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Hameleers, M.

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# The Epistemic Dimension of Populist Communication: Can Exposure to Populist Communication Spark Factual Relativism?

*Michael Hamелеers*

## INTRODUCTION

In times of mounting distrust in established knowledge, conventional expert sources, scientific evidence, and the abundance of counter-factual truth claims online, we are arguably confronted with a post-truth era (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Although truth has always been a construction whose validation depends on one's perspective, the current climate of distrust and the wide availability of alternative constructions of truth that compete for legitimacy has further eroded, relativized, and polarized support for factual information. In this chapter, I argue that this trend may be both cause and consequence of populist communication. Empirically, I aim to explore to what extent this is the case, and how beliefs related to the relative status of factual knowledge can be primed by exposure to populist communication.

Populist communication—which I understand as the emphasis of a moral and causal divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017)—has drastically changed in the face of shifts

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M. Hamелеers (✉)  
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands  
e-mail: [m.hameleers@uva.nl](mailto:m.hameleers@uva.nl)

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toward post-truth relativism. Initially, populism has been conceptualized as a social identity frame that juxtaposes ordinary people against political elites, such as the government (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). However, in line with increasing concerns over the prevalence of mis- and disinformation, media hostility and anti-science sentiments, populism has increasingly emphasized a central opposition between honest ordinary people and duplicitous elites, which include the mainstream media and scientists (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Conrad, in this volume). As omnipresent blame-shifting labels related to ‘fake news’ or ‘corrupt scientists’ may severely undermine people’s trust in mainstream information and conventional knowledge (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2022; Van der Meer et al., 2023), it is crucial to explore in what ways populism has taken on an epistemic dimension, and how the antagonism between the people’s truths and the alleged lies of the established order may contribute to increasing epistemic polarization and relativism.

Against this background, this chapter first of all explores how online populist messages create an antagonism between congruent and incongruent elitist truth claims. Based on the qualitative inventory of delegitimizing populist narratives, I report on the findings of an experiment in which participants were exposed to messages framed using epistemic populism. Specifically, people saw political messages in which scientific knowledge and expert evidence were attacked and contrasted to people-centric claims on reality. The experiment was conducted to explore if the emphasis on a binary divide between the people’s honesty and the deception of elites can fuel the perception that truthfulness has become relative, debatable, and polarized (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The main expectation is that when established knowledge is attacked and delegitimized, people will be strengthened in the belief that factual information is relative, flexible, and depends on one’s perspective. After all, delegitimizing conventional truth claims typically regarded as authoritative knowledge undermines the idea that truths are fixed, or that objective knowledge is not subjected to interpretation and biases.

As a well-functioning deliberative democracy should be founded upon a shared understanding of basic facts, I argue that the rise of epistemic populism across democracies is a potentially undermining force that further erodes trust and makes people open to counter-factual evidence resonating with their existing beliefs. Hence, when populists deliberately target science and mainstream media with accusations of disinformation and bias, the public may become increasingly polarized on an epistemic

level. As a consequence, citizens may come to distrust democratic institutions and media, and may instead gravitate toward counter-factual alternative media sources and conspiracy theories.

By mapping the epistemic dimension of populist communication and connecting it to its effects on perceived factual relativism, this chapter aims to make an important contribution to the populism literature. Although the epistemic component of populism has been acknowledged in extant literature (e.g., Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Saurette & Gunster, 2011), we currently know little about how the emphasis on epistemic populism in communication may fuel factual relativism, thereby contributing to epistemic populism on a societal level. Taken together, our study explores how the flexible and chameleonic nature of populism has adjusted itself to the era of factual relativism and increasing concerns on disinformation—herewith revealing the potentially disruptive nature of communication that puts into question the legitimacy of established knowledge and institutions involved in informing the public.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Conceptualizing Epistemic Populism*

Populism can essentially be defined as the emphasis of an antagonism between ordinary people and corrupt elites, who allegedly oppose and harm the ordinary people's will (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). Populism has either been studied from a political party or actor-centered perspective or from a discursive or stylistic framework. The former framework postulates that certain political actors or parties may be classified as populist, whereas others are not. The stylistic or discursive approach, in contrast, presupposes that populism can be emphasized as a style or frame and that the central ideas of populism can be present to various degrees (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In line with this, I conceptualize populist communication as the framing or emphasis on a central divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). This frame can be used to add an interpretation to different issues, and may be used by different political and non-political actors to stress a social identity frame that distinguishes the ordinary people from corrupt and dishonest elite actors (Bos et al., 2020).

In line with scholars who have looked at the connection between truth and populism (e.g., Hameleers, 2022; Saurette & Gunster, 2011;

Waisbord, 2018), I argue that populist communication has taken on an epistemic dimension in recent years, especially in the aftermath of growing concerns about disinformation and the weaponization of fake news after the 2016 US. elections. Specifically, polarizing political figures and political parties such as Trump in the US, Baudet in the Netherlands and the AfD in Germany often use their direct communication channels to blame established media for spreading ‘fake news’—especially when established information is in conflict with their positions (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Conrad, in this volume). These accusations are congruent with a populist style of communication, as the conflict between an honest in-group and culpable elite actors is emphasized: The elites are allegedly to blame for misinforming and deceiving the ordinary people, thus causing harm to the powerless and honest people.

