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Populism as a mediatized communicative relation: The birth of algorithmic populism

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Abstract:

In this paper, I want to introduce a(n digital) ethnographic approach to populism that understands populism as a (digitally) *mediatized chronotopic communicative and discursive relation.* Populism, I argue, is not only constructed in a (mediatized) communicative relation between journalists, politicians and academics, but also in the relation to citizens, activists and computational agency. Attention to all these actors, and the media they use, is of crucial importance if we want to understand populism. Digital media are not just new media that populists use, their algorithms and affordances reshape their populism. In times of digitalization, we cannot understand populism by only looking at 'the input', the frame that actors prepare for uptake, it is about the uptake as well. More concretely, I will argue that digital media have given birth to a new form of populism: algorithmic populism. Understanding and focusing on populism as a 'communicative relation' between all these human and non-human actors allows use to analyze 'populism' more precisely.

Keywords: Populism, algorithmic populism, algorithmic activism, communicative relation

Not many concepts have been hyped so many times and in so many different fields as the concept of 'populism'. This is especially remarkable considering that even today, more than 150 years after it was first used, there is still no consensus on its meaning. Even in the 21st century, we see paper after paper and book after book being published trying to define it. Populism is a textbook example of a so-called 'empty signifier'. Politicians, academics and journalists use it in very different ways depending on the (national or regional) context or on the people, parties, or the movements that use it to describe themselves or others.

At the same time, we all have a certain *common-sense* understanding of the concept. Keywords that we can find in all (academic and non-academic) definitions are *'the people', 'the voice of the people'* and *'the elite'* or *'the establishment'*. Most populism studies scholars (Blommaert, 2001; Blommaert, e.a. 2004; Mudde, 2004 ; Jagers & Walgrave, 2005; Abts & Rummens, 2007; Stanley, 2008; Maly, 2012, 2016 & 2018; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Müller, 2016 ; Müdde & Kaltwasser, 2016 ; Wodak e.a., 2015 ; Jäger, 2017 & 2018 ; Aslanidis, 2015) include these ingredients in their analyses. Populists are then those politicians who *claim* to voice the concerns of the people against the establishment.

After this, the theoretical muddle starts. From the moment one tries to pinpoint the content of that voice, the messiness of the real empirical world comes in. If we look at the actual people, parties and movements that are describing themselves or are described by others as populists, we run into theoretical problems. Left-wing and right-wing, democratic and anti-democratic actors, politicians, movements, activists and intellectuals: they can all be self-proclaimed

populists or (more likely) be accused of populism. They all can carry the burden of the label (and its overly negative associations). It is hard to find a common ideological denominator (Gidron & Bonikowksi, 2013). Even the classic contextual understanding of populism (see e.g. Jäger, 2017 & 2018) does not hold anymore. Podemos is only one counter-example to the idea that in Europe 'populist' seems to equal extreme right, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist and authoritarian demagogues. And Trump is the counter-example to the idea that in the US populism still connotes a left-wing position inherited by the inventors of the concept: the People's party of the 19th century. Populism thus is what D'Eramo calls (2013: 22) an inflated concept.

In this paper, I want to introduce a(n digital) ethnographic and interactional-sociolinguistic approach to populism that understands populism as a *mediatized chronotopic communicative and discursive relation.* Populism, I will argue, is not only constructed in a (mediatized) communicative relation between journalists, politicians and academics, but also in the relation to citizens, activists and computational agency. Attention to all these actors, and the media they use, is of crucial importance if we want to understand populism. Understanding Populism as chronotopic, directs us to understand the phenomenon in a specific context, as intrinsically connected to the time and the place in which it occurs. (Bhaktin, 1981: 42). It is this chronotopic nature, that produces specific modes of populism that have *'very clear and empirically demonstrable timespace characteristics'* (Blommaert, 2018). Analyzing populism as a chronotope in the digital age, means not only analyzing it as 'culturally determined', but also as the result of datafication. It is this embeddedness in a particular timespace constellation which is the determining feature for understanding populism as a communicative relation.

In order to introduce this approach, I will first identify some theoretical problems within contemporary populism studies. In order to tackle these problems, I will introduce a different analytical approach to the phenomenon. Understanding and focusing on populism as a 'communicative relation' between all these human and non-human actors, I argue, allows use to analyze 'populism' more precisely. It is important to realize that changes in the media field, also have effects on how populism is constructed. More concretely, I will argue that digital media have given birth to a new form of populism: algorithmic populism. Digital media are not just new media that populists use, their algorithms and affordances reshape populism. In times of digitalization, we cannot understand populism by only looking at 'the input', the frame that actors prepare for uptake, it is about the uptake as well. I will use the case of Trump to show how we need the communicative relation approach to understand populism as a real world phenomenon.

The theoretical muddle of populism studies

The most influential artifice to date to define and understand populism is the concept of 'thin ideology' (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). In this ideational paradigm, populism is understood as "*a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*" (Mudde 2004: 543) Stanley (2008) defines thin ideologies as those ideologies whose *'morphological structure is restricted to a set of core concepts which alone are unable 'to provide a reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that*

societies generate'" (Stanley, 2008: 98-99). The conceptual core of the populist 'thin ideology' is built on the distinction and the antagonistic relationship between the people whose will and voice is represented by the populist (party or politician) against the elite (see Stanley, 2008; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; Muller, 2016). This *'thin ideology'* is attached to *'full ideologies'* like conservatism, liberalism or socialism.

This artifice seems logical, and has proven to be very productive. It seems to explain the diversity of parties, movements, politicians and activists who sail under the (attributed or self-acclaimed 'populist' flag. The problem arises when this definition or approach is used to describe and analyze 'populists' or to theorize the concept further. Much of the theorization on populism that starts by defining populism as a '*thin ideology'* very quickly moves into a theory that continuously adds elements to the keywords of the 'thin ideology' (see for example, Mudde, 2004; Abts & Rummens, 2007; Stanley, 2008; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014).

