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Populist online practices: the function of the Internet in right-wing populism

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a theoretical classification of functions of different Internet applications and plattforms in right-wing populism. Its aim is to understand how the Internet is seen and used by populists and how it contributes to populism. Online communication by both populist leaders or organizations and non-organized actors is discussed. Main functions include the representation of the relationship between leaders and 'the people,' justifying the exclusion of outgroups, the conceptual elaboration of the right-wing populist ideology, developing a right-wing populist lifestyle and identity, and circumventing the traditional media.

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On social networking sites, we can see politicians use hashtags such as #leaveeu or #AuNomDuPeuple or comment on the corrupt political establishment and the lying media. There are also ordinary users who decorate their profile pages with national flags, and amidst birthday wishes and photos showing them with their partners walking the dog during sunset at a nearby lake, they share articles from conspiracy websites and reports on criminal foreigners, link to petitions against halal slaughter, and post memes saying that they still have the courage to express their love of their country. Right-wing populism has established itself as a political and ideological force in Europe (for an assessment of their influence in Western Europe cf., Mudde, 2013), but also in the United States (Oliver & Rahn, 2016) and other countries. Both right-wing populist politicians or other leaders and ordinary citizens express their worldviews online and often voice their criticism of, or hostility toward, the established media.

Research on populism and the media has mostly neglected the role of the Internet (for a recent review of literature in the European context see Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). It has focused on the presence of key elements of populism in the traditional media (mainly the press), often differentiating between media populism in the narrow sense (populism *by* the media themselves, Krämer, 2014) and in the broader sense (populism *in* the media, i.e., coverage of populist actors and their messages) (for a more encompassing typology of relationships between the traditional media and populism, see also Krämer, in press a. Research has mainly been interested in the intensity of media coverage of right-wing populism and populism by the media itself (e.g., Akkerman, 2011;

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Bos & Brants, 2014; Herkman, 2015; Rooduijn, 2014b) and in the effects of this coverage on the population. Long-term studies have investigated the causality between coverage and voting behavior or intentions (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Walgrave & de Swert, 2004), while experimental studies have dealt with different aspects of reporting and their influence on populist and intervening attitudes (e.g., Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vresse, 2016; Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2016).

Reversing the perspective, other studies and theoretical contributions have described the criticism or even hostility of right-wing populist actors toward the media, or anti-media populism (Krämer, in press b). Therefore, the few existing studies of right-wing populist online communication (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016; Groshek & Engelbert, 2013) have emphasized that populists use the Internet to circumvent the established media. These analyses have focused on how populist organizations and their representatives communicate core elements of populism online, mainly by posting short and emotional, often scandalizing or mobilizing messages.

The present article develops a more comprehensive theoretical classification of the Internet's functions for right-wing populism. Its aim is to understand how the Internet is seen and appropriated by populists and how it contributes to the manifestation and spreading of populism: which of the many applications, platforms, and their specific functionalities are used and how can this be understood from the perspective of a right-wing populist ideology? To ask for something's function is to ask for the abstract problem that it solves and that could also be solved otherwise – even if actors do not see as it a problem because it is always already solved in everyday practices. Therefore, the main question of the present analysis is what right-wing populists can achieve by using different online technologies. Whether they have strategically decided to pursue certain goals and to use certain means or whether they simply happen to use them without much reflection – I would argue that to solve these problems makes sense or is even necessary for those holding a right-wing populist worldview.

The analysis departs from the assumption that right-wing populism is not only expressed by actors in organizational roles, such as in parties or other associations, and that its communication is not confined to the reiteration of the key elements of populism identified by previous literature. I will, therefore, discuss online practices of both institutionalized or 'elite' populist actors and non-organized or at least non-elite actors, providing a broader spectrum of aspects of the populist worldview. The analysis departs from the critical assessment of the definition of populism as a thin ideology that has been influential in research on populism and the media.

Populism as a worldview and practice

Populism has often been described as a thin ideology (cf., Abts & Rummens, 2007; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). Thin ideologies, in general, are defined by their focus on a number of constitutive concepts instead of including their own definition of all main concepts that are politically contested in a given social and cultural context, such as liberty, equality, justice, etc. (cf., Freeden, 1996). Therefore, such a worldview only covers a smaller spectrum of social and political issues but is often complemented by peripheral concepts or combined with other ideologies. Furthermore, right-wing populism

can be described as 'thin' in the sense of being less theorized or scientified (Hawkins, 2009). Unlike other ideologies that have been developed or put forward in theoretical and philosophical writings, well-known right-wing populist publications are more often popular and essayistic than scholarly (although precursors and elements of the ideology have been developed in works of political theory, for example, by the writers of the New Right or the Conservative Revolution).

