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Why Populists Do Well on Social Media

Abstract: A link between populism and social media is often suspected. This paper spells out a set of possible mechanisms underpinning this link: that social media changes the communication structure of the public sphere, making it harder for citizens to obtain evidence that refutes populist assumptions. By developing a model of the public sphere, four core functions of the public sphere are identified: exposing citizens to diverse information, promoting equality of deliberative opportunity, creating deliberative transparency, and producing common knowledge. A well-working public sphere allows citizens to learn that there are genuine disagreements among citizens that are held in good faith. Social media makes it harder to gain this insight, opening the door for populist ideology.

Keywords: deliberation; populism; public sphere; social media; deliberative democracy.

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Introduction

It is often suspected that there is a link between the rise of populism and the increased use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In this paper, I aim to show that there likely is such a link, but that the mechanism underpinning this link can only be understood if we think more carefully about an important but somewhat neglected topic in political theory: the public sphere. What makes social media conducive to the populist agenda, I will argue, is the way social media has restructured the functioning of the public sphere and the way citizens relate to each other in the public sphere. This is a bold claim and I cannot hope to defend all aspects of it in this short, programmatic article. Instead, I will provide a roadmap of how such an argument needs to unfold, with many details needing to be filled in later.

One might think that political theory would have a detailed understanding of what the public sphere is and how it ought to be organised. There are two strands of literature that speak to this question, but only indirectly: On the one hand, the literature on public reason investigates which reasons can count as public in a liberal state (e.g., Quong, 2018). On the other hand, the literature on deliberative democracy argues for an ideal of democracy based on the free exchange of arguments (e.g., Bächtiger et al., 2018). Both literatures fulfil

important roles, but they do not answer the set of questions I'm interested in, such as: (i) Who should be allowed to speak in the public sphere?; (ii) Is there an obligation to hear everyone?; (iii) Is there a right to listen to all conversations in the public sphere?; (iv) Does it undermine the functioning of the public sphere if participants can hide the fact that they have been talking?

I therefore suggest that, in order to investigate and critically analyse the transition of public communication structures due to social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, we need better normative theories of the public sphere. None of the existing theories give us a good sense what, if anything, is bad about having our public sphere transferred to communication structures that, it will turn out, are quite different from our traditional understanding of the public sphere. To get a sense of what is happening to our democracies with the advent of social media, we need to explain much better how the public sphere ought to function as a venue and as a network.

The current public debate is awash with theories about 'echo chambers,' 'filter bubbles,' data privacy scandals, digital profiling, concerns about targeted political campaigning, and so on. All these debates are important and require urgent empirical and theoretical attention, ideally beyond the breathless news coverage. For political theorists, however, it is important to step back and think about the larger, structural issues that arise from the widespread use of social networking sites and messaging apps ('social media,' for short). And the structural change we are seeing right now is that social media transforms the communication structures in which political deliberation takes place. Or, to put it differently, social media changes how the public sphere functions.

This paper tackles the issue with a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, I develop a simple model of the public sphere to unveil idealised structural features and to obtain more clarity about the normative ideals that guide the public sphere or are promoted by a well-working public sphere. On the other hand, I will investigate what populism is and how it benefits from the restructuring of the public sphere I have alluded to above.

While I believe that this strategy holds promise, it also has a cost: the idealised model of the public sphere is not a model of any actual public sphere – it is not an empirical model. In particular, it does not offer an account of the public sphere prior to the emergence of social media. Because I do not develop a theory of the pre-social-media public sphere dominated by mass media, I am not in a position to show that the pre-social-media public sphere fulfils its core functions better than the social media public sphere (and it might be too early to make such general comparisons anyhow). The ambition of this paper is much more

modest: the idealised public sphere model shows us some distinct drawbacks and dangers of a public sphere conducted on social media communication structures. Whether these drawbacks and dangers are more or less worrying than those of a public sphere shaped by traditional mass media is not a question I intend to answer here.

I begin with a brief discussion of populism. I then develop a basic normative model of the public sphere and uncover functions of the public sphere based on that model. The following section analyses the effects of social media on the public sphere. The paper returns to the issue of populism in the penultimate section, showing why the recent restructuring of the public sphere through social media use tends to benefit populists.

Populism

According to Müller's influential theory of populism, the best way to capture the phenomenon is to focus on the core tenets of this ideology:

Populism, I suggest, is a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior. It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be critical of elites in order to qualify as a populist. Otherwise, anyone criticizing the powerful and the status quo in any country would by definition be a populist. In addition to being antielitist, populists are always antipluralist: populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people (Müller, 2016: 16, footnotes omitted).

This approach, which shares many similarities with Mudde and Kaltwasser's 'ideational' definition (2017), identifies two markers of populism that are jointly necessary and sufficient, namely *anti-elitism* and *anti-pluralism*. Anti-elitism is a worldview that characterises all politics as a conflict between a large majority of virtuous 'people' and a much smaller group of morally and otherwise corrupted 'elites.' Anti-pluralism is the claim that the will of 'the people' is well-defined and easy to identify, but is not represented by anyone but the populist.

