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Exploring Populism in Times of Crisis: An Analysis of Disinformation in the European Context during the US Elections

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Abstract: Electoral contests around the world are suffering from an increasing distrust triggered by the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Extant research on political communication has largely studied this phenomenon, but, in some cases, it has neglected the relationship between social and legacy media in the breakthrough of a radicalized populism. Based on a wide literature review of liberal democracy and the roots of populism, this study addresses the right-wing populist communicative actions as one of the causes of the fragmentation of the democratic system, defining a journalistic and fact-checking standard to promote a well-informed society. Specifically, our research focus is to illustrate the impact of populist rhetoric on the traditional media system through a multiple-case study applied in European countries affected by right-wing populist discourse following the last United States elections (2020). The results show a connection among the strategies (game frames) used on Twitter, being less clear in the number of retweets and the presence on the front pages of newspapers. These data serve as a guide to build a journalistic indicator, arguing that high-quality information could be the key for democratic systems to minimize populist rhetoric and tackle the disinformation that endangers their future.

Keywords: disinformation; populism; democracy; elections; polarization; legacy media; Twitter; journalistic quality; journalism standards



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1. Introduction

The crisis of Western democracies is a recent finding that lies with the proliferation of disinformation among voters (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018). Social media sites are considered relevant spaces to understand the dissemination of falsehoods (van Erkel and Van-Aelst 2020), as they have become central to political communication. One of the reasons for this trend is that social media sites are the main channels for populism (Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2020), allowing for quick communication with the people. Besides this, their messages are specially adapted to the digital era, becoming well-known and setting up their agenda within society (Gainous and Wagner 2014).

However, news coverage also plays a role in the shaping of disinformation that remains unexplored. Populist political parties and leaders usually enjoy wide news coverage since their actions are shocking and, therefore, newsworthy (Bos et al. 2010; Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2016). According to Aalberg et al. (2017), the weak political organization of this movement explains its great dependence on the media; that is, the success of populism relies on the traditional media system. This concept is here associated with journalism and legacy media.

Populism has marked academic and political discussion in recent years, although the concept is difficult to define (Mudde 2004). The literature highlights that the rise of populism overlaps with its communicative strategy (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2017), building a particular style (de Vreese et al. 2018). This communicative approach is used to spread fallacies and propaganda that benefit political actors.

The effects of the populist communication style on the democratic system are remarkable, even endangering its future (Runciman 2018). The Capitol assault in the US (6 January 2021) may be assessed as one of the latest events on this matter. The assault connects with the influence of Donald Trump's speech on voters through a discursive strategy based on the idea of fraud on both Twitter and the media (Pérez-Curiel and Naharro 2019) as he has before.

Although establishment media or politicians can also disseminate disinformation (Bakir et al. 2019), there is a lively scholarly debate on the role of populism (Caianni and Graziano 2016; Vasilopoulou 2018). The emergence of populist trends and their impact on decisions such as Brexit is, for some authors, the result of strong cultural clashes between the values of nationalism and those of cosmopolitanism in an increasingly globalized world (Norris and Inglehart 2019). These politicians have a critique of the post-war consensus in common, undermining liberal democracy as evidenced in Central Europe (Bustikova and Guasti 2017).

The aforementioned illiberal turn takes advantage of the digital technologies, as prior scholarship has deeply described (Tucker et al. 2018; Guerrero-Solé et al. 2020). International public opinion barometers (Edelman Trust Barometer 2021) show an awareness of the need to fight against fake news and misinformation. These concepts allude to inaccurate news or public information, which have to be planned to be identified as disinformation (Tucker et al. 2018). A deal between the public institutions and the media could be a solution to respond to the skeptical audience. For instance, the European institutions (EU vs. Disinfo 2018) and the WHO (2020) have already published official papers that recognize the influence of disinformation on the electoral results.

The use of fallacies that characterize populism inserted in society changes the notion of truth to post-truth (Lee and Xenos 2019). The effects of disinformation mean a risk for democracy since false information is disseminated in an intentional way. Disinformation is based on the great use of hoaxes, which means a difference compared to classic propaganda (Salaverria et al. 2020). In this scenario, the objectives of this study are as follows:

O1: To determine the impact of the populist rhetoric observed on Twitter on the traditional media system through the analysis of game frames and front pages regarding right-wing populism;

O2: To define a high-quality journalistic standard to overcome disinformation.

