Mutual affordances: the dynamics between social media and populism

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Abstract
In a recent contribution to this journal Paolo Gerbaudo has argued that an 'elective affinity' exists between social media and populism. The present article expands on Gerbaudo's argument and examines various dimensions of this affinity in further detail. It argues that it is helpful to conceptually reframe the proposed affinity in terms of affordances. Four affordances are identified which make the social media ecology relatively favourable to both-right as well as left-wing populism, compared to the pre-social media ecology. These affordances are neither stable nor uniquely fixed: they change in concordance with ongoing technological developments and in response to political events. Even though these dynamics can be quick-moving, a fairly stable alliance of interests between social media and populism seems to have emerged over the last decade. This raises the plausibility that as long as the current social media ecology persists, populist tendencies will remain prevalent in politics.

Keywords
affordances, algorithms, attention economy, populism, socially disruptive technologies, social media

Introduction

In a recent contribution to this journal Gerbaudo (2018) has argued that an 'elective affinity' exists between social media and political populism. Gerbaudo highlights that the mass networking capabilities of social media provide a suitable channel for the mass politics and appeals to the people characteristic of populism. This channel has not merely

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served as a tool for top-down communication by political demagogues, but also as an instrument for citizens to unite and express themselves, thereby challenging the political establishment. Hence, according to Gerbaudo we are witnessing

> "what could be tentatively described as an 'elective affinity' between social media and populism: social media has favoured populist against establishment movements by providing the former a suitable channel to invoke the support of ordinary people against the latter." (Gerbaudo, 2018: 746)

On Gerbaudo's analysis, the entanglement between populism and social media is partly explained in terms of a historical confluence of circumstances. Social media became widespread at a time when the neoliberal world order was facing a profound economic crisis and was challenged by populists on the right as well as the left. Additionally, Gerbaudo highlights structural reasons which explain why social media have served populism particularly well. Specifically, he highlights how social media are well-suited to amplify the voice of the people, and to facilitate the people's rally.

Although Gerbaudo's analysis is illuminating, more could be said about the factors that make the current social media ecology specifically amenable to populism. To this effect, a helpful conceptual move is to reframe the proposed 'affinity' in terms of 'affordances'. Unlike 'affinity', 'affordance' is a scholarly term of art. Originally introduced by Gibson (1979) in the context of ecological psychology, the concept has been widely employed in technological design studies, as well as media and communication studies (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Roughly, an affordance denotes a possibility for action: it describes how a given technological setting, such as the social media environment, invites people to act in specific ways. Two features make this concept a helpful tool for the present analysis. First, affordances are relational: what is afforded depends both on the specificities of the agent as well as the environment. Second, the language of affordances is amenable to functional explanations, and serves to clarify what kinds of practices a given technology allows or constrains. In virtue of these features, the concept lends itself well to disentangle the two-way interactions between social media and populism, and to explain why the social media environment offers specific communicative as well as ideological possibilities for populists.

The aim of the present article is to examine the populist affordances of social media in greater detail, and to explain in what ways social media technologies have contributed to disrupting the political status quo. It does so by delineating four affordances which make the current social media ecology specifically amenable to populism, compared to the pre-social media ecology. These affordances are neither stable nor uniquely fixed: they change in concordance with ongoing technological developments and in response to political events. But while these dynamics can be quick-moving, I argue that over the last decade a fairly stable alliance of interests has emerged between social media and populism. Not only do social media offer affordances that benefit populism, but the rise of populism has also benefitted several social media. These two-way dynamics give further substance to Gerbaudo's claim that there is an apparent affinity between them.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 highlights caveats about postulating a causal relation between the rise of social media and the global wave of populism and

suggests that their dynamics are better understood in terms of affordances. Section 3 clarifies the concept of populism and differentiates between its distinctive features in terms of *contents* and in terms of *style*. Section 4 scrutinises four distinct affordances that the current social media ecology offers to populism. Section 5 concludes by underscoring the alliance of interests between social media companies and populism.

Disentangling the dynamics: complicating factors

In the wake of the Brexit campaign and the United States presidential elections of 2016, it has become commonplace to link the rise of populism with the rise of social media. Various scholarly investigations have recently been dedicated to their supposed entanglement, collected *inter alia* in special issues of the journals *Information, Communication & Society* (vol. 20, no. 9, 2017) and *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (vol. 45, no. 9–10, 2019), as well as a special section of *Media, Culture & Society* (vol. 40, no. 5, 2018). But even if Gerbaudo's allusion to an 'elective affinity' between social media and populism is congruent with recent scholarship, substantiating that there is such an affinity is not straightforward (cf. Postill, 2018). Several factors complicate analyses of the relation between populism and social media, such as:

i.   The variety of definitions of 'populism' employed by scholars and the different connotations this concept has in different regional contexts;
ii. The difficulty of singling out the causal effects of social media on populism, and of disentangling social media from the broader media context;
iii. The fact that not only populists, but politicians in general use social media to their avail. There is a potential pitfall of merely cherry-picking examples involving social-media savvy populists;
iv. The diversity of social media and their rapidly changing applications.

