Media policy failures and the emergence of right-wing populism

The Routledge Companion to Media Misinformation and Populism

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Introduction

Right-wing populist leaders across the globe reacted to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in two main ways: by lashing out at 'foreigners' for spreading the virus and blaming the mainstream media for spreading 'bad news'. Donald Trump attacked journalists for downplaying his alleged policy successes in mitigating the 'Chinese virus' while Brazil's Jair Bolsanaro dubbed the pandemic a 'fantasy' and a 'media trick'. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, linked migration to the outbreak in Hungary and used Covid-19 as the pretext to cement his control of domestic media by passing a law that punishes anyone who publishes 'false' or 'distorted' facts. Matteo Salvini of Italy's Northern League pivoted from initial skepticism of the scale of the virus to circulating conspiracy videos that coronavirus was engineered in a Chinese laboratory. Coronavirus is thus just the latest backdrop that allows populists to reproduce their binary worldview of a 'pure people' being infected by external forces; as a 'storytelling technique, a way of fitting things into a certain narrative about the world' (Cliffe, 2020), populism depends on the ability both to communicate this frame and to govern according to its underlying logic.

One of the main explanations, therefore, for the rise in prominence of populist challenges to centrist political forces has focused on the former's effective use of the media: their ability to

transmit 'sentiment' over 'fact', to use 'authentic' language, to make full use of social media and to exploit the mainstream media's appetite for sensationalist stories. 'All neo-populist movements', argues Gianpetro Mazzoleni (2003: 6), 'rely heavily on some kind of indirect (and direct) complicity with the mass media, and all are led by politicians who, with few exceptions, are shrewd and capable "newsmakers" themselves.' In Europe and North America, this has worked to the advantage of iconoclastic far right politicians like Trump, Orban, Bolsanaro and Salvini – all of whom have received extensive airtime in which they have combined nativist rhetoric with outbursts against the political establishment (no matter how privileged they themselves may be). A dangerous cocktail of tabloid values, falling levels of trust in the media and unaccountable tech power (facilitating the spread of hyper-partisan news and disinformation) has fuelled the marriage of a xenophobic populism and polarised media and political environments.

Yet insufficient attention has been paid in the literature on populism to the *structural* conditions which underlie what Victor Pickard calls the 'misinformation society' (Pickard 2020) and of the ideological and commercial imperatives that underpinned the tendency of major news organisations to publicise and dramatise what they considered to be an 'illberal' form of politics. In particular, there has been scant critical examination of the policy actions (and inactions) that have facilitated environments in which the coverage of populist leaders and narratives is not simply profitable but the logical outcome of media markets in liberal democracies that are wedded to ratings and controversy. Even the fiercest 'anti-populist' coverage is hardly likely to compensate for the systemic degeneration of communication systems in which power has been increasingly consolidated by oligopolistic digital intermediaries and media giants, in which mainstream news media have failed sufficiently to appreciate the roots of polarisation, in which

public media have increasingly been identified not as monitors but as embodiments of elite power and, finally, in which highly partisan right wing media have been emboldened and rewarded.

In this combustible context, this chapter reflects on the implication for media systems of conceptions of populism that see it not so much for its 'anti-pluralism' (Mueller, 2016) or its appeal to a 'pure people' in opposition to a 'corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007: 23), but as a threat to 'reason' and social order as well as to consensual and 'objective' journalism. From this perspective, populism and its mediated forms can be seen as examples of 'policy failure' yet the underlying reasons for this failure and especially the idea that we might want to consider policy options that would foster resilient and tolerant political environments, are all too often ignored. The chapter seeks to correct this not by arguing that there is either a media policy or a legal 'solution' to populism – indeed I am far from convinced that we need a 'solution' to all forms of populism – but that existing liberal democratic approaches to media policy have fostered highly unequal and distorted communication systems that have both been exploited by forces on the far right and helped to normalise far right ideas through repeated exposure in mainstream media outlets (Mondon and Winter, 2020).

