The Populist Challenge 2.0

How populism profits from social media

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The current momentum of nationalist populism, and especially Donald Trump's election as president of the US, has provoked a heated debate about 'post-truth politics', or even the 'post-fact society' in academia and the media. Hitherto hailed as tools of democratisation and the weapon of choice against autocrats worldwide, social media has recently become the target of a lot of finger-pointing. It has been accused of having assisted political actors who mobilise voters through a crude blend of outlandish conspiracy theories and suggestive half-truths, barely concealed hate-speech, as well as outright lies. Charges against social media have culminated in blaming Facebook, practically, for enabling the spread of fake news and hate-speech at an unprecedented scale, thus influencing the 2016 US elections in favour of the Republican candidate.

There is no doubt that neither lies, nor the blending of fact and fiction, are new phenomena in politics. They are part and parcel of politics, not only of populism, as are emotions, in contrast to rational arguments. And, of course, there was populism before social media and Facebook.

Nonetheless, the advent of social media has had a tremendous impact on the structure and workings of the public sphere in modern democracies. This essay argues that the current populist challenge to liberal, pluralist democracy profits in a number of ways from the kind of public sphere embodied by Facebook. This discussion is preceded by a brief outline of the populist challenge and concludes with remarks concerning the defence of pluralist democracy.

The populist challenge

There is no doubt that populism is a fighting word. Accusing a political opponent of populism usually has the aim of discrediting them. Notwithstanding this, populism is also a useful category for analysis. It can be characterised by a particular understanding of the political and of democracy (Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2014; Rosanvallon, 2010; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2004). Let us take a brief look at how populism conceptualises the political, as well as democracy, and why this understanding challenges liberal, pluralist democracy.

First of all, populism revolves around the idea of the righteous people put under pressure from various sides. Populism always identifies the main threat as the invariably corrupt elites in politics, the economy and the media conspiring against the people. These enemies 'from above' are said to team up with other enemies 'from outside'. Basically, anyone can be declared an enemy, immigrants of course, but also other groups such as progressives, the LGBT-community, feminists, environmentalists etc. The equation is very simple: those who do not fit, or indeed oppose the way of life and interests of the populists' supporters, are excluded from *the people*. In short, populists idealise their own clientele as the true sovereign of democracy.

Populism entails the feeling that the people were deprived of their autonomy and self-realisation. Its enemies purportedly prevent the people from being who they truly are, and, thus, what is ultimately at stake here is identity and the recognition of identity. This identity is, however, not a matter of individual choice, but of descent and fate. Usually this identity is in one way or the other coded in terms of a distinct ethnicity or culture.

Secondly, the populist interpretation of the political is anti-pluralist and plebiscitary. Once the way of life and interests of the populists' supporters count as the unadulterated popular will, no longer can there be political fault lines among the people. As a result, the exchange, bargain and compromise between conflicting interests – the bread-and-butter business of democracy – is met with disdain. To the populists, it is just the business of the corrupt, selfish elites, always eager to increase their share. In contrast, populism assumes there is a common good, and a popular will oriented towards this common good, which precedes the

political process[1] (cf. Fraenkel, 2007; Urbinati, 2006). Ultimately, it is nothing but the expression of the people's identity. Hence, according to the populists, true democracy is about polling the authentic will of the people as directly as possible, in order to circumvent the bias caused by lobbying for particular interests.

Thirdly, and because of this, mood and affect are extremely important criteria in populist politics. Bleak scenarios of conspiracies, decline, and perdition – evoked over and over again – are defining features of populist affect management. Scenarios such as these suggest that the world is nothing more than a snake pit of lies and deceit. Hence, one is well advised to exclusively believe in what is in tune with the interests and values of one's own group. In other words: truth is that which affirms the group's outlook on the world and which promotes its cause. Populism thus tends to blur the distinctions between proven facts, half-truths, lies and fantasy in favour of sheer assertiveness and impact. It is pretty much the same phenomenon, which Harry Frankfurt in his classic essay, discussed as "bullshit" (Frankfurt, 2005). Hannah Arendt's "emancipation from reality and experience" captures something very similar. (Arendt 1986: 965).

Facebook: No neutral network

Facebook was not designed to host meaningful public discourse. In 2004, it was launched as a service to stay in touch with friends, colleagues, former schoolmates and the like. In the beginning, it was a tool for networking, for sharing experiences and thoughts with other users or for work on one's personal identity. The network of friends and acquaintances rapidly grew into something much bigger. The company still likes to think of its product just as a place where people personally connect, but in fact today this social network – with about 1.7 billion users worldwide – figures as a decisive factor in the strategies of businesses, journalism and political campaigns. It has become an important part of the public sphere. But what are its defining traits and to what extent does populism benefit from these features?

