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## Technologies and populism: how Donald Trump manipulates the political agenda

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*The article considers the influence of technological development on the rise of populist political actors. The authors reflect on the latest political developments, including the electoral successes of parties and presidential candidates which are commonly associated with populist rhetoric and policies, and confirm the initial hypothesis concerning the causal relations between digital technologies and these movements' popularity. To this end, the article overviews the general approaches to understanding populist policies and how their spread is facilitated by the development of technologies. The latter accelerates the exchange of information and entails the transformation of information consumption while also providing the tools for populists to interact with their audiences and spread their ideas more efficiently. Besides, an empiric case study dedicated to researching the policy of former US president Donald Trump and his information policy is conducted along with the content analysis of his social media accounts immensely used during his electoral campaigns and presidential term. Trump employed his social media activities to mobilize support among his target electorate by facilitating the spread of polarising and anti-establishment narratives. He portrayed himself as the only alternative to the system formed by the current elites able to save the country against internal and foreign threats. Thus, Trump utilised digital and information technologies to convey these narratives and rhetorical devices to wider audiences among the social media users, particularly tackling the issues that would be appealing to and easily perceived by them.*

*The results of the research confirm that even though the technologies per se do not cause the emergence and popularity of populist movements, their development is one of the key factors enabling and facilitating the burst of populist policies and their electoral successes.*

**Key words:** populism, technologies, information, narrative, Donald Trump, information strategy, United States of America

**Introduction.** The rapid development of digital technologies has made them an integral part of political processes: political parties and presidential candidates have social media pages, establish an active online presence, and conduct digital targeting campaigns aimed at increasing their outreach and recognition. The role these developments have for the social and political environment has drawn the attention of numerous academic and analytical publications.

Against this backdrop, there is an evident rise in popularity among parties and individual politicians commonly associated with populism. This has affected both internal political and electoral processes within individual states and international affairs, where the agenda of the states' foreign policy is sometimes altered substantively.

**Research purpose and assignments.** This article is aimed at testing a hypothesis that *the development and popularisation of modern technologies contribute to the spread of populist movements*. To this end, the article will overview the ways in which digital technology could facilitate manipulating public opinions and shaping the information space, making it favourable for the spread of respective narratives and ideas. Besides, the article will consider the case of former US president Donald Trump and his campaigns employing a variety of practices associated with populist strategies to cover the practical aspect of the matter.

**Research methods.** The methods used in the research include a case study and content anal-

ysis. With the help of content analysis, a detailed review of the Twitter activity of former US President Donald Trump was conducted and an ad-hoc database of his key narratives and messages that he used in this social network was formed. Such a selection of data made it possible to create a clear understanding of boundaries and sequences in the context of his use of this social network as a technological tool in creating not only a network of information but also information manipulation, which allowed him to gain a significant instrumental advantage within the 2016 campaign. The case study of this particular case, presented in the second part of the article, is based on this.

**Research results.** Populism is defined as a political ideology that employs anti-establishment rhetoric and emphasises the existence of a profound line of division between the «ordinary people» and the «corrupt political elite» [9]. Consecutively, public figures indulging in such strategies try to offer a better alternative to current political elites by tapping into the immediate needs of the population and suggesting easy solutions to complex issues. Such approaches are often seen used on all sides of the political spectrum. Some scholars researching the issue of populism highlight the mid-1990s when the Internet was developing and started gaining wider spread as the period of rise in popularity among both far-left and -right movements associated with populist rhetoric and approaches [2]. These findings suggest that the development of technologies, namely

the Internet, and the consequent emergence of social media, as well as the overall transformation of information and cyberspace, have at least in part entailed the spread of populist movements. There are several factors that could explain such developments.

