



The technological performance of populism

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Abstract

This article investigates the Trump campaign’s strategic use of digital platforms and their affordances and norms that contribute to a technological performance of populism. To do so, I build on theories of populism as a performance, rather than a set of identifiable qualities, and make a theoretical intervention calling for the need to add a material and technological focus to how scholars approach the concept in our contemporary media environment. This article presents a model for understanding populist affordances as those that center “the people” to various degrees, and applies that model in a case study of how campaigns in the 2016 US presidential race engaged in a technological performance of populism across a variety of platforms, including email, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and campaign-created mobile apps. Central to this analysis are campaign strategies of controlled interactivity, amateurism, participatory/user-generated content, and data-driven campaigning.

Keywords

Amateurism, campaign 2016, digital campaigning, populism, social media

In recent years, discussions of populism have become nearly unavoidable. In describing major national movements like the UK’s Brexit campaign or Spain’s Podemos party, and individual leaders from Rodrigo Duterte to Donald Trump, journalists and academics alike have highlighted the rise of populism as a key reason behind each of these political victories (Moffitt, 2016; Mounk, 2017). Although populism is often assessed via politicians’ rhetorical style, policy initiatives, and occasionally the media logics of news coverage about them, this article argues that in order to understand populism in its current

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form, we must also investigate how digital technologies allow for and encourage particular performances of populism. The 2016 US presidential election—specifically the campaign of Donald Trump—provides insight into how to begin considering this performance as it is executed on the ground. The question of this article is not how much or what type of populist a candidate like Donald Trump is, or if digital tools increase qualities of populism, but how his campaign performed populism using digital technologies, and how those technologies afford a particularly digital performance of populism.

In the analysis that follows, I investigate the Trump campaign's use of platforms and digital campaign strategies that contribute to this performance, including the use of email, social media, and campaign-created mobile apps. To do so, I build on theories of populism and make a theoretical intervention calling for the need to add a material and technological focus to how scholars approach the concept. I then present a case study of how campaigns in the 2016 US presidential race engaged in a technological performance of populism. While this analysis centers the Trump campaign due to its strong engagement in a technological performance of populism, it also investigates and highlights the performances of the Clinton campaign as well as those of primary contenders. Ultimately, through a case study of the 2016 campaign, this article attempts to simultaneously provide a more robust theoretical framework by which to interrogate future visions of populist leaders and movements, and provide an in-depth account of how the Trump campaign and supporters were able to center "the people" through a variety of digital platforms.

Defining populism

Political scientists, economists, and rhetoricians have all made recent declarations concerning the rise of populism across the globe (Alvares and Dahlgren, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Poblete, 2015). Despite its increasing importance, populism is a phenomenon that has simultaneously been widely operationalized and maintained a lack of coherence. This is possible because, as Cass Mudde (2004) argues, populism is best understood as a "thin-centered ideology" that requires little coherence or follow through. Similarly, Ernesto Laclau (2005) has argued that populism is a terrain that is irreducible to its particular qualities, and thus provides a wealth of options from which to pick and choose, all of which can be laminated together and labeled populism by those for whom it is politically expedient. This so-called "constitutive ambiguity" (Mény and Surel, 2002) does not imply the meaning of populism is empty, but that it is a concept that is most interesting when considering when and how it is performed, and how that performance reorganizes power (Moffitt, 2016). It is this process of performance, and the new opportunities and constraints digital technologies offer, that this article is concerned with. Throughout this piece, I draw on theories of performance studies that approach technologically mediated performativity as involving a combination of human and technological agency, wherein "the digital performs, the human reacts to the agency the technologies suggest, and vice versa" (Leeker, 2017: 21). As a result, a technological performance of populism is one that is not limited to attempts by individuals to strategically create populist identities or qualities, and involves "computational operations [which] could be understood as performative, while at the same time relieving human agency from mere intentional and representational action" (Leeker, 2017: 22).

Common operationalizations of populism are rooted in assessments of two major categories: policies advocated and rhetorical tools deployed. An understanding of populism rooted in particular policy platforms has centered around two overarching topics: maintaining national culture and maintaining national economy/reducing economic intra-national inequality (De Cleen, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Nicholson and Segura, 2012). The combination of these two areas can be seen in loose, overarching definitions of populism as a “cultural backlash” (Inglehart and Norris, 2016) that is simultaneously about economic insecurity and nationalism/xenophobia, and as a “fundamental rejection of pluralism” (Müller, 2016) at local, national, and global levels. This intersection also contextualizes populism’s central distrust of institutions and elites of both the political and economic realms. Across both policy and rhetoric, populism, Margaret Canovan (1999) argues, is “best seen as an appeal to ‘the people’” that relies on the legitimacy of the democratic masses, and a concurrent railing against the established structures and values of dominant culture. The construction of “the people”—who counts and how are they addressed—has long been a topic of rhetorical studies (Higgins, 2009; Laclau, 2007; McGee, 1975).

