

# Populist Discourse in the Polish Media

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## **7. Theoretical Background of Studies on Populist Political Communication in Social Media**

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### **Introduction**

For several decades, academic reflection on populism has constituted a significant portion of the research discourse in the fields of political science and media studies in the European context (Aalberg et al., 2017). Additionally, intensified extremist left/right-wing sentiments in Europe, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States have encouraged attempts to seek information about the sources, reasons, and outcomes of a new wave of populism. It is therefore worthwhile to refer to publications from recent decades and to review cases of intensified populism from the past, as well as the communication strategies employed by the populists themselves. These publications provide a point of reference for the dearth of papers, analyses, and case studies in the field of political communication. In the present ‘age of populism’ (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017), many of these papers provide an indispensable foundation for further studies into ‘what populism is today’ and how it is specific to our times. This may bring us slightly closer to answering a more fundamental question: why has populism recently spread to such a spectacular degree and what is the role of social media in this process?

Given the momentous transformations in politics, the media, technology, and – by this token – our everyday lives in recent decades, it is time to both expand on present studies and to review some theoretical concepts. The findings of various research projects should be adapted to national conditions in order to explain the local character of populist entities, strategies, and their outcomes. From the point of view of academic reliability, it is also important to test old concepts in new conditions created by changes in the media and how they are used by politicians and citizens – the increasing role of the latter in the process of political communication is now widely recognized.

### **Social Media and Political Communication**

Social media<sup>1</sup> and their specific nature have aroused considerable social and political expectations, seen as facilitators of pro-democratic, civil, and deliberative activities.

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<sup>1</sup> On account of the lack of consent as to the definitions and terminological relations between fundamental research categories, this chapter employs two terms. The broader one, social media,

They are frequently perceived as essential for the democratizing function of the Internet. This function first manifested itself in the 1990s, when the commercialized Internet was expected to ease the crisis of democracy resulting from the tabloidizing influence of traditional media (Wilhelm, 1999). It manifested itself again in the early 21st century, when the new ‘social opening’ and enthusiasm of the new millennium aroused hopes for greater civil independence (Baciak, 2006), and after 2011, when the Arab Spring and the protests against ACTA demonstrated the mobilizing power of the Web (Lakomy, 2013).

There is no doubt that over the last decade social media have become prominent in the landscape of modern mass communication media. They have clearly made their mark on the interpersonal and mass communication and have aroused the hopes of media researchers that the principles of ‘rational discourse’, understood in terms of its model as developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, could actually be implemented (Szachaj, 1990).

Several years ago, the Internet seemed to be evolving into a tool to control the authorities and expand democratic discussion. For instance, in 2013 E. Schmidt and J. Cohen, heads of Google, expressed this opinion when they wrote that “citizen participation will reach an all-time high as anyone with a mobile handset and access to the Internet will be able to play a part in promoting accountability and transparency (...). People who perpetuate myths about religion, culture, ethnicity or anything else will struggle to keep their narratives afloat amid a sea of newly informed listeners” (2013, p. 35).

Given recent experiences, it appears that such forecasts never came true and quite the opposite scenario was actually implemented. The lack of control over the content posted on the Web, based on ‘post-truth’, repeated data leaks, hacking attacks, illicit use of information about online consumers, the Cambridge Analytica data scandal, and other negative phenomena, show the Web as in ideal field for populists. The very foundations of the modern Internet seem to be conducive to dysfunctional styles of politics.<sup>2</sup>

Not only have the hopes for the Internet failed to come true, but the Web might have further exacerbated the same problems of political communication that emerged at the advent of mass media (Orliński, 2013). Such phenomena as hate speech, post-truth, tabloidization, and trivialization of politics have become serious problems that are addressed in essays about the condition of democracy and the abandonment of its liberal model. For over a decade, the Web has become increasingly ‘socialized’, which has further exacerbated these issues and transformed the relations between politicians and citizens, providing the former with a new weapon with which to struggle for their platforms. This struggle is at the core of today’s political marketing which has increasingly become the essence of modern politics *per se*.