This illustrates how the divide between the people and the elites emphasized in populist communication may go beyond blame shifting to political elites: The mainstream media, scientists, experts, and other knowledge disseminators may be attributed blame for lying to the people, or deliberately presenting them with a fake narrative to hide reality (Hameleers et al., 2020). This strongly aligns with the ideas of a conspiracy narrative: The powerful and ‘evil’ elites are accused of being involved in a scheme that is meant to silence the people and maintain the power imbalance in society (e.g., Barkun, 2003). Especially in an information ecology where counter-factual narratives compete for attention with established accounts of events (Waisbord, 2018), populist messages that contain ‘fake news’ accusations may offer a credible interpretation of events. Hence, in times when facts have become more relative and the truth debatable on factual terms (Van Aelst et al., 2017), delegitimizing populist narratives may be persuasive for citizens who are no longer sure whom to trust or believe.

Populism’s connection to constructions of truth and reality has formerly been referred to as epistemic populism by Saurette and Gunster (2011). In their analysis of Canadian political talk radio, Saurette and Gunster (2011) concluded that the construction of legitimate truth claims in talk radio often takes on a populist form, which specifically means that the knowledge of the ordinary people and common sense are seen as legitimate forms of knowledge. At the same time, the knowledge disseminated by elites, experts, and established information sources is deemed illegitimate. In line with populism’s emphasis on the centrality of ordinary people, epistemic populism highlights that the first-hand experiences

and common sense of ordinary people are a more trustworthy indicator of reality than distant expert analyses or elite interpretations that may be corrupt.

This understanding of epistemic populism resonates with the forms of counter-knowledge found on alternative or hyper-partisan media platforms (Heft et al., 2019; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Hyper-partisan alternative media may be a receptive platform for the expression of epistemic populism as they are characterized by their anti-establishment perspective: These platforms disseminate truth claims that challenge or attack established knowledge, whilst postulating alternative truth claims that are in line with a populist perspective (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Given the anti-elite perspective of hyper-partisan media platforms that offer an alternative to conventional information sources, this study will explore constructions of epistemic populism on the hyper-partisan US platform Breitbart as a case study. Considering that this platform is known for its hyper-partisan perspective and anti-elite constructions (Hameleers & Yekta, 2023) as well as its popularity among especially right-wing populists (Müller & Schulz, 2021), I consider it an important likely case of epistemic populism. In addition, as this US-based platform has a wide reach in terms of unique monthly users, its constructions of reality may have an important role in shaping perceived factual relativism. Yet, it should be noted that the inclusion of one specific alternative and hyper-partisan media platform is not representative of the wider alternative media landscape, or regional variances in the construction of counter-factual truth claims. I use a case study to explore the construction of epistemic populism, and to showcase the variety of the ways in which alternative truth claims may be framed in opposition to established claims on truth, objectivity, and expert consensus. I raise the following exploratory research question for the case study presented in this chapter: How and to what extent is epistemic populism constructed on the hyper-partisan media platform Breitbart (RQ<sub>1</sub>)?

## EPISTEMIC POPULISM AND FACTUAL RELATIVISM

Next to mapping the nature of epistemic populism on hyper-partisan media, I aim to show whether and how such communication may fuel factual relativism among recipients. Does the populist emphasis on a divide between legitimate and illegitimate truth claims fuel the idea that

the truth is debatable, subjective, and open to interpretation? Extant literature on the effects of fake news accusations and similar labels delegitimizing the media has indicated that exposure to anti-media communication lowers trust in the media or factually accurate information (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2022; Tandoc & Seet, 2022; Van Der Meer et al., 2023; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Specifically, Egelhofer et al. (2022) find that accusations of disinformation can lower trust in the targeted media outlet. For populist citizens, this may even spill over to general evaluations of the media's trustworthiness. In a similar vein, Tandoc and Seet (2022) find that different disinformation labels may impact perceived concerns about false information, and that explicit fake news labels can trigger perceived falsity and intentionality. Focusing specifically on misinformation exposure, Van der Meer et al (2023) find that messages that contain actual misinformation or an accusation of falsehoods lower trust in factually accurate information. Lastly, Van Duyn and Collier (2019) conclude that exposure to accusations of fake news in political discourse lowers news trust and reduces the accurate identification of real news.

