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Populism and the press: How populism threatens liberal democracy

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Introduction

My aim is to prove that populism is a threat to liberal democracy. According to a strand of literature, populism can be seen as a corrective tool to constitutional democracies that have lost touch with their people. In the view of other scholars, populism is not necessarily a threat to democracy, since populist movements are doomed to stand on the sidelines of the decision-making process. In the past years, though, the world has witnessed the insurgence of populist players that succeeded in gaining governmental power, or won important battles that will potentially change the global framework. In 2016 the now-President of the United States Donald J. Trump won the presidential elections and sat in the White House. In 2017 the Brexit referendum, with the “Leave” campaign led by what we would call a populist leader, sealed the will of the English people to get divorced from the European Union. In 2018, Italian elections brought into power two populist leaders with their parties. All these players and parties share the label of ‘populist’.

In this text I will show how populism represents a threat to liberal democracies, looking at the relationship between populism and press freedom. I will proceed following the logic of a simple syllogism:

- The freedom of the press is a bedrock of liberal democracy;
- Populism threatens the freedom of the press;
- Therefore, populism threatens liberal democracy.

I will show that the two premises are true, so the conclusion must be true, too. Definitions and framing are vital in this process. The definition of populism is not a unanimous one. Scholars do not even agree of what populism is; it may be an ideology, or a communicative strategy, or an organizational approach. Calling someone “populist” requires a specification of what one means.

I will start by giving some definitions, to clarify what I mean by ‘populism’, ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘press freedom’, and to prove the first premise true. Secondly, I will show how populism represents a sly menace to the freedom of the press, and demonstrate that the second premise is also true. By the time of Chapter 2, the syllogism will be proven true. I will stress the fact that the threat to press freedom by populist actors is not as loud and clear as we would expect from an authoritarian regime. With populism, it is the credibility of the press to be under siege. Populism does not openly praise the abolition of press freedom and pluralism. To state that populism is a threat to liberal democracy, it is necessary to assess that the process occurs noiselessly and unnoticed. Suspicion is instilled in the mass public word by word, doubt by doubt, tweet by tweet. Populist

parties and leaders discredit mainstream media labelling them as “fake news”, thus fostering the feeling of dissatisfaction and malaise felt by the public, which stops trusting legacy press and the “elite” media.

In Chapter 3 I will go “from theory to practice”, by giving real examples of populism threatening the credibility – and thus the freedom – of the press. My two case studies will be Donald Trump and the Five Star Movement. The two have ideological differences, but they both have menaced the freedom of the press and undermined the proper functioning of the free press as watchdog of the government. The increasing lack of trust in the media must not only be due to populist rhetoric, though. In the end of Chapter 3 I will try to give an account of what the press has (or has not) done to increase the environment of suspicion towards mainstream newspapers and journalists.

CHAPTER 1

Definitions

1.1 POPULISM

In the past decades the world has witnessed the emergence of modern populist movements. The wave of political success of populist parties and leaders has become a heated debate which has pushed scholars to investigate what is populism today and what are the reasons why, and the means through which, populism has gained success. Generally speaking, scholars seem to agree in explaining the rise of populism as a reaction to the failure of traditional parties and institutions to respond adequately to phenomena that characterize our times, such as economic crisis, globalization, inequalities, transnational integration, immigration, the decline of ideology since the so-called “end of history” in the ‘90s, and episodes of elite corruption. These failures generated a spread ‘political malaise’ and distrust in politics (Hameleers *et al.*, 2016) which revealed themselves as a fertile ground for populist ascendance.

Populism is a broad concept that can be qualified in many ways. A first distinction can be done between “inclusive populism” and “exclusive populism”, where the former definition is used to identify left-wing populism (diffused in Latin America), and the latter stands for right-wing populism (diffused in Europe) (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Furthermore, as De Blasio and Sorice remind us, populism can be studied a) as a political communication style and/or a set of discursive practices; b) as a political strategy framed in certain types of organisation; and c) as an ideology (De Blasio and Sorice, 2018). Barring all the different shades and nuances that can be given to the term (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018), scholars seem to agree on three key elements of populism: (1) reference to “the People”, (2) a battle against the “corrupt” elite, and (3) the identification of an out-group and the stress of an “us versus them” perspective.

For the purpose of this text, I will consider populism as communication style, with a focus on a peculiar “organisational” approach that views “populism as a distinctive way of linking political leaders with their supporters” (Kenny, 2019). Scholars do not agree on the definition of populism as an ideology, since it is not a total and all-embracing view of society. Nevertheless, back in 2003 Tjitske Akkerman (2003) referred to Canovan’s and Taggart’s “convincing account of the core ideas of populism” as an ideology. First, as I already mentioned above, the notion of popular sovereignty is central in the populist discourse. Populists’ rhetoric is frequently addressed to “the People”, portrayed as monolithic single entity, bereft of cleavages and differences. Plus, the People is treated as an informed, self-aware and conscious subject. This populist way of considering the people paves the way for a second main feature of populist ideology, which is the tendency to regard democratic legitimacy mainly in terms of majorities, with a direct link between the majority and the representatives. If the people as a whole agrees on informed preferences, so populism goes, then the only thing

the leader has to do is directly listen to the *vox populi*. It is no surprise, then, that populism implies distrust towards intermediary institutions and non-elected bodies. “Straightforwardness, simplicity and clarity are the clarion calls for populism”, concludes Akkerman (2003).

One aspect of populism which some scholars have focused on is its relationship with the media and the press. This is a double-edge relationship, a two-sided coin. On the one side, populist leaders take advantage of new forms of mass communication and social media; it is the so-called “populism *through* the media”. On the other side, populists tend to assign blame for political problems on mainstream media, or legacy media, which are accused of aggravating political situations through a partisan spread of fake news and the biased focus on certain news rather than others. Many scholars have explored the first side of the coin, in an attempt to explain how “populism *through* the media” and “populism *by* the media” are conducive for the populist cause (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016; Mazzoleni 2008). My aim is here to explore the other side of the coin, which focuses on the fury and hatred of populist leaders and parties against journalists and legacy media.

In investigating the means through which populist parties have conquered the political scene in different parts of the world, with peaks of success in the very last years, scholars have paid careful attention to the relationship between populism and the media, stressing a communicative understanding of the concept of populism (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Mudde, 2017; Engesser *et al.*, 2017). In the words of de Vreese *et al.* (2018):

The relationship of populist political communicators with the media has traditionally been strained. On one hand, populist actors need the “oxygen of publicity,” which is often supplied by the (mass) media. On the other hand, populist actors often receive [...] favorable coverage in the popular press (Mazzoleni *et al.* 2003).

These few lines give us an overall illustration of what I called the first side of the coin – namely, the understanding of the marriage between populism and the media. This first side, which could be called the “positive side”, is already twofold, and both aspects deserve attention. On the one hand we have “populism *through* the media” (or *for* the media, in Hameleers *et al.*, 2016), distinguished from “populism *by* the media” (or “media populism”) (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016; Mazzoleni 2008). The former puts attention on media as a forum, through which populist communication is spread. The media in this perspective help disseminate populist messages and increase the visibility and legitimacy of these actors. In the latter, media are seen as key actors which engage in their specific kind of populism (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Hameleers *et al.*, 2016). For a definition of media populism, I will quote Hameleers *et al.* (2016):

Media populism can be defined as the adaptation of elements of populist ideas (e.g., construction of pure people versus corrupt elites) and style (e.g., emotionalized) by the media themselves (Krämer, 2014). In line with the concept

of media populism, the media may actively use emotional blame attribution as a framework for the coverage of political issues.

Leaving aside the “positive side”, I would like to focus on the “negative side” of our coin. Another distinction is required at this point. To further explore the “negative side” – i.e. the populist persecution of journalists and free press – we need to introduce the distinction between established mainstream media and tabloid news media, the former being, in most countries, the mouthpieces of the ruling classes (Mazzoleni, 2008). As de Vreese *et al.* (2018) recall from Mazzoleni *et al.* (2003), populist actors often receive critical coverage in the “elite media”. In response, populist political actors often portray legacy media as corrupt elite institutions, in line with the definition of anti-elitism as a core determinant of populism (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018). The presence of a corrupt elite is fundamental for the populist discourse. Hatred against the establishment, institutions and inconvenient non-elected bodies is the warhorse of any compelling populist communication. In accordance with the tendency to create an “us versus them” political arena, populist actors present themselves as representative of that People that “corrupt elites” are exploiting for their own benefits. The presence of a common enemy, the culpable elites, helps creating a cohesive group of voters that has to fight (against) the establishment. This idea is anything but new, since the fear for the enemy as an element of cohesion has been used by the Romans since the II century BC; they used to call it “*metus hostilis*”, fear of the enemy.

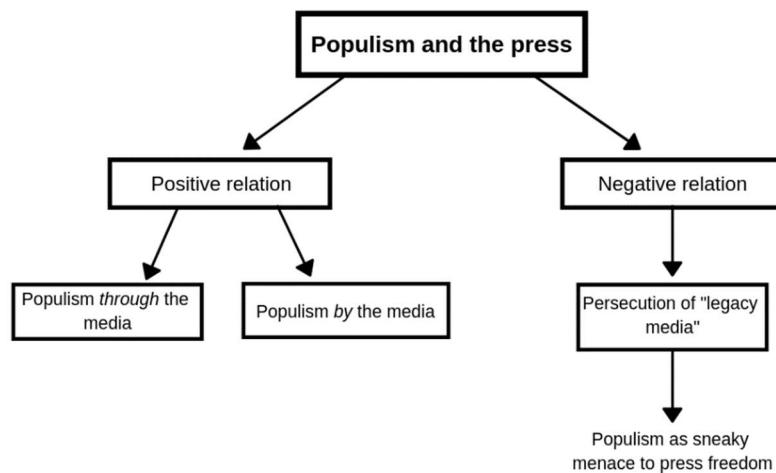


Figure 1

1.2 LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The relationship between populism and democracy is a tricky and potentially misleading one. As a matter of fact, populism might be pictured as the “purest form of democracy” (Torbjörn Tännsjö, as reported in Ristov, 2017). Populist movements advocate for a perfectly democratic electoral process – namely, direct

democracy. Consistently with the assumption that populism frequently refers to “the People”, populist leaders and movements stress notions of direct democracy and the exaltation of the “will of the people”, which is the reason why it is sometimes referred to as “radical democracy” or “democratic extremism” (Ristov, 2017). Plus, Hanspeter Kriesi (2014) recalls that “*populism is, according to the minimal definition of Pappas (2013, 2013a), ‘democratic illiberalism’. First of all, populist democracy is illiberal, because it takes ‘government by the people’ literally and rejects all checks and balances on the popular will. Constitutive elements of liberal, ‘Madisonian’ democracy – the rule of law, the division of power or respect for the rights of minorities – are rejected because they confine the people’s sovereignty*” (Kriesi, 2014).

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that there is a strong connection between democracy and populism, since (a) both have firm and solid roots in the people and (b) both indicate the paramount importance of the people (Pasquino, 2008). Ristov (2017) recalls that according to Vibert, as claimed by Mudde and Kaltwasser, “*populism can be seen as a sort of democratic extremism, in the sense that it is particularly suspicious of all kinds of unelected bodies, which are becoming increasingly powerful today*”. Much has been said on the debate whether populism is bad or good for democracy. Martin Ristov has explored the matter in detail in his “Populism in Europe – A threat or Corrective tool for the liberal democratic order?” (2017). The core of his argument is that populism may be seen as a corrective tool fitting a “minimalistic” definition of democracy:

Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser define democracy *sans adjectives* as a combination of “popular sovereignty and majority rule.” According to them, the word ‘democracy’ is per se hinting to the idea of being the “self-government of the people.” (Ristov, 2017)

Populism might thus be taken as a barometer of democratic state of health (Ristov, 2017), a signifier “of a malaise of modern democratic societies”, pointing out the absence of a necessary interaction between the demos and the intellectuals, and the need for *téchne politiké*” (the latter being the cooperation within society of spontaneous passions and intellectual reflections) (Urbinati, 1998). According to this perspective, it could be argued with cogency that populism is a corrective tool for society.

Nevertheless, using the alleged “will of the people” to justify and give legitimacy to any policy action, would indeed lead to the so-called “tyranny of the majority”. Again, this idea is nothing new. Polybius, Hellenistic historian from II century BC, used to call it “ochlocracy” – namely, mob rule – to refer to the tyranny of mob or a mass of people. The tyranny of the majority does not consider the needs and will of minority groups, which thus tend to be excluded from the decision-making process. If the majority is the only legitimate authority, all the others (such as, to mention one, legacy media) need to be cast aside.

But “democracy *sans adjectives*” is not what we have today. Nowadays the concept of democracy refers to the notion of liberal democracy (Ristov, 2017), and “populism is first and foremost about the

perceived degeneration of representative democracy” (Akkerman, 2003). Liberal, or representative, democracy was theorized by classical theorists such as John Stuart Mill, James Madison and John Locke. The distinctive feature was the presence of accountable leaders, elected by the citizens as their representatives and trustees. Liberal democracy is thus a system characterized where you find not only free and fair elections, as the expression of popular sovereignty, and majority rule, but also the protection of minority rights and the representation of minority groups. The definition of liberal democracy entails the presence a system of checks and balances which intertwines elected and non-elected bodies, those that populist actors dislike; it requires freedom of expression, alternative sources of information and, for the purpose of this text, freedom of press.