In his very popular and influential book 'What is populism?', Jan-Werner Müller starts from a similar position. All the classic keywords are present, but in trying to define an ideal-type he constantly thickens the definition of populism. In his understanding populism is '*a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified—but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional—people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior. (...) In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are always anti-pluralist: populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people.*" (Muller, 2016: 19-20). In addition to this definition, Müller stresses that populists also criticize media, civil society and show disdain for the democratic institutions. In Müller's definition, populism is a label that fits on to the usual populist suspects in our time: Wilders, Orban, Grillo, Le Pen, Front National, Trump and Chavez. This definition of populism has at least one remarkable effect: namely that it disqualifies the party that was the first in history to be labeled 'populism' as populist: The People's Party. As a result of the thickening of the definition, the original populists are not populists anymore. This a classic case in which the world is asked to follow theory, not vice versa.

This is one of the reasons that Jäger (2017, 2018) targets several contemporary populism scholars. He accuses them of using the concept in an a-historical way and thus contributing to the theoretical muddle we are in now. Jäger sees a way out in advocating a healthy 'hygiene' in the use of the term populism. Purifying the concept, according to Jäger, means to be able to define it. And in order to define it, you have to know its history (Jäger, 2018: 13-14). Jäger takes up the challenge and stresses that populism in the 19th century does not resemble populism as it is being defined in the 20th and 21st century. Jägers' (anti-)history of populism (2018) clearly wants to highlight the a-historical nature of the contemporary definition of populism.

Next to this, Jäger also stresses the problems and dangers of this dominant conception of populism. He rightly claims that the contemporary understanding and theorization of 'populism' has political effects. It serves certain political goals (organizing the status quo, protecting the elites and the establishment). This analysis, aligns with D'Eramo's conclusion that the contemporary meaning of populism, that can be traced back to Hofstadter (1955) and the pluralists, had from the start political motives. It was in the fifties of the last century when populism was theorized as a form of fascism characterized by anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories and provincial resentments. This exercise in historical revisionism should be understood in the context of the Cold War in which the new conception of populism became

a powerful cold war tool (D'Eramo, 2013: 20; Jäger, 2018). This new understanding of populism as inherently authoritarian and totalitarian constructed a *'bridge linking communism and fascism'* (D'Eramo, 2013: 20. In doing so it also legitimated a technocratic, elite way of doing politics. It legitameted the middle of the political spectrum, what D'Eramo calls the oligarchical new order.

But Jäger does do more. Sometimes explicitly and more often between the lines, Jäger argues that the original conception of 'populism' should be revived (Jäger, 2018). Or at least, that the negative stigma that is attached to populism should be removed or nuanced. The People's party, he stresses, gave birth to both a negative and a positive populism. In its original form populism was not racist, it was truly for and by the people. The implicit suggestion seems to be that the true meaning of populism can thus be only found in its first original conception. Jäger at least partially adopts a position that we could label as 'etymologism': advocating the idea that there is a 'true, original meaning' of a word and that the contemporary use of that word should remain the same. Concretely, he argues that the main goals of the original populists - '*public control over the currency supply, abolition of wage slavery, decent work, an accountable state'* (Jäger, 2018: 194) are not being advocated at all by those who are awarded the P-label. Jäger finds that '*Numerous movements that today count as contemporary 'populism', even lack the language'* (Jäger, 2018: 194) to truly fight for the common man, the people. The contemporary populists are constructed as 'populists' only 'in name', he concludes.

To summarize, we see that within the field of populism studies, populism can mean very different things. Even more, we see that the thin ideology is a very flexible analytical concept with political and social consequences. Jäger rightly highlights the a-historical conception of populism, just as he rightly highlights the role of academia in the construction of contemporary populists. Populism is nowadays being used a synonym for demagogues, racism, authoritarianism and nationalism. The concept has become a euphemism for far more radical ideological positions: it is being used as a thick ideology. Even though Jäger makes crucial points, his hygienic approach is a call in vain. Trying to fixate meaning, from a sociolinguistic perspective, is pointless. Meaning is always socially constructed, the idea that someone can fixate meaning is thus at best a comforting illusion. What we should do is study meaning. It is by studying the meaning of a concept that we get to understand the politics of it. The reason that populism is an empty signifier, is of course precisely because it is a political concept. It is part of the language '*for which and by which there is struggle'* (Foucault, 1970: 110) between parties, politicians and movements. Understanding, describing and analyzing how meanings shift should thus be the focus of our research.

Pinpointing some problems
If we look at all the actors that have carried the flag or the burden of the label populism from a historical and translocal perspective, we see that the meaning of populism changes. This is not a remarkable thing, nor is it unusual, but it is an important observation and it provides scholars with a solid starting point. Words and language acquire meaning through people using them in certain contexts. Understanding populism, will thus always need attention to the *chronotopic nature of populism* (Blommaert, 2017 & 2018; Blommaert & De Finna, 2018), a focus on how populism is constructed in a certain time and place. More concretely, understanding populism to a large extent demands an ethnographic approach: we need to focus on how 'populists' communicate themselves in concrete contexts as 'populists'. How do they acquire the label (or denounce it) and how to they produce meaning to that label?

This would entail a shift from a focus on content and categorization, towards a focus on 'populism' as a productive label. A focus on the actors who construct themselves and/or others as 'populists' in very concrete ways. When we shift our attention to this 'discursive battle' (Torfing,1999; Maly, 2012; Maly, 2016; Maly, 2018a), we cannot understand populism as an absolute category anymore. This also means that the focus on categorization should be understood as part of the process of the discursive construction of populists and populism.

The core problem of many contemporary populism studies lays on the one hand in the under-theoretization of 'thin ideology' as an analytical concept (see for instance: Aslanidis, 2015 for a substantial critique). One of the results of this under-theoretization is a high flexibility of the concept resulting in the constant thickening of the 'thin ideology' of populism. From the moment, the theory is thickened with elements of 'anti-democracy', 'anti-pluralism', authoritarianism or a Schmittian conception of the nation-state, or on the other hand with ideas of 'really sticking up for the people, anti-racist, progressive', it proves to be a very crude and sloppy analytical instrument.

