Social Media and the *Cordon Sanitaire*: Populist politics, the online space, and a relationship that just isn't there

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Abstract:

A significant volume of academic literature has sought to map and explore the spread of extreme and populist political ideologies across the West. Despite this, research accounts often fail to explain how these ideologies have moved from the political fringes to occupy positions of influence, particularly given the traditional media *cordon sanitaire* around extreme views. Given the growing successes of populist political actors in breaking through into mainstream political life, a more nuanced understanding of the traditional media *cordon sanitaire* – and the process by which it may be subverted - is required.

This paper posits an explanation for its erosion, identifying the growing pluralisation of the online media environment and the impact of social media content sharing as means by which fringe political actors may subvert overt and implicit barriers to popularising extreme positions.

Analysing data from the British Election Study, it offers a quantitative test of this theory, finding an inconsistent relationship between social media use and the reporting of extreme political opinions, even when controlling for political interest. Potential explanations for this are discussed alongside possible directions for future research.

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Introduction

Reflecting from the perspective of spring 2017, it seems likely that the last year will be seen as the beginning of a social and political watershed that will reshape life across the West. With the election of Donald Trump in the USA, the Brexit referendum, and the failure of the Renzi government to pass its amendment to the Italian constitution, mainstream political life seems to have been suspended, while populist political actors, for so long on the fringes of the national conversation, have moved into the mainstream of political life.

At the time of writing, the immediate tide seems to have been stemmed in some countries, with evidence from Holland - where the anti-Muslim politician, Geert Wilders, did less well than expected (winning 13% of the vote and gaining 'only' 5 seats in the Dutch parliament – see Foster, Boztas and Henderson, 2017) - and Austria – where the results of the re-run presidential election saw the populist right candidate defeated (Laboure and Braunstein, 2017) - offering some succour. Despite this, the immediate future remains uncertain, with the coming months offering the social and political conditions for further – and potentially more disruptive – upsets to arise

In particular, next month's French Presidential elections will further test the 'mainstreaming' (Kallis, 2015) potential of far-right parties, as Marine Le Pen's Front National looks all but assured to reach at least the second round run-off vote. If this is the case, then it would seem fair to assert that the once-vaunted *Cordon Sanitaire* against political extremism in Europe has been breached – perhaps irrevocably – making this a good moment at which to stop, take stock, and try to better understand both 'How?' to 'Why?'. In attempting to broach these issues, this article will consider the role of

social media in facilitating these shifts, specifically focussing on far-right (typically anti-migrant and nativist) messages and the online public.

In particular, while recognising that far-right populist movements vary significantly across Europe and the US in both their positions and focus, the centrality and salience of immigration as the only 'signature issue' evident in the platforms of most groups (Woods, 2014) offers a quantifiable focus for analysis. To this end, this paper will present the results of quantitative survey analysis exploring the relationship between social media use and the holding of anti-migrant political positions.

Understanding the 'Orthodox Account' of 21st Century Populism

While it may be tempting to view the recent breakthrough of right-wing populist political actors as the start of a new political epoch, received wisdom holds that the origins of the current insurgency can be traced back at least a decade, to the collapse of the global financial system during the great recession (Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler, 2011). Indeed the reinvigoration of far-right political actors and the mainstreaming of their discourse may be traced potentially further, with some arguing that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the imposition of neoliberal capitalism as the sole political system of the developed world created the preconditions for mass unemployment, the decline of traditional manufacturing, and the collapse of traditional national and regional identities (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) that lie at the heart of much contemporary unrest. The absence of a coherent or inspiring mainstream political narrative, so the long duree argument goes, has created a vacuum into which extreme groups (of all flavours) can expand (Malik, 2009). This is due in no small part to a (public) moderation of exclusionary rhetoric and more sophisticated messaging techniques; a slight of hand recently termed 'doublespeak' in terms of largely post-Cold War far-right movements in Europe (Feldman and Jackson, 2014; for a ground-breaking exploration of this issue, see Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: ch. 1 and ch. 2).

