Digital Communication, the Crisis of Trust and the Post-Global

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ABSTRACT

It is argued in this paper that the rise of populism worldwide can be seen as arising from a more general crisis of trust in social institutions and in the project of globalisation that has prevailed in Western liberal democracies. The circulation of "fake news" is best seen as a symptom of the crisis of trust rather than as a primary driver, as so-called "filter bubbles" are more reflective of political polarisation than of algorithmic sorting, and the interaction between so-called mainstream media and social media is readily apparent in the circulation of social news. Anti-elitism extends to journalists and news organisations as much as it does to political and business elites, but there are signs that trust in news is improving, as questions are increasingly being raised about trust in digital platforms.

Introduction: The New Populism?

In identifying periods of historical change in global systems, we often focus upon particular years that marked the point at which a series of developments in different places aligned in ways that would have lasting significance. The year 1968 is taken to be not only the year of a series of student-led protests against the Vietnam War and political leadership more generally in France, the United States, Italy, Germany and elsewhere, but as marking the rise of the 'New Left' as a global phenomenon, and the era of the new social movements (Caute, 1988). Similarly, 1989 is marked out as a year that saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, German reunification, and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, all seen as markers of a post-Cold War world, an interconnected global community and, in the most optimistic scenarios, the end of ideology and the triumph of liberal democratic capitalism (Fukuyama, 1992). Is there a case for identifying 2016 as another such year? One of the key events of 2016 was the vote in the referendum in the United Kingdom on 23 June, 2016 to leave the European Union (the 'Brexit' referendum), thereby overturning over 40 years of elite consensus about the benefits of British membership of the EU. Even more significant, and surprising, was the election on 8 November, 2016 of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, defeating the far more fancied and experienced Democratic Party candidate, Hilary Clinton.

David Goodhart described the Brexit vote as a revolt of the 'Somewheres' – those who 'are more rooted and usually have "ascribed" identities … based on group belonging and particular places' – against what he terms the 'Anywheres', or the '"exam-passing classes" … [who] have portable "achieved" identities, based on educational and career success which makes them generally comfortable and confident with new places and people' (Goodhart, 2017, p. 3). The

Trump voters have been variously described as the 'Deplorables', those 'left behind' by the globalization of the U.S. economy, and the predominantly white communities whom President Trump tweeted were the 'forgotten men and women of America' (Hochschild, 2017).

One of the most distinctive aspects of the Trump candidature was its articulation of an economic nationalist, 'America First' platform, where he proposed to reverse 40 years of greater global economic integration by reintroducing tariffs to protect U.S. manufacturing, and threatened to withdraw from a range of binding international trade and other agreements. The trends outlined here are increasingly analysed in terms of the *new populism* (Anselmi, 2018; Judis, 2016; Laclau, 2015; McKnight, 2018; Moffitt, 2016; Mouffe, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasse, 2017; Müller, 2016; Waisbord, 2018a, 2018b). Waisbord (2018a) has argued that we are in a 'populist moment' in global politics, where 'the uneven effects of globalisation on employment and national economies, migration, racist backlash, and social anxiety' act as structural supports for 'populist rhetoric [that] resonates with anti-elite sentiments, frustration and disenchantment with the failings of democracy as well as anxieties and opposition to aspects of globalisation' (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 18).

In broad terms, the academic literature on populism tends to go in one of two directions. On the one hand, there are those who associate populism with theories of ideology that construct a 'we/they' binary opposition between 'the people' and those who are 'other' to the will of the people (Anselmi, 2017; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasse, 2017; Müller, 2016). Mudde and Kaltwasse define populism in primarily ideational terms as a 'thin-centred ideology; it is a worldview that does not lend itself to a comprehensive social theory … but rather contrasts "the people" and "popular sovereignty" to "the elites"' (Mudde & Kaltwasse, 2017, pp. 5-7). Viewing populism as specific to liberal democracies, they argue that it is naturally opposed to pluralism on the one hand, as pluralism champions diversity, difference and the diffusion of

power, and government by elites on the other, including technocratic elites. The common association of populism with racism and anti-immigration sentiment is linked by Müller (2016) to its anti-pluralism, and as a form of identity politics on the part of those in the established majority national culture. Populism is here primarily associated with leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, and other divisive 'strongmen' whose common feature is an antipathy to liberalism and a preparedness to use force to deal with those considered to be 'enemies'.

By contrast, there are those who see populism as a viable strategy of the political left, as an alternative to the 'Third Way' politics that prevailed in centre-left and social democratic parties in the 1990s and 2000s. Authors such as Laclau (2015), Mouffe (2018), Judis (2016), and McKnight (2018) identify populism as primarily a political and discursive strategy that seeks to articulate the interests of 'the people' by bringing together diverse interests and grievances against established elites or 'the establishment'. It can be linked to right-wing nationalism or to the politics of the left, and left-populists argue that since the discontents that give rise to populism are grounded in material realities, such as the unaccountable power of big business or rising economic inequality and insecurity, a left-wing populism that unifies people collectively is just as possible as a right-wing one that divides across lines of race, nation and ethnicity.

