



## Seminário “Media, Populismo e Corrupção”



# Research on Populism in the Hybrid Media Ecosystem. Have we said the last word?

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# The populist landscapes

- Expanding populist political climates in many democracies
- Charismatic and media-savvy personalities
- Use of contentious agendas to attract media attention



# A Buzzword?

In the wake of Trump's election to the White House and Britain's vote to leave the European Union, attention to populism has skyrocketed. The Cambridge Dictionary declared **populism**

**2017's Word of the Year**, as media outlets drastically intensified their reporting, and occurrences of “populism” and “populist” in the New York Times nearly quadrupled from 2015 to 2017

(Rooduijn, 2019: 362).

This trend is mirrored in academia: research on populism is trendy and increasingly employed across various disciplines.

(Hunger & Paxton, 2021)





# «Populism is sexy»

(Roduijn 2019)

## Is it still true in 2022?

- Pandemic unveiled the weakness of populist rhetoric vis-à-vis the key-role of mainstream institutions
- In France populist forces (Le Pen and Zemmour) were defeated and in Italy Salvini and Berlusconi were overpassed by right-wing Meloni
- In research: the impression is that we are at a saturation stage: end of a hype
- \*\*\* in reality there are still obscure aspects that deserve being investigated



20 years of hype research on populism as a socio-political phenomenon

vs.

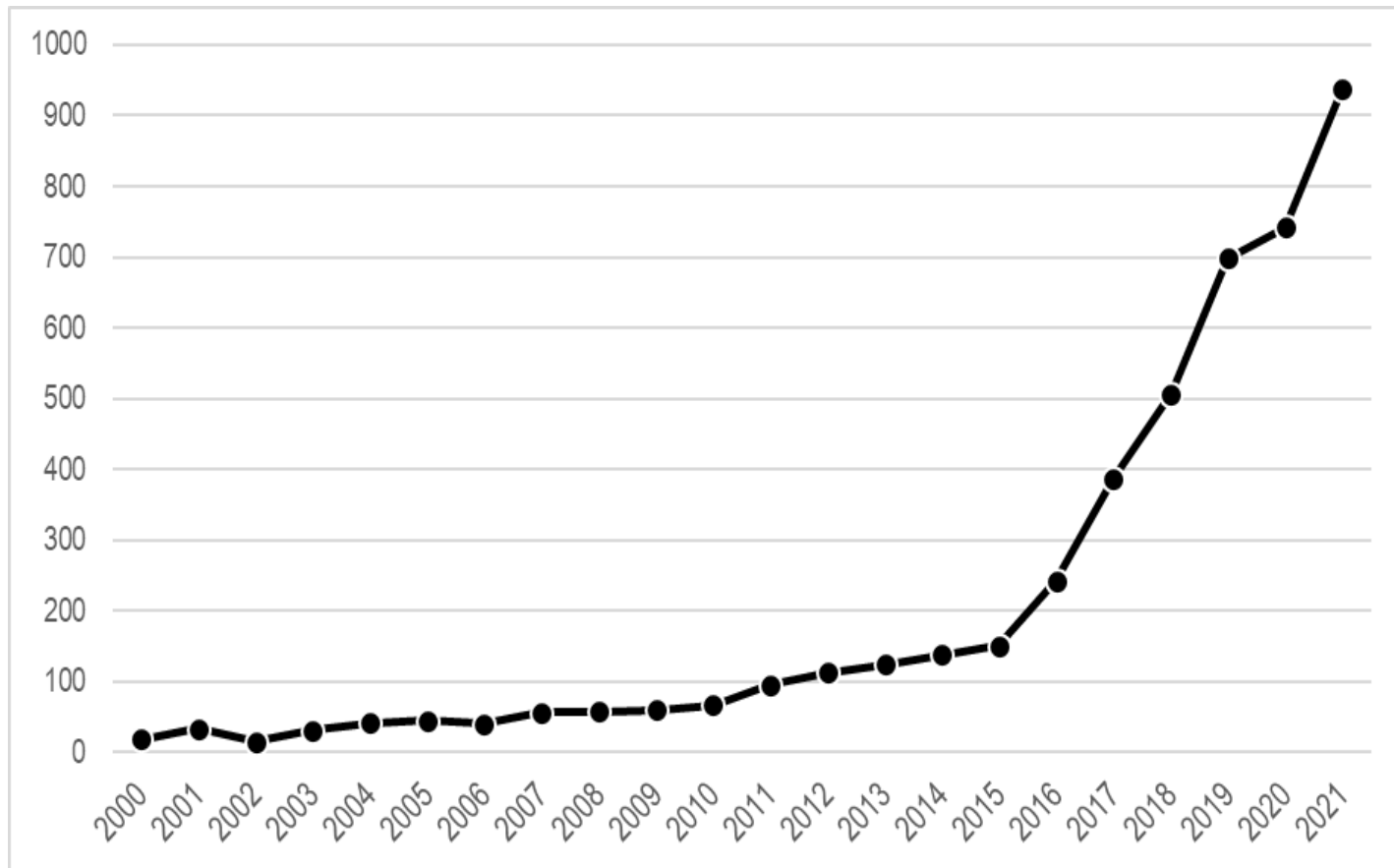
20 years of hype research on populism as communication phenomenon?