A number of caveats should be considered when describing right-wing populism as a thin ideology. If the concept is reduced and formalized too strongly, it loses its discriminatory power and cannot guide the interpretation of current populist communication. The following considerations on the thinness of right-wing populism will inform the subsequent argument on right-wing populism and the Internet:

1. The constitutive elements of the ideology should be described in sufficient detail as to capture the specifics of the populist worldview. For example, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) mention anti-elitism and exclusion as potential components of the ideology, but then define a type of 'empty populism' that is said to lack these two elements (their classification is also applied to the relationship between populism and the media by many contributions in Aalberg et al., 2017). On this basis, they propose a minimal definition of populism as 'a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 3). However, is it fruitful to consider any reference to the people (or to taxpayers, voters, consumers, etc., cf., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 3) as populism? The same authors then mention more specific ways of talking about the people. One way is to conspicuously display one's closeness to the people or stress sovereignty and promise the implementation of the popular will. Both types may be opposed to other ways of referring to the people, such as technocratic or aristocratic styles of allegedly governing to the benefit of the people, references to the people's irrationality as an argument in favor of representative democracy, calling for an open-ended discourse among a diverse population, etc. If populism is equated with (positive) references to the people, it becomes coextensive with democracy. Some have indeed even equated populism with politics as such, but described specific mechanisms by which it is said to function (cf., e.g., Laclau, 2005). Others have characterized populism as a hypertrophy of democracy (Plattner, 2010). However, if we are interested in specific right-wing ideologies and movements, we have to develop a specific understanding of how 'the people' and other elements of populism are construed and limit our definition of populism to these particular interpretations.

   Freeden (1996), who developed the concept of thin ideology, argues that concepts that are central to ideologies are always contested. According to his morphological approach, their meaning is only fixed by their relation to other concepts. For example, depending on other elements of an ideology, 'the people' can be defined as something that can be expressed by either the terms 'plebs,' 'demos,' or 'ethnos' (Gschnitzer, Koselleck, & Wagner, 1992; in the context of populism, cf., Priester, 2012, p. 64).

   Accordingly, the meaning of the core concepts of right-wing populism shares certain aspects with other types of populism (that define 'the people' in a non-pluralist, non-technocratic, etc. manner), but it is specified in a way that can already be

characterized as right-wing (due to the relationship with concepts such as the nation, native culture, or ethnicity, and the corresponding traditionalism or conservatism, see below). Right-wing populism is still 'thin' if it focuses on a right-wing interpretation of these core concepts. Further elements or concrete policies are then logically secondary, but they may lead to a 'thicker' variety of right-wing populism: the understanding of 'the people' and of anti-elitism can be complemented with aspects that are usually considered right-wing (such as economic liberalism), but also with more ambiguous ones or even with policies that commonly considered left-wing (e.g., protectionism and the expansion of social benefits are often seen as a variety of left-wing policy, but right-wing populism often connects solidarity and economic security to the idea of a national community). Apart from certain variations in the definition of the core concepts, these additional elements account for the diversity of subtypes and varieties of right-wing populism.

Therefore, the following analysis of the Internet's role in populism will have to rely on the relational character and the specific meaning of its constitutive concepts (but it will have to neglect the complementary elements and resulting sub-types).

2. While I would classify right-wing populism as an ideology (despite a considerable number of critical arguments that cannot be reviewed here), one has to be careful which aspects of the concept of ideology are stressed in the present case. Right-wing populism is certainly based on a particular worldview that is hierarchical and segmentary (see Krämer, in press b, for a description from the perspective of social theory). It emphasizes the distinction between a monolithic elite and the people and between different ethnicities, cultures, or nations, instead of functional differentiation and social inequality that is not confined to a single dimension of power (as contemporary social theory would describe society). This worldview not only comprises a description of the status quo, but it also implies a conservative utopia. Conservatism can be understood as a worldview that is only elaborated *ex post* when traditions are challenged or fading (Mannheim, 1965). Accordingly, right-wing populism has been characterized as a nostalgic ideology (Betz & Johnson, 2004) that is longing for a lost heartland (Taggart, 2004), but which, somewhat paradoxically, has become rebellious in the face of the perceived or constructed threats toward traditions (Siri, 2015).

