Chapter 5

Political communication, digital inequality and populism

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The proliferation of internet-based forms of communication has had a dramatic impact on the way in which societies, media and political actors act and interact in the twenty-first century. Political communication is changing, but it is unclear how the changes relate to concerns about inequalities in the media sphere. More critically, the contemporary communication landscape is challenging the study of political communication itself as new forces come to play a part in producing and transmitting messages across a whole range of media. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the conducting of political communication in the light of the current developments. The first part of the chapter explores aspects of the "transformation" of political communication whilst reflecting on questions of inequality. The second part focuses on populism, a subject that has considerably re-energized researchers and, more significantly, polities.

Contemporary societies are increasingly faced with situations in which the media have been transformed from mere channels of communication between interested parties into arenas of political engagement in which the media themselves are key actors in the political process. Whether they involve President Trump or negotiators in discussions about Brexit, Tweets have become not only bites of information but also part of a process of political, diplomatic and journalistic engagement. Moreover, such communication is no longer the preserve of those in the know, since it engages both political actors and the public. These two examples, and there are countless others, confront us with an urgent question: namely, how do we describe contemporary political communication practices? As we shall argue below, we are currently experiencing situations that take us beyond the (very recently) coined idea of the "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013). Change has been so rapid in the last four years that we need to re-assess the accepted ideas of political communication and mediated communication that litter contemporary literature.

The aim of this chapter is to seek answers to questions relating to changes in the conducting of political communication and, in so doing, to touch on concerns about inequality in opportunities – economic, cultural and political – that can help us

understand better the places that we now inhabit. The first part of this chapter will explore aspects of the "transformation" of political communication whilst reflecting on questions of inequality. The second part will discuss populism, a subject that has considerably re-energized researchers and, more significantly, polities.

The transformation of political communication

The proliferation of internet-based forms of communication has had a dramatic impact on the way in which societies, media and political actors act and interact in the twenty-first century. As Coleman and Blumler (2009) observed some years ago, "almost everything to do with political communication seems to be in flux nowadays: social formations and lifestyle, strategies of persuasion, politician–journalist relations, media technology, organisation and finance" (Coleman & Blumler, 2009: 43). Apart from the fact that societies are no longer as they were, these processes point to societies becoming increasingly made up of shifting alliances, groupings and collaborations, with the old certainties no longer in place. In such societies, the media – old and new, though the distinction no longer makes sense – become even more important as mechanisms of communication and mediators of the political system, of values, of morality, of … almost everything.

Nevertheless, writing about change in this generalized way probably minimizes the extent of the impact of the internet and the need for researchers to look beyond the old questions to appreciate the challenge of the new. We need, as Henry Farrell (2012) notes, to appreciate that, "as the Internet becomes politically normalized, it will be ever less appropriate to study it in isolation but ever more important to think clearly, and carefully, about its relationship to politics" (Farrell, 2012: 47). One way of achieving this is perhaps to move beyond the distinctions between old and new media, even beyond the notion of the "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013), by acknowledging the normalization of the internet in all communication processes. Communication, in the contemporary age, takes place across many platforms, albeit some more public than others, and is produced by a number of diverse actors, some institutional but many not. Just as we no longer truly convincingly separate the press from television when studying news, we should no longer seek to separate them from the newer platforms that are constantly emerging.

If that is now the case, do older models of political communication still have some purchase on contemporary life? Was the age of "mass media" a fleeting moment, no longer representative of current forms of production and consumption? How do we refocus older concerns in such a way as to take in newer ones, or do we have to abandon the old and start afresh? Is this the Fourth Age of communication, perhaps?[1] Are we

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1. Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh (1999) wrote variously on the three ages of political communication. When the first version of the paper was published in 1999, the internet was young. It represented the Third Age. Are we beyond that now?

beyond the "hybrid media system" in that "the interrelationships between older and newer media logics" (Chadwick, 2013: 5) that were central to it have been normalized?