The anti-elitism of the populist suggests that all political life is essentially a struggle between an often 'silent majority' and a smaller group of 'elites,' who are always described as acting in bad faith, but typically succeed because they are more influential and well-versed in the art of political plotting (Kriesi, 2014). This set of beliefs is sometimes referred to as the 'paranoid style' (Hofstadter, 1967) of populists. The anti-pluralism is based on a misguided democratic and

social choice theory that suggests that the ‘will of the people’ is always well-defined and easy to determine (at least for the populist). Within a preference aggregation framework, the idea of such a will flies in the face of Arrow’s Impossibility theorem and various other impossibility results (List, 2019; Weale, 2019). Outside a preference aggregation framework, more plausible interpretations of the ‘will of the people’ are available. It could be understood, for example, as a group intention that needs to be constructed in deliberation, or it could be based on the thought that there are some objective standards of the public interest or of good governance that can be tracked. However, even if we think that the notion of the ‘will of the people’ can be filled with content and that it can be tracked by suitably reliable procedures, there is little reason to believe that the populist is in an epistemically superior position to determine what this will is.

Müller’s definition helps to explain several auxiliary beliefs that populists typically hold to stabilise their world view and make it more robust to critical scrutiny. Populists often assume that ‘elites’ act in bad faith, which explains why they intend to pervert the ‘will of the people’ and why they often succeed. They maintain that ‘elites’ conspire against the unsuspecting ‘people,’ which explains why the people often do not notice that their will is perverted without the help of the populist. They also suggest that the ‘will of the people’ exists and can be identified by the populist (though not by his or her opponents), which explains why populists can speak with such certainty about the ‘true’ goals of the people. Finally, and related to the last point, populists insist that they can act as a saviour, ensuring that the will of the people is implemented due to the populist’s special capacities to uncover the betrayal of the elites and to give a voice to the people, which explains why ‘the people’ need a populist to assert their majority interests.

Populism is, in principle, a world view vulnerable to empirical refutation. Doubts could creep in once voters realise that ‘the people’ disagree about choices, that the populist politician does not know what ‘the people’ really want, that the ‘elites’ do not always act in bad faith or do not have the capacity to successfully suppress the majority, or that there is no reason to believe that the populist has special capacities to enable ‘the people’ to assert their interests.

The belief that is arguably most difficult to stably instil and maintain among the followers of the populist is the idea that ‘the people’ have a ‘will’ that the populist can easily identify. The populist interpretation is that everyone who counts as ‘the people’ agrees on something, or at least would agree on something on reflection. How does the populist deal with dissent? One option is to declare

that dissenters are not the ‘real’ people, another is to suggest that ‘the people’ are currently misled or suffer from ‘false consciousness’ but will eventually, with the help of the populist, discover their true interests (Müller, 2016: 22).

Perhaps the most dangerous political situation for the populist occurs when voters come together, realise that they have genuinely different views, in good faith, without being misled, and without being able to plausibly dismiss dissenters as being captured by elites. These political situations are likely to occur when citizens deliberate. Deliberation, especially if there is enough time and groups are small, typically reveals significant disagreement, though often also a willingness to compromise. It typically does not reveal a ‘will of the people’ – at least not in the sense of universal consent. Instead, the compromises that can be found require participants to move away from their most preferred option. Compromises are also typically more complicated than individual views, partly to accommodate different preferences, but partly also because deliberation enables citizens to learn about the complexity of a problem and respond to it. Deliberation also reveals that most citizens hold their own views in good faith, and not because they are misled or deluded. The better the deliberating citizens get to know each other, the less plausible the paranoid explanations become.

Personal deliberation experiences also help to strengthen the trust in representative democracy. The populist world-view is anti-representative, suggesting that all elected representatives are part of the political elite – apart from the populist representatives, of course. In this narrative, populists typically point out that representatives disagree with ‘the people,’ citing this as evidence for their elitism or bad faith. This storyline is much less plausible once citizens observe in deliberation that the positions represented by politicians are positions held by their fellow citizens, not just by distant elites.

For learning about the different viewpoints represented in society, large democracies traditionally turn to the public sphere, a place in which citizens and their representatives deliberate.

The Public Sphere

In this section I will lay the groundwork by making more precise what the public sphere is and how it functions. By creating and analysing a model of the public sphere, I uncover central empirical and normative assumptions that often remain implicit in the scholarly discussion.

The Public Sphere in the Literature

The public sphere is often invoked, but rarely precisely defined.¹ Rawls appeals

¹ For an overview, see Gripsrud et al. (2010).

to a version of it in *The Theory of Justice*, but he calls it the public forum: ‘If the public forum is to be free and open to all, and in continuous session, everyone should be able to make use of it’ (Rawls, 1999a: sec. 36).

Here Rawls focuses on two central values that ought to be embodied by the public sphere: First, all participants ought to relate as equals, regardless of their actual wealth, office, or social status. And second, all potential participants have an opportunity to take part in the activities of the public sphere. Thus, the public sphere should be guided by the values of equality and inclusivity.

