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Populism and the Media

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Populist landscapes

The European political landscape of the last decade has been home to numerous political figures that have stood out by virtue of their personality and their voicing of popular discontent. These include the likes of Jean-Marie Le Pen, Jörg Haider, Christoph Blocher, Pim Fortuyn and Silvio Berlusconi, all of whom are among the more recent manifestations of the populist political climate affecting much of contemporary Europe, as discussed in the introduction to this volume.

Independent of their ideology, the leaders of populist movements and parties often have features in common that clearly contribute to their popularity and political appeal: in most cases, they are charismatic figures and possess a great deal of media savvy. Furthermore, as Gianfranco Pasquino notes in his chapter, 'Populist leaders do not represent the people, rather they consider themselves – and succeed in being considered – an integral part of the people. They are of the people'.

These features usually combine to assure a lasting public notoriety and intense media visibility that leaders use as political capital in the pursuit of their goals in their domestic arenas. This has certainly been the case with Le Pen, who has succeeded in attracting (and deploying to his advantage) the criticism of the press, while Austria's Jörg Haider's personal glamour and controversial stances have brought him public attention both at home and abroad. A somewhat similar communications strategy was employed by Pim Fortuyn in striking sensitive chords of popular concern (for example, in relation to Muslim immigration) and exhibiting a glitzy outspokenness that assured him constant media interest. In fact, we can say that almost all populist leaders display flamboyant personalities and pursue highly contentious agendas that attract media scrutiny.

Personal charisma and media savvy have thus played a significant part in the origins and subsequent construction of populist movements. Surprisingly, most recent political science research has largely disregarded them both on

the grounds that charisma is not measurable, while media scholarship implements analytical categories that do not easily marry with the systemic approach of most political science work. An examination of the existing literature on populism confirms that 'little has been written on how the media work as the initiators or catalysts of public sentiments, how media content may voice sectional populist claims' and on how the media can be turned into powerful, if unwitting, allies of populist leaders (Mazzoleni, 2003: 2).

Do the media contribute to the rise of populism?

Looking at the most well-known cases of populist phenomena in Europe, we can see that leaders and movements often seem to rely on some sort of 'media complicity'. In many instances, the European media appear to have contributed to a legitimization of the issues, key-words and communication styles typical of populist leaders. 'Underdog' leaders who strive to gain public attention have regularly proved able to exploit the media's proclivity towards anything that 'breaks the routine' in political arenas, by resorting to communication strategies that ensure media coverage. The result of this 'supply and demand' relationship is an increased visibility and significant reverberation of the populist message among a wide audience. In other words, the media, intentionally or not, may serve as powerful mobilization tools for populist causes.

Clearly, no assumption is made here of causal links between the media and the spread of populism. Nonetheless, if we examine the processes of media-driven representation and the symbolic construction of favourable opinion climates – and of populist leadership, credo and action – we find that the media provide a significant degree of support for the rise of populist phenomena. The media factor, of course, is by no means the only independent variable here. That is to say, media action cannot be separated from the other structural factors considered in this volume, such as the nature of the political system and the specific features of the social and cultural political climates.

The example of social and political malaise – a common precondition for the growth of anti-political sentiments – shows that both political and media factors form a unique alliance, whose catalyst may be found in the country's political culture at a given time. This malaise is certainly not provoked by the media, but the media do play a role in disseminating it, either by simply keeping it on a country's public agenda, or by spreading political mistrust and a mood of fatalistic disengagement – all elements that can be easily and promptly exploited by populist politicians.

Furthermore, systemic phenomena such as the decline of a mass party interact to a very significant extent with media-driven processes, yielding new realities such as 'media parties' and, in our case, populist movements

that rely heavily on the mass media, and are led by politicians who, with few exceptions, are themselves astute 'news makers'.

The question of whether the media accord an invaluable and extraordinary public status to the upsurge of populist ideas, populist leadership and populist forces stands out as the key question to be addressed. In other words, do the media contribute to the political legitimization of these movements, by assuring them first of media-based legitimization, i.e. a visible place in the national polity? Is this result unintended and inescapable? What are the implications for the health of democratic life? This chapter will discuss these and other related questions from a political communication perspective and by drawing on mass communication theory.