I would like to emphasize that we have reason to be concerned about the pressures that populist parties put on constitutional checks and balances. Radical populists contend that all legislative power belongs to the people or to parliament and hence legislative power should not be divided. Balancing power via non-elected judges for instance is therefore contrary to populist principle. Populists do not have much respect for the principle of separating and spreading powers (Tjitske Akkerman, 2003).

Populists claim that the “general will” of the majority should be sovereign, with no (or few) institutions interfering to tame the desires of the People and with little attention to the needs of the minority. Populism is not against democracy *per se*, but it clashes with the notion of liberal democracy (Ernst et al., 2017).

To sum up, I will recall the words of de Vreese *et al.* (2018):

Is populism *per se* a positive force for change or a threat to democracy? Populism might increase representation and give a voice to groups of citizens that do not feel heard by the current political elite. Populism might broaden the attention for issues that are not in the mainstream news. Populism might mobilize groups of people that have felt on the fringe of the political system. Populism might improve the responsiveness of the political system by making actors and parties align their policies more with the “wishes of the people.” Populism might be a refreshing wakeup call to powerholders, prompting periodic reflections on their conduct and elitism. That said, populism might also challenge or have outright negative consequences for liberal democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Populism might curb minority rights. Populism can use an electoral mandate to erode independent institutions that are considered corner stones of liberal democracies like the courts or the free media. Populism might lead to political tribalism, which impedes civil discourse and discourages political compromise.

1.3 PRESS FREEDOM

The purpose of this text is to reinforce the idea that populism is inconsistent with liberal democracy, and thus represents a threat to liberal democratic principles. To do that, I shall focus on populism as a menace to one of the most prominent features of liberal democracy – namely, press freedom. In 1972 George Orwell wrote that “if liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear”. This is at odds with populism as communicative strategy, thus we will later investigate how (and, most importantly, why) populist leaders and movements undermine the legitimacy of mainstream media. Since this section is dedicated to the definition of the variables of our syllogism, and to the framing of the concepts used in this text, I will now briefly explain how the freedom of the press is vital for the proper functioning of liberal democratic processes.

The definition of press freedom has changed over time since the aftermath of the Second World War. First, press freedom used to mean freedom from government control. Then, a classical liberal perspective on media freedom came to mean the role of the media in protecting the individual from the abuse of the state. Subsequently, according to a more radical democratic perspective, the role of the free press was to outweigh the imbalances in society, between the degree of independence and freedom enjoyed by the media, and the citizens, in their ability to access media contents – namely, the availability of information. In case of asymmetry of information, cogently one of the origins of corruption, the media are expected to commit to more transparency and a freer flow of information (Färdigh *et al.*, 2012).

“Free media is a bedrock element of a functioning democracy”, Michael Lavarch writes. There is, notwithstanding, a palpable “tension between the essential free flow of information in a free society and the accountability which all power, including media power, must be subjected to for a society to be truly free” (Lavarch, 2012). Lavarch endorses the idea that pluralism, which inevitably requires freedom of the press, is a necessary requirement for democracy:

In order for democracy to flourish, it is vital that the citizen has various sources of information and access to proper forums for open and fair debate. The media plays a critical role in stimulating debate about important issues, presenting facts and reporting news, uncovering corruption and misconduct and providing a vehicle for diverse perspectives. [...] Importantly, the media is also a key accountability mechanism for keeping the institutions of power in check. [...] This creates a dichotomy, because as a consequence of this role, the media itself accrues an enormous amount of power, in that it packages and shapes the flow of information. The power to promulgate that information is key to the freedom of the press, and one that is jealously guarded — and rightly so. (Lavarch, 2012)

Freedom of the press can guarantee its ability to act as a watchdog for politicians and government. This is in line with the definition of liberal democracy as a system of interdependent authorities that cooperate in a network of checks and balances. But in order for the press to be truly free, the meeting of

some procedural requirements is not enough. For the press to be defined actually “free”, it must be able to exercise its oversight function towards main political, social, economic and institutional actors, to fulfil its role in the check-and-balance game. If newspapers and media sources do not enjoy credibility and trustworthiness, and the public does not rely on them for gaining information, what’s the point of being formally free to critique? If press freedom is the ability to oversee and eventually oppose the powerful, credibility is a necessary means for this end. A menace to the credibility of the press is a menace to press itself, as bulwark of liberal democracy.

Credibility is not something that should be given to the media for free, though. The press must also measure up to its credibility. Mainstream media should, and most often do, commit to ideals of truth, objectivity and clarity. Most journalists and information providers follow some deontology rule that devote them to professionalism and accountability. Nevertheless, there is no scarce evidence of a legacy press that is guilty of being biased, partisan and politically oriented, especially in the realm of the “negative relation” between populism and the press (*Figure 1*). This is where the faults of the press lay, faults that fostered an environment of mistrust towards mainstream sources of information.

To sum up, we can assume that free mainstream press, if perceived by the public as liar, is not really free to perform its liberal democratic right and duty to oversight on government’s activity. We will see how populist rhetoric against the press has the effect of delegitimising the authority of the media. If the media can be labelled as “biased” or “liar” whenever they go against the government, then the press will not be truly free. But journalists and information providers must be committed to values of truth, accuracy and correctness, which does not always happen. Today we are witnessing a situation where mainstream media is often looked at with suspicion: both politicians and the media themselves are responsible for this outcome, and we will see how and why in the course of this paper. It would also be necessary to give an account of how the notion of truth has changed in the 21st century, when it can be manipulated, and opinions are becoming more important than facts; but this huge subject will not find its place in this text.

CHAPTER 2

Populism and the press, a “marriage of convenience”

2.1 MEDIATIZATION OF POLITICS, SOCIAL MEDIA, MEDIA POPULISM

Let us start this section with what I called the ‘first side of the coin’, where the coin is the relationship between populism and the press, and the first side is their happy marriage (*Figure 1*). There are many causes attributed to the rise of populist movements. Low credibility of mainstream institutions and parties, corruption scandals, economic crisis, and other social, economic and political preconditions are among the most consolidated factors mentioned to explain the success of populist parties and leaders. Together with this “substantial” causes, I want to shift the focus on another “procedural” cause which deals with the new ways political messages are delivered. Many scholars, in fact, link the diffusion of populist discourses to the process of mediatization of politics (Kenny, 2019; Manucci, 2017; Kriesi, 2014; Esser, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008). Generally speaking, mediatization can be defined “*as the growing intrusion of media logic as an institutional rule into fields where other rules of defining appropriate behavior prevailed*” (Esser, 2013), or as “*the increasing influence that the media has across different spheres of society*” (Kenny, 2019). When we talk about the mediatization *of politics*, we mean the pivotal role played by the media in setting the political agenda and driving the public debate. In other words,

the commercial logic driving tabloid newspapers and television channels is considered to be a key trigger for the ambitions of populist actors seeking media exposure. Indeed, populist discourses are considered to fit the media-logic by providing controversial and newsworthy content, thus incrementing the visibility of politicians articulating populist discourses vis-à-vis mainstream politicians. (Manucci, 2017).

According to the new rules set by the era of mediatization of politics, the media and political actors are mutually linked by the need of visibility. They both have to meet the criteria of newsworthiness and marketability. Populism, here, proves to have a great advantage with respect to mainstream politicians, since the former’s communicative strategy is made of catchy soundbites and easy-to-deliver utopian solutions. Thus, populist political discourse fits the commercial logic driving the media (Manucci, 2017). In a world where the public is constantly bombed with new information, in order to emerge you have to scream louder. This is why “*political communication is now shaped by a growing space for extreme voices, new political challengers, and an anti-elitist agenda pushed by news media*” (Manucci, 2017). Accordingly, populist communicative strategy feeds the media with “provocative and fiery statements, and (...) violent attacks on their opponents (Mény and Surel, 2000, as reported in Manucci, 2017).

2.1.1 The role of social media

On the one hand, as I will later explain, populist actors instil suspicion in voters with respect to established media. On the other, they offer an allegedly more valid alternative, becoming themselves a source of news through social networks, particularly suitable for populist communication. If populist movements and actors present themselves as an alternative to official news provider, and journalists are depicted as not trustworthy, the public will rely on populist channels rather than legacy media.

“Social media as a channel fits the populist message by being non-hierarchical (Bartlett, 2014) and providing populist actors with the opportunity to circumvent traditional news channels (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017)” (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, *“Traditional ‘mass media logic’ is based on professional gatekeepers and a relatively passive audience, while the ‘network media logic’, very much liked by populist actors, evolves from interest-bound and like-minded peer networks”* (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). This approach agrees with what Kurt Weyland writes in his article “Neoliberal populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe”, as reported by Ristov (2017). He defines populism as a “political strategy” characterized “by a charismatic leader that appeals to a heterogeneous mass of followers ready for mobilization, in a direct, quasi-personal manner way”. This could explain why populist actors normally favour, at least in theory, forms of direct democracy (Ristov, 2017). Moreover,

Social media are often said to represent a perfect channel for the diffusion of populist messages: first, populist actors often accuse the traditional media system of being controlled by the mainstream political elites, and therefore they consider the new social media as the only neutral and independent arena; second, populist actors build their credibility on their links with ordinary people and advocate unrestricted popular sovereignty, hence the possibility of communicating directly with their electorate can reinforce their image of being approachable people; third, social media are more informal and favor a type of communication close to colloquial language, based on emotions rather than on reasoning, this being close to a populist discursive style. For all these reasons, populist actors are expected to mobilize voters via social media more easily than mainstream actors, thus enhancing their electoral performance. (Manucci, 2017)

Social networks perfectly serve the populist cause by giving the possibility to adopt a media-friendly packaging of political warhorses. The empirical analysis confirms that social media are highly compatible with populist communication, due to four main characteristics of social media platforms: *“A direct access to the audience without journalistic interference, a close connection to the people, an infinite potential for personalization, and the possibility to target specific groups”* (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). The same study also demonstrates that populist communicative strategy is predominantly used to attack and defame the “elite”, and in the meantime advocate for the people and mobilize it against “them” (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). Simple, short, immediate messages that are directly delivered to the personal devices of the public are in the very

essence of social networks. In particular, the social platform that better suits populists' necessities is Facebook, rather than Twitter (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). To attract voters and ensure visibility, populist actors have been masters in the so-called self-mediatization:

If political actors stage an event in order to get media attention, or if they fashion an event in order to fit to the media's needs, we speak of a self-mediatization (Meyer 2002). Politicians' instrumental use of marketing strategies, proactive news management and spin doctoring also fall under this term. (Esser, 2013)

2.1.2 Media populism

If populist actors have to respond to criteria of marketability, so do the media. It true that populist communication is media-friendly, as it packages contents in a way that can be easily understood and privileged by the media, resulting in some kind of “media complicity” (Kriesi, 2014). But it is equally true that the media must offer contents that catch the public's attentions, and in so doing the populist rhetoric comes very useful. I do not intend to generalize the phenomenon, but we cannot even discard the active role of the media in spreading and ensuring the populist success. We will later develop the fault of the press with this respect, though I will commit this paragraph to the so-called “populism by the media” (or “media populism”) (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Hamелеers *et al.*, 2016; Mazzoleni, 2008). Populists and the media in the internet era go hand in hand with the novel market rules of the news world: populist actors and movements privilege conflict (the “us versus them” clash) and negativity (the crisis of representation) in order to attract voters, and so do the media, in order to attract readers. *“The media sphere and the political realm are intertwined to the point that they constitute an integrated system for the production of user-friendly political news”*, Manucci explains (2017).

“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”, wrote Mazzoleni (2008). With his words, he stresses the difference between two different types of information providers: the tabloid media, which by their very nature act in complicity with populist actors and movements, and mainstream media, those that are depicted by the populist as art of the corrupt elite and thus paladins of the status quo. Tabloid media are thus more likely to serve the cause of the law of supply and demand, also in the realm of newsmaking. They need to sell contents, and such contents are more usable when they are catchy, instantly appealing and memorable. This is the same logic that drives populist rhetoric.

As a consequence, we can firstly conclude tabloid media are the perfect partner for populists is their ‘happy marriage’ with the media, which responds to my ‘first side’ of the coin. Secondly, we understood

how (some) news providers not only help spread the populist messages because they fit the same market-logics media have to follow, but some media can forge populist contents themselves, playing an active role in fuelling the populist cause.

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. (Mazzoleni, 2008)

2.2 POPULISM AND THE PRESS, A THREAT BEYOND THE THREAT

By saying that the relationship between populism and the press is a “marriage of convenience”, I want to suggest that it is a Janus-faced connection. Whenever populism needs the press, then it’s a good means to communicate a message. But when populist actors are criticized by the media, the press becomes “liar”. So far we have seen how populism and the press may share the same needs and must comply to the same criteria. Let us now turn to the second side of the coin, the negative relation between populism and the press (*Figure 1*). The exclusion of the mainstream media from the populist outlook has several advantages for the populists. First of all, portraying the press as part of the elites gives the leader a further scapegoat on which he can hamper his electoral success. This is perfectly in accordance with the above-mentioned notion of anti-elitism, a key element of populism. The scapegoat of the faulty elites, self-interested and “glued to the armchair”, diverts the trust of the public from the claims of legacy institutions to the allegations of populist leaders and movements. The latter are ready to present themselves as an alternative, with simple and ready-to-use solutions.