Perhaps the early Rawls really did think of the public forum as a place to be used by all. The later Rawls, however, is quite explicit in his restrictive view of its scope:

This forum may be divided into three parts: the discourse of judges in their decisions, and especially the judges of a supreme court; the discourse of government officials, especially chief executives and legislators; and finally, the discourse of candidates for public offices and their campaign managers (Rawls, 1999b: 133).

The culture of civil society, by contrast, Rawls calls the ‘background culture’ (Rawls, 1999b: 134). This way of conceptualizing the public sphere leads to a narrow understanding of a public to which the norms of public reason apply, and a wide understanding of a less regulated civil sphere.

A broader understanding of the public sphere would be useful to analyse the norms of public deliberation beyond courtrooms, parliaments, and election campaigns. The first point of call when looking for such an analysis is Jürgen Habermas, who, in his complex historical treatment, envisions the public sphere as an arena for the public exchange of reasons, guided by the force of better arguments, focusing on matters of public interest (Habermas, 1962, 1998). Habermas, like Rawls, emphasises that the participants should relate as equals.² The public sphere should also embody the values of transparency and reasonableness. But unlike Rawls, Habermas envisages the public sphere to be embedded in civil society, reaching well beyond the formal institutions.³

Proponents of deliberative democracy tend to agree with the broader understanding. Elizabeth Anderson, drawing on J.S. Mill and John Dewey, prefers the term ‘civil society’ over ‘public sphere’ and appears to imagine a looser connection of different venues for debate. But she alludes to norms that could plausibly apply to the public sphere when she writes that ‘citizens learn

² For a critique of this idealization, see Fraser (1990).

³ Habermas was pessimistic about how the public sphere would fare in the age of the mass media. See Habermas (2006).

to treat one another as equals: as eligible for inclusion in collective projects, entitled to an equal voice, whose concerns merit equal attention and response' (Anderson, 2009: 218).

Appeals to the public sphere often rely on spatial metaphors: the 'forum,' the 'arena,' or 'the stage' (cf. Fraser, 1990). Habermas, famously, thought of the public sphere in historical terms, as an 18th century bourgeois salon, though – arguably – in an idealised fashion, not necessarily an accurate historical representation. What is striking here is the focus on small-scale, restricted spaces in which deliberation takes place. Many other authors make reference to the 'agora' or the 'forum' (see, for instance, Elster, 1986). These are larger, but still geographically circumscribed spaces of public interaction. John Parkinson takes this spatial aspect as the crucial element for understanding the functioning of the 'public space,' as he calls it (Parkinson, 2012: 61).⁴ While I do not pursue the importance of literal public space for deliberation in the way Parkinson does, the emphasis on access and on common effects will be relevant for my model, too.

Cass Sunstein, in *#Republic*, points to the spatial interpretation of the US Supreme Court's 'public forum doctrine' (Sunstein, 2018: ch.2). He comes closest to my modelling approach when describing the importance of 'access' and 'exposure' to diverse views.

A Model of the Public Sphere

To get a tighter grip on the function of the public sphere, it is useful to think about its central rules more systematically and provide a functional account. The goal here is not to present an accurate picture of how the public sphere works in real life. Rather, the point is to take the spatial metaphor seriously to create a model.⁵ The model, it will turn out, is useful for deducing normative principles regulating the public sphere.

The model building starts by thinking about the public sphere as a physical space with participants talking to each other. They can 'speak' or they can 'listen' or, more generally, they can 'send' and 'receive.' To get a handle on the function of the public sphere, let us begin with a small-scale deliberation in a circumscribed space, not unlike the coffeehouses Habermas had in mind.

There are some basic side constraints for any conversation: To begin with, at any specific point in time, one can either speak, or listen to someone who is speaking, or do neither (but not speak and listen at the same time). Moreover,

4 Parkinson distinguishes between 'public sphere' and the 'public space,' but in this article I use these terms interchangeably.

5 On the use of models in political theory, see Johnson (2014).

at any specific point in time, one can only listen to one person.

Which principles regulate the public sphere? The spatial metaphor provides some hints, but very few authors have spelled out the interaction between speakers and listeners in detail.⁶ I suggest six crucial principles of the public sphere to regulate speaker-listener relations and their publicity:

The Principle of Open Access. Each individual can enter and leave the public sphere as they choose;

The Principle of Free Participation. Each individual can, at suitable times, start to speak to any person present in the public sphere. At the same time, no one is forced to speak;

The Principle of Listener Choice. Each person can choose to listen to any speaker and, at suitable times, change the person they listen to (but cannot normally listen to several speakers at the same time);

The Principle of Exposure. Each person present in the public sphere may have to hear the messages of any others until, at a suitable time, they can choose to speak themselves or listen to someone else;

The Principle of Transparency. Everybody is permitted to observe who talks to whom and can easily establish the relevant speaker-listener relations.

The Principle of Public Sphere Scrutiny. Policies, laws, executive acts, the conduct of officials, and other matters of public interest must be available for scrutiny in the public sphere.

Each of these features needs unpacking.