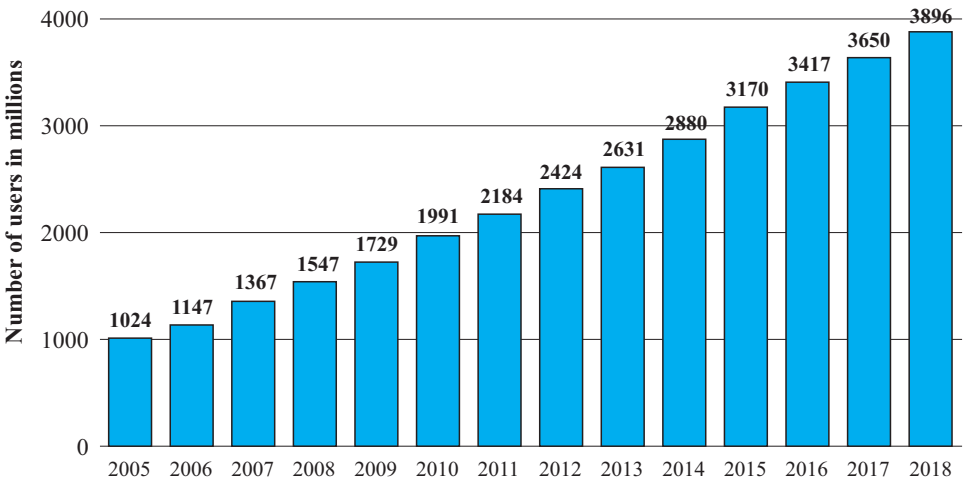
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encompasses forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The more precise term, which is the object of studies as the source of materials to be analyzed, is social networking services (SNS) that translate the concept of social media into specific communication solutions, websites, social portals and other.

<sup>2</sup> Similar observations can be found in media studies in Poland. These dysfunctional styles intensified particularly during the 2015 election campaign, when both the victory of the conservative Law and Justice party in the parliamentary and presidential elections, and the growing support for candidates with extremist and anti-systemic views (e.g. Partia KORWIN, Kukiz’15) were linked to brutal online campaigns (Nowina Konopka, 2015).

Critical considerations on the mutual influence of the Internet and politics should always include the important question of their populist components (Groschek and Engelbert, 2012). The first attempts at research on this relationship date back to the late 1990s (Bimber, 1998), in the times when the Web was essentially static, years before the 2.0 technology made it a social tool. The access to the Internet has also dramatically increased. It has almost quadrupled worldwide since the early 2000s (see Graph 7.1). An attempt to describe the changes in the Internet itself would probably take several volumes.

**Graph 7.1. Number of internet users worldwide from 2005 to 2018 (in millions)**



Source: Statista, 2019.

### **Populism and Social Media**

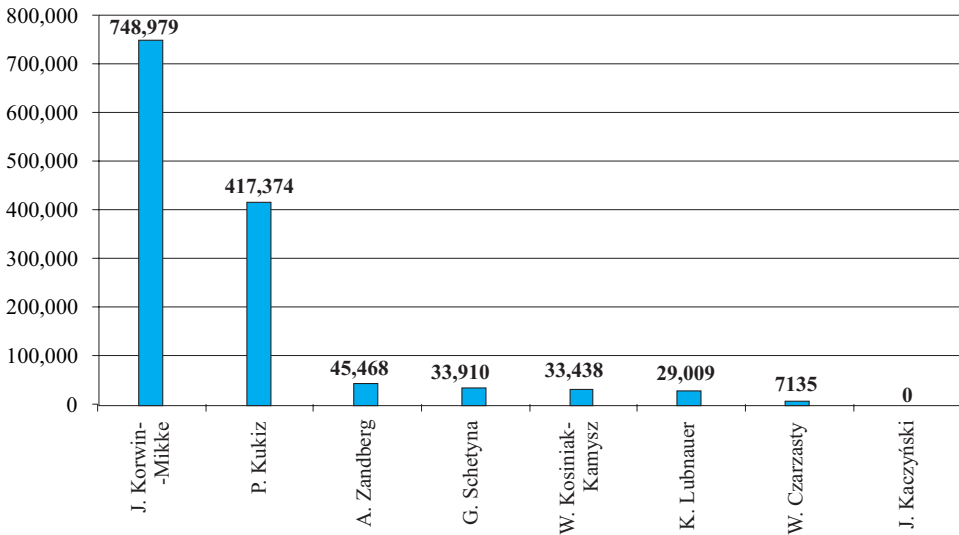
The relation between social media and populism has been addressed by an increasing number of papers in recent years (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, and Büchel, 2016; Dittrich, 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; KhosraviNik, 2017; Postill, 2018; Schumann et al., 2019 and others). Many of them focus on a single country cases like Switzerland (Ernst, Engesser, and Esser, 2017), Italy (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018; Bobba and Roncarlo, 2018) or Portugal (Salgado, 2018). They feature qualitative and quantitative research that tests theoretical concepts of the development of rhetorical strategies on the basis of source materials obtained from social networks. Such research generally concerns the following topics: the ways politicians use social media, how social media are used during electoral campaigns, social media as tools of permanent campaigns, social media as tools for supplying political content and building a dialogue with voters and as a source for influencing electoral decisions and informing citizens about politics, and the opportunities social media offer for expressing opinions, building political involvement and participation, creating political agendas, and influencing journalists (Ernst, 2016).

