Digital Memory and Populism

Introduction

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For the Special Section "Digital Memory and Populism," we invited contributions by academics addressing the uses of digital memory by populists, their supporters, and their opponents online. With the possibility to bypass traditional media and reach networked audiences, populist actors are increasingly active in digital publics to negotiate the role of the past with their supporters while being challenged by their opponents. In this process, personal and collective memories become a contested field in digital discourses on identity, belonging, and political ideology and are used to mobilize for or against populist agendas. The contributions in this Special Section shed light on how digital memory is shared, represented, constructed, and exploited to promote or tackle populism in different contexts and countries.

Keywords: digital memory, heartland, history, nostalgia, political communication, populism, social media discourse

The Special Section "Digital Memory and Populism" directs attention to the importance of memory in political discourse unfolding online and further charts the territory of how to understand and study populism through the lens of media and communication. Focusing on digital memory and media, it adds to the recently emerging literature on the uses of the past in populism (see e.g., Ding, Slater, & Zengin, 2021; Kenny, 2017; Manucci, 2022; Menke & Wulf, 2021; Merrill, 2020; Smeekes, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2021). However, it was our goal to invite contributions that approach digital memory and populism not only in the realm of party politics but also as a phenomenon that has saturated democracies to the extent that it has

left a mark on civil society and influences discursive fields in many societal domains (Feindt, Krawatzek, Mehler, Pestel, & Trimçev, 2014). Professional politics is coping with populism by incorporating or countering it (Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014; Schumacher & van Kersbergen, 2016; Verovšek, 2016). Yet, the sheer salience of populist communication not only changed global and national politics but has penetrated people's everyday lifeworlds and interactions (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018; Jaster, Swed, & Frère, 2022), including their relationship to the past. It seems to be this ability of populism to pervade into all cracks of society where it manifests in different forms that explains the difficulty of defining it as one thing (Urbinati, 2019, p. 114), such as a political style, strategy, thin-ideology, (normal) pathology, or form of discourse (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008).

The six research articles in this Special Section share a distinctive perspective on digital memory and populism, yet demonstrate in different ways how digital memory can be both harmful as well as empowering; not only in professional politics but also regarding bottom-up digital activism supporting or resisting populist agendas in memory discourses. Even though not all populism has to have problematic consequences for democracy, populism often unfolds a destructive and harmful impact on society that leads to distrust in democracy and threatens social cohesion, as, among others, the academics we cite in this editorial have demonstrated in their research over the last two decades. The question for us was how digital memory is intertwined with this populism and in which ways their relationship manifests online. Before presenting the six articles in detail, we will henceforth outline some foundations further characterizing the relationship between digital memory and populism.

Populist Uses of the Past: From Party Politics to the Center of Society

From a perspective on memory, an intriguing diagnosis of populism's entrenchment into the democratic foundation is Cas Mudde's (2004) "populist Zeitgeist" (p. 541). The German term *Zeitgeist* can be translated as *the spirit of the time* and describes a contemporary common state of mind and patterns of meaningful practices within a society (Krause, 2019). It not only points to the immense continuous occupation with populist politics, rhetoric, and narratives around the world but also introduces time and temporality as important elements of populism. Why populism is especially prevalent today can only be understood by investigating the crises-ridden decades that allowed populists to use the past for a story of decay and disenfranchisement. Research on populism (Kenny, 2017; Smeekes et al., 2021; Taggart, 2004), has repeatedly shown that to fathom the success of populist communication and its effectiveness among the targeted audiences requires a dissection of populist uses of the past and plays with temporality.

One of the core features of this play with temporality is connected to the often-mentioned antagonism between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites" (Hawkins, 2018). Populists emotionalize and mobilize people by claiming that injustices have been brought upon the "common man" by elites who exploit and disenfranchise them for their benefit disregarding the people's will (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017). This claim functions under two conditions: by first, summoning a sense of shared identity among the targeted community through constructing a vague and romanticized common past anchored in collective memory; and second, by convincing the community that something they rightfully possessed and valued in the past had been or will be taken away from them (Taggart, 2004, p. 274). Particularly successful examples of such populist memory discourses permeating society were Brexit and the Trump presidential campaign,

both of which demonstrated the effective exploitation of nostalgia for an alleged superior past (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kenny, 2017). Once the restorative narrative ("Take Back Control"; "Make America Great Again") was established as a core trope, it became the foundation of an agenda that spread into many discursive fields where it was then used to legitimize the claimed privileges of a nativist people and its supposed former glory (Smeekes et al., 2021).