Secondly, eliminating the interference of the press to communicate a message, or the news, gives the populist the opportunity to establish a direct communicative link with the electors. Populist parties are often defined as ones led by a personalistic and charismatic leader who embodies the whole ideology and image of the party. Such a leader charismatically builds his relationship with the public in an unmediated and uninstitutionalized way (Kenny, 2019; Kriesi, 2014). Thus, populists look for a direct linkage with their people, to mobilize it and call it to action in a way that is increasingly disintermediated. Social networks represent a very effective way to do that, since they provide “unchecked” access to the public without journalistic interference and offer the possibility to bypass the gatekeeping role of traditional media (Kenny, 2019) and establish a close and direct connection to the “People” (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Ernst *et al.*, 2017). Journalistic filters, on the other hand, safeguard democracy by counterbalancing this disintermediated communication with fact-checks and verifications.

2.2.1 Anti-elitism as a means to an end

It is utterly important to understand the concept of anti-elitism as a node of populist communication strategy. Attributing responsibility for negative outcomes to the corrupt elites, and thus blaming them for society's decay, is in the very nature of populism. As Hamелеers *et al.* (2016) put it,

the core of populism revolves around a distinction between a blameless in-group, which is not properly represented by the elites and which the populist parties claim to be able to represent, and a culprit out-group on which responsibility is to be attributed.

Scholars tend to refer to the populist sound bite of “corrupt elite” as referring to (previous) governments and supranational institutions, such as the European Union. I argue that the “out-group” is not only intended, for the populist purpose, as political elites, supranational institutions or Non-Governmental Organisations; in the to-be-blamed group we also find non-political actors, experts, intellectuals and, sure thing, also mainstream media and journalists. Among cultural elites, the most harmful is probably the legacy press, which is closer to the population and can spread its voice more rapidly. Being it an “elite” in the populist conception of the term, it is often pointed out as a scapegoat to blame for societal problems.

The populist bulwarks of the “us versus them” rhetoric and the anti-elitist discourse, defend the alleged need to refurbish the political landscape and ‘make the people great again’: people-centrism and anti-elitism are indeed to complementary nodes of populist strategy. Journalists and legacy media are thus often depicted as liars and “enemy of the people” (especially by the President of the United States Donald J. Trump (Grynbaum and Sullivan, 2019)), described as herald of fake news, maimed by a cloud of suspicion and mistrust which delegitimize them in the eyes of the public. “You won’t find it on the news”, or “They don't want you to know this”, are indeed two of the favourite mantras of the populist dictionary. But who are “they”? The media, the culprits, that filter the news according to what can preserve the status quo, and this is why “*extreme and opposition parties use [social media] to communicate directly with voters by bypassing the journalistic filters*” (Ernst *et al.*, 2017). These particular catchphrases are often coupled with some piece of news that support populist ideological warhorses. Heralding the media as part of the “guilty elite”, and journalists as “enemy of the people”, straightforwardly entails that media and journalists are perceived as servants of the ruling classes, and thus not reliable.

This is why, populism seems to suggest, you should not read the news on official newspapers or websites. All populist politicians and movements have lively social media pages, websites or blogs, presented as an alternative to legacy media. “Don’t trust them, trust us” is the bottom line. In this pages, communication and information are one and the same thing. These platforms are displayed as if they were the only means for true direct democracy and genuine bottom-up participation and legitimization of power (Manucci, 2017). One example is the Five Star Movement (5SM) in Italy, which counts to major “official”

sites. The first one is the blog of its founder, the comedian Beppe Grillo, which used to be the official voice of the movement at the early stages of its existence. The second one is The Blog of The Stars, allegedly the official website of the party today. If you visit those pages you will not read anything about the “partiality” of the pages, they call themselves “magazines” instead. One of the sections of the The Blog of The Stars is “information”, but what they are doing is in fact political communication. Finally, even if the online platforms of the 5SM allow the voters (not all the citizens, only those that are affiliated) to vote draft laws, elect candidates and share information, the procedures of online voting seem to be more plebiscitarian than truly deliberative (Manucci, 2017). Recent studies by Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani (2005), as reported by Manucci (2017), also prove that *“the majority of the posts removed from the [Beppe Grillo’s] blog contained criticisms of Beppe Grillo”*. In a populist framework, dissent is treated as disloyalty and betrayal (Solomon and Jennings, 2017).

We start to see here how anti-elitism, the “us versus them” rhetoric, the overstatement of direct democracy and the abuse of social networks are all part of the same threat to the credibility, and thus the freedom, of the press. This is a hard statement to prove: first of all, the empirical definition of populism is a heated debate, and scholars are not unanimous. The independent variable of populism is difficult to define and thus operationalize; secondly, the dependent variable of press freedom is a broad concept, and its limitation could come in many forms. Anyway, Paul D. Kenny has empirically proved that *“populist rule is associated with a decline in most measures of media freedom relative to programmatic party rule”* (Kenny, 2019).

2.2.2 Some empirical evidence

No matter how devious the populist threat can be to the media, the result will always be a restriction on freedom, that will eventually develop in physical limitations. The Research Fellow of Political and Social Change at the Australian National University, Paul D. Kenny, investigates whether the populist rule comes with restrictions on the freedom of the press. The question he poses at the very beginning of his *“The Enemy of the People”: Populists and Press Freedom* is the following: To what extent is the populist party rule associated with a decline in press freedom and freedom of expression? (Kenny, 2019). He uses cross-national data from 1980-2014 to test populism in power entails an erosion of the freedom of the press, and he finds that it is so. He refers to Donald Trump that calls journalists *“among the most dishonest human beings on earth”* (Grynbaum 2017), claiming that he is in *“a running war with the media”* (Hirschfeld Davis and Rosenberg 2017)” (Kenny, 2019).

We have already mentioned the fact that the President of the United States frequently denounces the press as “the enemy of the people”, and *“he has stated that he intends to silence critics by opening up libel*

laws (Gold 2016), while his erstwhile chief strategist, Steve Bannon, went on record saying that the news media “should keep its mouth shut” (Grynbaum 2017)” (Kenny, 2019). He also mentions the former President of Venezuela Hugo Chávez, who in 2010 shut down six television news stations aligned with the opposition, “including Radio Caracas Televisión (Minder 2010)”. Moreover, in Turkey, Kenny recalls, more than 130 media organisations have been shut down under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. “Some 45 newspapers, 29 publishing houses, 23 radio stations, 16 TV stations, 15 magazines and three news agencies have all fallen foul of the Turkish government” (Mortimer, 2016). In the Philippines then, the government uses the weapon of violent attacks and legal charges to silence the press, and particularly those websites and newspapers that report critically the action of Duterte’s administration (Conde, 2018). In Italy, the coalition government of the two populist parties, the already mentioned 5SM and the Lega, wants to cut down the public funds for the publishing industry, which would mean, *inter alia*, the shutdown of *Radio Radicale*, the Radical Party’s radio which receives state contributions to broadcast the parliamentary sessions in their entirety (LaPresse, 2019). In his paper, Kenny argues that

although the mass media has become increasingly important to all types of political parties, the way in which populist parties are organized means that they have especially strong incentives to erode press freedom and freedom of expression more broadly. (Kenny, 2019)

Kenny does not treat populism from an ideological point of view. He intends populism as an “organisational” approach, close to the “communicative strategy” interpretation of populism. According to this view, populism is “*the charismatic mobilization of a mass movement in pursuit of political power*” (Kenny, 2019).

There are two reasons why populism in this sense matters for press freedom. First, while mass rallies continue to be an important means by which charismatic leaders connect with supporters, they also rely heavily on the mass media to deliver their message and mobilize voters directly. Controlling the media is thus a core objective of populists compared to other types of political leaders, who can rely on party membership, dense civil society organizations, or clientelistic linkages mediated by a network of party brokers to mobilize supporters. Second, although populists can and do have parties, they are highly personalistic (...) This means that populist leaders face different time horizons and constraints on their behavior than the leaders of more deeply institutionalized parties. Unlike the latter, populists are not as motivated to ensure the survival of their party as organizations beyond their own personal political lives. Hence they are less interested in preserving the autonomy of institutions that balance governmental authority, such as the press. (Kenny, 2019)

His quantitative cross-national and time-series analysis on 86 countries shows that populist rule is negatively associated with press freedom, although its effects are about a third the size of that of authoritarian rules. And this is where populism is tricky. It is easier to state that authoritarian regimes restrict press freedom, because control of the press and suppression of the opposition’s voices is in the very nature

of authoritarian rules. But populism acts more sneakily, like I said at the beginning of this dissertation. Time will tell us if populism, with its threats and insults towards the press, is a regime *per se* or just a transitional phase towards more authoritarian rule.

The list Kenny gives of the possible ways to erode media freedom is exhaustive, to say the least. Restriction to freedom of the press may come under the form of “*harassment and prosecution of critical journalists, the censoring of press output, the closure through legal or illegal means of opposition-aligned media outlets, and the saturation of the media environment through state-owned or sympathetic private media*” (Kenny, 2019). But this is not the end of the story. He also mentions “contemporary techniques” that are intrinsic of the way we use the internet, and social media in particular, nowadays. Internet “trolls” – namely, those “who posts a deliberately provocative message to a newsgroup or message board with the intention of causing maximum disruption and argument” (Urban Dictionary definition) – can be used to hush and discourage government critics on the web. This should also be part of the list of possible erosions of media freedom (Kenny, 2019), and I argue that it is also an example of how excessive freedom for some jeopardizes the freedom of others, which is a tricky and heated debate concerning today’s usage of internet and social media.

Table 1. Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression under Populist Rule.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Media censor	Internet censor	Range	Harassment	Self-censor	Bias	Free expression
Lag DV	0.776*** (0.0250)	0.796*** (0.0332)	0.807*** (0.0294)	0.796*** (0.0257)	0.813*** (0.0258)	0.783*** (0.0230)	0.784*** (0.0301)
Clientelist	-0.133* (0.0746)	-0.0143 (0.0424)	-0.108* (0.0568)	-0.0562 (0.0630)	-0.0423 (0.0599)	-0.101* (0.0591)	-0.0143 (0.0172)
Populist	-0.208*** (0.0619)	-0.0136 (0.0178)	-0.114*** (0.0367)	-0.130** (0.0532)	-0.142*** (0.0519)	-0.157*** (0.0485)	-0.0251** (0.0110)
Authoritarian	-0.559*** (0.116)	-0.0554 (0.0551)	-0.451*** (0.109)	-0.365*** (0.0915)	-0.423*** (0.111)	-0.494*** (0.105)	-0.120*** (0.0263)
Lag GDPPC growth	0.000556 (0.00163)	-0.00221 (0.00202)	-0.00205 (0.00170)	-0.000324 (0.00126)	-0.000104 (0.00173)	-0.00139 (0.00196)	-0.0000502 (0.000365)
Conflict	-0.0127** (0.00609)	0.00217 (0.0109)	-0.0143** (0.00565)	-0.00243 (0.00374)	-0.0121* (0.00644)	-0.0122** (0.00614)	-0.00297** (0.00121)
Country FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	0.459*** (0.0632)	0.224*** (0.0466)	0.382*** (0.0612)	0.360*** (0.0537)	0.333*** (0.0544)	0.431*** (0.0565)	0.201*** (0.0289)
Observations	2,428	1,521	2,428	2,428	2,428	2,428	2,428
Adjusted R ²	.855	.657	.881	.846	.861	.855	.895

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Reference regime type is programmatic democracy.

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.

Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression under Populist Rule
(Table 1, Kenny 2019)

To test the hypothesis that “Populist rule is associated with declines in media freedom and freedom of expression”, Kenny (2019) restricts populism, with the lens of an “organisational” approach, to democracies, so that it does not become a weak proxy for authoritarianism (curious, huh?). Thus, populist parties are codified according to

- 1.) whether the party leader is the creator of a new personalist party vehicle, or whether she substantially removed constraints on their power within the party having otherwise gained the leadership; and 2.) whether the party relied primarily on the mobilization of independent or swing voters through the charismatic appeal of the leader via personalistic appeals through the media and mass rallies rather than on institutional or clientelistic linkages in coming to power.

