

Digital Media and the Entrenchment of Right-Wing Populist Agendas

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Social Media + Society
October-December 2019: 1–11
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305119885328
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms

Abstract

Since Brexit and the election of President Donald Trump, news media around the world have given extensive coverage to the issue of disinformation and polarization. This article argues that while the negative effects of social media have dominated the discussion, these effects do not address how right-wing populists have been able to successfully and legitimately use digital media to circumvent traditional media. The article uses the United States and Sweden as case studies about how digital media have helped to achieve electoral success and shift the political direction in both countries—though in quite different ways. It also argues that the sources of right-wing populism go beyond the hitherto dominant left–right political divide, capturing anti-elite sentiment, and promoting exclusionary nationalism. The dominance of the issue of media manipulation has obscured the shift whereby the relation between the media and politics has become more fluid and antagonistic, which fits the populist agenda. This shift requires a rethinking of political communication that includes both the social forces that give rise to populism and the alternative digital channels that entrench them, with implications for the prospects of the role of media in politics in the two countries and beyond.

Keywords

agenda-setting, media, Trump, Sweden Democrats, right-wing populism

Introduction

Ever since Trump was elected, the media and academic research have focused on how he won the election because social media duped people into voting for him. The media are awash with stories about disinformation and Russian meddling and the role of Facebook in elections. A recent paper by a number of prominent researchers that received widespread attention in the news media called fake news a serious threat to democracy: “the rise of fake news highlights the erosion of long-standing bulwarks against misinformation in the internet age. Concern over the problem is global” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). Snyder (2018), a prominent academic, summarized the Russian element succinctly: “America lost a cyberwar to Russia in 2016, the result of which was the election of Trump.” This is not just an American phenomenon. In Europe, countries with right-wing populist parties have undertaken research into disinformation and bots and foreign meddling in elections (including by this author; Fernqvist, Kaati & Schroeder, 2017) and they are developing new ways to regulate and counteract these. This article argues that the concern with media manipulation overlooks how regulating and counteracting digital media, however, appropriate that may be, will do little to tackle right-wing populist media uses, for two

reasons: the first is that right-wing populists use online media primarily to circumvent traditional media, setting an agenda that challenges elites, and that will not go away with social media regulation. Second, populist right-wing forces are deeply rooted in contemporary social changes that go beyond the traditional alignment of left and right. Only a rethinking of the workings of digital media and of this realignment can provide a realistic assessment for the future prospects of the role of the media in politics.

The article takes the United States and Sweden as case studies.¹ It will proceed as follows: first, it will discuss disinformation in the media, define right-wing populism, and analyze how digital media have been pivotal in the success of populists in the two countries. It will also present a framework for analyzing the role of digital media that captures the influence of right-wing populists on the media. Next, it will discuss how media attention has been dominated by manipulation and disinformation. The article then proceeds to argue that

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the relation between right-wing populists and media has become one of mutual dependence, whereby the continual challenge that populists pose to media and the media coverage given to these challenges reinforce each other. The final section draws out the implications of the two cases, arguing that the factors that have entrenched the populist agenda via digital media is unlikely to be resolved by means of media regulation or campaigns against disinformation, but must be tackled by challenging their agenda on this new terrain or changing the political allegiances of its supporters.

Disinformation, Media, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Sweden and the United States

The topic of disinformation and meddling in elections has become well-established in recent years. The targeting of potential voters in the American election in 2016 by companies such as Cambridge Analytica via Facebook and other social media was widely reported and continues to worry lawmakers and the public even as regulation has also started to emerge.² Similarly with the role of Russia in spreading disinformation, the role of bots, the polarizing effect of social media and alternative sources of news, and the political bias of search engines. We will come to the specific effects of digital media in our two cases shortly, but a broader point can already be anticipated, which is that there has been a more general effect whereby media, and digital media in particular, have increasingly come to be viewed as detrimental to the political process by the public and by political leaders. There has also been much soul searching by the media themselves.

There is now an extensive literature about populisms past and present and for several parts of the world (Moffitt, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Debates about this phenomenon are likely to continue, but there is widespread agreement that populism juxtaposes a virtuous people with a corrupt elite and regards the former as the sole legitimate source of political power (see also Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Populists, in Mueller's (2016) view, claim that they are the "100 per cent" people. They are the only true and virtuous people whose views are underrepresented in politics and in the media and they want to exclude "others." Populists on the right seek to exclude immigrants from the ethnic majority population, while populists on the left reject the external forces of economic globalization. Mueller also defines populists as anti-elite: they are against the media and the political "establishment" in the case of right-wing populists and against wealthy economic elites in the case of left-wing populism (left-wing populism is outside the scope here, since it has so far only played a minor role in the two countries examined). Thus the "exclusionism" of the right and left versions can also be seen in terms of a "horizontal" and a "vertical" dimension

(Brubaker, 2017): right-wing populism excludes "others" horizontally and certain parts of the elite—culturally cosmopolitan and part of the establishment—vertically. Left-wing populism excludes foreign economic forces (competing cheap labor, trade openness) horizontally and certain elites (economic globalizers and the wealthy) vertically.

