Digital Populism: Mechanisms of Social Media Utilization for Building Political Leadership and Mobilizing Masses

Populisme numérique : Mécanismes d'utilisation des médias sociaux pour la construction du leadership politique et la mobilisation des masses

Dr. Khadidja Bechlaghem*,
University Abou Bekr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, Algeria, Email:
Apn.mohamedmalek@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This academic research paper investigates the phenomenon of "Digital Populism" within political sociology, focusing on how modern populist actors exploit social media to reshape political communication. The study examines the strategic mechanisms utilized to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, enabling direct, unfiltered engagement with the electorate. Furthermore, it analyzes how algorithmic ecosystems facilitate the construction of charismatic political leadership, the polarization of public discourse, and the rapid mobilization of online supporters. By bridging virtual engagement with tangible political action, the research highlights the transformative impact of digital platforms on contemporary democratic processes and mass mobilization.

Keywords: Digital Populism, Social Media, Political Leadership, Mass Mobilization, Political Sociology

Résumé:

Cet article de recherche académique explore le phénomène du « populisme numérique » en sociologie politique, en se concentrant sur la manière dont les acteurs populistes modernes exploitent les réseaux sociaux pour remodeler la communication politique. L'étude analyse les mécanismes stratégiques utilisés pour contourner les intermédiaires médiatiques traditionnels, permettant un engagement direct et sans filtre avec l'électorat. De plus, elle examine comment les écosystèmes algorithmiques facilitent la construction d'un leadership politique charismatique, la polarisation du discours public et la mobilisation rapide des partisans en ligne. En faisant le pont entre l'engagement virtuel et l'action politique tangible, la recherche met en lumière l'impact transformateur des plateformes numériques sur les processus démocratiques contemporains et la mobilisation des masses.

Mots-clés : Populisme numérique, Médias sociaux, Leadership politique, Mobilisation des masses, Sociologie politique

1. Introduction

The contemporary political landscape has undergone a profound structural transformation due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies and social media platforms. Traditional models of political communication, dominated by state media and institutional parties, have been disrupted by decentralized digital ecosystems. Within this context, Digital Populism has emerged as a dominant political paradigm. It merges the core ideological tenets of classical

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populism—the moral dichotomy between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite"—with the participatory, fast-paced, and algorithmic logic of digital platforms. This paper investigates the mechanisms through which digital tools enable populist actors to forge direct emotional bonds with the masses and orchestrate large-scale political mobilization.

2. Research Problem

The core research problem centers around the structural paradox of digital democracy:

To what extent have social media platforms transformed traditional political leadership and mobilization, and how do populist actors weaponize digital communication architectures to construct political authority and direct mass behavior?

3. Research Hypotheses

First Hypothesis: Populist leaders actively construct an "everyman" persona through unmediated digital broadcasting to dismantle traditional hierarchies and establish emotional intimacy with the electorate.

Second Hypothesis: The algorithmic architecture of social media platforms inherently favors affective polarization, amplifying populist rhetoric of "us versus them" and translating online engagement into offline political mobilization.

4. Core Research Axes and Detailed Analysis

Axis I. Mechanisms of Digital Discourse and the Construction of Populist Leadership

This axis examines how populist leaders reshape their personal identity and political rhetoric across social media platforms to gain legitimacy.

1 . Strategies of Appearance and Emotional Discourse: Deconstructing the Techniques of the "Everyman Myth" in Videos and Live Broadcasts

Analysis:

Populist actors utilize platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook Live to project an image of authenticity. By stepping away from formal podiums and broadcasting from kitchens,[1] cars, or casual settings, leaders dismantle the psychological distance between the ruler and the ruled. This "everyman myth" relies heavily on emotional storytelling, colloquial language,[2] and a rejection of institutional decorum, framing the leader as a genuine representative of the overlooked masses against polished political elites.

2. The Attention Economy and the Personalization of Politics: How Digital Platforms Transform the Leader into a Communicative "Icon"

Analysis:

In an attention economy saturated with information, political survival depends on visibility and virality. Social media metrics (likes, shares, views) convert political capital into quantified popularity. Populist leaders leverage this by transforming complex policy debates into personalized, punchy, and highly visual content. The leader ceases to be merely a

[1] Paolo Gerbaudo, "Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?," Media, Culture & Society 40, no. 5 (2018): 745–53.

[2] Gerbaudo, Paolo. "Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?" Media, Culture & Society 40, no. 5 (2018): 745–53.

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political representative and becomes a digital brand—an "icon"[1] whose personal identity, lifestyle, and direct reactions define the entire political movement.