(Kenny, 2019)

Appendix A: Data and Robustness Checks

Table A1 Populist governments, 1980-2014

Country	Party	Leader	Populist rule	Ideology (econ)
Argentina	Partido Justicialista	Carlos Saúl Menem	1989–99	Right
		Néstor Kirchner	2003–06	Left
		Cristina Fernández de Kirchner	2007–14	Left
Bolivia	Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)	Evo Morales	2006–14	Left
Brazil	Partido da Reconstrução Nacional (PRN)	Fernando Collor de Mello	1989–2002	Left
Bulgaria	National Movement Simeon II	Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha	2002–05	Right
	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	Boyko Borisov	2010–13	Right
Colombia	Primero Colombia	Álvaro Uribe Vélez	2002–10	Right
Ecuador	Partido Sociedad patriótica	Lucio Gutierrez	2003–05	Right
	Alianza PAIS	Rafael Correa	2007–14	Left
Greece	Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)	Andreas Papandreou	1982–89	Right
Guatemala	Partido Patriota	Otto Pérez Molina	2012–14	Right
Hungary	Fidesz	Victor Orbán	1999–2002, 2010–14	Right
Indonesia	Partai Demokrat	Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono	2006–14	Center
Italy	Forza Italia	Silvio Berlusconi	1995–98, 2002–06	Right
	Il Popolo della Libertà (PdL)		2009–12	Right
Japan	Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP)	Junichiro Koizumi	2003–06	Right
Nicaragua	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)	Daniel Ortega	2007–14	Left
Pakistan	Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)	Benazir Bhutto	1988–90, 1994–96	Left
Paraguay	Alianza Patriótica por el Cambio (APC)	Fernando Lugo	2009–12	Left
Peru	Cambio 90	Alberto Fujimori	1990–91	Right
	Perú Posible	Alejandro Toledo	2001–06	Right
Philippines	Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino (PMP)	Joseph Estrada	1999–2001	Left
South Korea	Millennium Democratic Party	Roh Moo-hyun	2002–05	Center
Surinam	Nationale Democratische Partij / Megacombinatie	Dési Bouterse	2010–14	Left
Taiwan	Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)	Chen Shui-bian	2001–04	Right
Thailand	Thai Rak Thai	Thaksin Shinawatra	2001–05	Left
Turkey	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	2003–14	Right
Venezuela	Convergencia Nacional	Rafael Caldera	1993–98	Right
	Movimiento V República (MVR)	Hugo Chávez	1999–2013	Left
Poland	Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej	Andrzej Lepper	2005–07*	Right
Austria	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs	Jörg Haider	2000–02*	Right
Romania	Partidul România Mare	Corneliu Vadim Tudor	1993–94*	Left

* Minority member of coalition government

(Table A1, Appendix A, Kenny 2019)

As for the dependent variables, which measure media freedom, Kenny makes a list of seven: Government censorship of the media (*Censorship*), Government censorship of the internet (*Internet*), Range of media perspectives (*Range*), Harassment of journalists (*Harassment*) – which includes physical threats but also libels, Media self-censorship (*Self-censor*), Media Bias against opposition (*Bias*), Freedom of expression (*Free expression*). For all dependent variables a negative coefficient means less freedom and more censorship (Kenny, 2019).

Among other things, Kenny's quantitative empirical research sheds a new light on the causal relationship between the organizational nature of populist parties and restrictions to the freedom of the press. Then, it corroborates that theoretical strand of literature that links populist regimes with negative implications on rule of law, electoral quality and liberal democracy. Kenny (2019) finds that "all populists restrict press freedom", and "these findings have critical implications for our theoretical understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy". This further proves the point that press freedom is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the proper running of a liberal democratic state, and any threat to it – be it libel, harassment, imprisonment or partisan legal prosecution – is a threat to liberal democracy. If Kenny's manuscript proves that populism is a threat to the freedom of the press, it also proves that populism is a threat to democracy. And so, my initial point is proven.

2.3 CRITIQUES

There are two main strands of literature that are sceptical about the mainstream ideas about populism. The first one concerns the substantial notion that populism is a threat to liberal democracy, rather than a corrective tool (Ristov, 2018; Akkerman, 2003). A second more methodological critique deals with the relationship between populism and the media, and the need to fill the gap between theoretical assumptions and empirical support on the role the media have in the insurgence of populist movements. Hanspeter Kriesi (2014) is a representative of the first strand of critique. He draws from the work of Peter Mair, who in numerous publications has explained the rise of populism in Western European democracies with the decline of traditional parties as intermediaries between the citizens and the public policy. Peter Mair, Kriesi recalls, calls this peculiar stage of democracy "partyless democracy", where populism finds fertile ground to grow. In contrast with the somewhat gloomy conclusions that Mair drives from this scenario, Kriesi argues that populism might in the end be a "*productive force that may serve as the catalyst for a profound realignment of West European party systems – a realignment that brings the West European party systems more in line with the transformed conflict structures of West European societies*" (Kriesi, 2014).

The decline and weakening of the representative function of parties has made the voters free from their partisan ideologies and as thus paved the way for the rising of new political forces that promise to solve

their problems. New populist challengers, so the argument goes, may thus be the driving forces for a process of restructuration of the party system. This leads to a new interpretation of the “winners” and “losers” of globalization, where the political struggle is for the mobilization of the demands of the latter (Kriesi, 2014). An undeniable merit of populism, for instance, is to have put the people back on the centre of the scene. Those that were used to be left aside of the political debate have started to get involved, and are now willing to participate more in the public sphere, as an active part of the civil society. In the end, the challenge posed by populist movements, should they transform into regular parties or not, can be the catalyst that gives the representative function back to the mainstream parties (Kriesi, 2014). In a nutshell, what Kriesi believes is that, in the end, populism will boost an electoral mobilization that will have a corrective democratic effect. Moreover, populist challengers within a proportionality electoral system will not put democracy in danger, since they will always be forced to ally in coalition governments with mainstream parties, which are still electorally more influent. Only in (quasi) majoritarian systems, on the other hand, if populists happen to seize the majority, they will represent a threat to liberal democracy (Kriesi, 2018).

Another criticism is more methodological, and concerns the lack of empirical backup to support the theoretical expectations, with specific respect to the existing theories about the relationship between populism and the media. Rather, what Luca Manucci claims (2017) is that empirical research has not yet met the theoretical assumptions made so far. One first claim is that there is the need for comparative studies in favour of developed theories about the connection between commercial media and populist messages. To be questioned is the idea that populist discourses are spread by the media for commercial purpose only, while it may also be true that the media actually support those ideas and thus actively work to spread them. A second point Manucci makes is that the different studies about populism are difficult to compare, since there is no uniform understanding of the notion of populism. The different dimensions of populism are often confused: populism as communication style is often compared to different populist ideological contents (Manucci, 2017).

Together with the lack of conceptual consistency, the role of the media in the boosting of populism is problematic, given the contradiction between empirical results and theoretical assumptions. The alleged complicity of tabloid media to the populist cause (Mazzoleni, 2008), unlike quality newspapers', has not yet been confirmed. Rather, mainstream media and the so-called tabloid media give the same degree of attention to both populist and non-populist actors (Manucci, 2017). The privileged relation between media and populists leaders and movements is further called into question by the idea that it might not be the media that concede great visibility to the populists, but it might instead be the case that nowadays the media are important for all the broad spectrum of the electoral cleavage, and all political parties must meet the new criteria of the new mediatization of politics' era. In such a context, populist parties might simply be more perceptive of what the people want to hear, and thus set their communication strategy accordingly. Those

issues will be same treated by the media, which will inevitably end up covering those parties and leaders that share their agenda, even if just for electoral purposes.

To sum up, populism might not necessarily be a threat to liberal democracy, it can also be viewed as a corrective tool to the party system in liberal democracies. But this claim, too, like many others, still needs further empirical backup, as Manucci points out. First of all, the definition of what populism exactly is, is necessary in order to conceptualize and operationalize the phenomenon. The critiques submitted by Manucci (2017) came before the empirical study by Paul D. Kenny (2019): maybe some of the point Manucci raised were settled by Kenny's cross-national analysis. The cause-effect relationship between the role of the media and the success of populism is another point of heated debate. The two phenomenon are undoubtedly connected, but is it just correlation or actual causation? And which of the two is the independent variable? Are the media actually and actively backing the populist discourse, or are legitimately following the commercial logic of newsworthiness and marketability? Populism will certainly be, and already is, a great issue that will stimulate theories from various academic fields. In the meantime, though, reality might answer academic questions before scholars have even come up with an unanimous definition of populism.

CHAPTER 3

From theory to practice: the case studies of USA's Donald Trump and Italy's Luigi Di Maio, and the challenges of the press

With populist and nationalist forces making significant gains in democratic states, 2016 marked the 11th consecutive year of decline in global freedom¹. Scholars and observers were already studying some sort of shocks to the liberal democratic order, but 2016 was the point of no return, when many admitted that the liberal-democratic asset of the West could be irreversibly declining. 2016 was the year of Brexit, of Donald Trump's election, and the increasing consolidation of some "neo-populist" forces that would shake western democracies (Colombo and Magri, 2019). Despite the theoretical discussion outlined so far, it seems widely accepted that populism is to be seen as a threat to democracy as we know it today, in its liberal and constitutional rendering. This said, let us go back to the focus on the relationship between populism and the press, putting it into the real world. Is freedom of expression in danger? Should the professional category be worried about an authoritarian drift, that would suppress the free leeway of the media? What are the risks of making the reputation of newspapers devoid of any reliability and trustworthiness, and how does it happen? We will explore the matter, but only time will show us how it will settle.

I will analyse two so-called populist leaders, who are similar for some key aspects and different for others, in line with the acknowledged confusion about a unanimous notion of populism. The first one I chose is the President of the United States Donald J. Trump, aka @realDonaldTrump on Twitter, because he is surely the most prominent populist actor in the world. The second one I will deal with is the Italian Luigi Di Maio and his 5 Star Movement (5SM); he is probably one of the most significant populist performers, especially in the context of the European Union, but he is certainly the geographically closest to the author of this dissertation. I will use the same line of argument for both of them, contextualising the different scenarios in which they operate and the different societal context. In so doing, being it very recent events, I will report some reactions and opinions from authoritative members of the publishing industry. I will first clarify why Trump and Di Maio can both be called "populist", and what are the differences between the two with respect to the role they have within their parties. Then I will talk about the conditions under which the press has to work in each country: some will be different, but the idea that the press is the bedrock of democracy is shared by both Italy's and the United States' constitutional history.

I will not take into consideration the two ideological differences between Donald Trump and Luigi Di Maio; like I stressed at the beginning of this text, populism is not here intended as an ideological discriminator, but as a communicative strategy. If so intended, we can be sure that both of them can be considered perfect populist players. As for the threat to the freedom of the press, a small anticipation is at

this point required. Neither in Donald Trump's presidency, nor in Luigi Di Maio's political doing, will we see threats to the freedom of press and expression that we could label as authoritarian, because everything happens in the context of a liberal democratic regime, however under threat. If the path towards authoritarianism is made of stages, I would argue that populism can be considered one of the first steps. Di Maio's populism performs a sneaky threat to the freedom of the press, undermining its credibility. Trump's populism, on the other hand, is slightly more openly brutal against the media; I would say that Trump's populist performance is closer to what is not being studied as "souverainist populism", which might eventually prove to be closer to authoritarian methods.

The negative relation between populism and the press, though, does not solely depend on populist rhetoric against the media; the press, too, plays its part. We have extensively talked about the features of populism and the reasons why it brought to the drift of its relationship with the press, but it is now time to see what the faults of the press are. Both for ideological, legal and contextual reasons, the press has made its mistakes, rendering the populist propaganda easier. We have already investigated the role that media populism has and keeps having in the attention given to populist rhetoric, but the story does not end here. First, newspapers should show the public that populist allegations are fake. With time, the distance between the press and the mass public has widened, and legacy media have done little to fill the gap. This makes it easier for populist to label the press as part of the "culpable elite". Secondly, the media must face the challenge of the spread of fake news. When the reader knows about the weaponization of fake news, but he does not know how to distinguish between fake and real, it should be on the press to find a way out of this "market for lemons" of pieces of news. Finally, newspapers are not always impartial, and they sometimes appear to entrench themselves in some sort of ivory towers. This theme is a big deal in the United States, where "media bias" is commonplace. I will investigate all these factors in the specificity of the American and Italian contexts.

3.1 DONALD TRUMP: LIES AND RHETORIC AGAINST THE MEDIA

In order to further investigate the relationship between populism and freedom of press I will go into the details of the rift between Donald Trump, most prominent populist leader today, and the media. President Trump has always proven himself hostile to the press "elite"; and, as expected, he makes an extensive use of social media to communicate his actions and ideas directly to the electorate. Slightly in contrast with the hypothesis that Facebook is the social network that best suits populist methods (Ernst *et al.*, 2017), we will see how the 45th President of the United States prefers Twitter to spread his populist messages. I will first illustrate the common features between Donald Trump's way to deliver political communication and the configuration and nature of populism as a communication phenomenon, according to which messages that

express populist ideas are often released with a characteristic set of presentational style elements (de Vreese et al., 2018; Mudde, 2017; Engesser et al., 2017). Secondly, I will focus on recent events concerning frictions between Donald Trump and some journalists and media.

3.1.1 Populism against “the enemies of the People”

“The media is among the most dishonest groups of people I’ve ever met”; “The press are liars, they’re terrible people”; “[Media] are the most dishonest human beings”; “I’m not [going to] give you a question, you are fake news”. These are only some of the ways Donald Trump addressed journalists and the media (Brian Knappenberger, 2017). Remember when I said that one of the most common populist slogans against the press is *“You won’t find it on the news”, et similia* (2.2.1)? Here is what Donald Trump tweeted on November 2018: *“People are not being told that the Republican Party is on track to pick up two seats in the U.S. Senate, and epic victory: 53 to 47. The Fake News Media only wants to speak of the House, where the Midterm results were better than other sitting Presidents”* (@realDonaldTrump 11:41 a.m.; November 16, 2018). Similar, right? And I could report many more examples, or I could invite the reader to have a look at the President’s Twitter account.

Donald Trump is probably the most notable example of fury against journalism and the legacy media. He is also the most prominent actor in the populist realm, as brilliantly and definitively explained by Cas Mudde throughout a European tour of lectures in 2017². Mudde defines populism as a *“thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté general (general will) of the people”*. He claims that populist leaders have different politics, but they all share the same populist speech patterns. He shows videos of Donald Trump’s speeches where he uses all the populist patterns attributable to a populist rhetoric, such as: constant reference to “the People”, the creation of an “us versus them” tension, the call-out of the elite, the use of metonymies (alternate names) for things he criticizes and the stress on a victimized audience. The claim is confirmed by de Vreese et al. (2018):

It has become evident that (legacy) media are often portrayed by the very same political actors as ‘corrupt’ elite institutions, fitting into the above definition of anti-elitism. A recent example of this is U.S. President Trump’s attack on mainstream news media as ‘fake’ and speculating about limiting their freedom and operations (Amanpour 2016; Dawes 2016). To use his own words on twitter, ‘The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!’ (@realDonaldTrump 1:48 p.m.; February 17, 2017).