- 1) Schwörer, J. and B. Fernández-García (2021) *Demonisation of political discourses? How mainstream parties talk about the populist radical right*, *West European Politics*, 44:7, 1401-1424
- 2) Hunger, S. and F. Paxton (2022) *What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science*, *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10, 617–633



Absolute number of new publications per year containing the term “**populis\***” in the title based on the Scopus database (social sciences) ([Schwörer](#) & Fernández-García 2021)





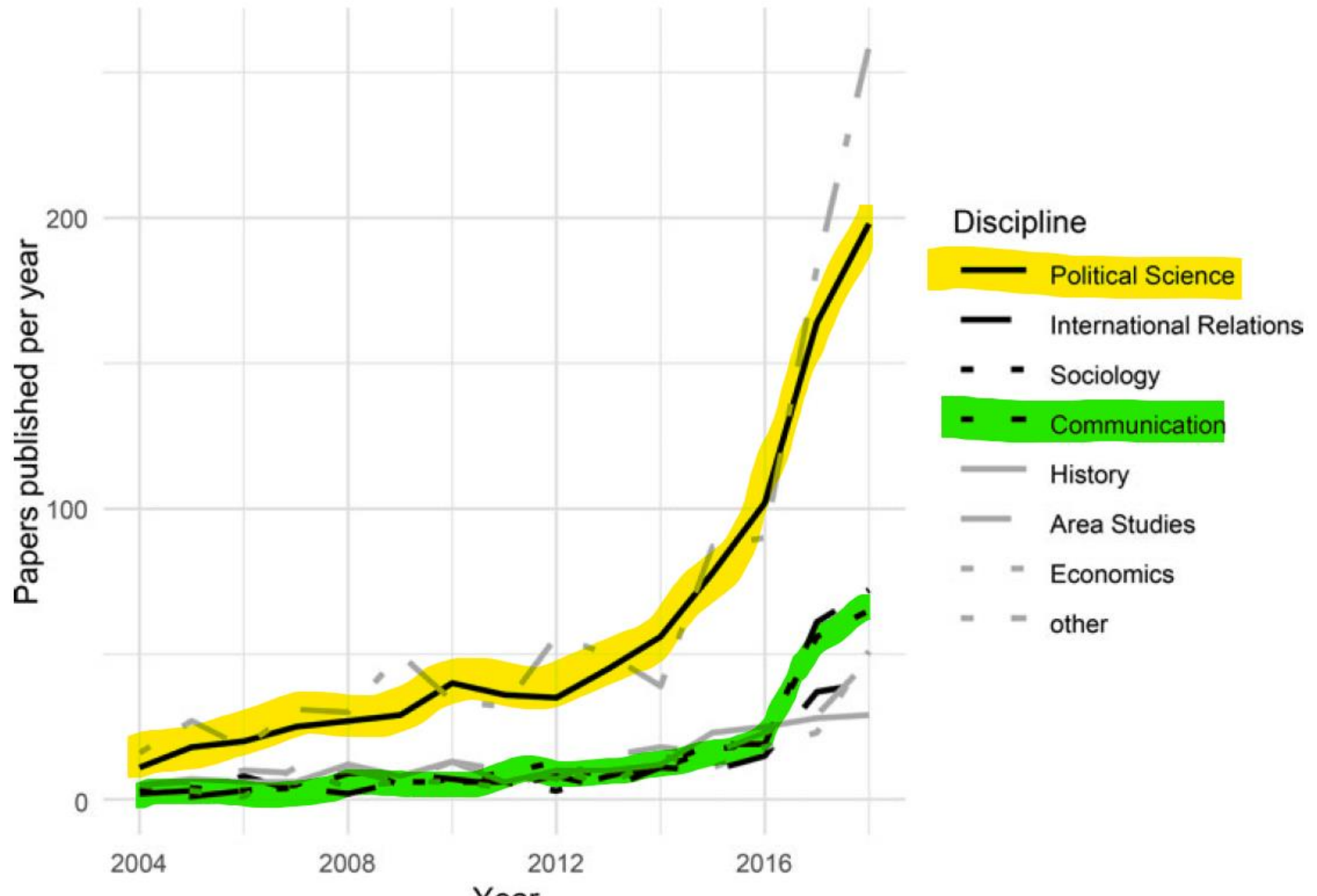
# Total number of articles on **populism** by disciplines from **2004 to 2018** (excluding disciplines with less than 20 publications) (Hunger & Paxton, 2021)