Central to contemporary visions of “the people” are related notions of authenticity and amateurism, which rely on claims of being similar to everyday people, and in opposition to political or economic elites. Although Erica Seifert (2012) discussion of authenticity as a dominant value in post-Vietnam politics and Robert Fenno’s (2003) work on homestyle shows that attempts to cultivate authenticity may not be particularly new, digital tools offer a variety of new ways to go about this practice. As Gunn Enli (2015) has argued, mediated authenticity relies on signifying realness in medium-specific ways, and can change from blog posts to social media to email.. Twitter has been argued to be a particularly productive space to develop authenticity through a variety of rhetorical markers like using all capital letters, making mistakes, and engaging in “real talk” (Enli, 2017). A key marker for authenticity in a digital context is the amateur style. Joel Penney (2017) has detailed the ways that user generated content—literally created by amateurs—has entered political communication, and even President Trump’s staffers say they strategically write social media content with typos and mistakes labeled amateur by the press and critics, so that the content reads as authentic (Linskey, 2018). Although it is often described as involving a “disinterested pose” that demands concerted effort and has been a goal of contemporary digital campaigns (Serazio, 2017), practices that are less strategic or even accidental—such as typos, gaffes, or “real talk”—can also contribute to a performance of both authenticity and populism. **AQ: 1**

If populism can be performed by policy or rhetoric, the widespread use of digital media by politicians invites us to look at a third category: the technological. As performance studies literature has suggested, studying technological performance involves investigating how both “digital devices and infrastructures perform, and they make humans (and non-humans) perform” (Leeker et al., 2017: 11). More specifically, I approach the study of campaigns’ use of digital tools through a lens of affordance theory, in which platforms’ functional and relational elements frame, but do not fully determine campaigns’ abilities to engage in certain behaviors (Hutchby, 2001), and a combination of human and nonhuman actor act with agency. Described in greater length after the methods section, populist affordances are those that enable campaigns to interact with

and center the idea of “the people” to various degrees. This turn toward the technological is in some ways an extension of the call for attention to the mediated or mediatised aspects of populism (Chakravartty and Roy, 2017; Waisbord et al., 2003), which attend to the ways media economies can encourage or discourage populism. Taking these together, a holistic study of the performance of populism would interrogate the policies advocated, rhetoric used, the digital affordances and esthetics that contributed to the production and circulation of these messages, and the media coverage of all of the above. At present, many of the intersections of technology and populist rhetorical style or technology and populist policy have been explored, but these studies do not often account for the materiality of digital messages. For instance, the range of studies concerning the how politicians use populist language in Twitter (Enli, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2016; Kessel and Van Castelein, 2016), Facebook, or in memes (Milner, 2013), and the effects of such messages (Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2017; Hameleers and Schmuck, 2017). This article takes a broader view, arguing we must add technological affordances and norms to the way we assess a movement or politician’s populist tendencies. While Engesser et al. (2017) have called for better understandings of the “opportunity structures” offered by digital media, this article goes a step further, arguing that digital platforms and their material features, play a constitutive role (Lievrouw, 2014) in constructing the very notion of populism.

Methods

As this article is theory building rather than theory testing, it draws not from a particular sample of digital texts, but provides a synthesis and analysis of the broad landscape of digital political campaigning in the 2016 election. For instance, it discusses contemporary practices of email targeting and messaging norms that have developed over the past 20 years, and contextualizes relatively new content of campaign-produced mobile applications and games by comparing them with existing social media strategies. It discusses affordances available to all campaigns via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and those designed into email management systems, webpages, or proprietary campaign technologies. Rather than providing an analysis of already-operationalized populism, this article attempts to observe dominant patterns in how populism is constructed through digital strategies that rely on the specific norms and affordances of digital platforms.

As this article’s theoretical intervention is a call for a consideration of the constitutive nature of digital media environments and particular platforms, its methodology is necessary inductive. To investigate how digital tools provide new ways to signal populism, I take a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), considering broadly how abstract notions of populism are signaled outside of specific policies or explicit rhetorical claims, and refining those categories over time. Populism’s connections to anti-elitism, nationalism, authenticity, and “the people,” as discussed in the literature review, provided an initial way to ground inquiry into how campaigns use digital tools in ways that center “the people.” Described at length in the analysis, these categories were further refined to: amateur/anti-professional image production, user generated or participatory media creation, and soliciting feedback and participation from the public.¹ These

categories cut across the digital platforms assessed, which included campaign created email, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, and mobile apps, as well as audience-created social media content and public commenting across platforms (in an app, webpage, etc.). This article investigates a variety of platforms in an effort to show how populism can be enacted through tools with varying degrees of interactivity, showing that populist affordances are not limited to social media.²

Following development of the inductive categories described above, I added particular focus to the Instagram and Twitter accounts of the Trump and Clinton campaigns due to the way the exemplified key elements of centering the idea of “the people.” In practice, this meant accessing posts from 1 June to 8 November 2016 and analyzing their content. While I predominantly present qualitative analysis of all texts, I also provide a quantitative, descriptive account of professional versus amateur content of these Instagram posts and of the type of Twitter account the Trump campaign retweeted, the quantitative work presented here was not conducted with multiple coders or reliability testing, and these findings should be read as part of this larger inductive project that triangulates the broader trends in campaign-produced messages across a variety of digital platforms.³ This article focuses heavily on the Trump campaign (as he has been widely called a populist and his digital campaign activities seem particularly relevant to that claim), but also investigates the practices of the Clinton, Cruz, and Sanders campaigns as they provide similar and contrasting examples that provide a more robust account of the technological performance of populism in 2016. As the goal of this article is not to assess how well Trump, Clinton, or any other candidate performed populism, I do not measure differences across cases, but use a variety of cases to show the prevalence of these emerging practices and performances of populism across the 2016 field.