The *Principle of Open Access* represents the normative ideal of having a free choice over whether one is exposed to the interactions in the public sphere and has the opportunity to contribute, or whether one stays away from the interaction. The exit option is especially important because it is the only option to ensure that one is not talked to – if one wants to be left alone, one needs to leave the public sphere. The option of entry matters because it guarantees that everyone who wishes to do so can take part in the deliberations of the public sphere. The value underpinning the *Principle of Open Access* is the freedom to associate or not to associate, but also the general negative freedom not to take part in non-essential social activities. A society that forced people to show constant presence in the public sphere would be, at least in this special aspect, totalitarian in the Orwellian sense: it would expose citizens to a potentially

⁶ Some remarks in this direction can be found in Adut (2012).

constant stream of news and views even in what should be moments of privacy, solitude, or calm. By contrast, a society that prevented citizens from entering the public sphere would be a closed society, perhaps a society controlled by an elite or a ruling class that prevents the emergence of an open public sphere.

The *Principle of Free Participation* says that every person present in the public sphere may, at suitable times, speak to any other person present. The 'suitable time' caveat takes into account that the speaking acts need to be compossible; how this freedom to speak can be exercised depends on whether the targeted person is available to listen. If the target person is neither speaking nor listening, one can start speaking to the target straight away. If the target person is listening to someone else, one can start speaking to the target person once there is a chance to interject. The target person will then listen for the moment until she can make her own move, i.e. continue to listen, listen to someone else, or start to speak to someone. Finally, if the target person is currently speaking, one can interject at the next possible moment. The target person will then listen, but can, at the next opportunity, interrupt the new speaker and start speaking again, or they can choose to continue to listen. The *Principle of Free Participation* grows out of the freedom to express oneself but also the democratic rights of citizens to take part in debates leading up the social decision making and to have a say. As the discussion shows, these rights are limited by the rights of others, and any working public sphere will have to have some norms in place to coordinate the sequence of speaking, so that everybody with enough patience can have a go at presenting their points. The *Principle of Free Participation* also contains a freedom not to speak: this means that no one needs to speak if they do not choose to do so. One may, therefore, use the public sphere as a passive listener. It is plausible that in large societies with large public spheres this right not to intervene in person and instead follow what others have to say is a position that many citizens will take.

The *Principle of Listener Choice* says that all participants in the public sphere may listen to speakers of their choice. This entails that they can direct away their attention from the person currently speaking to a new speaker. However, they can only do so at suitable times, e.g., when someone starts speaking to them, they will normally have to wait for a suitable opportunity before they can withdraw from that conversation and start listening to someone else. And because the human ability to listen has limited bandwidth, most people can normally only listen to one person at a time. The *Principle of Listener Choice* is rooted in the freedom of association. It enables people to pick, with some limitations, who they choose to pay attention to. The *Principle of Listener Choice* also introduces a competitive element into the public sphere: speakers

can attract attention to different degrees, as listeners can make choices to whom they want to listen continuously.

Because of the *Principle of Free Participation*, and because the *Principle of Listener Choice* only allows to change to whom one listens ‘at suitable times,’ there is no freedom not to hear things one does not want to hear, which is what the *Principle of Exposure* says. This means that, as long as people are present in the public sphere, others can choose to speak to them. The listener may end that process at some point, by either starting to speak, or by listening to someone else, but there is no right to do so immediately. Being in the public sphere entails that one can be subjected to unwanted speech. The only way to avoid this is to leave the public sphere. However, this is how it ought to be – the public sphere is a place in which one may be confronted with views that are surprising, unsolicited, and perhaps undesired. This impinges on the freedom to associate, but it only does so for citizens who choose to take part in the public sphere.

The *Principle of Transparency* comes in two parts. First, because the public sphere is public, each participant can observe who talks to whom.⁷ Second, because everybody has a right to listen, each participant has, in principle, the opportunity to access the content of speech acts. In practice, participants will be limited by their skills to follow different simultaneous conversations, of course, but that does not diminish the fact that all participants are permitted to observe who talks to whom, and about what. *Transparency* is difficult to make us of in its entirety if the number of people attending the public sphere is large. In small fora, everybody will naturally observe what is going on around them. In a large public sphere, by contrast, making sure that the connections between participants are transparent is a more difficult undertaking.

Finally, the *Principle of Public Sphere Scrutiny* indicates the content that must normally be debated in the public sphere. Public scrutiny, or at least the opportunity to scrutinise, I assume, is required for laws, executive acts, policies, public conduct, but also general matters of public interest, such as political values or principles. I will not spell out in detail or argue in favour of such a principle here (see Gosseries and Parr, 2018 for an overview; cf. Chambers, 2004). Instead, I simply proceed on the assumption that public scrutiny is needed for many public matters as a condition of political legitimacy. It may not be needed for all public matters because in some instances public scrutiny may be delayed, limited, or even waived, for instance, when publicity undermines effectiveness or infringes rights. It is also worth noting that the *Principle of Public Sphere Scrutiny* does not demand actual scrutiny of all acts that could

⁷ This is briefly mentioned in Geuss (2003: 52), who attributes this thought to Diogenes. See also Hendricks and Hansen (2016: ch.2).

be scrutinised. This is because the volume of public activity that falls into the domain of the public sphere is so large that most items cannot be scrutinised in the public sphere in detail. What matters, instead, is the opportunity to scrutinise if the need arises.