Both the United States and Sweden have seen the rise of right-wing populists: Donald Trump was elected as president in 2016 and many of the candidates whom he supported against others within his own party did well in the mid-term elections in 2018. He continues to be a challenger within the Republican Party but the party no longer seeks to disown him as it did initially. In Sweden, the anti-immigrant and right-wing populist Sweden Democrat Party won 5.7% of votes or 20 parliamentary seats in 2010, 12.9% and 49 seats in 2014, and 17.5% and 62 seats in 2018. Digital media played a critical role in the populist success in both cases. Twitter was a necessary factor in Trump's election, at least up to his nomination. He dominated digital media attention because his tweets were directly translated into outsize coverage in traditional media; for much of the primary outdoing all his rivals put together, as will be further spelled out below. He also dominated media attention in the race against Hillary Clinton and so needed to spend less, and did spend less, on campaign advertising. Yet by the time of the general election, he was guaranteed roughly equal coverage in any event. Still, Twitter, translated into traditional media dominance, plus populist support, explain his success (Schroeder, 2016). Since the election, his tweets continue to play an outsize role in traditional media, and he continues to enjoy the support of his populist base.

In Sweden, Twitter and Facebook played a far lesser role in the elections. And like Trump, the Sweden Democrats received mainly negative coverage in traditional media (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019). In Sweden, public service broadcast is still the main source of news. But the populists have "alternative media," news websites that support the Sweden Democrats and that promote a right-wing populist agenda. These alternative media have sizable publics: according to the Reuters Digital News Report (on which the rest of this paragraph is based), the following sites were used weekly in 2018: Fria Tider (11%), Nyheter Idag (10%), Ledarsidorna (8%), Samhällsnytt (8%), Nya Tider (6%), and Samtiden (6%). These are all "news" websites that support the Sweden Democrats and their anti-immigrant agenda, hence the Reuters Report calls them "partisan" or "alternative" websites (other researchers have labeled them "junk news," based on the fact that they do not adhere to professional or journalistic standards, see Hedman et al., 2018). Putting this in perspective, the largest source of news offline is Swedish national public broadcast TV (SVT, 56%), but the "alternative" sites are not much smaller than other online sources like SVT News (15%) or the two main newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* (18%) or *Svenska Dagbladet* (15%).

Furthermore, online sources, particularly on mobile phones, put together, are now more important than offline sources for news. Another way to compare these sites is with the United States, which is a more fragmented news market, and where Breitbart reaches 6% of users weekly, or Germany, where *Junge Freiheit*, the largest right-wing equivalent reaches 3% and German Breitbart reaches 1% weekly.

Clearly, alternative digital media play an important role and they paint a very different picture from traditional media in Sweden, one in which immigrant crime is rampant and where multi-culturalism, left-wing bias in public service media, and foreigners pose a threat to Swedish and Western culture (Holt, 2016). It is also worth noting that Sweden's professional code of journalistic practices stipulates that the characteristics of persons cannot be mentioned unless they are relevant to the story. This means that stories about crimes cannot, for example, report the immigrant or non-immigrant background of the perpetrators. The alternative media seize on this and often report criminal activity as being linked to immigrants. In fact, criminal activity including sexual violence has declined in recent years and is not linked disproportionately to immigration (Eck & Fariss, 2017). Yet one would have quite a different impression if one relied mainly on online alternative media that support right-wing populists.

There is more to say about how the role of digital media allows right-wing populists to circumvent traditional media in both countries. What is important in the context of this article is that the explanation of the advantage provided by digital media does not rely on the material shared or disseminated via social media on Twitter or Facebook or on search engine results as such, all of which have been much in the news since Trump's election and in recent European elections. Instead, the explanation rests on how right-wing populists and their supporters themselves have used digital media to set the agenda, an agenda which has become dominant in the United States and reshaped Swedish politics. To appreciate the importance of this framework for understanding the role of digital media, a contrast can be made with an example of misunderstanding digital media. In an influential recent account of the rise of populism, Mounk (2018) argues that the major shift in the media environment has been from the one-to-many communication of traditional media to the many-to-many communication of digital media (p. 140). Because of this shift, Mounk (2018) argues, the function of traditional media 'as gatekeepers has mainly evaporated' (p. 141). It is correct to say that the role of traditional media as gatekeepers has weakened, but that is because right-wing populists in Sweden and Trump in the United States have circumvented them, as argued here, and not because of the shift to many-to-many media. This new political agenda is coming from the President and how his tweets are broadcast in traditional media, and in Sweden, it comes from alternative media that support the populist party—not from the sharing or disseminating of disinformation or misinformation via

digital media among populist supporters (which will be discussed further below), as suggested by the many-to-many view.