The media factor

When speaking of 'media', we refer to a very complex whole that includes senders, channels, contents, audiences, print and electronic outlets, journalism, the entertainment industry and others. There is, however, a risk of failing to distinguish between the diverse weightings of each of these components on societal phenomena. This is also the case with the study of the relationship between 'media' and populism. For our present analysis, the focus will be on the news media. This means looking at how print and electronic journalism has dealt with populism, how journalistic routines and narratives have affected the coverage and presentation of events and leaders, and how populist leaders themselves have interacted with the news institutions.

The classical distinction between mainstream and tabloid news media is of great value in this analysis, as it has been argued that these two types of news outlets adopt different approaches in their treatment of populism (Mazzoleni, 2003: 15–16). In most countries, the established news media are the mouthpieces of the ruling classes. In terms of their degree of integration with the elites, 'they tend to adopt a law-and-order attitude and to use their journalistic weapons for the defense of the *status quo* when it comes under attack from anti-establishment forces, such as protest groups and populist movements' (Mazzoleni, 2003: 16). Political communication scholarship (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1987) has labelled this attitude 'sacerdotal', arguing that the mainstream media in particular tap primarily into the interests of the ruling political, economic and cultural classes, even when they engage in criticism or conflict (Bennett, 1988). These media tend overtly to combat or downplay protest/populist threats, contributing to their containment. However, there is evidence that the public cynicism of particular media outlets and certain campaigns against political corruption, government misdeeds and controversial policies, may be held responsible for the diffusion of political discontent and even anti-political attitudes among the citizenry. This is fertile ground for populist sentiments, even when media abide by the rules of balanced and pluralistic presentation of political events (as in the case of public service media) (Ociepka, 2005).

A quite different picture is offered by the tabloid or popular news media. These print and television outlets are by no means mouthpieces of the Establishment. Their 'vision of the world' has a commercial character and responds primarily to 'market imperatives'. Hence, ratings and competition for advertising resources seem to be the paramount elements of these businesses. The commercial approach produces a journalism which craves the sensationalistic coverage of events, exhibits a strong preference for personalized story-telling and searches for news that stirs the emotions or provides for a kind of political voyeurism. In brief, popular journalism implements to the highest degree the classical laws of the news-making profession, focusing to a greater extent than the quality-mainstream press on the eccentric aspects of social reality. It is not surprising, therefore, that these media give passionate attention to what happens in the usually animated precincts of populist movements.

Media populism

Political arenas around the globe have long been affected by a general process of 'mediatisation' of political leadership and action (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). The media – and especially television – have become increasingly central to the political process, to the point that political communicators now have to come to terms with the constraints of news production within the media industry. There is an ongoing adaptation of political public performances, language and at times even policy-making, to the demands of an increasingly commercialized mass media. Thus, the mediatization of political communication is often identified with the marketization of the public representation of politics. The implications of such changes in the realm of politics are diverse and all relate, to varying extents, to the dynamics of populism as they serve as the 'necessary background for populist messages' (Ociepka, 2005: 209).

The transformation of political language into spectacle is the most evident effect. In contemporary society, where image is paramount, political leaders must be good 'actors' and master the tools of drama in order to address effectively a domestic audience that has become increasingly distracted from politics. Pierre-André Taguieff (1997) emphasizes the mastering of television – the spectacle-medium by definition – by populist leaders, observing that 'populism has already turned into telepopulism. The successful demagogue of post-modernity is the telegenic tribune' (cited in Mény and Surel, 2000: 125). In Switzerland, for example, the success of Christoph Blocher's SVP/UDC party is to be found in the 'extraordinary media aura of its leader' (Tourret, 2000: 52). Blocher's case is an interesting one, because in a country where the mediatization of politics is hardly practised, the SVP leader's talent as a communicator has prompted the rise of an unprecedented 'spectacle-politics'. In particular, German language television made Blocher a true star of the popular programme *Arena*, thus offering him a nationwide audience (ibid.).