   As the rebellious character and right-wing populist protests show, an ideology also implies political decisions, practices, and a will to realize or approach the utopian condition. Proponents of an ideology also have to actively construct and mobilize the group that it declares to be the subject of the envisaged change (Bourdieu, 1981). Thus, any ideology is practical, but in the case of populism, it would be even less adequate to confine its study to search for some manifest propositions mentioning the core elements. It may not be as theorized as other ideologies, but is mostly practical and performative (cf., Moffitt, 2016, although defining populism as a style instead of an ideology). Therefore, the study of specific practices (that complement practices that are not specific to right-wing populism, such as voting or protests) by both functionaries and ordinary citizens seems necessary in order to fully understand right-wing populist communication, including on the Internet.

3. Although right-wing populism is classified as a thin ideology, it cannot be considered static. A thin ideology cannot produce arguments that are as diverse and complex as other full-blown ideologies and it cannot easily address the whole range of political issues (Freeden, 1998). However, right-wing populism may be on its way to becoming a full-blown ideology. Its expansion may not only be based on intellectual elaboration and implications for a larger number of topics, but also on the development of a new style and political identity. I do not refer to the already well-established rhetorical or discursive style of populist politicians, but to the assumption that we may witness the development of distinctively right-wing populist elements in the lifestyle of distinct milieus (with their own symbols, language, and practices that transcend the political sphere in the narrow sense). Right-wing populism could thus become central for some people's identity. Thus, the present analysis needs to consider the function of different online platforms in the elaboration of right-wing populism, its transformation into a lived identity, and the socialization into this identity.

Representing 'the People' and the anti-elite Elite

Anti-elitism and the claim of representing the will of the people have been identified as core elements of populism (Rooduijn, 2014a). However, the particular right-wing populist interpretation of these notions has to be considered when discussing their implications for populist online communication. Criticism of elites can be justified very differently. Its populist variety rests on the assumption that the popular will is homogeneous in principle and that the elite as a whole do not represent this will. It is then demanded that it be unconditionally implemented. Thus, the specifically populist vision of democracy and democratic practice is opposed to more pluralist and liberal conceptions, such as representative or deliberative forms (Abts & Rummens, 2007) and can be characterized as illiberal (Pappas, 2016) and plebiscitarian (Urbinati, 2013) or bonapartist (Pombeni, 1997). Supporters of populism are not necessarily in favor of direct democracy (Bowler, Denemark, Donovan, & McDonnell, 2016) or deliberation, but they may hope for referendums as redemptive acts (Canovan, 1999) to get rid of a problem or the old elite once and for all, or at least to punish those in power. While charisma cannot be considered a natural characteristic of a leader, a particular type of habitus of both populist leaders and their followers leads to the impression among the latter that the leader is particularly capable of intuiting the will of the people and willing to forcefully implement it (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Filc, 2011; Müller, 2014). Complex formal procedures, lengthy deliberations, checks and balances, or minority rights seem unnecessary and even illegitimate given the preexisting and basically unitary popular will (Canovan, 1999). They hinder its implementation, divide the people, or disrupt the direct relationship between the leaders and the people (which is never unmediated in a mass democracy, but populists constantly stage the seemingly direct contact to the people; cf., Moffitt, 2016).

This relational character of populism manifests not only in votes, gatherings, and televised appearances, but also online. Populist leaders mostly express their claims to leadership in a top-down manner. Even if the respective technologies, such as social media platforms, would allow for reciprocity, communication is often highly asymmetrical.

Leaders often do not engage in discussions with supporters and critics (which would run against the above understanding of representation). Rather, the platforms mostly gather formal and informal manifestations (for this distinction, see Krämer & Conrad, 2017) of approval on the occasion of messages posted in the name of leaders. Approval is expressed by using functionalities of such platforms whose conventional meaning is to positively evaluate postings, for example, by liking them, and, unless the opposite meaning is made clear, sharing them. This manifestation of approval and thus of both sides and directions of the relationship of representation (the claims of the representatives and the acclamation by the represented), is no longer confined to extraordinary circumstances (such as elections, rallies, etc.) but has been partly transformed into a more mundane phenomenon. However, this permanent plebiscite may lose its ritual and redemptive character.

Many platforms only allow for popularity cues, not for a formal expression of disapproval. If a sufficient number of positive reactions have accumulated on the profiles of populist actors, this can be taken as a sign of broad support. At an informal level, users can also express their support in free verbal (and sometimes visual) form. As commenters are self-selected and because the profiles of populist leaders often seem to be heavily moderated, informal approval often outweighs critical comments.

