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*Mapping the discursive connections between online populism and disinformation in the US*

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## 5 Populist disinformation

### Mapping the discursive connections between online populism and disinformation in the US<sup>1</sup>

*Michael Hameleers*

#### Introduction

The rapid dissemination of mis- and disinformation through digital media and the rise of populist movements have both been regarded as key threats to contemporary democracy. To date, populism and mis- and disinformation have been studied within separate research fields. However, there is a strong conceptual affinity between these concepts (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). First, populism's antagonistic worldview that frames a divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites may also apply to a cleavage between honest people and lying elites accused of spreading disinformation. Second, populism forwards negativity, conflict, and incivility whilst foregrounding ordinary people's feelings and experiences. Such people-centric expressions of knowledge and experiences are juxtaposed to expert knowledge and empirical evidence—which are either circumvented or attacked.

Although this does not mean that populism is the same as disinformation, or that populists always spread falsehoods, it does indicate that the central stylistic and framing elements of populism can give rise to a type of argumentation in which people-centric experiences are preferred over expert knowledge and empirical evidence. In addition to this specific way of constructing knowledge, the societal consequences of populism and disinformation may be comparable, in the sense that they both forward a strong delegitimising message. By attributing blame to the alleged 'corrupt' or self-interested elites whilst emphasising the centrality of ordinary people, populist communication may create strong societal cleavages. Specifically, the in-group of deprived people is framed in opposition to dishonest, lying, and corrupt out-groups that are said to harm the people (Hameleers et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017). But why would people accept such information?

Extant research on the political consequences of mis- and disinformation posits that people have a tendency to accept information that aligns with their partisan lenses, whereas they avoid or counterargue messages that attack or

oppose their identities (Thorson, 2016). As a result of such defensive motivations, polarisation between ‘us and them’ may be amplified, potentially trapping people in fact-free populist echo chambers that resonate with their worldviews, irrespective of their veracity. In this chapter, we extend the conceptualisation of the interconnectedness of populism and disinformation beyond their shared political consequences by focusing on two central connections between these concepts: (1) blaming the media or other elite institutions as part of a populist communication strategy, and (2) populist disinformation as a discursive construction of fact-free, anti-elitist, and people-centric discourse in which conflict and negativity trump factually accurate and rational exchanges.

We rely on a qualitative content analysis of social media data collected in the US to empirically explore how these two relationships are constructed online. The main research questions guiding this endeavour are: (1) How are the media and journalists or other knowledge institutions blamed for being dishonest and inaccurate?; and (2) How are populist expressions reflecting a discourse that circumvents empirical knowledge and expert analyses? As these two relationships may be expressed by both populist politicians and disenchanted ordinary citizens (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), the qualitative analysis focuses on both the direct communication of a radical right-wing populist (Donald Trump) and the constructions of reality by ordinary citizens expressing their views on Facebook as an ‘imagined community’ of distrust and disenchantment. Taken together, this chapter aims to offer conceptual and empirical evidence of the two ways in which populism and disinformation are connected—both in terms of a blame-shifting label and the discursive construction of reality.

## **Theory**

### *Populist communication connected to the attribution of blame to the media*

Populism essentially cultivates a central opposition in politics and society. Specifically, the ordinary people are pitted against the ‘corrupt’ elites deemed responsible for the problems experienced by the people (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). Considering that populist ideas articulate that the ordinary people are not represented by the ‘corrupt’ and self-interested elites, populism strongly relates to attributions of blame (Hameleers et al., 2017). More specifically, hardships and crises experienced by the ordinary people are said to be caused by elites that are allegedly unwilling and unable to represent their ‘own’ people. Thus, populism essentially blames the elites—who can be politicians, corporations, media elites, or supra-national institutions—for causing the negative developments that are experienced by the silenced and powerless people.

To date, empirical research has explored how populist communication is constructed on un gated online media settings (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Yet, we lack studies that inductively explore how populism is constructed and which discursive elements are

central to the construction of the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (but see e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2019). To move forward with this, the current chapter aims to explore how the central building blocks of populist discourse are constructed by politicians and citizens, and how these constructions reflect disinformation or misinformation as both a label and a style of communication (see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, for a distinction between disinformation as genre and label).