The personalization of political leadership is a further implication of the mediatization of politics and is closely connected to that of dramatization. The media have a far greater preference for stories about real people than for boring speeches or abstract issues presented in a bureaucratic style. Populist leaders, as noted earlier, are all strong personalities that perfectly fit the news media's demand for the spectacular and emotional treatment of social reality, including political life. In the 2002 general election campaign in the Netherlands, 'television news coverage of the parties was highly personalised, and the LPF coverage focused heavily on the leader' (Cherribi, 2003: 160). In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi has run his 'personal party' *Forza Italia* since 1994 with a strong personalized leadership. Parties such as the French *Front National* (FN) or Belgium's *Vlaams Blok* (now *Vlaams Belang*) have always been strongly identified with their leaders. Indeed, we could say that their destinies, like those of nearly all populist movements, are tied to the life cycle of their leaders.

The mediatization/marketization of political communication is intertwined with a broader shift in the media industry worldwide towards forms of content that respond primarily to audience demands and tastes by providing a larger supply of entertainment and sensationalism, especially in the information domains, and thus creating what Douglas Kellner (2003) has called the 'infotainment society'. Once again, television stands out as the medium that best epitomizes this trend in the news industry. Interestingly, in France, television is often nicknamed '*la machine à populisme*'. In 1990s Europe, the classical model of public (and socially responsible) broadcasting fell into deep crisis in the face of fierce competition from commercial channels in both the domestic and continental media marketplaces. This is seen by some analysts as one of the reasons behind the rise of a 'soft-videocracy' in certain political contexts. As the Italian philosopher, Remo Bodei (2003: 41), observed:

millions of adult and active citizens, men and women, are all equally captured by 'domesticated' politics, in the double sense of a politics introduced [by television] into the home and of a politics tailored to the style and modalities of domestic behaviour, expectations, fears and disputes. Accordingly, the protagonists of political competition take on the same elements (of being likeable or not, of inspiring 'fans' to be for against them) that surround the other heroes of the small screen.

The Berlusconi phenomenon is clearly a case of populism that combines a political communication style with popularized television language and contents. Similarly, part of the success of Jörg Haider in Austria is attributed to his 'skilful use of [communication] strategies, which correspond with contemporary media logics. [...] His performances are exemplary for the personalisation and popularisation of politics' (Hipfl, 2005: 60, 70). In short, political

populism nests perfectly in an environment where media populism thrives. It is no surprise, therefore, that recent research has presented convincing evidence that there exists a close link between the two forms of populism. As Cas Mudde (2004: 554) notes, when the media 'struggle for readers and viewers, and consequently, [...] focus on more extreme and scandalous aspects of politics', all this provides a 'perfect stage' for populist figures who find 'not just a receptive audience, but also a highly receptive medium'.

By 'populist media' or 'media populism', we mean highly commercialized media production and/or news coverage that yield to general popular tastes, as in the case of tabloid media. It comprises both the concepts of commercial treatment of collective imagery (and of public affairs) and of the sweeping 'popularization' of media practices and content. Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh (1999: 220) note that:

the voiced opinions of men and women in the street are being tapped more often in a veritable explosion of populist formats and approaches: talk shows; phone ins (with both even-handed and aggressively opinionated hosts); solicitation of calls, faxes, and e-mails for response by interviewed politicians; studio panels confronting party representatives; larger studio audiences putting questions to politicians through a moderator; and town meetings of the air, deliberative polling and televised people's Parliaments. The identities and styles of these efforts are extraordinarily diverse, ranging from the combative to the reflective and from glossy voyeuristic to the ultra-Athenian.

The influence of such populist/popularized media apparatuses on the diffusion of populist ideas is evident if we consider that forceful politicians can count on the readiness of these communication channels and that these same channels can also serve as vehicles reflecting people's sentiments back to them. Clearly, the political messages that populist media disseminate are of the kind that can appeal to mass audiences, very much like what occurs in the realm of popular culture. As the *Le Monde* columnist Patrice de Beer observed after the 2003 French parliamentary elections:

Lots of people here read no papers. They have television. Television also became focused on society and pop culture, *as is the news* (Italics mine). It mixes up pop culture and current affairs. It sets a particular agenda. Look at the last election when television highlighted crime, immigration, the 'inner city'. It gives people the idea that society is dangerous, totally corrupt. It turns them away from public life. It helps the extremists like Le Pen. (in Lloyd, 2005)

This convergence of goals between the populist media and populist political movements is normally unintentional. While there are cases in which media

outlets openly back populist leaders, the most conventional pattern is that of a 'production bias' (Entman, 1989) – a synonym for the inevitable 'slant' built into all news production processes, especially those of the commercial media.

