

Nikola Mladenović

Faculty of Sport, University "Union – Nikola Tesla", Belgrade, Serbia

Slobodan Penezić

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia

Faculty of Sport, University "Union – Nikola Tesla", Belgrade, Serbia

Mediatization and Neoliberalism: Critical Conceptualization of Media Populism

Abstract: This paper reconstructs the critical deficit of media populism research. Mediatization of politics is defined as the interplay between political and media logic, but researchers rarely examine all three constituents of political logic (polity, policy, politics). The paper dissects the media within the whole social system and introduces the interplay of polity/policy, media and economic logic. It argues that the media populism research is based thoroughly on the differentiation paradigm. Therefore, it introduces Hallin and Mancini's "shift toward neoliberalism" as a simultaneous process of differentiation and dedifferentiation and proposes networked understanding of populism. Neoliberal polity/policies are considered as conditions for the rise of populism. On the other hand, decrease in audience trust brought the rise of partisan and social media. It networked the populism today, literally.

Keywords: populism; mediatization; neoliberalism; media populism; media logic.

Introduction

Why do we have populism? And why today we have this kind of primarily right-wing mediatized populism? Media populism research tries to give an answer to the second question but barely examines the first. We believe the first question, related to the whole wave of left and right-wing populism as a reaction to neoliberal social conditions, changes the whole problem. The answer to the first question is needed to properly answer the second question. Mediatization is understood as a contribution to social theory.¹ It is the interplay of media-communicative and socio-cultural change. Unfortunately, scholars rarely follow this definition. Mediatization is often seen merely as a theory of media influence on society,² while the interplay is mostly ignored. But if the interrelationship becomes the focus of the theory, we can give a proper answer to both questions.

¹ Nick Couldry, "Mediatization and the Future of Field Theory," in *Mediatization of Communication*, ed. Knut Lundby (De Gruyter, 2014), 227–49.

² Stig Hjarvard, "Mediatization and Cultural and Social Change: an Institutional Perspective," in *Mediatization of Communication*, ed. Knut Lundby (De Gruyter, 2014), 199–227, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110272215.199>.

Media has notably become one element in a social system. That system creates a pattern of relationships from which an “intersubjective” understanding of values, norms and culture emerges. Media do not “transmit” a meaning that refers to something but stand in relationship to many individual and multi-individual systems. Namely, Lawrence Grossberg’s explains meaning as the product of system that provides a set of relationships among the elements of a language. That system of relationships creates the meaning for signs in human mass communication.³ We also need a holistic, systemic approach to this topic. Brent D. Ruben notes that only such systems approaches can tie together intrapersonal, interpersonal, and mass communication processes.⁴

If mediatization, therefore media populism, seeks affirmation as a socio-theoretical tool, it actually has to explain what model of society researchers should use. In this paper we want to acknowledge the interplay of society and media on many levels. We will focus on the most important social transformations that have occurred in the last several decades. Those social transformations are related to contemporary economic and political crisis, but neoliberalism as the backdrop of the crisis is rarely discussed. The interplay of media, culture and society is not complete without examination of the most powerful force today. The mainstream media are usually seen as committed to existing institutions,⁵ and therefore couldn’t really create the sentiments that foster populism. We believe this is not the case and by focusing on the interplay we will show that if neoliberalized institutions produced the crisis and mainstream media remained committed to them – that could be the cause of populism. If the media coverage of public affairs rarely tackled policy and polity issues, which are very important for people’s lives, then the social malaise we have today could be produced without the tabloids – through the network.

In order to show this, first we will argue that mediatization scholars neglect the examination of the interplay, especially when it comes to the relation between political and media logic, the modus operandi of political and media actors. The first section will therefore present the current state of media populism theory. Then we’ll propose that mediatization research, in order to upgrade its framework, has to rely on a more developed media system research, that examines the whole political logic – policy, polity and politics – not just the last constituent. The third section will describe the characteristics of neoliberal polity and policy. Then we will be able to deconstruct the concept of media populism. In order to understand populism, as well as media’s current working modes, the analysis of the interplay of political and media logic is not

³ Lawrence Grossberg, “Language and Theorizing in the Human Sciences,” in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (2), ed. Norman Denzin (JAI Press inc., 1979), 189–231 and Lawrence Grossberg, “Strategies of Marxist Cultural Interpretation,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (1984): 392–421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038409360049>.