On the other hand, we see that most populism scholar fail to study populist discourse as *communication* and thus as a process where the audiences are crucial part of the phenomenon. They only look at input and thus commit what J.B. Thompson called the "fallacy of internalism" (Thompson, 1990: 105): the idea that everything that can be explained as ideology can be found in the texts of politicians. Thompsons stresses that one cannot read of the consequences of cultural products from the products themselves. Studying the effects, and thus the actual uptake (which is always a work of interpretation and assimilation of content) is thus of crucial importance (especially in the age of digitalization and web 2.0).

Seen from an interaction-sociolinguistic paradigm, we see several problems with the dominant theories of populism:

1. First of all, the slippery slope between so-called 'thin' and 'thick ideologies' in the ideational paradigm of several populism theories obscures the full ideologies that are reproduced within the populist frame. As a result of this, theories of populism constantly have (1) to admit exceptions to the rule or (2) need to call for a kind of theoretical purity that reshapes the world to fit theory.
2. On top of that, it is striking that in most contemporary studies on populism, populism is used as an absolute category. A politician or a party is then populist or not based on a focus on the discursive input of the politician. There does not seem to be any attention to the uptake – the communicative relation - nor to the *chronotopic* nature of populism and the real concrete speech acts of the 'populist'.
3. Thirdly, we see that in most of the work within the ideational paradigm, populism is described as a *'purely political'* phenomenon. For some reason, the field of politics is isolated from society. In these theories populism seems to have nothing or little to do with the (changes in the) media field (see for instance Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014; Müller, 2017).
4. In the same move, the academic field that produces theories on populism is isolated from the political field. The study, and more concretely categorizing some actors as populists and freeing others from the label of course has political effects as well (see Jäger, 2017 & 2018 and D'Eramo, 2013 for a substantial critique). From the moment theories enter the 'public sphere', we could argue that they potentially contribute to

the construction of populist actors. In that sense, these theories are part of the equation: they co-construct 'populism' and should taken on board as data that need analysis.

5. Once political theories enter the public sphere, they potentially have far-reaching political effects. This raises different kinds of academic, social, political and ethical questions. The ethical questions become all the more important from the moment that populist theories are used as ideational categories, not only claiming to say something about keywords or communicative or discursive frames. Populism in this ideational frame becomes a categorization tool of the ideology, the belief system and the actual positioning of that actor. Labelling a party as populist in the sense of being racist can for instance result in the exclusion of this party from the political game. It is therefore important that scholars devote their energies developing and improving their analytical tools.

In tackling these five issues, I argue that it is more productive and precise to understand and analyze *populism as a (digitally) mediatized communicative and discursive relation.* This is a plea to understand populism from an interdisciplinary perspective and more concretely to bring in an (digital) ethnographic, discursive and/or (interactional-) sociolinguistic take into the field of populism studies. A (digital) ethnographic approach (Varis, 2016; Maly, 2018a) could help us in overcoming the theoretical muddle of populism by focusing on how populism is constructed in communicative relations between different actors in a specific chronotope. Understanding 'populism' as a communicative relation, would mean (1) separating ideology (and any normative judgements) from the communicative frame, (2) understanding populism as a frame that is used to normalize and (re)produce ideology, (3) focusing on the uptake and distribution of that frame and (4) focusing on the material side of distribution: the embeddedness of the populist voice in (digital) media. This interactional-sociolinguistic approach comes with an interactional-sociolinguistic ontology of discourse. In this ontology, discourse is not understood as 'text' but as interaction (Blommaert, 2005, 2011). This ontology causes us to focus on the relational (and the effects) and chronotopic characteristics of populism. Studying populism in this paradigm is studying the concrete communicative processes. Understanding populism as 'discourse-in-interaction' means that the different actors, the instruments for production, distribution and uptake in a particular context become key in understanding populism.

From (thin) ideology to communicative relation

A good starting point to study populism, is realizing that the concept did not start as 'a theory' or an ideology. Populism came into life as *the label* for a movement and a rising new political party in a two-party landscape. It is remarkable that very few scholars today focus on this process of labeling, on how exactly populists claim or acquire the label. The actual communicative acts through which populists become populists are ignored in the quest for categorization.

If we start focusing on the actual communicative acts, we must recognize that these acts are always (mass) mediated (Blommaert, 2017a). This simple point is something that has been missed or seen as unimportant by many populism scholars. If media are mentioned in populism studies, they are mostly mentioned in the context of media being part of the establishment and thus as being '*routinely accused by populists of "mediating," (...) which is seen by populists as somehow distorting political reality."* (Müller, 2016: 35). The other

context in which media are mentioned is when 'populists' gain power and transform "*the media landscape by turning state media into mouthpieces of the government and closing and harassing the few remaining independent media outlets*." (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2016: 145)

The thing is of course, that populism always exists in the synchrony between '(digital) media and politics'. Populists not only use media to articulate 'the voice of the people', or to out criticism on the media or the establishment, they are also labeled as populists in those media by journalists, academics of other politicians. This focus on media shouldn't just be about 'the populist style'(Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), it should be about the role of media in the process of becoming a populist. It starts from the fact that acquiring the label, in (digitally) mass mediated societies is always a mediatized process. And thus, it is important to realize that changes in the media field, also have effects on how populism is constructed.

More specifically, in the age of digitalization, the affordances and the algorithmic nature of web 2.0 should be taken on board in the study of populism. Digitalization has profoundly reshaped the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002; Van Poel & Van Dijck, 2014; Tufecki, 2015; Maly, 2018a & b). Populism is not only constructed in relation to journalists, politicians and academics, but also in relation with citizens, activists and computational agency. If we take media on board in our analysis, then analyzing populism as a style or a discursive frame that politicians can use to appeal to the people and mobilize them (Canovan, 1981; Taggart, 2000; Laclau, 2015 ; Jagers & Walgrave, 2005; Aslanidis, 2015) is not enough. The affordances of digital media and Web 2.0 push us towards understanding populism as a digitally mediated *communicative relation* between different human and algorithmic actors. It is not only about 'the input', the frame that actors prepare for uptake, it is about the uptake as well. This is, I argue, where populism studies could not only benefit from a sociolinguistic or discursive take, but it is also where we could find a new and more productive field of research.

