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The Opaque Operations of 21st Century Populism

A Global Studies Capstone Report

Populism, Political style, Media, Technology

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Introduction

My first year of undergrad, I sat in a still hallway and held my head in disbelief as I saw the confetti fall on Donald Trump as he accepted the presidential nomination. Was this just another horrific episode of *The Apprentice*? During the election cycle, a term was used to describe his meteoric rise: *populism*. The term was thrown around with ease, yet the definition was not ever really articulated. Then as other countries held elections, other political leaders came to power under the populist label: Modi in India, Johnson in the United Kingdom, Bolsanaro in Brazil, Duterte in the Philippines, and that is just to name a few. Coming into the theoretical side of the term, it seemed ripe with contested definitions and I knew that it would be something that I would want to research. While populist movements have risen across the globe, old definitions of populism are no longer viable in the 21st century. Literature on populism from 1990 forward characterizes populism as an appeal to ‘the people’, crisis, breakdown, threats, and ‘bad manners’ (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). We need to consider the theoretical and empirical lapses of populism -- as an ideology, logic, and discourse in order to understand contemporary populism as a political style. In addition, it is necessary to reconceptualize the effect that technology has on populism. Technological systems that I will include are embedded into the social media and new media we interact with on a daily basis, so long as we are connected to the internet, we are subject to them.

I will work predominantly with Moffitt’s interpretation of populism as a political style. A political style can be interpreted as reproties of performance. Moffitt’s theory coalesces the elements of past theorists’ notions of political style while adding important rhetorical and

aesthetic dimensions Hofstadter (1965; Ankersmit 2002; Pels 2003). Moffitt claims that there are “repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government to everyday life.” (2016, 38). In other words, populism as a political style is performed through symbols and images that are constructed by the populist actor. In this view, ‘the people’ are the central audience to the populist leader and are also the subject that populist leaders attempt to ‘render present’, in other words, they act for the ‘people’ they claim to represent (Arditi 2007). The concept of populism as a political style is applicable to the performative nature of politics that is particularly salient in this era of social media and new media. Additionally, I speculate that the phenomena of populism as a political style has become so global due to the crisis of public authority.

I claim that Moffitt’s application of mediatization to political style doesn’t adequately expose new media and social media’s effect on populism. Although the effect of increasing the role of mediatization, which is how “social interaction-within these (political) institutions, between institutions, and society at large-take place via the media ” (Hjarvard 2008,113), it precludes the social media platforms that are in place that are replicating populism. We cannot start to conceptualize contemporary populism without bringing the technology most often used by contemporary populists or by actors who use this political style. The books I relied on the most in my research are, *New Dark Age* by James Bridle and *The Global Rise of Populism* by Benjamin Moffitt.. To conceptualize the impact of technology on populism as a political style, I use critical perspectives on mediatization and new media technology (KhosraviNik 2018, Bridle 2018, Niklewicz 2017). These scholars deconstruct the opaque operations of algorithms, filter

bubbles and echo chambers to provide insight into how contemporary populism operates. I will situate populism as a political style and how it is replicated by the technology behind our social media platforms, that seems to be splicing itself to our social reality.

Literature Review

Populism has been classically characterized as a particular ideology. For Mudde (2004), populism is a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘corrupt elite,’ which argues that politics should be the general will of the people” (543). The thin centered ideology of populism is then able to be attached to whatever the socio-political context that the populist actor mobilizes under, meaning that it doesn’t exist as a pure ideology. (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2011, 2). Populism in this view can latch onto a ‘thick’ ideology such as socialism or nationalism, meaning that there is no pure form of populism as an ideology. The thin centered ideology of populism is the conflict between two separate and opposite groups. For instance, the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’.

Even those who conceptualize populism as a distinct ideology acknowledge the lack of evidence of an actual historical populist ideological movement. There has been no record of philosophical-political institutions that are the basis for populism as an ideology. There is no ‘Populist International’ (Stanley 2008, 100). The minimal definition of a ‘thin ideology’ for populism has yet to ‘thicken’. The concept of populism as an ideology lacks a common historical lineage, besides the one instance of a so-called populist party, known as the American People’s Party of the 1890s (Moffitt 2016, 19). Other ‘thin ideologies’ started as such and would eventually develop their own unique conceptual furniture to extend their appeal and validity

(Freeden 1996, 486). Examples of this include ecologism and feminism which both started with core values to develop into their own thick ideologies. Thus, populism as an ideology doesn't help conceptualize populism for it isn't an actual ideology. Populism in this sense just latches onto another ideology, common today is a nationalist ideology with populist style.

