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**Populisms, Media, and the public sphere:
Undermining Western Democracy in a Post-Truth Era**

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Introduction

“A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of populism. (Dubiel 1986)” The phrase is an allusion to the opening phrase of the Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who announced the revolutionary force of communism. Dating back to the end of the 19th century, populisms initially emphasized the interests and needs of ordinary people and opposed the monopoly of elite interests. Over time, populisms have taken on diverse faces in different social and political contexts. Take Italy's Five Star Movement as an example, this populist politics have attracted a wide range of supporters through direct democracy. In this context, populisms are often combined with issues such as anti-globalization, anti-immigration, and nationalism to attract people who feel marginalized by the globalization process by emphasizing national sovereignty and national identity. In 2018, the Five Star Movement and the far-right Northern League formed a coalition and Giuseppe Conte became the Prime Minister of Italy. This incident marked a breakthrough for populist politics in Italian politics, and more and more such breakthrough trends are appearing in countries around the world (Pirro 2018). Trump, a populist leader with great personal charisma, won the presidency in 2017 in the United States by promoting the Make America Great Again campaign. In the UK, during the Brexit referendum, evidence shows that populist rhetoric used the negative sentiment. This sentiment was about the backlash against global trade in the UK. It blamed the UK's economic problems on EU policies and international elites. At the same time, it has also fueled far-right movements and rhetoric in the UK and internationally (Bonikowski 2016).

As seen in this era, nationalist rhetoric is running rampant in Western democracies. Political parties have added simple distinctions between "us" and "them" to their policies. This has made the already vague definition of populisms even harder to measure. But there is no denying that the number of populist politics in Western democracies is growing exponentially. In the "post-truth era," individual populist politicians' statements on Twitter, Facebook, and other media are more likely to be echoed than in the past. So, what is the "post-truth era"? How does it differ from

traditional ideal theories of the media public sphere and democracy? How can populist politics capitalize on the post-truth era? What are the specific challenges to Western democracy?

Seeing the different definitions of "post-truth era", "populisms" and "public sphere", the author is interested in the history of their development and their mutual influences. Therefore, this thesis is based on literature review to analyze how the different definitions are applied in the present. Its contribution lies in bringing together three distinct bodies of social science research namely on a) media and public sphere; b) post-truth; c) populisms.

Chapter 1 "Theory"

1.1 Conventional theories: what is the role of media for the functioning of democracy.

Before discussing the influence of news media on politics, this paper seeks to clarify where this influence occurs, the concept of the 'public sphere'. Along with the changing times and media forms, scholars have slightly different definitions of the public sphere (Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023). This section will focus on Jürgen Habermas's original definition and Hannah Arendt's use of "public sphere".

Although Arendt developed her concept of the "public sphere" before Habermas, the original clear definition of the concept comes from Habermas. In the words of Habermas, the "public sphere" is a crucial area of our social lives in which individuals can freely express themselves and develop public opinion without fear of retaliation. He emphasizes that this sphere is characterized by the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association, as well as the freedom to express and publish opinions, which are fundamental to the functioning of a democratic society (Habermas, Lennox, and

Lennox 1974, 49). In this realm, politicians are compelled to respond to the sentiments and demands of public opinion, thereby ensuring that democratic governance remains accountable and reflective of the people's will (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974, 49) .

In Habermas's theory of the "public sphere", two distinctive features have to be noticed. First, the public sphere is defined by the availability and consistency of public information, which is essential for informed public debate and opinion formation. Second, as Peter Hohendahl points out in a footnote, there is a clear distinction between the state and the public sphere. The public sphere is a non-governmental space where opinions are expressed (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974, 50). This spatial separation is crucial because it represents the ability of the public sphere, through the influence of media opinion, to check and balance rights in another sphere. This means that the public sphere as proposed by Habermas is able to balance the political sphere through political participation thus guaranteeing the functioning of democracy.

As Habermas describes it, the public sphere is intrinsically linked to the health of democracy. The free exchange of ideas and the ability of citizens to shape public opinion make the democratic process vibrant. They also make it better at responding to the needs and aspirations of the population. This interplay between the public sphere and democracy underscores the importance of maintaining and nurturing spaces where open dialogue can take place without undue influence from the state or private interests. However, Habermas's theory receives the influence of Max Weber for a description of the public sphere and its role in democracy that is used to theories. With the blurring of the boundaries of the public sphere in reality, the discrepancy between theoretical descriptions of the 'public sphere' and the real democratic process has become more pronounced. This paper therefore turns its attention to Hannah Arendt's previous use of "public sphere" before Habermas.

Although Hannah Arendt did not explicitly define "public sphere", her use of the concept of "public sphere" is well worth studying. In her book "The Human Condition", the public sphere is described as a space in which individuals come together, "show up"

for each other, and engage in actions that are visible and meaningful to the collective (Arendt 2018, 68–72). Arendt splits the public and private spheres. She stresses their dual opposition and complementarity (Salikov 2018, 62). Alexey Salikov notes in a paper that Arendt's public realm is more like "an intersubjective space where people "appear" to each other" and "appear" in the public sphere. What is more importantly, she values the political activity of each individual within the public sphere (Salikov 2018, 92). Contrary to Habermas, Arendt's public sphere emphasizes the dual opposition and complementarity with the private sphere. Habermas's public sphere is dominated by the "weak public". It can think rationally, but only briefly affects politics with opinions. So, here political influence can only be achieved through public opinion. Therefore, the political influence of Habermas's public sphere is weak and limited. In comparison, Arendt's public sphere is composed of a "powerful public" because her public sphere is a place where the public expresses their opinions and engages in political participation. For Arendt's public sphere, political public discourse is not just a rational perspective. It is also aesthetic, self-presentational and emotional (Salikov 2018, 93). Thus, given the political nature of the public sphere and, as Arendt points out, the political expression of individuals within it, public opinion builds up the initial forms of news media within this sphere and influences the regulation of policy implementation. For Arendt, this is a necessary fourth power in Western democracy.

At the same time, the existence of the media helps to construct the legitimacy of hegemonic rule. In the process of hegemony trying to satisfy this legitimacy, democratic institutions are formed. For Antonio Francesco Gramsci, hegemony, that is, the dominance of one social group over another, needs to be consolidated and reinforced through ideology (Femia 1987). In the public sphere, the institution that can exercise this kind of cultural control is the media. Especially in today's ever-changing world, we have seen the rise of numerous political party networks and government platforms. These organizations are crucial for people to engage in the political process. The information disseminated by the news media is effective enough to directly influence political parties. This is why the author of this article believes that Arendt's "strong

public” theory is more relevant now that Western news platforms are quite influential.