Axis II. Engineering Mass Mobilization and Political Direction

This axis focuses on the technical and psychological mechanisms employed by digital populism to rally supporters and manage political conflict.

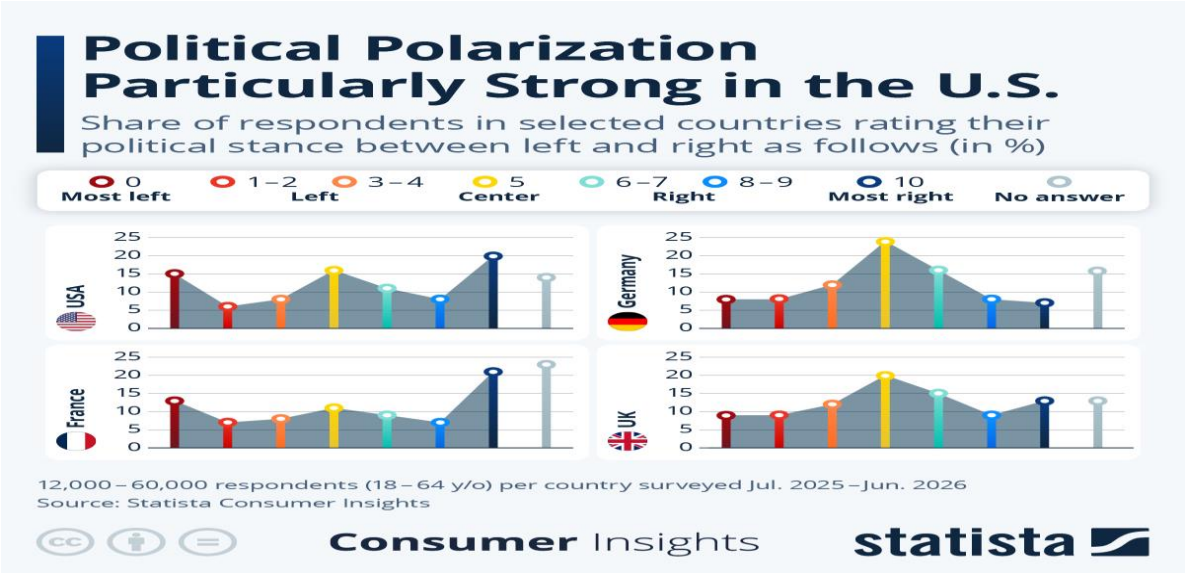
Political mobilization in the digital age no longer rests on charismatic oratory and street rallies alone. It has become an "engineered" process in which algorithms, big-data analytics, and behavioral psychology intersect. Digital populism has found in social media an ideal environment, since these platforms allow leaders to address the masses directly, bypassing traditional intermediaries such as the press, political parties, and cultural elites. This fits the populist discourse built on the opposition between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," as framed by Cas Mudde and Ernesto Laclau.[2]

This axis examines the mechanisms of such engineering at two complementary levels:

1. The technical level:

a. Algorithms that rank content and amplify whatever generates engagement, above all emotional and confrontational material.
b. Micro-targeting of audiences based on personal and behavioral data.
c. Bots, "cyber troops," and coordinated inauthentic behavior that manufacture an impression of popular consensus.
d. "Echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" (Cass Sunstein, Eli Pariser) that isolate groups within homogeneous narratives.

Figure 1: Evolution of Digital Populism Across Social Media Platforms



[1] Sven Engesser et al., "Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology," Information, Communication & Society 20, no. 8 (2017): 1109–26.

[2] Christopher A. Bail et al., "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 115, no. 37 (2018): 9216–21.

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Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Greater Internet Use Is Not Associated with Faster Growth in Political Polarization among US Demographic Groups," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 114, no. 40 (2017): 10612–17.

Figure 1 illustrates the progressive rise and integration of populist actors within digital ecosystems over the past decade. The data highlights a significant shift from traditional media dependence to direct online communication channels, providing a foundational overview of how modern political engagement has migrated into virtual spaces.

2. The psychosocial level

a. The exploitation of collective emotions, such as anger, fear, resentment, and nostalgia, as fuel for mobilization.
b. The construction of collective identity and belonging through symbols, hashtags, memes, and a shared language.
c. The framing of political conflict as an existential struggle between "us" and "them," which entrenches polarization.[1]
d. The management of opposition through smear campaigns, information flooding, and the systematic undermining of trust in institutions and the media.