To begin with, the development of digital technologies facilitates faster information dissemination, thus accelerating political processes and enabling effectively instantaneous access to information among target audiences of information campaigns. At the same time, these processes entail a dramatic increase in the amount of information available to ordinary users, with only part of this information being credible and accurate. As a result, most consumers are prone to accept the first information they see and deem trustworthy instead of digging into various matters to see how they could be misinterpreted in different media sources. Thus, with access to an almost unlimited number of sources of information, they often stick to just several that correspond to their opinions and seemingly require less effort to verify and sort.

In this situation, the information campaigns carried out by politicians turn into battles for perception, and populists often have the upper hand there. Some strategies used include creating multiple narratives about a particular current event or phenomenon – no matter how untrue and absurd they are – and circulating them in social media and other media outlets [4]. Thus, the narratives covering the actual events and complex policies aimed at solving problems are lost among the other ones spamming the information space and forming the perception of a significant part of the audience.

One of the consequences of this battle for perception and narratives is the battle for attention. Short tweets and TikTok videos with accurately selected hashtags become the essence of politicians' communication with their electorate [3]. These formats of messages are able to transfer information in short and easily perceivable pieces of text – contrary to longer texts requiring time, attention, and cognitive effort to comprehend and form an opinion. The media has become attention-driven and emotionally charged. Loud headers are often more important than the content of the publications since they will lead to more people reading them and becoming exposed to the necessary narratives.

In this context, populist movements obtain new methods for finding points of contention in society and press them at appropriate moments to criticise the current elites and gain political momentum. Similarly, non-populist actors are compelled to indulge in similar practices to keep up with the political race, making it a part of the political mainstream.

Besides, the development of technologies expands the possibilities for reading public opinions and triggering certain insecurities in target audiences, thus fostering polarisation and influencing specific

views and choices. These matters came to light after the controversial Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential elections, where an alleged use of *big data* technologies occurred. Big data refers to «the maximisation of computation power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyse, link, and compare large data sets as well as the process of drawing on large data sets to identify patterns in order to make economic, social, technical, and legal claims» [1].

The approach in question allows to form an understanding of the social media and technology users' personality types with a view to finding individuals more susceptible to specific messages and narratives – especially among the «swaying» electorate. It presents a kind of predictive modelling of a voter's needs and preferences, which are later used in creating political campaigns and slogans [5]. With such technologies in use, relatively moderate people might be turned into fierce supporters of extreme policies.

Lastly, it is important to mention the role of digital technologies in establishing a platform for voicing disagreement with current government policies for people with little to no political or governmental background. Such individuals could get thousands of followers who would catch up those ideas. In this sense, technologies act as an «enabler» of communication among like-minded people [13]. The issue is that it is true even for the views and positions that are normally considered marginalised. If before the people following these views were limited to their nearest «bubble», now they have an opportunity to communicate with their peers and popularise their ideas without any limits. The social media algorithms continue fostering this by setting the feed in accordance with a person's likes and interests expressed in the search queries and followed pages, which in turn further convinces them of the validity of their opinions. While permitting a free speech discussion on a range of topics and ensuring democratic processes, it also sets the basis for abusive practices aiming at promoting the political interests of certain representatives of political elites. As highlighted by Engesser et al. [4], the utilisation of social media platforms by populists enables them to establish a direct connection with the public, thus circumventing traditional journalistic gatekeepers. This direct engagement allows populists to foster a perception of proximity to the people by addressing them without intermediary filters. Additionally, the adoption of a more personal and colloquial language style further enhances this sense of closeness.

Furthermore, quantitative investigations conducted by Theocharis et al. [12] indicates that employing Twitter as a means to disseminate information, independent of traditional media channels, could potentially enhance candidates' electoral prospects. This is particularly evident when tweets contain controversial content, as they tend to captivate audiences and have

the potential for increased virality, effectively transforming them into spectacles that attract widespread attention.