Discipline	Articles	Discipline	Articles
Political Science	884	Religion	52
Sociology	239	Psychology	49
<b>Communication</b>	<b>226</b>	Public	47
Area Studies	225	Literature	45
History	200	Educational	45
Economics	173	Education	43
International Relations	171	<b>Linguistics</b>	<b>43</b>
Social Sciences	166	Language and Linguistics	42
Interdisciplinary	152	Public Administration	39
Multidisciplinary	146	Social Issues	39
Humanities	123	Environmental Studies	31
Law	98	Industrial Relations and Labor	27
<b>Cultural Studies</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>Film</b>	<b>26</b>
Ethnic Studies	77	<b>Radio</b>	<b>26</b>
Philosophy	76	<b>Television</b>	<b>26</b>
Criminology & Penology	73	Asian Studies	24
Planning & Development	73	Business	24
Anthropology	68	<b>Art</b>	<b>20</b>
Geography	58	other	389

Note: One article can be part of several categories and hence we report 4344 different instances of disciplines, while we only have 2794 articles in our data

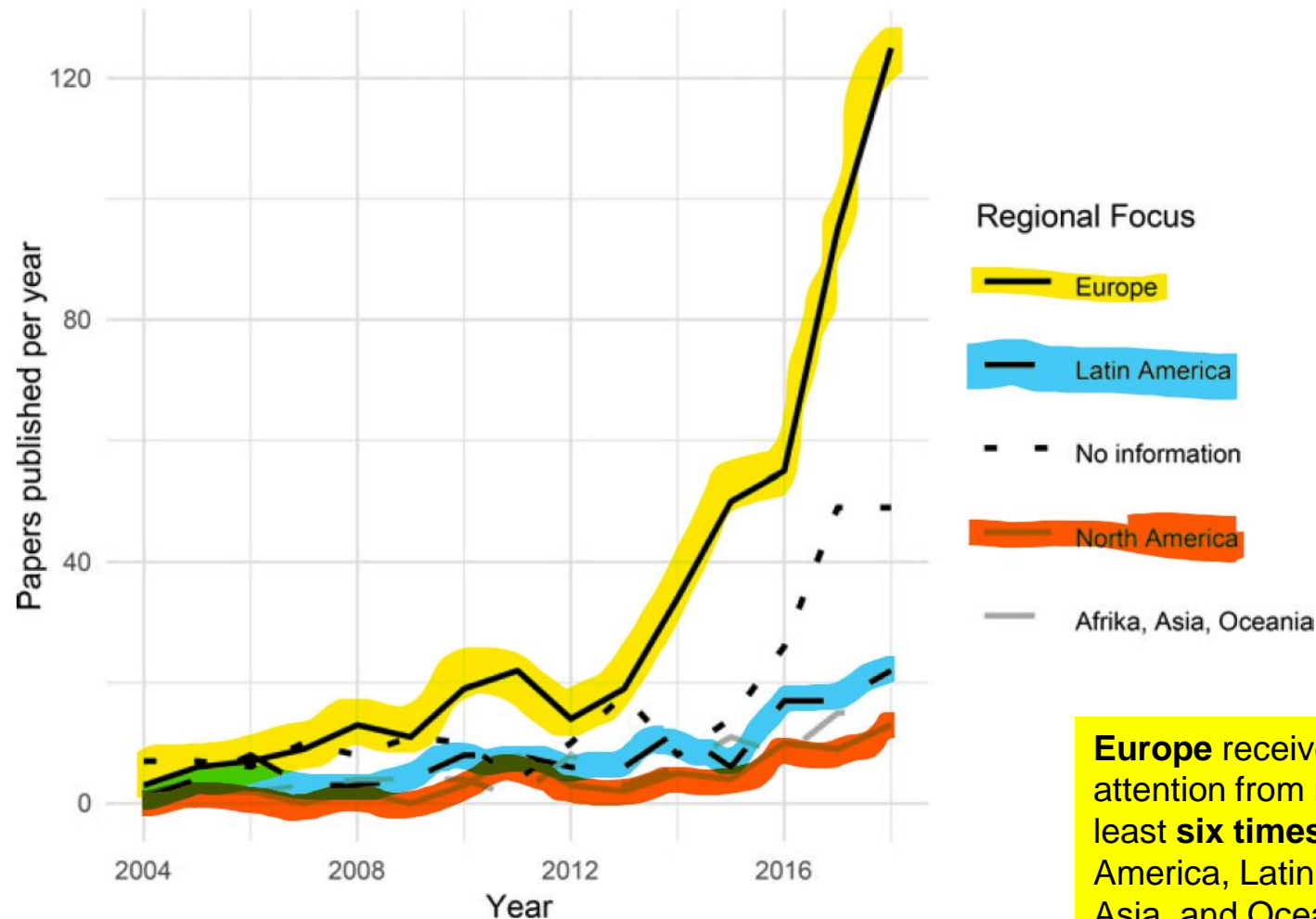


# Yearly number of published journal articles on **populism** across disciplines (2004-2016) (*ibidem*)





# Yearly number of published journal articles on populism by regional focus (2004-2016) *(ibidem)*



**Europe** receives the most attention from researchers, at least **six times more** than North America, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania



# A divided and fragmented field?

“We show that scholars of populism are “sitting at separate tables” due to three divides:

1. the different host ideologies under analysis,
2. different geographical foci, and
3. methodological differences.” *(ibidem, p. 629)*

I would add also **the divide of «theoretical perspective»**. Looking at populism from the **media/com scholarly reflection** it appears under a very distinct light, largely disregarded by political scientists but in our view crucial to the understanding of the phenomenon as such and in the different national contexts.



