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Inoculation against Populism: Media Competence Education and Political Autonomy

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Abstract: This paper offers an analysis of the relation between political populism and mass media, and how this relation becomes problematic for democratic societies. It focuses on the fact that mass media, due to their purpose and infrastructure, can unintentionally reinforce populist messages. Research findings from communication science and political psychology are used to illustrate how, for example, a combination of mass media agenda setting and motivated reasoning can influence citizens' political decisions and impair their political autonomy. This poses a particular normative challenge for modern democracies: how to counter these populism-supporting effects within the constraints of democratic legitimacy? After showing how severely limited legal measures to curb populist media effects would be, the paper argues in favour of media competence education as a way of providing future citizens with an epistemic toolkit to navigate the media environment and strengthen their political autonomy.

Keywords: populism, media, democracy, liberalism, education, autonomy

1 Introduction

Mass media systems, such as newspapers, radio, television, their digital successors, including an array of internet-based mass communication channels and social media platforms are an essential part of modern democracies. However, at the same time the communication mechanisms employed by these media systems (inadvertently) support modern political populism.[1] Politicians and political parties have learned to utilise mass media in ways which direct public

1 With the term *political populism* I refer to political programmes and political campaigning which aim to (a) exploit citizens' concern about topics like, e. g. migration, terrorism, economic

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attention to particular topics and frame perceptions of public events in specifically to suit their agenda.[2] Unsurprisingly, this also includes political agents pursuing a populist agenda. Simultaneously, publishers and broadcasters often benefit from a populist political climate and a fragmented political landscape which provides them with key audiences along partisan division lines (e. g. Prior 2010; Mancini 2013). But who bears the moral responsibility for the rise political populism? It seems that politicians and media publishers alike would make good candidates.

Yet, this paper will focus on a different aspect of the connection between political populism and mass media: even without any actor's deliberate intent, media systems may still contribute to the success of populist political messaging. This unintentional support of political populism is generated by the structural and economic conditions under which media systems operate. These conditions result in certain media effects which are prone to interact with widespread human cognitive biases. As a result, citizens' perception of political facts may be distorted, thereby leading to an impairment of citizens' political autonomy. This is why I am going to argue that a liberal democratic state has a responsibility to counter these effects.

While legal measures appear hardly feasible or justifiable in this context, the state can nevertheless provide knowledge and skills for its citizens through media competence education. This would be a justifiable and cost-effective way to support citizens' ability to identify certain types of media effects and raise awareness of how they can influence their political decision making. My aim is to demonstrate that media competence education can and should be an important part of a solution for the contemporary problem of political populism, and that this type of education is justifiable on widely accepted liberal democratic terms. Moreover, states might even be morally required to provide media competence education.

Before going into more detail, let me summarise the main problem briefly.

As the time and attention of audiences as well as the operational resources of two media providers are limited, decisions on what to report about (on the publisher/provider side) and what contents to access (on the audience side) must necessarily be made. In addition, media providers who want to stay in

injustice etc., and to (b) achieve political goals that are to a high degree incompatible with liberal democratic principles.

2 Analyses of the relation between politics and mass media in this sense can be found in, e. g. Mazzoleni (1987), Cook (1999), Bennett (2004), Boin et al. (2009), Hopmann et al. (2011), Mercille (2015).

business are subject to market constraints requiring economic efficiency.[3] As a consequence of these limitations of mass media communication, the unintended populist side-effects of media systems, or *populist media effects* as I will call them throughout this paper, cannot be avoided. Therefore, it would be unjustified to assign moral blame to politician or media publishers for these unintended effects.[4]

One could, of course, try to change the mass media systems themselves so much that populist media effects will no longer occur, e. g. by extensive regulation or state-controlled programming. However, this seems like an impossible task so long as one thinks of media systems as institutions that operate in principle independent from the political sphere and which may even take on the role of a fourth estate, through critical scrutiny of the realm of politics.[5] Any restructuring or censoring of mass media with the aim to counter populist media effects would constitute a massive interference with citizens' freedom of speech and most likely harm free democratic communication. Moreover, most media effects depend on the technical nature of mass communication and on the psychological condition of human audiences. No political restructuring short of abandoning mass communication completely would therefore be able to eliminate populist media effects.

While changing media systems is no viable option, another way of keeping populist media effects at bay is to address the responsibilities of the audience itself, i. e. the common citizen. Citizens' reception of media content contributes to the success of populist media effects and to some degree citizens can critically assess the media content presented to them. To do so, citizens need appropriate epistemic tools to make autonomous, responsible political decisions. Only if they have a sufficient degree of media competence, citizens can make meaningful decisions about how to interpret a given piece of media information.

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3 An alternative which avoids economic constraints on mass media, it seems, would be a state-run media system. While there are good reasons to be critical of market-based media systems, it occurs to me that state-run media systems are at a high risk of being 'hijacked' by government interests. An intermediate solution might be hybrid media systems where publicly financed media providers compete with purely market-based providers, as it is the case in, e. g. Germany or the UK. However, the problems of purely market-based media systems apply for hybrid systems as well, although perhaps the state-run segment is to some degree immune to market pressures. At the same time, though, state-run media providers are still vulnerable to accusations of being just a government mouthpiece.

