NATIONALISM, POPULISM
AND GLOBAL SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: The paper aims to investigate if and how social media platforms made users change their political opinions, particularly regarding the hot topic: nationalism vs. globalism. Social networks allow people to talk to each other all over the world, creating a non-stop global conversation. These kinds of media are global by nature and we are used to seeing them as one of the many consequences of globalization. In spite of this feature a paradoxical effect has occurred, as today social media are the privileged platforms for nationalist organizations, promoting the idea of the nation (or the return to) as the best way to fight globalisation. The paper, through a narrative approach, investigates nationalism on social media and its possible effects. The paper assesses scientific articles from international literature in English. The review also covers journalistic articles, reporting data, insights or simple news regarding the subject. In this case, the paper includes only articles coming from mainstream publications. Trying to pursue this objective, the review excludes articles not clearly reporting the name of the publication, author and date. In addition to this, all these articles are checked, making sure they have been cited or linked by other mainstream media.

Keywords: social media, disintermediation, polarization, nationalism, populism.

INTRODUCTION

There is a general consensus about the fact that globalisation means having stronger and interdependent relationships between organisations and people who are part of this system. On the other hand, there are many more different opinions about the effect of globalisation, its real nature and the kinds of relationships that shape globalisation. Some authors emphasize the economic relationships, while other point out the cultural ones. The Cambridge Dictionary, for instance, in its definition of globalisation reports both of these relationships. Economic: the increase of trade around the world, especially by large companies producing and trading goods in many different countries.

And cultural: a situation in which available goods and services or social and cultural influences gradually become similar in all parts of the world. Over recent years globalisation seems to have made many people afraid of and disappointed with its consequences, sparking strong reactions at social and political levels and the rise of nationalism is the main one of these reactions. Social media is one of the results of globalisation. These platforms have profoundly changed the way in which news and opinions circulate, enabling everyone to talk one-to-many and basically allowing people to bypass any kind of media. Of course, this disintermediation takes diverse forms according to the country and its culture, but disintermediation is the common essential element around the world. For these reasons social media is global by nature but paradoxically it has become the privileged media of nationalist and populist movements to spread their aims and ideas.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DISINTERMEDIATION

Since social media is so disintermediated, it is the ideal environment for emotionally-driven content. Nation is one of the most powerful symbolic ideas in human history so it seems particularly suitable to be shared in the social media environment. The idea of nation encourages people to express their opinions in a wild way, while the same concept reinforces the sense of identity in the same people. Thanks to this disintermediation everyone can become a self-publisher. There are no more barriers to taking part actively in the public debate.

The rise of blogs is the most paradigmatic example of this new ecosystem. While in the traditional ecosystem mainstream media (newspapers, tv, radio) need large resources and a complex organisation to collect, analyse and bring news to their audience, in the social media arena all these resources are not required. Blogs are the most paradigmatic example of this new situation. They are online spaces, usually owned and managed by a single person but more and more frequently by an organization, which report news and stories reaching a wide audience. This is the prime example of the opportunity to become self-

publishers as described above. In July 1999, Toronto programmer Andrew Smales became the first to launch a "do-it-yourself blog tool" at Pitas.com. Smales was inspired to create an "online diary community". One month later, Evan Williams, Paul Bausch, and Meg Hourihan launched Blogger.com, which quickly became the largest and best-known blogging website. When blogs are managed by a single person, their contents usually refer to a specific industry and are part of a wider business. This is the case with some popular fashion bloggers or food bloggers for instance. While blogs are focused on political subjects, they act as a sort of newspaper, with a brand name and supported by several editors. The relationship between blogging and journalism is controversial, as many bloggers still do not report news, but only comment on stories reported by professional journalists (Rogers 2017). Most bloggers find topics on social networks (58 per cent), followed by online magazines (53 per cent). However, not all topics derive from the internet: sources for blogs also come from face-to-face communication (51 per cent) and own considerations (50 per cent). Journalistic offline media plays a crucial role for 42 per cent of the respondents, and press releases are of interest to about 41 per cent (Open School of Journalism 2017).