In fact, strong public participation in politics in the public sphere is a good thing for Western democracy. But this also raises many questions. As Arendt notes the diversity of the public sphere and the political aspects it embodies, she is also concerned that these qualities of the public sphere may pose a crisis for contemporary democracy. She refers to this political situation as "Dark times" (LeJeune 2018, 63). According to Alexey Salikov, Arendt stated in 1968 that "speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding the political sphere, is a political crisis that under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrades all truth to meaningless triviality" (Salikov 2018, 92-93). Arendt is thus concerned with the vacuum of meaning in the public sphere, the space left for "demagogues" to flourish, and the fragility of a free press (LeJeune 2018, 64). In light of Arendt's observations, it is crucial to examine the qualities of the present age and how contemporary democracies are specifically endangered within the public sphere. Manifesting as a reflection of Arendt's "Dark times", the "post-truth era" that we currently inhabit possesses its own distinct characteristics, exacerbating the crisis of truth and democracy. So, what are the specific qualities of the present age? How, in the public sphere, are contemporary democracies specifically at risk? As a manifestation of the "Dark times", the "post-truth era" we are living in now has its own more salient qualities, posing a crisis for truth as well as for democracy. In order to further analyze the characteristics of the current era and answer the above questions, the next subsection will provide a definition of the "post-truth era" for the purposes of this paper, as well as the characteristics of the era.

1.2 Post-truth era definition and characters

The term "post-truth era" first appeared in 1985. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition means "occurring after or caused by the disclosure of the truth." By 1992, the dictionary gave the paraphrase "Originally U.S. Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political

debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." At the same time the dictionary emphasizes the role of social media plays in the era and the third category of ambiguous statements other than truth and lies ('Post-Truth, Adj. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary' 2024) . From this definition, it can be seen that post-truth utilizes the public sphere, led by social media, as a space for political discourse. This is similar to Arendt's view mentioned above. Therefore, in the following chapter, we will consider the public sphere's "dark times" mentioned by Arendt and focus on analyzing the features of the "post-truth era" that infringe on the truth.

First, in the post-truth era, the character of the "public sphere", once defined by Habermas as a place of rational discourse and limited political participation, has shifted. Public opinion, which has traditionally emphasized factual truth and discursive logic, is gradually succumbing to the role of emotional journalism in shaping public opinion and forms of political participation. Because people are now more connected to media platforms than in the past, emotional responses are more easily triggered and often take precedence over factual accuracy. Indeed, emotion, as an essential part of news communication, is itself necessarily present in the processing of information expression. But as Charlie Beckett and Mark Deuze suggest, Emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed (Beckett and Deuze 2016). Technological advances have facilitated this change, with the media becoming the primary vehicle for information in a context where the phantomization of social life has led to a high reliance on mobile devices and social media networks. These platforms have effectively become the new arena where information is not only disseminated but also curated to elicit an emotional response from the audience. In Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, humans are born with the need for emotional belonging (Maslow 1954, 97–105). In social media interactions, messages are crafted to seek approval or validation from peers. This mechanism of approval is usually visible through likes, shares and comments, further reinforcing the importance of emotional expression and empathy in the digital age. As individuals express their personalized

views and seek out like-minded individuals, the line between personal beliefs and collective emotions becomes blurred and emotional empathy often takes center stage (Lee et al. 2020).

Therefore, it is very easy for individuals to express their personalized opinions that show their characteristics and positions, and to find peers through the media. Similarly, along with the increased prominence of emotional values in public opinion, media opinion can simultaneously influence emotions. For example, users on social media often contribute content and expect others to recognize it by liking it or similar. In the absence of positive feedback, users may not only feel a lack of emotional value, but may also question their own social status, exacerbating their feelings of inferiority and other negative emotions (Lee et al. 2020). These interactions exist not only in the daily lives of the public, but also within the political sphere. Even though the category of emotional journalism exists, and many scholars have begun to focus on the expression of emotion as the core of engagement, the negative impact of emotion on the contemporary political information environment in the post-truth era needs to be emphasized (Weeks 2020).

More notably, fake news is still driven in this era, even if it is found to be fake. Arendt's "dark times" has one thing in common: a vacuum of meaning (LeJeune 2018, 63). Marginalized individuals are constantly searching for meaning. On this basis, lying, which has the same ability to change facts as "action," can easily fill the needs of individuals searching for meaning. At the same time, the production of false information can generate value far beyond the information itself. Considering the self-fulfilling prophecy, the fact that the disinformation is discovered in time does not change the reality of what has already been disseminated. Suppose a voter fabricates information on the Internet about a campaigner's vote fraud, it will be questioned and discussed by all parties. Even though this is a false news, the event itself has already been discussed through the presentation of false information, thus gaining more substance. Whether the statement is true or not, more people will join in the conversation about "vote fraud" and the reputation of the candidate will be tarnished.

In the post-truth era, the spread of this discussion has become even more rapid due to the convenience of media platforms. Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison in "Social Networking Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship" highlighted the role of these platforms in shaping the information landscape (Boyd and Ellison 2007). In addition, Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral concluded from a quantitative analysis of the difference in the speed of dissemination of true and false information on social media that false news has the property of spreading faster and more widely than true news due to a combination of factors such as novelty and the emotional response mentioned above (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). It is easy to tell, fake news is far more widespread and effective in the post-truth era, where different positions are expressed, than at any time before.

Thirdly, the media has been eroded by economic capital and heavily commercialized, and public trust in news and information has diminished. Johnson points out that in order to attract more advertisements and capital investment, media organizations often tend to actively cater to the interests of capitalists and advertisers, while neglecting the public interest and social responsibility (Wilding and Fray 2018). At the same time, due to the commercialized environment in the public sphere in the post-truth era, media reports have received more capital influences, which passively weaken their independence and objectivity. This commercialization leads to bias and distortion in news reporting, which seriously affects the public's trust in information.

Finally, in the post-truth era, the identities of media organizations and their original individual audiences are changing. Since the truthfulness of news reports depends on "inter-subjective consensus", the position of media organizations as "safety valves" in the flow of information is weakening. Censorship, which was responsible for constructing 'normativity', has lost its authority in this era and has become more of a mere platform disseminator (Michailidou and Trenz 2021, 1341–47). The private sphere is dominated by information from a wider field. Media platforms and in the private sphere, individuals can become part of the process of disseminating information that shapes the truth (LeJeune 2018). As a result, the boundaries between the private

and public spheres often become blurred and challenge the credibility of the media professional sphere. In such contextual conditions, there is also a growing polarization of discourse on media platforms.

Chapter 2 Populisms and the phenomenon

2.1 What is “Populisms”

First of all, what is “Populisms”? Do populisms have different performances and roles within the political activities of multiple political parties in different countries? Considering that the spread of “Populism” doesn’t only exist in the populist political parties, but also more widely in the personal expressions of different politicians and the other parties’ political narratives. At the same time, the spread of “Populism” has different characteristics under subdivisions, such as “Nationalist Populism”, “Economic Populism” and so on. Therefore, to avoid the bias in the following chapters, this thesis will use plural forms of nouns, such as “populist politics” to refer to the meanings of “populisms” with different political tendencies instead of simply “populism”. On this basis, this article hopes to expand this concept to all political activities with the characteristics of “Populism” by studying the following characteristics of “Populisms”.

