ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL
Available Online: https://assajournal.com
Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025.Page#.1273-1286
Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

# Digital Populism and the Erosion of Media Gatekeepers: The Role of Social Media in Modern Politics

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**ABSTRACT**
*The rise of digital populism has transformed political communication by enabling leaders to bypass traditional media and engage directly with the public through social media platforms. This shift allows politicians to disseminate unedited, emotionally charged messages, often appealing to anti-establishment sentiments, as seen in the strategies of figures like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Narendra Modi. While this democratizes access to political discourse, it also undermines the gatekeeping role of traditional journalism, facilitating the spread of misinformation and polarization. Social media algorithms amplify sensationalist content, creating echo chambers and simplifying complex policy debates into viral slogans. The decline of institutional trust and the rise of authoritarian tendencies further complicate the democratic landscape. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including platform regulation, media literacy initiatives, and the adaptation of traditional media to new digital realities. The article explores the dual nature of digital populism its potential for civic engagement and its risks to democratic integrity and calls for systemic solutions to balance innovation with accountability.*

***Keywords:*** *Digital Populism, Social Media, Political Communication, Misinformation, Traditional Media, Polarization, Algorithms, Democracy, Regulation, Media Literacy.*

## Introduction

Digital populism is the practice of political leaders using social media to conduct direct dialogue with the population and bypass the participation of the traditional media (Gerbaudo, 2018). This method enables politicians to design un-edited messages, which is usually rhetoric in nature that appeals to the emotions to rally supporters without having such messages put through the editorial process. In contrast to traditional media with their editorial control and fact-checking guidelines, social media allows distributing content instantly, individually, and in a very interactive manner (Engesser et al., 2017). Interactive environments of such platforms as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Tik Tok, and YouTube have established a new paradigm according to which politicians can evade the established gatekeepers and address their base directly (Chadwick, 2017). The given form of direct communication especially worked well with populist leaders, who presented

themselves as anti-establishment agents battling against a corrupt establishment (Moffitt, 2016). For instance, Donald Trump's prolific Twitter usage allowed him to set the daily news agenda during his presidency, often using inflammatory language that would have been filtered or contextualized by traditional media outlets (Waisbord, 2018). In the same manner, such leaders as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India have perfected this strategy as they use platforms such as Facebook Live and WhatsApp broadcasts to promote their political interests at the expense of critical media outlets (Tucker et al., 2018).

Digital populism is a significant change in the political communication landscape as a transition to a direct-to-voter communication model occurred in the traditional model of journalism where the professional news organizations performed the gatekeeper role (Chadwick, 2017). In the past, political communication was channeled through newspapers, television channels, and radio stations, forcing politicians to haggle with reporters and editors, who may dispute their statements or put them into perspective (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). The emergence of social media has, however, changed this dynamic as political leaders are now able to circumnavigate these institutional checks and be able to control their own narratives in real time (Tucker et al., 2018). This transformation has brought democracy to the political process in one way whereas it has opened up the democratic process to new challenges (Persily, 2017). The decline of traditional media's gatekeeping function has facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation and contributed to increasingly polarized political debates (Freelon & Wells, 2020). In addition, the fact that the algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content also implies that populist rhetoric, frequently simplistic and polarizing, is likely to enjoy an undue prominence on the internet (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Such a phenomenon leads to a serious concern regarding the issue of political accountability in the digital era, where uncontrolled online discourse may increase the popularity of populist appeals that do not concern themselves with the truth but rather appeal to the emotions rather than logical arguments (Moffitt, 2016).

With the digital populism further transforming the environment of political communication, the overall impact of this phenomenon on the democratic governance process is highly debated among the academic community and policymakers (Persily, 2017). According to the advocates, social media has increased transparency and the involvement of the population due to the collapse of formal boundaries between citizens and politicians (Chadwick, 2017). They point to examples like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's innovative use of Instagram Live to explain complex policy issues to young voters as evidence of social media's democratizing potential (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). Nonetheless, the same platforms are being cited by critics as the cause of institutional trust loss and partisan extremism due to the facilitation of disinformation and the strengthening of ideological echo chambers (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). The digital environment is also made more complicated by the fact that political actors can micro-target certain demographic groups with specific messages that may have false purpose (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Such technological change shows the necessity of introducing a system of strict regulatory measures and strong media literacy campaigns to prevent the dangers of online misinformation without sacrificing the democratic possibilities of digital interactions (Freelon & Wells, 2020). When we look at this phenomenon, it is apparent that the concept of digital populism is essential in understanding how the contemporary governance and political discourse may be fundamentally redefined in the age when viral media content plays a dominant role over rational

debate and when emotional appeals usually take precedence over significant policy discussions (Tucker et al., 2018).

