Tori Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck, and Claes H. de Vreese (eds)
Populist political communication in Europe
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Carsten Reinemann, James Stanyer, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, and Claes H. de Vreese (eds)
Communicating populism: Comparing actor perceptions, media coverage, and effects on citizens in Europe
Abingdon: Routledge, 2019. 279 pp. ISBN 9780367671648 (pbk)

Lone Sorensen
Populist communication: Ideology, performance, mediation
Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 316 pp. ISBN 9783030657550 (hbk)

That in the twenty-first century there has been, in the US and Europe, a veritable explosion of both populism and writing about it may be a statement of the blindingly obvious, but although many analysts agree that the media, both 'new' and 'old', have played an important role in populism's development and spread, detailed studies of this role remain relatively sparse and tend to be confined to various country-specific articles in journals and chapters in edited collections. That is why the three books which are the subject of this review article are particularly welcome.

Although it is not my intention here to add to the ever-swelling literature on populism itself, it is necessary to begin by outlining very briefly how populism today is generally understood.

Firstly, populism valorises 'the people', conceived as a unified and homogenous entity. This is akin to the way in which in the US right-wing politicians since Nixon have habitually claimed to represent the 'silent majority'. A good example of this in the UK context would be Nigel Farage crowing on Brexit night that 'this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people'.

Second, 'the people' are defined in opposition to an out-of-touch, unrepresentative 'liberal elite', or simply the 'Establishment'. This typically includes the mainstream media ('fake news'

in Trump-speak, the BBC in the case of those vociferously lobbying against it); elected politicians; civil servants and other public functionaries; academics and experts; judges (infamously the *Mail*'s 'enemies of the people'); and international organisations which allegedly threaten national sovereignty.

Third, populism involves the identification of out-groups: stigmatised Others who are represented as a threat to 'the people' – for example asylum seekers, migrants, people of colour, travellers, gay and trans people, statue topplers, BLM supporters, the 'woke', and so on and on. In other words, those who are not part of 'us'. Indeed, what constitutes 'us' is largely defined in opposition to those who are 'not us'.

In this review article I want concentrate on the three books which are its subject, but a number of precursors which do indeed discuss the role of the media in populism's rise should also be acknowledged. These are Mazzoleni et al. (2003), Albertazzi et al. (2008), Esser and Strömbäck (2014) and Moffitt (2016).

Populist Political Communication in Europe (hereafter Aalberg et al., 2017) and *Communicating Populism* (hereafter Reinemann et al., 2019) both have their origins in a programme funded by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), 'Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics'. This brought together researchers from 31 European countries between 2014 and 2018, and both books contain a wealth of empirical material of one kind or another on populist political communication in 24 of these. However, rather than discuss the programme's findings on individual countries, I want to highlight a number of its key conclusions regarding the role played by the media in populism's spread and political efficacy.

As some of the authors noted above observed as far back the early years of this century, the ever-increasing commercialization of and competition within the media ecology, which now of

course includes the Web, have provided populists with highly fertile soil in which to propagate their messages. We should also add to their number Cas Mudde, who in 2004 pointed out that politics had come to be represented in a new way by the media in that it was focussing more on 'the negative and sensationalist elements of news'. He attributed this partly to the growth of private media interests, not least in a broadcasting sphere hitherto dominated by public service broadcasters, and argued that this

> has led to a struggle for readers and viewers and, consequently, a focus on the more extreme and scandalous aspects of politics (not just by the 'tabloid media'). This development not only strengthened anti-elite sentiments within the population, it also provided the perfect stage for populist actors, who found not just a receptive audience, but also a highly receptive medium. (2004: pp. 553-4)

Add to increasingly cut-throat competition in the press and the growing commercialization of broadcasting the runaway development of the Web, and we are faced with a media environment which, as Toril Aalborg and Claes H. de Vreese put it in their introductory chapter to Aalberg et al. (2017), provides 'populist actors with news opportunities that allow them to "crash" the established media gates', weakens the traditional public interest functions of established media outlets and encourages 'ratings-driven outlets to pander to populist reactionary political agendas and to adopt populist frames on a range of prescient political issues (p. 7).

The chapter by Frank Esser, Agnieska Stępińska and David Nicholas Hopman in Aalberg et al. (2017), which draws together the project's cross-national findings, makes a very useful distinction between three different iterations of media populism: populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism.