One interesting feature of the rise of populist movements is that they have – perhaps unexpectedly – reaped the whirlwind of mass discontent with rising economic inequality in recent decades, identified by Piketty (2010) and others. At the same time, I think that we need to be careful that populism does not become the *concept du jour* of the next few years, in the way that neoliberalism became for the last decade (Flew, 2014, 2015). There is the risk of

seeing multiple forms of political leadership through the prism of populism, particularly as populism is associated both with popularity and leaders speaking directly to 'the people' rather than being mediated through other elites. New leaders of centre-left parties such as Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K., Bernie Sanders in the U.S. and Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand have been labelled as populists (e.g. Judis, 2016; McKnight, 2018), but there is a question as to whether this has become a generic shorthand for the rise of candidates from the left of Labour and Social Democratic parties. Political leaders of all kinds routinely adopt a populist presentational style when suitable, that can be articulated to a range of political positions and policy questions.

Insofar as we are seeing a rise in populist politics internationally, I will consider three possible factors underpinning it. First, there is the question of whether it is a product of the rise of social media, both in terms of the wide circulation of 'fake news' and disinformation, and in terms of a growing propensity towards online 'filter bubbles', or people only associating with people and ideas that reinforce existing points of view, reinforced by the algorithms that sort such information based on signals such as 'likes', 'shares' and 'retweets'. Second, I consider the extent to which there is a crisis of trust in social institutions that is particularly strong in liberal democracies, and whether that is cause rather than consequence of factors related to social media. Finally, I consider the extent to which populism is a nationalist movement driven by growing opposition to globalisation, and what responses may arise to that.

Populism and the Traditional Media

Moffitt (2016, p. 72) has observed that 'populism and the media make good bedfellows', and Mazzoleni (2014, p. 56) has argued that 'populism can only be understood (or investigated) within the framework of the media-driven influences that shape its contemporary features'.

Moffitt observes that populism as a communicative style tends to be associated with appeals to the 'common sense' of the people, argumentativeness, the preparedness to engage in 'inappropriate' talk, and a distaste for complexity combined with calls for decisiveness, and that this meshes well with logics associated with the 'mediatisation of politics' (Schulz & Mazzoleni, 1999; Hepp, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2014) including the prioritization of conflict, questioning of expert knowledge, personalization, simplification, the capturing of emotions, and the focus on scandals, crises and 'bad news' (Moffitt, 2016, p. 76). Many populist politicians have had a long history of engaging with the media. The Italian leader Silvio Berlusconi owned a television station as well as the AC Milan football team before entering politics, former U.S. Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin has since hosted several reality-based programs (e.g. *Amazing Alaska with Sarah Palin*), and the founder of the Australian One Nation Party, Pauline Hanson, appeared on programs such as *Dancing with the Stars*. Most notably, Donald Trump hosted *The Apprentice* on the NBC Network for 15 seasons before nominating as Republican candidate in the 2016 primaries, giving him enormous personal brand recognition.

The election of Trump promoted a great deal of soul searching in and about the U.S. media. In their edited collection on *Trump and the Media*, Pablo Boczkowski and Zizi Papacharissi (2018) make the point that the ways in which traditional news media and social media combined in the Trump campaign was unique, and that:

> From the apparent disconnect of the agenda-setting media with vast segments of the American voters to the deluge of fake news circulating on social media, and from the intensity of the confrontation between President Trump and the media to his constant use of Twitter to promote alternative – and often unsupported by facts – narratives, there is

a sense that the matrix that used to tie politics, media, technology, and the citizenry in fairly predictable ways has moved far away from equilibrium (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018, p. 1).

The relationship between Trump and the media can be understood as operating in two stages: the period prior to the election, and the period of the Trump Presidency. It has to be noted that Trump prevailed not only over Hilary Clinton, but over 16 other candidates in the Republican primaries, many of whom, such as Jeb Bush and Ted Cruz, had a far stronger profile in the mainstream of the party. Trump's highly unorthodox campaign, and his seemingly unscripted public speeches, proved to be catnip for news media organizations, thriving on conflict, unpredictability and quotable soundbites, all of which Trump delivered in spades. As CBS Chairman Les Moonves observed during the campaign, at a speech to the Morgan Stanley Technology, Media & Telecom Conference in San Francisco in February 2016:

> It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS … Most of the ads are not about issues. They're sort of like the debates … Man, who would have expected the ride we're all having right now? ... The money's rolling in and this is fun … I've never seen anything like this, and this going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It's a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going (quoted in Bond, 2016).