Some of the most famous work on populism was the work of Ernesto Laclau, who focused on the ontological content of populism. Laclau argued that populism is not just a political logic, but *the* logic of the political as politics is always the struggle between two competing antagonistic groups (2005, 154). Laclau framed the groups in a simple polysocial unit called 'the demand'. When the demand is not satisfied with the system, the people have the possibility to come into contact with the unsatisfied demands. The unsatisfied demands form a common antagonism or enemy. Put into a different way populism is a political logic of where equivalence triumphs over difference (Moffitt 2016, 23). The unsatisfied demands form an equivalential chain that bifurcates the system and the people (Moffitt 2016, 23). Here is where we can see the adoption of the most common understanding of populism. The 'people' versus the 'system', or whatever rhetorical flourish is used by the populist. Laclau formulates that all politics are populist, since populism is the logic of the political (Laclau 2005, 47).

Laclau argues in his later work that the populist does not speak for a common people, but makes the subject known as 'the people' through naming, performance or articulation (Moffitt 2016, 24). The performance that Laclau turns to is vital to populism as a political style. Populism starts from the perception of crisis, breakdown or threat, which is often performed or dramatized (Taggart 2000). As we noted earlier, the unsatisfied demand. Laclau was concerned with moving away from the concrete specifics of 'politics' and working with a more abstract level of

the “political” (Mouffe 2005, 8-9), which is important to consider when thinking of contemporary politics.

However we also need to look at how modern movements have managed to stray away from the ‘populist logic’ that Laclau sees as universal (Arditi 2012). The movements broke the logic of the way they organized as a populist organization. Occupy and *indignandos* have sought to distance themselves from “populist modes of discourse, organization and representation by refusing to articulate demands through a leader, or not articulating concrete demands at all” (Moffit 2016, 25). The universal logic of populism depends on a leader, such as José Mujica, former president of Uruguay, known as Pepe. These organizations flipped the people and put it before the leader. The additional shortcoming of populism as political logic is that it is too broad to allow for meaningful application. The political logic that he considers populism is too abstract. If we were to consider his theory and apply it, the political logic of populism would be applicable to *any* political case study. Laclau’s theory definitely was one of the most innovative and developed, but in order to be used for more empirical analysis the theory must be “brought back to Earth in some regards” (Moffit 2016, 25). The work of populism as a political logic noted the importance of performance in order to ‘speak’ to ‘the people’, which is necessary to populism as a political style.

Populism can alternatively be understood as a mode of political expression as manifested in text or speeches (Moffit 2016, 21). In other words, a populist actor can enter in and out of populist discourse. Both populism as an ideology and populism as a strategy divide populism in a “either/or” category. Either you fall into the category of a populist or you don’t. For instance, although Donald Trump employs a populist discourse, his ideology is not populism, but

nationalism entrenched in xenophobia. It is also important to note that Bernie Sanders is often labeled a populist as well whose discourse evokes a political revolution against 'the corporate elite', but his ideology is a closer to a democratic socialist (Postel 2016). This situates populism as a political style as not tied down to ideological leaning, but rather how they approach their conflicts. A populist discourse usually makes appeals to 'the people', speaking about a crisis or breakdown, and to 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016). The populist performs this crisis to the 'people' and how there is some crisis that is affecting the 'pure people', which serves as a sort of rallying cry. 'Bad manners' can reference instances where the populist stepped out of what was 'politically correct'. An example of this is how the populist actors appear when they speak, for Hugo Chavez presents himself as a 'man of the people', wearing ordinary clothes (Moffitt 2016, 55). The performance of the populist actor is most commonly: (1) appeals to 'the people,' (2) reference to a crisis or breakdown, and (3) reference to 'bad manners' or bad actors/a system that is not working for 'the people.'

