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## Political Journalism in a Populist Age

By Claes H. de Vreese

Twitter: @claesdevreese

Joan Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2017

Professor and Chair of Political Communication in the Amsterdam  
School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam

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## Introduction

Populist parties have enjoyed increasing electoral success in Western democracies.<sup>1</sup> The average share of the vote for “populist right” parties doubled from 6.7 percent in the 1960s to 13.4 percent in the 2010s, while “populist left” parties’ support rose from 2.4 percent to 12.7 percent in the same period.<sup>2</sup>

Explanations for the rise of populist parties have centered on economic insecurity and cultural disruption—the deepest economic recession in nearly a century, a widening gap in wealth within and between countries, and increasing numbers of migrants and refugees.<sup>3</sup> Globalization, which embodies many of these trends, has also contributed to the populist surge.<sup>4</sup>

The populist impulse is conditioned by differences in political systems. In proportional representation systems, populist parties have had vote shares too small to make them the governing party, although it’s been theoretically possible for them to be part of a coalition. In first-past-the-post systems, populist parties have also received relatively modest vote shares, although populist actors within a major party—Donald Trump being a prime example—have become part of the power structure.

## Populism as a Subject of Scholarship

“There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is clear what it is.”<sup>5</sup> That assessment is nearly as accurate today when it comes to the understanding of populism’s importance, but scholars have identified aspects of populism that are analytically useful.

For one thing, populism does not have a “mother ideology,” whether it’s liberalism, socialism, authoritarianism or something else. It can occur at any point on the political spectrum, although it tends to surface on the political fringes, right or left.

Populism has three distinguishing features that, individually or in combination, identifies it.<sup>6</sup> One feature is reference to “the people.” It’s the central element, common to all forms of populism.<sup>7</sup> When it’s the only element, it’s been dubbed *empty populism*.<sup>8</sup> A second feature is reference to a corrupt elite—an explicit condemnation of the establishment, current power holders, and a dysfunctional system. *Anti-elitist populism* is the term used for appeals confined to anti-elitism and “the people.” The third feature is out-group exclusion—the delegitimizing of a particular group or groups, such as immigrants. *Excluding populism* is used to describe messaging based only on “the people” and out-group exclusion. *Complete populism* is the term used when all three features—“the people,” anti-elitism, and out-group exclusion—are present.

In terms of its impact, there's a general tendency to see populism as a threat to liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> Populism might curb minority rights. Populism might exploit an electoral mandate to undermine core institutions like the courts or the news media. Populism might lead to a political tribalism that inflames divisions, blunts civil discourse, and eschews political compromise.

But that's clearly not the full range of possibilities. Populism might give voice to groups of citizens who feel elites are inattentive to their interests. Populism might give rise to legitimate issues that are being underplayed by the mainstream press. Populism might mobilize people who have not been politically involved. Populism might force political parties and leaders to tie their agendas more closely to popular opinion. Populism might serve as a wake-up call to the self-serving actions of powerful elites.

Scholarly assessments of populism's effects are typically of the "it depends" variety, seeing populism as both a threat to and corrective of conventional democratic practices.<sup>10</sup>

## **Populism as a Communication Phenomenon**

Not enough attention has been given to populism as a *communication* phenomenon. Political scientists have focused on the political, social, and economic drivers of populism, with only minor attention to the communication elements of populism.<sup>11</sup> Most of what is assumed about populist communication is a side note to studies of voting, particularly right-wing voting. As one group of scholars concluded: "Most of the assumptions about who is affected, why they are affected and by what kinds of message elements do not come from systematic studies."<sup>12</sup>