⁴ Brent D. Ruben, “Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Mass Communication Processes in Individual and Multi-Person Systems,” in *General Systems Theory and Human Communication*, ed. Brent D. Ruben and John Y. Kim (Hayden Book Co., 1975), 164–85.

⁵ Benjamin Krämer, “Media Populism: A Conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects,” *Communication Theory* 24 (2014): 42–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12029>.

enough. Social dynamics has to be examined through the interplay of political and economic logic, as well as media logic. The conclusion will show that this interplay can give us the answer to both questions and that this is the only proper way to tackle the problem of populism.

Where is the interplay?

What is mediatization all about? The usual answer is that it's about "theorizing the interplay between media, culture and society"⁶. It means that there's a dialectical interdependence between social fields or institutions, and that mediatization process is just one among other processes that are part of the interplay. It also means that we always have to deal with some kind of "inter-institutional configuration"⁷ because mediatization is a very contextually sensitive process.⁸ But it seems that mediatization researchers, especially the ones who examine populism, take the very definition of mediatization for granted. Even Stig Hjarvard sometimes reduces the interplay to a "theory of the media's influence on structural changes in culture and society."⁹

The case of mediatization of politics is clear. It is about the interplay of media logic and political logic. Logic consists of rules of conduct and (human, technological and other) resources concerned with production and distribution of information. *The political logic has three constituents: polity* (the rules of the political system), *policy* (problem-solving/creating area) and *politics* (power and publicity-gaining). Strömbäck and Esser explicitly acknowledge the media's modus operandi, its logic, which affects the "frontstage part of political processes (politics) more easily and forcefully than the backstage part (policy), and have less, if any, influence on the institutional framework (polity)."¹⁰ Even though they admit that the media logic can influence primarily the domain of politics, Strömbäck and Esser don't think this changes anything. Mediatization of politics research is literally just that. Not mediatization of policy/polity, even though this should be an important part of any theory of the interplay. Explanations about the crisis of democracy and the rise of populism are based solely on the highly reduced notion of mediatization of politics. In the next section we will examine neoliberal contribution to this polity and policy to complete this framework.

We have to face the fact that populism is more than a mediatized construction. It existed in the 19th century, when American populists were singing the song about 99

⁶ Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard, and Knut Lundby, "Mediatization: Theorizing the Interplay between Media, Culture and Society," *Media, Culture and Society* 37 (2015): 314–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715573835>.

⁷ Hjarvard, "Mediatization and cultural and social change: an institutional perspective," 202.

⁸ Zrinjka, Peruško, "Mediatization: From Structure to Agency (and Back Again)," in *Dynamics of Mediatization: Institutional Change and Everyday Transformations in a Digital Age*, ed. Olivier Driessens et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), 57.

⁹ Hjarvard, "Mediatization and Cultural and Social Change: an Institutional Perspective," 201.

¹⁰ Jesper Strömbäck and Frank Esser, "Mediatization of Politics: Towards a Theoretical Framework," in *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, ed. Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 16.

people with empty hands and one living in luxury.¹¹ That is, the same people who sang the 99 song (Occupy's "ancestors") were also against the Chinese immigrant labour,¹² and often were racists and anti-Semites (Alt-Right?) – all together! Therefore, populism was always a complex reaction to transformations of "existing power balances, prosperity levels, economic indices and labor models".¹³ That is today *a reaction to global neoliberal policies and polity*. This "social malaise" is "certainly not provoked by the media, but the media do play a role in disseminating it".¹⁴ When Mazzoleni starts his theorization of media populism, he sees it as a "nexus of influences"¹⁵ between media logic and the phenomenon of populism. It looked like it's on a path toward theorizing the interplay. Unfortunately, just a page later, media logic and media populism appear to be "overlapping concepts"¹⁶ – the interplay is lost.