The *Principle of Public Sphere Scrutiny* has a function in regulating the relation between public sphere and private spheres. Political deliberation can and does, of course, take place in private spheres: citizens debate public matters in their families or among friends, NGOs or political parties might strategize behind closed doors, and so on. Private deliberation has important functions. It may allow under-represented groups to speak up in protected environments, help minorities to develop their group views, or enable political parties to 'brainstorm' and strategize (see, e.g., Sunstein, 2000).⁸ Clearly, not every conversation about public matters needs or ought to be public at every stage of the process. However, democratic legitimacy normally can only be conferred onto a decision about public matters if there is an opportunity for public scrutiny in the public sphere at some point.

The *Principle of Public Sphere Scrutiny* has another important upshot: anyone who makes proposals to change public policy and seeks legitimacy to do so will eventually have to make these ideas available for scrutiny in the public sphere and defend them there. And once one does, one will likely experience disagreement and arguments against the proposal. This is why the public sphere is competitive in pluralistic societies: the public sphere is a place of reasoned contestation about the direction of public policy. It therefore creates an incentive to present good arguments in public.

Looking at the principles together, the public sphere model may seem like one unified place where everyone follows the same conversation, tying all participants into one debate. But the model is more flexible in that regard. In fact, the Principles of *Free Participation* and *Listener Choice* do not rule out the emergence of different 'sub-spheres.' These are groups of people that primarily talk among each other, and do not talk much to other sub-spheres. However, this effect is always limited by the opportunity for all participants to listen and talk to everyone. As participants compete for ideas, and ultimately for influence, incentives are created to listen and talk to participants beyond one's own sub-sphere. The important point is that, in the public sphere, sub-spheres are always open to new listeners and speakers, and that there are incentives to keep the boundaries of sub-spheres porous. Crucially, at certain moments, more unified conversations across sub-spheres are possible.

8 I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

This concludes our discussion of public sphere principles. It is important to note that the principles listed above are by no means complete. They need to be complemented with a wider set of norms of deliberative civility to enable a working deliberative exchange. For instance, deliberation cannot work without some further rules about when it is polite to interrupt, wider norms about reason-giving and justification, and norms to sanction participants that do not comply with the rules. For this reason, the *Principle of Free Participation* and the *Principle of Listener Choice* make reference to ‘suitable times’ at which people may change their current speaking or listening relations. This could be made precise in different ways, reflecting contextual norms of politeness.

The Functions of the Public Sphere

The public sphere model enables us to identify four core functions of the public sphere: to expose to unchosen thought, to promote equality of democratic opportunity, to create deliberative transparency, and to create common knowledge.

Exposure

Because of the *Principle of Open Access*, the *Principle of Free Participation*, and the *Principle of Exposure*, the public sphere creates a structure of social interaction in which citizens will be exposed to views that they cannot choose, likely including information and opinions that diverge from theirs (Sunstein, 2018: ch.2). The effect is reinforced by the *Principle of Public Sphere Scrutiny* and the incentives it creates to persuade others: political activists trying to put together a majority will need to convince citizens who start with other viewpoints. The public sphere therefore serves as a space in which citizens will learn about facts that they did not know before and experience viewpoints that they disagree with. As many liberals have argued, the experience of a wide range of views is essential for epistemically successful public decision making (Mill, 1859). The importance of exposure also shows that the public sphere is not a ‘marketplace,’ at least not in the sense that consumer choice reigns supreme. If citizens were to be treated like consumers, they would not be inconvenienced with views they disagree with. Rather, the very point of the public sphere is that its participants need to bear with unwanted speech. It could not be any other way in a deliberative process; deliberation relies on hearing views one does not necessarily want to hear.

Equality of Deliberative Opportunity

Because of the *Principle of Open Access* and the *Principle of Free Participation*, everyone has an opportunity to have their position heard in the public sphere. The setup of the public sphere provides everyone with the chance to have their

point made, making sure that different viewpoints are represented. However, because ideas have ‘jointness of supply,’ it is not necessary (nor productive) to hear the same ideas again and again. Instead, to express how much support each idea garners, voting is a much more efficient method (Christiano, 1996: 258-259). The public debate is not the space to measure the distribution of views, it is to make relevant facts publicly known, test and improve arguments, and have the orthodoxy challenged by new perspectives. *Equality of Deliberative Opportunity* therefore does not amount to equality of opportunity for influence.

Deliberative Transparency

Because of the *Principle of Listener Choice*, the *Principle of Transparency* and the *Principle of Public Sphere Scrutiny*, all participants in the public sphere have the opportunity to observe conversations about public matters and are able to witness who talks to whom. The participants also know that other participants have similar opportunities of observation. This does not necessarily mean that everyone observes everything, as the human capacity to follow different conversations at the same time is limited. More to the point, the fact that everyone has a right to see who speaks to whom provides an egalitarian assurance. It mitigates the fear that some privileged actors have ‘secret knowledge’ or can make ‘secret deals’ in the process of public scrutiny. And, provided that the citizens see a well-functioning, diverse public sphere in which their interests are represented, it also counters the suspicion that some citizens are more influential, or their views better represented than others in the public sphere.