Daniel Kreiss, who studied American presidential campaigns, offers his own way of understanding the significance of contemporary changes and the importance of studying aspects of campaigning in their (new) totality. In respect to one aspect of this newer research agenda, specifically how to think about what we formerly referred to as "audiences" in media research, he writes:

> As scholars begin to think more broadly about participation to include citizens' crea-tion, distribution, and interaction with political content online it seems clear that we lack firm categories for many contemporary aspects of political communication. For instance, how should scholars conceptualize retweets or sharing campaign content through Facebook, actions that are low cost and perhaps not even done with much forethought but that may be highly meaningful or consequential forms of politi-cal speech in terms of inadvertent exposure …? Finally, how do people encounter, create, and express public opinion in everyday life away from institutional political settings …, but with implications for campaigns? (Kreiss, 2015: 132)

This is not the only area in which developments have forced researchers to rethink categories and concepts. Kreiss's reflection also draws our attention to the ways in which research agendas need to depart from the earlier conceptualization of the pro-cesses of political communication. Another good example of this need is the current interest in data analytics, which has shone a light on the uses of the media (especially "new" media) to reach individuals with targeted information. This is what happened in the 2016 US presidential campaign and in the 2016 British (Brexit) referendum (see Cadwallader, 2017). The implications of these developments in data analytics are many – though not considered here – but one area is particularly relevant in the context of this chapter, namely that of universal access to communication.

Prior to the normalization of the internet, those who looked at aspects of political communication worked on a generally accepted assumption that access to the content of political communication was, more or less, universally available. British television election broadcasts or interviews in newspapers were openly available to all voters. Voters might read different newspapers or watch different channels, but all the content was available freely or at a low cost. Politicians who sought to persuade the public would use public means to reach the (mass) public, and this available content was the content that researchers analysed in their studies of communication in the course of election campaigns.

Developments in communication over the internet have completely overhauled this, admittedly simplified, version of political communication. Not only are institutional actors not the only communicators but, more significantly, the ability of institutional (and other) communicators to target individuals means that there is no longer a shared corpus of political communications. An activist might readily engage in canvassing and may wish to discuss with voters what they have seen on television services or in their

newspapers, but she can no longer assume that they have not accessed other information via their screens: information that might have been made available only to them.

In other words, the developments of Web 2.0 have paradoxically given rise to the promise of equality of access for all and, at the same time, to the targeting of some information to the few. This poses interesting questions regarding the promise of the Internet in respect of some older concerns amongst media scholars about the structures of media systems that restricted access to information and to diverse sources of information.

Such concerns are elaborated by Denis McQuail (in this volume, chapter 2) at various points in his later writings, and he provided a useful summary to which we can turn for some clarification. Briefly, he pointed out how "the variety of forms of media (in)equality that exist is matched by a variety of instruments of policy". Put differently, policies have often been designed to address specific issues relating to concerns about inequality in forms of media. The goals that he lists – and there are others – are as follows (McQuail, this volume, chapter 2):

- more equal access to the means of production and transmission;

- universal service and net neutrality;

- more equal representation in content;

- more equal distribution of reliable and relevant information amongst the public;

- more equal rights to autonomy in media matters for groups defined by culture, language or region, in resistance to hegemonic media influences

- more equal access as audiences to diverse sources and forms of provision;

- more equal ability to have the communication equipment needed to enjoy the benefits now available to many but not all.

If we imagine the pre-internet media age, we can make sense of these goals and the policy responses designed to ensure, for example, "more equal access as audiences to diverse sources" or "more equal representation of content". At election times, this would involve regulations to ensure that audiences were exposed to all the political points of view (albeit in proportion to the political strength of the parties, say). To enable this, the media would act as intermediaries to ensure that no particular groups dominated and/or that those contesting elections were properly and fairly interrogated.

While these goals remain worthwhile on many levels, they are no longer meaningful in the same ways. Consider the recent 2016 US presidential election or the 2017 British general election. In both elections, social media – for example Facebook and Twitter – played important parts in communicating political messages. Yet, in contrast to, say, the British broadcast media, social media are not regulated regarding what they can/cannot transmit. Neither Facebook nor Twitter behave as publishers, editors or journalistic organizations. The rules for these platforms are very different, and,

perhaps more significantly, the mainstream/traditional media are no longer the only sources of information available to the public. On the one hand, then, the internet has opened up the conversation to a whole new range of sources, but, on the other hand, those sources no longer need to pay attention to rules or regulations about fairness and objectivity or even truthfulness.

