Article

History of Media Studies

The Field of Western Populism Studies from 2000 to 2022

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Abstract

What are the causes for the phenomenon of populism in Western liberal democracies in the early twenty-first century? As a result of Donald Trump's election victory in 2016 and the electoral successes of populist movements in Europe, populism studies has emerged as noticeable subfield in communication science. We sketch a survey of this subfield with an analysis of 114 articles published between 2000 and 2022 from six journals. The field of populism studies is governed by the "illusio" that digitalization, mediatization, or populist communication style favors the rise of right-wing populism. This analysis shows that these factors are unlikely to have contributed to its rise. The stances taken by researchers to explain populism vary depending on whether the university is located in the European Union or the Anglophone world. Critical studies of the impact of neoliberalism as a cause of populism are rarely included in the research.

In the early twenty-first century, populism is on the rise in Western liberal democracies. Populism itself arrives on the back of the neoliberalism and digitalization of the late twentieth century. These two meta-processes may be at the root of populism. Communication scholars often attribute populism to the spread of digital media.[1] In sociology and political science, on the other hand, researchers highlight changes in social structures as causes of populism[2]—combined with critique of neoliberalism.[3] We contribute to this conversation by analyzing 114 articles from six journals in communication studies. The articles, which were published between 2000 and 2022, contain the word "populism" or "populist" in the title, abstract, or as a keyword. Taking the epistemological standpoint that scientific facts are also socially constructed,[4] we objectify the results by means of a field analysis inspired by Bourdieu.[5]

Communication studies is a fragmented post-discipline without a theoretical core or sub-disciplines conducting independent research. Topical interconnections such as the term populism bring sub-disciplines together in a communication imagination.[6] Populism as a shared dimension particularly interconnects the sub-disciplines of "political communication," "journalism," "cross-cultural/cross-national communication," and "critical/discourse analysis."[7] Accordingly, we selected the journals for this study based on their thematic focus in addition to the five-year impact factor (IF) indicated on their website at the start of the study in April 2022. This field analysis includes six journals tied to the field of communication: The *Journal of Communication* is the putative flagship journal in the field with the highest symbolic capital (five-year IF in April 2022: 9.5); the *International Journal of Press/Politics* (5.4) provides us with a communication journal that has meaningful connections to political science; *Journalism Studies* (3.8) allows us to integrate the perspective of journalism studies; *Media, Culture & Society* (3.1) gives us a journal with an explicit critical/cultural view; the inclusion of *New Media & Society* (7.7) gives us a chance to incorporate a journal that is largely focused on digitalization; and *Communication Theory* (5.5) programs theoretical and meta-perspectives into our study. By design, these journals' relatively high impact factors lend to this study a focus on the power pole in the field of communication studies. Since journal articles are the product of a collective process and knowledge is hierarchically ordered, we capture what has been deemed to be the most thoroughly consecrated academic knowledge of our time on the topic of media and populism. Major journals exert symbolic power within their academic field and through the consecration effect into other fields.[8] Their assumptions and results, if not critically reflected, can

[1] Gianpetro Mazzoleni, "Populism and the Media," in *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*," ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser, and Florin Büchl, "Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, 8 (2017).

[2] Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, September 2017.

[3] James Gwartney, Robert Lawson, and Joshua Hall, "Economic Freedom of the World 2017 Annual Report," Fraser Institute, 2017.

[4] Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979).

[5] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of the Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[6] Silvio Waisbord, *Communication: A Post-discipline* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).

[7] Hyunjin Song, Jakob-Moritz Eberl, and Olga Eisele, "Less Fragmented Than We Thought? Toward Clarification of a Subdisciplinary Linkage in Communication Science, 2010–2019," *Journal of Communication* 70, no. 3 (2020).

[8] Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

be transformed into doxa, a set of beliefs and values accepted as true and unquestionable within a given society.[9]

By situating these studies in a social field, we can present conceptions of populism, causal contexts for populism, and research findings in an objectified space, weight them according to their distribution of capital, and identify focal points and gaps. Our analysis shows that theoretical perspectives on populism, choices of methods, and interpretations of results are partly shaped by institutional characteristics; and patterns in the dynamics of the field enable us to forecast where populism research is headed, what we can steer against, which perspectives are most promising based on consideration of the empirical results, and/or which need more institutional support.[10]

The article is structured as follows. A field analysis implies three interrelated, necessary moments. First, we outline the genesis of the field of populism studies and its position in the social space and identify the field's doxa and illusio. While doxa describes a set of common, shared beliefs within a field, "illusio," in Bourdieu's terminology, is the specific belief of actors or groups of actors about why it is worthwhile to invest their resources in the field and how they do so.[11] In the second section we consider the range of positions taken by populism scholars regarding the main driver of populism, which is alternately identified as neoliberalism, social structures, mediatization, or digitalization. We establish relations between the studies of the field based on whether they represent orthodox, heterodox, or heretical actor groups and summarize the empirical evidence for each potential driver of populism. In a third step, we elaborate the habitus of the groups of actors based on their theoretical, regional, methodological, institutional, and temporal characteristics. Since the concept of habitus is complex and has largely been studied for the power pole of communication studies,[12] it is noteworthy that our focus is on the second step, the field analysis. In the conclusion, we link our field analysis to Bourdieu's argument to explain the rise of populist movements. In his works such as "The Weight of the World"[13] or "Firing Back,"[14] he prognosticated today's successors of early European populists Le Pen, Berlusconi, Haider, and others, and rightly predicted that their rise would result from ongoing neoliberal policies. Drawing on Thomas Piketty's "Capital and Ideology,"[15] we will update Bourdieu's arguments from more than twenty years ago and outline a research path for investigating the relationship between neoliberalism, the media, and populism.

[9] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[10] Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology.*

[11] Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology;* Alexis von Mirbach, *DigitaleIllusio: Online-Journalisten in Argentinien, China, Deutschland und den USA* (Berlin: LitVerlag, 2014).

[12] Michael Meyen, "International Communication Association Fellows," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012).

[13] Pierre Bourdieu et al., *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscila P. Ferguson, Susan Emanuel, Joe Johnson, and Shoggy T. Waryn (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999).

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market II* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

[15] Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

The Field of Populism in the Social Space and Its Genesis

Bourdieu, who gained his first academic recognition in the 1960s with a structuralist study of the Algerian Kabyle, was the world's most cited social scientist at the time of his death in 2002. Bourdieu's thinking tools like *field*, *habitus*, and *capital*, and his oeuvre generally (most prominently the book *Distinctions*[16]), are sociological classics and remain influential in the most diverse fields of academia.[17] However, Bourdieu's impact in communication studies has been uneven. Though he is regularly cited in the subdisciplines of journalism studies[18] or in the history of communication studies,[19] he is largely absent in the subdiscipline of political communication, which is also the case for the study of populism.[20]

Bourdieu's field theory posits that the structures of a microcosm are homologous to the structures of the macrocosm—similar to Russian matryoshka dolls. Accordingly, we will work our way from top to bottom when structuring the field of populism studies. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu describes the position of universities in the social space as essentially founded on cultural capital, which places them, like the sphere of cultural production, at the non-dominant pole. Universities occupy a powerful position within the sphere of cultural production because they represent an institutionalized form of cultural capital. Within the university field, two competing principles of legitimacy collide. On the one hand, there is a genuinely "worldly" or political principle, which is held by the "sciences of power," which have the most influence on society. On the other hand, a principle founded on the autonomy of the scientific and intellectual establishment prevails. The social sciences occupy an intermediate position in the university field and have staked a claim to a monopoly on legitimate reflection and legitimate discourse on the social world.[21] Communication studies, a comparatively recent field, is historically closer to the heteronomous-worldly pole than to the autonomous-intellectual pole.[22] The quantitative socio-scientific paradigm has spread beyond the US, displacing critical schools such as the Frankfurt School in Central Europe[23] and encountering resistance in Latin America.[24] The symbolic capital of communication studies in the broader academic field is historically low. Consequently, the collective habitus of the field strives for acceptance in the social sciences and social relevance through knowledge production for the outside world.[25] The intense public debates about populism, fake news, and hate speech, and "the growing realization among political scientists that discourse is crucial for understanding populism,"[26] provide an opportunity to increase the symbolic capital of communication studies. This habitual disposition leads to a first

[16] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[17] Gisèle Sapiro, *Dictionnaire International Bourdieu* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020).

[18] Phoebe Maares and Folker Hanusch, "Interpretations of the Journalistic Field: A Systematic Analysis of How Journalism Scholarship Appropriates Bourdieusian Thought," *Journalism* 23, no. 4 (2022).

[19] David W. Park, "Pierre Bourdieu und die Geschichte des Feldes der Kommunikationswissenschaft: Auf dem Weg zu einem reflexiven und konfliktorientierten Verständnis der Fachentwicklung," in *Pierre Bourdieu und die Kommunikationswissenschaft: Internationale Perspektiven*, ed. Thomas Wiedemann and Michael Meyen (Cologne: Halem, 2013).

[20] Benjamin Krämer, "How German Communication Research Discovered Bourdieu but Missed His Potential for the Study of (Populist) Political Communication," *History of Media Studies* 3 (2023).

[21] Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus.*

[22] Park, "Pierre Bourdieu und die Geschichte des Feldes der Kommunikationswissenschaft"; Waisbord, *Communication: A Post-discipline.*

[23] Maria Löblich and Andreas M. Scheu, "Writing the History of Communication Studies," *Communication Theory* 21, no. 1 (2011).

[24] Jesús Martín-Barbero, "A Latin American Perspective on Communication/Cultural Mediation," *Global Media and Communication* 2, no. 3 (2006).

[25] Meyen, "International Communication Association Fellows."

[26] Claes de Vreese et al., "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (2018).

explanation for the sharp increase in the number of populism studies from 2000 to 2022, as shown in figure 1 from the supply-side. Figure 2 illustrates the demand for populism studies in the field structure. The table shows that Donald Trump is the most mentioned actor, with 1,002 mentions in the field of populism studies. Since Trump is rarely mentioned before 2018 (10 mentions), the correlation between his victory in the 2016 presidential election and the boom is evident and serves as a showcase of the American universal in political communication and elite journals, where the US context is treated as a norm and shapes the expectations of scholars from other regions of the world.[27] While leaders such as Haider, Le Pen, Fortuyn, and Berlusconi have played a significant role in European politics since the 1990s, the term populism needed a US trigger to gain attention and acceptance in the major international journals we surveyed. Consequently, mentions of the European political parties AfD (159) and SVP (55) or the leaders Matteo Salvini (141) and Geert Wilders (76) trail Trump's mentions by a wide margin. Regardless of the geographical context, figure 2 shows that for the components of populist communication,[28] the research problem is right-wing populism (782) and, to a lesser extent, left-wing populism (141) and anti-elite populism (76). The most mentioned communication channels in the context of populism are Facebook (495), Twitter (451), and 4/8chan (110), followed by the traditional media FOX News (50).

When can we speak of a field? Bourdieu compares social fields to magnetic force fields in which individuals attract and repel each other like electrons. The actors, in our case the researchers, develop a "secret complicity" in the field, even without knowing or citing each other, and engage in a knowledge struggle to determine the legitimate points of view—in our case concerning the definition and conceptualization of the phenomenon of populism.[29] Like major universities, major journals are linked by objective relations, so that a change in the structure of these relations has an effect within each of them.[30] The emergence and limits of the field can only be determined empirically, which makes the research process a game of back and forth. To distinguish between a pre-field and the field of study, in *The Rules of Art* Bourdieu focuses on 1898, the year of the Dreyfus Affair in France, when Émile Zola's work "J'accuse" embodied the growing autonomy of the literary field from politics.[31] In a pragmatic modification, we choose Trump's election in 2016 as the tipping point and divide our analysis into the pre-field of populism studies from 2000 to 2017 and the field itself from 2018 to 2022. In addition to the proliferation of studies, the following presentation will show that, since 2018, research on populism has been limited to the context of populist movements, and as a result of knowledge struggles, we will

[27] Naiza Comel et al., "Who Navigates the "Elite" of Communication Journals? The Participation of BRICS Universities in Top-Ranked Publications," *Online Media and Global Communication* 2, no. 4 (2023).