This sunny optimism of media executives towards the 2016 Trump 'circus' (to use Moonves' description) was not shared by the journalists on the ground covering the campaign. For a prominent feature of the Trump demonology was the media, particularly the established 'liberal' media: the 'fake news' CNN, the 'failing' *New York Times* etc. It was this animus towards the media – with notable exceptions ranging from FOX News to Alex Jones' *InfoWars*

– that accelerated after Trump's election. The dispute about the numbers of people attending Trump's inauguration led to White House Press spokesperson Kellyanne Conway offering her famous proposition that the Administration had 'alternative facts' to those of the news media. At his first press conference upon becoming President, Trump admonished CNN White House chief correspondent Jim Acosta with the statement 'You are fake news', and the hostility has been almost unceasing since. Acosta has described the relationship in these terms:

> There is that natural tension that exists between the press and the people we were covering, but it was never like this. We were never called "fake news." We were never called "the enemy of the people," and that just created a totally different climate and environment that we are all trying to make sense of and trying to figure out: How do we cover the news in that kind of toxic environment? (Johnson, 2018).

Antipathy towards the 'liberal' media in the U.S. goes back as far as the Nixon administration and the Vietnam war, as shown in the 2017 Steven Spielberg-produced film *The Paper*, dealing with the decision of the *Washington Post* to publish the leaked 'Pentagon Papers'. One does not have to look far, however, to find comparable suspicion towards the mainstream media on the political left. Edward Herman described the U.S. mass media as 'dominated by communication gatekeepers who are not media professionals so much as large profit-making organizations with close ties to government and business. This network of the powerful provides news and entertainment filtered to meet elite demands and to avoid offending material' (Herman, 1995, p. 92). Robert McChesney recently acknowledged the 'irony' of critiquing the impact of digital platforms on the mainstream media when he and others had been 'writing detailed studies for years revealing how the traditional mainstream news media served to advance the interests of the powerful and undermine popular democracy'

(McChesney, 2018). The original premise behind WikiLeaks was that it would use the capabilities of the global internet and decentralized communication networks to promote a 'global transparency movement' that went beyond the limited horizons and compromised relationships of mainstream investigative journalism (Flew & Wilson, 2011). By 2016, however, the Australian Julian Assange who co-founded WikiLeaks had become one of the key purveyors of anti-Hilary Clinton material during the U.S. Presidential election, justified on the basis of exposing the inner workings of the 'deep state', possibly drawing upon material sourced from Russian hackers.

Digital Platforms and the 'Fake News' Question

'Fake news' was awarded the 2016 'Word of the Year' by the Macquarie Dictionary (Hunt, 2017). But the term has proven difficult to define, and the question lurks as to whether it is in fact something new. In particular, simply identifying the existence of fake news tells us little about the human intentions and motivations behind it. For the young men of Veles, Macedonia, who discovered that they could buy a BMW from online advertising revenues drawn from circulating pro-Trump articles on Facebook and other digital platforms, the motivation is not complicated. The money available from 'fake news' led to this town of 55,000 being the host of over 100 pro-Trump web sites, run by people whose wider knowledge of American politics could be described as vague at best (Subramanian, 2017).

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) proposed that 'fake news' sites arise from a mix of economic and ideological motivations. In the case of the Macedonian teenagers, the motivations were straightforwardly economic. But some form of ideological motivation is more characteristic. A site such as *InfoWars,* established by Alex Jones in 1999, certainly has a relatively consistent

worldview that we would today term 'alt-right', and which would be well understood among its 10 million monthly viewers, even if it is leavened with a very healthy dose of fake news in the classic definition. Two further characteristics of fake news that Allcott and Gentzkow identify are little investment in journalistic research that informs the stories that are published; and a focus on short-term profits rather than the long-term reputation of their sites are reliable news sources (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, pp. 218-19). They argue that the growing role of social media as a source of news can increase the production and distribution of fake news due to the confluence of three factors:

1. The rapidly declining costs of producing and distributing news content online, which shifts the strategic balance between highly profitable and short-term 'clickbait' strategies as compared to long-term brand-building as a trusted news source;

2. The formats of social media, particularly when accessed in small slices on mobile media platforms, that make it difficult to identify an article's veracity, or even the source the story has come from;

3. Practices of sharing, liking and commenting build upon established friend/follower networks where there may be a relatively high degree of ideological agreement, leading to the formation of what are known as 'filter bubbles', where the relationship of a news story to pre-existing preferences is more important than its accuracy.

We need to be careful about is the proposition that fake news is historically unprecedented, or that it emerges in a different media universe to the mainstream outlets. If we recognize that the term 'fake news' may be a synonym for what we once termed propaganda, then we can see how it has been a feature of the last 100 years. Graham (2017) has traced the origins of contemporary persuasive communication, using rhetoric and imagery to mobilise whole

populations to a single national objective, to the Committee on Public Information (CPI, also known as the Creel Committee), that persuaded U.S. citizens in 1917 to engage in the First World War. We can note the radio broadcaster William Joyce, also known as Lord Haw-Haw, who broadcast the English-language program *Germany Calling* from Hamburg from 1939 to 1945, who would report exaggerated figures on Allied troop losses on behalf of the Reich Ministry of Public Information and Propaganda, in order to reduce the motivation of the English, Americans and others to fight against the Nazis and to agree to peace terms. Allied military and civilians used to listen to the broadcasts even when they knew of their falsehoods and inaccuracies, as they could nonetheless provide clues about the situation of their troops and air crews in the absence of other information. In 1987, *The Sun* published a feature article for the U.K. General Election with the headline "Stalin: Why I'm Voting for Kinnock". The 'story' involved a London-based clairvoyant who had communed with the dead about their voting intentions, to find that the former Soviet dictator saw the Labour leader as continuing the historic mission of communism, while Winston Churchill and Boadicea were solidly behind 'Our Maggie' and the more patriotic Conservative Party. In the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections, one of the most consistently pro-Trump publications was the venerable *National Enquirer*, which may be a purveyor of fake news, but if so, it has been in that business for a long time (Rutenberg *et. al.*, 2018). So 'fake news' is not something that arrived full-blown in 2016.