Scholars have used classical content analysis to develop a qualitative coding scheme to measure the 'level' of populism in certain discursive texts (Hawkins 2009, 2010; Kroopmans and Muis 2009). However, there seems to be no clear agreement on what sources should be used for analysis in this method. Whether it is speeches, party manifestos or broadcasts it is hard to see how measuring the keywords used would do more than supplement an already existing theoretical assumption (Moffitt 2016, 23). This method seems to *measure* populism, rather than *understand* populism. This approach measures how often the populist amount of times the populist leader will say 'people' or something along those lines. To understand populism, you need to break down these theoretical assumptions that you are basing your measurement off of.

The discursive approach helps understand the gradational quality of populism and values the importance of speech acts or rhetoric, but it fails to include the performative and aesthetic dimensions that some theorists have stressed as significant to populism (Canovan 1999; Mouffe 2005). This methodological approach leaves out charismatic and stylistic elements of populism, which is important to understand populism as a political style.

It is necessary to situate the shifting understanding of populism within the changing shape of the modern political system. Populism as a political style stresses the performative elements of populism and contextualizes it in the conditions of reflexive modernity (Moffitt 2016, 39).

Reflexive modernity is the dissolution of conventional institutions and the rise of transnational movements. (Beck 2006). Reflexive modernity characterizes the modern era, where rampant media and technology allow constant flow of information which can shift political institutions rapidly

Moffitt fuses works on political communication and the media to conceptualize contemporary populism by introducing the concept of political style -- defined as “repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations” (2013, 387). Knight describes populism as a loose style involving a rapport with ‘the people’, and that signals a “them-and-us” mentality that can precipitate a mobilization of the ‘us’ versus the ‘them’ (1998, 223). Similar to the ‘pure people’ and ‘corrupt elite’ of earlier theorists. Populist theorists have conventionally focused on populism’s rhetorical features, speeches, rallies and the likes (Taguieff 1995, Kazin 1998, Canovan 1999, de la Torre, 2010, and Filc 2011). They refer to the use of populism to communicate in a simple manner and offer solutions that are direct and simplistic. Moffitt's notion of “populism as a political style” goes beyond the purely rhetorical elements to emphasize

the performative and relational elements of populism. For instance, populism as a political style pays attention to how the populist actors appear and thus perform a role for their supporters. We can think of ‘the people’ as an empty signifier that the populist actors perform to fill (Laclau 2005). Populist actors need to be able to speak for the people, so they need to make sure that they fit the part.

Political style has been used as a placeholder, just a term that had no defined meaning, in both political science and political communication literature. So, it is necessary to define what Moffitt means by political style in relation to populism. Political style has been something ephemeral that has not been pinned down when used in literature. Almost automatically people associate the word ‘style’ with aesthetics, theatre and fashion. For this reason, the political science and political communication literature have relegated style to being a superficial aspect of politics (Moffitt 2016, 33). Style can be defined in two ways, the first equates style with patterns, grouping objects or phenomena with similar traits to organize them in a comprehensible schematic (Moffitt 2016, 33). This definition has been used in art history, describing works of art that are made in a similar fashion or at the same time or place (Ackerman 1962). The second usage prioritizes the content of style. Goodman argues that “subject is what is said, style is how” (1975, 799). When we are describing a style of art, we are actually doing two things: first, we are taking part in a grouping activity, and second, we are basing our judgement on what to include in each grouping on *how* it is painted rather than *what* is painted. Style’s definitions tend to be intertwined when put to practical use, leading to the slippage of the term when used in politics. In politics, style and content should not be conflated. The content of what a populist actor is saying can vary based on *how* it is presented. Again, Moffitt defines populism as a political style:

“repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government to everyday life” (2016, 38). The definition of a political style is a necessary component of contemporary politics, especially for understanding populism. The stylistic performance can be embodied through speech, how the populist or other imagery is presented. The political actor can frame issues within the technocratic style or step out into the populist political style when necessary and isn’t stagnated by the ‘either/ or’ categorization. This also is necessary to understand that populism as a political style is constructed by the populist actor, both actively and passively (Moffit 2016, 38).