[28] de Vreese et al., "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style."

[29] Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Reflexive Sociology.*

[30] Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus.*

[31] Bourdieu, *The Rules of the Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

get a dominant definition of populism, leading to the autonomization of the field and increasing the stakes of entering the field with differing approaches.

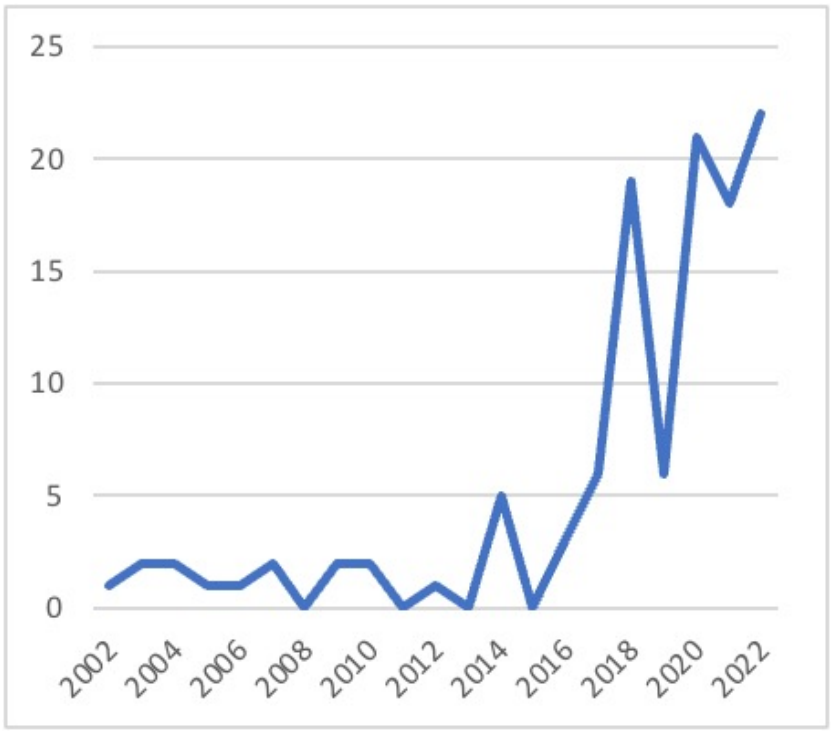

Figure 1: Journalism articles that mention populism or populist. Articles published between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2022, including "Online First."

Keyword	*N*	*Keyword*	*N*
Trump	1.002	Podemos	135
Right-wing	782	4/8chan	110
Facebook	495	VOX	89
Twitter	451	*Anti-elite*	76
Instagram	168	SVP	76
Salvini	159	QAnon	60
AfD	141	Wilders	55
Left-wing	141	FOX News	50
Sanders	140	Brexit	45

Figure 2: Associations with populism 2018–2022. Eighteen of the most-mentioned actors, parties, movements, and media associated with the rise of "populism," including the *components* of populist communication (de Vreese, 2018).

Pre-field of Populism Studies from 2000–2017

From 2000 to 2017, twenty-eight studies with the word "populism" or "populist" in the title, abstract, or keyword were published in the six journals examined. Based on the varying definitions of the term populism, the pre-field first shows why populism has long been considered a notoriously vague and slippery concept.[32] A first group of scholars uses the term in the context of *critiques of modernization*, for example of "market populism," that is, the notion that the free market is "on the side of the ordinary people."[33] Other critiques address the terms "critical populism"[34] and "techno-populism," the latter of which seeks to glorify communication technology.[35] The second group looks at populism in the context of the *commercialization* of the media and asks whether "tabloidization" is positive or negative for society.[36] The third group explores the extent to which *digital technology* contributes to the rise of populist movements.[37] A fourth group identifies populist *communication styles* of "aggressive journalists,"[38] the regional press,[39] or politicians.[40] Comparing the impact of the groups, figure 3 shows that ten studies on communication style (volume of 56.8) and ten studies on critical theory (52.6) represent the dominant view on the different concepts of populism. The contexts commercialization (22.1) and digitalization (13.1) are comparatively low. Figure 3 shows in addition the regional relationship between Anglophone countries and the European Union (EU) with regard to publications. Studies containing critical theory were mainly conducted at universities in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Australia, while studies focusing on the other contexts are roughly evenly distributed across the regions.

Compared to the six journals studied, the Italian Gianpetro Mazzoleni was the first to establish a connection between the media and political populist movements with his essay "Populism and the Media" published in a political science anthology.[41] In the later field of populism studies, Mazzoleni alone is cited 133 times. The twenty-one studies from the pre-field that do not cite Mazzoleni are cited three times, uniquely by Chadwick and Stromer-Galley.[42] With this, the tradition of populism research that criticizes modernization is disappearing—a tradition which the seven studies that cite Mazzoleni and are highlighted in black do not follow. Thus, in its socio-geographical genesis, the field of populism studies is a mirror image of the overall field of communication studies, where the socio-scientific paradigm travelled from the US to the rest of the world.[43] Although studies from Anglophone regions are higher in numbers in the pre-field, it is the Europeans who bring the quantitative method with media effects on a small range to the field. Since journals with

[32] Anastasia Kavada, "Editorial: Media and the 'Populist Moment,'" *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018).

[33] Cathy Greenfield and Peter Williams, "Financialization, Finance Rationality and the Role of Media in Australia," *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 3 (2007); McKnight, "The Sunday Times and Andrew Neil: The Cultivation of Market Populism," *Journalism Studies* 10, no. 6 (2009); Reece Peck, "'You Say Rich, I Say Job Creator': How Fox News Framed the Great Recession through the Moral Discourse of Producerism," *Media, Culture & Society* 36, no. 4 (2014).

[34] Joshua Gunn and Barry Brummett, "Popular Communication after Globalization," *Journal of Communication* 54, no. 4 (2004).

[35] Paula Chakravartty, "Telecom, National Development and the Indian State: A Postcolonial Critique," *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2 (2004); Bo Nilsson and Eric Carlsson, "Swedish Politicians and New Media: Democracy, Identity and Populism in a Digital Discourse," *New Media & Society* 16, no. 4 (2014); Tauel Harper, "The Big Data Public and Its Problems: Big Data and the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 9 (2017).

[36] Manuela Bueno, Maria Luisa Cárdenas, and Lola Esquivias, "The Rise of the Gossip Press in Spain," *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 4 (2007); Mary Debrett, "Branding Documentary: New Zealand's Minimalist Solution to Cultural Subsidy," *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 1 (2004); Stephen Harrington, "Waking up with Friends: Breakfast News, *Sunrise* and the 'Televisual Sphere,'" *Journalism Studies* 11, no. 2, (2010).

[37] Andrew Chadwick and Jennifer Stromer-Galley, "Digital Media, Power, and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns: Party Decline or Party Renewal?" *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21, no. 3 (2016); Niko Hatakka, "When Logics of Party Politics and Online Activism Collide: The Populist Finns Party's Identity under Negotiation," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 12 (2017).

higher impact come closer to the field of power, one might expect critical theory studies to have less impact than other theories, but this is not the case in the pre-field of populism studies. A difference in the journalistic impact factor is only visible in the higher weighting of the digitization context (6.6) compared to the commercialization context (3.2), which includes traditional media.

Mazzoleni's Framework

Mazzoleni's outstanding citation record points to a theoretical center in the field of populism studies that offers hypotheses for more than fifteen years of research. We present Mazzoleni's essay "Populism and the Media" in detail because his framework serves as a basis for organizing the substantive findings on the question of what causes populism. Mazzoleni adapts political scientist Cas Mudde's observation of a close linkage between political populism and populist media, [44] creates the term media populism, combines the systemic concept of mediatization with actor-centered "populist strategies" and asks: "Do the media contribute to the rise of populism?"[45] This question is the doxa of the later field. In Mazzoleni's framework (figure 4), the potential cause of mediatization (focus 1) is triggered by the "global shift to an infotainment society" and the *commercialization of media systems*, making it the root of populism. To gain attention and public goodwill, populist actors or parties (focus 2) or populist media (focus 3) employ two tactics. Distinguishing between these tactics is essential for understanding the root cause. The first tactic involves adapting to media logic (focus 4), for example, by means of criteria such as creating sensations, controversy, drama, personality, or visualization. This points toward commercialization as the cause of populism. The second communication tactic (focus 5) is "populism as a communication style," which includes features such as ultra-simplified messages, references to the people, playing the role of the underdog, or aggressive attacks on the liberal media. If understood as an ideology,[46] populist style can itself cause populist movements to emerge. In Mazzoleni's framework, journalists can be subject to a *production bias* (focus 6) or an *evaluation bias* (focus 7). The production bias means that journalists give populists more opportunities to increase ratings. Empirical confirmation would support the commercialization hypothesis as a cause of rising populism. The evaluation bias means that journalists are naturally opposed to populist ideas. Empirical confirmation of this would argue against mediatization as a cause. The effects of media populism can be observed at three levels: the media (focus 8), citizens (focus 9), or democracy (focus 10). Regarding the media complex, the effects can be identified through

[38] Steven E. Clayman, "Tribune of the People: Maintaining the Legitimacy of Aggressive Journalism," *Media, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2002); Brian M. Goss, " 'Jeffersonian Poetry': An Ideological Analysis of George F. Will's Editorials (2002–2004)," *Journalism Studies* 6, no. 4 (2005).

[39] Meryl Aldridge, "The Ties that Divide: Regional Press Campaigns, Community and Populism," *Media, Culture & Society*, 25, no. 4 (2003); Tanni Haas, "Importing Journalistic Ideals and Practices? The Case of Public Journalism in Denmark," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 8, no. 2 (2003).

[40] Carlos de la Torre and Catherine Conaghan, "The Hybrid Campaign: Tradition and Modernity in Ecuador's 2006 Presidential Election," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 3 (2009).

[41] Gianpetro Mazzoleni, "Populism and the Media," in *Twenty-First Century Populism*: *The Spectre of Western European Democracy*," ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[42] Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, "Digital Media, Power, and Democracy."

[43] Löblich and Scheu, "Writing the History of Communication Studies."

[44] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government & Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004).

[45] Mazzoleni, "Populism and the Media," 50.

[46] Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

Article	*Critical Theory*	*Commercialization*	*Digitalization*	*Populist Style*
2002–2017 *(total 28)*	Chakravartty 2004, Gunn 2006, Greenfield 2007, McKnight 2009, Gillespie 2010, Peck 2014, Raisborough 2014, Nilsson 2014, Graves 2017, Harper 2017	Bueno 2007, Debrett 2004, Harrington 2010, **Landerer 2014,** Holton 2016, **Herkman 2017**	Chadwick 2016, **Hatakka 2017**	Clayman 2002, Aldrige 2003, Haas 2003, Goss 2005, Torre 2009, **Groshek 2012**, Kelsey 2016, **Krämer 2014**, **Schmuck 2017**, **Müller 2017**
AP/EU	9 vs. 1	3 vs. 3	1 vs. 1	5 vs. 4 (+ Ecuador)
Quanti.	0 of 10	4 of 6	1 of 2	4 of 10
Impact	52.6 (Average 5.3)	22.1 (3.2)	13.1 (6.6)	56.8 (5.7)

Figure 3. The pre-field of populism studies. AP = Anglophone (USA, UK, Australia); EU = European Union (including Switzerland); Quanti. = quantitative method; Bold = studies citing Mazzoleni.

an increase in *media coverage* or through *soft populism* (focus 8b), i.e., non-populist politicians communicating in a more populist manner. As for citizens (focus 9), increased *attention* to populists may lead to an identification with the "populist stars" (focus 9a) or to a *change in attitudes* (focus 9b). Media populism may have a negative impact on the "health of Western democracies" (focus 10) because shifts in attitudes could result in support for *nationalist and xenophobic politics* in elections (focus 10a) or because public discourse undergoes *contamination through populism* (focus 10b).