It appears that populism and communication via social media have many common characteristics. On account of the lack of proper analyses, however, this statement re-

mains only an academic intuition. These two phenomena are mutually related and they can support and complement one another for the benefit of politicians and the media as such. It can be presupposed that the nature of communication conducted via social networks supports the style and strategies of populists who are keen to use tools such as Facebook and Twitter.

Such an intuitive presupposition is confirmed by statistical data, showing the dominating social media popularity of party leaders who have become the symbols of populist narratives, for example among Polish politicians: J. Korwin-Mikke (≈749k Fb followers) and P. Kukiz (≈417k) compared to A. Zandberg (≈45k), G. Schetyna (≈34k), W. Kosiniak-Kamysz (≈33k), K. Lubnauer (≈29k), W. Czarzasty (≈7k), J. Kaczyński (0k) – see Graph 7.2.

**Graph 7.2. A number of followers of Polish political leaders’ profiles on Facebook (2019)**



Source: Facebook.

Similar conclusions can also be found in literature featuring theoretical foundations for empirical studies (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017). But there is still insufficient number of in-depth studies on the relationship between SNS (Social Networking Services) and populism as a political ideology/style of communication (see Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018; Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018; de Vreese et al., 2018; Ernst et al., 2019). It is also worthwhile to verify the hypothesis that social networks provide a useful functionality to politicians and citizens who implement populism in their communication processes.

**Populism as an Ideology and a Style of Political Communication**

A significant portion of the extensive body of literature on populism is devoted to creating definitions and terminology. The discussion that emerges is interesting; however, it would be a mistake to name it an academic dispute. It is more of a collection

of paradigms that make up what C. Popper called a ‘searchlight’ that sheds light on the object of cognition from different angles (Popper, 2002). This situation may be used to accentuate various features of populism, to show the different points of view, to demonstrate the cultural specificity of its perception in different parts of the world, and to mutually complement the theories, thereby enhancing them or changing the direction of research. As concerns populism, its definitions and paradigms appear to be exceptionally extensive – approaching it as a left-wing or right-wing ideology,<sup>3</sup> a style of political communication, a third road between capitalism and socialism, or the result of the discrepancy between the idea and practice of democracy (Wysocka, 2010).

Media logic, definitional similarity of political marketing and politics as such, and the critical approach to describing the media-politics relation, are subjects often taken up by philosopher E. Laclau, who treats populism as a manner of articulation rather than an ontic category which should be defined by its form rather than its content (Beasley-Murray, 2005). This approach focuses on the use of rhetorical mechanisms and styles of speech that are defined as populist in various studies. They are usually used quite consciously, as shown by research on propaganda, rhetoric, and political marketing, demonstrating that politicians and media representatives perform communication activities purposefully in order to evaluate political facts, create an agenda, or exert influence over citizens. Politicians take courses and training sessions in political communication, there are guidebooks about it, not to mention the fact that media sections of political parties provide their MPs with instructions on how to talk about certain issues – ready-made patterns for public statements on a daily basis. In undertaking communication attempts aimed at fulfilling specific goals, political actors demonstrate intuition combined with willfulness, even if also sometime tinged with spontaneity. Although politicians may not be willing to call themselves populists, they are aware that they apply strategies that could easily be named populist.