This developmental argument further holds that the creeping impact of macro-level social changes, initially held in check by 'third way' political movements during the long boom that followed 2000's 'dot-com' collapse, was merely accelerated by the 'Great Recession'. Faced by the seeming impotence of 'establishment' social democrats, labour and other centre-left political parties that failed to see a return to growth and prosperity, increasing the likelihood that radical or fringe outriders could fashion a narrative that framed social problems – stagnating wages, identity precariousness, immigration and rising inequality – as the result of inefficacy, political corruption, and globalisation (Standing, 2016). Against this backdrop, the emergence of anti-migrant political discourse and hostility to the institutions of globalisation – in the case of Europe, the EU above all – is perhaps unsurprising.

This explanation, while widely syndicated and possessing obvious merits, neglects to consider the central role played by the media, and the so-called *new media* specifically, in facilitating the internalisation of unacceptable social positions. As Goffman (1974) suggests, public understandings of social problems – and our responses to them – are mediated, and often determined by, the influence of external forces including the media. Under such a view, traditional media sources like broadsheet newspapers and television news act as guardians of the public conversation, determining what may – and may not – be discussed (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), offering perspective on *why* social problems occur that rarely stray beyond the bounds of mainstream acceptability.

In the context of far right groups, this has in the past often included the operation of a so-called *cordon sanitaire*, under which groups and individuals associated with extreme political positions are either formally or informally deprived of a media platform (Downs, 2012). In the UK, perhaps the most famous example may be found in the mainstream media's treatment of the BNP, who, prior to leader Nick Griffin's invitation to take part in the BBC's flagship political programme *Question Time* following the election two MEPs in 2009, had enjoyed comparatively little access to major mainstream media forums.

Social Media and Political Access

While the *cordon sanitaire* has been the subject of much comment and scholarly attention, with a significant base of scholarly research exploring its operation vis-à-vis the mainstream media, comparatively few attempts have been made to provide an explanation of how populist political actors have come to breach it and connect with potential sympathises. Certainly, the recent rise to prominence of populist themes in mainstream political discourse suggests the need for an urgent exploration of how the *cordon sanitaire* has come to cease operating effectively, and possibly at all.

One potential explanation concerns the emergence of a new breed of media news organisation operating largely online – for example, Breitbart, *Geen Stile* (*No Style*; see Polakow-Suransky, 2016), and Takimag. The comparably low cost barriers and lack of moderating forces (e.g. editors, lawyers, printers and so on) influencing online news sites have led to a proliferation of new players entering the marketplace. Alongside, and to no small degree powering, these insurgent networks is the development of a culture of news 'sharing' on social media that has significantly expanded the audience for political news compared to traditional media (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar, 2015). Taken alongside the increasing high levels of social media use by almost all demographics (Colarik, 2017) this cultural shift has markedly increased the likelihood of individual members of the public viewing extreme 'news' content (Lee and Littler, 2015), an effect further compounded by the development and deployment of algorithms that promote and supress content on the basis of thematic substance (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, 2015).

The number of routes to public engagement have thus dramatically increased, with the chance of encountering content from alternative sources outside of the traditional media mainstream significantly increased relative to previous periods. One knock-on effect of this dramatic shift has been that the capacity of established media outlets to frame and regulate the national conversation has palpably weakened. Indeed, as the preservation of the *cordon sanitaire* relies heavily upon a uniform approach being adopted by at least a majority of media outlets, the increasing pluralisation of voices is likely to have impacted significantly the cohesion and integrity of the *cordon*. Formulated simply, the more participants in the national conversation, the more difficult it is to control, and the harder it becomes to deprive fringe political actors of a voice.