The abhorrence against the press that Donald Trump has shown in many occasions (Brian Knappenberger, 2017, from 1h23min) is perceived by journalists and scholars as a threat to freedom of

speech. In the same documentary, Knappenberger interviews an American Attorney and an American media critic, who try to explain why the hatred against the press can be dangerous for democracy and underline how menacing the freedom of journalism is against the American Constitution itself.

“What we do know will be his anger at some of the coverage of him. We’ll see a President filled with fury at things that some, maybe most, newspapers will say”. “How far down the road of repression – there’s no other word – he’d be prepared to go to punish entities that anger him? Without a meaningful application of the First Amendment³, you have a true risk of living in a suppressive state, of living in a country in which a president who thinks he’s doing the right things – they always do –, who thinks that his critics are harming the country – they always do – can limit the ability of the press, the willingness of the press, to expose, to criticize, and the like” (Floyd Abrams, First Amendment³ Attorney, in Brian Knappenberger, 2017).

“We have a man in power, the President of the United States, who doesn’t seem to care about the distinction between true and false. It’s possible we are sliding toward an authoritarian rule in the United States, which is a shocking thing to say, but there are many signs that it’s true. This is something that we need journalists to try and oppose. When they are in this position, where they’re sort of on the front lines of the slide toward authoritarianism, just trying to do their job turns them into the opposition” (Jay Rosen, liberal media critic, writer and professor of journalism, in Brian Knappenberger, 2017).

3.1.2 All the President's lies

The fact that Donald Trump spreads fake news has been confirmed by many authors and scholars. There is an impressive catalogue of all his lies made by David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson, up to November 2017. *“He is trying to create an atmosphere in which reality is irrelevant”,* they write, and they have calculated that *“He said something untrue, in public, every day for the first 40 days of his presidency”* (Leonhardt and Thompson, 2017). *“Donald Trump tells lies”,* writes Jeremy Adam Smith on Scientific America’s Guest Blog (2017). And they are very frequently unmasked, not only by, *inter alia*, former FBI director James Comey in a speech at the Congress (Smith, 2017), but also by journalists that commit their work to fact-check what the President says and writes. The Toronto Star’s Washington bureau chief, Daniel Dale, is the most famous Trump’s fact-checker. He documents President Trump’s mistruths in real time, live-tweeting almost all of his speeches. In January 2019, according to Dale, Trump’s lies had been more than four thousand. He curiously developed a quasi-scientific method to detect Trump’s lies: *“If Trump tells a story in which an unnamed person calls him ‘sir,’ it’s probably invented. If Trump claims he has set a record, he probably hasn’t. If Trump cites any number at all, the real number is usually smaller”,* Dale explains in an article for The Washington Post (Dale, 2018).

This commitment to his own reality, where facts do not really matter and opinions and impressions are the only important thing, together with the constant attacks and libels against journalists and media, are what make Donald Trump's populism a threat for the credibility and the freedom of the press. The more journalists fact-check and unmask the President's lies, the more he tries to get rid of them. Daniel Dale, for instance, was blocked on Twitter by Donald Trump; curiously, on May 23, 2018, Judge Naomi Reice Buchwald ruled⁴ that Trump blocking people on Twitter is unconstitutional, since it violates the principles outlined in the First Amendment³. Another example is the friction between the President and CNN's chief White House correspondent Jim Acosta: during a post-midterm elections press conference, Acosta irritated the President by asking him a series of insisting questions, for which Trump called him a "terrible person"; some hours later, his press pass for the White House was revoked. "This unprecedented decision is a threat to our democracy and the country deserves better", CNN stated (Stelter, 2018). In 2019, Acosta will publish his book "The Enemy of the People: A Dangerous Time to Tell the Truth in America."

"It is clear that the reputation of the news media is under siege", proved an Ipsos Poll⁵ on sentiment towards American media (2018). *"According to the General Social Survey, the number of Americans with some or a great deal of trust in the press has dropped 30 percentage points since the late 1970s",* the report says.

	Total	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Donald Trump	52%	14%	86%	59%
Fox News	43	15	73	49
Barack Obama	40	75	7	37
CNN	35	58	13	34
MSNBC	35	55	13	33
Breitbart	34	20	51	40
CNBC	32	51	13	31
Huffington Post	30	44	15	36
Washington Post	29	50	10	28
New York Times	29	53	7	28
BuzzFeed News	29	35	24	30
News talk radio	28	24	29	32
NBC News	26	47	7	28
CSPAN	26	34	15	28
ABC News	26	45	7	25
Associated Press	26	41	7	28
CBS News	25	43	5	26
Daily Beast	24	29	21	23
ESPN	24	25	19	32
USA Today	22	29	13	24
NPR	22	31	10	26
Wall Street Journal	20	27	11	23
Reuters News	17	25	7	21
BBC	14	18	5	16
PBS	12	20	3	12
The Weather Channel	7	7	3	11

Total unfavorable to the question "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the following?", Ipsos Poll on Sentiment Towards American Media (2018)

The poll was conducted to test “how Americans currently view the press and public support for efforts to restrict journalism. While we found that the large majority of Americans support the idea of the First Amendment³, *“there are worrying signs that freedom of the press might be conditional to many people”*. Data show that 85% of Americans believe that the “Freedom of the press is essential for American democracy.” Among both Republicans and Democrats, 68% of the interviewed admit that “reporters should be protected from pressure from government or big business interests.” A fair 29% of the American people agree with the idea that “the news media is the enemy of the American people,” and 26% confirm that “the president should have the authority to close news outlets engaged in bad behavior”.

3.1.3 A Threat to the credibility of the press

Another poll, conducted by YouGov in July 2018 as part of the CBS News 2018 Battleground Tracker⁶, a series of panel studies in the U.S., confirms the idea that Donald Trump’s populist rhetoric results in highly diffused distrust in the media. 53% of the respondents answer that they have “not much confidence” on the media, and 58% believe that the mainstream news media contain inaccurate information. The striking result is that 56% of the interviewed think that they can get accurate information from “friends and family”, while only 34% maintain so of Donald Trump. The level of perceived accuracy of Donald Trump’s messages is further developed in Table 11A of the poll: 91% of Trump’s supporters find the President’s information accurate, while only 11% of them think the same of mainstream news media (Table 11B, below).

The galaxy of the publishing industry is worried about what will be of the freedom of the press in the United States. A report on International Press Freedom was developed in 2018 by ARTICLE 19, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Index on Censorship IFEX, International Press Institute (IPI) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF - Reporters Sans Frontières). They claimed that press freedom was under threat, in a number of ways, including “direct stigmatization of media workers by politicians”. “These concerns inspired an unprecedented press freedom mission to the US in January 2018”, whose findings “paint a perturbing picture for press freedom in the US”. The report detects five areas of concern where the freedom of the media can be measured. Those are: 1) protests and public events, 2) crossing the border, 3) source protection, 4) free flow of information and 5) deteriorating rhetoric. This last one is what interests us, since the rhetoric they refer to is the same populist rhetoric we have learnt to know.

“The rhetoric that Trump and his administration have used to disparage and discredit the media... is of grave concern”, the report states. “By openly and aggressively targeting journalists and media outlets, the current US administration risks undermining media freedom and creates a culture where journalists find themselves unprotected”. “The journalists we met agreed that the negative public rhetoric about the press was feeding into an increased public antipathy towards media workers, including social media posts

that denigrate, harass or even threaten journalists”, the report continues. “Abuse from the President may have led to self-censorship and has broader implications for the trust of the media by some of the population. However, this rhetoric also appears to have galvanized the energy and resources of many media outlets and journalists” (ARTICLE 19 *et al.*, 2018).

CBS News Battleground Tracker



11A. Accurate Information - Donald Trump

Where can you go these days to get information that's accurate, whether or not you agree with their views?

	Gender			Age group				Race/Ethnicity			
	Total	Male	Female	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Accurate	34%	37%	32%	26%	31%	37%	43%	40%	12%	29%	29%
Inaccurate	66%	63%	68%	74%	69%	63%	57%	60%	88%	71%	71%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Weighted N	2,343	1,138	1,204	502	547	800	493	1,596	286	260	201

	Party ID			White Evangelical		Ideology			
	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Yes	No	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Accurate	34%	10%	34%	73%	56%	29%	5%	27%	68%
Inaccurate	66%	90%	66%	27%	44%	71%	95%	73%	32%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Weighted N	2,343	733	774	589	445	1,896	581	1,010	736

	2016 Vote			Trump Supporter				
	Total	Clinton	Trump	Other	Trump Supporter	Support if deliver	Don't support but could	Do not support
Accurate	34%	3%	76%	14%	91%	59%	11%	4%
Inaccurate	66%	97%	24%	86%	9%	41%	89%	96%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Weighted N	2,343	626	593	73	482	492	368	994

CBS News Battleground Tracker



11B. Accurate Information - The mainstream news media

Where can you go these days to get information that's accurate, whether or not you agree with their views?

	Gender			Age group				Race/Ethnicity			
	Total	Male	Female	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
Accurate	42%	42%	43%	46%	41%	44%	36%	39%	53%	47%	45%
Inaccurate	58%	58%	57%	54%	59%	56%	64%	61%	47%	53%	55%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Weighted N	2,356	1,151	1,205	512	549	802	494	1,595	293	267	201

	Party ID				White Evangelical		Ideology		
	Total	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Yes	No	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Accurate	42%	73%	36%	20%	24%	46%	80%	40%	16%
Inaccurate	58%	27%	64%	80%	76%	54%	20%	60%	84%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Weighted N	2,356	742	778	591	447	1,907	586	1,010	745

	2016 Vote				Trump Supporter			
	Total	Clinton	Trump	Other	Trump Supporter	Support if deliver	Don't support but could	Do not support
Accurate	42%	80%	11%	39%	11%	18%	46%	68%
Inaccurate	58%	20%	89%	61%	89%	82%	54%	32%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Weighted N	2,356	626	598	73	484	497	373	992

Tables 11A and 11B of CBS News 2018 Battleground Tracker (CBS News 2018)

The dangerous mixture between populist rhetoric, lies, power and electoral support, is what makes Donald Trump's populism a threat to press freedom, which is one of the fundamental drivers of liberal democracy. But the erosion of the credibility of the press is not the only way Donald Trump threatens the freedom of the press. We have already seen how Jim Acosta was denied the entrance in the White House, or how Judge Naomi Reice Buchwald ruled⁴ that Trump blocking people on Twitter violates the First Amendment³ of the American Constitution. Moreover, according to some, there is another attack on the principle of freedom of expression enshrined in the First Amendment³: "Julian Assange's indictment aims at the heart of the First Amendment", the Editorial Board of The New York Times writes⁷. The founder of WikiLeaks Julian Assange has published tens of thousands of classified documents in 2010. In the view of the Department of Justice of the U.S. Government, the mother of all leaks is a violation of 1917 Espionage Act, which is now for the first time used against a journalist. "*It is a marked escalation in the effort to prosecute Mr. Assange, one that could have a chilling effect on American journalism as it has been practiced for generations*", the journalists of The New York Times think. The new charges against Julian Assange

focus on receiving and publishing classified material from a government source. That is something journalists do all the time. They did it with the Pentagon Papers and in countless other cases where the public benefited from learning what was going on behind closed doors, even though the sources may have acted illegally. This is what the First Amendment is designed to protect: the ability of publishers to provide the public with the truth. (The New York Times, 2019)

The reference to the Pentagon Papers judicial case is a good one. The Supreme Court's sentence on the case says that "*The Government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people*"⁸. Leaving aside the judiciary power, to go back to The New York Times's fourth power, the Editorial Board of the newspaper attack President Trump's "relentless campaign against the news media". They cite as example the repeated label of "enemy of the people", but stress the significance of this Assange indictment as a step forward "to strike at the very foundation of the free press in the United States".

3.2 LUIGI DI MAIO, THE 5SM AND ITALY'S SAD RECORDS

Donald Trump became president of the United States of America in 2016; less than two years later, another populist force gained governmental power, this time in a European State. It was the 5 Star Movement (5SM) in Italy, in the person of Luigi Di Maio. The 5SM signed a “contract” with the Lega, another populist party, to run the country together in a coalition government. While we do not refer to Trump’s Republican Party as a populist movement, we cannot say the same of Luigi Di Maio’s 5SM. Donald Trump, Luigi Di Maio and the 5SM all share the same populist rhetoric and communicative techniques that endanger the freedom of the press, such as anti-elitism, the reference to the “People” and the building of an “us versus them” rhetoric.