4 Note that blaming these parties remains legitimate in cases of *intentional* populist exploitation of media systems.

5 If one prefers to think of the media system more as a fourth branch of government and in no way independent of politics, my argument in favour of media competence education should be even more convincing.

This required knowledge and awareness of the influence of media effects on one's decisions must be acquired and developed. Indeed, a wide variety of media and information competence and literacy education is already happening in democratic societies and has been adopted as an official educational strategy by international institutions like the UNESCO (2013).

Media competence, as I understand it in the context of this paper, is a combination of two kinds of knowledge and the skills to apply the relevant knowledge correctly. The first is theoretical knowledge about the technical and structural possibilities and restrictions of modern mass media (including internet-based media forms), about how media output is shaped by these factors, and how the output itself affects an audience's perception. The second kind is a more practical sort of knowledge, as it enables citizens to apply the first kind of knowledge in real life, i. e. to actually spot instances of populist media effects which may have an influence on their political opinion. This specific kind of media competence education, which can be part of a package of more general media literacy education, aims at fostering a very specific aspect of critical thinking limited to the particular domain of information conveyed by mass media.[6] It is one of several building blocks for the sort of '"cognitive defence" against [...] sensationalism and propaganda' (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, p. 3) that has been a general aim of media literacy education for at least the last sixty years.

In this paper I argue that citizens need sufficient media competence education to counter populist media effects and make politically autonomous decisions, particularly in light of populist tendencies becoming more mainstream in many contemporary democratic states. Media competence education could, to use a metaphor, inoculate citizens against political populism by developing their awareness of the effects that the media have on their political decision making. What is required from the perspective of political philosophy, however, is a justificatory argument in favour of this kind of education. Such an argument should draw on established principles of liberal and democratic political theories in order to provide solid ground for appropriate policy decisions. The ability of citizens to make autonomous decisions plays a major justificatory role here, as it is a basic requirement implied in almost all political theories concerned with citizenship. This includes theories with substantively moralised premises as well as those with normatively thin notions of citizenship and political responsibility. In the following, I will offer various moral as well as prudential reasons for a democratic state to provide media competence education for its citizens.

6 I will say more about the content of the sort of media competence education I have in mind in Section 6.

I start in Section 2 with explaining psychological mechanisms of human reasoning and the media effects which interact with them and eventually can lead to an unintended support of political populism. In Section 3 I argue that the resulting populist media effects constitute a relevant restriction of citizens' political autonomy under various theoretical frameworks by which one can model democratic citizenship. Section 4 establishes that nobody bears direct responsibility for populist media effects but that a democratic state has a responsibility to provide citizens with adequate means to engage with these effects. The limited feasibility and justifiability of legal options to counter populist media effects is evaluated in Section 5, while I argue in Section 6 in favour of (increased) media competence education to enable citizens to make more informed political decisions. Section 7 summarises my analysis and the arguments given in this paper.

2 Populist media effects

While the deliberate populist manipulation of news and media coverage is not uncommon, my focus in this paper is on the coincidental side effects that might benefit populist campaigning. Media support for populist aims can be generated without any agent deliberately and actively trying to achieve them. The mechanism providing this unintentional support is a combination of two factors. The first factor are cognitive biases which affect human decision processes and can lead to seemingly unreasonable choices. The second factor are media effects that occur due to the structural limitations of mass media, as a result of which mediated information must always be pre-selected and framed in certain ways. The interaction of these two factors eventually leads to sub-optimal political opinion formation on the side of the audience which might in turn lend support to populist tendencies among citizens. This is why I label them populist media effects.[7] For a better understanding of how populist media effects are generated and how they influence citizens' political attitudes, it will be helpful to give a more detailed summary of the relevant factors.

7 Strictly speaking, the effects I describe here are not restricted to the support of political populist attitudes. Depending on the topics on the media agenda and the political climate, these effects could also generate support for, e. g. stable centre-left politics. However, under the circumstances currently found in Western democracies, it seems that political populism is the main beneficiary. I use the label *populist media effects* therefore to pick out media effects in a particular socio-political context where these media effects mainly generate or maintain political views among citizens which make them more likely to support political populist agendas.

2.1 People as information processors

The unfortunate consequences of populist media effects arise in part due to the basic configuration of the human brain itself. Human decision making processes are generally subject to various heuristic errors and cognitive biases (see, e. g. Kahneman and Tversky 1982, 2000; Yamagishi et al. 2007), and decision making in political matters is no exception. Prominent cognitive biases that influence decision making are, e. g. confirmation bias, intergroup bias, availability bias, and motivated reasoning, to name just a few. In the following I will focus on motivated reasoning and the research that captures its influence on political decision making of voters (see, e. g. Kunda 1987, 1990; Redlawsk 2002; Kahan 2013). This should provide an impression of the general problems political mass communication faces.