Firstly, Facebook is marked by personalisation and thus fragmentation. Introduced in 2006, the personalised news feed is now at the heart of

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1 | However, a common good and a popular will are actually the outcome of the political process.

the social network experience. The news feed is a digest of content considered most relevant to the respective user. The exact workings of the complex filter algorithm are a business secret, undergoing constant adjustment (Constine, 2016). Very broadly put, from the content posted in the respective user's extended personal network, it picks roughly 10 per cent that will probably matter most[2] (cf. Mosseri, 2016). Criteria for relevance are derived from past behaviour, and from how intensely other users interact with the content.

The recent concerns about the effect that echo-chambers and filter bubbles might have on public discourse originate from this feature (cf. Sunstein, 2001; Pariser, 2011). On Facebook, users decide who populates their 'world' and, consequently, also make a choice on the content that they wish to be exposed to. The news feed algorithm amplifies this deliberate filter further, delivering ever more of the same. As a result, critics argue, manual and automatic filtering work to create enclaves of like-minded people and, not bothered by alternate points of view, these enclaves run the risk of radicalisation and the fostering of hostility towards other groups.

Because of this, Facebook provides an ideal environment for all those who are convinced of the grand conspiracy of the elites and of manipulation by the 'crooked' mainstream media. The social network invites them to retreat into counter-publics tailored to their needs, complete with a diet of hyper-partisan 'alternative media' and fake news that flatter their own opinions, prejudices and feelings.

Secondly, while the social network fosters fragmentation through personalisation, at the same time, it overrides other distinctions. Namely, it calls into question the well-established distinction between the few who produce media content and the many, largely passive consumers, who consume such content (Poster, 1995). Now everybody can – or at least has the potential to – directly address a large public, without any cost or the need to gain access to established media outlets.

Social media has been praised for toppling the gate-keepers who, from the editorial departments of the old mass media, decided what was worthwhile to put into the public sphere (cf. Chadwick, 2013). It goes without

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2 | According to Adam Mosseri, Vice-President of Product Management at Facebook, on average users actually read 10 per cent of the posts from their network.

saying that this narrative of emancipation is also attractive to populists and their supporters, who feel hostility towards the 'mainstream' media[3].

Furthermore, the common markers that help distinguish content with respect to quality, origin and intention, have also moved to the background or vanished altogether. Reliable news or cat-themed memes, birthday greetings or the latest celebrity scandals, life hacks or conspiracy theories – on the news feed they not only appear next to each other, there also appears to be no substantial difference between them[4] (Remnick, 2016).

These are near ideal conditions for the blurring of fact, fiction and fantasy typical of populism. Consider, for example, on the one hand, a journalistic report on the integration of immigrants based on serious investigation and a hastily penned rant on the same subject on the other. Once you deny that there is a difference in quality and assume instead that they are merely two equally legitimate conflicting standpoints, you are free to pick whatever suits you best[5] (cf. Lynch, 2016; Harsin, 2015).

Thirdly, as the number of senders and the amount of content produced keeps growing, while the attention of potential consumers remains by and large the same, the news feed turns into an attention economy (Franck, 1999). Content of varying natures enters a cut-throat competition for the scarce resource that is the users' attention. A recent study confirms the intuitive idea that the news feed algorithm decisively guides the users' attention and their interaction with the content they are exposed to[6] (Tufekci, 2015: 1130-1132). If the goal is to maximise outreach, such as is typically the case in advertisements, journalism and politics, it is therefore imperative to secure one of the top positions in the news feed. The algorithm creates feedback loops: posts on popular, so-called trending topics, stand a higher chance of receiving a top position in a user's news

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3 | However, the relationship between populists and old mass media is diverse and too complex to be summed up in a single sentence.

4 | As also Barack Obama aptly put it: 'An explanation of climate change from a Nobel Prize-winning physicist looks exactly the same on your Facebook page as the denial of climate change by somebody on the Koch brothers' payroll'.

5 | They argue that the Internet and social media proliferate competing standards of what establishes facts. We are confronted with ever more 'truth games' (Harsin), which cannot be decided.

6 | Zeynep Tufekci has pointed to this aspect in the inhouse study conducted by Facebook employees, Bakshy, E./Messing, S./Adamic, L.

feed and in turn are more likely to provoke user engagement and thus even increase their popularity. The social network's metrics provide a simple, yet all too simple means to measure value and importance: the intensity of interaction that content provokes. Or in one word: impact.

As research suggests, content that induces emotions like awe, anger or anxiety, is more likely to provoke interaction, regardless of other qualities such as novelty or practical utility. Users are also motivated to engage with social media because they want their own identity and lifestyle to be visible and recognised (Bennett&Segerberg, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015).

The flood of pro-Trump fake news during the 2016 US presidential election provides a good example. Journalists managed to track down a number of fake news producers. They tinkered fake news for Trump supporters for the simple reason that this group of voters was the most determined to engage with fake news and hence created the largest revenue in advertisements. Fake news producers also discovered something else: the messages that got the most interaction were those that affirmed the audience's prejudices and anxieties, but also their hopes and wishes, regardless of how outlandish they were. Fake news consumers also click what they want to be real, not only what they believe to be true (cf. Silverman, C. et al, 2016; Horning, 2016).