In this newer environment, the goal that audiences should have the freedom to access a whole range of diverse content equally has been achieved. In practice, though, research has suggested that audiences do not turn to a diverse set of sources but are wedded to a few – and more significantly, to sources that align with their views. According to the most recent Reuters Institute research:

> In a sample of six countries (US, UK, Ireland, Germany, Spain, and Australia), we found that over a third of social media users (37%) followed at least one politician or political party. Across countries, people who do follow politicians are most likely to follow a politician or party of the left (20%), followed by the centre (16%), while those on the right tend to get less attention (12%). This difference can partly be explained by age, given that younger groups who use social media heavily tend to be left aligned. High levels of political following in the United States (54%) reflect over a decade of using digital and social media in political campaigning, but it is still striking that they are twice the levels seen in Germany (25%). We tend to follow politicians we agree with; respondents on the left are five times more likely to follow left-leaning politicians on social media than politicians from the right. The same is true in reverse in equal proportion. (Reuters, 2017: 16-17)

This suggests that following politicians on social media may contribute to greater polarization. On the other hand, we should remember that, in the pre-digital age, political activists would have spent a considerable amount of time with people who held similar views as well. What is different is the scale of this activity. Over half of social media users (54%) in the United States follow politicians, which amounts to around a third of the entire US online population (Reuters, 2017: 16-17). This points to a level of polarization that might hitherto have lain dormant: there may not have been triggers to bring these differences to the fore. Whether this is part of an explanation for the rise of populism will be considered further below. It does, however, reflect another emerging trend, that is, polarization in the use of mainstream/traditional media. As the Reuters Report also notes:

> The resulting map for the United States … shows a deeply polarized media landscape, which reflects an equally polarized society. The websites of TV networks like ABC, NBC, and CBC are used far more by people who self-identify as left-wing, along with the New York Times and Washington Post. By contrast the Fox News and Breitbart websites are mostly used by people with right-wing views. Arguably the gap on the right of this map has provided space or a range of hyper-partisan right-wing sites to emerge over the last few years. The map shows just online sites, but we should

remember that polarization also exists in the print and TV markets. Two-thirds of right-wingers watch the Fox News TV channel but only 11 per cent of those who identify on the left. (Reuters, 2017: 20)

European countries do not display similar features, as the authors observed, but they do add that "the polarizing Brexit debate (in Britain) has increased distrust in the mainstream media generally from those on both ends of the debate, with the BBC particularly under fire" (Reuters, 2017: 21). If one adds to this the recent headlines in the press on this topic (Pells, 2016), the sense of a national split reflected by media discourse or, conversely, media discourse engendering a national split remains true. Views online – uncontrolled, unmediated and unfiltered – may not have helped to create a safe, or indeed any, space for considered and deliberative debate.

Adding concerns about "fake news" and resorting to shouts of "fake news" by those who do not wish to be challenged, as well as questions about the levels of trust in the media, one begins to see how the landscape of political communication has been convulsed. Put differently, the "public spaces" that the traditional broadcast media used to provide for discussion and conversation – the idealistic arrangement of a stable and comfortable social democratic system/public sphere – have been invaded by the hordes. The barbarians are not at the gates but inside the citadel!

The implications of this unfettered, uncontrolled freedom of access to all content and freedom for making all content freely available irrespective of truthfulness challenges the validity of the goals outlined by Denis McQuail. It is no longer simply about making things available to all but rather about tempering what is available and ensuring that the core purposes of responsible media/journalism are maintained and supported. Neither is easy to achieve in Western political systems that usually shy away from tinkering too heavily with media systems or offering a helping hand to journalistic enterprises. This implies that more traditional approaches to these problems are unlikely to succeed. In chapter 3 in the present volume, Hannu Nieminen concludes that

> … the solution offered by the elites to solve the crisis of trust, echoed by the legacy media, is not to provide new measures that would radically tackle the *real sources of inequality* (Arrese & Vara, 2015). What they suggest are more or less already existing means and instruments; this time, however, they are intended to appear more convincing and capable. The key words pointing to policy reforms, in both the market and the public institutions, include "responsible leadership", "social inclusion", "better governance" and "media literacy", and addressing the global risks effectively requires "(...) responsive and responsible leadership with a deeper commitment to inclusive development and equitable growth, both nationally and globally" (WEF, 2017: 4). In sum, the cure offered is to appeal to the elites´ moral and ethical obligations instead of proposing the necessary reforms to the power-related structures that actively produce inequality and polarization. (Emphasis added) (Nieminen, this volume, chapter 3)

