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Populism maintains a specific relationship with discourses of (un)truthfulness. Yet, although a growing body of research has explored the nature and effects of populist rhetoric, populism's cultivation of reality and dishonesty has been under-theorized. In this paper, we explore three relationships between populism and (un)truthfulness: (1) the cultivation of a conspiracy theory in populist discourse; (2) populism's denial or discrediting of expert knowledge or empirical information, and the legitimacy of journalism and mainstream sources of knowledge and (3) populist constructions of alternative truths that resonate with common sense and the experiences of the ordinary people. We further explore the effects of discourses of (un)truthfulness, and ways to combat the potentially negative political consequences of populist disinformation. Together, by exploring the discursive relationship between populism and (un)truthfulness, this paper aims to provide more detailed insights in how populist versions of reality and dishonesty that attack mainstream knowledge and interpretations may impact society and political decision-making. Keywords: populism, disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories.

Populism has been regarded as a key threat to democracies around the globe (Aalberg et al. 2017; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Canovan 1999). Among other things, populism is in conflict with the principles of deliberative democracy as it emphasizes a Manichean outlook that potentially contradicts the principles of reason, diversity, and a rational exchange of arguments between citizens with differing viewpoints (Waisbord 2018). Populist ideas may also foster polarized divides in society by activating or augmenting the perceived divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite and/or dangerous others (Müller et al. 2018). One crucial implication for deliberative democracy, central to this paper's argument, is that populism's anti-elitist rhetoric delegitimizes established truths and factual knowledge (Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019; Tambini 2017; Waisbord 2018), which undermines the principles of a well-functioning deliberative democracy. More specifically, political disagreement should derive from agreement on the underlying factual reality (Arendt 1969), which is under threat when empirical facts are stripped from their epistemic status.

Although some scholars have argued that populist ideas challenge established knowledge and emphasize distrust in the elite by introducing conspiracy theories and alternative facts

(Bergmann 2019; Silva et al., 2017; Waisbord 2018), we know markedly little about how truthfulness and honesty are constructed in populist discourse. And, more explicitly, how populism as an antagonistic discourse (Jagers & Walgrave 2007) opposes its own alternative realities to established facts and expert knowledge. It is relevant to understand populism's relationship to the truth as the increasing success of populist parties throughout the globe (Aalberg et al. 2017) implies that populist conspiracies and alternative realities find increasing support among citizens. The populist delegitimization of established knowledge, expert sources, and empirical facts may resonate with increasing levels of doubt and distrust in established facts among the electorate.

Even though opinions provide the foundation for democratic decision-making, these opinions and political disagreement should have a factual basis (Arendt 1969). If populist constructions of reality undermine the foundations of shared truths on which political disagreement is based, increasing relativism toward facts and expert opinion can be cultivated (Van Aelst et al. 2017), which presupposes that lies are justified as they reflect opinions. In order to understand the implications of reality discourses for deliberative democracy, it is thus crucial to arrive at a fine-grained understanding of how reality is referred to in populism and framed in opposition to alternative realities that oppose established facts and expert sources.

Populism, which can be defined as the cultivation of an antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite (Mudde 2004), relates to discourses of (un)truthfulness in three important ways: (1) it oftentimes refers to a conspiracy theory or a hidden truth; (2) it denies expert knowledge, the veracity of empirical information, and the legitimacy of journalism and mainstream sources of knowledge; and, (3) it introduces alternative truths that resonate with common sense and the experiences of the ordinary people. It thus strongly resonates with the politics of disinformation. By attacking established facts and empirical evidence, factual reality becomes subject to manipulation and fabrication (Monot 2017). This attack on established knowledge is central to populist discourse: Populists throughout the globe label elite knowledge and expert opinion as fake news (e.g. Egelhofer & Lecheler 2019), and present citizens with alternative realities that circumvent established truths.

These three factors are important to consider in today's post factual information era (Van Aelst et al. 2017; Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Hence, the current media landscape is characterized by high choice, fragmentation, and algorithmic-driven selective exposure options. As a key consequence of these technological advances, the information people receive is largely driven by confirmation bias since people have a tendency to select and uncritically accept information that reassures their existing views, whereas they avoid or dispute information that is not in line with their ideologies, identities or issue attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2017; Stroud 2008). These processes are not necessarily rational or conscious. People have a tendency to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) when selecting and processing information. Hence, incongruent information results in discomfort and is consequentially more likely to be avoided or counter-argued. Congruent information, in contrast, reassures a positive and consistent self-image and is more likely to be approached and uncritically accepted (Taber & Lodge 2006).