Based on extant research on delegitimizing messages that blame the media, it can thus be concluded that such communication can undermine trust in accurate information. Taking this one step further, I expect that the epistemic populism—stressing the validity of common sense and people-centric experiences over established facts—can enhance perceived factual relativism. The underlying rationale is that exposure to populist information that cultivates distrust in established facts, expert knowledge, and the mainstream media may activate cynicism related to the universal status of facts. Similar to the mechanisms underlying the effects of anti-elite populist communication, such messages may cultivate a deprived in-group identity, herewith motivating people to strengthen their attachment to the threatened in-group (e.g., Bos et al., 2020). Exposure to the idea that the media or other knowledge disseminators lie to the honest people may strengthen the perceived epistemic cleavage between 'us and them,' contributing to the belief that truthfulness is a matter of debate and the conflicting and irreconcilable perspectives of the people versus the elite.

Although one could argue that exposure to populist communication mainly strengthens the belief that there is one truth, which is the alternative version of reality allegedly hidden from the ordinary people, I postulate that the effects of populism on the general population are different. Indeed, although people with prior beliefs aligning

with populism may rather be confirmed in their idea that the established media and other elite actors spread untruths, the populist delegitimization of established knowledge may have a different main effect on the general audience: It can be interpreted as undermining the value of scientific evidence, expertise, and authoritative knowledge. Therefore, as a consequence of being exposed to epistemic populism, recipients may become more cynical toward the idea that truthfulness and objectivity are the result of fixed and objective scientific principles and consensus, rather than a relative and subjective and biased reading of facts and knowledge. Attacks on established and authoritative knowledge should thus activate the perception that facts are relative, subjective, and part of biased or ideological constructions. Based on this, I introduce the following hypothesis: Exposure to epistemic populism augments perceived factual relativism (H1).

To answer the research question and the hypothesis, I rely on two data collections using different methods. First of all, a qualitative content analysis of the alternative hyper-partisan media platform Breitbart is conducted. The central aim of this first study is to explore how the theoretically outlined concept of epistemic populism is framed by an alternative media platform. As a second study, and based on the findings of the content analysis, I conducted an experiment in which the central features of epistemic populism were manipulated into a political communication setting. The aim of this second study was to investigate whether exposure to the central ideas of epistemic populism would reinforce or activate the interpretation that factual knowledge and expert interpretations are subjective and contingent upon biases and personal interpretations. After all, the populist attack on science, truth telling, and factual knowledge may undermine the idea of an objectively observable reality, and may cast doubt on the existence of hard facts or independent expert knowledge.

## STUDY I: THE EXPLORATION OF EPISTEMIC POPULISM ON BREITBART

### *Methods*

To better understand how epistemic populism is constructed, I analyze Breitbart as a ‘most likely’ case of an alternative media platform that caters to the needs of a populist audience (e.g., Müller & Schulz, 2021) whilst also containing strong anti-establishment and counter-factual narratives



(Heft et al., 2019). I specifically look at the post-Covid-19 period in order to capture a wide range of issues for which truth claims may follow an antagonistic and populist framework. For this reason, I analyzed a theoretical sample of original articles published on Breitbart's website in the period from the 1st of June 2022 to the 1st of June 2023. As our exploratory endeavor does not aim for a representative overview of themes, but rather a diverse set of narratives that are theoretically meaningful, the inclusion criteria were formulated based on diversity and relevance: A maximum variety of narratives and topics was included within the selected timeframe (i.e., climate change, immigration, gun control). As a starting point, I took an initial sample of 50 articles. To assess saturation, and to allow for a cyclic-iterative analysis process, these 50 articles were coded before another 50 articles were selected and coded. For the additional sample, I looked for different perspectives that could extend or disprove additional findings, and herewith help us to arrive at an exhaustive overview of the construction of truth claims within the framework of epistemic populism.

The selected articles were coded selectively. This means that the articles were first read in depth. After this round of familiarization, relevant segments of the data were arced and assigned open codes, following a grounded theory approach of data reduction (Charmaz, 2006). A segment of text was deemed relevant when it contained implicit or explicit references to truth claims, reality, objectivity, expertise, evidence, common sense, or other related themes that connected to RQ<sub>1</sub> in the broadest sense. The procedures of open coding followed an unstructured approach, in order to not impose meaning on the data during the first step of coding: descriptive labels that summarized the essence of the fragments were attached to the data (i.e. invoking public opinion to voice partisan disagreement and delegitimization; fake news accusation paired with mission statement alternative media). In the second step of focused coding, the open codes were reduced, merged, and (re)grouped: Relevant codes were made more central and stripped from specific context; codes that discussed variety on the same dimensions were grouped; and similar codes were merged. This step allowed us to see the essence of the data, and formed the basis for developing themes that are discussed below in the results section. These themes discuss the main variety within different categories that indicate epistemic populism as an overarching concept.