According to motivated reasoning research, people usually aim to fit new information they encounter into their already existing belief systems. To realise this aim, motivated reasoners apply certain cognitive strategies, which I will describe in more detail below. The reason for this behaviour is the fact that beliefs about political state of affairs are usually not just stored as purely neutral information by the human cognitive system but instead also have affective components that influence the way contradictory political information is processed (see Redlawsk 2002; Redlawsk et al. 2010). This strategy can be observed across a range of cognitive contexts, including political opinion formation. Political opinions or views are, simply speaking, not mere beliefs, but form part of a more complex mental state that also includes affective components like emotions. These affective components motivate people to hold on to certain beliefs they feel attached to, even in the light of new contradictory information.[8]

Individuals encountering new political information which collides with their existing political views will therefore often employ various strategies to secure the structure of their belief system (see Nyhan and Reifler 2010). One strategy is to rely on biased search processes, i. e. mainly gathering information from sources which are known to provide information fitting well with already held

8 A clarificatory note on terminology might be useful at this point: the term 'information' (either with the qualifier 'political' or otherwise) designates purely factual information. However, this does not imply that, e. g. media reports conveying factual political information are free of any evaluative or normative aspects – usually they are not.

'Political opinions' or 'views' in contrast, terms which I use interchangeably, are meant to designate complex mental states that involve beliefs about facts (political information) as well as evaluative/normative components.

political beliefs.[9] Another mechanism is the generation of counter-arguments against new, contradictory information. During this process, individuals re-evaluate the possible reasons for holding on to their existing beliefs and try to develop arguments against the new information. Their counter-arguments do not have to be very good or even arguments in a strict sense, though. While remembering the reasons they had to endorse the beliefs in question, individuals involved in motivated reasoning also re-activate the affective components linked to these beliefs, so that at the end of the process they might even feel more certain about their existing beliefs – even if these might be proven wrong by the new information from an external perspective. Confrontation with contradictory information seems to lead to a 'backfire effect' in these cases, increasing the strength of individuals' political opinions (see, e. g. Gollust et al. 2009; Nyhan and Reifler 2010, Flynn et al. 2017; for a more critical perspective on the backfire effect see Wood and Porter 2019).

This is not to say that individuals never change their political opinions. It rather shows that it takes more than just a few facts which contradict their current position to make people abandon dearly held political views. The contradicting information needs to be significant and convincing enough to reach an 'affective tipping point', at which existing motivated reasoning mechanisms are bypassed (see Redlawsk et al. 2010). In highly fragmented modern media environments, which are often designed to serve the political views of a particular target audience, there is an increased risk that the required pressure to overcome motivated reasoning never sufficiently builds up. In addition, the structural necessities of mass media providers and the limited time audiences spend on news and political information make it even less likely that individuals reach the tipping point at which they revise their political opinion.

In the next sub-section, I will give a brief summary of a media effect that supports the tendency to employ motivated reasoning in political contexts: the capacity of mass media to set the public agenda and thereby determine (to at least a relevant degree) the political opinions of citizens.

2.2 Media as agenda setters

Mass media shape the content they deliver and thereby the political information audiences acquire. Of the various existing research approaches regarding media

9 The individualised filter bubbles of internet search engines as well as the personalised information environment of social media platforms appear to substantially support these biased search processes in the digital sphere.

effects, I will discuss *agenda setting theory* briefly here, due to its relevance for the unintentional reinforcement of populist messages. My general argument does not rely on this particular theory, though, and if needed, the populist potential of mass media would be transferable to other media effect theories as well. My aim is merely to demonstrate that there is a pressing case to think about the (non-intentional) interaction between mass media and populism which can be modelled by contemporary media theory and social psychology.

By selecting the topics and the way in which to report about them, the media affect the *public agenda*, which is the set of topics that members of a society think of as the most important public topics at a given time. Because it is impossible to keep track of national and international politics without access to media information in modern mass democracies, the public agenda, and thereby to a large degree also public opinion, is developed in response to an artificial information environment construed by mass media.[10] As a result the public agenda of citizens reflects quite accurately the media agenda, i. e. the set of topics dominating the media at a given time (see McCombs 2004).

This narrowing down of topics is already a potential problem for democratic societies. If citizens are supposed to be sufficiently well-informed about their political environment, topics that might be of importance might just go unnoticed. Conversely, if a topic appears repeatedly on the media agenda and thereby on the public agenda, citizens will assign a much higher priority to it. For example, if migration as a topic that is central to populist political campaigning repeatedly turns up on the public agenda, this basic kind of agenda setting can already contribute to political populism, making audiences more likely to consider it important when compared to other political issues which do not make it onto the public agenda. If topics on the media and public agenda are topics predominantly addressed by populist actors, large parts of the audience might get the impression that populist actors are indeed the only political actors concerned with the most pressing political issues – even if these issues only attain their perceived importance due to their media presence.

Another form of agenda setting which is even more relevant under conditions of present political campaigning is so-called *second-level agenda setting*, also referred to as *attribute agenda setting*. Attribute agenda setting affects not

10 Supposedly one could assume that there was no public agenda before any systems of mass communication evolved, although this would be a discussion beyond the scope of this paper. In contemporary democratic societies, at least, the public agenda is observably connected to the means of mass communication.

only *what* audiences think are significant topics at a given time but also *how* to think about them (see Balmas and Sheafer 2010). In the case of attribute agenda setting, media reports about an agenda setting object emphasise certain attributes, i. e. descriptive properties of that object. The most noteworthy aspect of attribute agenda setting is that it determines how the public perceives these objects in evaluative terms, including moral ones. A typical example of attribute agenda setting, the significance of which increases with the trend towards personalised political campaigning, is agenda setting with respect to candidates' character traits. Repetitive emphasis, e. g. on a candidate's straightforwardness ('he tells it like it is') will convince voters to elect this candidate due to the perceived favourable character traits.

