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Populism, Globalisation and Social Media

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EDITORIAL

Populism, Globalisation and Social Media

Terry Flew and Petros Iosifidis

There was no mistaking the rise of populism as a global phenomenon over the course of the 2010s. Historically associated with political movements in southern Europe and Latin America, it appeared to be ubiquitous, linked to the rise of new forms of (characteristically male) political leadership in countries as otherwise diverse as Russia, Hungary, Poland, The Philippines, Italy, Thailand, India and Australia. Most notably, the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President in November 2016, which followed the ‘Brexit’ referendum in the United Kingdom in the same year, established an interest in the language and political strategies of populism, including its relationship to the media.

As we will observe in this special issue of *International Communication Gazette*, populism as a political force has been associated with anti-elitist rhetoric, the targeting of ethnic and other minorities, hostility to mainstream media as the ‘enemies of the people’, the development of alternative online media and the circulation of ‘fake news’ through social media, and an invoking of cultural and religious traditions in the face of a perceived accelerating secular modernity. A notable feature of populist leaders and movements is their nationalism, but this is a nationalism that is globally networked and makes extensive use of digital media and the Internet. It has also at this stage not been associated with a turn to economic protectionism, in contrast to the rise of fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930, although this may change if a US-China trade war intensifies.

The nationalism of the new populists has rather taken issue with globalization as an idea, and with the laws, institutions and treaties with which it is associated. It has tapped into a more general crisis of trust in economic, social and political institutions – including the media – and the perceived failures of global elites with regards to the Global Financial Crisis, the ongoing wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen and Syria, and mass movements of refugees and asylum seekers. In contrast to more traditional political movements of the right in particular, it draws strongly upon the support of working-class voters, particularly those who felt distrustful of political and other elites, alienated from the growing cosmopolitanism of their societies, and disadvantaged in economies that are increasingly open to the forces of globalization, free trade and the free movement of workers around the world. It shares aspects of this critique of global capitalism with the political left, but has positioned much of the left – particularly those elements associated with ‘Third Way’ politics – as promoting rampant globalization at the expense of local cultures and traditions, and of being anti-democratic and unresponsive to the ‘popular will’.

We posit the possibility that this may mark out a period of ‘post-globalisation’. This does not necessarily mean a retreat into economic autarky and protectionist trade blocs, although that is not impossible. It does mean that the economic processes of globalisation over the period from the early 1970s onwards were enabled and facilitated by national governments that, whatever their other differences, were broadly receptive to claims that greater freedom of movement of goods, capital, commodities, ideas and people would be good for their own societies, as well as the world as a whole. As such, they have been prepared to join in with multilateral agreements and institutions that would facilitate more economic globalisation.

This was presented not only as being beneficial in terms of jobs and living standards, but as enabling societies and cultures to become more open, cosmopolitan, tolerant and modern in their ideas, beliefs and values. Not surprisingly, the Internet and social media, as the exemplary global technologies of openness, were seen as being at the forefront of this dismantling of the barriers to cultural modernity presented by traditional institutions, such as oligopolistic mass media.

This special issue hosts diverse works that reflect and critically investigate populism and nationalism, in relation to both globalisation and the systems of communication. We kick-off with the article by Terry Flew and Petros Iosifidis, that sets the tone for this special issue as it seeks to unpack the rise of populism and nationalism and its relationship to social media. Having examined how the globalization paradigm has influenced communication studies, the authors argue that economic insecurity, growing inequality in wealth distribution, as well as cultural change have brought about a broader concern about globalization. Contemporary populism has been associated with nationalism, but also with the active use of social media platforms as alternative communication sites to mainstream media. This complicates the relationship between truth and free expression in an age of social media, meaning that we need to account for the role of such platforms in the rise of populism and ‘post-truth’ politics.

Colin Sparks and Wenna Zeng’s reflective and thoughtful contribution analyses the coverage of the current US-China trade war in the *Global Times*. Given that some scholars contend that official nationalism is forced to make concessions to popular nationalism, this work attempts to find evidence in the coverage of international issues in a ‘popular’ official newspaper such as the *Global Times*. It finds that the newspaper’s coverage does indeed stress negative

features of the USA, but meanwhile devotes considerable space to the damage that its policies are doing to ordinary Americans. The coverage emphasises that there is broad international agreement in favour of free trade, suggesting the USA is isolated in adopting protectionist policies. The authors conclude that, at least in this instance, state-led nationalism remains central and no concessions are made to popular sentiments.

