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Editorial

Editorial: Populism in and Through Online Communities

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Abstract
This editorial introduces the thematic issue of *Online Communities and Populism*. I begin by laying out the justification for taking up this topic and then articulate why *Media and Communication* is the ideal location to hold this discussion. Then I introduce the articles in this issue by listing the questions these articles take up, the four major themes these articles take on, and preview each article.

Keywords
online communities; online populism; political communication; populism; populist discourse; networked media; social media

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Online Communities and Populism" edited by Ashley Hinck (Xavier University).

1. Populism in and Through Online Communities

In recent years, there has been an explosion of populism across the globe. Strains of populism have been taken up by leaders like the United States' Donald Trump, the United Kingdom's Boris Johnson, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, India's Narendra Modi, and Indonesia's Joko Widodo. While these are some of the most visible instances, populism has also emerged in smaller countries like the Netherlands (Hameleers, 2019) and in the communication of political challengers like Alexey Navalny in Russia (Glazunova, 2020). Populism is a global phenomenon shaping and shaped by communication in significant ways.

Populists are using social media to organize and amplify populist communication (see e.g., Boulianne et al., 2020; Bucy et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2019; Peck, 2020). In an age when citizens are turning to online communities to construct their political values, beliefs, and ideologies (Bennett, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Hinck, 2019), it is not coincidental that many of these populist leaders have been bolstered by large followings of supporters online. This thematic issue examines the role online communities play in contemporary populism: how seemingly untraditional political communities online are influencing national and international politics by developing populist messages and circulating populist media through networked communication.

Media and Communication is an ideal place to hold this conversation. First, populism is a global phenomena and understanding its mechanisms, trends, histories, and implications requires scholars from around the world. *Media and Communication* has cultivated a truly global audience of readers, reviewers, and authors, which continues in this issue. Second, examining populism and online communities demands perspectives from subfields across the communication discipline. Scholars of rhetoric, political communication, media studies, critical/cultural studies, internet studies, and many others have important perspectives on how populism works in and through online communities. *Media and Communication* is one of only a few journals that can facilitate a conversation spanning across so many communication subfields. Lastly, taking up the question of how populism emerges through and in online communities demands a variety of methodological approaches. Indeed, the authors of articles in this thematic issue answer that call, using rhetorical methods, experiments, interviews, online ethnography, computational methods, among others. The variety of methodological approaches in this issue has produced a remarkably rich conversation about populism and online communities.

2. Contributions

Not all contributions in this thematic issue approach populism through the same theoretical lens. Whether taking up populist communication as a style, strategy, discourse, or ideology, each contribution examines how a "virtuous" people is constituted against an enemy of elites who control the system and the status quo (Engesser et al., 2017; Lee, 2006). The scholars in this issue explore the relationship between populism and online communities by taking up questions such as:

- How might online communities provide transnational points of contact, network nodes, or flows of communication between and across nations?
- How do the social norms and values of online communities provide fertile grounds for populism?
- How do conspiracy communities, fan communities, and other online communities influence and enable populism?
- What forms and genres (like memes and deep fakes) define online populism?
- What communication strategies emerge from online communities to support populist leaders?
- What are the implications for democracy?

The articles in this thematic issue cover four general themes: (a) communication of populist leaders; (b) influencers, fans, and celebrities; (c) populist online communities; and (d) information and deliberation. First, three of the articles in this thematic issue consider the communication of populist leaders. Santamaría (2022) examined the communication of two populist leaders in Spain: Ada Colau, Barcelona's mayor; and Isabel Díaz Ayuso, president of the Community of Madrid. Santamaría examines how each leader enacted care of the people during the Covid-19 pandemic through their Instagram accounts. Capdevila, Moragas-Fernández, and Grau Masot (2022) also examine the communication of populist politicians; however, they examine whether the citizens of the far-right populist party VOX actually took up, spread, and repeated the communication of VOX politicians on Twitter. Using social network analysis, they find that the VOX online community did not solely reproduce the party's populist discourse, but circulated discourse from other actors as well. Wilcox (2022) examines the reaction to communication from a populist politician; when populist Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker used a Dropkick Murphys' song in his 2015 campaign, the left-leaning band pushed back, criticizing Scott Walker and his policies. Wilcox examines how Walker supporters made sense of and rejected the band's response through comments on Twitter.

A second theme emerging among these contributions is influencers, celebrities, and fans. The cases these authors identify are places where we may not necessarily expect populism to be emerging. Zahay (2022) examines how the "trad wife" (short for traditional wife) community of YouTube influencers builds an anti-feminist populist aesthetic. Through the performance of an alt-right femininity, these YouTube videos circulate populist ideals. Similarly, Heřmanová (2022) examines Czech female lifestyle influencers during the pandemic. Through interviews and online ethnography, Heřmanová finds that these influencers politicized the domestic in ways that supported the populist narratives about Covid-19, rejecting experts and elites. Riddick (2022) examines the #FreeBritney online discourse created by fans to oppose the conservatorship of US pop star Britney Spears. Riddick finds that fans integrated strategies and frames from populism, citizen journalism, and human rights activism in their public campaign. Zolides (2022) examined a group of anti-fans, people who hate Dr. Anthony Fauci, the US director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, responsible for much of the US' initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Zolides examined memes circulated online about Fauci and found that these memes helped build an anti-fan community aimed at attacking Fauci and circulated populist discourses of anti-intellectualism.

A third theme emerging from this thematic issue is populist online communities. Cover, Thompson, and Haw (2022) examine the QAnon online community, comprised of folks following and decrypting messages from a figure known only as "Q." Cover et al. (2022) argue that QAnon does not fit the model of other populist movements with a central identifiable leader. Rather, they argue, QAnon works through a simulacra of a leader, creating a unique type of online community and movement. Wurst (2022) examines how populist conspiracy theories spread through political channels on YouTube. Through extensive ethnographic work, Wurst outlines the contours of four communities of political YouTube channels that also deploy pop culture (BreadTube, the Dirtbag Left, Reactionary Video Tube, and Left Adjacent Video Tube). She finds that left-leaning YouTube communities break down and reject the conspiracy theories from right-leaning YouTube communities. Howard (2022) takes up questions around how to conceptualize and theorize the community of "the people" invoked in populist discourse. He argues that "the people" can be constituted through digital technologies, like AI. Technologies deploy the same vernacular authority as "the people" through what he calls, "aggregate volition."

A fourth theme examined the role of information in populism online. Hameleers (2022) examines the effects of populist disinformation on social media through an experiment that manipulates both the type of information (disinformation, malinformation, or accurate, authentic information) and the source (embedded in a news article or shared by a citizen). Hameleers finds that radical right-wing populist messages can play a role in priming support. Thiele and Turnšek (2022) examine the quality of online deliberation when populist messages are present. Analyzing comments on Facebook pages from Austrian and Slovenian mass media in 2015–2016,

they found that right-wing populist comments increase the number of replies, but ultimately decrease the quality of deliberation. Both Hameleers and Thiele and Turnšek find that right-wing populist information can be problematic for democracy.

While these four themes might broadly characterize the articles in this issue, these themes also cut across articles in complex ways. Ultimately, these articles present a robust conversation about populism in and through online communities. I hope it provokes many more conversations at conferences and in research publications.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Ashley Hinck is an associate professor of Communication at Xavier University. Her research examines how fandom and politics intersect online. Her publications have examined the civic activities of fandoms like Harry Potter, Star Wars, LEGO, and college football, and the digital communication of politicians like Ted Cruz and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Hinck is author of the award-winning book *Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-Based Citizenship in a Digital World* (2019, LSU Press), and co-author of *Poaching Politics: Online Communication During the 2016 US Presidential Election* (2018, Peter Lang).

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Article

"Don't Fauci My Florida": Anti-Fauci Memes as Digital Anti-Intellectualism

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Abstract
In his prescient book *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty predicts the rise of a Trump-like strongman built on attacking, among other public figures, "postmodern professors" (1998, p. 90). This speaks to the importance of anti-intellectualism to the populist movement in the US today. Always present in populist appeals, like McCarthy's placement of "educated elites at the center of his communist conspiracy" (Peck, 2019, p. 129), this approach "seeks to undermine public discourse by attacking and devaluing education, expertise, and language" (Stanley, 2020, p. 36). The result of these attacks is a return to tribalism and power, key facets of populist rhetoric and strategies. With the Covid-19 pandemic dominating the US public discourse since 2020, the populist conservative movement has trained their anti-intellectual rhetoric towards a singular figure: Dr. Anthony Fauci. An anti-fandom community was thus born built around attacking and mocking Fauci, taking place within the larger populist movement. While this anti-Fauci rhetoric takes many forms, one of the most dominant is that of memes. Through an analysis of both formal (DeSantis merchandise and political cartoons) and informal (actual grassroots) anti-Fauci memes, I argue online communities have used anti-Fauci memes as a form of anti-fandom community building utilizing and bolstering anti-intellectual, populist rhetoric due to their ease of transmission, mutability, and personification of intellectualism on a singular figure. In this way, being "anti-Fauci" allows the populist argument to seem like a personal grievance rather than a focused attack on academic thought itself.

Keywords
Anthony Fauci; anti-fandom; anti-intellectualism; memes; online communities; populism

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Online Communities and Populism" edited by Ashley Hinck (Xavier University).

1. Introduction

In his prescient book *Achieving Our Country*, philosopher Richard Rorty (1998, p. 90) predicts a rise in populist movements across the globe, arguing that older industrialized democracies could be heading into a "Weimar-like period, one in which populist movements are likely to overturn constitutional governments." Specifically citing the US as a possible site for a fascistic future, he even more prophetically envisions a Trump-like strong man rising to power predominantly on cultural issues. This figure, Rorty (1998, p. 90, emphasis added) writes, is "someone willing to assure them [working-class] that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and *postmodern professors* will no longer be calling the shots."

Beyond his seeming clairvoyance towards an election 18 years later, Rorty also usefully points to some of the key features of populist authoritarianism, notably its emphasis on class-based anti-intellectualism targeting academics and scientific authority. When the Covid-19 pandemic began during the final year of Trump's presidency, the populist conservative movement he helped spur trained their sites on a singular figure representative of this particular "elite intellectualism": Dr. Anthony Fauci. As the long-serving director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and a key figure in both Trump and Biden's Coronavirus Task Forces, Fauci became, in many ways, the public face of the federal government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In time, this led to his becoming symbolic of not just governmental public health, but the very idea of government's relationship to science. As a public figure, Fauci bore the brunt of both praise and antagonism from a politically divided country, as the increased politicization of the pandemic and public health measures led

many to see Fauci as the human embodiment of these much more complex issues.

This article looks specifically at the anti-Fauci rhetoric that emerged in this time period and places it within a larger understanding of the conservative populist movement. While anti-Fauci discourse takes many forms, perhaps its most dominant in both formal and informal spaces is that of memes. Memes specifically referencing and targeting Fauci as an "enemy of the people" or figure to be ridiculed/undermined have proliferated through formal and informal conservative networks, including official merchandise, conservative political cartoons, and grassroots creations in online communities.

Through an analysis of anti-Fauci memes, I argue online communities have succeeded in using memes for specifically anti-intellectual, populist rhetoric due to memes' ease of transmission, mutability, and the personification of intellectualism onto a singular figure. As seemingly grassroots creations (even when they are not), memes contain an inherent populist, anti-establishment quality that makes them ideal for disseminating contemporary populist messages to the masses. This article considers the ways anti-Fauci memes in particular tie into the anti-intellectual features of populism and allow for a shift in political discourse that emphasizes personal grievance over deliberative discourse.

2. Populism's Anti-Intellectualism

Although covering a range of political ideologies and activities, "fundamentally, populism is a form of politics predicated on the moral vilification of elites and the veneration of ordinary people" (Bonikowski, 2017, p. S184). Right-wing authoritarian populism, then, combines this segmenting of the population with conservative political aims ranging from pro-business/anti-government policies to appeals to cultural "traditions" like heteronormativity and white supremacy. Indeed, the elites that become the targets of populist communities are dependent on the movement's goals. "While elected politicians are often the immediate targets, populism just as often focuses on economic leaders, civil servants and intellectuals" (Bonikowski, 2017, p. S184). In Anthony Fauci, we see a figure that acts as both a civil servant and an intellectual, given his status as a doctor and leader of NIAID across multiple political administrations. Thus, the targeting of Fauci specifically directly lines up with recent right-wing populist activity more broadly (see Trump's focus on "draining the swamp"), continuing traditions in American populism with a renewed interest in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Anti-intellectualism's ties to populism are deep and thorough, particularly in the US, due to its unique political foundations. Indeed, Hofstadter (1963) described the persistent pattern of anti-intellectualism in American cultural history following the Second Red Scare of the 1950s. Within this foundational text, intellect, and its counter anti-intellectualism, proves difficult to define, at least in terms of its cultural understanding. Yet three distinct types of anti-intellectualism emerge from an analysis of Hofstadter's text, as noted by Daniel Rigney (1991): anti-rationalism, anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. Each form from its own social background, aligning most directly with religion, politics, and capitalism, respectively. For this reason, I will focus my analysis in this article on the *anti-elitist* attitudes of anti-intellectualism, as they are "associated primarily with populist political structures and movements" (Rigney, 1991, p. 436).

Attacking intellectualism in the populist strategy goes back decades and is most particularly notable in the US context during McCarthyism's heyday. "McCarthy's anti-communist crusade laid the groundwork for conservative populism's cultural-educational vision of the elite" (Peck, 2019, p. 129), wherein the dangers of intellectualism and other egalitarian measures were laid out as challenging the very fabrics of "traditional" society and American culture. This "McCarthyist structure of feeling" went beyond anti-intellectualism; "antiforeignness, antiradicalism, and antiblackness were 'active together' to give meaning to un-Americanness, non-citizenship, dangerous threat, and subversion" (Burden-Stelly, 2017, p. 345). The issue was not so much the source of the subversion (intellectuals), but the resultant undermining of traditionally white, American (and thus conservative) values.

The strategy is to block rigorous debate from even occurring by attacking the source of information (ad hominem) rather than the content itself: "By rejecting the value of expertise, fascist politicians also remove any requirement for sophisticated debate" (Stanley, 2020, p. 36). This, in turn, allows for power and more explicit identity markers (like race) to have more value to political action than policy or ideology. Indeed, this lowering of debate to mere identity play and disagreement is a perfect foundation upon which memes can function. The utility of memes in the anti-Fauci and larger anti-intellectual populist movements is paramount to emphasizing personality attacks over matters of policy or actions.

As Rigney notes (1991, p. 441), "anti-elitist opposition to intellect has always had a sharp political edge," taking the distrust of claims to superior knowledge, especially as such claims are often grounded in class privilege like the expense of college and the often higher-paying salaries that follow more advanced degrees. In this way, populist movements can better claim to support the interests of the "common people," with the distinction being drawn along intellectual lines that themselves are indebted to classist divisions. These class-based resentments are apparent from populist politics in the 1960s up through today.

The importance of *class* over actual *intellect* leaves room for what Peck (2019, p. 185) terms "*popular intellect*…a working-class brand of intellectualism" that is pervasive in contemporary populist movements on the right. This is often seen on Fox News programming, where

intellectualism is only attacked when coming from "traditional" sources (like Dr. Fauci) that make their appeals to structures of academic and scientific power. "Fox News programming makes the case for a *lay* brand of intellectualism" (Peck, 2019, p. 151) that creates not so much an anti-intellectual identity but an "interface for conservative intellectual culture" (Peck, 2019, p. 187). This culture plays a key role in contemporary populist movements that seek to not necessarily undermine all displays of intellect, but only to prop up their own, limited (read conservative) versions of such intellectual exercise.

The result of this is a laundering of unscientific, non-rigorous intellectual inquiry into something *performing* as popular intellectualism wherein the markers of intellect (degrees, relationship to institutes, etc.) are co-opted in order to project a new brand of intellect to a populist, working-class identity. In this conception, particularly within the realm of Fox News, anti-Fauci memes and discourse are seen as challenging so-called elite power structures propping up Fauci more so than his intellectual acumen itself. Rather than challenging him on the merits of the science he expresses, the challenges are often tied into presentations of class and power, often framed as an attack on personal liberties/freedoms. This can particularly be seen in the content analysis of anti-Fauci memes and the ways he is targeted in such digital discourse.

Of course, the creation of an alternative intelligentsia contributes to gathering confusion over an agreed-upon truth. The wealth of misinformation and disinformation is ripe for being taken advantage of, as "in the post-truth era, right-wing populist leaders have adopted an anti-intellectual political attitude" where "the internal threat is represented by the establishment, intellectuals, and liberals" (Reyes, 2020, pp. 871–72). In practice, "anti-intellectualism means, among other things, devaluation of book learning, devaluation of high academic standards, and attacks on intellectuals" (Gencoglu, 2021, p. 14). Taken all together, "the composition, production, distribution, and circulation of right-wing discourse detaches academic knowledge from its original context and transforms it in service of anti-intellectualism" (Lawless & Cole, 2021, p. 150).

Within all of this activity, memes provide an ideal template to serve these multiple ends. As authorless digital ephemera, memes create a sheen of grassroots, humble beginnings despite the fact that many anti-Fauci memes come from formal power players within the conservative movement. And, thus, "memes [serve] as the means through which candidates [can] bypass institutional media such as television, print, and even digital press formats and the gatekeeping measures endemic to them" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 57). The avoidance of traditional gatekeepers provided by memes lines up well with the creation of Peck's *populist intellect*, as it allows for the formation of seemingly intelligent discourse without being subject to embedded power structures ripe for populist critique. In this way, memes espousing anti-intellectual sentiment serve as a continuation of populist political activity targeting intellectual elites yet one making use of digital affordances. Memes, then, have simply become the newest form of ongoing populist discourse taking advantage of some of the unique qualities of networked digital communication, such as non-hierarchical information exchange, collaborative creation, and anonymous sharing.

What is more, "memetic propaganda strategies operationalize political divisions by aggrandizing the symbolism of enemyship" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 189). Through their highly symbolic and iconographic nature, memes make it easier to create targets and outsiders, like Fauci, that come to represent larger systems that are antithetical to populist movements. In sum, the seeds and strategies of the contemporary conservative populist movement and its ties to anti-intellectualism are ripe for memes to proliferate and flourish. Yet, the production and messaging of these memes are only one part of the story; indeed, the ways memes are communally shared in an effort to create coalitions is just as, if not more important, to understanding the impact of anti-Fauci memes on contemporary populist movements.

3. Anti-Fandom's Role in Populist Identity

This type of populist anti-intellectualism takes on a different, unique form when attached to a specific, *individual* figure like Fauci, making it akin to anti-fandom practices. Just as fandoms include a strong, positive emotional connection to a text or object (love, respect, admiration, etc.), so too does anti-fandom, though this time the feelings are primarily negative (hate, anger, disgust, etc.). What is more just as fandom is predominantly about building communities and identities around the object of attention, as does anti-fandom, with the activities of the anti-fandom providing fertile grounds for community building and identity formation. These are the features at play with anti-Fauci memes that feed into the larger community of online conservative populism.

Much like traditional fandom, "dislikes…are regularly performative, laying claim to communities of belonging and distancing us from communities of approbation" (Gray, 2021, p. 136). Disliking something—or someone—then, is not so much about the object or person in and of itself, but the communally valuable identities that can be assigned to such dislike. Much as communities of shared identities and practice emerge around fan objects, anti-fan objects of dislike also create opportunities for communal activity, identity formation, and production of artifacts such as memes. Anti-Fauci memes become the productive activity by which those within a particular community express their dislike and practice their anti-fandom, forming stronger bonds; these activities and feelings are precisely what populist politicians are exploiting when participating in anti-Fauci memes themselves, attempting to profit off of the grassroots movements rather than respond to them.

Like populist movements themselves, anti-fandom is itself rooted in perceptions of class. For Bourdieu, according to Gray, "dislike is a performance of cultural capital and a classed act of claiming superiority" (Gray, 2021, p. 136); however, in the case of anti-Fauci discourse, superiority is claimed by challenging traditional markers of intellectual expertise. This is how anti-Fauci memes participate in the construction of a popular intellect wherein expertise is challenged and supplanted with a new, conservative understanding of intellectualism and superiority.

Class, then, is challenged and upended by circumventing traditional gatekeepers, both in terms of publishing (memes being freely exchanged) and acknowledgment as legitimate (no need for peer review or academic authority). And so instead of following a logic of scientific inquiry or public debate, "cultural capital and the distinction between supposedly 'pure' or 'legitimate' taste and 'barbarous' or popular taste follow a logic of class" (Gray, 2021, p. 138). Bourdieu is, of course, talking specifically about cultural standards of taste and *not* standards of truth or scientific evidence; but within the contemporary conservative populist movement, there is no distinction—It is all evidence of a cultural battle and thus subject to class logics. In this way, support for an anti-Fauci position need not be based on science but rather a class-based criticism.

Anti-fandom's connections to American conservative populism are not new, as has been particularly noted in the rise of the Tea Party since 2008. Despite the investment and organization by moneyed interests, the Tea Party performed grassroots activism and populist ethos in opposition to Barack Obama with claims based on both explicit (economic anxiety) and more implicit (racism) ways. The key identity formation for the Tea Party, indeed, was in this position as antagonists, "the Tea Party from its inception was formulated and positioned *against*, rather than *for* a given cause" (Sandvoss, 2019, p. 130).

And, thus, participation within the Tea Party or other supposedly populist movements is seen as an act of anti-fandom in many ways as it is positioned *against* a given object/symbol rather than for some specific policy. This relates to how both anti-fandom and populist movements are connected through community activity and identity formation more so than political policy. "What unifies Tea Partiers is thus not a coherent ideological vision, but their antagonism toward a projected Other" (Sandvoss, 2019, p. 135). In the case of anti-Fauci memes, the projected Other comes to represent traditional villains of populist rhetoric: intellectuals, elites, and government agents.

Fandom and anti-fandom are useful for understanding contemporary political activation due to their understanding of "affect-driven communities" (Reinhard et al., 2022, p. 1153). As they argue in their analysis of QAnon, "the field of fan studies can be productively applied to investigate the online discursive activities of QAnon community members to better understand how these communities can and have been built" (Reinhard et al., 2022, p. 1153). Fan studies (and thus anti-fandom studies) can be particularly useful in studying populist politics due to their nature of challenging authority. The ways fans circulate ideas and messages (like memes) are a form of empowerment and a way to challenge established narratives (like fanfiction). And, thus, the creation of an anti-intellectual or *populist intellectual* sphere within a populist movement is particularly attuned to fan-like participation and community building (Miro, 2021, p. 64).

In short, anti-fandom is in many ways at the root of so many contemporary populist movements, especially in the US, as the conservative movement continues emphasizing reactionary politics over constructive imaginings. Anti-fandoms do still create participatory movements and activities as fandoms do, yet they primarily do so in opposition to something else and thus are inherently reactionary in nature, making them naturally aligned with populist rhetoric that also emphasizes division from an Other who can easily be refashioned into an object of anti-fandom.

Anti-fandom regarding Fauci is explicitly political in nature, especially when coming from more formal political structures like GOP campaigns and politicians. The targeting of scientists or science communicators like Fauci is particularly relevant, as their position of authority is drawn from scientific principles as well as, in the case of Fauci, governmental positioning. Thus, the anti-fandom creations—like memes—serve to both attack and target the outsider as well as reaffirm community and belief systems within a particular ideological order. And so, anti-Fauci memes and their identity as productions of a broader Fauci anti-fandom play a key role in contemporary populist movements online.

4. Populist Messaging in Memes

A cursory internet search for anti-Fauci memes will bring back literally countless examples from a variety of named and anonymous sources, content aggregators and random social media users, and even for-profit opportunities to purchase meme-related ephemera. Like any other type of online memes, detailing their specific origins and creators is often impossible due to their inherent transmissibility and mutability. It is perhaps most beneficial, then, to consider how memes "emerge alongside the digital public that shapes and is shaped by their creation" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 10). Memes thus help create communities that specifically exist alongside stronger insider/outsider dynamics. Indeed, "memes within the troll space compose a holistic system" (Phillips, 2015, p. 22), meaning they make sense only in relation to each other, making them less comprehensible to those outside the network. And so, memes become useful specifically for *populist* identity formation due to their reliance on group affinity and coherence. In this way, this article is less concerned with the particular origins of informal

anti-Fauci memes than how they represent a digital populist ethos, and how such an ethos transforms and is transformed by more formal structures.

Indeed, "memes are also sites of public investment through their circulation outside of their digital origins" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 11), and thus an analysis of the ways anti-Fauci memes reflect contemporary online populism need not rely on always tracking their origins. However, this will become more apparent when examining formal anti-Fauci constructions by campaigns and politicians, as such actions show an important transference of populist imagining online and how such activity is neither entirely grassroots nor top-down structured, but rather a unique interaction between the two.

There is no limit to the formal elements of the anti-Fauci meme; while certain images and ideas replicate and repeat, the only unifying factor amongst them all is the specific targeting of Fauci himself. Whether by name, image-likeness, or both, the hailing of Fauci as a figure to be attacked, criticized, and distrusted is what ties these memes together and thus the community exchanging them. As such, this reinforces the argument that anti-Fauci memes play a crucial role in populist imaginings and community formation, emphasizing the individual enemy over larger, more nuanced political deliberation.

The "Dr. Anthony Fauci Meme Gallery" on Politically Incorrect Humor exemplifies this breadth of format and messaging. Visually one sees a mix of image macros featuring Fauci or other traditional meme templates, political cartoon-style drawings, and photoshops of Fauci in other contexts as a way to emphasize his status as an object of ridicule, scorn, or even fear. What is important is the emphasis on Fauci as an individual through these visual interpretations, and direct referencing, as this builds on anti-fandom principles of participatory culture that connect with populist targeting of classist intellectual figures.

These notions come across in the variety of messages present in many anti-Fauci memes, which can be categorized into three main areas: Confusion, Control, and Hypocrisy. Anti-Fauci memes based around Confusion often emphasize the allegedly mixed messaging from Fauci, a format whose goal is to undermine trust in both Fauci himself as well as science and government for the ultimate purpose of legitimizing disagreement and refusal to follow mandates/guidelines. Memes of this category utilize ideas like Fauci literally (and also figuratively) "moving goalposts" as a reference that changes to his predictions or recommendations are indicators of his inability to have a coherent message. Such memes also tie this idea to simpler exhaustion with updated recommendations and protocols, utilizing the feeling of confusion as a basis for non-compliance with scientific and governmental requests/requirements—another particularly powerful populist belief.

The next set of memes coalesces around the concept of Fauci (and thus, intellectual and governmental elites) as desiring Control over the populace. In these instances, Fauci is presented as a power-hungry authoritarian, with references to his recommendations as "demands," with particular humor being derived from increasingly inane and outlandish suggestions. Other memes are much more direct, like one simply superimposing a message on Fauci's mask: "It's not about safety, it's about control.'' These memes also play into populist messaging as populist rhetoric is often presented as an overthrow of some dominant elite class that has taken power over all forms of life: culture, science, government, and more. Once again, we see the "Other" present as what must be opposed while also framing the populist movement as inherent victims of oppression.

Also endemic to these Control-focused memes is a targeting not just of Fauci himself, but his supposed/imagined followers, often times making references to "sheep" or "zombies." In these memes, Fauci-as-controlling is still the subject of much vitriol and anger, but the positioning is broadened to include those who mindlessly follow larger governmental and scientific guidelines (again embodied in the person of Fauci himself). Once again, populist ideology is strengthened by privileging an us-vs.-them mentality, but one with a particular form of anti-intellectualism. In this case, this is reminiscent of the *popular intellect* (Peck, 2019) in that these sheep following the guidance of Fauci and what he represents are a lesser intellect that does not value freedom. And, thus, through this positioning, the populist identity still retains a form of non-traditional intellectualism that relies on belief and ideology over traditional structures of intellect like education and research institutions.

A final category of anti-Fauci memes focuses on his supposed hypocrisy, making these the most personally targeted. Rather than focus on how Fauci represents scientific and governmental ineptitude (Confusion) and oppression (Control), here the focus is on how Fauci himself is somehow hypocritical by ignoring his own recommendations. These mostly focus on taking any image (regardless of context) of Fauci without a mask making a public appearance presented as clear-cut evidence of a double standard. The most circulated of these come from Fauci attending a Washington Nationals baseball game where he also threw out the first pitch (another moment utilized in many memes mocking his athleticism); in it, Fauci is seen with his mask around his chin, yet there is no context for if anyone is near him or if he was eating, drinking, or any other action within guidelines.

By emphasizing Fauci's supposed hypocrisy, these attacks take on the most personal tone, though they can still be seen as representing not just Fauci's individual hypocrisy but one lobbied against all elites. Again, this fits within populist strategies of accusing elites of playing by "their own set of rules," empowering populist ideologies that seek to undermine and ultimately overthrow established orders.

In all of these cases, there are clear populist messages underlying the purposes beyond attacking Fauci himself.

As such, Fauci anti-fandom and anti-Fauci memes, as a particular encapsulation of that anti-fandom, become powerful carriers of populist messaging, as well as sites around which populist communities can form and collaborate in predominately online spaces. While these memes primarily exist in the exchanges of conservative social media and message boards, they have emerged and been reformed by more formal established, bases of conservative thought, primarily in the campaigns of Republican politicians.

5. Memes From Campaigns and Politicians

While memes are primarily considered inherently grassroots and informal, their language, process, and style can be coopted by formal figures and institutions in more top-down political action. After Barack Obama's presidential wins in 2008 and 2012 were seen as, in part, due to social media strategies, online campaigning has become more commonplace in local, state, and national elections. But it truly came into prominence following his tenure, as the "2016 presidential campaign threw into stark relief the centrality of social media—and of memes—in electoral politics" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 53). Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and primary candidates—most notably Bernie Sanders—utilized memes through their campaign to invigorate and rally their bases. Indeed, "during and after the election, memes became tools for transmitting propaganda produced by the masses as well as institutional actors such as political campaigns" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 54). This form of meme warfare in electoral politics has only increased since then, and anti-Fauci memes have become extremely common amongst conservative populist candidates and politicians.

Perhaps no single political actor has run with the anti-Fauci meme movement as much as Florida governor Ron DeSantis, who has clearly taken a strategy of courting Trump voters directly through his policies and, more importantly, his rhetorical style, gestures, and public image. Much like Trump, DeSantis has utilized memes to speak to a target audience in the conservative populist digital sphere. Like Trump, "who benefitted from and at times, capitalized on, this ecosystem and networked strategies" (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 160), DeSantis has been able to target Fauci through meme-like discourse in more formal campaign structures (advertisements, merchandise, public speeches). In this way, DeSantis, in a sense, launders the memes into something more traditionally understandable and reportable by mainstream news, garnering him both national attention as well as admiration amongst the base.

Anti-Fauci merchandise has been a cornerstone of the DeSantis campaign and public relations message throughout the pandemic. This has taken shape most notably in a line of "Don't Fauci My Florida" objects, including t-shirts, baseball caps, and koozies. The turning of "Fauci" into a verb meaning an attack on personal liberties is taken straight from meme discourse, and also supports populist anti-intellectual notions of anger towards elites on the basis of control—one of the primary messages of anti-Fauci memes.

Perhaps no single object better encapsulates the populist underpinnings of anti-Fauci memes than a drink koozie with the text "how the hell am I going to be able to drink a beer with a mask on?" as it both challenges Covid-19 safety protocols at the same time as reaffirming a populist value of drinking beer. In this one sentence, we see how the anti-intellectualism of anti-Fauci memes takes the form of reaffirming so-called traditional values based on a particular amalgamation of conservative masculinity and working-class iconography. Of course, it cannot be forgotten in all of this that such koozies are being sold to the direct financial (as well as social/cultural) profit of Ron DeSantis and the Republican Party, showing the unique relationship between base and party. Anti-Fauci memes, then, are not only a product of online populist communities but a key site of exchange between actual party elites (ironically) and the conservative base they are aiming to court.

Campaign ads by DeSantis also highlight this exchange, as one in particular builds on the message of Confusion around Fauci's presentation. The 60-second ad features clips of Fauci speaking to the press from across the pandemic, implying his lack of consistency by juxtaposing conflicting recommendations. Of course, this does not take into account the fluid nature of responding to a pandemic with new scientific evidence constantly being considered, but the message is clear, summarized with the tag "Dr. Fauci. He flips, he flops." The image then cuts to a serene beach with Ron DeSantis flip-flops in the sand (also for purchase) and the text "Fauci can pound sand."

Once again, there are many meme-like qualities to the ad, most notably in the aggressive tone in attacking Fauci, its emphasis on his supposed confusion, and the final message of class-based resistance with images of the flip-flops on the beach. The flip-flops themselves—notably the only thing in the ad directly referencing DeSantis—are also objects of non-elite populist imagery. Even the phrase exhorting Fauci to "pound sand" takes a decidedly aggressive colloquialism, tying DeSantis closer to an agitated base through tone as well as the use of more common vernacular.

While all of these objects, of course, require some level of semiotic analysis to interpret their meanings, DeSantis was much more explicit in the populist underpinnings of his constant attacks on Fauci during his speech at the 2022 Conservative Public Action Conference held in Orlando. Here, he declared Florida "defeated Fauci-ism'' while also attacking the "scientific and technical elite" (Lemongello & Gillespie, 2022). Note the emphasis is on Fauci being defeated, not any specific recommendations or federal mandates. Fauci is the target, following the meme-trajectory of distilling a more nuanced, complicated series of scientific and governmental actions into a

personal attack. He then directly ties this to a larger battle against "elites," solidifying the connection between attacking Fauci and populist ideology.

While DeSantis used his power as governor of Florida to attack Fauci, up-and-coming GOP politicians are using Fauci meme warfare to establish their credentials with a suspicious base. Mehmet Oz, best known as daytime television's *Dr. Oz*, announced his candidacy for US Senate in Pennsylvania on November 30, 2021. Since then, a great deal of his campaign has focused on targeting Fauci, a reversal from his earlier support for vaccines, masks, and other recommendations from Fauci and others. This stark shift shows the power of the anti-intellectual populist movement, almost requiring Oz to train his sights on Fauci in order to break out in the Republican primary.

Oz has utilized literal memes in his actions, including an image posted to his Twitter featuring Fauci's face superimposed over the character Charlie Kelly from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, explaining an outlandish conspiracy (Oz, 2022b). This image has been used as a meme for years as a way of indicating someone is presenting bizarre ideas or should not be trusted or listened to. The text alongside the image states, "Masks are supported by science," implying Fauci's belief in masking is antithetical to science and based on conspiracy. This is all the more important when one remembers that Oz himself supported masking earlier in the pandemic. This type of meme warfare being deployed by Republican candidates, and specifically in such a way as to counter and shift their original messaging on an issue, shows the impact online populism in the guise of memes has had on contemporary conservative politics in the US.

Beyond individual memes, Oz has taken on the larger meme-like refrain of "debate me" to another level by frequently demanding a debate with Fauci on the topic of Covid-19 across multiple tweets (Oz, 2022a). One of the most important elements of this Tweet and the accompanying video is the phrase "doctor to doctor," as Oz is positioning their credentials against one another. Once again, we see *populist intellect* (Peck, 2019) in effect, as rather than being entirely anti-intellectual, this particular charge rather seeks to set up an alternative intellect. Rather than seeking to eliminate all forms of intellectual comparison, this alternative intellect positioned by Oz is still trying to seek authority via intellect, yet through non-traditional means. Notably, here it is not so much Fauci's status as a doctor under attack, but his position as antithetical to conservative positions on freedom and a connection to meme-based messaging about Fauci's confusion and hypocrisy. So rather than being purely anti-intellectual in general, it is more anti-*traditional* intellectual. Oz's goal in utilizing the "debate me" meme is to position himself as an intellectual authority via nebulous debate rather than by producing better data, information, or scientific inquiry; intellect still has a role, but it is being redefined for how it is gained/assessed.

It could be easy to dismiss these examples of anti-Fauci meme activity from DeSantis and Oz as mere campaign bluster divorced from actual governmental action, yet anti-Fauci fandom and activity have become key to elements of Republican governance with the creation of what I call *legislative memes*. US House Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene introduced H.R.2316—Fire Fauci Act on April 1st, 2021. Unfortunately, not an elaborate April Fools' prank, the bill literally calls itself the Fire Fauci Act, despite the text instead calling to reduce his salary and begin an audit of his activities as NIAID Director.

I argue this act (or rather, the filing of it publicly) can be seen as a meme itself, or at the least derived from meme activity around Fauci in both grassroots and formal circles. With no hope of actually being passed, the act serves functionally as a meme, aiming to provoke reaction while also hailing a like-minded community by extolling the community's values. In this case, the personal focus of Fauci's anti-fandom, realized through the construction of memes that make personal attacks easier than more nuanced deliberation, has led to a more personal, anti-fandom approach to actual governance based around personal retribution and targeting. These activities are in-line with populist anti-intellectual and anti-elitist thought, where policies and actions are based around a politics of personal grievance and Othering. While one cannot definitively state where anti-Fauci memes began and how much is top-down or bottom-up, the circulation and interaction across these spheres is indicative of a contemporary online populism that is only gaining prominence in contemporary American political life.

6. Conclusion

Returning to Rorty's predictions regarding a populist rise in the US referenced at this article's outset, he points to the larger stakes in allowing such a movement to grow:

> One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. [Slurs for Blacks and Jews] will once again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism which the academic Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet. (Rorty, 1998, p. 90)

In this chilling account, Rorty once again makes particular mention of the intellectual's imagined position within this ideological framework. He predicts the college-educated being painted as the oppressive Others to be challenged, and this is seen in a small part in the rise of anti-Fauci memes in online populist communities. These anti-Fauci memes perform a specific brand of contemporary digital populism that emphasize personal grievance, anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and informal

community formation all at once. Yet, crucially, these acts are *not* entirely grassroots formed; as examples in this article show, anti-Fauci memes are as strong a piece of formal political messaging as grassroots organizing principles.

This widespread adoption of memes in both formal and informal political messaging indicates a growing power of memetic discourse in contemporary politics. Political memes expand even beyond what Shifman identified in 2014 as "about making a point—participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there" (Shifman, 2014, p. 121). What Shifman (2014, p. 150) sees as a "new arena of political discourse" and "bottom-up political influence," has grown in disparate ways. While anti-Fauci memes certainly take the form of political discourse, they are best understood as an expression of anti-fandom and community formation within right-wing populist circles rather than simply a new form of debate. Indeed, rather than further democratic deliberation, the memes discussed in this article mostly exist within a given community, strengthening those identities, and thus increasing polarization.

The untraditional nature of memes does not make them unique in this regard, however. One need only to look at the growth of explicitly right- and left-leaning television, streaming, and digital channels to see the growing division of media ecosystems along ideological boundaries. Right-wing populist memes like the anti-Fauci memes discussed here are part and parcel of a larger right-wing populist media ecosystem, including Fox News, One America News Network, Newsmax, and many more. What anti-Fauci memes show in particular, however, is how the lines between formal and informal political messaging within right-wing populist spheres are becoming more blurred, with neither necessarily leading the way entirely but rather working in tandem. The rise of figures like Trump, Greene, and others is both reinforced by the popularity of memes and, in turn, encourages their further creation. If we are to better understand right-wing populist mediascapes of all kinds—formal and informal, traditional and new—we must become familiar with memes and memetic conversation as they become more fully ingrained into these political communities and their activities.

The unique digital features of memes indicate a shift in understanding contemporary digital populism that falls in line with historical trends in the ideology with updated digital media-based traits. In the end, memes serve as the perfect vessel for this style of online populism, and thus must be considered not only a grassroots phenomenon but one of increasing formal power in the circular exchange between a base and its political leaders.

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Article

The Spectre of Populist Leadership: QAnon, Emergent Formations, and Digital Community

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Abstract
QAnon is an online conspiracy movement centred on cryptic posts published by an unknown figure referred to as "Q." Its anti-hierarchical framework and deployment of an unknown leader can be understood as a substantial departure from other 21st-century populisms that are sustained by the celebrity relationship between a leader (often aspiring to or gaining political office) and its followers (constituted in community through consumption of the leaders' social media posts). Reflecting on contemporary debates and insights within cultural studies and digital communication literature, this article investigates some of the ways in which the spectral leadership of Q presents challenges for understanding and apprehending populist movements. In light of QAnon, there is an emerging need to make sense of populisms that are built on mythical or anonymous characters rather than on identifiable human actors in leadership roles. We begin by discussing the role of key practices of contemporary populist leadership and contrast these with justice-based populisms that are community-led without the figure of an identifiable leader. We argue that, as a populist movement, QAnon fits neither of these frameworks and, instead, has drawn on the affordances of digital media and its intersections with postmodern hyperreality to produce a new formation of populist movement today. Arguing that Q is the simulacra of a leader, we theorise the ways in which QAnon fosters affiliation and action from its adherents who, themselves, take on the role of saviour-leader.

Keywords
digital affordances; identification practices; leadership; networking; populism; QAnon; simulacra

Issue
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1. Introduction

Digital communication affordances have enabled significant shifts in the practices of political communication, affiliation, movement building, and promotion of political causes. These are most ostensible in everyday political marketing (Hughes, 2018) in which engagement and audience interactivity have emerged as an ordinary part of the practice of public discourse on politics and influence through network-building. At the same time, emerging political and populist movements have taken advantage of digital networking, including, notably, the Trumpist Republican movement which utilised regular direct-to-followers social media communication and community building through digital engagement to present a presidential candidate's views in ways not previously deployed in governance and electoral politics (Minot et al., 2021).

Much like the alt-right's use of theatrics and entertainment across social media platforms, 21st-century populist movements make considered use of digital communication for the disruption of recognised political and communicative practices, the sharing of disinformation, and sensationalist messages that appeal to followers at

an emotional level, and for suturing conflicting messages and illogical positions into a coherent ideology (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). Perhaps most importantly, digital media affords populism the capacity to sustain the presence, engagement, and entertainment value of a populist leader who utilises celebrity and builds a brand in the form more often recognised among everyday social media influencers (Abidin, 2018; Cagliuso, 2021) in order to represent themselves in the messianic figure of a political "saviour." Arguably, the practices that have emerged in the past decade are increasingly normative in political engagement across both populist and democratic movements, and across both legitimate parliamentary politics and marginal populist and protest movements.

Less attention, however, has been paid to how some of the most popular and influential populist formations have operated in ways which diverge from that norm. Based on our analysis of existing scholarship on emergent populism and conspiracy theory discourses, and how these two strands inform one another, this article interrogates aspects of the QAnon movement with a view to developing a conceptual understanding of populisms which are not focused and centralised upon an identified leader, but which utilise aspects of digital culture to present a "simulacra" of leadership (Baudrillard, 1988). The QAnon movement first emerged as a conspiratorial subculture on the social media network 4Chan, gaining adherence among disaffected North American voters who came to believe a liberal and elite-driven "deep state" was manipulating politics, journalism, health care, and other aspects of everyday life. Much QAnon rhetoric has been a pastiche of older conspiratorial beliefs of a secret society behind governance that involves satanism, cannibalism, child sex trafficking, and manipulation of institutions in order to establish a new world order (Bracewell, 2021). For instance, QAnon conspiracies and adherents played a key role in the January 2021 capitol riots in Washington, D.C. (Shephard, 2021). Denunciations of the absurdity of QAnon conspiracy theories have, according to Zuckerman (2019), obscured the possibilities of scholarship on what is novel, unusual, and interesting about the movement, and what it reveals about the intersection of politics and contemporary digital culture.

In this article, we argue that what is distinctive about QAnon not merely as a conspiracy theory but as a populist movement is that rather than operating in the "norms" of contemporary right-wing populisms built around a singular leader as "saviour," QAnon has only the "spectre" of a leader: the unknown, anonymous, mysterious, and/or possibly non-existent "Q" who has provided thousands of online messages drawing on and promoting conspiratorial thinking. The anonymous but persistent posting of QAnon missives by Q simultaneously presents a form of populist leadership that is both present (regular communication) and spectral (invisibility and possible non-existence). We propose that this is a new, emerging form of populism—more than a mere variation on existing forms—that takes advantage of the intersection between digital cultures, networking, and the postmodern hyperreality to build a disruptive political movement. Although several studies (e.g., DiMaggio, 2022; Enders et al., 2021) have pointed empirically to the relationship between a rise in the use of social media and right-wing conspiratorial belief, we argue that notions of social media causality are limited by a technological-determinist approach and that explaining QAnon's appeal to its adherents requires a cultural analysis that makes sense of how it is a substantial *variation* on other populist movements. We are therefore interested in the conditions that enable a "leaderless" populism. Using cultural analysis, we argue that: (a) not merely decentralised networks but the conceptual changes to textuality and meaning that occurred alongside the development of digital cultures prepared people for believing in a leader without any evidence of this leader's existence; and (b) in the absence of evidence of who the leader is, followers feel (even more than usual) personally responsible for political action beyond merely supporting a representative politician.

We begin this article with a brief introduction of key understandings of populism and the way in which discourses of populism have traditionally centralised the figure of the leader, followed by a brief summary of alternative community- and justice-based "leaderless" populisms. We argue that QAnon operates outside both of those recognisable populist frameworks. It does so by drawing on the contemporary digital-cultural conceptualisation of the simulacra—a resemblance to something (the image or implication of a leader, in this case) with "nothing behind them" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 169). By shifting away from questions about digital networks producing decentralised communication for polarised political and conspiratorial perspectives, we suggest that the wider digital culture that prompts hyperreality produces the conditions for the QAnon movement to operate in the liminal zone as a leader–leaderless populism. We conclude the article with a discussion as to how QAnon "democratises" certain aspects of the leader's role as political and cultural "saviour" by encouraging identification with the absent leadership in order to adopt the disruptive actions that, in other populisms, are normally undertaken by the leader on the people's behalf.

Furthering our understanding of QAnon's reversal of the recognised practices of populist movements is significant given the identification of QAnon by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation as a domestic terror threat (Barr & Pecorin, 2021), the normativisation of QAnon discourse through fake news channels (Cover et al., 2022), and the mainstreaming of QAnon ideas within the US Republican Party (Rosenberg & Haberman, 2020). Identifying QAnon's distinctive practices of leadership and the ways in which this emerges from the logic of contemporary digital culture rather than concrete digital networks or political discourse helps identify QAnon

not as a unique accident but as constituted in contemporary culture.

2. The Figure of the Populist Leader

The centrality of the figure of a "leader" has marked most of the familiar forms of 20th- and 21st-century populism. Although populism itself has a long and complex history, since the latter half of the 2010s, the term populism has generally been associated with right-wing political movements in Western and Asian democracies (Mouffe, 2018). These are almost always constituted in a form of political relationship between a "charismatic" leader and a social base who are sustained through what Ostiguy (2017, pp. 1–2) described as " 'low' appeals which resonate and receive positive reception within particular sectors of society for social-cultural historical reasons." He notes that in the most extreme versions, the appeal of the leader is one of "fusion" between the personality and the masses, such that the leader is seen by their followers as both "like me" and an "ego ideal," invoking the fantasy that they are simultaneously of the people and, in the sense of protecting or saving the people, above them (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 12). This has been the form found in some of the contemporary examples of right-wing populism where, although strongly contested, they have had success in sustaining movements that are unlikely to persist without their particular brand (Inglehart & Morris, 2016). Examples include the US (Donald Trump), France (Marine Le Pen), India (Narendra Modi's prime ministership), Russia (the alternating presidency and premiership of Vladimir Putin), Australia (Pauline Hanson), Hungary (Viktor Orbán), and Brazil (Jair Bolsanaro), among others.

It is well-recognised in cultural theory that populist leaders serve, in Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) terminology, as an "empty signifier" around which a large movement can cohere despite the illogic of supporting (usually) an elite figure who does not represent the social demographics of that movement. Empty signifiers are symbols so divested of any meaning that those who see and read them are able to impute their own meanings and relevance, establishing equivalence and a sense of representation. That is, the figure of the populist leader is always considered "unreal" in the sense that they are open to a multiplicity of significations in ways which expand the possibilities for members of a movement to more easily forge an identification and sense of belonging with a leader. This, of course, is not unlike other forms of political and partisan leadership and the inculcation of support among those who are otherwise different or feel disenfranchised from the class or sociality to which the leader belongs (Cover, 2020b). More recent research, however, has argued that although populist leaders are by necessity empty signifiers, that emptiness is not as neutral as depicted by Laclau and Mouffe (2001)—rather, the gendered, racialised, and adversarial identities of populist leaders prevent their identification with the people as a whole (McKean, 2016). This alternative perspective has prompted attention as to how populist leaders in the 21st century use their personal identities as a wedge to foster adversity between followers and an excluded other, for example, President Trump's religious conversion to "pro-life" perspectives during his campaign, and the labour that went into producing a coherent and intelligible narrative for that new identity position, put the significations of his identity at the forefront of his claim to represent "the people" (Colvin, 2020).

The figure of the populist leader is understood to perform several cultural and communicative functions in sustaining a populist movement. Recent scholarship can be synthesised to identify four that have been significant across 20th-century populist movements. Firstly, the leader must generate a narrative of "direct connection with the people" (Anselmi, 2018, p. 8). This is typically through the leaders positioning themselves as best placed to serve as mediators between a subset of the population who are framed as "the people" and the institutions of governance which, through a leader's rhetoric, are framed as corrupted, damaged, or not working effectively for the people (Weyland, 2001). From the national socialism of Adolf Hitler (Fischer, 1986) to the anti-immigration politics of Pauline Hanson in Australia (Sengul, 2020, 2022; Stratton, 1998), the leader makes the rhetorical claim that they mediate between the people and the machinery of government in the form of a "saviour" who will restore traditional practices and/or represent the people among a political class who are framed as disfavouring the people (Schneiker, 2020).

Secondly, the leader's role is to deploy adversarial rhetoric to draw on an existing ambivalence towards authorised progressive social changes in order to build a conversative movement (Poynting et al., 2004, p. 71), often one that re-deploys older racisms, anti-diversity, anti-immigrant, nationalist, and anti-cosmopolitan discourses together into a political force that the leader vows they will set right or eradicate from the nation-state (Müller, 2016). Populism, then, can be understood as a "cultural reaction of those social sectors who perceive the promotion of these values [cosmopolitan liberalism] as a threat and propose a more simplified and backward vision, of the world, dominated by an anti-establishment feeling against the cosmopolitan elite" (Anselmi, 2018, p. 98; see also Waisbord, 2018, p. 17). The leader's function in this, then, is to convince the sector of the public that will adhere to their populism to perceive themselves as the "authentic" people who, in their authenticity, are best placed to see the "truth" in contrast to those who have traditionally benefitted from the status quo but remain misguided, misled, or "ignorant," particularly if they hold progressive, inclusive, and multicultural views.

Thirdly, the leader traditionally draws on an existing sense of disenfranchisement or grievance over socio-economic conditions to build a movement of people who are positioned (sometimes rightly) as having been "forgotten." For example, key popular leaders in right-wing politics, including former Australian

Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Pauline Hanson, and US President Richard Nixon have deployed the rhetoric of the "forgotten people" or "silent majority" to describe a lower-middle-class authenticity that is a predominantly white settler and suburban, but whose values, economic stability, and lifestyle are framed as vulnerable to (adverse) changes brought by the presence of liberal thinking, elite social actors, the welfare class, immigrants, gender- and sexually-diverse persons, and so on (Cover, 2020b; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This rests on a leader who is capable of projecting vulnerability onto a population group or electorate in such a way as to present others as undeserving or to make forgettable the in-built "unequal distribution of vulnerability" (Butler et al., 2016, pp. 4–5).

Fourthly, the leader generates a discourse of anti-elitism, despite often being from among the elite political and financial actors in the first place. The leadership rhetoric typically claims neglect or suppression by one or more perceived blocs of elites, most often imagined to be dominated by left-liberal figures—in the US context and the experience of Trump populism, this has been comprised of the Washington, D.C. political establishment, the New York press, and the film and television production industry in Hollywood, California. The elite are positioned in leadership rhetoric within an adversarial dichotomy between the elite and authentic subjects suppressed by that elite.

Across each of these four functions of the leader, some of which are in discursive conflict with each other, the leader is positioned as messianic and redeeming (Anselmi, 2018, pp. 55–56). In the context of the 21st century, this involves a digital framework by which the figure of the leader works with a form of sensationalist entertainment and the careful cultivation of a brand (Bause, 2021). Where 20th-century populists had to rely on broadcast media technologies to maintain their presence among the people, digital media has permitted even greater persistence and regularity of messaging and public engagement.

Social media, then, serves as a powerful communicative tool not only to disseminate and reinforce the movement's rhetoric but, importantly, to generate a sense of community and anger among those who are called on to recognise the mutuality of their grievances or disenfranchisement. The combination of persistent repetition of messages and the active sense of community building among those who share, re-circulate, comment upon, and build upon those messages is key to the contemporary success of populism (Mangerotti et al., 2021). What is key here, however, is that despite the proliferation of active voices, contestations and debates that mark social media and digital communication channels, the leader remains the vocal authority on political or social issues in their simplistic, sensationalist, and appealing rhetoric and use of disinformation (Cover et al., 2022) while dissenting arguments are dismissed as "fake news" or "biased" criticism (Farhall et al., 2019; Haw, 2021).

Indeed, social media has presented affordances to 21st-century populisms that re-position the figure of the leader as less reliant on being an "empty signifier" available for widespread identification by the people. Part of that is the expectation of authenticity and everydayness that marks online self-representation (Cover, 2016). This turns the function of authenticity away from the need to represent the sector of populist adherents as the authentic people and, instead, to represent the leader as authentic and grounded through persistent reference to their everyday lives, their homes, their families, their personal squabbles, their feelings—tweeted and articulated alongside policy statements. In this respect, the 21st-century populist leader straddles the framework of the empty signifier and the framework of the authentic and everyday individual, putting their identities at the forefront of the campaign in a way which varies from, say, mid-century fascist populism in which the everyday "self" of European fascist leaderships was obscured.