Right-wing populist communication is often highly personalized. However, this term cannot be defined as it is done usually when dealing with online communication, referring to messages tailored to the individual recipient. On the contrary, right-wing populist communication is centered on the person of the leader. For example, a content analysis of social media posts by right-wing populist parties in five European countries before the 2014 European parliament election showed that the messages mostly centered on leaders instead of issues (Grill, 2016). The overall strategy of communication was found to follow a top-down approach: the parties posted links and photos instead of involving users and sharing or responding to others' messages.

Populists may resort to strategic ambiguity or communicate differently when addressing different audiences (e.g, those who are more or less sensitive to messages that could be considered offensive or extremist). However, the conception of the people as a homogeneous community allows or even requires it to be represented by a single person. In reality, this purportedly unmediated relationship of representation and mass acclamation requires organizational and technical resources. Personalized social media accounts (or websites) with messages that seem to come directly from the leaders themselves conceal this paradox of the technically and organizationally mediated 'unmediatedness.'

In addition to the performances of the popular will initiated by leaders, other non-elite populist actors can also render the people visible by technical means, for example, by launching groups that are not officially affiliated with populist organizations or by starting petitions that take up the plebiscitary character of right-wing populism (cf., Facebook groups such as 'NEXIT! Nederland uit de Euro!' or a petition to the UK Government and Parliament entitled 'STOP all immigration & implement an Aussie style border control system').

Do the proponents of this ideology define the Internet's democratic potential in a way that is similar to the parties that have been characterized as 'cyber-populist' (Gerbaudo, 2014)? Those may themselves be differentiated into more authoritarian and centralized versus more participatory anti-elitist parties (such as the Movimento 5 Stelle versus the Pirates Parties, cf., Hartleb, 2013). The Internet seems to promise an egalitarian informal

mass democracy functioning on the basis of likes, shares, and comments that seems to be in line with populist conceptions (Gerbaudo, 2014). However, its actual use may come down to one of two varieties of cyber-populism: '(1) techno-plebiscitarianism as seen in the tendency to upset the principle of pluralism and (2) techno-proceduralism as seen in the obsession with methods and the comparative neglect of substantive demands beyond the mere demand of democracy 2.0' (Gerbaudo, 2014, p. 70). Right-wing populists seem to embrace the more plebiscitarian, centralized, and authoritarian variety. They invite the whole people to express their identification with the movement by simple, formalized technical means without regard to further differentiations and diverging interests in the population (while differentiating between those who can legitimately count as part of the people and those who are excluded). As opposed to techno-proceduralism, they do not reduce their anti-elitism to demands for more direct participation or representation, but take substantial positions on a number of issues which can then be expressed online in a plebiscitarian manner.

Proving why the outgroups have to be kept out

As opposed to more inclusionary forms of populism, right-wing populism denies certain outgroups the right to be counted among the people: 'The people must be extracted from within the people' (Müller, 2014, p. 483). The boundaries are mainly drawn based on culture in the broadest sense, for example, by construing Islam as a way of life that is incompatible with, and dangerous to, the 'native' population of Western countries. Elite and non-elite populist actors alike use online platforms to draw attention to the claims, behavior, and the alleged character of the outgroups and their members. Sometimes, anecdotal evidence is collected more or less systematically. Organizational and privately run websites accumulate references to reports on violence or other (in the populists' view) scandalous behavior by foreigners or other minorities, or by opposite political camps. For example, a project sarcastically called 'Einzelfall-Map' ('Map of single cases') collected media and police reports about crimes (allegedly) committed by foreigners in Germany and marked the sites on a Google map.

Online contributions by right-wing populists also identify and deny claims and demands by outgroups. They are, thereby, excluded from the political process, from the 'people,' denying their entitlement to make political claims – often just by pointing to the outgroup's allegedly unjustified sense of entitlement. For example, those classified as culturally foreign or migrants are said to be mere guests that have contributed nothing to the prosperity of the nation and, therefore, do not deserve what they demand. Behavior by members of outgroups is framed and scandalized as unjustified claims of social support or political power, or as the ostentatious and offensive practice of a religion, culture, sexual orientation, etc. Some cases are even interpreted as evidence of discrimination against the 'normal,' majoritarian part of the population.

The sheer number of cases collected on some sites, together with the construction of an essentializing category such as 'alien crime,' seems to prove the populists' point. This type of reasoning based on anecdotal evidence, conformity with stereotypes or conventional wisdom, and emotional narratives is in line with the populist appreciation of common sense. Any abstract argument, for example, based on statistics, can then be dismissed as obfuscation by complexity, sugarcoating, or deception by elites.