Taking migration as an example once more, certain kinds of attributes of the agenda setting object 'migration' might be emphasised, such as the fact that there will be criminal immigrants. While it is close to certain that the percentage of criminal individuals among immigrants is not higher than in the native population, the newsworthiness of crimes committed by immigrants, and the emphasis on the fact that the perpetrators in a particular case have an immigrant background will, e. g. provide the audience with a particular mental lens through which to perceive immigrants: as potential criminals and a serious risk to society.

Agenda setting effects are, at least in liberal democratic societies with a decentralised media system, largely unintended effects. They occur due to factors inherent in the structure of media systems themselves. Time and resources of media providers are limited, so decisions must be made which topics will make it into a news feature, an article, or a blog post. These decisions depend on a variety of factors, not the least of which is their (assumed) newsworthiness. A topic that will interest the audience and thereby increase the probability for them to return to the same media outlet later is more likely to become a news item than a topic lacking this potential. In addition, what is considered as a relevant topic is subject to *intermedia agenda setting* – if several other media providers with significant impact have a topic on their agenda, it is more likely that other providers will jump on the bandwagon and start treating the same topic as a high priority news item.

Both aspects combined, the cognitive biases of audiences and media effects like agenda setting, result in populist media effects – effects that influence the political judgement of citizens in ways making them more receptive to populist political messages and build up an acceptance for populist, often undemocratic and illiberal views. In the next section, I will argue that this development has a detrimental effect on citizens' political autonomy.

3 Impairment of political autonomy

After this brief overview of how populist media effects develop, it is time to address how imperfect human reasoning and agenda setting effects affect the political autonomy of citizens. As a first step, I will offer a brief definition of my use of the term *political autonomy*.

It would not be very helpful to draw up a detailed, substantive account of political autonomy here. That would be a task beyond the scope of this paper, and it is also not necessary for arguing in favour of media competence education. Instead my much simpler claim is that for most accounts of political autonomy connected to theories of democratic citizenship, interference with citizens' political reasoning as described in the previous section would mean a restriction of citizens' political autonomy. Let me outline some characteristics that theories of democratic citizenship have in common and that can be used to define a ready-to-go account of political autonomy.

Depending on the underlying theory of democratic citizenship, a conception of political autonomy[11] will refer to slightly different capacities of citizens, therefore it is helpful to make a rough distinction between two types of normative theories here. The first type of citizenship account can be labelled 'other-regarding', the second type 'self-regarding'.

Other-regarding theories of democratic citizenship assume a normative framework within which citizens have certain obligation towards their fellow citizens in the process of political deliberation. These frameworks are needed to justify the political coercion that is a result of most if not all political decisions. Parliamentary decisions about laws, or referenda in cases of direct democratic decisions, always lead to a political state of affairs that some citizens would not have chosen but are coerced to obey. For this coercion to be justified, citizens (including politicians) involved in the decision process are usually subject to normative restraints to secure respect for the positions of their fellow citizens. These are theories of deliberative democracy and public reason liberalism.[12] According to these theories, the reasons motivating citizens' political decisions should be acceptable reasons not only for

11 I use the distinction between *concept* and *conception* in this paper as used in John Rawls's work about reasonable pluralism (2005). While most political philosophers agree that citizens have some form of political autonomy (agreeing on the concept), they have varying ideas how exactly political autonomy should be defined (disagreeing on the correct conception).

12 Accounts of other-regarding citizenship vary widely, of course, in their details about how to justify political coercion and on which normative standards justification must be based. Theories of this kind can be found in, e. g. Habermas (1984, 1996), Rawls (2005), Christiano (1996, 2008), Gaus (1996), Gutmann (1996), Waldron (1999).

themselves but also from the perspective of their fellow citizens, regardless of social background or other properties that would be considered arbitrary from an impartial moral perspective. These restrictions are often expressed as moral duties or responsibilities that citizens have toward their fellow citizens.

Other-regarding theories often operate with models of idealised societies for which they develop standards of justification. Yet, so long as these theories claim to generate guidelines for real-life political and social application, they need to consider the epistemic environment of citizens in modern democracies and recognise the fact that most of the political information is acquired by citizens via mass media. Citizens' justification of their political decisions is to a large extent based on this information. Requiring justifiable political decisions presupposes that citizens have reliable information about the world views and standards of other social groups in their society, and at least about the major implications their choices might have. Without a sufficient knowledge about the current state of their society, any attempt to make justified decisions seems impossible.

Therefore, regardless of the exact standards and modes of justification, a minimum of correct information about the facts feeding into political decisions are necessary. Any theoretical framework that requires citizens to adhere to its standards must also require conditions under which citizens have undistorted access to information which is relevant for their democratic decisions. The ability to understand media effects that support populist arguments is, I believe, one of these conditions. If this is the case, then normative requirements on political decision making also imply a requirement for a sufficient degree of media competence on the side of citizens.