2. Democracies and Populism

2.1. Democracy at Stake: From Liberal to Populist Democracy

The decline of liberal democracies is evidenced by the increasing support for authoritarian regimes (Foa and Mounk 2016). As stated by the populists, the democratic system began to be assessed as a model that only represents the establishment, following the hypothesis that society is antagonistic and divided into two groups—the pure people and the ruling elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). The current state of democracy is a consequence of this wave of populism, particularly far-right movements that pursue the geopolitical objective of tearing down the liberal order. The promotion of chaos and confusion regarding the democratic system are strategies for that purpose (Bennett and Livingston 2018).

Nevertheless, there are also some structural factors that put democracy into question, such as the growing individualization of the voter undermining classic cleavages, the ideological changes in terms of social democracy, or the digital transformation of the media. These conditions foster a new model of political leadership, in which opinions are more important than facts to determine public opinion (Block and Negrine 2017). Hence, the current sociopolitical, economic, and technological climate creates an opportunity for the emergence of personalized populism.

Academia indicates the differences between liberal and populist democracies (Table 1), which are useful to understand how the latter puts the principles of representative institutions into question.

Table 1. Comparison between liberal and populist democracies. Reworked from [Mudde and Kaltwasser \(2018\)](#).

Liberal Democracy	Populist Democracy
Pluralism and social diversity	Homogeneous society, people vs. elite
Well-balanced systems and separation of powers: legislature, executive, and judiciary Political independence of the media	Executive preponderance and rule of electoral contests Control of the media
Limited powers	Absolute powers (sovereign)
Checks and balances between the legislature and the judiciary	Full use of sovereignty on behalf of the people (additional powers)
Competitive elections	Permanent and rigged elections
Rational speech	Emotional speech
Diversity of recognized political parties	'We' and 'They' (false confrontation between 'friends' and 'enemies', polarization)
Representative institutions and political parties	Identification between the leader and the general will. Traditional party decline
Politics understood as agreements between parties	Politics understood as the rule of a hegemonic populist project
Fewer popular consultations	Frequent elections and plebiscites

Recent crises in Western countries (Euro, refugee, COVID-19, etc.) have intensified the degree of partisan competition, moving liberal democracy towards a populist one in which emotional speech prevails. Consequently, the far-right populist parties are able to achieve great levels of mobilization. Computational propaganda ([Woolley and Howard 2017](#)) and cyber-rhetoric ([Stromer-Galley 2014](#)) work as their main strategies to develop the political manipulation of the voters.

Populist strategies are based on a strong emotional charge that focuses on normal people ([De la Torre 2010](#)). This emotional storytelling affects the whole political system ([López Díez and Sulca 2020](#)), but mostly social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, whose features fit well into the current political communication. The aforementioned trend endangers journalism, as these messages impact the media system ([Crilly and Gillespie 2019](#)); hence, democracy is also threatened since high-quality reporting is essential to the health of the democratic system.

2.2. The Communicative Working of Populism

The concept of populism is largely studied from different approaches. Nowadays, it is mostly assessed as a thin-centered ideology that can adapt to different contexts ([Aalberg et al. 2017](#); [Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018](#)), but also as a communicative strategy ([Block and Negrine 2017](#); [de Vreese et al. 2018](#)). The latter point places the focus on how the success of this movement is linked to direct communication with people. The ideas of homeland and restoring sovereignty in a globalized world are key for these actors ([Hameleers 2018](#)).

Academic interest in the use of Twitter by populist politicians arose strongly in 2016 ([van Kessel and Castelein 2016](#)) due to the appearance of Donald Trump in the US, but also with the emergence of large right-wing forces in Europe. This includes the former UKIP in the United Kingdom, the National Rally in France, and the League (Lega) of Salvini in Italy. Populists use Twitter to criticize those in power and catch the attention of the media ([Bracciale and Martella 2017](#); [Gerbaudo 2018](#)). In this relationship with the media, tweets stand as a source of political journalism since these groups spread messages that are easily convertible into headlines in a massive way ([Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015](#)). On the other hand, the unlimited and free dissemination capacity of social networks distorts the true weight and dimensions of these groups in relation to the former parties.