A second part of the argument against Mounk is that the role of digital media does not, so far, depart significantly from the importance of traditional media. Newman et al. (2018, p. 10) say that in the United States in 2017, a little over half (51%) of Internet users got their news from social media, but just 2% get their news only from social media in an average week. Furthermore, the newness of using social media needs to be put in context: "Even those relying more on social media would have found much of the news in their feed came from traditional media outlets" (Newman et al., 2018, p. 10). This research is further supported for the United States by Taneja, Wu, and Edgerly (2017), who found that despite differences such as higher Facebook use for news among a younger generation as opposed to a generation of older users, there is "only a modest 'generational gap' in online news consumption . . . these two generations largely consume the same sets of popular outlets" (p. 18).

These findings point to an alternative framework for the role of digital media in politics which will underpin the analysis here (Schroeder, 2018, which is built upon here). In democratic systems, traditional and digital media together set the agenda within a contested public arena. This—mediated—arena is where the inputs from civil society (citizens, public opinion) are translated into the realm of politics and responded to by elites (mainly political elites, and also intellectual elites or broadly speaking academics plus public intellectuals, plus politically relevant economic elites). Certain political beliefs dominate the attention space across the agenda of traditional and digital media, though they are challenged by counterpublics (Fraser, 1990). Note that it is impossible to explain how right-wing populists dominate the media agenda (or, in Sweden, how they continue to challenge the dominant media agenda) without a framework that includes how digital media operate differently from traditional media and how they fit into the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) as a whole: in the United States, Trump's tweets are translated into the attention space of traditional news media; in Sweden, they provide an alternative to them.

On the side of social change, the framework suggests that politics is currently in an age of limits to the expansion of citizenship, caused by a long-term retrenchment of the welfare state. While citizenship rights have generally, but not unilinearly, expanded under pressure "from below," in the course of the 20th century (Mann, 1988), this expansion has recently stalled (Crouch, 2004; Schroeder, 2013). Right-wing populism can thus be seen as a response to these limits, seeking to enhance these rights for some ("the people") and curbing them for others, and especially those of immigrants—and in the United States, those who are seen as not being part of the American productivist ethos (Judis, 2016; Kazin, 1998), and in Sweden also those who are thought to pose a challenge to Western culture (especially Islam). We

can already note that right-wing populism goes beyond the traditional left–right divide insofar it also espouses economic nationalism (as does left-wing populism), which goes against the grain of the traditional right-wing championing of free and open market economies.

Right-wing populism dominates the executive branch in the United States and it has shifted the political agenda in an anti-immigrant direction in Sweden. Right-wing populism is a response to the limits, in social and other (cultural and political) forms of citizenship, that seeks to curb “others” and the elites that are not responsive enough to “the people.” Right-wing populism is not simply a response to growing inequality or to the “losers of globalization” (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Rodrik, 2017). Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2018) have reviewed the evidence for the class or economic determinants for Trump’s support and found it is at best partial; the authors say that “identity” matters more. For Sweden, the evidence for the economic basis of support of right-wing populism is also mixed (Sannerstedt, 2017). Right-wing populists want to deny social citizenship to “others,” but they seek to do so with the pretense of denying “undeserving” others’ cultural citizenship—hence “nativism” and welfare chauvinism. The media, according to right-wing populists, do not reflect these concerns. For them, the media are dominated by elites. Similarly in Sweden, where alternative media have attacked “multicultural elites” and their “political correctness.”

A Changed Media Landscape

Populists have challenged the status quo of conventional politics and they also continually challenge conventional media. But most studies to date focus on the role of social media without taking into account the symbiosis with traditional media (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017) and hence also miss how the role digital media vary within different media systems. The focus on social media like Twitter or Facebook also leaves out “alternative or partisan websites” and how political information is accessed outside of legacy media (e.g., via search engines). Hence too, this article uses “digital media” to refer to all online media outside of traditional (broadcast media) and their online versions. In this way, digital media encompasses all political or news sources outside of legacy media, setting them apart and also including more than just “social media.”

Trump must continue to challenge traditional media because he is embattled; the Republicans would abandon him (and some have done so) if they disagree with him. He also faces pressure from his opponents, which include those who seek to remove him by using the law. Traditional media have in recent years been under growing economic pressure because they increasingly face online competition. But they are also challenged by populists who address their supporters by means of online alternative channels—sometimes via translation in traditional media, as with Trump’s tweets.

