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Hameleers, M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Hameleers, M. (2019). Partisan Media, Polarized Audiences? A Qualitative Analysis of Online Political News and Responses in the United States, U.K., and The Netherlands. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *31*(3), 485-505. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edy022

Partisan Media, Polarized Audiences? A Qualitative Analysis of Online Political News and Responses in the United States, U.K., and The Netherlands

Michael Hameleers

Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Media outlets in the United States are frequently accused of articulating partisan biases in political reporting. In Europe, the media and citizens are assumed to interpret reality from polarized and populist mindsets. To date, however, empirical research has not explored *how* such interpretations are constructed online. Important questions remain unanswered: How are online media constructing partisan biases? How do citizens respond to such news? To answer these questions, this article draws on a comparative qualitative content analysis of online political news and responses in the United States, U.K., and The Netherlands ($N = 1,179$). Results reveal that citizens respond to partisan news with congruent polarized interpretations. These findings provide important foundational evidence for the congruence between partisan media and polarized interpretations.

The year of 2016 has been characterized by two major political events: the election of an allegedly populist president in the United States and the U.K.'s vote to leave the European Union (Judis, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). In both countries, these elections were surrounded by a heated debate among the public, most notably expressed on social network sites as Facebook or Twitter. This debate separated the electorates in two antagonist groups of partisans. In line with this, it has been long theorized that politics and

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michael Hameleers, The Amsterdam School of Communication Research *ASCoR*, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam. E-mail: m.hameleers@uva.nl

media in the United States are highly polarized, indicating that society is separated by Democrats and Republicans (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Is the audience equally polarized in their online self-communication? And if this is the case, would this also hold for European contexts that have witnessed the rise of populism?

In support of polarization among the public, it has been assumed that a pervasive societal divide has permeated the interpretation frames of citizens (Bartlett et al., 2011). This is reflected on social network sites, for example in responses to online news in the New York Times: "How can anyone support the lying sleazebag predator tax dodging Trump. He is an embarrassment to the nation." In the U.K., populist polarization in media and public discourse is assumed to have sparked the Brexit vote, pitting the pro-leave camp against the pro-remain camp.

Populism has been salient in many Western European countries, such as The Netherlands. Most notably, the right-wing populist politician Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party have been influential for more than a decade. The success of populist politicians is also reflected in public opinion and media discourse—and the media may even partially *cause* the success of populism (Krämer, 2014). Tabloid outlets are for example argued to be favorable to populist actors and viewpoints, whereas broadsheet outlets are accused of favoring the established political order (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Likewise, the audiences of tabloid outlets are argued to be aligned with populist views, whereas the audience of broadsheet outlets is aligned with the establishment (Hameleers et al., 2017; Krämer, 2014). But *how* may social network sites provide a discursive opportunity structure for the construction of such pervasive societal and populist divides by journalists and citizens?

It has been argued that the affordances of social network sites contribute to the construction of an online space in which citizens express their political opinions (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Hampton, 2016; Suler, 2004). This online context may not only provide a space for democratic deliberation (Habermas, 2006) but can also promote uncivil and violent expressions targeted at weaker groups in society (Lowry et al., 2012). In other words, the technological affordances of social media provide a context for citizens to express sentiments that may harm *and* strengthen deliberative democracy (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013).

The prevalence of social network sites as a platform for the expression of citizens' political viewpoints provides unique opportunities for communication and public opinion research. Because citizens express their opinions and feelings without being primed by researchers' questions, social media may be more suited to tap the lifeworld of citizens than traditional survey research. Therefore, the unobtrusive analysis of citizens' online responses to political news should provide an in-depth understanding of *how* citizens construct their views on politics in the light of polarization and populism. To this end, this

article compares three cases in which the electorate was assumed to be divided by "us" versus "them": the presidential elections in the United States, the Brexit vote in the U.K., and the 2017 general elections in The Netherlands. This comparison is made because all three countries have been associated with the rise of populism and polarization while differing in real-life opportunity structures (Esser et al., 2017).

Against this backdrop, it is crucial to assess how populism and polarization are constructed in different contexts. To do so, this article draws on an extensive comparative qualitative content analysis of online political news ($N = 93$) and citizens' replies ($N = 1,086$) on social network sites to answer the following twofold research question: To what extent and *how* did the media construct a partisan bias when covering political news, and to what extent and how did the audience *interpret* such news in polarized and populist ways? This article focuses on social network sites as platforms for the expression of polarized and populist discourse because the affordances of social media allow for the *interaction* of the sender-side and receiver-side. The perspectives disseminated by the media and citizens' responses thus align on social network sites.