**The Decline of Traditional Media's Gatekeeping Role**

Over the last several decades, legacy media institutions, such as newspapers, television networks, and radio stations, were the biggest gatekeepers of political messaging that controlled the information flow between politicians and the general population (McQuail, 2013). Such conventional media institutions were governed by the accepted journalistic standards, such as editorial control, fact-checking, and impartiality in reporting, which allowed the political discourse to be constructed but with a certain level of responsibility (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Politicians used press conferences, interviews, and news reports to relay their messages, which in this case, their intentions were usually refined by professional journalists, who had the opportunity to refute allegations, put things in perspective, or respond to misinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Such a model guaranteed that the political discourse was moderated by the institutional checks, although in some cases it was influenced by the media corporation's preferences (Herman & Chomsky, 2008). But this gatekeeping role has been undermined by the emergence of digital platforms so that politicians can now entirely bypass traditional media and address their constituents themselves, and in many cases unchecked (Chadwick, 2017).

The social media dislocation has been immense because politicians can now spread their messages in an instant and without editorials through social media such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube (Tucker et al., 2018). In contrast to traditional journalism, where the practice follows the professional principles of verification and balance, social media presents the emotionally captivating, simplistic, and polarizing messages rewarded by the audience (Persily, 2017). The algorithms reward viral content, which translates to the fact that inflammatory statements regularly attract more attention than a discussion about policy (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). The change has emboldened populist leaders who live off anti-establishment rhetoric because they will now be able to bypass the skeptical journalists and go directly to their supporters (Moffitt, 2016). The implications are enormous: political communication is getting more determined by immediacy and spectacle instead of deliberation and fact-based debate (Waisbord, 2018). Also, due to the decrease in the power of traditional gatekeepers, it is much easier to disseminate misinformation without any control, because social media and legacy media do not have the same mechanisms of accountability (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

One of the brightest illustrations of this change is the Twitter-dominant nature of Donald Trump until his ban in 2021 (Ott, 2017). Trump took to the platform to announce policy and attack his opponents, promote controversial claims without journalistic fact-checking or moderation. His tweets often dictate the news agenda even to the traditional media who are now being reactive instead of being proactive in political discussions (Wells et al., 2020). Trump also built an alternative channel to his supporters by avoiding conventional media outlets, casting influential members of the press as a "fake news media" and building upon an "us versus them" rhetoric (Benkler et al., 2018). Not only did this tactic negatively affect the trust in traditional media but also proved the point that social media could be used as a tool of influence over the masses (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In the same way, Facebook live streams enabled Jair Bolsonaro to reach out to millions of Brazilians without mediation by professional journalists (Recuero et al., 2020). His broadcasts had been full of false information about COVID-19 causing a lot of harm, and

Facebook was late to moderate; the latter showing how digital spaces allow leaders to spread misinformation that might cause harm and leave them unaccountable (Santos et al., 2021).

The other interesting example is the one of Narendra Modi who addressed Indian voters directly through the WhatsApp broadcast (Pal et al., 2020). The WhatsApp platform has more than 500 million users in India, to which Modi has been using its Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to disseminate messages, including propaganda and false information, to targeted groups of people (Banerjee, 2019). In contrast to conventional media, WhatsApp is an encrypted and decentralized network that is hard to track and fact-check political messages facilitating the uncontrolled spreading of polarizing language (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Modi government has also been alleged of deploying automated bots and fake accounts to boost its message further weakening gatekeeping role of professional journalism (Udupa, 2018). Such cases can illustrate that the social media platforms not only broke the influence of the traditional media on political discourse but also introduced entirely new problems to democratic governance, such as the rise of disinformation and the reduction of institutional trust (Persily, 2017).