This convergence of goals sees the media pursuing their own corporate ends by striking emotional chords on issues such as security, unemployment, inflation, immigration and the like. At the same time, populist leaders and their movements gain status, visibility and popular approval by generating controversy, scuffling with incumbent political leaders and resorting to inflammatory rhetoric.

Populist strategies to secure media attention and support

As has already been mentioned, populist leaders tend to be consummate players with the media and clever newsmakers. It is interesting therefore to look at the most successful communication strategies implemented by populist movements in order both to tap into the public mood and capture the media's attention.

The personality traits of the leading figures have a strong bearing on the public image of their populist movements and parties. Charismatic or not, all share a 'populist' communication style. Their appearance and attire is one aspect of this. As Brigitte Hipfl notes: 'journalists liked to comment on Haider's various dress styles and labelled him a male model' (Hipfl, 2005: 64), while Umberto Bossi (of Italy's *Lega Nord*) deliberately went for casual clothing and brandished big cigars. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen wore a red scarf over his mouth when speaking of leftist censorship. Another aspect is the language they use: Le Pen is an excellent orator who makes sharp puns about rivals while Bossi has used northern dialect and manipulated national (or regional) symbols (for example, the *Lega* holds rallies in Pontida, symbolic city of the northern Italian medieval insurgence against German emperors). Such personality features serve as strong poles of attraction for the popular media, as they often fit into the 'story-telling' frames of media industries (Kellner, 1990: 112).

However, to be effective, the leadership of a populist movement has to consider employing media management techniques that respond to the increasing professionalization of political action. Not all populist leaders use the sophisticated means that presidents, prime ministers and other major politicians employ in modern political warfare or make recourse to the 'scientific engineering and targeting of messages' (Bennett and Manheim, 2001: 282). Rather, in general, the communication strategies of populist leaders and movements include:

1. playing the role of the underdog;
2. use of professional expertise;

3. rallies;
4. free media publicity;
5. staging events; and
6. tactical attacks on the media.

(Stewart, Mazzoleni and Horsfield, 2003)

Playing on an underdog status is an uncertain strategy as it is not always successful. Le Pen and Bossi have paradoxically gained more support when targeted by unfriendly news coverage. In various elections, Silvio Berlusconi has cleverly exploited the aggressive hostility of the liberal Italian press and his supposed 'demonization' by the opposition. Like Berlusconi, Haider and Le Pen have also used professional media relations advisers and, in so doing, have succeeded in getting less hostile coverage. Similarly, in Belgium, the *Vlaams Blok* benefited from a professional leadership, strong and verbally skilled politicians and a pronounced communication strategy – perfectly suited to striking the anti-political chords of the population (Jagers and Walgrave, 2003).

However, the old 'pre-mediated' forms of political communication have been by far those most favoured by populist leaders. Bossi, Haider and Le Pen used their rallies to stand (and be seen to stand) amongst ordinary people and to address their constituencies directly, often using language they would not use in the media. The controversial and protest nature of populist leadership, as previously observed, assures them of constant media attention, especially in the early days of their movements. This free publicity accorded to the leaders and their ideas enables them to capitalize on their strong public visibility and explains why, for example, the *Lega Nord* decided not to invest much in campaign propaganda (Mazzoleni, 1992).

Another strategy widely implemented in the political arena is that of staging events both during and outside election campaigns. As Beata Ociepka observes:

populists often inspire media events by introducing issues into the public discourse in order to launch the process of opinion building. [...] The importance of public opinion surveys in contemporary democracies between elections provokes populists to perform media events in order to support the notion of 'a permanent election campaign'. The aim of such permanent election campaigns is full mobilisation of the electorate, for the long term, and especially before elections. (Ociepka, 2005: 210, 211)

Populist leaders and their movements thus possess a special ability to make headlines and appear on breaking news, depending on the particular mood of the country. Amongst the ways they do this are via press conferences, theatrical events, photo-opportunities, or by making inflammatory statements. Being a political 'pop star' or 'media-icon' makes it easier for

leaders like Haider to put on a show and adapt public presentations to the pop-culture-style presentations of media celebrities (Hipfl, 2005). One important side-effect of this courtship of the media, however, is that observed by Todd Gitlin (1980) with respect to the student protest movements of the 1970s in the USA, i.e. populist movements that 'professionally' use the media may pay the price of losing control over their self-definition.