The next key article by Hilde Van den Bulck and Aaron Hyzen analyses the connection between contemporary US populist nationalism and the post-global media ecology through the case of US radio show host Alex Jones and his Infowars. The work examines the role of Alt Right alternative/activist media and global digital platforms in the rise of Jones as ideological entrepreneur. To achieve this, the authors look at Jones' and Infowars's message, media, persona as celebrity populist spectacle, business model, political alliances with Alt Right and Trump, audience as diverse mix of believers and ironic spectators. By focusing on the mix of legacy and social media and their respective role in Jones' rise and alleged downfall, the article evaluates Jones' efforts as effective ideological entrepreneur, pushing his counter-hegemonic ideology from the edges to the mainstream.

Petros Iosifidis and Nicholas Nicoli's topical piece provides a descriptive account of Facebook's public announcements on how it addresses online disinformation. Based on a qualitative content analysis, the work explores some groundwork on Facebook's inner workings of how it combats (or fails to combat) online disinformation. To this end, the article unpacks the conceptual and theoretical framework relating to populism and the crisis of democracy before turning its attention to policy issues, online disinformation and Facebook. It concludes that online disinformation cannot be addressed by mere self-regulation, but

requires collaboration between governments, regulators, think tanks, the academy and technology providers in order to better shape the next internet phase.

In their contribution Stuart Davis and Joe Straubhaar examine the decline of the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and the ascension of the right-wing extremist Jair Bolsonaro of the far-right Partido Liberal Social (PSL) to the 2018 presidency in Brazil. The authors assert that popular right-wing Facebook groups and networks formed around the communication network WhatsApp fuelled antipetismo by directing hostility originating in the 2013 nationwide protests away from a variety of social, political, and issues and towards a villainous depiction of PT leaders and valorization of anti-PT activists like Bolsonaro. To question this claim, this compelling article takes two lines of research: a qualitative textual analysis of the social media accounts of two of the most active anti-PT groups: Vem Pra Rua and O Movimento Brasil Livre; and an examination of the role of the mainstream news networks TV Record and WhatsApp by those campaigning for recently elected president Bolsonaro for a continued negative campaign against left candidates, specifically the PT, using fake news items.

The last main article in this special issue by Jairo Lugo-Ocando focuses on how the political right in the Global South has appropriate agendas and issues that in the past were often associated to the political left and present them instead as its own. It does so, by showing engagements relating to social exclusion and poverty in the context of anti-globalization and nationalism discursive regimes that appeal to sound judgement. The article interrogates this claim by referring to the case of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and looking at a sample of Brazilian news media outlets and the type of messages in relation to poverty during the 2018

Brazilian elections. It concludes that by linking themes of social exclusion with nationalism in the news media, the political right has been able to explain poverty by means of increasing globalization and liberalism and co-opt this same agenda in their favour.

The papers in this special issue of *International Communication Gazette* contribute from transnational perspectives to ongoing debates that have global significance about the relationship of the rise of populism to critiques of globalisation that include – but are not exclusive to – nationalist arguments and perspectives. They also capture the new dynamics of digital and social media, where the much-vaunted openness and horizontal nature of online communication comes up against disinformation and ‘fake news’. Such politically and ideologically motivated online campaigns, and the emergence of new actors unconstrained by traditional ethical and professional boundaries of journalism, in turn shapes both the traditional media outlets – which are themselves now dependent upon digital platforms – and the responses of the digital platforms hosting such content, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp.

The papers in this special issue also pose the question of whether populism constitutes a particular ‘moment’ in the political cycle of liberal democracies, or will experience a period of longevity. The answer will depend upon at least two things. The first is whether the parties of the left themselves become increasingly populist in order to counter the challenge of right-wing nationalism. The other is whether we witness the rise of increasingly protectionist economic policies, and the dismantling of multilateral agreements, which would signal that populism marked a moment of the reversal of economic globalisation, and that we are now in a ‘post-global’ world.