It is reasonable to suppose that online journalism as source of inspiration for bloggers is even higher than 53 per cent if we consider that the 58 per cent (social networks sources) also includes many online newspapers who share their articles through social networks. In addition to this, bloggers' comments are usually written to spark reactions from the audience in order to get interactions and engagement. The close relationship between blogging and journalists is also proven by several phenomena. First of all, many top journalists are bloggers as well. It is interesting to read their opinions because quite often their blogs are more explicit than their articles written for mainstream media.

Another interesting element is the fact that online newspapers usually host a blog, led by one of their journalists. In general, blogging can be an opportunity to offer a greater stimulus and more points of views for public debate, feeding the right to free speech. However, literature shows that more audience

engagement does not necessarily mean more social inclusion and active citizenship. The emergence of the so-called "fifth estate" (Dutton 2009) of networked bloggers contributing through alternative media was supposed to herald a wider role for the audience in journalism, articulating important news, generating public debate and facilitating new forms of accountability. However, it is increasingly clear that audience inclusion has not been as participatory as expected. Research into news organisations' use of social media reveals that it does not always provide the heralded opportunities for the audience to become more active in the news-creation process, with limited user participation on websites and users rarely allowed to set the agenda (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2016).

NATIONALISM

The nation is the core concept of nationalism and it shows a pattern that is always present in the nation discourse: some spatial dimensions and its borders, a community and the idea of a cultural homogeneity of this community. This makes the nation the nodal point around which the nationalism discourse is structured. The nation can be seen "as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space, and that is constructed through an in/out (member/non-member) opposition between the nation and its outgroups" (De Cleen 2017). Identifying a shared past and traditions and a territory is essential to differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup to obscure the (historical) contingency of the nation, as well as to provide legitimacy for the nation's sovereignty over a territory (Freeden 1998, Wodak et al. 2009). The in/out approach is a typical feature of every nationalism. This approach is a result of the idea of community, one of the elements always present in the nation discourse. It is useful to underline that in the nation discourse the concept of the State is only in the background as the State's legitimacy depends on its representation of the sovereign nation (Jenkins, Sofos 1996). While the conceptualisation of nation is relatively easy, the conceptualisation
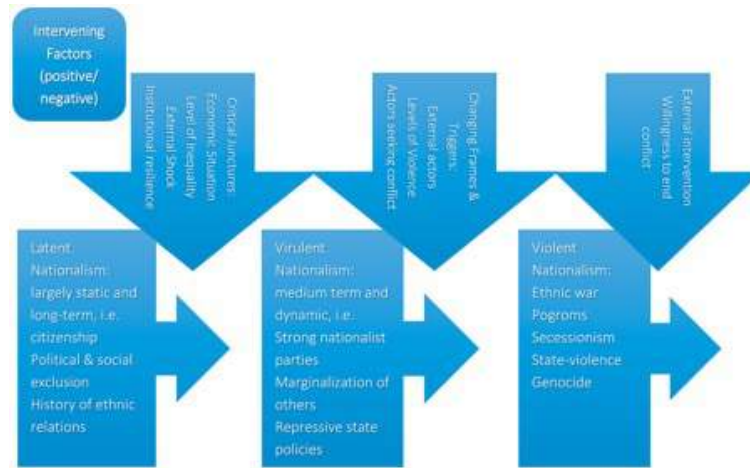
Fig. 1. *Illustration of the three main kinds of nationalism.*

of nationalism as ideology becomes more difficult, as nationalism takes different shapes and grades depending on the country. On the other hand, it is important to try at least to frame this elusive concept, before assessing how it is brought through social media. A first definition of nationalism focuses attention on the match between the culture of a community and the territory where it is based (Freeden 1998; Gellner 1983). Other authors define nationalism as "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation" (Smith 2010). According to Bieber we can identify three kinds of nationalism: Latent, Virulent and Violent and three intervening factors, positive or negative, that can change the situation for the worse or for the better, in the case of violent nationalism (fig. 1).

According to Bieber, although nationalism differs around the world, we can find some common patterns. The fear of immigrants, linked to the fear of a threat to the identity of the receiving country, is one of these patterns. The wish for homogeneity is an important element that fuels nationalism and traditionally it has always been weaker in countries with a

multifaceted identity and high level of immigration that con-
tributed to shape this identity.