Along with a careful strategy of courting the media to their benefit, populist politicians have at times also implemented the opposite strategy – that of bullying certain less-than-friendly media outlets – in an attempt to shore up support among followers who claim their voices are not represented by the (mostly) mainstream media. They also flout any negative public image (or definition) of the movement that may have been propagated by media perceived as representing the voice of the Establishment. This accounts for the setting up of party-controlled daily newspapers like the *Lega Nord's La Padania*. This type of media plays the dual role of supporting the movement's ideology, policies and battles in addition to reinforcing its identity among followers, and serving as a showcase of the movement to the 'outside world'.

Not all of these strategies to attain sympathetic coverage or support from the media meet with success. The elite media – those that reflect the political culture of the Establishment – can raise barriers against attempts by populists to secure their direct or indirect support. However, as Yves Mény and Yves Surel acutely observe, 'in the game of mutual exploitation/manipulation between the media and politicians, populist leaders can always gain a comparative advantage, at least in the beginning. Having little to lose and everything to gain, they feed the media with provocative and fiery statements, and with violent attacks on their opponents' (2000: 126).

From 'hard' to 'soft' populist communication

As outlined earlier, the processes of marketization and tabloidization of the news industry have affected all political action, leaders and political discourse worldwide. Populist politics is thus only one part of a political environment that has been moulded by the changes in political communication since the end of the Second World War (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). In other words, established parties and mainstream politicians share with populists significant degrees of media-centred, spectacularized, personalized and audience-pleasing communication.

Within this commonality of communication patterns in the media environment, a specific trend (which is not confined to Europe) can be singled out – the 'populist contamination' of mainstream political discourse. While some mainstream political players (both leaders and their parties) have resisted at least the most conspicuous and controversial manifestations of the mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999), it appears that populist language has become a sort of *koiné* for many others. This is a

process that also concerns other important aspects of the evolution (and crises) of liberal democracies – both in the old western world and in the newer democracies – and has created anxiety about what might be the likely outcomes of a populist drift in contemporary political arenas. On the one hand, it seems that some mainstream politicians are diffusing a kind of ‘soft populism’ that recoils from the excesses of ‘hard’ populist communication (with all its possible boomerang effects on moderate electorates), while at the same time espousing the same, or similar, attitudes and stances on issues dear to populists such as immigration, crime, unemployment, and the effects of European Union enlargement. On the other hand, there is a ‘soft populism’ that ordinary political action shares with populists which appeals directly to the people and is often intolerant of the constraints of elitist, representative democracy. It is important to note, however, that the language used by these ‘soft populists’ – who mostly address moderate voters – is quite unlike the boisterous speech of the ‘hard populists’.

In this sense, populism may be seen as a communication style which is adopted by political actors seeking to display their proximity to the people. Populism appears, therefore, as a ‘master frame, a way to wrap up all kinds of issues’ (Jagers and Walgrave, 2003). Many mainstream European political leaders and parties have been observed reverting at various times to either or both kinds of ‘soft populism’, in a clear attempt to ride the populist wave that continues to influence European economic, political and cultural climates, especially with regard to the challenges to European security and stability posed by globalization. The established parties thus use messages that are ultra-simplified and populist in tone, in an attempt to show their closeness to sensitive sectors of domestic public opinion and to capture transient emotions in disaffected voters (see also Alfio Mastropaolo’s chapter).

In Italy, Berlusconi has often appealed to voters, for example, by rejecting policies as a response to supposedly widespread popular demand. In France, during the 2005 riots in the banlieues, Nicolas Sarkozy borrowed language from the *Front National* that targeted the heartland of moderate French voters worried about the problems of ethnic integration. In his 1995 presidential campaign, Jacques Chirac adopted a populist rhetoric in his condemnation of elites, hidden economic powers and Europe’s democratic deficit (Mény and Surel, 2000:123). Tony Blair has also tactically adapted his communication style to the post-September 11 opinion climate. As Yves Mény observed:

Blair has weakened the Labour party and instead stressed his communication with the people. In that sense, his leadership contains a populist element [...] In any case, populism in the UK goes through the tabloid press. Blair’s decisions in relation to the Iraq conflict were criticised by the political elites, but supported by a large section of the popular press. (Mény, interviewed by Gnoli, 2003: 39)