As pointed out elsewhere (Menke & Wulf, 2021, p. 239), two decades ago Paul Taggart (2004) shed light on the powerful use of the past in populism with the concept of the *heartland.* The heartland is the "territory of the imagination" used by populists to instill a sense of belonging and prerogative within those who classify as "the people" and to set them apart from "the others" (Taggart, 2004, p. 274), usually corrupt elites or foreigners (Hameleers, 2018). Taggart (2004) characterized it as a retrospectively constructed, romanticized past that is "a profoundly ahistorical conception" and functions as "a diffuse vision, blurred around the edges but no less powerful for that" (p. 274). Hameleers (2018) emphasizes that the danger lies in the polarization resulting from the sense of in-group deprivation populists create and their simultaneous framing of out-groups as a threat to the imagined community (i.e., the *heartland*; p. 2173). Consequently, populist uses of the past create a sense of entitlement about what rightfully and historically belongs to a certain group of society (Hameleers, 2018, p. 2176). This sense is anchored in a claim of historical legitimacy that has been earned by past events, actions, convictions, values, and norms now determined by populists as the hegemonic tradition and heritage (Erll, 2019). Often this goes hand in hand with normalizing "certain forms of memory that modern democratic societies deem illegitimate: fascist, racist, or crudely nationalist modes of remembering" (Erll, 2019, p. 294). This is possible because collective memory is lived, owned, shared, and negotiated by communities and is affective, fluid, and "vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation" (Nora, 1989, p. 8). Some populist parties and movements have exploited this vulnerability by constructing memory that not always corresponds to past realities, is of a divisive nature, or does not have the potential to generate a humane future—three normative qualities that, according to Erll (2019), all public articulations of memory should be held against (p. 295).

As mentioned above, the populist Zeitgeist (Mudde, 2004) leads to the spreading of populist practices and agendas that originate or are promoted in the realm of party politics. Additional contemporary examples are Turkey (Elçi, 2022), Brazil (Louault, 2022), Hungary, and Poland (Lipiński & Szabo, 2022), where political leaders and their governments—while being the elites in power—claim to battle the elites. These elites, however, are then classified as the "deep state," progressives, or terrorists who threaten the rights and freedom of "the people" and "their" past. Many populist tropes have been normalized and arrived in the center of society, where they are reproduced and foster conspiracy myths, disinformation, anti-elite attitudes, distrust in institutions, and skepticism toward the democratic system (Jaster et al., 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2022). This becomes salient on the Internet and particularly social media. Populist thinking and communication are omnipresent in everyday online discourses, where a plethora of digital memory is employed in the interactions of users who both co-construct and contest populist agendas and attitudes (Hameleers, 2019; Zahay, 2022).

Digital Memory Discourses: Resisting or Supporting Populist Agendas

Understanding oneself in relation to the past is not only how each person makes sense of who they are, but it is also how societies and the communities they comprise create a sense of belonging and identity.

The collective remembrance and reconstruction of past events, historical figures, and cultural struggles are invaluable for understanding the development of shared values or norms and the articulation and transformation of identity by collectives and individuals alike (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Halbwachs, 2011; Lohmeier & Böhling, 2017; Wilson & Ross, 2003). On the individual level, we find people engaging in new mediated forms and formats of remembering that become increasingly important in processes of constructing personal as well as collective pasts (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, & Reading, 2009; van Dijck, 2004). Digitalization raises the question of how people collect, archive, and share their past, while at the same time, it poses challenges concerning what should and should not be forgotten (Grønning, 2021; Gudmundsdottir, 2014; Hoskins, 2014b, 2017). On the social level, some narratives are contested, and minority perspectives can now find a more immediate way to the public, enriching the respective accounts of past events and adding layers and nuance to how individuals and communities reconnect with the past (Molden, 2016). With the rise of digital communication, the main agents and institutions of preserving and communicating memory, such as journalists, historians, and politicians, as well as museums, archives, foundations, schools, etc., find themselves both challenged and complemented by new voices online (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2022). Countermemories are now more easily distributed and may pierce social media discourses as legitimate perspectives on historical events. Some voices that were muted or even banned before can contribute to a polyphony of memory (Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2020).

Digital memory (i.e., the digital expression, creation, remediation, curation, and negotiation of individual and collective memory) can be appropriated, amplified, and enriched but also challenged and recontextualized within a vibrant "hyperconnected memory culture" (Kalinina & Menke, 2016). This means that digital memory is not isolated but connected to all realms of memory work, such as journalism (Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), television (Baer, 2001; Hagedoorn, 2020), and museums (Meehan, 2022), both online and offline as well as digital and analog. Negotiating the past in digital media environments is increasingly networked and allows participants to contribute bottom-up with their mediated memories and historical references from many contexts by posting about them or linking to a plethora of (un)official, (semi-)public digital sources (Garde-Hansen et al., 2009; Hoskins, 2014a). Simultaneously, content from websites and online forums can be deleted or edited; users and their communication can be banned and vanish, for example, from social media. Hence, the codependency of remembering and forgetting persists with digital memory despite—or particularly because—of the abundance of circulating memory in flux online (Hoskins & Halstead, 2021).