At the same time, Mazzoleni narrows down his concept: "No assumption is made here of a *causal link* between the media and the spread of populism: The media factor, of course, is by no means the only 'independent variable' . . . and cannot be separated from the other structural factors."[47] The *socio-structural factors* (focus 11) are "the nature of the political system and the specific features of the social and cultural-political climates."[48] Causality can be tested using the "media life-cycle model" (focus 12) as such: If we first see an increase in coverage for populists and then an increase in voting for populists, the mediatization hypothesis is confirmed. But if populists first enter parliaments and then increase their coverage, this argues against the media as a driver of increasing populism.

[47] Mazzoleni, "Populism and the Media," 58.

[48] Mazzoleni, 58.

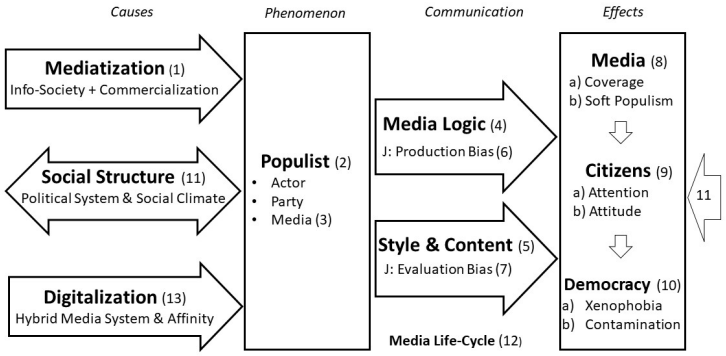

Figure 4: The foci of media populism, based on Mazzoleni (2008); Engesser et al. (2017).

Mazzoleni does not mention neoliberalism as a possible cause, but at one point he refers to the challenges of globalized capitalism. He also does not mention *digitalization* (focus 13) as a possible cause of populism in 2008. Engesser and colleagues added this element later, in an essay that is second only to Mazzoleni's inaugural essay in terms of influence, with 118 citations in our investigated field of populism studies (and, like Mazzoleni, was not published in any of the six journals).[49] They adopt Chadwick's notion of a "hybrid media system"[50] and highlight the novelty: While populists can be critiqued by journalists in traditional media, social media serves as a direct linkage to the people and allows populists to circumvent the journalistic gatekeepers. In the following, we will refer to populism's "affinity for social media" with the simplified term the *digitalization hypothesis*. The cause-and-effect chain of mediatization is the *commercialization hypothesis*. If the communication tactics of focus 5 are foregrounded, the study addresses the *style hypothesis*.

[49] Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media."
[50] Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

The Field of Populism and the Illusio of its Field of Power

A total of eighty-six articles with the word "populism" or "populist" in the title, abstract, or keyword were published in the six journals from 2018 to 2022. Fourteen of these articles examine populism in non-Western systems, which we exclude to avoid the complexity of comparing dissimilar systems.[51] If we differentiate between the twenty-eight studies from the pre-field in terms of whether they cite Mazzoleni or not, the difference that emerges is that they either cite Mazzoleni and/or Mudde or they do not include citations of the two authors at all. Indeed, Mudde, author of *The Populist Zeitgeist*,[52] has

[51] Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, eds., *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[52] Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

replaced Mazzoleni as the most cited researcher among populism theorists, with 216 citations in our investigated field of populism. We can consider Mazzoleni and Mudde as the same strain, since Mudde's citations relate especially to foci 2, 4, and 5 in Mazzoleni's framework. Thirty-six empirical studies in the field of populism studies follow the Mazzoleni-Mudde strain; we capture them as the field of power and the orthodox group of actors. Another twenty studies also examine populism empirically, but without reference to Mazzoleni and Mudde. This is the heterodox group of actors. As a third group, we identify a subfield of theorists represented by fourteen studies in which the reflection takes an orthodox, heterodox, or heretical position on the field of power. In addition, there are three introductions for special issues on populism (marked in italics in figure 5), which we assign to the field of power[53] and theorists.[54]

Reflecting the dominant conception of populism, one publication is representative of the field of power: the introduction for the special issue of *International Journal of Press/Politics*.[55] The text may not achieve the highest number of citations in the investigated field, but it is authored by five "patrons": de Vreese (87 citations), Esser (105), Aalberg (79), Reinemann (35), and Stanyer (18). All are professors with power over research funds, and their essay provides a "conceptual basis for a new generation of populism researchers."[56] The call for this special issue attracted more than seventy submissions. In their conception of populism, de Vreese combines Mudde's ideology-centered and Hawkin's[57] discourse-centered understanding of populism as an expression of *political communication content and style*. With respect to the causes of populism, the authors refer to the exogenous factors of "economic insecurity"[58] and "cultural backlash."[59] And yet, like Krämer[60]—the most cited scholar in the pre-field with 112 citations, who defined media populism as a phenomenology—the authors note: "We are not so much concerned with a normative assessment of opportunity structures."[61] This focus on populist communication specifies the illusio in the field of power. The doxa in the field as a whole is based on the question "Do the media contribute to the rise of populism?" Considering the most studied form of right-wing populism, as explained above, and the essay by Engesser and colleagues[62] on digitalization, which has been cited 118 times, the illusio of the field of power becomes: Does populist communication style and content contribute to the rise of right-wing populism through (social) media?

[53] de Vreese et al., "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective"; Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Michalska Koc, and Andrea Römmele, "Populism in the Era of Twitter: How Social Media Contextualized New Insights into an Old Phenomenon," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020).

[54] Kavada, "Editorial."

[55] de Vreese et al., "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective."

[56] de Vreese et al., 425.

[57] Kirk A. Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[58] Gwartney et al., "Economic Freedom of the World."

[59] Inglehart and Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism."

[60] Benjamin Krämer, "Media Populism: A Conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects: Media Populism," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014).

[61] de Vreese et al., 425.

[62] Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media."

Structure of the Field, Positions, and Results

We propose structuring the field of populism studies following the classical structure of a field analysis. The "top versus bottom" will be determined based on the volume of symbolic capital, which is the aggregated cultural-specific, social, and economic capital. To implement symbolic capital empirically, we will use the journal's five-year impact factor. The "left-right scheme" of the field will be arranged according to the relationship between the types of capital. In his graphic representations, Bourdieu reduces the three types of capital to the opposition between economic capital and culture-specific capital. In the university field, culture-specific capital is scientific capital. Thus, in figure 5, we structure the field based on two factors: economic capital (EC) and scientific capital (SC). The right side of the field is the heteronomous pole, which is more open to logic from outside of the field and influences from other social fields such as politics, economics, or the media.[63] The left side is the autonomous pole, where the actors orient themselves more strongly to the internal logic of the field. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu compares science to a "parliament of scholarship."[64] The authority sits on the right, implementing the techniques and rules of science within the framework of the existing social order. The opposition party sits on the left, responding to practical matters on the social level by making interjections. We locate the critique of neoliberalism, presented as the cause of populism, at the autonomous pole. Then, from left to right, the contexts of populism—social structures, mediatization, digitalization, and populist style—follow. The contexts of mediatization, digitalization, and style have penetrated the academic field from the outside—clear evidence that the growth of the field of populism studies is not due to Mazzoleni's theoretical innovation within the field in 2008. Instead, the field boomed in 2018 as a result of Trump's election, which took place outside the field, with the much-discussed question of whether Facebook or Twitter contributed to his victory.

[63] Bourdieu, *Rules of the Art.*

[64] Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 88.

We specify the studies in the field of power using Mazzoleni's thirteen foci. Like de Vreese et al.,[65] we group these foci together under the following complexes: "political actors" (foci 2, 4, 5, 13), "media" (foci 1, 3, 6–8, 12), and "citizens" (foci 9–11). The color coding in figure 5 is based on the empirical results. Green stands for studies containing results that support the field of power's illusio that style combined with digitalization fuels right-wing populism. Red represents studies that contradict the field's doxa that style, digitalization, *or* mediatization contribute to the rise of populism. Blue represents studies that do not confirm the style and digitalization hypotheses but point toward the commercialization hypothesis in the context of

[65] de Vreese et al., "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style."

mediatization. Gray represents studies that do not confirm the digitalization hypothesis but report that digitalization has had another effect on society than right-wing populism. Purple stands for studies that do not confirm the style hypothesis but report that populist style has had another effect than right-wing populism. The studies that do not examine the effect of populist communication but explore *how* populists communicate are highlighted in black. Studies that explicitly set a "counter frame" to the digitalization hypothesis are highlighted in yellow. Taken together, the seventy-three studies from the field of populism have an impact volume of 424.3, published by 192 authors. The thirty-eight studies in the field of power have an impact volume of 236.5 (137 authors), and the twenty studies in the heterodox actor group have an impact volume of 110.8 (36 authors). The fifteen theoretic articles have an impact volume of 77 (19 authors). Regarding the vertical hierarchy within the actor groups, the studies are classified according to their specific journal impact. For instance, a study published in the *Journal of Communication* (impact 9.5) is positioned higher than a study in *Media, Culture & Society* (3.1). If two studies are published in the same journal, the older study is positioned above the more recent one, as it is assumed to have a higher long-term impact.

In the field of power, there are fifteen studies in the "populist actor" complex that propose hypotheses regarding style and digitalization, eight studies in the "media" complex that investigate the commercialization hypothesis, and thirteen studies in the "citizen" complex that examine the effects of populist communication within the framework of all three hypotheses. The key findings are positioned from left to right in the field graph.

Actor Complex

Since Mazzoleni identified politicians and parties as populist actors in his 2008 essay, new actors have emerged by way of the internet (focus 2). In social networks, for example, we experience populism "by citizens,"[66] "transnational networks,"[67] or "hyperpartisan media."[68] Studies on the communication forms of *a priori defined populists* focus on style and content (focus 5). Populists are more likely to talk about corruption,[69] "dismiss the elites"[70] by means of "character assassination,"[71] use social media as a "double-barreled gun,"[72] reinforce aspects of right-wing populism,[73] and portray "the people" with visual content.[74]Regarding media logic (focus 4), populists convey their messages with a higher amount of negative language.[75] Taken together, the communications strategies of defined populists have an effect *inside* the digital nexus. Populists receive more au-

[66] Sina Blassnig et al., "Populism in Online Election Coverage: Analyzing Populist Statements by Politicians, Journalists, and Readers in Three Countries," *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 8 (2019).

[67] Jenny Hokka and Matti Nelimarkka, "Affective Economy of National-Populist Images: Investigating National and Transnational Online Networks through Visual Big Data," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 5 (2020).

[68] Anders O. Larsson, "Right-Wingers on the Rise Online: Insights from the 2018 Swedish Elections," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 12 (2020).

[69] Kaitlen J. Cassell, "The Populist Communication Strategy in Comparative Perspective," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Online First (2021).