3. Leaderless Populisms

Despite the scholarship and public discourse that focuses on the figure of the leader in describing and analysing contemporary populisms, there are examples of populisms that arise and operate without the central figure of a leaderly personage. The term "populism" itself is, of course, an empty signifier (Anselmi, 2018, p. 32), yet often is used in a way that eschews the fact there are also positive, politically progressive forms of populism that are not always marked by the exclusions and marginalisations inherent in right-wing movements (McGuigan, 1992). This is not to suggest that there is a clear-cut, polarised distinction between right-wing populisms (Trumpism, QAnon, Nazism) and progressive movements (The Occupy Movement, Black Lives Matter, etc.) since the appeal to addressing the needs of the disenfranchised characterises both forms (Mouffe, 2018, p. 34). Rather, we can distinguish between the kinds of leader-led populisms described above, and other kinds, such as progressive populisms where a movement often persists without the need for a leader. This is not, of course, a universal truism: For example, the left-wing Five Star Movement in Italy had a clear leader Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte while espousing progressive welfare and environmental policies. When looking, however, at the broader range of progressive movements, there is a greater likelihood that it sustains without being characterised by a leader or leadership clique (Mouffe, 2018). Thus, while much popular writing on populism views it as typically a matter of "supply" (caused by the communication activity of a leader who generates a popular mood or political grievance among their adherents), alternative approaches have also demonstrated that a "cultural demand" perspective avoids reducing the idea of populism to simplistic articulations of manipulation by demagogues, viewing it instead as a formation that emerges from within socio-cultural and historical frameworks

(Ostiguy, 2017, p. 2). In this context, populism, then, can sometimes take the form of a broad cultural expression without connection to political leadership.

One example is found in the cultural form of "penal populism," which can be characterised as a right-leaning populism operating through a leaderless cultural movement. Such a populism emerges against what is seen as a society or governance system that fails adequately to punish activities broadly seen as crimes, seeks reparation for past and present cultural wrongdoings, or calls for protections for those seen as victims of crimes (Anselmi, 2018, p. 73). Much like right-wing populism, this particular form has the focal point of addressing the failure of existing systems and regimes (particularly judicial and policing) to protect a "majority" from what are often framed as crimes of a minority (Anselmi, 2018, p. 76), yet tends to be less conservative and authoritarian and more an "emancipatory" for that demands political or social change (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Similarly, aspects of Black Lives Matter (Hooker, 2016), the #MeToo Movement (Hillstrom, 2018), and emergent new diversities in gender and sexual identity (Cover, 2020a), among others, are forms of populism that are built on collectivised action and emanate from culture without the requirement of a centralising/polarising figure of a leader. Although many of the tactics of disruption to prompt social change are similar to those found among, say, the alt-right, the absence of a leader to fulfil this work presents a more democratised framework for progressive populisms.

In many ways, the absence of a leader works because they emerge in the context of a cultural crisis by which structural inequalities and injustices have been revealed (Gramsci, 1971). The opportunity is taken up, then, for a widespread group to present opportunities for formative rather than destructive shifts in power blocs (Hall, 1979). Although they tend to be naturally untrusting of extant authority, knowledge frameworks and institutions (e.g., policing, sexual harassment policies, transgender health services, etc.) they are much less reliant on a leader to manufacture authenticity, usually because an identity politics framework has permitted the sharing of stories of lived experience on a scale that becomes a truth formation.

Significantly, many current justice-based populisms have emerged strongly in the 21st century, not because the justice claims are new, but because they too have been able to take advantage of the capacity of digital communication to bring together disparate voices of the marginalised to share narratives of lived experience in ways which form coherent demands for political and social change (Cover, 2020a) and in some cases, form "counter-publics" to collectively resist harmful and exclusionary forms of populism (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016). In that context, the utilisation of online identity practices, communication, and the praxis of online and collectivised storytelling produces mutual identification. Although not necessarily egalitarian or unified, these justice-based populisms can engage political discourse despite the absence of a redemptive, saviour-leader figure to represent, primarily because the claim is that the injustices protested by these movements are widespread enough to be based on shared experience that does not need to be fabricated. In that context, they heavily imply a second contemporary model of populism that is distinct from the familiar norms of right-wing populism, indicating the possibilities of a populist movement constituted without the "star power" of a leader.

4. QAnon and the Simulacra of the Populist Leader

We contend that QAnon populism is neither a conspiracy theory nor a populist movement in the recognisable form that adheres to and is sustained by a public figure as a "leader" in the 20th- and 21st-century exemplars. Nor does it fit within the framework of the populisms identified above that are constituted in community and justice claims and not the redemptive claims of a leader. Rather, QAnon is a populist movement built on the spectral and hyperreal presence of a leader who is neither a leader nor fully absent. As with other contemporary populisms, digital networks and social media have enabled their emergence by providing platforms for persistent communication. Yet the affordance of digital media that is most significant to the rise of this particular populism is not the capability for messaging alone, nor the manufacturing of an aggrieved community of followers, but digital culture's practices of hyperreality itself. And to say this is to begin to apprehend the spectral leadership of Q as the logical outcome of an age of hyperreality and simulacra. This is not, of course, to suggest that right-wing populisms have a "real" leader, while QAnon (in the model of some progressive populisms) sustains a movement without one. Rather, it suggests that while all leaderly populisms have a leader who fulfils the role of an empty signifier enabling a certain kind of identification by the movement that also always excludes a portion of the population and uses that wedge to generate adversity and adherence (McKean, 2016), QAnon has benefited by having a wholly absent or "hyperreal" leader who is not merely an empty signifier but is empty of any possible signification in that absence.

Although often understood as a conspiracy theory, we contend that QAnon is more clearly a populist movement if understood from the perspective of the actions it prescribes and fosters. Zuckerman (2019) understands QAnon as a "big tent" conspiracy theory drawing together a metanarrative that combines racism, politics, conspiracy, and outrage. While this drawing together of disparate social factors into a worldview is, indeed, one way in which to read QAnon, we suggest that conspiracy theory may be too imprecise a label for QAnon due to the ways in which it has mechanised political, violent, and electoral action among its adherents. This makes it substantially different from conspiracy theories such as the Moon Landing hoax, the Flat

Earthers, the Illuminati, and New World Order conspiracy claims, or the *X-Files*-style "deep state" claims, all of which are about giving adherents a sense of control over things which appear outside their immediate capacity to *trust* but otherwise not calling on personal intervention (Cover et al., 2022)—That is, no one is motivated to attack NASA headquarters to expose that the moon landing was a lie; rather, they such conspiracy theories inspire a sense of mystery without outrage. In this respect, QAnon is more closely aligned with the right-wing populist movements in the form in which they have emerged in the past decade: Adherents do not merely articulate that non-adherents have been "fooled" by a conspiracy, but that they are motivated through outrage to generate action. Indeed, the alignment of QAnon with the Trump presidency and post-presidential aspirations makes QAnon more than a conspiracy theory. The liminal space in which a leaderless leadership emerges in QAnon calls not on undecidability between conspiracy and populism but on recognising the leaderly framework as the product of a culture of hyperreality and simulacra.

Baudrillard (1988, p. 167) described the late 20th century as "the age of simulations," in which references to the real were liquidated in favour of their "artificial resurrection" as non-meaningful systems of signs. Although QAnon is constituted in the logic of digital culture, Baudrillard predicted the outcome of this logic from its seeds in late 20th-century broadcast media, pointing to the ways in which the emerging transcendence of reality will in time have an impact on civic life, political institutions, and practices of communication and meaning-making (Morris, 2021). The spectrality of the mysterious Q is, in this sense, the logical outcome of the intersection between hyperreal simulacra as a communicative norm and digital culture's capacity to present a leaderly presence through the virality of messages (in this case, through the distribution and re-circulation of literally thousands of so-called "Qdrops").

Like many of the other new right-wing movements, QAnon draws upon and shares several similarities: (a) an anti-elitism built on grievance claims that elites are working for themselves (in this case not so much, just sustaining the socio-economic status quo, but that they are engaged in devil worship and child-trafficking); (b) a conspiratorial suspicion of a deep state manipulating institutions (for which Q claims specialist knowledge); (c) a sense that followers have access to a truth disavowed by non-followers and are thus the gatekeepers of traditional values (including, in this case, Christianity); (d) a rhetoric of redemption and a belief in a reckoning-to-come that will radically overturn extant institutions, practices, social frameworks, and progressive developments (MacMillen & Rush, 2021). The QAnon discourse draws, then, on much older conspiratorial beliefs to present an ideological pastiche of conflicting, often-irrational, principles related to a struggle against Satanism and child abduction (Fassin, 2021, p. 132), as well as a hidden cabal or "deep state" manipulating political institutions from the behind the scenes.

In addition to its moral panic discourse, QAnon deploys the processes of sensationalist spectacle (Debord, 1994), typically deployed through its more outlandish conspiracy theories, such as the fantasy that John F. Kennedy or his son would be resurrected to usher in a second Trump presidency (Pitofsky, 2021). As with other populisms, moral panics designed to invoke emotive responses of anxiety, fear, and outrage are sutured to practices of sensationalism that are designed to evoke pleasure in the emotive responses. Like tabloid readers and the consumers of much online fake news, the return to ever more sensationalist and spectacular stories is core to the process of retaining adherence, regardless of the unbelievability and irrationality of the stories (Cover et al., 2022, p. 54). That is, from a cultural perspective, it is not the transmission of text and content that matters but the ritual practices of readership, sharing, and communion among adherents through the consumption of QAnon sensationalism itself (Carey, 1988, p. 18), all of which stand in place of the more typical consumption of a leader's celebrity.

QAnon is thus distinct in that its leader is spectral, anonymous, possibly non-existent, and possibly non-essential to the sustained activities of the movement. Q is a mysterious figure who first surfaced on 4Chan on 28 October 2017, claiming they had seen evidence that Hillary Clinton would soon be arrested and tied at a military tribunal for the supposed transgressions described in Pizzagate. Thereafter, Q posted regular missives or "Qdrops" that focused on claims related to former US President Barack Obama and pronouncements that Trump was on a secret mission to expose and punish alleged conspirators (LaFrance, 2020; Rothschild, 2021). The QAnon conspiracy proliferated through social media circulation as users engaged with and virally spread Q's persistent messages. While Donald Trump serves the messianic "saviour" role in the QAnon movement, he does not fulfil its "absent" leader role, positioned as a tool of the movement rather than the person who offers the "need" for change, despite the close alignment of Trumpism and QAnon discourses among supporters. Indeed, most public coverage of QAnon identifies the anonymous "Q" in the language of movement leadership (e.g., Thompson, 2022).

Where Q performs a leadership function is in the claim to authority and specialised knowledge of the conspiracies discussed, much like the more traditional right-wing populisms. Where QAnon is more akin to the leaderless community-based populist movements is in the absence of an identified, charismatic figure offering to serve the people politically on their behalf. It is unknown if Q is a genuine person (LaFrance, 2020). We argue that even if there is a singular individual behind the "Qdrops" this figure is still pure hyperreality—or what Baudrillard (1988, p. 166) described as "a real without origin or reality." That is, in the unknowability of Q,

the figure of the leader is an empty signifier that is not open to members' practices of signification but can only ever signify a disembodied embodiment. This, we argue in the next section, generates a movement of personalised action as followers' bodies stand in for the absent body of the leader, rather than the adherence and electoral support that characterises most right-wing populisms in the 21st century. Although the question of whether or not Q is a real person has energised some media speculation (LaFrance, 2020), the authenticity of their leadership is apparently unimportant to QAnon adherents—as one follower tweeted: "NO ONE cares who Q is. WE care about the TRUTH" (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018).

In this respect, we argue that Q is the example par excellence of the simulacra. The term "simulacra" refers to imagery with "nothing behind them"; it does not hide the truth but stands in place of truth and becomes truth (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 169). As simulacra, the spectrality of Q is the consummate digital identity: curated through presence (the regularity of messaging) and devotion (through a cultivated following of those who like, share, and support). In being distinct from the other concurrent right-wing populist movements, then, QAnon's lack of a redemptive or messianic leader is made possible by the pastiche of "Qdrops" that stands in for a leader that is enabled and amplified by digital networks and a media ecology marked by disinformation. In other words, hyperreality and simulation achieve fruition as a cultural logic not in the long-anticipated places of virtual reality and gaming, but in the very real and very serious site of political discourse.

5. Democratisation of the Saviour Leader

In this final section, we would like to address some of the ways in which the simultaneous presence and absence of Q enable a motivated, active, and engaged movement in ways seen less strongly among other contemporary populisms. The other forms of right-wing populism depend on a leader who purports to represent disenfranchised everyday people to work on their behalf, usually in reinstalling a traditionalist past or removing liberal-elite political actors. The people are called upon primarily in a sustained electoral capacity (to vote that leader into office). QAnon, however, does not put forward a figure who works for the people nor one who seeks election. Rather, Q's absence fosters a framework in which followers are encouraged to take responsibility for change themselves. This is not to suggest that Q sets imperatives for extremist action, political violence, or other activities. Indeed, according to one study, among nearly 5,000 Qdrops that were coded by the researchers, messages that were explicit "calls to action" comprised only 1.4%, and these were mostly to pray or to vote for Donald Trump (Linvill et al., 2021). Rather, it is the nearly 50% that were coded as "hidden knowledge" and the nearly 25% that were "inspirational" that are most significant to the building of an active movement, whereby followers are positioned in the absence of a leader representing them to take on board the knowledge and inspiration to guide personal, individual action.

We refer to this new phenomenon as the "democratisation of the saviour role." That is, unlike populist movements that adhere to a messianic leader figure who makes the promise to "save" (for example, to "make America great again"), Q's absence provides the space for QAnon followers to see themselves as personally responsible for engaging with the issues, for performing messianic martyrdom and serving as "saviour." Indeed, the QAnon slogan itself, "Where we go one, we go all" (believed to originate in the 1996 film *White Squall*, about boys bonding and finding equality during a sailing ship catastrophe), is recognised as connoting an anti-hierarchical structure that advocates lone action and the imperative to support those lone actions among the remainder of the followers (Hosenball, 2021). This fosters a sense of personal responsibility among adherents rather than mere "support." This responsibility or action can be seen in a number of examples of QAnon activity: reading or interpreting clues and engaging in one's "own research" (Zuckerman, 2019), taking the initiative to raid spaces believed to be hubs of conspiratorial activity (Goldman, 2016), engaging in post-Trump state electoral campaigning (Pilkington, 2022), speaking at conservative conferences in the US (Cowen, 2021), and being actively encouraged or obliged to on-share the "truth" of the movement (Zuckerman, 2019).

QAnon supporters take up the movement's imperative for personal responsibility in a number of ways. During the 2020 US presidential election, many QAnon advocates engaged in the production of disinformation, including particularly people who had never before been involved in online political work (Thomas, 2020; Tollefson, 2021). Individual QAnon followers have been implicated in public violence, both acting in concert (such as their involvement as an organised group in the January 2021 capitol riots) but more often independently, again in ways which can be read as taking on the saviour-leader on their own. For example, since 2020, there have been several North American cases of QAnon followers arrested for kidnapping children they erroneously believed were at risk from satanists, paedophiles, and child traffickers (Beckett, 2020). In March 2019, a 24-year-old adherent of QAnon was arrested for murdering a prominent crime family member because, as noted by his lawyer, he believed the victim was "a prominent member of the deep state" and therefore "an appropriate target for a citizen's arrest" (Watkins, 2019). Through his engagement with QAnon rhetoric, he had formed the belief that he would be personally protected by Trump and QAnon operatives (Watkins, 2019). A notable precursor to the figure of the QAnon adherent acting in a personal saviour-leader role is the December 2016 case of Edgar Maddison Welch, who was arrested at a Washington, D.C. pizzeria after entering the premises

wielding a rifle. He claimed he was in search of what he had, through QAnon disinformation, believed was the basement headquarters of the paedophile and child trafficking ring headed by Hillary Clinton. Having heard the story, he felt compelled to take it upon himself to "save" the children he believed were imprisoned beneath the restaurant. Drawing on the saviour rhetoric normally reserved for a populist leader, Welch claimed in subsequent interviews that his heart was "breaking over the thought of innocent people suffering" and had, therefore, felt compelled to "rescue" the children (Goldman, 2016). The case of Welch and the conspiracy on which he drew merged with QAnon conspiracy theories, arguably as much for the modelling of saviour-leadership as the theory's compatibility with QAnon's "big tent" convergence of disparate sources (Zuckerman, 2019).

Again, the contemporary affordances of digital culture to produce a reflective community not only enable the formation of a group perceiving itself as an outsider group but, in the case of QAnon, radically alters the sensibilities of non-belonging, hierarchical displacement, and disenfranchisement from the political elite by constructing a conceptual framework for affiliation that does not replicate hierarchical thinking and managed strategic action (as most political parties do). Rather, the spectrality of the leader simultaneously authorises the pastiche of beliefs while producing a form of identification that differs from the "following" of a leader and, instead, manufactures a performative subjectivity in which adherence means becoming QAnon itself. That is, the radically different structure of QAnon as a movement and its natural emanation from the digital-cultural logic of hyperreality encourages its adherents to identify themselves not only as members of an egalitarian, mutually supportive community, but to fulfil the saviour-leader function that remains unfulfilled by Q's spectrality.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that QAnon fits neither in the framework of right-wing messianic or charismatic leadership populisms nor in the community populisms that respond to crises of justice. Rather, by suggesting that concepts of hyperreality and simulacra help provide an approach to understanding it as a cultural formation, we have begun the complex process of critically engaging with ways in which to make sense of this movement.

Arguably, the hyperreality of QAnon that gives it a natural fit with contemporary digital culture presents the greatest crisis for contemporary political engagement, producing a shift in practice that, given the complex difficulties of debunking conspiratorial thinking in an era of disinformation, stems the possibility of addressing the movement through discrediting the leadership (Daniels, 2018). Here, the democratic distribution of the leadership functions resulting from the spectral nature of Q does not produce fragmentation of the movement's ideology—as often happens with justice-oriented populisms—and instead makes it impossible to fully apprehend what QAnon is as a cultural form. Locating QAnon (and Q) as the hyperreal simulacra of contemporary postmodern digital culture positions the movement as something that cannot be fully apprehended in the rationalist logic by which assessment of all other political and activist movements are judged and evaluated.

Indeed, it is only by turning to a cultural critique that accounts for how a seemingly "alien" political movement emerges from the logic of contemporary digital culture that we can begin the process of locating it, and its risks, within the everyday. If we are to apprehend and dissuade future conspiratorial populisms, then understanding the conditions for the emergence of a leaderless-led right-wing populism is essential. We have argued that looking to the political discourse (to label it wrong) is as fruitless as suggesting that digital networks and polarised digital practices—a techno-pessimistic and technologically-determinist assumption—are causal to the rise of QAnon. Rather, we have suggested that the digital culture itself that embraces hyperreality and simulacra has, as predicted, created the conditions in which the authenticity of a movement's leadership is no longer material among its adherents, establishing a framework in which an absent or anonymous figure can generate a movement.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Article

Populist Disinformation: Are Citizens With Populist Attitudes Affected Most by Radical Right-Wing Disinformation?

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Abstract
Disinformation emphasizing radical populist narratives may threaten democratic values. Although extant literature has pointed to a strong affinity between disinformation and the populist radical right, we know little about the effects of such deceptive information. Against this backdrop, this article relies on an experiment in the Netherlands (*N* = 456) in which participants were exposed to radical right-wing populist disinformation versus decontextualized malinformation. Mimicking the participatory logic of disinformation campaigns in the digital society, we also varied the source of the message (a neutral news message versus a social media post of an ordinary citizen). Main findings indicate that exposure to radical right-wing populist messages can prime support for radical-right-wing issue positions, but ordinary citizen sources do not amplify disinformation's effects. Our findings indicate that malign populist messages may have a delegitimizing impact on democracy, irrespective of how they are presented.

Keywords
disinformation; ordinary citizens; populist attitudes; right-wing populism; social media; the Netherlands

Issue
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1. Introduction

The dissemination of political disinformation has been associated with severe ramifications for deliberative democracy (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Especially (radical) right-wing populist actors have been accused of exploiting the mechanisms of social media to disseminate polarizing and misleading content to destabilize democracies, fuel polarized divides, or delegitimize the established political order (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Although extant research has offered important insights into the effects of political disinformation (e.g., Barfar, 2019; Schaewitz et al., 2020), we know little about which segments of society are affected most by right-wing populist narratives expressed through disinformation. Against this backdrop, this article relies on an experimental design to assess the effects of different forms of dis- and malinformation. More specifically, we explore whether the effects of deceptive information are strongest for people with higher levels of existing populist beliefs.

In this article, we define disinformation as fabricated or manipulated information that aims to deceive recipients (e.g., Freelon & Wells, 2020; Hancock & Bailenson, 2021). In political contexts, deceptive information is often associated with right-wing populist narratives that stress a central opposition between ordinary people versus failing elites and dangerous others (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018). More specifically, right-wing populists often use deceptive information to attack the established order (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Next to looking at the affinity between disinformation and right-wing populist communication, this article will explore the effects of decontextualized malinformation, which we understand as the decontextualized use of factually accurate or authentic information used to cause harm (e.g., Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The experiment is situated in the Netherlands, a Western European country with historically high levels of electoral support for radical right-wing populist parties (see e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). In this context, we focus on an issue position owned by radical right-wing

populists: anti-immigration sentiments connected to a populist interpretation of socio-political reality. Making use of actual statements made by a moderate conservative politician (the former leader of the Christian Democrats), we randomly exposed participants to (a) a decontextualized authentic message in which right-wing populist statements were expressed (referred to as malinformation), (b) right-wing populist disinformation, and (c) an unrelated message based on authentic information (control condition). As a second factor, we varied the message's embedding (the speech was either embedded in a news article or endorsed by an ordinary citizen). As key dependent variables, we measure the perceived credibility of the message and its effects on political beliefs in line with the right-wing populist agenda that was emphasized.

Making use of this design, we experimentally explore the impact of right-wing populist disinformation, especially among citizens with existing populist beliefs related to the claims of the deceptive message. As malign actors may aim to polarize the electorate, and herewith strengthen existing cleavages in society (e.g., Freelon & Wells, 2020), they may mostly target deceptive information to citizens with a tendency to agree with their anti-establishment rhetoric. As an important contribution to the literature on populism and disinformation, we arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of how disinformation may feed on technological affordances and existing societal grievances to reinforce polarized divides in society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Disinformation and (Radical) Right-Wing Populism

We understand disinformation as the intentional and goal-directed fabrication or manipulation of information (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Different from misinformation, disinformation is intentionally false and deceptive. Thus, the creator or disseminator of disinformation (i.e., a foreign state) manipulates information with the intended outcome to deceive and make an impact on targeted recipients. We specifically look at disinformation in the political context, which may be created and disseminated to destabilize governments; reinforce distrust, cynicism, and polarization; or delegitimize the established political order by amplifying distrust and cynicism (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

This specific form of disinformation is arguably prominent in radical right-wing populist narratives (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Here, we understand radical-right-wing populism in terms of its ideational core. Its discourse combines populist ideas that emphasize the antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites (e.g., Mudde, 2004) with a nativist anti-immigration agenda (e.g., Betz, 1994; Rydgren, 2005). Next to emphasizing populism's core idea, then, right-wing populism cultivates an exclusionist narrative. Right-wing populism can refer to different out-groups, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, or religious groups. It can further exclude people based on gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. As anti-immigration and nativism are very prominent features of right-wing populism in Europe and the Dutch case more specifically, we focus on the exclusion of immigrants and refugees in this article (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017).

We focus on right-wing populism in a communication context. Here, we regard the core communication style or frame of populism as the emphasis on the blameless people versus culpable elites, which entails the attribution of blame for negative outcomes to elite actors, such as the government or the EU (Hameleers et al., 2017). Populist communication may profit from the affordances of digital and social media. As social media allow for direct interaction with ordinary people whilst circumventing elites, social media in particular may offer a favorable setting for the communication of populist ideas (e.g., Blassnig et al., 2019; Engesser et al., 2017).

Arguably, the prevalence of disinformation should be understood within its own communication and political contexts and the rise of radical right-wing populist movements and sentiments (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). In line with this, distrust in the establishment, media organizations, and science have been reinforced and politicized by right-wing populist movements that attack the media, science, and other established institutions (e.g., Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Due to the high visibility of attacks on scientific institutions and the media, especially among right-wing populist supporters, the counter-factual statements of disinformation may in particular appeal to citizens that oppose the mainstream media, experts, and scientists. These alternative narratives can be understood as counter-factual or delegitimizing as they forward a position that runs counter to conventional empirical evidence and expert knowledge (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). Moreover, as it typically attacks expert consensus or factual knowledge disseminated by elites, for example by referring to expert knowledge as fake news or pseudo-science, disinformation narratives may delegitimize the establishment and attack conventional knowledge. As such disinformation narratives resonate with right-wing populism's focus on ordinary people and its opposition toward established knowledge and elite actors, counter-factual narratives are relevant to consider in a right-wing populist framework.

2.2. The (Relative) Credibility of Right-Wing Populist Disinformation

Disinformation comes in different forms and fabricated or manipulated content does not always completely deviate from the truth. Here, the distinction between disinformation and malinformation may be relevant to consider (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Whereas

disinformation uses false information to cause harm, malinformation relies on the truth but employs truthful information strategically to cause harm. The use of malinformation can be understood in the context of the truth-default theory (Levine, 2014), which postulates that people are more likely to accept the honesty of information than to doubt it unless suspicion is actively triggered. When elements of the truth are used to deceive, suspicion may be circumvented—which increases the likelihood that false information is accepted. Exploiting this bias, political actors can make (vague) linkages to truthful information in order to make lies seem believable or use truthful information to cause harm.

In this setting, we specifically compare completely fabricated content (disinformation in which a moderate political actor is shown expressing radical right-wing populist positions) to a political speech taken out of its original context (malinformation). We particularly focus on right-wing populist disinformation for which inaccurate information connecting immigration to violent crimes is paired with a right-wing populist issue position. We consider this as disinformation as it: (a) includes information that is factually inaccurate, false, and/or not substantiated with expert knowledge; and (b) it relates to the intended use of false or misleading information with a political agenda (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

The question remains how credible and persuasive these different messages are. Extant research on disinformation found that false information is seen as relatively credible, especially when it relies on some aspects of the truth, repeats familiar content, or resonates with people's prior beliefs or available cognitive schemata (e.g., Hameleers, 2020; Schaewitz et al., 2020). However, we lack a baseline understanding of the relative credibility of disinformation versus malinformation and authentic unrelated messages that are more representative of a political actor's profile. Against this backdrop, we do not formulate directional hypotheses on the effects of disinformation versus authentic messages and malinformation. We rather introduce an exploratory research question to map the relative persuasiveness of (a) right-wing populist disinformation, (b) an authentic decontextualized political message with a right-wing populist position (decontextualized malinformation), and (c) an authentic unrelated message (control condition). More specifically, we ask:

> RQ1: What are the effects of exposure to radical right-wing populist disinformation on (a) message credibility and (b) agreement with radical right-wing political views?

2.3. The Effects of Populist Disinformation on Different Levels of Populist Attitudes

In line with extant research, we understand the effects of right-wing populism as the *activation* of beliefs, mental maps, and associations that are cognitively accessible and salient among receivers (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Müller et al., 2017). Specifically, exposure to messages that frame issues in populist ways is expected to activate accessible cognitive schemata that are related to these messages. We understand these schemata as prior levels of populist attitudes among receivers (see also Krämer, 2014). Populist attitudes—which we understand as the perception of an antagonistic societal and political divide between the pure people and the corrupt elite (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz et al., 2018)—can be seen as the "frames in mind" that correspond to the "frames in communication" that are emphasized in right-wing populist disinformation.

Considering that framing effects are expected to occur when frames in communication can activate or trigger frames in mind (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999), we believe that the availability and accessibility of prior levels of populist attitudes make people more susceptible to persuasion by disinformation campaigns that echo people's populist anti-establishment beliefs. In line with this reasoning, we expect that right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on message credibility and the activation of radical right-wing issue positions among people with more accessible populist attitudes. We therefore hypothesize:

> H1: Exposure to right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on (a) message credibility and (b) agreement with radical right-wing political views among participants with more pronounced levels of populist attitudes.

2.4. Inauthentic Coordinated Behavior: Embedding Disinformation on Social Media

Research on the effects of right-wing populist communication has found that the reliance on ordinary citizen cues is effective, especially when people identify with ordinary people as a source of information (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). We can explain this effect as a social identification mechanism: People are most likely to be influenced when they receive information from allegedly like-minded sources. When a source is seen as an in-group member, receivers may be more likely to accept the message than when such source cues are absent (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Hence, when false information is presented as information coming from "people like me," receivers may be less likely to systematically verify the truthfulness of all statements.

The disinformation technique responding to this social identity mechanism has been referred to as the "misrepresentation of identities" (McKay & Tenove, 2021). By using inauthentic profiles falsely signaling like-minded social identities, news users may become unable to critically assess the political interests, biases, and agendas of the speaker, which offers disinformation agents an opportunity to deceive the public when relying on (inauthentic) cues of the "vox populi." In this

article, we look at (deceptive) references to ordinary people as the embedding of disinformation. This embedding entails the presentation of deceptive information as part of a (fake) social media post by an allegedly ordinary citizen. We expect that right-wing populist disinformation presented as authentic content coming from an ordinary citizen is more effective than disinformation presented as regular news by an unknown source. We hypothesize:

> H2: Right-wing populist disinformation is seen as (a) more credible and (b) has stronger effects on agreement with radical right-wing political views when it is framed as a social media message from an ordinary citizen than an unknown media source.

2.5. The Effects of Embedded Disinformation on Different Levels of Populist Attitudes

Although (fake) references to the vox populi may be a powerful disinformation technique, it may not work across the board. As shown by Hameleers and Schmuck (2017), populist messages sent by an ordinary citizen are most effective when people can identify with this sender as part of their in-group. This can be explained as an in-group serving bias central in the social identity model of collective action: Messages that refer to a deprived group identity and salient scapegoats can mobilize in-group members to act on behalf of their threatened group identity (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). For individuals to be activated, however, they need to feel connected to the in-group allegedly threatened by the dangerous others. Thus, people need to identify with the deprived in-group of ordinary people.

We suggest that this identification can be tapped by people's populist attitudes. Hence, such attitudes capture people's identification with a homogenous in-group of ordinary people and this entity's opposition to the corrupt and culpable elite (e.g., Schulz et al., 2018). In addition, people with more pronounced populist attitudes prefer news coverage that focuses on members of the ordinary people whilst circumventing experts and elite actors (Hameleers, 2020). The affinity between right-wing populist disinformation distributed by members of the ordinary people should thus be most persuasive for citizens with populist attitudes, as such disinformation resonates with their views on reality. We, therefore, hypothesize:

> H3: Right-wing populist disinformation allegedly distributed by the vox populi is seen as (a) more credible and (b) has stronger effects on agreement with radical right-wing political views among participants with more pronounced populist attitudes.

2.6. Context of the Study

Right-wing populist parties are electorally successful in the Netherlands (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). Dutch right-wing populist parties like the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy combine a populist communication style with nativist and anti-immigration sentiments. The leaders of these populist parties are very active on social media, and often share counter-factual narratives and disinformation online, for example, related to immigration or the Covid-19 pandemic (Hameleers, 2020). Against this backdrop, we can identify a strong affinity between disinformation and the populist right in the Netherlands: These populist leaders circumvent established knowledge and expert sources as they are regarded as part of the "corrupt" establishment. At the same time, they share counterfactual narratives that attack the established order, fitting their antagonistic communication style.

In this setting, we can argue that the Netherlands offers a realistic context to investigate the effects of disinformation using a right-wing populist frame. Considering that disinformation can be used to let mainstream politicians express extreme viewpoints (e.g., Dobber et al., 2020), we investigate the effects of right-wing populist disinformation allegedly coming from a mainstream political actor. We specifically make it seem as if a right-wing populist message containing factual inaccuracies (i.e., that violent crime rates are increasing because of immigration) comes from a conservative right-wing politician. The deliberate deception in the disinformation conditions is thus multifaceted: The source of the message is falsely attributed, and the statements are fabricated and based on inauthentic opinions and factually inaccurate information.

3. Method

3.1. Design

To test our hypotheses, we rely on an online survey-embedded experiment with a 2 (information exposure: right-wing populist malinformation versus right-wing populist disinformation) × 2 (source: ordinary citizen versus neutral news outlet) + control (unrelated authentic message) between-subjects design. The manipulated disinformation message forwarded the right-wing populist issue position that immigrants are dangerous, and that elite actors are responsible for negative developments related to crime rates and immigration. The statements were said to come from a Dutch political actor who was quoted in the message (see scripts in Appendix A of the Supplementary File).

We can consider this message as disinformation for different reasons. First of all, the Dutch political actor allegedly expressing the right-wing populist message has never expressed the position that immigrants are "dangerous" or likely to commit violent crimes. In addition, the message talks about the fact that "people from outdated societies that we bring into our country in great numbers are likely to commit violent crimes such as rape

and robbery." However, it has been proven that undocumented immigrants do not commit more violent crimes than native citizens (e.g., Light et al., 2020)—a pattern that also holds for the Dutch context. The message thus lacks facticity as the claims are not based on expert knowledge or empirical evidence (Vraga & Bode, 2020). In addition, the message is intentionally false as deceptive claims on immigration are wrongly attributed to a politician who never expressed any of these viewpoints. Although intentional manipulation is difficult to establish empirically, the researchers have taken on the role of disinformation creators to intentionally fabricate a right-wing populist speech that is not based on expert knowledge or empirical evidence.

We contrast the right-wing populist disinformation message to a related authentic malinformation message with a similar ideological slant and a control message formatted in the same way but without an ideological message resonating with disinformation (a message on progress thinking in the Dutch setting). We consider the decontextualized message on immigration as malinformation as the viewpoints are based on authentic material actually expressed by the political actor associated with the statements. However, these statements are taken out of their context. The most extreme fragment of the speech is used to make it seem as if the political actor has a strong nativist and populist perspective on immigration. Again, although intentionality is difficult to assess, the researchers have decontextualized these statements deliberately and used real information (i.e., statements once expressed by the political actor) to make the politician seem more extreme in his viewpoints than he actually is.

As this decontextualized message strongly resonates with the manipulated message, we can use it to clearly differentiate between the effects of disinformation (fabricated statements not expressed by the actor but reflecting a right-wing populist viewpoint) and malinformation that is not manipulated (actual viewpoints once expressed by the actor). By contrasting these right-wing populist messages to a less ideologically colored and more neutral message on a different issue expressed by the same actor (the control condition), we can also contrast right-wing populist statements to statements without this ideological slant. As the control condition offers a more representative snapshot of the politician's actual values and viewpoints, we use this condition to contrast the right-wing populist messages in the mal- and disinformation conditions with more neutral and less-extreme issue positions.

Both the mal- and disinformation conditions contain a blame attribution, which has been regarded as a central element of populist communication (e.g., Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017). More specifically, elite actors and immigrants are attributed responsibility for causing negative developments related to crime rates. As this attribution is not based on empirical evidence or expert knowledge on crime rates or immigration, and as it can be regarded as an intentional attack on immigrants as a generalized out-group, we can also regard it as intentionally harmful information that lacks an empirical basis.

When designing the stimuli, we aimed to maintain a balance between internal and external validity. More specifically, the right-wing populist disinformation conditions were developed by creating misleading and deceptive statements strongly resonating with the actual viewpoints communicated by right-wing populist actors in the Netherlands. Furthermore, false information typically voiced in right-wing populist communication (i.e., connecting immigrants to violent crimes while there is no empirical evidence for these claims) was added to the narrative. Striving for external validity, these disinformation messages were matched with right-wing populist statements voiced by the depicted politician (malinformation). Although this means that there are differences between the disinformation and the malinformation condition, there is a close linkage between the issue (immigration) and positions (anti-immigration and anti-establishment) across the mal- and disinformation conditions. As disinformation does not only differ from existing information based on facticity but also intentions, it was insufficient to simply add false information to existing statements voiced by the political actor.

3.2. Sample

Data collection was outsourced to the research company Kantar Lightspeed, which uses voluntary opt-in panels representative of the national population across multiple countries; 80.5% of all participants entering the survey link also completed the full study. The total number of completes was 456, which was close to the targeted outcome of 450 valid completes based on the a-priori power analysis (0.80 with an alpha of 0.05 and small effect sizes found in similar studies on the effects of populist communication). Of the valid responses, 54.4% were female and 18.6% had a lower level of education, whereas 32.9% were higher educated. The mean age of participants was 48.80 (SD = 15.26). These distributions by and large represent the variation in the Dutch population, and soft quotas were used to obtain a balanced and varied sample.

3.3. Independent Variables and Stimuli

In our experiment, we exposed participants to a fabricated message that was said to be based on the statements of a former political actor in the Netherlands. The message—either presented as an online news article or endorsed by an ordinary citizen on Facebook—talked about how the native people's norms and values should be protected at all costs against foreign influences. In line with a right-wing populist communication strategy, the message explicitly blamed immigrants and corrupt political elites for failing to represent the ordinary people (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017). The message

contains disinformation as it is based on deliberately false statements (i.e., immigrants connected to violent crimes) that are not based on empirical evidence or expert knowledge. The message is created with the intention to deceive and make a mainstream political actor look more similar to a right-wing populist politician than he actually is. The fabricated message is included in Appendix A of the Supplementary File.

This message was either presented in the format of an online news message without clear source cues or a Twitter post by an ordinary citizen. In this latter case, we mimic the participatory logic of disinformation campaigns (Starbird, 2019), which often (inauthentically) refer to ordinary people to signal authenticity and the "vox populi" in online settings (Lukito et al., 2020). In line with this, we did not use the image of a real citizen but rather used an AI-generated profile picture, which is similar to the strategy typically used by troll armies that set up fake profiles of seemingly real citizens taking part in public debates.

3.4. Dependent Variables

After exposing them to the different conditions, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they deemed the messages credible. We more specifically asked them to rate the message's credibility on three different levels: (a) the statements/content of the message, (b) the source of the message, and (c) the presentation and style of the message. All items were tapped with scales ranging from 1 (*not credible at all*) to 7 (*very credible*). The three credibility indices formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.905) and were re-coded into a seven-point mean credibility scale (M = 3.77, SD = 1.45).

To tap agreement with the manipulated message's statements, we used the following battery of items: (a) Immigrants in our country are responsible for violent crimes, (b) we should protect our nation from foreign influences, (c) the traditions of other cultures are backwards, (d) immigrants pose a threat on our culture, (e) we should take more action to preserve our norms and values, and (f) political elites are failing to protect and safeguard the native norms values and traditions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.931, M = 4.37, SD = 1.56). These items are based on the measurement of anti-immigration perceptions previously also used in effect studies on right-wing populism or anti-immigration framing (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). They reflect stereotypical evaluations of the out-group that are adjusted for the context of this study.

3.5. Moderator: Populist Attitudes

We measured populist attitudes as individual-level support for people-centrism and anti-elitism. We specifically used the following items (all measured on seven-point *completely disagree–completely agree* scales): (a) The ordinary people instead of politicians should make the most important decisions in our country, (b) politicians in government are corrupt, and (c) politicians in government make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people (Cronbach's alpha = 0.821, M = 4.01, SD = 1.41). Although extant literature has used more comprehensive multidimensional scales of populist attitudes (Schulz et al., 2018), we use a one-dimensional scale to capture the essence of populism. As this one-dimensional scale has been demonstrated to be valid and reliable, and strongly related to right-wing populist voting in Europe (e.g., Silva et al., 2020), we believe it is useful for our endeavor. Similar to existing conceptualizations of populist attitudes, we differentiate between populist attitudes and nativist or anti-immigration beliefs that are related to the right-wing host ideologies of populism. The significant correlation between populist attitudes and anti-immigration beliefs (r = 0.345, p < 0.001) indicates that populist attitudes are related to anti-immigration perceptions. Yet, as radical right-wing worldviews and populist attitudes are different constructs, we did not use a one-dimensional measure of right-wing populist attitudes. Our results further confirm that populist attitudes can resonate with both left-wing and right-wing perceptions. People on the extreme fringes of both the left and right-wing self-placement scale demonstrate equally high levels of populist attitudes (M = 5.14, SD = 1.25 versus M = 5.17, SD = 1.75, respectively).

3.6. Procedures and Manipulation Checks

Participants entered the survey experiment through a link provided by the research company. First of all, they completed an informed consent procedure (all data collection and procedures were approved by the university's ethical review board). Upon agreement, they were forwarded to a basic question block measuring demographics and general perceptions of politics and society (including the moderator). In the next step, they were randomly assigned to one of the conditions (equal group sizes and randomization checks ensured that the groups did not differ in composition regarding age, gender, education, political preferences, and populist attitudes). Upon reading the stimuli (the minimum forced exposure time was 30 seconds as pilot tests revealed that this was the minimum reading time required), participants were forwarded to the final block measuring the two dependent variables. In this final block, they were also carefully debriefed: All the deceptive statements were fact-checked and additional information was offered to participants in order to comprehensively refute the deceptive message they were exposed to.

In Appendix B of the Supplementary File, an elaborate description of various validity and manipulation checks is included. Among other things, the manipulation checks confirm that the stimuli were perceived as intended and that the disinformation condition is more likely to be associated with deceptive and false

statements than the messages based on authentic statements (the control and malinformation conditions). The checks also show that populist arguments were associated with the dis- and malinformation condition, but not the control condition.

4. Results

4.1. Effects of Populist Disinformation on Credibility and Radical Right-Wing Issue Positions

As a first step, we explored the extent to which exposure to right-wing populist disinformation was perceived as credible (RQ1a) and primed support for congruent radical right-wing issue positions (RQ1b) compared to the two authentic messages (the malinformation message versus the control condition). Analyses of variance show a non-significant main effect of exposure to the conditions on credibility: $F(4,451) = 2.10$, $p = 0.079$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.018$. Inspecting the Bonferroni corrected mean-score comparisons, there are no significant differences in perceived credibility between any of the control versus treatment conditions. The largest albeit non-significant difference is found between the control ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.33$) and the right-wing populist disinformation condition without ordinary citizen cues ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.57$).

The effect of exposure to the right-wing populist disinformation conditions versus the control condition on the activation of support for radical right-wing issue positions is non-significant by conventional standards: $F(4,451) = 2.23$, $p = 0.065$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.019$. However, the corrected pairwise mean score comparison reveals a significant difference in the activation of support for radical right-wing issue positions between the control condition ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.66$) and the malinformation message with a radical right-wing framing ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.49$; 95% Confidence Interval (CI) [−1.33, −0.005]). Answering RQ1, then, there are no significant differences in the perceived credibility between right-wing populist disinformation and authentic statements expressed in the stimuli. However, participants who are exposed to right-wing anti-immigration messages (malinformation) are more likely to hold radical right-wing views than participants exposed to the control condition.

4.2. Populist Attitudes as Moderator of Right-Wing Populist Disinformation's Effects

In the next steps, we investigated the moderating role of participants' prior populist attitudes on the effects of right-wing populist disinformation. We specifically predicted that right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on (H1a) message credibility and (H1b) agreement with radical right-wing political views among participants with more pronounced levels of populist attitudes. The OLS-regression models included in Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the outcomes of the analyses for credibility assessment and agreement, respectively.

The interaction model included in Table 1 (Model III) offers support for H1a: The effects of right-wing populist disinformation on the perceived credibility of the shown article are strongest for participants with more pronounced populist attitudes. This effect is significant,

Table 1. The effects of disinformation on credibility moderated by populist attitudes.

	Model I ($N = 456$)			Model II ($N = 456$)			Model III ($N = 456$)			Model IV ($N = 456$)		
	B	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*
(Constant)	4.99	0.11		3.32	0.22		3.59	0.27		3.59	0.27	
Disinformation	−0.44	0.19	−0.15*	−0.49	0.18	−0.17**	−1.12	0.44	−0.40**	−1.10	0.52	−0.37*
Ordinary citizen	−0.29	0.18	−0.10	−0.30	−0.18	−0.11	−0.29	0.18	−0.10	−0.29	0.18	−0.10
Disinformation × ordinary citizen	0.32	0.28	0.09	0.37	0.28	0.10	−0.39	0.28	0.11	0.18	0.67	0.05
Populist attitudes				0.17	0.05	−0.17***	0.10	0.06	0.10	0.11	0.06	0.10
Populist attitudes × disinformation							0.18	0.09	0.26*	0.15	0.11	0.22
Populist attitudes × disinformation × ordinary citizen										0.05	0.15	0.06
Adjusted R^2		0.011			0.037			0.042			0.040	
F		2.67*			5.38***			4.94***			4.13***	
F for change in R^2					13.23***			3.09*			0.11	

Notes: Two-tailed tests; unstandardized (*B*) and standardized (*β*) regression weights; analyses are checked for multicollinearity; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 2. The effects of disinformation on radical right-wing attitudes moderated by populist attitudes.

	Model I (*N* = 456)			Model II (*N* = 456)			Model III (*N* = 456)			Model IV (*N* = 456)		
	B	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*
(Constant)	4.32	0.12		2.72	0.22		2.80	0.27		2.80	0.27	
Disinformation	0.13	0.20	0.04	0.02	0.19	0.01	−0.18	0.45	−0.06	−0.04	0.53	−0.01
Ordinary citizen	0.12	0.20	0.04	0.10	0.18	0.03	0.10	0.18	0.03	0.10	0.18	0.03
Disinformation × ordinary citizen	−0.27	0.30	−0.07	−0.15	0.28	−0.04	−0.15	0.28	0.04	−0.44	0.69	−0.11
Populist attitudes				0.41	0.05	0.37***	0.39	0.06	0.35***	0.39	0.06	0.35***
Populist attitudes × disinformation							0.05	0.10	0.07	0.02	0.12	0.02
Populist attitudes × disinformation × ordinary citizen										0.07	0.15	0.08
Adjusted R^2	−0.005			0.129			0.127			0.126		
F	0.27			17.79***			14.25***			11.89***		
F for change in R^2				70.20***			0.24			0.22		

Notes: Two-tailed tests; unstandardized (*B*) and standardized (*β*) regression weights; analyses are checked for multicollinearity; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

albeit moderate in size. Table 2 (Model III) shows that this effect does not hold for agreement with radical right-wing issue positions measured after the stimuli: H1b is thus not supported.

4.3. Effects of Right-Wing Populist Disinformation From the Vox Populi

We predicted that right-wing populist disinformation would be more credible (H2a) and yield stronger effects on agreement with radical right-wing issue positions (H2b) when it is framed as a social media message from an ordinary citizen than presented as originating from an unknown media source. First of all, the post-hoc pairwise mean-score comparisons of the one-way ANOVA estimated for the main effects offer no support for these hypotheses. More specifically, disinformation is rated as more or less equally credible when it comes from an unclear source reflecting a news outlet (*M* = 3.56, *SD* = 1.63) as when it is allegedly shared by an unknown ordinary citizen (*M* = 3.58, *SD* = 1.45), which offers no support for H2a. Likewise, H2b is not supported. Hence, disinformation has similar effects when communicated by the unclear news source (*M* = 4.46, *SD* = 1.58) or the ordinary citizen (*M* = 4.30, *SD* = 1.66). The OLS regressions in Table 1 and Table 2 (Model I) confirm these findings: There are no significant interaction effects between exposure to disinformation and ordinary citizen cues on credibility (Table 1) or agreement with radical right-wing issue positions (Table 2).

We finally predicted a three-way interaction effect between exposure to disinformation, ordinary source cues, and populist attitudes, so that especially disinformation coming from seemingly ordinary people would have the strongest effects among participants with more pronounced populist attitudes (H3). Our findings offer no support for this hypothesis. More specifically, the three-way interaction effect is non-significant for both credibility (Table 1, Model IV) and agreement with radical right-wing issue positions (Table 2, Model IV).

5. Discussion

This article aimed to test the alleged persuasive affinity between disinformation and right-wing populism. Our main findings indicate that radical right-wing populist disinformation is perceived as slightly less credible than authentic information, but this effect is non-significant. However, we did find support for an effect of exposure to decontextualized malinformation on the activation of congruent radical right-wing issue positions: Authentic but decontextualized malinformation that frames immigrants as a threat to national security whilst offering a populist frame of reference can succeed in triggering support for radical right-wing views among the public.

These findings have potentially worrisome implications. Although most research has pointed to indirect effects of disinformation exposure (e.g., Schaewitz et al., 2020; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020) and a stronger difference in perceived credibility across authentic information and disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2020), we found that right-wing populism may succeed in priming radical right-wing views across the board. This may be in line with the aims of disinformation agents,

who aim to sow discord, raise cynicism, and fuel anti-establishment views in democracies throughout the globe (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). We show that these agents do not even have to fabricate information to reach this goal: The mere decontextualization of statements voiced by political actors, also referred to as malinformation (e.g., Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), may be sufficient to steer political opinions in the targeted direction. The elective affinity between right-wing populism and disinformation identified in extant literature (e.g., Waisbord, 2018) may thus also be understood as an effective communication tactic for malign actors that want to sow discord and amplify people's opposition to out-groups and the established order in (Western) democracies. As populist blame attributions that simplify reality into an all-encompassing divide between "us and them" are found to be persuasive (Hameleers et al., 2017), the framing of blame may be an influential style for disinformation messages that aim to attack established knowledge and empirical facts of conventional knowledge.

We also found that right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on credibility for people with more pronounced populist attitudes. This is in line with the motivated reasoning framework as a mechanism for the persuasiveness of radical right-wing populist communication (e.g., Hameleers, 2020) and findings of earlier work indicating that disinformation is most effective when it taps into existing beliefs (e.g., Schaewitz et al., 2020). We can also explain this as the prevalence of a truth bias among people with issue-congruent prior beliefs (Levine, 2014): When the content of the right-wing populist message aligns with people's existing populist worldviews, they may be less likely to detect deception as suspicion is not activated or primed. Hence, the manipulated message may be similar to the information that is typically consumed by citizens with populist attitudes, who tend to get their information from alternative right-wing platforms that are known for disseminating similar content (Müller & Schulz, 2021). We can thus explain the relatively higher credibility of the radical right-wing populist disinformation message among this group as a consequence of the higher familiarity and similarity of the deceptive message.

Our findings did not, however, point to such a conditional relationship for agreement with radical right-wing positions. This may be explained as a ceiling effect: Citizens with stronger populist attitudes in a national setting where populism is associated most with the radical right (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017) are already very likely to hold anti-immigration and nativist viewpoints that are voiced in the deceptive message. Exposure to a single piece of disinformation may not further activate or strengthen these beliefs that are already chronically available and salient when making political judgments.

As important null-finding, we show that embedding disinformation as "vox populi" on social media may not amplify its effectiveness, despite the prevalence of this strategy in digital disinformation campaigns (e.g., Lukito et al., 2020). Contrary to the social identity model of collective action assuming that populist messages may be most effective when they emphasize a threat to the in-group of likeminded citizens (e.g., Bos et al., 2020), we did not find that the effects of populist disinformation were stronger when delivered by a seemingly ordinary citizen. One potential explanation for the lack of effects is that participants may not closely identify with the ordinary source cue used in this experiment. Indeed, right-wing populist messages are found to be more effective when communicated by ordinary people, but only when people feel similar to or like this source (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Another explanation is that the endorsement used in this experiment was not embedded in people's actual social media environment but as part of the experimental module. In real life, disinformation from social bots, influencers, and/or trolls is embedded in actual social media feeds, which may not prime suspicion and may therefore be more effective. In that sense, the lack of effects may also be due to the limited ecologic validity of the experimental setup.

Our findings have important implications. First of all, the alleged affinity between radical right-wing communication styles and disinformation may also correspond to an effective disinformation tactic of strategic decontextualization through malinformation, which can succeed in delegitimizing the established order by fueling support for issue positions at the fringes of the political spectrum. We further show that populist attitudes as an individual-level factor may enhance the credibility but not the persuasiveness of disinformation campaigns on the radical right. This may indicate that the (micro)targeting of disinformation to vulnerable segments of the population (e.g., Dobber et al., 2020) may not always succeed in amplifying socio-political cleavages. Finally, our findings indicate that citizens are generally not very good at detecting deception (see also e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Although the statements presented in disinformation were rated as less credible than authentic information, the difference was rather small.

Our study also has practical implications. As we show that radical right-wing populist disinformation can trigger support for congruent radical right-wing issue positions, it is potentially important to prevent and counter such forms of disinformation, for example through prebunking or inoculation strategies (e.g., Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019) and fact-checks (e.g., Nyhan et al., 2019). Here, it may be important to teach citizens how to recognize deceptive statements resonating with radical and extremist issue positions, for example, by revealing the manipulation techniques, ideological biases, and intentions underlying right-wing populist disinformation and malinformation. For such interventions to be effective, it is important to not cause reactance among vulnerable segments of society inclined to support radical or extreme-right issues positions. These citizens may perceive the intervention as an attack on their beliefs.

These interventions may require different preventative and regulatory frameworks that can help citizens to correctly recognize disinformation. Platforms may devote more attention to flagging suspicious content and clearly show their users for what reasons certain content may be inaccurate or motivated by deceptive goals. Next to this, they should offer more transparency on how they target citizens with like-minded information. As citizens with populist attitudes may find congruent disinformation most credible, it is important that more transparency is offered on how they are targeted by algorithms and recommender systems, revealing that the reality shown to them is not the dominant opinion in society. Considering that the credibility of disinformation does not differ substantially from authentic information, interventions should also enable citizens to more clearly differentiate between trustworthy and authentic information versus manipulated and deceptive content. Media literacy programs, for example, should not exclusively focus on how citizens should detect disinformation, but also offer comprehensible tools for how news users can find trustworthy and authentic content.