Populism by the media occurs when media organisations actively and consciously engage in disseminating populist ideology and propaganda. This is particularly easy when populist politicians actually own media outlets, as in Hungary, Czechia and Romania, or when they are in

the hands of fundamentalist Christian groups, as in the US. Populism through the media occurs when the media amplify politicians' populist messages. Either this can be done deliberately or it is simply a result of routine journalistic practices. As examples of the former one could cite Fox News, GB News and TalkTV, and as instances of the latter, inviting populists onto public service broadcasting channels in the interests of 'balance' or in order to increase audience numbers by whipping up controversy – both of which have been put forwards as reasons for explaining Nigel Farage's 30-plus appearances on the BBC's *Question Time*. As Esser, Stępińska and Hopman put it, there is a mutually beneficial convergence here between the economics of the media and the ideological goals of populist political movements: 'Charismatic leaders, harsh rhetoric and stirring issues hit all the right keys of newsworthiness' (Aalberg et al., p. 369). Finally, populist citizen journalism occurs when media organizations open their doors to populist messages by audience members – usually in the form of reader comments on their websites. Clear examples of this practice are provided daily by *MailOnline*, although the website of the *Telegraph* frequently runs it a close second.

A crucial point made by the editors of Reinemann et al. (2019) is that just as populism appears in different forms across the globe, and enjoys varying degrees of success according to where it is situated, so populist political communication is a 'multi-dimensional phenomenon that can present itself in many different shapes and forms' (p. 4). Thus, they argue, the study of the macro-level context in which populism occurs is crucial, since different contexts provide different opportunities for populist measures. Key in terms of context are the media structures of different cultures, as well as public attitudes towards the media, and this is why, they assert, 'our understanding of populism can hugely benefit from systematic comparisons of various national contexts, various groups of actors and organizations, and different types of media' (p. 2). Such comparative studies have been relatively rare, and the editors of the present one argue that

contrary to universalist narratives about populism, 'there are no simple and across-the-board conclusions about workings of populist communications across Europe'. They conclude:

> Although economic issues and societal and political discussion about immigration and integration can generally be regarded as conducive to populist success, the dynamics and patterns of populist communication and how it is covered and perceived still seem to be strongly affected by national contexts. (2019: 242)

Reinemann et al. (2019) also contains revealing accounts of interviews with journalists and politicians in thirteen and eleven European countries respectively (although not including the UK in either case). The former overwhelmingly saw populism as a 'negative force' which has 'detrimental consequences for European democracies and societies'. This was especially true in the case of countries in which populists were in government, but 'there were no strong regional patterns of perceptions of populism or systematic differences between journalists from different types of media outlets' (p. 236). On the other hand, the politicians regarded media competition and commercialization as 'driving factors that contribute to a tabloidization of news-making, which was seen as enhancing the chances of populist messages and actors being covered' and saw social media 'as conducive to populist success because of the opportunities they provide for populists in particular to bypass the traditional news media' (p. 237). The authors conclude that:

> Politicians tend to consider the media as central actors and also part of explaining populist success, while journalists tend *not* to see the media as playing a significant role in the rise of populism … These differences may be indicative of a problematic unwillingness of journalists to accept the fact that they may unwittingly support populist agendas by, for example, promoting certain issues or applying certain frames. (emphasis in original, p. 238)

This last point is a crucial one, and the authors suggest that journalists' uncertainty about how to deal with populism is often related to 'a more general insecurity about journalism's role

in a liberal democracy under pressure. Therefore a necessary step for journalists and media organizations is to reflect on their values and their role in democracy' (243). In particular, they should ask themselves whether they are simply passive conveyors of information, and whether there should come a point at which they should explicitly defend democratic values. In the authors' view, they certainly should do so, as well as 'give voice to critics when foundations of liberal democracy (e.g. separation of powers, rule of law, religious freedom, minority rights, freedom of speech and the press) are challenged – or when populist parties (or parts of them) cross the line toward extremism' (244). Furthermore, given the use which populists readily make of dis- and mis-information, especially when claiming to speak for the majority and demonising various out-groups, journalists should be particularly assiduous in checking facts and correcting errors when dealing with such people, as well as being extremely wary of creating 'false equivalences' by giving as much weight to the extreme opinions of minority pressure groups as to majoritarian expert views. In short, journalists should be very careful indeed to ensure that they are not exploited by populist politicians, and that they do not unwittingly become an uncritical conduit for their messages.

Lone Sorenson, the author of *Populist Communication: Ideology, Performance, Mediation*, is actually a contributor to one of the chapters in Aalborg et al. (2017) and has been involved in the above-mentioned COST populism project in various ways. In the present book she draws on interviews which she conducted as a member of one of its working groups.

Observing that 'communication is the rocket fuel of populist parties and leaders' (p. 4), Sorensen explains that her focus is on 'how populism creates meaning – on what populism *does* communicatively' rather than on developing a definition of populism itself. She also notes that the book takes 'an integrated approach to the media ecology' (p. 5), because although populists are routinely identified as making extensive use of social media, 'like other politicians, populists use and address a variety of media platforms and types'. Thus she advances the argument that

'populist communication is enacted through performative assemblages across a variety of media' (p. 5), with populists adapting their communications to the norms and conditions of different platforms.