Theoretical framework

The stylistic choice of populism thrives in the modern media ecosystem, where the attention of the user is dwindling. The populist style can be subtle with how the populist actor dresses. The populist will find a group of like-minded people and usually refer to them as ‘good people’ in opposition to whatever antagonistic group they are confronted with. Populism as a political style dependent on the new media and social, and notes how new media and social media has changed the dynamics of the populist actors' visibility. Users are constantly trying to find their ‘people’, other users who might share some common beliefs. Populist actors can appeal to ‘their people’ through social media, changing their messages to suit the needs of whomever they claim to represent. The social media and new media technology has made it easy for populism to replicate itself and spread, which I will discuss further in my findings section. Seeing populism as a political style goes beyond the traditional understanding of content and

style that past approaches relied on. For instance. A current example, Donald Trump, the President of the United States, uses a populist style to reinforce a nationalist content. Populism as a political style recognizes the rhetorical, relational and aesthetic aspects that are crucial to framing populism in the contemporary media ecosystem. How the populist actors speak/write, how they relate to 'the people' and how they look to 'the people.' When there is an emphasis on the performative elements of populism, we can give populism a strong footing in the progressively 'stylized' and 'spectacular' political landscape (Debord 1994, Vaneigem 1994). There is a need to dramatize a crisis to give a starting point for populism. Populism as a political style makes 'the people' the central feature of populism, as well as the subject that populists attempt to 'render present' (Arditi 2007). Meaning, the populist actor performs for a group through mechanisms of representation, namely mediated enactments, television, social media, rallies, to allow a symbolic link of disparate identities. The populist actor is performing the role they wish to be, they are the actor and director of the movie simultaneously (Moffit 2016, 49).

Mediatization refers to the process in which social and political institutions and modes of interaction have changed as a consequence of the growth of social media's influence (Hjarvard 2008, 114). Mediatization allows the populist actor's performances to reach "the people" in unprecedented ways. This can be seen in the development of new media technologies as more and more populist actors are able to reach their audience with social media and new media outlets. Now 'common people' can engage with populist actors, allowing their populist message to be catered to individuals. Tweets and videos of a populist actor can reach the people who are supportive of the message like never before. Populism as a political style is performed and enacted by the populist leader, where the performance is essentially a term for how "juridical

power' inevitably "produces", what they claim to represent" (Butler 1990, 2). The populist actor then is able to capture 'the people' that are needed in the symbolic identity of 'the common people", which is possible through the process of mediatization. Populism as a political style depends on mediatization to perpetuate, where the constant performance of populist actors allows for the spread of populism. Mediatization means that political actors can reach out to their publics easier than before. A video or an image in the populist style can be sent immediately to the public, then as users interact and see it, they take part in the decision if they are included in that 'people'. I think of what my Precalculus teacher used to say, that 'common sense is not so common'. In the populist lense, 'the common sense' is slippery and is only fulfilled when some populist actor performs what you deem as your 'common sense'. The content of populism is embodied by what the ideals or fears of the given populist actor might be, but it nonetheless is a performative act. The new and social media technologies behind each screen, or otherwise known the opaque operations of populism, allow it to spread.

Although Moffitt's application of mediatization is utilized to populism as a political style, it is important to populism as a political style, it is a process that has more depth than that (Shroeder 2018). Behind the phone screens, computers and searches we have come to depend on, a system of technological developments are components in the rise of global populism. Computation has always been understood as one of mankind's greatest achievements. Our technology while augmenting us has been simultaneously shaping us. In what James Bridle describes as "computational thinking", this way of thinking is a kind of solutionism, that any problem can be solved with adjunct of computation (2018, 4). Computational thinking is plaguing modern societies, for we forget to realize the mechanisms behind the way we are

informed by computation. The information we see on a screen doesn't clearly show us how it got there, what operations codified this content for it to reach the user. Computation is progressively infiltrating our social lives, where our lives are “mediated through connectivity and algorithmic revision” (Bridle 2018, 38). A news feed that pops up on your device is not a neutral stream of information, rather it is content that has been coded towards *you*. This happens for computation is opacous in nature and increasingly complex, while also being viewed as both politically and emotionally neutral (Bridle 2018, 40). Meaning that, as computation has evolved rapidly, there are more and more operations happening behind the screen. With each step of the computation process being opaque, shrouded behind screens, servers and remote buildings, we are not given the political rationale on why the content you are seeing is there.