These alternative channels sometimes do not follow conventional journalistic norms, including in the use of crude language and in the aggressive tone toward opponents.

In the United States, the media agenda has been dominated by scandal and intrigues in the White House, investigations into election improprieties, and a battle between Trump and traditional media. The degree to which media have been preoccupied with media manipulation could be measured.³ It could be straightforward to analyze coverage in the main national newspapers using the bibliometric tool LexisNexis. The leading outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, CNN and Fox News set the political agenda in the media. They have all been dominated during Trump’s presidency by the agenda of media manipulation and lies. Yet it is not clear what such measurements would reveal since they would have to compare the topic of “media manipulation” with substantive policy issues.

A more useful measure might be to compare coverage of the Trump administration with coverage of the previous presidents. In that case, comparisons could be made with Watergate during Richard Nixon’s presidency or the Monica Lewinsky scandal under President Clinton, but these were both bounded temporally and in terms of amount of coverage, unlike the coverage of Trump’s scandals in the media, which have been constant and include foreign powers, the Mueller investigation into the campaign, his attacks on the media and counterattacks by the media, and personnel changes in the White House. Kurtz (2018) has provided an insider account of how the media have dealt with Trump. He points out that the media attention to these antagonisms apply to both sides: Trump, too, devotes much of his attention to the scandals surrounding him in the media, and would like the media to focus more on his substantive agenda. Kurtz argues that the media have been biased against Trump during his candidacy and presidency and that this bias has led to widespread distrust in the media. It is not clear whether the 2 years of Trump’s presidency have accelerated declining trust in the media (see, e.g., Nelson & Taneja, 2018, p. 15). A longer-term perspective (Lee, 2010) indicates that the effects of political ideology and partisanship on trust in news media and in government have been variable in recent decades. Furthermore, bias has been a constant trope in debates about American political communication (Groeling, 2013). What is clear is that debates about how digital media have undermined civil discourse have been widespread; they have dominated the attention space of the news media.

The news coverage of Trump’s presidency has been overwhelmingly negative, as Patterson (2017) has documented in relation to his first hundred days:

“What’s truly atypical about Trump’s coverage is that it’s sharply negative despite the fact that he’s the source of nearly two-thirds of the sound bites surrounding his coverage. Typically, newsmakers and groups complain that their media narrative is negative because “they’re not given a chance to speak for themselves”” (Patterson, 2017), while Trump

speaks for himself and about his treatment of media extensively on Twitter. Patterson also notes that

Fox was the only outlet where Trump's overall coverage nearly crept into positive territory—52 percent of Fox's reports with a clear tone were negative, while 48 percent were positive. Fox's coverage was 34 percentage points less negative than the average for the other six outlets.

This finding can be put in context: for online media, only Fox News and Breitbart on the right are among the most popular online sources ranged against more than a dozen online media on the “liberal spectrum” (Newman et al., 2018, p. 20). Yet even so, as Webster (2014) has pointed out, there is massive audience overlap overall. Online, people typically have multiple sources of news. Put the other way around, there is no evidence that online, people consume news that is more fragmented, if anything, slightly the opposite (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

In Sweden, too, there has been an increasingly confrontational atmosphere between populists and the media, as Herkman (2018) shows by reference to the recent rise in the number of media scandals related to the Sweden Democrats. Even if these scandals caused outrage in the media and among the public since they involved the transgressions of a widely held consensus, they nevertheless enhanced the visibility of the Sweden Democrats. And among the supporters of the Sweden Democrats, “the media hunt [against them] represents a corrupt elite and their excessively liberal opinions” (Herkman, 2018, p. 351). Yet in Sweden, trust in the media (and in politicians and experts) has remained comparatively high and constant since the 1970s, except in very recent years, and only among one group: Sweden Democrat supporters (Sannerstedt, 2017, p. 454). On the other hand, the public has not generally trusted the media on immigration, and among Sweden Democrat supporters, distrust on this issue stood at 93% while it was 60% among the general population (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019). Still, Sweden has not yet reached anywhere near the level of America in terms of the coverage of the negative role of digital media or of scandal (though the Swedish media cover American politics extensively along these lines, with warnings that the same could happen in Sweden). And as mentioned, public service broadcast still dominates, along with two quality dailies (one tending left, *Dagens Nyheter*, and one tending right, *Svenska Dagbladet*), in setting the agenda in Swedish politics. Yet populist supporters criticize public service broadcasting bitterly in alternative or partisan websites and on social media. Thus during the 2018 election, the Swedish government devoted several efforts to counteract foreign meddling in elections, the role of bots, fact-checking, and others. And Sweden is also party to European-wide efforts to regulate the role of digital media in elections and in politics generally. Yet it is unclear if these efforts dent the audiences of digital media. As Waisbord (2018) notes, “fake news will

likely remain a fixture of digital news, no matter what digital giants and governments do to curb the tide of fabricated information” (p. 24).