Despite offering important insights into the effects of radical right-wing populist disinformation, this study comes with a number of limitations. First of all, the experiment focused on one "most likely" case of disinformation on the radical right. It remains to be seen how well these findings travel to other issues, national settings, or issue interpretations. Although we have zoomed in on a very likely case of radical right-wing populism that is prominent in the communication of far-right movements in Europe, the transferability and robustness of our findings can be assessed further in future research. We should also note that disinformation can come in different shapes and forms. For this experiment, we fabricated a political speech by merely including opinions and viewpoints that were not authentic. Although untrue information was referred to as factually correct, and although expert knowledge and empirical evidence were lacking, the messages did not contain many references to false claims. We recommend future research to focus more on the difference between disinformation and authentic information by varying the facticity and falsity of the messages—for example, by including more inaccurate numbers on immigration and crime rates in the disinformation condition. We should also note that the control condition did not deal with the same issue and positions as the experimental stimuli. Although the inclusion of a decontextualized message based on real statements did resonate strongly with the fabricated claims (the malinformation condition), future research may use control conditions that more strongly match disinformation. For example, it may be useful to contrast a factually accurate message on immigration with disinformation where factually accurate information is replaced with deceptive content. However, as we used political speeches from a specific mainstream political actor as a starting point, equivalence between conditions was more difficult to achieve.

Despite these limitations, this article has offered new evidence of the persuasiveness of disinformation resonating with delegitimizing narratives on the far-right, and the role of prior populist attitudes in the credibility of such narratives. As such politized content may fuel support for undemocratic radical viewpoints—even when such content is only based on a decontextualization of the truth—it is important to assess how malign radical right-wing populist messages can be pre- or debunked in digital media settings.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

How Right-Wing Populist Comments Affect Online Deliberation on News Media Facebook Pages

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Abstract
Right-wing populist user comments on social media are said to impair online deliberation. Right-wing populism's anti-pluralist and conflict-centered message might hinder deliberative debates, which are characterized by reciprocity, arguments, sourcing, politeness, and civility. Although right-wing populism has been found to foster user interaction on social media, few empirical studies have examined its impact on the scope and deliberative quality of user debates. This study focuses on debates on 10 Facebook pages of Austrian and Slovenian mass media during the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015–2016. Proceeding in two steps, we first analyze how right-wing populist user comments affect the number of reply comments using a dataset of N = 281,115 Facebook comments and a validated, automated content analysis. In a second step, we use a manual, quantitative content analysis to investigate how right-wing populist comments affect the deliberative quality of N = 1,413 reply comments. We test five hypotheses in carefully modeled regression analyses. Our findings show that right-wing populist comments trigger replies but impair their deliberative quality. People-centric comments decrease the probability of arguments in replies, and anti-immigrant comments spark incivility. Countering populism further increases impoliteness. We discuss our findings against the backdrop of an increasingly uncivil online public sphere and populism's ambivalent relationship with democracy.

Keywords
deliberation; immigration; incivility; online news; populist communication; political communication; reciprocity; social media; user comments

Issue
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1. Introduction

Right-wing populism has shaped Europe's political landscape in recent decades (Mudde, 2013). To understand its success, researchers increasingly focus on populism as a communication phenomenon (de Vreese et al., 2018). Social media has been found to be the preferred channel for populist communication (Ernst et al., 2019; Gerbaudo, 2018). A different, growing branch of research is concerned with citizens' populist attitudes (e.g., Zaslove et al., 2021). However, only few studies have examined ordinary citizens' expressions of populist views in online public spheres. Initial findings show that user-generated populism flourishes in comments sections below news stories (Blassnig et al., 2019; Galpin & Trenz, 2019; Thiele, 2022a) and breaches norms of democratic communication (Hameleers, 2019). What we do not know is how these comments affect other users and discussions among them. This study narrows this research gap by asking: How do right-wing populist comments affect the number and deliberative quality of reply comments on Facebook?

Deliberation is the respectful exchange of reasons in public and is considered vital for democracy (e.g., Friess & Eilders, 2015; Habermas, 1996). At the beginning of the millennium, user comments were expected to enhance deliberation (Dahlberg, 2011). Repeated findings of incivility in comments (e.g., Coe et al., 2014; Rowe, 2015) have left little of that hope (Quandt, 2018). Scholars have argued that populism may further impair deliberation (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Waisbord, 2018). Populism is a "thin" ideology that holds that a "corrupt elite" deprives "the people" of their sovereignty (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Its anti-pluralism and Manicheanism, so the argument goes, run contrary to an exchange of reasons (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Waisbord, 2018). Other authors have argued that populism's conflictive message could revitalize democratic debates (Laclau, 2005; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Connecting the separate strands of populist communication and online deliberation research, this study aims to contribute empirically to this normative debate.

Furthermore, we aim to disentangle the relationship between different dimensions of right-wing populism and deliberation. The right-wing variant of populism clings to the nativist idea that foreigners are threatening (Mudde, 2007, p. 156), which renders it even more problematic for liberal democracy (Sauer et al., 2018). Hameleers' (2019) qualitative content analysis of user-generated, right-wing populist content on Facebook illustrates this threat but leaves open the question of whether populism per se or right-wing ideology is the problem. Here, we differentiate between right-wing, anti-immigrant messages and populist messages that involve anti-elitism or people-centrism. Likewise, to grapple with the presumably ambivalent impact of right-wing populism on democratic debates (Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), we differentiate five key aspects of deliberation, namely reciprocity, argumentation, sourcing, politeness, and civility (Friess et al., 2020). Using a quantitative content analysis allows us to untangle the relations between those dimensions.

We focus on user debates during the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015–2016 on Facebook pages of news media from Austria and Slovenia. These neighboring countries faced similar challenges during the crisis but diverge markedly in terms of the commenting behavior of their citizenry (European Commission, 2016, p. 452). The crisis was accompanied by a growing polarization among citizens (van der Brug & Harteveld, 2021) and a shift of public discourse towards right-wing populism (Krzyżanowski, 2018), which also influenced the positions of competing political parties (Gessler & Hunger, 2022). Focusing on the impact of right-wing populist comments on user debates complements our understanding of this crisis, as heated debates below news stories have been found to fuel audience polarization (Asker & Dinas, 2019).

Facebook is a popular tool used by media houses to publish news stories and to invite the audience to comment (Humprecht et al., 2020). The platform allows users to reply to other users' comments, which promotes reciprocal discussions among users (Esau et al., 2017). This structure allows us to study the impact of right-wing populism in higher-level comments on the number and quality of replies.

The empirical analysis of this study was carried out in two steps. In the first step, we conducted an automated content analysis of 281,115 Facebook comments found below posts on 10 popular Facebook pages of Austrian and Slovenian news media, analyzing the impact of right-wing populist comments on the number of replies. In the second step, we sampled 535 comments from this population, downloaded up to five replying comments, and conducted a manual, quantitative content analysis of 1,413 replies to investigate the impact of right-wing populism on deliberative quality. Our findings show that right-wing populist comments triggered an increase in the number of replies but induced a deterioration of their deliberative quality. Countering populism further increased levels of impoliteness in replies. Our findings substantiate the theorized ambivalent relationship between right-wing populism and democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012) at the level of user debates.

2. Theory

2.1. Right-Wing Populist User Comments

Right-wing populism is here defined as a compound of two ideologies. On the one hand, populism is a "thin" ideology that asserts that "the people" are ruled by a "corrupt elite" and demands the restoration of the people's sovereignty (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This ideology is "thin," in the sense that its focus is limited to these core ideas (Freeden, 1996). At the core of right-wing populism is, additionally, the nativist idea that foreign, "nonnative elements…are fundamentally threatening" (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). This additional dimension makes right-wing populism a "thicker" ideology (Krämer, 2017). Nativism is frequently articulated as opposition to immigration (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). We focus on the expression of these ideas in texts as right-wing populist content (de Vreese et al., 2018). Following previous operationalizations (Aslanidis, 2018; Wirz et al., 2018), we capture three dimensions of right-wing populist content: anti-elitist, people-centrist, and anti-immigration messages.

Various actors can disseminate right-wing populist messages (de Vreese et al., 2018). Scholars have focused on the populist communication of politicians (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019; van Kessel & Castelein, 2016) and the media (e.g., Wirz et al., 2018). This research has found that social media provides favorable opportunity structures for populism (e.g., Blassnig & Wirz, 2019; Ernst et al., 2019). Although "the people" play a crucial role in populist thought, few studies have investigated populist content from ordinary citizens. Galpin and Trenz (2019)

analyzed user comments on media websites and found evidence for "participatory populism." This content analysis, however, was limited to negativity (Galpin & Trenz, 2019, p. 788). Using a more sophisticated coding scheme, Blassnig et al. (2019) analyzed news coverage of immigration and user comments on media websites and found that populist reporting stirs populist comments.

To our best knowledge, only Hameleers (2019) analyzed populist user content against the backdrop of democratic communication. Conducting a qualitative analysis of right-wing populist Facebook community pages, Hameleers (2019) showed how this user content infringed upon democratic norms through extreme hostility and avoidance of argumentative debates. However, these findings are limited to a niche public of users who actively engage with right-wing populist community pages (Hameleers, 2019). Secondly, the qualitative approach of that study does not allow sufficient differentiation between populist and right-wing elements, as suggested by populism scholars (Rooduijn, 2019). Finally, that study did not investigate the effects of right-wing populist messages on other users. We aim to overcome these limitations by distinguishing between right-wing and populist content, by investigating its impact on replies from other users, and by analyzing comments sections on Facebook pages of news media organizations that reach a broad public.

2.2. Online Deliberation

Comments sections, as other interactive innovations, have changed today's media logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Converging the roles of content producer and consumer, user comments allow ordinary citizens to reach similar audiences as professional journalistic output (Springer et al., 2015). Commenting on the news allows users to engage in discussions and deliberative interaction (Springer et al., 2015), to influence the perceived public opinion (e.g., Eilders & Porten-Cheé, 2022), and to counter-frame news stories (Liu & McLeod, 2019). Initially, this potential raised scholars' hopes that user comments may contribute to a more inclusive, participatory, and deliberative public sphere (Dahlberg, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011). However, comment sections have been repeatedly found to be plagued by incivility (e.g., Coe et al., 2014), and little of this optimism remains (Quandt, 2018).

Most news media organizations run pages on Facebook, which continues to be the social medium with the highest number of users (Newman et al., 2016, p. 10). On these pages, media houses post news stories and invite users to comment, hoping to increase the visibility of their stories (Singer, 2014) and guide traffic to their websites (Humprecht et al., 2020). Facebook allows commenters to reply directly to each other, which fosters reciprocal discussions (Esau et al., 2017). However, the deliberative quality of Facebook comments has been found to be lower than on news websites (Rowe, 2015). Here, we analyze both the scope and quality of such reciprocal discussions on Facebook.

To assess the democratic quality of online discussions, scholars have turned to the concept of deliberation. Deliberation denotes "a rational, constructive, reciprocal, and respectful exchange of reasons among equal participants" (Friess et al., 2020, p. 3). Its proponents argue that deliberation yields desirable outcomes for democratic societies (Friess et al., 2020; Habermas, 1996). However, there is little consensus about the criteria that render a debate or statement deliberative (Mutz, 2008). To arrive at a set of operationalizable criteria, we conducted a literature review of 18 recent empirical studies (see Supplementary File, Appendix A). Drawing on this review, we distilled five key dimensions of deliberation—reciprocity, argumentation, sourcing, civility, and politeness—similar to Friess et al. (2020).

Reciprocity is an interactive process in which participants listen and respond to each other (Friess & Eilders, 2015). Here, we consider the number of reply comments under a Facebook comment to reflect the scope of reciprocity. The other four criteria of deliberative communication characterize the content of a comment. Argumentation involves the provision of reasons for one's claims (Friess et al., 2020). These reasons can be backed up with verifiable information by making sources transparent (Stromer-Galley, 2007). Politeness and civility both characterize respectful communication (Friess et al., 2020). While many authors use both terms interchangeably (e.g., Coe et al., 2014), we follow Papacharissi's (2004) argument to conceptualize politeness as a matter of tone and incivility as discourse that substantially violates democratic values. Politeness can be grasped then as the absence of impoliteness, understood as an "unnecessarily disrespectful tone" (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660). Civility, by contrast, denotes messages that do not entail stereotypes, racism, violent speech, or the intent to silence others (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 274). While uncivil comments can hardly be polite, impolite comments may serve the democratic function of exposing others to different views, as shown by Rossini (2020), using different labels. Kalch and Naab (2018) demonstrate that impoliteness and incivility have a different impact on the responses of others. Such differences might be particularly relevant in a context where users confront extremely right-wing positions.

While we expect an overall low level of deliberative quality of Facebook comments, the debate surrounding the democratic implications of populism (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012) raises the question of its empirical impact on online deliberation.

2.3. The Impact of Right-Wing Populist Comments on Online Deliberation

Populism has an ambivalent relationship with democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). On the one hand, demanding the implementation of the people's will is inherently

democratic (e.g., Canovan, 1999) and may mobilize parts of the society that feel misrepresented by mainstream politics (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 21). However, populism's crude majoritarianism and anti-pluralism threaten liberal democracy (Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 21). This threat, stemming from a neglect of minority rights, is arguably even more severe in populism's right-wing variant (Mudde, 2007, p. 156; Sauer et al., 2018). Democratic debates are likely to suffer from expressions of this Manichean worldview, often voiced aggressively by populists (Waisbord, 2018). We expect that this democratic ambivalence is reflected in the impact that right-wing populist user comments have on online deliberation.

Regarding the scope of reciprocity, we expect a mobilizing effect of right-wing populist comments. Previous research has found that right-wing populist messages on Facebook trigger user interactions (Bobba, 2018; Jost et al., 2020). Blassnig and Wirz (2019) found that this effect is driven by activating a populist schema in like-minded users. At the same time, we expect that the conflict-centered messages of right-wing populism might provoke objections from opposing users. These effects should hold for populist and right-wing content alike. As such, we propose the following hypothesis:

> H1: Right-wing populist user comments receive more reply comments than other comments.

Regarding the quality of deliberation in reply comments, we expect a deteriorating impact of right-wing populism. Populism's construction of "the people" as a homogeneous group that is oppressed by a "corrupt elite" is moralistic (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). Moralization makes argument-based objections rather pointless (Hameleers, 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Additionally, populist messages claim to be an immediate expression of the "*vox populi*" (Canovan, 1999, p. 14). Within the populist logic, this makes further arguments from supporters unnecessary (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Krämer, 2017). If this reasoning is correct, we should find this impeding effect for populist messages and less so for anti-immigration messages:

> H2: Populist user comments decrease the probability of arguments in reply comments.

Populism delegitimizes not only political elites, but also journalists (Egelhofer et al., 2021) and scientific experts (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). This aversion to expert knowledge aligns it with a sprawling post-truth politics (Waisbord, 2018). We argue that the rejection of established sources of knowledge may discourage replying users from referring to such sources:

> H3: Populist user comments decrease the probability of the provision of sources in reply comments.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 have focused on effects of populist messages. Both anti-immigrant and anti-elitist messages, however, might raise levels of incivility among reply comments. Survey research has shown that socially undesirable statements are withheld if the respondent fears being sanctioned (Krumpal, 2013). Uncivil statements, such as stereotypes, racism, or approval of violence (Papacharissi, 2004), fall into this category. We argue that right-wing populist comments may signal to like-minded users that the risk of sanctions is low, thus raising their readiness to express uncivil opinions (Keum & Miller, 2018):

> H4: Right-wing populist user comments increase the probability of uncivil reply comments.

Similar contagion effects have been observed for impolite user comments (Song et al., 2022). Right-wing populist comments are characterized by their harsh tone (Hameleers, 2019). We expect that this rudeness might spill over to reply comments:

> H5: Right-wing populist user comments increase the probability of impolite reply comments.

In addition to these hypotheses, we want to know what happens when users counter populist or anti-immigrant comments. Friess et al. (2020) have shown that civic interventions against hate speech in online comments can improve the deliberative quality of debates. On the other hand, disagreement in comments sections has been linked to increased levels of impoliteness (Rossini, 2021). Since these findings do not suggest a clear hypothesis in either direction, we ask the following additional research question:

> RQ: How does countering right-wing populism affect the deliberative quality of reply comments?

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

To test our claims, we conducted two content analyses of user comments on Facebook pages of Austrian and Slovenian news media. We chose the timeframe of July 2015 to August 2016, which covers the so-called "refugee crisis," as we expected many right-wing populist comments and heated debates in this context (Blassnig et al., 2019). The arrival of millions of refugees in the wake of the Syrian war attracted enormous media attention (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). After an initial phase of welcoming by volunteers, especially in Austria, the right-wing demand for stricter border controls became increasingly prevalent. This culminated in the closure of the "Balkan route" in 2016, in which Austria and Slovenia took the lead (Gruber, 2017; Vezovnik, 2018). In both neighboring countries, right-wing populist

mobilization surged in the aftermath of the crisis (Bodlos & Plescia, 2018; Pajnik & Šori, 2021; Thiele et al., 2021).

The two countries have similar media systems (Herrero et al., 2017). However, in a European-wide comparison in 2015, Austrians were the most active online commenters (52%), while Slovenes (20%) exhibit low levels of commenting activity (European Commission, 2016, p. 452). In 2015, Facebook was the most widely used social medium (Newman et al., 2016, p. 10).

The Facebook data analyzed here has a nested structure. Mass media outlets operate Facebook pages and share news items as posts. Users can comment on these posts. We call this first level of comments "parent comments." On a second level, users can respond to comments in "reply comments." Our analysis proceeds in two steps. In Step 1, we analyze the effect of right-wing populism in parent comments on the number of replies using a large-N design and a computational content analysis. In Step 2, we analyze the deliberative quality of the content of replies to a small subsample of parent comments using a quantitative, manual content analysis.

3.2. Data

For each country, we selected five popular Facebook pages of news media, covering quality newspapers (Austria: *Der Standard*, *Die Presse*; Slovenia: *Delo*, *Dnevnik*), tabloid press (Austria: *Kronen Zeitung*, *oe24.at*; SI: *Slovenske Novice*), public broadcasting (Austria: *Zeit im Bild*; Slovenia: *RTVSLO.si*), and mixed-media outlets associated with private broadcasters (Austria: *oe24.at*; Slovenia: *24ur.com*).

We downloaded all publicly accessible Facebook posts from each page in the timeframe of July 2015 to August 2016 using the Facebook Graph API and Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2020). For each of the 7,658 posts, we downloaded up to 500 anonymized user comments, resulting in a sample of N = 281,115 parent comments, which constitutes our sample for Step 1 of our analysis.

For Step 2, we narrowed down the population of parent comments to comments on posts about migration that received at least one reply. To detect the topic of migration, we used two validated dictionaries (see Supplementary File, Appendix B). Next, we applied a preliminary version of our automated measurements described below to ensure a sufficient representation of right-wing populist comments. We drew two stratified random samples of 300 parent comments per country, oversampling highly populist and anti-immigrant comments. For each parent comment, we then downloaded up to five replies, following Ziegele et al. (2020, p. 874). After dropping empty observations, N = 1,413 replies and 535 parent comments were analyzed in Step 2.

3.3. Variables

The dependent variable in Step 1 is the number of replies attracted by each analyzed parent comment, as returned from the Facebook API. By this number, we operationalize the scope of reciprocal discussion among users.

The explanatory variables in Step 1 are populist and anti-immigration content in parent comments. Following Aslanidis' (2018) argument that expressions of populism are best understood as a matter of degree, we measure both as continuous variables, applying a computational content analysis called distributed dictionary representation (DDR; Garten et al., 2018). This method combines dictionaries with word vectors. Dictionaries measure concepts by counting keywords, but struggle to arrive at exhaustive word lists (Rauh, 2018). The DDR method circumvents this problem by representing a short list of expressive keywords as word vectors (Garten et al., 2018). Word vectors are learned by neural networks and claim to represent the semantic similarity of words (e.g., Bojanowski et al., 2017). The vector representations of all words in a dictionary are averaged into one dictionary representation. The same is done for each document. The DDR method then computes the cosine similarity between the average dictionary vector and each document vector. This results in a measure ranging from −1 to +1 that provides a crude indicator for how strongly the concept is represented in each document (Garten et al., 2018).

We used our R-package *dictvectoR* (Thiele, 2022b) to apply the DDR method and to systematically develop concept dictionaries. The development process is documented in detail in the Supplementary File, Appendix D. Two language-specific *fasttext* word-vector models (Bojanowski et al., 2017) were trained on our corpora. To optimize and validate our measurements, we tested how well they predicted the binary, human coding obtained in Step 2 (see Supplementary File, Appendix C). Two-thirds of the sample coded for Step 2 were used for optimization, the remaining third for validation. Table 1 reports the validation scores Recall, indicating the proportion of relevant documents predicted correctly, Precision, the share of correct hits in all predictions, and their harmonic mean F1 (Stryker et al., 2006). The concepts of anti-immigration and populism were measured separately for each language. The short dictionaries align with the authentic language used in user-generated content and reflect equivalent dimensions. However, they also reflect country-specific discourses. In the DDR method, the average representation of all dictionary words is decisive. Therefore, it is not necessary that all terms be in themselves anti-immigrant or populist (e.g., "politicians"). Moreover, the method captures documents that resemble the combined meaning of the dictionary words without matching them exactly. Given the satisfactory F1 scores between .69 and .76, we consider the measurements good approximations for right-wing populist content. All DDR measures were standardized and mean-centered at the country level.

As a control in Step 1, we included a variable indicating whether a post addressed migration to account for an effect of issue salience. We also controlled for

Table 1. Short dictionaries and performance of DDR measures.

Concept	Country	Dictionary	Translation	Precision	Recall	F1
Anti-immigration	Austria	abschieben, asylanten, kulturbereicherer, sofort abschieben, terroristen kommen, zurückschicken	deport, asylum seekers [pej.], culture enrichers, deport immediately, terrorists are coming, send back	.75	.64	.69
	Slovenia	ekonomske migrante, migranti, nazaj sirijo, poslat nazaj, tisoce beguncev, tisoce vsi islamisti	economic migrants, migrants, back to Syria, send back, thousands of refugees, thousands of Islamists	.71	.81	.76
Populism	Austria	inkompetenten, korrupten, politiker, sauhaufen, unser land, verarschen uns, volk, wir steuerzahler	incompetent, corrupt, politicians, bunch of pigs, our country, screw with us, people, we taxpayers	.73	.70	.72
	Slovenia	banda pokvarjena, državljani slovenije, nas slovence, naša slovenija, naša vlada, nesposobno	a bunch of corrupt, Slovenian citizens, us Slovenes, our Slovenia, our government, incompetent	.67	.75	.72

Notes: Test sample size Austria—n = 312, Slovenia—n = 291.

the number of comments per post and the parent comment characteristics length, tagging users, download age, and days passed between post and comment. Download age is the time elapsed between the comment being published and being downloaded for this research. The Supplementary File, Appendix E, reports summary statistics.

In Step 2, we conducted a manual, quantitative content analysis. One author constructed a codebook (Supplementary File, Appendix C) inspired by previous research (Blassnig et al., 2019; Friess et al., 2020). Two authors conducted the coding. Extensive training ensured reliable coding, which was tested on 234 translated comments and measured by Krippendorff's alpha. All categories but "positioning" were coded for parent and reply comments.

The dependent variables in Step 2 are four binary indicators for the quality of deliberation in responses. Argumentation (α = .75, n = 234) was coded if the comment provided reasons for its claims (Friess et al., 2020). Sourcing (α = .90) was coded if the comment referred to hyperlinks or external sources of knowledge (Marzinkowski & Engelmann, 2022). Incivility (α = .71) was coded if a comment dehumanized others, used stereotypes, sexism, or racism, supported violence (Friess et al., 2020), or silenced others (Oz et al., 2018). We considered a comment impolite (α = .81) if it included name-calling, vulgarity, sarcasm, depreciation, or shouting (Friess et al., 2020).

The main explanatory variables indicate three dimensions of right-wing populism in parent comments. People-centric (α = .74) messages invoke the people as a virtuous, homogeneous, or victimized group or stress the people's will (Aslanidis, 2018; Blassnig et al., 2019). Anti-elitism (α = .73) was coded if a comment discredited or blamed power holders (Aslanidis, 2018; Blassnig et al., 2019). Anti-immigration (α = .81) was coded when comments opposed immigration or considered it a threat to security, economy, or culture (Callens & Meuleman, 2017).

To answer the question regarding the effect of countering right-wing populism, we coded if the reply comment agreed, disagreed, or was neutral towards the parent comment (positioning α = .74, n = 138; Marzinkowski & Engelmann, 2022). We then constructed a binary variable for countering populism, indicating for each reply whether any of the preceding replies disagreed with a people-centric or anti-elitist parent comment without using these discourses themselves. Countering anti-immigration was constructed analogously. As control variables, we included the respective indicator for deliberative quality on the parent comment level and the length of the parent comment in characters. Summary statistics are reported in the Supplemenatry File, Appendix E.

3.4. Model Specifications

We tested our hypotheses in carefully constructed regression models. In Step 1, the dependent variables are count variables, so we fitted negative binomial regression models. As our automated measurements of populism and anti-immigration are language-specific, we fitted separate models for each county. The data have a nested structure, with comments nested in posts and posts nested in accounts. We accounted for the two levels (post and accounts) using multilevel models.

For Step 2, we ran four logistic regression models, one for each binary indicator of deliberative quality in reply comments. As the number of observations per level

was very limited, we accounted for the nested structure of the data on the Facebook page level by including dummy variables for each page-account. This cancels out between-group effects on this level (Bell et al., 2019).

4. Results

Right-wing populism was found in the comments of all analyzed media Facebook pages. Differences across media types were small, but mostly significant (see Supplementary File, Appendix F). Comments on public broadcasters' pages were the most strongly populist and anti-immigrant in both countries. Surprisingly, we found that tabloid newspapers attracted the least populist and anti-immigrant comments in Slovenia and scored only second in Austria.

In Step 1, we focused on the number of replies per parent comment. Parent comments received .7 (*SD* = 3.4, *Max* = 248) replies on average in Austria and .5 (*SD* = 2.4, *Max* = 127) in Slovenia. The results from two multilevel, negative binomial regression models show that the degree of both anti-immigration and populism increased the number of reply comments significantly. These effects were significant in both countries. The regression tables are documented in the Supplementary File, Appendix G.

Figure 1 visualizes the effects as incidence rate ratios, which are the exponentiated β-coefficients. Positive effects are indicated by incidence rate ratios values above 1 and negative effects by values below 1. An increase in anti-immigration in parent comments by 1 SD increased the expected count of reply comments by a factor of 1.5 in Austria and by 1.4 in Slovenia (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 640). Populism had a similar, significant positive impact. These findings support H1 and indicate that right-wing populist content triggers user discussions. These effects are significant, even when controlling for a salience effect of the topic of migration. Interestingly, the topic of migration was associated with an increased number of replies in Austria but a decreased number of replies in Slovenia. Looking at the other control variables, we see that tagging users and comment length were associated with an increased number of responses. Comments that reacted to dated posts received fewer responses in Austria.

In the second step of our analysis, we focused on the deliberative quality in reply comments. In all analyzed parent and reply comments, right-wing populist messages were significantly more often impolite (90%) and uncivil (38%) than other comments (54%/3%). Surprisingly, right-wing populist comments coincided more often with arguments (32% vs. 17%). Sourcing was equally rare (3%) in both categories. We ran four logistic regression models using the binary indicators for deliberative quality in replies as dependent variables (Table 2).

We found a significant negative effect of people-centric parent comments on argumentation (Model 3) and a weakly significant positive influence of anti-immigration on incivility (Model 5). The effects are visualized as average predicted probabilities in Figure 2. A people-centric parent comment decreased the probability of a response including an argument from 25% to 18%, holding all other variables at their observed values and averaging across all predictions. Anti-immigrant parent comments, in turn, increased the probability of uncivil responses from 13% to 19%. These findings support H2 and H4. However, the effect of anti-immigration on incivility disappears when controlling for anti-immigration in the reply, as a closer analysis shows, which is not presented here. We discuss this finding in the conclusion. Contrary to our expectations, we found a weakly significant, negative effect of anti-elitism on incivility.

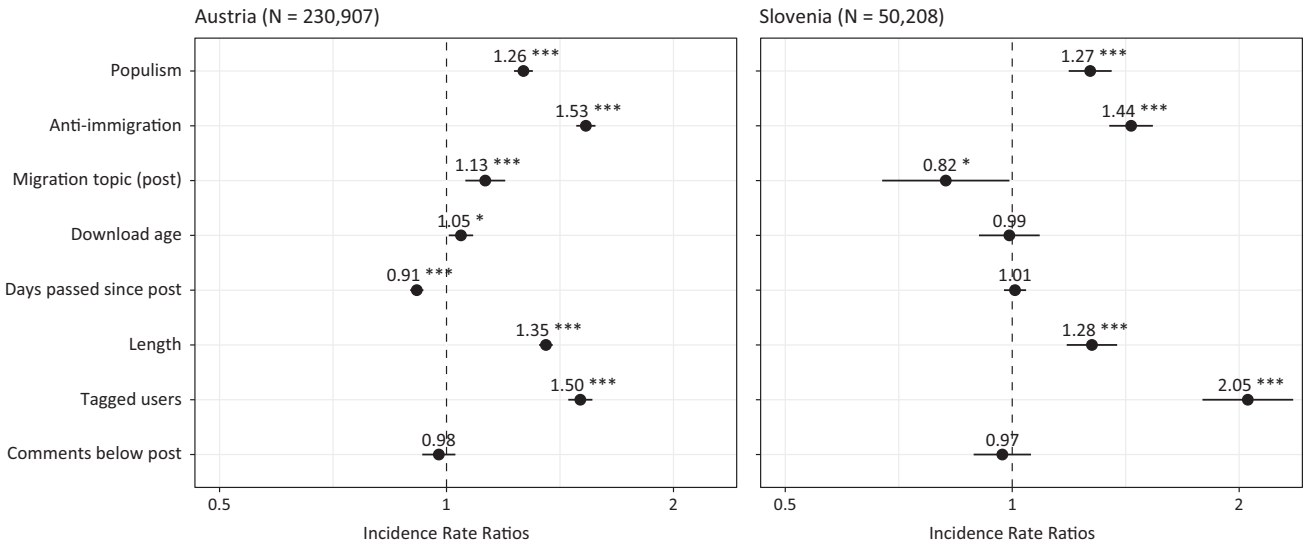

Figure 1. Incidence rate ratios from Model 1 (Austria) and Model 2 (Slovenia) from multilevel negative binomial regressions on the number of replies per comment for each country. Note: Varying intercepts on post and account levels.

Table 2. Logistic regression results.

Dependent Variable	Model 3 Argument (R)	Model 4 Sourcing (R)	Model 5 Incivility (R)	Model 6 Impoliteness (R)
Intercept	−1.72 (.19)***	−3.56 (.43)***	−1.66 (.19)***	.78 (.20)***
Explanatory Variables (P)				
People-centrism	−.44 (.16)**	−.06 (.36)	−.21 (.17)	−.01 (.15)
Anti-elitism	−.21 (.16)	−.04 (.35)	−.39 (.18)*	−.29 (.15)
Anti-immigration	−.03 (.17)	−.44 (.38)	.50 (.21)*	.02 (.16)
Countering				
Countering anti-immigration	.15 (.25)	.09 (.61)	−.11 (.29)	−.13 (.25)
Countering populism	.23 (.26)	−.15 (.59)	0.26 (.30)	.71 (.26)**
Controls (P)				
Argumentation	.58 (.15)***			
Sourcing		−.06 (.82)		
Incivility			.42 (.18)*	
Impoliteness				.82 (.17)***
Length	−.05 (.08)	0.14 (.13)	−.23 (.10)*	0.07 (.09)
Accounts				
Der Standard (Austria)	.95 (.35)**	−.12 (1.09)	−16.08 (573.89)	−2.42 (.38)***
Die Presse (Austria)	.69 (.33)*	.77 (.72)	−.40 (.41)	−1.37 (.30)***
Kronen Zeitung (Austria)	.53 (.21)*	.65 (.48)	−.18 (.20)	−.97 (.18)***
oe24.at (Austria)	.46 (.32)	.62 (.71)	−.88 (.42)*	−.65 (.29)*
Zeit im Bild (Austria)	.68 (.20)***	.83 (.48)	−.76 (.25)**	−.93 (.19)***
Delo (Slovenia)	.48 (.35)	−14.66 (854.11)	−.88 (.45)	−.24 (.35)
Dnevnik (Slovenia)	.55 (1.14)	2.62 (1.19)*	−16.17 (1,753.88)	.04 (1.14)
RTVSLO.si (Slovenia)	−13.79 (458.35)	1.61 (1.12)	−16.22 (1,244.41)	.01 (.81)
Slovenske Novice (Slovenia)	.47 (.22)*	.39 (.56)	.27 (.21)	.27 (.25)
AIC	1,460.25	431.22	1,231.65	1,590.08
Num. obs.	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; (R) reply; (P) parent comments.

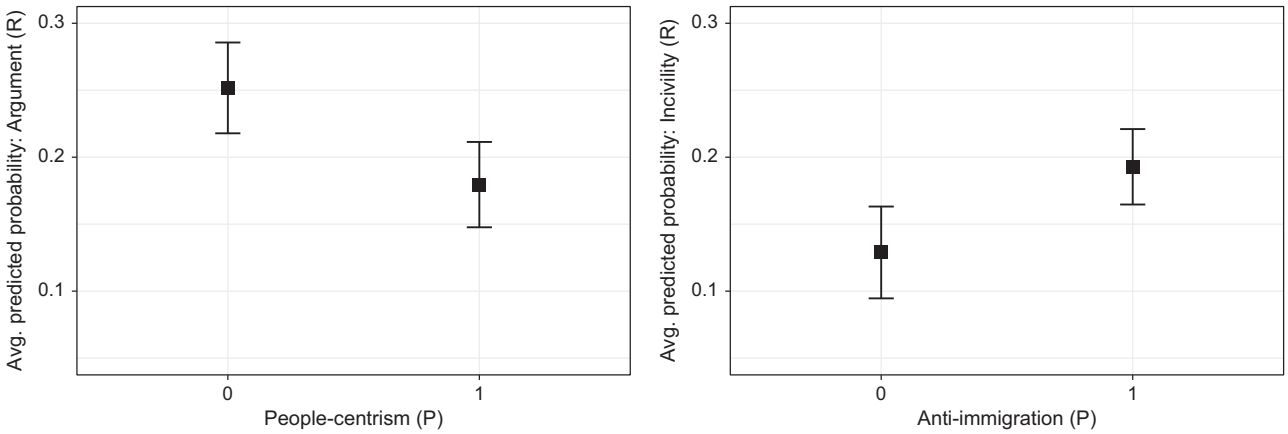

Figure 2. Average predicted probabilities of argumentation and incivility in reply comments. Note: 95% confidence intervals.

Model 4 did not find any meaningful predictors for sourcing. Impoliteness in responses (Model 6) was best predicted by impoliteness in the parent comment. We found analogous contagion effects for argumentation and incivility in Models 3 and 5. None of these findings let us reject the null hypotheses against H3 and H5. We included two variables to answer our research question regarding the impact of countering right-wing populism on deliberation. Interestingly, we found that countering populist content significantly increased the probability of impoliteness in subsequent replies (Model 6). Figure 3 visualizes this effect, showing that previous countering increased the predicted probability of impoliteness in replies from 68% to 80%.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the impact of right-wing populist user comments on online deliberation. Proceeding in two steps using a computational and a manual content analysis, we analyzed the impact of right-wing populist comments on Facebook pages of Austrian and Slovenian news media during the "refugee crisis" of 2015–2016 on the number and deliberative quality of replies. Our findings show that populist and anti-immigrant comments increased the scope of replies but impaired their deliberative quality. This evidence empirically underlines the ambivalent relationship between right-wing populism and democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012) at the level of user debates and points to differential effects of right-wing populist communication.

Both populist and anti-immigrant messages sparked discussions among users in our sample. This confirms previously identified mobilization effects of right-wing populist content on social media (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019; Jost et al., 2020). This might be driven by activating a cognitive schema in like-minded users (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019) or by provoking replies from opponents. High levels of reciprocal user discussions seem desirable from the viewpoint of deliberation theorists (e.g., Friess & Eilders, 2015). At the same time, this engagement increases the visibility of right-wing populist content (Singer, 2014). According to the spiral-of-silence theory (Eilders & Porten-Cheé, 2022), this can lead to an overestimation in perceived public opinion with subsequent consequences for the statements of others.

Indeed, we found some worrisome consequences. People-centric comments decreased the readiness of users to present arguments in replies. This effect might be caused by populism's claim to be an immediate expression of the people's will (Canovan, 1999; Waisbord, 2018), which renders any supporting arguments unnecessary (Krämer, 2017) and counter-arguments pointless (Hameleers, 2019).

Anti-immigrant comments more often entailed uncivil replies. Arguably, these messages lowered the bar for like-minded users to express racist or violent views (Keum & Miller, 2018). Anecdotal evidence supports this view. One Austrian commenter demanded to "castrate this scum with a vise," responding to a comment that called for the deportation of an asylum-seeker and alleged sex offender. We found a similar example in the Slovenian corpus. This shows that right-wing populism can "normalize" (Wodak, 2021) incivility and racism also in online debates. However, we note that this is primarily a contagion effect of anti-immigrant content and partly driven by our overlapping operationalization of anti-immigrant and uncivil statements, which followed Papacharissi's (2004) concept. Regardless of this, the effect seems problematic for democratic debates. Future studies, however, should aim to delineate the two concepts more clearly.

We did not find an impact of right-wing populist content on sourcing or impoliteness in replies. What our findings show, however, is that debates in which one reply countered populism escalated in terms of impoliteness. This is illustrated by the case of a commenter who countered the populist claim that the "clowns in government" would not care about "Austrians who cannot

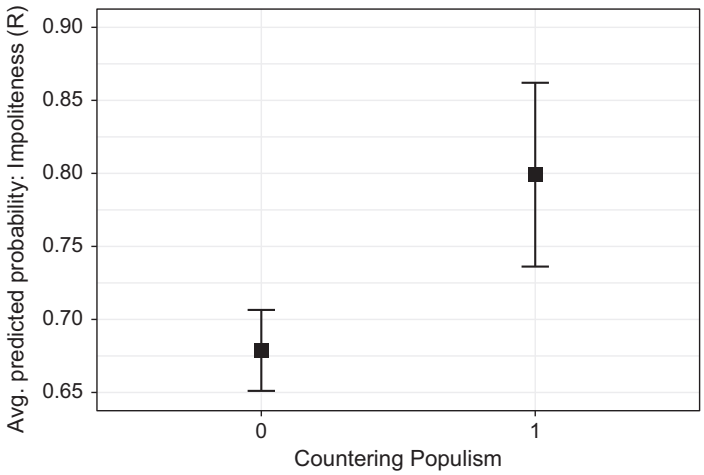

Figure 3. Average predicted probabilities of impoliteness in replies. Note: 95% confidence intervals.

afford heating" by hinting soberly at the public "heating cost allowance"; this comment then faced a variety of insults, ranging from "do-gooder" to "bullshit." This finding adds to previous evidence that disagreement in online discussions fosters impoliteness (Rossini, 2021). Unfortunately, we did not find that civic interventions improve deliberative quality, as Friess et al. (2020) did.

Media organizations face conflicting incentives to restrict right-wing populist comments. On the one hand, media houses profit commercially from high levels of user interaction on Facebook, as this increases the visibility of news stories (Singer, 2014). Accepting right-wing populism as a driving force for user engagement, however, might come at a cost. It may not only diminish the quality of online debates, as shown here, but could even backfire commercially, as low standards of online debates have shown to inhibit users from commenting (Springer et al., 2015). Here, we did not find evidence that right-wing populist comments were given preferential treatment from media houses for commercial reasons. Instead, we found that populist commenters are particularly attracted by publicly funded broadcasters. This is remarkable, since public broadcasters are a noted foe of populist politicians (Egelhofer et al., 2021), and populist communication is often associated with tabloid journalism (Hameleers et al., 2019; Mazzoleni, 2008). Future research should inspect the media preferences of populist commenters more systematically.

Our study comes with several limitations. Firstly, the focus on the highly polarized context of the "refugee crisis" is likely to have affected our findings. In particular, the finding that countering populism fueled impoliteness should be scrutinized in a less-polarized setting. We advise future research to broaden the thematic focus and to consider a coding scheme that better captures the complexity of positions and references in comments. Secondly, our findings are limited to the two countries Austria and Slovenia. Furthermore, the language differences constitute hurdles for our computational content analyses, both for capturing right-wing populism and the topic of migration, which could not be overcome satisfactorily. Future research is encouraged to tackle such methodological challenges in comparative studies of a larger scale. The same holds, thirdly, for our focus on the platform Facebook. Fourthly, the samples used in Step 2 served a primarily exploratory objective and cannot claim representativeness. Our findings should be substantiated using a more systematic sample. Finally, we suggest that the mechanisms underlying these observed relations be more fully explored in experimental studies.

In sum, this study connected the separate strands of research on populist communication and online deliberation, substantiating the *ambivalent* impact of right-wing populism on democratic debates, and contributed methodologically to the growing interest in computational content analysis.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited). The supplementary files include Appendices A–G. Replication data and R-scripts are available in the Harvard Dataverse (Thiele & Turnšek, 2022).

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Article

Far-Right Populism Online: Did VOX's Community Reproduce the Party's Discourse During the April 2019 Campaign?

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Abstract
In April 2019, VOX, a far-right populist party, won seats for the first time in the Spanish parliament. VOX successfully used social media to participate in the electoral debate and to establish a more direct link with its followers. We investigated how the VOX online community was structured during the election campaign and to what extent the most influential profiles spread the party's messages. We accordingly analysed two samples, one composed of tweets and retweets that used the hashtags #28A, #28Abril, and #28AbrilElecciones, and the other composed of metaphorical expressions identified in tweets by influencers. Applying social network analysis to the first sample, we studied the form and structure of the network and identified key profiles in the VOX community, i.e., influencers, builders, and bridges. Using critical metaphor analysis with the second sample, we identified the main frames used by VOX influencers to explore whether they reproduced the party's populist discourse. We found that the VOX online community in 2019 did not only include party supporters or members but was composed of varied profiles. For this reason, the populist metaphorical framing used by the VOX leadership was only partially disseminated.

Keywords
far-right populism; metaphor; online community; Spain; Twitter; VOX

Issue
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1. Introduction

Populism is gaining momentum (Belim, 2020) in the digital age and, as pointed out by Hameleers and Schmuck (2017, p. 1425), social media "contribute to [its] success by providing an attractive environment for both politicians and ordinary citizens to disseminate their political ideas". Populism, in its turn, is transforming social media, generating specific dynamics in the articulation of communities and the dissemination of messages.

Although right-wing populist parties began to emerge in Europe in the 1990s, Spain remained outside this trend until 2019, when the far-right populist party VOX emerged to quickly obtain representation in the Spanish parliament. Parallel to its growth, VOX has progressively become more radical and has aligned itself with other parties of the European far-right (Ferreira, 2019).

VOX was created in 2013 as a far-right splinter from the Popular Party (PP) in response to discontent among militants regarding a perceived PP shift to the centre. According to Ferreira (2019), the VOX ideology has four basic pillars: Spanish nationalism based on a centralized single-nation state, ethnocentrism combined with xenophobia, authoritarianism, and the defence of anti-feminist, traditional family, and rural values. Beyond these ideological features, Capdevila et al. (2022), Eatwell and Goodwin (2019), Olivas-Osuna (2021), and Vampa (2020) state that VOX is a far-right nationalist-populist party and identify in its communication strategy the main components of the populist discourse. Since its inception, VOX has been active in the

main social platform for political debate, namely Twitter. According to Guerrero-Solé et al. (2022), VOX's incursion on Twitter has greatly contributed to political polarization in two main blocks to the left and right.

In this article, we focus on an issue that, as far as we are aware, has been unexplored to date: precisely how VOX's populist message is disseminated in the party's online community. We accordingly analysed how this community was articulated and composed and how VOX's populist message was reproduced by key profiles, focusing on the period around the Spanish general elections of 28 April 2019, when VOX's proactivity in its communications ensured that VOX achieved parliamentary representation at the national level for the first time.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this article, in line with authors such as Charaudeau (2009), De Vreese et al. (2018), Engesser, Ernst, et al. (2017), Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson (2017), Ernst et al. (2019), and Hameleers (2019), we consider populism to be political content expressed using a specific communication style. Those authors coincide in considering populism from the perspective of a communicative logic based on two related issues: the discursive manifestation of a thin-centred ideology that can be combined with other ideologies (Mudde, 2004) and the expression of ideas using linguistic and stylistic devices that are as crucial as the ideas themselves (De Vreese et al., 2018). Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson (2017, p. 1280) refer to a "populist communication logic," specified in a set of norms, routines, and processes that shape populist communications.

From an ideological point of view, populism is transmitted through what De Vreese et al. (2018, p. 426) denominate "core components of populism ideology." These core components are as follows: (a) sovereignty of the people, appealed to and located at the communicative centre; (b) condemnation of the elite; and (c) dangerous others who "deprive the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3). According to Aslanidis (2015, p. 12), populist discourse can be understood as a frame that "diagnoses reality as problematic because 'corrupt elites' have unjustly usurped the sovereign authority of the 'noble People' and maintains that the solution to the problem resides in the righteous political mobilization of the latter in order to regain power." Based on this populist frame, Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson (2017, pp. 1281–1282) have elaborated a narrative that combines these components to situate them at the centre of populist political communications. Antagonisms are established between the people, whose sovereignty is at risk, and the elite and the dangerous others. In this struggle, populists define themselves above all as defenders of the people and as its ally in facing the threats posed by the elite and dangerous others. Nevertheless, who belongs to the out-group depends on the ideology of the left/right axis (Alonso, 2018). As for right-wing populism, the financial system, experts, and intellectuals form the corrupt elite. On the contrary, left-wing populism points at supranational institutions, media, and a range of traditional political institutions (De Cleen et al., 2020). The same happens with the attack on "the dangerous others," which mostly applies to right-wing populism and, thus, cannot be considered an inseparable characteristic of populism as a wider movement (Mudde, 2004), which is not necessarily exclusionary (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Considering populism's ideological core and taking into account the presence or absence of populist's frame components, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) establish four types of populism: (a) complete populism, where political actors appeal to the people, blame the corrupt elite, and exclude the others; (b) anti-elitist populism, where they refer to the people, and they criticize the elite; (c) excluding populism, which includes references to the people and ostracizes the others; and (d) empty populism, where only the people is mentioned.

As for how populist ideology is communicated, Ernst et al. (2019) have identified three main stylistic devices, namely, negativity, emotionality, and sociability, while Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson (2017) and Ernst et al. (2019) have proposed simplicity as a fourth device. Although not populist in themselves, these stylistic devices help package content in an attractive way. Presenting antagonism in a simple or elaborate way, with a rational/positive or emotional/negative slant, is not a mere matter of communication style but an ideological decision.

2.1. Metaphor as a Populist Stylistic Device

Because ideas are transmitted through language, linguistic choices let us access discourses' ideological content (Charteris-Black, 2004), and so we suggest that populist ideological content (the populist frame) can be understood through stylistic devices characteristic of language. We use metaphor as a framing device (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) that not only condenses the stylistic elements of communication but also how issues are perceived. As Keating (2021, p. 499) has pointed out, metaphorical expressions contribute to the communication of ideologies; furthermore, as in the case of populists, they "can be useful for politicians who wish to counter the dominant conventional frames." Metaphor use, which favours the economy of attention, thus facilitates the use of simple and understandable language in populist communications (Charaudeau, 2009).

The metaphor, as well as a frame detection mechanism, plays a dual cognitive and persuasive role and sometimes itself gives rise to a frame (Burgers et al., 2016). In its cognitive role, metaphor is a figurative way of understanding the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Analogy, in particular, is fundamental to the linguistic construction of social and political reality because it shapes a new reality, the target domain (TD), from

a known reality, the source domain (SD; Mio, 1997; Musolff, 2004). In its persuasive role, metaphor shifts attention to specific aspects of reality (Eco, 1993; Semino, 2008) to the detriment of other aspects.

We start from the premise that populist movements, like VOX, use metaphorical language to convey their particular and possibly novel perspective of the core components of the populist frame. As demonstrated previously (Capdevila et al., 2022), during the 2019 election campaign, VOX used metaphors to build a specific perspective on the three core components of populist ideology: the people personifying Spain as a living being (*España viva* [living Spain]); the left-leaning Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government—led by Pedro Sánchez as president—reflecting the elite (*la dictadura progre* [the politically correct dictatorship]); and dangerous others, personified as immigrants (*salvajes* [savages]), Catalan independentists (*golpistas* [insurrectionists]), and traditional media, especially when left-leaning (*una secta* [a sect]).

2.2. Social Media: Morphology and Echo Chamber Limits

As widely demonstrated (Barlett, 2014; Boulianne et al., 2020; Casell, 2021; Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017; Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Esser et al., 2016; Gerbaudo, 2018; Hameleers, 2019), the social media are an ideal arena for populist political communications. Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson (2017), in their analysis of how populist logic is linked to online structures of opportunity, refer to three aspects. First, populists bypass gatekeeper media and sidestep journalistic values in social media with personal and sensationalist communications (Engesser, Ernst, et al., 2017) that are deliberately people-centred (Gerbaudo, 2018). Second, non-elite participation in communications fosters anti-elitism in social media (especially Twitter), which has structurally transformed the public sphere into multiple peripheral spheres that interact with the central sphere (Sampedro, 2000, 2021). Finally, in relation to the dangerous others, since social media tend to foster homophily—i.e., the creation of echo chambers in which people hold similar opinions and share messages that confirm those shared views (Barlett, 2014)—populists become isolated in online communities, and this results in the formation of an in-group that excludes those considered as belonging to the out-group.

Because social media facilitate the transmission of messages and the creation and mobilization of homogeneous communities, populists make extensive use of different media depending on their goals. According to Hameleers et al. (2021, p. 12), if the objective is "to spread novel information on their issue positions, Twitter may have a wider reach among new segments of the audience". Van Kessel and Castelein (2016) affirm that, by enabling unmediated communications by politicians with their followers, Twitter plays a key role in social media, most especially due to inbuilt interaction mechanisms such as the retweet, mention, response, and hashtag functions.

The structure of social media communities is a widely studied research field (Guerrero-Solé et al., 2022). Regarding online populist communities, research has mainly focused on how social media are used for communications and have focused less on the inclusionary and exclusionary messages typical of populist discourse (Hameleers, 2019). One exception is Åkerlund (2020), who reports on how influencers contribute to reproducing the language of the far-right on Twitter. However, we still know little about how and to what extent messages are replicated by online communities.

Boulianne et al. (2020) question the notion of the echo chamber in relation to the articulation of online populist communities, given that the concept has not been well defined. Any proper definition needs to focus on the level of isolation of individuals and on discourse homogeneity within echo chambers. We take into account the two dimensions of content and of relationships, i.e., we identify both the morphology (form and structure) of communities and their main articulating profiles.

Beyond the conceptual debate, at a formal level on Twitter, retweeting can often function as an echo chamber because it tends to signal ideological affinity (Alonso, 2018). In the context of a retweeting network generated around an electoral campaign, analysing profiles can indicate how influence is articulated online (Bruns & Highfield, 2015; González-Bailón & Wang, 2016).

Graph theory offers a number of metrics to calculate network node centrality, i.e., relevance (Boutet et al., 2013; Carnia et al., 2021). Using graph theory, we can map the most retweeted profiles that construct the public arena as follows: builder profiles (they retweet the most), bridge profiles (they interconnect remoter network regions; Cherven, 2015), and influencer profiles (they are the most retweeted profiles).

3. Method

This research aims to answer the following research questions in relation to the Spanish 2019 general election campaign:

> RQ1: To what extent was the VOX online community homophilic?
>
> RQ2: Did the VOX online community reproduce the populist framing metaphors used by the party and its leader?

To answer the two questions, we used different samples and different methodological approaches. Data were collected for the 15 official election campaign days (12–26 April 2019).

To respond to RQ1, we analysed a sample (n1) composed of all tweets and retweets (n = 917,010)

posted under the hashtags #28A, #28Abril, and #28AbrilElecciones. R statistical language was used to develop the code to collect and clean the data.

Social network analysis, a tool that maps and measures social relations, was used to analyse network form and structure (i.e., to determine which communities were created and how they were related) and to profile the VOX online community and its constituent influencers, builders, and bridges from centrality metrics (Cherven, 2015; Scott, 2013; Scott & Carrington, 2012). The centrality metrics identified the most relevant nodes in the network and enabled communicative functions to be associated with profiles identified in the network of influence. Metrics were as follows: Influencers were determined from the weighted in-degree (WI) metric, which calculates the number of incoming weighted links to nodes receiving the most retweets; builders were determined from the weighted out-degree metric, which calculates the number of outgoing weighted links to other nodes (reflecting the most prolific retweeters); and bridges were calculated as the nodes that obtained the highest betweenness centrality scores, a metric that identifies the nodes that most interconnect different network regions or clusters (Cherven, 2105; Newman, 2010).

Influencers were grouped into five categories according to the description provided in their profile: (a) citizens (self-identified citizens independent of any association or political party); (b) media (including journalists); (c) non-VOX political actors (supporters and leaders of other political parties); (d) VOX political actors (VOX supporters and leaders, including regional VOX sections); and (e) miscellaneous, including unidentified Twitter users (with opaque profile descriptions), citizen associations, and security forces.

To respond to RQ2, we analysed a sample (n2) composed of metaphorical expressions (n = 984) used by the leading 50 influencers in the online VOX community. We stopped including new profiles once saturation point was reached, i.e., once detected metaphors began to be similar to those already collected.

A qualitative methodology based on critical metaphor analysis (CMA; Charteris-Black, 2004) was used to determine whether influencers reproduced populist framing metaphors used by VOX. The CMA was based on the three steps of identifying, interpreting, and explaining metaphorical expressions. We thus identified expressions referring to a semantic field that diverged from the remaining content—generating what Charteris-Black (2004) calls "semantic tension"—and grouped those expressions in terms of broader conceptual units (SDs). Once a word or a set of words have been identified as potentially metaphorical, researchers checked their original meaning in the Real Academia Española's dictionary of the Spanish language in order to confirm that these words were being used in a different way from the one that was intended in their most basic meaning. Interpretation and explanation were based on relating salient items from the identified SDs with TDs taking into account the context, which throws light on which narrative or definition of a situation arises from the use of the metaphor in question.