“Populisms” have different definitions, but these different populist politics all share the same characteristics. This article tends to Mudde’s view that populism is an extreme ideology. It divides society into “the elite” and “the people”, where “the elite” are corruption and self-interest and “the people” are pure and clean (Mudde 2004, 556–57). Therefore, for populisms, "elites" and "people" are irreconcilable polar opposites, and the so-called "elite politics" is political activity that relies on suppressing the expression of the general will of the people. The so-called "politics of the elite" is a political activity that relies on the suppression of the expression of the general will of the people (*volonté générale*) (Mudde 2004, 556–57).

Although Populisms present elitism and pluralism as opposites to popular politics, the populist parties still join political activity as a kind of elites in reality. Considering Populism is only a ‘thin-centred ideology’ (Mudde 2004, 557–59), it can be very easily combined with the other ideologies, including nationalism, socialism and so on. This article also believes this can be seen as one of the reasons that populist policies are so normal nowadays. The performance of this in reality is the use of populist approaches in the political activities of several parties, even if they are not populist parties themselves. Such as Spain's Podemos party, an emerging left-wing populist party, continues to grow as a blend of socialist views. Its political programme emphasises social equality, opposition to economic injustice and strict regulation of the financial sector. Its democratic participation and political reforms also attest to its socialist philosophy (Sola and Rendueles 2017).

However, along with these increasing amount of political activities, the western democracy has met up with some bigger challenges. The discursive explanation of this point will be discussed in the next section, but before that, this paper wishes to address one more question. Why is the number of Populisms growing as never before? What kind of role does the media in the post-truth era play?

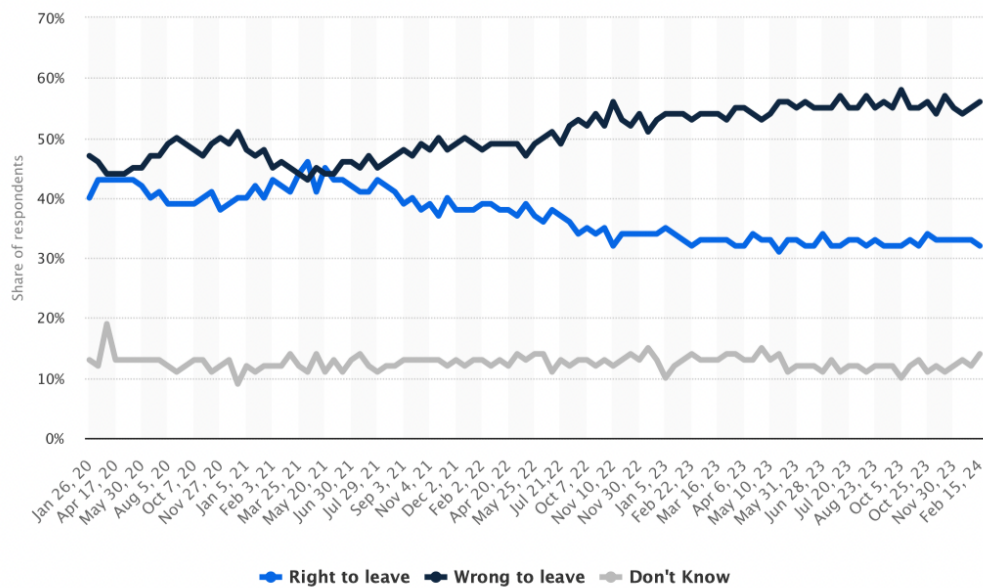
2.2 Phenomena and Uses

2.2.1 Populist exploitation of emotions and fake news in the post-truth era

To further illustrate this point, this paper wishes to get back to the different definitions of Populisms, which are the demagogic and opportunistic character. An interpretation of populist politics is *Stammtisch* politics, with conflict as its core (Muller 2016), a highly emotional and simplistic discourse directed at people’s “institutions” (Mudde 2004, 559). Therefore, populisms are very good at using the emotion emerged from the conflicts within the times of crisis in order to gain public support for a populist policy.

While the characteristics of the post-truth are getting more pronounced, the journalism media’s political features within the public sphere are also been influenced. In the public sphere, the public’s opinions are getting closer to the two polars, where the polarizing rhetoric is growing. According to the “In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the European Union?” (‘Brexit Poll 2024’ 2020), the amount of people who attended to vote didn’t change, but among the participants, the trend of polarized views has gradually increased over time.

Figure 1 In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the European Union? (‘Brexit Poll 2024’ 2020)



Details: United Kingdom (Great Britain); YouGov; February 14-15, 2024; 2,030 respondents; 18 years and older; GB Adults

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This polarizing tendency of the public opinions corresponds to the need for the development of populisms. Populisms tend to find the common “enemies” between the most privileged groups, which is usually the populist parties themselves, and the most vulnerable groups, such as the people who suffering from hunger, refugees, and cultural minorities (Muller 2016). This paper believes that populist politicians are not concerned with the specific location of extremist views or the specific content of the conflict, but rather focuses on the negative emotions such as anger, terrify which derived from the

conflicts. And it tends to make use of these negative emotions to increase the supporting group of itself. The negative emotions that populisms can benefit from here are centred on the state anxiety caused by 'anger' and 'fear' (Sadurski 2022). In order to extend the understanding to the populisms' way of using these emotions in the post-truth era, the following section will focus on concrete examples that illustrate the rise of these emotional currents and the public sentiments they encapsulate in the public sphere. By examining specific instances, this thesis aims at better analysing the emerging emotions and how they represent the public demand.

At the beginning, this article focuses on the source of this kind of state anxiety. There are three main theories to analyse the reasons for the rise of populist politics: the culture conflict theory, the rich-poor divide theory, and the systemic flaw theory (Jiang 2019). I personally believe among them, the first two can well explain the state anxiety caused by "anger" and "fear".

From the perspective of culture conflict theory, Jiang Rui is concerned that Ronald Inglehart, as a representative of this theory, pointed out that in the Western countries where life was affluent after the Second World War, the current generation, which did not lack material resources, valued more the sense of identity in terms of values. This has risen public normal anxiety about the state of affairs in a globalised environment where cultural integration and the influx of immigrants are eroding familiar living environments. It can be assumed that in this case, the social anxiety will fuel by the growing visibility of immigration and international news. Here, "Filter bubbles" come into play.