"Us Versus Them" Constructions: Partisanship, Affective Polarization, and Social Categorization

Partisanship is as an important component of social identity (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). A partisan identity relates to people's experienced group membership to a political party, such as the Democrats or Republicans in the United States (Iyengar et al., 2012). The perseverance of partisan identities can result in *polarization*, which can be regarded as a the *divergence* in approval and affect toward partisan of the in-group vis-à-vis the out-group. Partisanship is especially a relevant component of identity in countries with a two-party system (United States) and may be of less relevance in multi-country settings (The Netherlands).

Reasoned from the premises of social identity theory, expressing membership to groups is a relational process. Positive qualities are attributed to the in-group and negative qualities are attributed to the out-group perceived as substantially different (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Both the in-group and the out-group are perceived as homogenous entities (Hogg, Meehan & Farquharson, 2010). This process of social differentiation is highly affective: in-group members express hostile sentiments to the out-group while emphasizing positive feelings toward in-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Applied to party identification in the United States, this process of social differentiation has been labeled *affective polarization* (Iyengar & Westwood,

2015). Affective polarization can be defined as the process by which people identifying as Democrats or Republicans evaluate co-partisans positively and partisans of the opposed party negatively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). By maintaining the boundary between the in-group of co-partisans and the out-group of opposing partisans, the psychological need of belonging and orientation is fulfilled (Tajfel, 1978). Using this perception of the self as frame of reference, all sorts of societal issues and events can be interpreted in light of one's party identification.

Outside of the United States, a similar process of social categorization has become pervasive in politics and public opinion. In the U.K., for example, the recent Brexit movement has sparked the construction of a "pro-leave" versus "pro-remain" partisan camp (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Such partisan biases in politics and media can augment polarized divides in society, affectively distinguishing the pro-leave camp from the pro-remain camp. This means that fellow partisans are rated more positively, whereas opposing partisans are attributed negative qualities, eventually widening the gap between both camps in society (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In The Netherlands, people who identify with the "ordinary citizens" as an in-group have allegedly became emotionally distant from citizens who do not identify with this in-group. They, for example, refer to them as the ignorant and selfish "left." The other "camp," in turn, perceives the populist electorate in negative terms.

Social Categorization and Populism

Populism has traditionally been defined as a "thin-cored ideology" in which the people as the "good" homogenous in-group is pitted against the "evil" elites (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). Populist messages concretize this Manichean outlook on society by blaming the elites or societal out-groups for the problems experienced by the ordinary people (Hameleers et al., 2017; Laclau, 1977). It has been argued that populist ideas are rooted in crisis situations (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Taggart, 2000). Being chameleonic in nature, populism is argued to adapt itself to different contexts and to stick to any sense of urgency (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). In the midst of a perceived crisis situation, populist ideas emphasize a specific causal and moral interpretation. More specifically, members of the in-group of ordinary citizens are "helpless" victims. Out-group members, in contrast, are depicted as "culpable" others. Morally, ordinary citizens are "good" and innocent, whereas out-groups are "evil" (Taggart, 2000).

Populist ideas are composed of three central, related components: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and the potential exclusion of societal out-groups (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Weyland, 2001). First, populist ideas refer to an in-group of "the people." In populism, the

concept of the people most saliently refers to a "silenced majority" of ordinary citizens whose will *should* be central in political decision-making (Canovan, 1999). Following the populist rationale, *because* the elites only care for themselves, the people no longer feel represented by the elites (Mudde, 2004).

This antagonistic relationship between the "good" in-group and culpable others brings us to the second central component of populism: *anti-elitism*. In populist rhetoric, the elites are perceived as an enemy that threatens the wellbeing of the ordinary people from *above* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In populism, the elites are frequently lumped together as a homogenous out-group. The elites are accused of only filling their own pockets at the cost of the people they *should* represent (Laclau, 1977; Weyland, 2001). The "corrupt" elites are thus blamed for exploiting the people.

The final component of populism is the potential *exclusion* of societal outgroups. This component is not necessarily orthogonal to anti-elitism but may enrich the core idea of the central divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In right-wing populism, the elites are not the only threat to the well-being of the people as homogenous entity (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Rather, immigrants, refugees, and other outgroups excluded from the people are blamed for taking away resources that naturally belong to the ordinary native citizens (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Next to this, immigrants are interpreted as a threat to the national symbols, norms, and values that define the native citizens' community (Taggart, 2000).

In the political climate of The Netherlands, all these elements are present in the right-wing populist discourse of the Freedom Party. First of all, the hardworking Dutch citizens are seen as a homogenous in-group whose will should be represented in politics. The Dutch government and European politicians are seen as the corrupt elites, scapegoated for not representing the ordinary people. At the same time, immigrants and people with different religious backgrounds are seen as threats to the people's purity and safety: these out-groups should thus be excluded.

