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Essay:

A Complicated Relationship: Right-Wing Populism, Media Representation and Journalism Theory

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Abstract: The current upswing of right-wing populism in the United States and in Europe is a challenge not only for policy makers, but also for journalism theory. If and how to report on right-wing politicians, movements and issues is a delicate question that various strands of theory answer differently. Functionalist systems theory is in favor of large-scale coverage due to the stimulating news values of populist debates, although the precise character of the political integration remains unclear. In contrast, rational democratic deliberation theory is to be interpreted as a complete rebuttal of the irrational character of populism. The argument here would be that we must not allow the media be dominated by irrational debates. At the same time, democratic media theory is all but uniform in dealing with the phenomenon. While traditional rational public sphere theory is clearly anti-populist, paradoxically left-liberal and postmodern public sphere theory, anti-elitist and radically post-modern as it is, can be used as an argument for better representation of marginalized voices, including right-wing populists.

Keywords: populism, journalism, democracy, public sphere theory, system theory

Introduction

In recent times, we have seen massive media coverage of right-wing populist figures, parties and movements in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom or in other parts of Europe. Donald Trump, the Brexit movement, the German right-wing “Alternative for Germany” (AfD), or the French Front National are among the most well-known examples. Reporting on populism, however, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is needed as a way of scrutinizing potentially dangerous movements that seek to transform liberal into hegemonic democracy by restricting constitutional rights of minorities and even the press. On the other hand, intensive media attention seems to make these movements appear bigger than they actually are and helps them set the public agenda. Trump was the only Republican presidential candidate with a significant worldwide resonance when he was still a marginal opponent long before he became an elected president. “Brexit”

echoed like drumbeats in the British tabloid press – a fact that surely secured the final minimal lead in the national referendum on Britain’s membership in the European Union. In Germany, the right-wing protest movement “Pegida” in the East German town of Dresden received so much media coverage that it seemed like a nation-wide phenomenon during a time when large numbers of refugees came to Germany. A critical German TV feature counted about forty talk shows in 2017 which had dealt with the refugee issue – while none was, for example, produced on the German car emissions fraud scandal.¹ The populist agenda dominates our media – even when the media are being critical.

How do we explain the massive media attention given to right-wing movements in Europe and the United States? Is it simple capitalist sensationalism as part of a symbiotic relationship with the populist urge for prominence? Having talked to many German journalists it seems to me that there is a widespread insecurity about professional ethics when it comes to the new phenomenon of mainstream right-wing populism. Clarifying the issue from the perspective of journalism theory is, in fact, rather complicated. There is not only a deep gulf between functionalist and democratic theories concerning the role of media in the public sphere. Democratic deliberation and public sphere theory are also in themselves contradictory and sometimes confusing. Practical journalists and communication scientists alike are in dire need of an update in professional ethics.

Functionalist theory

According to the German system theoretician Niklas Luhmann, “systems” are defined on the basis of differences created with regard to social environments (Luhmann 1975, 194). The mass media, he argues, have autonomous functions that define their right to exist. Luhmann says that the primary function of media is to reduce complexity. Through processes of gatekeeping they structure the world and set the agenda for society. The media discourse enables co-orientation among people: we talk about the same issues and share perspectives that help us understand and interpret the world. In this sense, the media also contribute to the integration of people into society. We are all part of a certain mainstream discourse that, one way or the other, synchronizes our worldviews.

It is not so important for co-orientation and integration whether media focus on political news or on entertainment. Luhmann argues that the function of media is actually to enable communication with “strangers” of whatever kind (Gerhards/Neidhardt 1990, 16). Functionalist systems theory is somehow related to Marshal McLuhan’s “The medium is the message” paradigm (1964). McLuhan proposes that a medium itself, not the content it carries, affects society. In this

¹ „Talkshows: Bühne frei für Populisten“, Monitor, Das Erste, 19 January 2017, <http://www1.wdr.de/daserste/monitor/videos/video-talkshows-buehne-frei-fuer-populisten-100.html>.

sense, the mass character of big media might be more important than their actual output.

News value theory, as the main neoliberal explanatory theory for the agenda selection practiced by modern media, is just another expression of the idea that the medium itself owns “values”. Even those who believe that news values are not determined by the medium argue that values are defined by the journalists as individuals or as professional groups (Staab 1990). Such an argument is also related to the more leftist post-structuralist or post-modernist version of radical constructivism (von Glasersfeld 1984). Functionalism, news value theory and radical constructivism allow for maximum toleration of all kinds of media output, as long as the mass character of the media is guaranteed, large audiences are created, and the media thereby co-orientate and integrate people and society.