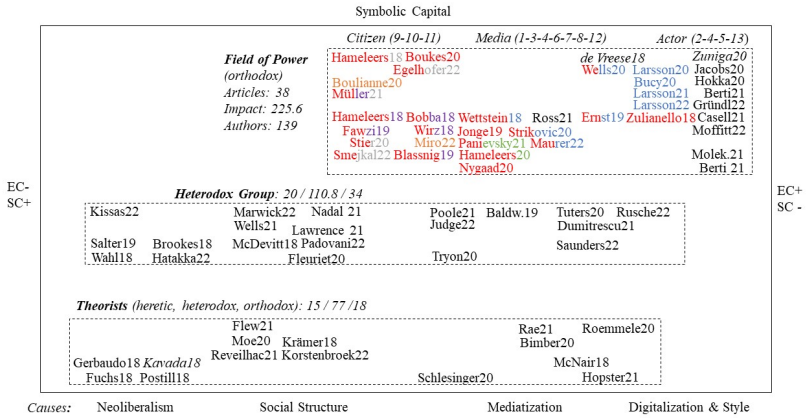

Figure 5: The field of western populism studies. EC = Economic Capital; SC = Scientific Capital. Color coding is based on responses to the question: Does populist style and/or digitalization contribute to the rise of right-wing populism? Yes (green) | No (red) | Not measured (black) | Possibly as part of media logic (blue) | No, but may contribute to polarization (gray) | Counter frame (yellow) | No, but may contribute to anti-elite populism (purple)

dience engagement (focus 9a) on Facebook,[76] Instagram,[77] and Twitter.[78] These higher levels of engagement (focus 9a) point toward the "social media affinity" of populism. However, the findings of a study *without an a priori classification* of populists paint a different picture. In twenty-six countries analyzed, only four percent of political leaders' Facebook posts contain at least one element of populist communication. Thus, "the populist zeitgeist 'thesis' [focus 8a] does not apply to communication strategies."[79] A comparison of communication channels that includes talk shows, Twitter, Facebook, and the news media reveals that: "It is the newspapers of all places where we found the highest proportion of populist statements."[80] Populists can make a breakthrough into traditional media through social media, but a comparison of communication tactics shows that their reason for doing so is not populist style, but "the so-called news value bonus because their messages are controversial, spectacular, and taboo-breaking—and thus meet the selection criteria of the media."[81] Bucy and colleagues[82] and Wells and colleagues[83] also show that media logic is crucial for the transfer from social media to traditional media. With regard to traditional media, leaders of the German right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) have received much more news media coverage about their provocation ("content that perfectly matches media logic") than about their attacks on political elites as an element of populist style.[84] As Strikovic et al. note, "Politicians are not becoming more populist across the political spectrum, but rather there is a tendency toward personalization, which makes 'normal' political communication appear more populist."[85] summary, the results from the political actor complex do not support the hypothesis that digitalization and style are the drivers of populism. As the elements

[70] Johann Gründl, "Populist Ideas on Social Media: A Dictionary-based Measurement of Populist Communication," *New Media & Society* 24, no. 6 (2022).

[71] Carlo Berti and Enzo Loner, "Character Assassination as a Right-Wing Populist Communication Tactic on Social Media: The Case of Matteo Salvini in Italy," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2021).

[72] Kristof Jacobs, Linn Sandberg, and Niels Spierings, "Twitter and Facebook: Populists' Double-Barreled Gun?" *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020).

[73] Carlo Berti, "Right-Wing Populism and the Criminalization of Sea-Rescue NGOs: The 'Sea-Watch 3' Case in Italy, and Matteo Salvini's Communication on Facebook," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 3 (2021).

[74] Benjamin Moffitt, "How Do Populists Visually Represent 'The People'? A Systematic Comparative Visual Content Analysis of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders' Instagram Accounts," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Online First (2022).

[75] Cassell, "The Populist Communication Strategy in Comparative Perspective"; Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska and Przemyslaw Wilk, "Casual, Colloquial, Commonsensical: A News Values Stylistic Analysis of a Populist Newsfeed," *Journalism Studies* 22, no. 6 (2021).

[76] Larsson, "Right-Wingers on the Rise"; Anders O. Larsson, "Picture-Perfect Populism: Tracing the Rise of European Populist Parties on Facebook," *New Media & Society* 24, no. 1 (2022).

of media logic function similarly across all media sectors, In Wells and colleagues propose that, instead of focusing on the "hybrid-media hypothesis," more attention should be paid to the economy as a cause of populism.[86]

Media Complex

We can continue to test this commercialization hypothesis in the media complex, which comprises eight studies. In addition, the studies of Wirz and colleagues[87] from the citizen complex and of Müller and colleagues[88] from the pre-field are included in this analysis, as they report results of content analyses conducted in parallel.

One study supports the populist zeitgeist thesis of *populism by the media* (focus 3). Focusing on a twenty-eight-year period of media coverage (focus 8a) in the Netherlands, Hameleers and Vliegenthart observe "clear evidence for an increasing presence of people-centric, anti-elitist and right- and left-exclusionist coverage in newspapers."[89] However, they put these findings into perspective. First, "populist rhetoric is not as overtly dominant in media coverage," and, second, "we may not be able to establish a clear causal relationship between the increasing trend of populist references in media coverage and increasing support for populist ideas and parties in public opinion."[90] Causality can be tested using Mazzoleni's *media life cycle model* (focus 12) and four content analyses of news coverage in Northern and Central European Countries.[91] In an international comparison, all four studies show that in countries where populist parties have been present in parliament for a longer period of time and are thus in the zone of legitimate controversy, populist themes, messages, or intra-media agenda-setting are more prevalent in print media. In terms of causality, this suggests that the media are not the driver of a possible populist zeitgeist but that they *follow* it. The studies also show that coverage is rather low in absolute terms (focus 8a): "In contrast to many allegations regarding the news media following the last European elections, Brexit, and the election of Trump . . . we found populist actors (on the left and right) to be mostly *underrepresented*."[92] "Only a small share of articles" contained statements that can be considered populist.[93] "Most articles had no or few (populist) style elements" and "anti-immigrant statements were relatively scarce."[94]

Thus, according to the results, journalists are not subject to a *production bias* (focus 6), but rather are subject to an *evaluation bias* (focus 7). Regarding comments on populist alternative media "the overwhelmingly negative coverage implies that the mainstream media is fulfilling its democratic role by informing and promoting public understanding of the motives and ideological views of right-wing

[77] Anders O. Larsson, "The Rise of Instagram as a Tool for Political Communication: A Longitudinal Study of European Political Parties and their Followers," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2021).

[78] Erik P. Bucy et al., "Performing Populism: Trump's Transgressive Debate Style and the Dynamics of Twitter Response," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020).

[79] Mattia Zulianello, Alessandro Albertini, and Diego Ceccobelli, "A Populist *Zeitgeist*? The Communication Strategies of Western and Latin American Political Leaders on Facebook," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (2018): 447.

[80] Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser, Sina Blassnig, and Sven Engesser, "Favorable Opportunity Structures for Populist Communication: Comparing Different Types of Politicians and Issues in Social Media, Television and the Press," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24, no. 2 (2019).

[81] Ernst et al., "Favorable Opportunity Structures," 183.

[82] Bucy et al., "Performing Populism."

[83] Chris Wells et al., "Trump, Twitter, and News Media Responsiveness: A Media Systems Approach," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020).

[84] Marcus Maurer et al., "How Right-Wing Populists Instrumentalize News Media: Deliberate Provocations, Scandalizing Media Coverage, and Public Awareness for the Alternative for Germany (AfD)," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Online First (2022).

[85] Edina Strikovic et al., "On Behalf of the People: The Use of Public Opinion and the Perception of "the People" in Political Communication Strategies of Dutch MPs," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25, no. 1 (2020): 39.

[86] Wells et al., "Trump, Twitter, and News Media Responsiveness."

[87] Dominique S. Wirz et al., "The Effects of Right-Wing Populist Communication on Emotions and Cognitions toward Immigrants," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (2018).

[88] Philipp Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage on Populist Attitudes in the Public: Evidence from a Panel Study in Four European Democracies: Polarizing News Effects on Populist Attitudes," *Journal of Communication* 67, no. 6 (2017).

alternative media while refraining from legitimizing these actors."[95] While two studies show that the *evaluation bias* is weaker owing to the electoral success of populists,[96] the effects are evident on both private and public media journalists. This means that "the differences in media strategies cannot simply be attributed to commercialization."[97] Overall, we endorse the conclusion of Wettstein and colleagues regarding the media complex:

> The media have been criticized for providing a favorable stage for populist actors, and—bluntly said— falling victim to the news value bonus and provocative strategies of populist actors whose main goal is to trigger news coverage, polarize the electorate and mobilize their own supporters. Although the theoretical argument sounds plausible, we do not find convincing empirical support for it. . . . The term "media populism" should be used with reservation.[98]

Mazzoleni asked the question: "Do the media contribute to the rise of populism?" We propose formulating the question differently based on our findings:

To what extent do the media contribute to the downplay of populism?

In the citizen complex, the study reporting the largest proven media effect in the field of populism studies also suggests that the question should be posed this way. Boukes and Hameleers show that satire shows broadcast by mainstream media reduced support for Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders among viewers (focus 9b).[99] Thus, this result also belies the hypothesis that media contribute to the rise of populism.

Citizen Complex

Of the thirteen studies in the citizen complex, three studies examine the behavior of online users and ten studies examine the effects of populist communication and include sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, education, or income. Hameleers and colleagues investigate social structures in the most depth, also including country structure data: unemployment and migration levels.[100] We will first present the effects of populist communication on citizens' attitudes (focus 9) and then its effects on democracy (focus 10).

The results of the studies with real-life settings are consistent with those of experimental studies, and one aspect stands out: "The influence of populist statements depends on media users' prior attitudes"[101] or comes "on top of pre-existing attitudes."[102] Effects are evident among people who feel relatively deprived,[103] who already hold populist attitudes,[104] who are disappointed by politics,[105] or who hold anti-pluralistic world views.[106] At the same time, the

[89] Michael Hameleers and Rens Vliegenthart, "The Rise of a Populist Zeitgeist? A Content Analysis of Populist Media Coverage in Newspapers Published between 1990 and 2017," *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020).

[90] Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 32.

[91] Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage"; Martin Wettstein et al., "News Media as Gatekeepers, Critics, and Initiators of Populist Communication: How Journalists in Ten Countries Deal with the Populist Challenge," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (2018); Silje Nygaard, "Boundary Work: Intermedia Agenda-Setting Between Right-Wing Alternative Media and Professional Journalism," *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 6 (2020); Wirz et al., "The Effects of Right-Wing Populist Communication on Emotions and Cognitions toward Immigrants."

[92] Wettstein et al., "News Media as Gatekeepers," 487.

[93] Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage," 981.

[94] Wirz et al., "The Effects of Right-Wing Populist Communication on Emotions and Cognitions toward Immigrants," 505.

[95] Nygaard, "Boundary Work," 10.

[96] Ayala Panievsky, "The Strategic Bias: How Journalists Respond to Antimedia Populism," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27, no. 4 (2022); Léonie de Jonge, "The Populist Radical Right and the Media in the Benelux: Friend or Foe?" *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24, no. 2 (2019).

[97] de Jonge, "The Populist Radical Right and the Media in the Benelux," 205.

[98] Wettstein et al., "News Media as Gatekeepers," 490–91.

[99] Marc Boukes and Michael Hameleers, "Shattering Populists' Rhetoric with Satire at Elections Times: The Effect of Humorously Holding Populists Accountable for Their Lack of Solutions," *Journal of Communication* 70, no. 4 (2020).

[100] Michael Hameleers et al., "Start Spreading the News: A Comparative Experiment on the Effects of Populist Communication on Political Engagement in Sixteen European Countries," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (2018).

[101] Michael Hameleers, Linda Bos, and Claes H. de Vreese, "Selective Exposure to Populist Communication: How Attitudinal Congruence Drives the Effects of Populist Attributions of Blame," *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 1 (2018b): 69.

findings should be "interpreted with care," as the media effects are "rather low (between 1 and 2%)"[107] or "only explain between 1% and 3% of the variance."[108] In other words, populist messages do not lead to an increase in right-wing populist attitudes, but they can have a reinforcing effect in experimental tests. What is a reinforcing effect?