Now let's move on to the analysis of the specific case of former US President Donald Trump, who during the 2016 presidential campaign and during his first term in power actively applied a whole set of the above-mentioned topics and tools to create a more comfortable information space and manipulations. Twitter, in this context, was a really convenient platform. The emergence of Twitter in 2006 initially raised questions about its potential value and purpose. Originally conceived as a platform for facilitating group text messaging within social circles, Twitter quickly evolved into a powerful medium for mass communication. In a historical context where typesetting costs hindered the expansion of the newspaper industry beyond single-page headlines, Twitter's emergence represented a unique development in media form, resembling a parallel form of communication.

Following the 2008 election, which underscored the significance of social media in political campaigns, Twitter gained recognition as a crucial tool for electioneering and governance. By 2018, particularly during Trump's tenure as the most active Twitter user, the platform boasted approximately 330 million monthly users, predominantly in the United States but also globally [11]. Twitter's purported ability to reach a diverse audience, combined with its accessibility, has led many to regard it as a «democratic» platform. Observers such as Vann Newkirk have framed Twitter within a narrative of «democratisation,» suggesting that providing discursive access to politicians redistributes power away from them, exposing them to critique and dissent that they might otherwise evade in more controlled messaging environments [10].

Decentralised and anti-establishment movements like the Tea Party, Alt-Right, and Black Lives Matter have leveraged Twitter's platform to organise large-scale events and pose significant challenges to public figures. However, in the case of Donald Trump, Twitter served as a catalyst for his rapid ascent to power, rather than a mechanism to counter or undermine that power. While some of Trump's Twitter followers have recently expressed disillusionment with his tweets, this sentiment does not necessarily diminish his influence or authority.

Let us review some of the background research conducted by our colleagues. George Lakoff has examined Trump's tweets, contending that their masterful aspect lies in consistently framing the message ahead of others in the informational sense [7]. While this observation holds merit to some extent, it overlooks the extent to which the medium itself plays a significant role. As highlighted earlier, Twitter's focus on the latest tweet and its reactionary nature

to the prevailing «crisis» of the moment emphasise timing rather than framing as the key to Trump's message co-optation.

In the article on Brexit and Trump, Carole McGranahan [8] contributed a perceptive analysis of Trump's engagement with what she terms the «political sociality of moral outrage.» McGranahan astutely observes that while politicians have long been associated with deception, the sheer volume of falsehoods propagated by Trump signals an era of unparalleled political dishonesty. She prompts an inquiry into how anthropology can historically, culturally, and politically comprehend this phenomenon. McGranahan's call for a broader contextual examination of «Trump-speak» resonates with our argument regarding the necessity of such an approach.

Apart from direct falsehoods and provocations, which may be described as the first method of Twitter communication, one should also underline the ambiguous nature of the president's communication with his supporters. Ambiguity emerges as a significant asset for Trump's Twitter strategy, fostering a sense of solidarity among his supporters by tapping into their underlying feelings of persecution. This ambiguity revolves around an undefined adversary, which aligns with the prevailing sentiment among his supporters characterised by a perceived marginalisation stemming from political correctness and progressive social values. Notably, Trump's revival of the Nixon-era slogan «great Silent Majority» during his campaign resonates with this sentiment. Nixon originally invoked this term to rally support for his Vietnam War policies amidst anti-war protests, mirroring Trump's appeal to a contemporary «Silent Majority,» albeit one vocalised primarily through Twitter.

The continuous narrative of confronting an invisible adversary cultivates a collective sense of strength and unity among Trump's followers. As one supporter expressed, the act of fighting, irrespective of its justification, underscores the desire for a leader unafraid to champion their cause. This sentiment reflects a broader sentiment of perceived victimisation, as articulated by another supporter who lauded Trump's defiance against what they perceived as bullying tactics employed by corporate media. In their view, Trump's willingness to confront this perceived bully symbolised a victory for the American people, resonating deeply with his base.