"Filter bubbles", personalised online environments tailored by algorithms, have the potential to unconsciously filter out narratives that demonstrate the positive outcomes of cultural integration. According to a review of Eli Pariser's book "The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You", written by Samuels, Mark Gregory: "filter bubbles" incubate on social media and can lead to polarisation and homogenisation of worldviews, exacerbating existing prejudices and anxieties. Among other things, Pariser mentions prejudices and anxieties about cultural change and

immigration-related prejudices and anxieties (Samuels 2012). Thus, the subliminal outcomes of successful cultural co-existence on reality do not reach the anxieties of self-perceived minorities, and thus do not effectively challenge deep-seated anxieties about cultural encroachment. Such selective exposure to information can create fertile ground for populist and nationalist sentiments to take root and find a willing audience.

Besides, Populisms can easily combine with nationalism in this environment and find its own audience base. With the UK's departure from the European Union, the awkwardness of "English" as the "foreign" language of the EU is becoming increasingly apparent (Moreno-Tenero, Weber, and Ginsburgh 2018). At the same time, discontent in Italy is growing due to immigration and the domination of the labour market by people of other nationalities in the EU. A part of the Italian public is dominated in its political choices by the state of anxiety caused by the clash of cultures. Faced with this situation, an article in euronews in April 2023 mentioned that Prime Minister Giorgio Meloni's right-wing government has proposed a new bill that would punish the use of English and other foreign words in official communications with the Italian government with fines of between 5,000 and 100,000 euros. As the leader of a right-wing populist party, Giorgio Meloni capitalised on the anxieties of groups upholding traditional values, taking advantage of the highly emotional nature of the post-truth era to introduce the decree and gain more support for populist politics ('Ciao, non hello! L'Italia bandisce le parole inglesi con multe salate' 2023).

At the same time, the anger and fear towards the "invasion" of the foreign culture is reflected in the cultural recognition of the individual and the group (Sadurski 2022, 17–47). Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory states that individuals who perceive their views to be in the minority will avoid sharing them in public due to fear of social isolation or strong opposition (Griffin 2022, 372–81). The individual will try their best to avoid the conflict between their own opinions and the mainstream political opinions in the public sphere, and they will even avoid telling their family and friends their political position because of fear. These are more frequent especially in those areas of intense political polarization or violent conflict where strong emotions

are present. They may choose to keep silent since they are afraid of provoking reprisals. “Silence” as one of the characters of post-truth era enhances the populist-driven rhetoric. When the public media is enlarging the voice from most of the people, the silence of minority views creates a further self-reinforcing spiral, which will make the others believe, this kind of opinions are rarer than the reality (Griffin 2022, 372–81). In the European refugee crisis, the policy has already shifted from a generous refuge policy to a strict one, and which always accompanied by respondents in favor of generous tolerance being more cautious about expressing their views on perception (Johansson 2018, 59–65). As a result, populist parties were able to capitalize on this by harvesting more superficial supporters when enacting their own extreme policies and cutting down on negative expressions in society. (Johansson 2018, 75–77)

2.2.2 Populisms and Economic Policies

From the point of view of the theory of polarization between the rich and the poor, the economic crisis and its instability have led to a sense of insecurity and tension among the lower classes, and even the positive sentiments associated with the results of economic development have created the conditions for populist politicians (Jiang 2019). In terms of populisms economic policy, populist political parties always tend to some neo-liberal policies, such as a low taxation and limited regulation when facing to the economy. But meanwhile, they doubt the free trade (Velasco 2020, 21-23). For some highly developed Western capitalist countries, such as the United States, the deterioration of resource distribution and the growing social disparities caused by income differences are exacerbating the popular psychology of inequality. By contrast, within economically stagnant as well as backward capitalist countries, the public is also susceptible to such sentiments in comparison to developed countries. Because of the post-truth era, the public is more easily to ignore the difference between the “real income” and “nominal income”, and the value of the additional benefits they receive from other governments. Therefore, when populist political parties emphasize the localization orientation of resources’ redistribution and the restriction of foreign

companies to reduce the outflow of capital in their economic policy, they will gain more support. Of course, this kind of policy can gain the positive outcome in some countries. According to Feldmann Magnus and Popa Mircea's study, Poland once proposed and enacted measures against foreign banks and supermarkets, including strengthening domestic ownership of the banking sector and promoting a stronger local business class attempt to reduce externalization and move away from middle incomes (Feldmann and Popa 2022, 235–37). This policy helped Poland's economy grow stably. Later, the spread of this simple fact helped Poland's populist government get re-elected. But they also benefited from the fact that in the post-truth era, the emotional value has overridden the need for factual scrutiny, the people did not notice that these policies would lead to growing redistributive expectations from their broad group of supporters and narrowly defined business interests, and thus to lower economic efficiency in the long-run benefit curve (Feldmann and Popa 2022, 235–37).

What is more noteworthy is that populist parties have been able to win the hearts and minds of their lower- and middle-class target voters even when their economic policies have not been received good feedback and have even worsened the country's economic situation. This is because they capitalize on the need for "identity" (Velasco 2020, 21–23). The post-truth era can satisfy populisms' own demand for political purity, which claims that all politics begins with "us", who present themselves as the expression of the people's interests and "them", who are the corrupt elites (Muller 2016). Such simplified formulations can circumvent the loss of support groups for taking a clear position in a conflict and rationalize all political behavior of populist parties

The interactive nature of social media shapes the environment for populist demands in two ways. First, interactivity amplifies the transmission of this "status anxiety" as an externality, exacerbating collective identity concerns. Digital media, such as social media, provide more opportunities for users to participate and interact with each other, thus joining the process of information creation and transmission. The process of increasing the platforms for individuals to express themselves and participate in the community further contributes to the situation of collective identity. (Sundar and

Limperos 2013) By analyzing the communication of Brexit supporters on social media platforms like Twitter during the EU referendum, in 2014, Kirsten Mogensen found out that the strategic use of hashtag slogans such as "Take Back Control" significantly contributed to the cohesion and connectedness among individuals and communities sharing the same political stance (Mogensen 2014, 191–94). Furthermore, Mogensen discovered that the interactivity of digital media can exacerbate the sense of disenfranchisement felt by the public (Mogensen 2014, 191–94). The public's expression of political opinions in digital media and the identification that comes with a collective identity can alleviate their disappointment at the decline of democracy and the loss of political speech rights during their use of digital media. However, in contrast to realpolitik, their emotions such as anxiety and anger are further amplified. At this point, this group of individuals who perceive that the collective has been marginalized and neglected in many ways, including economically and culturally and politically, are in desperate need of a political representative who can fight for their rights to be reclaimed.