This information setting, and such biased processing by citizens, may facilitate the spread of populist ideas across society. In an era where the veracity of facts is less influential than

information that reassures echo chambers or existing ideological identities, and in a digital information setting where non-professional communicators can express themselves without the interference of journalistic gatekeepers that verify statements or sources, fact-free and populist sentiments may not only reach the audience in increasingly more pervasive ways, but they may also have a strong impact on people's beliefs and political decisions when they reassure the hopes and fears they are experiencing.

In this paper, the relationship between populism and discourses of truth and dishonesty is explored theoretically. In addition, based on the conceptual connection between populism and discourses of (un)truthfulness, theses on the political consequences of spreading populist realities and accusations of dishonesty are advanced. By conceptualizing the connection between populism and the truth, this paper does not only contribute to a better understanding of the electoral success of populist parties around the globe, it also postulates practical recommendations on how different actors responsible for the supply of political information should deal with the challenge of populism. Can we actually think about practical solutions to mitigate the potential negative consequences of the rise of fact-free sentiments in a time where the truth has increasingly become more subjective? Can we re-connect truth and politics (Arendt 1969; Manot 2017) by helping citizens to distinguish facts from alternative realities and conspiracies introduced by populists? Here, it should be stressed that political decision-making is not necessarily rational. Even though people may vote for populist parties because they feel that these parties are best able to represent their needs (Aalberg et al. 2017), they may not always be capable or motivated to find the truth. Emotions or prior attitudes and behaviors may motivate political action, and populist communication may intentionally seek to respond to these emotions and heuristics. The key contribution of this manuscript is to explore the role of reality and alternative facts in populist discourse, which may contribute to our understanding of increasing relativism toward facts in a post-truth world (Van Aelst et al. 2017) connected to the rise of the populist zeitgeist (Mudde 2004).

Defining Populism as a Discursive Frame in Politics, Media and Society

Populism has been defined in different ways. The most cited conceptualization considers populism to be a 'thin' ideology that revolves around the expression of a Manichean divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites (Mudde 2004). This ideology is thin or incomplete as it does not entail a full or all-encompassing frame of reference to comprehend socio-political reality (Mudde 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). It simplifies political issues by filtering them through a perceptual screen such that society is divided by the ordinary people versus the corrupt elite that block the interests of the homogenous people. The thin core of populism may be supplemented by different host ideologies, such as nativism (right-wing populism) or economic inclusionism (left-wing populism).

We regard populism as a set of ideas that can be communicated, experienced and primed, on both the supply-side (i.e., political parties) and the demand-side (i.e., voters). Taking the premises of the ideational approach as a point of departure, populism can be approached from a communication or stylistic perspective (Aalberg et al. 2017; Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016). More specifically, the populist ideas of politicians become tangible through the language they communicate, and they need a medium to express their realities to the voters they claim to

represent. On the demand-side, citizens gain familiarity with the issue positions of populists, and populist ideas of other actors, through the information channels they select and attend to. Hence, to comprehend the challenges of populism and the political consequences of populist rhetoric, we have to focus on populist *communication* as a starting point (Aalberg et al. 2017).

Indeed, a growing body of research indicates how populist ideas are expressed by politicians via the media, and social media in particular (Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2018). Social media channels allow communicators to circumvent mainstream elites and media channels that populists accuse of spreading lies. By circumventing journalistic principles, routines and roles that involve the verification of claims and sources, populists can use social media to their advantage and directly communicate to the ordinary people they claim to represent, whilst relying on a fact-free and hostile discourse that cultivates the boundary between the ordinary people and the culpable others. Hence, as populist voters are known to doubt the mainstream media and even regard the information spread by the media elite as Fake News (Fawzi 2018; Schulz et al. 2018), the direct communication of fact-free populist sentiments via social media channels is an effective channel to reach the populist electorate.