Computation serves as a cognitive hack. The brain when confronted with complex issues makes the decision that requires the least amount of justification. The brain uses the process of computation to offload the decision making and responsibility to the machine (Bridle 2018, 43). We no longer think of a complex issue and consider other opinions when making the decision on a topic, we back up our cognitive biases and reinforce them with “automation biases” (Bridle 2018, 43). Meaning that we search online in order to affirm our views, political, social or otherwise. This serves particularly well into the populist actor’s hand for creating “sound byte solutions” for the increasingly complex issues of the political realm. The populist actor actively constructs their political style and technological systems serve as a way to circumvent traditional gatekeepers in media. These systems serve as a modern adjunct of populism, that operate behind the populist actor. Computational thinking serves a problematic feature of society for information is not critically viewed and the technological systems in place that are allowing

populism to circulate.

Methodology

This data was obtained through bibliographic research accessed through both the CSUMB Library and Google scholar. Research was conducted from August of 2019 to February of 2020. This paper draws on secondary sources to give insight into the relationship between populism and technological systems, such as algorithms and how they shape echo chambers and networked publics. I mainly draw from scholars with expertise in populism, political communication, media studies, performance, technology and critical media studies to inform my research. Primary sources include examples from media coverage to ground the theoretical concepts I am articulating. I build off Benjamin Moffitt's theory of populism as a political style in this paper. I think his theory has the most basis for conceptualizing contemporary populism. I use his theoretical framework, but I find it necessary to apply perspectives on technology and the technological systems of new media and social media that are at play. The political system doesn't occur in a vacuum and the growth of the new media and social media's roles are a vital factor to consider. To expand on the work on populism as a political style, I will supplement the theories of populism as a political style with a nuanced application of media technology theories and technological systems. This research examines populism in this digital age along these levels of analysis: national, transnational and global.

Discussion of Findings

Populism as a political style is a suitable argument, but doesn't consider the technological conditions that are all too important how we situate ourselves in the world. In our technological age, our very own creation is shaping what content is shown and what isn't. These are because of

mathematical equations, known commonly as algorithms, which are a set of instructions designed to perform a certain task (Christensen 2013). Constantly crafting what content is shown, an equation is computing what is the most suitable outcome for the user. The populist has a cyborg-like charisma, reaching ‘people’ from across the globe. Instead of finding their ‘people’ with a particular political message, populists now are actively and passively creating ‘the people’ with technology, known as a calculated public or networked publics (Gillespie 2014, 189).

Technology has hollowed out the phenomena of populism, for the empty signifier of the ‘people’ is now just part of our lives, which can be reduced to a set of equations (Crawford 2016, 77). Populism as a political style pays the most attention to the socio-technical conditions we are in. Although Moffitt gets close with an interpretation of “Mediatization” and populism, it doesn’t elaborate on the new media and social media technologies and how they form virtual groups. In our case, the availability of new media and social media, users are able to find groups of people easier than ever before. These are a set of data points that can basically estimate ‘the people’ needed for the populist actor. There is also the phenomena of a filter bubble, where users tend to only interact or associate with very like-minded people. The populist actor now has the reach of technology, more specifically new and social media, can find their ‘people’ in this age of darkness (KhosraviNik 2018).

In this section, I supplement Moffitt’s theory of populism as a political style. I argue that we cannot explain any political phenomena without exploring the effects of new media social technologies such algorithms, filter bubbles and echo chambers. Especially now that new media and social media have taken such a strong hold of how people receive information. I claim that populism as a political style is the next turn in the long history of the contested definition of this

slippery phenomena of populism, but we need to pay attention to how the technology is actively shaping and allowing this phenomena to perpetuate.