2.2.3 Populisms and Leadership

To further discovering the moral logic of populisms, this paper finds that its role is not only useful in explain the failed policies, but also in shaping the personal image of populist party leader (Muller 2016). Muller's study has emphasized the importance of populisms inner logic in developing its evolution in the digital era. Making use of the digital media and platform-based features of the post-truth era, populist politicians are able to reinforce its internal political-moral logic and further weaken the boundaries between the public and private spheres (LeJeune 2018). This paper argues that populisms can promote the invasion of the private sphere through the blurring of boundaries, thus fueling individuals' 'status anxiety' and generating more trust in trusted populist leaders. Max Weber distinguishes between three types of authority: traditional authority, legitimate authority, and charismatic authority. Although charismatic leadership is different from populist leadership, there are important similarities between

the two (Muller 2016). Taking Trump as an example, he always uses Twitter or the other digital media platform to announce his pure and unified political context with the people by emphasizing what he called “the people of US” and the idea of “constructive change”. In his tweets and speeches, there are always existing a strong “us” emotional expression, which can make his supporter as a part of the process of building a common and pure political moral order with Trump. At the same time, through the negative description of “they”, mainstream media control and his political opponents, Trump subtly inspires a sense of identification with the “pure people”, thus solidifying his political position in digital media.

Considering the supply of populist politicians, which centers on the ability of political parties to communicate anger and emotion in ways that resonate with a disaffected public. The language is distinctive when populist leaders speak directly to the people, such as Charles de Gaulle, William Churchill, or Teddy Roosevelt. Each leader has his or her own unique characteristics, whether great or not, but all have a high degree of consistency in "strong". There are positive emotions for "us" and negative emotions for "them". The "emotional" accusations against the elite and the rest of the "mainstream" are obvious (Sadurski 2022). Digital media, and especially social media, are an excellent tool to promote such sentiments to bring populist leaders closer to their supporters. After analyzing Donald Trump's social media communication strategy between July 1, 2018, and July 1, 2019, Taseñte and Rus found that his posts on Twitter, Facebook, and Facebook elicited the highest level of audience engagement in posts that elicited reactions such as love, sadness, and anger. Whereas the content of the posts with the highest audience response centered on satirizing opposition politicians, praising his own government policies (Taseñte and Rus 2019).

During the process of forming their personal identity of populist leader, except for enlarging emotions and finding their positions, a more convenient way which is ‘Lies’ is needed. All these analysis above are started from the first definitional description of populisms, focusing on how emotions in the post-truth era have helped its development. Moving on this paper will focus further on the second interpretation of populist politics.

In this second interpretation, populist politicians are used to describe opportunistic policies that wish to please the people quickly and "buy" their support, rather than allowing them to rationally search for the "best option" (Mudde 2004). Lies, therefore, have become the favored method of populist politics.

“Populisms rely on lies.” (Sadurski 2022) First of all, populisms are very good at telling stories through making lies. They have found there are often no consequences when politicians are caught not telling the truth. Therefore, the truth in the post-truth era is gradually losing its "symbolic authority" (Newman 2023). Considering Donald Trump who is widely recognized as a populist leader, he consistently makes statements that are inconsistent with the facts. The Washington Post published an article in 2020 titled “President Trump has made more than 20,000 false or misleading claims” (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2021). The Washington Post published a story in 2020 that stated that he had campaigned on having "tremendous support" in the African-American community, which has no clues or evidence. This paper believes, the exploitation of this type of fake news cleverly places his position on the same side as African Americans as a way of achieving the populist desire to be on the side of the pure and vulnerable. Even if this one statement proves to be false, Trump has expressed his position to African Americans that he is willing to be on their side. At the same time, for other Americans, there is a tendency to turn a blind eye to discrimination in order not to be described as racist by the conspiracy-theory public opinion favored by populisms. Thus, when citizens lose the discursive framework for dialogue with people of different viewpoints, the tyranny of the majority is feared to come true. Populist policies are then able to serve as the target of the subsequent attacks by a tiny minority that manipulates this tyranny.

The use of lies doesn't only help populist elections, but also help them to gain support for the policies they want (Beckett and Deuze 2016). Armitage refers in a paper to the politicization of climate science in the United States, where right-wing politicians and their think-tanks strategically deny the current state of global warming, and greenhouse science to the public through the dissemination of media messaging tactics.

The main methods are through emphasizing the uncertainty of climate science to decrease the common sense and weaken a part of the truth, to make it seem less coincident. Sometimes, the political parties will realize this through raising fabricated doubts to the funding and supporting climate-sceptic individuals and organizations (Armitage 2005). During this kind of global question, populisms usually manipulate scientific data and fabricate false interpretations of the data. At the same time, due to the blurring of the public and private spheres in the post-truth era, populist politicians give climate scientists the same level of status as the people on media platforms, ignoring the unique nature of the science itself, which allows them to argue against each other. This paper argues that many political parties in Western democracies are increasingly focusing on short-term interests in order to be able to sustainably develop and fulfil their political objectives during their political tenure.

Secondly, considering that the true value of information is itself in the service of critically debated democratic processes, the populist exploitation of fake news can itself lead to the precariousness of the legitimacy of an otherwise democratic government and erode trust in its representative democracy (Michailidou and Trenz 2021). Populist promotion of fake news can effectively undermine the mediating role of media institutions as a way of awakening more intense political resistance among the populace. Another research points out that this part of the public sphere is also fueled by ideological divisions that promote the production of fake news (Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023). Even though some scholars such as Privitera note that populist politicians need to rely on media outlets to increase its trustworthiness, the importance of fake news as a tool used by populisms to question rights and gain public opinion needs to be emphasized (Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023). Furthermore, in a chapter called *Populisms and the Media* in “The Oxford Handbook of Populism”, Luca Manucci mentions that media are capable of generating populist discourse in their own right, rather than merely serving as a space for political actors to speak out (Manucci 2019, 471). It can be assumed that this also symbolizes the destruction of the role of public opinion in the traditional Habermas public sphere. This thesis believes that as the political value of

the information itself weakens, populist discourse can be easily grasped by political actors regardless of whether they have real control of the media. This is one of the reasons why populist politics grew during this era.

2.2.4 Over-commercialization of the media market and the changing role of media organizations

Faced with the characteristics of the post-truth era, journalism is facing a structural collapse. Structural collapse means that the system of the basic market of traditional media has a significant decay, where the market no longer supports the same level of news production results due to commercial pressures and changes in media dynamics. "The over-commercialization of the news media - driven primarily by profits and thus the need to sell advertising - manifests itself in frivolous reporting that prioritizes entertainment over information (Pickard 2020). " So it leads to the lack of informative, fact-based news and the rise of clickbait and lurid reporting (Pickard 2020). Thus, the structural collapse of tradition and a highly commercially marketized media system create ideal conditions for a "disinformation society."

One of the characteristics of "market failure" in journalism is the "imperfect" goods associated with knowledge and information and the effects of externalities, which exacerbate the distortions in the distribution of the production of journalistic goods (Stiglitz 1989). The high value placed on elites and the marginalization of minorities in liberal democracies is further reinforced, thus increasing their polarization.