Rooduijn in a 2019 account on “**The state of the field**” observes that the studies of the last decade differ from earlier work on populism in various ways:

**First**, scholars agree with each other much more strongly than before on how the term should be defined. Although populism is still a highly contested concept, and researchers still struggle with conceptual issues, many scholars nowadays agree that it should be defined as **a set of ideas that concerns the antagonistic relationship between the corrupt elite and the virtuous people.**

**Second**, the emphasis on *conceptualising* populism has made place for a focus on *measuring* it. [...] As a result, various researchers have investigated to what extent political parties and politicians express populist messages – mostly by means of **quantitative content analysis methods.**



**Third**, populism studies nowadays also focus on other actors than politicians and parties. There has been **a shift from the supply side of the political spectrum to the demand side**

**Fourth**, various important recent contributions to populism research have been made by **communication scientists**

**Fifth**, scholars increasingly assess populism in power. This is due to the fact that in recent years populist parties (at least in Europe) have become much more experienced with government participation.



# Rooduijn concludes with a **warning**

One serious handicap of populism research is the blurriness of the concept. So:

“For many scholars the sexiness of populism is an incentive to employ the term – even if the real focus is on a different topic.

Although this will likely increase the popularity of the field even further, in the end it will most probably also lead to more conceptual blurriness, sloppy inferences and invalid conclusions” (369-370).



# Confused concepts

- Populism = radical right?
- Populism = natinalism?
- Populism = nativism?
- Populism = 'sovereign-ism'?
- Populism = Euro-scepticism?