Misinformation can basically be understood as the spread of inaccurate or false information disseminated without the intention to mislead (e.g., Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Wardle, 2017). Disinformation, in contrast, can be defined as the goal-directed and deceptive use of false or fabricated information in order to achieve profit or cause harm to individuals, groups, or democracy at large (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle, 2017). Although mis- and disinformation are not the same as populist communication, we can identify a discursive connection between both concepts. This connection applies both to the targets of populism’s blame attribution (i.e., the fake news media) and the style of communicating populist discourse (i.e., circumventing experts and empirical knowledge).

This relationship can, first of all, be understood as a blame-shifting tactic, in which anti-media sentiments are expressed (also see e.g., Krämer, 2017). In line with this, populist ideas can regard the established media outlets as part of the ‘corrupt’ establishment that is far removed from the people’s experiences. Populism’s blame attribution strategy may thus apply to the attribution of causal responsibility to the established media and journalists, and therefore cultivates an epistemic blame attribution that delegitimises established knowledge. Therefore, we first identify a relationship between populist rhetoric and attributions of mis- and disinformation: next to shifting blame to political elites, populist communication can shift blame to the established press or media elites for not representing the ordinary people’s worldview (misinformation) or for deliberately lying to them (disinformation).

Hence, populist ideas can regard elite actors as part of a lying or dishonest enemy that does not represent the people’s truth. In line with this, established media, journalists, and other elites that are responsible for disseminating knowledge are delegitimised as part of populism’s blame-shifting label. In line with this conceptualisation of the populism-disinformation relationship, this article aims to understand how politicians in the US and ‘ordinary’ people use social network sites to express populist boundaries that blame the media for the people’s problems. Here, we are mostly interested in how radical-right wing populist actors, such as former president Trump in the US, who have theoretically been associated with the spread of disinformation (e.g., Ross & Rivers, 2018), attribute blame to the media by accusing them of disinformation. However, it still remains an open question if, and if so, how, the affinity between the ideational core of populism and discourses of (un)truthfulness or the radical right-wing component is the driving force of attributions of blame to the media. For

this reason, we will contrast one most likely case of media scapegoating and fake news accusations (Trump) against other cases (left-wing populists and mainstream politicians).

In this chapter, a ‘mostly likely’ case of polarising disinformation accusations was chosen. Hence, the high levels of polarisation, fragmentation, and populism—combined with low trust in established institutions—make the US a vulnerable disinformation case (Humprecht et al., 2020). As fake news accusations may abound in a context of polarisation, fragmentation, and low trust in established information sources, we consider the US a relevant case for understanding the discursive relationship between populism and disinformation. Especially Trump’s communication can be regarded as a stereotypical case of media delegitimation that aligns with a radical right-wing populist framing of reality (e.g., Bhat & Chadha, 2020). With regards to the assumed relationship between populism and accusations of disinformation, we pose the following research questions: How are delegitimising references to the media as a scapegoat for the people’s problems constructed in social media content communicated by Trump (RQ1) and comments expressed by citizens (RQ2)? Considering that politicians are more likely to communicate political ideas via Twitter and citizens more likely to express themselves via Facebook (e.g., Vosoughi et al., 2018), we focus on different platforms for politicians’ and citizens’ discourses.

### **Populist disinformation as a style of fact-free communication**

Next to the blame-shifting relationship, this chapter considers the affinity between the framing of populism and the stylistic elements featured in disinformation campaigns. Hence, the second connection between populism and communicative untruthfulness conceptualised in this chapter—populist mis- or disinformation—describes the connection or discursive affinity between populist styles of communication and the expression of fact-free sentiments that circumvent, delegitimise, reject, and attack sources of expert knowledge and empirical evidence. But what populist styles may align with the communication of mis- and disinformation as false information?

Populist communication has been referred to as people-centric, conflict-focused, emotionalised (i.e., through anger and fear expressed toward the out-group), and based on common sense and gut feelings rather than rationality (Ernst et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019). Such styles may also be present in disinformation, which often contains a delegitimising and emotionalised narrative that targets established sources of information (e.g., Hameleers, 2022). Extending this argument, this chapter forwards the argument that the circumvention or attack of empirical evidence and expert-based analyses and knowledge may align with a style of argumentation that relies on people-centric experiences, feelings, and opinions instead of verified information.

Taking into account that populism, especially when expressed in online settings, shares a similar communication strategy (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Krämer, 2014), the second relationship between disinformation and populism is regarded as a discursive affinity between the constructions of reality through both populist and disinformation narratives. This stylistic affinity revolves around an emphasis on people-centric experiences over empirical evidence and expert knowledge. Although this does not imply that information without expert knowledge and empirical evidence references is always false, or that information with such references is always true, it does connect to a type of communication that deviates from journalistic principles that strive for the truth (Waisbord, 2018). The people's opinions, feelings, and experiences are less susceptible to verification and scrutiny than information presented as empirical evidence. Hence, they may not be subject to scrutiny as the true experiences of the people should always be central in political decision-making according to the populist master frame.