However, it is absolutely not clear what "the real sources of inequality" are. If they lie outside the media field, media policies are likely to have little impact. After all, over

half a century of responsible journalism and media has led us to a point at which polarization rather than consensus seems to be the order of the day. The "sources of inequality" may lie in the distribution of economic and political resources, as people have always suspected. In that case, the media are simply reaping the consequences of inequalities elsewhere, and discussions of media policies with respect to issues of equality/inequality are secondary. Such a conclusion is not very far from the one arrived at by Denis McQuail. Having set out the issues, he writes: "The underlying trends of media today are profoundly unsettling and require re-examination of our normative goals and assumptions" (see McQuail chapter 2 in this volume). As he concludes:

> What remains necessary and steadily more elusive is the more equal distribution of public communication that has qualities of transparency, non-exploitation and reliability as well as diversity and relevance. Such a goal does not look attainable, except by structural provision, guaranteed by democratic control, itself equally unlikely. In the end we are back with the two narratives mentioned at the start, one the technological and the other a matter of human agency. Technology seems to be running ahead of purpose, strongly driven by global market forces. (McQuail, this volume, chapter 2)

In this new landscape, researchers, the public, "old" media and political actors have had to adapt to the emergence of the "new" media: political actors no longer have sole control over the agenda, and "old" media are no longer the only means of message dissemination (and agenda building). The emergence of the internet pushed developments in a direction that had hitherto only been imagined. Political communication no longer needed to be *mass* communication but could be targeted to individuals as well as groups; it could be direct and not mediated by traditional professional journalists; it could be interactive; it could be plentiful, since there was no restriction on the supply; it could be peer to peer; and so on. Nevertheless, as noted above in the quote from Daniel Kreiss, the elements of unpredictability in the new environment, as well as the newer forms of political and economic control over message construction and dissemination (through such things as data-driven and targeted posts and emails), not only mean that older models and questions need reframing but that new ones need to be formulated (rapidly).

The degree to which the entry of the internet has transformed and professionalized the nature and content of political communication is indeed a question of great contemporary significance. To answer it, we must take a very wide perspective on the subject and accept that our ability to grapple with any more than a small part of the whole will make any answer of limited general value. As newspapers and television provide news alongside websites, Facebook and Tweets, we become aware of the public side of communication and the private side of communication to individual screens. We can easily grasp and study the public side, but it is more difficult to study the private one and the interactions between the two. Nonetheless, the need to adopt an imaginative strategy of research is more important than ever.

Old and new inequalities

As we have seen in the discussion of media inequalities above, there are concerns about the source of these inequalities and the policy approaches that may be needed to address them. We have noted, for instance, that the ways in which the public can access content via the internet create a much more level playing field, since an internet connection enables access to an infinite amount of content. At the same time, following Kreiss's comments above, the place of the public in the communication process has changed quite dramatically. Inequalities related to this dimension are no longer as fixed (McQuail & Windahl, 1981: 93) and no longer pose obstacles to different forms of communication, at least not in the same way. The advent of the internet offered the potential to overcome all of these obstacles. As Kristof Jacobs and Niels Spierings (2016: 7) put it:

> Proponents of the *equalization thesis* suggest that new technologies such as social media level the playing field and redistribute the power balance in favour of previously disadvantaged parties … Regarding social media, the core argument is that social media are (1) cheaper, (2) require less expertise, and (3) allow disadvantaged parties and candidates to bypass traditional media … Furthermore, it has been claimed that its *interactive* nature and its possibility of *anonymity* also benefit marginalized groups. [Emphasis added by author]

Denis McQuail also noted this point when he wrote that:

> the potential of new media to bypass established institutional channels does also seem to improve the chances for the many and reduce their dependence on the various monopolistic sources of information and influence. … The political voices that have urged us to develop the "electronic highway" into homes, libraries, schools and workplaces see this as an emancipatory programme of action as well as a necessity for economic progress. (McQuail, 2010: 156)

However, the new media have not transformed the media world in terms of the social stratification of ownership and access. In effect, rather than creating more competition, they have created new and immensely powerful monopolists, like Google, Facebook and Amazon (Keen, 2015). Jacobs and Spierings (2016) summarized the *normalization thesis*, noting that new technologies "merely reinforce existing inequalities", since "(1) online technologies simply replicated old power inequalities because larger parties have *strategic departments*; (2) already powerful politicians are generally better campaigners and more *professional*, and thus better at taking advantage of new technologies; and (3) leading political actors tend to have the resources and *motivation*" (2016: 7).