Common Knowledge

The public sphere has another important function that is based on the *Principles of Free Participation, Listener Choice and Transparency* – it allows citizens to create common knowledge (Hendricks and Hansen, 2016: ch.2). It is useful to distinguish two terms: mutual knowledge of a fact occurs when all individuals know this fact; common knowledge requires, in addition, that all individuals know that all individuals know this fact, and that all individuals know that all individuals know that all individuals know that all individuals know this fact, and so on, up to infinity. The easiest way to create common knowledge is by a public announcement, such that all individuals observe each other when they hear it.⁹

The public sphere is well-suited for creating common knowledge because it is possible to make public announcements that are heard by everyone while, at the same time, everybody is observing each other listening to the announcement. Not all speaking acts in the public sphere are like that, of course, only those

⁹ See Vanderschraaf and Sillari 2014 for a much more precise and comprehensive account.

where one speaker manages to capture the attention of all others present in the public sphere, unifying any sub-spheres for a moment. The option to create common knowledge fulfils a crucial role, even if full common knowledge is rarely achieved to perfection.

The public sphere can help create common knowledge of different content, but in the context of this paper I am most interested in one specific type: the common knowledge that the participants of the public sphere can have good-faith, genuine political disagreements. How is such common knowledge generated? By observing fellow citizens having an argument in the public sphere in which the genuineness of their views and convictions is confirmed while disagreement remains. After this experience, the audience to this disagreement knows that there can be disagreements, they believe that disagreeing individuals can genuinely hold the beliefs they report (rather than being strategic or deliberately provocative), and the audience knows that other audience members know this, know that they know, etc.

Common knowledge about good-faith disagreement not only creates the mutual knowledge that there can be genuine disagreement. It also rules out wrong beliefs about the beliefs of others. This has two important upshots. First, the participants are now in a more symmetrical relation regarding their views on political disagreement. Second, this symmetry reduces distrust. Once there is common knowledge about the possibility of good-faith disagreement, all participants can take this as a given and move on to the question how they should deal with disagreement. They stop worrying about bad-faith explanations for disagreement, and they also stop worrying about others worrying about that.¹⁰

The public sphere model is not a policy prescription: its idealised principles cannot always be fully implemented of course. To protect the proper functioning of a state's real-world public sphere, it may be necessary to temporarily restrict its size, restrict participation to elected representatives, or subdivide the public sphere into separate fora to compromise between access and meaningful exchange. In the same vein, it may not always be possible to guarantee that every citizen can speak to every other citizen; it may not always be possible for all citizens to personally speak to the prime minister, for example. But note that, even if the *Principle of Free Participation* cannot be fully implemented, there are surrogate provisions in some constitutions, such as the right to petition enshrined in article 17 of Germany's basic law, ensuring that every citizen can direct written requests to all officials and will receive an answer. While not

¹⁰ Just because participants in the public sphere obtain common knowledge about the possibility of genuine disagreement does not lead them to the conclusion that disagreement is always genuine. However, after experiencing genuine disagreement they will find it more likely that other disagreements are also genuine.

guaranteeing an actual right to speak to everyone, it does ensure a more limited form of communicative access and response, preserving some of the spirit of the ideal principle.

These considerations on the relation between model and real-world public sphere conclude the discussion of the public sphere model. Developing this model has been useful because it uncovered some fundamental norms of a shared space for public exchange. The next section applies these insights to the effects of social media on the public sphere.

How Social Media Restructures the Public Sphere

The advent of the World Wide Web gave internet activists and democratic theorists cause for optimism. Finally, there was a technology to connect people across the world, to enable the unhindered flow of information, and to break down local or national barriers. A great number of volunteers contributed to public resources, such as free and open software or online encyclopaedias. A vibrant ‘blogosphere’ suggested new forms of deliberation. The lowering of costs and entrance barriers for publishing information made it much easier to make information accessible for a wide audience and provided users with a universe of information. In ‘The Wealth of Networks,’ for example, Yochai Benkler (2006) describes the democratic potential of the internet, pointing to lower barriers and costs for information transmission, search and matching, easier connections and shorter paths between individuals, and the ability for everyone to publish and broadcast.

This optimism has been dampened by a growing concern about the negative influence of social networks on the quality of political discourse. One telling example is the contrast between Benkler’s optimistic 2006 book and his more recent work on ‘Network Propaganda’ (Benkler et al., 2018).

Much communication that used to take place in the more traditional public sphere has migrated ‘online,’ it takes place on Facebook, Twitter, and other social network and social messaging services.¹¹ This is not only a change in medium, it is also, and arguably more importantly, a change in the structure of sender-receiver relations.