NATIONALISM AND POPULISM

The in/out approach is something nationalism and popu-
lism have in common and for this reason they can be combined.
On the other hand, we must take into consideration that, while
nationalism is usually radical right, populism can also charac-
terize left wing parties. The idea of pure people against the cor-
rupt elites is the core concept of populism (Mudde, Rovira,
Kaltwasser 2012). The illegitimacy of the elites and their inca-
pacity to represent the pure people and its will and needs is at
the basis of the people discourse carried out by populist parties.
Halikiopoulou underlines that

the definition of the people and the elites changes depending on
whether a party is on the right or the left of the political spectrum.
The right focuses on immigration and national sovereignty – the peo-
ple is defined as "us" the natives, who should have access to the col-
lective goods of the state, and the elites are those corrupt outsiders
and their collaborators, who seek to undermine "our" sovereignty.
The left, on the other hand, focuses on economic exploitation and in-
equality – the people are "us", the exploited and economically de-
prived, while the elites are those associated with free trade, globalisa-
tion and Western imperialism (Halikiopoulou 2019; Brubaker 2017).

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lism have in common and for this reason they can be combined.
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nationalism is usually radical right, populism can also charac-
terize left wing parties. Similarities and differences between na-
tionalism and populism, can be represented as in fig. 2.

NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The US is a typical example of a country like this, in which in
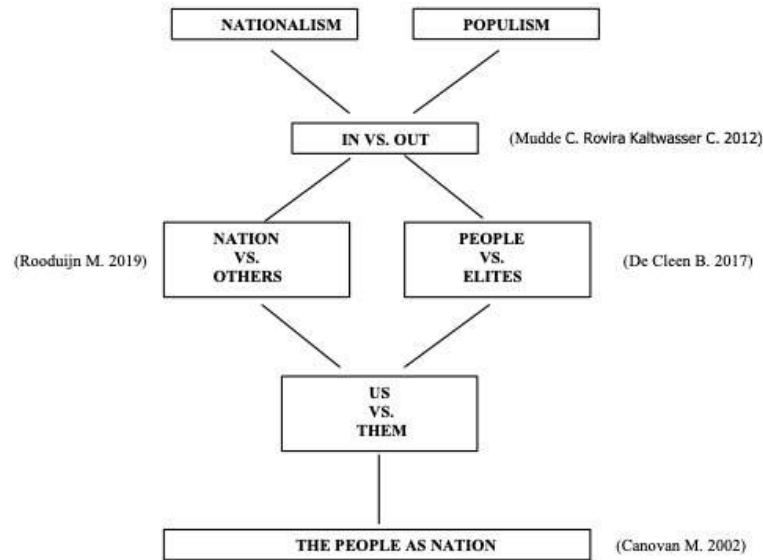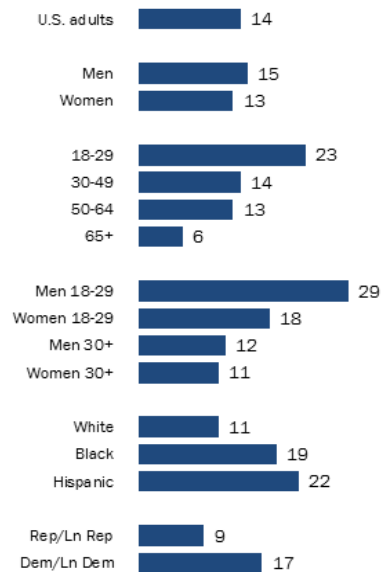the discourse of its identity WASP narration has always lived

Fig. 2. *Similarities and differences between nationalism and populism.*

alongside the Melting Pot narration. On the other hand, the last elections in the US seem to have changed this paradigm, which has sounded familiar and reassuring for decades, showing a new attitude on the part of the electors and the way in which they get and process political information. On top of this change there is social media, which has transformed the way in which citizens consume political information. Individuals now have access to a wider span of viewpoints about news events, and most of this information is not coming through the traditional channels, but either directly from political figures or through their friends and relatives (Francescato 2018). A recent Pew Research Center survey says that for most Americans, exposure to different content and ideas on social media has not caused them to change their opinions. But a small share of the public – 14 per cent – say they have changed their views about a political or social issue in the past year because of something they saw on social media. Certain groups, particularly young men, are more likely than others to say they have modified their views because

Roughly three-in-ten younger men changed their views on an issue because of social media

% of U.S. adults who say they changed their views on a political or social issue because of something they saw on social media in the past year

Category	Value
U.S. adults	14
Men	15
Women	13
18-29	23
30-49	14
50-64	13
65+	6
Men 18-29	29
Women 18-29	18
Men 30+	12
Women 30+	11
White	11
Black	19
Hispanic	22
Rep/Ln Rep	9
Dem/Ln Dem	17

Note: Whites and blacks include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Respondents who did not answer or gave other responses not shown.
Source: Survey conducted May 29-June 11, 2018.