As they are aware of the usefulness of messages on Twitter, populist forces spread impact messages loaded with high-sounding statements (van Kessel and Castelein 2016). The fact that the traditional media serve as a loudspeaker for these tweets has led to the professionalization of the management of social media by political parties (Hladík and Štětka 2017). However, this is combined with the desire to convey a sense of amateurism to build a relationship of trust (Enli 2017), especially in far-right groups.

Online platforms have democratic and social consequences for political knowledge since some citizens feel that they can receive important news only through social networks (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017). This passive role occurs in the spiral of cynicism that usually characterizes the relationship of mutual dependence between politicians and journalism (Brants et al. 2009). This cynicism contributes to considering politics as something remote from the citizenry, boosting the decline in electoral participation. Populists are the politicians who most distrust the media. They believe that the press performs its job poorly, not being representative of society (Waisbord 2018). Paradoxically, these types of messages are disseminated, and their impact increased thanks to the legacy media.

Methods of news production influence the perceptions of society regarding politicians (Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018). Focusing on the Twitter statements of leaders means delving into the process of the personalization of politics, as well as the distortion of facts for democracy (Munive 2016). Additionally, the media system gives primacy to the horse-race campaign in electoral contests (López-López and Oñate 2019). These practices cultivate disinformation (Freelon and Wells 2020) and are identified as being frequently utilized in populist political communication (Bennett and Livingston 2018).

The relevance of Twitter in political communication was consistently identified in prior scholarship (Jungheer 2016). This does not mean that its use as a journalistic source is homogeneous among countries. Studies in contexts such as the Nordic countries (Skogerboe and Krumsvik 2015) indicate that the media do not frequently use social networks as a way to set the agenda. By contrast, in the USA or Spain, it is usual to employ Twitter for journalistic purposes (Newman et al. 2021), being more popular than in France and Italy. In the past, the mere presence of an individual on the front pages constitutes some kind of influence, but nowadays, this effect is also connected with the relationship between journalists and politicians on social media (Verweij 2012).

Against this backdrop, our research aims to further understand the reasons for the crisis of democracies, the deepening of the transnational relationship of far-right populism, and its impact on the media system. Our objective is to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which practices of far-right populism can be identified from populist leaders on Twitter?

RQ2: What is the impact of the most-shared populist messages on Twitter in legacy media?

3. Method

For this study, a quantitative content analysis was applied to the tweets of populist leaders and the front pages of leading newspapers. This method is positively appraised in communication studies, as it allows the study of the different items that make up a published message (Karppinen and Moe 2012; Krippendorff 2012). Besides, the multimodal approach joins both social (Twitter) and legacy media (newspapers) due to the existence of a hybrid communication model (Chadwick 2017).

Based on the literature, populist actors have a particular communication style (Runciman 2018) in common, characterized by a preference for strategic messages (Aalberg et al. 2011) as well as for a communicative repertoire focused on provocation and polarization (Arias Maldonado 2016). Furthermore, Twitter has worked in recent years as the main channel for political communication, specifically regarding populism (Bracciale and Martella 2017), since the microblogging features of this social network adapt very well into its disruptive and fragmented communication (D'Heer and Verdegem 2015). Bearing these milestones in mind, samples were obtained from the following Twitter accounts:

- Donald Trump (United States), @realDonaldTrump;
- Marine Le Pen (France), @MLP_officiel;
- Matteo Salvini (Italy), @matteosalvinimi;
- Santiago Abascal (Spain), @Santi_ABASCAL.

The sample covers the USA and three Western European countries, which have experienced extreme-right governments at the national, regional, or local level. The historical context and the political cultures play a role in this matter; hence our sample includes countries from different waves of democratization (Huntington 1991). The breakthrough of far-right populism is also more recent in some of the countries selected (Italy and Spain). By contrast, the political party of Le Pen in France has a long tradition. France, Italy, and Spain are the EU countries that have far-right populist parties with the most deputies in their national parliaments. It should be noted that countries still matter to define international representative data, which explains the usefulness to carry out a cross-compared analysis.