Perceived power differentials, further amplified by "market failures" in the media marketplace, exacerbate individual public "state anxiety" (Sadurski 2022). Faced with economic market failure, Brexit supporters in the UK tend to be more pessimistic about their economic prospects (Gidron and Hall 2017). Interestingly, this concern often arises in the context of collective identity perceptions of the self, i.e., individual 'state anxiety' is often based more on concerns about 'other people like me', even when the personal situation remains stable and secure. Considering that the press is the "fourth

power", "status anxiety" in the media market is more likely to be magnified in the absence of political rights. As in other commercial and economic markets, those who perceive themselves as disadvantaged tend to maintain this perception in the political and cultural spheres as well. Similarly, collective identity occupies a larger position compared to the individual, and the impairment of group political rights as well as the lack of cultural status will be infinitely magnified.

In addition, the high level of commercialization of digital media has brought about a concentration of ownership in the media market, which has resulted in undue influence. As with all political rights, the control of ownership in traditional media markets is designed to prevent any one company from having too much influence in the market. However, the high degree of commercialization of the media implies a monopoly brought about by a highly capitalized economy. Facing with the demand of economic development, countries have eased policies restricting the influence of a single media company. In a study of 30 territories around the world, the top 10 content companies accounted for an average of 67% of content. As an example, Trump, a huge fan of digital media, has become the largest source of potential customers for US media ever, with his campaign and subsequent election inspiring hundreds of thousands of Americans to scramble to buy digital news subscriptions and memberships. The New York Times has subsequently surpassed the recently achieved milestone in subscriptions (Doctor 2017). It is evident that the dominant companies in the media market, and much of the market environment, prefer populist political parties, or rather, for the commercial benefits that can be delivered by highly personalized leaders in populisms. In terms of demand structure, the highly commercialized media market has abandoned its role as a watchdog of neutrality and regulation in favor of the higher economic benefits of greater influence. As a result, the media's "demand" for populist politicians grow.

Along with the highly commercialized trend within the media market, populisms have also been able to profit from the from the shifting roles of traditional news organizations. Given the inherent uncertainty of the truth of information, journalists as

well as institutions tend to have two traditional roles in the previous public sphere. The first one is a role of a “Watch dog”, who is in charge of preventing the imposition of the truth of a specific institution or individual on the whole society. The second one is a critical intermediary, whose role is to build a “normative” recognition, to form a common rational and factual epistemology in the public sphere (Michailidou and Trenz 2021). But by the time, both of two roles’ effects are decreasing.

From the first point of view, due to the blurring of the public and private spheres, the unified truth is becoming less and less important in the post-truth era. Therefore, populisms can easily break this "watch dog" by utilizing the "emotions" and "lies" mentioned above. It is then able to mark out the "enemy" elites that are worth fighting against in political campaigns, and to gain the resonance and support of the electorate. In the European media landscape, there are even legal instruments that suppress the ability of media organizations to censor, such as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP), to prevent them from investigating corruption and other public interest issues. By making critics of the facts, which are primarily media organizations and journalists liable for litigation costs and the threat of financial loss, they are silenced and made to submit to the dominant narrative structure (Ní Mhainín 2020). Even though there have been many protests this regulation, the censorship of the media has become much less effective under restrictions such as these. This shift in identity reduces the challenge to extremist narratives, exemplified by populist politicians, and worsens the media environment.

As for the second point, critical perception of news sources loses importance because the value of the information itself must be based on an exchange of arguments, as well as on blind public trust and the superficial value that is attributed to the information. Populist parties can construct a value model of information through propaganda to increase trust in their individual leaders - often highly charismatic leaders in populisms - even at the cost of undermining trust (Michailidou and Trenz 2021).

Chapter 3 Populisms and democracy in post-truth era

Media play a crucial role in modern democratic politics as an important tool for disseminating information and shaping public opinion. However, the healthy function of democratic politics is facing unprecedented challenges with the commercialization of the media market and the transformation of media identities. This transformation is not only a change within the media sphere, but also an erosion of the foundation of democratic politics, symbolizing its decline and instability. So, what are the specific impacts of populist politics on democracy in the post-truth era? Before further discussion, this article believes that the political environment in which populisms currently exist should be discussed, which is also the hotbed for the development of populist politicians, that is, the democratic system.

3.1 Populisms and Democracy

Firstly, it needs to be recognized that democracy itself has certain flaws. While scholars such as Stefan Rummens argue that populist politics is inconsistent with the core foundations of democracy (Rummens 2017, 554–70), there are also scholars such as Ernesto Laclau who argue that populist politics are essentially a democratic ideology (Laclau 2018, 1–20). After analyzing the books of the above-mentioned scholars, Andrej Zaslove and Maurits Meijers suggest that populisms may also enhance civic political participation and provide more choices, and that individuals with strong populist attitudes do not necessarily reject liberal representative democracy (Zaslove and Meijers 2023). Therefore, this paper argues that when confronted with a large number of populist policies that have garnered much support, there needs to be a brief discussion about which democratic flaws populisms exploit and how it complements democratic political narratives before populist politicians can appeal to the people who support liberal democracies.

Populist political narratives care a lot about the inadequacy of representation in representative democracy, which undermines the original objective of democracy. In reinforcing the division of camps, populisms would prefer a form of direct democracy

that can directly strengthen the political participation of the people in the public sphere of democracy and make it more egalitarian. Through polling in Latin America, Rafael Pineiro, Matthew Rhodes-Purdy and Fernando Rosenblatt showed that populism can increase political participation among the poorer classes at a time of social inequality (Piñeiro, Rhodes-Purdy, and Rosenblatt 2016, 3–23). Through the use of direct and emotive political language, populist politicians are able to target the weaknesses of representative democracy in which ordinary people feel ignored and marginalized, effectively galvanizing political participation among groups that are usually excluded from the political process. Political participation here does not only refer to voting in elections, but also to broader behaviors such as participating in political party activities, engaging in discussions and debates on political topics in public forums, social media, blogs, or private gatherings. To prove this trend, Andrej Zaslove and Maurits Meijers, through a data analysis of populist attitudes among Dutch respondents, point out that populist parties' presence can indeed improve democratic equality by reducing the unequal participation of poorer and less educated citizens (Zaslove and Meijers 2023).

Secondly, populisms are able to challenge the old democratic political elite by exploiting weaknesses in democratic institutions such as rigid decision-making and slow response to popular demands. Populist politics thus passively promotes democratic responses to specific issues. In Argentina, under the leadership of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, populist policies and strategies of direct appeal to the population have increased political participation and transparency (Colalongo and Donato 2021). For example, the Kirchner administration chose to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with the public, thus attempting to increase transparency and reduce the influence of established political and economic elites (Colalongo and Donato 2021). These strategies aimed at increasing the political participation and ensuring the government can better satisfy the public's demands. Facing with economic and financial problems, Kirchner's government tended to use the foreign policy which appealed to the public directly and resisted neoliberal economic policies. This effort did result in advancing the negotiation of the foreign debt, and the

resolution of economic problems. And this part of the populist parties, as part of the process of running for office in a democracy, in turn strengthened the trust of a part of the public in the system itself (Colalongo and Donato 2021).