Populism and the Hidden Truth: Conspiracy Theories and Populist Rhetoric

Populists do not only attribute blame to the allegedly corrupt elite for failing to represent the ordinary people's will, they also frequently point to a hidden reality, or conspiracy of different actors that are said to cooperate to deprive the people (Bergmann 2019; Silva et al., 2017;) This is most salient in the discourse of right-wing populist actors who, for example, claim that the mainstream elite and immigrants are collaborating to 'replace' the native population. On the left-wing, such conspiracies mainly entail an alleged collaboration between the extreme rich (i.e., banks, the wealthy 1%) and the political elite that contributes to a widening gap between the extreme rich and the extreme poor (Aalberg et al. 2017). Indeed, extant literature has defined an important affinity between populist discourse and conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2018; Silva et al. 2017). Following the rise of populist movements in the 21st century, it can be observed that populist conspiracies have been connected to many different issues. Climate change policies are, for example, frequently referred to as a conspiracy between elite actors and the mainstream media that hide reality from the ordinary people in order to promote their own agenda. Right-wing populists oftentimes introduce an alternative reality (i.e. climate change is a hoax and a waste of resources) and blame the media and opposed political actors for lying to the people.

But what are the key components of a populist conspiracy, and how is this connected to the discursive relationship between populism and the truth?

Just as populism cultivates an antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite, a conspiracy theory is Manichean in nature (Barkun 2003; Oliver & Wood 2014). More specifically, conspiracy theories emphasize that an 'evil' elitist outsider is posing a threat to the in-group (Barkun 2003). Hence, in conspiracy theories, the powerful elites are blamed for hiding the truth from the people; they cover up reality in order to promote their own evil schemes. Conspiracy theories further highlight a severe sense of distrust and skepticism toward the established truth, and knowledge that is created by the established order (Barkun 2003). This element of conspiracy theories can be used to conceptually link populism to discourses of (un)truthfulness. More specifically, populist rhetoric attacks the established order, including the

empirical evidence and experts that are regarded as part of the elitist enemy. These mainstream sources of verified information and realities are regarded as a tool of the powerful in conspiracy theories (Fenster 2008). Hence, the powerful elite are said to *deliberately* spread falsehoods and 'fake' realities to maintain their own power positions, to silence the oppressed voices, and to prevent mobilization of the people.

This worldview is shared by many populists. Hence, the elites are oftentimes accused of silencing the voice of the ordinary people, and for deliberately lying to the silenced majority in order to promote their own political agenda (Hameleers 2018). Populism therefore does not only involve the expression of a binary divide between 'us and them,' it also aims to reveal a perseverant struggle between the truth and honesty of the people and the fake reality forced upon the electorate by the elites. Populism's understanding of these elites does not limit itself to the established political order, or to politicians in government. Indeed, the mainstream media, referred to as the Fake News media by many radical right-wing populists throughout the globe, corporations, or the corrupt monitory institutions that steal from the honest people (an idea that is also salient in left-wing populism), and supranational institutions, such as the unresponsive European Union, can all be scapegoated in populist rhetoric. European right-wing populists, for example, frequently blame the European Union and national governments for deceiving the ordinary people: Their global climate change and refugee policies are referred to as conspiracies intended to profit from the people's welfare whilst depriving them of their identities.

In many cases, populists explicitly point to a conspiracy between different enemies of the people (Bergmann 2019; Silva et al., 2017). For example, the political elites are accused of secretly collaborating with banks or corporations to fill their own pockets, whilst depriving the ordinary people. This 'chameleonic' nature of populist out-group constructions also explains why populist actors can remain populist when in power. Although they have become part of the political establishment themselves, they can distract their followers and continue to express their populist issue positions by shifting blame to other elites. Perhaps the most influential example of this discursive shift can be observed in the case of Donald Trump in the US. Prior to the elections, the Democrats and the political elites in government were his main target of blame shifting. Yet, after becoming president of the US, different out-groups were invented, among which the Fake News Media is the most salient (Hameleers 2018). Against this backdrop, cultivating a conspiracy that involves different elitist groups that are accused of posing a threat to the ordinary people becomes a very effective and adjustable communication tactic for populists that gain political power.