Populists often emphasise the notion of a heartland, portraying it as vulnerable and in need of protection from external threats. This construction of threat scenarios is characterised by a dichotomy between 'Us'—the homeland or collective identity—and 'Them', the perceived outsiders or adversaries [14, p. 66]. In a tweet dated February 3, 2017, Trump utilises this framework by invoking the concept of the homeland («our country») and asserting the imperative of shielding it from «evil» forces:

“We must keep “evil” out of our country!”

This narrative constructs an image of the homeland under siege by an unspecified malevolent entity that must be prevented from infiltrating «our country». Notably, the use of first-person personal pronouns such as «we» and «our» underscores the dichotomy between the collective identity and the perceived threat posed by the «other». The identity of the collective represented by «we» remains implicit, defined primarily by its opposition to the perceived evil [6].

Furthermore, Trump’s tweet coincides with an incident at the Louvre Museum in Paris, a context in which the original executive order, aimed at suspending entry from six predominantly Muslim countries, was still in effect. This juxtaposition serves to bolster the legitimacy of the executive order by reinforcing the narrative of safeguarding the nation against perceived dangers posed by the «Other».

Thus, we can conclude that the very fact of the presence of Twitter as an element of Donald Trump’s communication and information strategy did not become a defining element of his populist rhetoric and/or manifestations of a certain political radicalism, which was clearly characteristic of this politician during 2016-2021. Rather, in this context, technology became a catalysing condition for the spread and strengthening of such rhetoric and also helped in the shortest possible time to achieve the desired size of the audience and reach precisely those parts of it that were susceptible to radicalization and were ready to follow this rhetoric. Therefore, technologies in politics – in particular, communication technologies – cannot be defined in purely scientific terms as the root causes and root of populism as a phenomenon of the modern system of international relations. Rather, their influence on the information field surrounding political processes can be compared to the influence of gunpowder on the conduct of hostilities – it did not change the essence of the war itself, but significantly expanded its format, increased the number of participants and led to more destructive results.

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## Технології та популізм: як Дональд Трамп маніпулює політичним порядком денним

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*У статті розглядається вплив технологічного розвитку на піднесення популістських політичних акторів. Автори розмірковують над останніми політичними подіями, включно з виборчими успіхами партій і кандидатів у президенти, які зазвичай асоціюються з популістською риторикою та політикою, і підтверджують початкову гіпотезу щодо причинно-наслідкових зв'язків між цифровими технологіями та популярністю цих рухів. З цією метою в статті розглядаються загальні підходи до розуміння популістської політики та того, як її поширенню сприяє розвиток технологій. Останнє прискорює обмін інформацією та тягне за собою трансформацію споживання інформації, а також забезпечує інструменти для популістів для взаємодії зі своєю аудиторією та ефективнішого поширення своїх ідей.*

*Крім того, проводиться емпіричне кейс-стаді, присвячене дослідженню політики колишнього президента США Дональда Трампа та його інформаційної політики, а також контент-аналіз його акаунтів у соціальних мережах, які активно використовував під час його виборчих кампаній і президентського терміну. Трамп використовував свою активність у соціальних мережах для мобілізації підтримки серед свого цільового електорату, сприяючи поширенню поляризаційних та антисистемних наративів. Він зображував себе як єдину альтернативу системі, сформованій нинішніми елітами, здатну врятувати країну від внутрішніх і зовнішніх загроз. Таким чином, Трамп використовував цифрові та інформаційні технології для донесення цих наративів і риторичних прийомів до широкої аудиторії користувачів соціальних мереж, зокрема, звертаючись до питань, які були привабливими для них і легко ними сприймалися.*

*Результати дослідження підтверджують, що хоча технології самі по собі не спричиняють появу та популярність популістських рухів, їхній розвиток є одним із ключових факторів, що сприяють сплеску популістської політики та її успіху на виборах.*

**Ключові слова:** популізм, технології, інформація, наративи, Дональд Трамп, інформаційна стратегія, Сполучені Штати Америки