However, the populist communicative process, wherever and by whom it is enacted, has two core elements. Firstly, it attempts to delegitimise what it characterises as 'elite' forms of representation ('fake news', #scumedia and so on) and, second, it claims to speak for 'ordinary people' in their own terms. This involves breaching 'institutional and professional norms of politics, whether through speech, tone, dress, gesture or other means' (p. 142), both in traditional political spaces such as parliaments and in media settings of one kind or another. All of this in the cause of communicating a sense of 'authenticity' – what Sorenson refers to as 'showing doing exposure' and 'showing being ordinary' (p. 143). For example, UKIP MEPs turning their backs on the European Parliament during the singing of the 'Ode to Joy' or Farage habitually being interviewed on television in pubs with a pint of beer in his hand and smoking a cigarette. But the key point here is that all of these breaches of conventional political behaviour are performative and constitute a '*display* of ordinariness that aims to establish the relationship between populist representatives and the represented' (emphasis in original, p.142). But, of course, the success of this kind of performance depends precisely on not *itself* appearing artificial or contrived – in other words, inauthentic, even though these are entirely staged acts. Furthermore, however vehemently the populist politician claims that in their media performances they are communicating directly with 'the people', the performance is nonetheless wholly mediated.

In order to demonstrate how populist communication plays out in practice, the book compares performances by two populist parties with very different political programmes and ideological backgrounds – the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa. By comparing populist communication in a

transitional and an established democracy, and by focussing particularly on the two countries' different modes of representation, political cultures and the stability of their political systems, the study 'cuts across left-wing and right-wing forms of populism to appreciate the shared elements of the populist communication process' (p. 7). It finds that both parties, although operating in very different media systems, made effective use of hybrid modes of mediation directed at different audiences. As far as their use of social media is concerned, Sorensen argues that the South African government's effective censorship of the EFF on the mainstream broadcast media pushed the EFF to stage many of its disruptive acts on Twitter – where it also turned the government's exercise of its censorship powers into yet another performative resource. UKIP, on the other hand, was able to perform many of its disruptive acts in public in the European Parliament, one of which was noted above, and its use of Twitter played a more limited role in the party's assemblage of hybrid mediated performances. Sorensen states that in its case:

> Twitter was not a means of usurping the role of mainstream media but rather of addressing it. The struggle over mediation therefore became a battle of who could walk the tightrope of legitimacy and norm-breaking in the most creative way to attract the attention of legacy media. (247)

However, this is to ignore the fact that UKIP, and Farage in particular, already had a highly significant presence in the legacy media, one which actually had very little to do with Twitter activity. Farage's ubiquity on *Question Time* has already been mentioned and he also had a regular column in the *Express* as well as contributing frequently to other right-wing papers and the *Spectator*. (Curiously, he also had his own column in the *Independent* at one time). In 2015, the then owner of the *Express*, Richard Desmond, donated over £1m. to UKIP's campaign in that year's General Election, and the paper was the only national title which urged its readers to vote for the party. Furthermore, its former political editor and chief political commentator, Patrick O'Flynn, served at one time as a UKIP MEP.

Indeed, Sorensen more than once quotes a UKIP Tweet that references one of Farage's *Express* columns. This was from 4 July 2014 and was revealingly headlined '"UKIP hasn't gone to Brussels to be placid and inert" vows Nigel Farage', and she marshals it as part of her argument that UKIP used Twitter to address and attract the attention of the mainstream media. But this is to get things precisely the wrong way round, because what we have here is a very clear example of UKIP using a national newspaper article in order to bounce its message onto Twitter. Furthermore, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Petley 2021), this is a very far from uncommon route in the UK when it comes to populist (and indeed far more extreme) messages making their way into the online world – entirely unsurprisingly given the dominance of populist-inclined right-wing papers in the national press ecology.

This is something which urgently needs further investigation and analysis. In the chapter on the UK by James Stanyer, Cristina Archetti and Lone Sorensen in Aalberg et al. (2017) the authors correctly note that 'the most striking feature of the literature about media and populism in the United Kingdom is its patchy nature' (p. 169) and this is still the case. Furthermore, much of the literature which they cite concerns the British National Party and the English Defence League, with the authors concluding that 'these studies help challenge the widespread belief that newspapers might contribute to the success of populist actors by giving these groups a voice and even supporting their rhetoric' (p.169-70). However, I would argue that, although their ideologies certainly contain populist elements, these are basically single-issue, outright racist parties, and thus it is only to be expected that they have never found overt support even in the most right-wing of British national newspapers. However, populist discourse is alive and well in Britain today: in the right wing of the Tory party to which former UKIP members have emigrated *en masse* and in the newspapers which ever more vociferously support that wing of the party, namely the *Mail*, *Sun*, *Express* and *Telegraph*, as well as on GB News and TalkTV, which have close links with these titles. And these are sources which endlessly direct their

energies to producing the kind of populist clickbait that is meat and drink to many denizens of

the online world. There are extremely rich pickings here for any student of populist political

communication, and the three books which are the subject of this review article should be

required reading for any form of research into this increasingly troubling development for the

health of democracy in Britain.

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