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Editorial: Media populism: How media populism and inflating fear empowers populist politicians

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Editorial on the Research Topic
[Media populism: How media populism and inflating fear empowers populist politicians](#)

The rise of populist politicians across the world spur investigations of the conditions by which these aspiring leaders coalesce public support. Central to the electoral bids of all populist leaders is how they utilize media messages to advance their agendas and candidacies. Politicians exploit all types of media—including their social media—to deepen public support. This general trend, which we label “media populism,” allows politicians to leverage media of varying types in delivering their populist messages across diverse political constituencies. But, in spreading their messages, these populist politicians do more than communicate with supporters: they are also actively stoking fear while undermining faith in long-standing political institutions.

The irony of this dual use of media infrastructure shows that the more traditional politicians courted media coverage from older, more established platforms to carry their messages in years past, the political figures who exploit media populism in the present do so by taking advantage of the communication opportunities social media presents. As such, there is a clear technology angle to media populism that suggests the need for scholars to revisit this topic with regularity. We offer this collection of essays as part of investigating the puzzle of “media populism” influence on political systems across the world.

In terms of using media to undermine institutions, [Alonso-Munoz and Casero-Ripolles](#) show this dynamic clearly in their paper: “Populism Against Europe in Social Media.” Their work tackles the concept of Euroscepticism discourse on Twitter, offering a comparative analysis between Spain, Italy, France, and the UK, during the campaign for the 2019 EU Parliament election. They argue that digital media’s consolidated role in the circulation of populist messages among a large audience is substantial. They use their paper to analyze the framing and communication strategies of populist actors in online discourse in raising doubt about the European Union, creating

Euroscepticism. They find that two types of Eurosceptic discourses—right-wing and left-wing—inflate fear and raise doubt about the EU effectiveness.

Raising doubt may be second only to stoking fear in terms of the goals behind populist media. Utilizing qualitative content analysis along with discourse analysis Kurilla, in his paper: “Kung Flu: The Dynamics of Fear, Popular Culture, and Authenticity in the Anatomy of Populist Media” analyzed the dynamics between Trump’s use of COVID-19 terms in blaming China for the pandemic and how media addressed these terms. He shows that part of the mechanism driving populist media is the fault lines of friend vs. enemy and the people vs. elites. When leveraging media for these messages, populist politicians like Trump benefit from the increase of public angst and fear.

But the dynamics of how politicians may use populist media to their advantage is not as cut and dry as transmitting Tweets.

Specifically, Mols and Jetten, in their work, “Understanding Support for Populist Radical Right Parties,” show that the available media space offers opportunities for demand and supply factors to influence how parties act in larger political coalitions. Using an analytical model to describe supply and demand interplay, the authors show the role media play in party response to public expectations about what these right wing organizations claim they can deliver.

Though a different mechanism than supply and demand, the contexts where we find media populism are critical to understanding political success. In their paper, “Taming the People: Comparing Protests and Populism in Arab and American Politics,” Khamis and Fowler advance this contextual emphasis in a comparison between Egypt and the United States. Their focus is on how culturally distinct populist movements perform in shaping public response, comparing how Presidents Trump and Sisi dealt with protests and political movements. Khamis and Fowler find that, in using common rhetorical

tactics, including populist strategies, to undermine the protests, both Trump and Sisi faced limitations in effectively translating populism into political action, despite using similar tactics.

The larger take away from these papers is that the political use of “populist media,” though more complex and qualified in its effects than conventional wisdom might assume, remains a potent threat to democratic norms and institutions. Our goal with this collection of papers was to show the role of the media, coupled with political planning and tactics, in putting populist politics into effect. But there remain many more worthy avenues of inquiry into this phenomenon.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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