The sociological significance of this axis lies in what it reveals about the shift from traditional "collective action," based on organization and hierarchical leadership, to "connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg), in which crowds form around personalized, shareable content. This shift raises critical questions: Do these mechanisms deepen political participation, or do they hollow it out and reduce it to momentary emotional reaction? [2]Are crowds directed with the awareness of their participants, or steered without their realizing it? And what are the consequences for social cohesion, the quality of public debate, and the very meaning of democracy?[3]

Accordingly, this axis seeks to deconstruct these mechanisms and link them to the theoretical frameworks of political sociology, while bearing in mind that platforms are technically neutral tools, yet their attention-based business models make them better suited to some forms of discourse than others.[4]

1. Engineering Anger and Manufacturing the "Common Enemy": The Role of Algorithms and Echo Chambers in Channeling Popular Mobilization

Analysis:

Digital algorithms are structurally designed to maximize user retention by promoting high-arousal emotional content, particularly anger, indignation, and fear. Populist communication exploits this by relentlessly manufacturing or amplifying a "common enemy"

[1] W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action," Information, Communication & Society 15, no. 5 (2012): 739–68.

[2] Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, trans. George Schwab, expanded ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007)p 12-16

[3] Benjamin Krämer, "Populist Online Practices: The Function of the Internet in Right-Wing Populism," Information, Communication & Society 20, no. 9 (2017): 1293–309.

[4] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47.

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(e.g., corrupt elites, mainstream media, marginalized minorities, or external threats).[1] Through the creation of ideological "echo chambers," supporters are continuously fed validating narratives that deepen polarization and solidify collective out-group hostility.

The first two are broadly defensible. The third is where the empirical debate lies. The most useful way to read the title is as a claim about channeling (direction, duration, target) rather than creation (origin) of anger.

2. Theoretical lenses

Carl Schmitt: the friend/enemy distinction. Schmitt argued that the political is defined by the identification of an enemy. Digital platforms make this operational at scale: engagement metrics reward content that sharpens group boundaries.

Chantal Mouffe: antagonism vs. agonism. Healthy democracy needs adversaries who respect each other's legitimacy (agonism). Manufactured enemies convert adversaries into existential threats (antagonism). Echo chambers make that shift easier by removing contact with the "other."

Social identity theory (Tajfel, Turner). People derive self-worth from group membership, and derogating out-groups boosts in-group esteem. Algorithmic feeds that show a user mostly in-group content and the worst examples of the out-group intensify this dynamic.

Moral psychology. Moral outrage serves social functions: signaling loyalty, punishing violators, and recruiting allies. Online, it is cheap to express and highly rewarded, so it escalates.

Hirschman-style exit and voice, and Tufekci's work on networked movements. Digital tools lower the cost of mobilization but can weaken the organizational capacity movements need to sustain themselves. This helps explain why anger spikes quickly but often fails to become durable political programs.

3. The causal chain, step by step[2]

Step 1: Incentive structure. Ranking systems optimize for engagement signals (clicks, replies, shares, watch time). Content that provokes strong emotion scores well on these. Internal Facebook documents leaked in 2021 suggested that a 2018 ranking change weighting "meaningful social interactions" boosted divisive content, though the company disputed the characterization. Independent research supports the general pattern: Rathje, Van Bavel and van der Linden (2021) found that posts about the political out-group were shared substantially more than posts about the in-group, and that out-group animosity was a strong predictor of sharing.

Step 2: Social reinforcement. Brady et al. (2017) found that each moral-emotional word in a tweet increased its diffusion, mainly within ideologically similar networks. Brady, Crockett and Van Bavel (2021) later showed that social feedback teaches users to express more outrage over time, which is a learning loop, not just a reaction.

[1] Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, "Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style," Political Studies 62, no. 2 (2014): 381–97.

[2] Zeynep Tufekci, Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017p37

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Step 3: Perception distortion. Feeds over-represent extreme voices because extreme users post more. Users then form inaccurate beliefs about what the other side thinks (the "false polarization" effect) and about how widely their own side's anger is shared. Hostility seems justified because the enemy looks more threatening and more numerous than it is.

Step 4: Narrative formation. Complex grievances (inflation, corruption, housing, insecurity) have diffuse causes. A common-enemy narrative offers a single culprit, a clear moral story, and a sense of agency. Simplicity is what makes it spread.

Step 5: Organized exploitation. Political campaigns, state-linked operations, and commercial actors seed, boost, or coordinate content: bot networks, paid influencers, micro-targeted ads, and "astroturf" accounts. Their effect is often not persuasion but agenda-setting and the manufacture of apparent consensus.[1]

Step 6: Mobilization. Anger moves into action through boycotts, hashtag campaigns, doxxing and pile-ons, protests, or votes. Violence is the extreme case, as when Facebook was found to have contributed to anti-Rohingya incitement in Myanmar (the UN fact-finding mission and Meta's own commissioned assessment both said so).