Social Network Sites as Platforms for Polarization and Populism

The media have been connected to the dissemination of populist and partisan divides across society, hereby playing a key role in priming or augmenting polarization. In the context of media populism, it has been argued that tabloid media in particular provide a favorable platform for populist sentiments (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). The rationale behind this media–populism relationship is that the news values and style of tabloid media in particular resonate with populism: both are assumed to simplify complex issues, tap into common sense, and prioritize the voice of ordinary people above expert or elitist sources. Moreover, tabloid readers are more likely to self-select

into populist content than readers of broadsheet media (Hameleers et al., 2017). The media can thus shape populist "us versus them" divides, which may eventually drive polarization among the electorate.

In the context of partisanship, it has been argued that partisan cues are salient in many facets of media, politics, and society (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). This means that media outlets display a favorability bias to one party while being negative toward the other party. Crucially, the strength of polarization resulting from partisan identities has increased in the United States but not in the U.K. (Iyengar et al., 2012). This difference in contextual factors warrants the comparative scope of this research: In what ways are partisan cues constructed in the informative fields in the different countries, and how do they relate to polarized reality constructions among the electorate?

Media are argued to fulfill an important democratic role in society (Habermas, 2006). In line with Lévy's thesis on cyber-democracy, the new information culture emerging from online media's affordances fosters a high degree of participation and reciprocity (Lévy, 2000). The information culture's political and cultural structures can complement and oppose traditional structures of the nation-state. On social media, citizens are not only receivers of information but also senders of messages at the same time (Pingree, 2007). This allows them to influence each other's interpretation of social issues, such as on the Brexit vote or on the presidential elections in the United States. The technological advances of social media allow people to express their sentiments and interact with each other in a multitude of ways (Papacharissi, 2010). Among other things, people can express their political dissatisfaction and communicate their views on politics in interaction with a large audience of likeminded others. The potential of the social media allowing ordinary people to interact and present themselves in virtual environments has been labeled as *mass self-communication* (Castells, 2007).

The online context of social network sites has important ramifications for the identification processes central to affective polarization and populism. By expressing themselves on social network sites, citizens can forge linkages to other in-group members (Shah et al., 2001). In doing so, they can also share their hostile sentiments toward the out-group of participants of the opposed party. Hence, online spaces provide citizens with a forum to share their in-group favoritism and their negative affect toward the other (Suler, 2004). But *how* may social network sites create a favorable context for citizens to express polarized and populist sentiments?

It has been argued that the interactions articulated online would not take place in face-to-face conversations (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Owing to the technological affordances of social network sites—most saliently asynchronicity, editability, and perceived anonymity—citizens are inclined to express more hostile, societally undesirable sentiments online compared to their

inhibited offline interactions (Suler, 2004). The absence of a direct response and retribution in online spaces may enable citizens to construct the affective boundary between "us" and "them." Indeed, it has been argued that disin-hibition in online spaces allows citizens to express hostile sentiments to socie-tal groups (Lowry et al., 2016). Although behavior on social network sites is *still* guided by ethical norms and values (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013), the *percep-tion* of safety and distance may be fostered by the online context (Hameleers et al., 2017). In line with the premises of social identity theory, social network sites may create a space for citizens to constantly compare their in-group's identity to those of out-groups (Tajfel, 1978). But how are these identity constructions situated in their context?

Country Comparisons

To date, empirical evidence on the content and effects of populism has mainly been collected in the Western European context of right-wing populism (Bos et al., 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017). In The Netherlands, for example, the rise and fall of the right-wing populist party of Pim Furtuyn received a lot of attention. More recently, Geert Wilders and his electorally influential right-wing Freedom Party have been the focus of many empirical case studies. This Dutch right-wing populist context concentrates around the issues of migration, crime, welfare distribution, and targets the national and European elites as scapegoats for the problems experienced by common citizens.

Polarization and partisanship have mainly been regarded as U.S. phenom-ena (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In the United States, news production is frequently regarded as biased, favoring either Republican or Democratic inter-pretations of various issues, such as immigration or climate change. The audience is assumed to be polarized along similar partisan camps. In the U.K., it has been argued that the Brexit referendum has augmented divides between the pro-leave and the pro-remain camps.

To better understand how these partisan biases, populism, and polarization are constructed on social media platforms in these different settings, it is important to assess how well the results of earlier studies travel to countries with different roots of partisan, populist, and polarized sentiments. These factors, for example, are the salience of the migration crisis, levels of distrust in Europe, the economic situation, and general levels of cynicism (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Esser et al., 2017; Kriesi et al., 2006).

The Congruence Between Partisan News and Polarized Audiences

Situated in the context of social network sites and its affordances, this study aims to understand *how* citizens respond to partisan political news. To arrive

at a better understanding of the congruence between partisan media and polarized audiences, we pose three specific research questions. First, we zoom in on the media's partisan bias: *How* are the media constructing partisan and populist biases when reporting on political news in the United States, U.K., and The Netherlands? (RQ1). Next, we shift our focus to the electorate's responses to such news: How are citizens constructing polarized and populist interpretations of political news on social network sites? (RQ2). Finally, we assess the congruence between the media discourse and public opinion on social network sites by raising the question: How are the partisan and populist biases of the media related to the populism and polarization of the interpreting audience? (RQ3). These questions are studied on social media platforms, as the affordances of the online, interactive context allow for the study of the dynamics and alignments of the media's partisan discourse and the audience's responses. The perspectives of both the media and the public are thus represented on these platforms.