That said, none of these complications is unsurmountable. I will address them as follows:

i.   In section 3 I briefly overview different characterisations of populism, focusing specifically on the distinction between the *contents* and *style* of populism. It can be useful to hold these elements distinct: for instance, social media might specifically influence a populist style of communication, but have less effects on the contents of populist ideology.
ii. The rise of populism over the last decade requires a multicausal explanation. The causal contribution of social media constitutes only one – perhaps small – piece of the explanatory puzzle, and it may not be possible to clearly extract it from the broader causal dynamic underlying the rise of populism. By framing the explanation in terms affordances, however, the difficult task of vindicating a specific causal history can be avoided. The concept of affordance facilitates a functional explanation, in terms of preconditions, possibilities and constraints. As such, it allows us to partly abstract from causal claims, focusing instead on the question of whether the current social media ecology has fostered conditions that alter the political dynamics in a populist-friendly way.

iii.   Using social media is evidently beneficial for politicians of *all* stripes. The thesis that there exists an 'elective affinity' between populism and social media, on the other hand, suggests that social media benefit populists more than non-populists. To delineate the latter thesis, I will not focus on just any affordance that social media offers to populism. Instead, I focus on the distinct affordances social media offer to populism *relative to the previous media ecology* – that is, relative to the media ecology as it existed before the advent of internet-based social network sites and social media. Historically, several of these 'new media' emerged in the period between 2005 and 2010, and they have been widely used around the globe roughly since the last decade.

iv.   Social media can be roughly understood to comprise all digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication and interpersonal connection (Burgess et al., 2018). My analysis will specifically centre on social media that are frequently used as platforms of political communication, as for instance by Facebook and Twitter. These – and other – social media have changed substantially over the last decade, and continue to do so. But even if we acknowledge their transient nature, some properties have also remained fairly stable and uniform, such as the commercial logic underlying their design.

The concept of populism

A major challenge in analysing the relation between populism and social media is the variety of characterisations of populism present in the scholarly literature (see Bosetta and Husted, 2017 for an overview). Some scholars characterise populism as an ideology or set of ideas (e.g. Mudde, 2004), others as a style of political communication (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) and still others follow Laclau (2005) in understanding populism as a logic of articulation, in which 'the people' are pitted against a common adversary – 'the elite' or 'the establishment'. These different characterisations need not be regarded as mutually exclusive (Engesser et al., 2017), but their emphasis differs. In this section I will focus specifically on differentiating between the typical *contents* of populist ideology and the characteristic *style* of populist communication. While several populist politicians may propound both the ideology and express the style characteristic of populism, in principle these two features may also come apart.

In terms of contents, populism can be understood as what populism scholar Cas Mudde calls a 'thin ideology': an ideology made up of only a few core beliefs, in which the voice of the people holds priority over fixed ideals. The central unit of populist ideologies is 'the people', which is set against some out-group, typically 'the elite'. Hence, Mudde defines populism as

> "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." (Mudde, 2004: 543)

The dichotomy between 'the people' and 'the elite' might be connected to the more general dichotomy of 'in-group' versus 'out-group': populists favour an in-group typically

defined in terms of 'the people', and are antagonistic towards an out-group typically defined in terms of 'the elite'.

Thus understood, populism is ideologically flexible; it can have both right-wing and left-wing expressions. In its typical right-wing variety, the in-group is delineated in terms of national identity, and pitted against immigrants, or ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. In its typical left-wing variety, the in-group is defined in terms of class and pitted against the economic establishment, the privileged ethnic class, or the 'one percent'. What right- and left-wing varieties have in common is their anti-establishment character: populists typically have misgivings about the ruling class and mainstream institutions.

Especially in Europe and the United States, right-wing proponents of populism – 'national populists' – have gained notable electoral successes during the 2010s. Following the definition of populism scholars Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), national populism can be understood as

> "an ideology which prioritizes the culture and interests of the nation, and which promises to give voice to a people who feel that they have been neglected, even been held in contempt, by distant and often corrupt elites." (idem: 48)

More specifically, Eatwell and Goodwin highlight four core concerns (the 'Four Ds'), which serve to explain the appeal of national populism among a substantial part of the electorate (idem: 271–272):

I.   *distrust* of the increasingly elitist nature of liberal democracy and a feeling of being left out of the political conversation;
II. anxiety about the *destruction* of the nation, sharpened by rapid immigration and ethnic change;
III. concerns about relative *deprivation* as a result of growing economic inequality;
IV. *de-alignment* from the traditional parties.