## FINDINGS OF STUDY I

*Quoting Public Opinion and the People's Feelings to Delegitimize the Opposition*

In many hyper-partisan constructions of reality, the opinions and feelings of the ordinary people or the majority were used to legitimize truth claims congruent with a conservative ideology. In many cases, Breitbart selectively quoted results from public opinion data to indicate the weak support for liberals or their political positions: 'With the president set to showcase "Bidenomics" in a speech in Chicago, a new poll finds that only one in three US adults approve of his economic leadership. That 34 percent figure is even lower than his overall approval rating of 41 percent.' Next to referring to the majority of the ordinary people as evidence for bi-partisan truth claims, the feelings and sentiments of ordinary citizens were often used to legitimize hyper-partisan positions on immigration. As an example, in an article stating that British families had to move out of a military base to make room for 'alleged asylum seekers,' Breitbart included different quotes from appalled families:

British Military families have been left 'appalled' after they were given just a week's notice to leave their homes at a former airbase in Essex to make way for alleged asylum seekers. Speaking to Sky News, a member of one of the military families said: 'We've almost been moved off the base now before the asylum seekers move on. Originally we were given a good time period. It was a good couple of months. But over the last few weeks that's all shuffled.'

By referring to the personal and emotional narratives of ordinary citizens, and by emphasizing the legitimacy of partisan claims by selectively referring to congruent public opinion data and majority support, epistemic populism was constructed (RQ<sub>1</sub>). Specifically, experts and elite interpretations of events were circumvented, whereas the ordinary people's common sense and truth claims were used to justify anti-liberal, anti-left, anti- 'woke' or other anti-establishment narratives.

*Logical Fallacies and Selective Quoting of Evidence*

Next to the emphasis on the experiences and common sense of ordinary people and the circumvention of experts and conventional evidence,

Breitbart's truth claims often contained logical fallacies. Specifically, congruent truth claims were constructed by only selectively quoting evidence, or by relativizing incongruent truth claims through unfair comparisons. As an example, to legitimize the conservative position that electric vehicles are part of a deceptive left-wing agenda, Breitbart discussed the safety risks of electrical vehicles. To make the point that electric vehicles are more dangerous than traditional vehicles, they selectively compared one of the smallest gasoline-fueled cars with one of the biggest electric trucks: 'The official, Jennifer Homendy, raised the issue in a speech in Washington to the Transportation Research Board when she pointed, by way as an example, to an electric GMC Hummer that weighs about 9,000 pounds with a battery pack that alone is 2,900 pounds—roughly the entire weight of a typical Honda Civic.' Although it is discussed as an example, the narrative compares vehicles from completely different categories (a small hatchback to a large SUV) to make the general point that electric vehicles are heavy and thus more dangerous.

In a similar vein, applied to the congruent conservative perspective on gun rights, Breitbart compared the deaths caused by guns to the deaths caused by car accidents to legitimize the truth claims that guns are not dangerous: 'CNN pushed gun control by citing accidental gun death figures for children but omitted the fact that car accidents kill 27 times more children.' Although this statement may be factually accurate, the accusation that a mainstream media outlet 'omitted facts on car accidents' is a logical fallacy in the sense that the statement was about the deaths of gun control, and not a comparison between the risks of firearms compared to other causes of death among children. Yet, by blaming the media for selectively leaving out factual information, an accusation of partisan bias was articulated.

### *Delegitimizing Conventional Knowledge and the Mainstream Media*

Next to emphasizing the centrality of the people, populism revolves around the attribution of blame to out-groups. In epistemic populism, this could relate to the attribution of blame to the media, experts, or other sources of conventional knowledge dissemination. This anti-elitist perspective was also present in the reality constructions of Breitbart. In different instances, the elites were accused of silencing the ordinary people by limiting the freedom of speech: 'Hate speech laws currently going through the Irish parliament will see ordinary people treated like

‘drug dealers’ over their views, a Senator has said.’ The attribution of untruths to the elites also followed a partisan logic. For example, Breitbart devoted an entire article to ‘debunking the lies of Biden.’ In this article, Biden was accused of deliberately deceiving the people. Yet, most of the debunking messages themselves did not contain references to empirical evidence or relevant expert knowledge. The accusation of disinformation was constructed in a populist manner: Biden was accused of lying, and common sense was used to legitimize this claim.

Accusations of disinformation were also often targeted at the mainstream media or social media platforms. Social media companies were accused of censorship, and their efforts to combat disinformation were regarded as an intentional attempt to hide the ordinary people’s truth. Mainstream media channels, such as the BBC, were accused of spreading fake news, even if they admitted their mistakes after spreading potentially inaccurate information: ‘The fake news Tweet has since been deleted, but the BBC insisted it was an ‘honest mistake’ after the speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York this Tuesday.’ The apologies of the BBC were regarded as ‘belated’ and their own claims on the honesty of their mistakes were refuted by pointing to the partisan bias of the media platform: ‘Clearly blaming the President for the conflict they inadvertently believed was coming, Britain’s BBC Tweeted that Donald Trump tells UN General Assembly ‘war will follow’ after his decision to re-impose sanctions on Iran.’

Interestingly, alternative media’s anti-establishment position and their opposition to mainstream media and the established order was explicitly emphasized by Breitbart, stressing that their role is to not act as amplifiers of the established media: ‘At the very least, consumers of alternative media—you know, our customers—expect us to not act as amplifiers for the establishment media. At the very least, if nothing else, alternative media should be a place where we are not the media’s toadies, where we do not unquestioningly spread MSM narratives.’