According to Christian Fuchs (2014), stratification patterns created by age, ethnicity and class shape the use of digital media and cause information gaps to widen rather than narrow. As he points out:

> The hypothesis of the end of information inequality (what is in a misleading way often called the "digital divide") due to the rapid adoption of the internet … is a

myth. Stratification no longer so much concerns physical access to the internet, but rather the use of this technology and the skills required for this use. As long as there is a stratified society, information inequality will exist. (Fuchs, 2014: 190)

This also applies to communication in the world of politics. As Curran and colleagues (2012) remind us, people who actively participate in politics can be untypical of the general population, which can influence the nature of online discourse. It is well known today that the politically active tend to be drawn from the higher socio-economic groups, the more highly educated and older people. Recently, evidence has also emerged of a "second-level" democratic divide that concerns the differences between those who actively use the Web for politics and those who do not (Min, 2010). In effect, there are various levels of divides in the age of digitally mediated communication (Mansell, 2017; Robinson et al., 2015). For example, those engaged in political online participation are even more skewed towards the affluent and highly educated than those engaged offline, though they are more often younger (Morris & Morris, 2013). Hindman (2009) showed that the news dominance of white middle-class men extends from traditional newsrooms to online news sites and the entire blogosphere of political communication. As he notes, "ultimately, blogs have given a small group of educational, professional, and technical elite's new influence in US politics. Blogs have done far less to amplify the political voice of average citizens" (Hindman, 2009: 103). Accordingly, Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) stress that the internet seems to be promoting political exclusion rather than inclusion. The increasing media choice has not diminished the inequality in knowledge about political information and political knowledge among different groups in society (Aalberg et al., 2013). Prior (2007) also argues that, although there is more media choice, this at the same time allows for easier avoidance of political information among those who are not interested, leading to less accidental exposure to news, less political knowledge and, as a consequence, the exclusion of the unmotivated from democratic politics (Aelst et al., 2017; Prior, 2007).

It would be a mistake to draw a distinction between better and worse forms of participation and engagement over time, since these things inevitably change and have different meanings across different eras. However, recent political upheavals, such as the rise of populist movements and electoral upsets (e.g. Brexit and Trump), suggest that the nature and impacts of communication in "the hybrid media system" have challenged the understanding of the way in which politics operates. We explore this in the next section.

Social media and the rise of populist political communication

Changes in the media have occasioned responses in political parties and in the ways in which they have come to use the media for their own ends – be they electoral campaigning or other forms of public communication, for example diplomacy. As the architecture of the internet creates numerous possibilities for citizens and voters (and

trolls!) to play a part in politics, politicians, political parties and those aligned to them overtly or covertly (for instance, see the case of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica) as well as political communication practices have tried to adjust to the new environment. Political actors, defined broadly, have once again attempted to find and utilize "effective means of persuasion". As has been argued elsewhere (see Negrine, 2008), there has been a greater degree of professionalism in the ways in which all organizations have sought to deploy the media, old or new, for their uses. A more proactive media strategy is probably typical of all organizations as they continue to employ armies of public and media relations professionals to mediate (control, "spin", "leak", spread and target) content. This argument can be extended to incorporate the use of internet-based services, such as Twitter and Facebook (see Kreiss, 2015; McGregor et al., 2017). Social movements, for example, have found the internet useful as a means of building support and encouraging direct action (Bennett, 2003). However, as Fuchs (2014) notes:

> … social media do not cause revolutions or protests. They are embedded into contradictions and the power structures of contemporary society. This also means that in society, in which these media are prevalent, they are not completely unimportant in situations of uproar and revolution. Social media have contradictory characteristics in contradictory societies: they do not necessarily and automatically support/amplify or dampen/limit rebellions, but rather pose contradictory potentials that stand in contradiction with influences by the state, ideology, capitalism and other media. (Fuchs, 2014: 207)

In one way or another, today's election campaigns inevitably include a social media campaign. Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner (2013: 3) argue that social media present an "entirely new paradigm" for the relationship between politicians and the public, one with a "new set of rules and codes" (ibid.). Paolo Gerbaudo (2018) remarks that "social media has favoured the rise of populist movements also because of the aggregation logic embedded in its algorithms and the way it can focus the attention of an otherwise dispersed people" (Gerbaudo, 2018: 5). In practice, political actors (such as Donald Trump after his election in 2016) can express their views on thorny socioeconomic and political issues without the filtering enacted by the professional and ethical rules of the traditional mass media. Whether such activities on Twitter are deemed to be successful – a matter of contention – will depend on the followers, the emotional content of the Tweet, its propensity to go viral and a host of other criteria. The unpredictability of the process of diffusion makes internet-based communication a challenge to study and assess.