Perhaps more than any other recent phenomenon, the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath offers a useful illustration of this shift in action. As has been widely reported, almost uniquely amongst US presidential candidates Donald Trump enjoyed very little support from mainstream media outlets – with fewer endorsements from historically right-leaning newspapers than almost all previous republican candidates. In fact, the only nationally-distributed newspaper to editorially endorse Trump's insurgent candidacy was the casino magnate, Sheldon Adelson's, *Las Vegas Review-Journal* – scarcely a journalistic paragon (Collins, 2016). Individual writers, of course, were prepared to endorse his candidacy – if far less frequently than was the case with his mainstream challenger, Hillary Clinton – with establishment republicans and conservative news outlets (for example, Fox) equally unwilling to offer unqualified support for his candidacy and policy positions.

Despite this, he went on to enjoy significant success online, with social media used to disseminate pro-Trump content from new media outlets such as *Breitbart News* and *The Drudge Report* through to the neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer* (Grusin, 2017). As this content became more widely shared and linked to online, hard-line political positions – including on immigration – swiftly became a subject of discussion, gradually penetrating more mainstream political conversation, violating the *cordon sanitaire,* and ultimately paving the way for a discussion of these topics by mainstream political actors.

Such an approach would seem to offer a logical explanation of the role played by social media in facilitating the transgression of previous social and political norms against discussing certain topics, most notably immigration and white (working class) identity. Indeed, such a view would suggest that high rates of social media use should – given the recent explosion in the number of alternative online news media sites - correlate with high levels of concern around the key issue and themes promoted by contemporary political far right outlets – mainly, immigration.

Methods

To test this hypothesis, this article offers the results of regression analyses conducted using data from the face to face survey portion of the 2015 British Election Study. Specifically, it explored the relationship between social media usage and concern about populist political issues, hypothesising that those reporting Facebook and Twitter usage will be more likely to show concern about immigration.

As a test of this theory, a logistical regression model was specified to include control measures for age, gender, and marital status, alongside binary measures of either regular Twitter or Facebook usage, and concern over immigration as the dependent variable. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1 and Table 2, below.

[Table 1 about here]

[Table 2 about here]

In the first pair of models only age and Twitter usage were significant at the 10% level, with rising age correlated with a slight increase in the likelihood of expressing concern over immigration, and Twitter usage correlated with a moderate decrease in the likelihood of expressing concern over immigration. When included, Facebook usage was insignificant at the 10% level, with the data highlighting a slight (albeit non-significant) relationship with concern over immigration consistent with the direction of our hypothesis.

These results may be taken as a challenge to our theory, affirming an inconsistent relationship with concern over immigration. There are several possible explanations for this result, perhaps the most obvious of which relates to patterns of social media usage. While digital technologies have played – and increasingly play – a transformative role in political life (Bennett, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Chadwick, 2013), Fuchs (2014) notes that academic enthusiasm for the political significance of the online space overstates the extent to which most users employ social media as a means of engaging politically. Particularly in the case of Facebook users, while it is true that, we "increasingly live [our] lives online" (Tsagkias, Weerkamp, and De Rijke, 2010), Drummond (2006) notes that most people are "disinterested in politics, [and] apathetic to political messages", with the result that much of the content shared on social media is 'mundane', and unrelated to politics. This view is further supported by the work of Cha, Perez and Haddadi (2009) who suggest that, while political and current affairs are the single largest category of shared content on social media, they are still

exceeded in volume by other content in a ratio of almost 2:1. Put simply: the overwhelming majority of social media users are keeping up with the Kardashians, but probably not the Trumps. If this is the case, then the absence of a significant result for Facebook usage may simply reflect the failure of our models to control for political interest, a factor which may also explain the surprising result for Twitter usage.

To address this possibility, two further models were tested. These replicated the analysis of the first models, with sub-samples of both those self-reporting as politically interested and those self-reporting as apolitical.[2] The results of these subsidiary analysis are presented in Table 3 and Table 4, presented below.

[Table 3 about here]

[Table 4 about here]

Consistent with the revised hypothesis, indicators of social media use were insignificant amongst politically disinterested respondents, with only age significant in both sets of models and Gender significant in the model exploring low interest Facebook users.

