities for participation and public visibility, but also new risks and even new performative practices of politics and its actors. The new populisms raise questions in the relationship of politics with the media, but also a new framework for the relationship of politics with truth. Considered word of the year 2016 by the *Oxford Dictionaries*, *post-truth* denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less

influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs (*Oxford University Press*, 2017). According to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española*, *post-truth* is understood as "deliberate distortion of a reality, which manipulates beliefs and emotions in order to influence public opinion and social attitudes"[2]. It is an "emotional lie" aimed at distorting reality and shaping public opinion.

After the Referendum on the United Kingdom's stay in the European Union and the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, the words "post-truth" and "fact-alternatives" entered the lexicon of the discussion on media and populism to refer to a certain erosion of factuality and a new relationship of political actors and citizens with the truth. What is understood by truth and factuality became, in fact, the object of discussions and reinterpretations, especially because the notion of truth became anchored in particular interests and everything that does not agree with those interests, with partisan or ideological visions, became disqualified independently of the verification of facts, objectivity and the principle of reality.

Hannah Arendt had already denounced that "truth and politics have always been in a bad relationship" (2006, p. 27), as well as the massive manipulation of facts and opinions in which the media play a preponderant role. Noam Chomsky himself included the media in the set of systems that produce corporate propaganda, denouncing a certain "systemic bias" of the media in the service of economic and corporate interests of "manufacturing consensus" (2005). Thus, *post-truth* should not be confused with mere disinformation or manipulation of public opinion, concepts that have a long history in political thought.

The discussion on *post-truth* refers to a time in which facts are ignored and emotions and beliefs are imposed on the factual events or facts considered "objective," especially due to the way they are propagated, repeated or "viralized" in the digital media. Beliefs or information to be verified are considered credible and are often disseminated as covert political propaganda. It refers, on the one hand, to circumstances in which facts are less influential in shaping public perception of events than beliefs or emotions. When the facts of the world do not agree with the mental frames of individuals, the facts are rejected and the frames prevail, linguist George Lakoff would say in *Don´t think of an Elephant*.

> People think through frames [...] For truth to be accepted it has to fit into people's frames. If the facts do not fit into a certain frame, the frame holds and the facts bounce (2007, p. 16).

On the other hand, post-truth defines a time where the centralized devices of propaganda production and falsifications of reality, whose Ministry of Truth in the Orwellian newspeak is the most eloquent metaphor, gave way to a multiplication of decentralized and fragmented devices of production of falsehoods and alternative narratives about the events of the world. In *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life,* Ralph Keyes points out that in the *post-truth* era, there are hardly any more truths or lies, but rather a third category of ambiguous and dubious statements that do not correspond exactly to the truth but are too "soft" to be called lies (2004, p. 15). In Keyes' perspective, *post-truth* exists in an ethically gray zone that allows people to dissemble without being seen as dishonest, since lies are almost always presented as just another narrative about reality, as another version or "alternative fact." It does not matter whether the "stories" or narratives shared are true or false, since the subjects are only interested in confirming and sharing a certain vision of the world, a vision that is in accordance with their preconceptions, stereotypes, attitudes, or beliefs[3].

Thus, *post-truth* has become a visible political strategy in many electoral campaigns of populist leaders, and it is not by chance that it is related to the proliferation of falsehoods and

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[2] https://dle.rae.es/?id=TqpLeom.
[3] The expression "alternative facts" was used by Kellyanne Conway, counselor to President Donald Trump, to defend the White House narrative that Donald Trump's inauguration had no less of an audience than the inauguration of his predecessor, Barack Obama.

rumors. Because of the appeal to emotions and the way they are "manufactured" and disseminated in the digital media, fake news is essentially *post-truth*. While it is true that fake news and rumors have existed since the emergence of the press, it is also true that the digital era has created the conditions for their widespread dissemination and diffusion. We refer to false information intentionally designed to mislead or manipulate the public, using techniques specific to the field of journalism, techniques that give them apparent veracity and factuality: "we define 'fake news' as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and that could mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). They are essentially emotionally appealing contents, which arouse the public's attention because they cause some kind of sensation, reinforcing political and ideological ideals. They are, above all, disseminated in digital social networks and sponsored by political propaganda and by the so-called "click industry" and commercial advertising. The digital world has created more facilities for the production and dissemination of content related to parody, rumorology and political or economic interests.

There are two main motivations for the production of fake news. The first is economic: news articles that go viral on social networks can generate significant advertising revenue when users click through to the original site [...]. The second motivation is ideological. Some producers of fake news seek to promote the candidates they support (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 217).

Often it is the populist political leaders themselves who are responsible for spreading false, manipulative, or distorted content. In the 2017 Dutch election campaign, anti-Muslim leader Geert Wilders, has posted on his Twitter feed a doctored photo where he places a political rival, Alexander Pechtold, at a rally calling for the imposition of Islamic law in the Netherlands.

Figure 2: Wilders tweets a fake photo (left) to link a rival with Islamists.

Source: *El País*, 8 February 2017.