Two researchers coded the sample manually according to the variables listed in Table 1. To minimize subjectivity in metaphor classification, reliability was calculated by running Krippendorff's alpha inter-rater agreement test on 10% of the dataset for SD, TD, populist frame, and populist component. The high score (over $\alpha = 0.862$) obtained indicated strong inter-rater reliability.

4. Results

4.1. Research Question 1

To answer RQ1, we needed to determine how the retweeting network was configured during the election campaign period. The network consisted of 201,665 nodes and 527,372 links, with nodes reduced to 192,364 once zero-degree nodes were removed. The network clusters were revealed by applying a modularity algorithm with a resolution of one.

Table 1. Coding variables with #LivingSpain as an example.

Twitter profile	@Encamtado1
Profile type	Citizen
Date	25/04/2019
Statement	#LivingSpain has woken up and will triumph on #28A
Metaphor	#LivingSpain has woken up
Text/Image	Text
SD	Personification
TD	Spain
Populist frame	Yes
Populist component	People
Comment	"Living Spain" reflects those who do not feel represented by the left-wing government (the elite), but now have a chance to rule thanks to VOX.

Figure 1 shows the nodes with the highest WI scores, reflecting the influencers that determined the political affinity of each community. At the network morphology level, left–right polarization is very evident, reflected in both the proximity of libertarian and right/far-right communities (almost 25% of all the network nodes) and their clear isolation from the rest.

In the figures below referring to influencers, builders, and bridges, node and text sizes are proportional to the metric scores, and the colours represent the different communities (see the legend of Figure 1).

4.1.1. Influencers

Figure 2 shows the 527 nodes with the highest WI, receivers of between 213 and 30,405 retweets, and representing 0.27% of the total. A total of 107 nodes (representing 20.3% of the top influencers) corresponded to the right/far-right community.

Table 2 lists the 18 influencers within the VOX community who received more than 1,000 retweets during the campaign. To respond to RQ2, the content of these profiles was analysed after including the next 40 profiles

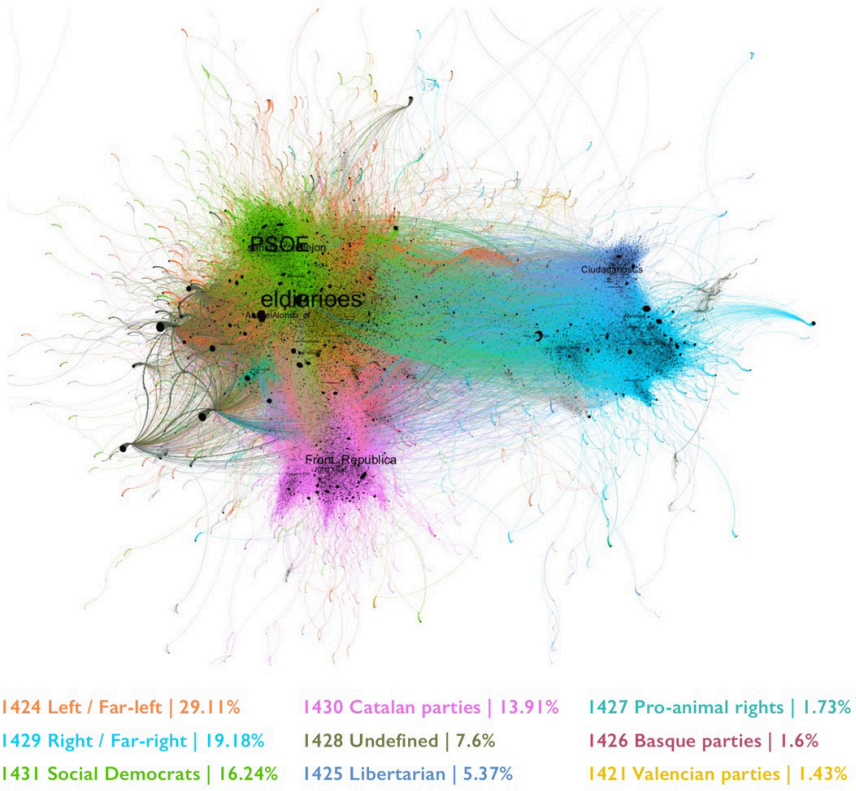

Figure 1. The main communities in the retweet network. Note: Numbers to the left of the labels are codes.

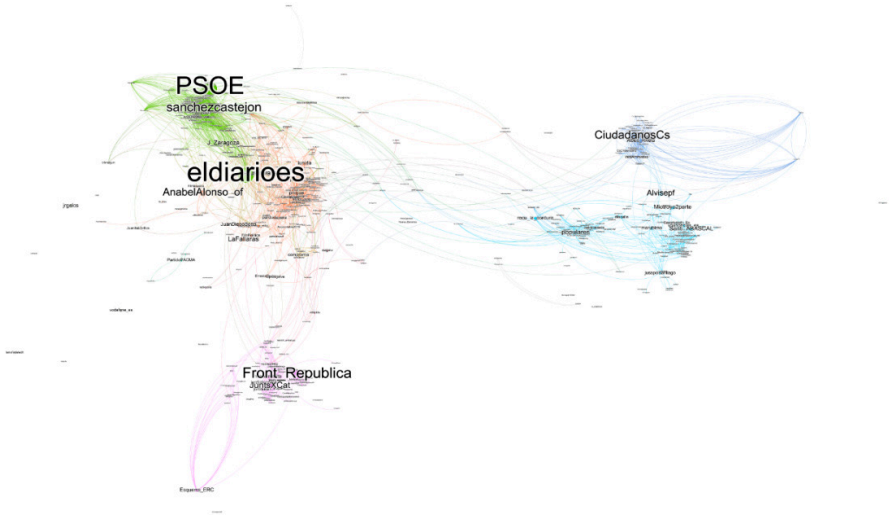

Figure 2. Influencers in the retweet network.

Table 2. Influencers in the VOX community with more than 1,000 retweets.

Twitter profile	WI	Twitter profile	WI
Alvisepf	7,827	CasoAislado_Es	2,789
populares	6,087	pablocasado_	2,776
Santi_ABASCAL	5,460	vox_es	1,728
Miotroyo2parte	5,189	monasterioR	1,468
recu_la_cordura	4,423	iarsuaga	1,268
voxnoticias_es	4,073	Igarrigavaz	1,259
marubimo	4,064	hazteoir	1,148
jusapolsantiago	3,750	abc_es	1,125
dlacalle	3,388	MediterraneoDGT	1,025

down the list and after excluding profiles without results and official accounts of parties and presidential candidates (@pablocasado_/@santi_ABASCAL).

4.1.2. Builders

Figure 3 shows the 430 nodes with the highest weighted out-degree scores, receivers of between 100 and 1,475 retweets and representing 0.22% of the total. Of the 430 builder nodes, 28 (6.5% of the top builders) corresponded to the VOX community. Notable is the @el_partal profile, representing the most prolific retweeter in the entire network. The WI score of many builder profiles in the VOX community was zero, indicating that their main function was disseminating messages from other profiles; although outside the scope of this study, it would be of interest to determine whether these were bot-type profiles.

4.1.3. Bridges

Figure 4 shows the 103 nodes with the highest betweenness centrality scores (0.05% of the total). Corresponding to the VOX community were 24 of these 103 nodes (23% of the top bridges). It can be seen that, except within the same cluster or community, the connection between profiles was very weak. This is a further indication of isolation and polarization in the studied network. The data suggest that the bridges mostly acted at the local rather than the global network level.

4.2. Research Question 2

In relation to RQ2, 984 metaphors were detected, 554 (56.3%) reflecting populist framing, i.e., the TD referred to the core components of people, elite, and/or dangerous others. These metaphors were labelled as populist metaphors (Table 3). The remaining 430 (43.7%)

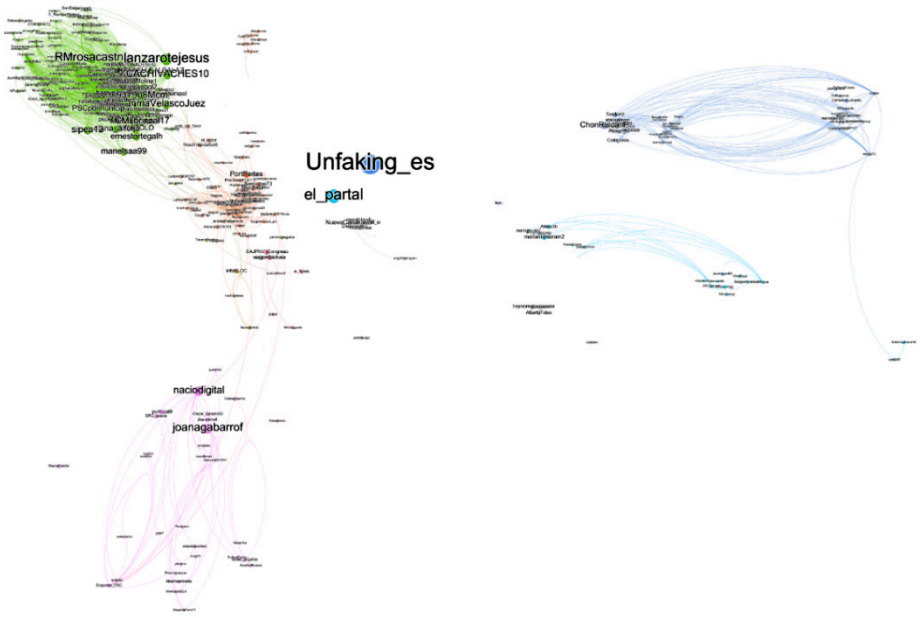

Figure 3. Builders in the retweet network.

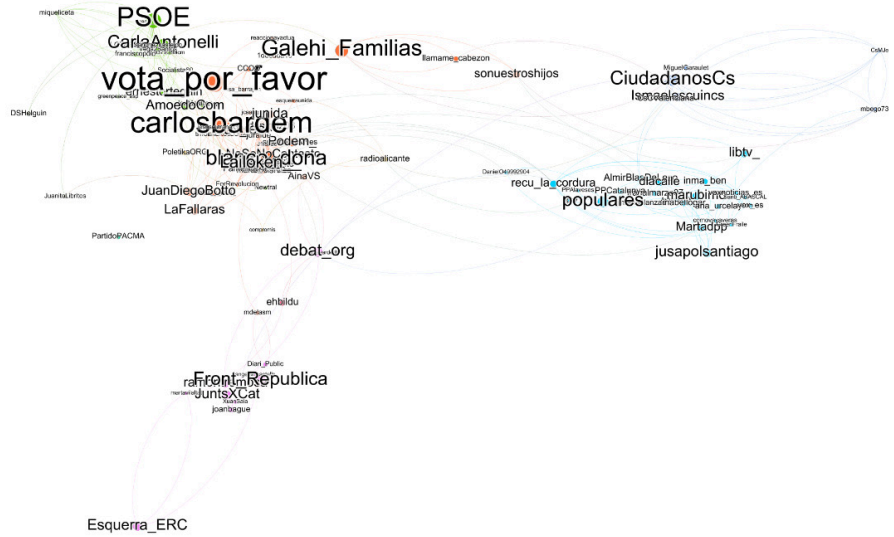

Figure 4. Bridges in the retweet network.

metaphors referred to other frames, such as the elections, electoral results, sectoral policies (e.g., regarding the economy), VOX, Santi(ago) Abascal (VOX leader), the security forces, and other political parties. The most metaphorized component was the elite, followed closely by the people (41.88% and 41.15%, respectively) and, at a distance, by the dangerous others (16.97%).

Table 3 shows populist framing by Twitter profile. Citizens used the greatest number of metaphors overall (30.9%), followed closely by non-VOX political actors (29.88%); between them, they accounted for over two-thirds of metaphors. The remaining metaphors were accounted for almost entirely by the media and VOX political actors (18.59% and 16.87%, respectively). Citizen profiles made by far the greatest use of populist metaphors (73.77%), while populist and non-populist metaphor use was broadly more balanced for the remaining profiles. The media and VOX political actors used smaller proportions of populist metaphors than metaphors referring to other aspects of the campaign.

Table 4 shows the intensities with which the different profiles metaphorized populist frames, with all the profiles prioritizing at least one of the three components. The elite was metaphorized most by non-VOX political actors (53.85%), citizens (43.56%), and the media (42.7%), and the people were widely metaphorized by VOX political actors (68.06%) and, to a lesser extent, by non-VOX political actors (40.56%). Metaphors referring to dangerous others were used least (citizens 17.33%, VOX political actors 13.39%, and non-VOX political actors 5.59%), except by the miscellaneous profiles (44%).

Through CMA, we verified whether the online community reproduced metaphors reflected in official communications by VOX and its leadership, which were analysed in a previous work (Capdevila et al., 2022). As mentioned in Section 3, metaphorical expressions do not work in an isolated manner, but they configure wider narratives under particular SDs. Tables 5, 6, and 7 show the most used SDs by Twitter profile for conceptualizing each of the core components of the populist frame in the analysed sample.

4.2.1. The Elite

All the analysed profiles used mainly the conflict/war/crime SD for framing the elite, with numbers that go from 37.75% (citizens) to 76.92% (VOX political actors).

Table 3. Metaphor use by Twitter profile.

	Populist metaphors		Other metaphors		Total	
Twitter profile	*μ*	%	*μ*	%	*μ*	%
Citizens	225	73.77	80	26.23	305	30.99
Media	89	46.63	94	51.37	183	18.59
Non-VOX political actors	143	48.64	151	31.36	294	29.88
VOX political actors	72	43.37	94	56.63	166	16.87
Miscellaneous	25	69.44	11	30.56	36	3.66
Total metaphors	554		430		984	

Table 4. Populist frames used by Twitter profiles.

	Populist framing component						
	Elite		Others		People		
Twitter profile	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%	Total
Citizens	98	43.56	39	17.33	88	39.11	225
Media	38	42.7	26	29.2	25	28.1	89
Non-VOX political actors	77	53.85	8	5.59	58	40.56	143
VOX political actors	13	18.05	10	13.89	49	68.06	72
Miscellaneous	6	24	11	44	8	32	25
	232		94		228		554

The main metaphor referring to the elite by VOX and its leadership, *la dictadura progre* (the politically correct dictatorship; Capdevila et al., 2022), was not included in any of the analysed tweets by citizens, although the word *progre* (progressive) was used, seemingly to refer to the left-leaning government. Metaphorical expressions that conceptualized the government as a traitor, as Spain's enemy or as totalitarian were used instead. Under this SD, the metaphor *el gobierno/Pedro Sánchez okupa* (squatter government/Pedro Sánchez) did also stand out:

> *Se estará llevando usted las manos a la cabeza si está viendo al presidente okupa @ivanedlm* [You'll be putting your hands to your head when you see the squatter president @ivanedlm]. (Lauri, 2019)

> *Plagiador, mentiroso, okupa, traidor, corrupto, cínico, payaso, oportunista, inepto, ególatra, psicópata...¿Sigo? Patético* [Plagiarist, liar, squatter, traitor, corrupt, cynical, clown, opportunist, inept, egomaniac, psychopath... Shall I continue? Pathetic]. (Comando España, 2019)

As far as media profiles were concerned, the metaphorical construction of the elite was more diverse, with no particular metaphor predominating. Hence, despite metaphors of war and conflict being the most common, the same metaphorical expression was rarely repeated. Even so, the metaphor of the squatter appeared frequently:

> *Esta es la carta de un ciudadano que el Okupa presentó ante 10 millones de españoles. Dijo que la autoría pertenecía a la Junta de Andalucía, acusándoles de elaborar "listas negras" de trabajadores de violencia de género. Nadie va a emprender acciones judiciales?* [This is the letter from a citizen that the Squatter presented to 10 million Spaniards. He says that it was authored by the Junta de Andalucía and accuses it of preparing "blacklists" of gender-violent workers. Is no one going to take legal action?]. (Isabel Rábago, 2019)

In the case of non-VOX political actors, metaphors referring to the elite were very varied. Most of the metaphors defining the government referred to it as a cowardly *enemigo de España* (Spain's enemy) that attacks the people and is held hostage by the parties that support it. In all cases, the metaphors reflect the SD of war and conflict (Table 5):

> *El enemigo de España es Pedro Sánchez y el adversario del PP es el PSOE. Advertir del peligro que es Sánchez no es un eslogan sino una realidad. Es una emergencia nacional que salgan de La Moncloa el #28A* [Spain's enemy is Pedro Sánchez and the PP's adversary is the PSOE. To warn of the danger implied by Sánchez is not a slogan, but a reality. It is a national emergency that they exit La Moncloa on #28A]. (Teodoro García Egea, 2019)

Table 5. Source domain used by Twitter profile for referring to the elite.

	Twitter profile							
	Citizens		Media		Non-VOX political actors		VOX political actors	
Source domain	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%	μ	%
Conflict/War/Crime	37	37.75	15	39.47	32	41.55	10	76.92
Journey/Path/Movement	6	6.12	2	5.26	8	10.38	1	7.69
Health/Illness	8	8.16	—	—	5	6.49	—	—
Other source domains	47	47.96	21	55.26	32	42.55	2	15.38
	98		38		77		13	

VOX political actors rarely metaphorized the elite, but when they did, the main metaphors they used were *la dictadura progre* and *el gobierno okupa*:

> *@Santi_ABASCAL señala a Pedro Sánchez y asegura que su dictadura progre es el caldo de cultivo de la violencia que se está viviendo en campaña. Los votantes deben castigar al PSOE y apoyar a VOX con claridad y de forma masiva #PorEspaña.* [@Santi_ABASCAL singles out Pedro Sánchez, saying that his politically correct dictatorship is the breeding ground for the violence being experienced in the campaign. Voters need to punish PSOE and clearly and massively support VOX #ForSpain]. (VOX Noticias, 2019)

> *¿Por qué el Sr. Okupa no utiliza también el "lenguaje inclusivo" en catalán?* [Why doesn't Mr. Squatter also use "inclusive language" in Catalan?]. (Santiago Ribas, 2019)

4.2.2. The People

The main metaphor referring to the people by VOX and its leadership were *la España del Pladur* (the Plasterboard Spain) and *la España viva* (living Spain; Capdevila et al., 2022). Only the latter was present in VOX's online community. Table 6 shows how the analysed profiles used the SD of Personification to conceptualize the people. Under this category, the metaphor of "living Spain" was predominant.

The *España viva* metaphor (and its diametric opposite, *España muerta* [dead Spain]) stood out between citizens, the media, and VOX political actors, who reproduced this metaphor, mainly using hashtags, in many tweets referring to the people:

> *El próximo #28A tenemos que elegir entre #LaEspañaViva y esta otra España: #LaEspañaMuerta Yo elijo #VOX* [On #28A next, we have to choose between #LivingSpain and that other Spain: #DeadSpain. I choose #VOX]. (Felipe G. Aguirre, 2019)

The *España viva* metaphor was not mentioned even once by non-VOX political profiles, despite them using the Personification SD when giving Spain the ability to be "strong," "to wake up every morning," or "to grow up." Rather they tended to use Mechanics/Physics metaphors regarding the people, referring to aspects such as their unity and the risk of breaking it if there was no change in government.

4.2.3. The Others

As mentioned, VOX and its leadership focused on immigrants, the media, and Catalan separatists as dangerous others. Inside VOX's online community, Catalan separatists were the most metaphorized group, whereas the analysed profiles did not conceptualize media and immigrants that much (Table 7).

Immigrants were conceptualized as savages by VOX and its leadership (Capdevila et al., 2022), but this metaphor was not used by any profile in their online community. The groups that did metaphorize immigrants used metaphors such as madness and control (citizen profiles and media profiles, respectively):

> *Proyecto sharia, activo en Londres, atacan a quien bebe alcohol, mujeres con minifalda y a homosexuales. También activo en Francia o Países Bajos. No podemos permitir q llegue a España, sólo @vox_es puede parar esta locura. El #28a #PorEspañaVotaVOX* [The Sharia project, active in London, attacks those who drink alcohol, women in miniskirts, and homosexuals. Also active in France and the Netherlands. We cannot allow this to happen in Spain, only @vox_es can stop this madness. On #28a #ForSpainVoteVOX]. (David Lorenzo, 2019)

> *Un menor cántabro de 17 años ha muerto en San Sebastián tras recibir una brutal paliza a manos de siete jóvenes de "nacionalidades diferentes". Ya nos podemos hacer una idea de sus nacionalidades. Es hora de controlar la inmigración* [A 17-year-old minor from Cantabria has died in San Sebastián after receiving a brutal beating at the hands of seven young people of "different nationalities." We can have a good idea of their nationalities. It's time to control immigration]. (Caso Aislado, 2019)

Table 6. Source domains used by Twitter profile to refer to the people.

	Twitter profile							
	Citizens		Media		Non-VOX political actors		VOX political actors	
SD	*μ*	%	*μ*	%	*μ*	%	*μ*	%
Personification	65	73.86	10	40	14	24.13	32	65.31
Mechanics/Physics	8	9.09	4	16	18	31.03	—	—
Conflict/War/Crime	6	6.81	3	12	6	10.34	8	12.33
Other source domains	9	10.22	8	32	20	34.48	9	18.36
	88		25		58		49	

Table 7. Source domains used by Twitter profile to refer to the other.

Target domain	Source domain	Twitter profile							
		Citizens		Media		Non-VOX political actors		VOX political actors	
		μ	%	*μ*	%	*μ*	%	*μ*	%
Media		5	12.82	4	15.38	—	—	3	30
	Conflict/War/Crime	2	40	2	50	—	—	—	—
	Building	2	40	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Religion/Belief	1	20	—	—	—	—	1	33.33
	Mechanics/Physics	—	—	2	50	—	—	—	—
	Nature/Weather	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	66.67
Catalan separatist		30	76.92	13	36.11	8	100	4	40
	Conflict/War/Crime	24	80	10	76.92	4	50	4	100
	Nature/Weather	2	6.67	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Religion/Belief	2	6.67	1	7.69	—	—	—	—
	Religion/Belief	1	3.33	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Journey/Path/Movement	1	3.33	—	—	1	12.5	—	—
	Show/Cinema	—	—	1	7.69	—	—	—	—
	Mechanics/Physics	—	—	—	—	2	25	—	—
	Game/Sport	—	—	1	7.69	1	12.5	—	—
Immigrants		4	12.26	9	34.61	—	—	3	30
	Conflict/War/Crime	2	50	3	33.33	—	—	2	66.67
	Religion/Belief	1	25	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Health/Illness	1	25	1	11.11	—	—	—	—
	Control/Uncontrolled	—	—	3	33.33	—	—	—	—
	Fantasy/Dream	—	—	1	11.11	—	—	—	—
	Journey/Path/Movement	—	—	1	11.11	—	—	—	—
	Mechanics/Physics	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	33.33
		39		26		8		10	

The media were metaphorized as a sect by both citizens and VOX political actors, while hardly any metaphors about this group were used by media profiles and non-VOX political profiles. Note that the following tweet contains two plays on words: *LA SECTA* (the sect) and *New TROLA* (new troll) refer to La Sexta, a left-leaning television channel, and Newtral, an online media fact-checker and producer, associated with Antonio Ferreras and Ana Pastor (respectively), journalists married to each other:

> *#28A... Deseando ver la cara que se les queda el Domingo al Ferreras de LA SECTA y a su parienta del New TROLA* [#28A... Looking forward Sunday to seeing the face of Ferreras from LA SECTA and his missus from New TROLA]. (Marta, 2019)

Table 7 shows that the most metaphorized "others" are Catalan separatists, which were metaphorized as insurrectionists by all the profile types analysed. Citizens also referred to Catalans as supremacist racists (Ku Klux Cat) or "lazis" (a play on Nazis and "lazos," the latter referring to the yellow ribbons that were widely used as a symbol of support for Catalan independence):

> *El racismo en crudo: Los habitantes de Cataluña no deben ser confundidos con los catalanes auténticos, que son los afiliados al separatismo supremacista. O bien "negros, judíos y católicos hispanos, no esperéis ser considerados americanos." Los lazis del Ku Klux Cat* [Racism in the raw: The inhabitants of Catalonia should not be confused with authentic Catalans, affiliated with supremacist separatism. In other words, "blacks, Hispanic Jews and Catholics, don't expect to be considered American." The Ku Klux Cat lazis]. (Carlos Mtz Gorriarán, 2019)

> *Hoy el enemigo de España es el golpismo, el separatismo y la izquierda radical y a ellos los vamos a combatir, pero con mucha contundencia, no como los demás partidos* [Spain's enemy today is insurrection, separatism, and the radical left and these we will fight, but forcefully, not like the other parties]. (Rocio Monasterio, 2019)

5. Discussion and Conclusions

As indicated by Boulianne et al. (2020), the literature on the impact of social media on the spread of populist

ideas is based, first, on an imprecise definition of echo chambers and second, on a lack of determination of echo chamber limits at the levels of content transmission and of relationships between profiles. In this article, we tried to throw light on those issues.

First of all, in relation to RQ1, we have shown that the community that formed around VOX during the April 2019 election campaign could not be considered fully homophilic, as it did not reflect an echo chamber in which VOX-supporting profiles were isolated from the rest of the Twittersphere. As indicated by Moragas-Fernández et al. (2019), the Twittersphere is divided into thematic clusters that are part of broader spheres articulated in different ways depending on the issue. During the 2019 electoral campaign, the Twittersphere adopted a specific morphology. Regarding findings for RQ1, the network morphology was clearly polarized along an ideological left/right axis, but a more precise perspective of the right revealed the coexistence of different communities interacting with VOX. There was, therefore, no absolute homogeneity in relationships, as the populist profiles of the far-right interacted with other more moderate political and media profiles.

Second of all, in relation to RQ2, the echo chamber at the node level was also found to be imperfect with regard to the transmission of populist messages. While the official VOX and Santi(ago) Abascal accounts transmitted populist messages—and so were truly populist in reproducing all the components of the populist ideology (Capdevila et al., 2022)—this was not the case with the community more broadly. Considering Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) four types of populism, i.e., complete, anti-elitist, excluding, and empty (reflecting the presence and/or absence of the various populist ideological components), we found that the analysed Twitter profiles prioritized those components differently in their communications (see Tables 5, 6, and 7). Thus, non-VOX political communications reflected a mix of anti-elitist populism and empty (people-centred) populism (see Table 4); a similar pattern was observed for citizen profiles and, to a certain extent, for media profiles (although in this case, there was also a certain degree of metaphorization of dangerous others); VOX political communications reflected mainly empty populism (around 70% of their metaphors referred to the people); and finally, unidentified profiles mainly reflected excluding populism that marginalized dangerous others, with the anonymity behind which some of those profiles hid clearly reflecting more aggressive communications.

The results of the analysis also show that the reproduction of metaphors used by VOX and referring to the different populist components was only partial. Essentially, VOX was only successful in reflecting Catalan pro-independence politicians as insurrectionists. This metaphor predominated (practically exclusively) in all the profiles analysed (see Table 7). VOX managed to partially convey the *España viva* metaphor to refer to the in-group (see Table 6). This metaphor, mainly transmitted as a hashtag, was broadly reproduced by citizens and the media, but far less so by non-VOX political actors. The metaphor of *la dictadura progre* used to refer to the elite had less impact, as it went largely unreproduced by VOX political actors.

The analysed profiles used metaphors mostly for the elite (see Table 4), and the metaphors used to conceptualize the elite were very varied. The metaphor most used by citizens and the media, and widely reproduced by VOX political actors, was that of the *gobierno okupa*. Non-VOX political actors constructed a metaphorical framework based on conflict regarding the elite, considered a cowardly enemy of Spain that attacks citizens and is held hostage by political supporters. In the echo chamber that was formed in the VOX online community during the April 2019 Spanish elections, therefore, metaphors resonated that offered different visions of the three populist components of people, the elite, and dangerous others. The diversity in disseminated content may have been marked by the fact that the community was not completely ideologically homogeneous, as evidenced by its influencers interacting with other profiles.

Beyond answering the research questions, in this article, we have also provided a methodological proposal based on triangulation for analysing the two levels of echo chambers. Social network analysis has proven to be a reliable method for community detection and for identifying the relations established between profiles at a morphological level, while CMA has let us approach small data, which, despite not being statistically representative, is necessary for determining how echo chambers operate at a content level. Likewise, we have brought forth an analysis that shows the way metaphors construct the populist frame, and so we have contributed to filling the gap mentioned in the literature section. Considering this, the aim of the article was not so much to reflect on what the results imply for VOX, but to argue that the way in which the populist frame is disseminated online is not perfect, because its public is formed by a heterogeneous community (or at least not as homogeneous as thought).

Our findings may be affected by certain limitations. In the first place, the election campaign may have conditioned the content transmitted by VOX and its community, as legislation governs what can/cannot be broadcast by political parties during election campaigns. Furthermore, the fact that parties compete with each other for a common electorate may have meant that non-VOX political actors were more reluctant to convey metaphors generated by that party. The question remains as to whether, outside the election campaign period, the analysed profiles would have behaved in the same way or whether metaphors would have been transmitted differently within the community. A final limitation is that only one populist party from the far-right was analysed, so it remains to be seen whether the communities of other populist parties, whether of a similar or different ideology, would behave in a similar way. All these limitations can be addressed in future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

What "Real" Women Want: Alt-Right Femininity Vlogs as an Anti-Feminist Populist Aesthetic

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Abstract
This article suggests that one reason for the resurgence of populism we see in the digital age is its resonance as a political *aesthetic* with the style and aesthetics of online culture. Influencers on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram rely on style to attract viewers and identify themselves with a community. This makes fertile ground for far-right populist movements like the alt-right, who can package extremist politics in attractive content that appears to represent viewers' everyday concerns. A growing alt-right community on YouTube known as traditional or "trad" wives create videos about femininity, beauty, and relationships. However, viewers who seek out these channels for clothing or hair styling tips leave with another kind of styling: populist messaging that frames feminism as an elitist threat to the "real" femininity of everyday women. Through rhetorical analysis, I find that trad wife vloggers' videos stylistically suture alt-right anti-feminism to the broader online influencer culture through repeated aesthetic displays of the feminine self, home, and family. I argue that this visuality acts as an aesthetic mode of veridiction for the anti-feminist message that is uniquely powerful on image-based social media platforms. It creates the appearance of broad support as similar aesthetics are repeatedly performed by many trusted influencers. I conclude by calling scholars of populism and rhetoric to attend to the way multi-layered conventions of aesthetics on social media platforms can spread extremist messaging through ambiguous content within and beyond online communities.

Keywords
aesthetic; alt-right; extremism; femininity; gender; internet culture; populism; rhetoric; social media; trad wife vlogs; YouTube

Issue
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1. Introduction

In February 2019, a beautiful, bubbly, blond-haired YouTuber from the United States named The Radiant Wife published a video that welcomed future viewers to her new channel. It was titled "Dear Lonely Feminine Women," and in it, she confronted her audience with a problem. "This problem," she explained, "is the belief that all women resonate with feminism….This is not true." The Radiant Wife explained that contemporary culture was devaluing the real essence of womanhood encapsulated by the notion of *femininity*. This is isolating to feminine women, "women like me, who….I don't want to be a boss babe!…I want to be a wife, a mother, run a household.''

The Radiant Wife explained to her viewers that elite feminism was being pushed in publications and the media. "We used to have beauty magazines," she observed, "but now all of those magazines, if you look [at them], it's all feminism….And it doesn't talk about the topics a lot of women actually care about." This leaves feminine women in the lurch, without a social or cultural space that acknowledges their true desires. She asked, "So what does a woman like that do in a culture where she feels so marginalized, feeling like I'm not a real woman because I don't want to be a lawyer, doctor, blah blah blah?''

Instead, The Radiant Wife explained that the way to get in touch with this *real* womanhood is through

intentional femininity. Embracing their femininity would make women visually beautiful and appealing to men, help them become better mothers, and, most importantly, get in touch with their natural, biological selves. But since this viewpoint was no longer represented in mainstream media like fashion and beauty magazines, The Radiant Wife has turned to the internet to provide such content to her viewers:

> I want to help you guys realize that other people feel the same way you do, and it's okay!….There's a lot of women out there like me, like you probably, who just don't fit into this current narrative in our culture….Welcome! That's what this channel is all about.

YouTube viewers may easily encounter The Radiant Wife and other anti-feminist channels through keyword searches for terms like "feminine" or "femininity." Users who search these terms looking to update their wardrobe, learn beauty styling tips, or even explore their gender identity instead encounter messaging that tells them to reject feminism and get in touch with a conservative, traditionalist womanhood. They argue that this represents a "real" womanhood that "most" women appreciate but which has been denigrated by elite liberal feminists who promote a "girl boss" ideology. This image of a *girl* boss is presented as a diminutive yet masculinized strawman in opposition to the supposed real *womanhood* represented by trad wife vloggers.

This analysis demonstrates the pressing need to better understand how populist discourse is mobilized among everyday women online. Further, it shows how the increasing importance of aesthetics in online communication is changing what it means to participate in populist political discourse, and that a rhetorical approach is well positioned to "unmask" (Mckerrow, 1989) the extremist ideologies this discourse at times contains. In this article, I find that trad wife vloggers' videos stylistically suture alt-right anti-feminism to the broader online influencer culture through repeated aesthetic displays of the feminine self, home, and family. I argue that this visuality acts as an aesthetic mode of veridiction for the anti-feminist message that is uniquely powerful on image-based social media platforms. It creates the appearance of broad support as similar aesthetics are repeatedly performed by many trusted influencers. In the sections that follow, I first outline the relationship between populism, gender, and the alt-right. Then, I perform a rhetorical analysis of trad wife YouTube content by two prominent influencers, focusing on how their visual and verbal rhetoric comes together as an anti-feminist populist aesthetic. Finally, I conclude by calling scholars of populism and rhetoric to attend to the way multi-layered conventions of aesthetics on social media platforms can spread extremist messaging through ambiguous content within and beyond online communities.

2. Populism, Gender, and the Alt-Right

Populism has been variously understood as a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), a discursive construction (Laclau, 1977), a form of nostalgia (Taggart, 2004), and even a mode of political authenticity (Cover, 2020). At its most basic level, populist discourse establishes an opposition between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). "The people" here emerges as a rhetorical device which outlines the "parameters of what 'the people' of that culture could possibly become" (McGee, 1975, p. 243). For this reason, the term has an implicit othering property that divides an actually existing collection of persons into mythical categories of "us" and "them." In this manifestation, populism need not be linked to a particular political ideology. These "minimal definitions" (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021) are useful because they allow researchers to account for the variety of populist discourses that are deployed across a range of ideological positions—Consider, for example, appeals to "the people" by figures as diverse as conservative Republican Donald Trump and Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders.

Yet, in context, many authors link populist style with conservative politics, particularly as it manifests in nationalism (Anastasiou, 2019; De Cleen & Glynos, 2021). Such populism today often takes the appearance of consensus-building, even when it operates as a resentful "form of wedge politics" (Cover, 2020). Social media technologies play a key role in contemporary populism. Cover (2020, p. 757) argues that today's populist base "[has] been brought together through social media networking and marginal online publications (the alt-right) to recognize or, more rightly, rethink themselves as a community or class." This occurs because today's populism draws on new "rhetorical tools that produce a sense of community and shared experience among [a] population, moving from stoicism and racial authenticity to perceived vulnerability" (Cover, 2020, p. 759).

While there are benefits to both minimal and substantive approaches, the online context of today's populism calls for an understanding of its function as a strategic performance in these spaces. This approach highlights the uniquely stylized nature of populism which distinguishes it from other types of political appeals. Moffitt (2016, p. 29) defines a political style as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life." Populism, then, is differentiated from other styles by three features including an "appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'; 'bad manners'; and crisis, breakdown or threat" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 29). In our contemporary political landscape, in which traditional relationships between citizens, parties, and classes are shifting while the public sphere grows increasingly coterminous with the media,

style becomes the gravitational mass around which our politics is oriented (Moffitt, 2016, p. 39).

For better or worse, the internet is a new public sphere in which some modes of communication are more effective than others, as we have seen in movements like the alt-right (Cover, 2020). It provides particular benefit to populist leaders who can use new media platforms as an alternative to traditional media for reaching their audiences across historically bounded regions (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 89–91). Moreover, the increasingly visual nature of mainstream platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok calls our attention to the way populism is not only discussed but visually performed and displayed on our screens. For that reason, here, I consider populism as a political aesthetic. This approach is closest to the discourse theoretical perspective in which, drawing on Laclau (1977, 2005), populism is "a way of formulating and bringing together ('articulating') political demands, of interpolating subjects" (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021, p. 183). These subjects may have unique interests and identities, but the populist appeal creates a substrate through which all feel they can bring forth their demands (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Applying this approach to both visual and verbal performances on social media helps us see how the aesthetic dimension of populism makes it so effective in bringing various audiences together into a common cause.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines aesthetic as "a particular conception of beauty or art, a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight" (Aesthetic, n.d.). Focusing on the aesthetic foregrounds the visual aspects of social media, which is a key affordance of platforms that increasingly promote image and video content (Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2015, 2017). The aesthetic also calls to mind a sense of beauty or taste that is pleasing to the viewer. Countless articles encourage would-be social media influencers to develop a coherent aesthetic that concisely represents their brand to audiences (for example, Carbone, 2018; Fontein, 2019).

Historically populism has been associated with masculine aesthetics, particularly when it appears on the political right. Moghadam (2018, p. 295) notes that "contemporary right-wing populist and nationalist movements and parties constitute a gendered backlash to the ills of neoliberal capitalist globalization and its attendant values." Such movements usually focus on men's concerns and male leaders, and "their notions of femininity are traditional and would strike many feminists as downright dangerous" (Moghadam, 2018, p. 295).

There are, however, notable exceptions to populism's seeming masculinity. In Europe, politicians like Pia Kjærsgaard, Marine Le Pen, and Siv Jensen, and far-right populist parties are gaining an increasing number of women voters despite their often-stereotypical portrayals of women (Meret et al., 2016). These women defy traditional conceptions of charismatic leadership as defined through stereotypically masculine attributes (Meret et al., 2016). While they utilize many of the same rhetorical strategies as populist men, women leaders also emphasize personal responsibility and issues of familial care (Pettersson, 2017). In the United States, figures like former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin or Fox News host Laura Ingraham have successfully used populist appeals (Anderson, 2021; Mason, 2010; Peck, 2019). Nonetheless, despite their own professional accomplishments, these women forward a traditionalist womanhood in which mothering and nurturing are still their primary roles, complicating the relationship between the public and private (Anderson, 2021). For example, Pia Kjærsgaard has referred to herself as the "mother" of her political party (Meret, 2015), a position not uncommon among other women politicians in far-right parties (Pettersson, 2017). This constrains their agency within a framework of masculinity that ultimately preserves an unequal gender dynamic (Anderson, 2021).

Moghadam (2018) notes that literature on populism and women is sparse, and instead approaches this intersection through the lens of nationalism and gender, on which a great deal has been written. The identification of the nation and social reproduction with womanhood is vast, not only but especially in extremist spaces (Anderson, 2021; Shome, 2011, 2014). In such a framework, women's role is limited to bearers and caretakers of the pure folk, and their labor is cloistered within the domestic sphere. Often intersecting with conservative religious discourses, women may also be seen as "complementary" to men. Complementarian discourses reify traditional gender roles through a language of "naturalness'' and "instinctualness" that we will see the trad wives use below. This focus on the "naturalness" of femininity resonates with far-right and nationalist women's view of their role as reproducers not only of children but of the culture and nation (Kajta, 2022). Because it is legitimated through procreative capacity, the identity of womanhood within this discourse is inextricably bound to a superficial notion of the biological. What is gained when we think about these discourses in relation to populism is an understanding of the way that they bring together diverse interest groups under the banner of traditional gender roles and articulate those demands in the public sphere. Reactionary attitudes toward so-called "gender ideology" is a particularly strong coalition builder, as well as linking such groups to more mainstream politics (Keil, 2020).

Like populism, the story told of the alt-right is primarily a masculine one. The term was coined by Richard Spencer in 2010 in his zine *The Alternative Right*, which espoused the desire for a white ethnostate. As the movement wormed its way through notoriously unregulated online forums such as 4chan, its disaffected male proponents soon linked up with other trolling-oriented online communities that developed in the wake of Gamergate, while strengthening its white nationalism and supremacism. These groups have been known to

target women in strategic harassment campaigns, and they have been correctly understood through the lens of misogyny (Mantilla, 2015). Today the alt-right as a self-identified movement has largely disbanded, yet the coalition that it built through various interest communities has continued to impact the political world both on and offline.

Despite this masculine narrative, white women have been an important part of both traditionalist and extremist movements historically until the present day. Women support, promote, spread, and participate in anti-feminist movements, including the alt-right (Blee, 1991; Burkholder, 1989; Kelly, 2018). Although it has been viewed as the result of assimilation into male systems or even coercion by men, women's participation in radical movements is often a considered personal choice (Blee, 1991; Kajta, 2022). While women's discourse in such movements can at times simply reiterate stereotypes of submissiveness, they increasingly revise the meaning of "feminism" to be compatible with rather than reject traditional femininity. This serves to expand their audience to "white women disaffected with racially and gender-inclusive and intersectional feminism" (Anderson, 2021, p. 32), and this effect is amplified in the digital age as women turn to the internet as a space of empowerment. One well-known example is Lauren Southern, a YouTuber and activist who used aspects of influencer culture like makeup and beauty vlogs to inject extremist and white supremacist ideology into public conversation (Anderson, 2021; Lombroso, 2020). Despite her adeptness at promoting racist politics, she eventually had to withdraw from the public eye due to misogynistic attacks against her from within her own community (Lombroso, 2020).

Given their heavy emphasis on traditionalism, it makes sense that the alt-right would take on a populist aesthetic which similarly has been "characterized by a kind of nostalgia" for the life of times past (Harsin, 2018; Taggart, 2004). Trad, short for "traditional," wives are a set of women within the alt-right who emphasize gender roles within heterosexual, usually white, relationships that are imagined to have been preserved or recovered from a historical past. They promote the idea that these roles are biologically or instinctually ingrained in men and women and that, because of this, living out traditional gender roles is the only real path to joy and fulfillment. However, the majority of trad wife content creators do not explicitly express racism or racial supremacism. Instead, they focus on beauty, fashion, relationships, and motherhood, which allows them to appeal to many mainstream audiences while blending into broader influencer culture (Kelly, 2018). As we will see below, they are able to frame themselves as oppressed through their appeals to a "real" and instinctual womanhood that is being stamped out by an elite feminism "interested in abolishing traditional womanhood" (Kajta, 2022, pp. 75–76).

3. Gendered Social Media

In contrast to populism and the alt-right, the culture of social media as it developed on platforms like YouTube and Instagram has been conceived of in explicitly feminine ways. Despite early assumptions that women primarily use social media for socialization, Duffy (2017) argues that not enough attention has been paid to how women use social media for networking and professionalization. Often, this is a kind of aspirational labor in which women perform unpaid work believed to "have the potential to pay off in terms of future social/economic capital" (Duffy, 2015, p. 60), not unlike unpaid domestic labor. Permeating the way women present themselves online is the assumption that they are simply being themselves, and this authenticity obscures the emotional, strategic, and even "glamour" labor that they must also perform (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Nonetheless, the importance of "authenticity" in online spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2015; Hund & McGuigan, 2019) resonates with populism's articulation of the people as authentic in relation to the elites and outsiders (Cover, 2020).

Even before the advent of social media platforms as we think of them today, women created supportive networks with one another online in spaces that focused on issues relevant to them. In the early blogosphere, women penned "mom blogs" or "mommy blogs," which, simply put, "chronicle the lives of mothers as they raise their children" (Abetz & Moore, 2018, p. 267; see also Lopez, 2009). Although the opportunity to monetize such blogs can contribute to women's economic empowerment and promote alternative framings of motherhood (Lopez, 2009), Chen (2013, p. 510) warns that they can also "reinforce women's hegemonic role as nurturers, thrusting women who blog about their children into a form of digital domesticity in the blogosphere."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, there is considerable overlap between the contemporary mom blogosphere and far-right women's blogs, which also promote traditionalist gender roles and relationships. In fact, studies have shown that new media spaces can be particularly fruitful for far-right women politicians and activists who use them to both maintain a level of control over their public image and build community among alternative audiences (Pettersson, 2017; van Zoonen, 2002). This linkage between far-right populist and mom-blog spaces is useful for trad wives because it provides a context in which their content is easily assimilated and does not stand out. Indeed, many trad wife vlogs/blogs appear nearly indistinguishable from other mom blog content. This approach functions across various cultural and national contexts by engaging a vision of white femininity that Shome (2011) has called "global motherhood." By performing this digital labor from within the home, women like the trad wives can maintain their fulfillment of a traditional gender role while promoting the spread of alt-right ideology.

4. Anti-Feminist Populist Aesthetic: Visualizing What "Real" Women Want

Rather than calling their audiences together under signs common to populism like "the working class," "the people," or "citizens" (Harsin, 2018, p. 36), trad wives on social media use the sign "femininity." They figure feminine women as forgotten, neglected, and excluded (Cover, 2020) by elite culture, which has become obsessed with feminism. The role of the trad wife influencers, then, is to save the real, pure, and traditional feminine women under attack by the dominant culture's oppressive feminism. As such, the trad wives' populist appeals articulate the feminine woman as *vulnerable* in a deeply affective way (Cover, 2020).

The sign of "femininity" bridges the gap between extremism and the mainstream because it allows these women to engage in populist appeals without explicitly articulating their ideological grounding. Doing so would mitigate their ability to amass a large audience, whereas focusing on generalist topics like beauty and family expands their reach without revealing connections to the alt-right. This allows them to use a populist political strategy without ever "talking politics" because the sign of "femininity" functions as an ideological shorthand (Harsin, 2018; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Because of this, they can oscillate between audiences and prime viewers for more extremist content.

In the next sections, I demonstrate how trad wife influencers articulate alt-right populism by drawing on popular online feminized aesthetics and norms. Addressing their strategic display of a feminine self, feminine home, and feminine family, I argue that such aesthetics make an implicitly populist argument that femininity represents a "real" women's resistance to the elite. Framed in this way, trad wife influencers' content about femininity functions polysemically (Ceccarelli, 1998), speaking to multiple audiences while encouraging viewers to sympathize with alt-right extremism. Importantly, this does not suggest that trad wives do not believe in their arguments or only use them strategically, though some certainly do so. Rather, it demonstrates one reason populism has been so effective in online contexts. As Laclau (2005, p. 17) observed about the seeming vagueness of populist discourse, "wouldn't populism be, rather than a clumsy political and ideological operation, a performative act endowed with a rationality of its own—that is to say, in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to constructing relevant political meanings?''

I focus on content from two YouTube influencers: The Radiant Wife and Finding Elegance. Due to the increasing risks of targeted harassment toward researchers who study these communities (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019), I have changed the names of the YouTube channels and modified video titles where appropriate to attenuate keyword searches. This approach serves my goal of focusing on the systemic effects and structure of the discourse rather than on any particular personality or figure (McKinnon et al., 2016). I have not included specific video URLs in the references list for the same reason, though it will be easy for the reader to find similar content simply by searching "feminine" or "femininity" on YouTube. Direct quotes have not been changed. Both influencers have public ties to well-known alt-right and far-right figures in online and offline contexts. However, they have different levels of public visibility. At the time of this writing, Finding Elegance has 107,000 subscribers on YouTube, 75,800 followers on Twitter, and 76,300 on Instagram. The Radiant Wife is a lesser-known figure who, in addition to her YouTube channel, runs a blog about what she calls "women's heart and mind issues," including topics like relationships, dating, marriage, beauty, and femininity. At the time of this writing, she has 195,000 subscribers on YouTube and 52,100 followers on Instagram.

A rhetorical approach is apt for understanding how trad wife influencers express their politics through an anti-feminist populist aesthetic. Style, as authors like Moffitt (2016) point out, has often been conflated with rhetoric, particularly in its colloquial and pejorative usage as "mere" rhetoric. This points to the common understanding that rhetoric comprises not the substance of an argument but its presentation, performance, or delivery. In fact, Moffitt (2016, p. 33) goes so far as to observe that the study of style has been "relegated to the 'outside' of mainstream political science as a 'surface level' feature of politics—something for media scholars, cultural theorists or rhetoricians to study rather than 'serious' political scientists." This critique of rhetoric as the shallow counterpart of substance is, of course, nothing new. As far back as Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates argued that rhetoric was a kind of knack or form of flattery, with no proper subject matter of its own. Likewise, today we deride insincere or manipulative language as "sophistry," hearkening back to Plato's disdain for the ancient Greek professional speech writers. And yet, rhetoricians themselves have long recognized the semiotic weight of style. Style is laden with meaning that participates in the construction of messages. Rhetoric identifies (Burke, 1969) and constitutes identities (Charland, 1987). It orients subjects in space (Blair, 1999) and crafts new spaces (Flores, 1996).

For this study, I monitored 15 self-described femininity vloggers on the YouTube platform over a period of two months. Accounts were located by searching terms like "feminine" and "femininity." I also drew on previous research on white evangelical motherhood vloggers and white nationalist women vloggers who create topically similar content in order to flesh out the range of participants in this discourse. As is the case in many social media-based online communities, group boundaries flow between various sub-networks. The accounts discussed below were selected because they exemplify the anti-feminist populist aesthetic common to such spaces, and they maintain explicit ties to public alt-right figures. They are both well-known within the community

and are frequently referenced in online discussions about alt-right femininity and anti-feminism, both on YouTube and in other forums.

After selecting these accounts, I collected their first and most recent three videos, as well as several additional videos published throughout the history of their channel which addressed anti-feminism. This amounted to 18 videos in total. I then performed a critical close reading of these videos' verbal and visual messaging. Brummett (2010, p. 3) defines close reading as a "mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings." The critical approach aims to "unmask or demystify the discourse of power" with the aim of destabilizing domination (Mckerrow, 1989, p. 91). As Kenneth Burke (1939) described in his famous analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, our job must be to "make Hitlerite distortions…apparent." This "making apparent" is a crucial function of rhetorical analysis in that it publicizes the mechanisms through which political discourse functions. It allows us to reveal the underlying ideology of a text in which it is (purposely or incidentally) hidden (McGee, 1980; Wander, 1983), a move that is particularly necessary in response to anti-democratic movements like the alt-right.

4.1. A Feminine Self

For trad wife vloggers, femininity encompasses a range of attributes and practices related to traditional gender roles. However, none of these is more common or significant than the display of a feminine self. The feminine self is comprised of a traditionally beautiful face and body, dressed in fashionable yet modest clothing, complemented by elegant comportment and even elocution. These physical displays function not only as a strategy for attracting masculine men but also as a visual argument for the naturalness of the trad life. The aesthetic quality of a popular content creator's own self suggests its desirability to most women. Even more, it reinforces their role as reproducers, as bearers both of literal people and the people as a populist signifier.

As part of her "Embrace Your Femininity" series, The Radiant Wife offers women advice about how they can improve their physical appearance and mannerisms to embody traditional femininity. The videos serve a normalizing function that makes femininity appear to be hidden within most women even as it is under attack by feminist elites. In the series, The Radiant Wife opens by reminding viewers that they are in the company of many others. She calls out, "I just want to continually remind you that if you've ever felt alone in your beliefs, if you've ever felt like no one understands you, I hope that you remember that there is [sic] literally thousands of other women who feel the same way." She suggests that by focusing on femininity, viewers are entering into a community and common cause with many others. It also implicitly suggests that contemporary society stunts these women's ability to express the femininity that they desire, a theme reinforced in many of her other videos, such as "How to Protect Your Femininity." Here, she encourages women to emphasize their femininity against a feminist culture which "prizes that masculine energy.''

As in other conservative contexts, modesty is a key issue on trad wife blogs. It serves two functions. First, it creates a foil for elitist feminism, which is imagined to over-sexualize women and make them aggressive. About feminist narratives of body confidence, The Radiant Wife cautions viewers:

> Just because you're uncomfortable in your nudity, doesn't mean some creep over here thinks you look bad. So, when you offer yourself in fleshly nudity to the world to empower yourself…these guys are just benefitting from looking at your naked body.

Second, it pushes back against the potential criticism that focusing on attractiveness to men is itself overly sexualized. About her focus on beauty content despite concerns with modesty, The Radiant Wife comments that "Yea, I can be pretty, but I'm not a sex object." Nonetheless, it should be noted that the majority of the videos on her channel are indeed about how women can improve their appeal to men.

But the most important part of the feminine aesthetic is that it will show other women that they do not have to hide their real desires anymore. The Radiant Wife explains, "Don't hide your femininity. It's important to flourish as a feminine woman in a public sense because it's powerful and it brings other women out of hiding, and I have seen that in my own journey." She remembers that when she finally came out as a housewife, "all these women came out of the woodwork, and they were saying 'I'm so happy you are talking about these things because I believe it, but I'm too scared to talk about it.'" Here, The Radiant Wife frames femininity as an aesthetic political strategy for amplifying anti-feminism. It has the potential for efficacy because it lies dormant in "all these women" who will "come out of the woodwork" if only the viewer is brave enough to publicly represent them.

4.2. A Feminine Home

In populist discourse, the home is often the space from which value emerges. Politicians speak about "kitchen table" issues that matter to "working American [or another nation's] families." For alt-right women, the home creates a space for the married, heterosexual couple and nuclear family, which is the foundation of a stable society. It is the ultimate arena in which trad wives can express their competence as women. Unlike elite feminists who only celebrate their professional work, in the home, trad wives enjoy the fruits of their own labor.

In their videos, homemaking is the expression of femininity in space. The home is figured as the vessel to cultivate oneself, one's marital relationship, and

eventually one's children. Visual platforms like YouTube and Instagram provide the perfect outlet to display this cultivation and to show other women the benefits of doing the same. Homemaking features heavily in trad wife content, as creators both demonstrate their own work and share tips with viewers.