These accounts were analyzed in the framework of the 2020 US elections to shed light on the similarities and divergences among Trump and some European populist leaders since they represent charismatic leaders that may use an illiberal style. The comparison with Trump is due to the high presence of this political leader in the media, which could make him a world reference for extreme-right movements. Additionally, we considered the front pages of four leading newspapers, one per country, as the messages on Twitter are likely to be reproduced by the media (Rúas Araújo et al. 2018). The sample includes the following media outlets: *The New York Times* (United States), *Le Monde* (France), *La Repubblica* (Italy), and *El País* (Spain). According to the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), these are the most important newspapers of general information in their countries.

The aforementioned newspapers are considered influential in their national media landscape; thus, they can set their public agenda. As talking about establishment media, we expect that they are not very receptive to populist messages. However, the coverage of Donald Trump is expected to be wider considering that he was the president, while the three European right-wing leaders were not part of the executive branch. Therefore, *The New York Times* may be more likely to publish populist tweets, understanding the presidential position as a form of influence.

To ensure the research interest of the sample, we selected a four-week period from 11 October to 8 November 2020. Note that these weeks comprise the time before Joe Biden was declared winner, including the day of the election (3 November). Hence, the campaign and the reactions to the results were analyzed in this study to offer findings on the shaping of populist tweets and their impact on the media. All tweets published by the selected leaders were included. The front pages of the media outlets covering the US elections were captured. Every front-page news story about the US election was included. In total, we collected 1130 tweets and 76 front pages and processed the data with IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 25. The sample focused on the politicians' Twitter accounts, excluding the newspapers' Twitter accounts, as our purpose is to assess the impact of the social media content spread by populist leaders on the traditional media system. Beyond that, some of these newspapers do not usually trigger a significant number of retweets.

Codification was carried out manually by the authors following previous research of the use of frames on Twitter (Carral and Tuñón-Navarro 2020; Rivas-de-Roca et al. 2021). The study of the strategic communication (game frame) was applied through the classic items for this purpose (Aalberg et al. 2011): horse race and governing frame, politicians as individuals' frame, political strategy frame, and news management frame. All these items seek to obtain votes, as previously described in the literature (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2018).

Giving more information on the codification process, the horse race and governing frame refer to conflicting positions; meanwhile, the politicians as individuals' frame includes personal and emotional aspects of the leaders. Moreover, the political strategy frame

focuses on political events. News management is also important because it overlaps with the relationship to the media and, for instance, with criticism of journalistic work.

Regarding the thematic agenda, we created a content analysis worksheet using dichotomous variables derived from breaking topics during the US elections. Specifically, tweets about conspiracy theories refer to deceptive explanations to social problems, as those mentioning an electoral fraud triggered by the establishment. This is the range of categories:

- Conspiracy theories;
- Security;
- Corruption;
- COVID-19;
- Foreign affairs;
- Economy.

The research items are classified into one of the issues or game frames. Moreover, we complement the data through available secondary material (reports or studies particularly referring to fact-checking). The secondary data are relevant for contextualizing the quantitative information, building a journalistic standard at the end that would come from empirical research on the impact of populism on the media system and how these messages are developed. Finally, we discuss future research strategies for this topic to assess our contribution. To guarantee the replicability of the study, the intercoder agreement was calculated with Scott's Pi formula. We achieved an acceptable error level of 0.94, using two previous rounds of coding training of 5 days each to define the codebook.

4. Results

4.1. Communication Practices in Far-Right Populism

Results are reported as follows. First, we present the data for game frames variables on Twitter to assess the communicative action of Donald Trump compared with European populist leaders. Then, the quantitative information regarding the impact of tweets on the audience and the media system is discussed to develop a fact-checking model based on the knowledge of populist communication.

Table 2 offer some evidence on the convergence of populist politicians with Trump in terms of the use of the horse race and governing frame, which is also the most frequent one used by Salvini (8.8%) and Abascal (14.6). They usually employ this strategy to emphasize the idea of fraud, criticizing the legitimacy of electoral contests in the framework of the US elections. The main exception is Le Pen since she prefers a personalized approach (13.4%) for politicians as individuals' frames (Figure 1) instead of a competition perspective (horse race and governing frame), which is quite low in her case (3.2%).