In the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn was credited with bringing to an end the 'political correctness' of political discourse which was held to be typical of traditional public debate. Dutch politicians (and the media themselves) are no longer afraid to speak out about issues such as immigration and the cultural integration of Muslims and to lay bare their deeper concerns. As Oussama Cherribi noted: 'a year after Fortuyn's tragic death [...] the main political parties on the Left and Right have adopted as their own the anti-Islam and assimilationist policies of the LPF [*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*], and positive images of the leader continue to be widespread in the press' (Cherribi, 2003:267).

The media-marked life-cycle of populist movements

Comparative analysis of populist phenomena has illustrated that the rise (and, in some instances, the fall) of populist leaders and movements is influenced to varying degrees and at different stages of their respective 'life-cycles' both by the way the media have covered events, figures and messages and by the success of their own media management strategies. Applying a frame of analysis from Julianne Stewart, Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Bruce Horsfield (2003) to the European populist phenomena, we can divide into four distinct phases the diverse impacts both of media factors on populist movements and of populist movements on the media.

The ground-laying phase

This is the phase of diffused malaise in domestic public opinion in which the media mostly play an indirect role in facilitating the rise of organized populist forces. Media coverage may spread a sense of malaise and can trigger anti-Establishment reactions and political disaffection. The ensuing climates of cynicism and disenchantment provide ideal ground for the dissemination of the views of political leaders such as Le Pen, Haider, Bossi, Blocher and Dewinter as they start to gather electoral support and thus enter the political arena. Apart from the dramatization of the country's ills by both elite and tabloid media, the populist media plays a role in spreading the populist message. In fact, in some countries, certain populist media buttress new populist movements by catering to the entertainment needs of their audiences and/or by highlighting negative stories that might stimulate public unrest. In other words, we can find a sort of 'convergence of goals' in what has been labelled 'newsroom populism'. This was the case, for example, in Austria when tabloid newspapers fuelled an opinion climate that favoured Jörg Haider (Plasser and Ulram, 2003). According to Brigitte Hipfl (2005: 58), popular television programmes, such as 'Big Brother', 'can function as "normalising contexts" for populist strategies and become part of the "space of opportunities" for populism'.

In Belgium, the success of the *Vlaams Blok* (VB) in 2003 was indirectly facilitated by the phasing out of the *cordon sanitaire* raised by the national press to keep in check the diffusion of xenophobic sentiments put forth by that party. Various news media began to cover some of the controversial issues that made the political fortune of Philip Dewinter in an attempt to defuse the VB's challenge to the country's political *status quo*. This meant opening the doors of mass communication to the extreme Right. In doing so, the Flemish media (with the significant exception of the mainstream paper *De Morgen*) opened a Pandora's Box (Arnauts, 2003). In fact, the heavy coverage of criminal stories comprised a large part of the daily news diet 'which in Belgium has been found to be linked to one particular item on the menu: crime news' (ibid., 53) and researchers have detected a correlation between this diet and support for the Far Right (Walgrave and De Swert, 2004).

The insurgent phase

Populist movements gradually gain popular support and build up their organization to the point where they can effectively challenge the other parties. From the perspective of media-populist relations, this phase is characterized by two main features:

1. populist leaders seek to secure the direct attention of the media by displaying a large array of communication tactics;
2. the mainstream media and tabloids respectively manifest very different attitudes towards the search for public visibility by these leaders.

During this phase, it is possible to observe the media savvy of leaders in action: they stage controversial events, engage in verbal extremism and fiercely attack government policies (for example, on immigration, taxes and social welfare). Bossi's neo-Celtic liturgies, Haider's remarks about the Nazis and the Jews, Fortuyn's outspoken statements on Islam are all 'newsworthy' realities that the media will automatically cover in their pursuit of corporate goals. In the case of Fortuyn, many within the Dutch media 'pro-actively contributed to establish Pim as a brand name in his ascent to political power, so that he already had a sympathetic audience among opinion leaders as well as the general public' (Cherribi, 2003: 149). Fortuyn 'brought the journalists exciting news... [and]... journalists through their own media logic have done nothing other than stimulate the hype' (ibid.: 161).