Populist Disinformation: How Populism Delegitimizes Established Truths

The centrality of attributing blame to the mainstream media and established truths in populist discourse links up to the politics of disinformation. Disinformation can be defined as the intentional spread of untrue or dishonest information (Freelon & Wells 2020; Tandoc Jr. et al. 2018; Wardle 2017) and can be deployed to achieve electoral success or discredit the opposed party, for example. Disinformation has frequently been associated with the politics of the radical right-wing, a party family that may spread dishonest information to augment polarized divides in society and to raise distrust and cynicism in the established political order (Marwick & Lewis 2017). Disinformation can be associated with many different topics and issues, such as the European refugee crisis of 2015, the pandemic coronavirus in 2020, or governmental

communication related to climate change. Central to recent disinformation campaigns is that political actors manipulate or fabricate information in order to make it reflect their political agenda (Freelon & Wells 2020). This may not only be harmful as it can cultivate factual misperceptions, it may also have consequences on less rational perceptions by contributing to affective polarization and to negative out-group emotions (Marwick & Lewis 2017).

Disinformation may involve different practices, such as the decontextualization of information to fit a certain (partisan) issue position, the pairing of different sources of multimodal information to present an alternative storyline, or the complete fabrication and manipulation of reality to communicate a new reality that is out of touch with the objective truth (Wardle 2017). One example of disinformation that relies on different modalities to fabricate often political stories is Deep Fake News, in which deep learning technologies and artificial intelligence are used to make real people say fake things. Such forms of manipulation may be highly persuasive as audiovisual content is typically perceived as credible and authentic.

As argued by Waisbord (2018), we can identify a clear relationship between populism and the politics of disinformation. Disinformation is defined by its political intentions; actors who communicate fact-free or fabricated stories do so in order to change or disrupt the established order (Freelon & Wells 2020; Wardle 2017). Such tactics also underline populism's references to (un)truthfulness. Populist actors attribute blame to the established truths and knowledge to delegitimize the status quo and established facts to create momentum for alternative worldviews that cultivate people centrism (Marwick & Lewis 2017). In doing so, they may contribute to increasing relativism toward established knowledge and expert sources. Such relativism may contribute to factual misperceptions among the electorate, but can also undermine trust in the authorities or official sources of information. As an example, right-wing populist actors across the globe expressed distrust in the WHO and other sources of expert knowledge during the coronavirus outbreak in 2020. For interventions proposed by the government to be successful, it is important that citizens trust factual information about the pandemic.

Populist actors, and radical right-wing populists more specifically, often attack mainstream and established knowledge by casting doubt on the honesty and accuracy of the information spread by the mainstream. Hence, journalists of established media channels are frequently personally attacked for disseminating lies that hurt the ordinary people. By allegedly neglecting reality, and by not relying on accurate information, the legitimacy of the mainstream press is attacked, and voters are told that they should no longer trust the mainstream media that aims to damage the people. The same tactics are applied to empirical evidence and expert knowledge; by pointing to a conspiracy between elite expert and politicians, and/or by delegitimizing evidence as left-wing propaganda, populists emphasize that the sources of information spread by the mainstream are not trustworthy, and should not be taken into account in making political decisions. Such accusations have severe consequences. By delegitimizing established truths, populists cultivate momentum for an alternative reality that resonates with their supporters' perceptual screens. Hence, motivated by the desire to maintain cognitive consonance and confirm prior held beliefs, people may be persuaded by information that resonates with their identities, values and beliefs, irrespective of its veracity (Nyhan & Reifler 2010; Van Aelst et al. 2017). Populist communicators are known to strategically respond to

people's perceived deprivation, anger, and fear. By tailoring their blame attributions in such a way that they respond to these sentiments, populists may be highly effective in communicating issue positions that lack any factual basis. But what are the central features of the 'alternative reality' that populists *do* convey to their followers? What reality do they contrast to the 'fake' reality propagated by the elites?

Populist Reality: Prioritizing the People's Experiences and Feelings over Reason and Facts

Populist rhetoric strongly resonates with people centrism (Aalberg et al. 2017; Jagers & Walgrave 2007). This means that the experiences, interpretations, and analyses of the ordinary people should be the focal point of politics according to the populist rationale. Moreover, ordinary people should be regarded as more authentic and trustworthy sources than the dishonest elites. Indeed, extant research has shown that populist citizens have specific preferences for information in their daily news environment; expert knowledge and analyses should be circumvented, whereas the ordinary people and their interpretations should play a central role in the news (Hameleers et al. 2017). Hence, the 'populist reality' may be regarded as an interpretation of socio-political reality in which the people's experiences and analyses are at the center stage, and expert knowledge and verified empirical evidence are received with doubt and skepticism.