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Fig. 3. *How many Americans changed their views on an issue because of social media.*

of social media. Around three-in-ten men ages 18 to 29 (29 per cent) say their views on a political or social issue have changed in the past year due to social media. This is roughly twice the share saying this among all Americans and more than double the shares among men and women aged 30 and older (Bialik 2018, fig. 3).

Francescato reports that two recent studies have tried to explore if social networks favour or diminish political polarization. The first one (Barbera 2015) found lower political extremism in Twitter and Facebook users in Germany, Spain and USA

compared with older users and non-users of the Internet and social media. These results argue against the hypothesis that the Internet in general and social media in particular are the main drivers of political polarization. On the contrary, Barbera found that growth in political polarization is largest in groups least likely to use Internet and social media.

The second study (Boxell, Gentzkow, Shapiro 2017) used nine measures of political polarization ranging from straight voting to affective polarization, which they defined as the tendency of people identifying as Republicans and Democrats to view opposite partisan negatively and co-partisans positively. Less than 20 per cent of those 65 years and older used social media while 80 per cent of those ages 18 to 29 were frequent users. For eight of the nine individual measures, polarization increased more for older than younger. These findings confirm those of Barbera (2015): Twitter and Facebook increase exposure to political diversity, which seems to induce political moderation.

Another US experiment reports interesting results about the relation between social media exposure and political polarization. The authors surveyed a large sample of Democrats and Republicans who visit Twitter at least three times each week about a range of social policy issues. One week later, they randomly assigned respondents to a treatment condition in which they were offered financial incentives to follow a Twitter bot for 1 month that exposed them to messages from those with opposing political ideologies (e.g., elected officials, opinion leaders, media organizations, and non-profit groups). Respondents were resurveyed at the end of the month to measure the effect of this treatment, and at regular intervals throughout the study period to monitor treatment compliance. The authors found that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became substantially more conservative post treatment. Democrats exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes after following a conservative Twitter bot, although these effects are not statistically significant (Bail et al. 2018). Asking why digital nationalism seems so strong, the first answer offered by the literature is about a certain ability to disseminate fake news. This is not the place to investigate the fake news phenomenon, however we
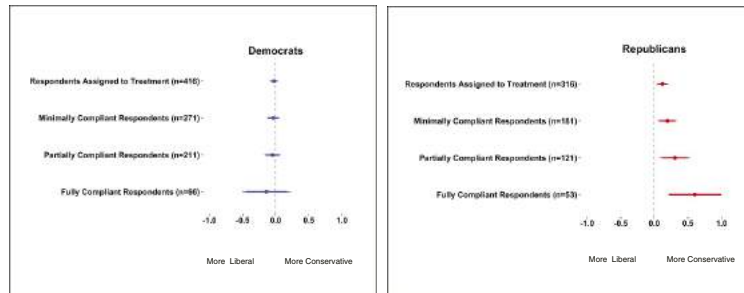
Fig. 4. *Effect of following Twitter bots that retweet messages by elected officials, organizations, and opinion leaders with opposing political ideologies.*

