

Title: **Representing the people: Populists on social media**

Name: **Lone Nerup Sorensen**

Email: ics2lns@leeds.ac.uk

Affiliation: **PhD student, School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, UK**

Extended abstract: 1190 words

This paper investigates the influence of democratic context on populists' representations of 'the people' on social media. In doing so, it considers how populists utilise social media as a means of mediation to enhance their message. And it interrogates populists' use of social media to criticise, reframe and take control of traditional, gate-kept media narratives. I compare two populist parties: the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) – a new, radical and explosive phenomenon in South African politics – and the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which gained unprecedented support in the recent UK elections. These two cases have emerged from contrasting democratic contexts and pathways to democracy. Yet both parties are responding to a crisis of representation in a liberal democracy, and both build their message on similar strategies of representing 'the people' through social media. In this paper I present the initial findings of a qualitative analysis, to be undertaken in the spring of 2016, of tweets by the two parties during their most recent general election campaigns in 2014 and 2015.

The paper forms part of my PhD thesis and moves beyond existing knowledge in the following respects:

- It compares populism across regions, contexts and subtypes and, in doing so, avoids the traps of Western-centric studies that often entangle the concept of populism with local political and cultural factors.
- It develops an integrated conceptual framework of populist communication and political representation and verifies this empirically.
- It brings social media onto the populism research agenda and contributes both to the theoretical development of populism's relationship to the wider media ecology and to empirical approaches to studying populism on social media.

My two cases – UKIP and the EFF – are responding to crises of representation that have grown out of different democratic contexts. The recent transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994 brought about a more descriptive mode of representation (Pitkin, 1967), to allow the black majority to feel represented by politicians with a similar identity to their own. The focus on resemblance, rather than responsiveness, however, has brought about a crisis where citizens feel betrayed by their representatives, who are not responding to their needs. The EFF rally this 'economically oppressed' black majority. In the UK, in contrast, a more active form of representation was bred through a long and slow process of democratic development and technocratisation. The focus on action rather than resemblance manifests itself in a crisis where citizens feel removed from the political elite and unable to identify with, or feel understood by, their representatives. UKIP gives voice to the common man who feels unable to connect with the distant elite.

Though these crises take different forms, both can be perceived as crises of communication. In both countries, the crises are set in a changing media environment, which sees public participation in politics moving to the periphery, and moving online (Brants and Voltmer, 2011, pp. 8–9). Where mainstream politicians struggle to negotiate the demands of modern

mediated representation – and fail to both listen to and communicate with the public in a language they identify with – populist parties occupy the margins of the political arena and satisfy the public's demands on and for communication. As a result, populists' success is growing in very different democratic contexts around the world. Such contexts shape the populist message, which offers an alternative mode of political representation and conception of democracy. But what exactly populists mean by 'representation', and who the people are that they claim to represent, often remains ambiguous.

I approach the populist message as a unique response to the challenges of modern mediated political representation. I interrogate this message in the form of the representative claim (Saward, 2006), a plea where the representative presents a certain idea of the people and asks that they subscribe to it. The populist representative claim creatively constructs a uniquely populist idea of 'the people', which is not only articulated verbally, but also performed. I consider this performance in the context of a modern media environment with high demands on the visual and the spectacular (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014).

Social media, meanwhile, provides a unique environment for expressions of anti-media populism, attempts at controlling the media ecology, and populists' un-gatekept conceptions of who they represent and why. I approach social media as a strategic tool that populists may use to circumvent and interact with traditional media coverage, but a tool that simultaneously shapes the populist message in the act of mediation. In this sense, the medium is part of the message: populists utilise social media affordances and cyber-utopic ideology to answer the challenges of modern mediated representation. However, given populism's lack of pluralism (Mudde, 2004) and particular construction of 'the people', populists' utilisation of social media's democratising image in different democratic contexts begs the question: democracy for whom?

My data constitutes tweets by the two parties' official and leader accounts in the two months before the most recent general elections in each country (7/5/2014 in South Africa; 7/5/2015 in the UK). I extract and analyse the data using NCapture and Nvivo 10. I develop a qualitative performance-oriented method of analysis of social media data specifically for this project. The method transposes the concept of performance, as it is analysed in theatre studies, to a virtual environment and political context to encompass elements of both populist style and ideology. The method considers multi-modal elements of data, taking into account visuals, different elements of text (content, 'voice' and 'gesture' in the form of fonts, stress, emoticons, etc.), platform affordances (the 'stage') and the role of an active, if virtual, audience (e.g. replies, conversations, favourites). It moreover considers how the political performance communicates beyond its immediate setting on Twitter to other texts and performances. It thus enables the analysis of strategies of remediation of traditional media content, references to external democratic context and use of the ideology of social media as a tool of emancipation and democratisation.

A previously conducted pilot study inspires a number of expected findings on the question how democratic context influences populists' representations of 'the people' on social media:

- A uniquely populist representative claim, shared by the most different cases, that defines 'the people': as a homogenous mass and a silent majority; negatively in relation to a threatening 'other'; and as imbued with a sense of unity and community.
- Categories of democratic context shared by the cases and relevant to their definitions of 'the people': a threat to sovereignty; unrepresentative elites; and the repression of alternative voices.
- Definitions of who constitutes 'the people' within each category, contrasting between cases according to their specific democratic context: e.g. the threat to sovereignty takes the form of expansion of EU powers and immigration in the UK and imposition of donors on economic and political agendas in South Africa. These respective contexts influence definitions of 'the people' in nationalist versus economic terms.

The pilot study also found interesting utilisation of the structural affordances and emancipatory ideology of social media. The parties used these to:

- criticise the media and political establishments by contrasting them with self-representation as a radical people's cyber movement.
- take control of the traditional media narrative by reframing and interjecting remediated content.

I expect that the findings from the extended study will confirm, expand on and deepen this preliminary empirical verification of my conceptual framework.

References

- Brants, K., Voltmer, K. (Eds.), 2011. Political communication in postmodern democracy : challenging the primacy of politics. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Moffitt, B., Tormey, S., 2014. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Polit Stud* 62, 381–397. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12032
- Mudde, C., 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39, 542–563.
- Pitkin, H.F., 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. University of California Press.
- Saward, M., 2006. The Representative Claim. *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, 297–318. doi:http://0-dx.doi.org.wam.leeds.ac.uk/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300234