Here, we can also see an interesting connection between the theme related to references to public opinion data and the delegitimization of the media. More specifically, to emphasize the narrative that established media cannot be trusted, Breitbart referred to public opinion data that revealed the public’s low trust in the mainstream media, and the prominent perception among especially conservatives that the mainstream media deliberately deceives the people:

In other words, only one-quarter of the country believe the media are not guilty of intentionally spreading lies to mislead the American people. The partisan breakdown is even more revealing. A full 92 percent of Republicans believe the media intentionally mislead the public. Independents are not far behind, with 79 percent. Even a majority of Democrats, 52 percent, agree, with only 46 percent disagreeing.

These statistics were used to legitimize the antagonistic narrative that the mainstream media cannot be trusted, and that established media and journalists are involved in deliberately deceiving the people: ‘No fair-minded journalist can look at these numbers and not be blown away by the fact that the establishment media have so lost the trust of the American that a breathtaking 72 percent now believe (and for good reason) fake news is reported deliberately.’

### *Partisan Truth Claims*

Confirming the relative and partisan nature of reality and truth claims, Breitbart explicitly referred to the conflict between the factual claims constructed by Democrats and the truth. More specifically, in the context of a discussion on gender rights and equality, the position that people can identify with a gender that is different from their biological identity was delegitimized by calling the Democrats’ position false facts and a ‘religion’ that you cannot disagree with without risking a violent reaction: ‘But for today’s Democrats elite and Democrat leaders, it’s not only not a fact, it is religion to them that you affirm that men can get pregnant and if you don’t say it, then you are responsible for violence. I mean, this is their line.’ In the same article, the claim was made that Democrats ‘do not believe’ that women exist. This position was referred to as crazy and opposed to reality: ‘They don’t believe there is any such thing as a woman, not really, and they think that if a biological man wants to claim to be a woman, hey, that’s fine, and we all have to accept it, or else we’re bigoted and violent. It’s just crazy.’

The Democrat Party and President Biden specifically were often delegitimized by referring to their truth claims as illegitimate or deliberately dishonest. In one instance, Biden was made to look incapable and stupid by referring to mistakes he made in a speech about the war in Ukraine: ‘According to a Bloomberg reporter, Biden also said ‘Iraq’ during a conversation on Tuesday about the Ukraine war.’ Although this attack on

Biden was rather implicit, Breitbart frequently referred to the false information disseminated by Democrats or Biden, or the deliberate attempt of opposed partisans to deceive the people. Conservative or Republican truth claims and positions were not delegitimized, whereas the factual claims of the Democrats were delegitimized or put into question. This shows that the epistemic populism expressed on Breitbart follows a partisan logic.

### *Exclusionist Reality Constructions*

Extending the concept of epistemic populism, our analyses indicate that Breitbart's coverage emphasizes a right-wing populist narrative. Hence, next to the opposition between corrupt elites and the honest ordinary people, Breitbart consistently refers to immigrants as 'illegal aliens,' which confirms a right-wing populist construction of reality: 'Driver's licenses for illegal aliens are vital for the open borders lobby because when illegal aliens are pulled over by local police, driving without a driver's license is the first criminal charge that can put them in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody.'

In the content analyzed, the ordinary people's gut feelings, common sense, and emotions were often used to legitimize out-group hostility. Hence, the negative emotions of ordinary American citizens related to immigration were frequently referred to in order to legitimize the position that immigrants are undesired: 'But many residents were angered by their public spaces and tax dollars being handed over to illegals. 'It seems this whole thing was dumped on us,' one resident said, according to WGN-TV. 'We pay taxes in this district and we should have been told what's going on and why.' Thus, because ordinary US citizens experienced negative sentiments toward out-groups, a wider anti-immigration narrative was legitimized as a truth claim.

## CONCLUSION OF STUDY I

The findings of the case study on the truth claims of alternative hyper-partisan media outlet Breitbart are congruent with the conceptualization of epistemic populism (Saurette & Gunster, 2011). The analysis specifically reveals that public opinion data and emotions of ordinary people are used as evidence to substantiate partisan and exclusionist truth claims. In the hyper-partisan construction of Breitbart's reality, immigrants and

Democrats are excluded or delegitimized, whereas the political and media elite that voices incongruent issue positions is referred to as ‘fake news’ or ‘uninformed.’ Extending existing conceptualizations of counter-media or epistemic populism communicated by alternative media (e.g., Heft et al., 2019; Saurette & Gunster, 2011), our qualitative analyses reveal that references to the ‘ordinary people’ and ‘common sense’ can be invoked by referring to the majority of citizens—which is corroborated by selectively referring to statistics of opinion polls. It can also be observed that the legitimization of the people’s truth claims and the delegitimization of elites is highly emotionalized: The frustration, anger, fear, or disappointment of the ordinary people targeted at the elites is often emphasized as evidence for people-centric truth claims, which aligns with the idea that populism is a highly emotionalized discourse (Hameleers et al., 2017).