The chapter identifies four areas of 'policy failure' that have nurtured the highly skewed media environments prone to populist exploitation and concludes with a call to devise a new policy paradigm based around *redistribution* that aims that to reconstruct media systems in order both to resist both state and market capture and to undermine the appeal of populist forces on the far right. It focuses on examples from Europe and the US not because they epitomise some sort of undifferentiated 'global populism' (see Chakravartty and Roy, 2017 for a fascinating account of 'mediatised populisms' across the Inter-Asian region; see also Artz, 2017, for an equally

interesting collection of essays on populist media policies across Latin America) but because, since the 1980s, they have provided some of the earliest and most visible examples of an emerging market-oriented communications policy paradigm characterised, according to Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2003: 197), by a susceptibility to pragmatism and populism.

Media policy failures

Our communications systems are not in any sense 'natural' but created in the shape of the vested interests that dominate at any one time; communications policy is a highly political, value-laden, interest-driven field of decision-making. Since the 1980s, this has generally followed a market logic whereby decision makers have been in thrall to rhetorics concerning innovation, efficiency and consumer sovereignty. Under the guide of neoliberalism (Freedman, 2008) or 'corporate libertarianism' (Pickard, 2014), communications markets have been restructured better to enhance capital accumulation and elite influence and to inscribe a commercial logic ever deeper into the cultural field.

Yet this policy restructuring is executed not simply through visible and identifiable legislative or regulatory acts but often through flawed decision-making processes that remove certain issues – notably those concerning concentrations of media power – from the policy agenda. Thus we have 'media policy silences' (Freedman, 2014) and 'media policy failures' (Pickard 2014: 216) characterized by 'inaction' and 'invisibility' and often caused by the ideological affinity between and mutual interests of policymakers, regulators and industry voices. This underlies the 'regulatory failure' that Robert Horwitz (1989: 29) describes as taking place when 'a captured agency *systematically* favors the private interests of regulated parties and

systematically ignores the public interest.' I argue that a series of media policy failures and silences have taken place in Europe and North America that have further distorted our communications landscapes and worked to the advantage of parties and movements on the right.

Failure to tackle concentrated ownership

Traditional ownership controls in media markets that seek to prevent any single company from gaining undue dominance or any single voice from gaining undue prominence have long been a key part of a democratic toolkit. According to Ed Baker (2009), concentrated media ownership 'creates the possibility of an individual decision-maker exercising enormous unchecked, undemocratic, potentially demagogic power…Even if this power is seldom exercised, no democracy should risk the danger.' This fear of 'demagogues' is at the heart of liberal opposition to all forms of populism – borne out by the warnings posed by the reign of former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi whose control of media outlets was essential to his populist success. Yet, as a result of pressure from lobbyists arguing that ownership rules are both a brake on innovation and an impediment to profitability at a time when traditional business models are under pressure, ownership rules in countries like the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand have been systematically relaxed since the 1980s. We have seen consolidation in terrestrial and satellite television markets, in the national and local press, in wholesale and retail radio and online such that the top 10 content companies in a study of 30 countries from across the globe account for an average 67% of national market share while the top four digital platforms account for a whopping 88% of their national media markets (Noam, 2016: 9).

Concentrated media markets do not, of course, create populist movements out of thin air but the desire of neoliberal policymakers to cement commercial values in, and to minimise regulatory controls on, accumulations of media power is hardly without consequence. First, this simply enhances the visibility, in particular, of far right politicians who can be relied upon to generate the provocative speech and nativist appeals that plays well with ratings. As Victor Pickard has argued in relation to Donald Trump's victory in 2016, 'the news media's excessive commercialism – driven by profit imperatives, especially the need to sell advertising – resulted in facile coverage of the election that emphasised entertainment over information' (Pickard, 2020: 2). Second, size matters, especially in media landscapes where there is a fierce battle for attention and therefore strong incentives for political leaders to accommodate to media power. The agenda-setting roles of Fox News in the US or of the tabloid *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* in whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment in the run-up to the Brexit vote were partly made possible by their status as dominant and very influential players in their respective news media markets. As long as liberal politicians and policymakers continue to exercise only a rhetorical commitment to plurality, then the incentives for large news organisations to amplify the controversial – and often racist – content that far right populists are only too pleased to provide will continue to exist.