P.A. Taguieff (2001) claims that populism is a style that can be applied in different frameworks, a method of manipulation, and a manner of expressing particular interests (2001). J. Jagers and S. Walgrave (2007, p. 3) state that this style has three foundations: (1) it always refers to ‘the people’ and justifies its actions by appealing to and identifying with ‘the people’; (2) it is rooted in an anti-elite sentiment; and (3) it considers the people as a monolithic group without internal differences except for some very specific categories who are subject to an exclusion strategy.

In this manner, the authors take a stance in the conceptual dispute of whether to understand populism as a style or a specific ideology. This coincides with the understanding of populism as an element in a political game aimed at attaining electoral goals. Assuming that such a style is purposefully applied in order to imbue statements with certain characteristic properties that may become a source of social influence, populism as such

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting here that this paper focuses mainly on the phenomena and processes characteristic of right-wing populism in social media. This choice results from the dominant character of populism in the narration of right-wing politicians who use social media as the main channels of mass communication and their recent electoral successes (e.g. Donald Trump in the USA, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage in the UK, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, Paweł Kukiz in Poland and others – more about the latter in chapter 8). The manifestations of left-wing populism present in social media are of a different nature, relying to a greater extent on the activities of collective entities, using them as a tool for organization and mobilization.

is a compound of rhetorical and strategic techniques and measures, and can therefore be called a significant element of political marketing. The populist style is manifested by means of different rhetorical and conceptual aspects externalized in the process of political communication. Social media emerge here as a natural extension and complement of the formerly researched methods of establishing relations between political actors and citizens (voters), such as political manifestos, statements for the media, participation in televised debates and programs, etc. A political post on Facebook or Twitter may be seen as a new ‘genre’ containing messages employing a populist style.

This style is characterized by its application of exceptionally diverse ‘communication techniques’ (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) that make use of rhetorical constructions and specific content. Some of these are mutually exclusive and marked by different ideological origins (agrarian, right-wing, left-wing and so on), making it impossible to develop a list that would be universal for populism and to then refer to this list in studies on political communication, trying to identify them, for instance, in posts on social media. Another crucial issue that influences the manifestation of a populist style are its cultural determinants. The three foundations proposed by J. Jagers and S. Walgrave (2007) should be deemed most universal, particularly in reference to politicians as senders of messages and to users of social media (for instance, online opinion leaders). Nevertheless, these communication activities also encompass the emotionalization of messages (Demertzis, 2006), hyperbole, and appealing to the extremes (e.g. economic liberalization and welfare state), as well as scandalization (Mudde, 2004) and at the level of content: referring to one’s private experience (being ‘one of the people’), the category of one’s ‘native land’ (Taggart, 2000), anti-party sentiment (Scarrow and Poguntke, 1996), the negation of political correctness (Greven, 2016), the glorification of strong leadership (di Piramo, 2009), building the image of a strong or eccentric personality of the sender of messages (Taggart, 2000), and combining political matters with pop-cultural issues (Mazzoleni, 2008).

### **Populism and Social Media – Marriage of Convenience?**

When defining populism in terms of the stylistic or thin-ideological component, one can assume that populist communication techniques are strategies that befit the paradigm of activities oriented at consumers (voters) who are “the core of marketing activities” (Żuchowski and Brelik, 2007, p. 207). The selection of a communication strategy also determines the appropriate selection of methods for reaching the recipients. Thus, persuasive messages broadcasted by politicians on breakfast television, in specialist press, and on Twitter will differ vastly from one another. Given the present state of development of the Internet, it can be assumed that social media – with their specific functionalities that differentiate them from other media – will offer the best adapted channel for populist messages. It even appears that, due to their non-elite character and significantly lower access barriers for citizens than in traditional media, the Web is becoming a “natural environment” for those who employ a populist communication style (Groschek and Engelbert, 2012).