It is not necessary to say that the massive coverage of right-wing populism can be explained by its almost perfect fit with a large number of news values – for example, personalization, conflict, emotion, visibility or entertainment. Such factors make it an ideal candidate for functionalist, neoliberal or post-modernist journalism approaches. Right-wing populism is a massive stimulation of the political system, for co-orientation and the re-integration of people and society. It is a reactionary and revolutionary challenge at the same time. Populism subscribes to democratic values, but it seeks to transform “liberal” into “hegemonial” societies, or into what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “dictatorship of the majority” (de Tocqueville 1985, 145f.). Since, as Gerhards and Neidhardt argue, the political system is the only super system with general competences (1990, 8f.), massive political changes are ideal stimuli for a complete re-programming of the media discourse and for co-orientation and re-integration of society. At a time when many people have abstained from politics and voting, populism has the potential to reintegrate populations into a common discourse community, even if beyond the mere orientation towards the same agenda, “cultural wars” between leftists, liberals and rightists are on the rise. Re-integration does not necessarily happen in the sense that people become more right-wing and democracies more illiberal or even authoritarian. As one can observe in Europe, right-wing populism mobilizes not only reactionary but also liberal and international forces. After Brexit and Trump’s success, elections in 2016 in the Netherlands, Austria and France strengthened liberal political parties.

However, when populism echoes like drumbeats in the neighboring media system, the long-term effects of such coverage remain unclear. The media might stabilize or destabilize our political systems. The functionalist neoliberal coverage of right-wing populism is certainly integrative since it stimulates new political debates and co-orientation, but the precise character of the new integration remains unclear. Functionalist media define the *Zeitgeist*, but they also add an element of insecurity and chaos to the political system. In other words: one cannot control populist effects on democratic systems.

Democratic deliberation theory

As a consequence, not only German system theoreticians have been arguing since the 1990s that radical constructivism is not a sufficient theoretical basis for journalism (Boventer 1992). The medium, in their view, is *not* the message. They clarify that, although many radical constructivists resort to Niklas Luhmann's radical functionalist systems theory, systems theory *as such* can also be in tune with "objectivity", which is obviously a concept in sharp contrast to radical constructivism. Luhmann's shift away from Talcott Parsons' structuralism to post-structuralist functionalism is not universal in system theory. Parsons acknowledged the influence of "environments" on systems through processes of "adaptation" (Parsons 1950). From the perspective of the media system, the political, economic or scientific systems are such environments. In the same sense, scholars like Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur also speak of "media dependencies" (Ball-Rokeach/DeFleur 1976). All these approaches argue that media coverage is not only autonomous but also interactive with, and adaptive to, the perceptions of reality held by others that pose structural constraints.

My argument here is as follows: the dialectic between functionalist autonomy and structural dependency forces systems into realistic, or better, "intersubjective" views of the world. We usually call this "objectivity" in journalism. It is exactly in the field of objectivity where systems theory can meet the seemingly normative deliberation theory, for instance, when Jürgen Habermas, in his "Theory of Communicative Action", time and again refers to Parsons (Habermas 1984-87). In his world famous book "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", he claims that media should not be arbitrary constructors of reality, but enable "bourgeois reasoning", and a public sphere that informs the people, probably also serves as a "Fourth Estate" (Habermas 1991). Habermas argues that journalism should help society to define and solve its problems. Now, objective "problems" in the sense of Habermas are "differences" between a system and its environments like those heralded by the functionalist systems theory, but on an intersubjective rather than a subjective basis. The interactions between a system and its environments and their mutual influences on each other create the real core of intersubjectivity.

The liberal democratic theory of the public sphere and the (neoliberal) functionalist version of systems theory are complete antidotes in this respect. "Objectivity", according to Habermas, is what societies as a whole consider to be problems, either defined by science or public consensus. Truthfulness is important for the media. Reality checks are possible and needed. Media output therefore is "news". News must be solid information and, what is more, *meaningful* information – let us call it "knowledge". News must be meaningful knowledge circulated to enable societies to function as democracies. The task of the journalist is to be investigative – seek reality, not absolute reality, but intersubjective visions of reality, including the limitations of knowledge, the "known unknowns", as the outer limitations of our knowledge societies (Innerarity 2013). The "differences" media should create

from the perspective of democratic deliberation theory are therefore not only intersubjective and meaningful, but also rational.