Such a populist reality resonates with the key stylistic features of populist communication. Hence, populists rely more on emotional language, common sense, conflict-coverage, and simplifications than mainstream actors do (Aalberg et al. 2017). More specifically, populists simplify reality into a power struggle between the good people and the evil elite, and rely on an emotional language to cultivate in-group identification and distance to the 'evil' outsiders (Hameleers et al. 2017; Wirz 2018). This populist reality further emphasizes that the ordinary people are part of an honest in-group, who are victimized by external pressures they cannot directly control. Hence, the ordinary people are depicted as pure and virtuous, and are much closer to reality than the elites that reside in their ivory towers.

The reality of the ordinary people prioritizes feelings and common sense over empirical evidence, which is said to be fabricated or invented to support the status quo anyway (Hameleers 2018). Hence, according to the populist rationale, when people are driven by their common sense, many pressing issues will be solved. Or even better, common sense may reveal that some problems do not even exist, but are rather invented or fabricated by the elites to maintain the power discrepancy between the established order and the silenced others (i.e., climate change). This again connects to an alleged populist conspiracy theory where the evil forces of power are accused of creating problems that do not really exist in order to maintain their position in power and silence the ordinary people.

The reliance on the people's knowledge and experiences in populist reality constructions can be extrapolated to the media preferences of populist citizens (Hameleers et al. 2017; Schulz et al. 2018). More specifically, people with stronger populist attitudes are found to prefer news coverage that quotes ordinary citizens instead of experts (Hameleers et al. 2017). These ordinary people, in turn, are trusted most when they describe their own experiences and feelings toward specific events or developments (i.e., refugees entering the native people's country or crime rate developments). Populist cultivation of reality prioritizes episodic and conflict framing to interpret

issues so that anecdotic evidence is trusted more than empirical evidence, which is related to some distant 'fabricated' and elitist construction of truthfulness.

Populist reality constructions may not only be characterized by a specific type of framing, but also by prioritizing some *issues* over others. Hence, some topics may be deemed more important in populist reality, whereas other issues are deemed as not being worth any attention at all. In line with extant literature on populism, there are two issues in general that are typically owned by right-wing populist parties: criminality and immigration (Aalberg et al. 2017; Smith 2010). More specifically, right-wing populist worldviews claim that these two issues should receive most attention in political decision-making, and politicians (i.e., the elite) who are not acknowledging the priority of these issues are accused of looking away, or only serving their own corrupt agenda. To provide an example, radical right-wing populists in Europe stress that Islam is the greatest threat to the Western world. At the same time, such populists emphasize that the mainstream politicians fail to see the importance of this issue; they are even blamed for protecting the 'dangerous' others. Populist realities can thus also be characterized on the agenda level in which the allocation of political and financial resources is depicted as a zero-sum game; the attention and money spent on supposed non-issues, like climate change, is a waste and should be spent to deal with 'real' and more pressing issues facing the ordinary people.

The Political Consequences of Spreading Populist Truths and Disinformation

Exposure to populist realities and disinformation may have far-reaching political consequences. As indicated by recent experimental research (Hameleers et al. 2018; Matthes & Schmuck 2017; Wirz 2018) and survey data paired with content analyses (Müller et al. 2017), exposure to populist worldviews may activate similar interpretation frames among receivers. At the same time, mis- or disinformation has been shown to result in factual misperceptions, or inaccurate attitudes among voters (Thorson, 2016). How should we understand the process by which receivers are affected by populist reality and disinformation constructions, and what are the consequences on a societal level?

Populist rhetoric may affect people on an individual level by activating or priming support for a populist worldview or ideology (Bos et al, 2019). More specifically, populist references to reality emphasize a binary divide between the truthful 'us' and the lying or dishonest 'them,' which may activate similar mental schemata among voters. Hence, as shown in negative stereotyping research, exposure to binary worldviews and negative stereotypes may make negative stereotypes highly salient and accessible in the minds of receivers (Dixon 2008). Thus, when citizens are exposed to populist realities in their daily environment, for example in their news media diets, their interpretation frames may become more aligned with populist realities. When they need to arrive at a political decision (voting, attributing, responsibility) the primed stereotypes may be used as a heuristic cue; the elite is punished and the populist contenders who voice similar negative stereotypes are rewarded at the ballot box. Exposure to populist ideas may thus even correspond to a higher populist vote intention (Hameleers et al. 2017).