Scholars' inattention to populist communication is rather surprising given the changing media landscape and the communication opportunities it offers non-mainstream political actors.<sup>13</sup> As one scholar put it, "populism is particularly suited to the contours of the new media galaxy."<sup>14</sup> We've seen confirmation of that proposition recently in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Hungary, and Italy.<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between populist communicators and the media has typically been strained. On the one hand, populist actors often receive critical coverage in the mainstream press,<sup>16</sup> and the news media are typically portrayed by populist actors as part of the "corrupt" elite. On the other hand, populist actors need the "oxygen of publicity" that the news media can provide. The news media are important in terms of disseminating their messages and increasing their visibility and legitimacy.<sup>17</sup> Journalists have been responsive in many instances; news coverage of populist actors has been on the rise.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, as with Wilders

in the Netherlands and Trump in the United States, populist actors have even had some success in setting the mainstream news media's agenda.<sup>19</sup>

## Reporting on Populism: 10 Guidelines for Journalists

Media systems differ in the attention that populist communication is likely to receive.<sup>20</sup> Although all systems have news outlets that compete broadly for audience, some systems have partisan outlets that favor particular parties, which can be less open to giving voice to populist communication. Additionally, some media systems have regulations about access and balance that affect how much attention such communication receives.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, it's an open question as to whether populist actors receive disproportionate coverage, either too much or too little, relative to comparable actors.<sup>22</sup> What's clear is that the recent populist surge has prompted self-reflection on the part of news outlets and journalists about their coverage of populist actors.<sup>23</sup> This tendency was particularly pronounced among British journalists in the wake of their Brexit referendum coverage and American journalists in light of their coverage of Trump's presidential campaign. The question is a difficult one, and the answers will undoubtedly vary across political and media systems, and even for different news outlets within the same media system.

That said, the following are coverage suggestions based on what's known from scholarly research about populist communication:

1. *Cover politics as usual.* Research has shown that neglecting and isolating new political entrepreneurs can lead to a questioning of the media's fairness and even contribute to the newcomer's political success.<sup>24</sup> Belgium's Vlaams Blok party is a case in point. The party was neglected by political opponents and the media, and it gained popularity in the wake of criticism of the established parties and "elite media."<sup>25</sup> It's advisable for journalists in most cases to report on populist actors as they would on other political actors.
2. *Don't cover politics as usual.* In contrast to the first recommendation, there are also good reasons for journalists *not* to cover populism as if it's just another form of politics. Deep populist sentiments are typically held by much less than half of the electorate, which makes balanced coverage problematic. It can give the impression that a populist impulse is more substantial than in fact it is. Moreover, the ideas advocated by some populist parties and candidates go beyond what's acceptable in a liberal democracy. Scholar Robert Picard notes that the problem of "false equivalency" is a challenge "because there are some ideas that simply

should be ignored, repudiated, or denounced.”<sup>26</sup> There are risks in calling out such ideas, including the charge of elite bias, but journalists’ civic duty compels a vigorous response.

3. *Governing is not campaigning.* During election campaigns, media organizations and journalists commit additional resources to their political coverage.<sup>27</sup> This resource allocation is justified by heightened public interest at the time of elections and by a need to match or counter the extra activities of political parties, candidates, and their supporters. An increasing challenge for news outlets is how to cover actors who are in campaign mode during the time they’re governing, as is the case of the Trump presidency. The situation can lead journalists to frame stories about governing in the same way that they frame election stories—as a game and a fight. Research indicates that the effect is to heighten public distrust of both the political process and the news media.<sup>28</sup>
4. *Not too much meta-coverage.* Given the campaigning-is-governing strategy and the often unorthodox communication strategies of populist actors, it can be tempting for journalism to focus on process over substance. In election coverage, the result is an oversupply of poll, horserace, and political strategy stories.<sup>29</sup> Imbalance can also occur if journalists are overly attentive to the communication style of populist actors.<sup>30</sup> American journalists’ obsession with Trump’s tweets is a case in point, much like Dutch journalists’ focus on Wilder’s tweets. Such coverage, if overdone, contributes to public cynicism about politics and journalists.<sup>31</sup>
5. *Don’t chase every shining object.* A challenge in the coverage of populist actors is their tendency to bypass the press, communicating directly with constituents through social media.<sup>32</sup> The Dutch MP and leader of the Freedom Movement (PVV) Geert Wilders typifies this style. He rarely gives interviews or answers journalists’ questions, reaching out to his audience through Twitter instead.<sup>33</sup> Such communication has been shown to give “increased traction for controversial ideals that provoke and incite others towards extremism, violence, racism and Islama-phobia.”<sup>34</sup> This strategy poses a challenge for journalists. Messaging by elite actors or political parties is potentially newsworthy, but one-way communication, where the journalist is a passive recipient, raises accountability issues. Journalists should be as wary of tweets as they are of standard news releases.
6. *Be factual about non-facts.* Contemporary communication is awash with misinformation and disinformation.<sup>35</sup> Research indicates that it’s hard to effectively retract or correct false information.<sup>36</sup> Much of it “sticks” even when the correction is nearly immediate.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, corrective information does reduce misperceptions, which makes it an important task for journalists.<sup>38</sup> Corrections of populist-originated disinformation should

