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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

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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 pop-

ulist messages and circulating populist media through networked communication.

Media and Communication is an ideal place to hold this conversation. First, populism is a global phenomenon 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 tradi-

tional 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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About the Author



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).