Method

Data Collection and Sample

This article draws on an extensive qualitative content analysis of online political news and responses in three countries: the United States (30 news items and 347 responses), the U.K. (31 news items and 354 responses), and The Netherlands (32 news items and 385 responses). The sample frame in all countries covers the period from June 2016 to January 2017. The key events of the Brexit, the U.S. elections, and the salience of the Dutch migrants' debate in the preelection period were covered in this sample frame.

Purposive sampling geared toward maximum variation regarding the core themes of partisanship, (affective) polarization, and populism was employed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

This means that, for the U.S. sample, we selected outlets that varied between trust among conservatives and liberals. More specifically, we selected one outlet trusted by liberals and distrusted by conservatives, the *New York Times* (Pew Research Center, 2014), and another outlet trusted by conservatives and distrusted by liberals, *FOX News*. We included one outlet that, albeit not uncontested, should more closely represent both sides of the U.S. electorate, *CNN News* (Pew Research Center, 2014). In the United States, we selected articles using the following search string: *Presidential elections OR Donald Trump OR Hillary Clinton.*

For the British sample, we selected the tabloid outlet *The Sun* because empirical evidence has indicated that it predominantly present arguments in favor of leaving the European Union (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, 2016). Second, the tabloid, *Daily Mirror,*

was chosen as it contained most pro-remain articles. In addition, we included the pro-remain broadsheet outlet, *The Guardian*. For this outlet, we expected a *less* polarized and more balanced interpretation of political news (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, 2016). Taken together, the British sample aimed to reflect a variety of balanced, pro-remain and pro-leave arguments in the context of both tabloid and broadsheet outlets. In the U.K., the following key words were used to find articles: *Brexit AND (Remain OR Leave)*.

In line with extant literature assuming that populist interpretations should be most salient in tabloid and less salient in broadsheet media outlets, we included both tabloid (*de Telegraaf*) and broadsheet outlets (*de Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad*) in the Dutch sample (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni et al., 2003). These outlets included a variety in left-wing and right-wing leanings. In The Netherlands, the following search string was used: *EU OR government OR immigration OR immigrant* OR asylum seekers*. All results from the key word search were manually judged on applicability.

In each country, the units of analysis were sampled on three different levels: on the level of news outlets, on the level of articles, and on the level of replies to these articles. The inclusion of new articles and replies ended at the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This means that new articles and responses were collected and analyzed until new data no longer revealed novel insights into the central concepts of the study. This study thus employed a cyclic-iterative strategy of data collection and analyses: an initial sample of 10 articles for each outlet and 10 responses to each article were sampled and analyzed. After these analyses, each new article was analyzed to judge whether new themes or categories could be established. The initial selection of 10 articles aimed for maximum variety of political news coverage by selecting articles with a variety of publication dates, topics, length, and interpretations. To achieve theoretical saturation, we eventually sampled a range of responses between 10 and 31.

Analysis

The units of analysis—online news articles and responses to these items—were analyzed in line with the tree-step procedure of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At the first stage of *open coding*, different sensitizing concepts central to affective polarization, social identification, and populism were used to guide data analysis. These concepts were in-group and out-group constructions, hostility, crisis sentiments, constructions of the in-group's community, people centrism, anti-elitism, and out-group exclusion (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000; Tajfel, 1978). Excerpts in the data that provided insights into the meaning and construction of these concepts were identified and arced. The open codes informed the second step of *axial*

coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During this step of coding, the arced segments of the data were attached to four key categories presented in a matrix: in-group favoritism, out-group hostility, polarization, people centrality, anti-elitist populism, and exclusionist populism. These categories were based on an extension of social identity theory and populism in the context of social network sites. During the final step of *focused coding*, the rich data on all key categories were reduced to more general themes. To remain close to journalists' and citizens' words, these themes were enriched with quotes.

Quality Checks

To assess the level of agreement among researchers, peer debriefing was conducted (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). To this end, a random sample of 15 posts and 100 responses was selected. For these data, the coding and emerging themes in all three steps of the analysis procedure were extensively discussed. These quality checks were not intended to assess complete similarity between independent coders but established the extent to which independent researchers agreed on the themes emerging from the data (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The results of this quality check indicate that both researchers by and large agreed on the data reductions and themes resulting from the three subsequent coding steps. Existing differences were discussed until agreement was reached.