Returning to the definition of mediatization, “social interaction-within these institutions, between institutions, and society at large-take place via the media” (Hjarvard 2008,113). When we consider the scarce amount of attention that each user has, populist actors have to work to get that attention (Schroeder 2018, 3). Naturally, populism is able to thrive in this scenario, for the performance of populism is supposed to cut through the noise or the darkness. The populist actor can now frame arguments to reach exactly ‘the people’ they claim to represent. Traditional media has gatekeepers that the new media, such as social media, are able to circumvent (Moffitt 2016, 85). Anyone who has an account in these new media or social media platforms can interact politically or socially, which can be picked up by a populist leader. Another thing to consider about this Mediatization, even traditional media consumers who watch television news can succumb to seeing the news that occurs on social media. Traditional media sources have a tendency to take tweets or other social media posts and run it on the air (Moffitt 2016, 90). So now, the populist actor has their message that was catered for social media, it is then recycled to go onto national television or other mainstream media. Instead of having to perform to ‘their people’ on television, the populist actor can create their messages from their couch and if it gets enough attention it will find its way into traditional media. The appeals to ‘the people versus the elite’ or other related signifiers can now be performed with ease.

Populism can be seen as the nexus of media logic and political logic, where “politics is increasingly influenced, shaped and colonised by media logic” (Moffitt 2016, 76). Media logic corresponds with populism as a political style quite well (see Figure 1.1). The media logics of

dramatisation, polarisation and prioritisation of conflict serves as a backbone of the populist political actor (Stromback 2008, 233; Bos, van der Berg and de Vreese 2011, 185). In this process, one may ask if the rise of populism was due to the mediatization of politics or if populism has helped allow mediatization to take place? I speculate populism as a praxis has become more common because of the mediatization that has happened. I argue that the technological systems behind our new media and social allow populism to replicate or perpetuate. Moffitt's application of mediatization within populism as a political style is vital. However, this process is too passive and doesn't include the various technological systems that are embedded into our devices and the wider repercussions they have in public discourse. Our phones, computers and media are constantly shaping who we hear from, allowing idealized notion of the Habermasian Public sphere to erode almost entirely (Greenfield 2017, 25). Rational debate has been degraded and the appeal to emotion is the new modus operandi. The polarization, dramatization that has found through the mediatization of politics has allowed populism to thrive (Moffitt 2016, 63). Populists are able to perform to their specific 'people' and attempt to solve complex problems with sound byte-solutions. We need to consider the socio-technical conditions we are in and how prior conceptions of mediatization fall short.

See Figure 1.1

What needs to be conceptualized and examined in depth with regard to populism as a political style is the role media technology plays in shaping this political style today. We almost write our technology, computers, and smartphones off as a neutral tool. We conceptualize that the information that we are accessing when we type something into a search engine will ping results that are true and accurate. We think that computation technology has allowed this viral

distribution of knowledge. This conception couldn't be further from the actuality. The computation technology has created a landscape where there is an almost unapproachable amount of knowledge that exists. The technology we cherish, in some ways, has made us actually know less. This is key to understanding populism as a political style, that we are existing in a period of darkness. Now, I don't mean darkness in the nihilistic sense, but not having a clarity of what is in front us. We have created a system that has vast repositories of knowledge, but limited ways to access that knowledge. We have created a chasm, as James Bridle calls it, of knowledge. The abundance of information and "plurality of worldviews are not producing a coherent consensus reality, but one riven by fundamentalist insistence on simplistic narratives, conspiracy theories, and post-factual politics" (Bridle 2019,10). Populism as a political style is able to thrive when there is so much uncertainty, a true crisis of public knowledge is at play and operates as a crucial component to the global rise of populism.

Algorithms serve as a way to navigate ourselves through the digital realm in their most basic sense. Algorithms also provide "a means to know what there is and how to know" (Gillespie 2014, 167). In this sense, they are able to serve as a key logic for governing flows of information, which we use to constitute what we know. Algorithms compute what is the 'hot' or 'trending' discussions or news, showing us what topics might be the most relevant to what we are searching for. What these algorithms also do is stem the flow of which publics we participate in. Gillespie calls these relevance algorithms (2014, 168). These specific set of algorithms help us understand how contemporary populism operates. Algorithms are just equations trying to give the user their desired output (Gillespie 2014, 180). These algorithms are not able to judge if they are actually important to what is going on. These serve as pathways to understand culture,

politics and other larger societal practices. “Our sense of the world is subtly conditioned by the information that is presented to us for interested reasons, and yet doesn’t disclose those reasons” (Greenfield 2017, 23). What these algorithms do is take data and crunch it. Our knowledge is then codified, crunched for each user, meaning a clear consensus of reality is obfuscated by our very own operational systems.