Country	Data Analysis	Interview Subjects	Platforms	Social Media and Politics
Brazil	281,441 tweets were collected from 82,575 unique accounts, collected February–March 2017, and 80,691 tweets from 33,406 unique users from in May 2017.	10	Facebook Twitter WhatsApp	Bot networks and other forms of computational propaganda were active in the 2014 presidential election, the constitutional crisis, and the impeachment process. Highly automated account support and attack political figures, debate issues such as corruption, and encourage protest movements.
Canada	3,001,493 tweets collected from September–October 2015.	10	Twitter	Political parties use bots, but there are also positive ways to use algorithms and automation to improve journalism and public knowledge.
China	1,177,758 tweets from 254,132 unique accounts, collected February–April on Twitter; 1,543,165 comments from 815,776 unique users on Weibo collected January–February 2017.	2	Facebook Twitter Weibo	On Twitter, several large bot networks published anti-government messages in simplified Chinese. Opinion manipulation on Weibo occurs, but not through automation.
Germany	121,582 tweets from 36,541 users, collected over the period of three days in February 2017; and 154,793 tweets from 32,008 unique users collected over the course of seven days in March 2017.	13	Facebook Twitter	Social bots played a marginal role in German elections; whereas substantial misinformation has been circulated during pivotal moments of political life. Germany has emerged as a leader in countering computational propaganda, with a state-wide regulation to be implemented in the summer, and numerous civil society watchdog projects.
Poland	50,058 tweets from 10,050 unique accounts collected March–April 2017 on Twitter.	10	Facebook Twitter	There is a clear industry of producing and managing fake accounts and automation over multiple platforms. A tiny number of right wing accounts generate 20% of the political content over Twitter.
Russia	14 million tweets collected from February 2014 to December 2015 from more than 1.3 million users.	0	Twitter	Russian Twitter networks are almost completely bounded by highly automated accounts, with a high degree of overall automation.
Taiwan	49,541 comments and replies to a message from the Taiwanese President in January 2016. 1,396 tweets about the President from 596 unique users collected in April 2017.	10	Facebook Twitter LINE	Combined human and automated personal and political attacks on the Taiwanese President.
Ukraine	Representative sample of political perspectives on MH17 tragedy, beginning summer 2014.	0	Facebook Odnoklassniki Twitter VKontakte	Ukraine is the frontline of experimentation in computational propaganda, with active campaigns of engagement between Russian botnets, Ukraine nationalist botnets, and botnets from civil society groups.
USA	17 million tweets from 1,798, 127 unique users, collected November 2016.	15	Facebook Twitter	Twitter bots constituted over 10% of the sample, and they reached highly influential network positions within retweet networks during the 2016 US election. The botnet associated with Trump-related hashtags was 3 times larger than the botnet associated with Clinton-related hashtags.

Fig. 5. *Evidence Used Across Country Case Studies.*

can cite a comprehensive study, led by Oxford University. The Computational Propaganda Research Project at the Oxford Internet Institute has researched the use of social media for public opinion manipulation. The project has investigated nine countries and a team of 12 researchers carried out the study

analysing tens of millions of posts on seven different social media platforms during scores of elections, political crises, and national security incidents.

In addition to that, they interviewed 65 experts. Each case study analyses qualitative, quantitative, and computational evidence collected between 2015 and 2017 from Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Poland, Taiwan, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States. According to their definition, Computational propaganda is "the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks". The project identified these main findings: *a*) Social media are significant platforms for political engagement and crucial channels for disseminating news content. Social media platforms are the primary media over which young people develop their political identities; *b*) Social media are actively used as a tool for public opinion manipulation, though in diverse ways and on different topics; *c*) In every country they found civil society groups trying, but struggling, to protect themselves and respond to active misinformation campaigns; *d*) the authors highlight that this study is the first systematic collection and analysis of country-specific case studies geared towards exposing and analyzing computational propaganda (Woolley, Howard 2017).

On the other hand, the way in which nationalist parties disseminate their propaganda across social media, seems effective by itself, regardless of fake news.

Siegler has identified four methods far-right movements use to win the social media battle (Siegler 2017): *a*) Livestreaming reports: in this way these movements are able to cover low newsworthy news but highly symbolic for their propaganda. This is another consequence of the disintermediation described above; *b*) Direct access to activists: thanks to social media, electors and supporters have direct access to nationalist activists. It is also a way to show (off) how nationalist politicians are close to "real" people. We can see here another intersection between nationalism and populism; *c*) Capitalizing on the information divide: according to the author, an increasing number of Americans do not trust mainstream media. This is a great opportunity for political activists to become, through their social media

accounts, the main source of news for this audience; *d*) Emotional appeals to fans and followers: social media allow nationalists to stimulate the electors with emotional messages, which are usually much more effective than rational argument.