Even though Mazzoleni acknowledges that the media "cannot be separated from other structural factors", at the same time he treats the media only as an "independent variable".¹⁷ That is, of course, not in line with the whole idea of the interplay and nexus of influences, where media have to be a dependent variable, too. Those structural factors don't just form an inter-institutional configuration that fosters populism; that's also a configuration that challenges the media. But even though Mazzoleni doesn't go further in this direction, it's still Benjamin Krämer that explicitly doesn't want to "speculate on the institutional and organizational backgrounds of media populism".¹⁸ Basically – he doesn't want to talk about the interplay, or neoliberal polity and policy. Actually, Krämer criticizes the tabloids because of their "popular aversion to abstract and theoretical conceptions of society".¹⁹ The problem is he's the one who's doing it.

That doesn't stop him from saying that tabloids are populist because they're fostering a "sentiment of crisis, insecurity and social tensions", while the "quality media (and their users) seem to be more committed to the existing institutions", so they probably don't cultivate populism.²⁰ That is, according to Krämer, being committed to the institutions that created the social malaise cannot in any way foster populism. This is highly problematic, not just because the interplay of policy/polity and media is not examined, but because this focus on style and ideology is not a sufficient explanation for the cause of populism. Actually, it's a thin explanation of a thin ideology. Tabloids

¹¹ John Donald Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (The University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 81.

¹² John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion* (Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

¹³ Gianpietro Mazzoleni, "Mediatization and Political Populism," in *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, ed. Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 45.

¹⁴ Mazzoleni, G. "Populism and the Media," in *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 50.

¹⁵ Mazzoleni, "Mediatization and Political Populism," 47.

¹⁶ Mazzoleni, "Mediatization and Political Populism," 48.

¹⁷ Mazzoleni, "Populism and the Media," 50.

¹⁸ Krämer, "Media Populism: A Conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects," 43.

¹⁹ Krämer, "Media Populism: A Conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects," 50.

²⁰ Krämer, "Media Populism: A Conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects," 50.

always occurred in the periods of social crisis and conflict,²¹ so why do we assume tabloids caused this state of affairs, not vice versa?

This is not just an issue within mediatization research. The constant thin explanations are lurking beneath the surface of the usual political communication research. For example, when van Aelst et al. examine the contemporary political information environment, they understand it as a “supply and demand of political news and political information within a certain society”,²² which means they’re concerned with the “relationship between media, politics and citizens”.²³ That is, again, not the whole interplay, because the market is missing. Later, when van Aelst et al. discuss that what quality news means depends “on the preferred normative model of democracy”²⁴, one should assume their normative model doesn’t include the economy, even though they use the market categories of supply and demand. When van Aelst et al. talk about what the news should be, they say the news should be “substantial, factual and diverse”.²⁵ But without the substantial normative and critical aspect what can they say about substantial news? Their answer is: “It deals with issues and topics that are relevant for people in their role as citizens” and “at the heart of substantial political news thus lies ‘factual information’”.²⁶ In the end, substantial becomes just a synonym for factual and diverse, even though the last two mean nothing without a normative aspect.

Hegel, Kuhn, Hiedegger and recently Rorty suggested that communication must protect vigorous debate in an open, collaborative society and provide the means to empower communities and special interest groups to have their say. For critical theorists, “the flood of precise information and brand new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once”.²⁷ For example, is covering the Trump and Clinton campaign equally a sign the audience will get a substantial variety of information? Not really, because both Republicans and Democrats are neoliberals.²⁸ It’s a *factual account of fake diversity*. It will be substantial when the media start talking about neoliberalism, seriously. In the context of the neoliberal network society, challenges to democracy couldn’t be just “increasing fragmentation and polarization, epistemic relativism and growing inequalities in political knowledge”.²⁹ Other social inequalities, polarizations and conflicts related to neoliberal reforms should be discussed – the interplay of

²¹ Bojan Cvejić, “‘Crna hronika’ i etika u štampi u Srbiji pre 100 godina i danas,” *CM: Communication and Media* 19, no. 2 (2024): 368, <https://doi.org/10.5937/cm19-49941>.

²² Peter Van Aelst, Jesper Strömbäck, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Claes de Vreese, Jörg Matthes, David Hopmann, et al., “Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment: a Challenge for Democracy?” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 41, no. 1 (2017): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2017.1288551>.