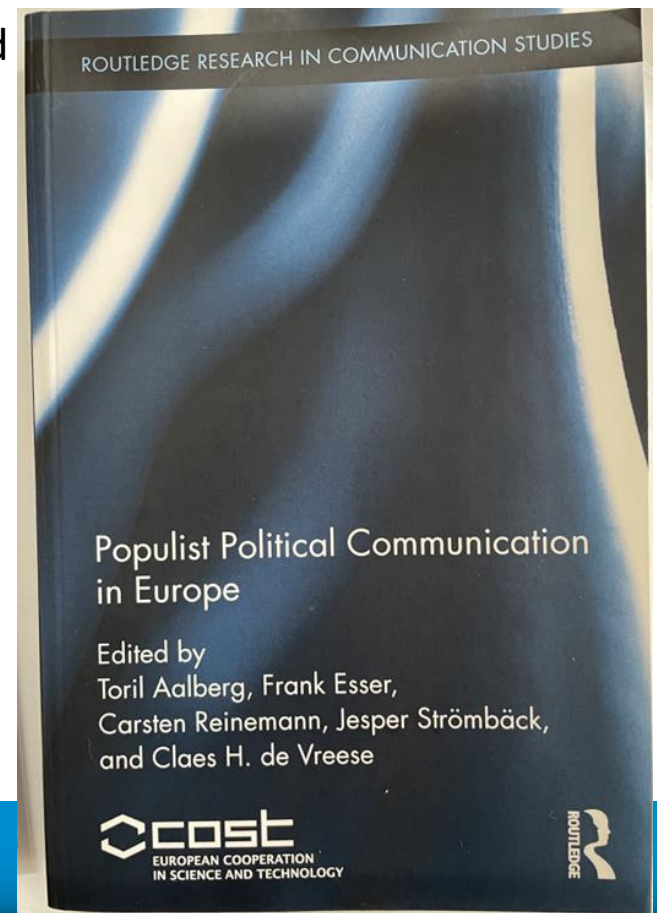




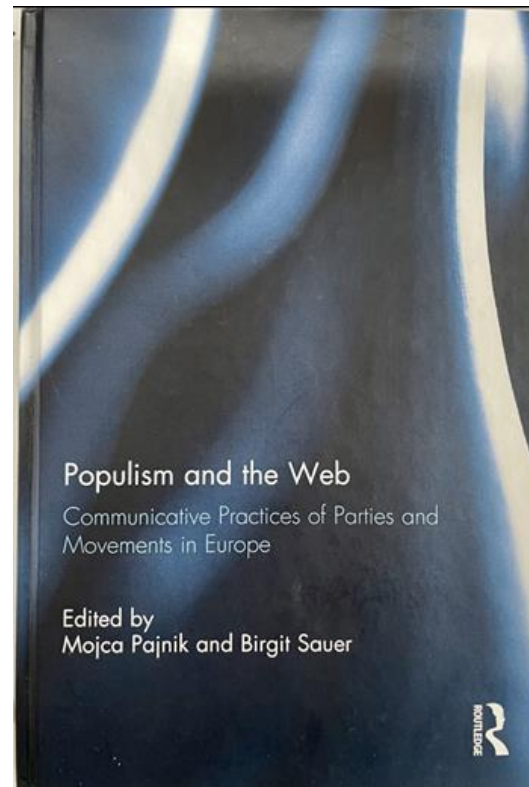
# The special case of communication research on populism

Communication scholarship too was largely missing in this area, then (thanks to Brexit and Trump) from 2016 to 2022 there has been a surge of studies, supported by EU programs like COST and Horizon 2020:

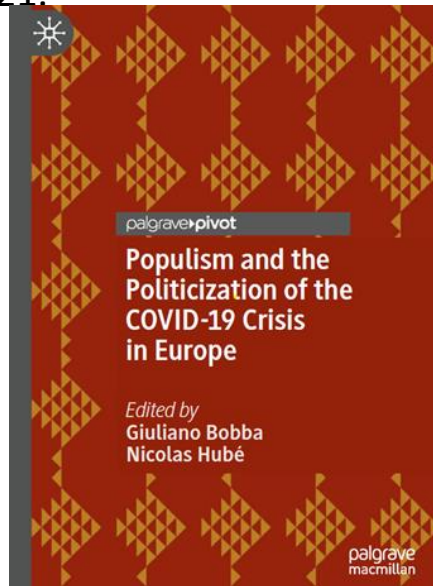
➤ the COST group produced many journal articles and eventually a pivotal book for much current research:  
(2017) Aalberg T., Esser F., Reinemann C., et al. (eds),  
***Populist Political Communication in Europe***,  
New York: Routledge.