We can use the functions identified in the public sphere model to assess the changes social media makes to the public sphere. The first two functions, *Exposure* and *Equality of Deliberative Opportunity*, are often at the centre of the debate, and they surely play a role. But in my view, more attention should

¹¹ Here I focus on Facebook and Twitter as the most influential social media platforms with significant social content. I ignore smaller platforms like Reddit and largely unpolitical services like Instagram. I only have a cursory look at closed messaging groups like WhatsApp, though a more comprehensive analysis should investigate their role in ‘privatizing’ the public sphere.

be given to *Deliberative Transparency* and to *Common Knowledge* production. In my view, these functions are impacted in a structurally deeper and arguably more important way.

Consider first *Exposure*. If the public sphere fragments into many sub-networks, there is a risk that the exposure function is undermined (Sunstein, 2018). The exposure function may suffer because social networks allow for self-sorting into groups of like-minded people (the so-called ‘echo chamber’ effect; Bakshy et al., 2015). A related effect is due to the social algorithms controlling who connects to whom, potentially leading to the creation of ‘filter bubbles’ (Pariser, 2012). Empirically, while there is some supporting evidence, the jury is still out whether these results are robust and substantive (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016), especially when looking at overall media use (Guess, forthcoming; Dubois and Blank, 2018). One difficulty is that much of the data needed to answer these questions is not publicly accessible as it is held by the platforms that need to be analysed.

We now turn to *Equality of Deliberative Opportunity*. Here the effect is mixed. Social media have substantially lowered the entry barriers for reaching large audiences, thereby increasing communication opportunities. At the same time, ‘virality’ effects also come with extreme path dependency: some messages will reach millions, other, perhaps equally important contributions, never achieve this ‘viral’ quality and are heard by very few.

Deliberative Transparency, by contrast, is impacted in more fundamental ways. Transferring the public sphere into social media communication structures has undermined transparency. One reason for that is sheer volume: as the number and frequency of contributions increases, participants in the networked public sphere can only digest a small proportion of available content. Twitter, which is largely public, is a good example: it has dramatically increased conversation of public matters. Tweets are public but given that half a billion tweets are added every day, users need to filter, and many choose to depend on the filter mechanisms Twitter’s social algorithms provide. Even Twitter users highly focused on a specific debate (say, all tweets relating to Brexit) will have a unique stream of reading experiences, with different users being shown different tweets depending on their network and other choices on the platform. Another reason why *Deliberative Transparency* is undermined is the opportunity to restrict entry to groups (most notably on Facebook and a default feature of messaging apps like WhatsApp or Instagram). This has led to a partial replacement of a public sphere with structures more akin to private conversation.

Finally, *Common Knowledge*. Given the lack of *Deliberative Transparency*, creating common knowledge has become difficult. In the model public sphere, the common knowledge production was enabled because everybody who attended the public sphere was able to observe the proceedings and could witness not only the communication of others, but also that everyone witnessed this setting of deliberative equality. In a fragmented social media landscape, creating common or even just mutual knowledge of this kind has become virtually impossible. The structure is too decentralised for the participants to witness each other.

The phenomenon affects common knowledge production in general, but is particularly problematic in relation to disagreement. Without the relevant *knowledge*, citizens will remain in a state of ignorance about the fact that the disagreements they observe are often based on beliefs that are formed genuinely, in good faith, rather than being the result of manipulation or strategic thinking. And without the relevant *common* knowledge they do not know that this experience is shared and that other participants have also learned from this observation. Experiencing disagreement while knowing that this disagreement is in good faith is quite different from experiencing disagreement while believing that it is the result of manipulative power. The former is the first step towards recognition of reasonable pluralism, while the latter may be the beginning of conspiracy theories about nefarious elites preventing the ‘will of the people’ from emerging. It can also lead to a ‘delegitimation’ of democracy by portraying opposing voices as enemies (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019: 35). The most plausible response to the genuine disagreement is to rationally deliberate and seek to bridge differences, while the response to suspected conspiracy may well be an unravelling of trust between citizens and an increasingly ‘paranoid style’ of politics.

The importance of creating common knowledge about genuine disagreement is not widely acknowledged in the literature, as most attention has been given to the reduction in exposure that social media is suspected to cause.¹² It is unclear, however, whether more news personalization leads to less exposure to diverse opinions. The empirical evidence on this question is mixed, as we have seen. The change of perspective I propose is fundamental. When looking through the prism of exposure, the relations put into relief are dyadic: exposure is promoted if there are more dyads of individuals disagreeing with each. But when considering common knowledge of genuine disagreement, the relevant relations to be considered go beyond the interest in dyads: required are, at

12 Even Hendricks and Hansen 2016, who appear to be the first to recognise that social media can undermine common knowledge production, do not focus on genuine disagreement.

the minimum, two individuals showing genuine disagreement, an audience observing this disagreement, and the audience observing each other observing this disagreement.

Once the audience has obtained the common knowledge that genuine disagreement is possible, and that all audience members know that genuine disagreement is possible, and so on, the relation between audience members is transformed: with the possibility of genuine disagreement observed and commonly acknowledged, they are now much more likely to respect disagreement with each other. And they are less likely to fall for the populist narrative that disagreement is the work of dark forces to occlude the ‘general will.’ Common knowledge of genuine disagreement is a core feature to make diverse citizens relate in civil ways.