We also need to be cautious about attributing the spread of fake news to digital platforms. Insofar as fake news is spread through platforms such as Google, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, it is occurring in the context of a wider news ecology where fake news would not circulate if it was confined to digital platforms. Its spread is enabled by practices of news gathering in organisations that would be otherwise considered to be part of the mainstream

news media, who now largely operate in the same news ecology as the digital platforms. More generally, media organisations of all kinds, including digital platforms, are grappling with the changing expectations of their publics, as their own viewers, readers and occasional content producers. It is notable that the economists Allcott and Gentzkow focus primarily upon supply factors as drivers of the circulation of fake news yet, as Economics 101 tells us, that supply would trickle to the margins in the absence of consumer demand for such content. The turn to alternative news sources, of which some primarily trade in fake news, occurs in the context of a wider crisis of institutional trust and the backlash towards globalization, in which the media are both key drivers and among those institutions most affected. These phenomena appear to be most particularly marked in the Western liberal democracies, which generates their own sources of crisis in the global order, as they lack a morally authoritative speaking position \ in an increasingly multi-polar world system. It is the relationship between the crisis of trust and the growing opposition of globalisation, most clearly manifest in the rise of populist nationalisms, that creates the demand for fake news and the disengagement from public institutions, including those of the media.

The Platformized Internet and the Rise of Social News

The major transformation in the nature of digital media from the 2000s to the 2010s was the increasing *platformization of the internet*. Starting with search, and accelerated by social media platforms and mobile apps, the content of the internet has come to be increasingly associated with the digital commercial platforms through which it is distributed and accessed. This has allowed for the rise of network monopolies and oligopolies, as logics of industrial organization and powerful first-mover advantages in digital markets reduce the degree to which the internet is a driver of innovation in the Schumpeterian sense (new start-ups, a proliferation of small

players etc.), meaning that increasingly digital media comes to resemble more traditional media markets in terms of concentration of ownership and control (Bauer & Latzer, 2016). What are variously referred to as the FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google) or the FAMGA (Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon) are now unequivocally among the world's largest companies (Mosco, 2017). With this, there are growing calls for their regulation by legislators around the world, with concerns ranging from anti-competitive practices and misuse of personal data to the failure to adequately moderate hate speech, fake news or other content with adverse social consequences on their sites (Flew, 2018a). Indeed, such developments have brought back an old question of whether these digital platform companies are in fact media companies, and should be regulated by nation-states along broadly similar lines (Gillespie, 2018; Mansell, 2015; Napoli & Caplan, 2017).

The impact of the rise of digital platforms has been very clearly apparent with the *growth of social news*. The growth of social news, or news accessed from and shared through social media platforms, has been the major trend in news consumption in the 2010s. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism observed that, over the 2012-17 period, 'the biggest change has been the growth of news accessed via social media sites like Facebook and Twitter' (Newman *et. al.*, 2017, p. 10). They found that, in the U.S., over 50% of the population accessed news through social media, up from 25% in 2013. In Australia, the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra found, in the *Digital News Report 2018*, that 52 per cent of those surveyed accessed news from social media, with 17 per cent identifying it as their primary source of news (Park *et. al.*, 2018, p. 14). This comes at a time when more Australians are accessing news from online sources (86%) than from traditional outlets such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio (83%), although these traditional sources are still slightly higher as a main news source (53% to 47% in 2018) (Park *et. al.*, 2018, p. 12). These figures

also skew strongly on an age basis: younger people are far more likely to draw upon social news, and older people on television and radio news (Newman *et. al.*, 2017, p. 11).

With regards to the question of whether the digital platforms are primarily responsible for the circulation of fake news, I would offer some cautionary observations. The point made above that fake news has clearly circulated through newspapers, magazines, radio and television prior to the internet, and post-internet, is not merely a historical one. It draws upon the awareness that, for fake news websites to get wider circulation than the relatively small numbers of people who share their stories on social media, they need to have the stories taken up by larger online media. In this respect, the story of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election is less about the content generated by Macedonian teenagers (or indeed, Russian agents), than it is about the growing presence and influence of online partisan news sites (Vargo *et. al.*, 2018). While digital pure-play sites sometimes disseminate fake news, it is online partisan media that has been found to be critical, and these sites have characteristically evolved their own relations of trust with their audiences. Moreover, while we may be focusing upon the likes of FOX News and partisans of the Right linked to the rise of Trump, such as Rush Limbaugh, Alex Jones, *Drudge Report* and others as the purveyors of fake news, they tap into a wider skepticism about traditional news media outlets and the forms of journalism with which they are associated which clearly also has a presence on the left.