## STUDY 2: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTS OF EPISTEMIC POPULISM

The first study revealed that the style and construction of truth claims on alternative hyper-partisan media platforms may follow the logic of epistemic populism. Specifically, conventional expert knowledge and empirical facts were circumvented or attacked, whereas a people-centric construction of reality was foregrounded. To investigate whether the populist divide between people-centric truth claims and the delegitimization of conventional knowledge can result in perceptions of factual relativism, an experimental study was conducted. This second data collection aims to explore the consequences of epistemic populism for democracy, specifically related to the ideas of factual relativism (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017). Can the populist delegitimization of science, established claims on truth and expert knowledge result in growing relativism, uncertainty, and perceived subjectivity of facts?

### *Methods of Study 2*

An online experiment was conducted among US participants. Confirmed by the case study above of Breitbart, immigration was selected as an issue that is prominently covered in an anti-establishment manner by alternative media outlets. The experiment followed a simple between-subjects design: Participants were either exposed to a neutral control condition that reported on the facts of US immigration policies or an experimental

epistemic populism condition in which the antagonism between ordinary people and corrupt, lying elites was central. The topic of the experimental and control condition was kept similar. In line with the findings of the case study, the narrative of the experimental condition blamed the mainstream media and elites for deceiving the ordinary people. Participants were randomly assigned to the *control condition* or the *epistemic populism condition* (equal group sizes). Appendix 1 includes the stimuli.

The data for the experiment were collected by an external international research organization (Kantar Lightspeed). Based on a voluntary-opt in panel, a diverse sample of 169 participants was used for this study (80 participants were assigned to the control condition, 89 participants were assigned to the experimental condition). The sample reflects balanced and diverse representations across age categories (47.7% between 18–50 and 52.3% older than 50), gender (47.9% female), and education (51.5% higher/moderate and 48.5% lower educated). Inclusion criteria for participation in the study consisted of agreeing with the informed consent procedure and being a US citizen over 18 years old. The sample was also varied regarding ideological self-placement, although substantially more right-wing participants were sampled: 33.7% identified (mostly) as left-wing, and 66.3% as right-wing. The overrepresentation of right-wing participants is relevant to consider in this study, as the hyper-partisan message that contains a blame attribution to the media may resonate most with their existing political beliefs.

The central dependent variable of perceived factual relativism was measured with a battery of survey items developed for the purpose of the experiment. Specifically, seven different statements that tapped the extent to which participants believed that the truth was relative, malleable, and subject to political or partisan reasoning were developed (i.e., there is no common truth, multiple accounts of reality co-exist; the truth is a subjective interpretation of factual information; the truth is a subjective interpretation of factual information). Scores on the seven items (all measured on 7-point disagree-agree scales) were averaged to form a scale of perceived factual relativism ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.867$ ). The average is slightly higher than the midpoint of the scale, which indicates that, across the board, participants were moderately skeptical about the universal nature of facts and truthfulness.

After the measurement of the dependent variables, a manipulation check was included. To confirm that participants could correctly spot the difference between the neutral message and the epistemic populism,



I asked them to indicate whether the message talked about (1) basic facts about immigration (corresponding to the control condition) or (2) whether it contained an accusation to elites for deceiving the people (the epistemic populism condition). Independent samples t-test confirmed that the manipulation was successful: Participants in the control condition were significantly more likely to associate the message they saw with key facts on immigration ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) than participants in the epistemic populism condition ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ );  $t(155) = 2.16$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ; 95% CI [0.041, 0.938]. In addition, participants exposed to epistemic populism were significantly more likely to associate the message with the emphasis on a cleavage between ordinary people and corrupt elites ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ) than participants in the control condition ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ );  $t(155) = -4.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; 95% CI [-1.78, -0.63]. Overall, it can be concluded that participants correctly identified epistemic populism, and the difference between the experimental condition and the neutral control condition that simply reported factual information on the topic of immigration.

## FINDINGS OF STUDY 2

Turning to the test of the main hypothesis that exposure to epistemic populism would trigger or activate perceptions of factual relativism (H1), I compared the mean scores on the measure of perceived factual relativism between the mean control group and the epistemic populism group (the treatment). The findings of an independent samples t-test in which the conditions were included as independent variable and the averaged perceived factual relativism score as dependent variable revealed no significant differences across conditions. In other words, although participants in the experimental condition reported slightly higher levels of perceived factual relativism ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) than participants in the control condition ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ), this difference was not substantial or significant ( $t(155) = 2.16$ ,  $p = 0.296$ ; 95% CI [-0.55, 0.31]). Hypothesis 1 cannot be supported based on these findings. In contrast to the expectations, showing people a message in which established knowledge was attacked and undermined, and contrasted to a people-centric interpretation of reality, did not correspond to stronger beliefs about the subjective and biased nature of reality and truth claims.