Table 2. Use of game frames on Twitter (%). Relevant findings are presented in bold.

	Donald Trump	Marine Le Pen	Matteo Salvini	Santiago Abascal
Horse race and governing frame	24.9	3.2	8.8	14.6
Politicians as individuals' frames	3.1	13.4	7.5	9.5
Political strategy frame	9.3	1.2	7.2	5
News management frame	3.5	4.1	3.5	4

The preference for the horse race and governing frame highlights the application of a confrontational that seeks to identify and undermine enemies. Thus, Twitter is employed as a tool for far-right populism at the international level. This identifies a controversial pattern of communication that Salvini and Abascal share in common with Trump. However, the rate of this competitive perspective is much higher in the US Republican candidate (24.9) than in the rest of the leaders. This finding may be explained by the fact Trump was, at that moment, in an electoral race and attempting to achieve voters.



Figure 1. Tweet from Le Pen using the politicians as individuals' frames.

Within this context, giving more predominance to a conflictive frame could affect the quality of democracy, as it fosters a negative feeling to opponents among the audience. The leaders promote antipluralist practices linked to polarization (De la Torre 2010; Arias Maldonado 2016). The detected trend overlaps with consolidated pop politics (Mazzoleni 2008) that is critical to the media system. Therefore, it is relevant to analyze the impact of these populist tweets on the public and those legacy media.

4.2. Influence on User Preferences and Legacy Media

Social networks allow direct communication between politicians and citizens, but the question is whether these messages are influential or not. Our research empirically tests the reach of far-right populism in terms of retweets and the impact of these tweets in leading newspapers for each country.

As can be seen in Table 3, a thematic item such as corruption (95.9%) draws the most attention of the users; 95.9% of its messages receive over 300 retweets. The second, more disseminated topic is conspiracy theories (61%), followed by foreign affairs (59.3%). These three issues can be identified as distinctive of populism, fueling the idea of fraud. Further, the mention of foreign affairs refers to the existence of a cosmopolitan and international enemy that is associated with liberal values, as evidenced by Figure 2 for Salvini.

Table 3. Retweets by issue and game frames (%). Relevant findings are presented in bold.

	1–49	50–99	100–299	Over 300
Conspiracy theories	-	19.5	19.5	61
Immigration/security	1.1	13.5	35.6	49.8
Corruption	-	-	4.1	95.9
Gender issues	-	16.7	58.3	25
COVID-19	3.9	17.9	37.4	40.8
Environment	-	12.5	50	37.5
Foreign affairs	1.2	25.9	13.6	59.3
Economy	7.6	29.7	32.2	30.5
Horse race and governing frame	5.1	19	24.2	51.7
Politicians as individuals' frames	3.5	23.6	38.8	34.1
Political strategy frame	10.9	19.5	14.1	55.5
News management frame	21.4	26.8	23.2	28.6
Other	3.4	17.6	37.3	41.7



Figure 2. Tweet from Salvini referring to foreign affairs (US elections).

Although game frames are considered more illustrative for building the typical communication of populism, people seem to have a low level of interaction with their messages compared with thematic ones. Accordingly, the strategic item that catches more attention over 300 retweets is the political strategy frame (55.5%). The horse race and governing frame are also relevant (51.7% over 300 retweets), but to a lesser extent, as was shown among the leaders. This supposes that the strategies boosting a high degree of interaction sometimes fail to match the most used by far-right populism.

Regarding the legacy media, the results reveal how the content of populist leaders on Twitter is only reproduced on the front page of the newspaper selected in the US (*The New York Times*). Table 4 present information about the presence of populist tweets in the media, filtering the data by the number of retweets generated. These front pages refer to news items about the US election that may contain or are based on reproduced tweets of the selected politicians. Findings show that messages posted on Twitter by Trump are nearly always present on the front pages of the leading newspaper of his country.

Table 4. Influence of Twitter accounts of populist leaders in the press. Presence on the front pages and number of retweets for messages on Twitter (%). Relevant findings are presented in bold.