In the U.K., one of the more interesting recent features in the media landscape has been the growing critique on the left about bias at the BBC, and traditional centre-left outlets such as *The Guardian*, and their coverage of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader (Margetts, 2017; Freedman, 2018). This has in turn prompted the rise of a range of alt-media sites on the left, such as *The Canary*, *Novara Media*, *Evolve Politics*, *Skwarkboxx* and *Another Angry Voice*

(Chakelian, 2017). This echoes an earlier era of critique of the BBC, associated with the Glasgow Media Group in the 1970s (GUMG, 1976) and authors such as Colin Sparks (1986) and Stuart Hall (1986), that has been somewhat dormant as the interests of the left were taken to be synonymous with promotion of public service media.

The potential for overlap between 'fake news' and partisan online media generates another concern, which is that crackdowns on 'fake news' become the pretext for more general activities that harass and constrain emergent online news media outlets whose points of view challenge established incumbents. One of the last acts of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak before losing office was to pass an *Anti-Fake News Bill* through the Malaysian parliament in April 2018. Razak had long insisted that the opposition, which included not only opposition politicians and parties but also bloggers, alternative media outlets such as *Malaysiakini*, and academics, had used 'misinformation' and 'fake news' against him, and the new legislation gave the courts the power to prosecute those who would use media, including the internet, to 'hide the truth or push their own agenda.' (Haciyakupoglu, 2018). With former-PM Razak now facing charges that he and his family embezzled millions in government funds for personal use while in office, it may well be that the news being promulgated was not 'fake' at all, and that the courts and government agencies would not have been the most reliable adjudicators of such claims. Australia has had one of the most concentrated media systems in the OECD, with four companies (News Corporation, Fairfax, Nine Network and Seven News Media) accounting for 80 per cent of online news accessed from commercial sources (Papandrea & Tiffen, 2016). In such an environment, social media platforms such as Facebook and Google have provided important distribution outlets for international brands such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, and public interest-oriented publications such as *The*

Conversation and *The New Daily*, as well as new digital-only publishers such as *Buzzfeed* and *Junkee*, providing some degree of diversity of news sources.

There is also the question of filter bubbles. Kalev Leetaru (2017) observed that 2017 was the year of filter bubbles, and related concepts such as fake news and echo chambers, and connects this directly to the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President on 9 November 2016. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has defined the filter bubble effect as one where 'users may find themselves receiving less exposure to new information or conflicting viewpoints' by virtue of algorithmic sorting by digital platforms based on revealed past online behavior (ACCC, 2018, p. 10). By contrast, while noting the possibility of filter bubbles, the Reuters News Report fund that users of social media, aggregators, and search engines experience more diversity than non-users (Newman *et. al.*, 2017, p. 9). Laetaru pondered whether 'as digital platforms increasingly mediate the world around us, they are increasingly the perfect scapegoat, rightfully or wrongfully, for a diverse world where not everyone thinks alike' (Laetaru, 2017).

Amidst all of the talk about filter bubbles, there is actually surprisingly little evidence. A study of 14,000 internet users in seven countries undertaken by the Quello Centre at Michigan State University concluded that 'Internet users generally rely on a diverse array of sources for political information … they display a healthy scepticism when it comes to information on social media. They will tend to cross check dubious information when they encounter it' (Dutton *et. al.*, 2017, p. 127). At the same time, they found that it was the most politically engaged and active internet users who made the most use of digital platforms to access multiple sources of information on relevant topics, indicating that susceptibility to fake news and filter bubbles may be greater among those who were less familiar with the internet and less politically

engaged. It was also noted that the propensity to use search engines for news bore an inverse relationship to trust in mainstream media in different countries. But Dutton has advised caution in introducing new regulations on the basis of this, as 'panic over fake news, echo chambers and filter bubbles is exaggerated, and not supported by the evidence from users across seven countries' (Dutton, 2017).

The Pew Internet Research Center survey on *The Political Environment on Social Media* (Duggan & Smith, 2016) found that Facebook and Twitter users themselves were predominantly of the view that they did engage with people with a diverse range of political views. Only 22% of Facebook users and 17% of Twitter users surveyed were of the view that most of the people in their networks had similar political beliefs. This is not to say that these users were necessarily satisfied by their interactions on social media with people with diverse political views. The Pew survey found that 37% of those surveyed described themselves as being worn out by the number of political posts they received, and 59% found interactions with those with different political views to be stressful and frustrating. It is notable that 39% of these social media users took action to see fewer posts from, block, or unfriend people for reasons related to politics, including offensiveness, disagreement, abuse and harassment. Insofar as this behavior leads to reduced exposure to people with different political views, it arises from decisions made by the users themselves using tools available from digital platforms, rather than the content distribution processes of the platforms themselves.