²³ Van Aelst et al., “Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment,” 5.

²⁴ Van Aelst et al., “Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment,” 8.

²⁵ Van Aelst et al., “Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment,” 8.

²⁶ Van Aelst et al., “Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment,” 5.

²⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), vii.

²⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union* (Polity, 2012), 104; and Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 40.

²⁹ Van Aelst et al., “Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment,” 19.

political, economic and media logic. Therefore, we would like to propose an upgrade to the mediatization research. What we need is a thick mediatization theory. The real theorizing of the interplay.

From media systems to neoliberalism

The interplay of logics should be based on “relation between media systems and political systems”.³⁰ Hallin and Mancini never forget policy and polity: “One cannot understand the media without understanding the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of civil society”.³¹ Hallin maintains that populism is a “*joint product of neoliberalism and of mediatization*”³². Once you add neoliberalism into equation the role of the media cannot stay the same. Communication scholars usually rely on a *differentiation theory*,³³ based on the idea that in modern societies there’s a constant specialization of functions, leading to the formation of many relatively autonomous functions. From that perspective, the media became more distanced from the political system and an institution of its own. The society is seen as interconnected group of institutions with different purposes, interests and values, basically – logics, with different *modus operandi*.

But Hallin and Mancini see the “shift toward neoliberalism” as a *simultaneous process of differentiation and de-differentiation*.³⁴ Critical perspective cannot neglect the problem of power. Jürgen Habermas or Pierre Bourdieu maintain that “the media have lost autonomy in relation to the market”.³⁵ While mediatization scholars think commercialization facilitated the institutionalization of the media, for Hallin and Mancini the public sphere “collapsed into the market... and into the system of political power”.³⁶ Where mediatization scholars often see a semiautonomous media institution, brought by commercialization, Hallin and Mancini see colonization of the lifeworld: “Media are becoming less differentiated in relation to the economic system, even as they are becoming more differentiated in relation to the political system [...] market logic tends to dominate wide swaths of society.”³⁷

Social dynamics is created through the interrelationship of political and economic logic. It is striking how neoliberal economy is understood only through the thin definitions like “free market” or “cut-throat competition”. For Friedrich Hayek,

³⁰ Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

³¹ Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 8.

³² Daniel Hallin, “Mediatization, Neoliberalism and Populisms: the Case of Trump,” *Contemporary Social Science* (2018): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2018.1426404>.

³³ Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 77.

³⁴ Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 291.

³⁵ Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 88.

³⁶ Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 81.

³⁷ Hallin and Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 291.

laissez faire “never provided a criterion by which one could decide what were the proper functions of government”.³⁸ It was the idea of “competitive order”³⁹ from the very beginning. For Milton Friedman “the central principle of a market economy is cooperation through voluntary exchange”.⁴⁰

Another striking fact about neoliberalism is that it contains non-democratic elements, influenced by Carl Schmitt. While scholars are aware of Schmittian background of many populist actors, whether it’s an organic link between the leader, Schmitt’s⁴¹ idea of a *sovereign power as being capable to introduce the state of emergency* is something that neoliberals strongly support.⁴² In neoliberal terms, if the *order of the free market* is threatened, preservation of that order implies that “the basic principle of a free society [...] may yet have to be temporarily suspended”.⁴³ The sovereign power can introduce the state of emergency to preserve the order. It means “abolishing democracy [...] in defense of economic freedom”.⁴⁴

But Ludwig von Mises seems to be the most interesting: “Society cannot exist if the majority is not ready to hinder, by the application or threat of violent action, minorities from destroying the social order”,⁴⁵ that is the market order, “the foremost social body”.⁴⁶ Sure we need controlling mechanisms and some command elements in our societies, even a power that will maintain the rule of law. But that doesn’t mean “Fascism [...] saved European civilization” and that “the merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live eternally in history”.⁴⁷ The fact that this was written in a book called *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition* is one of those moments when the parallax view has to set in: “Fascism was an emergency makeshift”.⁴⁸ From this perspective, it is completely understandable that Hayek and Friedman supported the Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, and that Hayek could in 1978 write in his letter to The Times: “Personal freedom was much greater under Pinochet than it had been under Allende”.⁴⁹ Or that he could say Pinochet’s regime could be more liberal than an unlimited democracy.⁵⁰

³⁸ Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (3 volumes) (Routledge, 1998a), 62.