Building further on this discursive affinity between populist styles and disinformation narratives, the second research question of this chapter explores if, and if so, how, populist communication aligns with a communication tactic that avoids verified empirical evidence and experts whilst prioritising conflict, emotions, and people's experiences. The corresponding research question reads as follows: How are online populist expressions communicated by Trump (RQ3) and ordinary citizens in the US (RQ4) reflecting the circumvention or attack of elitist knowledge and empirical evidence whilst prioritising experiences, conflict, and people-centrism as the focal point of reality?

## **Method**

The four research questions are answered through a qualitative analysis of social media content in the US. Specifically, for this chapter, the direct communication of Trump and other US politicians on Twitter and the communication of ordinary citizens on Facebook was scraped and analysed discursively. These social media channels were chosen for different reasons. Centrally, the affordances perspective was used to contrast people-centric communication on Facebook with politicians' communication on Twitter. This perspective entails that different social media channels may respond to and empower different needs for communication, interaction, and sharing (e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2018). Twitter is mostly used to acquire novel information and can be used as a one-directional communication channel for political actors and other elite communicators. More specifically, followers receive updates from connections that are not necessarily reciprocal connections or 'friends'. Politicians frequently use (or have used in the past) Twitter as this channel enables them to reach a large number of followers, with whom they do not have to be connected. Moreover, social media channels such as Twitter allow politicians to circumvent the gatekeeping functions

and higher thresholds of established media and journalism, for which access is restricted or mediated.

Communication among ordinary citizens or members of the public on Facebook is more likely to be guided by strong-tie networks (e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2018). People mostly know each other, and connections are mutual on Facebook. In addition, Facebook interactions among citizens typically allow for richer and more detailed discussions and less elitist interactions than the response sections offered by Twitter. Based on these different uses connected to Twitter and Facebook, data from politicians' Twitter accounts in the US were scraped. Here, the qualitative analysis focused on Donald Trump as a stereotypical right-wing populist actor who is known to communicate hostile blame attributions to the media. The analysis was conducted at the time that Trump was president of the US with access to Twitter.

To further explore whether populist delegitimisations, anti-media sentiments, and the proposed relationships between disinformation and populism are essentially part of a radical right-wing populist phenomenon, Trump's Twitter communication was contrasted with the direct communication of the left-wing populist actor Bernie Sanders and a mainstream politician with a different political affinity (Hillary Clinton). The key aim of the case selection procedures was to explore and empirically map the theoretical premise that populist disinformation mainly pertains to the radical right-wing of the political spectrum and therefore is less salient in the communication of other political actors.

For the sample of Facebook communities used by ordinary citizens in the US to vent their disenchantment and populist attitudes, a most-likely strategy for the selection of cases was also employed: publicly accessible online communities revolving around the celebration of ordinary citizens and native people, whilst providing a forum for anti-elitist communication, were used to get inductive insights into the construction of populist disinformation by the ordinary people themselves.

The sample frame reflected a key electoral event in the US in order to map the antagonist and conflict-oriented discourse associated with populist disinformation: the presidential elections in the US. This event took place on November 8, 2016. In this setting, the four months of Twitter activity selected as relevant for a rich and thick analysis of content yielded 1,153 tweets by Donald Trump (excluding non-relevant entries and retweets). This sample was extended with 603 tweets posted by Bernie Sanders and 405 tweets from Hillary Clinton.

To contrast this Twitter communication with the Facebook communication of ordinary citizens publishing their ideas in online communities, we focused on exactly the same time period. Here, two publicly accessible Facebook community pages that reflected radical-right wing issue positions were sampled. As they typically reflect hostility, people-centrism, and anti-establishment communication, authoritarian Facebook pages were sampled (one patriotist community page and one nativist page were selected). The sampling strategy consisted

of two stages or ‘layers’ of selection: original posts on communities as well as replies that included engagement with these posts were selected in order to maintain narrative constructions of ordinary citizens co-constructing meaning online. Based on principles of maximum variation and saturation (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a small sample of ten original posts in each community was found to be sufficient for saturation (meaning that an additional sample of new posts did not yield additional findings). For every post, the first ten replies were selected (ordered by date). In total, 20 posts and 234 replies were analysed. To contrast these most likely community pages to negative cases, we added one left-wing community page that reflected an anti-corporation perspective, whilst articulating a more inclusive understanding of the people (which is in contrast to the authoritarian emphasis of the radical right-wing pages).