Without a sufficient understanding of the particularities and limits of mass media, populist media effects are prone to distort citizens' political decision process, thereby impairing their capacity to make justified political decisions. If this capacity is considered a central aspect of political autonomy, then populist media effects are detrimental to citizens' political autonomy from the perspective of other-regarding theories.

In contrast to the other-regarding democratic theories stand what I want to call self-regarding theories of democratic citizenship. These theories, often derived from economic theories about social behaviour, argue that citizens (especially in their role as voters) make self-interested decisions and that they are legitimately expected to do so. Any further requirements of political morality would be idealistic and hardly feasible.[13] Obviously, from this perspective

13 I take public choice theories at large to be self-regarding theories of citizenship, as, e. g. found in Buchanan (1984), Brennan and Lomasky (1993), Buchanan and Tullock (1999), Mueller (2003).

citizens do no need specific information about the interests or world views of their fellow citizens, which would be necessary to make other-regarding political decisions. Nevertheless, self-regarding citizens need valid information as well. To make sound judgements about what sort of candidates, parties, and political measures will serve their individual interests best, citizens needs some knowledge about political programmes and the implications of policies.

Self-regarding accounts of citizenship provide less of a normative background on which to base a conception of political autonomy; probably quite a few public choice theorists would deny that anything meaningful can be said about the political autonomy of citizens, the concept of autonomy itself being already too normatively loaded to make any sense in the context of their theory. However, I deem it safe to assume that the self-regarding perspective on democracy must imply an interest of voters to either make political decisions that are in their own best interest, or that they at least think are in their interest.[14] For the purpose of this paper, I will treat the capacity to make sufficiently informed decision in regard to one's self-interest (actual or expressive) as a form of political autonomy, although very different from the conception that is implied by other-regarding accounts of citizenship. Nevertheless, distortion of citizens' political decision making due to populist media effects results in a decreased capacity to make correct decisions in this regard, which would also be an impairment of the self-regarding version of political autonomy.

Finally, I need to concede that there are of course theoretical positions that are beyond the reach of my argument. Jason Brennan, for example, argues against the idea that democratic participation is in any way autonomy-supporting, as a single citizens' vote in an election makes virtually no difference in the outcome. When applying a conception of 'autonomy as difference making', where the degree of autonomy directly related to the degree of changes in the world an agent's action brings about, the degree of autonomy in political participation for the common citizens must also be virtually none (see Brennan 2016, pp. 88ff.). While I agree that this would be the case if autonomy as difference making were the correct conception to apply in the political context, I do not think that it actually is. I cannot give a detailed argument against this view here but nevertheless want to suggest that in a political context

14 As Brennan and Lomasky argue, the decisions of voters are not so much plain attempts to further self-interest but have an expressive function, which leaves room for a variety of normative attitudes to be expressed in political decision making. In this case, not all political decisions voters make might be in their actual interest; expressive voting could lead to outcomes that might be in no one's actual interest, such as, e. g. referenda or elections leading to war (Brennan and Lomasky 1993, pp. 49ff.).

decisions and actions of *groups* bring about political change, and that an individual's contribution to group agency might be relevant for its degree of political autonomy. However, those who share Brennan's position that democratic participation has no value in terms of individual autonomy might not find anything compelling in media competence education for citizens.

Apart from this last perspective, though, it seems to me that the problem of the impairment of citizens' political autonomy poses a problem for a broad range of liberal democratic frameworks. Cognitive biases combined with agenda setting effects are distorting the information transfer between citizens and their political environment, and thereby the formation of reasonable political beliefs and attitudes. Any theoretical framework that cares about the political autonomy of citizens (regardless whether it uses this term or not) is faced with the question of how to cope with this problem. There may be a range of factors that are able to counteract the systemic distortion of political decision-making processes that results from mass media communication. For now, I however want to focus on the state as the agent bearing a responsibility to counter populist media effects. In the following section I will give a more detailed answer to the question why the state has this responsibility.

4 Political responsibility

At this point I want to remind the reader that for the aspects of mass communication I described in Section 2 and which I labelled populist media effects, there are no responsible agents in any moral sense. This is not to say that agents who are deliberately exploiting the cognitive biases and media effects involved are not morally responsible – they certainly are. Most contemporary politicians who engage in populist political campaigning are aware of the opportunities of exploiting mass media. My current focus lies not on these clearly identifiable (and responsible) agents but on practices often aiming at neutrality and objectivity, like news reporting, which may also contribute to populist political effects without any of the involved agents intending to do so.

However, the lack of responsibility for producing populist media effects does not mean a complete lack of responsibility when it comes to countering these effects. This responsibility can be rendered in different ways, similar to the distinctions I made in Section 3 between other-regarding and self-regarding accounts of citizenship.

If one accepts that state authority is morally justified, it appears that the state as a political agent has some sort of obligation to at least attempt to decrease the disadvantageous side of mass media effects on democratic decision processes. If the state's authority is morally legitimate, then this legitimacy is at least to some degree bound to the extent to which the state enables citizens to exercise their capacity for political autonomy and to participate in democratic deliberation. By refusing to attempt to secure its citizens political autonomy, the state would undermine its own legitimacy. A legitimate state has therefore necessarily an obligation to protect its citizens from an impairment of their political autonomy.