In Swedish politics, the populists wrap themselves in the mantle of the country's main political tradition; the “people's home” (or “folkhem”), though their message in the media and in campaign material (mostly between the lines) is that its citizenship rights or benefits should be restricted to native Swedes, excluding immigrants and foreign cultures that supposedly threaten Sweden. Their politics is mainly focused on immigration and their pressure has led to more stringent immigration policies being put in place since 2016. The initiative for this change came from the left, from the Social Democrats, but they were clearly responding to pressure from the Sweden Democrats. It is not clear how popular the new restrictive policy is, but it certainly steals the populists' clothes. The immigration issue also played a major role in the 2018 election, for example, in the television debates among the party leaders. In any event, in Sweden, as mentioned, the populists' most pronounced digital media presence continues to be in alternative media. But as in the United States, the problem with demonstrating the effect of digital media is that it would be necessary to determine how much people rely exclusively on these alternative media (and ultimately also to what extent their views are shaped by non-media influences). Yet we have seen that in Sweden, as elsewhere, people are exposed to a variety of media, with overlapping audiences, as elsewhere (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

What is the evidence for media manipulation affecting the 2016 American election? The debate will surely continue, but a number of studies have probed the matter from different perspectives. Jackson Lears (2018) has pointed out that the stories about the Kremlin's interference in the American election postulate a conspiracy or a concerted effort where there likely was none; perhaps a sign that the populist ideas have percolated into the general population. Several studies (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018) have demonstrated that the influence of Facebook's “fake news” on the election was unlikely to have been decisive in Trump's victory (although it cannot be ruled out). Kim et al. (2018) found that “stealth media,” campaign advertisements on Facebook by foreign and domestic organizations not registered by the Federal Election Commission, played an outsize role compared with advertisements by registered groups. But Nelson and Taneja (2018) say for the election period that “the fake news audience is small and comprises a subset of the Internet's heaviest users, while the real news audience [of the major news outlets] commands a majority of the total Internet audience” (p. 13). There have also been a number of studies investigating bots and the spread of “junk news,” which played an important role mainly in supporting the Trump campaign and the Sweden Democrats (Hedman et al., 2018), though these studies have been careful not to make

claims about whether the influence was decisive in the outcome of the election. Overall, a recent overview concludes, “evaluations of the medium-to-long run impact on political behavior of exposure to fake news (for example, whether and how to vote) are essentially non-existent in the literature” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1095).

Digital media companies in the 2016 American election campaign mainly aimed to maximize revenue from campaigning for both parties (Kreiss & McGregor, 2017). Their role has since become regulated, as with the requirement to label political campaign messages. Foreign involvement in campaigning and elections and the bias of digital media have also come under intense scrutiny from lawmakers. But again, digital media manipulation was not decisive (as far as we know) during the 2016 campaign, and there was relatively little discussion of this issue during the 2018 mid-term campaigns. And although Trump promised in April 2016 not to use Twitter if he became President—“not presidential” (!)⁴—in fact, the role of Twitter, and how it translates into dominant attention in the media, continues to give him a decisive advantage vis-à-vis the media and his opponents: the media constantly report on and discuss his tweets. But attributing an underhanded role to digital media, foreign or domestic, misses the mark that the media landscape has changed, and aggressive or uncivil challenges and bypassing gatekeepers are not illegal, and nor does the focus on these address the sources of recent political changes, to which we can now turn.

Polarized, or Beyond Left and (Traditional) Right?

Media dominate American politics more than they do elsewhere: in a fragmented and log-jammed political system and with a liberal media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) with fierce commercial competition, more effort must be made to dominate the media attention space than in the “corporatist” media systems of Northern Europe, where several parties compete for attention in the political system, and where public service media play a large role in the media system. Right-wing populist politics are partly emerging in the interstices between—or in the vacuum left by—how media attention has concentrated on matters other than policy or substantive issues.⁵ In this interstitial space, a new political force has emerged that is beyond traditional right- and left-wing politics. Policy has shifted toward right-wing populist “my nation first” politics which is different from traditional Republicanism and different from a traditional right- or left-wing orientation in Sweden, and this has also been achieved by means of support of traditionally right and left voters whose support has become realigned.