However, this thesis argues that the impact of populist politics on democratic politics does not stem from its intrinsic qualities but is manifested in the direction of policies adopted in competition with other parties. These policies reveal, to some extent, the deficiencies of the democratic system, holding other political parties' hostage to compete with the populist parties, thus leading to changes in the democratic system. Since populist politicians are fundamentally different from democracy, its so-called "changes" to democracy may pose a threat to democracy. In the post-truth era, these potential harms of populisms have been further amplified, and their negative effects far outweigh any possible positive ones.

3.2 Populisms' harm to democracy: the destruction of the public sphere

This thesis argues that the reason why populisms in the post-truth era can make such a great impact on democracy is that, in addition to the decline of democracy itself, the most fundamental reason is that populist politics are able to make an unprecedented impact on the core of a democratic society - the public sphere discussed in the previous chapter. This is also the biggest difference between the "dark times" mentioned by Arendt and the post-truth era. The following paragraphs will first analyze the specific impacts of populisms on democracy in the post-truth era, and then analyze how these impacts have harmed the public sphere on which democracy is based, to answer the question: how has the damage done by populisms to democracy been dramatically manifested in the post-truth era?

While populisms' solution to practical political problems can, from a certain point of view, indirectly contribute to the public's trust in the ability of the democratic institutional environment to solve practical problems, the purpose of the populist system itself is not to solve problems. As populist politicians are biased towards

galvanizing public sentiment and gaining the votes of people who do not support the original political party. Instead of addressing the long-term outcomes of policies in a democracy, populist politics tend to insist on short-term policies in a more direct and intense manner because of the strong emotional needs of its audience. As a result, populist politics often promises, in the name of democracy, that the government will follow the will of the "real people" (Sajó 2021, 112–52). In fact, it is not that populisms are unaware of the need for institutional reforms, but it is just that it is not sure if it can be elected after the reforms. In the face of the existing political problems of democracy, there is a political rejection of any reform that would reduce the power of the vote.

To better understand how populist politics work, take Italy as an example. In Italy, in 2016 Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi proposed a constitutional amendment to streamline the legislative process by reducing the powers of the Senate and increasing the role of the Chamber of Deputies and the Prime Minister (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017, 154–62). In this way, it would overcome the gridlock in areas such as education, justice and labor caused by inefficient legislative idioms. But in the Italian political landscape, populist parties such as the Five Star Movement portrayed the reforms as a struggle between "democracy" and "anti-democracy," and the referendum as a way for Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to ignore the interests of the people in favor of greater power. As a result, the referendum was unsuccessful, Renzi resigned, and not only did the Italian political system come to a standstill, but the public became more skeptical about the stability of the Italian political system (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2017, 154–62). Here, the populist parties play a trick. The Five Star Movement takes advantage of the purity of the original purpose of democratic politics, which is to give political rights to "people" to emphasize the rationality of its own policies. It can be seen that "democracy" serves as a protective shield for populisms in this political competition. This role is not only effective in this political competition, but Populist parties also make extensive use of people's emotion of expectation for the purity of democratic purpose in the other political situation. Meanwhile, since they keep claiming they are presenting as "democracy", their failures are also blaming on the "democracy" system,

which harms the "democracy".

First of all, one of the primary ways populisms harm democracies is by exploiting emotional narratives that resonate with the public's sentiments, often at the expense of factual accuracy and rational debate. This strategy of gaining support for politics through mobilizing emotions tends to lead to a decline in trust in democratic governments and exacerbates the polarization of Western democracies. While populist political discourse can contribute to political transparency to a certain extent by repeatedly cross-examining other political elites, which will inspire political responses from the rest of the political elites (Zaslove and Meijers 2023), the real effect of this part of transparency is worth considering when the narrative of fake news in the post-truth era is added to the system. This distrust is directed at the mediating role of the media and news and organic participants, rather than at the information itself. A case in point was the presidency of Donald Trump. The Trump administration was known for its confrontational stance towards various governmental agencies, which led to a significant decline in public trust in these entities (Ladd and Hetherington 2020). In an article, the New York Times highlighted and delved into Donald Trump's use of the phrase "deep government" to express his high level of skepticism towards public servants through his emotional and polarizing rhetoric. Interestingly, the article has now been deleted, and Trump used the democratic distrust of institutions such as the judiciary and the free press that already existed in the post-truth era to repeatedly reinforce that questioning of the traditional role of government institutions.

Furthermore, the decrease of trust also arises in the disparity between election outcomes and the claims put forth by populist parties. Through the construction of falsehoods, populists often assert that they represent the majority, claiming to embody widespread public sentiment. However, election results sometimes reveal their support to be minimal. Considering that such fabrications not only pervade the electoral strategies of populist politicians but also permeate the narrative of political parties within the overall system of democratic politics, this paper contends that this dissonance can also engender distrust in the public sphere upon which democratic politics is

grounded.

In the process, populist politicians' damage to democracy exists not only in terms of trust in democratic institutions. By utilizing the emotional political narratives of the post-truth era, populisms have altered the rational character of public opinion as Habermas points out (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974, 49), and have changed the identity of the media in the public sphere. As a result, populist politicians have had a dramatic impact on the public sphere underlying democracy in the post-truth era. In addition, populisms have changed the role of the media in the public sphere. Once seen as a bastion of objective information dissemination, traditional media are often portrayed by populists as part of the corrupt elite that the movement opposes. This narrative undermines the credibility of existing media and creates an environment in which alternative, often partisan, sources of information dominate. This situation can lead to the fragmentation of the public sphere, where different groups form their own echo chambers and where diverse voices, and rational debate are drowned out by emotional appeals and confirmation bias.

It is mentioned above within this thesis that populisms can play on the emotions that matter most to the public in the post-truth era to grow its audience. This is fundamentally contrary to the requirements of rationality of discourse in the public sphere. In the process, populisms' damage to democracy exists not only in terms of trust in democratic institutions. By utilizing the emotional political narratives of the post-truth era, populisms have altered the rational character of public opinion, as Habermas points out, and has changed the identity of the media in the public sphere. As a result, populist politicians have had a dramatic impact on the democratically based public sphere in the post-truth era. "Do emotions conquer facts?" an article by Ya Yang, Lichao Xiu, Xuejiao Chen, Guoming Yu uses the CCME model of communication studies and finds, through a study of emotions in shaping public opinion in the post-truth era, that public discourse is distorted by the fact that emotional appeals are located above factual accuracy (Yang et al. 2023, 1–7). This shift undermines the rational basis of the public sphere, and for Habermas, this irrational public discourse itself has lost its

protective function of democracy in the public sphere and its role in balancing the political sphere.

