

# The Populist Channel: Communication and campaigns in post-factual times and the paradox of modern democracy

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  - Interplay of online mass media and social media (Newman, Fletcher, Levy, & Nielsen, 2016) → analytical distinction difficult

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- **Content on social media** (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) + No significant third party filtering
  - No fact-checking
  - No editorial judgment
  - “An individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN, or the New York Times.” (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 211)

## Group exercise

### **Please discuss in small groups**

- In which ways may populist actors benefit from the internet?
- In which ways may mainstream parties (not) benefit from the internet to the same extent?

# Online Opportunity Structures for Populists

**Table 1.** Interplay of populist communication logic and online opportunity structures.

Populist communication logic			Online opportunity structures
Content	Ideology	Popular sovereignty	Democratizing potential
		People-centrism	Direct connections to the audiences
		Anti-elitism	Non-elite actors
		Exclusion of 'others'	Homophily
Messenger Form	Actors Style	(Charismatic) leaders	Personal connections to the audiences
		Simplification	Attention economy
		Emotionalization	
		Negativity	
Motives and Aims	Strategy	Power	Non-institutionalized masses
		Legitimacy	
		Mobilization	

Figure 1: Engesser et. al. (2017), 1282

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## ■ Online environment

- Allows for circumvention of traditional opinion leaders
- Facilitates “one-step flow of communication” (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015).
- Respective technologies allow for reciprocity, but: communication is often highly asymmetrical

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## ■ Internet provides infrastructure for **personalization of politics**

## Online Opportunity Structures vs. Mass Media Logic

Theresa in her response paper:

*The same use of social network (especially Facebook) we find in the Czech political discourse. The leader of right-wing populist party SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) Tomio Okamura is followed by more than 250.000 people. Not all of them are his voters and once anybody publicly expresses disagreement with Okamura's attitudes, his post is immediately deleted and he is forbidden to contribute with any other comments.*

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- **Optimum between vagueness and clarity:** in a plain and non-“politically correct” style (Krämer 2017)
- **Selective exposure:** self-socialization into ideologically consistent content  
Daniel in his response paper: *“Through this kind of selection people who tend to have critical opinions about the current situation, will be chosen to receive certain content that provides them with additional information concerning this topic to strengthen their doubts.”*



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- Internet may contribute to formation of an international network of right-wing populist movements

## The Mass Media Conceived of as Established Elite

Lundrim in his response paper:

*Furthermore, they tend to use social media posts to gain approval based on likes and shares/retweets as an indicator of the general opinion. This tendency of preferring new means of communication instead of the old ones is seen as a statement in itself.*

# Fake News and News Fabrication

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  - → Particularly “newsworthy” if the author is a person in authority.
- News fabrication: 2 relatively new dimensions to the issue of news fabrication
  - 1. Financial motive of the author
  - 2. Development of news bots (give illusion of widespread acceptance of a news item)

## Fake News and Their Impact on (Political) Behaviour

Tandoc Jr, Lim, and Ling (2018):

*On December 4, 2016, a man carrying an assault rifle walked into a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC. He was intent on “self-investigating” whether the restaurant, Comet Ping Pong, was the headquarters of an underground child sex ring allegedly run by then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her former campaign manager, John Podesta (Lopez 2016). He was motivated by stories he had read on right-wing blogs and social media that had developed this line of thought. In the process of his “self-investigation,” he fired several shots into the ceiling of the restaurant. No one was injured, but it was just one of the several threats made to the pizzeria after the news report spread through social media sites, such as Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter (Lopez 2016). The viral news report, however, was a hoax. The District of Columbia’s Metropolitan Police Department also officially declared it as a “fictitious conspiracy theory” (Ritchie 2016).*

# The Populist Conception of Quality of Democracy

- Populist exploit **tension between two dimensions of the quality of democracy**:
  - criticise poor results of the democratic regime
  - therefore campaign for a modification of the democratic procedures
  - → favour elements of direct democracy

# Populism, Pluralism and Democracy

## Plattner (2010)

The Dual Nature of Liberal Democracy:

1. Majority rule
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→ **Modern democracy has a dual character**

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  - **Majority:** Feel that the popular will is being thwarted, various economic or other interests are manipulating the political process to serve their own private ends rather than public good.
  - **Minorities:** Feel that they are not getting a fair representation in government, that their interests / concerns are being neglected or overridden by political leaders (primarily responsive to the dominant electoral majority).

## Positive Effects: Corrective for Democracy

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6. can **bring back the conflictive dimension** of politics and thus help to revitalise both public opinion and social movements in order to foster the "democratisation of democracy".

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5. Fosters a **plebiscitary transformation of politics** which undermines the legitimacy and power of political institutions (e.g. parties and parliaments)
6. Ironically, by advocating an opening up of political life to non-elites, populism's majoritarian, anti-elite thrust can easily promote a shrinking age of “the political” and cause a contraction of the effective democratic space.



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### 3. **Populism as an underside of democracy** Emerges within democratic politics, but can morph into authoritarianism.

## References

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