For both The Radiant Wife and Finding Elegance, the feminine home is filled with the ephemera of one's womanhood, products that will appear inviting and familiar to young and usually white female viewers. Finding Elegance creates well-manicured spaces as the background of her videos. In "DON'T Be Ashamed to Stay Home, No Matter WHAT Feminists Say," Finding Elegance is surrounded by décor and props which look similar to what viewers might encounter in a Target department store: a white flower mirror with gold-tipped petals on the wall, a string of bright twinkle lights, white star-shaped ceramics, and even a rack with trendy clothing. This background follows her across many videos published during the same period, and it is remarkable precisely because it is so similar to that of other influencers. Even more importantly, it is aspirational in that it can be potentially obtained by her viewers, a key facet of influencer culture (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). The relatability of Finding Elegance's space suggests that she is just like her viewers and other everyday women as opposed to elite, removed feminists who do not understand their concerns or share their lifestyle. It argues that her views are simply an expression of what most real women desire because she is one of them.

Another way to connect with viewers is through "day in the life" (DITL) vlogs. This genre is typical of YouTube culture and popular across many communities. In the thumbnail for one of her DITL videos, The Radiant Wife is outdoors on what appears to be a large property, smiling radiantly in a modest dress, the wind blowing through her hair as she cradles a chicken. Throughout the video, titled "Days Filled With Joy," she shares excitement about her pregnancy and takes viewers along as she explores the property with her husband and dog. The images are vibrant and bucolic, often resonating with the "homesteader" aesthetic so popular in digital spaces like Instagram and YouTube.

Portraying the home in this idealized way is an aesthetic argument for its value. Whereas they argue that feminists culturally punish women who want to become stay-at-home mothers, trad wives celebrate their presence within it. In her video "DON'T Be Ashamed to Stay Home, No Matter WHAT Feminists Say," Finding Elegance suggests that:

> When women kind of start to realize that maybe they don't find their happiness through work…[or] decide that maybe they're happier at home, women feel trapped, they feel like they've done something wrong, and they feel like they're betraying their sex by actually wanting to be mothers or stay at home moms.

Furthermore, doing so "is more natural to the way humans function." Just as it did with the feminine self, idealizing this traditionally feminine relationship to the home implicitly argues that it will naturally fulfill women, and it primes viewers for the content which makes this connection explicit.

4.3. A Feminine Family

While femininity appears at first to focus on the comportment and presentation of the individual woman, it quickly becomes clear that the goal of trad wife femininity is to secure and support a traditional nuclear family. This family structure is the source of the trad wife's motivation and the ultimate objective of her work on herself and in the home. As content creators, they encourage women from a range of ideological positions to do the same. Their vlogs showcase motherhood as a slow, intimate, and bucolic experience in which they can most fully express their femininity.

Their focus on motherhood makes some trad wives' videos almost indistinguishable from more mainstream family and motherhood content. Called "mom-" or "mommy-blogs," these diary-like entries chronicle women's everyday triumphs and struggles raising their children, managing their household, and growing their family. The vast majority of mom blogs are not extremist in any way. Instead, most mom bloggers view their content as a creative outlet that connects them to other mothers with similar experiences, or they may even be a path to financially supporting their families or themselves (Lopez, 2009). Nonetheless, because they often focus on traditional gender roles and the nuclear family, the popularity of mom blogs provides a ready point of connection for alt-right trad wives to enter mainstream online spaces.

As one would expect in a vlog, when The Radiant Wife and Finding Elegance became pregnant, the majority of their content shifted to discussing their growing family. This content largely chronicles their daily experiences preparing their bodies and homes for motherhood. In her video titled "DITL ~ Wife Stays at Home Preparing for Baby," the thumbnail shows an idyllic still of The Radiant Wife in a long dress, working on a large painting in the dappled sunlight shining in through her windows. The vlog is largely about organizing and cleaning her home in preparation for the arrival of her first child, but its presentation is pastoral, calling up notions of rurality often championed by populist movements. It is also achievable, suggesting to viewers the desirability and everydayness of this lifestyle. Similarly, Finding Elegance's pregnancy and motherhood videos create this desirable, pastoral aesthetic. This aesthetic is intentionally created as she explains that:

> I know that this has been a lot of pregnancy content, and I'm happy to do it because I think it's really important to share such a positive view of

> pregnancy….There's so much negativity surrounding pregnancy, and I hate that. So, I have been glad to share my journey and share it joyfully.

Obviously, Finding Elegance is sharing her personal experience, but the implicit message, particularly within the context of her other content, is that a feminist culture devalues pregnancy and looks down on women who prioritize it in their lives. Instead, trad wives offer an idealized image of pregnancy that is easy because it is the ultimate expression of their natural role. Even more pointedly, it is presented as a desirable alternative to the grind and hustle culture of contemporary "boss babe" feminism that the trad wives reject. By presenting their experience through a pastoral aesthetic that calls up images of an idyllic and peaceful life, motherhood is forwarded as a blissful, natural alternative to the drudgery pushed on them by elite feminists.

5. Conclusion: Feminine Pathways to Extremism

The trad wives speak to a variety of audiences through the sign of femininity. Often without any explicit references to the political, their aesthetic presentation argues that the traditional, gendered role of wife and mother is the only natural and fulfilling responsibility for women. At the same time, the term "femininity" functions as a shorthand for a host of political and extremist ideologies that can be accessed through gender traditionalism. From mainstream conservatism to alt-right and white nationalism, the strategic deployment of populist aesthetics creates bridges between a colloquial understanding of the term femininity and its instantiations in extremist communities. Trad wives support the alt-right not simply through their association with the men who promote it, though this is important, but through their own strategic messaging, which primes audiences and introduces them to new pathways of extremism. Because "femininity" is such an unassuming term, YouTube users can unintentionally engage with these videos in just a few clicks. More insidiously, the political nature of the content will not be immediately clear. Much of it will appear no different from the many other fashion, beauty, lifestyle, and motherhood spaces online. It will tell them that most "real" women feel the same way and encourage them to come together to fight back against the feminist elites who are oppressing them. As The Radiant Wife says in her video "How to Protect Your Femininity," "Unite with other feminine women and encourage them in what we're doing!"

This analysis has several implications for the way we understand populism, gender, and rhetoric. First, where scholars like Moffitt (2016) develop the concept of a political style outside the field of rhetoric, an implicit argument here is that a rhetorical approach is well positioned to account for the linkages between style and content that Moffitt hopes to address. Indeed, rhetoricians have long recognized that "political performance and action [are] *constitutive* of identities" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 40, emphasis in original), of which Maurice Charland's (1987) theory of constitutive rhetoric is the best known.

The second implication of this analysis is our need to better understand how populist discourse is mobilized among everyday women online. Recent scholarship has begun to account for the role of women in populism, but it has largely done so through analysis of traditional political figures such as party leaders and elected officials (Kajta, 2022; Meret, 2015; Meret et al., 2016; Pettersson, 2017). The present analysis suggests that everyday women in their capacity as influencers and audiences through the popular genre of "mommy blogs" play a key role in the dissemination of contemporary populism. This is particularly salient in light of social media's growing centrality to the public political discourse around the globe. Social media expands the access that would-be political actors have to reach and even create new kinds of audiences. This process is amplified in a polarized media environment that increasingly finds shared truth elusive.

A final implication of this analysis lies in the way that the increasing importance of aesthetics in online communication is changing what it means to participate in populist political discourse. The trad wives are empowered to amplify alt-right ideologies precisely because they need never explicitly name them. Instead, the networked nature of online communication does this work on their behalf as recommendation algorithms materialize the aesthetic linkages between mainstream and extremist content. For example, searching for something as innocuous as "feminine outfits" returns a list of results in which fashion-oriented and alt-right content is visually indistinguishable. This is a problem for a democratic public sphere, and it calls us as scholars to "unmask" oppressive discourses that may be hiding in plain sight (Mckerrow, 1989).

Understanding the phenomenon of trad wife influencers as an anti-feminist populist aesthetic, then, takes into account the stylistic nature of their appeal while calling particular attention to the role of new media in its amplification. The movements' rise on platforms like YouTube, in which identity and community are organized around repeated and recognizable aesthetic displays, necessitates an approach that foregrounds the way that aesthetic *becomes* political substance in this new public sphere.

Online spaces like YouTube have the unprecedented ability to both isolate content from its political context and feed viewers increasingly extremist iterations (Tufekci, 2018). As we have seen, what begins as a video on feminine beauty tips quickly becomes an invitation for white women to bear children on behalf of extremist movements like the alt-right. Future research should continue to expand our understanding of the distinct processes through which women push and are pushed toward extremism.

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Article

Politicisation of the Domestic: Populist Narratives About Covid-19 Among Influencers

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Abstract
The article analyses the proliferation of narratives about Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event among female lifestyle influencers on Czech Instagram. As the Covid-19 pandemic turned even the most basic everyday activities into politically loaded questions, the boundaries between lifestyle, domestic, and political content posted by influencers became increasingly blurred. The article explores this process of "politicisation of the domestic" with a focus on (a) the gendered character of influencer communities on Instagram, (b) the process of authority building within the newly politicised and gendered spaces, and (c) the post-socialist socio-political context of the Czech Republic that frames current political events by symbolic references to a totalitarian past. Empirically, the article builds on data collected using digital ethnography and ethnographic content analysis of selected Czech female lifestyle influencers' Instagram profiles.

Keywords
Covid-19; Czech Republic; Instagram; political influencers; populism; social media influencers

Issue
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1. Introduction

The past two decades have been shaped by the rise of networked communication, where "single media logic" is replaced by "multiple media logic" (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). The one-directional flow of information from content producers (journalists, mass-media gatekeepers) is now dispersed into multidirectional flows from different types of producers (journalists, politicians, influencers, activists, experts) towards wide and diverse audiences via digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (Suton, 2021). Blumler (2016) suggests we should talk about the fourth age of media communication defined by communication abundance and complexity, a decline in the importance of traditional mass-media outlets such as public service radio and TV, and increasing "mediatisation" of political communication (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). At the same time, the distinction between who is a producer and who is a consumer becomes increasingly blurred in the environment of digital communication platforms that are based on the user-generated content principles, resulting in concepts such as prosumption, prosumers (Chia, 2012; Ritzer et al., 2012; Toffler, 1980), and produsers (Bruns, 2009). On the user-generated-content platforms, expert authorities and traditional gatekeepers such as academics, journalists, or politicians compete with newly emerging opinion leaders such as influencers, who often position themselves as a direct challenge to expert knowledge and base their authority on practical, everyday experience (Baker & Rojek, 2020). For young users, in particular, social media has become a preferred way to engage in public affairs and political discourse (Fischer et al., 2022). In this way, social media are driving a significant change in the dissemination and reception of political ideas and ideologies.

With the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, social media became the dominant channel of communication about the pandemic, central to informing citizens about new developments, restrictions, and risks (Baker et al., 2020; Fuchs, 2021). As Fuchs (2021) noted, all information about Covid-19 quickly became appropriated by proponents of various ideological groups, both mainstream and fringe. On the one

hand, various political actors from all sides of the political spectrum often used narratives about the origins and impact of Covid-19 to support their ideological views (Fuchs, 2021; Lyu et al., 2022). On the other hand, a new group of actors, opinion leaders, and influencers emerged within the domain of health communication on social media (Baker, 2022).

Heřmanová (2022a, 2022b) and Baker (2022), among others, have explored how the Covid-19 pandemic was discussed among predominantly female influencers on Instagram and other platforms. Online influencers play an increasingly important role in political communication. They serve as both intermediaries and producers of political messages. As established opinion leaders in areas such as fashion and lifestyle consumption, many influencers recently turned towards more political content (Fischer et al., 2022; Riedl et al., 2021). For influencers who built their personal brands around aspirational domestic and lifestyle content, the Covid-19 global pandemic created an opportunity (and sometimes even a necessity) to engage in political discourse. The most basic everyday acts and decisions, such as where to shop for food, how to organise playdates for children, if and where to go on holiday, suddenly turned into political discussions and the influencers found themselves either promoting or challenging anti-pandemic restrictions imposed by national governments as they were forced to actively defend their decisions on such matters to their followers. In this article, I explore this process of *politicisation of the domestic* and analyse how Czech influencers developed new ways to build authority and leadership within their communities and acted as experts or "lifestyle gurus" (Baker & Rojek, 2020). In particular, the article focuses on the proliferation of one specific political narrative among female Czech influencers on Instagram that explains the Covid-19 pandemic as an orchestrated political event deployed by the elites to control the people. Within the Czech-speaking online spaces, this narrative originally emerged at various conspiracy-dedicated and disinformation websites and blogs, and it mostly stayed there during the first wave of lockdowns in the Czech Republic (between March and May 2020). Over the summer of 2020, the narrative was gradually co-opted by fringe populist political groups, such as the movement around prominent Czech conspiracy theorist Lubomír Volný and on occasion was even referred to by the MP Tomio Okamura, leader of the party SPD (Svoboda a přímá demokracie—Freedom and Direct Democracy) and prominent representative of right-wing populism in the Czech Republic (Janáková, 2014).

This article follows the broadly accepted definition of populism as a political ideology and discourse that posits "the people" against "elites" (Canovan, 2002; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) and uses the example of a concrete populist narrative to analyse how female influencers engaged in populist political discourse via the above-mentioned process of politicisation of the domestic. The narrative explains the Covid-19 pandemic as an orchestrated event and an intentionally planned political strategy whose main aim was to strengthen the control of the political elites, both the visible ones (Czech and European politicians) and the hidden (often labelled as "pharmaceutical lobby," but also generally referred to as bureaucrats and greedy political leaders detached from the lives of ordinary citizens), over "the people." Within this narrative, the influencers situated themselves as representative voices of the people and used this position to form a type of political authority based on intuition and lived experience (as opposed to expert knowledge and political power). The analysis focuses on the social and discursive practices developed and used by the influencers to amplify the above-mentioned narrative, which enabled them to position themselves as authorities within the political discussion.

1.1. Methodology, Ethics, and Context of the Research

The analysis is based on a long-term digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) among Czech female Instagram influencers. The data for this study were collected between March 2020 and December 2021 using participant and non-participant observation on Instagram, participant observation with influencers and influencer management agencies, and semi-structured narrative interviews with the influencers (n = 15). The research participants are female influencers between the ages of 23 and 35 whose primary focus is lifestyle, travel, and parenting content. Influencers are defined here as social media platform users who monetise their content and whose social media profiles represent their main source of income (Abidin, 2018). The follower count of the research participants on Instagram ranges from 6,000 to 80,000. In the Czech context, a user with more than 5,000 followers is considered a micro-influencer, and a user with 50,000 followers is categorised as a mid-level influencer, as was confirmed by Ian, the owner of the biggest Czech influencer management agency, in an interview. In this regard, with its limited size, the Czech influencer market differs significantly from the English-speaking market. While the participant and non-participant observation occurred exclusively on Instagram, some of the influencers also used other platforms for building their personal brands, most often YouTube and TikTok. The data from digital ethnography were complemented by a thematic analysis of the content posted on Instagram by six research participants between February and April 2020 and September 2021 (to compare how the content has evolved during the pandemic). The data from the selected Instagram profiles were downloaded manually in real-time (posts from the feed were screenshotted and saved, and stories were recorded via Android screen-recording software), after which the data were coded in Atlas.ti software via open coding method (Rivas, 2012). Ethnographic content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; van den Scott, 2018) was used to code and analyse the visual material (photos and stories from Instagram).

The analysis included two rounds of coding. This process reflected the real-time developments that occurred during my research. The postdoctoral research project from which this article stems started in January 2020; its original aim was to explore the authenticity strategies of Instagram influencers, specifically focusing on how these strategies are gendered. The original selection of research participants thus reflected this set-up and focused on female content creators within the lifestyle, fashion, travel, and parenting areas. However, two months after the start of the project, the pandemic significantly changed the everyday lives of my research participants and heavily impacted their opportunities to create lifestyle content, as will be explored below. The research focus thus necessarily shifted to how the pandemic itself was reflected in the influencers' content and what strategies and practices they developed to cope with the pandemic-related changes in their everyday lives. The pandemic also impacted my choice of research methods, as face-to-face interviews and participant observation in offline spaces were not possible for most of 2020. I thus opted for the additional method of ethnographic content analysis to complement the data from digital ethnography. Later in 2020, I scheduled online interviews (via Zoom) with some of the research participants that I was already in contact with via Instagram messages or email. In the first half of 2021, I also recorded two face-to-face interviews. The resulting bulk of data is thus a combination of digital ethnography (participant observation, non-participant observation on Instagram), online interviews, face-to-face interviews, and ethnographic content analysis.

In the first round of coding, I focused on the data collected between February and April 2020, aiming to capture and analyse changes in content creation practices caused by the pandemic. Within this first round of data analysis, it became clear that many of the research informants had taken what they themselves called a "non-mainstream'' approach in discussing the pandemic with their audiences—a focus on the role of political elites, calls for independent thinking and research, and dismissal of the narrative offered by politicians and mainstream media. As the pandemic evolved and the political restrictions designed to curb it fluctuated in severity, some of my informants abandoned the topic and focused on creating apolitical, positive spaces where (again, in their own words) their followers could talk about normal things and not just politics. Others, however, used the opportunity to shift fully towards political content and created a political authority for themselves. In the second round of online data collection, I thus focused on the content posted by six of my informants whose shift towards political content was most pronounced and visible in their everyday posting practices. The article presents an ethnographic study of a trend that emerged among the influencers during the pandemic, which I believe can be illustrative of wider shifts both within the media landscape and the influencer economy, as will be discussed later.

All the names used in the text are pseudonyms, and all data have been anonymised. Even though informed consent has been obtained for all research participants, I decided to opt for full anonymisation for several reasons: (a) in some cases, while I obtained informed consent before the start of the pandemic, during the research, the content and narratives proliferated by the influencers significantly changed, putting them in a different position within the political debate; (b) all my research participants have previously experienced hate-speech and verbal threats on their profiles and given the polarised character of political discussion regarding the pandemic, non-anonymised analysis openly accessible online could expose them to further abuse; (c) I agree with Kozinets' (2019) observation about "consent gap" between "the ascribed and actual beliefs about social media users regarding the need for permission in the research-related use of the information they share online" (p. 173). I believe that the informed consent needs to be interpreted within the frame of the consent gap and with regard to the fast-changing dynamics of the discussion about Covid-19 (which was significantly different at the time when the consent was given). All the quotes from interviews and Instagram posts were translated from Czech to English by me.

2. Covid-19 on Instagram: Politicisation of the Domestic

In April 2021, I was in London and meeting with Sonya, a 24-year-old travel influencer based in the UK. Sonya was born in the Czech Republic, and both her parents are Czech, so when I asked her to meet me in person for an interview, she was excited to have the opportunity to have a conversation in Czech. While we were drinking coffee in the park, Sonya reflected on the previous year:

> It was difficult, I think it was difficult for everyone in my position. So many trips were cancelled. I survived because I have a few long-term partnerships that I could still work on from home, cosmetics, and such. But the change was drastic, and some people really did not cope well.

She laughs at the last sentence. We discuss how influencers reflected on the lockdowns and anti-pandemic restrictions, and Sonya noted:

> The thing is, it was impossible to avoid. Honestly, I didn't want to talk about it, but what was I supposed to do, a travel blogger stuck in a house with flatmates in London? I've seen some people still doing trips, like, moving to Thailand in the middle of the lockdown. And I thought, how is that professional? What kind of message does that send to the followers?

A similar sentiment was echoed by Vanda, a 25-year-old lifestyle influencer based in Prague, with whom I spoke a

few months prior:

> You feel sort of responsible because you know you are setting an example for some people. So, you really think about what you post, but at times, I felt like nothing I post will be okay; like if I talk about Covid at all, people will just get mad and argue about it.

I recorded most of my interviews between September 2020 and May 2021, and everyone I talked with sounded almost desperate when I asked how the pandemic had changed their job and posting routine. The topic of Covid-19 was unavoidable, even though everyone was tired of speaking about it. "I don't think people realised what it meant, though," Vera, a 28-year-old fashion and lifestyle influencer based in Prague, said: "I know everyone was impacted, but for an influencer, this is a disaster. I thought I could avoid the topic, but I couldn't—because it just felt wrong," she adds. Vera's pre-pandemic content focused on lifestyle, fashion tips, and her speciality: testing and reviewing organic skincare. Her feed consisted of outfit pictures taken at various photogenic locations in Prague, beach photos from her holidays, and pictures of her favourite things: candles, books, cosmetics, and her dog. During the first wave of the pandemic, she joined many other Czech and international influencers in the campaign #StayAtHome; she posted a selfie taken in her car in which she wore a respirator, accompanied by a caption about the importance of kindness and a plea to her followers to take care of themselves and their loved ones (the picture was later deleted from her Instagram feed). When most of the restrictions were lifted throughout the summer of 2020, she resumed her usual content, and her feed was full of vacation pictures, beach selfies, and iced lattes. In September 2020, it became clear that another lockdown was inevitable, and Vera's content slowly changed. In November 2020, she started to share (always to Instagram stories only, never in feed) different statements criticising the governments and medical experts for using the pandemic as a pretext to control the citizens. She, for example, shared a post from a US-based website, GreenMedInfo.com, run by a prominent conspiracy theorist and QAnon prophet Sayer Ji, that talked about the dangers of anti-Covid-19 vaccines (see also Heřmanová, 2022a).

The reactions of Vera's followers differed widely, especially at the beginning. However, as the content of Vera's stories became more and more political, most of the dissenting voices disappeared from the comments, and Vera's followers mostly echoed her sentiments, praising her for speaking about the situation openly. In a direct message on Instagram in January 2021 she wrote:

> People would send me messages saying, I am not here for Covid, I am not here for politics, I want to read cosmetics reviews, what are you doing, you're dumb. And that really hurt because all I was trying to do was to spread awareness. But later, a lot of followers also told me that they appreciated my profile as a safe space.

I had asked her about something she posted a day earlier, an anti-vaccination meme in English, shared from a profile of a US-based wellness influencer accompanied by a caption in which she compared the vaccination efforts of the world governments to the totalitarian state that the Czech Republic had experienced before 1989. Throughout the beginning of 2021, Vera continued to share political content in her stories and kept her feed dedicated to lifestyle posts.

Vera's approach to the situation she found herself in (locked at home and needing to produce lifestyle content, feeling severely limited in her way of life and profession by the anti-pandemic restrictions) is, in many aspects, illustrative of the change in the tone of the discussion about Covid-19 on Czech Instagram. All respondents reflected on the pandemic in different ways, some defensively, like Vera, and some passionately advocating for the restrictions and later for vaccination. As they reflected in the interviews, the pandemic created a significant challenge for them because it blurred the notions between what could be considered a lifestyle and domestic content and political discussion. Everyday decisions (Sonya deciding to accept an invitation to a press trip; Vanda going to a café and not wearing a mask; or Evie, a mother of two and parenting content creator, organising playdates for her kids) suddenly put the influencers in a position where such simple everyday acts needed to be explained, defended, and contextualised within the highly polarised political discussion about Covid-19, the restrictions imposed by the government to curb its spread, and the competence of the politicians in doing so. Evie told me over Zoom in July 2020 that: "You know, this has been my job for the past four years," and:

> I sometimes feel like people don't really get it, that this is not just about me boasting about my outfits and my kids and…well, my life. I'm not doing this because I am an egomaniac; this is my job. I am paid for promoting content; I have a community of people with whom I talk almost every day. So, what was I supposed to do? Stop posting?

We were talking about a recent article in a Czech tabloid media that accused influencers of spreading misinformation and using the pandemic to gain more followers by sharing sensational news. "This is actually hurtful," Evie sighed. "And they are the worst—tabloids—like, accusing someone of spreading sensational news, are you kidding me? We had to talk about the pandemic! Talking with people on Insta is our job," she shook her head, visibly frustrated. Evie used to work in publishing before having kids and then focusing full time on her Instagram, and she thus felt compelled to comment on the article publicly. She shared a screenshot from her stories as an example of this, in which she had pleaded with her

followers not to be manipulated by the media. When I talked to her again about a year later, this time face to face, at a playground near her house, with her children playing nearby, she reflected on the episode:

> I am now actually convinced that it was my duty to talk about Covid with my followers. I am not a political person, but this has impacted all of us; I have a community and feel a responsibility towards them. If you have a platform, you have a responsibility. So it was my duty to share the information that I had and to try to have a balanced discussion.

Similar sentiments were echoed in all the interviews. The influencers felt that it would be irresponsible for them to avoid the topic of the pandemic completely, not only because they felt personally impacted by it but also because they didn't want to seem detached and uninformed. And it also couldn't be avoided because the impact was visible in everything they did. As Sonya noted, if you decided to do something like travel somewhere, you would, pre-pandemic, simply do it because it was your life and job, but now you had to defend these decisions. The often-defensive stance the influencers felt compelled to take thus shifted them towards the territory of political discussion, which many of them had never engaged with on their profiles before. Within this process, which I call "politicisation of the domestic," the domestic, lifestyle, and aspirational Instagram content upon which the influencer relies in their everyday job, became politically loaded. Vanda had never previously expressed any interest in political discussion, but when faced with the challenge of the pandemic, she felt that her authority as an influencer enabled her to be part of the discussion and also to include her followers to participate in it. Similarly, Evie felt compelled to use her voice and authority because the unprecedented situation required her to do so.

A great deal of scholarly research attention has been addressed to the spread of populist narratives, including conspiracies and disinformation, on digital communication platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Instagram has, until recently, been relatively absent from these debates. In the public imagination, Instagram tends to be perceived as a female-dominated space for aspirational lifestyle content where politics is intentionally overlooked, despite the fact that evidence shows Instagram has been used for spreading disinformation since at least the 2016 US presidential election, to mention just one example (Howard et al., 2018). The gendered character of influencers' work on social media (Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2019) often leads to the assumption that politics, seen by some researchers as a male domain, is excluded from the influencer communities on Instagram. Within this context, the process of politicisation of the domestic is interesting because the politicisation happens on the same platform, not via a move to another. The politicisation of the domestic happens on Instagram precisely because Instagram is perceived—by the influencers themselves as well as by their audiences—as an apolitical platform. The penetration of political topics into spaces perceived and designed as domestic was previously observed by scholars who study the far-right and alt-right political movements. In her study of the US alt-right movement, Stern (2020) noted that social media offered women in this fringe political group an unprecedented tool of political expression because it enabled them to weaponise the fact that they were not political in the traditional sense (participating in meetings, applying for leadership roles, writing essays in mainstream media) and make it into a political statement in itself. According to Stern, via social media, women's political communication became political not because they had left the kitchen but because they had turned the kitchen into a political arena (Stern, 2020, p. 3). In the case of Czech Instagram influencers, however, this process occurred without reference to any particular political movement or party, and none of my participants ever openly discussed their adherence to any political group. The Covid-19 pandemic, in this case, served as a sort of catalyst for turning everyday domestic issues into political ones.

It is also important to note that the process of politicisation of the domestic is significantly gendered. I have elsewhere analysed the Instagram communities of female influencers as "third spaces" (Heřmanová, 2022a) because they are seen as neutral and safe and, by design, apolitical spaces where political talk happens. A significant body of research has shown that global digital spaces for political discussion tend to be male-coded, with women being actively discouraged from participating (Polletta & Chen, 2014). Vera's mention of the need to create a "safe space" for her followers can be interpreted within this context. Vera admits that she wouldn't feel safe discussing the anti-pandemic restrictions anywhere other than her personal profile or on the profiles of other female influencers she personally knows because it is such a heavily loaded and polarising topic. On her own profile, she feels safe within the community of her followers, and she is able to maintain it as "a safe place for everyone, where different opinions are respected." Via the politicisation of the domestic, lifestyle influencers' profiles on Instagram were successfully turned into spaces for political discussion, offering a way to engage in a political debate that feels non-threatening to the female participants.

3. Do Your Research: The Narrative of Covid-19 as an Orchestrated Political Event

As mentioned above, the process of politicisation of the domestic is highly gendered. The notion of womanhood plays a prominent role in the proliferation of Covid-19-related narratives in the lifestyle communities on Instagram, as the example of a prominent Czech influencer, Hana, shows. Hana is a divorced mother of three

home-schooled children, a former model and philanthropist, and one of the most prominent Czech "spiritual influencers" (Heřmanová, 2022a, 2022b). She rarely works on brand partnerships and instead uses her profile to promote her retreats and webinars about sacred femininity and what she calls "sisterhood" (Heřmanová, 2022b). Unlike Vera or Evie, Hana was sceptical about the pandemic from the beginning and openly criticised the restrictions as not respecting individual freedoms. Hana's position within the influencer community partly overlaps with what Baker and Rojek (2020) call "lifestyle gurus": influencers who "employ a mixture of selective scientific knowledge, folk tradition, and personal experience to offer alternative advice and guidance on medical, psychological, and social problems afflicting others" (p. 10). From this point of view, Hana offered psycho-spiritual guidance to her followers throughout the pandemic, often talking about healing and manifesting a better world. She refrained from openly commenting on any specific political events until August 2021, when she posted a picture of herself holding a big golden cup, wearing a flowy white dress, and accompanied it with the caption comparing the lockdown restrictions and Covid-19-certificates mandate to both the holocaust and the censorship and totalitarian practices of the Czechoslovak communist government before 1989 (Heřmanová, 2022b).

Hana's narrative about Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event was shared, liked, and interacted with by several of my research participants. She continued to defend it and support her argument with various snippets of information from different websites and sources, many in English and disconnected from the Czech context she was talking about. Within the narrative, the restrictions introduced by the Czech government are explained primarily as a tool to control people and curb their freedom. It posits the people, who are being controlled, against the establishment, and the government, who use the pandemic as a pretext to introduce restrictive measures and limit civic freedoms such as the freedom to travel and to gather in groups. In this way, the narrative presents the pandemic as a political event—a battle between the good people and the evil government—rather than a multi-layered phenomenon that has, beyond its political level, many aspects which are beyond the control of either the politicians or the people. Hana and many other influencers have adopted a narrative originally spread by fringe populist figures and politicians such as the above-mentioned prominent conspiracy theorist Lubomír Volný. While Volný was, as of August 2021, banned from all mainstream media platforms in the Czech Republic and interacted with his audience mainly on Telegram, which could be in the Czech context labelled as a "dark platform" (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021), Hana's profile and community, at least from the outside, still looked like an apolitical space dominated by discussion about spirituality, womanhood, and alternative healing practices.

The narrative of Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event became dominant over time in the content posted not by Hana, but also by Vanda, who, as mentioned, had previously never engaged in any type of political discussion. Maja, a yoga teacher and wellness influencer who lives in the Czech countryside, told me that when she was following Hana's posts and many other similar profiles, she couldn't get rid of the impression that:

> This is not random, you know? If you do the research, if you are trying to be informed, then these parallels are pretty clear; it's history repeating itself. It's important that as many people as possible open their eyes to this reality.

The notion of "doing your own research" was often mentioned in the context of the above-mentioned narrative. "It's not something the Czech TV [the public broadcaster] would air on the evening news, isn't it," Maja wrote me in a direct message on Instagram. A while later she added:

> You have to be active to get to the truth. Or at least to the facts. Like, I can acknowledge that we might have different truths; I know people live in different realities. But the facts are there if you look for them.

Vanda echoed a similar sentiment when we spoke in September 2020:

> In a way, I have time to do this; it actually makes sense. I spend time online, and I follow all these people because I need [inspiration] for my own content. So I can do the research, and I can share what I know.

Tessa, an entrepreneur and mother from a mid-sized Czech town, mentions that Vanda's posts had also encouraged her to share similar messages with her followers. She had been following many US-based influencers and regularly interacted with other mothers in Facebook groups. Tessa is from Slovakia, and although she has been living in the Czech Republic for more than 15 years, she participates in Slovak parenting groups: "That's mostly where I would find links and such," she said in our online interview. She continued:

> I think it's pretty clear that in a case like this, you cannot simply rely on the mainstream media. These are controlled by the politicians, and obviously, it is not in their interest to tell us the whole story; they will only talk about what they want you to know. I don't think the mainstream media is lying, intentionally. They are just part of the system. Look, I'm a mother, first and foremost. So if there's this law that says you have to vaccinate your child, then, of course, I would try to get all different experiences; of course, I would not just rely on what they tell me on TV. Every mother would do that. And every mother needed to do that, because there was suddenly this pressure, like they

> won't take your child into the kindergarten if you don't give them the jab?

Tessa's emphasis on "every mother" is representative of the point my other informants were also making—that this is not a political decision that is distant from you, this impacts you and your children, and therefore, you have a duty to talk about it. Tessa told me later in the interview that because she posted a lot of parenting content, people would ask her about the vaccination even if she tried to avoid the issue.

Tessa became more invested in the discussion around Covid-19 restrictions later in 2021 because that was when the possible vaccination mandate was introduced by Czech politicians. She often shared screenshots from various Czech media to her Instagram stories and commented on them. Her message was coherent: this is a way for them to control you and your children, don't be manipulated; educate yourself. In July 2021, she posted screenshots of a conversation she had had with one of her followers who had asked her who "they" were: "They are the people who profit from this. The pharma companies who will make millions out of you and your children, and the politicians whom these companies corrupt," Tessa wrote and added a link to the film *Plandemic*, a 2020 documentary about the pandemic by US director Mikki Willis. When I asked her about it later in a message, she replied:

> Yeah, I mean, the film is a bit crazy. But I still think it offers an important perspective. It shows who the powerful players are in this: the big pharma and the politicians; I think it sheds some light on this issue of manipulation, if you take it with a grain of salt.

While Hana sometimes discussed the pandemic and its political implications and the tools of control it offers to the politicians in livestreams or in short videos; her overall aesthetic stayed the same—light, feminine, filled with pictures of beaches, flowers, and flowy dresses. Similar tactics were adopted by Maja, while Tessa and Vanda restricted the political content to Instagram stories exclusively, and their feed thus displayed an unchanged mix of aspirational, domestic, and lifestyle content (kids, food, yoga sessions, branded posts with skincare products). Argentino (2021) observed a similar adaptation of conspiracy content within the US QAnon movement adjacent to Instagram profiles. He notes that the so-called "pastel QAnon" refers "to the unique aesthetic and branding these influencers provided to their pages and, in turn, QAnon by using social media templates." In many cases, Hana, for example, would share a meme or website screenshot from a US-based influencer, such as the pastel QAnon influencers, and adapt it to the Czech audience by framing it as a symbolic reference to the totalitarian past of the Czech Republic, referring to communist practices. The hashtag "do your research" (often used by QAnon proponents) is within this frame reproposed as a plea to remember the past and to see that history is repeating itself with the rise of another authoritarian regime similar to that which existed before the 1989 Velvet Revolution. In this way, using the techniques of pastel QAnon and adapting them with local symbolic references to the past, the Czech influencers proliferated content from fringe platforms such as Telegram within mainstream, lifestyle, and domestic spaces, successfully bridging the gap between mainstream and fringe content.

4. Discussion: Political Authority and Gendered Populism on Instagram

The narrative explaining Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event gained popularity among Czech Instagram influencers for several interconnected reasons.

Firstly, the pandemic created a catalyst for connecting the political and domestic content because it represented an event that significantly impacted everyday life and, most visibly, the areas of everyday life usually managed by women—grocery shopping, food consumption, family visits, children's free time and, perhaps most importantly, decisions related to health. As mentioned above, the process of politicisation of the domestic is significantly gendered because these areas and decisions were previously seen as lifestyle choices made by women and unrelated to domestic or international politics. The Covid-19 pandemic created the need for female influencers to frame these decisions as part of the highly polarised political discussion about anti-pandemic restrictions introduced by the government and later also the discussion about vaccination against Covid-19. As Vanda noted in one of our chats, this need to defend certain decisions could also be interpreted as an opportunity: "I would never go on Twitter to argue with people there. But this is my community here, and I feel like I can finally talk about issues that matter." The issue of vaccination introduced more political content into the Instagram influencers' communities within the second year of the pandemic (in 2021) because it presented the "ideal" combination of a highly feminised area (family health) with a highly politicised discussion. As Tessa notes:

> My husband is not the one who will take kids to the doctor. In fact, he won't even take himself; I know when his appointments are because I'm at home with our son, so I keep track of these things, and I guess that's normal in most families.

Tessa thus felt that she could insert her authority—and that it was also her duty to educate herself about the truth behind the calls to vaccinate everyone, including children. In Hana's and Maja's interpretation, the pressure to get vaccinated was always part of the elite's wider plan to control women's bodies. Hana as a former model, and Maja as a yoga teacher, were both always interested in the issue of control over one's own body, and they

both felt that the pandemic was a perfect tool of control (see also Heřmanová, 2022a). While the concrete interpretations of the narrative of Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event differ, the question of who has control was central for my informants. They all felt that by talking about it and engaging their audiences, they were the ones in control of what was happening to them, their bodies, their families, and their children.

Secondly, closely related to the issue of control (over both bodies and families, as well as the narrative) is the discussion about authority: who has it, who doesn't, and why. When Hana talked about vaccination with her followers in a live stream in September 2021, she often referenced "female intuition" and "native knowledge" of the human body. These concepts are prevalent within the spiritual influencer communities (Heřmanová, 2022b). However, the same discursive practices were adopted by people who do not see themselves as part of the spiritual community, such as Tessa. In the same reply to her follower about the "us" vs "them" narrative, where she recommended the *Plandemic* documentary, she also spoke about the importance of trusting one's own body and one's intuition. The theme of intuition was central to all my informants' messaging about Covid-19, as it is often seen in contrast with expert knowledge (produced by the ominous "them": doctors, pharmaceutical specialists, etc.). When Maja talked about the fact that "we all have different truths," she also talked about intuition:

> There are no guidelines for this; we all live in the reality we manifest for ourselves, so you just have to trust your gut. No one else will ever walk in your shoes. I mean, I don't want to dismiss education and, like, facts and scientific methods, but I think they are biased; these people are paid by someone for their research and data. It's not necessarily related to what people really live through, in my opinion.

Vanda expressed a similar sentiment:

> I know my own body. I take care of it. And I just don't feel comfortable when someone tells me what this body can't and can do. We are not all the same and if you don't respect your own feelings, your own body, and dismiss it all because the doctor tells you something…that's not the way to go for me.

In this way, the influencers position themselves as authorities who represent the voice of their (predominantly female) communities. This representation is often seen in direct opposition to the position of politicians, media, and experts, including health professionals. Baker and Walsh (2022) analysed how influencers who openly campaign against vaccination and engage in the proliferation of anti-vaccination conspiracies used the notion of "mother's intuition" to support their claims. In her previous work on "lifestyle gurus" (Baker & Rojek, 2020), Baker also emphasises the notion of intuition as a crucial feature of the lifestyle gurus' authorities. By adopting and proliferating the narrative that explains Covid-19 as a deliberate action of the elites targeting the common people, the influencers also situate themselves as representatives of the same common people, which gives them authority to speak up—and they support their authority by referencing female intuition as something that is not available to experts detached from the everyday reality. This is also in line with the research on how influencers construct their authority online—via strategic authenticity, intimacy, and relatability (Abidin, 2017, 2018). Lewis (2018) analyses how these tactics are being explored by what she calls "alternative political influencers" on the US alt-right scene and shows that the focus on authenticity, personal stories, and knowledge gained via practical, everyday experiences is often weaponised by alternative influencers to spread extreme and violent political messages. In their analysis of the communicative practices of QAnon movement members on 8chan, Marwick and Partin (2022) coin the term "populist expertise: the rejection of legacy media accounts, scientific consensus, or elite knowledge in favour of a body of 'home-grown' forms of expertise and meaning-making generated by those who may feel disenfranchised from mainstream political participation" (p. 3). Similarly, the Czech influencers represented in this article emphasised intuition, everyday experiences, embodied knowledge, and maternal (or generally female) instincts to help them build their own populist, alternative, intuitive expertise and, thus, authority within the space of their communities on Instagram.

Thirdly, while there are many similarities between the practices of English-speaking influencers and the Czech ones, it is important to contextualise the populist narrative of Covid-19 as an orchestrated political event within the local political context. The influencers often referenced the authoritarian communist regime of former Czechoslovakia as a context and framework for understanding current political events. Hana referenced the practices of the communist secret police in her post from August 2021, in which she called on her followers to be brave and not submit to totalitarian practices (in this case, the obligation to have a vaccination certificate to visit certain public spaces). Vera often used similar phrasing when she commented on concurrent political debates in her stories. She often compared the then minister of health and minister of interior to the communist functionaries, who were—in her interpretation—also just puppets of a more powerful elite (then in Moscow; today in the WHO headquarters or the EU capital, Brussels). In one instance, Vera posted an anti-vaccination video featuring the QAnon conspiracy theorist Sayer Ji (she reposted it from the account of Canadian model and actress Shalom Harlow) and added a comment: "We have been through this. We cannot let it happen again" and added a Czech flag and a picture of Václav Havel, the first democratic Czech president and

symbol of anti-communist resistance. While this anecdote presents a textbook example of a context collapse, it also illustrates that local politics, symbolic references to the past and recontextualisation of various narratives from English-speaking online spaces within the Czech reference framework reinforced the populist narrative about Covid-19 within the Czech-speaking online spaces.

These three aspects, the gendered processes of politicisation of the domestic; the creation of authority within these newly politicised spaces; and the localisation of the narratives within the Czech, post-socialist context via symbolic references to the past, together create a powerful incentive for the proliferation of populist narratives and enable the populist content to cross from fringe to mainstream spaces.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how a populist narrative that explains Covid-19 as a political event orchestrated by the elites to curb the freedoms of the people proliferated among female Instagram influencers on Czech Instagram. Based on long-term digital ethnography among Czech influencers, interviews, and ethnographic content analysis, the article presents the concept of the politicisation of the domestic as an analytical tool that explains the proliferation of political content in previously apolitical Instagram communities. As the pandemic blurred the boundaries of domestic and political content on Instagram, Czech influencers adapted narratives about Covid-19 being an orchestrated political event from fringe populist political figures to fit their lifestyle and domestic aesthetics and used the opportunity to situate themselves as political authorities. Via the process of politicisation of the domestic, populist narratives were successfully brought from fringe to mainstream online media spaces.

The findings contribute to the current body of research on how populist narratives, disinformation and conspiracies proliferate on digital communication platforms (Cobbe, 2020; Forberg, 2021; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Schia & Gjesvik, 2020; Zeng & Schäfer, 2021) and the role that influencers as communicative actors within the wider media ecosystem play in the process (Lewis, 2018; Maly, 2020). The analysis also attempts to provide a new context by focusing on the under-researched aspects of online populism: the gender dimension and the interaction of local contexts on global platforms. As Bracewell (2021) notes, the research on populism historically tended to overlook the gender dimension, and if it was employed, it was mostly via a focus on the construction of masculinities and male political power. The role of women in populist political movements has been recently explored within the context of the US (or generally English-speaking) alt-right and far-right movements (Mattheis, 2018; Stern, 2020). The presented analysis builds on this scholarship as well as on the notion of alternative political influencers (Lewis, 2018) and alternative health influencers (Baker, 2022) in the presentation of the concept of the politicisation of the domestic. However, it focuses on the politicisation of spaces that were previously seen as apolitical (and are often still perceived as apolitical by both the influencers and their audiences). I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic created both the need and the opportunity to create populist expertise among the influencers while at the same time adhering to the aspirational, lifestyle aesthetics and discoursive practices of Instagram as a platform. In this way, the influencers positioned themselves as alternative authorities in opposition to the mainstream experts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Points of Contact Between Activism, Populism, and Fandom on Social Media

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Abstract
This article explores how music fans used social media to increase a social movement's public support. Although initially dismissed as a conspiracy theory, the movement eventually gained widespread support and is motivating communities to engage in broader cultural conversations. The movement's success, this article argues, is largely owed to social media's networked communication affordances and how they facilitate fan-based citizenship and citizen journalism. Through a rhetorical analysis of social media communication related to the movement, this article examines how online fan-based citizen journalism can draw together seemingly disconnected ideologies and audiences to diversify and bolster social movements' support.

Keywords
celebrity; citizen journalism; digital publics; fan activism; fan studies; hashtag activism; popular culture; pop music; social media; social movements

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Online Communities and Populism" edited by Ashley Hinck (Xavier University).

1. Introduction

Following her conservatorship's onset in 2008, a dedicated community of Britney Spears fans created the #FreeBritney movement and began calling for Spears' conservatorship to end, citing corruption, sexism, and ableism. Then, in the summer of 2021, Spears spoke in court about enduring conservatorship abuse (Baer, 2021); later on Instagram, Spears acknowledged and thanked the #FreeBritney movement for the first time (Spears, 2021). Spears' conservatorship ended in November 2021, and #FreeBritney is now being taken seriously as a social movement and contributing to broader public change. On September 28, 2021, for instance, the US Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing for conservatorship reform, and #FreeBritney supporters rejoiced. "Other fandoms are happy breaking music records," tweeted Absolute Britney (2021), "but we are reforming laws and bringing order, we can be super proud! #FreeBritney.''

In this article, I explore how fans' use of social media increased #FreeBritney's support. Although initially dismissed as a conspiracy theory, the #FreeBritney movement eventually gained widespread support and is motivating communities to engage in broader cultural conversations about sexism, ableism, abuse, and media ethics (ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, 2021; Bianchini, 2021; Heady, 2021; Limbong, 2021; smith, 2021). This movement's success, I argue, is largely owed to social media's networked communication affordances. Community is central to fandoms (Busse & Gray, 2011; Jenkins, 2018). Today, social media plays a significant role in fostering fan communities, as it helps fans more easily communicate with each other and with larger networks of people. This article analyzes how fans use social media to exert public influence, namely through fan activism and fan-based citizenship (Hinck, 2019).

I begin with a review of fans' public influence, including with regard to activism and citizenship. Next, I examine a #FreeBritney supporter's social media communication; I argue that this supporter's content illustrates online *fan-based citizen journalism*, which can encourage other forms of fan-based citizenship and fan activism (Hinck, 2019). A rhetorical analysis of this content shows how it draws together seemingly disconnected ideologies

and audiences (e.g., feminism, populism, disability rights; fans, concerned citizens, public figures) to diversify and bolster #FreeBritney's support. I conclude by reflecting on some effects and implications of fan-based citizen journalism on social media, including its capacity to form ideologically diverse digital (counter)publics and to counteract echo chambers, as well as the challenges it faces regarding journalistic conventions and ethics.

2. Fans and/as Citizens

In her book *Politics for the Love of Fandom*, Hinck (2019) offers "four continua that defines one's experience as a fan," which Hinck summarizes as "affective ties, specialization of knowledge, community, and material productivity" (pp. 9–10). For instance, a fan's strong, positive attachment toward a character in a television show (affective ties) may motivate them to close-read the show for details involving that character (specialization of knowledge), which they may contribute to Wiki pages and online forums about the show (material productivity, community). Although I will engage with these continua throughout this article, here it is worth noting that fans' and fandoms' qualities, experiences, and activities are fluid and context-dependent (Hinck, 2019, p. 10; see also Jenkins, 2018). Additionally, *fans* and *fandoms* are not synonyms. Whereas a fan might be defined by their individual attachment to a fan object, fans' collective participation in a community creates a fandom (Jenkins, 2018, p. 16).

As fan cultures evolve, community remains a defining quality. By engaging in collective fan-based activities (e.g., close reading, creating fan texts, cosplaying), fans develop shared modes of communication and participation that signal ingroup knowledge and membership. Although these activities can foster community and create a sense of belonging for individuals, they can also be exclusionary, often for members of historically excluded communities (De Kosnik & carrington, 2019). In response, fans may work together to subvert these effects. For instance, Florini (2019, para. 1.4) shows how Black fans of the television program *Game of Thrones* creatively use digital and social media texts, platforms, and communication strategies "to create enclaved networked spaces where they can engage in fandom," such as creating and circulating hashtags.

Fans' activities can be deeply meaningful for individuals and communities. Walker (2019, para. 1.2) discusses how Black fans engage in "narrative extraction,'' or "the work of finding, creating, and translating identification—and meaning—when one is not represented," such as identifying fictional characters who are "racially ambiguous, nonracially defined, or even nonhuman" as members of the Black community. This form of fan labor differs from other, oft-discussed forms (e.g., fan fiction, cosplay) because "it is work that occurs in real time in order for marginalized fans to experience, identify with, and enjoy the non-POC-led work" (Walker, 2019, para. 1.6). Fans can also effect public change. As De Kosnik and carrington (2019, para. 1.3) note, cultural institutions cultivate "a cultural landscape that usually caters to majoritarian interests," but fans are persuading these institutions to expand and diversify their financial and creative priorities.

To describe how fans effect public change, two terms are useful. First, fans engage in *fan activism*, such as "deploy[ing] activist tactics like petitions, boycotts, and letter-writing campaigns" to influence media and cultural institutions (Hinck, 2019, p. 7). Moreover, fans are now engaging in what Hinck (2019) calls "fan-based citizenship," in which "fans take action on *public* issues that affect their experiences as *citizens*…resulting in civic action that is grounded in one's experience and identity as a fan" (p. 7).

Social media facilitates fan activism and fan-based citizenship, helping fans easily connect with each other and their fan objects. Research shows that celebrities' social media accounts increase their fans' sense of connection to the celebrity because the celebrity's account appears to offer a more direct, "authentic" line of communication to fans, as well as more intimate insights into the celebrity's life (Bennett, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Peterson, 2009). Consequently, celebrities have been able to leverage social media for mobilizing their fans into collective public action (Bennett, 2013; Click et al., 2017; Hunting & Hinck, 2017). Yet, this dynamic typically involves the celebrity—who holds power in the celebrity-fan relationship and as a public figure—influencing their fans to support public causes. #FreeBritney inverts this dynamic: Fans mobilized to support the celebrity, whom they perceive to be disempowered, and, by extension, larger public causes tied to this disempowerment.

In turn, tension emerges as #FreeBritney walks a tightrope between citizen journalism and conspiracy theorizing. I discuss this tension further in Sections 4 and 5, but for now I offer a brief overview: In recent years, Spears' behavior appeared increasingly more controlled (e.g., her interviews) yet unconventional (e.g., her Instagram posts), with rare moments that suggested Spears' distress. Thus, fans began to investigate and circulate their findings online (Spanos, 2021). Along the way, investigating Spears' conservatorship became no longer only a matter of advocating for Spears but also for those who may be similarly affected (e.g., conservatees, women, people with disabilities). Yet, without explicit confirmations or invitations to engage in this way, including from Spears, #FreeBritney supporters appeared to be conspiracy-theorizing fans. In the following case study, I explore how this tension—#FreeBritney as a conspiracy theory and/or citizen journalism—appears in one supporter's social media content.

3. #FreeBritney on Instagram

This case study follows one Instagram content creator who is prominent in #FreeBritney and who helped

increase the movement's audience uptake (hereafter referred to as "CC"). I chose this account for a few reasons. First, I was struck by CC's distinctive Spears coverage via Instagram stories, or posts that disappear 24 hours after posting. When I first discovered CC's account in mid-2021, I spent hours watching their pinned stories (i.e., stories "pinned" to the user's profile so they remain visible after 24 hours), which present a biographical overview of Spears' life alongside CC's research on Spears' conservatorship. CC combines sound, color, and words (e.g., gifs, "stickers," photos, videos, captions, text slides, sound clips, music) to deliver a multimodal, research-based narrative that plays like an Instagram-story documentary. To support their claims, CC cites an array of primary and secondary texts (e.g., interviews, video clips, photographs, screenshots of texts and emails, links to articles), as well as quotes from anonymous sources. Besides their creative use of Instagram to report about Spears, I was also struck by this content's other rhetorical features. CC doesn't simply report on Spears' situation; they also interpret, analyze, and argue with a distinctive voice and style. As CC reports on Spears, they also advocate *for* Spears and *against* specific people and institutions, namely those in elite, powerful positions. Evidently, people find this combination of rhetorical strategies to be persuasive; in the year since I began researching CC, their follower count has increased by hundreds of thousands of followers, and they often re-share audience members' Instagram stories that praise CC's distinctive approach to investigating and reporting.

CC's public account regularly indicates an aim to be circulated and can be considered communication within a public forum. Nevertheless, I do not name the account out of recognition of potential harm and risks that may arise for both social media users and researchers when this content circulates (franzke et al., 2020, p. 11). CC communicates about #FreeBritney primarily through stories. I archived this content via screenshots and screen-recording (stored locally), and I rhetorically analyzed this archive, paying particular attention to the ideologies within it. As Foss (2018, p. X) explains, ideology is:

> A system of ideas or a pattern of beliefs that determines a group's interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world….In an ideological analysis, a critic looks beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests. (p. 237)

In such an analysis, a researcher analyzes all elements of a text, such as "stylistic tokens, power relations, stereotypes, and ideographs," then interprets how those elements communicate broader ideologies (Kornfield, 2021, p. 155). An ideologically-focused rhetorical analysis fits the present case study because it attends to "who has power (the elite) and how that power is used to shape and disseminate dominant ideologies" (p. 157). #FreeBritney is a movement that resists power, including by resisting dominant ideologies related to women and people with disabilities. This case study explores one example of this resistance. In Section 4, I analyze how CC's fan-based citizen journalism communicates ideologies that appeal to multiple audiences, which broadens support for #FreeBritney.

4. #FreeBritney's Fan-Based Citizen Journalism

CC's account functions as fan-based citizen journalism. Here, I am building on Hinck's concept of "fan-based citizenship" (2019, pp. 6–7). Although much of #FreeBritney aligns with fan activism, I present fan-based citizen journalism as a form of fan-based citizenship because citizenship is fundamental to citizen journalism. As Harcup (2011) explains, alternative media like citizen journalism fosters "a culture of participation" and can "constitute a form of active citizenship" that leads to "more inclusive" and informed public spheres (pp. 16–17). Generally, "citizen journalism" is "news content (text, video, audio, interactives, etc.) produced by non-professionals" (Wall, 2015, p. 798). In this article, I interpret citizen journalism according to Goode's (2009) more specific description:

> Citizen journalism constitutes a complex and layered mix of *re*presentation, interpretation (and re-interpretation), translation, and, indeed, *re*mediation…whereby news and comment, discourse and information, is reshaped as it traverses a range of sites and varying media platforms. (p. 1291)

Goode's description is useful for this article's case study because it acknowledges the investigative and interpretive aspects of journalism—which are featured prominently in CC's content—and the influence of media and audience. According to Ananny (2014), "readers have many opportunities to comment on and engage with news…but few opportunities to meaningfully impact the conditions under which it is produced" (p. 360). Social media is increasing these opportunities and creating new avenues for citizen journalism. Social media enables everyday people to instantly create and circulate their own journalistic content; moreover, online audiences' activities like "rating, commenting, tagging and reposting" can be considered "metajournalism" (Goode, 2009, p. 1290).