Technological performance of populism

If we generally map populism by assessing its rhetoric and policies, the technological performance of populism should be understood as a third axis to apply. Following Canovan’s emphasis on populism’s ability to center “the people,” I define populist affordances as the ability to center “the people” through technological means. These categories go beyond usual metrics like interactivity and engagement between institutions and individuals, in an attempt to account for the ways campaign practices center different voices, values, and styles. In order of least to most centering of “the people,” this framework involves speaking to the people, engaging with the people, styling oneself on the people, and highlighting voices of the people. Figure 1 illustrates how common digital campaigning practices fit into this model. The use of this framework as an additional axis for understanding populism, rather than a standalone assessment tool, means that campaigns can appear to perform populism by engaging in rhetoric and policy without much attention to the technological elements, or that engaging with more populist technological affordances can bolster a performance of populism that may be lacking on either of the other axes. In the following analysis, I discuss four prevalent categories of campaign practices that fit along this axis: controlled interactivity (and the many types of campaign practices that umbrella term involves), use of amateur production techniques, encouraging/enabling participatory or user-generated content, and data-campaigning.



Figure 1. A model of populist affordances, and how common digital campaigning practices fit into it.

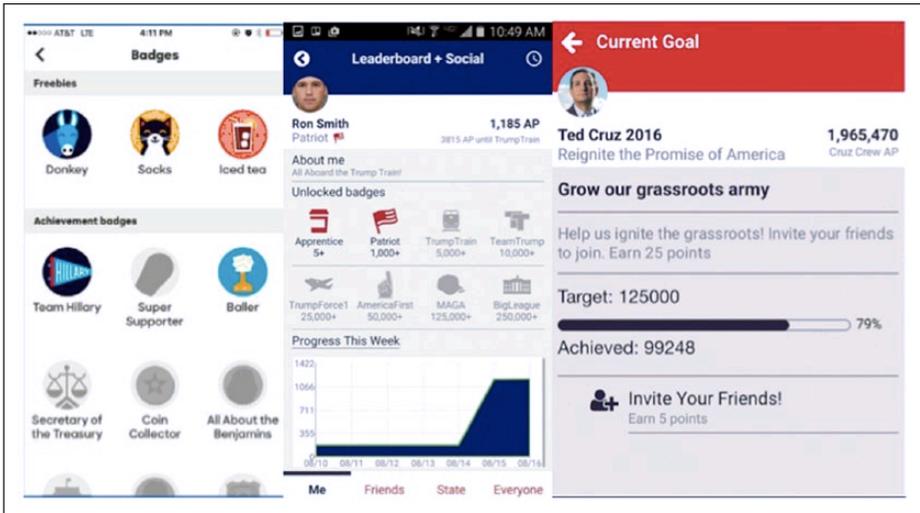


Figure 2. Gamified elements of campaign apps (left to right, Clinton, Trump, Cruz apps). [AQ: 6]

Controlled interactivity—from engaging with the people to highlighting the voices of the people

In many ways, the interactive features that have long made digital political campaigning productive are also important to the construction of populism. Indeed, digital media, and especially social media, have often been heralded as democratic in nature, even populist (Bimber, 1998; Engesser et al., 2017), precisely because of their ability to level the disparities between elites—whether they be political elites, sports heroes, or entertainment industry celebrities—and allow everyday citizens to participate (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013). Campaigns have made use of this possibility for interaction, often engaging in “controlled interactivity” or “managed participation” (Howard, 2006; Kreiss, 2012;

Stromer-Galley, 2014), defined as practices engineered by political campaigns to make citizens feel as if they are interacting with or participating in a campaign in a deeper and more reciprocal way than is often the case. Even if tightly managed, forms of controlled interactivity also center “the people” to varying degrees, as the ability to talk back establishes a context in which citizens’ voices matter. Acknowledging the role of algorithmic gatekeepers and the power of platforms to make users’ content more or less visible (Gillespie, 2014), the one-to-one and many-to-many relationship between all actors is the foundation upon which social media networks are founded. This section discusses a range of practices of controlled interactivity that contribute to the technological performance of populism, from soliciting feedback via comments/dialogue, interactive polls, and gamification, to recirculating ideas and comments of members of the public.

If the very promise of social media has been that “regular” people can talk directly to those in power, the Trump campaign’s use of Twitter regularly held up their end of the bargain, often retweeting and responding to little-known supporters who had few followers or were otherwise not known to the public. Although it has become common practice to retweet news organizations (both mainstream and more partisan sites), advocacy groups, celebrities, and figureheads for these groups, amplifying the voices of unknown potential voters and supporters is not. The Trump campaign broke with traditional campaign practice, retweeting accounts of relatively obscure and unknown supporters 109 times from 1 June to Election Day, amounting to 6.4% of the total tweets in that time frame. These individuals were not affiliated with any political institutions (from national advocacy groups to local talk radio), nor were they individuals who led politically affiliated groups (i.e. [College] Students for Trump). The Trump campaign also retweeted institutions and institutionally connected individuals at nearly the same rate, for a total of 115 times, or 6.7% of total tweets. Retweeting unknown and unvetted members of the public happened to such great extent that it has resulted in what would previously have been considered gaffe-worthy events of Trump retweeting known racists and antisemites, obscenely named accounts, and bots alike (Abramson, 2017). The Clinton campaign, on the other hand retweeted unknown members of the public virtually zero times, the closest case being leaders of small, but still institutionally connected groups like “Wellesley Women for Hillary” or staffers of other political allies. These findings support Pew data gathered during a month of the primary that found Trump retweeted the public more often than any institutions or institutionally connected actors, while Clinton most often retweeted her campaign and campaign staff, and Sanders most often retweeted the news media (Mitchell et al., 2016). In order to highlight institutional voices rather than those of the people, the Clinton campaign shied away from this populist affordance as the Trump campaign embraced it.