The loss of the gatekeeping role of the traditional media leaves very important questions regarding the future of political communication and democratic responsibility (Pickard, 2020). In contrast to its democratizing effect on information access (since it enables politicians and citizens to interact directly with one another), social media has increased polarization, misinformation, and authoritarian approaches (Zuboff, 2019). In the absence of the balancing mechanism of professional journalism, the political conversation is more and more in the hands of the algorithms that reward engagement rather than truth (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). According to some scholars, restoring balance can be achieved through rebuilding trust in the conventional media and redesigning the social media regulation (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Some, however, argue, that the gatekeeping model has been broke beyond repair and a completely new system of providing transparency and accountability in the digital era is needed (Freedman, 2018). Faced with increasing efforts by politicians to use social media as an unmediated source of communication, democracies will have to find a way of countering the evils of digital populism without hampering the freedom of political speech (Sunstein, 2017).

**How Social Media Fuels Populist Messaging**

The emergence of social media outlets has made them potent spreaders of populist rhetoric mainly because of their algorithmic designs that reward clicks over content (Zuboff, 2019). These algorithms are pre-programmed to put a lot of content that attracts intense emotions, especially anger, fear, or outrage, since those are kinds of posts that result in the most interaction among users and increase the overall use of the platform (Brady et al., 2021). Consequently, the unconstructive political messages tend to gain excessive attention, whereas subtle policy debates are pushed to the periphery (Ribeiro et al., 2020). It is an optimal setting to populist leaders, who depend on black-and-white, Us versus Them stories that can only proliferate in attention-driven systems (Badawy et al., 2019). As an illustration, studies indicate that morally interesting tweets travel more quickly on Twitter than neutral, political, language, which provides populists with a structural advantage in the general discourse (Brady et al., 2021). The proposed algorithmic bias towards the emotional content successfully rewards polarizing rhetoric and punishes complexity, which literally transforms the essence of political communication (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

One of the processes contributing to this trend is the construction of digital echo chambers and advanced micro targeting ability (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Social media sites gather large

quantities of information about their users, which means that political players can present hyper-personalized content to support the already held beliefs and biases (Tufekci, 2019). This selectivity means that voters will see more and more ideologically harmonious messages and be prevented against any contrary opinion (Bakshy et al., 2015). In elections, campaigns can divide the audience with a scalpel: this or that message is sent to a particular demographic category (Hersh, 2020). The 2016 presidential election in the U.S. showed how psychographic profiling could be applied to influence the minds of voters, and some would get inflammatory information regarding immigration, whereas others would be exposed to messages of economic protectionism (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017). Such a division of the sphere of public life into separate information bubbles complicates the process of building consensus and promotes populism that relies on polarization (Sunstein, 2018).

Another aspect of populist communication on social media is that it is based on simplified and viral-friendly forms that avoid policy complexity (Waisbord, 2018). The difficult political problems are simplified to catchy slogans, affective images, and memes that spread quickly across the networks (Shifman, 2018). It is reflected in such simplification as the campaigns of Take Back Control (Brexit) or Build the wall (Trump), as complex problems were reduced to emotionally appealing, yet policy-imprecise slogans (Moffitt, 2016). The study has shown that this type of simplified messaging works especially well on visual platforms, such as Instagram and Tik Tok, where the target audience has limited attention and where the emotional appeal counts more than the factual information (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). The formatting limitations of communication platforms (e.g., Twitter character limit) also promote such a reductionist approach towards the political communication process (Parmelee, 2020). As a result, the social media process is increasingly becoming about the charismatic performance rather than substantive discussion, where politicians are now evaluated more on their viral quality than policy mastery (Enli, 2017).

The Brexit referendum offers a very interesting case study of the convergence of these dynamics in practice (Moore & Ramsay, 2017). Observing the Vote Leave campaign, it is clear that they applied the micro targeting capabilities of Facebook to the fullest, sending various messages to various groups of voters (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). A well-known advert--Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU was displayed especially to the audiences inclined towards anti-immigration rhetoric, although it was created on the grounds of misleading statements (Persily, 2017). The most common content shared by the campaign was always simplified, emotionally loaded rhetoric on the topics of sovereignty and immigration instead of complicated economic arguments (Bastos & Mercea, 2019). More importantly, the total amount expended on the Facebook ads completely paled in comparison to the organic reach procured via algorithmic boosting of polarizing content (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). The case demonstrates that the structural properties of social media, when coupled with the populist approach to communication, can play an important role in affecting democratic processes without resorting to the mechanisms of traditional accountability (Tucker et al., 2018). The case of Brexit shows that there is an immediate necessity to revisit the issue of platform governance and political advertising regulation in the digital era (Nielsen et al., 2020).