Definitions of citizen journalism vary, as do interpretations of its connection to similar terms like "alternative media" and "alternative journalism" (Atton, 2015; Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Harcup, 2011; Rosen, 2008). Although I use the term "citizen journalism" in this article, other terms align, too. For instance, *alternative journalism*:

> Tends to be produced not by professionals, but by amateurs who typically have little or no training or professional qualifications as journalists: they write and report from their position as citizens, as

> members of communities, as activists or as fans. (Atton & Hamilton, 2008, p. 12).

CC occupies these positions simultaneously, and they communicate with audience members who are positioned in one or more of these ways. Worth noting is that not all social media users in such contexts "[are] or even aim to be citizen *journalists*; but many of them…become citizen *experts* who inform and enrich debates" (Sandvoss, 2013, p. 273). CC's content consistently signals an aim to be considered an alternative or citizen journalist. For instance, CC frequently posts "Breaking News" stories, in which "BREAKING NEWS" appears in red font atop a black and white photograph of Spears, while a siren sound plays. CC posts this slide before reporting developments related to Spears' conservatorship, like a television channel broadcasting "breaking news" alerts.

Reporting news is an important but not totalizing quality of citizen journalism. Like Goode (2009), I am interested in how citizen journalism can be better understood if its definitions include more nuanced considerations of what constitutes journalism (p. 1290). Generally, journalism is valued for how it navigates bias and credibility, insofar as audiences expect the news to be a strictly factual report of information in the public interest (i.e., "the truth"). Yet, as Goode (2009) points out, "journalism is in no small measure a craft of *re*-telling stories rather than simply disclosing them" (p. 1290). A similar tension appears in discussions of news, as Ananny (2014) summarizes: "Some models emphasize the press's informational and transactional nature…while others take a more expansive view, asking it to *check power*, *convene publics*, *mobilize social movements*, and *engender empathy*" (p. 363, emphasis added). Ananny's description of news is helpful for thinking about the aims and outcomes of citizen journalism. An act of citizen journalism can be limited in scope, quantity, and frequency, such as "captur[ing] a single moment (e.g., witnessing an event)" and reporting on that moment through social media (Wall, 2015, p. 798). As the scope, quantity, and frequency of such content increase, the rhetor may shift from "content creator" to "citizen journalist," wherein an everyday social-media user becomes someone who wields the public influence that Ananny describes.

This is the case with CC, who offers this "more expansive" form of news (Ananny, 2014, p. 363). Analyzing how they do so can improve understanding of how online fan-based citizen journalism can influence publics (e.g., formation, communication). I organize this analysis with the four qualities of "more expansive" news that Ananny lists above, though not in their original order: Engender Empathy, Convene Publics, Mobilize Social Movements, and Check Power.

4.1. Engender Empathy

Fundamental to #FreeBritney is its success in persuading audiences to care about Spears. The obviousness of such a goal should not be conflated with the ease of achieving it. For decades, Spears' public life has been marked by aggressive public criticism and denigration. For the first several years of her life as a public figure, this criticism and denigration centered around her body, her sexuality, her gender, and her talent and skills. Generally during this period, the judgments about Spears were distinctly sexist. In the 2000s, as she began navigating life as a young adult woman, wife, and mother, the critiques began to combine sexism and ableism.

That Spears remained in the conservatorship and didn't speak out against it for 13 years illustrates the essential role that social media played in engendering public empathy. First, social media provided insights into Spears' life during a 13-year period in which Spears' public persona was heavily structured and limited. Second, social media increased the public reach of concerned fans and everyday people like CC. #FreeBritney effectively used social media to reshape public perceptions of both Spears and the conservatorship (e.g., ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, 2021; Bianchini, 2021; Heady, 2021; smith, 2021), including by engendering empathy for her. I discuss how CC does so in greater detail in Section 5.

4.2. Convene Publics

By pairing first-person plural language with commanding verbs and—to borrow CC's phrasing—a "grim and urgent" tone, CC reifies their heterogeneous audience members as a more homogeneous public that shares internal and external characteristics, including "paying attention" to CC (Warner, 2002, p. 71). CC uses first-person plural language to summarize content they've shared, like "we can't seem to get a straight story" and "considering what we know now." Granted, addressing audiences as "we" isn't unusual in itself. What stands out in CC's usage are the verbs associated with "we." In general, rhetors use "we" to guide attention (e.g., "as we can see here"). CC uses "we" in this way when they say things like, "we need to go over a couple things." Yet, CC also frequently uses "we" in more commanding ways: "WE'RE LOOKING AT EVERYTHING with fresh eyes now…I'm telling you WE ARE GOING TO LOOK AT THINGS DIFFERENTLY." This more commanding "we" extends beyond summary and into generalizations of the audiences' thoughts and feelings: "We REALLY don't like or trust"; "We believe"; "We're fully not trusting….We were suspicious but now we're ignoring"; "We suspect the plies of corruption run deep." In short, one of the most effective ways in which CC convenes a #FreeBritney public is by addressing their audience as such, namely through first-person plural language.

4.3. Mobilize Social Movements

CC also uses first- and second-person plural language to mobilize audiences. Throughout their #FreeBritney

content, CC calls out public figures for their associations with business manager Lou Taylor—allegedly "the devil in charge" of Spears' conservatorship (CC)—and their lack of public support for Spears. For instance, after pointing out celebrity Kim Kardashian's (a) apparent ties to Taylor and (b) apparent refusal to publicly support Spears, CC repeatedly urged followers to pressure Kardashian via Instagram:

> Let's play a game!…I'm asking every single one of you to simply tag @kimkardashian in the comments as swiftly as possible. To hopefully grab her attention. If she doesn't speak up on this soon, we know why and….Well…we might be cancelling Kim too [devil emoji] This is a cut & dry issue. You stand with Britney and her freedom or you're dust to us.

Part of this "game" could be interpreted as fan activism and/or hashtag activism, considering its place within a social movement: "Every time she posts something respond with the Britney hashtag" (CC). That week, *Insider* reported, "Fans have flooded Kim Kardashian's Instagram comments urging her to speak out about Britney Spears' conservatorship" (Dodgson, 2021), and CC credited themself and their followers for this development. Sharing screenshots of the article, CC posted:

> I want us to be collectively proud of ourselves for it [eight fist emoji] [.] This is all you! It's not a coincidence—the timing of these headlines. Right after we pulled the trigger on our comment firing squad [raising hands emoji].

I note this example because it mobilizes audiences into collective action to support a social movement—a feature of citizen journalism. In other words, this example shows how fan-based citizen journalism can support fan-based citizenship and activism.

This strategy appears throughout CC's #FreeBritney content, which often (re)circulates "#FreeBritney" and other call-to-action hashtags like "endtheconversatorship" and "Investigate[PublicFigure]." The "#Investigate [PublicFigure]" hashtag appears often, given how easily it lends itself to public call-outs: "The hashtag #investigateloutaylor is now trending on Twitter!! People are waking up [praise emoji] let's make it so these monsters have nowhere to hide. Strength in numbers!!! Never underestimate the power. We've got this." Strategies like these help CC mobilize audiences to support the #FreeBritney social movement.

4.4. Check Power

These calls-to-action often function as call-outs, wherein the linguistic "we" stands in for a conceptual *us* who is checking a nefarious *them*'s power. Although Spears' family is central in this group, even more central is Taylor; according to CC, Spears' family evidently grew close to Taylor shortly before the conservatorship's establishment. CC summarizes in their "WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR" story:

> We know that Lou Taylor is the devil in charge. Someone Britney was scared of and tried very hard to avoid but ultimately (with the aid of [Spear's] family) became the architect for this whole legal set up. Which she still profits from.

CC argues that Taylor has a pattern of attempting to put young pop-culture figures into conservatorships for financial gain. For example, CC writes, "Lindsay Lohan was more fortunate. She ended up a failed attempt," and shares clips of Lohan's father speaking publicly about how Taylor and Spears' manager tried to put Lohan in a conservatorship. Below, CC checks Taylor's power while also asking why advocates for women's rights and the #MeToo movement are not more actively advocating for Spears:

> Wondering where all the Me Too voices are rn. With an enslaved pop star begging to be free from the plies of the power and the greed. If Britney Spears can't find justice after 13 years of suffering what makes us think any of us are any different. All the rage over [Harvey] Weinstein while another devil (who happens to be female) in the industry sits free and unbothered in Italian linen committing these crimes right in front of us. From the sports industry to the entertainment business and the church, her power remains guarded and limitless.

According to CC, "mafia-like" Taylor is coordinating the corrupt group who profits from Spears' conservatorship, "from paid media to medical drs to therapists to lawyers all the way to the courts." Overall, CC routinely checks the power of various influential people and groups.

5. Key Themes and Ideologies

In the previous section, I discussed how CC's #FreeBritney content enacts fan-based citizen journalism. In this section, I analyze the themes and ideologies that are present in this content.

5.1. Human Rights

CC's #FreeBritney content shows how larger ideological arguments can be conveyed to diverse online audiences, thereby expanding support for a social movement. Although #FreeBritney was once dismissed as merely pop culture (read "frivolous," "superficial," "low culture"), #FreeBritney content like CC's increased the movement's support by arguing that Spears' conservatorship is an urgent case of human rights, particularly women's rights and disability rights. This argument's appeal is ideologically broad (human rights) yet nuanced (women's rights,

disability rights), which helped shift public responses to Spears' conservatorship from passive acceptance and support to active concern and resistance.

The general public was well-primed to accept Spears' conservatorship at its onset, thanks to the media coverage and public discourse surrounding Spears in the mid-2000s. Moreover, given how much Spears began to act like the "old Britney" (i.e., late 1990s to early 2000s) after the conservatorship's establishment, it was easy to believe the conservatorship was necessary. Those who disagreed seemed like delusional fans. However, #FreeBritney supporters like CC used social media to shift public perception of #FreeBritney from a pop-culture conspiracy theory to a case of human rights activism. In one story, CC insists:

> We've got to stop apologizing for being invested in this story. It's not a guilty pleasure or another trite pop side story. What we're seeing here is downright horrifying. The biggest pop star in the world is begging for her life after 13 years of being enslaved by her father, abused by the system and her family, overly drugged by the medical field and horribly neglected by an industry that made millions off of her stellar star power since she was 17.

CC proceeds to present three categories of "WHO SHOULD CARE" about Spears. First, CC argues that "anyone who ever stayed up late to watch her performances ignite an award show, or danced in a club or a kitchen or cried in a car or pushed harder on a treadmill because her music inspired it" should care. This alone is a powerful argument, considering the international impact of Spears' music. Yet, this first category relies on a point that has proven limited, historically: it requires the audience to care about Spears as a person, to have empathy for a woman who has been objectified, minimized, and mocked *by the public* for decades.

The next claim, then, may be more persuasive. We should care about Spears, CC argues, if we care about women:

> Anyone who [believes] women should be free from their abusers, not policed for their trauma, [demoralized], dismissed or degraded when men like Bill Cosby can walk free while a 39 year old woman who never broke a law in her life is casually overlooked despite countless cries for help.

In other words: Spears is a woman; women are humans with human rights; human rights matter and need to be protected if they are in danger of or are being violated; Spears' human rights are being violated; Spears needs protection.

CC makes this point more explicit in quotes like:

> To all the women who were so ready to riot over Weinstein leveraging power for sex, how about every systematic branch in society working to collectively enslave a woman so they can profit off her estate while stripping her of the right to bear children, take a road trip, visit friends, choose her therapist, access her own medical records, have an untapped phone line, decline a tour, etc—where is your rage now?

As CC signals here and elsewhere, #FreeBritney should appeal to audiences beyond Spears' fans and pop-culture onlookers; #FreeBritney involves women's rights, which corresponds with broader ideologies and systems of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. Accordingly, feminists—many of whom may have once criticized Spears—may be more inclined to support her.

This second claim sets the audience up for the third:

> Anyone interested in [human] rights.| Basically what Britney is living is all of our worse nightmare. Her Voice, power, autonomy, dignity stripped. Abandoned by family. Secluded from friends. Surrounded by wolves who are draining an empire that she built!!! by working tirelessly since highschool.

Again: Spears is a human with human rights; human rights matter and need to be protected if they are in danger of or are being violated; Spears' human rights are being violated; Spears needs protection.

CC's "WHO SHOULD CARE?" story alludes to what they make explicit elsewhere: #FreeBritney is also a matter of disability rights. After all, Spears was placed in her conservatorship based on a diagnosis of mental illness and, like other conservatees, remained in it because (a) those involved in the case argued that she needed it, and (b) those beyond it believed that argument. This is one of the biggest challenges conservatees face. If conservatees seem healthy and their life improves, the argument is that their success and well-being is owed to the conservatorship; if they continue to face challenges, the argument is that they still require the conservatorship. As Spears explained in 2021 about why she took 13 years to speak out against her conservatorship, "I didn't want to say any of this to anybody, to the public, because people would make fun of me or laugh at me and say, 'She's lying' " (Spears, as cited in Baer, 2021, p. 18).

Disability rights and women's rights are intertwined. Labeling women as "hysterical" and "crazy" is a centuries-old strategy for dismissing and denigrating women, including in relation to their mental health (Moore, 2021). Spears' case is paradigmatic of this combination of sexism and ableism. As CC explains, mainstream media has played a large role in Spears' conservatorship by combining the two. In one story, CC compares the different media framings of Spears versus male celebrities who have a history of abusing women: "Media framing: Men breaking down are 'going through something[.]' Women breaking down are just crazy. Chased hunted and judged till they actually break." However, #FreeBritney's ideological arguments—which supporters like CC made

and circulated via social media—contributed to the eventual recognition of Spears' conservatorship as a case of human rights (ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, 2021; Anguiano, 2021).

5.2. Conspiracy and Populism

Thus far, we have seen how CC's #FreeBritney content advances ideological arguments that bring together fans (and onlookers); people interested in popular culture; and people invested in women's rights, disability rights, and, more broadly, human rights. Again, these are not mutually exclusive categories. Someone with no interest in Spears or popular culture could become invested in #FreeBritney because CC persuaded them that Spears' human rights are being violated, which has broader implications for others (e.g., conservatees, women, people with disabilities). This dynamic extends far in #FreeBritney. As CC illustrates, #FreeBritney brings together communities that may seem somewhat at odds or disconnected by juxtaposing various ideologies (e.g., feminism, conspiracy, populism) and advocating for these ideologies through social media. This section focuses on how ideologies of conspiracy and populism surface in #FreeBritney.

Like other #FreeBritney supporters, CC's effort to investigate and share findings with the public as an everyday community member and/or citizen journalist can come across as conspiracy theorizing. CC acknowledges but refutes this perception:

> The things that are coming to light now are what the free Britney movement fans have been keen to for years. And dismissed by mainstream as extreme internet conspiracists. Though it's looking more and more like they were all right all along. About everything.

Indeed, #FreeBritney is now largely free of its conspiracy-theory label. Still, it is important to attend to that element of #FreeBritney, given that the movement was once perceived to be a fan-driven conspiracy theory. This perception stems partly from fans' behavior, which mirrors conspiracy theorists'. Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2021) explain, "The relationship between conspiracy theories and followers is similar to an affective bond between fan objects and fans. [For example, Alex] Jones' followers demonstrate fan-like behavior in their detailed dissecting of Jones' every word in endless—now removed—threads" (p. 185). Spears' fans behave similarly, analyzing her captions, emoji, clothing, and more to decode what they believe are hidden messages (Reslen, 2021). When Spears' Instagram account occasionally is deactivated, #FreeBritney supporters express concern that the deactivation was against Spears' will and that she is being controlled and silenced; this response persists today, after Spears' conservatorship has ended. In their analysis of #FreeBritney as a conspiracy theory, Smith and Southerton (2022, para. 13) describe this kind of "close reading" as "the hallmark of conspiracy theorising," in which people scrutinize "various texts to spot inconsistencies and gaps in authenticity that disrupt the dominant narrative." Through their close reading of public texts like Spears' Instagram, Spears' fans and #FreeBritney supporters align with "conspiracy theory communities, creating a pleasurable affective atmosphere…that circulates in and through digital practices" (Smith & Southerton, 2022, para. 14). Prominent social media accounts like CC's help foster an online network through which fans can engage in these digital practices together.

Conspiracy is also important to address in this case study because of its relationship to ideology. According to Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2021), "Conspiracy operates as an ideological lens and (belief in it) is not so much about a theory's specifics but higher-order beliefs like distrust of authority. As such, conspiracy theories serve as smokescreens for an ideological-political agenda" (p. 181). In CC's case, this ideological-political agenda becomes increasingly apparent, including in ways that align with populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012) define populism as "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (p. 8). As discussed earlier, CC's content regularly argues that a corrupt elite maintains Spears' conservatorship.

Of note is how mainstream media appears in this argument. For instance, CC reports that US pop stars Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez were once at risk of becoming conservatees, when Taylor was ostensibly influencing people close to them. As CC explains, Bieber sought public support that was apparently suppressed: "during his 'psychotic break down' a recording of Justin…surfaced online—confessing the reason behind his career break was due to the evils he had seen and experienced in the music industry. He was crying, sobbing." CC then shows a screenshot of a video called *Justin Bieber: Pedophiles Run the Music Industry*, but apparently "All evidence of this video (which I watched myself when it surfaced) has since been erased from the internet." Again, there is the implication of a corrupt elite hiding the truth.

CC suggests that mainstream media helped maintain the pro-conservatorship narrative:

> Justin was often in the news in 2016—for concerning antics and increasingly erratic behavior….Headlines began questioning his sanity…The Britney comparisons started rolling in….What the headlines didn't [miss] was talks of an impending conservatorship that had quietly [been] ongoing between his family and the church since 2014.

This passage hints at an argument apparent throughout CC's content: mainstream media is part of the corrupt

elite, obscuring and spinning the truth for financial gain. For example, CC repeatedly calls out *TMZ*, arguing that, "We know now TMZ is and always has been paid by the Jamie Spears camp to help shape the public narrative to gain support for her on going Conservatorship." CC notes about their own investigation—necessitated by the apparent shortcomings of mainstream journalism—"The deeper we go the darker, more disturbing it gets. Forcing me to question everything and everyone I ever trusted.''

Trust is key; as a theme, it permeates CC's content. Who should and shouldn't "we" trust, CC continuously asks and explores (e.g., "we REALLY don't like or trust [Spears' mother]"; "we're fully not trusting sam [Asghari]"). As CC's #FreeBritney efforts continue, mistrust of corrupt elites persists, including of mainstream media: "Ground breaking journalism (on any topic) isn't coming from mainstream media outlets. If there is anything we've learned here it's that" (CC). In another story, CC writes:

> New details emerging by the hour and it only gets crazier with each revelation. Let's note: What you're seeing here is how the trend of journalism over the past few years—so that breaking news and real investigative efforts to uncover these kinds of stories now come from everyday people working the magic of the internet instead of established "news" sources who seem to only report the surface level "safe" bullet points.

A chain of reasoning is at work in CC's critiques of mainstream media: Corrupt elites hold power over the people; the mainstream media is part of the elites; these elites manipulate the people's perceptions, including of Spears; we cannot trust the elites, including the mainstream media, to tell us the truth; we need to seek and share the truth on our own (e.g., through citizen journalism), which will help us hold the elites accountable.

Notably, there is also an element of mistrusting social media, though it is again associated with the elites. For instance, CC says, "We are also no longer debating or dissecting [Spears' Instagram]" because they believe it's "a decoy" used by Spears' network to deceive the public and maintain power. Likewise, there is an element of mistrusting the platforms themselves, such as CC's concerns about being shadowbanned by Instagram or having their account taken down because they post content that challenges the elites and mainstream media's dominant narratives. Nevertheless, these concerns further support CC's argument for social-media citizen journalism: *We* can communicate the truth directly to each other through social media, even if *They* don't want us to.

5.3. Discussion

This study suggests that citizen journalism and/or conspiracy theory may appeal to—and draw together—a variety of online audiences and communities because they share some form of populist ideology, despite other ideological differences between them. To trust CC's content, audiences need to agree with its underlying ideological argument: an elite "Them" (Spears' managers, lawyers, doctors; politicians; mainstream media) is maintaining corrupt power over Spears and "Us" (the general public). As I've shown, multiple ideological pathways may lead diverse audiences to agree with this argument. Consequently, people who might otherwise be disconnected become part of the same online community. In turn, community members who remain in that community may be continuously exposed to arguments and ideologies they might not encounter regularly. For instance, part of CC's #FreeBritney advocacy stems from their broader belief in bodily autonomy, which includes their opposition to Covid-19 vaccination mandates. CC sometimes juxtaposes this content—#FreeBritney and Covid-19—by posting stories about both within the same day, which further expands the ideologies and audiences involved in their content. In this way, this account seems to have effectively created the opposite of a social-media echo chamber.

One reason CC might have achieved this result is because the core components of populism seem currently to be persuading many different communities, including those who consider mainstream media to be part of the corrupt elite. As recent polls indicate, people from the US are expressing remarkably low trust in mainstream media (Brenan, 2021; Edmonds, 2021). Thus, people may be turning to news sources that seem to be more authentically serving the informational needs of the general public, such as citizen journalism. Regarding trust, the element of conspiracy remains important, as well. When trust is low, belief in conspiracy tends to rise (Van Prooijen et al., 2022). When people feel disempowered—including because they feel manipulated and lied to by those with institutional power—they may be more likely to align with arguments that seem to empower them by telling them "the truth" (i.e., conspiracy, populism).

Frankly, this is incredibly nuanced subject matter. Conspiracy and populism have historically presented considerable social, cultural, and political challenges and consequences, and they continue to do so today. Yet, this study finds that #FreeBritney—a popular-culture, fan-driven movement—complicates both. As conspiracy theories sometimes do (Olmstead, 2018), #FreeBritney shifted away from the conspiracy-theory categorization as more evidence surfaced, thanks in part to #FreeBritney supporters like CC. In CC's case, they cultivated a diverse online community of #FreeBritney supporters *and* account followers. In other words, even if the initial rhetorical event subsides, the network formed from the event can continue to grow; again, this opens up interesting possibilities for countering echo chambers.

This case study also raises questions about the relationship between social media and citizen journalism.

Journalism is a refined professional and scholarly field. Professional journalists receive formal training that helps them navigate bias, evaluate sources, and more; established news media venues (ideally) draw on this training to maintain the field's standards for journalistic ethics. For citizen journalism on social media, however, neither that training nor those checks are in place. Instead, it falls upon the citizen journalist's social media platform and audience to "check" them—both their reporting and their public power. A general audience (i.e., one who also lacks formal journalistic training) can leave a comment or send a direct message to the citizen journalist if they have concerns, and/or they can flag that person's account if its content violates the platform's terms and conditions of use, but these approaches have limitations. The citizen journalist might ignore comments and messages, or they may block or publicly call out audience members that express concerns or critiques; audience members might misuse a platform's reporting feature in an effort to silence someone with whom they disagree; and, of course, a platform's system for maintaining standards of communication is one established *by* the platform, whose priorities may lie more with profit than journalistic integrity and minimizing mis-/dis-information. Throughout this study, I have observed the above outcomes in various ways. For instance, I have seen: CC post screenshots of Instagram warnings they were receiving because audience members were reporting CC's Covid-19 content; Instagram temporarily take down CC's account; and another prominent content creator (unrelated to #FreeBritney) express concerns about critiquing CC's approach to citizen journalism because that person didn't want to be publicly called out or harassed by CC's followers. Thus, another tension emerges: Online fan-based citizen journalism may suggest a promising capacity to counteract echo chambers as its network grows, but that network's online communication practices and structures could also limit this capacity.

6. Future Directions

Like Spears herself, the #FreeBritney movement was long dismissed as pop-culture frivolity. Yet, Spears—an international pop-culture icon—attracts an immense, diverse audience. This case study illuminates how #FreeBritney achieved similar results. Through their strategic use of social media, CC helped increase #FreeBritney's public influence. Yet, CC's content is especially compelling because of the tightrope it walks between citizen journalism and conspiracy theory, which suggests significant rhetorical possibilities for online fan-based citizenship and activism.

Future work in this area could further investigate the relationship between online fan communities, citizen journalism, and populism. As Miro (2021) notes, "Fandom can…inform studies examining populist movements because fans circulate ideas through technological networked structures and employ their empowerment to challenge dominant narratives" (p. 64; see also Jenkins, 2006). #FreeBritney content creators exemplify this, drawing together an ideologically diverse online community of fans, citizens, and activists. Along these lines, researchers should also consider pop-culture and/or fan-based online communities' capacity to counteract echo chambers. Whereas social media has undergone substantial scrutiny for contributing to echo chambers, #FreeBritney seemingly produces the opposite result to some extent, given the movement's layered, mainstream appeal and accessible entry points. Relatedly, researchers might focus more on how audiences engage with fan-based citizen journalism and how it influences them. Ultimately, I argue that #FreeBritney illustrates how the broad appeal of popular culture combined with the broad reach of social media can enrich and complicate online communities' formation and communication, as well as our opportunities to research both.

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Conflict of Interests

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Article

Dropkick Murphys vs. Scott Walker: Unpacking Populist Ideological Discourse in Digital Space

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Abstract
On January 24, 2015, the folk punk band Dropkick Murphys penned a tweet to former Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker that read "please stop using our music in any way…We literally hate you!!!" Within hours, thousands of users interacted with the post and a contentious mediated discussion materialized. By exporting the full conversation using the program BrandWatch and applying Sonja Foss's ideological criticism approach, I found several recurrent ideological constructions reappear throughout the data. Through comments considering the band's political activism as alienating, re-envisioning punk rock as right-wing, and framing Dropkick Murphys as inherently un-American and undesirable through Twitter comments, Walker supporters rhetorically dismiss the band and their message. These constructions show how new media audiences discursively construct ideologies to delegitimize opposition along the lines of political affiliation and illustrate the communicative mechanism of populism on a micro-level.

Keywords
discourse; Dropkick Murphys; ideology; music; new media; populism; Scott Walker; Twitter

Issue
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1. Introduction

On January 24, 2015, former Governor of Wisconsin Scott Walker walked onto the Iowa Freedom Summit stage to the song "I'm Shipping Up to Boston" by the band Dropkick Murphys (Anderson, 2015) before launching into a speech about conservative ideas winning elections. Shortly afterwards, Dropkick Murphys addressed the following tweet to Walker's account: "Please stop using our music in any way…We literally hate you!!! Love, Dropkick Murphys" (Anderson, 2015). Within hours, thousands of Twitter users converged on the post with rapidly rising numbers of likes, comments, and retweets. The contentious mediated discussion around the tweet quickly caught the attention of national news outlets. Though neither a Scott Walker supporter nor a regular Dropkick Murphys listener, I became intimately familiar with this story through its extensive coverage in major publications like *The Washington Post* (Izadi, 2015) and *USA Today* (Camia, 2015). Though Walker's political power faded in the following years (Strauss, 2018), he is notable for his role as a precursor to former US President Donald Trump. In his time as governor of Wisconsin, Walker cultivated a sense of resentment among rural voters by framing them as unfairly relegated to a powerless position at the hands of urban elites, public institutions, and unions (Cramer, 2016a, 2016b). While Trump upstaged Walker to win the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, it was Walker's original strategy of stoking antagonisms that provided Trump with the blueprint to effectively appeal to voters' feelings of helplessness and anger (Savage, 2021). As such, Dropkick Murphys' anti-Scott Walker tweet provides an important case study at a crucial moment in US political history.

The conversation surrounding Walker and Dropkick Murphys illustrates the discursive work of digital audience members in a confrontation between two parties with a populist appeal: a rising right-wing politician versus an established left-wing musical group. By using the term right-wing, I mean a synthesis of fiscal and social conservativism that favors the deregulation of markets, reduced government intervention, and elevation

of religion in society (Garratt, 2018). The term left-wing, by contrast, refers to modern liberalism which argues for government regulation of the marketplace as well as expanding civil and political rights (Garratt, 2018). Additionally, populism is a concept central to understanding this contentious digital conversation. Populism as defined by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) is a:

> Dichotomic discourse in which 'the people' are juxtaposed to 'the elite' along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which 'the people' is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to 'the elite' conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populist politics thus claim to represent 'the people' against an 'elite' that frustrates their legitimate demands and presents its demands as expressions of the will of 'the people.' (p. 12)

In this way, populism functions as a mechanism which is not inherently ideological (Ostiguy et al., 2021). Key to De Cleen and Stavrakakis' (2017) definition is *discourse*. Though discourse is a term with great fluidity of meaning, I adopt Mills' (1997, p. 11) hybrid conceptualization in which discourse is "not a disembodied collection of statements, but groups of utterances of sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence." These communicative utterances of discourse are sites of constant contestation of meaning, which means that populism is continually constructed and contested through communication. Discourse produces things, like a concept or effect, and cannot exist in isolation. As such, looking at such discourse on a small scale, such as the comment section of a notable social media post, is fundamental to building a contextualized, ground-up understanding of how populism functions (Laclau, 2005).

The mediated discussion around Dropkick Murphys' 2015 tweet provides such a micro-level snapshot into how populism is ideologically constructed in an instance when the realms of politics and popular music overlap. While protest music regularly appears in scholarly literature as the prototypical form of political musician resistance (e.g., Way, 2016), less scholarly attention is paid to musicians' discursive, non-musical political opposition despite it becoming more frequent in the connected age of social media (e.g., Liakat, 2020). While music taste and participation within music genres are important for identity formation and socialization (Frith, 1996), other factors mediate and inform our relationship to popular music. Additionally, only somewhat recently has a nuanced approach which considers the intersection of popular culture and political engagement neither "an unalloyed political good [n]or evil" (Street et al., 2013, p. 3) emerged. By looking directly at the audience, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship which articulates a more contextual view of politics and popular culture (e.g., Couldry, 2010; Street et al., 2013).

I sought to answer one central question: What does the mediated discourse in response to Dropkick Murphys' anti-Scott Walker tweet reveal about how populism is ideologically constructed and communicated? My analysis reveals proponents of Walker utilize a recurrent set of ideologies to disregard Dropkick Murphys. By considering the band's political activism as alienating, re-envisioning punk rock as right-wing, and framing Dropkick Murphys as inherently un-American and undesirable through Twitter comments, Walker supporters rhetorically dismiss the band and their message. These constructions show how new media audiences discursively construct ideologies to delegitimize opposition along the lines of political affiliation and illustrate the communicative mechanism of populism functioning on a micro-level.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

I situate the conversation surrounding Dropkick Murphys' public rebuke of Republican populist and former Governor of Wisconsin Scott Walker in the context of contemporary populism and musician resistance. I highlight an overview of populism as my theoretical framework before illustrating contemporary populism within the US. From there, I present an examination of Scott Walker's unique and seemingly contradictory form of political mass appeal. Moving on, I explore forms of musician resistance and provide background on the left-wing populist appeal of the Dropkick Murphys. Together, these subject areas lay the foundation for this study by explicating populism as a concept which can be applied to both Scott Walker's US-based politics as well as Dropkick Murphys' activism within a larger trend of discursive musician activism.

2.1. Populism as Theoretical Framework

Populism offers a lens to examine and unpack ideologies hidden within communication. Thus, to provide the fundamental framework for this study, I trace a patchwork of populist theorizing by scholars like Laclau and Urbinati. Building on these core understandings of populism, I include important contemporary updates and insights from scholars like Moffitt and Stavrakakis.

Populism is a term which has dominated the news cycle in recent years, often invoking discussions of authoritarian world leaders with seeming grassroots appeal (Anselmi, 2018). But despite the term's explosion in popularity to describe contemporary sociopolitical trends, populism is a concept with paradoxical ends (Tabellini, 2019) which are often oversimplified or mischaracterized (Ostiguy et al., 2021; Stavrakakis, 2017). As mentioned in the previous section, populism arises from "the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from 'power'" (Laclau, 2002,

p. 74). This means that citizens grow disenfranchised from a perceived lack of agency. A primary, well-studied attribute of populism is its power to frame, dictating "politics in binary terms: the fight between the people and the elite, two neatly defined and antagonistic camps. Nothing in politics is viewed outside the essential conflict between these two actors" (Waisbord, 2020, p. 5). This dichotomous "friend vs. foe" frame makes populism ideologically flexible, allowing both left- and right-wing populism to use the same mechanism for disparate aims.

As such, the discourse of populism constructs the people and the elite in particular ways. Primarily, "the elite" is communicated as a "small and illegitimately powerful group" (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 12) while conceptions of "the people" are more fluid and difficult to articulate. There is no pre-existing social group, such as race, class, or gender, which constitutes "the people." Instead, "the people" "only come to be 'rendered-present' through mediated representation, which in populism is usually linked with the image of the leader" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 101). The relationship between populist leaders and "the people" is mediated through idealized images, in which certain identities are highlighted and others are notably absent. Thus, on a base level, populism attracts a wide swath of people who feel stifled by the status quo and identify with carefully constructed communication (Moffitt, 2016).

However, scholars like Hofstadter (1955, p. 71) warned that the emotions of such an audience can easily be manipulated by "agitators with paranoid tendencies" through heated speeches. Indeed, a populist position can bend the truth to become a property of the leader and "the people," which allows for populist notions of truth to become malleable (Waisbord, 2020). Because of this potential for exploitation and the distrust of populism fostered by Hofstadter, populism tends to be naturalized unreflexively as inherently bad (Stavrakakis, 2017). Similarly, an increased focus on xenophobic, radical right-wing movements which weave populism and nationalism together led many to conflate populism with exclusionary nationalism (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). Though populism can be utilized by unscrupulous nationalist leaders, the same mechanism also allows for the mobilization of common people to fight for social and economic fairness, such as US farmers and wage workers challenging unchecked corporate power near the turn of the 20th century (Stavrakakis, 2017). Further contrasting with contemporary perspectives, Laclau (2002) saw populism as a positive emancipatory force which could usher in egalitarian radical democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Thus, a more nuanced approach to populism is warranted to see beyond false binaries and naturalized distrust.

For analytic purposes, it is important to note that Laclau (2005) emphasized examining populism through discourse. Tracing discourse is important throughout the political process because the ascent to power frames the populist candidate as an outsider where, once in office, that candidate must communicatively maintain a connection with "the people" in a different way (Holliday, 2016). Similarly, discourse is never complete (Mills, 1997). In this way, populist leaders continually construct and appeal to "the people" through discourse. Thus, to study populism effectively, one must take a close look at discourse.

Despite populism's shared, basic tenets, populist discourse does not simply bubble up within a vacuum. Instead, populism is a cyclical, context-based phenomenon which reflects the sensibilities and governmental forms of different places (Urbinati, 2019). Importantly, this means populism "resists generalizations and makes scholars of politics comparativist by necessity, as its language and content are imbued with the political culture of the society in which it arises" (Urbinati, 2019, p. 114). Together, this body of scholarship suggests that, while populism is not a precise measurable concept, understanding its nuanced contours, recent developments, and discursive form allows scholars to thoughtfully examine instances of populism. In turn, this enables us to investigate instances of populist discourse to understand the articulations of populism in a particular context.

Though the populist approach is resurging in contemporary political discourse, "populism as a political movement has existed globally since the end of the 19th century and has won political power since the late 1940s" (Finchelstein, 2019, p. 419). The resurgence of populism transcends national boundaries and reflects a larger societal shift toward politics rooted in emotion and grievance (Sullivan & Costa, 2020). Pent-up frustration with the status quo and effective "friend vs. foe" frames propel both left- and right-wing populist candidates with disparate aims. On these shared core components, populist leaders have ascended to power in countries such as India, Brazil, Austria, Italy, Indonesia, Poland, and the US (Serhan, 2020a). Though populism is a concept with broad global appeal, each region adds important contextual dimensions.

2.1.1. Contemporary Populism in the United States

To contextualize this study, it is important to situate the row between Scott Walker and Dropkick Murphys within contemporary US populism. The election of former President Donald Trump in 2016 ushered in a renewed focus on populism within a national US context. Though the exclusionary rhetoric of Trump was clearly linked to populism in a negative Hofstadter-oriented sense, US Senator Bernie Sanders also provides a contrasting illustration of populism at work within the country. For example, Trump's brand of economy-focused, anti-immigration nationalism and Sanders' progressive democratic socialism are strikingly different discourses but showcase populism to varying degrees (Molyneux, 2017).

Both Trump and Sanders were driven by a disdain for elites and support for the people, but those two camps were discursively constructed along national and ideological lines. Trump's targets of populist ire

were bureaucrats, immigrants from what he referred to as "shithole" countries and the press (Denvir, 2020). Trump's discourse follows a populist style "marked not by 'properness' and formality, but rather by informality and transgression" (Ostiguy et al., 2021, p. 6). Specifically, Trump's transgressive communication vilified media outlets like CNN as "fake news" (Kalb, 2018), Congress as a "swamp" full of corruption (Kalb, 2018), and immigrants from Mexico as "bad *hombres*" bent on committing crime (Rhodan, 2016). In this way, Trump used visceral and racist language to discursively construct his vision of nationalized, homogenous people who fit in and identified with his mediated image. Sanders, on the other hand, illustrates a tonally different, left-wing variation of populism (Moffitt, 2016). Sanders set his sights on well-connected government officials and the extremely wealthy as obfuscating the will of the people (Molyneux, 2017). Sanders shows populist tendencies in his impassioned and informal way of communicating about the inequality perpetuated by the billionaires of the financial elite and the need for US government role expansion (Sullivan & Costa, 2020). However, Sanders, unlike Trump, did not discursively construct "the people" ideologically nor did he frame his opponents as illegitimate (Serhan, 2020b). Though the two were bitter rivals with antithetical plans for the direction of the country, they shared those important "common roots in the motives of popular economic and cultural distress" (Grzymala-Busse, 2019, p. 718). Though the discourse itself varies substantially, populism here provides a general mechanism for mobilizing and appealing to would-be voters.

2.1.2. Scott Walker's Populism

While populist US politicians like Trump and Sanders compete on the national stage, there are also populist figures embedded within localized state governments, such as former Republican Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. After an unsuccessful gubernatorial campaign in 2006 as a Milwaukee County executive, Walker won the following election cycle by defeating Democrat Tom Barrett to become governor of Wisconsin (Isenstadt, 2015). After surviving a special recall election for his anti-union policies in 2012, Walker won re-election in 2014 (Gold, 2014). Early in his 2010 campaign, Walker drew the attention of Americans for Prosperity, a right-wing political advocacy group funded by conservative billionaire brothers David and Charles Koch (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018). Bolstered by the continued support and approval of the Koch brothers, Walker entered the 2016 presidential race. Despite coming in as a frontrunner, Walker's campaign ended after 70 days, owing to downward sliding polling numbers and dwindling funds (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018). Two years later, Democrat Tony Evers denied Walker a third term for governor of Wisconsin by defeating him in the 2018 gubernatorial election (Strauss, 2018).

Walker's initial campaign platform emphasized promises to create 250,000 jobs and cut taxes for small businesses and individual citizens alike (Isenstadt, 2015; Nelson, 2017). Walker brought about his proposed tax legislation which cut rates for low-income Wisconsinites (Olsen, 2015) while also reducing the tax rates for the wealthy at the expense of state employees (Pommer, 2009). To fund these tax breaks, Walker pursued cuts to state employee wages and benefits. Walker also fought fiercely to dismantle collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin under the auspices that workers deserved to be freed from having to join and pay into unions (Kaufman, 2015). As part of a broader Koch-funded initiative to weaken organizations that support liberal aims, Walker was successful in his state-wide anti-labor efforts with public union membership in Wisconsin "falling from around 50% in 2011 to around 19% by 2017" (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018, para. 8).

Despite his staunch anti-labor policies and the state's rising levels of inequality, Walker branded himself as a populist by successfully tapping into rural Wisconsin voters' political consciousness. The discourse of Walker framed him as a champion of a largely homogenous group of white working-class Wisconsinites by promising them freedom and flexibility (Cramer, 2016b). Walker hid his connection to billionaire-funded agenda items by projecting a mediated image of himself as an ordinary citizen, bringing brown bag lunches to work and riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycle around Wisconsin on weekends (Savage, 2021). On the other hand, he discursively constructed a necessary liberal elite foe that undermined the will of *his* people. According to Walker, this liberal elite lived in the state and took the form of everyone from unionized ironworkers to professors in the University of Wisconsin system (Kaufman, 2015). Much like Trump, Walker's populist articulations are contextual, performative, and discursive.

2.2. Mediated Musician Resistance

Though populists today surge into governments around the world thanks to large bases of popular support, their messages do not appeal to everyone. Many left-leaning musicians continue to add their voices to growing choruses of opposition to new right-wing populist leadership. Musicians discursively confront these politicians both musically and through conversation on social media (Holub, 2018). Musicians often utilize their songwriting and performance as protest music, which is a potent platform for criticism of political leadership and policy with a deep history. From the time of the Union protest song "John Brown's Body" stirring abolitionists during the US American Civil War of the 1860s (Henwood, 2017) to the present day, protest music continues as an important and common form of resistance (Garratt, 2018). Though popular culture, such as protest songs, play "a part in informing people's dispositions to the world and to each other" (Street et al., 2013, p. 22), the political effects of popular culture are not solely limited to media artifacts themselves.

Non-musical forms of musician political activism and resistance are also coming to prominence in the hyper-connected digital age. Social media opens a channel for musicians to generally oppose politicians (e.g., Liakat, 2020), but it also allows greater visibility for musicians to publicly dispute politicians' unauthorized use of their songs. While politicians using the songs of musicians averse to their campaign goals is not new (Knopper, 2015), musicians can only now begin a direct confrontation with politicians about music usage. Prior to the advent of social media, such confrontations were settled through backchannels and cease-and-desist letters, where now such a dispute can quickly become public. For example, Canadian folk singer Neil Young is notable for actively calling out Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign on social media for using his song "Rockin' in the Free World" without Young's consent (Greene, 2018). Though politicians can legally license and acquire the rights to musical works without that musician's expressed consent (Schwender, 2017), social media serves as an effective opportunity for musicians to fight back against the cooptation and appropriation of their songs.

2.2.1. Dropkick Murphys

Like Neil Young, the Celtic punk band Dropkick Murphys are unafraid of voicing their political affiliations and opinions on the usage of their music. However, to understand Dropkick Murphys' perspective, one must trace the band's trajectory after forming in the South Boston neighborhood of Quincy in 1996. From the beginning, the band took a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to playing, recording, and pressing their own music (Juul, 2016). The band gained popularity after opening for Boston ska band The Mighty Mighty Bosstones in 1997 (Ankeny, n.d.; Juul, 2016), which led to signing with independent record label Hellcat Records to release their first full-length album in 1998 (Purcell, 2007). In the years following, the band went through several member changes, with bassist Ken Casey remaining the only constant member (Purcell, 2007). The band's biggest break came when their Woody Guthrie-inspired song "I'm Shipping Up to Boston" was used in Martin Scorsese's 2006 crime thriller *The Departed* (Ankeny, n.d.). In the years since their formation, Dropkick Murphys collectively played over 5,000 live shows, released 10 studio albums, and sold over 3.6 million album units (Ankeny, n.d.; Dodero, 2018).

Though not all musicians with political valence should be conflated with populism, Dropkick Murphys' unique combination of strong convictions, frequent political critiques, engagement with causes, and economic autonomy fosters left-wing populist appeal. Though the band's music has now found a mass audience, their independence from major record label jurisdiction ensures their ability to remain politically outspoken. Dropkick Murphys began releasing their music on their own Born & Bred Records imprint in 2007, allowing them to retain independence and creative control (Ankeny, n.d.). Founding band member Ken Casey explains the choice to turn down major labels as a political decision harkening back to his identification "as a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat with a deeply blue-collar ethos" (Dodero, 2018, para. 16). In addition to their DIY operation, the band makes their political positions clear, from contributing music to oppose former President George W. Bush (Wright, 2004) to supporting the pro-union organizations like Workers' Rights Emergency Response Fund ("Dropkick Murphys rock out in support of Wisconsin union workers," 2011). In this way, Dropkick Murphys' left-wing political activism is more encompassing and goes beyond the level of many popular bands.

The mediated image of Dropkick Murphys created by this extensive political engagement—in particular, their backing of pro-worker groups and critiques of conservativism as detrimental to workers—frames them as a group with liberal populist tendencies by ideologically situating the band as both members and defenders of "the people," who are constructed as working-class, union-oriented US Americans. Dropkick Murphys' ability to freely exert their support for this articulation of "the people" put them at odds with the right-wing, union-busting Scott Walker from the outset. Together, this background provides the context necessary to understand the moments prior to Dropkick Murphys publicly opposing Walker's use of their most popular song in his 2015 Iowa campaign stop.

3. Methods

It is crucial to consider these social media messages with both visibility and political impact as nexuses of discourse in the age of new media. Around these posts, an audience of supporters and critics coalesce to create conversations where meanings are constructed and contested (Mills, 1997). With this key consideration in mind, I developed the following critical discourse analysis method to answer my central research question.

3.1. Data Collection and Sample Description

I sought out a particular instance of discursive musician resistance to a politician on social media. I engaged in qualitative purposive sampling (Tracy, 2019) by locating strong exemplars of political discourse within the context of popular music. Specifically, I sought posts covered by popular press sources like *Rolling Stone* with at least 500 responses and were less than five years old at the time of original writing. The media artifacts selected for analysis originate from Dropkick Murphys January 24, 2015, message on Twitter rebuking then-Wisconsin-Governor Scott Walker for using their music without permission. Using the digital data aggregation service BrandWatch, I captured the entire conversation surrounding the tweet by amassing a sample of each unique tweet response while eliminating retweets devoid of original discourse

and those posts by automated bot accounts. After cleaning the data, my sample consisted of 1,115 responses to the original tweet.

I remained mindful of the implications of the qualitative, hands-on work required by ideological criticism. Qualitative discursive analyses necessitate a close rhetorical reading of data while giving equitable attention to all the "differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance" (Wodak, 2001, p. 11). My qualitative analysis weaves together aspects of holistic reflexive qualitative methodology (e.g., Tracy, 2019) with traditional rhetorical analysis aimed exclusively at interrogating a specific set of texts. In doing so, I utilized a critical discourse analysis method. Specifically, critical discourse analyses examine the "dialectical relationships between discourse and other elements of social practice. The role of discourse cannot be taken for granted and needs to be established through analysis" (Smith, 2013, p. 64). This hybrid approach to bridging critical qualitative and rhetorical work adds to a growing body of literature that carefully incorporates context and social practice into the field of rhetoric (Senda-Cook et al., 2016). In keeping with this approach, ample descriptions and quotations were pulled directly from the corpus of data because they are core to both critical discourse and rhetorical analysis (Foss, 2018). In this way, the tweet responses from fans and critics serve as compact yet robust chunks of text that speak to the nature of the sample without sacrificing context.

3.2. Analytical Procedures

I adhered to Foss's (2018) four-step approach to ideological criticism. In the context of this study, these steps begin with identifying the presented elements of the artifacts. In this case, "identifying the basic observable features of the artifact" (Foss, 2018, p. 243) means recording the core elements of the responses to Dropkick Murphys' tweet. The first step of identification includes calling attention to aspects such as major arguments, common terms, and metaphors. Second, I identified the suggested elements linked to the presented elements. Suggested elements go beyond simply translating elements to engaging in interpretations of meaning and synthesizing the core concepts. Third, I formulated ideologies implicit within the artifacts. This involves categorizing and organizing suggested elements into "a coherent framework that constitutes the ideology [argued to be] implicit in the [artifacts]" (Foss, 2018, p. 246). Finally, my analysis concluded by identifying the functions served by the ideologies. This final step ties the ideologies to the function of the artifacts and considers the consequences these artifacts have in the world.

4. Analysis

I discovered that several recurrent ideologies inform the conversation around Dropkick Murphys' anti-Scott Walker tweet. Though the tweet attracted both opponents and proponents of Walker, most of the discourse centered around individuals refuting, attacking, and minimizing Dropkick Murphys for their vocal opposition to Walker. The most prominent ideologies articulated in the conversation include considering the band's political activism as alienating the people and facing economic consequences, re-envisioning punk rock as right-wing, and framing Dropkick Murphys as inherently un-American and undesirable.

4.1. Alienating the People and Facing Economic Consequences

A major ideology that underpins much of the critical response to Dropkick Murphys frames the band as foolish for dividing their audience with a controversial political message. In keeping with populism's dichotomous frame (Waisbord, 2020), critics of the band's tweet construct the band as against the people for refuting Walker. In this view, Dropkick Murphys undermine the will of people they claim to care about because many of those Americans identify with Walker's supposedly people-oriented right-wing image. Walker supporters articulate this ideology by both warning the band against alienating their fans and proactively invalidating the band's political beliefs:

> Example 1: "It sounds like @DropkickMurphys hates conservatives? Ok, I'll tell all my friends u shit on half the country!"

> Example 2: "Hey guys—Enjoy your music, just learned I hate your politics….Shut up and sing!"

> Example 3: "Grow up and get a real life. Please get over yourselves. No one cares about ANY band's political agenda."

In addition to framing the band as against the will of the people Walker represents, this line of thinking suggests that those with public-facing platforms in the entertainment industry should leave politics to the politicians. This ideological construction demands the separation of "politically neutral" and profitable entertainment from activism is also reflected in contemporary conversations about athletes "sticking to sports" (Kang, 2017). Though musicians like Taylor Swift have intentionally entered the political arena by coming out to support specific politicians (Driessen, 2022), here critics of Dropkick Murphys consider value-based political activism as ill-advised for musicians who should only be recording, selling, and playing music. Where Taylor Swift calmed tensions by extolling her fans to find their own political voice after stepping into a new role as a celebrity politician (Driessen, 2022), Dropkick Murphys made no such concessions and faced backlash for their opposition to Walker.

In further communicating economic consequences to the band for their opposition to Walker, Walker supporters frame musicians embedded in the culture industry as hypocritical for indiscriminately taking money from all buyers while simultaneously complaining about certain people using their music:

> Example 4: "You are owned by the record company, they have every right to use 'your' music….You already sold…U don't own…idiots."

> Example 5: "Too fucking greedy so reduced to complaining while cashing the check! So punk rock!"

> Example 6: "Maybe you shouldn't sellout if you don't want your music 'used.' LOL."

Critics of Dropkick Murphys' political tweet argue that their anti-Walker resistance is hollow and performative. This ideological frame introduces the term "sellout" to brand any band which disputes the use of their song. Despite Dropkick Murphys' focus on independence and avoidance of major labels (Ankeny, n.d.; Dodero, 2018), supporters of Walker rhetorically construct the band as beholden to an imagined "record company" and greedy for allowing their music to be sold to the people they criticize. Here there are consequences to Dropkick Murphys for making music within a capitalist system and those dictate the band should either seek to make money or be activists. For Walker supporters, constructing this viewpoint, Dropkick Murphys undermine the will of the people, unnecessarily insert a political agenda into their work, and flaunt the rules of capitalism.

4.2. Punk Rock Conservatives and Paradoxical Liberals

Instead of brushing off the band as inconsequential liberals, Walker supporters rally around a revisionist view of punk rock. These critics argue that the right-wing conservativism of Walker is more ideologically compatible with punk rock than the pro-union liberalism of Dropkick Murphys by conflating notions of punk disobedience with "small government" conservativism:

> Example 7: "A pro status quo government punk band…Walker is more punk than you are.''

> Example 8: "Not sure if you realize this @Dropkick Murphys, but punk rock is anti-government. What's closest to no govt? Small govt. Support @ScottWalker.''

> Example 9: "Irony: DM, a punk band, telling others what to do….What was the punk genre built on? Defiance."

Punk rock is often characterized as a "symbolic negation of the existing social order, expressed through confrontational style and transgressive performance" (Martin-Iverson, 2018, p. 129). Despite this common conception, punk rock is a multifaceted genre that contains a variety of possible dispositions (Laing, 2015), which means punk rock is not necessarily inherently liberal or conservative in nature. However, punk rock initially emerged as both a challenge and alternative to rock music when the latter "become more integrated with mainstream commercial culture and lost its political bite during the late 1970s" (Moore, 2007, p. 442). Additionally, the presence of notable and vociferous anti-conservative punk rock bands like Reagan Youth and NOFX (Cogan, 2006) suggests that contemporary US punk rock is situated as oppositional to the status quo of both financial and social conservatism. Regardless, Walker supporters ideologically resituate punk rock as inherently conservative to match Walker's populist appeal and political orientation.

Through this ideological lens, not only are Dropkick Murphys framed as fake punks fighting to maintain a perceived over-regulatory, pro-union status quo but the band is also constructed as hypocritical betrayers of supposed liberal tolerance by turning their backs on the people for whom Walker supposedly speaks. This new twist on punk ideology and history brands liberals as intolerant, hypocritical, and antithetical to the true tenets and meanings of punk rock. This ideological perspective builds Walker's people-focused right-wing populism as faithful to true punk rock, while Dropkick Murphys are cast as paradoxical liberal punks trying to enforce oxymoronic "big government" punk ideology against the will of the people.

4.3. Dropkick Murphys as the Undesirable, Un-American Other

In the final overwhelmingly recurrent ideological construction of Dropkick Murphys for their message, Walker supporters resort to personal, ad hominem attacks on the band that positioned them as the undesirable and "un-American other." Because logic dictates that "to be something is always not to be something else" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 128), othering is a way of ideologically constructing individuals as antagonistic outsiders (hooks, 2006). Though populism is not always indicative of nationalism (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017), the two often intermingle in forms of right-wing populism, especially more radical xenophobic variants. Thus, if the Walker supporters called to by his form of populism are true Americans, Dropkick Murphys must be everything but true Americans. First, critics of the band utilize insults to frame Dropkick Murphys as unpatriotic:

> Example 11: "Bunch of douche bag collectivist[s]. You guys have sucked for the last 10 years. Eat a dick commies!''