In the United States, a shortcoming of the focus in the media on media manipulation and scandal is that Trump’s political agenda is not as extensively covered as it has been for previous presidents. Some indications for this point have

been given, though more research will be needed (and it has been indicated how this may be done). In any case, this focus has made it appear that there are no such new policies. Yet in fact, there is a consistent “my nation first” politics in foreign and domestic policies, even if it is pursued by means of the usual process of compromise. The two, foreign and domestic, are linked: less spending on foreign economic or soft power, more on the military, so as to put American domestic interests first. This is not a politics favoring just capitalist elites; there is a policy shift toward Keynesian infrastructure spending (however limited) which can be seen as a version of the Swedish right-wing populists putting the “people’s home” first. Indeed, right-wing populism in America harks back to the left-wing version of populism in the late 19th century, the “producerist ethos” which continues to be part of American patriotism even among its least well-off citizens (Cramer, 2016; Duina, 2017) and favors economic nationalism. Trump, in his aggressively nationalist trade policy, perhaps exaggerated in his pronouncements, is pursuing an economic agenda that Democrats have pursued in the past. And, as Swedberg (2018) has shown, Trump’s economic ideas, even if—or precisely because—they are highly simplistic and contrary to the consensus among economists—fit well with the ideas of his supporters: during the election, “Trump’s views were unorthodox, as compared to standard economics, and so were the views of many of his voters” (p. 24). He has promoted economic nationalism and protectionism, which pits him and his supporters against globalizers (Campbell, 2018, p. 152) and chimes well with Americans’ “exclusionary” ideas about immigrants and foreign powers, while favoring the “producerist” manufacturing sectors at home.

In Sweden, the turn beyond left and right has taken the form of the governing coalition that has put in place highly restrictive immigration policies which have encountered opposition mainly from the smaller parties (especially the Greens and the Feminist Initiative). As Demker (2017) documents, since this restrictive policy was put in place in 2016, there has been a marked shift in Swedes’ attitudes toward refugees, with most Swedes now favoring taking in fewer refugees (there used to be more support for this). She also notes that there is now less support for the idea that immigrants should be able to practice their own religion. Finally, among Sweden Democrats, only 20% support the idea that immigrants should be guaranteed the same standard of living as the rest of the population; only among Conservative Party supporters is the proportion otherwise less than half (Demker, 2017, pp. 457–458). This recalls the argument about more restrictive social citizenship and the “people’s home” made earlier. But in Sweden, the role of the media is also different: as in other European countries (like Germany), right-wing populists are ostracized, by the parties in government and by the media, though not during election debates when they must be accorded equal status in public service and other traditional media. Yet the attention they receive from the

media, again, is largely negative. One of the effects of this “pariah” status, however, is that they can claim to be mistreated by the “mainstream” or “elite” media, which also shifts attention to the “alternative media” which present their populist agenda (Holt, 2016).

In Sweden, there is some evidence of disproportionately high working-class support and support among the less educated for the Sweden Democrats and also more rural support; there is least support among civil servants (Sannerstedt, 2017, pp. 457, 459). Employment and the economic situation are not generally correlated with support however; in this respect, supporters are “Medelsvensson” (average Swedes; Sannerstedt, 2017, p. 462). But Sweden Democrats’ interest in politics is high, not low, as if often assumed (Sannerstedt, 2017, p. 457). In any event, in both countries, a sizable proportion of voters on the left now seek to put the nation first, as do populist supporters on the right. And left-wing parties used to be protectionist or economic nationalists, but now it seems that right-wing populists have become more associated with this policy (or at least Trump and the Sweden Democrats have).

The focus of this article is on the media, so a full analysis of the social bases of this shift is beyond the scope here. Yet a clear shift is nevertheless emerging whereby the old left/right cleavages of the bipolar world have been replaced by a “my nation first” stance versus elites and “others.” The larger global force for this new direction is a more nation-centric and no longer bipolar world in which resources for citizenship rights are increasingly constrained. Those who are not among the ethnic majority or not part of a common “producerist” or Western culture should, according to populists, be excluded from citizenship rights, and the elites that are unresponsive to this demand removed from power. In the United States, these forces dominate in the White House (the executive branch) and some parts of the Republican Party. Apart from immigration, Trump has enacted right-wing populist policies which increase inequality, have increased the country’s debt, reoriented environmental policy, and much else. These policies go beyond left and right since putting America first—spend more, tax (allegedly) less, and with tighter control of immigration—can be achieved (or not) with bipartisan support or at least compromises. Foreign policy is another area where Trump has pushed a populist stance. Mann’s (1986, p. 29) distinction between “geopolitical diplomacy” and “military power” is useful here, since Trump has weakened American power in terms of geopolitical diplomacy (or soft power) and the structure of alliances while strengthening its military power; again, a foreign policy that fits squarely with a populist views and goes against the views of foreign policy elites, as Smith (2016) notes.