Gillespie describes it as, “algorithms nestle into people’s daily lives and mundane information, users shape and rearticulate the algorithms they encounter; and algorithms impinge on how people seek information, how they perceive and think about the contour of knowledge, and how they understand themselves in and through public discourse” (2014, 183). We see some news trending or populist actors trending on Twitter or other new media and we misconstrue the *validity* of the information with the *visibility* of the information (KhosraviNik, 2018). As the populist fights for attention in the media ecosystem, creating a crisis or performing, their content comes to the forefront. Algorithms then codify the content entrenched in populism, making the user beyond susceptible to what are known as calculated publics, which are the result of the “intersection of people, technology, and practice” (Gillespie 2014, 188). We are then entrenched both digitally and physically in populist style. We are then situated with users with similar mindsets as people we are supposed to share an affinity with (Gillespie 2014, 188). We are now being shaped socially by our own tool. Algorithms are shaping the world as we know it, allowing for the populist to create their people through calculations rather than charisma.

Gramsci would rifle through his hair and turn over in his grave with this “crisis of authority” we have with mainstream media (1971, 275). He was describing the crisis of legitimacy that the Church and other institutions in the interwar period. Authority in this case is

the mass distrust of the national news system, according to Pew Research Center with only 18% of Americans having a lot of trust in national news organisations (Barthel and Mitchell, 2017). This crisis of knowledge allows for the space for alternative news sites to be used and ultimately circulated online. Alternative news sources can include everything from Breitbart, Infowars and the likes. Populism has a tendency to attack the mainstream media, regardless of the ideology behind it (Gerbaudo 2018, 749). Historically, the start of constant crisis cycling on the news was first introduced following the events of 9/11. The ‘ticker’ was introduced at the bottom of mainstream media sources, such as Fox News, CNN and MSNBC. The ticker circulated news that was not dated and would run on constantly on the bottom of the mainstream media broadcasts, The ticker of constant crisis was the predecessor of the online streams on Facebook, Twitter and other new media sources. The media ecosystem has evolved as the digital streams have shed our ability to have coherent stories of the world and heralded our era of paranoia (Bridle 2019, 204).

Conspiracy theories seem to fit right into this and have found their way to the mainstream because of populist actors. Hofstadter writing in 1964, noted the paranoid style of American politics from Masonic and anti-Catholic panics of the 1800s to Senator Joe McCarthy’s Communist conspiracies in the 1950s. This historical othering the American tradition and that tradition has seeped into the global rise of populism. The enemy is “unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, or tries to deflect the normal course of history” (Hofstadter 1964). The enemy or the other is not tied down to the complexities of everyday life. They supersede the situation at hand to grasp the totality of it and are able to manipulate it in ways that the rest of us are not capable of. This othering entrenched in paranoia

has the capability to sound like a conspiracy before you know it. Conspiracies are an extreme resort of the powerless, imagining what it would be like to be powerful (Bridle 2019, 205).

Conspiracies are the next tool in the contemporary populist tool belt. These conspiracy theories are entirely possible with the networked society we are now tethered to.

Tin foil hats aside, this is a tragedy of public knowledge that is being circulated by populists. Conspiracies are the “poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital” (Jameson 1990). A failure that is possible when slippage into theme and content. Simple narratives are the bread and butter of populism as a political style in creating ‘their people’ and dramatisation of a crisis or threat. This championing of ‘common sense’ and rejecting the bureaucrats, technocrats and other ‘Elites’ (Moffitt 2016, 14). Some commentators have called this stylistic choice “epistemological populism” (Saurette 2011, 199). The ‘common sense’ is the validated knowledge and helps appeal to the ‘common people’ in populism. Simplistic narratives are used to try and gain control of the complexities. The world as we know it is technologically augmented, accelerating the complexities of what we know. Conspiracy theories are a violent attempt to regain control of what people know. “We are networked, where knowledge wraps arounds us, simultaneously illuminating and disorientating us” (Bridle 2019, 209). The tinfoil hat has found a new crown on President Donald Trump, who most recently claimed that hydroxychloroquine when taken with azithromycin is effective in treating the COVID-19 virus, which hasn’t been clinically tested. He stated in a press conference, “What do I know? I’m not a doctor,” he added, “But I have common sense”(MSN, 2020).