The thesis may be risked that choosing the Web as a distribution channel for populist content is not accidental at all; it tends to be a purposeful and highly pragmatic

choice. The rationality of populist communication via social networks is confirmed by the first studies in this field. It appears that, on account of the high degree of fragmentation of social media content, the populist elements become simplified, making it easier for social media users to interpret and complement them with their own ideological approaches. This significantly enhances the dissemination of populist messages (Engesser et al., 2016).

Apart from studies and general considerations on the functionalities of the Web that invite the use of specific communication styles, it should also be stressed that there are numerous tangential points between populism and social media, listed in Table 7.1 below.

**Table 7.1. Populist communication activities and the corresponding features of social media<sup>4</sup>**

<b>Populist ideological factor/style</b>	<b>Features of social media supporting populist strategies</b>
Referring to the category of ‘the people’	Social media as ‘the media of society’, of ‘the people’
Anti-elitism	Generating content independent of mainstream media, which are part of the elite
Exclusion of ‘the others’	The ease of overcoming political correctness in the social network, where the sense of anonymity encourages hate speech directed at minorities, refugees, etc.
<i>Stammtisch</i> (Germ., society gathered around a table)	Textual and visual simplification of messages and their emotional nature
“Heartland”	Online community as a ‘homogenous and virtuous society’
Anti-party sentiment	Potential for general and open criticism
Negation of political correctness	Limited gatekeeper functions
Cognitive emancipation	Multiple sources facilitate access to more extended/complex knowledge of politics
The principle of “more leadership, less participation”	Websites are constructed so as to facilitate the personalization of politics and emergence of a star-like online system
The strategy of extraordinary personality	Image creation potential
Close relations with pop-culture	Pop-culture’s interference in the language of the internet

**Source:** Own elaboration.

Social media appear not to have fulfilled the hopes and expectations placed in them, and their role in the development of democracy in the age of another wave of populism is highly dubious. At the same time, everything seems to be pointing to the idea that social media are “genetically adapted” to support politicians who employ populist communication styles (Barlett, 2014) and their functionalities create a certain “climate” bolstering media users in expressing their opinions (Mazzoleni, 2014).

It is also beyond doubt that social media have made people more eager to express their views online and to do so more often. It is a paradox that those media which are called social are, in fact, exceptionally individualistic (Gerodimos, 2012). Commenting on recent events, media users join the political discussion and support or deplore

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this comparison may provide a starting point to not only discuss the validity of the above collation, but also to search for other, similar, and complementary proposals. When describing populist narrative styles and the operation of the modern electronic media, we are facing a highly dynamic object of research where it is not feasible to design a universal theory and the phenomenon may only be captured at a specific moment in time and political circumstance.



politicians' postulates. In doing so, they make use of a wide range of means of expression, including comments, podcasts, pictures, and memes, the most popular of which remain text-based genres. In this respect, media users do not differ much from political actors who employ social media tools in their attempts to stimulate civil activities that will help them achieve their political goals (electoral support, participation in political events, promulgation of specific ideological values, etc.).

It is worth remembering that this process is based on the new (network) media logic which differs from the theories familiar to us in terms of how content is produced (by media users), how news are distributed (via the Web), and how media users apply information (Klinger and Svensson, 2015). Others emphasize the lack of traditionally understood logic (Engesser et al., 2016). Assuming, however, that this logic exists, it is likely that one of its important elements consists of politicians encouraging media users to be active (creating a so-called "buzz" around a given issue and helping attain their goals). Recent years have brought a certain qualitative change, making it possible to collect and analyze such activities. Thanks to the new functions of social media, each user may create a personal channel aiming to achieve certain goals, similar to politicians. It is worth stressing the difference in the ways in which political actors and citizens employ a populist style. It seems that, in the former case, the primary goals are clearly defined (winning support which is to translate into electoral results), whereas in the latter case, we are dealing with a broader range of intentions and objectives. These may include a need for recognition, a search for popularity, expression of political opinions and ambitions, and so on. However, it is impossible to rule out a scenario in which citizens' online activities (creating content, sharing, commenting, etc.), working for the benefit of politicians, are dictated by their individual convictions. These activities may involve voluntary or paid work for electoral committees as well as other informal activities supporting a political entity. It cannot then be excluded that the objectives of political actors and social media users are convergent and complementary, more so as online communities are typically based on shared ideas and interests (Ernst, 2016).