In Sweden, the policy toward the Sweden Democrats has been a “cordon sanitaire” of excluding them from governing coalitions and decision-making, including future ones. The Sweden Democrats have been excluded, but at the cost of a rightward populist shift on the key issue of immigration. It is

an open question whether this strategy of “stealing the clothes” of extremist parties while assigning them a “pariah” status, will continue to work (see van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018). In Sweden, there has been perhaps less debate about the corrosive role of digital media and more of a concern among the country’s elites that the consensual politics that have kept the Sweden Democrats outside of the mainstream should hold. Yet even here, during the 2018 election, the role-played by disinformation and digital media manipulation fomented uncertainty about the role of the media in politics. The elections both in 2014 and 2018 led to coalition deals whereby the Sweden Democrats were excluded from being part of the government. These minority governments, on both occasions formed with great difficulty and after protracted negotiations, have allowed the Sweden Democrats to claim that “the people” are not being represented because a “deal behind closed doors” has been made (though on both occasions, there was speculation in the media about whether the other parties would cave in, abandon the cordon sanitaire, and form a majority government by including them).

The evidence for polarization, fragmentation, filter bubbles, or echo chambers caused by digital media continues to be much debated. Perhaps the impression which fuels this debate is a “high choice” environment in which many diverse sources outside of traditional or legacy media gain attention. Yet, as Webster (2014) has shown, there continues to be massive audience overlap, whereby people share many of the same sources of news. Whatever the cause of these debates, there has certainly been an entrenchment of a new more aggressive and antagonistic tone throughout the media system and also a personalistic focus on Trump; a feature of the populist media “style” (Moffitt, 2017). In Sweden too, even among younger people who use more social media as news sources for learning about politics, these are still used mainly as a complement to traditional media (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018). The idea of polarization is one of the constant tropes of American exceptionalism and has now affected Europe’s new political climate too. But perhaps the main “polarization” is that there is a new pole in politics which challenges cosmopolitan intellectuals and political elites. The new pole goes beyond left and right and combines “ultranationalists” (“ultra” because this goes beyond the conventional nationalism of the era of nation-state building) on both sides of the political spectrum, and combines economic nationalism from the left and citizenship exclusionism from the right, and tries to shift politics to a new version of right-wing politics that is populist; right-wing also because it is anti-progressive, harking back to an idealized past, and rejecting progressive internationalism. Again, this shift is “ultra-nationalist” because it is not the traditional nationalism with its equal self-determination of nations, but rather a “my country first” version of nationalism based on exclusionist citizenship policies. Political conflict over the benefits of citizenship can thus be masked by this exclusionary “ultra-nationalism.”

Conclusion

In both cases, populist successes have changed the media landscape and the political direction of the country. Trump’s populist media strategy and his coverage by the media are mutually reinforcing: the fact that coverage focuses on his personality and leadership rather than on policies shapes his responses—and vice versa. This is a departure that has shifted media, too, in the direction of populist political communication: personalistic, with antagonistic relations between populists and traditional media, and focusing on style rather than substance, which also fits the American media system with its intense competition for audiences. It is somewhat different in Sweden, where there is an asymmetry between the coverage in traditional as opposed to alternative media, where only the latter adopt an aggressive populist style, including antagonism toward traditional media and especially public service media. In Sweden and in the United States, a new political direction has taken hold whereby an ultranationalist populist right has reconfigured the traditional right/left distinction. In the United States, this direction has occupied executive power and taken parts of the Republican Party along in a Trumpist direction. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats have reshaped the agenda on immigration, and the government has been kept in a fragile state of coalition. In both countries, changes to the media landscape have become entrenched, perhaps less so in Sweden where alternative news media provide the populist party and its supporters with an opportunity to continually challenge the government and traditional media, including during elections. The argument can therefore be summarized as follows:

US	Trump’s tweets	Translated into traditional media	Initially bypass gatekeepers in overcoming rivals in primary race, now entrenched (and still bypass gatekeepers) to set the president’s media agenda
Sweden	Alternative online “news” media	Provide supporters of Sweden Democrats with their partisan view of the world	Initially bypass traditional media to make visible the views of an outsider party and its supporters, now entrenched to maintain these views even when the party is in parliament

In short, there are two pathways, one where Trump’s tweets translate into traditional media and one where alternative online “news” media continue to provide an outlet for the views of a party and its supporters who feel they are not represented in traditional media. This summary also highlights a key difference between the two countries: in the

United States, bypassing serves the president’s media agendas, while his ardent supporters have many online alternative partisan media to choose from, such as Breitbart.com, which sometimes criticize the president. In Sweden, bypassing serves both the party and its supporters, and both can claim its agendas are not represented in traditional media.