The posts and/or responses were analysed at the level of tweets, Facebook posts, or replies. The Grounded Theory approach was used to analyse the data in a step-by-step approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The coding process was selective in the sense that only excerpts that were relevant in light of the research questions were coded. First of all, open coding was applied to label segments of tweets, Facebook posts, and responses in light of the sensitising concepts that offered the building blocks of the four research questions (i.e., discursive constructions of truth, fake, misinformation, disinformation, populism). Furthermore, we looked at the type of argumentation used to make claims about reality: was empirical research quoted? Were expert analyses referred to? Did the politician or citizen refer to experiences and common sense as argumentation/evidence for their issue positions?

During the second step of focused coding, this extensive list of codes (500+) was reduced by merging unique open codes, reformulating codes to higher levels of abstraction, and raising codes to categories. Codes were grouped and ordered based on their variety. In this process, piles of codes related to the construction of truth, the attribution of blame to (mainstream) media, falsehoods, and populism were made. These groups were used when conceptualising dimensions that captured variety in the concepts of interest. Finally, during the step of axial coding, connections between these groups were made. All in all, the analysis was focused on mapping how the two theoretically proposed relationships between populism and disinformation in the online setting were shaped discursively. Thus, how was populist disinformation presented as a blame-shifting label versus a style that attacked, circumvented, or delegitimized expert knowledge and empirical evidence? Although it can be noted that content was selected based on the dependent variable, considering that communication with a high likelihood to contain populism and disinformation was included, the analysis does not strive toward representativeness or an assessment of the relative dominance of populist disinformation. Rather, the focus on most likely cases of the targeted expressions was intended to map—as rich and detailed as possible—the different ways in which populism and disinformation are entangled discursively.



## Results

### *The Divide between honest people and lying ledia*

Trump often used Twitter to scapegoat the traditional press for withholding the truth from ordinary people. The media, and mainstream media in particular, were blamed for spreading lies that deprived the people of the truth. This can be exemplified by the following Tweet containing an anti-media sentiment expressed by Trump: “Not only does the media give a platform to hate groups, but the media turns a blind eye to the gang violence on our streets!” . Even more explicitly, Trump actively referred to a number of media channels he regarded as part of the so-called ‘fake news’ media—allegedly the greatest enemy of the American people: “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” References to the “danger to our country” or “the American people” explicate the discursive linkage between blame attributed to the media and populist communication that expresses a central divide between ordinary native citizens and the corrupt or dangerous out-groups responsible for the people’s deprivation. In line with this, Trump expressed that *because* the media are not reporting accurately on the facts that happened, and as they deliberately distort the truth, the native people are threatened severely.

Trump further emphasised that the media’s dishonesty and inaccurate reporting are goal-directed and deliberate: “FAKE NEWS media knowingly doesn’t tell the truth. A great danger to our country. The failing @nytimes has become a joke. Likewise @CNN. Sad!” These accusations of disinformation further point to an alleged political goal or hidden agenda of the news media: “Crooked Hillary colluded w/FBI and DOJ and media is covering up to protect her. It’s a #RiggedSystem! Our country deserves better!” Trump blamed different allegedly ‘biased’ news outlets for disproportionately supporting Democrats, supporting the idea that Trump blamed the media for being hostile against his party. In this reading, these opposed media outlets are referred to as propaganda machines that promote and uncritically disseminate the political agenda of the Democrats whilst disregarding, attacking, or strategically neglecting the Republicans.

The references of Trump to established media also reveal the discursive framing of an alleged “climate of dishonesty and disinformation” as a key threat to the native ordinary people. Trump specifically used adjectives such as dishonest, rigged, dirty, crooked, and fake to denote that the media are an enemy of the people. Contrasting this fake news label and disinformation accusation central to Trump’s communication with other political actors, it can be confirmed that hostile media sentiments and accusations of disinformation do not spill over to left-wing populists or the mainstream. Thus, Bernie Sanders did not voice hostile media sentiments. Specifically, disinformation, fake news, or related accusations were not addressed to the established press or other sources of information. The discourses of (un)truthfulness voiced by him did emphasise an antagonism

between the people's reality and the lies spread by his political opponent Trump (at least in the pre-election period). In the pre- and post-election periods, Clinton also did not explicitly engage in discourses of (un)truthfulness, although her partisan communication blamed Trump for being dishonest and inaccurate in his depiction of reality.