While static texts on websites and social media can certainly contribute to the essentialization and exclusion, this is not specific to online communication. In contrast, technologies such as databases and interactive maps seem to lend particular credibility to right-wing populist claims as they purportedly demonstrate that the threats are omnipresent and systematic evidence justifies the fear of outgroups.

However, calls for exclusion have to be argued for and defended. They have to be detached from overt racism that would scare off some potential supporters of right-wing populism (Groshek & Engelbert, 2013 argue that right-wing populists use online communication for a 'double differentiation' from both extremism and the political elite). In comparison to journalists, ordinary commenters in online forums or on social networking sites are more often inclined to use labels such as 'racist,' 'Nazi,' 'fascist,' etc. Therefore, organized and other right-wing populist actors try to articulate the exclusion of outgroups and favoritism of the ingroup with more acceptable concepts such as 'patriotism,' 'preservation of "our" culture/values/tradition/ … ,' etc. The right-wing populist worldview is, thereby, linked with more socially acceptable and established discursive and thought patterns, such as ethnocentrism or banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), an almost hegemonic culturalism (defining migrants primarily in terms of their culture instead of, for example, their economic and class position, cf., Yılmaz, 2012), and a precedence of particular social relationships in everyday moral reasoning (i.e., a feeling that one primarily has obligations, even 'natural' duties toward one's family, local community, and ethnicity). In contrast to traditional media, messages posted on social media and websites can be deleted, justified, reframed, or recontextualized at any time. Comments, even if they can be more critical and harsh, can be ignored, deleted, or addressed as it seems tactically useful.

On the one hand, if functionaries reduce right-wing populism to a few elements in short social media posts, it may also be easier to keep them strategically ambiguous and avoid criticism (Engesser et al., 2016). On the other hand, a strategic redefinition of concepts might seem necessary and can only be achieved by linking them to others, albeit in short slogans. Plausibility and acceptability can be achieved by both simplicity and ambiguity (letting people read less extreme meanings into messages) and by linking concepts and claims to conventional ideas and habits of thought.

Therefore, populists have to find an optimum between vagueness and clarity, although plain talking and defying 'political correctness' is part of their style and consistent with their ideology. This can also be achieved by combining a provocative style, which can then count as a sign of truthfulness and courage, with vagueness. If their messages are then met with criticism and hostility, this is paradoxically seen as evidence that those who really speak in the name of ordinary people are being censored and attacked. Even if the traditional media often scandalize populists' remarks (or collaborate in their self-scandalization, cf., Haller, 2013), opposition is often more fierce in discussions and comments on online platforms, so that self-scandalization even works more reliably, and evidence that the voice of the people is being suppressed seems ubiquitous.

Establishing equivalence and elaborating the worldview

As previously mentioned, right-wing populism can be considered thin (but not as thin as some authors would suggest) but expanding. One way of expanding the reach of a thin ideology is to use the same frames to interpret any upcoming event and issue. Thus,

they can be characterized as yet another equivalent manifestation of the same crisis and unfulfilled demands: the popular will is not actually represented by the elite and the people is threatened by internal and external enemies.

This practice of routinely establishing equivalence and ensuring that the ideology covers many different issues is not completely uncreative and may contribute to the impression that right-wing populism provides an answer to any grievance. However, framing any issue in the same way may weaken the issue ownership of right-wing populist movements and expose the ideology's thinness. Populist organizations as well as also ordinary citizens can try to keep the focus on core issues such as immigration. However, on the politico-cultural or strategic individual level, a need may be felt for a more comprehensive and elaborated worldview.

According to the morphological approach to ideologies mentioned above, they consist of interrelated contested concepts whose meaning is determined by their mutual relationships. In particular, an ideology can be considered full-fledged if it conveys a specific meaning to classical political concept. For example, we can read posts by right-wing populist leaders who use the concept of liberty and explicitly or implicitly define it as freedom from the burdens imposed by minorities, from the threat of Islamic domination, or the freedom to express their worldview without being restricted by 'political correctness' (whereas a thin conceptualization of populism would not consider liberty as one of its core concepts or related to populism at all). This idea is paralleled by the practice of using 'politically incorrect' language. The leaders of the Dutch and Austrian 'Freedom Parties' tend to define and 'practice' liberty in exactly the above way, be it in social media posts or in speeches (that may then also be uploaded on video platforms), instead of emphasizing traditionally liberal policies.