Amongst high political interest users Facebook usage again failed to attain significance at the 10% level, though Twitter usage was shown to have an even more significant negative relationship with concern over immigration. Given that these results paint a picture significantly at odds with the initial hypothesis advanced in this paper, our hypothesis must be rejected.

Discussion

While it is important to be circumspect when making claims on the basis of a single study, the results presented here nevertheless raise a number of timely questions in respect of the relationship between social media use, political opinions, and the fragmenting *cordon sanitaire*. By failing to show the hypothesised relationship between regular use of Twitter or Facebook on the one hand, and concern over immigration on the other, our findings challenge the theoretical approach we have suggested, and argue the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of social media in framing political issues. This is discussed at length below, alongside the other implications of these results.

Methodologically, however, it remains possible that our results may reflect not the absence of the hypothesised relationship, but simply the impact of the significant and well documented difficulties inherent in establishing media effects in large and heterogeneous data sets (Valkenburg, Peter and Walther, 2016). As Rodney and Wakeham (2016) argue, social media induced attitudinal changes tend to be slight, gradual, and influenced by a range of social and individual level factors. As a result, capturing the impact of such effects using data from a single, single point, survey is extremely challenging, if not impossible. If such a view is accepted, then the possibility must be allowed that our results reflect less the absence a relationship or the inaccuracy of our theory, but the impotence of the tools used to identify it.

More than this, the results may be taken to highlight the need for a more nuanced analytical model, in particular containing measures to account for the impact of political outlook. While academic research suggests that immigration is an issue transcending the traditional left-right divide (Ford and Goodwin, 2012), it seems reasonable to assume that its salience does not distribute evenly across

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[2] Political interest was quantified via a binary indicator formed by dichotomising a 4-point ordinal scale of political interest.

the political spectrum. In particular, it is easy to imagine that there are specific political sub-groups for whom immigration is not an issue, or for whom it may be viewed in exclusively positive terms. For example, many on the ideological far-left, and in the political centre, may support a more liberal immigration policy, and as such would be immune to the impact of news content on social media that aims to raise the salience of immigration and frame discussion of the issue in negative terms. As there is convincing evidence of substantial political social media usage amongst members of these sub groups (see Castells, 2015), not dissimilar to levels found in more extreme political groupings, it is possible that the failure to control for political outlook may have influenced our results. The inclusion of such individuals in our sample, absent a measure allowing the models to control for their presence, may well introduce significant heterogeneity, with detrimental implications for the accuracy of the models.

While the inclusion of a measure of political outlook would allow our models to control for the impact of political outlook, developing such a measure would pose enormous logistical and methodological challenges. As indicated above, this is because the issue of immigration and xenophobia transcends the traditional political binaries of left/right and authoritarianism/liberalism, requiring indicators that articulate a more nuanced view of political identity. While such measures could, in theory, be developed, the intricacy inherent in determining their content and composition places them significantly beyond the scope of a short article.

Beyond these methodological challenges, additional substantive critiques of our theory are also possible. As our sole significant result showed that, amongst the politically interested, Twitter usage was correlated with a decreased likelihood of respondents expressing concern over immigration, we must allow for the possibility that, far from exerting a significant positive effect on concern over immigration, social media use may ultimately reduce concern over immigration. This would accord with the literature dealing with political engagement online, especially the work of Dahlgren (2005) who argues that, rather than acting as a force for radicalisation, participation in the digital space may serve to inhibit the transmission of radical ideas through its "pluralisation of the public space". Such an argument holds that the increase in voices resulting from the low barriers to entering the online arena prevents extreme narratives from securing dominant positions by ensuring that they are challenged. If this view is accepted, the emergence of far-right immigration rhetoric into the political mainstream would be the result *not* of social media violating the cordon sanitaire, but instead of the embrace of immigration populism by mainstream media outlets – a view supported by the work of Bauder (2008).