The theoretical framework of priming and negative stereotyping presupposes that populist worldviews and (mis)perceptions of reality are not easily created or altered. Hence, populist worldviews and realities may be relatively stable traits that are not easily swayed by

cues in people's information environment. This means that misperceptions may not be created when people are exposed to populist realities or disinformation, but rather that pre-existing incorrect perceptions of a populist reality are reinforced or activated when people are exposed to disinformation and populism (Hameleers et al. 2018).

As a key political consequence, existing divides in society may be strengthened or augmented when populist realities are disseminated through online information channels. More specifically, people who oppose populist interpretations of reality (i.e., those who prefer empirical evidence and expert-centered news coverage) may not only reject populist worldviews, they may also counter-argue populist ideas when exposed to populist realities. This means that their existing disapproval of populist realities and their preference for expert-based coverage and empirical evidence is activated. At the same time, people with pre-existing populist worldviews may selectively expose themselves to more populist news coverage, and these self-selected populist realities may further prime their existing worldviews (Hameleers 2019; Müller et al. 2018). This means that, as a key political consequence of the spread of populist constructions of (un)truthfulness, the societal divide between supporters and opposers of populist worldviews may be further consolidated, and the cleavage between the ordinary people and the elite may be reinforced.

The perseverance of such populist echo chambers can be explained in the framework of defensive motivated reasoning and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957; Taber & Lodge 2006). More specifically, people have a tendency to process information in a way that confirms their prior attitudes; incongruent information is avoided, rejected or counter-argued, whereas congruent information stands a higher stance of selection and acceptance. When people's prior attitudes are in line with populist constructions of (un)truthfulness, they are more likely to accept these populist interpretations of reality. When people are exposed to populist reality constructions that run counter to their views, in contrast, they may reject or avoid these interpretations to prevent cognitive dissonance. Another key political consequence of the spread of populist constructions of reality can be connected to the characterization of the current information setting as post-truth or post factual (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Van Aelst et al. 2017). In other words, in the midst of the perseverance of technological affordances of high-choice and fragmented media, the 'objective truth' has increasingly become a matter of interpretation and opinion, and the evidential value of facts is no longer undebatable. Hence, in line with populist worldviews, expert knowledge and evidence is seen as subjective, and dismissed as a tool of the powerful elite to maintain their power positions, and to manipulate the general public. Citizens that support populist worldviews may thus become increasingly more skeptical of empirical evidence and expert opinion as these sources of knowledge are regarded as part of hidden evil forces that hide the reality the ordinary people are living and witnessing. Facts and verifiable evidence may thus lose power in a society where populist worldviews prevail since these sources of truth conflict with a people-centric and anti-elitist worldview.

Dealing with the Challenge of Populist Realities

Although the omnipresence of populist realities in the media, public opinion and politics may be regarded as a key threat to representative democracy and democratic communication (Waisbord 2018), there are some potential treatment recommendations that we can put forward.

Here, we can rely on two potential interventions that have been applied to political communication, and disinformation more specifically: news media literacy interventions (Vraga & Tully 2016; Tully et al. 2019; Vraga & Tully 2019) and corrective information that refutes disinformation (Hameleers & van der Meer 2019; Nyhan et al. 2019; Wood & Porter 2018). Generally, we can discern two ways of combating the potential negative consequences of the spread of populist realities—initiatives that make the audience more critical and resistant by inducing their critical skills *before* populist disinformation is received (pre-bunking), and tools that respond to populist reality constructions by verifying and refuting falsehoods (de-bunking). Even though we should not understand political decision-making as an exclusively rational process on the individual-level of voters who are guided by facts and empirical evidence, making facts easily available to citizens and offering recommendations on how the facts can be distinguished from erroneous information and lies can help citizens to navigate the increasingly more complex digital information setting. Hence, the aim is to make factual reality central to political disagreement: even though citizens may disagree on causal and treatment attributions for problems experienced in society, these sources of disagreement should be based on agreement on the underlying facts.