Failure to regulate tech companies

The failure by policymakers to tackle monopolistic behavior is particularly clear in the digital sphere where a handful of giant intermediaries dominate their respective markets and where Facebook and Google alone account for such an overwhelming proportion of advertising revenue

that, according to the *Financial Times*, they 'not only own the playing field but are able to set the rules of the game as well' (Garrahan, 2016). Powered by ever-expanding piles of cash and the logic of network effects which rewards first-movers, these intermediaries are not simply expanding into associated fields but usurping some of the editorial and creative gatekeeping roles previously fulfilled by traditional content companies (Hesmondhalgh, 2017). Yet this market power, combined with the specific ways in which their algorithms function, has created giant monopolistic machines for the circulation of misinformation and propaganda that some commentators have argued has distorted recent ballots in the US and the UK (Cadwalladr, 2017). Whether or not it can be proved that 'fake news' has changed the result of elections – and research suggests that its influence may well have been exaggerated (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2016) – it is certainly the case that Google and Facebook have created both incentives and systems for low-cost, highly-targeted transmission of clickbait posing as news. For Tim Berners-Lee, the founder of the web, the 'system is failing…We have these dark ads that target and manipulate me and then vanish because I can't bookmark them. This is not democracy – this is putting who gets selected into the hands of the most manipulative companies out there' (quoted in Solon, 2017).

The problem is that this is a situation generated not simply by the computational power of complex algorithms but by the reluctance of regulators to address intermediary dominance. True, the European Commission did impose a €2.4 billion fine on Google in 2017 for abusing its dominance by unduly prioritising its own price comparison service but this is likely to be a mere inconvenience to its parent Alphabet as opposed to a structural challenge to its operating model. Regulators refuse to acknowledge Facebook and Google as media companies and instead continue to rely on the same liberal policy frameworks that were developed in the 1990s that

protected them from responsibility for the content they carry. US regulators like the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission do have antitrust remits that would enable them to challenge intermediary power but, wedded to a neoliberal vision of market fundamentalism, prefer to remain silent. Indeed, according to Barry Lynn and Matt Stoller (2017), 'the FTC itself partially created the "fake news" problem by failing to use its existing authority to block previous acquisitions by these platforms such as Facebook's purchase of WhatsApp and Instagram.' Shackled by a worldview that still sees regulation as an impediment to innovation, neoliberal governments are happy to rely on industry self-regulation that is insufficiently strong to change corporate behaviour or to pre-empt hateful forms of speech that continue to circulate and that underpin the growth of far right parties.

Failure to safeguard an effective fourth estate

First Amendment absolutism and libertarian conceptions of speech continue to undergird arguments against regulation of corporate interests. Yet this has not prevented attacks by the state on investigative journalism, one of the hallmarks of a functioning 'fourth estate' and one of the great traditional liberal defences against demagogues and tyrants. In the US, before 2008, a grand total of three cases had been brought against whistleblowers and leakers under the terms of the Espionage Act for helping journalists to report on classified government programmes. The Obama administration, however, used the Act to launch nine cases, leading the *New York Times* to comment that that if 'Donald J. Trump decides as president to throw a whistle-blower in jail for trying to talk to a reporter, or gets the F.B.I. to spy on a journalist, he will have one man to thank for bequeathing him such expansive power: Barack Obama' (Risen, 2016). Similarly, the

UK government passed the Investigatory Powers Act in 2016 that provides for unprecedented surveillance and hacking by the security services but fails to guarantee sufficient protection for journalists' sources. 'We do have to worry about a UK Donald Trump', commented one British lawmaker, Lord Strasburger. 'If we do end up with one, and that is not impossible, we have created the tools for repression' (quoted in MacAskill, 2016). Politicians like Donald Trump have, therefore, inherited anti-democratic tools that can be used against legitimate journalistic inquiry in the context of the rise of surveillance states and anti-terror regimes.