Even if one tends toward philosophical anarchism and denies any moral legitimacy, and therefore the application of moral concepts like 'duty' or 'responsibility' for the relation between the state and its citizens, there are relevant prudential reasons for states to care about citizens' political autonomy. Populist political movements tend to endanger stability of democratic states and might lead to a deterioration or perhaps even collapse of existing democratic institutions. In turn, the degree of individual freedom decreases, leaving people with fewer, and perhaps less attractive opportunities to shape their lives than they would have in a fully functional liberal democratic state. So even if the government as an artificial agent stands not in any moral relation to its citizens, it is reasonable to assume that everyone involved, politicians as well as average citizens, should have a rational interest in the stability of democratic institutions. If one further assumes that one of the central functions of the state is to act in the interest of its citizens, states still ought to offer measures to counter populist effects for prudential reasons. This can be called prudential responsibility.

From either perspective it therefore seems that the state has some sort of responsibility, either on moral or on prudential grounds, to keep political populism at bay.[15] As I mentioned before, populism has many different causes and spreads via a multiplicity of vectors, so of course any effective strategy against populism needs to be similarly multifaceted. Preventing the spread of political populism via mass media should be one part of such a strategy, and in the following sections I will discuss two different ways the state could attempt to do so.

15 These two options are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that the state's responsibility is overdetermined; in addition to moral reasons (if one believes that morality is relevant in this context) there can be significant prudential reasons as well to safeguard democracy against populist tendencies.

5 Regulation

The first thing to think of when contemplating government measures to decrease populist media effects might be regulation by law. Laws are, after all, one of the main instruments of states to impose the kind of order that the government (and perhaps a majority of citizens) assume to be beneficial. Legislation is a powerful instrument to create incentives to act in certain ways. The tools available to states are not the only prohibition of harmful goods or services. Taxation or licensing offer similarly effective means to regulate behaviour.

However, a liberal and democratic state needs to justify cases of restrictive legislation, as they usually limit citizens' freedom. The requirement for justification is particularly strong in the case of laws restricting media because this is potentially limiting the freedom of expression of citizens and any restriction of this basic liberal democratic principle must ask for very robust justificatory reasons. Two major principles that are often referred to when justifying restrictions on the freedom of expression are John Stuart Mill's Harm Principle and Joel Feinberg's Offence Principle (see Cohen-Almagor 2005). While both have their place in the debate about free speech and its limits, I do not think that either of them is useful when it comes to populist media effects. Let me explain why.

The Harm Principle can justify restrictions of free expression in cases where speech will quite certainly lead to harmful consequences, as illustrated in Mill's famous example of an inciting speech given to a mob in front of a corn-dealer's house (see Mill 2008, p. 62). While Mill's own example leaves a lot of questions unanswered, the common modern interpretation is that 'the intention to lead people to harmful action constitutes an instigation' (Cohen-Almagor 2005, pp. 5f.), in which case legal restrictions are justified.

Although the Harm Principle justifies restriction of free expression in cases where harm is intended and likely to occur, it is toothless in the case of populist media effects due to the context from which these effects arise. As I explained in Section 2, populist media effects occur due to technological and economic side constraints of mass media systems, without any agents aiming at creating them, thereby eluding the Harm Principle's justificatory mechanism. It might be that all individual agents involved in the news cycle have strict professional ethics that focus on objective and neutral reporting but nevertheless, populist media effects keep occurring.

Due to the limits of the Harm Principle, Feinberg argues that reasons beyond harm might be relevant for limiting certain expressive activities. He develops the Offence Principle (see Feinberg 1985), which states that one is genuinely offended (and thus, perhaps, entitled to state regulation concerning the offence) if (a) one

suffers a disliked state, (b) one attributes that state to the wrongful conduct of another, and (c) one resents the other for his or her role in causing one to be in that disliked state. This set of conditions certainly covers a range of cases for media legislation (e. g. laws regulating violent or pornographic media content), although determining when (perceived) offence is a robust reason for limiting others' freedom of expression can be a tricky task, often mired in disagreement and dependent on the cultural context (see Feinberg 1985, pp. 47f.).

Even though the Offence Principle offers a wider range of application than the Harm Principle, it is hard to see how it could be used to justify media restriction on grounds of populist media effects. First, it is unlikely that someone would suffer a disliked state directly due to populist media effects, although one could construct an exotic case of highly reflective media theorists and political philosophers feeling seriously offended by the daily evening news. While this would satisfy the first condition for offence, it must fail at the second condition – there simply is no one this state could be attributed to, no individual which caused this state.[16]

It looks like justification for potential government regulation of populist media effects cannot be gained by employing these two established principles from the debate about free speech and expression. Justification for restriction would need to rest on other grounds. As I have argued, populist media effects result in an impairment of the political autonomy of citizens. While the talk about political autonomy has a slightly theoretical ring, it would be possible to translate it into phrases more suitable for every-day politics, such as citizens' right to balanced information and sound political choice. A more consequentialist justificatory route could emphasise the risk populist media effects pose to social stability, the increasing social fragmentation and dissent, and similar consequences.