When Kriesi (2018) argued that populist parties do not represent a threat to liberal democracies (with proportional electoral systems) because populist challengers in power would always require a government coalition with mainstream parties, he did not take into consideration the possibility of an executive coalition between populist forces. This is the Italian case of the so-called yellow-green government, made by members of the populist right-wing Lega and the 5 Star Movement. I will focus the attention on the latter, which has been on the political scenario as a national populist force for more time than the Lega, which was until recently only a regional party and whose story would require much deeper study. At the beginning, the 5SM was a typical populist challenger. It presented itself as the voice of the Italian people, impotent vis-à-vis the political scandals that had shocked the country for years. Its aim was to cater the needs of the “losers” that were forgotten by the elites and that had lost their power to influence the decision-making process. They believed in direct online democracy, transparency, honesty and participation from below. After 2018 electoral turnout they officially became the first Italian party, and they formed a government with the Lega from June 2018: the political chief of the Movement was, at that time, Luigi Di Maio, who later became the Minister for Labour and Economic Development; Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega and master of far-right exclusionary populism, is now Home Affairs Minister.

3.2.1 The 5SM against the “fourth power”

The 5SM have always accused the media of spreading fake news. Such allegations reached a peak when one of the main exponents of the 5SMovement called the journalists “mercenaries” and “sluts”. The cut of the public funds on the publishing industry has always been one of the 5SM’s warhorses; once they gained power and formed a coalition government in 2018, the threats became concrete. We have already seen that Radio Radicale will close, but the story does not end here. In November 2018, the Movement launched the online campaign *#IoNonCiCasco* (You don’t fool me), based on the idea that the powerful lobbies that had been ruling the country for decades were controlling the “fourth power”, and thus the media were against

them trying to “de-legitimize” them. *“The problem with the press is that it is not doing disinterested free information, but it is delegitimizing a political force to meet the business and political interests of their publishers. The fourth power is the last one on which those defeated in the elections can count. And they exercise it brutally, for their own sake and to the detriment of the quality of information and citizens”*, they wrote on the official blog of the Movement. *“De-legitimization is the method used by authoritarian powers to take out their opponents (...) What saves us is the possibility offered by social media to speak directly with citizens and maintain a direct relationship with all of you”* (5 Star Movement, 2018). The corollary of this message is effectively delivered: do not trust mainstream media, they are biased; read about us on our channels, because we will tell you *the* truth.

The threat to the freedom of the press passes through the attacks on its credibility. If a politician you trust succeeds – and they do – in instilling suspicion towards the media, then you will rely on him and him only to gather information. One month later, Minister Di Maio got back on offense: *“We will make a gradual cut to publishing industry, our great battle. We will make a first cut of 25% in 2019 of funds for publishing, 50% in 2020 and 75% in 2021. Until in 2022 there will be no more funds for publishing, so that all newspapers can stay on the market and no longer suffer unfair competition because of some newspapers that take public money instead”* (HuffPost, 2018). According to the National Federation of the Italian Press and the Italian Order of Journalists this was *“yet another confirmation of the will of the 5 Star Movement to hit the information (...) They want to reduce the voices, weaken pluralism, in the illusion of eliminating the critical voices and manipulating the consent of the citizens”* (HuffPost, 2018). The fact that Di Maio struggles to abolish public subsidies to the press is also recognised as a threat to press freedom in a Report promoted by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2019).

3.2.2 Italy’s sad records

The 2018 Index on Censorship maintains that threats to the freedom of the press also appear in the form of defamation and discredit, which occur when media workers are publicly ridiculed, and psychological abuse, that consists of verbal harassment and offline bullying (Mapping Media Freedom, 2018). This report gives an account of political interference in European media freedom, stating that even in EU member states the commitment to personal or party agendas by some politicians is jeopardizing the public’s right of information. Demonising the media is an indirect way of political interference. *“The willingness to smear journalists or the outlets they report for, rather than debate the facts, in order to warp the public’s right to information is the true threat to media freedom in the EU”*; in Italy, for instance, *“journalists have been threatened with having their police protection removed”* (Mapping Media Freedom, 2018). The reference is to Lega’s leader Matteo Salvini’s threat *“to remove police protection for investigative journalist Roberto*

Saviano, despite the known threats to his life from criminal organisations” (Council of Europe, 2019). The propaganda campaign against the media fosters an environment of tension and distrust. *“Italy was the EU member state with the most reports categorised as physical assaults, with 83 incidents verified during the period covered”*, the report states, in reference to attacks on journalists (Mapping Media Freedom, 2018). *“In Italy, assaults are most often directed against journalists by private individuals who are part of the stories being covered”*. Furthermore, *“Italy’s journalists were intimidated most often, with 133 reports”* (Mapping Media Freedom, 2018).

Another meaningful document is the Annual Report 2019 developed by the Partner Organisations to the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists (Council of Europe, 2019). This study, too, confirms the scenario that *“press freedom clearly deteriorated in Italy in 2018: the number of violations in Italy reported to the Platform more than tripled compared to 2017”*: *“Italy is among the countries with the highest number of alerts posted on the Platform in 2018. Thirteen alerts focused on Italy, the same number as in the Russian Federation”*, the Report acknowledges (Council of Europe, 2019). As a consequence, Italy gains the first place among EU member state in this category. As for active threats, too, Italy has a primacy among the European member states, with a total of 19. Even if the Council of Europe’s report recognises that organised crime is one of the biggest threats to journalists in Italy, it also clarifies that *“the majority of alerts recorded in 2018 have been submitted after the official installation of the new coalition government on 1 June. The government’s two deputy prime ministers, Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini regularly express through social media rhetoric particularly hostile to the media and journalists”* (Council of Europe, 2019). All chickens come home to roost, in the end. Even if Italian populist movements never explicitly praise violence against the media, their belligerent messages fuel an environment that put in danger the freedom of the press, as proved by both aforementioned reports. The Italian Federation of Journalists’ Unions warns that *“media professionals now face a new threat in the country: a constant risk of violence fuelled by the hostile rhetoric of members of the government and the ruling coalition parties”* (Council of Europe, 2019).

Again, the problem is not just rhetorical. A recent scandal in European politics gives new life to something Europeans learned to be afraid of: the problem of Russian interference. Austria’s (former) vice chancellor and far-right party leader Heinz-Christian Strache has been forced to resign after a video showed him with a woman he thought to be the wealthy niece of a Russian oligarch. The two were in Ibiza, and the woman offered to buy 50% of shares of the “Kronen Zeitung newspaper”, to direct the editorial line in favour of Strache’s party. The former vice-chancellor did not reject the offer, and expressed the will to build a media landscape in Austria similar to that of Hungary, ruled by Viktor Orbán, another well-known populist actor.

Before the European elections on May 26th 2019, Strache, Orbán and Matteo Salvini were dreaming about building something together at the EU level. The Kremlin has denied having anything to do with the “Ibiza-gate”, but the outrage that made the Austrian government collapse is just the tip of an iceberg of inquiries, suspicions and proofs that link far-right movements to some sort of Russian interferences on European democracy. The willingness alone of far-right movements to plot with Russian personalities represents a threat to the freedom of the press and the proper functioning of the democratic process in Europe.

3.3 POPULISM AND THE PRESS: CHALLENGES and FAULTS

According to a media Trust Index in Europe (Statista, 2019), a survey on trust in the media in the EU 28 countries in 2017, 41% of Europeans tended to have medium trust in the media, while 38% had low or no trust in the media at all. Only the resulting 21% was found to have high trust in the media, such as television, radio, written press, the internet and social networks. The increasing distrust in the press cannot only be due to populist rhetoric. In fact, what populism do is fostering sentiments of social insecurity and feelings of betrayal that are already in the minds of the people. Media populism (*see 2.1.2*) is certainly one of the faults the press has in the success of populist movements and actors, but this is not the only factor that ought to be considered.

Newspapers and media channels are a means that citizens have at their disposal to be informed on what happens around them, but if they perceive the press as distant they will not rely on it for trustworthy information. Thus, the media have the duty to speak a language that readers can understand. Moreover, the environment of distrust is fuelled by the increasing spread of fake news, that find a suitable path of diffusion in social networks and internet in general. In the lemon market of internet news, whatever you read may or may not be a fake news, and readers sometimes do not have sufficient analytical tools to distinguish between the two. So, again, this is something the press must deal with. To fight back the allegations of being liars and partisan, the media have to be as objective and *super partes* as possible. They sometimes fail to do so, occasionally in good faith, but this automatically instils suspicion in some slices of the population. A biased “editorial line” creates a polarized population, and readers will easily avoid those pieces of news that they do not want to read because they perceive them as biased and not reliable.

3.3.1 The distance between the media and the public

The press is at the service of the people, but if the press speaks a language that the public does not understand, the democratic circuit shorts. The readers will not trust a piece of information they do not fully understand. This is a problem the media have to face. I have already stressed the tendency of populist actors to use social networks for a direct and simplified communication. Thus, the citizen has to choose between clear and fast messages in social networks, and long, articulated and complex articles in newspapers; they will most likely prefer simple pieces of information.

The press cannot ignore this. If unverified information is so easy to find – and it is – and until the political and legislative branches do not put limits to the spread of information on the internet – as they should –, the media must struggle to reach the attention and the mind of the public. Populist anti-elitist rhetoric pictures the media as entrenched in ivory towers that set them apart from the true needs and interests of the population. If the media wants to fight back the populist threat, they should succeed in turning this conception upside down. The media should become somewhat more popular, which is not a synonym of “populist”. Using simple words to briefly explain complex concepts is not an easy task, but if this cultural gap between the “intellectuals” and the public is not filled, the mainstream press will lose his role in safeguarding democracy.

I do not intend to mean that people are ignorant, and I will not cite data about functional illiteracy. I will not remind that “Specifically, in literacy, average scores ranged from 250 in Italy to 296 in Japan. The U.S. average score was 270, while the PIAAC international average was 273”⁹. The point is that populism and distrust in the press do not come out of nowhere; populist movements have gained great importance in democratic countries, too, which inevitably means that they cater the needs of more than few ignorant people. Part of the blame for the lack of trust in mainstream press must be put on the mainstream press, which has remained blind and deaf while the rest of the population was becoming angrier and less curious, while teenagers stopped reading books and adults gave up buying newspapers. They have probably lost any connection to some strata of the population, and they must now work to regain the attention of the masses.

3.3.2 The lemon market of the media

It is sometimes argued that people trust more what they read on social networks than what they see with their own eyes. Take, for instance, the example of Ebbw Vale, a small town in South Galles, that was given new life thanks to the funds of the European Union. The town is filled with signs that remind that Eu funds were invested in Wales. Nevertheless, in 2016, 62% of the inhabitants of Ebbw Vale voted in favour of Brexit. Why? Because Facebook told them to do so. Journalist Carole Cadwalladr from the “Observer” went there to study the case of Ebbw Vale. Talking with the people there, she realized that most of them voted to “Leave”

because the European Union had done nothing for them, and they were fed up with immigrants. “They said that they wanted to take back control, which was one of the slogans in the campaign”, Cadwalladr explains in a TEDtalk¹⁰. “And they told me that they were most fed up with the immigrants and with the refugees”, she adds. “Which was odd. Because walking around, I didn't meet any immigrants or refugees. I met one Polish woman who told me she was practically the only foreigner in town. And when I checked the figures, I discovered that Ebbw Vale actually has one of the lowest rates of immigration in the country”. Cadwalladr’s inquiry led to the breaking of the scandal of Cambridge Analytica.

Fake news and their potentially disruptive force are the issue of our time. Internet can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the web is a democratic public good, accessible to anyone in most countries. Internet has and continues to pave the way for the insurgence of important movements that change society for good. On the other, it is a mysterious entity. Few know how it works, and those who do are among the most powerful people in the world. How can users defend themselves, if one of the powerful wants to spread a piece of information on the internet? Distinguishing between verified news and fake news is complicated, and it will be even more so. This is an example of information asymmetry between buyer and seller, where buyers are the internet users and sellers are whoever utilize big data to spread information on the internet. When the goods traded are news, we could talk about a “Market for Lemons” in the media industry. The metaphor is borrowed from George Akerlof’s 1970 paper, where he shows the consequence of information asymmetry in a market filled with goods of different qualities.

Suppose that information is a car, and you need to buy it. The buyer knows nothing about cars, he only needs one, so he decides to trust you. The customer is unexperienced and has no tools to verify if what he will be told is right or wrong, the only thing he can do is rely on someone. This is how the information on the internet works. This is a recent issue, since before the advent of the web the buyer and the seller in the media industry were never alone: articles were written on newspapers that were read by anyone, not only by that one unexperienced buyer of news. So, spreading fake news was more difficult, because the whole country, or so, was watching. Now being informed is private. It happens between you and your device, and no one knows what your Facebook page will show you, or what ads your screen will be filled with. Thus, the risk for the unexperienced reader is to be targeted by some communication campaign, maybe paid for by some politician or other kinds of stakeholders, without knowing how to respond.

The distrust in the media grows when the unexperienced reader finds out about the risk of fake news. He probably feels that he would not be able to distinguish fake and real, and whatever he happens to read may be equally fake or real. When you do not know whom to trust, you tend to trust no one. Plus, the unexperienced reader is one of those forgotten by the mainstream press, by the “elites”, by trade unions and by the government. People often do not have time to read, verify, check and question what they find on their social feeds. That is the key. People “find” fake news, but they have to look for more elaborated and

documented pieces of information. And why should they, if, together with all the rest, social networks tell them that mainstream media, institutions and date are not reliable? According to 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, 76% of the respondents worry about false information or fake news being used as a weapon. The consequence of all this is that the unexperienced reader will choose to trust that one voice that speaks louder, simpler and that gives him a scapegoat. Populism, here it is. Thus, another challenge the press has to face is that against the fake news: the media must find a way to get out of the market for lemons.