To understand what a reinforcing effect is in this context, we have to look more closely at the individual components of populist communication. The three components of *populism as a communication style* are "references to the people," "anti-elitism," and "anti-out-groups."[109] The methodological key result is that the components only have a significant effect when they are combined.[110] In all the studies examined, it is clear which component is the key driver: "A systematic relation could only be found for anti-elite populism, which includes both right- and left-wing populism."[111] The anti-elite factor is also most frequently found in reader comments[112] and social media likes.[113] In the field of populism studies, the research problem (see above) is "right-wing populism" (766 mentions), while anti-elite populism receives less attention (76 mentions). However, the results make it clear that anti-elite populism is the more socially relevant phenomenon. While the anti-elite component has the strongest mobilizing effect, the anti-out-group factor can trigger a reaction and have a demobilizing effect.[114] Hence, the possible effect of populist communication for democracy (focus 10) is not an increase in right-wing populist attitudes. Rather, populist communication might have a *polarizing effect*, widening gaps in society and increasing the problem of fragmented populations in democratic systems.[115]

Supposed social polarization caused by populist communication is connected to the digitalization hypothesis (focus 13) as well as to the concern that public discourse is being contaminated by populism (focus 10b). One fear is that populist alternative media could displace the legacy press. However, these concerns are "unwarranted."[116] Legacy press outlets are notably dominant—consumed nineteen times as much as hyper-partisan news sources, even by citizens with populist attitudes in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, and the US.[117] The exposure to populist alternative news among voters of the German AfD party is relatively low,[118] and legacy news media are still highly influential in a right-wing online forum in Spain.[119] A closer look at the results reveals a difference between researchers from North American universities and those from continental European universities. Two German research teams reach a similar conclusion: As people with populist attitudes still consume more alternative media than people without populist attitudes, alternative media could have a polarizing effect and pose a threat to liberal democracies.[120] At a US university, on the other hand,

[102] Wirz et al., "The Effects of Right-Wing Populist Communication on Emotions and Cognitions toward Immigrants," 509.

[103] Hameleers et al., "Selective Exposure to Populist Communication."

[104] Jana Laura Egelhofer et al., "Populist Attitudes and Politicians' Disinformation Accusations: Effects on Perceptions of Media and Politicians," *Journal of Communication* 72, no. 6 (2022).

[105] Nayla Fawzi, "Untrustworthy News and the Media as 'Enemy of the People?' How a Populist Worldview Shapes Recipients' Attitudes toward the Media," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24, no. 2 (2019).

[106] Klára Smejkal et al., "Just a 'Mouthpiece of Biased Elites?' Populist Party Sympathizers and Trust in Czech Public Service Media," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Online First (2022).

[107] Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage," 987.

[108] Egelhofer et al., "Populist Attitudes and Politicians' Disinformation Accusations," 8.

[109] de Vreese et al., "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style."

[110] Hameleers et al., "Start Spreading the News."

[111] Fawzi, "Untrustworthy News and the Media as 'Enemy of the People?' "

[112] Blassnig et al., "Populism in Online Election Coverage."

[113] Giuliano Bobba et al., "Populism and the Gender Gap: Comparing Digital Engagement with Populist and Non-Populist Facebook Pages in France, Italy, and Spain," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (2018).

[114] Hameleers et al., "Selective Exposure to Populist Communication"; Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage."

[115] Hameleers et al., "Selective Exposure to Populist Communication"; Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage."

[116] Sebastian Stier et al., "Populist Attitudes and Selective Exposure to Online News: A Cross-Country Analysis Combining Web Tracking and Surveys," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25, no. 3 (2020).

[117] Stier et al., "Populist Attitudes and Selective Exposure."

Juarez Miro and Toff present "a challenge to overly simplistic understandings of digital media platforms as places where people with like-minded views solely engage with a narrow range of information sources."[118] Their result regarding a right-wing online forum suggests that the discussions there "resemble normatively positive deliberative spaces—albeit in this case in support of illiberal political positions."[119] At a university in Canada, Bouliane and colleagues make a distinction within the polarization thesis using right-wing echo chambers from the internet: The effects of informational similarity "are online not more than offline" and "could push all citizens [socialists, Greens, and others] towards extremes."[120] Their key finding on the digitalization hypotheses is:

> Overall, we do not find evidence that online/social media explain support for right-wing populist candidates and parties. Instead, in the United States, use of online media *decreases* support for right-wing populism.[121]

Therefore, it should be noted that the results in the field of power provide little evidence for the digitalization and style hypothesis. While the effects of populist messages and their share in the media are always small and require interpretation in order to weight them, the results for the connection between social determinants and populist attitudes are clear (focus 10). People with a lower income, a lower education, and a higher age are more likely to hold populist attitudes.[122] Male gender is also a strong predictor of populist behavior online.[123] The sixteen-country experiment by Hameleers with twenty-eight co-authors,[124] which examines social structure in most depth, shows that "populist communication . . . resonates with the opportunity structures in countries."[125] The motivating potential of populist messages increases with the *national level of unemployment* and the *overall political climate*, while with regard to the *level of immigration* of a country there is "clearly no impact of populist cues on political engagement."[126] This result also suggests that anti-elite populism, and not right-wing populism, is the crucial component for the rise of populist movements. Anti-elite populism is caused by a sense of social insecurity, which leads us to neoliberalism as a driver in the final section. How is the question of cause negotiated in the heterodox field of populism studies?

Heterodox Group

In the heterodox field, almost all studies[127] are in the context of the field's doxa: "Do the media contribute to the rise of populism?" However, they use different definitions of populism, which is why

[118] Philipp Müller and Ruben L. Bach, "Populist Alternative News Use and Its Role for Elections: Web-Tracking and Survey Evidence from Two Campaign Periods," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2021).

[119] Juarez Miro and Toff, "How Right-Wing Populists Engage with Cross-Cutting News on Online Message Boards."

[120] Sebastian Stier et al., "Populist Attitudes and Selective Exposure to Online News"; Müller and Bach, "Populist Alternative News Use and Its Role for Elections."

[118] Juarez Miro and Toff, "How Right-Wing Populists Engage with Cross-Cutting News on Online Message Boards," 14.

[119] Juarez Miro and Toff, 1.

[120] Shelley Boulianne, Karolina Koc-Michalska, and Bruce Bimber, "Right-Wing Populism, Social Media and Echo Chambers in Western Democracies," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020): 695.

[121] Boulianne et al., 683, emphasis added.

[122] Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage"; Fawzi, "Untrustworthy News and the Media as 'Enemy of the People?' "; Stier et al., "Populist Attitudes and Selective Exposure to Online News"; Müller and Bach, "Populist Alternative News Use and Its Role for Elections."

[123] Bobba et al., "Populism and the Gender Gap."

[124] Hameleers et al., "Start Spreading the News."

[125] Hameleers et al., 533.

[126] Hameleers et al., 531.

[127] An exception to this is Leon A. Salter, "Editorial Representations of the National Standards Education Policy: Populism, the Journalistic Identity and the Citizen-Consumer," Journalism Studies 20, no. 7 (2019).

the term sometimes becomes a slippery concept again. Ten studies examine populism in the context of digital media, ten studies in the context of traditional media. The digitalization studies differ from those in the field of power insofar as they all relate the rise in populism to changes in social structures and include socio-demographic variables and/or set a counter frame to the digitalization hypothesis. We order the studies between the autonomous and heteronomous poles, depending on the factor that the author highlights as the strongest cause of populism. Four studies highlight digitalization as a key factor in the rise of populism. For instance, the memes posted on the board of right-wing populist network 4chan contribute to the normalization of antisemitic content;[128] follower networks of the right-wing AfD might increase polarization;[129] Russia Today (RT) conveys an anti-elite worldview to youth in Western democracies;[130] and journalists should exercise caution when including populist leaders' tweets in their reports.[131] The commercialization hypothesis emerges as the strongest in four studies in the heterodox field. In this group, the one-media fallacy[132] in the field of communication studies and Mudde's "thin-centered" definition of populism[133] are criticized. Communication studies should instead focus on the economic relations of social platforms[134] and on the reduction of media owners' influence, as mediated populism has existed for decades in the US via talk radios or Fox News.[135]

Seven studies of the heteronomous field highlight changes in social structures as a major factor in the rise of populism. In this group, the study of McDevitt and Ferrucci provides especially clear empirical evidence for our ordering of the causes of populism between the autonomous-scientific and heteronomous poles. They compared the explanations of Trump's victory in 2016. While scholars mostly viewed his rise as predictable when considering journalists' low level of interest in rural communities and misunderstanding of populism, the journalists from outside the field implicitly argued that his victory was facilitated by the media illiteracy of citizens who were unable to resist fake news.[136] But, as further studies show, the frequent call for more media literacy is not a promising solution to the post-truth dilemma, as the media literacy of people using the 8chan imageboard of the right-wing conspiracy QAnon is relatively high.[137] Newspapers taking a direct stand against Trump potentially reinforced his "fake news" and "enemy of the people" rhetoric.[138] Instead of social media, television news continues to play a major role in rural areas, with the critical components: the anti-elite ethos and widespread democratic dissatisfaction[139] that populist projects turn into political power.[140] An example of such a populist project is Trump's concept-metaphor of the border.[141] Five studies in the

[128] Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen, "(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering on 4chan," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 12 (2020).

[129] Felix Rusche, "Few Voices, Strong Echo: Measuring Follower Homogeneity of Politicians' Twitter Accounts," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2022).

[130] Robert A. Saunders et al., "ICYMI: RT and Youth-Oriented International Broadcasting as (Geo)Political Culture Jamming," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27, no. 3 (2022).

[131] Delia Dumitrescu and Andrew R. Ross, "Embedding, Quoting, or Paraphrasing? Investigating the Effects of Political Leaders' Tweets in Online News Articles: The Case of Donald Trump," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 8 (2021).

[132] Elizabeth Poole et al., "Tactical Interventions in Online Hate Speech: The Case of #stopIslam," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 6 (2021).

[133] Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, "The Technological Performance of Populism," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 2 (2019).

[134] Brian Judge, "The Birth of Identity Biopolitics: How Social Media Serves Antiliberal Populism," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2022).

[135] Chuck Tryon, "Sinclair Broadcasting as Mini-Media Empire: Media regulation, Disinfomercials, and the Rise of Trumpism," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 7 (2020).

[136] Michael McDevitt and Patrick Ferrucci, "Populism, Journalism, and the Limits of Reflexivity: The Case of Donald J. Trump," *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 4 (2018).

[137] Alice Marwick and William Clyde Partin, "Constructing Alternative Facts: Populist Expertise and the QAnon Conspiracy," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2022).

heterodox group focus on global capitalism or neoliberalism as a decisive factor in the rise of populism. They report that the term populism is used in the legacy media to defend the status quo of liberal democracy. But as populism "is a reaction to collapsed financial capitalism, the label masks a deeper conversation."[142] Similarly, the anti-elite populism of Lady Gaga and Greta Thunberg on Instagram prevents a serious debate about the effects of neoliberalism,[143] but "theorizing economic globalization is vital" for understanding Trump's distinctive brand of "angry populism."[144] Thus, in the aggregate, the heteronomous field is positioned further to the left than the field of power.