Populism, in this understanding, presupposes

1. A communicator that mobilizes *'an anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People'* (Aslanidis, 2015: 96), that is somebody who can be labeled or labels him-or herself as a populist or claims to speak in the name of the people.
2. A (claim to a) certain amount of knowledge of the demands and/or needs of (a part of) the people 'the populist' claims to represent (in many cases now acquired through datafication)
3. Other actors like journalists, politicians and/or academics who label the communicator, party or movement as populist
4. A (digital) media infrastructure through which the message of 'the populist' is distributed and knowledge about the audience is gathered
5. And some kind of uptake, legitimation or recognition of (a part of) the people (in the form of likes, shares, followers, militants and voters)

Understanding populism as a communicative relation highlights that populism is the result of a complex interplay between all of these different elements. This is especially important considering the rising political use and importance of digital media not only as 'passive media', but as media with algorithmic agency (Tufekci, 2015). Digital media are not just intermediaries anymore – the message is not just distributed by digital media but also shaped and altered. Digital media and social media in particular are non-linear, they (re)shape and re-organize the communicative structure of the 'input'-discourse. They have agency, they are mediators.

In the digital age, political discourses are only to a small extent produced by politicians. Millions of citizens, activists and even algorithms (re)produce political discourses (Maly, 2018a). That is why it does not suffice to look at the input and why attention for the uptake is at least as important. Digital media have fundamentally altered the media and political field, and studying populism inevitably means that we should include these media in our analysis. Social media like Facebook and Twitter allow politicians to control their own voice and message but they only control it within the given formats of the social medium they use. These media come with specific affordances and as such they not only shape the discourse, they contribute to the construction or destruction and distribution of the populist voice.

The algorithms, and the general affordances of these media are staked on neoliberal principles which translate into the valuing of hierarchy, competition and a winner-takes-all mindset (Van Dijck, 2012: 21). These media are thus not 'just' neutral platforms connecting users sharing content. In these digital media, the popularity principle which states that '*the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect to you. (Van Dijck, 2012: 13)* is king. Within this logic, being a populist without online followers is a contradiction in terms. Politicians, and populists in particular thus have to build a large audience if they want to claim to be speaking in name of the people. And each post needs to reach an audience that actively supports or at least interacts with the mediatized voice, so that the algorithms push it into relevance. Each post has to have 'likes', 'retweets' and 'comments'.

The populist has to produce 'popular posts'. Producing such posts is clearly not only a matter of content, it is also about knowledge about the medium itself and the algorithms and affordances that organize the distribution of posts. The algorithms of these media have agency (Tufekci, 2015), they '*select and prioritize content by algorithmically translating user activity into 'most relevant' or 'trending' topics.*' (Van Poel & Van Dijck, 2014). In order to construct the 'populist voice', the politician first of all has to build his or her own followers. These followers are the first people that can interact with a post and as such can give it the aura of 'being popular' and of the perception that the politician is really articulating 'the voice of the people'. The number of followers, likes and retweets are political facts. Depending on the success, or the hype and discussion a post generates, it will be distributed further and become visible to more people. Moreover, in many cases it will trigger journalists to write about it, and as a consequence they can reproduce (or question) the politician's claim on 'the voice of the people'.

Social media have thus become political battle fields. The configuration of these media make it crucial for a wannabe populist to not only build up his or her audience, but populists also need to make sure that their posts generate retweets, shares and likes. Without interaction, the populist will never be able to make the populist claim. We should of course recognize that this process is partially algorithmically constructed. In Facebook for instance we see that the number of interactions, and especially shares will make your post more visible on the News Feeds of your followers (Maly & Beekmans, 2018). In Twitter, we see that the more interaction (likes, comments and retweets) a tweet generates, the more chance it will have to be featured as a Twitter Highlight and thus the higher the chance that Twitter will make this highlight visible to potential new audiences (Twitter, 2018). The likes, retweets and shares are thus not only important in creating the perception of popularity; it is also algorithmically important to reach out to an ever-larger audience.

Numbers matter. Popularity is a coded and quantified concept and as such it is manipulable (Van Dijck, 2012: 13). It is thus no wonder that this not only gives birth to a new populism, but also a new type of activism. We could call this '*algorithmic activism*'. This type of activism contributes to spreading the message of a politician or movement by interacting with the post in order to trigger the algorithms of the medium so that it boosts the popularity rankings of this message and its messenger. This type of activism, when intentional, presupposes that the activists not only subscribe to the message they interact with, but also understand the affordances and the algorithmic construction of the medium. Algorithmic activists use (theoretical or practical) knowledge about the relative weight certain signals have within the proceduralized choices the algorithms of the media platforms make as proxies of human judgment in relation to the goals of the medium itself.

This type of activism can be organized in many different ways. It is dependent on the different platforms where the political battle is fought, on the knowledge and the technological competences of the activists, the mobilization power of the militants and their financial means. In its most basic organization, it consists of individual activists or militants who use one or more social media accounts. In its most elaborate form it consists of huge bot networks, backed up by many militants, databases and financial means to fully exploit the affordances of social media like Facebook's lookalike-audience products allowing advertisers to upload lists of names or mails and then design so-called lookalike audiences that have a lot in common (not only demographically but also concerning interests, habits and preferences) with the original list. Advertisers can then target these audiences.

If we adopt a perspective on populism as a *(digitally) mediatized chronotopic communication relation*, we are forced to look at concrete data, at the concrete ways in which actors communicate themselves and others as 'populist' and at how they organize 'uptake' and how their populist message is reproduced. In order to illustrate how we can mobilize this approach in our analysis, I will zoom in on the construction of Trump as a populist. I'll start by looking at how Trump is understood in the ideational frame before I 'll further zoom in on the digitally mediatized chronotopic communication relation.