- Another collective book (also focusing on Europe) was edited in 2018 by Mojica Pajnik and Birgit Sauer, looking at populism in the digital public sphere: ***Populism and the Web. Communicative Practices of Parties and Movements in Europe***, New York: Routledge.



- Bobba, G. and N. Hubé (eds.), ***Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe***, Palgrave, 2021.



It examines populism in relation to the pandemics in 8 countries. It takes in due account communication explaining tools.

- Block, E., ***Discursive Disruption, Populist Communication and Democracy. The cases of Hugo Chavez and Donald J. Trump***, Routledge, 2022.



It analyzes the disruptive power of populist speech. "Middle ground politics and journalism have been substituted by the **adversarial rhetorical styles of populists**, multiplied through multi-fragmented channels, texts and voices."



# Special issues of refereed journals & hundreds of articles on various journals across disciplines



[Volume 23, Issue 4, October 2018](#)

Special Issue on Populist Communication



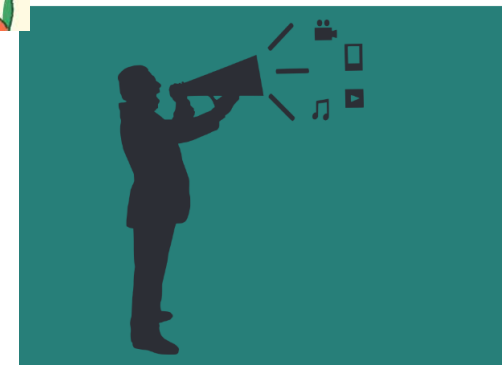
**Vol. 3, n. 3 (2018)**  
Special issue on  
**Mediated populism**  
(Edited by M. Higgins)



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**MEDIA E POPULISMO**  
MEDIA AND POPULISM



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO  
DIPARTIMENTO DI  
SCIENZE SOCIALI E POLITICHE

Beside the scholarly publications there has been an enormous number of (academic) **fora, conferences, seminars**, - and several **research groups** throughout the globe that have looked into populist communication with a comparative approach (then going beyond Euro-centrism).



# Where do we stand?

Populism is really to be considered a  
**communication phenomenon?**



A convincing answer is given by de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann and Stanyer in the article

**“Populism as an Expression of Political Communication”,**

published in 2018 on *IJPP* (23/4)

that sums up the key points of the COST book quoted above





“Conceiving populism as an ideology that is articulated discursively by political actors and media actors bridges existing literature from political science and communication science.

From a distinct political communication point of view, the focus now shifts from what constitutes the ideology of populism to how it is communicated.”



So:

With populism “as **content**,” we refer to the public communication of core components of populist ideology (such as people-centrism and anti-elitism) with a characteristic set of key messages or frames.

With populism “as **style**,” we refer to the fact that these messages expressing populist ideology are often associated with the use of a characteristic set of presentational style elements.

In this perspective, populism is understood as features of political communication rather than characteristics of the actor sending the message.



# Degrees of populism (as comm phenomenon)

- *Complete populism* includes reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups.
- *Excluding populism* includes only references and appeals to the people and exclusion of out-groups.
- *Anti-elitist populism* includes reference and appeals to the people and anti-elitism.
- *Empty populism* includes only reference and appeals to the people.



# Operational definitions

- Media populism/Mediated populism
  - ☐ Populism **by** the media
  - ☐ Populism **through** the media
  - ☐ Social media populism
- Degrees of Populist Rhetoric

All of these (and many others) are valuable signs of the richness of populist polcomm research



# Media Populism

- Hypothesis that (news and entertainment) media:
  1. By primarily responding to commercial imperatives produce content that caters to the tastes and needs of large audiences, thus providing (unintentionally or not) a platform conducive to political populism. Ex. covering with sensationalist style critical social issues [eg. Immigration], and giving account of the incendiary rhetoric of populist leaders, provide large visibility to the movements
  2. Ideologically-oriented media (eg. British tabloids, or Fox News) may take sides and support, often quite openly, populist claims, thus assuring political and electoral consensus to them.