As second quality check, member checks were employed. More specifically, four members who responded on online political news posted on Facebook were asked to review the themes that resulted from this study. These members by and large agreed on the themes that emerged. The only source of disagreement was on the themes that revealed the hostility of people's contributions. The members perceived contributions as "They only cause trouble. Are there any inflatable boats left?" as an expression of citizens' freedom of speech, while these were coded as hostile sentiments in our analyses.

Results

Expressing Partisan and Populist Biases in Political News Coverage

Partisan media interpretations. In the news coverage on the presidential elections in the United States, a partisan bias was expressed by referring to the election of Trump as either a negative or positive landmark in U.S. history. journalistic anti-Trump interpretations can be illustrated by the following quote of the *New York Times*: "Reaction to a Donald J. Trump presidency rippled across the globe, with financial markets abroad falling as US television networks raised the prospect that Hillary Clinton might lose." *Fox News*

shaped their partisan bias by posting controversial statements that actively invited the audience to participate, for example: "Donald J. Trump says the fact that Hillary Clinton is even allowed to run for president is proof that the US election system is rigged. Thoughts?" Alternatively, this outlet quoted interpretations of opinion leaders who favored Trump over Clinton: "I never, ever want to be able to say it's President Hillary Clinton. If you don't vote for Donald J. Trump, you're essentially creating a window and an opportunity for [her] to become the president."

Another way in which partisan biases were shaped was by referring to the sharp societal divide among the electorate, as done by the *New York Times*: "This election has revealed that Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton voters occupy two separate countries." *Fox News* constructed the societal divide from the other side by articulating a *negative* evaluation of Clinton supporters: "Conway suggests that the outrage over the call shows many Americans' unwillingness to accept Donald J. Trump as their president and to give him a chance. Do you agree?" Again, *Fox News* explicitly asked the audience to respond. Although *CNN* articulated a less clear partisan bias, their news coverage implicitly articulated support for Clinton by including more perspectives of Trump opponents than supporters, as illustrated by the following quote framing Trump supporters as "angry white men": "President Bill Clinton says President-elect Donald J. Trump 'doesn't know much', but that 'one thing he does know is how to get angry, white men to vote for him'."

In the U.K., *The Sun* clearly articulated a pro-Brexit view by highlighting the moral superiority of an independent Britain free from the undemocratic regime of the European Union: "Brexit is our chance to escape a burning building, we should flee before the EU drags us down." *The Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian* clearly voiced support for the remain-camp by highlighting the potential negative implications of a Brexit vote. After the Brexit vote, different negative developments were causally related to Brexit in *The Daily Mirror*: "Jamie Oliver forced to close six restaurants because of Brexit" or "This is why Brexit has already ruined Christmas." *The Guardian* was less explicit in opposing the Brexit. *The Guardian* for example forwarded a more nuanced and less direct causal interpretation between Brexit and closing Jamie Olivier's restaurants: "As every restaurant owner knows, this is a tough market and post-Brexit the pressures and unknowns have made it even harder."

Populist media interpretations. Explicit populist interpretations were only found in the British and Dutch cases, in the tabloid newspapers *The Sun* and *de Telegraaf*, respectively. *The Sun* highlighted populist interpretations by emphasizing the causal and moral divide between the ordinary British people and the corrupt politicians in the European Union: "This is our chance to make Britain even greater, to recapture our democracy, to preserve the values

and culture we are rightly proud of." *The Sun* articulated a clear recommendation for the British people, which revealed their partisan bias: "SUN Says we urge our readers to beLEAVE in Britain and vote to quit the EU."

Such populist media interpretations can be illustrated by the following quote of *de Telegraaf's* article on the government's policy regarding refugees: "Economic migrants from safe countries who file in hopeless asylum requests in multiple EU-countries, will be able to do so without being punished." In this article, journalists actively argued that migrants where coming from "safe" countries, thereby exploiting the ordinary native people's system.

Answering RQ1, it can be concluded that the media shaped divides between the in-group of supporters for the virtuous people and the out-group of people supporting the culprit other. Although populist sentiments were only explicitly expressed in the media coverage in the U.K. and The Netherlands, a bias favoring the people as in-group above the others deemed responsible for negative developments in the country was visible in all outlets. In the end, in-group favoritism and out-group hostility were thus, in different degrees, present in the media discourse of all countries.

Affective Polarization Among the Audience

Public opinion in the United States. Most people who responded to partisan political news responded with congruent polarized interpretation frames. People who responded to political news in the *New York Times* articulated a societal divide pitting the in-group of Democrats against the out-group of the Republicans. In light of RQ2 and RQ3, whereas journalists interpreted this divide in more or less affectively neutral ways, the audience articulated the societal divide in very *hostile* ways, as can be illustrated by the following quote: "The resistance will be relentless. The liar Trump is the most horrific disgrace in modern US politics. Defeat the raving orange toddler." Such expressions of affective polarization also entailed explicit *populist* interpretations of a moral and causal divide between the blameless people and culprit others, most saliently the "corrupt" political elites: "The System may have elected him, But WE did not. He does not represent US, only them. The system is rigged."