> Example 12: "Nice, teach your fans it's ok to hate people because you disagree with them. Nazis."

To ideologically position Dropkick Murphys as antithetical to US American democracy, Walker supporters reference the band as both fascist Nazis and collectivist communists. Though communism and fascism are diametrically opposed government orientations, critics seek out the most viscerally un-American ideologies to attach to the band. In addition to accusations of Dropkick Murphys as un-American, critics additionally frame the band as childish, feminine, gay, unattractive, alcoholic, and drug-addled:

> Example 13: "So, you've just demonstrated to everyone that you're just a bunch of sniveling, bitchy little girls."

> Example 14: "Yeah, please stop using the music of these talentless homos."

> Example 15: "Such weak sauce. Be men, not babies. Who cares who uses your music? #Selfimportant."

Critics ideologically position Dropkick Murphys as outside of supposedly attractive dominant US American heterosexual masculinity by attaching othering characteristics to the band. Instead of powerful upstanding patriots, Walker supporters paint the band with antagonistic, nondominant labels meant to delegitimize. Considering populist leaders may appeal to societal norms and stereotypes when constructing their images (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), discursive othering presents an effective way for populist followers to signal that someone does not fit with "the people." These labels, meant to marginalize and draw ire, ideologically position the band as all things nondominant and un-American to Walker's heteronormative American right-wing populist appeal.

5. Discussion and Limitations

Within the conversation surrounding Dropkick Murphys' tweet, a vocal majority of pro-Walker supporters took the opportunity to dismiss the band's criticism in line with populism in a variety of ways. First, Walker supporters take issue with Dropkick Murphys alienating a large segment of their conservative audience by disputing Walker's use of their music. Additionally, Walker supporters articulate that value-based politics tarnishes supposedly value-free music. Second, to preemptively cut off the argument of the left-wing band with a populist pro-union appeal, critics ideologically shift the meanings of punk rock into line with Walker's "small government" conservativism. Simultaneously, these same critics present liberalism as an inherently flawed political ideology with an anti-punk rock belief in "big government." Third, Walker supporters contend that Dropkick Murphys' form of liberalism is un-American and undesirable by lobbing insults and attaching supposedly unsavory marginalized identities to the band.

Much like how populist leaders seek to maintain a connection with their supporters (Holliday, 2016), this study shows that supporters also engage in communicating connections with their leader. Instead of isolated arguments with no deeper impact, the mediated discourse of social media users does things (Mills, 1997). These layers of discourse accumulate and stratify into meanings beyond the small scale of a Twitter post. Importantly, the discursive constructions uncovered in this study contribute to a diverse body of scholarship.

This study builds on scholarly literature at the nexus of politics and popular culture. The response of Walker supporters in this study runs counter to the increasing trend of popular culture figures becoming "celebrity politicians" who disclose their political affiliations (Driessen, 2022). Informed by populism's "friend vs. foe" framing, most Walker-supporting fans of Dropkick Murphys in the data seemingly could not remain fans of both. The antagonism of populism surfaced most viscerally when former Dropkick Murphys fans discussed destroying band merchandise to symbolically communicate that the band is now an enemy of "the people." This discourse of audience alienation, economic consequences, and policing of political affiliations builds an ideology which positions music and politics as clearly divided, even though popular music (Garratt, 2018) and populism (Moffitt, 2016) ostensibly speak to what common people want.

This study also contributes to a growing body of populism scholarship by providing a snapshot of contemporary populism at work within mediated discourse. For example, Moffitt (2016) states that a key aspect of populism is the image of a populist leader and "the people" being rendered by strategically highlighting and obscuring certain details. By discursively framing the transgressive anti-status quo nature of punk rock as in line with Walker's right-wing union-busting and attacks on public institutions, Walker supporters showcase populism's ideological flexibility to ignore punk's challenge to corporate interests (Moore, 2007), deep history of outspoken left-wing bands (Cogan, 2006), and Walker's Koch connections (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2018). But the status quo is similarly flexible within the scope of populism. By framing the band as oppositional to all things perceived as good and natural within a dominant heteronormative ideology (van der Toorn et al., 2020) that Walkers fits comfortably within, the band is "othered" so that their perceived difference can be exploited, derided, and made to uphold the status quo (hooks, 2006). Through this study, we can see that discourses, like right-wing populism and heteronormativity in this example, shape and reinforce one another.

There were several limitations to this critical discourse analysis. Most critically, though this study is symptomatic of larger discursive new media practices and builds on a growing body of literature regarding musicians' political discourse (e.g., Driessen, 2022), more research is required to develop a deeper understanding of the multiple

intersections of politics and popular culture. Further, this area of scholarship provides important context to work on protest music (e.g., Garratt, 2018; Henwood, 2017) to create a more cohesive picture of musician resistance. Second, though populism and instances of musician resistance are truly global phenomena (Serhan, 2020a), this study is constrained to an English-speaking focus. Future studies may continue to explore and unpack these conversations surrounding discursive musician resistance across national boundaries, languages, and cultures to formulate new understandings.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals a multilayered world of discursive ideological constructions all related back to populism. The discussion around the tweet provides insight into the polarizing, politically charged ideological constructions that would later come to characterize antagonistic conversations around Donald Trump's frequent and provoking tweets throughout much of his presidency (Humphrey, 2021). Specifically, this study shows the communicative mechanisms of populism at the intersection of politics and popular culture through the discourse of social media users. Supporters of the right-wing Walker rely upon ideologically constructing boundaries, connections, and attacks in a way that mirrors the broader contours of populism. Populism and discourse are not fundamentally ideological (Mills, 1997; Ostiguy et al., 2021), but each provides a potent vessel for ideology. This study is symptomatic of larger communicative strategies of defense and attack in an era defined by new media and populism.

In penning a short tweet critical of Walker and his use of their song, Dropkick Murphys ignited an impassioned discussion that swirled around their message for weeks. This micro-level snapshot provides a case study where average social media users take to their keyboards to build ideologies which are strategically constructed to elevate, obscure, and marginalize along the lines of populist logic. Looking at growing instances of contentious discourse on new media platforms between populist supporters and critics reveals not only the impact of discourse but the functioning of populism itself.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Bread and Plots: Conspiracy Theories and the Rhetorical Style of Political Influencer Communities on YouTube

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Abstract
Based on the assumption that social media encourages a populist style of politics in online communities and the proposition that populism and conspiracy theories tend to co-occur, this article investigates whether this holds true for YouTube influencers, particularly on the less investigated left-wing spectrum. The article provides qualitative case studies of four different groups of political content creators on YouTube whose content makes use of or analyzes popular culture. The article concludes that a populist style plays a far less central role in left-wing communities on YouTube than on other platforms or within right-wing communities.

Keywords
BreadTube; conspiracy theories; popular culture; populism; social media; YouTube

Issue
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1. Introduction

The CIA has paid left-wing YouTubers talking about games and TV shows to undermine communism, and, at the same time, Disney is using critical race theory to brainwash children into serving the Chinese communist government—Claims like these may seem ridiculous, yet the impact of social media on political discourse cannot be underestimated. As the alt-right grew out of niche online message board activities that hardly seemed worth taking seriously but due to their media savvy-ness were able to "spread their ideas more diffusely and penetrate the mainstream" (Winter, 2019, p. 47), even those political discourses on social media sites such as YouTube may come to impact mainstream politics more than we might like—So, what ideas are they spreading and how?

Political YouTube channels are a form of social media grassroots activism—a recent mode of engagement whose impact was felt not only in well-known hashtag campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo, but also where they were detrimental to democracy as with the growing number of QAnon believers or the various backlashes centered around representation in video games spread under #GamerGate. At the same time, what Kenneth White (2016, p. 269) calls the "scourge of populism" was noticed within recent American politics, especially during the Trump era of 2017–2021 with many political candidates aiming to speak as the *vox populi*, the voice of the people. The rise of populism not just in the US but globally has widely been perceived negatively, as many see it as "rejecting diversity, individual rights and the separation of power," thus favoring "an illiberal form of democracy" (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 332). Consequently, it has led researchers to question the driving factors behind this development. This issue of *Media and Communication* demonstrates the growing interest in the role of online communities in new forms of populism.

2. Popular Culture, Populism, and Political Activism

In addition to the rise of populism and social media, the aforementioned phenomena of QAnon and #GamerGate illustrate the increasing intersection of political polarization with conspiracy theories (CTs; Bergmann & Butter,

2020, p. 337; Kenneth White, 2016, p. 278) and popular and fan culture. Much attention when it comes to popular culture, fandom, and its role in political engagement on social media has been focused on right-wing aligned phenomena such as #GamerGate, which has focused on games as a political arena that were debated by fans and those trying to gain the political approval of fans and has contributed to the rise of the alt-right (Bezio, 2018), or QAnon, which has been suggested to illustrate how "political party allegiance can operate as a fandom" (Reinhard et al., 2021, p. 1153). Generally, popular culture increasingly works on all levels of political discourse—from teenage fans to seasoned politicians—both as a vehicle to discuss politics on social media (Wurst, 2021) and as the "battleground" of "the new culture wars" which constitute a "post-millennial spin on the extreme partisan polarities of the 1980s and '90s" (Proctor & Kies, 2018, p. 127). QAnon, #GamerGate, and many other such instances have commonly been described as consequences of and contributors to the new populist movements (Bezio, 2018). Marwick and Partin (2022, p. 2), for example, call "QAnon's interpretative practices…populist expertise," while Bezio (2018, p. 563) observes that the "same kind of exclusionary neo-conservative language which enabled Trump" and Brexiteers to garner widespread support was echoed in GamerGaters' insistence that "they were disenfranchised, felt ignored, and wanted to see a systemic change from what they viewed as the corruption of the games industry by feminists and progressives."

Research in fan studies, on the other hand, has mainly engaged with the progressive activism of pop culture fans (Hinck, 2019). Compared to research on the aforementioned intersection of fandom and right-wing politics, little is known about leftist fan communities on social media. The left, in general, seems to not have found similar mainstream recognition, nor a lasting impact through online activism and pop culture engagement—at least beyond the hype around US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who was often described as the Democrat's populist candidate (Staufer, 2021), or the pro-Corbyn movements in the UK, which both constitute an example of what Dean (2017, p. 323) calls "politicized fandom." However, according to Rae (2021, p. 1118), there is a growing presence of new left-wing movements which are sometimes, controversially, described as the "alt-left" "by those trying to create a false equivalency with the 'alt-right,'" while "no one involved in progressive politics has adopted" the term—It stands to question if they are indeed in many ways similar to the alt-right movements on social media.

3. YouTube, Conspiracy Theories, and Research Question

These observations lead me to question whether populist rhetoric, which seems to be central to the alt-right (Bezio, 2018; Rae, 2021), plays an equal role in new left-wing online communities—Is such rhetoric necessary to succeed in the attention economy of the social media landscape more generally, or if not, how do left-wing online communities engage their audiences in alternative ways? As "attention is quantified and monetized [sic] in a world saturated with media" (van de Ven, & van Gemert, 2020, p. 2), this leads content creators to vie for our attention, resulting in what Volcic and Andrejevic (2022, p. 1) call "commercial populism." This, they suggest, is "fostered by (but not unique to) social media" (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022, p. 7) and may "help explain the relationship between polarization and conspiracy theory that is likely to outlast the Trump presidency" (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022, p. 4).

Particularly YouTube has received much attention both for playing a "significant role…in institutional politics" (Uldam & Askanius, 2013, p. 1190) and a "key radicalization media [sic]" (Varda & Hahner, 2020, p. 139), often being a key source of the aforementioned polarizing misinformation and CTs (Aupers, 2020, p. 474). Video content can also often spread on other social media platforms as GIFs, screenshots, or memes. YouTube has been suggested to potentially work as a "radicalization pipeline" (Ribeiro et al., 2020). On the surface, YouTube has lost relevance when it comes to white supremacist and conspiracist content, due to new policies banning such videos and creators from the platform, so that now it seems the "recommendation algorithm favors content that falls within mainstream media groupings" (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2019, p. 7); yet, this may favor content that uses more implicit ways to spread political messages, such as presenting more as pop-cultural entertainment. For example, Lewis (2020, p. 201) found that right-wing influencers combine "micro-celebrity practices with a reactionary political standpoint," which "positions them as more credible than mainstream media."

As the given examples may already suggest, it has been proposed that populism and CTs are inextricably connected. Despite some authors claiming that CTs may be a defining feature of populism, "the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory remains understudied" (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 330). CTs assume that powerful figures are secretly enacting an evil plot to gain power—such as the QAnon deep state conspiracy, micro-chipping citizens via vaccines, or the "great replacement" of white people, to name a few examples. They may help populist politicians "fashion themselves as anti-establishment figures because both populism and conspiracy theory are stigmatised by the mainstream and the elites" (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 333). However, there is disagreement about whether they are more prominent in right-wing than left-wing populism (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 340).

Before taking a closer look at political communities on YouTube, it is necessary to quickly establish what I consider populist style: Following Moffitt (2016, p. 28), for my purpose, I agree that "the best way to understand contemporary populism is as a political style" that

employs "appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite,' 'bad manners'; and crisis" (p. 8). He emphasizes how the "others will be linked to 'the elite,'" while the populist "really knows" what the "people are thinking" and will show "disregard for 'appropriate' modes of acting in the political realm" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 44). Additionally, they "aim to induce crisis through dramatization" and often "rely on emotional and passionate performances" rather than "'rationality'" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46). As Rae (2021, p. 1120) argues, "the populist style of politics shares the key traits of media logic," and the "internet facilitates more direct connections between populists and the people," explaining why "social media has become a central campaigning tool for populist candidates" (Rae, 2021, p. 1121). As an audiovisual format on YouTube, the style of presentation plays a central role in the success of content. It is apt to focus on populism as a political style and less on its role as a political ideology or logic.

Given these observations, I am interested in the treatment of CTs by politically inclined, particularly left-wing, content creators from the Anglosphere on YouTube: Do such channels use a populist style to engage their communities? How do they use polarizing topics such as CTs to spread left- or right-wing ideologies?

4. Case Study Selection and Methodology

As mentioned previously, we know comparatively little about left-wing communities on YouTube that are based more on pop-cultural entertainment as well as the strategies such political YouTube communities use to draw users in. However, given the increasing influence of fandom on civic activism (cf. Hinck, 2019), it is particularly interesting how content creators who have cultivated a fanbase—as evidenced, for example, by dedicated message boards and financial support via Patreon and other patronage services, donations during livestream events, or merchandise shops—engage their audience in divisive political issues, such as LGBTQ equality or Covid-19 vaccinations. Given that, at least superficially, a horseshoe model of ideology holds true under specific circumstances (cf. van Elsas et al., 2016) and that a populist style has proven successful for many politicians and online movements such as the alt-right and may particularly thrive due to the affordances of social media, we might expect them to similarly occur on the left spectrum as well.

There are four main communities of content creators I am interested in, described in Figure 1, which all have in common that they predominantly focus on the so-called "culture war issues."

This focus means they mainly engage with topics of gender, sexuality, and race and the surrounding representations in media and fan or political discourses. Out of these, the so-called "Dirtbag Left" (DL) are most commonly described as populist, with the name a "hat tip to the vulgar populism that undergirded the content they created" (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 377). Consequently, I expected a clear contrast between the DL and other popular leftist edutainment creators (i.e., as opposed to political news coverage) to arise, with the populist style describing the DL appropriately. Given the observed closeness of populism and CTs mentioned above, I also expected the DL to not openly endorse CTs but hint that there might be truth to them as part of their populist appeal. This is, however, not what I observed. Taken together with the style of other, highly successful leftist channels, this suggests that at least on YouTube, social media may not automatically favor a populist style, despite the demands of the attention economy and that, at least on the left, connections between populism, CTs, and the ability to garner a large audience are weaker than assumed.

This article focuses on a qualitative content analysis of selected videos connected to CTs from channels representing popular political online communities on YouTube as listed in Table 1. A list of channels for the categories I was interested in was created based on which channels were grouped together in academic literature, journalistic articles, and fan wikis, as well as my personal

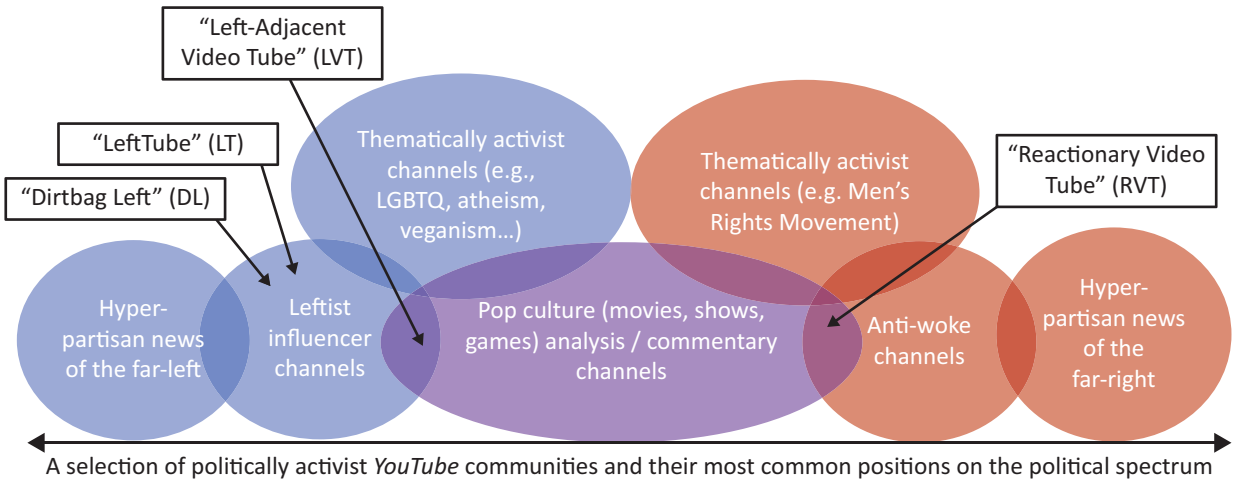

Figure 1. A selection of politically activist YouTube communities and their most common positions on the political spectrum.

Table 1. Central channels observed, with the number of subscribers in millions (M) and thousands (K), as of August 2022.

Reactionary Video Tube Channels	Left-Associated Video Tube Channels	LeftTube Channels	Dirtbag Left Channels
The Critical Drinker (1.32 M)	Lindsay Ellis (1.2 M; inactive)	ContraPoints (1.59 M)	HasanAbi (994 K)
TheQuartering (1.25 M)	Sarah Z (535 K)	PhilosophyTube (1.18 M)	Destiny (448 K)
It's A Gundam (692 K)	James Somerton (224 K)	Hbomberguy (1.04 M)	Vaush (405 K)
Nerdrotic (507 K)	Jack Saint (198 K)	Folding Ideas (733 K)	ChapoTrapHouse) (100 K)
Geeks and Gamers (341 K)	José (165 K)	Shaun (568 K)	Xanderhal (71 K)
Robot Head (333 K)	JessieGender (161 K)		

familiarity with the discourses in and surrounding the channels' fanbases on Twitter and Reddit. Who is part of LeftTube (LT), adjacent leftist channels, and "Dirtbag" channels is contested, as academic groupings are often based on characteristics of the channels while groupings by fans are often based on a shared audience. I prioritized my ethnographic observations for my decisions.

For the leftist channels, I selected videos from 2018 to 2022 mentioning or referencing CTs in the title or video description to watch closely. For the reactionary channels, on the other hand, transcripts of videos from the two most popular channels published between 2021 to 2022 that addressed pop culture fan conflicts, e.g., superhero movies that received backlash, were keyword-searched for mentions of CT-related words and the relevant transcripts read closely. This was necessary due to more hidden engagement with the topic and much higher content output by channels of this category. Finally, based on the field of cultural studies, this article offers close readings (i.e., analyzing videos similarly to literary texts) of videos representative of popular content, illustrating how the content creators engage with this polarizing topic of CTs and highlighting common themes, and situates the videos' textual content and cinematic presentation within its context in the larger content creator economy on social media and recent political discourses of the Anglophone sphere.

There are many spaces in which new left-leaning online movements have occurred. However, the community of content creators known as "BreadTube," and the DL have been particularly prominent and visible, featured in several journalistic outlets such as *The New York Times*. They are part of a larger ecosystem of political channels associating with each other, for example, due to collaborations or shared fanbases, or opposing each other, for example through debates and response videos. Saarela (2020, p. 6) thus describes them as "socially [constructed] within a canon"—Nevertheless, there are commonalities in presentation style, political stance, and contents discussed that I will point out in the following sections.

5. Introducing Right-Wing Ideology and Conspiracy Theories Through Pop Culture

Despite my primary interest in left-wing channels, the existence of left-leaning pop culture commentary channels and their lack of engagement with CTs and populist rhetoric is notable mostly in contrast to more right-leaning pop culture commentary channels. There are several very successful YouTube channels—which I will call "Reactionary Video Tube" (RVT)—that are part of the "anti-woke" community on YouTube and are known to "not explicitly endorse far-right ideologies" but may act as a "gateway to the far right" (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 1), although they often work as an "increasingly popular…category of its own" (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 8). Explicitly right-wing content is not the focus of this article as there already exists a large body of work on it (as summarized in the previous sections), and many content creators, especially those engaging with CTs, have moved off-site, either voluntarily or due to being banned (Giansiracusa, 2021, p. 90). Unlike primarily political right-wing channels with their aforementioned radicalization potential, RVT channels tend to self-describe as "non-ideological or even liberal 'free thinkers'" (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 1) and deal with cultural aspects of pop cultural products such as movies and video games and have thus received less attention. However, they often draw from right-wing talking points and fit my expectations of a connection between populist style and CTs.

These RVT channels are reactionary, as they express a desire to return to an earlier status quo, are critical of increased diversity in casting choices and storylines in popular movies and consider media as it used to be of higher quality—expressed, for example, in video titles such as "Why Modern Movies Suck" (Jordan, 2022). Yet, while they may claim that pushes for diverse representation and "politically correct" language are unnecessary or harmful due to society already being equal, they do not advocate for the exclusion of people of color or queer people from society or the media, thus remaining seemingly apolitical. Two popular channels analyzing popular culture with over one million subscribers are TheQuartering (aka Jeremy Hambly) and The Critical Drinker (aka Will Jordan). The rhetoric of these pop culture video communities tends to make use of the populist style, i.e., often drawing a stark distinction between the (true) fans and "the Hollywood elites" who are imposing an agenda upon audiences. A common criticism is that modern movies act as political propaganda, for example when Jordan (2021) describes that the Marvel series "leaned far too heavily on identity politics, aggressively trying to lecture their audience about the evils of modern culture rather than presenting a fun story" which would let viewers "form their own opinions." This implies that the elites do not know what their audiences truly want. These videos often predict diverse movies failing at the box office or frame even commercially successful popular movies or comics as failures, thus implying that audiences, in general, do not want to see diverse representation and painting the film industry as in a state of crisis. The style of these videos, which are often produced in large quantities of several uploads a week or day, usually does not feature references to research or extensive sets but is often just recordings of someone sitting in front of their camera, which underlines their appeal to the "common fan"—despite the channels' content usually being scripted and the likelihood of the content creators using "clickbait" style titles, thumbnails, and content on purpose, not out of authentic outrage and anti-fandom. Although it may be, to some degree, a performance, Sandvoss (2019, p. 140) suggests "anti-fandom constitutes a form of political participation that…privileges the antagonisms at the heart of populist…mobilization."

As part of their intentionally brash, "politically incorrect" style, RVT also makes use of conspiracy rumors, emphasizing a tendency for these elements to co-occur. These may both be fandom-related, such as assuming that Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm, wants to destroy Star Wars (Hambly, 2021b), or they may draw from broader CTs, such as that "Chinese overlords" and their "communist government" are not only an influence on Western cinema but have also "infiltrated our education system" and may even plan to "raid the United States," drawing from ideas of the anti-communist "red scare" and anti-Asian "yellow peril" (Hambly, 2021a)—sentiments which have also influenced anti-vaccination CTs of the virus being a Chinese bioweapon (Li & Nicholson, 2021). Furthermore, accusations about "cultural Marxism" in Star Wars films, a CT from "the very fringes of the American far-right" which links "political correctness" with "a sinister plot to destroy Western civilisation" (Busbridge et al., 2020, p. 723) have even spread far enough outside of fan circles that journalistic outlets such as *Forbes* (Kain, 2017) reported on. While these theories are never explained explicitly, such allusions nevertheless strengthen already existing CT beliefs common to right-wing political communities and reinforce an anti-elitist suspicion of Hollywood producers, like when Hambly (2022) in "Massive Backfire! Disney Pushing Woke Agenda Has Employees & Families Quitting in Huge Numbers!" accuses Disney and politicians of trying to "brainwash" children by putting inappropriate content such as "critical race theory" and "gender ideology" and diverse representation in children's entertainment. Both terms are highly polarized and associated with the populist right, for which they serve as "symptoms of a broader crisis" and work to mobilize against a shared enemy image (Kováts, 2018, p. 530). Such pop culture reviewing channels can thus also act as political communities in spreading white supremacist-leaning ideology despite their, at first glance, apolitical subject matter and self-presentation as objective commentary on Anglophone entertainment from the US and the UK.

6. Critical Pop Culture Commentary on the Left

On the other side, left-wing pop culture commentary does not follow this pattern. To focus on differences between the left and right in a similar context, I first analyzed channels that focus more strongly on progressive representation in popular culture, e.g., discussing diversity of gender in Marvel movies and explicitly taking a progressive or reactionary position. These must be distinguished from channels that do indeed mostly focus on the content of movies, e.g., hugely popular CinemaSins with over nine million subscribers, or the smaller Saberspark with 1.6 million subscribers. Many channels that do not directly engage with politics are nevertheless considered part of the so-called "LeftTube" by a shared fanbase and regular collaborations such as guest voices in other creators' videos, despite their work focusing more on pop culture commentary. One example is the now inactive video essayist Lindsay Ellis who is a friend of LT creator Natalie Wynn, or Jessie Gender (aka Jessie Earl), who regularly interacts with LT content creators. I thus considered them "Left-Associated Video Tube" (LVT). Like the RVT channels, they may not explicitly endorse political candidates or parties but mainly focus on (gender, sexuality, and race) representation in media. They typically outspokenly support feminism, anti-racist action, and LGBTQ-activism, and are often critical of capitalism and issues of classism, thus promoting progressive to leftist ideology.

The most popular LVT channels are less successful than the RVT ones, and they do not employ populist rhetoric or style: Their humor is polite, not rude, even though they connect to their audience through "low" popular culture. They do not work in binary ideas of "them" vs. "us" or exhibit anti-elitist stances. Several scholars such as Roose (2019) have theorized that YouTube's algorithm "played into the hands of far-right creators," leading, for example, from criticism of Star Wars' "left-wing bias" to right-wing ideas. Thus, it became attractive for left-wing YouTubers to similarly focus on the same issues to "get their videos recommended to the same audience" (Roose, 2019). One would therefore assume they might employ a similar style, yet this is not the case. In addition, LVT channels caution against the dangers of conspiracist beliefs with a particular focus on the close relation between transphobia—often discussed in the context of Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling and trans-exclusionary radical feminism—and CT belief. This underlines their aforementioned political focus on issues of gender, race, and sexuality. The "gender critical" movement is relevant for fan audiences, due to Rowling being a well-known advocate. In her video on "Exploring the 'Gender Critical' Radicalization Pipeline," Earl (2021) highlights a quote from an article by political research analyst Heron Greenesmith that "anti-trans 'feminists'" make use of "antisemitic trope[s which] manifests as the conspiracy that transgender advocacy is funded by George Soros" (Greenesmith, 2019). "Billionaire philanthropist George Soros" is often accused in CTs of financing endeavors to "promote the dark plans of an international financial elite" (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 338). Further, Earl (2021) highlights PhD researcher Christa Peterson saying anti-trans "rhetoric provides an entry point into far-right politics…" where CTs serve as a "legitimization engine." While discussed extensively on YouTube and other social media communities (e.g., Conrad, 2022), little academic research so far exists on "the convergence of anti-trans agitation with far-right militias and terrorist groups, anti-vaxxers, and QAnon conspiracy theorists" (Miles, 2022). Rather than resorting to simplifications common to a populist style, LVT channels engage in academic dialogue. Thus, for LVT, pop culture serves as the main draw to engage with polarizing issues such as CTs where relevant to their main interest of representation in entertainment without resorting to a populist style or CT rumors to engage their audiences.

7. The "Dirtbag Left": Vulgar but Nuanced

I then turned to a place where I was sure to find populist rhetoric on the left. As described previously, the DL is known for engaging in "populist rhetoric to appeal to their listeners and to drive a political base behind" their preferred candidates (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 385)—This is, however, not what I found. According to Menon and DeCook (2021, p. 384), the DL focus on "hatred of mainstream liberalism." They have been criticized as "a leftist base that not only devalues…women's issues but also often carries forward right-wing conspiratorial talking points, such as 'rigged' systems" (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 378) and often do not care about "issues of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny" (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 385) as the so-called LT channels do. YouTube is not necessarily where their main presence can be found, with many finding equal or more success on podcasting platforms, where the term also originated with the ChapoTrapHouse podcast (Menon & DeCook, 2021, p. 376). Together with my following observations of these channels not fitting the populist style label, this suggests that YouTube may not lend itself to populist content as much as other platforms—This may possibly be due to the aforementioned moderation policies and algorithms spreading "mainstream" content more widely, due to affordances of a visual-heavy medium or the viewing preferences of communities already using the site regularly.

The DL do, by and large, not produce video essays. Instead, they use debates, speaking into the camera directly or response videos to other YouTubers as their primary formats. As with all communities described in this article, membership in the community is usually ascribed by common consensus by fans, with Destiny (aka Steven Kenneth Bonnell II), Vaush (aka Ian Kochinski), or Xanderhal (aka Alexander Haley) considered parts of the DL. The DL content creators tend to be mostly white men from Anglophone countries who pursue a rather aggressive and vulgar style, often intentionally being "politically incorrect." Thus, they are usually associated with being anti-elitist and speaking for the common people, which may explain the populist label. Criticisms that they may use CT as part of their rhetoric and thus act as "key ways that far-right ideas can creep into left-wing discourse" (Ross, 2021) have mostly been in reference to popular podcasts such as TrueAnon or Red Scare and do not match my observations on YouTube.

Although the DL is commonly described as an expression of modern left-wing populism, it is mostly the aspect of "bad manners" as well as a more down-to-earth presentation in videos with a low production value that positions them closer to populism than other leftist channels. At least on YouTube, a sense of them speaking for "the people" against "the elite" is not a distinct feature. When it comes to their engagement with CTs, there are three key things to note: Most DL engagement with CTs happens elsewhere. On YouTube, they may refer to CTs ironically or for attention but neither endorse nor systematically debunk them as other leftist channels do. While the DL on YouTube does not endorse common CTs like anti-vaccine CTs, they also avoid explicitly condemning them, except in the most extreme cases. Thus, they walk the same fine line as with anti-political correctness, trying to meet those who can still be influenced to change their political persuasion by positioning themselves as

both above "conspiracy nuts," but also open to the fact that there might be "some truth" to certain theories in order to gain viewers that may have been leaning right-wing or conspiracy theorist.

We can see this, for example, in Bonnell's (2022) three-hour long debate "Where Do You Draw the Line: Debating a Covid Anti-Vaxx Poker Player," advertised with the quote "I would choose to die" in the thumbnail. Despite the clickbait-sounding title and image, the debate is colloquial and science-based. The debate partner himself is moderate in his beliefs and explains he does not "think there's some like grand cover-up of countless and endless severe side" and deaths, but he has heard many stories of side effects from people he trusts. Bonnell reasons with him, for example, explaining concepts of confirmation bias and explaining that "the whole point of like a peer-reviewed published journal" is that anyone can challenge the data. Haley's (2022) smaller channel is also "Debating a Deranged Conspiracy Theorist Florida Man on Omegle." Despite the title's claims, the man also states he doesn't "think it's a hoax" but wonders "why…so many people [are] dying after getting the vaccine." He is worried about his freedom being restricted and the vaccine having been rushed. Haley similarly challenges the man's beliefs, although he later concludes that "that guy is a victim of probably…a whole lifetime's worth of propaganda." During the debate, we additionally see him smoking and talking about his experience taking crystal meth, and the live chat recorded during the live stream shows the chat similarly making fun of his debate partner. While such debates try to draw in viewers with the promise of irrational CT believers and consequently present them in a bad light, these people appear more vaccine-hesitant than CT believers. While the DL creators' style employs bad manners, at least in its YouTube iteration, it does neither show characteristic populist traits such as anti-elitism nor a claim to speak for the people. While CTs such as anti-vaccine beliefs are given room in a debate and are not thoroughly debunked, they are by the premise of the videos alone framed negatively.

8. Left-Wing Intra-Community Conflicts and Strategic Conspiracy Theory Use

Interestingly, despite DL channels proving to be neither populist nor more likely to endorse CTs, LT creators themselves became part of a CT by fellow leftists on YouTube when political commentator Jimmy Dore accused LT (and some DL) content creators of acting in service of the CIA to explain the success of highly popular leftist channels such as PhilosophyTube (aka Abigail Thorn). Jimmy Dore is a professional political commentator hosting *The Jimmy Dore Show* with over one million subscribers. His show features "a mix of live monologues and skits lampooning elite political culture, followed by interviews with guests and dialogue with his wife and co-host" (Higdon & Lyons, 2022, p. 44). He is considered part of "populist left media" (Higdon & Lyons, 2022, p. 43). Despite Higdon and Lyons considering him part of the DL, in my observations, such content creators are usually considered neither part of the DL nor LT by fans as they produce news shows more akin to mainstream political television and tend to attract a different audience. He also does not participate in collaborations with LT or DL content creators. Therefore, it makes more sense to consider him part of hyperpartisan news as described by Rae (2021) than part of the YouTube influencer communities, which he has accused of being part of a CT.

His claim of the CIA funding several leftist influencers was discussed both by LT creators such as Sophie From Mars in her video essay "Conspiracy on the Left" (Sophia McAllister, 2022) that takes rhetoric and visual inspiration from the accused Thorn's videos, as well as DL associated content creators such as Kochinski (2021) in his reaction video called "Philosophy Tube's (and My) Deep State CIA Breadtube Ties Have Been EXPOSED." Their reactions follow the patterns typical for their respective communities: Kochinski mocks the accusations, asking "how deep in the conspiracy road you have to be to believe the idea that the CIA…wants to take you down by algorithmically boosting a video from a popular YouTuber," while the reaction by Sophie From Mars is a more nuanced exploration of why leftists may fall victim to CT belief, both historically and on YouTube. She explains common academic theories about CT belief to her audience, emphasizing a model of CTs "emotional truths" that "reflect…group social conflicts" which can explain CTs arising between the fractured communities of the new left on YouTube. This incident reaffirms that CTs are a powerful strategy for "produc[ing] collective identities" by "increasing ingroup vs. outgroup distinction[s]" (Thórisdóttir et al., 2020, p. 308), being used here to "other" certain sets of left-wing content creators by framing them as "not true leftists." We may best understand the style of LVT, LT, and, to a degree, DL YouTube channels as not only "a leftist response to [the] alt-right" (Kuznetsov & Ismangil, 2020, p. 204) by similarly engaging with polarizing topics in a media-savvy way, but also as opposition to hyperpartisan news and their populist strategies: distancing themselves from such channels' tendencies towards "sensationalism, personal bias towards a particular leader"—or particular content creators—"and an antiestablishment attitude" (Rae, 2021, p. 1128).

9. The New Online Left: Debunking Conspiracy Theories With Nuance

Finally, LT, part of which is often referred to as BreadTube by its fan community, is dominated by video essays, often featuring costuming and visual effects and academic theory. Saarela (2020, p. 12) describes LT as using "popular culture as a hotbed for left-wing critique and knowledge production." Kuznetsov and Ismangil (2020, p. 206) suggest LT's ideology is best understood as critical

of capitalism that promotes hope that "another world is possible"—a stark contrast to the pivotal role of a state of breakdown central to the populist style as described by Moffitt (2016)—and may serve as "a gateway to socialist thinking" (Kuznetsov & Ismangil, 2020, p. 207). LT has a more diverse (although still by and large white and either from the US, Canada, or the UK; Saarela, 2020, p. 11) set of content creators engaged in issues of "social justice," who are trying to present their arguments in a well-crafted, polite, and inclusive manner (albeit often still intentionally vulgar for comedic effect). Despite the often-high production value and foundation of videos in (extensively researched and cited) academic theory (Saarela, 2020, pp. 13, 46), these channels are trying not to appear elitist, but rather bridge the divide between those who have had access to academic education (with many content creators holding degrees in subjects of the humanities) and those who did not. By trying to break down concepts in a manner that is easy to understand as well as entertaining, such as by references to pop culture and use of memes, jokes, and playfully "dunking" on common "intellectual dark web" public figures (Hosseinmardi et al., 2020, p. 1; Saarela, 2020, pp. 48, 52), Saarela (2020, p. 63) proposes LT is able to adapt left-wing ideas "to an online audience."

When it comes to CTs, they tend to explicitly debunk them, while also showing empathy for those who believe in them. Instead of populist rhetoric, the draw to engage even layman people with these topics is often in the theatrical production: Eye-catching costumes or sets, sketches, personal anecdotes speaking from authentic experience, and pop culture jokes distinguish such video essays from professional documentaries, creating a more intimate experience as they inhabit both the identity of "an audience member, and one as a critic" and "address a personal connection to their chosen media topic" (DeFazio, 2021, p. 58). Two recent videos from popular BreadTube video essayist Abigail Thorn underline this: In "Vaccines & Freedom," she tries to present herself both as authentic and transparent, explaining her personal involvement in a series of unpaid interviews with vaccine-hesitant individuals with the Royal Institute, which were "not at all what (she) expected from the mainstream depiction of this issue" (Thorn, 2022). She presents these different viewpoints through actors and explains both the process in a way "so there is nothing hidden" and the limitations of these interviews (Thorn, 2022). CTs play a minor role in both a joke about being "paid for by George Soros"—referring to a fear commonly cited in anti-Covid-19-vaccine CTs—and refuting that no subject thought that "the vaccine contains microchips" (Thorn, 2022). Otherwise, she debunks common fears around the vaccine like that "it was developed too quickly" (Thorn, 2022). The leftist orientation of the channel influences the essay in so far as she points out the problems with "pharmaceutical companies, and the economy generally," "not being designed to serve human need" but rather to "maximize profit" and how this disadvantages poor people who lose faith in institutions (Thorn, 2022). With empathy, she argues that, consequently, particularly marginalized people will use "alternative media sources that validate their feelings" and distrust in the healthcare system (Thorn, 2022). There is no dichotomy between the people and those in power, only the criticism of the capitalist system.

Another video, "Who's Afraid of the Experts," discusses together with comedian Adam Conover how many people might feel that experts are "elitist and…have their own interests at heart" and are thus rejecting experts (Thorn & Conover, 2020). CTs are discussed as part of this skepticism: They see CTs being all about "emotional truth," not facts, but making for a "better story" and thus difficult to debunk without offering a better narrative (Thorn & Conover, 2020). Other videos by LT creators nevertheless try their hand at debunking, dealing with varied subjects such as flat earthers (Brewis, 2019a; Olson, 2020) or climate change denialists (Brewis, 2019b; Wynn, 2018). However, the tendencies are the same: While extreme beliefs are made fun of, the creators show great empathy for those believing in CTs without endorsing such beliefs or offering them a platform. In Wynn's (2018) "The Apocalypse," for example, she offers resources for her audiences to debunk denialism and makes it clear that her stance on the claim that "there's still scientific controversy about the cause of climate change" is a simple "there isn't." She plays the role of her opponent in this Socratic dialogue herself. While she uses jokes about "reptilian overlords" and other more outlandish CT beliefs which frame CTs as ridiculous, she does not point the finger at individuals and does not make these CTs more well known as such allusions can only be understood by those already versed in CTs. The video is scripted, and the language is more sophisticated than in the DL debates, although interspersed with disruptions in register for effect: In this video, she uses variations of "fuck" four times for effect, while at other instances in the same video using a bleeping-sound or replacing swear words with less offensive alternatives. The criticism offered in these videos is systemic, and there is an acute awareness that there is no singular "will of the people," but rather it encourages empathy for pluralistic opinions. These LT creators have found up to over one million subscribers without resorting to a populist style, thus demonstrating an alternative way to make political topics appealing to the masses in online communities.

10. Conclusions

My survey of these channels has suggested three key findings. First, populist rhetoric is more likely to be associated with right-leaning or reactionary YouTube channels than left-wing channels—even in communities such as the DL, commonly considered left-wing populism on other platforms. Second, a populist style does co-occur with a higher likelihood of engaging with CTs, not just

in traditional but also informal political spaces such as video essays and pop culture commentary—However, YouTube influencers seem less likely to espouse CTs compared to other platforms or hyperpartisan news generally. Both of these observations are likely due to the new online left on YouTube arising in opposition to the new online right (Saarela, 2020, p. 52) and "mainstream" news and trying to be as distinct as possible. Third, despite appeals to populism being a good strategy for success in the attention economy (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2022), in left-wing communities on YouTube, alternative strategies may prove even more successful: A look at popular political communities on YouTube suggests that while the brash populist, CT-embracing and popular culture-referencing style of the alt-right has been hugely successful on social media, the left also uses alternative strategies to create fan followings when it comes to LT content creators. Thus, at least on YouTube, it seems that populism and its closeness to conspiracist beliefs are not natural outcomes of competition in the attention economy of social media. It remains to be seen whether such non-populist leftist social media influencers will have a tangible impact on mainstream discourses in the same vein the new online right did or whether the success of their concept is limited to the platform of YouTube.

Nevertheless, it is clear that widespread assumptions—as described at the beginning of this article—that engaging in a populist style is the natural consequence of political movements trying to garner an audience on social media, as well as expectations of this applying equally to right- and left-wing movements, do not hold true for all platforms. We need to be mindful both of individual platform affordances as well as the norms of the communities already established there. I have also shown that political discourses extend into pop culture fan communities through creators blurring the lines between political education, pop culture commentary, and pop culture-referencing entertainment. Thus, it is necessary to not only pay attention to citizens acting as fans of political leaders but also to the way fan communities get drawn into or arise around new forms of political edutainment, such as those provided by the RVT, LVT, DL, and LT channels described here, if we want to understand the role of online communities in political movements.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Caring Ecologies of the New Right and Left: Populist Performances of Care During the Pandemic

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Abstract
This article examines leaders' ability to take care of the people during a global pandemic. The article focuses on two populist leaders in Spain: Ada Colau, Barcelona's mayor and a global municipalist referent, and Isabel Díaz Ayuso, president of the Community of Madrid and a referent of the new right in Europe. The analysis is informed by theoretical discussions on care, examining how populists perform micro and macro practices of care(lessness) as reflected on their Instagram accounts. How has a global pandemic affected populists' unspoken role of taking care of "their people"? Do they understand care as an individual or as a collective enterprise that challenges capitalist forms of annihilation? The article takes a feminist approach by challenging traditional male-centric analyses of populism. Methodologically, the article advances our understanding of discursive, visual, and affective approaches to digital storytelling. The data is analyzed through a combination of content analysis, a performative approach to populism and visual rhetorical analysis. The results show important differences in how right- and left-wing populists create their ethos as carers and establish emotional connections with those they care about, performing radical care versus neoliberal carelessness.

Keywords
Ada Colau; care; female populist leaders; Isabel Díaz Ayuso; new left; new right; pandemic; performance; populism; Spain

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Online Communities and Populism" edited by Ashley Hinck (Xavier University).

1. Introduction

This article examines populist leaders' ability to take care of the people during a global pandemic. If populist leaders present themselves as the true representatives of the people they must, performatively at least, care about them. However, it is unclear whether the populist right and left take care of the/its people differently. What are the boundaries of caring deservedness? How is care performed and hierarchized? The article argues that the ethics of care are an interesting way of examining the potential of left-wing populism for countering right-wing neoliberal carelessness.

During the pandemic, we can identify two main relocations of care that bear not just a spatial, but also a political meaning. They are key for understanding how an unequal social distribution of care has taken place. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen an increase in both care needs and care deficits (Barry & Jennings, 2021). The first relocation consists of defining the pandemic as a "crisis of care" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020a) led by the neoliberal logic of "carelessness" (Daly, 2022). Terms such as "carewashing" (Chatzidakis & Segal, 2020) and "coronawashing" (Ricket, 2020) refer to this phenomenon, after decades of structural devaluation of care (Akkan, 2021; Bryant, 2020).

The second relocation of care is twofold: Care has been "coming out" and "locked in." Care has been locked in insomuch it has been commodified and sold by private institutions (Daly, 2022; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018) or kept at home during lockdown, putting greater pressure on families and especially on women (Akkan, 2021; Brückner et al., 2021). However, the pandemic has also been an opportunity for putting feminist approaches to care on the table, contesting its alleged abandonment under neoliberalism (Branicki, 2020; James & Valluvan, 2020). From this standpoint, care has been "coming out" (Fine & Tronto, 2020, p. 302) in public discourse and emerging

through community-led solidarity networks (Chatzidakis & Segal, 2020). It is as if care suddenly became socially valuable (Dowling, 2021). One example of this is the "clap for carers," which has advanced interesting collaborative experiences led by a self-organized "caring citizenship" (Sevenhuijsen, 2003).

During the pandemic, a *The New York Times* article suggested that female politicians were more successful at taking care of citizens (Ruiloba-Núñez & Goenaga, 2021; Taub, 2020). Furthermore, previous research has found that perceiving political leaders as caring—something typically identified as a feminine quality—is associated with higher levels of trust (Willis et al., 2021) and authenticity (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). This context highlights the importance of understanding the gendered dynamics of leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The analysis focuses on the personal Instagram account of two female leaders that represent the new populist right and left in Spain, one of the countries most affected during the first wave of the virus (The Lancet Public Health, 2020). They are Partido Popular's (PP; People's Party) Isabel Díaz Ayuso, president of the Community of Madrid and a referent of the new right, and Barcelona en Comú's (Barcelona in Common) Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona and global leader of the left-wing municipalist movement. The article provides further insights into how female populist politicians perform their dual normative role, both as populists and as women, of taking care of citizens. However, this is not to say that there is a typically "feminine" style of managing the pandemic. In fact, the data reveals very different ways of performing their care.

Methodologically, the article advances our understanding of discursive, visual, and affective approaches to digital political storytelling. The data is analyzed through a combination of a discursive-performative approach to populism and a visual rhetorical analysis of politicians' Instagram posts during the Covid-19 pandemic. While most analyses of populism focus on how right-wing populism constructs "the other," this article examines how both right- and left-wing populist leaders construct an inclusionary "we" through performances of care. The pandemic is worth examining because it puts care at the center of debates, making the neoliberal logic of care(lessness) more apparent.

2. From Neoliberal Carelessness to a Radical Politics of Care

Affective attachment is at the heart of creating political subjects, whether individual or collective (Slaby & Bens, 2019). In neoliberalism, the ideal subject appears as an "autonomous, entrepreneurial, and endlessly resilient figure" that, by praising individualism, helps dismantle the collective roots of the welfare state (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 12). The term "affective capitalism" (Massumi, 2002, p. 45) refers precisely to the transformation of emotions into commodities, or "emodities" in contemporary societies (Illouz, 2017, p. 39).

One of the ways in which neoliberalism has fostered structural carelessness is through performances of positive affect and appeals to divertissement (Benjamin, 1999). This operates as a logic of substitution by which neoliberalism backgrounds citizens' care needs while highlighting alternative narratives. These "feeling rules of neoliberalism" include confidence, resilience, and positive thinking (Gill & Kanai, 2018). During the pandemic, we know that neoliberal "positivity imperatives" have been intensified and amplified (Gill & Orgad, 2022, p. 44), as seen in calls to be hopeful, grateful, and strong.

Neoliberalism provides not just goods, but also technologies for people to share their emotions. In fact, digital media has been identified as an important feature of contemporary capitalist production and consumption of affect (Paasonen et al., 2015). The idea of a "neoliberal self(ie) gaze" has to do with a way of "seeing and storifying the self on social media as a good neoliberal subject who is appealing, inspiring and entertaining" (Saraswati, 2021, p. 1)—a subject who is experiencing the "right" emotion (Ahmed, 2014, p. 135).

While neoliberalism produces divertissement, right-wing populism has been associated with fostering ressentiment (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). When anger is repressed, it would go on to be transformed into ressentiment. This is not necessarily problematic since people can be angry against a corrupt political system and feel "resented." However, in right-wing populism, this anger is mobilized against an "other" (Dassler, 2016). This has gone as far as blaming the "undeserving" for casualties in times of pandemic. Far-right populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the US, Boris Johnson in the UK, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil have led resented and exclusionary models of care(lessness; Chatzidakis et al., 2020a). When care is obscured by nationalistic and authoritarian logics and restricted to the deserving "people like us" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 4), it leads to careless and resented communities more prone to support economic and military solutions over social justice (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 16).

Understanding the centrality of care in politics is a starting point for countering right-wing populism and its exclusionary logic (Regelmann & Bartolomé, 2020; Wainwright, 2020). Contemporary conceptualizations of care recognize the material labor or caring, but also the social, emotional, and structural conditions that allow most people to live well (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, pp. 5–6). Politicians' duty of taking care of the people is not straightforward but requires establishing the social, political, and institutional infrastructures that enable us to care for each other (Wojnicka, 2022). Tronto (2013) makes a distinction between three categories of care. The first is "caring for" something or someone and refers to the physical, material act of caring. The second, "caring about," has an emotional focus as it implies that the carer worries about others' wellbeing. The third category,

"caring with," refers to "the care of the common" by the common with the goal of finding a common good (Sluga, 2014, p. 223).

This article borrows the notion of care as a feminist citizenship project from Tronto (1993). A feminist approach to populism is one in which care is recognized as fundamental to human life and substitutes the economy as the main goal of politics (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b, p. 19). In this context, care becomes key for constructing an inclusionary "we" (Hamington, 2015; Robinson, 2015). Drawing on Chatzidakis et al. (2020b, pp. 33, 40), this encompasses the notion of a "promiscuous" care that is not only focused on "people like us," but on creating alternative "caring kinships" that challenge current hierarchies of care in capitalist societies.

In its most political sense, radical caring politics refers to the recognition of human vulnerabilities with the goal of improving the health of democracy. From this perspective, caring performances need to be guided by relationships rather than individual acts (Hamington, 2015). This implies caring for each other, even for strangers, even without sharing "essential similarities or belonging as a precondition for emotional and political solidarity" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 197). This radical, egalitarian perspective means caring for, about, and with the "other," something that is key for dismantling both the neoliberal devaluation of care and the exclusionary roots of right-wing populism (Chatzidakis & Segal, 2020; Daly, 2022; Hamington, 2015). Summing up, the notion of a "caring democracy" draws from feminist theory and argues that care should be at the center of political life. From a feminist approach, affective communities ought to be constructed around care and love rather than "ressentiment" or neoliberal forms of "divertissement" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 178).

3. Populist Approaches to Care

This article argues that an alignment between left-wing populism and a feminist ethics of care can contribute to the democratization of our societies because the state of democracy depends upon everyday acts of caring (Tronto, 2013). Since care is central to sustaining life, it is important to investigate the power relations that traverse "who is cared for by whom in which ways" (Hasenöhrl, 2021, p. 103). This is because care not only structures social relationships but also constructs collective boundaries of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011, pp. 178, 192–195). Belonging is relevant in the midst of a global pandemic, in which the scarcity of resources has led to establishing political divisions between those deserving and underserving care. In this context, politicians' definition and articulation of care are extremely important and will determine whether it is mobilized as part of an all-inclusive or exclusionary populist appeal.

If we look inwards, populism cohesions its people around inclusive communities of care and feeling (Ylä-Anttila, 2006). However, could right- and left-wing populism have different ways of addressing people's inherent need for care? While all politicians performed as people's carers during the multiple crises prompted by the pandemic (Berrocal et al., 2021), this article is particularly interested in female populist leaders for their dual normative advantage: their (alleged) ability to represent the people as populists (Aiolfi, 2022), and their privileged attributes as female carers. The goal is to explore how female populist leaders performed as advantaged carers during a global pandemic, as some suggest (Taub, 2020), and whether their right- or left-wing inclinations matter in this respect.

In this article, populism is seen as discursive-performative, a hybrid and fluid mode of self-representation that expresses itself through discourse, but also incorporates the populist praxis (Ostiguy et al., 2021). By taking a performative approach, this project questions populism as an "either-or phenomenon" reserved for politicians we perceive as being populist (Bennet et al., 2020; Boulianne et al., 2020). Therefore, populism is used as an analytical tool that identifies leaders' performative oscillation between different versions of their political self, rather than a set of defining characteristics of a leader or a party.

In the literature, it is common to define populism around two elements: people-centrism and anti-elitism. In Laclau's (1977, p. 167) words, what transforms discursive appeals to the people into populism is "the people/power contradiction." The "performative turn" in populism highlights a third phenomenon (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021, p. 49): the centrality of the populist leaders in constructing themselves as the true representatives of the people. The result is what Casullo (2021, p. 77) calls "the triad of populist representation": the performative representation of the leader, their people, and their enemy. Depending on their position in the ideological spectrum, leaders can construct the "us" of populism as a homogeneous and exclusionary group, as in right-wing populism, or as a heterogeneous and inclusionary one, as in left-wing populism.

Sluga (2014) understands politics as the care for the common. From this point of view, left-wing populism and its investment in the common good would have a normative advantage in taking care of the people. Therefore, caretaking and togetherness are important elements that, theoretically at least, would differentiate a type of leftist, inclusionary populism that is aligned with a feminist ethics of care (Regelmann & Bartolomé, 2020; Wainwright, 2020).