The aforementioned relationship is the essence of marketing interdependence between political actors and other web users inclined to be active in supporting politicians by sharing content or posting their own materials. Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and YouTube are natural environments for political mobilization (Gerbaudo, 2014). This mobilization occurs at several levels, in line with the principle of transmission of content from political entities to media users via opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Although its scale is dramatically different, a similar process takes place in the communication environment of social media, with information spreading geometrically across the Web, wherein opinion leaders form the nodes. It is the primary goal of online political marketing to trigger the activity of such nodes. In studies on political communication, this activity tends to be an underestimated stage of political mobilization (spreading from one social media user to another) that may employ a populist narrative style similar to the communication strategy adopted by politicians. The scheme of this process may be seen in Graph 7.3.

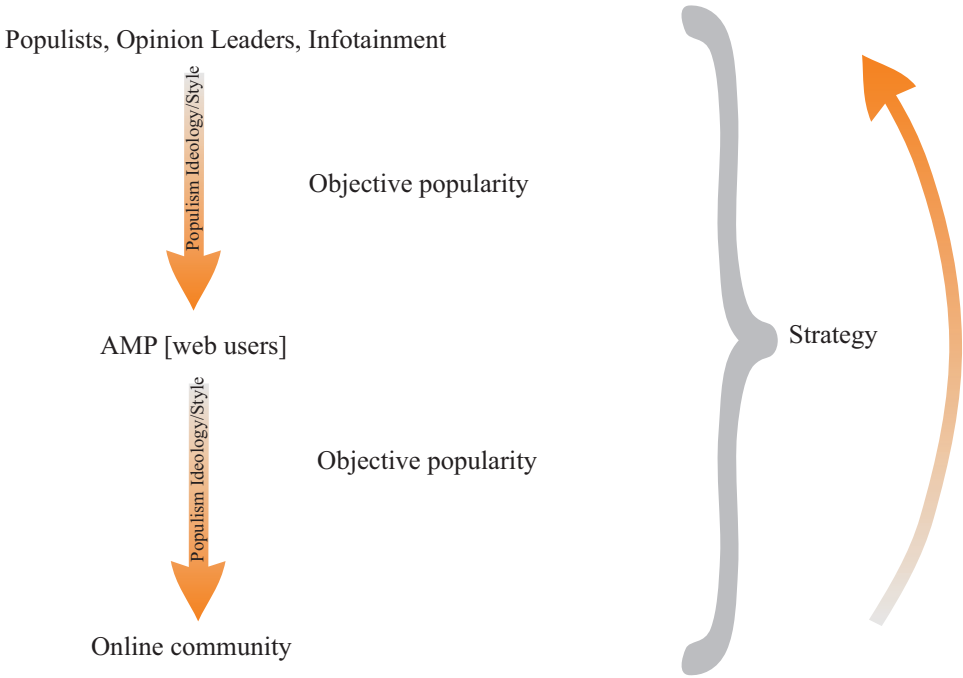
The adoption of a populist operating strategy will call for preferred rhetorical tools and styles conforming to the media logic, in order to arouse the interest of other social media users by means of emotionalization, shocking language, and other tools of populist narration. This leads to a question: can populist styles be employed not only

by politicians, but also by citizens? Before the age of the Internet this question was impossible to answer, but in the age of Facebook we are presented with an opportunity to analyze textual units created by social media users.

Commenting and content sharing form a part of the system of dependencies that is beneficial for all three parties of political communication:

(1) Political actors promulgate preferred content via social media users who create/transfer populist messages. Importantly, politicians setting up accounts on social media and posting messages through them is only the first stage of online marketing activities. The main objective of increasing the popularity of a post, and thereby of the political actor who authored it, is achieved only after the post is shared, recommended, and commented on (generating unique content) by other users (Klinger and Svensson, 2015).

**Graph 7.3. Using populist ideology/style as political strategy**



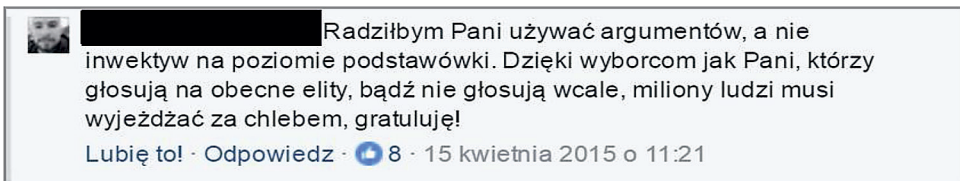
Source: Own elaboration.