Yet, even if some degree of justification for regulations limiting mass media can be given on these grounds, the prospect of success of regulatory measures remains uncertain. At the same time, such measures would come at a high justificatory cost from a democratic perspective, as the following two problems illustrate.

The first problem is related to the independence of the media. It is unlikely that restrictions of populist media effects by law can be realised without

16 One could insist that media providers are a sort of collective agent and can as such indeed bear a responsibility to the offence somebody takes in populist media effects. In this case, the offence taken would be caused by the very nature of media systems and therefore would require abolishing existing media systems as a whole. This does not seem like a plausible application of the Offence Principle.

sweeping illiberal and undemocratic side-effects. Getting the upper hand on systemic media effects would require some heavy-handed state interference with existing media systems, as the government would effectively have to change the way media providers work. Media providers would need to be removed from a free market context and work in an isolated sphere, where resources are not allocated by market mechanisms but by state funding alone. Even then, the audience's time to follow media reports is limited, and psychological mechanisms like motivated reasoning will persist. Not only would such an attempt be prone to fail, it would also resemble the government strategies of historical communist states more than anything else. It appears that such a profound regulation of media systems would do more harm than good and would certainly not be supportive of democratic information exchange.

The second problem with regulation would be that a thorough interference with mass media to curb populist media effects would itself imply a pre-selection of the ways how content is presented, which, again, could be taken as an impairment of citizens' political autonomy. While the details of how such a regulatory practice could be implemented are elusive (to say the least), it seems that any such practice would bear a striking resemblance to straightforward censorship. In order to prevent one way of impairment of citizens' political autonomy, the state would need to impair it in a different way. This sort of trade-off would gain not much in terms of improving and sustaining political autonomy, while causing significant costs for implementation and maintenance.

To summarise, any attempt to regulate mass media to counter populist media effects is difficult to justify and would be even more difficult to realise. Therefore, I suggest in the next section that it might be more promising to aim at education instead of regulation.

6 Education

A different strategy available to the state to counter populist media effects is education. This approach has several advantages over regulation: it relies on an educational infrastructure that is prima facie justified and already in place in modern democracies, and it does not interfere in any way with the freedom of expression of media providers. I also assume it to be genuinely autonomy-supporting.

In order to successfully teach students about populist media effects, media competence education first needs to convey the knowledge of how these effects work and why they are in place. While this needs to include theory-focused

lessons about the technical and economic structures of mass media, media competence education should also aim to work with examples from contemporary media reporting to demonstrate the relevant effects and let students themselves apply their previously acquired knowledge. Further practical exercises could include, e. g. letting students themselves produce short news features about current social or political topics to gain a better understanding of the structural conditions shaping mass media output. A variety of strategies suitable for this kind of teaching can be found in the literature on practical media competence and literacy education.[17]

An important advantage is that educational infrastructure already exists. Where democratic states do not provide education themselves, they set the requirements for education, and by determining the structure of school curricula, they can provide children with the necessary epistemic toolkit they will need once they become full-grown citizens. Media competence education can be incorporated into current school curricula with comparably small efforts.

More important still, from a normative perspective, is the range of well-established justificatory arguments for an education of children aiming to provide them with the knowledge and attitudes they will need as autonomous citizens. Even though political philosophers might disagree about the details, there is a widespread consensus that liberal democratic states should supply adequate education for children. Proper education is assumed to be a requirement of justice, supplying children with the necessary skills and knowledge to become autonomous citizens with a capacity to lead a flourishing life (see Rawls 2005; Brennan 2002; Brighouse 2009). Further, education qualifies as a requirement of democratic stability for many political philosophers, which is important to maintain a liberal democratic state over generations (see Gutmann 1999; Callan 2010). Many accounts of liberal democratic education combine elements from both views, arguing that it contributes to the capacity of citizens to live an autonomous and good life as well as to political and social stability (see Galston 1991; Reidy 2001; Levinson 2004). Independent of the details of these different accounts, it seems safe to assume that their proponents would agree with the claim that media competence education contributes to the general goals of liberal democratic education.[18]

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17 For examples see, e. g. Considine et al. (2009), Hague and Payton (2010). While the current literature on media literacy tends to focus on digital media literacy, many of the teaching approaches are useful to teach the type of media competence advocated in this paper.

18 How effective media competence education is under real-world circumstances remains, nevertheless, an empirical question. For social or psychological reasons not considered in this paper, it might fail to achieve any improvements of citizens' political well-informedness

At the same time, education for media competence is no threat to freedom of speech and expression. In contrast to regulatory approaches to counter populist media effects, education for media competence does not interfere with mass media systems at all. Neither the working processes nor the content of media systems is subject to state control, therefore we do not need to consider any special justification for potentially limiting essential liberal democratic freedoms. The media arena remains open to all kinds of permissible political views and all kinds of information providers.[19]

Perhaps one could be tempted to argue that teaching (future) citizens media competence indirectly manipulates public opinion in a way similar to the deliberate exploitation of mass communication by political populists, leading to an indoctrination of mainstream political ideals. However, this is exactly what media competence education should not be. To the contrary, it is part of an education that aims at bringing up politically autonomous citizens with at least basic knowledge to judge the plausibility of media content themselves. Media competence education contributes to the capacity of citizens to make informed political choices and have a reasonably clear picture of their larger political environment.