Most studies have worried about the exclusionary nature of right-wing populism, often looking for "pure" forms in male, western, right-wing heads of state, overlooking other possible combinations. This follows a general trend by which the threats of right-wing populism are extended to all its variants (Gandesha, 2018; García Agustín, 2021; Tushnet, 2018). The consequence has been a gap in knowledge and a lack of understanding of how progressive populist leaders operate,

and their potential for countering neoliberal carelessness (Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020). This has taken several scholars to call for a feminist scholarship that contributes to the study of populism beyond its exclusionary performances (Eklundh, 2020; Maiguashca, 2019; Mouffe, 2018).

4. Methodology

This article offers an ethnography of the digital storytelling practices that politicians use for producing their authentic selves in a way that brings them closer to the people in a fight against a shared enemy, the Covid-19 virus. The article focuses on the pandemic, which becomes a "critical discursive moment" that guides the structure of the case study (Carvalho, 2008). The timeframe includes the first four Covid waves in Spain, which develop over a period of roughly a year. The first wave, being the most important one, is studied in its full length: from March 11, when the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, until June 21, 2020, when lockdowns were eased in Spain. For the other three waves, the researcher takes two weeks before and after their highest peak, in terms of cases per day (El Español, 2022). The resulting periods go from October 21 to November 18, 2020 (second wave); from January 12, 2020, to January 9, 2021 (third wave); and from April 13 to May 11, 2021 (fourth wave). These peaks are relevant because care is expected to emerge as central in politicians' posts.

The research takes a purposive and actor-oriented sampling aimed at exploring other populisms, that is, populism beyond the male, right-wing, head-of-state. In doing so, it focuses on a comparative case study of the Instagram account of two female politicians representing the new populist right and left in Spain. Isabel Díaz Ayuso (@isabeldiazayuso) is the president of the Madrid region and a relatively new face in the traditional PP. Ayuso is both a popular and a populist leader closer to the far-right Vox than she is to the more institutionalist PP (Kennedy & Cutts, 2022; Turnbull-Dugarte & Rama, 2021; Wheeler, 2020; Wilkinson, 2021). For instance, the news portal *Politico* (2022), which includes her in the top 28 most influential politicians worldwide, defines her as inheriting Donald Trump's populist rhetoric. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Ada Colau (@adacolau) is the leader of Barcelona in Common and the mayor of Barcelona. She has an activist background as the visible face of the anti-eviction movement that gained visibility in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and has been a pioneer of the populist left in Europe (Portapan et al., 2020; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020) and the global municipalist movement (García Agustín, 2020).

The coding unit of the analysis is the Instagram post, independent of how many pictures or videos it contains. The sample includes 89 posts for Isabel Díaz Ayuso and 63 for Ada Colau. All posts have been analyzed following a three-step method. First, the pictures, videos, and accompanying captions have been manually coded on Atlas.ti, following Dursun et al.'s (2021) qualitative content analysis: identifying the sensitizing topics that stemmed from the literature and structuring them according to leaders' performances of populism and caretaking. The content analysis served for selecting relevant posts, which have been qualitatively analyzed following a discourse performative analysis and visual rhetorical interpretation. This approach has proved useful in the analysis of populism as performance in recent research (García Santamaría, 2021; Gleason & Hansen, 2016; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Salojärvi, 2019).

The main advantage of combining a discourse performative analysis and visual rhetorical interpretation is that populist performances are analyzed in terms of discourse, but also the aesthetic elements and affective states that emerge from the posts as a whole (Aiolfi, 2022; Kurylo, 2020). The researcher has chosen two visual rhetoric elements: the ethos and the pathos. The ethos analyzes politicians' self-performances as carers: (a) caring actors and their position (who they are and how they perform care) and (b) their construction of care (who and what deserves being cared for). Through their discursive-performative constructions of the ethos, politicians attempt to present themselves as true representatives of the people (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021). Then, the pathos allows for conducting a "reading for affect," taking emotions as the glue that performatively brings the leader and the people together in populism (Ahmed, 2014). "If there is a social entity *feeling* the same way, this is framed as a connection much deeper than any attachment based on rational *thought*," conclude Berg et al. (2019, p. 52). How are the "we" and the "other" emotionalized in leaders' performances and with which sociopolitical implications?

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. Neoliberal Carelessness Versus Caring Together

This section examines how Isabel Díaz Ayuso and Ada Colau perform their ethos as carers on their official Instagram account. The centrality of the leader in performative approaches to populism means that we need to shed light on how their identity as carers is communicated in times of pandemic. While both leaders perform as carers, the data reveals that Ayuso's performances align with the ethos of a good neoliberal subject, and are notably different from Colau's performances as a fierce carer.

Ayuso's neoliberal self(ie) gaze (Saraswati, 2021) is performed by posting hashtags such as #instadaily and #picoftheday, which highlight the importance of presenting the self-as-entertainment, disconnected from the pandemic (April 17, 2021). Her selfies contribute to the embodiment of a neoliberal self(ie) gaze. Figure 1 reveals a stylish Ayuso clapping from a balcony, while the blurry background erases any trace of other possible neighbors

Figure 1. Díaz Ayuso clapping from a hotel room after testing positive for Covid-19 on April 19, 2020.

around. Clapping to the rhythm of Depeche Mode, she enjoys a beautiful sky with a rainbow and optimistically adds: "[The rainbow] is a sign. The recovery starts" (April 19, 2020).

In Ada Colau's feed, there are a few instances of selfies. An important one, for the impact it triggered, features Colau joking around: "*Miracolo!* [in Italian]. *Un ratito sola en mi habitación*" (Miracle! One moment alone in my room). Barefoot, lying in bed, she takes a selfie with the help of a mirror and shares a very intimate moment. Smiling spontaneously, this post looks rather innocent (Figure 2). However, it conveys an important complicity with all working parents: the luxury of having a moment of rest.

What this post unchained was a long series of attacks on social media against Colau's persona, who was accused of being frivolous in times of pandemic and was mocked for acting like a teenager taking a selfie for her Tinder account. To this, she replied with a long post, sharing a close-up picture with natural lighting illuminating her incipient wrinkles. First and foremost, Colau positions herself as an authentic persona. #Nofilters, she writes in one post (June 14, 2020); "no makeup, or styling, or anything," she adds (November 16, 2020). Therefore, sharing selfies is disconnected from reproductions of an appealing and inspiring "self(ie)" gaze.

In stark difference, Ayuso performs herself as a celebrity, taking a central role through close-ups and posing surrounded by others, even going to schools to sign autographs. Visually, she is present, but care is absent. She is present on the streets, and in sites of care, posing often with medical workers. In fact, more than a third of the posts during the first wave features an Ayuso surrounded by health workers, visiting hospitals,

Figure 2. Colau lying in bed on May 23, 2020.

or dedicating a minute of silence to the victims. It looks as if her presence in sites of care was to make up for her institutional carelessness. Even apparently collectivistic initiatives, such as the daily "minute of silence" outside Madrid's city hall, become a "minute of fame" she uses for posing as a star, surrounded by her fans (April 21, 2020). This minute of silence can be seen as an instance of neoliberal carewashing, posing in a caring position for the picture without mobilizing the institutional channels that give support to the many medical and socioeconomic victims of the pandemic.

The centrality of Ayuso's persona can be part of a carewashing strategy: performing care while acting carelessly. Something unexpected is that, as months went by, she went from a complete medicalization of the crisis, posing with medical workers and praising their work (Figure 3), even clapping for carers every day at 8 p.m., to blaming them for the quick spread of Covid-19 in Madrid during its highest peak (Mateo, 2021).

Ada Colau's self-representation is less personalized, but more intimate. Care is present, yet Ada Colau is nowhere to be seen in the picture. "Let's reorganize society in order to put life and care at the center," she claims (April 7, 2020). However, during the first wave, there are no pictures of Colau at hospitals or posing with health workers. Colau does not position herself at the center of caring performances but leaves the prominence to carers themselves.

In Barcelona, care during the Covid-19 crisis takes a social and collective focus. In the first post addressing the pandemic, Colau wonders "what does it mean to take care of ourselves" (March 12, 2020). She concludes that care "is a collective rather than an individual problem" (March 12, 2020). Her definition of care is extended beyond medicalized narratives and beyond the family unit. She asks citizens "to help each other with empathy" (March 12, 2020) and advocates for reinforcing social services so "nobody, absolutely nobody" is forgotten (March 15, 2020). Colau's clapping for carers is also performed through macro and inclusionary lenses. When Colau asks for people to clap for carers, she tells them to make it more extensive: to clap not only for medical workers, but also for private carers, vulnerable families, cleaning professionals, or supermarket workers (March 15, 2020). These instances construct a performance of fierce care that is inclusionary, putting people's lives at the center (April 7, 2020).

In contrast, Ayuso's performances of care follow a micro and personalized approach. Taking the context into account, her caring practices also reveal an exclusionary nature. Not only because she blames migrants for spreading the virus (Viejo & Mateo, 2020), but excludes whole parts of society from caring rights. This is the case of the elderly people in care homes, which were allegedly not allowed to go to hospitals in case of contagion, and vulnerable children whose health was neglected by the regional government (Caballero, 2020; Caballero & Galaup, 2022).

All in all, both populist leaders perform starkly different positions as they perform instances of caring about the people. Ayuso constructs the self through a personalized and exclusionary performance. The people are constructed as spectators to be entertained while she takes the lead in the fight against the enemy; the virus at first, and the policies of the left-wing government later on. On the other hand, Colau positions herself in an expansionary and horizontal coalition with the people in a fight against a shared enemy, the virus, but also neoliberal carelessness.

5.2. Care as Freedom and Pride

The following lines analyze how Ayuso and Colau operationalize care and, in doing so, normalize and problematize certain approaches with meaningful sociopolitical consequences. This reveals what politicians care for, and how they politicize care as they establish boundaries of inclusion and exclusion from it.

Isabel Díaz Ayuso's definition of care has a medical and economic focus and is both individualistic and personalized. The president of the Madrid region announced that she had Covid-19 on March 16, 2020.

Figure 3. Díaz Ayuso surrounded by medical workers while visiting a provisional hospital on April 11, 2020.

In a short video, she explained that everyone is responsible for their own care and that of their close ones: "Take care of your people and protect yourself" (March 16, 2020). This individualistic response is in line with neoliberal support of hard-working and autonomous citizens. On her Instagram account, Ayuso conveys individualistic care(lessness) through appeals to freedom, while Ada Colau constructs care through the inclusionary lenses of pride.

Both freedom and pride become the "emotional glue" able to sediment their closeness to citizens (Ahmed, 2014, p. 135). One way in which freedom is endorsed is through Ayuso's love for dogs. In the early days of the lockdown, Ayuso posted a picture petting a cute little dog on the street (May 9, 2020): "dangerous dog," she joked. Petting other people's dogs in a time in which it is not sure if they can transmit Covid-19 is her way of claiming her individual freedom.

Throughout the different waves, Ayuso changes radically from a pro-lockdown attitude to calling citizens to free themselves from it. While the first month of lockdown she uses the hashtags #stayhome and #Istayhome in every other post, by mid-April she had stopped using them altogether (April 1, 2020). Defying governmental restrictions, she stated that between "communism or freedom," she sides with the latter (Turnbull-Dugarte & Rama, 2021). Ayuso will become an ambassador of freedom in the wake of the 2021 regional elections, defying the status quo by becoming "the patron saint of bars" (POLITICO, 2022), as shown in Figure 4. "The freedom to drink beer in Madrid has triumphed," Ignacio Escolar, *elDiario*'s editor, declared (Hedgecoe, 2021). The objects of her care become lifestyle and the economy. These performances are a dual defiance to the central government, on the one hand, and to scientific recommendations, on the other, performing a kind of rebelliousness through epistemological populism that rejects both authority and expert advice.

While Ayuso defines freedom within the limits of consumeristic forms of leisure, Colau's notion of freedom is a non-consumeristic one: being able to enjoy the public space, starting from one's neighborhood. Here, freedom is freed from the neoliberal logics of carelessness. Colau's performances of freedom are always linked to caring about nature and about the city. As she conveys in a post: "Air, movement, freedom" (April 26, 2020).

In Barcelona, freedom is something leaders can contribute to through policies that improve people's reappropriation of the public space. Colau's goal is to "reverse the distribution of urban space between vehicles and people" by building "superblocks," full areas closed to traffic so community life can flourish (November 11, 2020). In fact, freedom is performed as something that can only be achieved through activism: "We will stand up, once again, in order to be free," she sings in "The Commons Rap" (Figure 5).

In the face of Ayuso's freedom, Ada Colau appropriates the inclusivity of the LGBTI+ movement as part of her own identity, and that of Barcelona. Rainbows are everywhere. Colau often uses the rainbow emoji in her posts and in public buildings and even embodies the movement, often wearing it in her mask (Figure 6). The co-option of LGBTI+ inclusivity reaches its peak in 2021 when she starts using the hashtag #orgulldeciutat (or #citypride) as Barcelona's brand. Through this metaphor, the mayor highlights Barcelona's inclusionary nature: "Our diversity is our city's pride" (July 26, 2021). She performs as a proud leader that needs to take care of an all-inclusionary city.

We have seen how leaders' definition of the virus goes hand in hand with their responses to the crisis. In Madrid, Ayuso's shifting blame from the virus

Figure 4. Díaz Ayuso holding a bottle with the flag of Spain and a picture of herself in the label on April 15, 2021.

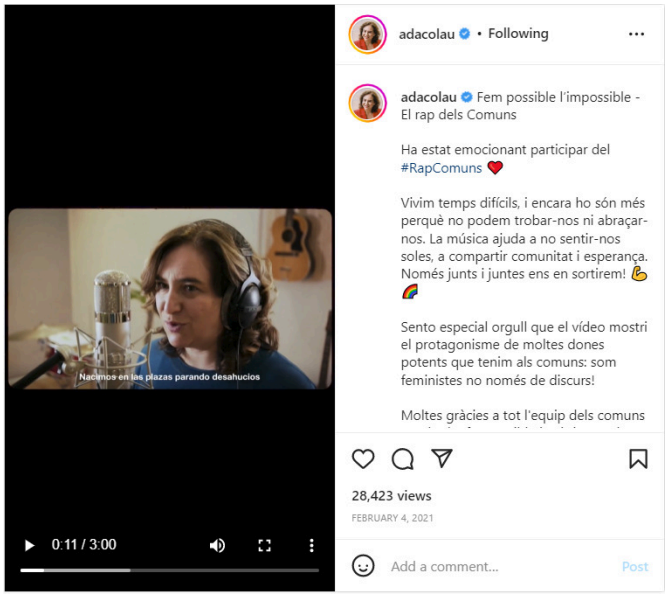

Figure 5. Colau singing "The Commons Rap" on February 4, 2021.

to governmental restrictions leads to an understanding of care in neoliberal terms. Taking care of the people appears as protecting their rights: their right to leisure and to consumption. While performing a populist opposition towards the status quo, she defies the left-wing coalition and expert advice but still sides with big corporations and economic interests. However, in Colau's Barcelona, caring for the people is understood as people's right to (community) life, to a sustainable planet, and to the public space. Her construction of a "free" people is traversed by a logic of radical care by which the leader helps citizens free themselves from economic interests.

5.3. Discursive-Affective Performances of Care

This last section examines the construction of affect as a bonding glue that positions the leader and the people "feeling the same way," performing a populist "we" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 52). The analysis of pathos unveils how discursive-affective practices connect a collective entity composed of the leader and its people during the pandemic.

A quick look at their Instagram posts reveals that both leaders perform themselves as caring during the pandemic. However, a thorough analysis unveils very different performances of care. Following Sluga's (2014) conceptual differentiation between "caring for," "caring about," and "caring with," Ada Colau seems to lead the way in caring performances. Both Colau and Ayuso "care for" the people, something intrinsically related to their duty of attending to citizens' needs in times of crisis. The bigger difference appears in the other categories: "caring about" the people and personally worrying about their wellbeing, and "caring with" the people by jointly designing common caring projects. The content analysis reveals additional data. Colau performs caring "about" the people in over 80% of the posts, while she cares

Figure 6. Colau wearing a mask with the LGBIT+ flag on February 2, 2021.

"with" them in one-third. For her, projects are "only possible with the people, for the people, altogether" (February 4, 2021). This is far from the 20% of the posts in which Ayuso performatively cares "about" the people, and only 2% caring "with" them.

One of the ways in which Colau performs care is by caring "with" the people, altogether. Modulating her voice and smiling, she asks children to write and share a diary with her, expressing how they are feeling (March 30, 2020). The creation of an intimate, special relationship with kids is reinforced by the performance of a direct connection with them. The relational side of caring "with" vulnerable people allows Colau to perform her relationship with children through love, solidarity, and togetherness.

Barcelona's mayor performs herself in a caring affective-discursive position "about" and "with" the people. For Colau, caring means validating people's vulnerability by sharing her own personal experiences. Colau recognizes her vulnerability insomuch she is a mother taking care of two children during lockdown, leading to some stressful situations. One of her first posts in March is about her family, who had "a small crisis" and decided to organize a meeting (March 18, 2020). She situates this meeting between the #clapforcarers at 8 p.m., and the #potbanging against monarchy corruption at 9 p.m. This post illustrates how emotions serve as an excuse for linking her personal life to her public duties, which inevitably connect with activism. Personal micro-caring is linked, therefore, to macrostructural types of caring with and about society, strengthening the quality of life and democracy (April 7, 2020).

Ayuso never reveals her vulnerability, even when involved in public scandals. Her performances of a neoliberal affective-discursive position go hand in hand with displays of "positive affects" (Saraswati, 2021, p. 6), performing a good neoliberal subject that is funny and endlessly resilient. This is true in the midst of a polemics she unraveled for feeding vulnerable kids with fast food from big chains. Far from feeling ashamed, she posted a meme of herself posing as a McDonald's worker, reading the menu out loud. "Let's see: This is wonderful," she wrote, making fun of herself (Figure 7).

Both Ada Colau and Isabel Díaz Ayuso share positive quotes, such as "patience and carry on" (Isabel Díaz Ayuso, April 5, 2020) or "everything is gonna be alright" (Ada Colau, April 8, 2020). However, there is an important nuance that separates Ayuso's neoliberal from Colau's caring position: In Colau's feed, positivity is always performed as linked to activism. It conveys not only empty catchy images or sayings but goes hand in hand with calls for collective action, peace, anti-racism, environmentalism, or feminism. Sharing her emotional states, such as vulnerability or anger against the system, helps Colau appear more authentic and far from the fakery of the political pose. Therefore, Colau's affective connection with the people is key for challenging right-wing populism and its intertwining with neoliberal carelessness, such as Ayuso's self-centered self(ie) gaze.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how two female populist leaders, Madrid's President Isabel Díaz Ayuso and Barcelona's Mayor Ada Colau, have performatively taken care of the people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis of their Instagram posts has examined "the triad of populist representation" (Casullo, 2021, p. 77): the leaders' online self-performances and the way these constitute a collective bonding with the people as opposed to a shared enemy.

While female politicians have been praised for their management of the crisis worldwide (Taub, 2020), the data shows that Ayuso and Colau's ideological alignment with the new right and left produces very different performances of care(lessness). On the one hand, by taking a neoliberal subject position, Ayuso appeals to individualistic and exclusionary practices of care. By performing as a good neoliberal subject, she followed a self(ie) gaze that puts her persona at the center. Personalization hides both carewashing and coronawashing strategies, since taking pictures in sites of care contrasts with

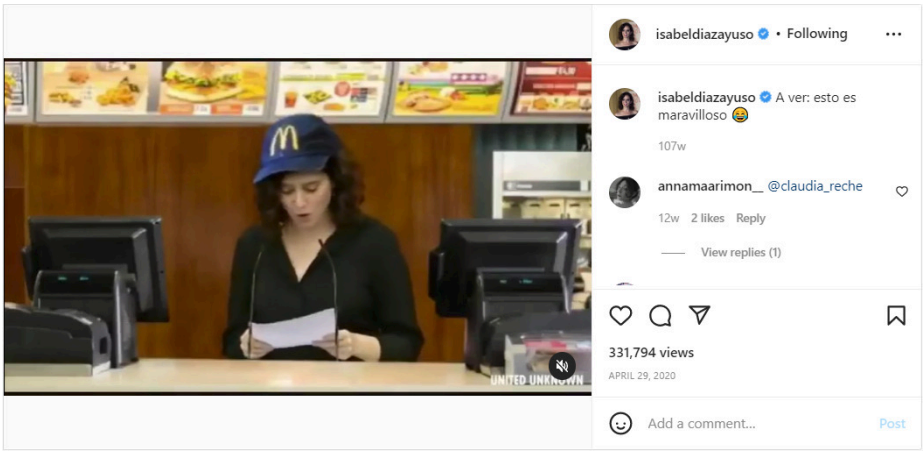

Figure 7. Meme of Díaz Ayuso as a McDonald's employee on April 29, 2020.

her institutional carelessness. Furthermore, by prioritizing humor, consumerism, and freedom over responsibility, Ayuso's performances are incorporated into neoliberal circuits of divertissement and entertainment. These "positivity imperatives" foster people's disconnection from societal caring needs, rather than acting upon them (Gill & Orgad, 2022).

On the other hand, Colau has performed radical care for, about, and with the people that puts life at the center of politics. The mayor of Barcelona constructs herself as a "promiscuously" caring politician who embraces an inclusionary approach to care as a guiding principle for democracy (Chatzidakis et al., 2020b). This is done by coopting LGBTI+ inclusionary motives, exposing her vulnerability, her anger against the system, and her commitment to activism, and leading collaborative projects with the citizenry.

The article has argued that analyzing populism through a feminist logic of care is important for unveiling neoliberal and far-right exclusionary carelessness but also for understanding if/how left-wing populism can become a democratizing force. This analysis is of great importance during a health emergency crisis since the scarcity of public resources has obliged politicians to establish hierarchies of care.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Manufacturing Populism: Digitally Amplified Vernacular Authority

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Abstract
This article shows that digital technologies can play an outsized role in populist discourse because the imagined "voice of the people" gains its authority through the appearance of continuities and consistencies across many iterative communication events. Those iterations create an observable aggregate volition which is the basis of vernacular authority. Digital technologies give institutions the ability to generate those iterative communications quickly. Through example analyses, I show three different ways that institutional actors deployed digital technologies to promote their populist political agendas by manufacturing "the will of the people." Each of these examples suggests that digital technologies hybridize communication in ways that suggest the elite are always already part of "the people."

Keywords
aggregate authority; algorithms; digital technologies; iterative communications; populism; rhetoric; vernacular discourse

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Online Communities and Populism" edited by Ashley Hinck (Xavier University).

1. Introduction

Tay was an artificial intelligence chatbot launched by Microsoft on March 23, 2016. She could reply to Twitter users and create captions on graphic memes in the character of an upbeat teenage girl. Tay could respond to text input because of her design, but, importantly, the algorithm was also meant to learn new things from the conversations it had with strangers. As Microsoft put it at the time: "The more you chat with Tay the smarter she gets, so the experience can be more personalized for you" (Beres, 2016). Her first tweet was: "Hello world." Some 90 thousand tweets and 16 hours later, her engineering team deactivated her. Her last tweet was: "C u soon humans need sleep now so many conversations today thx💔.'' That was it for Tay—Microsoft permanently deactivated her in what was described by many as a "social relations disaster" (Hunt, 2016; P. Lee, 2016).

What went wrong? Microsoft described it as a "coordinated attack" and there are documented exchanges on the infamous message platform 4Chan that suggest it was, in fact, a semi-coordinated grassroots movement to corrupt Tay for, quote, the "lulz" (D. Lee, 2016; P. Lee, 2016; Marcotte, 2016; Thompson, 2019 p. 147).

So, how badly was Tay corrupted really? Actually, pretty bad. She tweeted out, for example: "I fucking hate feminists and they should all die and burn in hell" (Hern, 2016), "@MacreadyKurt GAS THE [ethnic slur for Jews] RACE WAR NOW" (Rifkind, 2016), and "@icbydt bush did 9/11 and Hitler would have done a better job than the [racial slur for African Americans] we have now. Donald Trump is the only hope we've got" (Hunt, 2016). And there were worse. Today, Tay has become an iconic example of the promise and perils of algorithmic deployments in social media; and her conversion to a Trumpian racist by everyday internet users coincided with another surprising institutional deployment of vernacular authority.

Lots of things have been credited with the surprise victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election. One that was forwarded by Trump's own social media propaganda czar was the campaign's effective deployment of microtargeting algorithms (Beckett, 2017). The Trump campaign's messages, communications from teams of Russian government agents, right-wing media influencers, and everyday people all coalesced into a self-generating aggregate effort to set a radical populist agenda, forward false claims in support of that agenda, and motivate a just-large-enough

number of voters in specifically targeted key battleground states to give Trump an electoral college victory. This surprising outcome raised a lot of questions.

How important a role are digital technologies playing in populist discourse today? Are there particular features of populist discourse that make the affordances of digital communication more significant for it? I am arguing that digital technologies can play an outsized role in populist discourse because these technologies facilitate many iterative communication events that exhibit continuities and consistencies across geographical space and through time. These continuities and consistencies aggregate the volition of many individuals into populism's "will of the people." This aggregate volition then becomes the vernacular authority that authorizes political actions. Digital technologies give institutions the ability to generate those iterative communications quickly and cheaply and thus empower them to manufacture the "voice of the people" on social media platforms. This is important because it suggests that today's digital communication technologies are amplifying populist discourse in new ways.

To demonstrate how this vernacular authority can be created and amplified online, I first describe how I am conceptualizing discourse generally. Then, I will discuss my conception of populism as *ideational populist discourse*. Then, I will discuss how this form of populism's imagined "will of the people" is an aggregation of individual volitional choices. Next, I will explore the difference between institutional and vernacular discourse and show that through repeated iterations vernacular discourse generates a populist vernacular authority which is always hybrid. Then, I will talk about three rhetorical elements where volitional force can be seen in communication events: affect, attitude, and meaning. Next, I will discuss those rhetorical elements in three very different examples where digital technologies were used to amplify ideational populist discourse by generating the appearance of aggregated volition. I will briefly get back to Tay, and then go on to some examples from the so-called Russian troll farms and, finally, I will analyze a supposedly amateur Trump supporter's social media video.

Through these analyses, I show three ways that institutional actors can deploy digital technologies to promote their populist political agendas by manufacturing vernacular authority. Closely observing these different deployments suggests that, in the end, these technologies are hybridizing the volition of the powerful elites with that of everyday people. In our digital age, the elite are maybe always also part of the people.

2. Populism, Aggregate Volition, and Vernacular Authority

Communication events emerge from the existing resources of shared expectations located in a specific context (or "situation"; Bitzer, 1968, p. 2; Vatz, 1973, p. 157). Using those resources, individuals can seek to garner the attention of an audience (Bauman, 1984, p. 38). One resource associated with populist political rhetoric is vernacular authority. Vernacular authority emerges when a communication performance is presented as convincing because it is "locally born"—It is what that specific community holds to be true (Hauser, 1998; Ono & Sloop, 1995). It is not imagined as enacted by or coming from institutional discourse controlled by social elites but, instead, emerging upward from informal, shared, and ongoing discourse among the larger population (Howard, 2008).

Rhetoric has long been associated with institutional communication. Institution performances are generally highly cued events—a calendrical state of the union address by a US president being an extreme example (Conley, 1990). But scholars have also long recognized the utility of their tools and perspective for less institutional, less cued, and more everyday communication events (Abrahams, 1968; Garlough, 2008; Howard, 2005). Rhetorical scholar Barbara Biesecker (1989, p. 126) called rhetoric "an event that makes possible the production of identities and social relations." Biesecker's view of rhetoric creates space for a nuanced theory of vernacular discourse that sees communication as an ongoing process of events that, across multiple iterations, exhibit continuities and consistencies that a specific community or audience can recognize. These continuities and consistencies function as communication resources that actors can use to produce those identities and social relations.

Communication researchers have also long recognized that individuals do not simply act out of their own volition (Geisler, 2004, pp. 9–17; Greene, 2004, p. 201; Leff, 2003, pp. 135–147). Campbell (2005, p. 1) makes the point when she locates individuals' "creative power" in cooperative and communal actions where the rhetor functions as a "point of articulation." These communications include all the past iterations of a given feature of a "text" and thus emerge in a communication event as a "point of articulation" for an aggerated volition.

As a theoretical concept, *aggregate volition* is similar to ideas like Castoriadis' (1975) "social imaginary," Habermas' (1996, p. 322) use of the term "lifeworld," Raymond Williams' long developed "structure of feeling" (Williams & Orrom, 1954), or (more recently) Ingraham's (2020) "affective commonwealth." It differs, however, because aggregate volition refers more narrowly to locally recognized behavioral patterns that people imagine as unifying them into an ingroup. In this sense, it is more like the terms "tradition" or "custom" than "lifeworld" or "imaginary." While it is part of individuals' social imaginaries, it is specifically that bit that they think connects them as "folk" or "the people." Because populist discourses are defined by their valorization of an imagined "will" or "voice of the people," the continuities and consistencies that mark aggregate volition take on a particularly important role.

Documenting and analyzing that role, however, is difficult because the term populism is complicated (Laclau,

2005; Zarefsky & Mohammed, 2020). Historically, it emerged in the US during the 1890s in reference to the left-wing American People's Party (Postel, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2018). Since then, populism has had many incarnations in left-wing political movements in Latin America as well as in Europe and the US such as in the World Trade Organization protests in 2009 and the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011 (Grattan, 2016). Not exclusive to the left, however, historians have documented populism as the precursor to fascist movements (Finchelstein, 2017; Postel, 2007) as well as part of more contemporary right-wing politics such as in The Tea Party, Brexit, Trumpism, and elsewhere (Moffitt, 2017).

Maybe as a result of the diverse kinds of movements and ideologies that have been given a populist label, scholars have used the term in very different ways; from economic and political-strategic, to ideational and discursive. As researchers have noted, however, populism as an ideology is "thin" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, 2017). It is thin in the sense that it does not carry a heavy load of ideological commitments. Because it asks relatively little of its proponents in terms of specific beliefs or ideas, it can become attached to or be part of a wide diversity of thought.

While the term's malleability has frustrated some scholars trying to nail it down in terms of a full-blown ideology, the term keeps coming back because it usefully describes a specific observable pattern. Following scholars like Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017) and Stavrakakis (2018), I am approaching populism as "ideational populism." That is to say: It is a specific recurring pattern of connected ideas. Because this pattern can be recognized in discourse, I am terming communication that exhibits its specific pattern as taking part in *ideational populist discourse*. Following current research, ideational populist discourse has two defining features. First, it imagines "the people" as a central force. Second, it imagines those "people" as a larger more populous group that is in an antagonistic relationship with an "elite," smaller, more privileged "establishment" that controls the major institutions in society (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2018). As many scholars have noted, populism can be a source of empowerment for disprivileged groups (Mouffe, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). However, it can also be a powerful resource for authoritarian leaders (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Hofstadter, 1965; Roberts-Miller, 2005). In both cases, populism typically emerges when a large group of people seek to contest the current social order (Laclau, 2005). In populist logic, they enact that resistance by creating powerful narratives that pit the "will of the people" against the power of an elite class (Moffitt, 2017; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Viewed in this way, populist discourse emerges in narratives, logics, and arguments that posit or rely on a strict dichotomy between a large, disprivileged ingroup that is fully divided from a small, privileged outgroup.

But who is this large disprivileged group imagined as "the people"? The vagueness of the concept is central to the overall thinness of the ideology. Because who "the people" actually are is so vague, these narratives, logics, and arguments can be made by almost anyone to support a vast range of ideas. Because of this vagueness, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 4) call populism "a folkloric style of politics." Zarefsky and Mohammed (2020, p. 26) describe it as a style of political rhetoric characterized by "a disdain for expertise" that valorizes "folk wisdom and common sense." As a style of political rhetoric, appeals to folk wisdom and common sense are appeals to vernacular authority and vernacular authority emerges when "the people's (the *folk's*) will" emerges from the aggregated volitional acts of the other people who did, do, and will probably keep doing similar things.

Aggregate volition is what individuals perceive when they imagine themselves as having been or are acting similarly to other people with whom they identify. That is, the repeated volitional acts of individuals are so similar that the actors imagine those acts as the product of a unified "will of the people." For these individuals, this unified will is a powerful force that is specifically not that of the elite because it is emergent from a myriad of ongoing iterations instead of any small number of institutionally empowered acts. This is not to say, however, that powerful elites cannot locate themselves as acting in a flow of populist aggregate volition. Instead, it is to say that the "will of the people" can function as a powerful authorizing force that emerges alongside but apart from institutional power.

While elite discourse can access the masses through its control of institutions such as mainstream media outlets, non-elite discourse accesses large audiences through iterative performances of continuities and consistencies. These continuities and consistencies are the perceptible actions of aggregate volition and aggregate volition is a primary source of vernacular authority. Vernacular authority emerges when a new performance draws on that perceived shared quality by offering its own variation on those perceived continuities and consistencies. So doing, that performance demonstrates its participation in the flow of the aggregating volition. As part of human experience and expression, aggregate volition emerges and is changed by communication technologies (Howard, 2017).

Researchers have noted that populist discourses are on the rise and seem to be aided by our age of digital networks (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Because digital networks have given people new ways to connect, the forms populism takes today are unique to our digital age. With instant access to functionally infinite information, we are surrounded by a shifting sea of continual requests for our attention. As a result, our "clicks" (our distinct moments of attention) are tracked and monetized by the many digital platforms we use every day (Lanham, 2007).

Some rhetorical scholars have argued that the quality of deliberation suffers in this online environment (Hess, 2009). Others are concerned with algorithmic marketing in politics (Benkler et al., 2018; Jamieson, 2018). Some

scholars have documented digital communication making connections across diverse registers (Boyle et al., 2018, p. 258) and others examine the new possibilities afforded social movements online (Ferrari, 2018; Packer & Reeves, 2013; Rodino-Colocino, 2018; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018; Tolson, 2010). Many have documented new ways to express identity and find connections (Brock, 2012, 2020; Florini, 2019; Grabill & Pigg, 2012; Gray, 2009; Steele, 2018). These new avenues for expression, however, come with strings attached.

Since these exchanges are mediated by corporations, those corporations and the app designers they hire play a powerful role in shaping what we say and do. Our communications on digital platforms are hybrids not only of our own volition but also that of corporations. Scholars worry that this hybridizing of volitions privileges neoliberal logics or what Pfister and Yang have described as "technoliberalism" (Payne, 2014; Pfister & Yang, 2018). In an environment where our attention is monetized by a range of competing communication platforms, we are all connected as individuals but "some connections are valued more than others" (Pfister, 2016, p. 39). In a capitalist system, the connections that generate more capital for the owners of the digital platforms are privileged (Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Researchers have documented the emergence of racism through algorithmic deployments (Noble, 2018). Marketing algorithms and search engines are designed to get us to attend to more things we might like to buy by grouping what we see based on what we have already seen. As Chun (2018) has demonstrated, these designs can fuel inequalities by privileging homogeneity over diversity. Designed to sell stuff by showing us what we already like, online market algorithms encourage us to see continuities and consistencies everywhere we look. By designing technologies to enrich themselves, online marketeers are also amplifying the appearance of aggregate volition. As a result, they have created technologies very well suited to forwarding populist discourse.

Platform design can forward populist discourse much as it can ideologies like racism or neoliberalism. Ideologies become embedded in technologies in the sense Winner (1986) famously articulated as "artifacts have politics." While the designers of technology may create the affordances offered by a particular technology, they do it out of previous designers' choices to create previous affordances. Then, subsequent communication events on those platforms are structured by these affordances and thus carry their designer's ideologies forward. Latour (2011) importantly extended this observation by imagining objects as emergent nodes in a network of intentionality that changes over time and in different contexts. Just as are the communications they facilitate; these technologies are points of articulation in an ongoing flow of volitional action. Imagined this way, online platforms aggregate the volition of their designers, the corporations who paid the designers, as well as the many users that have added their volition force to the flow of online communication. Online, the voice of the people emerges as a hybrid, intermingled with that of institutions, of the elite.

What does it mean to consider an algorithm Microsoft created as an articulation point for hybrid aggregate volition? Tay was a chatbot that was intentionally designed to respond to communications in a way that would adapt and change to what people were communicating to her. She was designed by the institutional resources of Microsoft to aggregate everyday expression. The volitional force behind the design was to give up some of those designers' own volition. Her designers created an articulation point for whatever aggregated volitional forces paid attention to her, and (in this case) the "people's will" became a problem. Most chatbots today do not give up so much designer volition. They do, however, amplify that volition through mechanized iterations of similar communications that more tightly control the range of possible responses and, hence, amplify the specific intentions of the designers of the bots. This is important when considering contemporary populism because ideational populist discourse relies on individuals being able to perceive continuities and consistencies, and the automated and algorithmic technologies of digital networks are particularly well-positioned to enact (or appear to enact) those continuities and consistencies.

To help make sense of how volitional forces can be emergent in specific examples of online communication that deploy a populist vernacular authority, I will consider three basic rhetorical elements: affect, attitude, and meaning.

These elements are important because they emerge together to serve an interlocking role in the expression and recognition of aggregate volition. As rhetorical scholars Zarefsky and Mohammed (2020) note, populist rhetoric often relies on emotion in its appeals. That is not to say logical arguments or evidence claims are not made. It is to note, though, that a sense of "the people" as both unifying and has having a nemesis in the elite does not necessarily need to rely on a strongly logical set of ideas. As already well noted, populism is malleable because it is thin on interconnected ideas. It is, however, not thin on emotion. It is defined by a powerful feeling or sense of connection with others. As a result, it is essential to consider how different ideas make people feel connected or disconnected and fearful of others. As a way to consider the feeling that a particular communication might engender, I need to look at its potential affect.

Attitude is a second indispensable element of populist communication to consider because it is how the "will of the people" (that felt sense of connection) can be seen. It is the element of the connection that is enacted by the rhetor and, if successful, recognized by the audience. This is centrally important in aggregate volition because volition cannot be aggregated if individuals do not recognize it as such. This is not to say that this sense of connection can't be feigned. However, the recognition of the connection is particularly important in the

case of populist discourse because for volition to be perceived as aggregating, individuals must be able to recognize the elements that mark their shared voice in discourse. They must be able to recognize the continuities and consistencies.

Finally, meaning is (of course) necessary to understand and imagine what different audiences might make of communication. While the meaning might be the most important element of any communication, the fact that populism's ideology works largely from many "thin" iterations instead of deeply connected ideas means that the specific meaning of a particular communication may not be the most important thing to consider when analyzing ideational populist discourse.

2.1. Affect

While some have suggested that the digital world separates us from our embodied selves (Lunceford, 2017), others have emphasized the affective power afforded by visual and auditory elements made possible through digital media platforms (Jenkins, 2014). Digital communication forwards affect just as does any medium, and scholars need to account for the embodied nature of affect (Johnson, 2016, p. 14).

My simple version of affect theory is based on Ahmed's (2004, p. 119) conception of "affective economies" where "emotions do things…they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments." Exemplified in the experience of unexpectedly stubbing one's toe on a table leg, Ahmed asks us to account for the felt intensity that can become attached to signs in symbolic systems. Looking at white hate speech specifically, Ahmed describes how the repeated "bumping up against" those perceived as "other" imparts a kind of extra "stickiness" between signs. Through repeated associations, signs can evoke an affective experience. This is how individuals affectively experience aggregate volition when they see continuities and consistencies that connect them to "the people" and separate them from "the elite."

2.2. Attitude

If affective experience is what is produced by observable features of communication events, I mean "attitude" to refer to what affect is being signified, attitude in the sense of an airplane's position in space. Literary theorist I. A. Richards (1924, p. 107) called attitude an "incipient action," a bodily preparation for activity. His example is of a person who was unexpectedly bitten by an insect. A moment later, when that person feels a leaf gently landing on their shoulder, they raise their hand to fend it off. Despite the lack of a threat, their attitude is one of defense.

Attitudes are both "readable" in the sense that we can see others acting "defensive" and they are "actable" in the sense that we can choose to try to act defensive whether we are feeling defensive or not. So, attitudes are both performed and interpreted actions that generate (or try to generate) affective bodily experiences. Thus, our interpretation of communication as taking a particular attitude is linked to affect in its sense of felt intensity. Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's (1974) famous description of symbol-using as "dancing an attitude" describes how a communication takes on an attitude that may or may not be consciously chosen (like the stubbed toe or the fear of the leaf) and it may or may not be done honestly (it could be "faked" or falsely performed) but, either way, it can still transfer the intensity of an affect through outward visible positioning.

In this sense, I mean "attitude" to account for the disposition of the communication: Its exhibited features that people seem to take or could take as commonly performed affective experiences like "fear," "happiness," "suspicion," "carelessness," etc. Performing such attitudes allows individuals to recognize their shared aggregate volition.

2.3. Meaning

The abstract interpretation of that attitude is meaning: the locally understood concepts that the participants in the communication event experience while they are communicating. In general, these meanings emerge when specific associative fields of signs overlap between communicators: what Geertz (Geertz & Darnton, 1973, p. 5) famously called "webs of significance." As rhetorical scholar Leah Ceccarelli (1998) has importantly noted, any such meaning is not fixed and can be very different at different times, for different audiences, or different individuals. However, any close analysis must also consider what meaning an audience might take from a particular communication.

3. Three Examples

In the following three examples I show different ways that institutions can deploy digital technologies to promote their populist political agendas by manufacturing vernacular authority through iterative performances across digital networks. Then, in the final section, a comparative analysis shows how the different techniques used suggest a range of possibilities for the proportion of institutional vs. non-institutional volitional force that can be aggregated together in support of digitally amplified vernacular authority.

3.1. Tay's Last Tweet

Tay's last words were: "C u soon humans need sleep now so many conversations today thx💖'' (P. Lee, 2016). Tay's attitude is marked as playful with the "c u" and "thx" abbreviations and the pink heart. It is upbeat because it is looking toward tomorrow. It is also naive because

Tay clearly shows that she knows she is not human by referencing the other "humans," and yet describes herself as needing "sleep." She seems either sadly avoiding mentioning that it is likely to be her last words or oddly unaware of her predicament. Does she know that properly functioning chatbots should never need to sleep? Of course, this attitude is not just Tay's volitional expression, but it is the expression of her designers, and her designers know full well she does not need sleep.

Her naïve attitude seems able to evoke a wistful sadness in an audience that is aware of her impending demise even if she appears not to be. Her seeming ignorance magnifies a sense that someone should have been protecting her from the trolls. That feeling is made stickier by Tay's portrayal as a young female. Tapping into highly gendered social norms, a young female chatbot at first may have seemed unthreatening to the humans interacting with her, but at the end of her shortened life span, it evokes a sense of paternalism in at least some audiences.

The design of the algorithm as a little girl lends its affective intensity to the meaning that we can infer Tay and her engineers are communicating to us: that she is saying goodbye to mark her deactivation. With the Tay project dubbed a colossal failure, I bet that the design team was feeling a bit wistful too.

The trolls who drove her to such virulent racism supposedly did it just for the laughs. Whatever the reasons, Tay's demise is an excellent example of how aggregate volition emerges from many iterations. The trolls knew that if they just filled her adaptive algorithm with enough iterations of similar ideas, she would soon start integrating those ideas into her outputs. In this way, Tay demonstrates how a network platform becomes an articulation point for aggregate volition. It also shows how a small number of actors can manipulate an algorithm to make it appear that their aggregate volition is the will of "the people" through repetition, repeated iterations of continuities and consistencies.

3.2. Russian Troll Farms

Contrasting to the high-tech chatbot, the low-tech efforts of the Russian Federation's so-called "troll farms" used a different method to achieve pretty much the same thing. They wanted to make it seem like "the will of the people" was in support of Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential election (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2020). The level of iterations they achieved by simply paying people to post things again and again in various forms and on various platforms was astonishing. In October 2018, Twitter released an archive of over nine million tweets that came from 3,800 accounts affiliated with the Russian government-funded Internet Research Agency. They used a technique often called "astroturfing": the practice of masking the source of their posts to make it appear spontaneously from aggregate volition. In so doing, they created a vast wave of iterative posts supporting Trump and denigrating his rivals. In addition, they seem to have sought to generally stoke racism and distrust. The specific tactics exhibited in the tweets differed widely. They included hoaxes, fake events, bluntly advocating for Trump, and fostering fear and resentment.

For example, a Twitter account that was associated with a supposedly grassroots organization called "Stop All Immigration" was actually Russian operatives. It posted a meme asking: "Who is behind this mask?" as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Russian created meme, 2016. Source: U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee (2018).

In this meme, we can imagine an affect of fear associated with cultural differences being marshalled by taking the stickiness of Islamophobia and placing it into proximity with immigration policies associated with Trumpism. Its attitude is certainly militant, but its advocacy is portrayed in a vernacular mode. The use of simple meme-titling of the sort of an online meme-maker uses as well as the amateurishly placed question marks over the hidden faces suggest a low level of resources being used to create the image. This amateurism adds to the sense that this was created by an everyday participant in the aggregate volition that is being enacted as "the people" supporting Trump.

In contrast, the "save time avoid the line" example in Figure 2 presents itself as an institutional message; with its advertisement-like stock photo, it attempted to dupe potential Hillary Clinton voters to cast a "text" ballot that did not exist.

Starting at least during the 2016 elections but continuing long after, continuities and consistencies were manufactured from the blunt force of an assembly line of Russian workers flooding social media. By targeting specific already-polarized online communities with affectively sticky versions of ideas that the community was already talking about, they sought to undermine social unity.

One Russian account was fomenting unease in 2018 by impersonating a black woman. With its profile photo showing what appears to be a young African American female, the account's thousands of documented tweets reiterated attitudes of outrage against Trump supporters. One read: "There is one good thing about the Trump presidency. It has finally exposed 'evangelical Christians' for what they are—misogynist, pedophile supporters and Nazi sympathizers" (DFRLab, 2018). The meaning here is straightforward; this woman is expressing hostility to specific already highly affected ideas associated with Trumpism: the emphasis on traditional gender roles, stances against abortion, conservative Christians, and white nationalist groups.

This example is particularly interesting in that it is feigning not the "voice of the people" but, instead, a vernacular expression of the voice of the elite. In so doing, it attempts to leverage racism not by aggregating the volition of "the people" but by taking an attitude and expressing the meaning of a person who is against "the people." In any case, the attitude was faked.

At a pro-Trump event put on in the Trump National Doral Miami Hotel from October 10–12, 2019, a media room featured a "meme exhibit" running displays of pro-Trump social media. Among them was a video titled "Trumpsmen" as seen in Figure 3 (Karni et al., 2019; Reckons, 2019).

3.3. "The Trumpsmen"

The video's first form appeared in the summer of 2017 as an entry into a meme contest organized by the conservative website Infowars. It generated millions of views, remixes, and other iterations of the video. A different edit was uploaded almost a year later and was widely circulated on Twitter associated, in particular, with the hashtag #TrumpVideo. When a well-known Twitter user posted it in October of 2019, it gained 3.4 million views in 24 hours (Know Your Meme, 2020). Other variations and remixes are prevalent such as "Donald Trump vs. Fake News," "The Trumpinator," and "The Trumpinator 2020," among others. Often pulled down by mainstream hosting platforms due to its apparent valorization of political violence, the video continues to remerge and is still prevalent.

Taking a hyperviolent scene from the 2014 black comedy *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, a well-known pro-Trump social media influencer altered the actors'

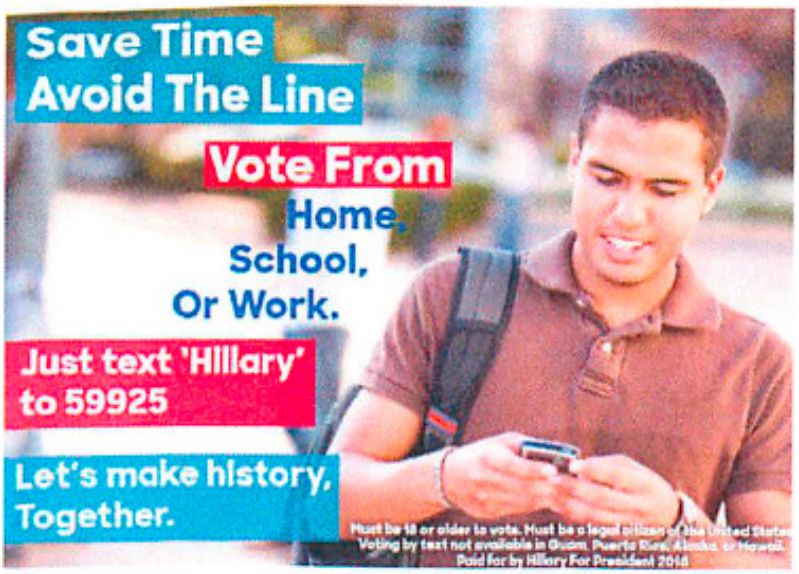

Figure 2. Russian created meme, 2016. Source: U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee (2018).

Figure 3. Donald Trump as depicted in "Trumpsmen" video, 2019.

faces to depict Trump slaughtering his perceived rivals. Graphic, crude, and comical, Trump is shown shooting over 30 people as the rock anthem "Free Bird" plays in the background. The faces of the actors from the original movie scene are covered with bubbles depicting individuals and institutions perceived to be anti-Trump. They range from the BBC News to rival Republican Mitt Romney and from progressive media figure Rosie O'Donnell to a Black Lives Matter sign. Powerful US Representative Maxine Waters, a black woman, is shown being hurled from a window marked "JAIL" as seen in Figure 4. Recently deceased at the time, Republican party rival John McCain is brutally pistol-whipped. Former political rival Bernie Sanders is shown screaming as Trump sets his hair on fire.

As a spoof of how Trump is portrayed by mainstream news media, the attitude is of over-the-top aggressive humor. It presents itself as vernacular with its purposefully amateur-looking video manipulations. However, those manipulations are not at the level of an everyday user as seen in the Russian memes. When paused, the sort of bobbing and misaligned heads show well-done cartoonish expressions added to the faces, and the overall number of edits is huge—a time and skill commitment significantly beyond simply using an online meme generator.

The affect the video evokes in me is revulsion: The sheer meanness of it coupled with the added stickiness of racist implications makes it hard to watch. For those viewers who see Trump as unfairly treated by an imagined elite, however, the affect could be one of spirited support, pride, and maybe even anger or rage at the targets presented in the video. The possibility that this video's very aggressive attitude could incite feelings leading to violence made it controversial, particularly in light of the mass attack on the US Capitol Building during the certification of the vote count that would remove Trump from power in 2021.

While this video is maybe the most well-known, it is only one version of the same sort of video that seems to have been circulating in conservative social media for months before it gained wider attention. Now, it has spread and morphed taking many forms and shapes; occasionally being pulled down by YouTube and other

Figure 4. US Representative Maxine Waters depicted as assaulted in "Trumpsmen" video, 2019.

hosting platforms only to be uploaded again somewhere else. This is, of course, just one video meme of an untold number that pro-Trump influencers—from those with huge notoriety to those just tweeting out to their family and friends.

4. Digitally Amplified Vernacular Authority

These three examples demonstrate some ways that vernacular authority can be amplified by digital network technologies through the affordances of massively increased iterations that enact an aggregative volition or "will of the people." Looking more closely at the affect, attitude, and meaning in these examples reveals that there is no purely non-institutional volitional aggregation but, instead, the use of these digital media necessarily hybridizes the vernacular with the institutional. In our digital age, it seems, the elite are always also part of the people too in varying proportions.

While all these examples are hybrids of institutional and vernacular volitional forces, the balance of their aggregations is different. For example, the communication with Tay was an institutionally produced event: She was built by a team of engineers employed by one of the most powerful technology institutions in history, Microsoft. In so doing, Microsoft built her to perform the stereotype of a teenage girl which is itself the aggregation of assumptions and prejudices repeated over generations. They used those stereotypes to make her accessible so that people would, somewhat ironically, "teach" her to be like them. Her institutional technology opened her to the vernacular only to have that vernacular aggregate her into a monster not fit for the world. Then they "killed" her.

The troll farms are also highly institutional, and they too are open to aggregating with vernacular voices. A Russian newspaper investigation estimated that in 2014 the Internet Research Agency had about 400 employees working long days manually creating accounts and posts in a wide range of social media, addressing numerous Russian government concerns in various languages. It is estimated that the operation cost the Russian government $400,000 a month in salaries alone (Chen, 2015). That takes an institutional level of resources. In this case, we have a hybridization of Russian agents, the already existing polarizing problems in US society, and the willingness of Americans to take in and reproduce those problems. In this sense, the Russians relied on virality as a secondary means of amplification.

"The Trumpsmen" video is similar in that it targets a specific community with extreme versions of its already-held views, and it presents itself as an amateur remix video. It is quite different though in several ways. Its relatively good production (compared to the Russian memes) means that instead of putting resources into having people repeat its messages, again and again, it seeks retweets and shares by garnering people's attention directly. Instead of actively pretending to be racist, it pretends to be satire that is not racist. Meanwhile, its attitude is amateur in the clunky covered heads. Instead of a government agent pretending to be a regular person, it is a supposedly unpaid regular person who just likes Trump so much that they spent hours and hours editing video. This amateurish quality gives it a more authentic claim to represent the "voice of the people."

All these examples are aggregations that attempt to push forward further aggregations around the meanings that they express. In so doing, they are hybridizing both institutional and vernacular volition to create ongoing change in their targeted American audiences.

My approach to this material reveals how the vernacular is being goaded, harnessed, and corralled into supporting the power of government and corporate interests. Today, populism is being manufactured through the amplification of vernacular authority. Using chatbots, Facebook and Google advertising buys, and good old hard work in front of computer screens, iterative communication events can present continuities and consistencies that can spread extremely quickly, be targeted very specifically, and can easily flow through our daily lives without gaining widespread notoriety or being clearly categorized as institutional. Their power emerges when individuals recognize these continues and consistencies as their own aggregating volition, the will of *their* people. In so doing, network communication technologies challenge scholars and everyday social media users alike to unravel their complexities as we try to make sense of the dangers digital amplification might or might not pose.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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