A number of concepts have been redefined by right-wing populists, sometimes to such a degree that they have become almost completely detached from their original meaning; others have almost faded into obscurity beyond small circles and have been resurrected. Both types have then become distinctive for the ideology, including concepts such as 'islamization,' 'population exchange,' 'sovereignty,' etc., at least in some countries. In other cases, right-wing populists position themselves as defenders of the 'original' meaning of concepts such as the family, marriage, citizenship (restricted to native-born inhabitants), and of traditional gender roles (e.g., Poland's Law and Justice Party), while some right-wing populists such as Geert Wilders also emphasize the protection of women's and gay and lesbian rights from Islam or Islamism.

Right-wing populism is on its way or has already nearly achieved to elaborate a complete vision of society and social change and the corresponding utopian counter-image. Over recent years and decades, they have incrementally evolved from many statements, performative practices, and less comprehensive texts, but have also steadily developed in parallel to the daily business of staging a state of emergency and a representation crisis.

The work of elaboration is probably still done in larger part in books, magazines and during conferences and speeches, but the results are increasingly available online. This function of the Internet may not be specific for right-wing populism. As in other social and political movements, right-wing populist actors differentiate their communication according to the purpose and audience: news and announcements; images, soundbites, and memes; party programs, position papers, and 'theoretical' treatises. In future empirical research, right-wing populism should be compared to other movements that are based on

a thin ideology in the course of expansion, analyzing the role of different online platforms in the process: do they serve to include the movements' basis in the elaboration or to disseminate and popularize the conceptual input provided by some intellectual circles? To what degree is the development of a right-wing populist worldview based on intellectual and popular publications by leading figures and intellectuals (Müller, 2016) as well as conferences and talks attended by a small new right elite? What is the role of an international networked sphere of blogs and other platforms that negotiate and circulate new elements of the worldview? What have right-wing populist movements and individual Internet users learned from other movements when it comes to using online networked platforms for the collaborative elaboration of political concepts?

Developing a right-wing populist lifestyle and identity

Online platforms provide an environment wherein individuals can socialize themselves into a right-wing populist worldview, adopt corresponding practices, symbols, and esthetics as part of their lifestyle, and, thereby, express a right-wing populist identity they have developed. Due to its selective use, mass-mediated communication (both online and offline) is already an agent or means of self-socialization (Arnett, 1995). Users find concepts and interpretations of social phenomena that lead to a crystallization of previously latent, less specific, and clear-cut attitudes and grievances. Furthermore, partisan media provide coverage of events and issues that are selected and framed in a way to confirm an ideological predisposition.

Kemners (2015) has analyzed the development of anti-establishment attitudes as a career: persons who have a feeling of social or personal crisis get in contact with information that problematizes the current political conditions (which is sometimes described as a kind of 'awakening'); they explore and validate this critical attitude (discovering new evidence for the degeneracy and conspiracies within the existing institutions and developing an identity as an outsider); and, finally, consolidate the new worldview, reinterpreting previous experiences in its light and drawing practical consequences (e.g., by avoiding any use of the mainstream media).

Developing a comprehensive theory of the role of the media and, in particular, the Internet in right-wing populist (self-)socialization is certainly a worthwhile endeavor, but such a framework cannot be laid out within the confines of the present article. I can only refer to the above functions: providing concepts and interpretations and collecting examples of incidents that seem to illustrate and confirm the right-wing populist worldview. Furthermore, users seem to increasingly adopt symbols that serve to express their identity. This includes the use of flags and other national symbols outside the context of sports and national holidays, logos of right-wing populist parties and organizations, recurrent phrases, puns, and slogans, memes, social media groups whose names refer to right-wing populist claims and terminology, etc. (cf., the examples in the Introduction).

Social media platforms allow people to communicate their identity beyond the immediate range of social interactions, and, therefore, in a more selective and stylized manner. At the same time, it is possible to explore others' reaction to one's identity and have it confirmed in interactions, including hostile reactions that confirm one's status as a critical outsider.

As users adopt beliefs, symbols, and practices of right-wing populism as part of their lifestyle and identity and present them on online platforms, the ideology can also appear

more plausible, viable, and attractive to others. This could be furthered by users' profiles where central right-wing populist messages are mixed and linked with topics at the ideology's periphery and everyday concerns that reveal a certain anxiety about, and resistance to, detraditionalization and a loss of status. This type of concern may be characterized as the pre-political equivalents of right-wing populism.