In doing so, media competence education supports democracy. Aside from the intrinsic value one might see in the political autonomy of citizens, it increases the probability of citizens making less biased political decisions. This increase contributes to more rational outcomes of decision processes that involve democratic deliberation and voting, thereby improving the overall quality of democratic decision processes. Particularly because average citizens in modern democracies get most of their political information via mass media, more competence in accessing and evaluating media information is an important democratic asset.

Nevertheless, one needs to be aware that media competence comes in degrees and like other kinds of competences, will be distributed unevenly throughout a population. The degree to which individual citizens will develop the type of media competence I discuss here will depend on their mental capacities, on their motivation to employ their knowledge about populist media effects, and likely on social and economic influences. As with other forms of competences, there might be no incentive to engage critically with

and of their political autonomy. Such a result would, of course, void any prima facie justification.

19 Of course, certain content and media providers distributing this content can be censored or prohibited on other grounds than countering populist media effects. Content that, e. g. aims at deliberately undermining or overturning democratic institutions would be of that kind.

media when this is viewed as of no value in one's social environment, or one's mental capacities might be impaired by economic pressures (see Mani et al. 2013). The task of media competence education is to provide children and adolescents with sufficient knowledge and a range of practical examples to apply this knowledge, not more.[20] It increases the chances of them not falling for populist media effects later, thus contributing to a stable society. Media competence education is no panacea against political populism; it constitutes, however, an important element of a comprehensive programme to secure democratic institutions by enabling citizens to make informed choices when voting and to engage in a more meaningful political deliberation.[21]

In summary, media competence education appears to be a prima facie robustly justifiable and autonomy-enhancing measure to counter populist media effects from the principled view of the political theorist.[22] Further, it provides citizens with necessary knowledge and skills to make valid judgements about deliberate populist media manipulation, thereby adding to measures liberal democracies can take to address this problem. At the same time, there are no concerns about media competence education curtailing rights or liberties of citizens or media providers. Instead, it appears to be a much more practicable and less costly strategy compared with an extensive and intrusive legal regulation.

20 What exact level of knowledge and of practical exercise is required will be mostly a matter of empirical context. A democratic society should at least provide minimum knowledge for citizens to be able to recognise media effects in their daily lives if they are motivated to do so. If more time and financial resources are available at educational institutions, additional practical exercises are useful to foster a habituation of media effect recognition in students. On the question of whether media competence education should in addition aim to inculcate a *desire to apply* the relevant knowledge in daily life (perhaps as a sort of democratic virtue) I want to remain agnostic here. Restrictions on this aim could be (a) normative concerns, depending on the underlying theoretical liberal and/or democratic framework and (b) the limited availability of teaching resources that most schools could allocate to media competence and/or civic education.

21 I use the term 'political deliberation' in a wide sense here, which includes deliberation across various social spheres and groups, from formal public political events to semi-public exchanges among friends, colleagues, and neighbours.

22 A full justification, all things considered, to integrate media competence education into a curriculum is more complex and context-dependent. Under real-world conditions, media competence education will have to compete with other valuable educational aims for limited material resources, aptly trained teachers, and time. In contexts of scarcity, other educational aims might take priority. It is also possible that the value of various educational aims turns out to be incommensurable, in which case no definite prioritisation is available.

In addition, for a full justification, it needs to be shown that an effective autonomy-enhancing education programme is indeed feasible under real-world conditions and not just an ambitious ideal.

7 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for using media competence education for children as a means to increase future citizens' political autonomy and to improve the outcome of democratic decision processes. This appears especially relevant in light of the fact that media effects can support political populism even without any deliberate attempts of media manipulation. Even if all actors involved only have the best of intentions, the inherent structure of media systems in combination with human cognitive biases can lend support to populist propaganda in a mechanism which I labelled populist media effects.

Populist media effects can impair the political autonomy of citizens by distorting political information. If citizens make political judgements based on this distorted information, it reduces their capacity to make reasonable political decisions that satisfy the democratic standards applied to them in their role as citizens. If one assumes that it is part of the responsibility of governments to support the political autonomy of citizens, it seems that governments have an obligation to counter or minimise populist media effects.

Due to the lack of blameworthy actors that can be held responsible for populist media effects, it is difficult for political institutions to find strategies to counter them. I have assessed two ways governments could react to populist media effects: the first would be to instantiate legal restrictions, the second to provide children with media competence education. The first option does not seem too promising, as it is unclear how systemic media effects should be restricted. Even if it were somehow possible to implement them, it would be difficult to justify any restrictive measure, particularly considering the costs in terms of interference with the central liberal democratic principle of freedom of speech.

That being the case, my claim is that education is the preferable option, due to its robust justifiability in the context of liberal democratic education, its non-existent interference with citizens' and media providers' rights and liberties, and its potentially autonomy-enhancing effects on future citizens. This provides a theoretical underpinning for a practice of media competence education that can already be observed in many existing democracies and which would benefit from continuous support, especially in the face of contemporary political developments. It appears that media competence education can be a democratic way of inoculating future citizens against populism.

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