Theorists

The essays in the sub-field of the theorists have one thing in common. Several possible factors are always raised when examining the cause of populism, "as the transition is a complex and multi-faceted one."[145] The following representation ranks the studies according to the factor that authors address most strongly in their reflection. Five studies come closest to the digitalization hypothesis. In this group the "affordances framework" serves to highlight how social media provide opportunities for populists.[146] Furthermore, digital media have played an important role for mediated populism,[147] the spread of reactionary populism,[148] and voting for Trump.[149] One study by the theorists supports the commercialization hypothesis, emphasizing platform economy in the post-public sphere.[150] Five theorists highlight changes in social structures as a key factor, explicitly criticizing the "doxa" in populism research[151] and the "highly moralistic condemnation of right-wing populist movements" in academic discourses.[152] As there is a constant collective populist identity in societies,[153] the field of populism studies needs a "thicker" concept to judge the impact of populism[154] and critical social theory to explore the economic and political factors promoting mistrust.[155] This call was preceded by a contribution by four theorists focusing on the impact of neoliberalism in a special issue of *Media, Culture & Society*. In a "provocative essay,"[156] Gerbaudo criticizes Mudde's definition of populism: "It does not address the root causes behind this surge and the failings of the neoliberal system that have engendered widespread discontent." Instead, "key for a perceptive understanding of populism is the work of Ernesto Laclau."[157] The critical perspective encompasses nuanced views: "The 'It's the neoliberal economy, stupid' refrain is common among contemporary analysts of the phenomenon . . . but we need to add the 'cultural backlash thesis,' "[158] and the political left has to "come up with proper responses."[159] Yet,

[138] Regina G. Lawrence and Young Eun Moon, " 'We Aren't Fake News': The Information Politics of the 2018 #FreePress Editorial Campaign," *Journalism Studies* 22, no. 2 (2021).

[139] Chris Wells et al., "News Media Use, Talk Networks, and Anti-Elitism across Geographic Location: Evidence from Wisconsin," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26, no. 2 (2021).

[140] Lluis de Nadal, "Populism and Plebiscitarianism 2.0: How Podemos Used Digital Platforms for Organization and Decision-Making," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2021).

[141] Jill K. Fleuriet and Mari Castellano, "Media, Place-Making, and Concept-Metaphors: The US-Mexico Border during the Rise of Donald Trump," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 6 (2020); for Italy's fascist tradition as a root of populism, see Cinzia Padovani, "Journalists' Roles and the Ultra-Right: The Case of Italy," *Journalism Studies* 23, no. 10 (2022).

[142] Stephanie Brookes, "What Do We Mean When We Talk about Populism? Local Politics, Global Movements and 'The People' in Political Coverage of the 2016 Australian Federal and United States Presidential Elections," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 8 (2018); Niko Hatakka and Juha Herkman, "Hegemonic Meanings of Populism: Populism as a Signifier in Legacy Dailies of Six Countries 2000–2018," *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 8 (2022).

[143] Antonio Kissas, "Populist Everyday Politics in the (Mediatized) Age of Social Media: The Case of Instagram Celebrity Advocacy," *New Media & Society*, Online First (2022).

[144] Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, "Media Coverage of Shifting Emotional Regimes: Donald Trump's Angry Populism," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018); for neoliberal patterns in media coverage, see Leon A. Salter, "Editorial Representations of the National Standards Education Policy: Populism, the Journalistic Identity and the Citizen-Consumer," *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 7 (2019).

[145] Andrea Roemmele and Rachel Gibson, "Scientific and Subversive: The Two Faces of the Fourth Era of Political Campaigning," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020): 599.

[146] Bruce Bimber and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, "The Unedited Public Sphere," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020); Jeroen Hopster, "Mutual Affordances: The Dynamics between Social Media and Populism," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 3 (2021).

neoliberalism theorists have little impact with their argumentation in the field of populism research, as will be shown by the habitus characteristics in the third step of our field analysis.

Habitus and its Characteristics

In figure 6, we highlight the characteristics of the habitus of populism studies with respect to five focal points: style and digitalization, commercialization, style with structural data, social structures, and neoliberalism. We have reduced the complex tool of habitus to its characteristics: journal, nationality, theory, method, funding, year. The results of the studies reveal a gap between the evidence and the impact in the field. The twenty-six studies from all three actor groups that examine populism combined with digitalization and/or style have the highest impact volume by far: 169.4 out of the total 424.3. The thirteen studies from the field of power that examine the effects of populist communication in the citizen complex have an impact volume of 85.5. This is followed by the commercialization hypothesis, with a total impact volume of 69.4 in thirteen studies and across all three groups of actors. The twelve studies by the theorists and heterodox scholars who highlight socio-structural causes as the main drivers of populism have an impact volume of 66.8. The nine out of the seventy-three studies in the field of Western populism that propose neoliberalism as the cause of populism have by far the lowest impact volume in the field, 33.2. In addition, a comparison of the average impact of the individual studies reveals that the studies addressing neoliberalism clearly have the lowest impact: 3.7. Here, the effect studies from the field of power have the highest average impact of 6.6 (and are positioned at the top in the middle of the field, like in an ideal-typical conception of the field). This focus is followed by digitalization and style (average 6.5), social structures (average 5.6), and commercialization (average 5.3). This demonstrates that, strategically, it is least worthwhile for researchers to explore populism in the context of neoliberalism. The impact factor is, of course, inextricably linked to the journal. The greatest contrast in the field of populism studies is between *Media, Culture & Society* and *New Media & Society*. Of a total of twenty-six studies highlighting digitalization and/or style as drivers of populism, sixteen were published in *New Media & Society*. Seven of the nine studies conducted in the context of neoliberalism were published in *Media, Culture & Society*. Thus, the effect of the journal is most pronounced with regard to studies on the causes of populism here. In the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, the context of populism style with structural data (seven out of twenty-three studies) is slightly ahead of the commercialization hypothesis (six

147 Roemmele and Gibson, "Scientific and Subversive."

148 Brian McNair, "From Control to Chaos, and Back Again: Journalism and the Politics of Populist Authoritarianism," *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 4 (2018).

149 Maria Rae, "Hyperpartisan News: Rethinking the Media for Populist Politics," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 5 (2021).

150 Philip Schlesinger, "After the Post-public Sphere," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 7–8 (2020).

151 Benjamin Krämer, "Populism, Media, and the Form of Society," *Communication Theory* 28, no. 4 (2018).

152 Timo Korstenbroek, "Rethinking the Public Sphere in an Age of Radical-Right Populism: A Case for Building an Empathetic Public Sphere," *Communication Theory* 32, no. 1 (2022), 68.

153 Maud Reveilhac and Davide Morselli, "Populism in an Identity Framework: A Feedback Model," *Communication Theory* 32, no. 1 (2022).

154 Hallvard Moe, "Distributed Readiness Citizenship: A Realistic, Normative Concept for Citizens' Public Connection," *Communication Theory* 30, no. 2 (2020).

155 Terry Flew, "The Global Trust Deficit Disorder: A Communications Perspective on Trust in the Time of Global Pandemics," *Journal of Communication* 71, no. 2 (2021).

156 Kavada, "Editorial."

157 Paolo Gerbaudo, "Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?" *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 747.

158 John Postill, "Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 756.

159 Christian Fuchs, "Authoritarian Capitalism, Authoritarian Movements and Authoritarian Communication," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 788.

out of twenty-three studies). The *Journal of Communication*, on the other hand, appears to focus on the effects of populist communication with structural data (three out of four studies). *Communication Theory* consistently highlights social structures as the strongest driver of populism (four out of four studies). In the ten studies published in *Journalism Studies*, the focus is equally distributed across all contexts of populism. The context of neoliberalism is not mentioned in any study published in the *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Theory*, and the *International Journal of Press/Politics*. Hence, based on the impact-evidence gap, we observe a second key phenomenon in the field of populism research: a complete void of studies addressing neoliberalism and social structures as causes of populism in the field of power.

Characteristics: Theory, Method, Authors

In the field of power, the application of Mudde's theoretical framework yields the finding that almost none of the thirty-six empirical studies refer to social structures as a cause of populism.[160] In addition to our close reading of the studies, Ernesto Laclau's citation offers quantitative evidence for this major finding. In Bourdieu's logic, Laclau is Mudde's symbolic opponent in the field of social sciences. For Laclau, populist discourse is the *consequence* of a discursive gap between political representation (the signifier) and reality (the signified). He comments on the causes of populism: "If I had to subsume them under one label, it would be: *globalised capitalism*."[161] Mudde and Kaltwasser consider Laclau's theory "extremely abstract."[162] Mudde succeeds in narrowing down the slippery concepts of populism by providing a minimal definition for empirical testing. His focus is on identifying the measurable *effects* of populist communication as a threat or counterweight to liberal democracies.[163] Laclau's research is situated on the left in Mazzoleni's framework, Mudde's research is on the right. Mudde is cited 176 times in the field of power; Laclau is cited ten times. If we consider that Laclau is the best-known populism researcher in the field of social science,[164] the field of power has become an autonomous area of research in the field of communications which provides a mirror-image inside the field of social science. This structuralist ordering principle of opposites can hardly be imagined in a more ideal-typical way in Bourdieu's field theory. Of the twenty studies in the heterodox field, Mudde is cited fifteen times; Laclau is cited forty-seven times. Among the fifteen theorists, Mudde is cited twenty-four times; Laclau is cited sixteen. This leaves us with an overall Laclau-Mudde ratio of 215 to 73 in the field of populism studies. Focusing on the Mudde paradigm also leads

[160] An important exception is Hameleers et al., "Start Spreading the News."

[161] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 230.

[162] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

[163] Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

[164] Carlos de la Torre, *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (London: Routledge, 2019).

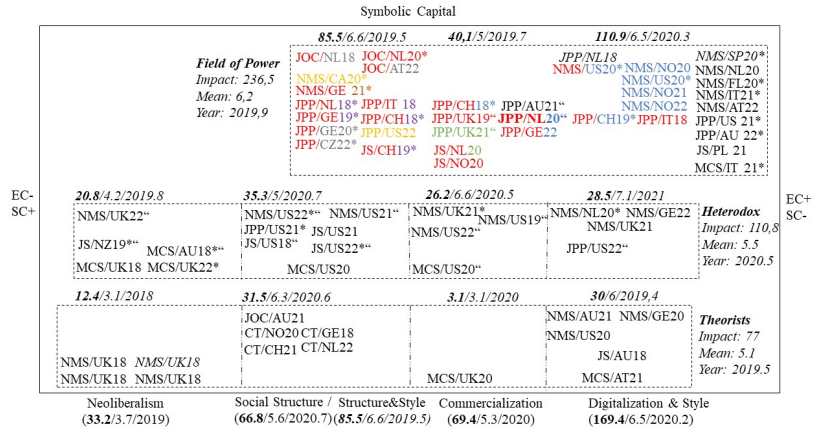

Figure 6: Habitus in the field of Western populism studies. CT = *Communication Theory*; JOC = *Journal of Communication*; JPP = *International Journal of Press/Politics*; JS = *Journalism Studies*; MCS = *Media, Culture & Society*; NMS = *New Media & Society*. AU = Australia; CA = Canada; NZ = New Zealand; UK = United Kingdom; US = United States; AT = Austria; CH = Switzerland; CZ = Czech Republic; FL = Finland; D = Germany; IT = Italy; NL = Netherlands; NO = Norway; PL = Poland; SP = Spain; asterisk (*) indicates *funded study*; quotation mark (") indicates *qualitative study*.

to a methodological homogenization. In the pre-field of populism, the ratio between quantitative and qualitative approaches is in favor of qualitative, with twenty out of twenty-nine studies. In the more recent field, thirty-two of the thirty-six empirical studies in the field of power employ a quantitative research design (89 percent). In the heterodox field, the ratio is slightly against quantitative designs, with nine out of twenty studies (45 percent). Theoretical and methodological homogenization has occurred in the field of power, although there is a greater diversity of authors. The thirty-eight studies in the field of power are co-authored by 137 authors, averaging 3.6 authors per study. The twenty studies in the group of heterodox actors are written by thirty-six (co-)authors (an average of 1.8), and the fifteen theoretical essays are written by nineteen (co-)authors (an average of 1.3). These differences in the theories and methodologies employed between the actor groups are shaped by institutional, especially regional, characteristics.