While email was the site of some of the first populist digital campaigning (Cornfield, 2004), it has not garnered much attention for being a particularly innovative or reciprocal technology in recent years. The Trump campaign, however, used email as yet another channel to engage with and solicit feedback from the public. Ben Epstein and Jeff Broxmeyer (2017) detail how, in a study of the massive amount of emails the Trump and Clinton campaigns sent their supporters, the Trump campaign was the only one to include short surveys, or “quizzes.” In those, the campaign asked its supporters how they felt on particular issues, or, in some particularly publicized cases, controversies that were

currently in the press, or how Trump's campaign was doing. These requests for feedback ranged from straightforward public policy polling questions that could help the campaign know what issues its biggest supporters were interested in, to biased, push-poll type questions such as this one after being in office for a year: "How would you rate the job the President is doing?" with answers limited to "Great" "Good" "Okay" and "Other," without an option to explain the final option (Watson, 2017). Far from simply lacking rigor, these push-poll style questions offer an opportunity for participation that is not only interactive, but a fun and cathartic sharing of opinions with a campaign you assume is fellow-minded, situating supporters as co-conspirators and collaborators in the campaigning. This tactic, absent from the Clinton campaign, was also undertaken by the Cruz and Carson campaigns in their respective campaign-produced mobile applications, where people could earn points for taking "quizzes" that, similarly to the internal polling campaigns do, asked supporters what political issues they cared about and what their political stances were.

Campaigns often encourage supporters to take actions such as donating or recirculating campaign content via email or social media, and 2016 saw the dominance of a new tactic to encourage such action: gamification. Gamification is fundamentally about giving those who control a system the ability to reward actions they find desirable—whether the rewards are tangible or perceived, material or social—and is shown to maintain people's attention and motivate action-taking (Bogost, 2011; Hamari et al., 2014). Traditionally, rewards take the form of allowing players to earn points, badges, or awards, level up or gain powers for taking desirable action (or removing these items for undesirable ones), and ranking users accordingly on leaderboards.

The Carson, Clinton, Cruz, Kasich, Sanders, and Trump campaigns all engaged in varying degrees of gamification to encourage mobilization,⁴ with the Clinton app involving more full-game style narrative and play, the Sanders and Kasich apps shying away from game play and gamification in favor of providing information, and the Carson, Cruz and Trump apps taking a purely gamified approach. The Clinton app used a real-time countdown toward Election Day to add urgency the calls to action it deployed, and included a narrative structure where app users went to the campaign headquarters in Brooklyn and could explore everyday life within the office. In addition to being asked to take particular actions to earn points and badges, players could engage in purely world-building experiences like petting the office dog and meeting non-playing characters. Conversely, Trump and Cruz's apps, which were created by the same company, both took a purely gamified approach, foregoing narrative and including only points systems and leaderboards in addition to a news feed that users could read and contribute to. Interestingly, the Sanders 2016 app did not prominently feature a points system or leaderboard, instead inviting people to scroll through its news category, go to events in its events tab, and learn about Sanders' position on issues engage in various forms of organizing. It did offer people the option to take action under a main navigation tab labeled "Organize," but did not gamify this experience.

In some regards, almost all activity within a campaign-created mobile app falls into the category of controlled interactivity. For an action taken—a quiz finished, a piece of profile information provided, a Facebook post shared, a friend invited—points are given, and the user's score goes up or badges are won. Some apps, like that of the Trump



Figure 3. “Digital yard sign” profile pictures from 2010 and 2012, respectively. They are from candidates of the same congressional district (IL10), but are different shapes due to changes to Facebook’s image layout.

campaign, offer badges that act as levels and are based on the number of overall points. Others, like as the Clinton campaign’s app, offers level-based badges as well as particular badges for different types of actions the campaign wants to encourage, such as repeated daily use of the app or committing to vote. By encouraging citizens to participate in campaign activities and provide feedback to campaigns and politicians, campaigns are directly requesting users to engage in participatory norms of citizenship. While not necessarily populist in ideology, these fixtures of contemporary campaign strategy are populist in structure, contributing new avenues for campaigns to engage with the people.