With the possibility to bypass traditional media, reach networked audiences, and thrive on bottom-up discourses online, populists increasingly engage in digital publics (Krämer, 2017; Moffitt, 2019)—also to negotiate their versions of the past with supporters and opponents (Hameleers, 2019; Menke & Wulf, 2021; Richardson-Little & Merrill, 2020). This comes with platform dynamics and affordances of social media (boyd, 2011) to which discourses adhere and that shape how memory can be communicated and negotiated. The types of engagements emerging in those discourses are relevant; they indicate whether digital memories reach and affect targeted and/or like-minded groups, or if they evoke digital activism and critical discourse, in which the presented past becomes contested and is confronted with countermemories (Birkner & Donk, 2020; Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2022; Molden, 2016). This might be the case when actors and institutions neglect, misrepresent, or suppress the pasts of communities in their construction and communication of memory. This potentially renders subsequent digital memory discourses sites of resistance against so-called

mnemonic hegemony, which emerges from "prioritizing some memories over others according to the specific power constellations of a given society" (Molden, 2016, p. 128). Depending on the power constellations, countermemory might indicate either resistance or support for populist agendas. Consequently, memory becomes an embattled field in digital discourses on identity, belonging, and political ideology used to mobilize for or against populist agendas. Current research, however, is mostly problem-focused on populism and those actors promoting it in various societal domains across the globe (Jaster et al., 2022) while less work has been done on digital activism and countermeasurements against populism that often form online. While it is pivotal and urgent to understand populism and its uses of the past, the Special Section also puts attention on actors and groups who challenge populist agendas by the means of digital memory activism. Subsequently, different approaches to populism are featured in this Special Section, thereby contributing to our understanding of various dynamics within and in relation to populism.

The Special Section: Genesis and Contributions

The idea for this Special Section originated from the 2018 preconference "Towards a Polyphony of Memory? Media, Communication and Memory in the Digital Age" organized by the editors in collaboration with the Communication History Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) in Lugano, Switzerland. The preconference assembled scholarship on media, communication, and memory from a multiplicity of backgrounds, stimulating theoretical discussion and giving new impulses for research. Beyond theoretical conceptualizations and empirical case studies, contributions also reflected the methodological aspects of media and memory research in a globalized and digitally connected world. Even though the focus of this conference was rather broad, the submissions we received, and the presentations given, showed an emphasis on digital memory and populism; hence, it motivated us to do this Special Section.

In this Special Section, we present six papers by media and communication researchers on the uses of digital memory by populists, their supporters, or their opponents online. In these articles, authors shed light on how digital memory is shared, represented, constructed, and instrumentalized online to promote or tackle populist agendas in Germany, Japan, Mexico, Turkey, and the United States. The authors comprise international studies that demonstrate how memory is particularly relevant today for populist communication strategies and their appeal online, how digital memory is integrated into political imaginaries for the future, and how populist messages thrive on collective memory discourses salient in contemporary digital culture. The articles also offer research exploring the potential of digital memory to challenge populist narratives and examine the creative uses of the past to mobilize and organize bottom-up political engagement by the means of digital media, networked communication, and memory.

This Special Section subsequently broadens the theoretical and empirical understanding of the relationships between populism, memory, and the digital. In the six articles, these relationships are investigated, scrutinized, and conceptualized, thereby adding new insights to the fields of media and communication, memory studies, and populism research.

The article "Populists' Use of Nostalgia: A Supervised Machine Learning Approach," by Lena Frischlich, Lena Clever (both University of Münster, Germany), Tim Wulf (LMU Munich, Germany), Tim

Wildschut and Constantine Sedikides (both University of Southampton, United Kingdom), contributes with an innovative methodological approach to measure nostalgia in party communication on Facebook. In their study, the authors use supervised machine learning to examine the use of nostalgia among German political parties. The authors showcase the potential of computational methods for memory and nostalgia research, which allows scaling up research with large data sets. In their study, this is demonstrated by the authors' analysis of nostalgia in communication across the political aisle, instead of focusing only on renowned populist parties. Frischlich and colleagues find that populist parties, particularly the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD), use nostalgia more frequently than nonpopulist parties and that nostalgic posts tend to receive more engagement from users. Additionally, they show how nostalgic narratives used across the party spectrum differ from one another.

In their article "Commemorative Populism in the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Strategic (Ab)use of Memory in Anti-Corona Protest Communication on Telegram," Christian Schwarzenegger (University of Augsburg, Germany) and Anna Wagner (Bielefeld University, Germany) propose the concept of "commemorative populism" to describe the weaponization of history and memory by populist activists to further their political cause. The authors conducted a qualitative content analysis of Telegram posts by the German "Querdenker" movement, which has organized protests against COVID-19 containment measures. The study identifies six types of weaponization of history and collective memory by this movement (e.g., addressing false representations of the past or disinformation). The conceptualization sensitizes for the different uses of the past in populist movements and adds nuance to what otherwise might remain a simplified understanding of how populists exploit memory and history. The authors caution us that commemorative populism and its appropriation of the past potentially deforms, devalues, and distorts collective memory at large, making it a pivotal task to understand its mechanisms and find possibilities to negate it.