In the setting of the correction of disinformation, fact checkers that debunk falsehoods have received most empirical attention (Hameleers & van der Meer 2019; Nyhan & Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016). The results of most experimental research are mixed: in some cases, fact-checkers that rely on empirical evidence to refute incorrect claims in political communication may help to correct misperceptions (Hameleers & van der Meer 2019; Nyhan et al. 2019), whereas other research points to a central role of defensive motivated reasoning (Thorson, 2016). This means that, when news consumers are exposed to false information (in our case populist reality constructions that rely on inaccurate and fact-free statements to attack the elite) that they strongly agree with, they will avoid, reject or even counter-argue corrective information presented in fact-checkers. A so-called 'backfire effect' of corrections is, however, not identified in recent research that shows that fact checkers are at least capable of correcting factual misperceptions among partisans, even if their ideological lenses align with the communicative untruthfulness (Hameleers & Van der Meer 2019; Nyhan et al. 2019). Overall, research on fact-checking indicates that factual misperceptions can be corrected by exposing people to facts (Wood & Porter 2018), but ideological or affective perceptions are relatively hard to change by confronting people with the factual reality.

Even though fact-checkers that debunk populists' false representations of reality may be effective at times, there are at least three major drawbacks that can be associated with debunking. First of all, although factual misperceptions can be corrected on a short term, fact-checkers do not affect the evaluation of candidates or ideological identities (Nyhan et al. 2019). This corresponds to the notion that politics is not only about making rational judgements pertaining to the veracity of information, but also a matter of identity and emotions. As argued by Arendt (1969), democracy is about opinions, but these opinions should be based on agreement on the basic facts. Second, in times of information overload and fragmentation, it is impossible to verify all political information that reaches citizens. Hence, the setting of personalized communication implies that it is hard to establish an individual's news diet, so how can we reach people with corrections in a fragmented news setting if we do not even know what falsehoods they have seen? Extant

experimental research has mainly looked at the effects of fact-checkers in a forced exposure, artificial media setting, but we know little about the real-life effects. Third, although backfire effects may be scarce, there is at least evidence that fact-checkers are less likely to be selected when they attack existing views (Hameleers & Van der Meer 2019), which indicates that the actual impact of corrective information spread via platforms such as PolitiFact.com or factcheck.org is rather limited. Given these challenges, what can we do to mitigate the impact of populist untruthfulness?

Extant research has shown that media literacy interventions can induce news consumers' critical skills (Tully, Vraga, & Bode 2019). Media literacy can be defined as the critical skills needed for news audiences to navigate their information environment (Aufderheide 1993; Ashley, Maksl, & Craft 2017), as well as the skill to recognize disinformation (Tully et al. 2019). As shown by Tully et al. (2019), news media literacy interventions that teach audiences how to recognize and deal with disinformation can have an impact on misperceptions, although one single learning intervention may not be enough to make an impact. Yet, news media literacy interventions may be a powerful weapon in the fight against disinformation as they are not connected to one single news article, which also means that their effects depend less on existing partisan ideologies or existing attitudes. Moreover, they may reduce the impact of all instances of disinformation that reach news consumers in fragmented digital information settings, as they induce critical skills among citizens that they can use whenever they encounter novel information. In the long term, governmental interventions and educational packages may help to promote more critical skills among news consumers and the impact of disinformation and populist constructions of reality may be reduced drastically. Yet, we need more empirical research on the effectiveness of pre-bunking initiatives to populist constructions of disinformation.

Discussion

It has frequently been argued that our current information society poses a threat to democracy. Among other things, the affordances of social media may have contributed to a fragmented and high-choice information setting (Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Stroud 2008) in which citizens show a tendency to selectively expose themselves to content that confirms their own frames of reference (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2017). In this setting, alternative constructions of reality or disinformation may prevail since attitude-consistent information stands a higher chance of selection and acceptance than incongruent information, irrespective of the veracity of such content. Defensive motivated reasoning may thus be stimulated in a high choice information setting (Bennett & Iyengar 2008), and this may give rise to a so-called post-factual communication era (Van Aelst et al. 2017). In such a context, objective, verified evidence may be regarded as truthful insofar it confirms people's existing views, and alternative realities that contradict empirical evidence are readily available in high-choice information settings.

Such an information landscape provides the contextual backdrop for the central relationship between populism and (un)truthfulness explored in this paper. When people can shape their own biased information environment, expert knowledge and empirical evidence may be circumvented, whereas people-centric and anti-elite constructions of the truth may prevail at times of increasing distrust in mainstream institutions. More specifically, I identified three levels

of affinity between the politics of populism and (un)truthfulness: (1) populist conspiracy theories that point to a deliberately hidden truth; (2) a populist de-legitimization of established expert-based knowledge; and, (3) the introduction of alternative realities that resonate with a populist people-centric and anti-elitist worldview. Together, these associations between populism and discourses of (un)truthfulness give rise to political disinformation in two ways; elite knowledge and information is dismissed as untruthful or Fake News (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), and people-centric experiences, emotions, and common sense are seen as more accurate and truthful than rational, verified and expert-based knowledge.