These concerns constitute what political scientists call the 'demand side' of nationalist populism: sentiments felt by a large part of the electorate, which contribute to the populist wave. The nationalist concern (II) is specific to right-wing populism; distrust, deprivation and de-alignment, on the other hand, are also among the core sentiments giving rise to left-wing populism.

The 'supply side' of populism, in turn, concerns populist leaders, how they navigate elections and how they speak to the people. Populist movements often revolve around charismatic leaders, with an unconventional and uncompromising attitude. They tend to instil a sense of crisis and often appeal to emotions of indignation, resentment, anger, fear and hope. Another style element of populism is the characteristic mode of communication, which often relies on sticky messages and bold words and gestures. Style might prevail over substance: even in the absence of a substantive ideological program, the anti-establishment rhetoric of mediagenic populist leaders may suffice to draw broad support. But often style and substance align: the unconventional and uncompromising attitudes typical of populist leaders fit their anti-establishment ideology, and their use of clear statements and accessible language fit the aspiration to speak on behalf of the people.

Social media's four populist affordances

I will argue that the current social media ecology offers at least four distinct affordances to populism, as compared to the previous media ecology:

a. Social media allow citizens and politicians to circumvent editorial filters;
b. Social media algorithms allow sensational claims to spread comparatively easily;
c. The low-level affordances of social media invite a 'populist style' of communication;
d. Social media allow for the real-time expression – and measurement – of the 'general will' of the people.

a) Social media allow citizens and politicians to circumvent editorial filters

A core tenet of populist ideology is to further the general will of the people, as opposed to the elite. The rise of social media has served to empower the people and to make the media landscape less elitist. Social media lower the threshold for non-elite actors to engage in mass-communication. They provide citizens with a platform to express themselves, virtually without entry barriers and restrictions to content (Dittrich, 2017). In the pre-social media ecology these entry barriers typically existed in virtue of editorial filters: publishers and journalists had a major influence over which contents were presented to the public at large. In the current social media ecology, contents can be distributed worldwide by media users themselves. This includes contents critical of the political establishment, which would have been less likely to pass editorial filters in the previous media ecology. Sidestepping traditional media filters leads to a greater diversity of political voices being expressed, including a proliferation of more extreme views. This decentralising tendency has served populism well, as populists views are often located at the further ends of the ideological spectrum.

   Circumventing traditional filters has affected not only the 'demand side' of populism, but also its 'supply side'. On social media populist leaders can directly address the masses and connect and interact with citizens in ways that offline media do not allow for (Engesser et al., 2017). Moreover, social media allow populist leaders to circumvent 'establishment' media outlets, which they typically associate with the corrupt elites. For these leaders, social media have opened new doors to cultivate a general media presence. If their messages on social media attract sufficient publicity, these messages stand a good chance of being covered by traditional media as well. Hence, social media can serve as a means to influence the general media attention. Indeed, in recent years they have increasingly become publicity machines for politicians (Owen, 2018). A clear example of this is the social media usage of Donald Trump, who actively uses Twitter to forward his political agenda and fight political battles. For Trump, Twitter serves as a mouthpiece which allows him to reach out to the media at large. By contrast, in the previous media ecology he would have been more dependent on journalists to get his messages across to the public.

b) Social media algorithms allow sensational claims to spread comparatively easily

Even though social media allow users to circumvent traditional editorial filters, the messages displayed at Facebook and Twitter News Feeds are not unfiltered. Their contents are selected and ranked by an algorithm, thereby influencing which messages users are most likely to see. In the previous media ecology, the values underlying the editorial filtering process were largely rooted in journalistic quality standards. The logic of social media filters, by contrast, is less transparent, but it generally seems to be geared towards favouring content that is 'popular', in the sense of maximising variables such user interaction, viewer duration and clickthrough (van Dijck et al., 2016). This ties in with the suggestion that the digital sphere is increasingly fuelled by an 'attention economy' (Davenport and Beck, 2001). In the internet age, information is plentiful and easily available. People's attention, on the other hand, is a scarce resource, over which different media compete. The more attention they are able to harvest, the greater their value for advertisers. Therefore, a crucial component of the algorithmic design typical of current social media is an attempt to maximise attention, for instance by algorithmically favouring items that receive disproportionally many views, clicks, likes and retweets. This tends to result in an event-oriented design of suggested content, which favours breaking news and viral items (Poell and van Dijck, 2018).