Regionality: Anglophone World versus EU

As we did when addressing the pre-field, we distinguish between the following regions: the Anglophone world (USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) and continental Europe, which we call the European Union (EU) area post Brexit for simplification purposes (Germany, Netherlands, Austria, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and the non-EU country Switzerland). Overall, there is a rather balanced split of the seventy-three studies between the regions, with thirty-eight studies from the EU region and thirty-five studies from the Anglophone world. However, of the thirty-eight studies from the field of power, twenty-nine studies are from universities in the EU

region, and nine studies are from the Anglophone world. The imbalance is even greater in the heterodox actor group; eighteen of the twenty studies are from the Anglophone world, and two studies are from the EU. Among the theorists, there are nine articles from the Anglophone world and six from the EU.

Hence, we observe a remarkable effect of the regions regarding the conceptualization of the causes of populism, which is amplified when we look more closely at the countries within the actor groups. The three studies from the field of power that propose a counter frame to the digitalization hypotheses are from North America.[165] The two studies from the heterodox sub-field that argue most strongly in favor of digitalization and style are from the EU region.[166] Therefore, in contrast to in the Anglophone world, in Europe there is a danger of an *officialization effect*.[167] The fact that the same research question is repeatedly addressed can create the impression that the online world is fueling right-wing populist attitudes. Through the focus on digitalization and communication style, the field of power has experienced a development that Mazzoleni warned against; while it might be convenient to "blame the media" or digitalization for the rise of populism, "pursuing this interpretation equates to furnishing an alibi for phenomena that should really be looked for elsewhere."[168] Until now, neoliberalism has not been addressed as a cause of populism in the field of power. In the thirty-six empirical studies, the term is mentioned twice in passing.[169] In addition, criticism of neoliberalism is described as a characteristic of left-wing populism in the introduction for the special issue of *New Media & Society*: "Radical left movements initially focused on pre-USSR collapse, criticizing capitalism and neoliberalism."[170] Hence, in the field of power, the context of neoliberalism is not only excluded from empirical analyses, but theoretically placed in the sphere of deviance.[171] The power of the social sciences lies in their monopoly over legitimate public discourse and legitimate thinking about the social world (see above). If we neglect the neoliberalism factor, it has implications for politics, the media, and society.

Assuming that neoliberalism discourse is non-existent in this field in the EU, it becomes apparent that countries in the Anglophone world attribute different causes of populism. Hence, we further divide these studies into two regions: the US and the Commonwealth (UK, Australia, New Zealand). In the group of heterodox actors, seven studies from the US focus on societal discontent as a cause of populism, but do not include criticism of the neoliberal era or globalized capitalism. Nine studies from the Commonwealth, on the other hand, link the rise of populism to the effects of neoliberalism or global capitalism. This means that, unlike in the US and the EU, criti-

[165] Juarez Miro and Toff, "How Right-Wing Populists Engage with Cross-Cutting News on Online Message Boards"; Wells et al., "Trump, Twitter, and News Media Responsiveness; Boulianne et al., "Right-Wing Populism, Social Media and Echo Chambers in Western Democracies."

[166] Tuters and Hagen, "(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism"; Rusche, "Few Voices, Strong Echo."

[167] Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*.

[168] Mazzoleni, "Populism and the Media," 53.

[169] Zulianello et al., "A Populist *Zeitgeist*?," 448; Molek-Kozakowska and Wilk, "Casual, Colloquial, Commonsensical," 771.

[170] Homero Gil de Zúñiga et al., "Populism in the Era of Twitter: How Social Media Contextualized New Insights into an Old Phenomenon," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 4 (2020): 587.

[171] Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

cism of neoliberalism is in the legitimate zone of discourse in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. Seven out of a total of thirteen studies from the UK highlight neoliberalism as a major factor. Therefore, neoliberalism is a "mainstream" cause of populism in the UK, and the discourse there presents a mirror image of the focus of other studies within the field of populism research.

One interface for heteronomous influence on the field of science is the funding institutions. In terms of funding, the field of power has a slightly higher average (0.5), with nineteen out of thirty-eight studies, than the heterodox group of actors, with eight out of twenty studies (0.4). This almost equal distribution among the groups of actors suggests that the regional funding institutions support the regional understandings of populism in the field. Within the field of power, however, a difference can be observed regarding the combination of digitalization and style versus commercialization. Only one study out of the eight studies in the media complex investigating the commercialization hypothesis received funding (12.5 percent). Studies in the political actor complex (nine out of seventeen studies; 53 percent) and citizen complex (nine out of thirteen studies; 69 percent) with a focus on the digitalization and style hypothesis received a significantly higher share of funding. This funding practice may have an effect on the dynamics of research in the field of populism.

When viewed in the aggregate, the heterodox field is currently in trend, with a mean publication year of 2000.5, compared to the field of power (2019.9)—as is ideal in field theory. Theoretical articles are decreasing at the aggregate level (2019.5). Although the evidence points increasingly against digitalization and style as drivers of populism, in the field of power, studies in the political actor complex investigating *how* populists communicate via social media are in trend, with an average publication year of 2020.3. But the average publication year is declining (2019.5) for studies in the citizen complex that test *whether* populist communication has an effect on attitudes or democracy—or not. Studies in the media complex focusing on the commercialization hypothesis occupy a middle position in the field of power (2019.7). In the heterodox field, the four studies addressing the digitalization hypothesis have the most recent average publication date (2021). However, the seven studies that look into social structures as drivers of populism follow in second place (2000.7). Given the higher amount of studies, the trend in the field of populism studies could lead to a battle between the stance of empirical EU researchers, who forefront digitalization and style, and empirical Anglophone researchers who focus on social structures. The theorists concentrate on social structures (2020.6) more than digitalization (2019.4) and commercialization (2020). The context of neoliberalism

has the oldest average publication date among both theorists (2018) and heterodox researchers (2019.8) and is in danger of disappearing. However, Kissas[172] from the heterodox group of actors seems to occupy a key position. His study was published in *New Media & Society*, a high-impact journal, in 2022. Either Kissas is an isolated case or he is pointing toward a reversal of the trend. An argument in favor of a trend reversal is that, in the field of cultural production, authors on the left with low economic capital yet high scientific capital can rise over time from being penniless "bohemians" to join the "established avant-garde." They can then exert pressure on the field of power through the higher symbolic capital they have acquired.[173] Yet we are still in the present.

[172] Kissas, "Populist Everyday Politics."

[173] Bourdieu, *Rules of the Art.*

Conclusion

In our conclusion, we highlight three key findings of our study, discuss limitations, and finally point to a framework for future research based on Bourdieu's interventions against neoliberalism and its updated evidence by Thomas Piketty. The main purpose of this study is to contribute to the question of the most likely causes of the rise of populism in the liberal democracies of the Western world: digitalization, the populist style, mediatization, the social structure, or neoliberalism. Since we analyzed 114 articles from six high-impact journals in different sub-disciplines of communication studies, we provide an extract of the best available knowledge on the relationship between media and populist movements of our time. Having made this argument from a positivist point of view, we must immediately limit ourselves; despite the theoretical sampling, we do not cover the entire pole of power, nor the entire field.

Thus, our first key finding is that in our sample of the six journals there is little to no evidence that digitalization, populist communication, or the commercialization of media are the cause or a significant factor in the rise of populist movements. To sum the evidence up: the use of online media and social networks may even decrease support for right-wing populists;[174] the populist digital media do not displace the legacy press;[175] and if there are echo chamber effects in society, they are all political directions and online not bigger than offline.[176] On digital platforms, the share of populist messages is lower than in traditional media,[177] where the overall share is also low.[178] Populist actors gain media attention not through populist style, but through elements of traditional media logic such as provocations, which points to commercialization as a cause.[179] But instead of falling into the trap of commercial production bias, journalists form a *cordon sanitaire* against populist actors with their evaluation bias.[180]

[174] Boulianne et al., "Right-Wing Populism, Social Media and Echo Chambers."

[175] Stier et al., "Populist Attitudes and Selective Exposure to Online News"; Müller and Bach, "Populist Alternative News Use and Its Role for Elections"; Juarez Miro and Toff, "How Right-Wing Populists Engage with Cross-Cutting News on Online Message Boards."

[176] Boulianne et al., "Right-Wing Populism, Social Media and Echo Chambers."

[177] Zulianello et al., "A Populist *Zeitgeist*?"; Ernst et al., "Favorable Opportunity Structures."

The causality test through the media life cycle model shows that the media are not the driver of a possible populist zeitgeist, but that they follow it.[181] While the effects of populist messages are always small and require interpretation to weigh them,[182] the results for the link between populist attitudes and social determinants such as income, education, age, and gender are clear.[183] Furthermore, the study that examines social structure in the most depth, the sixteen-country experiment by Hameleers with twenty-eight co-authors,[184] shows that the motivational potential of populist messages increases with the national unemployment rate and the overall political climate, but not with a country's level of immigration. This result is consistent with the robust finding that it is not the right-wing anti-outgroup component that is crucial for the rise of populist movements but the anti-elite component, which includes left and right-wing populism.[185] Taken together, these findings point to economic changes in the social structure as the main driver of populism with a general distrust of "elites" and open up the possibility that neoliberalism is a significant cause.

However, and this is our second key finding, this evidence is not reflected in the impact of articles that consecrate our investigated journals, where studies that mention social structure or neoliberalism as the root of populism receive lower impact than studies pursuing the power field's illusio. Thus, instead of supporting the belief that a higher impact reflects the best available knowledge, our study rather points to the relevance of Bourdieu's social constructivist distinction between symbolic and scientific capital. The focus on digitalization and style to explain the emergence of populism is not based on the field autonomous scientific capital, but rather follows a heteronomous logic to increase symbolic capital. The tendency to over-interpret the role of the media in the power pole may lie in the habitual striving to gain social relevance through knowledge production for the outside world[186] or in the historical closeness to the heteronomous-worldly pole,[187] and becomes visible in the funding practice, where the focus on the digitalization and style hypothesis receives the highest share.

What might appear disrespectful in Bourdieu's conception (what academic would want to position themself at a distance from the autonomous intellectual pole?) is at the same time a strength. In times of hate speech, conspiracy theories, online radicalization, and events such as the storming of the US Capitol, it would be fatal if communication studies did not investigate whether social media and populist styles are the cause of the rise of right-wing populist attitudes. In comparison to the heterodox actor's group and theorists, the great advantage of the field of power is that it has narrowed down

[178] Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage on Populist Attitudes"; Wettstein et al., "News Media as Gatekeepers"; Wirz et al., "The Effects of Right-Wing Populist Communication on Emotions and Cognitions toward Immigrants"; Hameleers and Vliegenthart, "The Rise of a Populist Zeitgeist?"

[179] Bucy et al., "Performing Populism"; Wells et al., "Trump, Twitter, and News Media Responsiveness"; Marcus Maurer et al., "How Right-Wing Populists Instrumentalize News Media: Deliberate Provocations, Scandalizing Media Coverage, and Public Awareness for the Alternative for Germany (AfD)," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Online First (2022); Strikovic et al., "On Behalf of the People."

[180] Ayala Panievsky, "The Strategic Bias"; de Jonge, "The Populist Radical Right and the Media in the Benelux"; Boukes and Hameleers, "Shattering Populists' Rhetoric with Satire at Elections Times."

[181] Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage on Populist Attitudes in the Public"; Nygaard, "Boundary Work"; Wirz et al., "The Effects of Right-Wing Populist Communication on Emotions and Cognitions toward Immigrants."