Amateur and antiprofessional content—styling oneself on the people

Since 2010, campaigns have produced images designed to be shared via social media: first and most commonly, as profile pictures, and later in 2012 and beyond, as infographics or persuasive messages. As the social dynamics and technological affordances of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter expanded and shifted, these signs went from being profile pictures that acted as “digital yard signs” (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015) to infographics that campaigns encouraged citizens to circulate (see Figures 3 and 4 for example). Campaigns

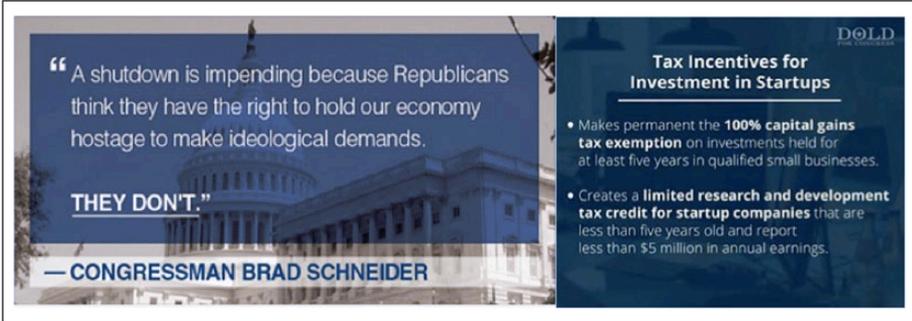


Figure 4. Professional quality infographics circulated on congressional campaign (also from IL10) Facebook accounts in 2013 and 2015.

were motivated to create and encourage the circulation of such texts for multiple reasons. Most importantly, the Facebook platform encouraged it. The newsfeed algorithm has historically been understood as rewarding images over pure text, and following this, the social norms within Facebook increasingly leaned toward the visual from 2010 on. By 2012, the Obama campaign published esthetically pleasing infographics that could explain complex issues such as economic improvement and job growth, and provide character-driven persuasive arguments for how Obama’s first-term policies improved individuals’ quality of life (Harris and Hohmann, 2013). By 2014, thanks in no small part to the development of free, easy-to-use digital design tools such as Canva or Instagram’s in-app image editing, smaller campaigns were creating national quality images and infographics with cohesive branded aesthetics (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015).

In 2016, the Trump campaign circulated infographics and videos with campaign slogans and information on Twitter and Instagram, but they looked significantly different than the Clinton campaign, and even from down-ballot races in earlier years. Looking specifically at Instagram, a space where infographics, images, and videos a campaign creates are likely to be posted, meaningful differences between the Trump and Clinton campaigns’ production quality and styles emerge. From 1 June to 8 November 8, the Clinton campaign produced an Instagram feed of 312 total posts (248 images and 64 videos), consisting almost exclusively of professional quality images and video. Of the total static images the Clinton campaign produced, 89.9% (223 images) of them are professional in style, with sharp focus, a clear center of attention, and, when involving graphic design, it was on-brand and well executed. In 476 total messages (410 images and 66 videos), the Trump campaign’s Instagram feed featured such professional caliber still images only 34.9% of the time (143 images). The Trump campaign instead chose to highlight content that was more amateur in style—panoramic shots of a crowd that may be slightly blurry or that lack a central subject of focus, poor lighting, a cropped photo that cuts people off, subjects with their eyes closed or not paying attention. Strikingly, there is little branded style or esthetic similarity across the images, with a variety of typefaces being used and little attention to maintaining a coherent brand via color, filter, or tone. While the Clinton campaign appeared to use three different fonts over the roughly 6-month period, the Trump campaign appeared to use at least 25.



Figure 5. A variety of the types of images posted to the Trump campaign’s Instagram account. From left to right: Row 1: three designed images using various amateur production techniques, such as bordered and collaged images, a mix of typefaces, stock photos and images, and out-of focus or too-dark photos. Row 2: a professional caliber image with layered text and image; an amateur image featuring a professional photograph, but hard-to-read-text; an amateur collage of photographs from an appearance on a television show and the show’s logo. Row 3: a redesigned copy of a Tweet from the Trump campaign account; an amateur behind-the-scenes style photograph; an amateur image featuring off-brand font that dominates the image.

Although some of the Trump campaign images certainly involved skillful and professional graphic design that was similar in norms and production quality to other major campaigns, many also looked of starkly low quality, due to the use of a variety of fonts in images, overwhelming amounts of difficult to read text, poorly shot or pixelated images, or layouts that separated images into strangely separated frames (see Figures 5 and 6 for comparison of typical posts). Low and amateur production values were accepted in many areas of the campaign, from Instagram to Facebook, to the banner picture for Trump’s administration and campaign accounts. Even as the campaign made use of additional app-based tools like Layout to create posts with multiple pictures or additional



Figure 6. A variety of the types of images posted to the Clinton campaign’s Instagram account. From left to right. Row 1: an amateur behind the scenes style selfie; a family picture posted as a #tbt or “throwback” (almost half of Clinton’s amateur content consisted of old family photos); a professional image of a behind the scenes moment; Row 2: three typical, professional photographs from rallies and campaign events. Row 3: three professional style images designed by the campaign.

borders, the images lacked the professionalized norms most other Instagram photos include, such as filters that increase brightness and well-framed shots of individuals.

The divide between the campaigns’ esthetics could also be seen in the videos they produced. Those the Clinton campaign posted to Instagram were often of television ad quality, involving relatively seamless editing of separate video clips, and animating text over moving images. Of the 64 videos the Clinton campaign produced, only 5 did not involve those features (one of those five was a scripted behind the scenes look into the campaign). The Trump campaign, on the other hand, created a majority of videos (38 of 66) that were amateur in quality, involving little to no editing, blurry or shaky camera work, abrupt cuts, poor sound quality, off-brand text, or text that impeded the video.