In this respect, the algorithmic filters of social media are generally favourable both to spreading the *contents* of populist messages and to the *style* of populist communication. The urgency, immediacy and appeal to crisis that is typical of populist ideology, are amenable to generating news contents that easily become trending. Politicians who draw attention to issues that resonate with mass audiences have an edge in the social media environment. Indeed, the social media ecology largely centres on charismatic 'political attractors', who have an ability to generate surprises and whose statements easily become soundbites with a potential for virality, irrespective of their newsworthiness. An inkling for sensational issues has proven particularly advantageous to attract viewers and listeners, even more so than in the previous media ecology. The attention-oriented business model of social media serves the popularity of politicians who favour sensational content and emotional appeals. Moreover, this trend towards greater sensationalism is not restricted to social media, but can be observed in the general media environment (e.g. Faris et al., 2017).

c) The low-level affordances of social media invite a 'populist style' of communication

The affordances highlighted thus far are 'high-level affordances': they concern possibilities for action that have become more salient through changes in the overall media ecology. But social media also give rise to low-level affordances – that is, affordances embedded in the concrete user interface and specific buttons of online media, which both enable and constrain communicative practices. Several of social media's low-level affordances are amenable to a populist style of communication. Twitter incentivises short messages, which ties in with the preference populists have for bold claims using simple language (Oliver and

Rahn, 2016). Facebook incentivises emotion-driven modes of online interaction ('like', 'dislike', *etc.*), which meshes well with the characteristic emotion-driven appeals of populism (indignation, anger, fear, resentment, hope). Not only the user interface, but also the algorithmic design of social media is well-suited for a populist communication style. Personalised and affective messages by charismatic leaders are typically favoured by social media algorithms: these receive a lot of interaction (likes, retweets, shares), become more visible on people's News Feed, and tend to reach a broader audience.

Importantly, low-level affordances are not only solicited by populist leaders and supporters. To the extent that political discourse takes place on social media, practically *all* political actors employ them. Indeed, the low-level affordances of social media clearly place constraints on communicative practices. It is likely that they have contributed to a *general* shift towards a populist style of communication, both among politicians as well as the public. This shift is further accommodated by the aforementioned sensationalist tendencies of social media. As Hameleers et al., 2017 and others have observed, in favouring a populist style, social media bear resemblances to tabloid media. Extending the analogy, the changes that have taken place in the recent media-ecology might be compared to a situation in which tabloid media have acquired a much larger readership at the expense of broadsheet newspapers.

d) Social media allow for real-time expression – and measurement – of the 'general will' of the people

Following Gerbaudo (2018), a core affordance of social media is that they can serve as the people's voice and the people's rally. Social media have made it easier for people to share their opinions, but also to connect with their peers, to hold elite individuals and agencies publicly accountable, and to pressurise politicians to let their voice be heard. Hence, there is a clear sense in which social media have empowered the people, furthering the demand-side of populism.

But in fostering the possibility to articulate the general will of the people, social media also offer a distinct affordance on the supply-side of populism. Social media help politicians to figure out what the general will amounts to, and provide unprecedented tools for measuring public opinion. Accordingly, they allow parties to gather real-time data about the issues people care about. Such information is especially valuable for parties that adhere only to a thin ideology, and are intent on capturing the *volonté générale*, flexibly going along with changes in public opinion. It is no coincidence, then, that populist parties typically support referenda and more direct forms of democracy, and that some of them – such as *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy – are at the forefront of experiments in internet democracy. Social media have put in place a digital infrastructure that goes a long way to realising the populist aim of capturing the will of the people, and even to update it in real-time.

Conclusion

I have highlighted four respects in which mainstream social media offer distinct affordances for populism. This list does not aspire to be exhaustive, nor are its categories

uniquely fixed: both with respect to the high-level and low-level affordances of social media, different affordances could be highlighted. What the present analysis *does* aspire to show, however, is that a convincing case can be made for the existence of an 'elective affinity' between populism and social media, and that this affinity is helpfully understood in terms of affordances. Moreover, the analysis provides theoretical grounds for predicting that as long as these affordances persist, it is likely that politicians as well as the public will continue to solicit them, thereby perpetuating the populist tendencies characteristic of the last political decade.

In closing, it should be noted that there is little reason to think that social media companies intentionally seek to foster populism. By contrast, social media companies typically expound the very neoliberal outlook that many populists oppose (Gerbaudo, 2018). Instead, the 'electoral affinity' is better regarded as an *unintended alliance*, at least insofar as the ideological preferences of social media companies are concerned. But importantly, even if unintended, the affinity is not accidental. Populist leaders do not merely free-ride on the platform architecture of social media companies. Instead, there is a symbiosis between them, whereby social media benefit from populists' campaigns for attention too, since these campaigns contribute to the popularity of the platforms. In other words, the affordances go both ways: not only does the social media ecology offer distinct affordances for populism, but populism also affords a political discourse from which social media benefit. As a result, there is little reason to suppose that social media companies will proactively seek to readjust their algorithms in ways unfriendly to populism, even if populist ideologies conflict with the prevailing political views in Silicon Valley. Instead, the alliance of interests might well persist, and help to facilitate a stable presence of populism in global politics for years to come.

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