Dubois and Blank (2018) have observed that there are significant methodological challenges in making claims about the existence of filter bubbles. One is that most studies tend to be single platform, and are unable to capture the extent to which 'the internet creates a high-choice media environment where individuals may access news and political information from a diverse array

of media and sources' (Dubois & Blank, 2018, p. 730). The second point is that attempts to measure the existence or otherwise of echo chambers or filter bubbles fail to adequately capture the ways in which people are interacting with their entire media environment. Studying 2000 social media users in the U.K., their strong finding was that 'greater interest in politics and more media diversity reduces the likelihood of being in an echo chamber' (Dubois & Blank, 2018, p. 740). In line with other studies, they did find that some online users may be in an echo chamber, but estimated this to be only about 8 per cent of those surveyed. They identified increased media literacy as the best way to address this situation, particularly around encouraging people to use a range of news media and information sources to 'fact check' political information. In other words, what we are finding is that the existence or otherwise of filter bubbles is related to questions of media literacy, selective exposure and retention, and trust or otherwise in authority figures in the media and elsewhere. They are neither unique nor driven by the digital platforms as such.

The Crisis of Institutional Trust

Declining levels of public trust in institutions and professions has been a widely documented phenomenon for some time. The Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018, where whistleblower Christopher Wylie revealed to *The Guardian* that the personal data of as many as 87 million Facebook users was accessed through an online quiz, and then on-sold to third parties including Donald Trump's 2016 U.S. Presidential election campaign, threw into question the trustworthiness of digital platforms with personal data. The likes of Google, Facebook, Twitter and other platform providers, who had long basked in the warm glow of Silicon Valley 'disruption', now found themselves at the centre of scandals around public distrust, along with other businesses and public institutions. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 revealed a

startling degree of dishonest behavior around the misleading of investors and the luring of prospective home buyers into mortgage arrangements that were unsustainable. In Australia, a Royal Commission has been taking place in 2017-18 into Misconduct in Banking, Superannuation and the Financial Services Industry. At the same time, in a seemingly unrelated area – but very much related in terms of the crisis of trust – the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was released in late 2017, shedding sharp light on the abuse of trust in the churches.

Public opinion polling data has been pointing to a crisis of trust in Western liberal democracies for some time. In the United States, the Gallup Trust surveys, which have been undertaken since 1973, demonstrate consistently declining trust in major political, social and economic institutions, with the sharpest falls being in perceptions of the Congress, big business, churches and organized religion, banks, and the news media (Gallup, 2018). Internationally, the Edelman Trust Barometer has become the major globally applied framework for understanding the crisis in institutional trust that underpins concerns about the future of news. Based upon a survey of over 2,000 participants in 28 countries, and drawing a distinction between those in the top 25 per cent of income and education levels ('elites') and the general population, the Edelman Trust Barometer (2018) has shown evidence of alarming declines in trust in business, government, NGOs and the media, with the sharpest declines in liberal democracies. Notably, these institutions are universally trusted less by those outside of the top 25 per cent, and this coincided with a decline in trust in experts and authority figures, and a growing degree of trust in 'people like yourself'. The then-UK Education Minister Michael Gove's infamous comment prior to the 2016 Brexit referendum that 'people in this country have had enough of experts' (Mance, 2016) had its roots in findings such as these. Donald Trump's proclamation after winning the Nevada Republican primary that he 'loved the poorly educated' also suggested

that there was electoral mileage in such scepticism towards expert opinion.

Focusing more specifically upon the media, we find evidence of a downward trajectory. Edelman found that in 22 of the 28 countries surveyed, more people distrust the media than trust it, and that trust in media has fallen from 57% in 2013 to 43% in 2018, making it lower than trust in business or NGOs, although higher than government. Trust in media is lower among the general population (43%) than it is among the more educated and higher-income segment (53%), and 70% of those surveyed worldwide feared the use of fake news as an information weapon. In the United States, there is now a massive 34-point difference in levels of trust in media among Republican voters (27%) as compared to Democrats (61%), and this sits alongside the Gallup findings of a consistent decline in trust in newspapers and television from 1996 to 2010.

Australia has the second lowest level of trust in media of the 28 countries surveyed, (after Turkey), with only 31% of those surveyed trusting the media. The question of a lack of trust in media has been a recurring theme in Australia, with the 2012 Finkelstein Review identifying declining public trust in journalists as a major issue facing media organisations, and viewing this as a problem of industry self-regulation, along similar lines to the Leveson review in the UK. A 2017 Essential Media poll found a decline in trust in all mainstream media outlets, with only 42 per cent of those surveyed trusting daily newspapers, as compared to 63 per cent in 2010 (Dawson, 2017). The June 2018 Roy Morgan Survey found a Net Trust Score for newspapers in Australia of -13% (i.e. 13 per cent more people distrusted than trusted the source), television -16%, and social media -42%. Put differently, Australia's most trusted news organisation is the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, followed by the Special Broadcasting Service, and the least trusted is Facebook.