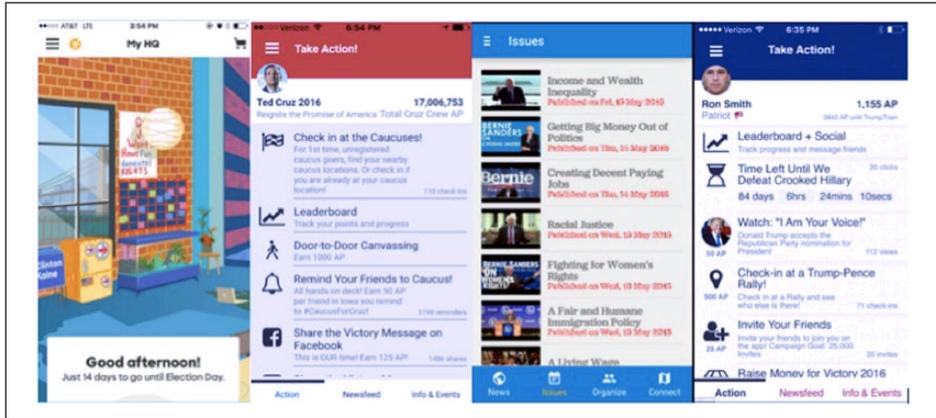


Figure 7. Screenshots from the Clinton, Cruz, Sanders, and Trump apps.

Differences in esthetics and production value also extended to campaigns' mobile apps. (Figure 7). The Trump and Cruz campaigns' mobile applications relied heavily upon text, creating simple, yet amateur esthetics. The Clinton campaign's app, *Hillary2016*, on the other hand, was widely praised for its detailed and artistic illustrations of various scenes of campaign life and narrative components, which all other apps lacked. The Clinton campaign had illustrated settings a user could “walk” through, which the Trump and Cruz campaign app consisted of a variety of lists—lists of actions you could take, a newsfeed where the campaign and other supporters could post, lists of friends and points leaders, information and events, and so on. In the *America First* and *Cruz Crew* apps, these lists were predominantly text-based, with simple icons and in-post images (such as a picture embedded in a campaign tweet) as the only images. The Sanders campaign's app was also text heavy and relied upon listed items, but established slightly more coherence with its overall campaign brand by using the same serif typeface and color scheme as the campaign logo throughout much of its app. That said, the “Connect” section of the Sanders app broke with this look, reverting to sans-serif typeface and adding to the unpolished look of the app. Although it is likely that the Cruz, Sanders, and Trump apps were created in a simplistic manner due only to time and money constraints, rather than in order to signal their populist tendencies, such choices feed into existing performances of populism and support or detract from them.

Participatory and playful politics—styling oneself on and highlighting the voices of the people

Notably, the Trump and Clinton campaigns and their supporters all engaged deeply with participatory media creation, encouraging users to become producers of campaign-related content, and relying on the public to participate in political marketing (Penney, 2017). Far from simply involving the act of production by users, participatory culture also involves traditions of play, post-modern self-reference, pastiche and DIY mashups, and perhaps

most notably, meme production and circulation (Jenkins et al., 2013; Massanari, 2015; Shifman, 2013). Memes are a uniquely participatory form of message, inviting participants to recirculate and create original texts in participate in political discourse. They are also products of Internet culture that extend throughout platforms, using and taking advantage of the affordances of each, changing shape and content when necessary or meaningful, and thus offering a range of opportunities for interaction. Finally, they are also a form of Internet social capital, signaling to others that users are in the know within a particular audience, fandom, or subculture, as well as within Internet culture as a whole. The content of political memes is more issue-based or informative than images that might serve to humanize the candidate, relying on viewers to know, understand, and synthesize that knowledge if they are to be successful (Graeff, 2016). The parodic, playful tone of memes lightens the often negative and delegitimizing arguments made within political memes (Ross and Rivers, 2017), enabling campaigns to criticize an opponent in a way that is different from “going negative” as is traditionally seen in attack ads. This playfulness is also an important element of meme culture, and indeed Internet culture, more broadly (Massanari, 2015; Shifman, 2013). Moreover, Subir Sinha (2017) has argued that social media have been a site of populist practices of articulating a claim to “the people,” because of these platforms’ ability to blur the line between elite and popular power. Within the framework of populist affordances, meme production can involve both highlighting the voices of “the people” and styling oneself on “the people.”

In the case of the 2016 campaign, the memes of “The Deplorables” and Pepe the Frog highlight the ways that Internet-birthing participatory culture drove Trump-supporting content. Following a speech in which Hillary Clinton publicly derided “half of Trump supporters” as “deplorable,” these supporters struck back, reclaiming the label and creating memes condemning her words and attacking her, and celebrating their own political views and praising Trump. Echoing the amateur design discussed earlier, crude photoshopping and splicing together video clips are common esthetic practice in memes. One of the most widely spread and popular “deplorables” memes featured Trump and members of his campaign and family (and notable racist icon Pepe the Frog) edited onto the bodies of characters from the movie poster for the film *The Expendables*, retitled as “The Deplorables” (Figure 8). The wide meme of Trump supporters as “deplorables” extended beyond image-oriented memes, as Twitter users began renaming their handles with the title of Deplorable as well.