The Fox News audience clearly represented another group of society, articulating support for Trump's electorate and hostility toward people who voted for the other candidate. Again, these responses reflected a Manichean outlook in which the society was seen as ultimately separated between "us" and "them": "They had no limits to their hypocrisy and they broadcasted their divisive messages in all media channels." The Democrats were also accused of being arrogant and rejecting the will of the people: "These leftist liberals want the electors in these states to reject the will of the people? It is the height of arrogance to assume that THEIR opinion matters to anyone!".

The centrality and popular sovereignty of the general will—a core component of populist rhetoric—was explicitly emphasized in people's opposition to Clinton as a candidate for presidency: "She thought she had enough fraud votes to overcome the will of the people. The dead voters and illegals and hacked voting machines couldn't swing enough votes to overcome the will of the people." Citizens' populist sentiments also constructed a boundary between people and the "evil" and criminal elites: "Hillary Clinton is nothing but an evil lying criminal who should have never been allowed to run for President in the first place."

Populist expressions were not reserved to blame attributions on a political level. Citizens also attached *exclusionist* components to their populist boundary constructions, as illustrated by the following quote: "Better than allowing illegals to flood the country to afford a win in an election causing jobless Americans to lose their homes. I voted for Donald J. Trump." This populist construction opposed the "blameless" in-group of Americans to the "culpable" illegal others.

In support of the alleged balance of *CNN* compared with *Fox News* and the *New York Times*, boundary interpretations on *both* sides of the electoral divide were expressed in responses to political news on *CNN*'s online platform (RQ2). Indeed, some people opposed Trump and his electorate: "President elect is a chump, anybody that voted for him and can actually feel good about your vote should really be ashamed to be proud of it." Other citizens constructed Trump and his supporters as the in-group and Clinton and her electorate as the out-group: "I'm shocked so many people would want a pathological liar and a known criminal to run this country. I'm thankful every day that she lost." *CNN* thus offered more room for opposing views and deliberation compared with the other outlets in the United States. It can thus be concluded that the partisan divides shaped by the media resonated with the (populist) identity constructions of citizens in their responses to online news.

Public opinion in the U.K. Overall, the pro-Brexit bias of *The Sun* resonated with the interpretations of citizens (RQ3). People who responded to news on the online pages of *The Sun* first of all legitimized the Brexit vote as an expression of the people's general will. This defensive stance can be illustrated by the following quote: "They have no right to block Brexit, if this blocked there is no democracy what so ever. Majority won, for leaving EU and the result must stand."

People's replies also reflected *populist* interpretations focusing on the elites' failed representation of the people's will: "Get our laws back, do not be ruled by faceless people in Brussels." This populist rationale emphasized that common sense and the will of the people instead of the detached political order in the European Union should be central in political decision-making.

Anti–elitism was not only targeted at the political order, the media were also frequently accused of disseminating fake news and biased reporting: "Sure your team of astute journalistic investigators are racing to the next Big story." These accusations were only highlighted when journalists emphasized an interpretation of political affairs that opposed the dominant attitudinal congruent pro-Brexit stance.

Next to emphasizing the opposition between the ordinary people and the elites, replies also reflected nativist perspectives. These expressions constructed the boundary between the "real" British people and others with differing values and norms: "Born in UK doesn't make you British if you still value the values, culture and traditions of your father's father. For me he is a Syrian or Iranian." Such nativist interpretations were relativized by explicitly denying being racist: "Voting to leave was nothing to do with being a racist but to stem the amount of illegals trying to enter the UK." Citizens' boundary construction did reflect very hostile and uncivil sentiments targeted at specific groups in society: "Islam and its followers hate themselves. What chance does white infidels have against these kiddie fiddling monsters who want their own law allowing pedophilia, beheadings, sex with 9 year olds, women slavery, the list is endless."

People's interpretations were substantially different in the response sections of The Daily Mirror. In light of RQ3, citizens' discourse reflected a critique of and resistance to the dominant "remain" interpretations forwarded by The Daily Mirror. More specifically, people disagreed with the newspaper's emphasis that a lot of negative societal developments should be blamed on the Brexit: "What a load off bollox. We are still a full paying member of the European Union, we haven't left yet, it's likely to take up to 2 years or more. Stop blaming everything on Brexit." The Daily Mirror was also accused of spreading incorrect news: "Another bullshit Mirror story: what part of Leave can't you understand?"

In light of RQ2, The Guardian predominately contained references to pro-remain interpretations. Overall, these interpretations were less polarized and more balanced compared with the other newspapers. Citizens who engaged in political discussions on the platform of the Facebook page of The Guardian were more inclined to engage in argumentative discussions, presenting more civil and rational arguments. The Guardian's online platform may in this regard be considered as a space for political deliberation. Although people did criticize the government and its policies, they mostly did not construct hostile populist boundaries between "us" and "them." Moreover, populism itself was seen as a problem for people responding to political news: "Europe being the scapegoat, the ultimate "other" to blame when we don't hold ourselves or our leaders accountable. Conspiracy theories galore."