³⁹ Milton Friedman, “Neoliberalism and its Prospects,” *Farmand* 17 (1951): 89–93.

⁴⁰ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 166.

⁴¹ Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship* (Polity, 2014).

⁴² Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (3 volumes) (Routledge, 1998c), 124–26.

⁴³ Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1998c), 124.

⁴⁴ Wolfgang Streeck, “The Crises of Democratic Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 71 (2011): 7.

⁴⁵ Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Fox and Wilkes, 1996), 149.

⁴⁶ von Mises, *Human Action*, 315.

⁴⁷ Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition* (Cobden Press, 1985), 51.

⁴⁸ von Mises, *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition*, 51.

⁴⁹ Andrew Farrant, Edward McPhail and Sebastian Berger, “Preventing the “Abuses” of Democracy: Hayek, the “Military Usurper” and Transitional Dictatorship in Chile?” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71, no. 3 (2012): 513, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.2012.00824.x>.

⁵⁰ Werner Bonefeld, *Strong State and the Free Economy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 48.

Therefore, it is particularly important to notice that when very distinguished European thinkers talk about EU, they mention Carl Schmitt. And even when they don't mention Schmitt, they talk about the lack of democracy⁵¹ or democratic deficit of the Union.⁵² For Jürgen Habermas, it's not just that the Union is the work of political elites, it is that Schmitt "suppresses the normative question concerning the bearer of the constituent power 'of the people'" and "has in mind the pre-democratic forms of federation".⁵³ Ulrich Beck is afraid of the "Carl Schmitt scenario"⁵⁴ for Europe, the end of democracy, when the risk society meets Schmitt's states of emergency. The "Merkiavelli method", created by conflating Angela Merkel and Niccolò Machiavelli, is based on a "threat of withdrawal, delay and refusal of credit" to member states,⁵⁵ what Bauman and Bordoni call "coercion".⁵⁶ It means that "the substance of designing or authoring laws is that the discretion to choose lies in the hands of the designer"⁵⁷ – a Schmittian sovereign, a "pouvoir constituant",⁵⁸ that preserves the order by introducing the state of emergency, a legal exception, when it's necessary to construct a constitution that is "still to come".⁵⁹

That way, hearing about Union's "anti-democratic design"⁶⁰ or "de-democratization of democracy"⁶¹ is expected. For Beck, neoliberalism has been "built into the European constitution in the shape of the Fiscal Compact – bypassing the European public sphere in the process".⁶² The principles of fairness, equalization, reconciliation and non-exploitation were violated.⁶³ One can read too many times that the Union ruled out Keynesian policies and institutionalized the market fundamentalism and austerity measures, even though people voted against it. The EU institutions for Habermas seem to be "completely beyond the reach of democratic controls".⁶⁴ We're witnessing a "post-democratic exercise of political authority" and a "reification of popular sovereignty".⁶⁵ That is, the Union is "planned for but not by the people".⁶⁶

⁵¹ Anthony Giddens, *Turbulent and Mighty Continent: What Future for Europe?* (Polity, 2014).

⁵² "Introduction: Fading of a Dream." In *Europe's Crises*, ed. Gustavo Cardoso, Joao Caraça, John Thompson, Manuel Castells, Michel Wieviorka, and Olivier Bouin (Polity Press, 2018), 1–8.

⁵³ Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union*, 34.

⁵⁴ Ulrich Beck, *German Europe* (Polity, 2013), 26.

⁵⁵ Beck, *German Europe*, 50.

⁵⁶ Zygmunt Bauman and Carlo Bordoni, *State of Crisis* (Polity, 2014), 36.

⁵⁷ Bauman and Bordoni, *State of Crisis*, 34.

⁵⁸ Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, 123.

⁵⁹ Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, 119.

⁶⁰ Perry Anderson, *The New Old World* (Verso, 2011), 116.

⁶¹ Etienne Balibar, *Citizenship* (Polity, 2015), 4.

⁶² Beck, *German Europe*, 52.