A key trend identified in these surveys is declining trust in digital platforms. Distrust of Facebook as a 'media organisation' is fascinating to observe, since Facebook itself claims that it is not a media organisation, but rather an entity that enables the carriage of digital content among its users. The Edelman Trust Barometer found that in 21 of the 28 countries surveyed, there was less trust in digital platforms than in media generally, and considerably less trust than in journalism. The question of whether digital platforms are in fact media companies is being revisited by regulators such as those of the European Union, which may revisit the EU E-Commerce Directive for Third Party Content that gives digital platform companies 'safe harbor' with regards to content hosted on their sites (Rozgonyi, 2018). Similarly, the future of Section 230 of the *Communications Act 1996*, which founded safe harbor in the United States, is subject to active discussion and critique (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli & Caplan, 2017).

Distrust of digital platforms as a primary source of news has been paralleled by a growth in online subscriptions to leading publications. In the U.K., publications such as *Private Eye*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *The Economist*, *Prospect* and *London Review of Books* have all reported increased print and digital revenues over the past five years. In the U.S., digital subscriptions to the *Washington Post* doubled in 2017, and *The New York Times* reported a 46 per cent increase in digital subscription revenue between 2016 and 2017, now having over 2.5 million digital-only subscribers. In Australia, *The Australian*, *Australian Financial Review*, *The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph* all experienced significant growth in their print and digital subscription bases between 2016 and 2018 (Flew *et. al.*, 2018). In the U.S., this is described as part of the 'Trump bump', where the association of 'fake news' with the election of Trump has led to a turn towards trusted news brands, and a greater preparedness to pay for journalism that is seen as having a quality imprimatur. But it may be reflective of a

wider trend towards being prepared to pay for media content from trusted sources. *The Atlantic* editor Jeffrey Goldberg has identified the current period as akin to that when the magazine was established in the 19th century, with an American public hungry for quality journalism and hard-edged intellectual debates, and where 'quality journalism is a scarce commodity these days and I think the discerning readers reward places that are making stories that mean something' (quoted in Peiser, 2018). *New Statesman* Deputy Editor Helen Lewis observed that their publication was going to a subscription model so that the publication could 'reject serfdom and build up your own kingdom: attract readers directly to your website, and ask them to pay something, rather than fund your journalism largely through adverts that users can find intrusive and irritating' (Lewis, 2018).

Trust matters as it is an essential underpinning of social and economic development, constituting an essential component of social capital, as the 'glue' that facilitates cooperation and coordination for material mutual benefit (North 1990; Williamson 2000; O'Neill 2017). Trust constitutes having firm belief in the reliability, truth or ability of someone or something, and a belief in another's integrity. It can be personal and relational; an attitude and belief; and, if warranted, a virtue, and two dimensions: the particular, or the degree of trust and confidence in those in your immediate circles, and the general, or trust in the many strangers whose actions we are increasingly dependent upon in ever more complex institutional environments (Hosking, 2014, pp. 27-34). Trust is what Pierre Rosanvallon (2013, p. 4) has termed 'an institutional economiser', which 'eliminates the need for various procedures of verification and proof' as well as providing what Giddens (2010) has termed 'ontological security', or the belief in a shared and shareable reality. Defining trust as 'the realisation of social expectations', Stephen Coleman (2012) has observed that trust in institutions is dependent upon their meeting societal expectations: the more that such expectations are disappointed, the greater the risk to

relationships of trust.

There is no doubt that major institutions have regularly failed to meet societal expectations, be they businesses, politicians, political parties, churches, the media and others. Moreover, there is a crisis in the 'light touch' regulatory models that have been adopted over the last two decades through frameworks such as 'responsive regulation' (Streeck, 2016). Such models depend upon corporations having an ethical core to their operations, and a preparedness to be held to account and effectively sanctioned when they are in breach of agreed ethical guidelines. At a time when economists such as Thomas Piketty have been tracking growing inequalities of income and wealth within advanced capitalist societies (Piketty, 2010), it is no surprise that levels of social trust are low, and anti-elite sentiment is high. The risk, however, is that a cycle of institutionalized distrust and suspicion of elites feeds upon itself, which is where the climate for fake news, populist politics etc. becomes rife. In such an environment of generalised distrust, there may be growing popular demand for more authoritarian politics that are seen as being more effective than the prevarications and elisions of the mainstream parties and institutions of liberal democracies. Such developments bode ill for the media, and very likely for those who have historically most required legally protected speech rights, such as academics or members of minority groups. This is why, as the conversations in the Trump administration turn from the media as purveyors of 'fake news', to the media as 'the enemies of the people', we need to start paying attention.

Post-Global Populism?

Phenomena such as the rise of political populism, the circulation of fake news, and the question of whether online filter bubbles exist, cannot be understood independently of wider trends

affecting social, economic and political institutions. A key driver has been the decline in institutional trust, which is an understandable response to instances of abuse of trust by powerful people and institutions, but which generates the risk that a generalised crisis of trust in institutions, and in expertise more broadly, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The concept of 'post-truth' (Waisbord, 2018a) envisages a world where expert opinion is routinely dismissed, as every issue is seen through a partisan political lens, leading to the search for millenarian figures who can 'fix' the problems once and for all. While we once looked to the internet as providing new avenues of accountability and transparency, that would challenge elite power by enabling more bottom-up formations that would hold truth to power against powerful institutions, this is appearing less and less likely. This is due in part to the platformisation of the internet, and the associated recognition that the flows of digital content are always already mediated through powerful digital platform companies whose own decisions need to be held up to scrutiny. It is also part of the recognition that simply engaging online is insufficient: activists need a strategy for engaging with the public institutions of the state and civil society, even if they distrust their more general *modus operandi*.