Public opinion in The Netherlands. In light of RQ2, hostile populist discourse was constructed in the online response sections on the Facebook page of the tabloid newspaper *de Telegraaf*. This populist discourse first of all pitted the common Dutch citizens against the corrupt establishment using a highly emotionalized tone: "Hey, bunch of mentally disabled elites in The Hague, is it so hard to adjust a law? Things we do not want are also forced upon us!". The national elites were blamed for not representing the people's will and for forcing their policies on the powerless citizens. People's anger was targeted at politicians accused of filling their own pockets: "Those idiots in The Hague are so stupid and naïve to believe this money is used for a good cause. They are only enriching themselves!". Anti-elitist interpretations also scapegoated left-wing elites: "All these leftish people are only filling their own pockets!".

Dutch citizens' populist boundary constructions also emphasized the divide between the native people and migrants or refugees as the "evil" out-groups. According to this populist mindset, refugees were attributed blame for depriving the native people: "It is absurd that they cannot be send back. They are not political refugees, so get rid of them. They only cause trouble. Are there any inflatable boats left?" People's construction of the populist boundary between native citizens and migrants reflected a strong sense of relative deprivation. The elites were accused of prioritizing the needs of the fortune-seeking migrants above the needs of their own people: "Fortune-seekers get everything for free. And the Dutch people? Higher taxes. Having to wait ten years for a house. The government gives you a hard time if you want something as a Dutch citizen. When will this delusion stop?".

Although they voiced hostile expressions targeted at specific groups in society, people perceived that they were falsely accused of being racist: "We are accused of inhumane racists with gut feelings towards these poor refugees. Now, it's finally clear they we were right all along. Although it is too late now." Although populist constructions dominated the tabloid newspaper's response sections, some contributions did not agree with the newspaper's populist bias (RQ3). This can be illustrated by the following reply accusing the newspaper for spreading hate instead of disseminating facts: "*Telegraaf*, you continue to spread hate and fear. This is rubbish. And now continue to spread fear across the country."

In the left-wing broadsheet newspaper *de Volkskrant*, citizens expressed populist boundary constructions in response to non-populist news reporting (RQ3): "This man is a dictator because he is not listening to the Dutch population. A fraud who cannot keep his promises." The populist boundary constructions are extremely hostile: "Which ass did he lick? He is not a representative of the Dutch population. He needs to be kicked out of the

country." However, in support of a less clearly polarized audience of this newspaper, the online platform of *de Volkskrant* also gives voice to citizens who explicitly *oppose* populist views: "And the populist propaganda is released again. These people should be ashamed of their selves."

Similar to the U.K. context, the newspaper was also accused of lying and spreading fake news. These accusations were voiced by citizens whose views counterargue the newspaper's interpretations: "*De Volkskrant* is just a Nazi outlet. No facts, only talking from gut feelings targeted at people that criticize the European Union. Fact is that the EU is Hitler's biggest wish and the EU is founded by Nazi's."

Public opinion in responses to *NRC*'s news contained nativist sentiments, which is incongruent with its overall non-populist news coverage (RQ3). These sentiments pitted the "superior" native people's norms, values, and traditions against the "inferior" traditions of threatening out-groups: "I will fight for the culture, norms and values that have always existed in our country. I want to get out of the EU, fortune-seekers need to be kicked out and real refugees need to be prioritized." These nativist boundary constructions also emphasized that the power to tolerate belongs to the native people: "He needs to adjust. It is great that he can speak our language. But when the war is over, he has to go back to his own country."

Discussion

In 2004, Mudde (2004) argued that we are witnessing a "populist zeitgeist," an era in which populism has spread among political and public discourses all around the globe. In support of this rationale, the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit, and politics in The Netherlands have all been associated with populist uprisings (Judis, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Next to this, U.S. media and public opinion are argued to be dominated by a similar pervasive societal divide, referred to as *affective polarization* (Iyengar et al., 2012). Still, extant literature has not yet made a comparison between the U.S. and European context to explore *how* this societal divide is constructed by the media and citizens. This is especially relevant in the light of the flexibility and adaptability of populist discourse to different perceived crises and media settings. To integrate these traditionally separated approaches to comparable phenomena, this article has presented the results of an extensive content analysis of online political news and responses. This analysis was geared toward an in-depth understanding of how the media and citizens constructed a societal divide between "us" and "them," and how the frames of the media resonated with citizens' interpretations expressed on social network sites.