⁶³ Beck, *German Europe*, 65.

⁶⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy* (Polity, 2015), 3.

⁶⁵ Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union*, ix and 14.

⁶⁶ Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy*, 11.

Commercial media, and global neoliberal polity/policies create an interplay in which the audience can remain passive (“informed and educated”) or react against it any way they can. Media rarely tackle neoliberalism because they can’t fight themselves. Maybe that is the reason for many media theorists who see coverage of major events (especially in “Western World”) as “self-referential.” On the other hand, the malaise of declining media credibility and public trust is grounded in what we can start calling a “crisis in intent” – the perception by media audiences that mediated messages are self-serving and self-referential. Meanwhile, people are looking for something mainstream media doesn’t cover. There is an idea that populist actors, “losers and refusers [...] try to elude moral censure”⁶⁷ by creating closed circles on digital platforms.

Conclusion and discussion: neoliberal mediatization

The critical perspective always examines the media within the whole social system.⁶⁸ Without a holistic approach, the very notion of media populism remains a thin explanation of the phenomenon that’s getting thicker every day. Why do we have populism? Maybe because neoliberal transformation of our societies brought increasing inequality, roll-back of the welfare state and de-democratization of democracy? Maybe it’s completely logical for people nowadays to react and defend themselves against the network? Neoliberal doctrine fundamentally marked political, economic and media logic, as well as its interplay. The goal was never laissez-faire but political construction of a globally controlled market. Equality was never the goal of the network society, because that would pose a danger for the market mechanism.

In the context of the political-economic logics’ nexus, media backed out of defining public interest in terms of justice and solidarity, that became decoupled from economic growth. If the media remained committed to neoliberal political and economic institutions, then they were not really steered by audience involvement and ratings in crucial moments. When it matters the most, the media don’t appear liberal at all but assume a pro-corporate standing in its coverage. It is predominantly shaped by the dimensions of the omnipresent neoliberal model of reality production (and its numerous manifestations or versions), which has long resulted in a marriage of convenience between media actors and non-media actors who undoubtedly influence their work models, leading it through various forms of media populism, at the expense of quality journalism (information), in pursuit of financial profit. Unsatisfied audience searched for alternative facts, that are unfortunately anti-rationalist, anti-enlightened and anti-science oriented most of the time. But media scholars rarely ask why the media institutions distanced themselves from their public interest role in the first place.

⁶⁷ Wolfgang Streeck, “The Return of the Repressed,” *New Left Review* 104 (2017): 13.

⁶⁸ Paul Lazarsfeld, “Remarks on Administrative and Critical Communications Research,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 2–16. (Paul Lazarsfeld studied audiences to find out what effect radio might have on audiences. His goal was to show how powerful radio was in influencing audiences. He is also considered the father of Survey Research methods.)

We've tried to show that we have populism because of the *neoliberalization of the social structure*. People are rightfully angry and find the pro-neoliberal media coverage of polity and policy inadequate. But there are many ways to respond to this, why choose the ugliest? Well, the articulation of grievances, theorized by Laclau,⁶⁹ is distorted due to national capital's and media's interests. People who are against neoliberalism end up supporting populism that is very ambivalent about neoliberalism. Sanders, Occupy, Podemos and similar actors are undoubtedly against neoliberalism. Trump is more of a "radicalization, not a rejection of neoliberalism".⁷⁰ The question is: where is this anti-neoliberal populism? It's hardly there at all. People's dissatisfaction with neoliberal structures is channelled in the worse way possible. If we want to simplify: *why do we have populism – neoliberalism; why do we have this kind of populism – mediatization*.