Populist in heart and soul?
Trump is a hard nut to crack and some populism scholars are hesitant to label Trump as a populist. In an interview with The Atlantic, Cas Mudde for instance remains "*skeptical that Trump is, in his heart of hearts, a populist. The chances that he becomes more "elitist" in office are greater than for someone like the presidential candidate Marine Le Pen in France, who has been consistently populist for years,'* Mudde said. But, he added that *"Donald Trump the politician today is a populist radical-right politician."* (Friedman, 2017)

This quote is informative, within the interactional-sociolinguistic paradigm, and this for several reasons. First of all, Mudde's communication here is published in The Atlantic, and is thus produced for a broad audience. It is thus best understood as part of the communicative relation that co-constructs Trump as a (fake) populist. A second element that is remarkable is the stress Mudde puts on the 'authenticity' of the populist. When expressing his doubt as how to label Trump, Mudde points to the populist's inner conviction. A true populist is seemingly somebody who is *'in his heart of hearts, a populist'*. Mudde thus makes a distinction between a 'true populist' and a 'fake populist'. The difference between the two is found in the 'conviction'. The populist thus has to truly mean it. He should in his heart truly be a populist: be a man of the people. And Mudde adds that he thinks that the *'chances are that he (Trump)*

becomes more elitist'. Trump thus has a lot of characteristics of a true populist, but he still could be a fake.

Le Pen, on the other hand, is understood as the real deal because she has been communicating herself consistently as a true populist. Mudde's qualification of Trump as a populist radical-right politician starts when Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller enter the picture. From the moment these 'real populists' are on board, according to Mudde you could see Trump becoming more populist. The example that Mudde highlights is Trump's inaugural speech, '*which was clearly populist*''(Demeulemeester & De Preter, 2017). This change in discourse, only adds to the idea that Trump is possibly not sincere, and thus not a real populist.

The fact that Mudde gives so much weight to the 'sincerity and authenticity' of the populist can easily be read as an effect of the ideational paradigm. In this interview, populism is understood as an ideology within a '*cognitive and ideational frame*' in which ideologies are assumed to control the minds of the members (see Blommaert, 2005: 161 for an elaborate discussion on different conceptions of ideology). In this paradigm, populism is a series of ideas in which the populist and his followers should *believe.* A real populist is then somebody who truly believes that he or she articulates the voice of the people. That same assumption is also made by Müller, who states that populists '*assume*' that '*the people' can speak with one voice*' (Müller, 2016:57). Within populism studies, a true populist not only stands up to the elite and does this consistently; he or she should also be a populist in one's heart: they should truly believe in their people and in the fact that they fight for these people. This touches upon a key element in the ideational paradigm: that the populist believes in their populist communication.

It at this point that we see how Mudde's and Müller's communication contributes to the notion that true populists are, at least in their own heart and in their own perspective, true advocates of the people against the elites. This ideational approach to populism raises theoretical problems: the focus on intentions and ideology as cognitive phenomena disregards the material side of ideology. Ideologies do not just pop up in our minds; they are distributed in society through the use of media (Althusser, 1971; Blommaert, 2005). One could question if it really matters if Trump is a populist in his heart.

If we analyze Trump's communication in an interactional-sociolinguistic paradigm, it does not really matter if the populist *believes* that the people only has '*one voice'.* What is more important is whether he can make it *believable*, if he is seen by others as the one articulating the voice of the people. Moreover, I think we can safely say that the Trump campaign never believed that the 'people' speak with one voice. The people and the voice of the people have always been very flexible concepts, sometimes including a lot of people, sometimes defined very narrowly (Maly, 2016). We all know by now that Trump spoke in many different voices (Nix, 2017; The Guardian, 2018; Conorida, 2018; Maly, 2018a; CBS, 2018). And these different voices were constructed through the datafication of his targeted audiences. Trump mobilized a strategic authenticity (Gaden & Dumitrica ,2014), tailormade to resonate with certain targeted audiences (and not with others).

Populism and the datafication of the people
Trump did use the populist frame. From the start of his campaign, we see that he communicated himself not only as an outsider or a successful businessman and patriot, but also as the defender of the American people against a corrupt elite. Trump's discourse constantly framed him as 'the voice of the people'. His "*America is back. I am your voice*"