The medium as means and message – the meta-function

The Internet's meta-function for populism is to circumvent the traditional media, both as a strategy and a message. If the mainstream, non-populist media are considered part of the conspiring and non-representative elite (Krämer, in press b), it seems consequent to communicate on separate online platforms such as social media and via direct messages (but also in other niche media and, somewhat paradoxically, on the participatory platforms provided by the established media and other mainstream institutions in the case of ordinary populist citizens and sometimes even functionaries). On the one hand, this is rational on a tactical and strategic level. Populist actors can thus ensure the (ideally) unfiltered dissemination of their messages and, on the longer term, wean parts of the audience from the traditional media once they become familiar with the anti-media populism and different framing of issues on populist platforms. On the other hand, staging a boycott of the mainstream media or emphasizing the necessity and ability to circumvent them is a symbolic matter for populists. They often cannot completely dispense with the mass media as a platform and source of information, which leads to a number of paradoxes, such as the populist communication paradox identified by Holt and Haller (2016): populists denounce the 'lying press' while using the media as a source when the coverage fits the populist worldview. However, populists often strive to demonstrate that they, not the established media, represent the people's interests and consequently need a platform to convey this very message and their further claims. It is on this platform that they can criticize the media for being unfair and unbalanced and thus put them under pressure to cover them more intensively and favorably.

This meta-message is not identical to the ideology of cyberpopulists, because the right-wing populists have usually not adopted cyber-utopian discourses – as do those parties who identify themselves with the Internet as the new medium, and the establishment with the 'old' and 'dying' media (Natale & Ballatore, 2014). While cyber-utopian beliefs imply that the Internet is per se democratic, the question of factual control seems to be more important to right-wing populists. The elites are often said to control the traditional media, but some right-wing populists also warn about online censorship to the advantage of those in power and the left (e.g., by accusing the German Minister of Justice of conspiring with allegedly left-wing extremist civil society organizations to scheme Stasi-like surveillance and censorship of social media).

However, right-wing populists also encounter direct opposition on online platforms that allow for user comments, even if they avoid the confrontation with critical journalism. Ordinary right-wing populists experience contradiction, sanctions, or at least non-responsivity (Krämer, in press b), for example, by media organizations or other institutions that do not reply or react to populist criticism expressed in user comments. While critical reactions to right-wing populist messages signal to the general public that they are not left uncontested, criticism and lack of reactions by institutions may also confirm populists' enemy images and conspiracy theories.

However, the Internet also provides platforms for both organized and ordinary populists to avoid not only journalistic gatekeeping, but also criticism and social control. In general, groups and forums provide an opportunity to express oneself in 'online communities' in the original sense: groups of like-minded persons with a feeling of solidarity (more recently, the term has often been used to denote any social media platform). A considerable number of right-wing populist closed groups can be found where members can talk openly, vent their anger, and organize without fearing rejection or sanctions. In their public online communication, organized populists can control their public image by using platforms or accounts they manage themselves and where they can remove critical comments or comments by supporters that seem too radical.

Both populist organizations and previously unorganized individuals can use online technologies (such as groups on social media platforms or chat and messaging applications) to plan and coordinate protests and small-group actions, such as vigilante and neighborhood watch groups or symbolic actions. While such symbolic interventions usually had the function of drawing the attention of traditional media to an issue and a movement, today's right-wing populists can use their own online channels to inform about such actions. While mass protests and public appearances of leaders seem to be more in line with the overall ideology, certain groups, in particular those that are independent of the large parties, have adopted a broad range of interventions that have been part of the repertoire of previous social movements (cf., e.g., the 'Identitarian Movement.' However, although its groups are often affiliated with right-wing populist parties and groups, they may be classified as right-wing extremist or part of the New Right).

In the case of right-wing populism, we have to consider a number of opposing tendencies concerning the functions of Internet platforms. First, it can be used to communicate publicly, to organize, and to mobilize with fewer preconditions than in the past. Second, it may be characterized as a medium that allows for confrontation, fierce debate, and attacks, whether anonymous or not. Third, concerning the opportunity to avoid confrontation and messages conflicting with one's own attitudes, Internet applications enables selective exposure and algorithmic filtering. While this feature has been broadly recognized in scholarly and public debates, somewhat less attention has been given to the opportunities for social segregation by means of closed platforms, and by banning users or deleting messages. However, further research has yet to explore the relationship between anonymity, closed circles, the public display of right-wing populist identity, and confrontation.