To explore whether the lack of effects still holds when we explore differences across groups that are more or less vulnerable to populist

communication, for example, based on prior populist attitudes, media distrust or ideological alignment, a series of regression analyses was conducted. I found no significant interaction effect between exposure to epistemic populism and existing populist beliefs ( $B = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p = 0.480$ ). In addition, there were no significant interaction effects with political ideology ( $B = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.547$ ) or media distrust ( $B = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.839$ ). This indicates that perceived factual relativism is a rather stable trait that is not easily affected by exposure to a single populist message that delegitimizes the elites and their truth claims. Thus, even among people likely to support populist truth claims, or oppose such interpretations, there are no effects of exposure to messages that attack established truth claims.

## OVERALL DISCUSSION

In the current digital media ecology, competing interpretations of truth and reality compete for attention among a fragmented audience. At the same time, populist politicians often attack and delegitimize the truth claims of established media, politicians, and scientists (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Conrad, in this volume; Lovec & Mahmutovic, in this volume). In this setting, it may be extremely difficult for citizens to discern true from false information. In addition, the populist attack on knowledge and established truths may make people uncertain about which ‘facts’ to believe and support, given that alternative claims on reality abound online. As an example, on social media platforms, the truth claim that COVID-19 is a virus originating from China was accompanied by the alternative claim that it was a biological weapon constructed in a lab by evil elites. When both alternative versions on the same issue are paired with seemingly authentic expert references and legitimized with empirical evidence, how can citizens make a well-informed decision on what is true?

This chapter argues that the populist attack on expert knowledge, established facts, and other institutions of knowledge dissemination can be harmful for democracy. Hence, although the truth may not be regarded as a fixed entity, but rather a construct that depends on perspective and context, some things are observably true whereas other things are demonstrably not supported by empirical facts or expert consensus. Yet, this understanding of truth and facticity is undermined by recent expressions of right-wing populism that attack incongruent knowledge and evidence whilst presenting alternative truth claims that are not in line with

scientific consensus. This populist interpretation has been referred to as epistemic populism, which we can understand as the emphasis on people-centric truth claims contrasted with an attack on established sources of scientific and expert-based knowledge (Saurette & Gunster, 2011).

Considering that populism obtained an epistemic dimension across various parts of the globe, this chapter explored the concept of epistemic populism in terms of its content and effects. As the delegitimization of established knowledge and the accusation of fake news may lower people's trust in real information (e.g., van der Meer et al., 2023), it is crucial to assess how epistemic struggles are communicated on counter-media, and how the divide between the people's honesty and the lies of the elites may influence people's own understanding of the value of facts and truths. Hence, the delegitimization of truth claims may contribute to factual relativism, and herewith erode the epistemic basis of deliberate democracy (van Aelst et al., 2017).

Based on an exploratory qualitative content analysis of the hyper-partisan platform Breitbart in the US, we can see that the divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites central to the classical definition of populism (e.g., Mudde, 2004) can be extended in an age of post-truth politics and factual relativism. Hence, in the current (digital) landscape where incongruent truths are often dismissed as opinions or alternative interpretations (van Aelst et al., 2017), fake news accusations delegitimize conventional knowledge (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019) and disinformation is presented alongside established information (e.g., Waisbord, 2018), populist communication emphasizes a specific alternative epistemology of truth and objectivity. As illustrated with our case study, this people-centric epistemology considers the ordinary people's emotions and public opinion as key markers of objectivity and truth. Hence, congruent claims on truthfulness are often legitimized by referring to the feelings of ordinary citizens, or the outcome of opinion polls stressing the majority of beliefs supporting the truth claim.

This epistemology is further characterized by the delegitimization of established knowledge disseminators, such as mainstream media channels, opposed political elites, or institutions and large corporations. Similar to research on counter-media (e.g., Heft et al., 2019; Ylä-Anttila) or epistemic populism in alternative media (Saurette & Gunster, 2011), we found that the establishment was often blamed for not representing the people's truth, or even for deliberately hiding reality from the ordinary people. These accusations often went beyond fake news or disinformation

accusations. Hence, extending literature on the centrality of disinformation accusations in right-wing populism (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), the elites were often blamed for offering a biased representation of reality by selectively quoting facts that supported their position. In addition, the analysis of the alternative media platform Breitbart revealed a strong exclusionist and radical right-wing construction of reality: Immigrants and non-native citizens were excluded from the honest ordinary people, and were not included in the legitimization of truth claims.

The populist epistemology was, however, not devoid of references to expert knowledge and evidence. However, evidence was quoted selectively and out of context. In that sense, expert knowledge and empirical data were used insofar as they were instrumental to the construction of hyper-partisan truth claims—a finding that is congruent with existing research on the epistemology of alternative and hyper-partisan media in the US (e.g., Hamelaers & Yekta, 2023). This makes epistemic populism difficult to detect at times: As the people-centric epistemology is not based on the complete circumvention of conventional claims of truthful information and objectivity, for example, by referring to data from public opinion polls or by claiming expert consensus, epistemic populism may be highly persuasive and credible for media users.