The novel situation in which we now find ourselves, in these two countries and perhaps beyond, is not that there is polarization or filter bubbles or echo chambers. Future research needs to examine the media system and how, in different ways, gatekeepers are being bypassed in the context of an assault on traditional media (and especially public service in Sweden), and how populists nevertheless manage to engage their supporters. They have been able to entrench their message and shape the agenda either by bypassing legacy media and criticizing public service media (Sweden) or bypassing legacy media via Twitter which is translated into legacy media (the United States). Trump now goes into the 2020 election with the advantage that his Twitter megaphone regularly becomes relayed throughout legacy media. It is not clear whether traditional media would allow Democrat presidential contenders to have the same advantage, or if these contenders will use Twitter or other channels as part of their strategy, but they must do so if they are to reclaim the agenda, or shift the political agenda outside of the media by changing voters’ minds. The Sweden Democrats are secure in their knowledge that, no matter how traditional media cover them, they can use alternative digital media to promote their agenda among their existing and potential supporters. Again, it is not clear how or if other Swedish parties apart from the Sweden Democrats can engage them on this alternative digital terrain, or if “stealing the populists’ clothes” by having adopted their immigration has muted their appeal. Digital media have irreversibly changed the media landscape; progressives must in future meet populists on this new terrain to set the agenda—or mobilize to change the party political allegiance of voters. Both efforts will require different strategies in the two cases, but regulating social media and disinformation will play a secondary role in comparison.

In the United States, the relation between Trump and the media is one of unprecedented antagonism, both sides accusing the other of dissimulation in a contest that makes the public seem polarized and with digital media held responsible for having led to this split and for contributing to the atmosphere of misinformation and disinformation. In Sweden, the political communication environment has become more uncertain from an earlier baseline of long-standing comparatively high trust in the media and in politics and politicians. In the United States, the debate about media bias and dissimulation and foreign interference as well as ill feeling toward digital media are unlikely to go away: whatever may be the case about voters or the public being polarized and the like, a negative view of the role of media (if discussions in the media themselves are an accurate reflection of public opinion) and especially of digital media now unites

Americans of all persuasions. In both the countries, and possibly beyond, whether the populist agenda remains entrenched in the media and in society will partly depend on the persistence of the challenge to conventional politics via digital media and on the role of this negative view; in other words, it will depend on the symbiotic relationship between populist political challengers and the responses of those whom they challenge via media. In the absence of a crystal ball, and since populism challenges cosmopolitan elites and the objectivity of media, perhaps the last word can be left to a recent article in *The Economist*, the media mouthpiece of these elites, about the prospects of Trump (which equally applies, mutatis mutandis, to Sweden):

The Mueller investigation has been running for 81 weeks and counting. For much of that time it has offered those yet to get over the 2016 election a chance to fantasize about an alternative ending to the Trump presidency, one in which the good guys get the bad guys and justice is served . . . in the absence of documentary evidence, this [the misdeeds during the election or otherwise] is, in an epistemological sense, unknowable . . . There will be no final scene where the detective explains how the loose ends fit together. The only denouement available is political, and therefore contested. ("The Russia Investigation: Mueller, She Wrote," 2018, pp. 43–44)

The Mueller report has now been (partly) made public, but intrigues continue and the final scene in the drama remains elusive. Social science, which is also committed to objectivity, albeit of a different kind, and should put analysis before hope, could provide a similar concluding and undramatic perspective: whatever the outcome, the structural conditions which gave rise to Trump's and the Sweden Democrats' populism, including how media enabled them, and how the changes media and in politics, in turn, became entrenched, will be with us for some time to come—even after the current dramatis personae have left the scene.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for making very helpful suggestions that have improved the paper.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research for this paper was supported by the Volkswagen Stiftung project "What Do 'the People' Want? Analysing Online Populist Challenges to Europe."

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Notes

1. These two countries have often been used for comparing the politics of Western democracies, for example, in relation to the media and politics (see Erik Åsard and Lance W. Bennett, 1997) and also the "media systems" approach of Hallin and Mancini discussed further below. Recent comparisons of their political and economic systems include Blyth (2002) and Pontusson (2005).
2. For the role of Cambridge Analytica, to the extent that it has been documented, see Kreiss and McGregor (2017).
3. The tool developed by Groeling, Joo, Lie, and Steen (2016) could be used, since it includes CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, NBC, and local news, and also Twitter mentions, both of Trump and various topics.
4. See (<https://www.politico.com/blogs/2016-gop-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/04/trump-no-tweeting-president-222408>), reviewed on December 17, 2018.
5. For the notion of how "interstitial emergence" enables new social phenomena, a social-structural explanation derived from Evans-Pritchard, see Mann (1986, p. 16).

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