In contrast to the apparent willingness of commercial media to provide substantial and continuing access to controversial and politically destabilizing populist platforms, the elite media demonstrate considerable angst in attempting to conform to the statutes of good journalism while avoiding contributing inadvertently to the rise of anti-Establishment forces. Although they have no choice but to cover these events, there is some evidence that the elite media either underestimate the overall political significance of

these parties, or else that they seek to undermine the populist upsurge by adopting tones of outrage and ridicule. This was the case in the relationship between the Italian mainstream media and Bossi at various stages in the *Lega Nord's* life and with regard to Berlusconi's flamboyance and self-interested policies. A similar tactic was also adopted by the French liberal media in its treatment of Le Pen on several occasions.

The established phase

This is a critical phase for populist movements. Once they have achieved public legitimization through their presence in parliament (and even in government), the media tend to become disenchanted with them. Populist leaders lose some of their original charismatic appeal and find it more difficult to retain the media spotlight than they did in previous phases. Moreover, the political agenda they must address in parliament or in government no longer has the sensational aura that it used to have. Any continued inflammatory rhetoric is overlooked by the media as being chiefly directed towards the movement/party's constituency. Both the established media and commercial outlets no longer experience the dilemmas they faced in phases one and two: their defence of the existing order is overtly displayed. Comparative analysis has shown two interesting patterns in the conduct of the media with regard to populist phenomena during this phase. First, there is the possibility of conflict between the previously supportive populist or tabloid media and the leadership of the populist parties. For example, when FPÖ politicians entered the governing coalition, the tabloid newspaper *Kronen Zeitung* became critical of Haider and his party's agenda.

Second, the mainstream media can display an unprecedented deference to populist parties that have gained power. This can be explained in terms of the 'sacerdotal' attitude common to most elite news outlets. In Italy, once the *Lega Nord* and its leader joined the Berlusconi-led government in 2001, it began to receive more serious attention, even though it had often been ridiculed in the insurgent phase (Biorcio, 2003b). The same occurred with Denmark's Pia Kjaersgaard, founder of the *Dansk Folkeparti*, after her electoral and personal success at the 2005 elections, and following her support of Anders Fogh Rasmussen's government coalition. In 2006, the party's popularity rose dramatically in the opinion polls following the *Jyllands-Posten* Prophet Muhammad cartoons controversy. To a certain extent, Le Pen and the FN also received compliant media treatment during the 2002 presidential campaign. Indeed, the major French television channel, TF1, was accused by the Socialists of having given such excessive coverage to Le Pen and his position on security questions that it was nicknamed TFN.

The decline phase

Clearly this is not a phase that is relevant to all European populist leaders and movements. On the contrary, most of the movements mentioned in

this chapter are still fairly successful and continue to receive significant media attention. The conduct of the media in the decline phase varies from country to country: media attention may be prompted by the newsworthiness of a 'sensational' fall in popularity of a formerly controversial leader, or by the appearance of competitors in the national political marketplace, as was the case with the split in Le Pen's party a few years ago. The hypothesis by Fritz Plasser and Peter Ulram (2003) that, if the FPÖ were to lose its media popularity, it would surely fall into decline is a most interesting one. This is in fact occurring in Austria with the BZÖ, a party founded by Haider and his sister that joined the Schüssel cabinet, but then gradually lost popular support (cfr. Heinisch in this volume). Given the close interdependence of populist movements and the media as well as of charismatic leaders and their parties, this hypothesis might well apply to other cases. The murder of Pim Fortuyn attracted huge media coverage and mustered significant electoral support, but the movement that survived its leader lacked his charisma and media savvy, and therefore did not survive, among other factors, the consequent media disinterest (Cherribi, 2003; see also Lucardie in this book).

Populists, media and democracy

To answer the earlier question of whether the media are accomplices in the creation of populist climates and the rise of populist movements, there is some convincing evidence that there are close ties between media-centred processes and the political phenomenon of populism. All phases in the life-cycle of a populist movement are affected by some sort of media-driven influences, and populist leaders cannot disregard the seductive power of the media. If they do, they risk marginalization. This intrinsic interdependence can be seen in terms of 'media complicity' in building the destinies of populist leaders and their movements.