One of the uncertainties of the current period is the future of globalisation. The spate of trade wars now being initiated by the U.S. government with China, the EU, Canada and others is unusual since we have been in a period that has been surprisingly free of such actions for at least 25 years. Indeed, the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its companion institutions in 1999 was meant to see an end to such nation-to-nation conflicts, or at least to see them adjudicated on a multilateral basis. The period from the early 1970s to the mid 2000s saw an almost continuous growth in world trade as a percentage of GDP, and associated growth in foreign investment, cross-border mergers, and foreign affiliates (Flew, 2018b). There was a sharp turn in public discourse in the 2010s about attitudes towards

welcoming refugees and displaced persons, most notably in Europe, but also in countries such as Australia, Canada and, of course, the U.S. But it comes in the context of a faltering in the path towards ever greater economic globalization. *The Economist* observed in 2017 that:

> The new nationalists are on the march in Europe and America. They argue that globalisation has benefited the elites and penalised the ordinary workers and that governments should put America/Britain/France first … The world may have entered a third phase of the post-1945 economy, after the Bretton Woods phase (fixed exchange rates and recovery) from 1945-early 1970s and the globalisation phase from 1982-2007. Each phase ended in a crisis (stagflation in the 1970s, a credit crunch after 2008). The next era could see globalisation in retreat for the first time since 1945 (*The Economist* 2017).

Whether we are heading towards a post-global age remains to be seen. It is certainly a position with some influential advocates. The former Trump strategist Steve Bannon envisages the future of politics as being a contest between cosmopolitan globalists and populist nationalists. To his mind, the 2018 elections in Italy were the marker to the future, where right-wing populists (Mario Salvini's League) and left-wing populists (the Five-Star Movement) could form a coalition based on restricting large-scale migration and reclaiming powers from the EU in particular, and global elites generally (Bannon, 2018). Or, as Bannon put it in an interview with the BBC, populist nationalism can be 'Donald Trump + Bernie Sanders'.

I personally do not think that we are heading to a post-global age of rival economic nationalisms, although it is more of a possibility than was the case a decade ago. The strong support of China for a rules-based international order is relevant in this regard (Xi, 2017), and

the European Union is likely to remain committed to multilateral institutions, although will be an ongoing source of tension within the EU member states. At the same time, the advocates of strong globalization, be they cultural cosmopolitans or neoliberal globalists, the followers of what has been termed 'Davos Man' (Tett, 2017), have had their wings clipped. In the current climate, it is hard to envisage a major world leader who would say, as Tony Blair did to the 2005 Labour Party Conference in Blackpool, that 'I hear people say we have to stop and debate globalisation. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer' (Blair, 2005).

The limits of globalisation discourse have included a perennial tendency to underestimate the continuing capacity of nation-states to shape the conduct of ostensibly global mobile capital, overestimation of the power of supranational institutions, and underestimation of the continuing significance of national cultures and forms of identity in an age of (some) globally mobile populations (Flew, 2018c). The rise of populism, as a symptom of the crisis of institutional trust, requires a rethinking of some of the shibboleths of the globalisation paradigm. There are subtle realignments along these lines occurring with both traditional centre-left and centre-right parties in liberal democracies, not least because they are often dealing with populist insurgencies on their flanks. What Chantal Mouffe (2018, p. 17) described as 'post-politics', where 'those who oppose the "consensus in the centre" … are presented as "extremists" or disqualified as "populists"' is in retreat.

The question of whether a left-populism, relying upon alternative online sites that critique the mainstream media, and highly critical of the impact of globalization upon nation-states, can adequately address the spiral of distrust, or will end up further contributing to it, remains an important one. If the politics of liberal democracies becomes a battle of competing populisms, then those populists of the right possess two advantages. The first is that they comfortably

embrace a connection between migration, nationalism and sovereignty, because national culture and nation-states remain highly relevant. By contrast, left-populists face the challenge of whether to focus on a politics of the nation-state, or to be focused upon more cosmopolitan discourses. Second, anti-elitism has proven to have both anti-capitalist and anti-expert dimensions. Since many of the global challenges of our time, notably climate change but also issues such as the impact of automation on the future of work, do require both expert opinion and responses that are coordinated across nation-states, a move to a narrow nationalism and anti-elite populism inevitably will appear as a retreat from the most urgent issues of our time. We would also expect the media to be prepared to critically engage with such questions in the spirit of seeking to rebuild what Waisbord (2018b) refers to as a 'communications commons', and that it is not engaging in the further fragmentation of political discourse or the denigration of expert opinion.

About the Author

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