Such a position would, however, fail to explain why the strong pre-financial crisis norms against politicising migration and activating xenophobia came to be violated, and why Facebook use was – amongst all but the politically interested – directionally linked to an increase in the likelihood of expressing concern over immigration. Particularly in respect of the latter point, our results may be taken to hint at the possibility of important qualitative differences in social media usage by platform that may have significant implications for our understanding of the digital space, and which may well merit further research exploration.

Finally, the pluralisation argument would also challenge work on digital extremist communities that suggests that the adoption and entrenchment of extremist attitudes increases with greater online participation (Wojcieszak, 2010). While it is possible that a more nuanced understanding of online group dynamics, substantive content, and the pathways through which information is disseminated may help to reconcile these differential findings, further research is clearly necessary to establish the extent to which this is the case.

Conclusions

This article has highlighted the inadequacy of orthodox explanations for the rise of right wing populist political actors, and in particular, their failure to account for the role of social media in facilitating the violation of the *cordon sanitaire*, and the continuing growth and success of political positions associated with the far-right; above all, hostility to immigration. In attempting to address this deficiency the authors have offered an explanation of social media's influence that accounts for the increasing pluralisation of the online news environment and the dynamics of political social media usage, offering the results of quantitative analysis with British Election Study data as a means of testing it. While the results presented here fail to substantiate the existence of the hypothesised relationship, a number of credible explanations are presented and discussed, including the impact of methodological limitations and the possibility of pluralisation of the media environment offering greater opportunities for extremist views to be contested.

For these reasons, this article must confess to posing more questions than answers. To address them, further research will be required, particularly employing more sophisticated analyses that include more complex measures of social media engagement, political orientation, and the context of exclusionary ideology. More than this, the adoption of research designs that deploy randomised control trials or longitudinal data sets as a way of addressing both the difficulties inherent in establishing causation and in capturing such sensitive media effects, are welcome.

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Table 1 – Twitter Usage and Concern about Immigration

	B	S.E.	P
Age	.024	.002	.001
Gender	-.048	.088	.343
Marital Status	-.005	.029	.870
Twitter User	-.229	.135	.089
Constant	-2.184	.200	.001
Note: Model χ^2 = 131.732 (DF=4, P<.001) Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 = .065, N = 2987			

Table 2 – Facebook Usage and Concern about Immigration

	B	S.E.	P
Age	.026	.003	.001
Gender	-.076	.088	.387
Marital Status	-.006	.029	.843
Facebook User	.003	.101	.974
Constant	-2.308	.221	.001
Note: Model χ^2 = 128.768 (DF=4, P<.001) Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 = .063, N = 2987			

Table 3 – Twitter Usage and Concern about Immigration amongst High and Low Political Interest Respondents

	B	S.E.	P
Low Political Interest			
Age	.025	.004	.001
Gender	-.222	.136	.101
Marital Status	-.028	.047	.555
Twitter User	.002	.212	.993
Constant	-1.826	.308	.001
High Political Interest			
Age	.026	.003	.001
Gender	-.041	.118	.727
Marital Status	.002	.038	.951
Twitter User	-.303	.177	.086
Constant	-2.329	.267	.001
Note: Model 1 χ^2 = 56.047 (DF=4, P<.001) Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 = .066, N = 1221 Model 2 χ^2 = 84.042 (DF=4, P<.001) Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 = .071, N =1758			

Table 4 – Facebook Usage and Concern about Immigration amongst High and Low Political Interest Respondents

	B	S.E.	P
Low Political Interest			
Age	.028	.004	.001
Gender	-.240	.136	.079
Marital Status	-.026	.047	.575
Facebook User	.196	.160	.220
Constant	-2.043	.344	.001
High Political Interest			

Age	.026	.004	.001
Gender	-.029	.118	.808
Marital Status	.002	.038	.952
Facebook User	-.109	.133	.413
Constant	-2.480	.290	.001

Note: Model 1 χ^2 = 57.566 (DF= 4, P<.001) Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 = .068, N = 1221, Model 2 χ^2 = 81.669 (DF=4, P<.001) Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 = .069, N =1758