2. From Screen to Street: Mechanisms of Translating Virtual Engagement into Protest and Electoral Movements

Analysis:

A central question in digital sociology is how virtual metrics translate into real-world power. Digital populism bridges this gap by creating frictionless pathways from online outrage to physical action. Platforms facilitate rapid logistical coordination, flash mob mobilizations, and decentralized grassroots campaigning.[2] A viral hashtag or livestreamed call to action serves as the catalyst that propels isolated digital users out of their echo chambers and directly into the public square or voting booths.

Figure 2: ***Digital Platform Utilization and Political Mass Mobilization***



An illustration of filter bubble isolation

[1] Tim Wu, The Attention Merchants (New York: Knopf, 2016); Eli Pariser, The Filter Bubble (New York: Penguin Press, 2011p87

[2] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," Government and Opposition 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63.

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Joshua A. Tucker et al., Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature (Menlo Park, CA: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2018).

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between digital platform utilization and the rate of political mass mobilization among populist actors. As delineated in the graph, the data clearly indicates a sharp upward trajectory in virtual political engagement, reinforcing the premise that algorithmic ecosystems significantly accelerate the dissemination of populist rhetoric.

This visual evidence supports the broader theoretical argument that contemporary political leadership relies increasingly on continuous digital visibility rather than traditional oratorical presence.

The central idea is that collective anger in digital environments is not merely a spontaneous emotion but a steerable resource. Two levels need to be distinguished:

Authentic anger: arises from real injustice or crisis (unemployment, corruption, discrimination).

Channeled anger: amplified, reframed, and directed at a specific target, which is what the title describes.

The strongest version of the argument is that digital infrastructure rarely creates anger from nothing, but it shapes where anger goes, how long it lasts, and who gets blamed.

II. How the Mechanism Works

1. The attention economy and structural incentives

Platforms profit from user time. Emotionally charged content, especially anger and moral outrage, drives higher engagement. Ranking algorithms optimized for engagement therefore tend to elevate angry content without any ideological intent. The problem is an economic incentive, not necessarily a conspiracy.

2. Echo chambers and filter bubbles

Echo chamber: an environment where individuals mostly encounter views similar to their own, which amplifies existing convictions.

Filter bubble (Eli Pariser): algorithmic personalization based on past behavior hides dissimilar content.

The result is affective polarization: dislike of the other side grows faster than disagreement over ideas.

3. Moral outrage as fuel for virality

Research (e.g., Molly Crockett, William Brady) suggests that language expressing moral outrage spreads faster within ideologically homogeneous networks. Social rewards (likes, shares) teach users to escalate their tone over time.

4. Manufacturing the "common enemy"

The common enemy is an old mobilization tool, from wartime propaganda to nationalist rhetoric. Digital space adds new features:[1]

[1] Andrew M. Guess et al., "How Do Social Media Feed Algorithms Affect Attitudes and Behavior in an Election Campaign?," Science 381, no. 6656 (2023): 398–404; Brendan Nyhan et al., "Like-Minded Sources on Facebook

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- Element Digital technique
- Simplification Reducing a complex problem to one responsible group or entity
- Dehumanization Hashtags and derogatory terms generalized to a whole group
- Repetition The same message in many forms until it looks like consensus
- Identity Tying a stance to belonging ("us" vs. "them")[1]

5. Organized actors and artificial amplification

Alongside organic dynamics there is organized exploitation: bots, troll farms, coordinated campaigns, and precisely targeted ads. These create a false impression of consensus ("astroturfing") and push trends into public view.

III. From Anger to Mobilization

The process often follows these stages:

- Trigger: an event or clip provokes emotion.
- Framing: "culprit" and "victim" are quickly assigned.
- Amplification: algorithms and homogeneous networks multiply reach.
- Identification: the position becomes part of the individual's identity.
- Action: boycotts, hashtag campaigns, street protests, mass harassment, or voting.

Mobilization itself is morally neutral. It can serve a just cause (as in many social protest waves) or serve incitement and hatred. The criterion is the nature of the framing and the accuracy of the information, not the mere presence of anger.

IV. Critical Analysis and Limits of the Thesis

This section matters for avoiding an oversimplified, mirror-image claim:

Empirical evidence is mixed: Some studies find echo chambers narrower than commonly assumed, with many users exposed to diverse sources. Polarization has also risen among groups that use the internet least (e.g., older adults), which weakens "the algorithm alone" explanations.