3.3.3 Media bias

Populist rhetoric paints the media as partisan and biased. This is often referred to pieces of news that tell a story that populists do not like. But it is not always like this. Sometimes media are partisan due to a specific, sometimes paternalistic, editorial line that puts the journal in one position or another of a political debate. The concept of “Media bias” describes the tendency of journalists or news organizations to be affected by their own opinions when they report news, and this also influences the way they report it and the choice of what to report. We are used to left- or right-wing newspapers, but the distinction does not necessarily mean that journalists do not report checked and verified facts. Objectivity is almost impossible, but honesty is indispensable: this said, a slight right- or left-wing partisanship is part of the work of the journalist. But the problem in the post-truth era is that what matters is what seems, so if you “seem” leftist, for instance, it will be easy for populist actors to label you as “enemy”, or “fake news herald”. It is hard for a newspaper to be irreprehensible and unassailable when it is openly biased for one party or another.

In the United States of America media bias is a heated debate. Gallup and Knight Foundation’s 2017 Survey on “Perceived Accuracy And Bias In The News Media” shows that “*Americans believe the news media have a critical role to play in U.S. democracy but are not performing that role well. One of Americans’ chief concerns about media is bias, and Americans are much more likely to perceive bias in the news today than they were a generation ago*” (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2017). The results of the report present a picture of diffused distrust in the news media. The respondents to the survey, overall, think that 62% of the news they see on television, read in newspapers and hear on the radio is biased. This percentage grows when respondents are asked about news read on social media. Plus, Americans believe than 44% of news reporting is inaccurate, number that, again, increases when we talk of accuracy on social media.

The report also points out that when answering questions, Americans make little difference between bias and accuracy. Thus, those media perceived as biased are also perceived as inaccurate. This misperception creates a fertile soil for populist rhetoric that aims at blurring the line between “different” and “wrong”. “*To a large degree, bias and accuracy appear to be in the eye of the beholder, greatly influenced by whether one agrees with the ideological leaning of the news source. Americans’ perceptions of fairly*

widespread bias and inaccuracy in news may be unduly influenced by the bias they perceive from the ‘other side’ of the ideological spectrum rather than their own side”, the study considers. And the authors challenge the press, suggesting that “Counteracting perceptions of bias and inaccuracy may have a role to play in addressing the lack of trust in the news media and giving Americans more confidence in the media’s ability to carry out its democratic responsibilities” (Gallup/Knight Foundation, 2017).

In order not to give populism a reason to criticize it, the press should be as neutral as possible. But sometimes the work of journalist requires to give greater attention to some forces rather than others, for instance those that are in power or those that are mostly talked about at the international level. Partisanship, thus, is legitimate, but it is a double-edge sword in this era of populist rhetoric and anti-elitism sentiments.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I tried to give enough evidence that populism is a threat to democracy, rather than a school or a corrective tool of it. Despite the insistence on the goodness of direct democracy, typical of the populist rhetoric, in the end the populist outlook acts as the illness, not the cure, of democracy. In constitutional democratic systems the will of the people is not the end of the story. Direct democracy can play a role within liberal democracy, but it should be tamed by a system of checks and balances consisting in an equilibrium between different societal actors, under the roof of the separation of the four powers that ensure the smooth running of a democratic society: the judiciary, the executive, the legislative and the press.

When the will of the majority is the only thing to be satisfied, minorities are forgotten. Thus, in order to have a fair society that caters the needs of the majority and ensures equality among all citizens, direct democracy praised by the populists should not encroach upon the other elements that create a stable liberal democratic system. Picturing whatever is “not democratic” as illegitimate builds an environment of distrust in institutions, that will eventually prove unstable and unfair. The rhetoric against the “elite” press fits in this reasoning. The free press acts as a watchdog on all the other powers, and therefore it is a tool at the service of the people, whose interest is not to be manipulated by a charismatic political leader. This is the reason why the relationship between populism and the press is of great importance. Any political actor that instils suspicion towards the fourth power represents a threat to the freedom of the press, especially if such a political force gains power and wins the confidence of the public.

What is missing in this dissertation is a deeper account of the reality that press has to face in the 21st century. Further developments of the issue could put the relationship of populism and the press into the context of the so-called “post-truth” era, where internet breaks national and cultural barriers but also blurs the line between true and false. In a time where the individual has a private access technological to the world in his pocket, the devices work the other way around, too: people around the world have access to the pockets – and the minds – of anyone anywhere. This is an enormous power which our society has not learnt to shelter from. The issue of “fake news” is, no more and no less than terrorism and climate crisis, a global problem that must be addressed globally. The press must adopt the strongest commitment to truth, ever.

Another element with which this dissertation could be further developed is the individual psychological mechanisms that make the mass public so keen to believe in what populists praise. Irrational tendencies such as the confirmation bias, anchoring and other cognitive bias make it simpler for the populist to play with the minds of the people. The polarizing algorithms of social networks such as Facebook, the echo-chambers and the social “bubbles” detach users from reality and immerse them in their own system of beliefs. The press is in charge of informing the people, through technologies we enjoy nowadays – namely,

television, radio and the internet. The problem is that those people that should be informed are the same that do not believe in the trustworthiness of the press.

Finally, the more populist gain power, the more countries make steps backward in terms of human rights and civil attainments. How is that even possible – just after decades in which past generations have fought for the right to vote, abortion, divorce, equality, rights for minorities, peace and integration – that we are now regretting our value system? The British people wants to get rid of the European Union, American States are passing laws to make abortion almost impossible, the Italians face a resurgence of fascist nostalgia. Is history going back? What role does populism has in this, and what are the challenges that a free press must face? These are all questions that this dissertation has not approached, but they might be the focus of further work.

Notes

- 1: Freedom House's Report (2017), *Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy*, Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf

- 2: See *Science & Cocktails* (2017).

- 3: First Amendment (Amendment I) to the United States Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

- 4: *Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University v. Trump*, No. 1:17-cv-05205 (S.D.N.Y. May 23, 2018). Available at: <https://www.courtlistener.com/docket/6087955/72/knight-first-amendment-institute-at-columbia-university-v-trump/>

- 5: "These are findings from an Ipsos poll conducted August 3-6, 2018. For the survey, a sample of roughly 1,003 adults age 18+ from the continental U.S., Alaska and Hawaii was interviewed online in English. The sample includes 323 Democrats, 363 Republicans, and 207 Independents" (Ipsos, 2018)

- 6: "This CBS News 2018 Battleground Tracker was conducted by YouGov using a nationally representative sample of 2,420 U.S. adults between July 26-28, 2018. The margin of error (a 95 percent confidence interval) based upon the entire sample is approximately 2.5 percent." (CBS News, 2018)

- 7: "The editorial board represents the opinions of the board, its editor and the publisher" (New York Times, 2019)

- 8: Supreme Court's sentence on Pentagon Papers, *New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713, 714 (1971).

- 9: S. Department of Education, *STATS IN BRIEF* (2017) NCES 2018–007. Comparison of the results of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report (Goodman et al. 2013) with those of 2012 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018007.pdf>

- 10: TED2019, speech by British investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr: "Facebook's role in Brexit — and the threat to democracy". Available at:

https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy/transcript#t-102047

11: Quote from Winston Churchill's speech in the House of Commons (11 November 1947). Available at: https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill#column_206

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<https://rsf.org/en/news/media-freedom-us-under-threat-report-finds>

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Riassunto in italiano

Introduzione

L'obiettivo di questa tesi è dimostrare come il populismo rappresenti una minaccia per la democrazia liberale. Secondo alcuni, il populismo può essere considerato uno strumento correttivo per la democrazia, le cui istituzioni hanno perso il contatto con la popolazione. Secondo altri, il populismo non rappresenta una minaccia perché destinato a restare ai margini dei processi istituzionali. Tuttavia, negli ultimi anni il mondo ha assistito all'insurrezione di alcuni movimenti populistici che sono riusciti a vincere le elezioni e salire alla guida di governi, o hanno avuto successo nel determinare fenomeni politici destinati a cambiare l'assetto mondiale. Nel 2016 Donald Trump è diventato il quarantacinquesimo Presidente degli Stati Uniti d'America con una campagna elettorale incentrata su una retorica dai toni populistici e menzogneri. Nel 2017 il referendum sulla Brexit è stato vinto da coloro che caldeggiavano l'uscita dall'Unione Europea, con la campagna per il "Leave" promossa soprattutto da leader populistici e con l'aiuto ormai accertato della diffusione di notizie false tramite social network. Nel 2018, infine, le elezioni italiane sono state vinte da due partiti populistici che hanno formato un governo di coalizione. Questi tre fenomeni, i più palesi e importanti esempi di populismo in Occidente, rappresentano una minaccia alla libertà di stampa.

In questa tesi intendo dimostrare che il populismo è una minaccia per le democrazie liberali, concentrandomi sul rapporto tra il populismo e la stampa. Il ragionamento procede seguendo un sillogismo:

- La libertà di stampa è un requisito necessario per il funzionamento di una democrazia liberale;
- Il populismo minaccia la libertà di stampa;
- Quindi, il populismo minaccia la democrazia liberale.

Questa tesi prova la veridicità delle due premesse, in modo tale che anche la conclusione risulti, per forza di logica, esatta. Nel farlo, definire i concetti è un passaggio fondamentale. In primo luogo, non esiste una definizione unanime del concetto di "populismo": può essere considerato come un'ideologia, una strategia comunicativa, o un modello organizzativo. Il primo capitolo di questa tesi si concentra sulle definizioni, e dimostra che la prima premessa del sillogismo è esatta. Nel secondo capitolo il discorso si sposta specificatamente sulla relazione tra stampa e populismo, definito come una strategia comunicativa. In questo contesto, la seconda premessa del sillogismo si dimostrerà esatta. Alla fine del secondo capitolo, dunque, il sillogismo verrà dimostrato. Nel terzo capitolo passerò "dalla teoria alla pratica" portando i casi studio americano e italiano per dare esempi concreti di come partiti e leader populistici mettono a repentaglio la libertà di stampa e il suo ruolo di sorvegliante di un giusto processo democratico.

Capitolo 1: Definizioni

Il riemergere di partiti e movimenti definiti “populisti” ha spinto studiosi e osservatori a cercare di capire cosa è il populismo oggi, e come è riuscito a dominare la scena politica e mediatica dell’Occidente. Un punto su cui si trovano tutti concordi, è il motivo per cui il populismo sta avendo tanto successo. Partiti e personalità definite “populiste” sono riuscite a procacciarsi la fiducia di un elettorato sfibrato e disilluso dalla crisi dei partiti tradizionali. Le forze politiche non sono state in grado di rispondere adeguatamente alla crisi economica, alla globalizzazione, alle ineguaglianze, ai processi di integrazione transnazionali, ai flussi migratori, all’indebolirsi delle ideologie che hanno segnato il Novecento, alla crisi di valori che ne è conseguita, e agli episodi di corruzione delle classi dirigenti. Tutto ciò ha determinato un diffuso “malessere politico” e una profonda sfiducia nel sistema e nelle sue istituzioni, intercettate da forze politiche nuove, figlie della crisi di un sistema che ha dimenticato alcuni strati sociali. Nonostante le divergenze su cosa sia esattamente il populismo, e sulle varie sfumature attribuibili al termine, tre caratteristiche fondamentali sembrano essere fuor di dubbio: 1) un costante riferimento al “Popolo”, 2) una battaglia contro le “élite colpevoli”, e 3) la divisione della società in due gruppi, “loro” e “noi”. Per analizzare il rapporto tra populismo e stampa, ho ritenuto conveniente considerare il populismo come strategia comunicativa che mira a instaurare un contatto diretto con la popolazione, e a instillare una sempre più diffusa sfiducia negli organi di stampa. In questo modo si re-indirizza la fiducia del pubblico verso canali “ufficiali” del partito o dei suoi leader, che si presentano come portatori di salvezza dopo anni di inganni e bugie da parte delle classi dominanti.

Nella definizione di “élite colpevole” rientrano tutti quegli organi non direttamente eletti dal popolo, come se l’unica possibile forma di legittimazione fosse il consenso popolare. Anche la stampa, quindi, è additata come parte di quell’establishment che ha voltato le spalle ai cittadini. Dall’altra parte, però, il rapporto tra stampa e populismo riesce a essere tra i più fruttuosi e convenienti. La situazione è facilmente riassumibile con l’immagine di due lati della stessa moneta, dove la moneta è il rapporto tra stampa e populismo, e i due lati sono rispettivamente uno di collaborazione e uno di guerra aperta. Il rapporto collaborativo tra stampa e populistici vede i due attori aiutarsi a vicenda per aumentare la visibilità mediatica e incrementare il traffico online. L’altro lato della moneta, poi, vede i populistici accanirsi contro i giornali e i giornalisti, accusandoli di scrivere “fake news” e di essere “nemici del popolo”; per contro, alcuni giornali prendono apertamente posizione contro i partiti populistici. Creando questa consolidata dialettica mortificatrice e accusatoria nei confronti delle istituzioni tradizionali, i populistici riescono facilmente a screditare agli occhi delle masse chiunque li critichi o abbia posizioni diverse.