GLOBALIZED NATIONALISM

Nationalism on social media is a strong and global trend. Paradoxically, nationalism actually is the only real global political phenomenon. In the US primaries in 2016, Trump, with his nationalist and anti-immigrant agenda, grabbed much more attention than the other candidates, thanks to Twitter. For this reason, it is interesting to see the surprising relationship between the number of tweets in which Trump and other candidates are mentioned and their coverage in mainstream media over the course of the primary campaign and beyond, (Groeling et al. 2016). It shows a clear correlation: Trump is mentioned in tweets far more than any other candidate in both parties, often more than all the other candidates combined, and the volume of tweets closely tracks his outsize coverage in the dominant mainstream media.

Polling data confirms that Trump pulled ahead of other Republican candidates in synchrony with his dominance of the media attention space, despite the fact that his nomination as Republican candidate was opposed by the party up to the party's convention and beyond. Thanks to social media, candidates can easily impose their own agenda, with journalists relying on Twitter as a major source (Schroeder 2018). Similar social media nationalism trends have emerged in India, while the nationalist Prime Minister Nerendra Modi got his second term especially thanks to TikTok, a Chinese short videos app, which claims to have over 120 million monthly active users in India. One of the most popular Modi videos showed a TV screen recording of Modi speaking in a session with a paper in hand and his supporters banging the table behind him in agreement along with a famous dialogue from Bollywood movie "Munna Bhai MBBS": Sir, bahar casualty mei koi marrne ki halat pe raha, toh usko form bharna zaroori hai kya?".
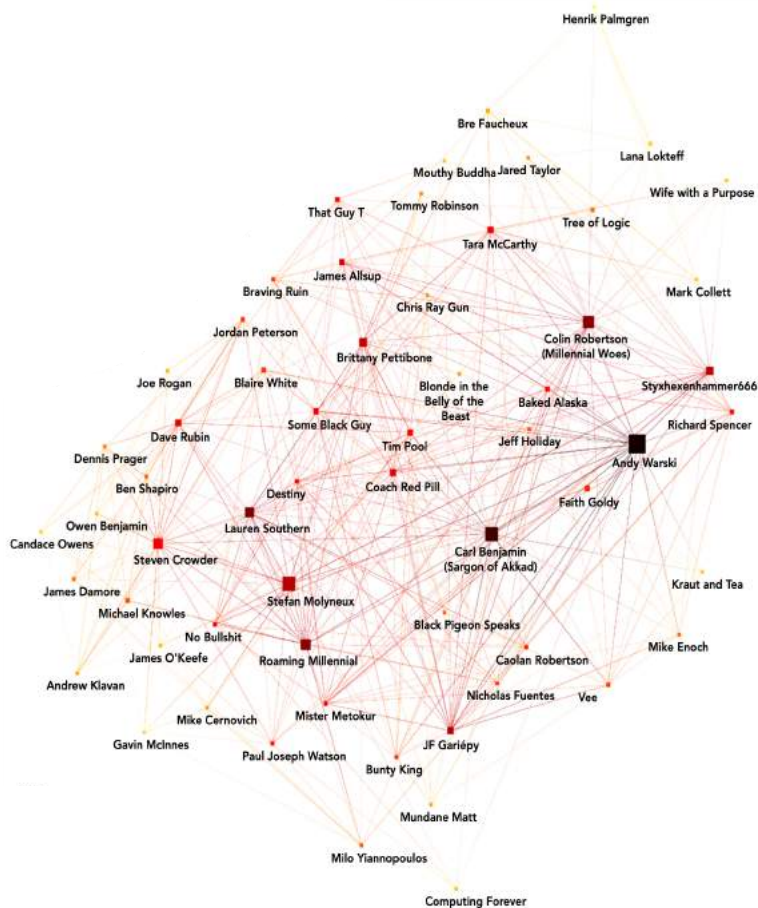
Fig. 6. *AIN Network Paths.*

In an interview with Bollywood star Akshay Kumar, Modi said that he enjoys memes on the Internet (IANS News service 2018). For sure TikTok is the perfect app to share videos like this and to represent nationalist politicians as friendly and looking after the needs of their electors.

In the UK online nationalism seems particularly strong on YouTube and it deserves a more profound analysis. Paul Joseph Watson and Carl Benjamin are two popular nationalist youtubers.