**The Appeal of Direct Communication**

The avoidance of traditional media scrutiny and the total control over the messaging are among the greatest benefits of social media to politicians (Enli, 2017). Avoiding the need to go through

journalistic mediators, political actors can evade difficult questions, the verification of facts, and the discussion of their arguments by critiquing the arguments and any contradictions or flaws in them (Lawrence et al., 2020). This direct access to the constituents enables politicians to deliver highly selected stories without journalistic gatekeeping that could otherwise put their statements into perspective and question them (Vaccari, 2020). As an example, Donald Trump, who used to be the U.S. President, often issued significant policy statements and launched attacks on his opponents on Twitter with no major journalistic intervention (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). According to research, such direct communication approach is especially successful when used by populist leaders, who tend to present traditional media as a part of a corrupt establishment and represent themselves as genuine representatives of the masses (Waisbord, 2018). Nevertheless, this solution brings up very important democratic questions, as it allows to spread misinformation and dilute accountability systems which always played a central role in the political discourse (Tucker et al., 2018).

The use of social media communication also enables politicians to develop a strong feeling of authenticity, which modern audiences can relate to (Enli, 2017). Real time and unscripted aspects of such platforms as Instagram Live or Twitter make people believe that they can see the real person behind the political figure (Kreiss, 2019). This strategy has been perfected by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) using her creative approach to Instagram Live to ask her followers to define her policy positions at the kitchen table, as she cooks dinner (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2020). This method removes the old taboos between politicians and voters and creates intimacy and trust that is hard to obtain and maintain using traditional media presence (Chadwick, 2019). Research shows that this type of seemingly genuine communication works especially well among younger demographics, who do not trust institutional politics but react well to a more personal and transparent approach (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Yet, researchers warn that such perceived authenticity is usually well-calculated and behind the scenes, we are likely to find a group of digital strategists who prepare these seemingly spontaneous moments (Kreiss & McGregor, 2019).

Most importantly, it is possible that direct social media communication allows politicians to create the support of grassroots and react to the controversies faster than ever before (Karpf, 2016). It is possible to provide an instant response to the emerging story, and Facebook groups can fast-track supporters around a particular topic or counter-narrative through platforms such as Twitter (Bennett & Segerberg, 2018). This fast-response capacity was seen in AOCs 2018 campaign, when her staff members would immediately clarify any misinformation by her opponents and the media, which attracted progressive activists to her campaign (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2020). In a similar way, the possibility to micro-target certain demographics with specific messages enables the campaigns to mobilize niche constituencies that may be neglected in mass media tactics (Hersh, 2020). Studies of digital campaigning show that this direct mobilization is especially targeted at outsider candidates and social movements since it limits the dependence on old party organizations and media (Karpf, 2016). Nevertheless, this ability can also worsen the political polarization, as the politicians can talk mostly to their constituents and not reach out to the wider and more diverse audiences (Sunstein, 2017). With direct digital communication becoming the standard, the task of democratic systems will be to maintain cross-cutting discourse spaces and use the possibilities of these new technologies as a participatory tool (Freelon et al., 2020).

**Risks and Challenges of Digital Populism**

Digital populism has led to the situation where it is easy to conduct misinformation without any checks because social media platforms do not have the best verification systems on political information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In contrast to the conventional journalism which is guided by editorial principles and fact-checking procedures, social media provides politicians and ill-intended actors with an opportunity to share false or misleading statements with little or no accountability (Tandoc et al., 2018). Studies also show that misinformation travels much faster than facts on such social networks as Twitter and Facebook, especially when it confirms the populist discourse that involves primarily emotions and not facts (Vosoughi et al., 2018). As an example, in the case of COVID-19, populist leaders like Brazilian Jair Bolsonaro and the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte have utilized social media to propagate ineffective cures and reject scientific experience (Bennett et al., 2021). Such weakening of the fact-based discourse is detrimental to informed democratic decision-making, with voters becoming more and more unable to separate between credible information and falsehoods that are being used to manipulate them (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). What makes the situation even worse, platforms prioritize engagement in the algorithm, which results in misinformation that is often sensationalized gaining more exposure than a balanced and factual coverage (Persily & Tucker, 2020).