The results first of all revealed that the construction of a societal divide was salient in all three contexts. Affective polarization by the media was, however, most clearly expressed in the United States. The tabloid newspapers in the U.K. and The Netherlands actively participated in constructing a populist divide between the innocent people and the culpable elites and societal out-groups. In the United States, the congruence between partisan media and polarized audiences was articulated most explicitly. U.S. citizens frequently articulated a moral and causal opposition between an in-group of "good" fellow partisans and an "evil" out-group of citizens who voted for the other party. In doing so, these people reinforced the partisan biases articulated by the media. In the Dutch online context, such congruence was far less saliently expressed. People who responded to political news of a left-wing broadsheet outlet that did not engage in populist coverage responded with strong populist sentiments that *did* emphasize the divide between the "good" people and the "evil" elites. In the U.K., a middle position can be identified. Although people responding to partisan pro-leave news predominately articulated a similar divide between the "good" people and the "corrupt" EU, citizens did not always agree with the media's partisan bias.

These findings can be interpreted in light of the negotiated media effects paradigm (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Situated in the context of a multi-country comparison, the findings of this study illustrate that the dominant constructions of a societal divide were not always accepted by the interpreting audience. In The Netherlands, citizens' interpretations deviated strongest from the frames suggested by the media. In the United States, in contrast, the divide between partisans seems to have permeated both the media discourse and public opinion. This underlines the findings of earlier research on the pervasiveness of affective polarization in the United States (Greene, 1999; Iyengar et al., 2012). Being among the first contributions to compare the U.S. context to Europe, our findings demonstrate that this divide is not that strong in Europe. In The Netherlands and the U.K., people play different roles in accepting, negotiating, or resisting the articulated viewpoints of the media (Hall, 1973). But what are the implications of citizens' online expressions for democratic deliberation?

Two alternative perspectives can be forwarded. First of all, the online context may provide citizens with a safe space to voice their opinions and their discontent with the political order. By offering the potential for effortless and asynchronous interaction with other citizens, the online context may hereby positively contribute to democratic deliberation (Habermas, 2006; Pingree, 2007). Alternatively, the online context may foster depersonalization of community membership and perceptions of the absence of "hard" norms and values (Lowry et al., 2016). In that sense, the online context may shape a disinhibited social space that promotes dangerous and antisocial behavior (Lowry et al., 2016).

The findings of this study can be interpreted in the light of *both* perspectives. For democratic deliberation, it is necessary that people interact and share rational arguments of opposing views (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). In the United States, it may be argued that democratic deliberation did not occur. People did, for example, not leave the safe space of their "filter bubbles" as they interpreted partisan news with attitudinally congruent constructions of a societal divide between "us" and "them." Importantly, by means of personalization, filter bubbles can have important democratic implications by shaping the flow of information, only exposing people to information congruent with their interests and prior selections (Pariser, 2011). In the U.K. and The Netherlands, the highly emotionalized, hostile, and one-sided populist interpretations articulated by citizens can also be interpreted as the absence of democratic deliberation. Still, on a positive note, the interpretations of Dutch and British citizens on the online response sections of the broadsheet outlets *de Volkskrant*, *NRC*, and *The Guardian* provide a space for argumentative discussions between people who disagreed.

This study has some limitations. First of all, the qualitative approach taken in this article cannot provide insights into the salience of partisan, polarized, and populist expressions. Moreover, it is not possible to quantify the extent to which the partisan biases of the media were congruent with citizens' interpretations. However, as the aim of this current study was to explore *how* these societal divides were constructed by the media and citizens in the context of social network sites, we regard the quantification of the emerging themes and congruence as an important next step for future research.

Second, the focus on one social network site, Facebook, may have biased some of our findings. Facebook may give rise to different technological affordances and may cater to the needs of a different audience compared with other social media (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). More specifically, the online spaces provided by the outlets may only be visited and followed by issue-publics, who selectively expose themselves to the newsfeed of their preferred media outlet (Stroud, 2008). Facebook, in that sense, attracts a more diversified audience of partisans and non-partisans, who may selectively expose themselves to attitudinally incongruent content.

The selection of three specific country cases can be regarded as another limitation. The Netherlands as prototypical case of salient right-wing populism has been chosen for reasons of maximum variation regarding media systems and the salience of the migration issue in this context. Yet, other European countries that witnessed the rise of similar populism movements, such as Germany, France, or Austria are also relevant. However, these Western European countries are expected to be similar to the Dutch case. Still, future research that includes more similar and dissimilar countries is highly recommended.

Despite these limitations, this study has demonstrated *how* partisan biases are constructed by the media *beyond* the typically studied context of the United States. This study further demonstrated how populist interpretations are constructed in public opinion. In the midst of the rise of populism throughout the globe, this article has contributed to our understanding of *how* social network sites may provide a platform for such identification processes.

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Biographical Note

Michael Hameleers is Assistant Professor in Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), Amsterdam, The Netherlands. His research interests include populism, framing, (affective) polarization and the role of social identity in media effects.