(2) Social media users fulfill the goals of individual or collective political entities, achieving their own goals (usually broader goals that are analogous to those of political actors) at the same time.

(3) Following traditional media logic, media institutions (such as SNS) can take advantage of social media’s extensive content and their growing popularity, resulting from the emotional and populist rhetoric employed by their users, and achieve their own business goals, such as selling contextual advertising. Thus the distribution of content that triggers the activities of others (“buzz”) by both citizens and politicians is economically advantageous for such media.

This approach is somewhat atypical of studies on populism and political communication because it recognizes that citizens/media users are fully-fledged senders in the classical communication model. Earlier studies concentrated on media users primarily as recipients of populist messages. Their reactions and responses to ‘external’ populism were examined. At present, when a vast majority of messages are created by citizens rather than by politicians, researching the communication activities of this dominant group seems justified. Additionally, the online communication activities of members of the public have begun to overtake their offline activities in many fields (Barlett et al., 2013), which provides yet another reason for such studies. Figures 7.1 through 7.3 show further examples of the employment of a populist ideology/style by Polish SNS users.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 7.1. Anti-elitism in the post of a discussion participant on Facebook**



[I would advise you to use arguments instead of playground taunts. Thanks to such voters as you, who vote for the present elites or do not vote at all, millions of people have to earn their living abroad, congratulations!].

Source: Facebook, April 15, 2015.

**Figure 7.2. Referring to the category of ‘the people’ in the post of a discussion participant on Facebook**



[I am glad that we, Poles, have such a president, for now – in Słupsk, later on maybe in the country].

Source: Facebook, 10 April 2015.

**Figure 7.3. Exclusion from the community (of the politicians of Law and Justice) in the post of a discussion participant on Facebook**



[Or maybe they are not true-born Poles but agents? Because, that’s my impression!].

Source: Facebook, April 1, 2015.

Statistics of the number of shares, retweets, emotional markings (such as Facebook’s ‘likes’), and subscriptions by other users may indicate that such posts as those quoted

<sup>5</sup> In chapter 8 we will present an application of semi-automated content analysis (quantitative method) to show how social media can be used in populist political communication (using the example of a Polish populist political actor Paweł Kukiz in 2015).

above and others similar fulfill their role. On the one hand, it is about individual SNS users achieving their particular goals – after all they do not write for themselves but in order for every message to gain the greatest popularity possible. On the other hand, the web structure of media users in this case, in contrast to traditional media, provides a kind of ‘conveyor belt’ for messages created by individual (politicians) or collective (political parties, organizations) political entities. This relation may be named symbiotic, while also being central to web media logic. The conscious selection of a populist style, or elements of populist ideology, may constitute an important step in the process of political communication. It can even be said that, owing to this mechanism, “populism is becoming populist” both in content and form, focusing on increasing the popularity of the message and inducing other users to adopt and promulgate it.

## Conclusions

Electoral successes of populists in recent years around the world are a clear indication that the Internet has failed to stand up to the hopes that it could improve politics. On the contrary, it has become an element in numerous negative developments, including its becoming another channel offering support to populists. Everything seems to indicate that the evolution of the Web into a social, interactive medium that can only be legally controlled to a limited degree, makes it an excellent communication channel adapted to spreading populist content. Politicians who choose a given strategy to communicate with voters believe it is most rational and effective to use the Internet as the best tool to increase their popularity. Studies in this field confirm that this is actually what politicians commonly do.

The phenomena that have been examined thus far are only some of many ways in which content circulates on the Web (political actor – citizens). A considerable majority of communication acts take place between citizens. It is impossible to design a comprehensive picture of what we call populist communication if these are not identified and examined as well. It is also impossible to understand the operational mechanisms of contemporary political marketing techniques. It seems that today, more than ever, the ability to mobilize citizens to be active in promoting electoral candidates is at the root of a successful campaign, especially on social media.

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