One of the most toxic outcomes of the digital populism is the systematic loss of trust in institutions, such as media and academia as well as government agencies (Luhrmann & Lindberg, 2019). The leaders describing themselves as populists position such institutions as a part of an illegitimate elite, ignoring critical journalism as fake news and professionals as disconnected technocrats (Farkas & Schou, 2020). The social media have made this delegitimization campaign extra potent, as conspiracy theories and anti-establishment narratives spread there virally (Uscinski et al., 2021). The situation in the United States is no different and the constant diversion of the so-called mainstream media has led to a drastic decrease in the trust levels among the public as only 34 percent of the Americans have gained confidence in the traditional news sources in 2023 (Pew Research Center, 2023). In Hungary, the government of Viktor Orb has used social media to turn independent journalists into enemies of the state, making it much easier to concentrate authoritarian control (Polyak, 2022). The resulting lack of trust between people and their institutions leaves a vacuum that leads to populist messages taking root in any society regardless of how unfounded they are, leaving society easy prey to demagoguery and manipulation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Digital populism is also a factor that negatively impacts political polarization by supporting black-and-white, us-versus-them perceptions of the world with little possibility of compromise (McCoy et al., 2018). The algorithms of social media are set to maximize engagement and they therefore serve users the content that confirms what they previously believe in, thus leading to self-reinforcing echo chambers (Bakshy et al., 2015). This process is used by populist actors, who present political issues as a struggle of life and death between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," where there is only a binary to be won (Mudde, 2020). In India, the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has employed WhatsApp to distribute anti-minority propaganda that contributes to the intraethnic strife (Banerjee, 2021), and in the U.S., right-wing extremists have sought to organize on the platforms such as Gab and Telegram around exclusionary nationalist politics (Conway et al., 2022). The latter is caused by so-called outrage entrepreneurs, who are political leaders and media celebrities who purposely arouse outrage in order to galvanize their followers (Berry & Sobieraj, 2021). It also leads to the disintegration of the public sphere in which cross-

cutting dialogue becomes more and more uncommon, and political differences become cultural warfare (Suhay et al., 2022).

What is most disturbing, though, is that digital populism has led to the emergence of authoritative tendencies in the allegedly democratic regimes, with the leaders using social media to shut down anyone who opposes them and securing their authority (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). Several governments have increasingly used troll armies and automated bots to bully critics on the internet, which is a strategy that authoritarian regimes in Turkey, Russia, and China are using (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). In less dramatic versions, populists have been elected, such as Giorgia Meloni in Italy and Javier Milei in Argentina, who have turned to their huge social media audiences to evade institutional controls, as barriers to the popular will (Moffitt, 2023). According to the legal scholars, such practices are popularizing a new form of authoritarianism in the digital age, in which leaders can use the mechanisms of participatory media to destroy democratic norms (Feldstein, 2021). To give an example, El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele has attacked journalists on Twitter and has been cheering the loss of judicial independence and, at the same time, has been scoring high popularity ratings (Alvarez & Valencia, 2023). These tendencies imply that until the major reforms of the platforms and enhancement of protective measures, digital populism can further undermine the principles of liberal democracy across the globe (Zakaria, 2023).

**Way Forward**

The ability of social media platforms to regulate themselves in terms of political content is also very controversial, and it is clear by the fact that the fact-checking policies are unevenly applied in various situations (Gillespie, 2018). Although the short-lived trial of labeling misleading tweets made by political figures by Twitter showed the hypothetical possibilities of accountability that the platforms can provide (Roth & Pickles, 2020), the inherent conflict between corporate and democratic values remains. Studies show that platforms are faced with what is referred to as a moderator dilemma; either tight control of content will be accused of censoring, and light policies will allow misinformation to thrive (Douek, 2021). This contradiction was made especially evident in the 2020 U.S. election, where platforms put in place short-term protection against electoral misinformation and then reversed them later (Persily & Tucker, 2020). Moreover, Facebook internal records demonstrate that the attempts to make algorithms less toxic towards politics unintentionally lowered engagement levels, sending the wrong message to content creators, who may not see a reason to work harder on themselves (Horwitz & Seetharaman, 2020). These difficulties indicate that although platform self-regulation can be one of the solutions, it cannot be the only one to the threats of digital populism to democratic discourse (Klonick, 2020).