Krzysztof Wasilewski (Koszalin University of Technology, Poland) analyzes a marginalized radical group in his article "Radical-Right Populist Media Discourse in Social Media and Counter Strategies: Case Study of the #ConfederateHeritageMonth 2021 Twitter Campaign." The author first used digital tools to visualize metadata from Tweets using the hashtag #ConfederateHeritageMonth to contour the public sphere that emerged around commemoration practices. The author then conducted a qualitative discourse analysis for uncovering the themes and strategies that shaped the negotiation and reinterpretation of collective memory about the American Confederacy on Twitter. As a guiding concept, Wasilewski draws from Lievrouw's (2011) genres to classify actions within the memory discourse as culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and common knowledge. Wasilewski also demonstrates how this small public was "hacked" by opponents who took over the memory discourse, thereby showing how right-wing populist uses of the past can be challenged or contained by opposing actions and digital remembrance corresponding with historical facts.

In her article "Deploying Private Memory in the Virtual Sphere: Feminist Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in Mexico," Emanuela Buscemi (University of Monterrey, Mexico) seeks to study online feminist engagement and digital memory activism against gender-based violence and feminicides in Mexico as a discursive mobilization strategy. The author does so in the context of political-cultural invisibility and devaluation of violence against women in the public discourse fostered by the populist rhetoric of the government. Using the methodology of a feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Buscemi analyses Facebook posts by the feminist collective

Las brujas del mar ("The sea witches") as a form of raising awareness and denouncing the impunity for feminicides and other related gender-based violent crimes. By reflecting on online remembrance and honoring of victims of feminicides and *desaparecidas* as "counternarratives," Buscemi explores relationships between cyberfeminism, digital activism, populist memory politics, and gender-based violence in Mexico and reflects on how digital memory is shared, constructed, and instrumentalized online.

In their article "Remembering Gezi: The Digital Memory Practices on Twitter During the Anniversaries in the Face of Populist Challenges," authors Duygu Karataş and Mine Gencel Bek (University of Siegen, Germany) offer their explorations of how the 2013 Gezi Protests in Turkey are remembered on Twitter. In their methodology, the authors draw on quantitative and qualitative content analysis of Tweets posted during the anniversary week of the protests in Turkey between the years 2014 and 2021. They develop a typology of five memory practices to gain an understanding of popular actors and themes relevant to the online and digital remembrance of the Gezi Protests on Twitter. They thereby also reveal how populist communication tactics of the state and its allies extend to the realm of memorialization and are challenged by refuting false accusations, resisting fake memories, and subverting delegitimizing representations. In this manner, the authors offer insights for the debate on activism, memory, and social media and present their reflections on academic research into disinformation and populist communication tactics in the context of digital memory.

In the article "Remembering and Forgetting Fukushima: Where Citizen Science Meets Populism in Japan," Yasuhito Abe (Doshisha University, Japan) studies the digital memory practices of Japanese citizen science practitioners of the Minna-no Data Site (Collective Database of Citizen's Radioactivity Measuring Labs) to counter populist discourses after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. Drawing on the methodology of discourse analysis, Abe examines numerous websites and documents related to post-Fukushima citizen science initiatives to offer an understanding of how the Minna-no Data Site developed citizen-science-based memory practices. Abe argues that the site provided a specific way of remembering the Fukushima disaster that "pushed back" against the populist notion of the 2020 "Recovery Olympics" promoted by the government. Furthermore, the author offers an argument on citizen science as a method for remembering the past and indicates opportunities and challenges facing citizen science-based memory practices.

All articles in the Special Section present original, creative, and insightful research from across the world and demonstrate how deeply digital memory and populism are intertwined. In reading the contributions, it becomes evident that individuals as well as societies are and will be continuously drawn to their past both in constructive and destructive ways. Hence, it remains a pressing task to shed light on the role memories play when digital communication further blurs boundaries—not only between the private and the public but also between the local, national, and global—yet, without neglecting the existence or rise of new social, geographical, or economic demarcations. No matter if under these conditions digital memory is used to advance a populist cause or battle it, both scenarios are worth further academic exploration. The presented articles are a testament to the significance that memory discourses—many of which emerge online—have for social cohesion in democracies. Ultimately, the Special Section should be regarded as another step toward the investigation of the potential digital memory has for challenging divisive movements and forms of populism that threaten social cohesion and a (more) humane future.

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