These different ways of connecting people, organizations and new practices mean that "political communication" in the digital age can take many forms and be viewed from a number of different perspectives. One constant across many Western democratic societies, though, is the growing disconnect between political parties and the public, so much so that party membership has declined substantially over the last few decades.

In this context, social media provide an opportunity for political actors to subvert traditional gatekeeping forces from the mass media and instead craft a targeted message directly for the members of the public who are more receptive to their messages (Gainous & Wagner, 2013). In other words, parties – perhaps more accurately the leaders of parties – can communicate directly with followers or prospective followers. Still, the closed world of political communication of yesteryear has been opened up to elements that have disrupted the established ways of seeing and understanding communication processes. In the age of Web 2.0, new methods of interaction provide a new type of public space that has dramatically changed party politics. "This includes not only the modernisation and professionalisation of mainstream political parties, but also paves the way for new challengers and a new dimension of campaigning" (Hartleb, 2013: 135).

Some of those challengers have come from outside established political parties or their hierarchies, such as Donald Trump in the US, Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, Le Pen in France and Beppe Grillo in Italy. Like others who have appealed directly to voters over the heads of the established party structures, their appeal has been based on directly engaging with people and promising to meet their needs. They have often been described as "populist" in their appeal and "style" (see Block & Negrine, 2016; Moffit, 2016). Engesser and colleagues (2017) identify five definitional elements of populism: emphasizing the sovereignty of the people, advocating for the people, attacking the elite, ostracizing others and invoking the "heartland". Others have emphasized similar elements, including an appeal to "the people" (Laclau, 2005; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014); an anti-politics, anti-elitist, anti-establishment ideology, sentiments and tactics (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017); a "language" or "discourse" characterized by a confrontational, anti-establishment ethos and colloquial language that provide a sense of closeness between leaders and their public (Hawkins, 2010; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007); a focus on (a usually charismatic) party "leadership" and "agency" to situate, popularize and legitimize populist issues (van Kessel, 2011); exploiting crises of democratic representation to acquire positions of power (Taggart, 2002); patronage, paternalism and party clientelism, especially in Latin America (Philip & Panizza, 2011); and a complex and fractious relationship with the media (Mazzoleni, 1987). While all political actors may be prone to critiquing elites and the political establishment, populists "claim that they, and only they, represent the people" (Müller, 2016: 3).

Even though populism could be regarded as a style of political communication that might be employed by every party, in effect, populist ideas and rhetoric have gained momentum all around the globe as populist politicians have come to realize that social media are important tools for their political goals (Cranmer, 2011: 299). In this sense, social media have provided new methods for political communication, which populists and populist parties can exploit (Aalberg et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that "at the communication level" – we would argue, at all levels – "populism is not a homogenous form of ideological expression, but a complex

interplay between individual strategies, contexts, and party memberships" (Cranmer, ibid.). In a similar vein, the populist style of communication is less and less connected to the right/left political cleavage but rather the result of a varied combination of gradations that mix with different individual aspects of the leader's style, a style that undoubtedly incorporates the communication possibilities of all the media, including social media (Bracciale & Martella, 2017).

Arguably, one way in which populist leaders can continue to claim to represent "the people" is by adopting communication strategies that reach the public in an unmediated fashion as well as in a way that enhances their position as populist leaders. In Trump's inauguration speech, we find a populist appeal to the people: "Today we are not just transferring power from one administration to another … but we are transferring power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, *the people*" (The White House, 2017). In effect, this is achieved by appealing to "the people" and adopting what Moffitt refers to as the demonstration of bad manners and the rejection of political conventions (Moffitt, 2016: 43-45). In such ways, populists disregard the "normal" and the correct in their critique of elites.

How extensively *other* populist politicians use social media to communicate and the factors that influence their activities have rarely been examined in great detail (see Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). President Trump has certainly used Twitter extensively – whilst neglecting more traditional means of political communication – but the Twitter practices of other leaders have been much less documented (Block & Negrine, 2016). We have yet to see a comprehensive analysis of the social media usage of a significant number of populist leaders before we can produce anything more than generalities. In this respect, President Trump may be unique rather than the general rule and his style very much contingent on his personality, preferences and peccadillos.