*A populist conception of truth: ordinary people are honest*

To answer the second research question, we looked at the affinity between populist constructions of knowledge and truths and disinformation discourses. In the direct Twitter communication of Trump, expert analyses and empirical evidence are oftentimes neglected and discredited, whereas ordinary people are regarded as the most reliable source of honest and accurate information. This type of evidence that prioritises common sense and ordinary people was used to interpret many different issues, for example, the (failing) expenditures of the government. Trump frequently made delegitimising claims without any references to evidence, statistics, numbers, or expert opinion.

More specifically, as illustrated by the following quote, Trump actively defended the political agenda he pursues as the agenda governed by the common sense of the American people: "Our agenda is NOT a partisan agenda—it is the mainstream, common sense agenda of the American People". Moreover, Trump explicitly referred to "facts" and "the truth" without contextualising such claims with empirical evidence to support these truths.

In these references to the truth and the centrality of ordinary people's reality, the two types of relationships—accusations of disinformation and a populist framing of truth and reality—oftentimes co-occurred in single interpretations. As Trump tweeted in 2018: The Fake News hates me saying that they are the Enemy of the People only because they know it's TRUE. I am providing a great service by explaining this to the American People. They purposely cause great division & distrust. They can also cause War! They are very dangerous & sick!

Foregrounding the people's honest and pure truth was not just a right-wing populist idea communicated by Trump. The left-wing populist actor Bernie Sanders also emphasised that ordinary people are right, whereas elitist outsiders (i.e., corporations) are breaking their promises by lying to the people. This can be illustrated by the following Tweet in 2016: "Time and again Native Americans have seen the government break solemn promises and corporations put profits ahead of their sovereign rights".

Importantly, Trump's populist disinformation narrative often contained blame attributions and hostile claims without offering expert knowledge and empirical evidence. Hence, when blaming experts and the media, Trump did not offer evidence to illustrate why they were wrong, and rather referred to common sense and his own observations to back up delegitimising labels: The so-called experts on Trump over at the New York Times wrote a long and boring article

on my cellphone usage that is so incorrect I do not have time here to correct it. I only use Government Phones, and have only one seldom used government cell phone. Story is soooo wrong!

*Facebook users' construction of honest 'Us' versus dishonest 'Them'*

The two relationships between populism and disinformation under study—the blame-shifting label and the discursive construction of reality—were also identified in the reality constructions of US Facebook users who were part of anti-elite communities. Here, we will mostly pay attention to the main differences between the themes already identified in Trump's tweets and the Facebook posts of citizens. First of all, Facebook users sharing their disenchantment made a less clear distinction between trustworthy versus corrupt media outlets. Ordinary citizens frequently lumped the media, opposed partisans, and governmental institutions together as an elitist outsider that did not comprehend the people's reality. As one member of a Facebook community explained: "Those that are white getting in trouble for hate (racist) crimes and yet the far left communist Democrat controlled media never seem to report these hate crimes against the whites" (Facebook user, February 15, 2017).

Based on the analysis of the Facebook posts, we can conclude that the epistemic and moral boundary between the innocent and honest ordinary people and the lying elites was more salient than reflected in the direct communication of the radical right-wing populist leader. Similar to the political discourse on Twitter, however, people referred to their understandings of a universal reality or one truth without using empirical evidence or facts: "That's the truth. People with jobs don't vote Democrat unless they just don't understand what goes on in this world" (Facebook user, April 6, 2017).

If we contrast these reality constructions to the reality expressions salient on the left-wing Facebook community page, we can conclude that people-centrism and a focus on the common sense of ordinary people are salient themes on these community pages as well. On these pages, the reality constructions and lies of corporate and political elites are contrasted to ordinary people's experiences. Here, we see a left-wing populist construction in which the hardworking ordinary citizen is juxtaposed to the self-interested elites. Media critique is salient here as well, but it takes on less hostile and uncivil forms. Although the hostile media critique on the right-wing populist pages may be considered as accusations of disinformation or fake news—as an intentional attribution of deception and misleading information is expressed—the left-wing pages more closely reflected attributions of misinformation.