Despite this premise, the experimental study did not find any effect of exposure to epistemic populism on perceived factual relativism. Hence, compared to a neutral control condition stating basic facts on US immigration, a message containing epistemic populism to frame immigration did not activate the belief that facts are subject to interpretation or manipulation. Although the perception of factual relativism strongly correlated with populist attitudes, media distrust and a right-wing ideology, our findings lend support to the idea that factual relativism is a stable trait that is not easy to influence by exposure to a single message. On the one hand, this can be approached optimistically: Although polarizing figures and right-wing populists may deliberately try to delegitimize knowledge disseminators (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), they may not succeed in further augmenting these beliefs among the general population. Another explanation is that not the idea of factual relativism, but rather the confirmation that the resonating universal beliefs in truth, is strengthened by populist communication. Hence, exposure to populist ideas may strengthen the belief that people-centric and anti-elite perspectives represent credible interpretations of reality, and that conventional statements of reality are invalid. However, we do not find any indirect effects that

such ideas on reality are affected more by people with prior populist attitudes, which contradicts the idea of fostering a universal perspective on reality based on exposure to congruent epistemic populism.

On the other hand, approaching the null effects less optimistically, the already high averages of perceived factual relativism in our sample indicate that people in general tend to perceive facts as subjective and a matter of opinion. Hence, people in general may have lost their faith in established sources of factual information and have come to accept the terms of post-truth politics and factual relativism. This is in line with the salience of concerns related to disinformation in the current digital information landscape (e.g., Newman et al., 2023). Hence, many people are very concerned about mis- and disinformation, and these concerns may not be representative of the actual (low) levels of disinformation (e.g., Acerbi et al., 2022; Knuutila et al., 2022).

This study has a number of limitations. First, both the exploratory content analysis and the experiment were very limited in scope: They contained a case study of one hyper-partisan platform and one message of epistemic populism, which makes it difficult to generalize to the multifaceted and diverse setting of counter-media or populist communication. Different accusations of fake news may have different effects (e.g., Tandoc & Seet, 2022), and our focus on just one delegitimizing message and one issue may overlook these nuances. In addition, alternative media across settings may apply different epistemologies: As alternative media is an umbrella term, it may also relate to left-wing media that criticize the establishment, or media that are closer to conventional truth claims and expert references in their coverage. Thus, we cannot extend the concept of epistemic populism to all alternative media platforms. That being said, many alternative media and populist communication across the Global North and South take on a counter-factual epistemic perspective. Related to this, the limited geographical scope of this project may be considered as another limitation. We focused on the US, where the weaponization of fake news has taken center stage in politics after the 2016 US elections. This may partially explain why we did not find any effects of epistemic populism on factual relativism: people may have already been desensitized to this frame that permeated the bipartisan nature of political and media discourse.

Despite these limitations, I believe that the exploration of the concept of epistemic populism applied to alternative counter-factual media is

extremely relevant in the context of increasing concerns about disinformation, growing distrust in empirical and scientific evidence, and the cultivation of people-centric sentiments by the populist radical right.

## APPENDIX I: STIMULUS MATERIALS

### 1. Control

#### **Key Facts About US Immigration Policies**

##### **BY OUR EDITORIAL OFFICE**

The US has lifted restrictions established early in the coronavirus pandemic that drastically reduced the number of visas issued to immigrants. The number of people who received a green card declined from about 236,000 in the second quarter of the 2020 fiscal year (January to March) to under 78,000 in the third quarter (April to June). By comparison, in the third quarter of fiscal 2019, nearly 266,000 people received a green card.

Overall, more than 35 million lawful immigrants live in the US; most are American citizens. Many live and work in the country after being granted lawful permanent residence, whilst others receive temporary visas available to students and workers. In addition, roughly 1 million unauthorized immigrants have temporary permission to live and work in the US through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Temporary Protected Status programs.

### 2. Epistemic Populism

#### **Failing Mainstream Media Deceive Ordinary Citizens About Immigration Policies**

##### **BY OUR EDITORIAL OFFICE**

The US has lifted restrictions established early in the coronavirus pandemic that drastically reduced the number of visas issued to immigrants. At least, the established media want us to believe that immigration is declining. They deliberately hide the fact that immigrants allowed to enter our country illegally are increasingly allowed to profit from our welfare. They conceal the fact that immigrants receive more welfare than native US citizens who need to receive support most in times of the crisis we are facing.

The mainstream media make it seem that the number of visas issued reduced, whilst in fact our country offers unlimited support to immigrants who come here to profit from our wealth. They receive better housing, free healthcare benefits, and are more likely to be supported when they cannot find work due to the pandemic. This situation once more shows that the mainstream media do not care for ordinary native citizens, and rather support elitist voices in society. Urgent action is needed!

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