		1–49	50–99	100–299	Over 300
Donald Trump	Present on the front page	-	-	-	235
	Not present on the front page	-	-	-	2
Marine Le Pen	Present on the front page	-	-	-	1
	Not present on the front page	-	-	33	97
Matteo Salvini	Present on the front page	-	1	-	-
	Not present on the front page	55	202	251	186
Santiago Abascal	Present on the front page	-	-	-	-
	Not present on the front page	-	-	-	67
Total	Present on the front page	-	1	-	236
	Not present on the front page	55	202	284	352

The table shows whether the tweets of politicians are visible on the front pages of the news about US elections. We collected the number of retweets of the original messages on Twitter to evaluate if this could be related to their appearance on front pages.

At this point, our research provides two additional inter-related insights. First, most of the tweets coming from Trump, Le Pen, and Abascal obtained more than 300 retweets,

underscoring the great quantitative impact of these leaders on Twitter. People are more likely to interact with their messages, probably because of their provocative style (Enli 2017). Second, according to our data, the number of retweets does not directly mark the news impact on the media since most of the content from Le Pen, Salvini, and Abascal is omitted from the front pages of the newspapers.

We must consider that the traditional front pages are still a way of setting the public agenda. The results indicate that the newsworthy criteria for those pages involve several factors that go beyond high dissemination on social media, with the exception of Trump. One reason for this finding could be the research period chosen, as the US elections received wide coverage and Trump was a candidate for that electoral contest. Nevertheless, prior studies have also detected the high media attention to this politician (Mounk 2018; Pérez-Curiel and Naharro 2019).

As aforementioned, the management of the front pages lies with internal media procedures. In the framework of this study, populist content has not permeated the main space of newspapers, but the remarkable data in the US make it useful to reflect upon how the legacy media are approaching social platforms and populism.

4.3. Learnings for Fact-Checking in Social Platforms

Despite the fact that social networks are overwhelmingly blamed for misinformation, the media system still plays a role in the circulation of fallacies, making it needed to develop a journalistic standard. In this sense, the personalization of politics and the increasing media system has contributed more to spreading fake news than to avoiding them (Carlson 2020). For this reason, our paper suggests promoting a culture of media literacy aligned with previous research (Mantzaris 2018). The objective is to educate critical audiences and, thus, restore the trust among the three actors of political communication: politicians, citizens, and the press.

Despite the outstanding work of fact-checking initiatives, the verifiability of the media system was put into question. The action of journalism is characterized by the first stage of breaking news, in which the proliferation of fake news is possible (Nielsen and Graves 2017); then, the newsroom work as a second stage of applying quality control to verify the content. This process should move to a first position, involving the correct use of sources, antecedents, contextual data, and interpretation of the facts (Mantzaris 2018).

To define a practical standard for the media system, it is necessary to introduce fact-checking strategies to the media logic. The proposal should include digital and traditional messages, as politics maintains a hybrid nature (Chadwick 2017). Furthermore, our findings show a preference of far-right populist leaders for a horse race and governing frame, but the international media studied are not really permeable to these messages. Hence, the coverage is not as poor as expected, but we observed a worrying reproduction of Trump messages on the front pages of the US newspaper selected.

In this context, we propose the following equation to measure the quality of a journalistic piece:

$$\text{JQL Journalistic Qualification Level} = [\text{V1 Presence} + \text{V2 Quantity-Diversity of Sources}] + [\text{V3 Background-Context} + \text{V4 Explanatory-Interpretative-Opinion Data}] / \text{JQL Journalistic Qualification Level} \quad (1)$$

When discussing explanatory and interpretative opinions, we recommend providing further explanations on the concepts of issue and game frames. The audience needs to know that this sort of communication is usual for populist leaders. Beyond that, the use of certain issues is connected with the political purpose of building agenda, as these topics may define the public discussion. As a result, social media has become one of the main sources for learning politics, also affecting the media system (Bode 2016).

Another point is the employment of propaganda mechanisms since it is a defining feature of populism that endangers the future of democracies by undermining the notion of truth. Hence, journalists and media outlets have a responsibility to explain this

phenomenon to citizens. The JQL is based on a comprehensive approach, attempting to provide more information about the political purposes behind the news.