Yet these authoritarian instincts - ones that have been successfully exploited by populist leaders like Orban in Hungary and Kaczynski in Poland – coincide with a reluctance in liberal democracies to create effective systems of fully independent press self-regulation. So, for example, in the UK, the government has refused to enforce the full recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry that were designed to hold the press to account for the kinds of misrepresentation and distortion that was so evident, particularly in relation to coverage of immigration, in the run-up to the Brexit vote, in some of the leading tabloids. This failure to ensure that there is low-cost access to justice for those individuals and groups who have been unfairly targeted by right-wing media together with what Victor Pickard (2020: 4) calls the 'slow-but-sure structural collapse of professional journalism' both incentivises journalists to pursue stories that target and scapegoat minorities and undermines their ability to report on issues such as class, immigration and wealth that the far right are quick to sensationalise and simplify.

This is magnified by what Sarah Smarsh calls the 'economic trench between reporter and reported' (Smarsh, 2016) – the fact that the highest levels of journalism are increasingly filled by those who can afford to go to journalism school and who are thus most likely to be drawn from

the elites that are targeted by populist rage. 'That the term "populism" has become a pejorative among prominent liberal commentators should give us great pause' argues Smarsh. 'A journalism that embodies the plutocracy it's supposed to critique has failed its watchdog duty and lost the respect of people who call bullshit when they see it' (Smarsh, 2016). One response to this would be to introduce new levies on digital intermediaries to fund outlets committed to public interest journalism, particularly those from the not-for-profit sector, in order to correct this imbalance. For many years, neoliberal administrations saw this kind of initiative as a tax-raising disincentive to innovation that has no part to play in a dynamic market economy. However, the sheer scale of government intervention into the world economy as a result of the coronavirus has changed the debate and it is now incumbent on media reform advocates to make sure that subsidies are not ringfenced for the legacy press that helped to normalise right-wing populism in the first place.

Failure to nurture independent public service media

One of the great fears of mainstream journalism is that partisan media environments fuel political polarisation (and vice-versa) and destabilise democracy by shifting the political centre of gravity away from a 'moderate' consensus to 'extremes'. Media outlets in deregulated and highly commercial media systems gravitate towards wherever ratings and profits are to be found while media in authoritarian states are often 'captured' by business interests working closely with governments (Schiffrin, 2017). In this context, one potential solution is regularly proposed: an independent public service news media that is strong enough to defy the pressure of both government and market and to serve citizens without fear or favour. According to this narrative, it is organisations like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Norwegian NRK and the Finnish YLE that are claimed to offer the best prospect of impartial, high-

quality journalism that is insulated from the partisanship that feeds 'extremism'. According to the European Broadcasting Union (2016), countries with strong public service media traditions are likely to have greater press freedom, higher voter turnout, less corruption and lower levels of right-wing extremism.

In reality, far from retaining independence from all vested interests and delivering a critical and robust public interest journalism, public service media are often far too implicated in and attached to existing elite networks of power to be able to offer an effective challenge to them. Indeed, public service media are likely to be intertwined – through funding arrangements, elite capture and unaccountable modes of governance – with the specific configurations of political power in their 'home' states in the same ways as are commercial media. The BBC, for example, may lack the shrill tones of a Fox News or a Breitbart and is certainly publicly committed to impartial reporting but by marginalising voices that are not part of the established liberal consensus and amplifying those closest to official sources (Mills, 2016), it generates criticism from both left and right.

In Europe, public service media appears to be a particularly ineffective bulwark against extremism given the sizeable votes in recent years for far right politicians in countries like Austria, Germany, France and the Netherlands, all of which have high levels of consumption of public service content. These channels find it difficult either to transcend the tensions and polarisation that mark their wider political environments or to establish themselves as fully independent of power elites. In part, this is because public service media across the globe have been hollowed out – their funding has been cut, their staffing reduced and their services suffused with a market logic – in ways that make it increasingly difficult for them to provide an authoritative centrist challenge to political polarisation. This is not to denigrate the need for a meaningfully independent form of public media that acts as a counterweight to vested interests but simply to note that existing institutions have all too often been identified with precisely the same power elites that populists claim they are seeking to challenge.