More generally, it is likely that, as de Vreese and colleagues (2018: 424) note:

> Populism might broaden the attention for issues that are not in the mainstream news. Populism might mobilize groups of people that have felt on the fringe of the political system. Populism might improve the responsiveness of the political system by making actors and parties align their policies more with the "wishes of the people".

It is necessary to add that populists can influence the agendas of other political actors as they too seek to address the wishes and desires of "the people". An example of this is the ways in which an anti-immigration, anti-(EU) elite stance moved from the margins of UKIP to the Brexit campaign in the 2016 referendum in Britain.

There is some debate around the issue of whether economic inequality is the principal reason for the rise of populism. Many have pointed out that "those left behind" because of the pursuit of globalization, who have suffered in the process, have tended to support political leaders who have been critical of established institutions. In this respect, those who have not benefitted from economic changes – that is, those who have suffered economically – have shied away from established parties. However, others have argued that "populism is a socio-cultural and identity

phenomenon more than a socio-economic one" (Goodhart, 2017: 51-52) and that populism therefore requires a different sort of analysis, particularly as it relates to appeals to the voting public. Targeted appeals to voters, especially on social media, might be more successful if they adopt the anti-elitist/anti-establishment strands that are regularly incorporated into populist approaches to politics. In other words, social media – largely unregulated and disruptive – can aid appeals to cultural and political identities compared with the more "rational" and discursive discussions so beloved of politicians of yesteryear. Much research remains to be carried out along these lines as more and more information emerges from studies of behind-the-scenes work by web campaigners for some political groups. One outcome, amongst many, of these changes and the different forms of appeal that have made populism more mainstream is the negative consequences for liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). "Populism can use an electoral mandate to erode independent institutions that are considered cornerstones of liberal democracies like the courts or the free media" (de Vreese et al., 2018: 424). This in turn allows a counternarrative to be established – a narrative that challenges the traditional media for providing "fake news". In these scenarios, populist leaders – and their supporters – challenge the "elitist media" for being self-centred and narrowly focused on an agenda that ignores or overlooks the immediate concerns of those who have long been forgotten. Thus, issues such as immigration or overweening international control of states, which traditional media have tended to shy away from, become organizing principles for populists. Their claim to represent the people runs right through their appeals.

It is no coincidence that, in his farewell speech, former US President Barack Obama, regarded by many as the "first social media president" (Katz et al., 2013), warned that social media are an existential threat to democracy because of their ability to divide and sow dissent:

> For too many of us, it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighbourhoods or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste – all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly, we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there. (CNN, 2016)

How, therefore, to recreate a more civil citizenry and more civil forms of citizen participation, without fracturing the forms of democracy that have existed in Western societies in recent decades, remains the key question for all.

Concluding remarks

Communication scholars face many challenges ahead as the old fractures and the new disruptions present a whole range of new problems. Much of the communication environment is dominated by a focus on celebrity, rumour and populist attacks, with populist politicians proving to be sometimes unpredictable and opportunistic. Legacy media are attacked as "fake news", and the levels of distrust and cynicism are high. At the same time, politics is presented to the public as a cynical game (Gurevitch et al., 2009). Traditional parties appear to have lost their bearings. Citizens, often on the fringes of discussions of political communication, have more media choices, but those are not necessarily any better than the previous ones. More significantly, the differences that have surfaced amongst the electorates may have become structural, such as those between different (identity) groups (Brexiteers and Remainers, liberals against the far right or Trump supporters and non-Trump supporters).

The challenges for the future are not only structural – as they have always been – but consist in looking for ways to ensure the continued survival of some form of democratic process that is both inclusive and unified: a system of politics that allows for all voices to be heard in a civil manner; a system of politics in which communication in a robust journalistic fashion is not simply deemed to be "fake news" to feed distrust.

Contemporary political communication is thus facing challenges from a number of directions. It needs to be constructive in pointing out the challenges to robust forms of communication, which deny the possibilities of truthful and honest reporting and feed divisions that encourage uncivil dissent. Political communication needs to be in a form that can allow for divisions, but not such divisions that can lead to possibilities of harm. It must be remembered, though, that political communication is something that the media do undertake. Therefore, it is mandatory for the media to provide the space for a civil form of communication.

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