Thus, although media critique may be a universal theme and a central element of Facebook pages that reflect more people oriented and critical views on politics, only radical right-wing pages strongly reflected the discursive relationships between populism and disinformation. Hence, the affinity between populism and

the ‘fake news label’ (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019) is a more defining characteristic of radical right-wing and authoritarian online communities.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In current digital societies, the spread of dishonest or inaccurate information may have far-reaching political consequences (van Aelst et al., 2017). Online, the epistemic and universal status of factual information increasingly becomes the focal point of heated debates, and people’s acceptance of information may be driven by defensive and consistency motivations rather than the motivation to reach the most accurate decisions (e.g., Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). At the same time, populist movements are popular and influential online (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017), and increasingly take centre stage in the epistemic and post-factual debates by delegitimising elitist or established understandings of a factual reality—further contributing to the erosion of a shared belief and trust in science, empirical evidence, and expert knowledge. Amidst this epistemic crisis, this chapter sought to conceptually and empirically identify the affinity between disinformation narratives and populist discourse.

Against this backdrop, this chapter has proposed a two-sided relationship between populism and mis- and disinformation: (1) the attribution of mis- and disinformation to the (media) elites; and (2) populist disinformation as a communication style that may circumvent empirical evidence and expert analysis, whilst placing common sense and ordinary people at the centre stage of reality. Based on the qualitative analyses reported in this paper, we found that Trump in the US expressed a populist boundary between the dishonest, inaccurate, and fake media and ordinary native people who were victimized by the media’s dishonesty. These attributions can be seen as accusations of disinformation: the media were accused of deliberately distorting reality to promote their own biased political agendas.

Supporting the theoretical premise that populist discourse is often devoid of empirical facts, expert knowledge, or a rational foundation (e.g., Waisbord, 2018), Trump’s anti-media discourse clearly avoided expert knowledge, statistics, verifiable facts, or evidence, and relied on common sense and the people’s truth as evidence for the populist claims made. In that sense, a clear evidence-driven foundation for fake news accusations was often missing. There was little room for balance or opposing viewpoints, and the populist discourse was generally one-sided and presented as the only reality opposed to the fake news presented by opposing politicians and media sources. However, this does not mean that references to experts and evidence were absent in all accusations and delegitimising narratives. In line with the ideas of epistemic populism, alternative sources of expertise that resonated with partisan claims were used to legitimise accusations at times (see, e.g., Saurette & Gunster, 2011). Although these ‘experts’ and sources of evidence are not featured in

legacy media or conventional knowledge disseminators, such references can be used to enhance the legitimacy of delegitimising claims (also see Peck, 2019 on ‘Fox Populism’).

One central implication of these findings is that social network sites such as Twitter provide (populist) politicians with a platform to express delegitimising discourse that is devoid of a fact-based narrative. This may eventually increase polarised divides in society, and raise levels of political distrust and cynicism among the electorate (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Explicit attacks targeted at the news media were only found on the radical-right and did not spill over to the communication tactics of left-wing populists or mainstream politicians. Left-wing populists may, however, emphasise people’s centrality and attributed dishonesty to their political rivals and the (corporate) establishment. Hence, discourses of untruthfulness can be connected to populism in general, whereas the explicit reliance on common sense and emotions as the focal point of reality and blame attribution to the ‘lying’ established press is a communication tactic of radical right-wing populists in particular.

But how is populist disinformation constructed by ordinary citizens online? The qualitative content analysis of citizens’ discourse on Facebook largely confirms the findings of the politicians’ discourse, pointing to a clear link between populist interpretations expressed by right-wing populists and disenfranchised or nativist ordinary citizens. The difference mainly revolves around the type of moral and epistemic cleavage emphasised by the public. More specifically, citizens communicating in certain Facebook communities referred to the political and media elites as a larger enemy threatening ordinary people, whereas Trump articulated a more fine-grained distinction between the fake news media and politicians of the opposing party. The analysis of the negative cases—left-wing-orientated Facebook community pages—revealed that emphasising the people’s truth is not restricted to radical right-wing populist interpretations. However, media critique was less hostile and focused more on unintended false information (misinformation) than intentional deception (disinformation). These findings indicate that citizens communicating their political perspectives on different platforms do distinguish between attributions of mis- and disinformation.

There are important avenues for future research on this topic. Future research may extend the analysis to different platforms (i.e., including commentary sections of mainstream outlets) and political actors (i.e., a clearer distinction between populist and mainstream actors may be relevant). Second, the qualitative and inductive findings presented in this article offer some important insights into how populist disinformation manifests itself online, but may be extended with (automated) content analytic research that also provides insights into the relative salience of, and relationships between, different forms of populist sentiments targeted at the media.

## Note

- 1 *This is a revised and updated version of the following open access publication:*  
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