Populism and Social Media

How can a well-working public sphere keep populism in check? I focus on two thoughts. First, the doubt that a well-working public sphere can instil regarding the claim that there is a ‘general will’ in the sense the populist suggests: a natural consent that is covered up by nefarious forces. Second, the role that *Transparency* and *Common Knowledge* can play in defusing elite conspiracy theories. Taken from this perspective, fighting populism is an epistemic challenge – what needs to be tackled are the false beliefs that underpin it.

We have seen above that a central premise of the populist narrative is the existence of the ‘will of the people.’ There are several reasonable positions one could take on this matter: some might think that the ‘will of the people’ exists or can be brought into existence as a matter of deliberative construction (Richardson, 2002). Others might think that some public judgements can be correct or incorrect according to objective standards. Yet others, committed to a preference aggregation framework, point out that the will of the people is at best a contingent construct – contingent on the choice of aggregation procedures, all of which come with distinct drawbacks. This paper is not the place to adjudicate between these positions. What matters for present purposes is that no plausible analysis suggests that the populist has special epistemic access to the ‘will of the people’ and can successfully identify it where others fail.

It now becomes apparent why the communication structures provided by social networks are so conducive to populism. First, because social media tends to reduce the *Deliberative Transparency* of the public sphere, it is easier to form a skewed view of how preferences or opinions are distributed across society. If most of your social media peers agree with you, and only more remote relations disagree, it is easier to assume that there is (near) consensus. Moreover, once you

realise that there is less agreement than you expected, the ‘bad faith’ hypothesis kicks in: since all your peers are very reasonable people and agree on something, surely all those with other opinions must be misguided, mistaken, deluded, or acting in bad faith. This set of beliefs, that others are either incompetent or acting in bad faith, is hard to refute if your interactions with disagreeing others remain superficial. It takes dissent from persons you respect to create doubts about the bad faith and incompetence hypothesis.

To learn that one can reasonably disagree about the public good (or even what the so-called ‘will of the people’ is) takes frequent experiences of dissent from people whose views one values. This is why a well-working public sphere is so valuable for democracy: it creates a conversation about the public good in which everyone can observe genuine disagreement.

The insight that disagreement is mostly genuine, a product of the basic fact of pluralism, does not come naturally. It is something that needs to be learned and requires frequent reminders. Very few institutions can provide these reminders: elections, for example, can show disagreement but they do not show *why* people disagree and therefore cannot falsify the bad faith hypothesis. Unstructured local deliberation does not work either because citizens might self-select like-minded peers and fail to see that their peers are not representative. Deliberation on social media might not work that well for similar reasons.

What *can* work is public deliberation, organised in a way that makes the exchange of reasons open for everyone to follow. The important point here is not active participation. The important point is to see genuine disagreement emerging in discussion, demonstrating to everyone listening that there are several reasonable positions, each finding support. Merely listening to such a debate in the public sphere will have the required effect, regardless of whether one actively contributes. In fact, less can be more for this purpose: it is better for everyone to follow the proceedings of one well-working public sphere than society splitting into many sealed-off spheres, where information about what is going on in the other public spheres is limited. To fight populism, the most important function of the public sphere is to demonstrate to everyone that genuine disagreement is the normal state of affairs.

As we have seen, populists rely on anti-elitism, which is propped up by the belief that there is a powerful elite, acting in secret, conspiring against the people. The resentment on which populists draw is fed by this assumption of secret control and domination. In this respect the communication structures of social media are perfect for the populist. With public debate happening in so many different virtual locations, many of which have closed access, the populist

narrative can thrive because (i) it is hard to follow what others are saying and therefore difficult to refute the elite conspiracy theory; (ii) it is hard to observe the communication structures that evolve and therefore difficult to rule out the existence of secret cliques with high levels of influence; (iii) it is hard to create common knowledge and therefore difficult to fight situations of distrust; (iv) It is hard to find evidence that citizens have good-faith, genuine disagreements and to create a setting of mutual epistemic trust in light of these disagreements.

The upshot of this discussion is that social media tends to restructure the public sphere in ways that makes it difficult to challenge the beliefs a populist ideology relies on. Without a well-working public sphere, the populist's anti-elitist and anti-pluralist message is less likely to be contradicted and undermined.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested one plausible link between populism and social media: that social media tends to undermine the central functions of the public sphere, and thereby enables the success of populists. This short paper cannot offer a comprehensive analysis, but I hope it will motivate political theorists to revisit the public sphere and its functions, and political scientists to turn these early musings into an empirical research program.

The central epistemic challenge in order to refute populism is to show that modern societies experience genuine good faith disagreements. A decentralised social media structure makes it much harder for citizens to arrive at this conclusion by observation. Changing central structural features of the public sphere comes with significant risks – we should therefore question whether social media platforms should be allowed to do this without careful investigation of the consequences and without democratic oversight.¹³

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