(Trump, 2016b) slogan on his personal website demonstrated this further. Trump presented himself as sticking up for 'Joe the Plumber' and articulated a voice that is absent in the political establishment (Maly, 2016). Who he claimed to be – a multimillionaire – was mobilized to frame him as the candidate that was really independent of the establishment. Because of his wealth he, and only he, was truly independent of that establishment. How he communicated about himself, neatly aligned with his claim on the voice of the people. '*Together, we are making history, we are bringing back the American Dream*' not for *'a select few'*, but for everyone. Trump clearly articulated the populist frame and he explicitly claimed to represent the people, all the people.
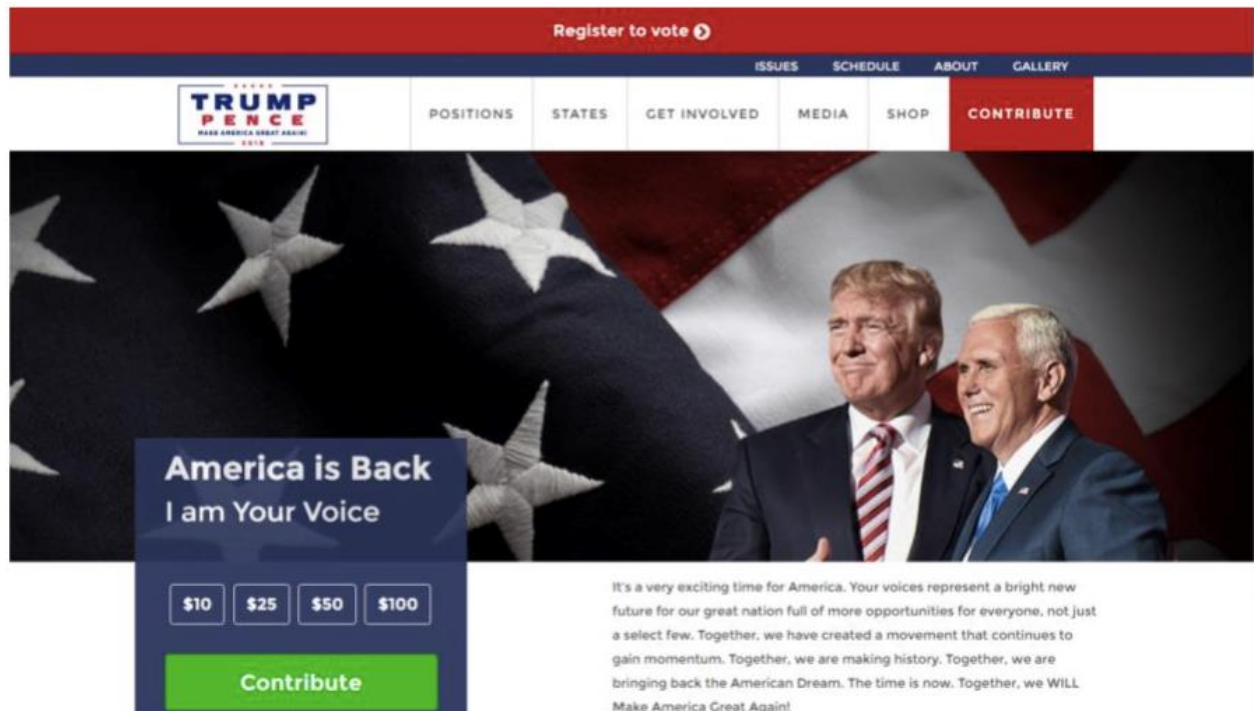
His discourse was to a large extent culturally determined (See Maly, 2017 for a more in-depth analysis) – focusing on race, gun rights, abortion, the American dream – ànd determined by datafication targeting very specific audiences with very specific topics and voices. Trump's populism is thus only understandable chronotopically. The fact that the classic populist communicative frame was present from day one did not imply that the Trump campaign *assumed* or *believed* that the people had one voice. It at this point that we see the theoretical weakness of the ideational paradigm. There is a fundamental difference between articulating the populist frame to mobilize support, and *believing* it. It is thus best to leave intentions aside and take a pragmatic stance, and analyze the functional side of the populist frame. The populist frame is useful to address 'the people' to give people the idea that you will truly fight for them. The populist frame is thus best understood within a politics of recognition (Lempert & Silverstein, 2012) addressing a particular audience. It is through this frame that populists try to mobilize 'the common man and woman'. As Mitt Romney has found out the hard way, in a democracy, it is hard to win elections if you explicitly claim to only fight for the 1%.

However, articulating the populist frame is of course not enough; you have to attach it to a discourse on the issues that matter and align it with one's image. The politician needs to make the frame believable: who she or he is, what she or he stands for and how she or he

positions him- or herself on the issue need to produce a coherent 'message'. A message that allows people to ascribe to it. It would be wrong though to assume that the same 'message' was communicated to everyone. On the contrary, Trump spoke in many different voices to different people, foregrounding different issues and using different media for doing that. It is thus important to understand *how the populist frame is materially embedded.* The material base of contemporary populism matters because it at least partially shapes the discursive outcome.

The populist frame is mediatized in very different media, addressing not 'one audience' but different audiences. On some days, the Trump campaign claims to have had 50.000 different versions of one Facebook advertisement running (CBS, 2018). These ads were monitored closely and the results were used target more specifically. Alexander Nix, the CEO of Cambridge Analytica at the time, gives the example of the Trump communication on the 'grab the pussy' controversy (Nix, 2017). Their data pointed out that among certain target groups the controversy didn't have any effect on their views on Trump, so they decided not to communicate there. Where it did have effects, on the other hand, they communicated to rectify the *off message* messaging. The Trump campaign was thus deeply technological and used the affordances of digital media to shape its message. The Trump campaign therefore invested a lot in the datafication of the different target groups of the campaign. Quite soon in their campaign, they started to construct a database of the people who came to the Trump rallies. The primary focus was on the supporters of Trump (Green & Issenberg, 2016; CBS, 2018). This formed the basic data that was uploaded on Facebook. To upscale it they used '*the lookalike -audiences'* product from Facebook and they did this with the help from embedded Facebook, Twitter and Google staff (CBS, 2018).

The Trump campaign harvested data and used the affordances of social media to target specific audiences with specific tailormade communication (Nix, 2017; CBS, 2018). The voice of the people was thus envisioned as 'the voices of the people'. From the moment Cambridge Analytica came on board, in the summer of 2016, this strategy was refined and upscaled. From July 2016 they invested in three models: (1) the first model was built to target the die-hard supporters of Trump to give money, (2) the second model focused on determining who would vote for whom and (3) the last model was set up to find who would vote for which issue (Nix, 2017). Underlying these models was a digital set-up targeting the audience not just on the basis of demographics, but on their digital footprints. According to Alexander Nix, the company had 5000 data points on 230 million Americans (Nix, 2017; The Guardian, 2018; Conorida, 2018). They were – again according to Nix himself- able to create psychographic profiles on the basis of those data and to target different audiences based on these profiles on social media (Conorida, 2018). Brad Parscale, the digital media director of the Trump campaign denies that they used psychographics, but stresses how they did target people on the basis of their preferences using different statuses (words, sentences, …), different images, different colors, and targeting them with different issues. All in all, as O'Neill already stressed, these practices are hardly unique, nor uncommon. This is not a special sauce, it is ketchup (O'Neill, 2017). We thus can safely assume that it is a common strategy that is widely used.