(Source: Mazzoleni, G., Mediatization and Political Populism, in Esser & Strömbäck, Eds., *Mediatization of Politics*, Palgrave, 2014)



# Populism BY the Media

**Populism by the media** manifests itself when media organizations explicitly engage in their own kind of populism. For example, when they act as advocates on behalf of the people, with a critical attitude toward power holders; or when they actively express hostile opinions toward social groups. Some media outlets can be openly sympathetic to populist actors and adopt many elements of the populist rhetoric in their work.

**Source:**

de Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 423–438. pp. 429

([https://demos-h2020.eu/en/terminologies-on-populism?has\\_sidebar](https://demos-h2020.eu/en/terminologies-on-populism?has_sidebar))





# Populism THROUGH the media

**Populism through the media:** By providing a forum for actors using populist communication, the media help disseminate their populist rhetoric and increase the visibility and legitimacy of these actors. Some issues (immigration, crime, economic crisis) are closely aligned with populist actors, and the agenda of issues covered by the media can also be populist.

**Source:**

de Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 423–438. pp. 429

([https://demos-h2020.eu/en/terminologies-on-populism?has\\_sidebar](https://demos-h2020.eu/en/terminologies-on-populism?has_sidebar))



# Populist Rhetoric

**Populist Rhetoric** It is a special type of political talk that divides the population into two categories:

- 1) pure, moral, and victimized people, and
- 2) a corrupt, malfunctioning elite.

Populism constructs fear and is related to the various real or imagined dangers posed by "scapegoats" (LGBT people, minorities, feminists, marginalized groups) that are blamed for threatening or damaging societies.

**Source:**

Wodak, R. (2015). *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. London: Sage.



# Social Media Populism

## Social Media Populism

Rather than a definition perhaps it's currently the larger field of research, registering several contributions on both sides of SUPPLY and DEMAND of media and communication elements.

I am sure that most of us have done some research on:

### (Supply side)

- How populist leaders use the social networks
- Differences between mainstream and populist political communication
- Content analyses of Facebook/Instagram/Tiktok/Twitter populist posts
- Intensity of social media use in election campaigns
- Nature and features of populist rhetoric/narrative/story-telling

### (Demand side)

- Effects of populist social media messages on the followers and/or opponents
- Types and extents of «connective participation» of prod-users
- Role of viral memes (pro & con) in the populist web-sphere
- Etc.



# The 'bottom line'

**Theoretical perspective: Populism as a political communication phenomenon** (cfr. Esser 2022)

- Mainstream news media and populists distrust and criticize each other (esp. in countries w/ cordon sanitaire).
- This prompts populists to seek alternative channels of communication.
- To circumvent professional journalism, social media are increasingly used for populist communication. This is especially true for (i) challenger parties and extreme parties, (ii) Facebook as platform, (iii) mobilizable issues, (iv) sympathetic media sources.
- This explains, at least partly, the success of populist actors in the hybrid media ecosystem. Link to (i) news logic and (ii) audience logic.
- Affinity between populism and disinformation: Political actors combine both in their SM communication; users who support populist ideas share more disinformation; societies with high polarization, accepted populist parties/discourse, and high SM use for news are less resilient against circulation of disinformation



**Populism is better identified conceptually and empirically in a communication frame**





As we can see, a lot has been researched and theorized about populist political communication in the last 5 years by communication scholarship.

Now, my question is:

Do we have sufficient theoretical tools to understand the current developments of populism, especially vis-à-vis the platformization of much communication in the political arenas?



My answer is **Yes we have!**

However, in the last couple of years we sense that the field is in a sort of stalemate, for saturation, or for the feeling that theoretical research has said the last word on what is populism as communication.



# An...open conclusion

What's missing/what's ahead:

From a scholarly point of view, further research on:

- Hybrid media contexts
- Disinformation
- Construction of opinion/cultural climates
  - Entertainment media as tools of «mass distraction»?
- Role of digital platforms as key players
  - Tools of «mass deception»?
  - Meta – TikTok as China-controlled – Elon Musk's Twitter
- Algorithms – Artificial Intelligence



## From a civic involvement perspective

- Research that contributes to unveil the populists' (mis)uses of media to challenge democracy
- Investing resources in journalism education to detect and debunk populist-driven disinformation on hybrid info channels

**The defense of democracy should constantly guide our scholarly work!**





*Muito  
Obrigado!*



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