The perseverance of populist constructions of reality and disinformation have severe political consequences, of which three are most central. First, when accusations of dishonesty and conspiracy theories resonate with citizens' existing populist perceptual screens, they can result in factual misperceptions. The attacked elites and experts are distrusted and regarded as the peoples' enemies, irrespective of the factual basis of the accusations. An uninformed electorate may be dangerous for democracy, as voters are not able to base their political decisions and accountability on factual information, and instead rely on emotions and sentiments that can easily be swayed or manipulated by political actors that aim to gain power, such as radical right-wing populists. Second, such confirmation biases and defensive motivated reasoning may augment polarized divides in societies; people with populist interpretation frames may increasingly be separated from people who do trust expert knowledge and empirical evidence. One example is the increasing cleavage between right-wing populists and the left in Western European countries that have historically been regarded as relatively less polarized. Finally, the salience of accusations of Fake News and the introduction of alternative fact-free interpretations may cause more confusion and skepticism among citizens, who may no longer be able to discern truthfulness from dishonest and manipulated information. This is even more important in the setting of increased technologies and artificial intelligence. More specifically, it is already possible to fabricate audiovisual material that looks authentic. So-called Deep Fakes are already being used to make an existing person say and do things they never did, and they are increasingly easier to make. These technologies are rapidly evolving, and, when in the wrong hands, can be regarded as powerful tools for political actors to influence society and public opinion in a goal-directed way.

Despite these threats to democracy, this paper ends on a more positive note. Different interventions have been developed to combat the consequences of untrue or biased information, of which news media literacy interventions and fact-checkers are potentially the most salient examples. Although fact-checkers that refute partisan disinformation may be effective (Hameleers & van der Meer 2019; Nyhan et al. 2019) they cannot keep up with the high pace and fragmentation of today's stream of digital information, and they may not be selected by citizens that disagree with their attacks on their beliefs (Hameleers & van der Meer 2019). It may thus be important to make news consumers more media savvy, and stimulate more critical skills and healthy skepticism needed to filter out inaccurate and dishonest information from reality. In this setting, pre-bunking initiatives and news media literacy interventions have been regarded as viable alternatives to make people more resistant to persuasion by communicative untruthfulness (Tully et al. 2019). Yet, evidence on their effectiveness is scarce, and messages that tell people how they should behave are at risk of being rejected or avoided. Again, this indicates the challenge of

interventions that aim to combat disinformation by confronting people with facts: people are not always consciously and rationally navigating the digital information environment, and may accept and approach information that confirms their ideological perceptual screens that act as filters to distinguish convenient realities from factual information that undermines their beliefs.

Against this backdrop, we can formulate the following practical recommendation. News media literacy interventions should be tailored to overcome confirmation biases (Tully et al. 2019) and frequently repeated through different channels to make sure that these messages actually reach people with different ideological leanings. Even though political decisions are not always rational, fact-free discourses may best be combated by making factual information easily accessible for all citizens. Moreover, these interventions should reach people at a younger age, and should also provide practical recommendations on how to deal with the challenge of populist disinformation—what can people do to expose themselves to balanced and truthful information that does not simply confirm their priors? Finally, these news media literacy interventions should be combined with de-bunking initiatives that should have a preventative impact on the longer term. Repeated exposure to fact-checkers should induce more knowledge and confidence in media consumers so they can recognize falsehoods and manipulative content in their daily information environment.

Although this paper aims to offer new conceptual insights into the alignment between populism and (un)truthfulness, and its potential consequences and remedies, future empirical research is needed to map the salience of populist constructions of reality and dishonesty, and the effects of such constructions on public opinion. We lack research on the impact of populist ideas and disinformation in real-life settings. How are populist constructions of reality and disinformation reaching people in a fragmented information setting, and how are people affected by it outside of artificial laboratory settings? When future research sheds more light on the process by which citizens are affected, we can also start to design more effective interventions that can prevent the political consequences of dishonest populist communication among societies across the globe.

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