The Trump campaign thus used detailed insight in the algorithmic identities of people, and used these data to target small niches with very specific communication. In trying to build a mass of Trump supporters, the campaign focused on communicating the 'outrage' of the people. Tapping into outrage aligned very well with Trump's characteristic way of speaking, with the populist frame *and* with the algorithmic nature of the social media platforms

(Martinez, 2017). Social media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, were Trump's primary communication channels. Most of the 90 million dollars of Trump campaign money were spent on social media and on Facebook in particular (Bump, 2018). Communicating 'outrage' was not just about Trumps 'gut feeling'. Even though many commentators describe(d) Trump and his campaign as a loose cannon, amateuristic and in full chaos (see Maly, 2017 for an analysis), we see that the construction of Trump's voice in the campaign was not (entirely) an *accident du parcours* (Albright, 2017).

The core of the campaign was about targeting the loyal Trump supporters and the niche of 'angry white men' as Kimmel (2013) described the new emerging electorate that was shaped in the last decennia by outrage radio hosts and digital media. But to some extent it was also an algorithmic construct. We know for instance that Cambridge Analytica programmed a Twitter sentiment-mining code designed to scan recent tweets *"containing keywords like 'Trump', "Carson", "Cruz", "Bern", Bernie","* and on outrage sentiment concerning key issues like *"guns", "immigration", "immigrants", 'health care', to pull 'user' and voter id's* (Albright, 2017). The outcome of this script is then used "*to create test phrases, establish control groups, and apparently provide sets of future terms around keywords related to political campaign issues"* (Albright, 2017).

This script adds additional proof to the now widespread knowledge that within the Trump campaign, the people were never imagined to have 'one voice'. On the contrary, the people were imagined to have many different voices, many different characters and many different issues they found important (Albright, 2017). This is hardly the behavior of someone who *believes* that the people have one voice, nor someone who articulates 'one voice'. On the contrary. The 'populist' articulated thousands of different voices with different registers and tones tackling different issues. Algorithmic populism is thus about trying to speak to and connect niches into one mass. 'The people' is thus an algorithmic construct. And note that this practice was fully operative during the Bannon era. So even the 'true populist' was convinced that the people were in effect speaking in different voices.

Algorithmic activism and the multi-voiced campaign
Importantly, the campaign also clearly imagined a large part of the people as being anti-Trump. Model two and three of the Cambridge Analytica strategy were not only set up to connect the 'natural Trump fans' with new niches of voters, but they were also used to target the people who would never vote for Trump. These voters were addressed as potential Clinton voters. Or even more concretely, they were addressed in the context of a strategy that Steve Bannon called *shrinking the electorate*. They had three major voter suppression operations '*aimed at three groups Clinton needs to win overwhelmingly: idealistic white liberals, young women, and African Americans'* (Green & Issenberg, 2016). This strategy again relied heavily on datafication and the algorithmic possibilities of the new digital media.

African-Americans for instance were targeted with messages that underlined the 'racist' nature of Hillary Clinton. In order to achieve that, the Trump campaign for instance amplified the voice of Bernie Sanders and Black Live Matters activists in Instagram advertisement, created a South Park – Style video that they distributed to African-American through so-called 'dark posts' (sponsored messages that are directly targeted a specific audiences and are not published on the timeline of the advertiser) on Facebook and bought ads on African-American radio stations (Green & Issenberg, 2016). If we look at one such campaign film Trump launched on his Instagram-profile, we see that the voice of Trump is totally absent.

Instead, Bernie Sanders and one Black Lives Matters activist are used to say that Clinton's super-predator speech in the nineties was racist (Trump, 2016).


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Anonymous ID:1laIau0g Mon 25 Jul 2016 00:17:54 No.82583314 🇺🇸  Report

the /cfg/ meme starter pack V2 contains:

/cfg/ Google Doc text file - July 12 2016 version
guide of advanced meme warfare 1.3
guide of using gimp to make /cfg/ memes
gimp programs for windows and mac
guide of using adobe photoshop cc 2015 to make /cfg/ memes
memetic warfare font pack - containing fonts used in Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump presidential campaigns
blank folder - containing over 100 images and templates for /cfg/ memes
done folder - containing over 600 completed memes collected from previous /cfg/ threads

https://mega.nz/#!hJ4QQILA!867CMGe_uOwliX44h8EhFXk7QPNQQAjF5LMg9-rEXNE

Other Important Links:

/cfg/ Google Doc (updated everyday, text file is for backup purposes only) - https://docs.google.com/document/d/184csN1oQdRRhnzqAC5p90ySYgcS91GAO4FybPqZD_0s/edit

Mindeye's Red Pill Media List (watch the videos in the media folder, VERY IMPORTANT) - https://mega.nz/#!zZlXwZha!pRcAmXpspc8QCiGSWl4r-A

CSPAN - Hillary Clinton Email Investigation - July 7 2016 with Transcripts - https://mega.nz/#!MJgAjJZS!oyEC4r0DZ9S95tnjKhX6qPVyeqlDD86m0I5LN0HKu-M

CSPAN - Justice Department Oversight - Attorney General Loretta Lynch - July 12 2016 with Transcripts - https://mega.nz/#!9chQUBAC!HuldSCQ4UU0biZm7aYkURmLsA3JmU4niSTs6v6K1GG8

/cfg/ meme starter pack V1 - https://mega.nz/#!hFJjTL5a!gjyOGEewEP5EE-ZOxeEno7ucZqQwPfrBR7oVDMWTfzE

font suggested by belgian anon

Use Roboto Sans & Playfair Display

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It is interesting to see that the #altright activists supported this strategy to the full. On 4chan several posts circulated explaining how pro-Trump activists could contribute to the election of Trump. In this post, several documents were linked that were set up to educate and organize 'the swarm'. Databases with memes were set up, manuals for online communication and guides for meme warfare were created and uploaded on pastebin (MYNUNUDONALDACCOUNT, 2016). One document, Guide for Advanced Meme Warfare, explicitly focuses on targeting Clinton: "*The most effective political propaganda appeals to emotion. The idea is to stack up so much doubt, emotional appeals, and circumstantial evidence ON TOP of facts that we create a landslide of anti-Hill sentiment that permeates through society.*" (MYNUNUDONALDACCOUNT, 2016). In order to achieve that goal, 'memes' should be based on 'research', and should be distributed on a massive scale. The document thereby makes explicit that sharing by individuals is not enough, and activists should learn to set up and maintain bot networks.