Conclusion

The strategy in building the present theoretical framework has been to depart from right-wing populism as an ideology. Today's varieties of populism may still be thin and not share a common source in terms of the history of political thought or a single social movement. However, at least some of them have become 'thicker,' or 'more ideological' in the sense of providing an increasingly elaborate worldview instead of being a simple style or strategy that lacks descriptive and utopian content (and I have argued that we should refrain from overly thin reconstructions of populist ideologies that would miss the unique meaning of the constituent concepts arising from the ideology's morphology). The use of different Internet applications and platforms by right-wing populists can be interpreted as

a message in itself, a tool, and a factor in the development of the ideology that fulfills several important functions. If we depart from the ideological character of populism, we can theorize the transformation of relatively unstructured grievances into a worldview, a reason for protest and votes, the transformation of scattered incidents into evidence for this worldview, and the transformation of lifestyles of particular milieus to include practices and symbols of a particular right-wing populist connotation. Or, at a more abstract level, we can observe the construction of 'the people,' the exclusive ways of constituting it as a political subject, and the claim to represent it. While there has always been a homology between ideologies and styles, social media platforms as some of today's main means to build and reveal one's identity are increasingly used to express a distinctively right-wing populist self. Ordinary users creatively adopt and develop genuinely right-wing populist styles that correspond to the political worldview.

Reversing the perspective, we can now recognize how the requirements deduced from right-wing populist ideology match communicative functions of different Internet applications and platforms that have been identified in the literature (see Table 1). Furthermore, it is now possible to assess whether these functions are unique to right-wing populism or pertinent to any variety of populism. If we define populist representation in general as the personalized and acclamatory expression of a unitary popular will (instead of deliberative or participatory procedures), populist ideologies can be communicated and elaborated in a rather top-down manner and platforms without particular interactive functionalities will be sufficient. Therefore, whether online communication is of any particular relevance for this function remains an open question. Among the vast spectrum of social structures (such as relationships, groups, collaboration, etc.) that can be constituted on social networking sites and similar platforms, asymmetric, quasi-plebiscitary relationships match the populist conceptions of politics most closely.

Unlike typical right-wing populism, other varieties do not demand the exclusion of parts of the population. Proponents of these types may also use interactive technologies to collectively organize information on perceived social problems. However, the formalization of knowledge inherent in such platforms will then not be used to essentialize social

Table 1. Summary of the functions of the Internet for right-wing populism.

General functions of online applications and platforms[a]	Specific function for right-wing populism
Provide and receive information on (social) reality, interpretations, opinions, and arguments (e.g., on static websites, news websites, and social media posts)	Presentation and elaboration (?) of the ideology, framing and evaluation of issues and events in terms of the worldview (e.g., anti-elitism or exclusion of outgroups)
Present and negotiate personal identities (e.g., on social media platforms, while potential aspects of identities may be encountered on a variety of platforms)	Self-socialization into a right-wing populist worldview; adoption of beliefs, symbols, and practices of right-wing populism
Establish and entertain social relationships (e.g., on social networking sites)	Demonstrating the (plebiscitary and bonapartist) representation of 'the people': top-down claims of leadership and acclamation (e.g., by liking and sharing)
Coordinate collective action: collaborative production of content (e.g., on collaborative plaforms such as Wikis, collaborative maps) or organization of offline actions and events (e.g., via messaging/chat applications and platforms)	Interactive and collective organization of information on misconduct of elite and outgroup members; construction of threats by accumulation of anecdotal evidence
Automatically process of (social) data in order to provide personalized services and content (e.g., recommender systems)	Confirmation of right-wing populist worldviews due to automated selective exposure to ideologically consistent content

[a]see Beck (2010), Fuchs et al. (2010), and Schmidt (2006).

categories and stigmatize outgroups, but possibly also to aggregate and visualize discrimination and structural problems.

Thicker and increasingly established populist ideologies develop a range of symbols and practices that can serve as templates for personal identities which may then be represented and negotiated online.

As long as established media outlets are seen as a part of, or controlled by, the ruling elite, any populist movement can turn to more direct forms of online communication and messaging in order to circumvent the mainstream media.

Finally, the possible role of algorithms in selective exposure to political messages and in the rise of right-wing populism merits a separate discussion, but unlike the above functions, this mechanism cannot directly be related to right-wing populist ideology (on the contrary, segregation is ambivalent from the perspective of this worldview: while exclusion of certain groups is essential, the legitimate population should not be fragmented).

As a next step, the above theoretical considerations should be fit in an overall framework that describes and explains trends in the development of right-wing populism, for example, linking it to milieus that resist cultural change, to media change and changes in political fields that occur independently of populist challenges, and to discursive opportunities.

Such an overall framework could lead to a more systematic assessment of right-wing populism. Do we witness an effective and lasting backlash against cultural change or has resistance only become more visible? On the one hand, the Internet could just sharpen the image: the ideology can crystallize among those already susceptible to right-wing populist worldviews and styles, making previously existing milieus more visible. On the other hand, the Internet may contribute to the formation of an international network of right-wing populist movements that have become increasingly effective, and maybe also more radical and violent.

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