Fig. 7. *Paul Joseph Watson video from February 2017.*

Watson has 1.4 million subscribers; Benjamin, 860,000. That makes them some of the biggest beasts in Britain's growing online nationalist ecosystem, where a web of networked social media platforms, news sites and video accounts amplify each other's reach. Watson's figures alone seem be enormous: 500,000 views for each YouTube video once it has been up for a couple of weeks, according to him. 150 million Twitter impressions a month, 500,000 likes on Facebook a month. Benjamin's numbers are also huge. An interview with UKIP's party leader Gerard Batten uploaded on December 4 on the future of the party had been viewed over 100,000 times by December 10 (McTague 2018).

They are all part of what has been called Alternative Influence Network (Lewis 2018), an international network of bloggers, particularly active on YouTube, which spread nationalist, racist, and anti-liberal political positions. During his research, Lewis collected around 65 far-right influencers across 81 channels, from 1st January 2017 to 1st April 2018.

In spite of their independence, they cooperate very closely with each other, using YouTube and the English language, to cross the borders and the language barriers.

These bloggers claim to offer an alternative political point of view against the "official truth" spread by liberal mainstream media. It is possible because, again, social media allows every user to become a self-publisher or a self-broadcaster in this case.

Their popularity comes also from the peculiar language they use. They are political commentators but, unlike the traditional ones from the mainstream media, they adopt the typical

technique of brand influencers, posting videos and photos of their private lives accompanied by a political message for example, or exploiting pieces of pop culture. An interesting instance is the use of the red pill metaphor by these YouTubers, referring to the famous scene from the film "The Matrix", in which the actor finally sees the truth after having chosen this pill. It is an intriguing allusion to the fact that rebellion against liberal politics and media allow us to "see the truth". In that way these political influencers show a unique capability to grab youth attention, something that the mainstream media lost a long time ago.

Carl Benjamin is an influential British YouTuber, who broadcasts under the pseudonym Sargon of Akkad. On April 2017, Benjamin had a livestream with Jordan Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, promoting gender traditionalism, denying the existence of a gender pay gap and questioning that IQ is the highest predictor of success. It is interesting to underline here that even some university professors are part of this international network of political commentators. As said, they are all independent in the sense they are not necessarily members of a political movement, also because they are from a huge range of countries. However, they ultimately show very few differences and they all share the same battle against liberal democratic principles.

However, Benjamin became very popular on 4th January 2018, during a livestream around scientific racism, according to which there are be scientific differences between races of humans. The debate around this controversial topic was led by two other political YouTubers: Andy Warski and Jean-François Gariépy. Carl Benjamin took part of the debate, presumably debating against scientific racism, a stance he frequently echoes. However, his function appeared more as group entertainment than genuine disagreements. During that livestream the debate became the first trending video worldwide on YouTube, with more than 10.000 active viewers.

MAIN FINDINGS

Nationalism and populism are a multifaced phenomenon, with differences depending on the specific country and its culture. However, we can identify some common topics across the different kinds of nationalism, which are about identity and national borders. The in/out approach is something that nationalism and populism have in common. Even if populist parties do not base their political purpose on the spatial dimension and its borders (or at least not as strongly as nationalist parties), in any case they tend to make a division between "us" and "them".

Nationalist movements' communications on social media seem to be predominant and a great change, after years in which liberal culture used social media in a more effective way (e.g. the Obama campaign in 2008). However, if we look at the relationship between social media exposure and political opinions, the picture becomes more fragmented and less predictable. The literature seems to say that the correlation between social media exposure and changing personal political ideas is stronger in young Americans than adults, for instance. At the same time, there seems to be more political extremism among Twitter and Facebook users in Germany, Spain and the US than among older users and non-users of social media. It is more or less the same if we investigate political polarization. Maybe these initial findings show us that we should not investigate political polarisation itself, but focus our efforts on a better understanding of how it works for specific clusters, segmented by features such age, gender, education etc.

In addition to this, literature does not seem to be sufficiently investigating how electors who are already polarized (and whose polarization may be reinforced by exposure to social media) can influence those they interact with socially (friends, colleagues, neighbors etc.) according to the two-step flow communication theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet 1944; Sá Martino 2017).

Finally, social media platforms base their success on the fact that they allow political activists a complete disintermediated communication, with no more barriers to taking part

actively in public debate and adopting the typical technique of brand influencers.

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