More notably, populist discourse has now been able to use emotional discourse to construct "evidence" of the illusion of rationality, thereby covering up the lack of rationality in public discourse. In the chapter "Post-Truth, Postmodernism and the Public Sphere," the editors point to the impact of the Covid-epidemic on populisms (Conrad et al. 2023, 13–30). This impact has ranged from an initial mass focus on scientific truth and a decline in populist support, to a strange definition of "freedom" widely discussed in social media (Conrad et al. 2023, 13–30). Under the guidance of populist political discourse, the concept of "freedom" gradually deviated from the norm and began to pursue the freedom to advocate for not being forced to wear masks or not being vaccinated. It can be seen that populists, after an initial short-lived decline in support, capitalized on the crisis and the panic in the crisis to their own advantage, blaming the crisis on the outside interventionists in an attempt to trigger a new round of state anxiety (Conrad et al. 2023, 13–30). By further exploiting the crisis, populist politicians skillfully incorporate partial truths to guide the control of public discourse and thus the space for private political discussion in the public sphere. Such public discourse is even more harmful to democracy. Populisms, as stated above, capitalize on the cultural anxiety of the people and the anxiety of the status of the rich and the poor to oppose the elites with a fierce discourse. This formulation of political discourse actually places populist parties in the public sphere of Habermas, the antithesis of the political sphere, and acts directly as a check on the monitoring of the political sphere that public opinion originally intended (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974, 49). But this part of the checks and balances is extreme and irrational, and therefore loses its supervisory role at the same time as populist politics are able to gain more support. When the public opinion loses its rationality and populist plays a role as the opposite to the political sphere, the boundaries between the political sphere and the private sphere become even more blurred.

This blurring of the boundaries between the personal and political spheres in the

public sphere not only distorts civic participation in a democracy, but also degrades the democratic process as a result. Although for the "strong public" in Arendt's public sphere, it is unavoidable to present the emotional needs of political will, what the public essentially has and wants to express is the emotional needs for political positions. Along with the blurring of the boundaries between the personal and public spheres, populisms are shifting this emotional demand from the relatively rational aspects of politics to the cult of the individual. Max Weber categorized authority into three types: traditional authority, legitimate authority, and charismatic (Mudde 2004, 541–63). Populisms, on the other hand, tends to breed charismatic leaders through political mobilization and media manipulation, particularly through the use of social media platforms to engage directly with voters. For example, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who is widely regarded as a populist leader, mostly used Facebook and Twitter to communicate directly with voters and militants during his campaign, utilizing WhatsApp's massive, automated messaging service to garner support (Feres Júnior and Gagliardi 2021). This behavior has turned individual citizen participation in the public sphere into one based on personal loyalties rather than concern for public affairs. But this runs counter to the democratic need for mass participation in public affairs, whereby individuals must have a degree of cognitive understanding of political issues and processes prior to engaging in political activity to be effective in democratic participation (Nai 2022, 668–83).

Finally, in the pursuit of their political goals, populist parties often act to shape and control other institutions of power, such as the judiciary. This behavior not only causes damage to the pluralistic expression of democratic politics and public opinion in the public sphere but is even capable of infringing on the principles of human rights and the rule of law, thus threatening the very foundation of a democratic society. In the post-truth era, with the prevalence of online media, populist movements have found an easier route to political advocacy. This propaganda strategy is especially easy to implement in the commercially driven media environment of the post-truth era. By creating public pressure in the public sphere, populisms not only restrict freedom of speech, but also has the potential to erode the foundations of democratic institutions in

many forms (Crowley, n.d.). During US President Donald Trump's time in office, he has used social media to radicalize popular opinion, thereby pressuring cases before the courts. He tried to reorganize the judiciary belonging to his party through public opinion attacks on the independence of the judiciary, relying on the intimidation carried out by a section of powerful interest groups in state judicial elections (Crowley, n.d.) (Kalb and Bannon 2018). It can be seen that this act of populist politicians have broken the mutual checks and balances of the separation of powers in the democratic system and threatens the very essence of the democratic system.

To conclude, populisms in the post-truth era threaten democracy by undermining trust in institutions, distorting the public sphere through the politics of emotion, manipulating the concept of democracy, promoting charismatic leadership over rational discourse, and attempting to control other branches of power. These acts either threaten democracy directly or cause an unprecedented impact on democracy by affecting the very foundations of the public sphere on which democracy rests.

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis is grounded in existing literature and focuses on three distinct areas of social science research: media and the public sphere, post-truth, and populisms. It begins by defining these concepts and proceeds to analyze the characteristics of populisms in the post-truth era. Subsequently, it combines these characteristics with political cases to examine how populist politicians undermine the foundation of the Western democratic system—the public sphere—thus weakening Western democracy.

First, the thesis reviews the theoretical contributions of Habermas and Arendt to the public sphere, emphasizing the central role of rational discussion and political participation in democratic societies. However, with changes in media forms and the rise of social media, the role of the public sphere has shifted, with emotional news and personal beliefs playing an increasing role in shaping public opinion. Secondly, the

thesis analyzes the characteristics of the "post-truth era" in which the problem occurs. It is reflected in the rise of emotional political discourse, the spread of fake news, the commercialization of media, and changes in media organizations and audience identities. Together, these characteristics contribute to the erosion of facts and truth. Combining these characteristics, the thesis starts from the definition of "populisms" and points out that in the post-truth era, populist politics can take advantage of the structural collapse of the media market, leading to the proliferation of false news and the commercialization of information. Therefore, populisms have a growing influence.

On this basis, the thesis further explores the performance and role of populisms in political activities, including how populisms use emotions and fake news to gain public support, and how populist politicians shape personal image and politics through economic policies and leadership styles. Populist leaders communicate directly with voters through social media, using emotive language and accusations of "elites" to solidify their political positions. Finally, the thesis combines the characteristics of the "public sphere" that is the basis of democracy, the characteristics of the "post-truth era" and the specific development form of "populisms" using media and points out the fundamental harm of "populisms" to the democratic system.

In summary, this thesis argues that populist politics, through the media in the post-truth era, can erode trust in institutions, distort the public sphere, manipulate notions of democracy, promote charismatic leadership, and seek to control other branches of power. Thus, through the growing prevalence of populisms in the post-truth era, a threat is posed to the very foundations of democratic institutions. In the future, to ensure the healthy development of Western democratic systems, it is crucial to pay attention to the identification of populisms. By strengthening media censorship, reducing its commercialization trends, and considering the mutual influence of information and emotions between the political and private spheres, it may be possible to mitigate the threat of populisms to democracy.

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