In their study on political mobilisation in social media, W. Lance Bennett and Segerberg showed that users assess politics in a highly personalised manner; one's own lifestyle and the presentation of one's identity are crucial (Bennet&Segerberg, 2013). Ideologically thin messages, like memes and hashtags, which have a high potential to stir emotions whilst also being easily personalised and distributed, do a much better job in promoting a political cause these days than unattractive, cumbersome party organisations. They can initiate cascades of the sufficient thrust to be trending and, hence, garner even more attention.

This new form of political mobilisation does not only resonate with populist disdain for organisations and the fantasy of the spontaneously erupting popular will. With regards to the Tea Party Movement, and the Swedish *Sverigedemokraterna*, Bennett also points out that populists might pursue authoritarian politics, but they are successful in this new mode of mobilisation because they do not impose a strict party line Bennett&Segerberg, 2013). Rather, they aim at unleashing anger and indignation (on the German case of PEGIDA cf. Rohgalf, 2016;

Bizeul&Rohgalf, 2016: 49-67). For this purpose, they offer diverse, ambiguous materials and the vague narrative of omnipresent traitors and enemies, which can be individually adapted to fit one's own anxieties and grievances. The populists, so to speak, offer an outlet for various, individually felt forms of discomfort – and social media provides the infrastructure for this.

Donald Trump was mocked for his inconsistency and eclecticism. However, eclecticism is not a deficit here. On the contrary, it is a promising way to mobilise crowds – not only online audiences. Yet the Trump campaign had a different take on personalised politics than the one identified by Bennett and Segerberg. Social media, combined with big data and cutting-edge psychometrics, enabled the micro-targeting of a huge range of groups of potential voters. It allowed for the addressing individual citizens, delivering content tailored to their personality, life situation, opinion, etc (cf. Krogerus&Grassegger, 2016).

In defence of pluralist democracy

With nationalist right-wing populism on the rise, liberal, pluralist democracy is under pressure. The open society and its emancipatory development since at least the 1960s is being jeopardised from within. The preceding remarks have set out to contribute to an adequate understanding of the present challenge. In this conclusion we shall ask what to do in defence of a pluralist, liberal democracy and argue that it is not social media that is at the centre of this answer.

First of all, do not settle for the diagnosis of the post-fact society. It is important to note and criticise a recently successful wave of politicians to whom facts do not seem to matter. However, announcing the era of post-truth equals a declaration of surrender (cf. Pörksen, 2016). The proponents of a pluralist democracy should not consider themselves to be the relics of an era that has come to an end, but approach the future with a realistic, yet forward looking mindset.

Secondly, do not let the populists define the rules of the game. Populists attack politicians and journalists – and, at times, also scientists – as members of an allegedly corrupt elite. But the reaction to this depends on who is attacked. Far too often, those attacked do their challengers a favour and behave just like the elite they have been accused of representing. Instead of banding together against the populist newcomers, political

parties should sharpen their respective profile and engage in a serious competition for the best solutions to urgent problems, but also for the most promising vision of the future. Journalists should report critically on populists, but a near 24/7 coverage will, at the end of the day, not help the pluralist cause, but rather the populists. Facing the populist challenge, journalists need to also resist the temptation of discovering, again, 'the man in the street who feels neglected'. This paternalistic attempt to win back trust will surely backfire (cf. Haemin, 2016).

Thirdly, fight hate-speech and misinformation on social media. Part of this struggle is a matter of criminal prosecution. But it is also the business of independent fact-checkers to debunk hoaxes and urban legends. All social media users are called upon to exercise counter-speech whenever hate-speech appears online. Last but not least, it is the duty of social media companies like Facebook to intervene – whilst there are also good reasons not to make Facebook the arbiter of truth. For the sake of a pluralist democracy, we cannot allow a single corporation to decide what is fact and what is fake. Nor should a government agency play this role. In a pluralist democracy, what is true remains subject to an ongoing process of trial and error and of the exchange of reasoned arguments. The willingness to listen and to consider your opponent's arguments is a mandatory precondition. Here we touch on the aspect of a political and civil culture on which a pluralist democracy depends.

Fourthly, maintaining this political and civil culture is an everyday task. Let me conclude with just two thoughts on this complex endeavour. To start with, make sure you do not start seeing society through the populist lens. The Manichaean distinction between the people and the elite is ultimately a pre-modern, pre-democratic, anti-political one, echoing the insurmountable hiatus that separated the commoners from the nobility[7] (De Saint-Victor, 2015). On the one hand, this is an inadequate paradigm for understanding politics in modern societies, including actually existing power asymmetries and inequality issues. On the other, it downplays the political opportunities the 'ordinary citizen' indeed has in modern democracies. Blaming nebulous elites for everything may be a convenient way to cope with reality, but it is an act of intellectual and political surrender.

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7 | Jacques de Saint-Victor aptly pointed to this aspect of populism.

What is more, a pluralist political and civil culture will be the ongoing task of political education in schools, in academia, in adult education and beyond. And last but not least, this culture is the result of lived experience.

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