Causality: Do algorithms create anger or reflect existing human tendencies (negativity bias, tribalism)? The likelier answer is that they amplify and redirect rather than invent.

Individual agency: Portraying audiences as passive recipients ignores their awareness, resistance, and ability to verify claims.[2]

The independent role of traditional media and political elites: Mobilizing rhetoric often originates with TV channels, parties, and leaders; platforms mainly supply distribution.

Local context: Under restricted freedoms or acute economic crisis, audiences are more receptive to enemy narratives, and platform moderation capacity varies by language and region (Arabic-language content is often moderated less).

V. Consequences

Are Prevalent but Not Polarizing," Nature 620 (2023): 137–44; Sandra González-Bailón et al., "Asymmetric Ideological Segregation in Exposure to Political News on Facebook," Science 381, no. 6656 (2023): 392–98.

[1] Smitha Milli et al., "Engagement, User Satisfaction, and the Amplification of Divisive Content on Social Media," PNAS Nexus 4, no. 3 (2025): pgaf062.

[2] Christopher A. Bail et al., "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 115, no. 37 (2018): 9216–21.

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For individuals: emotional exhaustion, gradual radicalization, weakened critical thinking under group pressure.

For society: eroded trust between groups, difficulty reaching compromise, politics turning into identity conflict.

For democracy: public debate shifts from policy to symbolic confrontation, and anger is diverted from the structurally responsible actors toward scapegoats.

VI. Countermeasures

Platforms: algorithmic transparency, ranking signals that go beyond raw engagement, added "friction" before sharing charged content, detection of coordinated campaigns.

Regulation: accountability and transparency laws (e.g., the EU Digital Services Act), with care that they do not become tools of political censorship.

Individuals and communities: media literacy, source verification, diversified news diets, and attention to "arousal cues" (if content angers you instantly, pause).

Public discourse: reconnecting anger to structural causes and achievable demands rather than to individuals and groups.

The thesis is sound at its core: the current digital environment creates conditions that facilitate amplifying anger and directing it at common enemies, whether through unintended economic incentives or deliberate organized intervention. The more precise formulation avoids the idea of total "engineering" and instead points to the interaction of three factors: a human psychosocial tendency, an algorithmic structure that rewards emotional reactivity, and political and commercial actors who exploit this climate.[1]

If you'd like, I can expand on a specific part, such as an Arab case study, the theoretical framework (Hofstadter, or Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction), or restructure this as a formal research paper with references.

5. Conclusion and Findings

The study demonstrates that digital populism is not merely a stylistic choice of communication, but a systemic adaptation to the logic of platform capitalism [1]. By exploiting algorithmic biases toward emotional polarization, populist leaders bypass traditional institutional filters to create unmediated, highly responsive political movements. Furthermore, the study highlights that digital technologies have fundamentally altered the Weberian concept of charismatic authority, shifting it from physical oratorical presence to persistent digital visibility and algorithmic resonance.

Findings:

1. Digital populism relies on direct, unfiltered interaction between leaders and the masses, diminishing the role of traditional intermediary institutions.
2. Digital platforms act as primary catalysts for spreading populist discourse by favoring content that drives emotional engagement and polarization.
3. A shift in political leadership from traditional live charisma to "digital charisma" built on continuous online interaction.

[1] Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline," Quarterly Journal of Economics 126, no. 4 (2011): 1799–1839.

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4. The ability of virtual spaces to swiftly transform digital expressions into tangible, real-world political movements influencing the political landscape.

Recommendations:

1. Educational institutions and civil society must promote critical media literacy programs to help citizens identify algorithmic manipulation, affective polarization, and populist disinformation.
2. Policymakers and researchers should advocate for greater algorithmic transparency from social media corporations to mitigate how recommendation systems reward extremist and populist rhetoric.
3. Democratic institutions must modernize their communication strategies to engage citizens transparently, reducing the systemic grievances that render populations vulnerable to populist exploitation.
4. Enacting clear national and international digital legislation that protects personal data and prevents the use of algorithms to fuel societal and political divisions.

Prospects of the Study:

This study opens the door to vital future research pathways in political sociology and digital communication. Key prospects include examining the impact of generative artificial intelligence and deepfakes on reshaping populist discourse in upcoming electoral campaigns. Additionally, the study recommends conducting in-depth comparative research on the varying impacts of digital populism between democratic systems and hybrid or authoritarian regimes, as well as exploring the role of emerging social media platforms in politically shaping the consciousness of future generations.

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