Conclusion: towards a new policy paradigm

Media policy failures did not cause the rise of Trump, Bolsanaro, Modi, the Alternative for Germany, the People's Party in Austria or indeed Brexit. Those have other structural causes related to legacies of racism, experiences of insecurity and disenchantment with a political system that rewards people so unequally. In reality, populism is not a failure of a normally smoothly functioning political market but an inevitable, if volatile and contradictory, reaction to structural flaws in liberal democracy. Indeed, polarised political environments are not necessarily more *illiberal* than centrist political systems which themselves police a narrow and unrepresentative consensus. However, in its predominant nativist and xenophobic orientations, populism poses a particular danger to minority populations and social justice more generally. If we want to see an end to reactionary and demagogic populist voices, then we will need to develop very different policy orientations from those that currently serve corporate and state elites and that have opened up spaces that have been exploited by the far right.

What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which those most contemptuous of populism's anti-elite narratives are so reluctant to acknowledge their own complicity in facilitating the discursive and material conditions they now seek to oppose. This is as true for media elites as it is true for other areas of political life. Liberal media policies have been unable to lay the basis for independent, critical and representative media systems that would articulate and respond to the very diverse sets of concerns that citizens have in their respective environments. Policy silences paved the way for the emergence of powerful and yet unaccountable digital intermediaries through whose channels travels the 'fake news' widely believed by mainstream politicians and commentators to have corrupted democratic politics.

Policy silences smoothed the path for the implantation of commercial values throughout our communications systems, unshackling conceptions of the public interest from corporate responsibility so that poisonous coverage of refugees and other minorities is entirely legitimate and constitutionally protected while far right populist figures litter news bulletins because a business logic demands it.

These policy silences are intensified by a regulatory failure to challenge the intimacy of governments and media executives – a familiarity which further contaminates democratic societies and simply hands ammunition to far right populists who are then able to attack mainstream media as representatives of elite power. Liberal democratic media policy with its commitment to market forces, its privileging of corporate speech rights, its complicity with the establishment and its technocratic obsession for innovation ahead of the public interest, is therefore severely implicated in the growth of those reactionary movements that it is now affronted by. It has achieved this not by specifically tilting the policy framework towards populist parties but by failing to produce conditions which could sustain a robust and fearless media – one willing to stand up against populist bigotry while at the same time 'comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable'. Instead, both commercial and public service media have all too often helped to 'mainstream' populist ideas on race and immigration before, at least in some cases, turning their editorial ire onto precisely this kind of politics.

If centrist politicians and mainstream media really wished to remove the conditions in which anti-democratic forces are able to grow, they would acknowledge that is time for radically new communications policies – not solutions to populism *per se* so much as responses to degenerated media environments that have been captured by corporate and state elites. We need a new policy paradigm to supersede the market-oriented approach outlined by Van Cuilenburrg

and McQuail (2003), one that is based not simply around notions of freedom, access and

accountability as they suggested, but on the *redistribution* that is necessary to confront the abuse

of media power by states and corporations.

This is a paradigm designed to cater to the needs above all of disaffected citizens and

depends on reversing the policy failures outlined in this chapter. Instead of allowing further

concentrations of media power, a redistributive media policy will seek to break up existing

oligopolies and tackle the corrupting influence that comes with market domination; instead of

bowing down to the giant digital intermediaries whose algorithms increasingly structure patterns

of everyday life, a redistributive model will seek to find ways to use these algorithms better to

serve the public interest, in part by forcing private companies to share their proprietary models; a

redistributive model will siphon cash from the giant stockpiles held by the largest intermediaries

to support new, non-profit grass-roots journalism start-ups with a mandate to serve diverse

audiences; and, finally, a redistributive model would seek to construct vibrant public media

systems that are independent of vested interests and meaningfully able to hold power to account,

to cater to all audiences, irrespective of partisan affiliation and social background, and to cut the

ground from underneath the poison of the far right.

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