Memes highlighting support of both Trump and Clinton also drew heavily on imagery of Internet culture. Mentioned above, one of the most prominent recurring icons in Trump supporting memes was Pepe the Frog. Pepe has a long history in Internet culture (Roy, 2016), as a recurring feature of message boards where many memes originate, and ultimately laid claim to by White supremacists, who have long played a role in the less-trafficked, more anonymous portions of the Internet. Precisely because of its emergence from the participatory cultures of the Internet, Pepe’s meaning remains inherently polysemous and ambiguous, even as its connection to hate groups became widely known. Far from merely circulating images of Pepe or Photoshopping him into political situations, Trump supporters also appropriated the frog emoji as a stand-in for Pepe, signaling a range of meanings from “I am a white supremacist” to “I am a Trump supporter.” Trump supporters also repeatedly used images associated with “mom memes,” like the Minion characters from the children’s animated movie *Despicable Me*, which have become a staple of Internet



Figure 8. Deplorable memes across platforms.

culture irony that has also seen wide engagement from older populations in a genuine and irony-free manner (Douglas, 2015; Feldman, 2015). As use of Minion memes often signals a deep misunderstanding of Internet culture by older, not digitally savvy populations, it also allows multiple populations a way into the same conversation.

Beyond the specific memetic texts of the 2016 campaign, it is important to note that the technologies of meme creation are themselves democratic and populist, enabling almost anyone to craft their own content and become part of a conversation. Creators of memes need not be knowledgeable of Photoshop or other editing software, as meme generators provide templates that make it easy to combine any available picture with desired text, precoded to load in Impact font, creating a text immediately recognizable as a meme, the esthetics of which are necessarily amateur.

While supporters created a majority of this work, campaigns themselves also produced content that drew on participatory esthetics, referenced memes directly, or was designed to be turned into memes. A major form of this type of content production involved creating and purchasing Snapchat filters for supporters to use at public events,

and circulate these images to their own networks (done by the Clinton, Sanders, and Trump campaigns). The Clinton campaign took this idea beyond Snapchat, developing a propriety tool called Trump Yourself, which allowed users to add their face to campaign slogans or mock Trump's attacks, and directly encouraged users to circulate these images and highlight them on social media. The Clinton Instagram account recirculated one such image, and the Trump campaign made multiple Instagram videos that made reference to "deplorables" or used meme-like cartoon images of Clinton's nose growing like Pinocchio. Even when they do not directly create meme content, campaigns often reference content, push connected narratives on journalists, and encourage surrogates to recirculate such content, and social media platforms enable users to see both campaign and supporter-produced content in the same space (Bossetta, 2018; Kreiss et al., 2018).

Foregoing data-driven campaigning—talking to the people?

Increasingly, campaigns' ability to engage in microtargeting, or using the digital footprint data of an audience create and circulate messages in a highly specific and personalized way, has been a subject of excitement, concern, and attention for campaigns (Barocas, 2012; Hersh, 2015). While it has become popular, it is not a particularly populist aspect of campaigning. Politicians, academics, and journalists alike have made claims about the failure of targeting data as an adequate stand-in for "the people," and individual people more generally. In a literal way, the practices of microtargeting segment the public into niche audiences rather than speak to a massive group of divergent interests. Even if targeting has long existed, microtargeting (and touting it as a great strategy) represents a public claim of the practice of disassembling the people into many audiences, rather than speaking to "the people" (which stands as the lowest level of the populist affordances model). Although populist messages could certainly be sent out in such an approach, the affordance of microtargeting itself does not center the people. As the Trump campaign notably lagged behind both the Clinton campaign and the Cruz campaign, the lack of use of an affordance contributes to Trump's technological performance of populism.

Despite the post-victory publicity garnered by the Trump campaign's data operation, to call the campaign a data-driven operation is a mistake. Although aided by Cambridge Analytica's social media ad targeting and the RNC's email testing data late in the campaign season, these contributions were limited in the percentage of the campaign in which they were deployed, and outside of social media ad buys were limited in scope more generally. Although email is a rather old technology, it is the site of the vast majority of analytics-based message testing (Baldwin-Philippi, 2016; Hestres, 2017; Issenberg, 2012; Karpf, 2016), and it is something the Trump campaign lacked capacity in. In both 2008 and 2012, the Republican presidential nominees' use of data lagged behind both Obama campaigns. Following the 2012 election, the RNC made a concerted effort to improve its targeting capacity, but these efforts were not enough to overtake the continued development of the DNC and the Clinton campaign in particular, and were in fact hamstrung by the Trump campaign's lack of capacity around analytics-backed practices (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017). Even in the primaries, the Cruz campaign's use of data far outpaced that of the Trump campaign. Trump, on the other hand used mass-oriented digital tools like Twitter to effectively drive traditional news coverage (Chadwick, 2017;