Pro-Trump activists were thus very well informed about the algorithmic nature of social media, and used that knowledge to create the perception of popular support. Algorithmic manipulation is not only the privilege of Facebook and Google (Tufekci, 2015), as algorithmic activists and the customers of Facebook can at least try to play the algorithms in favor of their cause. Of course, it is very hard to establish the exact magnitude of this type of activism, and how it relates to the official Trump campaign. Nevertheless, several indicators direct us to believe that this type of algorithmic activism was a factor in the presidential election of 2016 and in the creation of the populist image of Trump and in making his discourse circulate online.

We can distinguish three types of algorithmic activism in the Trump campaign:

(1) The use of click farms[1]

A populist who doesn't get likes, shares or retweets can hardly claim to speak in the name of the people. The populist needs 'a people' that visually supports him or her. Concretely, the populist needs popular support by at least a part of the people. It is therefore not unusual anymore to invest in click farms to create the 'illusion' of popular support. At the same time, this will enhance the distribution of the Facebook or Twitter post. Already in 2015, media (Brown, 2015) were reporting on the fact that only 42% of Trump's Facebook followers came from the US.

(2) Bots

Bessi & Ferrara (2016) estimated that during the American election period of 2016 about 400,000 bots were engaged in the political discussion about the presidential election. These bots were *"responsible for roughly 3.8 million tweets, about one-fifth of the entire conversation."* The interaction of these bots does not only help to spread content by a candidate, but also contributes to the general idea that the candidate enjoys popular support. And this is exactly what the researchers established when focusing on Trump's bot supporters: *'they generate almost no negative tweets'* and this could result in biasing *'the perception of the individuals exposed to it, suggesting that there exists an organic, grassroots support for a given candidate, while in reality it's all artificially generated.'* (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016)

(3) The MAGA and #alt-right activists.

The MAGA activists is a broad category of activists that partially organized, partially swarm-like operated, as 'algorithmic activists'. The most known activists are the social media celebrity Mike Cernovich and Jeff Giesea. In the last weeks before the election they set up the #MAGA3X campaign which urged people to do 3 things on a daily basis to help get Trump elected. This could range from offline activities to convince people to vote for Trump, to retweeting 3 pro-Trump stories every day or retweeting and hashtagging your tweets with the #MAGA3X hashtag. Just like the pro-Trump bots, this activism helps create the perception that Trump is popular among the people. Pro-Trump-activists like MicroChip also organized the uptake of Trump's social media message by (1) organizing pro-Trump activists in direct message groups of 50 people divided per topic to share and like certain posts, (2) using the peer-to-peer-platform AddmeFast to organize likes and shares to make certain posts and hashtags trending on Twitter and (3) using simple Google script bots to do the same.

Populism: from thin ideology to chronotopic communicative relation

If we look at populism from an interactional-sociolinguistic paradigm, we encounter it as a digitally mediated chronotopic communicative relation. We then understand how politicians, academics, journalists and algorithms contribute to the creation of a 'populist message'. We see how the label 'of populism' is not only constructed by the populists themselves, but also by academics and journalists who function as 'messengers of the message'. These messengers of message are in most cases responsible of the labeling of politicians as populist. Trump for instance did not post one tweet mentioning the concept. Trump is only in part understood as a populist through his own communication and

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[1] Click farms are mostly low-paid workers who are hired to click, like and share content for a small fee per like.

positioning; more important is the fact that the label is acquired through the communicative acts of academics, journalists, politicians and activists.

A focus on the uptake of messages is crucial in any understanding of populism. They are politically facts. It is those interactions that not only legitimize the populist frame, but also make sure that 'the populist frame' can be distributed online. Contemporary populists have to take the algorithmic nature of the different social media platforms into account. Moreover, we should realize that the algorithmic nature of digital media contribute to the construction of a new type of populism. Just like in the nineties 'populism' morphed to fit into the new commercial news and entertainment formats (Blommaert, 2004), we see that it today again changes. Trump, is an excellent example here.

Populism and the creation of the perception of a populist politician articulating the 'popular' voice of the people is clearly chronotopic. The populism of Andrew Jackson was constructed in a very different age, using different media, having a different tone, form and content. If we want to understand populism, we should thus understand it in its context. The populist message addresses certain groups of people in a very specific context. This cultural context is of crucial importance to understanding which message scores and which doesn't. Trump's focus on gun rights for instance was part of his populist message, but it is clear that this mostly works in an American context, and then especially among republicans. And it is also clear, that this message was also the result of a very specific space in which it was produced: a digital world.

The role of algorithms and the affordances of digital media in the construction of the contemporary populist is not a detail, but rather touches upon the heart of the phenomenon. It is also clearly that not only the politician and the campaign team anymore that create the message, as 'algorithmic activism' is a crucial part in the creation of 'the populist voice'. This underlines the importance of understanding populism not just as a frame, but as a communicative relation in which uptake is as important as the supply side. So even though on the surface Trump kept on speaking in name of the people, behind that surface things look entirely different.

Understanding populism in the digital age obliges us to take all these human and non-human players into account, it is a sociotechnical assemblage. Studying populism is then not about reading the beliefs or intentions of the populists, or trying to categorize politicians or parties. Instead, it is about analyzing how a party, politician or movement comes to be known as 'a populist' or 'populist'. In this interactional-sociolinguistic paradigm, we are also able to exactly describe and analyze how certain politicians are understood as populist and others not. This also enables us to begin to understand how certain politicians, even without claiming to be populist, use the populist communicative frame to put a very radical ideology in the market as *'the voice of the people'*.

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