It is immediately clear that right-wing populism might be an ideal candidate for functionalist media theory, but it is also the complete antidote to rational deliberation theory. “Fake news” is a populist political strategy. Stereotypical hate speech about women and minorities is flagrant. For Trump, Twitter messages replace political programs. The representatives of the AfD in German federal parliaments are known for their lack of expertise. It is truly not easy to capture the rational essence of populism. Even when populism is covered in a critical way, massive and early media coverage ennobles such movements and lifts them into the status of serious political projects; but the media are, in fact, rather premature in doing so. In all these facets, right-wing populism is the opposite of what Habermas considered the public sphere to be. Seen from this perspective, the media coverage of the right-wing is indeed an illegitimate neoliberal response and an artificial hype about a political movement.

Democratic representation theory

However, the story is a bit more complicated. There is another way of looking at democratic media theory. The core concepts here are “representation” and “balance”. Public sphere theory started as an elitist top-down information model in the early 20th century. During the Lippmann-Dewey controversy in the 1920s, Walter Lippmann, for instance, formulated his then mainstream views of the role of the political class, in particular, to educate people (rather than leading a dialogue with them) (Beierwaltes 2000). This perception was widened after the Second World War to include mass organizations like political parties, trade unions. Beginning with the 1960s and with people like Habermas, the public sphere was meant to include the whole of civil society. Habermas himself reacted to his leftist and feminist critics, who bemoaned his too narrow focus on “bourgeois” reasoning in his earlier work, by extending the public sphere to the social peripheries (Habermas 1996). In particular, the Internet was thereafter heralded as a massive chance for the integration of more and more people into public debates. The peripheries of the public sphere have increasingly become the new centers.

The way of dealing with multiple voices in journalism is what we call “balance”. However, there is an internal conflict between the norms of “objectivity” and of “balance”. We easily speak of “balanced *and* objective or neutral journalism”, but often ignore the complexity of this conceptual marriage. Rational objectivity burdens the journalist with a complex search for facts and intersubjective constructs of reality. However, facts and (scientific) truths often lie beyond the existing discourse (just think of Galileo Galilei). Therefore, contradictions might arise between objective and balanced reporting. Representing articulated voices in society can create enormous and often systematically propagandist distractions from “the

truth”, often considered as “false balances” (Boykoff/Boykoff 2004). Balance therefore can be the enemy of objectivity and neutrality.

This dilemma, more than pure resort to neoliberalism and systems theory, explains the confusion about whether or not to cover right-wing populists. From the perspective of objectivity, coverage might be illegitimate – but from a perspective of representation and balance, reporting is often a necessity. Journalists must report about populists after they are elected into parliaments and offices because they are backed by voters. Prior to the elections legitimacy is usually lower, as in the case of Trump, who received clearly too much attention although he was only one of many Republican candidates. It is also questionable whether right-wing populists are social movements which need to be covered. The nature of right-wing support differs from country to country, and, at least in Germany, it is very often not the poor who vote for respective parties, but rather members of the middle class, who want to utter their protest against migrants, refugees and globalization. Right-wing (racist) movements, however, are usually not considered to be social movements, since they oppose basic norms of human rights. Quite like many Islamist groups, they must be considered to remain outside the realm of civil society. They are rather radical protest movements in opposition to core values to civil society.

However, quite ironically it is the leftist liberal idea of integrating peripheral voices into the public sphere that lends legitimacy to the representation of the new right. Liberal theory which was designed to widen the social spectrum is turned against itself by the illiberal right. Liberal theory can reject hate speech as a violation of the ground rules of public debate; but it must also protect the participation of civilized deliberations of the radical right.

Conclusion

What remains in the end is a rather complicated situation. We must admit that coverage of the right-wing has a certain integrative function for all those who have turned their back on democracy. However, the question remains: integration into what? A post-truth political culture of public debate? In contrast to functionalist media theory, rational deliberation theory is to be interpreted as a complete rebuttal of the irrational character of populism. The argument here would be that we must not allow the media be dominated by irrational debates. At the same time, we should admit that democratic media theory is all but uniform in dealing with the phenomenon. Left-liberal public sphere theory is in tune with the anti-elitist and radical post-modern inclusion of complete civil societies.

In the end, it seems that there is as much reason for the mass media to cover as there is to systematically ignore and boycott populism. The risk of slipping into post-truth conditions that are eroding democracy must be weighed up against the

dwindling trust and integration of those who follow the new right. Functionalist news values and the sensationalist coverage of right-wing populism, however, should be characterized as what they really are: neoliberals playing around with a dangerous political movement.

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