[182] Hameleers et al., "Selective Exposure to Populist Communication"; Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage on Populist Attitudes in the Public; Egelhofer et al., "Populist Attitudes and Politicians' Disinformation Accusations."

[183] Müller et al., "The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage on Populist Attitudes in the Public"; Fawzi, "Untrustworthy News and the Media as 'Enemy of the People?' "; Stier et al., "Populist Attitudes and Selective Exposure to Online News"; Müller and Bach, "Populist Alternative News Use and Its Role for Elections."

[184] Hameleers et al., "Start Spreading the News."

[185] Bobba et al., "Populism and the Gender Gap"; Blassnig et al., "Populism in Online Election Coverage"; Fawzi, "Untrustworthy News and the Media as 'Enemy of the People?' "

[186] Meyen, "International Communication Association Fellows."

[187] Park, "Pierre Bourdieu und die Geschichte des Feldes der Kommunikationswissenschaft."

the various conceptions of populism to a minimal definition, which has yielded an impressive body of empirical evidence. Based on this evidence, right-wing populism can be explained in an exaggerated way: Media populism and digital style are dead. This insight from the empirical results should be communicated to the outside world and prevail in the impact consecrated through the journals. Instead, the dynamics in the field of populism studies indicate that digitalization and style hypotheses continue to be the trend and that even in the heterodox group the neoliberalism factor is disappearing from the analysis. Thus, in addition to providing theoretical and empirical insights, this study is also an appeal to the patrons of major journals to promote critical perspectives. Aware of such endeavors in journals like the *Journal of Communication*,[188] our appeal is more specifically to European patrons of populism research, which leads to our third key finding.

[188] Christian Fuchs and Jack L. Qiu, "Ferments in the Field: Introductory Reflections on the Past, Present and Future of Communication Studies," *Journal of Communication* 68 (2018).

We observe a remarkable regional difference in the conceptualization of the causes of populism, with the distinction between Anglophone scholars and scholars from the EU region revealing even greater differences than the distinction between the field of power and the heteronomous group. In its socio-geographical genesis, the field of populism studies is a mirror image of the entire field of communication studies.[189] In the field of populism, it has mostly been European scholars who have displaced critical Anglophone scholarship, not vice versa.

[189] Löblich and Scheu, "Writing the History of Communication Studies."

While Mazzoleni's intention with his influential article on media populism was to use the concept of mediatization to bridge a systemic approach with actor-centered populist strategies, the later reduction of the term media populism to Mudde's ideology-centered understanding of populism[190] again excluded contextual factors. The result of this theoretical and methodological homogenization in the European shaped field of power is as follows: While studies from the Anglophone world still problematize social structure or neoliberalism as causes of populism and/or set up a counter frame to the digitalization or style hypotheses, there is a complete void in empirical studies in the EU region when it comes to addressing socio-structural factors as causes. Having shown that 89 percent of the studies on digitalization and style hypotheses have been funded makes the heteronomous influence on the field of populism studies in the EU region evident. Bearing in mind Bourdieu's critiques against the commodification of public goods such as education in the 1990s and 2000s by the European Union and their "anti-democratic institutions" which are "increasingly subjected to the dictates of international bodies whose aim is to strip the entire world of all obstacles to the exercise of an increasingly concentrated economic power,"[191]

[190] de Vreese et al., "Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style."

[191] Bourdieu, *Firing Back*, 71.

we call for an investigation of funding practices in the EU region on a larger scale. Future research will be needed to test whether there is a systematic bias in neglecting the self-initiated changes in the social structure as causes for the "crisis of democracy"[192] and over-promoting less relevant factors such as the onset of social media, disinformation, or hate speech. Our final task follows a recent call to bring Bourdieu and his critique of neoliberalism into the field of populism studies.[193]

Bourdieu defined neoliberalism "as a program for destroying collective structures in a planned manner with the objective of paving the way for the free market's neoliberal utopia."[194] The "scientifically predictable consequences" of neoliberal policies, he said, are a longing for the nation-state, xenophobia, chiliastic reveries, and "hordes of people who follow the first demagogue they come across."[195] The latter are "cynical kitsch characters" who appear to have political power, but actually only serve media mechanisms and embody the depoliticization of disappointed people. Readers can, if they wish, derive a characterization of the personified research problem of populism studies from this prognosis. See above.

In the late 1990s, Bourdieu explained why it is so difficult to gather evidence for a critique of neoliberalism: Its mechanisms are subtle, and its consequences will only become visible twenty years later.[196] Today, we confirm the rise of populist movements in Western liberal democracies, and the economist Piketty provides an updated version of Bourdieu's argument to explain populist movements. There are semantic differences between the two French scholars. Instead of referring to neoliberalism, Piketty speaks of hyper-capitalism or of what Bourdieu calls symbolic power, which is similar to Piketty's conception of ideology. Piketty shows the consequences of the "conservative revolution" of the 1980s with the shift to the "neo-proprietarian ideology": inequality has increased in all regions of the world, especially in the US, where the top decile's share of national income was higher in 2020 than it was in 1900.[197] Since neoliberal measures were essentially driven by pro-worker parties, Piketty observes "legitimate feelings of abandonment"[198] in populist movements and sheds light on a disorder in the politic-ideological sphere in Western democracies. Due to the academization of the traditional left parties, political conflict no longer takes place between top and bottom, but between the intellectual and cultural elite versus the commercial and financial elite. Piketty defines the term populism as "a catch-all term frequently used by elites to discredit political movements they deem to be insufficiently under their control," and states: "If one wants to explain the rise of 'populism,' it might not be a bad idea to begin by looking at the rise of 'elitist' political parties."[199]

[192] Wolfgang Streeck, *Critical Encounters: Capitalism, Democracy, Idea* (London: Verso, 2020).

[193] Krämer, "How German Communication Research Discovered Bourdieu."

[194] Bourdieu, *Firing Back*, 68.

[195] Bourdieu, 71.

[196] Bourdieu, 88.

[197] Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, 37.

[198] Piketty, 33.

[199] Piketty, 33.

Using Bourdieu's notion of "homology"—that is, the organization of parallel social spaces around the same basic divisions between economic and cultural capital[200]—we can apply Piketty's analysis to journalism. A first step would be a "field mapping"[201] by examining the demographic characteristics of audiences of the journalistic products to see if the shifting cleavages in the party structure are reflected in the field of journalism. In Bourdieu's conception, the power of the media is both great and small. It is small because of the heteronomy of the journalistic field, in which journalists follow the external constraints of the economic and political fields, becoming "puppets of a coercive context."[202] The power of the media is great because of its promise of symbolic power and, in the case of neoliberalism, the incessant hammering of "economic vulgarities" until they become collective beliefs without alternatives. The second step would be to identify, in a more nuanced way than Bourdieu, which media propagate the myths of hyper-capitalism[203] and whether they reflect the economic interests of their audiences. Following Piketty's ideal of a bottom versus top cleavage in the polit-ideological sphere, low-symbolic media should oppose neoliberal policies such as tax and welfare cuts, and high-symbolic media will favor them. In addition, since position holders close to the cultural pole rely more on state support, we expect media with higher cultural capital to be more likely to oppose neoliberal reforms, and conversely, media with a higher ratio of economic to cultural capital to favor free market policies. If this state of the media structure is not given, the results could indicate a homologous explanation for distrust in media, just as Piketty argues for distrust in the political field, where the lack of representation leads to an anger against the elites, which is called populism. This is one direction to investigate the relationship between media, populism, and neoliberalism. One could provide many more—for example, through the studies on "market populism" from the pre-field of Western populism studies.[204]

We limited our field analysis to the context of the Western world due to the research problem of rising populism in liberal democracies. Of the thirteen studies in the field which examine populism in the non-Western world, four studies apply the field's dominant definition of populism based on Mudde,[205] while nine studies use the term populism in manifold forms.[206] Thus, the Central European concepts of populism have traveled around the world, albeit on a small scale, but the non-Western concepts of populism have not yet penetrated the research context of the Western democracies. A systematic global comparison of the meanings and equivalents of populism around the world is pending. In the debate about the "De-Westernization" of communication studies[207] and the criticism of an

[200] Bourdieu, *Distinction.*

[201] Rodney Benson, "News Media as a 'Journalistic Field' What Bourdieu Adds to New Institutionalism, and Vice Versa," *Political Communication* 23, no. 2 (2006).

[202] Bourdieu, *Firing Back*, 67.

[203] Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*.

[204] Greenfield and Williams, "Financialization, Finance Rationality and the Role of Media in Australia."

[205] Ricardo F. Mendonça and Renato Duarte Caetano, "Populism as Parody: The Visual Self-Presentation of Jair Bolsonaro on Instagram," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26, no. 1 (2021); Ignacio Siles et al., "Populism, Religion, and Social Media in Central America," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Online First (2021); Jefferson Lyndon D. Ragragio, "Mediatized Voices of Science: News Media Narratives

"internationalization through Americanization,"[208] this study has shown that research of the Anglophone world should not be equated with the quantitative socio-scientific paradigm of small media effects. Moreover, the internal differences in the Western fields also need to be highlighted in the history of media studies—for example, through field reflections that go beyond the power pole rather than, as in our limited study, focusing only on the elite journals.

The sharp conceptual differences between Anglophone and EU research on populism reflect a fragmented internationalization in communication studies; even though researchers from the Western world publish in the same journals and meet physically at conferences like the ICA, intellectual exchange between the two sides of the Atlantic remains low. It is also noteworthy that, with Bourdieu and Piketty, we are pioneers in introducing a French perspective on the emergence of populism into international communication scholarship, since there is no study from a French university in the field of populism studies. Thus, this field analysis is an empirical confirmation that the communities of two fundamental countries of the European Union, France and Germany, are largely unfamiliar with the writings on the other side of the Rhine.[209]

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Data Availability Statement

The number of citations for authors and the calculations for the field graphs are disclosed in the Supplemental Materials Document.

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References to the 114 articles in our field analysis are provided in the Supplementary Materials Document.

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[206] Sallie Hughes and Mireya Márquez-Ramírez, "Local-Level Authoritarianism, Democratic Normative Aspirations, and Antipress Harassment: Predictors of Threats to Journalists in Mexico," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 4 (2018); Chin-Chuan Lee and Hongtao Li, " 'Media Events': First Quarter of a Century and the Next," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 1 (2018); Maria Luengo, "Gender Violence: The Media, Civil Society, and the Struggle for Human Rights in Argentina," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 3 (2018); Philipp Baugut and Katharina Neumann, "Online News Media and Propaganda Influence on Radicalized Individuals: Findings from Interviews with Islamist Prisoners and Former Islamists," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 8 (2020); Stephen Monteiro, " 'Welcome to Selfiestan': Identity and the Networked Gaze in Indian Mobile Media," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 1 (2022); Matthew Ming-Tak Chew and Yi Wang, "How Propagames Work as a Part of Digital Authoritarianism: An Analysis of a Popular Chinese Propagame," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 8 (2021); Tom Boellstorff, "On Tolerance: Four Indonesian Reflections on Digital Heterosexism," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 1 (2020); Özlem Erkmen et al., "Worsening Safety Conditions for Women Journalists in Turkey's Alternative News Media," *Journalism Studies,* Online First (2022); Tawseef Majeed, "Embedded Authoritarianism: The Politics of Poor Press Freedom in Indian Kashmir," *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 3 (2022).

[207] Silvio Waisbord and Claudia Mellado, "De-Westernizing Communication Studies: A Reassessment," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 4 (2014).

[208] Thomas Wiedemann and Michael Meyen, "Internationalization through Americanization: The Expansion of the International Communication Association's Leadership to the World," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016).

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