Our proposal assumes that social networks, especially Twitter, are key for political influence. However, the centrality of populist leaders in the media system should also be reconsidered. This position is embedded in the consolidation of digital political action, in which populism works very well. According to our study, the presence of populist tweets in social media occurred when the leader was involved in an electoral race, illustrating the relevance of the JQL for democracy.

The central position in their national public spheres is embedded in a context of consolidation of digital technologies for politics.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

In this study, we take disinformation as a starting point to discuss the reasons for the collapse of some liberal democracies. Specifically, this research focuses on the role of far-right populism, assessed as a global phenomenon that threatens the postwar democracy consensus. For this reason, we also define a journalistic standard that aims to improve the coverage of populism. This research contributes to the budding and increasing literature on the communicative dimension of democracies, providing three contributions alongside the quality indicator defined.

Our first contribution furthers our understanding of the relationship among the game frames used by different far-right populist leaders around the world. In the context of the US elections, Salvini (Italy) and Abascal (Spain) have the prominent use of the horse race and the governing frame in common with Trump. Therefore, it could be stated that a national electoral contest is not needed to develop conflictive communication. In any case, it should be noted that the US elections may be so influential in having fueled a polarized environment in other countries.

Second, our study offers valuable evidence on the behavior of users with populist messages regarding retweets. The public tends to share more thematic tweets than those referring to strategic communication (game frames). Nevertheless, the issues triggering greater attention are hallmarks of populism (corruption, conspiracy theories, etc.); thus, the movement would be able to determine the agenda at some point.

The third contribution refers to the impact of populist messages on the media system. Leaders such as Trump, Le Pen, and Abascal usually generated more than 300 retweets when posting on Twitter. However, these populist tweets were not published on the front pages about the US elections of the leading newspapers in each country, with the exception of Trump, who monopolized the contents of *The New York Times*.

Taken together, our results show similarities in the game frames applied by the far-right populism on Twitter, while the audience prefers a thematic agenda on this social network according to the levels of interaction. Moreover, there is a silver lining finding in the fact that most of the legacy media selected do not reproduce the populist tweets on their front pages, a situation only concerning the US.

Following fact-checking parameters, we argue that a professional media standard is required to report populism, as the success of this political movement lies in a flow of disinformation (Gerbaudo 2018). This is why the JQL is defined and understood as an indicator rooted in the knowledge of issue/game frames and propaganda mechanisms to avoid these movements that mark the agenda for the whole society (Pérez-Curiel and Rivas-de-Roca 2022). Journalistic coverage that applies the JQL might balance the public to better learning of politics from social media (Shehata and Strömbäck 2018), triggering positive effects based on political participation. In a turbulent context, we assume that journalism and legacy media must intervene to fulfil the social function of the press.

Some limitations of our analysis must be pointed out. The data collected could be compared with other populist leaders from different media systems or journalistic cultures such as Germany, the Nordic countries, or South America, which can bring divergent results regarding the use of game frames. We did not provide a comparison with equivalence

non-populist leaders as our objective was to check the particular style of this group, which is aligned with recent studies (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017; Hameleers 2018). In addition, the retweet function is a very limited indicator to evaluate the attention of the public and, thus, the impact of the populist messages on Twitter.

As a consequence, our study should be considered a first assessment that aims to promote a journalistic standard based on trends from some populist leaders on social networks. Bearing the latter in mind, we cannot know the usefulness of the fact-checking techniques since the literature misses some findings that shed light on the causal patterns shaping disinformation.

In short, social media cultivates the dissemination of disinformation and political polarization, which are features of populism, but at the same time, may have encouraged outcomes for democracy (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017). The breakthrough of populism as a political communication style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mazzoleni 2008) compels comprehensive journalism that reports on social networks from quality standards. The explanatory mission of journalism is particularly required, developing concepts such as issue/game frames and propaganda mechanisms. Systematic and in-depth coverage could improve the situation of democracy by contextualizing the communicative practices of populism. For this reason, it would be noteworthy to supervise the application of quality indicators from a world observatory that includes journalists specialized in political and digital fields. The connections among the selected leaders are sometimes recurrent, fostering the need for a transnational approach in times of uncertainty for democracies.

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