In this way, the necessary balance between achieving profit and protecting the public interest in the context of media editorial tendencies is completely undermined, thus affecting media original orientation toward fulfilling their three main functions of informing, educating, and entertaining the public. We expect the media to be a responsible social stakeholders in our civilization, but this rarely happens.⁷¹ More specifically, the trend of shifting the editorial focus radically toward profit-driven activities, which is strongly attached to the fulfilling of their entertainment function, most useful from the perspective of media-financial opportunity, has long culminated in the trends of the overall commercialization of their work and the tabloidization of the global social reality. It is the neoliberal paradigm that changes the perspective of media studies towards the whole framework of social communication.⁷²

Commercial media focus on drama and infotainment instead of critical coverage of neoliberal polity/policy. They operate within a nation state framework and usually have the ethnic majority as the core audience, so the populist reaction is often nationally anchored. But only international reaction can change policies and polity in Brussels. By nationalizing the protest against a regime that is supranational, the "populist backlash is contained in national parliaments".⁷³ That way, the European order of the free market is preserved. One country, even several, can "temporarily suspend" the "principle of the free society", and that will be only a glitch within the system that will still function. When people get tired of their populist leaders, the state of emergency can be withdrawn, and the country can safely be integrated back to the international market order. In this context, *mediatization shows itself as an instrument of neoliberalism*, a powerful tool for containing popular protest and distorting the real alternatives.

⁶⁹ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005).

⁷⁰ Hallin, "Mediatization, Neoliberalism and Populisms: the Case of Trump," 4.

⁷¹ Biljana Vitković, "Učešće mladih u medijima i analiza preliivanja informacija o njima od jedne ka drugoj vrsti medija," *CM: Communication and Media* 18, no. 54 (2023): 331, <https://doi.org/10.5937/cm18-43849>.

⁷² Slobodan Penezić and Goran Kauzlarić, "Neoliberalna epistemologija i konceptualne promene u medijskom posredovanju," *LIMES Plus: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 1 (2024): 109, <http://iriss.idn.org.rs/2597/1/SP-txt-Limes-2024.pdf>.

⁷³ Werner Bonefeld, *Strong State and the Free Economy*, 168.

This means positioning the ideal of profit-making on the pedestal of an absolute imperative and in the middle of the media-society relationship. Even though numerous media actors, as well as those who lead them down this misguided path, profit from this, the true victims are the public, the public interest, but indirectly, also the media actors themselves (although they are either unaware of this or consciously forget it). They feel the consequences of their own irresponsibility or such ad-hoc media actions with the first significant change in the social climate and among those factors that influence their work (and, in turn, which the media undoubtedly influence at the same time, according to the principle of feedback). This price has already been paid by many once-important media actors, but the entire contemporary world continues to pay it along the way, because it undeniably depends on quality information (nowadays more than ever, probably), while we are at the same time living its paradox embodied in the fact that, evidently, there is less and less of it, despite ever-growing new possibilities and sources of information. We can notice the decline in public trust and the re-articulation of the Enlightenment's core values.⁷⁴ The media should be impartial brokers of facts and provide much of that knowledge so that citizens can make informed decisions. That core belief appears to be under challenge.

References

- "Introduction. Fading of a Dream?" In *Europe's Crises*, edited Gustavo Cardoso, Joao Caraça, John Thompson, Manuel Castells, Michel Wieviorka, and Olivier Bouin, 1–10. Polity Press, 2018.
- Anderson, Perry. *The New Old World*. Verso, 2011.
- Balibar, Etienne. *Citizenship*. Polity, 2015.
- Bauman, Zygmunt and Carlo Bordoni. *State of Crisis*. Polity, 2014.
- Beck, Ulrich. *German Europe*. Polity, 2013.
- Bonefeld, Werner. *Strong State and the Free Economy*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.
- Couldry, Nick. "Mediatization and the Future of Field Theory." In *Mediatization of Communication*, edited Knut Lundby, 227–49. De Gruyter, 2014.
- Cvejić, Bojan. "'Crna hronika' i etika u štampi u Srbiji pre 100 godina i danas." *CM: Communication and Media* 19, no. 2 (2024): 367–90. <https://doi.org/10.5937/cm19-49941>.
- Farrant, Andrew, Edward McPhail, and Sebastian Berger. "Preventing the 'Abuses' of Democracy: Hayek, the 'Military Usurper' and Transitional Dictatorship in Chile?." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71 no. 3 (2012): 513–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.2012.00824.x>.

⁷⁴ Charles C. Self. "Lecture 1–3," in *Study Guide for Mass Comm Theory*, ed. Charles C. Self (University of Oklahoma, 2008), 17.

Friedman, Milton. "Neoliberalism and its Prospects." *Farmand* 17 (1951): 89–93.

Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Giddens, Anthony. *Turbulent and Mighty Continent: What Future for Europe?* Polity, 2014.

Grossberg, Lawrence. "Language and Theorizing in the Human Sciences." In *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (2), edited Norman K. Denzin, 189–231. JAI Press inc., 1979.

Grossberg, Lawrence. "Strategies of Marxist Cultural Interpretation." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 no. 4 (1984): 392–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038409360049>.

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Crisis of the European Union* (Polity, 2012).

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Lure of Technocracy* (Polity, 2015).

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press, 1989.

Hallin, Daniel, and Paolo Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Hallin, Daniel. "Mediatization, Neoliberalism and Populisms: the Case of Trump." *Contemporary Social Science* (2018): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2018.1426404>.

Hayek, Friedrich. *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (3 volumes). Routledge, 1998.

Hepp, Andreas, Stig Hjarvard, and Knut Lundby. "Mediatization: Theorizing the Interplay between Media, Culture and Society." *Media, Culture and Society* 37 (2015): 314–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715573835>.

Hicks, John Donald. *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party*. The University of Minnesota Press, 1955.

Hjarvard, Stig. (2014). "Mediatization and Cultural and Social Change: an Institutional Perspective." In *Mediatization of Communication*, edited Knut Lundby, 199–227. De Gruyter, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110272215.199>.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Judis, John B. *The Populist Explosion*. Columbia Global Reports, 2016.

Krämer, Benjamin. "Media Populism: A Conceptual Clarification and Some Theses on its Effects." *Communication Theory* 24, (2014): 42–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12029>.

Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. Verso, 2005.

Lazarsfeld, Paul. "Remarks on Administrative and Critical Communications Research." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941): 2–16.

Mazzoleni, Gianpietro. "Mediatization and Political Populism." In *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, edited Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck, 42–56. Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

- Mazzoleni, Gianpietro. "Populism and the Media." In *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, edited Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, 49–64. Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Penezić, Slobodan and Goran Kauzlarić. "Neoliberalna epistemologija i konceptualne promene u medijskom posredovanju." *LIMES Plus: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 1 (2024): 83–117. <http://iriss.idn.org.rs/2597/1/SP-txt-Limes-2024.pdf>.
- Peruško, Zrinjka. "Mediatization: From Structure to Agency (and Back Again)." In *Dynamics of Mediatization: Institutional Change and Everyday Transformations in a Digital Age*, edited Olivier Driessens, Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard, and Goran Bolin, 57–85. Palgrave, 2017.
- Ruben, Brent D. "Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Mass Communication Processes in Individual and Multi-Person Systems." In *General Systems Theory and Human Communication*, edited Brent D. Ruben, and John Y. Kim, 164–85. Hayden Book Co., 1975.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Dictatorship*. Polity, 2014.
- Self, C. Charles. "Lecture 1–3." In *Study Guide for Mass Comm Theory*, edited Charles C. Self, 2–21. University of Oklahoma, 2008.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. "The Crises of Democratic Capitalism." *New Left Review* 71 (2011): 5–29.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. "The Return of the Repressed." *New Left Review* 104 (2017): 5–18.
- Strömbäck, Jesper and Frank Esser. "Mediatization of Politics: Towards a Theoretical Framework." In *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, edited Frank Esser, and Jesper Strömbäck, 3–31. Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.
- Van Aelst, Peter, Jesper Strömbäck, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Claes de Vreese, Jörg Matthes, David Hopmann, et al. "Political Communication in a High-Choice Media Environment: a Challenge for Democracy?" *Annals of the International Communication Association* 41, no. 1 (2017): 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2017.1288551>.
- Vitković, Biljana. "Učešće mladih u medijima i analiza prelivanja informacija o njima od jedne ka drugoj vrsti medija." *CM: Communication and Media* 18, no. 54 (2023): 305–36. <https://doi.org/10.5937/cm18-43849>.
- von Mises, Ludwig. *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Fox and Wilkes, 1996.
- von Mises, Ludwig. *Liberalism in the Classical Tradition*. Cobden Press, 1985.

Article received: December 16, 2024
Article accepted: February 1, 2025
Original scholarly article