In an investigation into exposure to fake news during the US presidential election, Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler concluded that 1 in 4 Americans had visited pages with suspicious, biased or false content during the election, pages mostly powered by Facebook and with a pronounced pro-Trump stance (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018). In fact, data from a Pew Research Center report indicates that 23% of Americans admit to having shared a made-up news story at some point during the election and 14% said they shared a story they knew to be false. Indeed, top fake content about the U.S. election generated higher engagement on *Facebook* than top election stories from the top 19 media outlets. During the critical campaign period, 20 fake news stories about the election posted on blogs and partisan websites generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions and comments on the Facebook platform[4].

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[4]   https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook.

In 2018, fake news has also occupied the political and media agenda of the Brazilian presidential election. In a political spectrum where television advertising has always been a determining factor, the ultra-right-wing Jair Bolsonaro, who in the first round had only 8 seconds of television advertising, was the only one to have been able to get the most out of his campaign, and without the support of a major political party, he focused his strength on digital media, particularly WhatsApp, a platform that has more than 120 million users in Brazil, according to data from the platform itself. The conservative candidate of the Partido Social Liberal (Social Liberal Party) did not participate in electoral debates during the second round of the elections and gave virtually no television interviews. In terms of political communication in the Brazilian case, the innovation has to do with the use of the users of digital media themselves as replicators of the propagandistic content and of the candidate's statements disseminated on digital platforms. In the digital political battle, Bolsonaro's campaign has not shied away from using false information as disguised political propaganda. The far-right candidate accused his opponent, the candidate of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), Fernando Haddad, of being responsible for the creation of school material to "sexualize children" and teach "gender ideology" in Brazil, which he called *gay kit*, one of the main fake news disseminated in the presidential campaign, with more than 580 thousand engagements in social networks in the month of the elections (Jardelino, Barboza Cavalcanti & Persici Toniolo, 2020).

An IDEA/Big Data Avaaz poll noted that 83.7% of Jair Bolsonaro's voters believed the information that Haddad distributed the *gay kit* for children in schools when he was education minister[5].

Figure 3: The so-called *gay kit* program by Jair Bolsonaro never saw the light of day in public schools. It refers to the project called School without Homophobia that sought to train teachers in LGTB rights to prevent violence and promote respect for diversity among young people and adolescents.

Source: *Veja Review*, 31 July 20.

Supporters of the ultra-conservative candidate used digital media, especially WhatsApp and Facebook, as a real disinformation machine to spread these and other false news stories. Journalists from *El País*[6] monitored for three weeks pages and online mobilization groups supporting the Partido Social Liberal (PSL) candidate, and verified the dissemination of lies camouflaged as news, false celebrity endorsements of Jair Bolsonaro's campaign and propaganda videos that sought to disprove news unfavorable to his campaign, creating a distrust of traditional media, very common to these neo-populist movements. The 2018

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[5]   https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/eleicoes/pesquisa-mostra-que-84-dos-eleitores-de-bolsonaro-acreditam-no-kit-gay/.

[6] https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/09/26/actualidad/1537997311_859341.html.

Brazilian elections saw an organized information war within WhatsApp, in which false rumors, manipulated photos, decontextualized videos and audio hoaxes, became campaign ammunition and went viral on the platform with no way to control their reach or origin (Resende *et al.*, 2019, p. 1).

7. Final considerations

The relationships between digital populism and post-truth politics raise questions related to new mechanisms of fraud and falsification of reality that must be interpreted through the collapse of gatekeeping and the emergence of new forms of mediation based on the new digital ecosystem. It is in this sense that the politics of *post-truth* establishes a close "affinity" with the communication strategies of populist leaders (Waisbord, 2018b, p. 14).

For populism, facts are not neutral entities that can be checked, verified, or contrasted outside the frameworks of interpretation and knowledge. Facts are neither supreme and unquestionable phenomena nor constitutive elements of truth. On the contrary, facts are subsidiary to the narratives of predetermined visions of politics, of the clash between popular and elite interests, and of ideological worldviews (Waisbord, 2018b, p. 10).

Political polarization, the emergence of alternative political and media movements, the demagogy and rhetoric of recent populist movements have found in online communication, particularly in digital social networking sites, a "sounding board" for the dissemination of their messages and anti-system speeches, appealing to the "people" without intermediaries. By promoting direct communication with and among the "people," stimulating feelings of outrage against the elites and against the political establishment, populist rhetoric feeds on communicative flows without the traditional mediation of organic agents in the field of journalism.

Thus, modern political lies, such as disinformation strategies, image manipulation and the profusion of "alternative facts," resist the assault on truth and objectivity in a completely new way. If it is true that, as Hannah Arendt forcefully pointed out, truth and politics have always been in a bad relationship (Arendt, 2006), the current populist rhetoric has ended up relativizing the importance of truth and facts in the public debate characteristic of the network society. Recent populist phenomena, especially related to the growth of the far right, are problematic for democratic communication. The conflict between the communication strategies of some of these movements, such as the use of *post-truth* politics, disinformation and lies, or the use of junk news as a form of propaganda, and the structuring principles of the media field, such as the search for truth, respect for the facts, freedom of the press and the independence of journalism from the pressures of political power, is visible. If populism exposes the crisis of liberal democracies and citizens' distrust of political institutions, some contemporary populist movements reveal problems related to the expansion of digital communication. The decentralization of communication processes caused by the impact of networked communication, the irruption of digital social networks and the exponential growth of mobile communication users, particularly smartphones, created the ideal context for certain populist movements to use strategies characteristic of the so-called *post-truth* era.

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