La definizione di democrazia liberale è fondamentale per capire perché il populismo, per quanto insista sulla bontà della democrazia diretta, resta una minaccia per la democrazia liberale. Secondo alcuni, il

populismo potrebbe essere addirittura considerato come “la forma più pura di democrazia”, in quanto una delle caratteristiche distintive del populismo sia l’elogio della democrazia diretta come cardine del processo decisionale di una società. Il fatto è che all’interno di una democrazia liberale si crea un equilibrio di controllo tra organi eletti e non eletti, con compiti diversi e complementari. In tale sistema gli organi eletti, come il potere legislativo, collaborano con il potere giudiziario e legislativo, controllandosi a vicenda, con Organizzazioni Non Governative, enti privati e indipendenti, movimenti sociali, associazioni e gruppi di interesse. In una società liberale la volontà della maggioranza è solo un tassello di un complesso puzzle che tutela anche le minoranze. La volontà del popolo, per come viene idolatrata dal pensiero populista, rischia di diventare una tirannia della maggioranza.

In questo equilibrio di poteri, la stampa gioca un ruolo fondamentale di controllo orizzontale. Una stampa libera inchioda gli organi ai propri doveri e informa i cittadini sui loro diritti. Pertanto, è un elemento fondamentale della democrazia liberale. Una stampa libera significa libertà di pensiero ed espressione, pluralismo nell’informazione e accesso a canali diversi tramite cui i cittadini possono formarsi un pensiero critico indipendente. I media assicurano che le istituzioni, i politici, i governanti, i potenti e chi prende le decisioni debba sempre rendere conto all’opinione pubblica. Perché i media svolgano la loro funzione di vigilante, devono essere credibili agli occhi dei più. Altrimenti, se perderanno la loro credibilità non avranno più nessun peso all’interno degli equilibri di una democrazia liberale. Un attacco alla credibilità dei media è un attacco alla loro libertà di agire come cani da guardia del potere. Secondo la definizione di democrazia liberale, la libertà di stampa è un requisito fondamentale per il corretto funzionamento di una società democratica.

Capitolo 2: Il populismo e la stampa, un “matrimonio di convenienza”

Per capire le ragioni e le condizioni che hanno portato a un così grande successo dei partiti e dei leader populistici, occorre analizzare anche i meccanismi mediatici che, oggi più che mai, determinano le dinamiche di comunicazione politica. Negli ultimi anni abbiamo assistito a una “mediatizzazione della politica”, un fenomeno che vede i comunicatori politici sottostare a logiche mediatiche di visibilità e commerciabilità. In questo senso, la stampa e la politica mediatizzata devono rispondere ai medesimi criteri, e da questa comunanza di interesse può nascere un’implicita collaborazione. Inoltre, parallelamente alla retorica anti-elitaria e di discredito degli organi di stampa, i leader populistici si pongono come alternativa ai canali di informazione ufficiali. Queste due linee d’azione contribuiscono in modo decisivo alla perdita di fiducia verso la stampa e ne minano la libertà. I social network giocano un ruolo chiave in questo processo. Attraverso i loro profili social, i leader populistici riescono a raggiungere direttamente e velocemente il lettore, diffondendo messaggi brevi e incisivi che colpiscono le menti degli utenti e li convincono di un’idea.

Slogan, frasi fatte e ritornelli sono alla base di una comunicazione populista, e si stampano nella memoria dell'utente molto più efficacemente dei lunghi e spesso complessi articoli di giornale. Insieme ad un populismo diffuso *attraverso* i media, si assiste a un fenomeno populista anche *da parte dei* media. I canali di informazione, oggi, devono rispondere a criteri di commerciabilità per poter vendere. Questo li pone sulla stessa linea di interesse dei comunicatori populistici: il risultato è una sorta di complicità tra alcuni organi di stampa, specialmente i cosiddetti “tabloid media”, e la retorica populista. I due fattori sopracitati costituiscono quello che potremmo chiamare un “matrimonio felice” tra populismo e stampa, che però funziona solo finché i due attori condividono lo stesso obiettivo: raggiungere più persone possibile, a prescindere dalla validità o veridicità del contenuto.

Quando, però, i giornali riportano fatti verificati che contraddicono la realtà semplificata dipinta dai populistici, la storia è ben diversa. A quel punto i mezzi di informazione diventano “fake news”, faziosi, di parte, nella retorica populista. In questo modo instillano nei cittadini un sentimento di sfiducia verso la stampa, così come verso le altre istituzioni “elitarie” non elette dal popolo e quindi, secondo i populistici, imposte dal sistema. Parte della definizione di populismo, infatti, contiene elementi di “anti-elitarismo”, solitamente rivolto verso i partiti tradizionali o le Organizzazioni Non-Governative. Le “élite”, che vengono presentate come colpevoli dei problemi del paese, comprendono il mondo accademico, gli intellettuali, gli esperti e chiunque ostacoli la tendenza del populismo a vendere soluzioni facili per problemi complessi. Il Presidente degli Stati Uniti Donald Trump si è spesso riferito alla stampa chiamandola “nemico del popolo”, e nel blog del Movimento 5 Stelle è stata lanciata una campagna contro i media che sarebbero al servizio delle élite corrotte. Sulla scia di questo argomento, i leader populistici suggeriscono che non conviene informarsi tramite la stampa, megafono delle classi dominanti, disposta a distorcere la realtà pur di delegittimare i cosiddetti populistici. Proponendo canali di informazione “paralleli”, tramite profili social personali o siti di partito, la retorica populista si presenta come propagandata come disinteressata e veritiera, e dunque valida alternativa ai canali di informazione ufficiali.

Lo studio di Paul D. Kenny (2019) è un'analisi sui governi di 86 paesi tra il 1980 e il 2014, nonché una dimostrazione empirica dell'associazione negativa tra governi definiti populistici e la libertà di stampa. Secondo Kenny, la libertà di stampa è minacciata non solo dai comportamenti “classici”, come violenza e persecuzioni contro i giornalisti, ma anche da “tecniche contemporanee”, come i troll di internet che possono manipolare e falsare un dibattito sui social. Tra le variabili dipendenti per misurare la libertà di stampa Kenny considera la censura del governo dei media e su internet, la pluralità di fonti di informazione, la persecuzione dei giornalisti (ad indicare non solo le minacce dirette, ma anche gli insulti), l'auto-censura dei media, e la libertà di espressione. La conclusione di Kenny è che “tutti i populistici riducono la libertà di stampa”.

Capitolo 3: Dalla teoria alla pratica: i casi studio di Donald Trump in America e Luigi di Maio in Italia, e le sfide della stampa

Secondo il Freedom House Report del 2017, il 2016 è stato l'undicesimo anno consecutivo di declino della libertà di stampa mondiale. Il 2016 è stato anche l'anno dell'elezione di Donald Trump a quarantacinquesimo Presidente degli Stati Uniti. Il Presidente Trump è uno degli esempi più lampanti e influenti dell'ostilità verso la stampa. Trump non si è mai fatto scrupoli a chiamare i giornalisti "nemici del popolo" o "fake news", riferendosi esplicitamente ai principali media americani. Inoltre, Trump fa uso estensivo dei social network, Twitter in particolare, per comunicare direttamente con i cittadini. Secondo Floyd Abrams, legale esperto del Primo Emendamento della Costituzione americana, quello a tutela della libertà di stampa e di espressione, l'applicazione del Primo Emendamento è ora più che mai fondamentale, per contrastare la rabbia del Presidente contro la stampa. E ancora, il professor Jay Rosen sostiene che il Presidente americano in carica non si interessi della differenza tra vero e falso, e che questo potrebbe portare il paese verso l'autoritarismo. È un fatto che il Presidente Trump menta. Alcuni giornalisti hanno calcolato che Trump avrebbe detto pubblicamente una cosa non vera ogni giorno per i primi quaranta giorni della sua presidenza. Il giornalista Daniel Dale ha addirittura sviluppato delle ricorrenze retoriche nei discorsi di Trump che possono fungere da segnali che si tratta di una bugia. Dale spiega che se il Presidente comincia una storia con una persona ignota che lo chiama "sir", o se sostiene di aver battuto un record, si tratta di una falsità; e se cita un qualche numero, probabilmente quel numero è in realtà più piccolo. Oltre al problema della confusione tra vero e falso, la stampa in America soffre di una crisi di credibilità. Secondo un'indagine condotta da Ipsos, la reputazione dei media è sotto attacco. Motivo di preoccupazione è la violenza verbale con cui il Presidente si rivolge ai media, compromettendone la capacità di svolgere il loro ruolo di inquisizione del potere. La retorica populista del Presidente contro la stampa, le bugie, il potere e il supporto elettorale, sono una ricetta velenosa per la libertà di stampa, elemento fondativo della democrazia liberale.

Meno di due anni dopo l'elezione di Donald Trump, in Italia vincevano le elezioni i due partiti populistici del panorama nazionale: il Movimento 5 Stelle e la Lega. I due hanno formato un governo di maggioranza dove i rispettivi leader, Luigi Di Maio e Matteo Salvini, sono diventati vicepremier e ministri. In questa tesi sono andata nel dettaglio solo del M5S, in quanto il secondo richiederebbe uno sforzo di analisi molto maggiore, per diversi motivi che qui non trovano spazio. Uno dei grandi cavalli di battaglia del Movimento 5 Stelle è sempre stata la campagna di sfiducia contro la stampa. Tra le loro promesse elettorali c'è sempre stata quella di tagliare i fondi pubblici ai giornali, e da quando sono al governo hanno già adottato dei provvedimenti che hanno determinato la chiusura di alcune emittenti. La guerra contro la stampa, però, si spinge oltre. Sono stati diversi gli esempi di insulti, tra cui appellativi di "pennivendoli" e

“puttane”, rivolti ai media da un esponente di spicco del Movimento. Nel novembre 2018, poi, a pochi mesi dall’insediamento del governo populista, è stata lanciata una campagna social sul blog ufficiale dei 5 Stelle, in cui si sostiene che le potenti lobby che hanno governato il paese per anni abbiano “le mani in pasta” anche nel quarto potere, la stampa, e lo utilizzino per delegittimare il Movimento. Diversi recenti studi e indicatori, mostrano come la libertà di stampa in Italia stia subendo una nuova ondata di minacce e violenze, anche a causa della violenta comunicazione politica nei suoi confronti.

La sfiducia nei confronti della stampa, però, non può essere solo colpa di una retorica politica violenta. Se negli anni è andata a crearsi una distanza tra i media tradizionali e il pubblico, distanza che i partiti populistici hanno saputo intercettare e sfruttare, deve essere anche colpa della stampa, che non ha saputo mantenere il contatto con i lettori, sempre più distratti da facili soluzioni informative comodamente disponibili sulla home di Facebook. Nell’epoca dei messaggi rapidi e del linguaggio semplice, la stampa non ha ancora trovato una soluzione per non perdere l’attenzione e l’interesse del pubblico di massa, che per sua natura non si fida di quello che non riesce a comprendere. Un’altra sfida che la stampa di oggi deve affrontare è il grande tema delle “fake news”. Per il lettore medio è difficile capire se una notizia è falsa o vera, tanto che viene a crearsi un “mercato dei limoni” di notizie che getta un’ombra di sospetto anche su quelle affidabili. Se poi qualche politico dice che qualche testata è “fake news”, è ancora più facile essere ingannati. I giornali e i canali ufficiali di informazione devono ancora trovare un modo di uscire da questo mercato di informazione asimmetrica. Infine, l’idea che la stampa sia di parte e aprioristicamente contro alcuni partiti, a volte è vera. In America viene chiamato “media bias”: è un fatto che alcuni giornali pecchino di faziosità quasi paternalistica. I giornalisti devono cercare di essere irreprensibili e inattaccabili, in modo tale da far risultare palesemente infondate le accuse populiste di diffondere bugie e di essere di parte.

Conclusione

In questa tesi ho cercato di dimostrare con fatti e dati che il populismo rappresenta una minaccia alla libertà di stampa, e quindi alla democrazia liberale. Tramite una retorica di delegittimazione di tutto ciò che non è direttamente eletto dal popolo, dipingendo organi indipendenti come marci e corrotti, il populismo mina i principi di separazione dei poteri che sono alla base del corretto funzionamento delle democrazie costituzionali. Ho voluto trasmettere l’idea che la sfiducia nel sistema non è solo colpa della retorica populista, che si fa portavoce di un sentimento di malessere sociale già diffuso per altri motivi. La divisione sempre più marcata della società è dovuta anche a un fallimento dei partiti tradizionali nel comprendere i bisogni delle classi “dimenticate”, di dinamiche sociali e politiche sempre più dettate da logiche commerciali, di un ruolo progressivamente maggiore di internet e dei social network che polarizza l’opinione comune, e di altri fattori che hanno delegittimato agli occhi delle masse la bontà del sistema.

Ulteriori sviluppi di questa tesi possono concentrarsi sulla deriva sempre più autoritaria ed escludente del populismo, che arriva a minacciare non solo la libertà di stampa ed espressione, ma anche altri diritti politici, civili, e infine umani. Maggiore attenzione e tempo potranno essere dedicati a un'analisi delle dinamiche da social network e nel loro impatto sull'opinione pubblica, con un excursus sui cosiddetti “errori cognitivi” insiti nella mente umana che accentuano la polarizzazione sociale. Bisognerà render conto dei motivi per cui la società occidentale sembra tornare indietro nella storia delle conquiste civili e politiche, con leggi che rendono quasi impossibile l'aborto in America, ad esempio, o il ripresentarsi di nostalgie fasciste in Italia, e quale ruolo abbia il populismo in questi sviluppi anacronistici.