Government regulation is becoming a significant addition to platform self-regulation, and the Digital Services Act (DSA) of the EU can be described as the most far-reaching attempt so far to regulate platform responsibility (Tambini et al., 2021). Under the tiered approach, the DSA will put more stringent requirements in terms of transparency and due diligence on the very large online platforms, such as the necessity to conduct risk assessments of democratic systemic harms (European Commission, 2022). In the U.S., such initiatives as the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act have been proposed to pressure platforms into providing information to researchers examining the disinformation problem (Lujan & Eshoo, 2021). Nevertheless, these regulatory initiatives are confronted with many issues such as jurisdictional constraints, first amendment implications, and the extreme rate of development of circumvention strategies by malicious users (Keller, 2021). Comparative analysis suggests that the effectiveness of regulation

differs significantly depending on the level of enforcement and political situation, and although the NetzDG law in Germany decreased the amount of overt hate speech, this tool can be used to crack down on criticism in authoritarian systems (Cusumano & Pohle, 2022). This implies that effective regulation between democratic control and safeguard of fundamental rights should occur (Cremer et al., 2022).

Ultimately, it might be the fate of democratic discourse in the digital era which is impacted by the promotion of media literacy and regulations (Breakstone et al., 2021). Research proves that the education of media literacy can have a substantial impact on the capacity of users to recognize misinformation, especially when it is aimed at teaching lateral reading and source evaluation skills (Wineburg et al., 2022). The national media literacy program in Finland, incorporating the critical thinking of digital propaganda into school curricula in all subjects, has proved to be especially effective in creating resilience in society (Poyhtari et al., 2021). In the case of the traditional media, to operate within this new environment, it is necessary to reconsider business models and, at the same time, increase the level of investigative rigor and transparency (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Others such as The Washington Post have been able to switch to a mix of the subscription and new forms of digital storytelling, whereas others face the conflict between engagement rates and the journalistic norms (Bell & Owen, 2022). The future probably contains a more hybrid media ecology with professional journalism alongside, but still separate to, channels of direct political communication (Chadwick, 2021). Nevertheless, unless all three of these fronts are pursued and addressed with concerted efforts, the corrosive impacts of digital populism might exceed the self-corrective capability of democracies (Benkler et al., 2022).

**Conclusion**

The ascent of digital populism marks a fundamental shift in how political power is constructed and contested in the 21st century. Social media platforms have democratized political communication by dismantling traditional gatekeepers, enabling direct engagement between leaders and citizens, and amplifying voices that were historically marginalized. This newfound accessibility has revitalized civic participation in many ways, fostering movements that challenge entrenched power structures and creating spaces for grassroots organizing. Yet, this very openness has also become a conduit for manipulation, where the absence of editorial oversight allows misinformation to flourish and emotional rhetoric to overshadow reasoned debate. The paradox of digital populism lies in its dual nature it empowers and disrupts, includes and divides, democratizes and destabilizes. As we stand at this crossroads, the central challenge is not merely to critique these platforms but to reckon with their irreversible role in shaping modern democracy while mitigating their most harmful consequences.

The regulatory landscape attempting to address these challenges remains uneven and fraught with contradictions. On one hand, initiatives like the EU's Digital Services Act demonstrate a growing recognition that platform accountability is essential to preserving democratic integrity. These efforts aim to impose transparency and curb the worst excesses of algorithmic amplification without stifling free expression. However, such measures often struggle to keep pace with the rapid evolution of digital tactics, while their implementation varies widely across political contexts. In more authoritarian regimes, similar regulations are weaponized to suppress dissent, revealing how easily well-intentioned frameworks can be co-opted. Meanwhile, the reliance on media literacy as a societal defense against misinformation, though vital, is a slow and generational project one that cannot alone counteract the immediate damage wrought by viral falsehoods and

polarized discourse. The tension between innovation and regulation, between free speech and communal harm, underscores the complexity of governing digital spaces in a way that upholds democratic values without lapsing into censorship or complacency.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of democratic norms in the digital age will depend on a recalibration of how truth, trust, and power function in public life. Traditional media institutions must adapt, not by nostalgically clinging to their former gatekeeping role but by reasserting their value as arbiters of verified information and forums for nuanced debate. Political leaders, tech companies, and civil society alike must confront the uncomfortable reality that the architecture of social media—optimized for engagement rather than truth is fundamentally at odds with the deliberative ideals of democracy. The solutions will not be singular but systemic, requiring collaboration across sectors to design platforms that prioritize integrity over virality, and civic cultures that reward critical thinking over partisan fervor. The rise of digital populism is not merely a phase but a permanent transformation of the political landscape. The question is whether societies can harness its potential for inclusion while resisting its centrifugal forces of division and in doing so, forge a path toward a more resilient democratic future.

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