This is not the first time President Trump has flaunted conspiracy theories. Alex Jones, who has hosted the right-wing conspiracy network *Infowars*, said “it was surreal to talk about issues here on the air, and then word-for-word hear Trump say it two days later” (Bridle 2016.). The lack of coherent reality for users in the media ecosystem is causing traditional psychological models to become obsolete. The widely used definition of delusion, as according to *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* states that “a belief is not a delusion when it is held by a person’s culture or subculture” (Bridle 2019, 208). The network to which we devoted much of time makes it possible for the people who use it to seek out people with similar beliefs and concerns across the globe and establish a virtual community to justify their beliefs and validate their concerns. These networked communities of self-confirming groups are the echo chambers of the modern populist.

Conclusion

In our media ecosystem, populism seems like one of the most effective ways to gain attention. It gives a simple narrative to what are complex problems. The performativity of crisis and appealing to the ‘common people’, it is almost like the populist has gained charisma by becoming cyborg. Augmenting their ability to reach people across national boundaries and connecting ‘people’ through algorithmic and symbolic revision. We need something to hold onto in the age of unknowing, but we need to be critical of the algorithmic processes that are constantly calculating ‘what we know’. The mediatization of politics allows for the easy to understand populist policies to fit into sound bytes, simple solutions and framing of situations. Moffitt’s theory of populism as a political style, where the populist actor performs a crisis, appeals to a ‘common people’, and can resort to ‘bad manners’.

We are in complex times, simple narratives will not solve the problems of contemporary society. Our own technological systems are allowing populists to perform to their 'people'. One that is often based on paranoia and othering. Populism as a political style is the most cohesive to theorize contemporary populism. It doesn't get trudded down with universals, like populism as a political logic. It also notes the graduation nature of the populist actor, meaning they can step out of their performance of the populist style.

There needs to be more research on new media and social media, as we have seen, there are corporations that are able to influence voters using the data points of the 'calculated publics' (Heawood 2018). Also more research on how media events cause the possibility of a 'spreadable spectacle', when entrenched in these technological systems, we lack agency and the information we see is based on other parties' decisions or calculations (Mihailidis 2017). These types of 'spectacles' can be used by a populist, for instance the moniker of President Trump is, "Make America Great Again". This is what is known as a "retrogression into a utopia", these spectacles that surround and shroud our knowledge of what's outside our social life that is mediated by algorithmic revision (Silva, 2018).

The processes, design, and rationale of how the information you are reading is opaque, there is always a 'black box' of algorithms that companies will keep in order to 'stay on the cutting edge' (Greenfield 2017). Yet, these algorithms are capable of cutting up a consistent view of reality, fragmenting us and allowing for violent conspiracies to fester. We rely on these technological systems of algorithms, filter bubbles and the likes, as a logic and how we situate ourselves in the world. Algorithms, computations and other technological systems are the opaque operations of populism as a political style.

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Figures

1.1

TABLE 5.1: Populism as Political Style versus Media Logic

Populism as Political Style	Corresponding Aspects of Media Logic
<i>Appeal to 'the people'</i> Dichotomy between 'the people' and 'the elite' Antielite/establishment/system Denial of expert knowledge	Sports based-dramatisation and polarisation Prioritisation of conflict Antiestablishment attitude
<i>'Bad manners'</i> Disregard for 'appropriateness' Political incorrectness 'Colourfulness'	Personalisation Stereotypisation Emotionalisation
<i>Crisis, breakdown, threat</i> Demand to act decisively Distaste for complexity Instrumentalisation of politics	Intensification Simplification Focus on scandals