The existence of a 'media populism' that has its origins in the typical patterns and practices of commercial media outlets (such as the tabloid press, talk radio and infotainment TV shows) offers an undoubted, if largely unintentional, backdrop to the flowering of populist climates by disseminating sentiments ranging from popular discontent on particularly hot issues to vehemently anti-political attitudes. This is why researchers refer to a 'convergence of goals' between the media and populists. They need each other. The media must cover the sensational stories provided by contentious, often flamboyant (and in some cases 'media darling') figures while populist leaders must use the media to enhance the effectiveness of their messages and build the widest possible public support. Beata Ociepka (2005: 223) uncovers similar trends when assessing the role of the domestic media in the rise of Polish populism: 'The relationship between the media and populist politicians is reciprocal. Both sides in the relationship are conscious of possible manipulation, but at the same time are fated to cooperate'. This seems to be

a rather common phenomenon in Europe (and elsewhere), no matter how different the political and cultural contexts in which populism emerges.

The evidence from comparative research shows that the media are far from being compliant, submissive ‘accomplices’ to populist politicians. In contrast to an apparent convergence of goals between populist movements and the populist media, there is a patently more adversarial attitude adopted by the mainstream media, albeit with some interesting exceptions. The different handling of populist issues and leaders by the Establishment media in the various phases of the populist party life-cycle reveals an ‘evaluation bias’ (Entman, 1989), exactly the opposite of the ‘production bias’ built into typical news-making processes. However, an important distinction should be made here, as the elite media in some cultural environments can display contradictory responses to populists in the sense that they may not be completely hostile to new movements, especially in their very early stages.

The adversarial type of ‘evaluation bias’ is the most common one in advanced democracies. This ‘takes the form of committed defence of the *status quo* and the adoption of a “law and order” frame’, that makes the media ‘play the role of paladins of the established political order’ (Stewart, Mazzoleni and Horsfield, 2003: 234). There may also be some (production) bias in a ‘convergence of policies’, especially when the established media back populist actions. For example, the media fostered the cultural claims of Fortuyn and the nationalist agenda of Haider, and have favoured movements considered essential to large-scale political manoeuvres – as in their occasional support for Bossi’s bullying of the old political class in Italy on the eve of its demise following the ‘Clean Hands’ judicial investigations of the early 1990s.

A final reflection should be made on the implications for the health of western European democracies of the evidence of strong – even if not always intended – collusion between the goals of the media and the political strategies of populists. In other words, what contribution have the media made to the democratic process by interacting with populist phenomena and diffusing their messages within popular culture? In many cases, due to their preference for applying emotional codes in public information, the media have played a role that is anything but supportive of ‘quality’ public debate or the creation of an informed citizenship. This factor, together with the ‘social and political conditions’ (Cfr. Pasquino in this book) that precede the emergence of leaders capable of exploiting them, has contributed to the rise of many hard and soft populists and, through the simplification and personalization of crucial issues that merit more considered treatment, has helped legitimize personalized political and populist leaderships. There is also a serious risk that citizens and voters will identify themselves with these political ‘stars’ in a dangerous ‘information short-cut’ that translates swiftly into electoral support for the nationalistic, xenophobic and reactionary policies advocated by many populist leaders. The fact that populism presents

itself as a 'democratic' phenomenon – claiming to cure established democracies of their ills – makes the picture of the enlarged Europe's democratic evolution even more indistinct, particularly in relation to the challenges posed by large-scale immigration and economic globalization.

It seems that what has been identified with 'media populism' is the irresistible global mass communication environment that facilitates the circulation of populist streams in the democratic body. However, while it might be obvious and convenient to blame the media for this trend in the European political environment, pursuing this interpretation equates to furnishing an alibi for phenomena that should really be looked for elsewhere. After all, the media act to some extent as mirrors of society. As stated in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, the media are not 'independent variables', but rather are 'intervening variables' in cultural, social and political processes that have more 'structural' origins. Moreover, recent sociological work points to media populism as a positive resource for democracy and informed political citizenship, in that it 'may offer a way into politics for people otherwise excluded or bored' (Van Zoonen, 2005: 150). That is not to say, of course, that the media are 'neutral' players in the populist political game. What we can say is that the news media in particular bear the responsibility for exercising criticism and vigilance in their portrayal of political reality, be it populist or mainstream.