Wells et al., 2016). The Trump campaign was even publicly called out by tech journalists and political journalists alike for perceived rookie mistakes, like not targeting email lists by geography, political interest, or other common demographic categories, or getting rally attendees email addresses when they signed up, but not verifying attendance (Caldwell, 2016; Detrow, 2016). At the other extreme, the Clinton campaign, which continued with best practices in testing and analytics-driven decision-making the Obama campaign pioneered in 2012 to the degree that many people working in both the analytics and the digital shops in Brooklyn were the same staffers who headed those departments in Chicago in 2012. In many post hoc analyses, the Clinton campaign was in fact criticized for being *too* data-driven (Gold, 2017). Specifically that their use of (ostensibly imprecise) data led them away from the changes in public opinion—or true knowledge of “the people”—they should have been able to otherwise see. The Trump campaigns’ choices to forego analytics-backed practices across platforms were likely not strategic in nature, but a product of lacking necessary resources while being able to make use of ubiquitous and user-friendly publicly oriented platforms. Still, the presence of mass appeals at rallies, on Twitter, and in email inboxes, rather than highly targeted and repeatedly tested features, results in visible engagement with more populist affordances.

Conclusion

While political theorists have acknowledged that the concept of populism is more ideological than substantive, and open to enough interpretation that it can be more than performed in an ad hoc manner, gaps remain in how its features have been assessed. This article seeks to remedy at least one of those gaps, proposing a framework that accounts for the ways candidates and movements can perform populism through the use of various digital platforms and strategies. This model asks scholars of populism and political communication to pay special attention to the way that digital affordances that center “the people” contribute to and/or disrupt populist efforts. Practices of controlled interactivity across a variety of platforms, including email, social media, and mobile apps, allow campaigns to speak to and engage with the people, and the Trump campaign also made use of highlighting the voices of the people through these practices. Similarly, engagement with playful participatory politics gave users avenues to actively contribute to the campaign without management, including generic conventions of memes as well as the use of particular Internet “characters,” such as the 4chan-birthed Pepe the Frog, and animated Minions from the *Despicable Me* movies. These moments of playful politics not only center everyday people as message-creators, but invite them to draw on their own communities of practice, identities, and interests as they do so, tapping into the anti-elite element of populism. Also emphasizing an anti-elite disposition, the Trump campaign’s content often reflected an amateur production style, despite widespread professionalization of campaign content over the past 8 years. Although this article’s observations about amateur production style in Instagram posts has limitations due to the fact that they were coded by a single person and have therefore not been reliability tested, these broad findings align with similar qualities found in the Trump campaigns’ mobile app discussed in this article, as well as additional studies’ assessment of Twitter content (Enli, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016). Further, more deductive work in this area remains an important

area for further scholarship. Finally, the Trump campaign made more limited use of practices that did not center notions of “the people,” such as microtargeting. These are not simply practices that exist within a platform, but practices that are of the platform—important norms and common practices that relate directly to their mediated nature. When yoked together, these affordances and digital esthetics enable the technological, as opposed to a rhetorical or policy-based, performance of populism.

Attention to the technological performance of populism is not only important for a more robust understanding of the phenomenon of populism, but also provides insight into contemporary digital political campaigning practices. In discussions of productive digital campaigning, one common refrain about the successes of the Trump campaign and subsequent administration has been that of “authenticity” (Enli, 2017; Jamieson and Taussig, 2017; Kennedy and Kolb, 2016; McGregor et al., 2016). In these assessments, “authenticity” stands in for many behaviors exhibited both on and offline—an unfiltered and combative style, adherence to amateur or outsider status through disavowals of a teleprompter or managed persona, willingness to go off-script and an embracing of that would have previously been understood as gaffes, and so on—without reference to any essential or true self. By approaching authenticity and amateurism as connected to performing populism, we can better investigate the persuasive or mobilizing work such practices may be doing.

These findings also highlight how practices of digital campaigning fit into and can be complicated by larger cultural conversations, such as populism. Interestingly, technological performances of populism may not be “good” campaign tactics, and while campaigns may make strategic choices about to perform populism through digital tools, they also might unintentionally engage in a populist performance while making “poor” use of digital tools. While certain elements of digital campaigning have gained clear consensus as best practices (message testing emails, not sending push polls, or vetting those who act as surrogates for a campaign, for instance), this work shows there may also be ways that “bad” practices fit within a particular cultural moment. Moreover, it demonstrates that how even tactics were enacted unintentionally or amounted to a failure with regard to more instrumental goals, they may meaningfully expand what is seen as the repertoire of available practices. These digital campaigning practices extend across a variety of tools, from how the campaign creates images for circulation and makes design choices when creating original mobile applications, to how new platforms enable interaction with the public in popular social media platforms. Together, this information highlights the variety of ways populism can be performed via digital technologies.

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Notes

1. In refining, I discarded the concept of nationalism because while it is relevant to populism, it was only legible as a rhetorical (often visual) practice, rather than related to the technological axis.

2. I forego analysis of campaign websites and Youtube channels as a major function of each is to serve as a repository for vast amounts of campaign content, including content often circulated via social media.
3. These posts were accessed a year after the election, from the publicly available Trump Twitter Archive, created by Brendan Brown (<http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/>), and scraped from the Trump and Clinton campaign's publicly accessible Instagram in April 2018 using 4K Stogram.
4. Campaigns' field teams also developed apps geared toward canvassers (e.g. Sanders' Field The Bern app), combining voter data and canvassing instructions, and allowing for decentralized canvassing operations and data collection. The focus of this article is on supporter apps that do not necessitate participating in such a high-participation action such as canvassing.

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Author biography

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