be done in a matter-of-fact way. Adding other information, such as the persistency of false claims, will diminish the effect.

7. *Contextualize.* Context is always important in news stories, but doubly so in the case of populism. Audiences have little understanding of populism and might see it as a novelty or, in its malignant form, as benign. Yet, news stories about populism tend to be devoid of historical, comparative, and contemporary understandings of what it represents.<sup>39</sup> Audiences need that type of context in order to respond properly to what populist actors are proposing.
8. *Claim Relevance.* Populism poses a challenge for journalism and legacy media. A hallmark of populist rhetoric is its anti-elite component, and established news organizations are portrayed as part of the elite. The effect is that journalists are forced to report about themselves and their role, as well as about the media generally. Journalists need to be candid with their audience about such things as media ownership, the role of algorithms in information seeking, and the use of trolls.<sup>40</sup> A lack of transparency will serve only to feed the argument that the news media are manipulating the agenda. Transparency about media is a step journalists can take that would help reclaim their relevance in the new media system.
9. *Ask for details.* Constituent elements of populist communication are the anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric, typically voiced on behalf of “the people.” When covering populist actors, like any political actors, attention to the details of their (policy) proposals is imperative. An insistence on explanation and justification can be daunting, but it is the only way to discover whether populist proposals are realistic and would serve “the people’s” interests. As Columbia University’s Michael Schudson reminds us, such details represent more than just accountability to the voters: “The press can serve as a stand-in for the public, holding governors accountable – not to the public (which is not terribly interested), but to the ideas and rules of the democratic polity.”<sup>41</sup>
10. *Be a non-combatant when called an enemy.* The press and journalism are always in the line of fire, justifiably so if they are to be held accountable and deserving of being called the Fourth Estate. However, some populist actors have systematically targeted (most of) the media as fake, lying, or unfair—“Lügen Presse” and “Fake News” are just two expressions. That’s a challenge for journalists. Studies show that politician-bashing by the press, which has been commonplace for years, undermines confidence in both politicians and journalists.<sup>42</sup> There’s reason to think that journalist-bashing by politicians has the same effect. But journalist-bashing also represents an opportunity for the news media. In liberal democracies, citizens have come to take a free press for granted, and journalist-bashing gives reporters an opportunity to make the case for why a free and unfettered press is

essential. Getting in food fights with the journalist bashers is not the way to do it. Thoughtful pieces, steeped in context, will be far more effective.

## **A Concluding Thought**

Journalism is being challenged at a level unprecedented in its history. The content and authority of traditional news outlets are being questioned, and their monopoly on people's attention has been lost to new platforms and communicators. The rise of populist politics is yet another challenge, accompanied as it is in some cases by actors hostile to journalists and even to the idea of press freedom. Yet, as with the other challenges, the rise of populist politics reminds us why we need journalists, and why we need them to do their job effectively.



## Endnotes

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