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The media role in populism: a case study of the 2016 US presidential election

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Abstract

The election of Donald Trump, an openly xenophobic populist, who had never held elected office confounded many in the media and prompted a degree of soul searching. Many journalists and commentators pointed to socio-economic factors and the rise of "fake news" as contributing to Trump's election victory. What went largely ignored was the complicity of the elite news media in the populist victory. The dire financial situation in which most elite news organisations found themselves prompted a convergence of editorial and commercial interests. This resulted in a cycle of tabloidization, clickbait, fragmentation and thus declining standards and credibility. This decline in credibility hampered the effectiveness of news media's watchdog role in democracy. Furthermore, the increased focus on sensational news stories and use of tabloid strategies caused a media-populist complex, whereby the media relied on sensationalist and shocking news stories from populists to engage readers and drive advertisement revenue. Populists also relied on the news media to disseminate their message and increase their profile in the political arena. Nowhere is this complex more evident than in the media coverage of the 2016 US presidential election. Throughout the election Trump received favourable treatment from the news media. He was continually afforded more news coverage than his opponents and this coverage was largely positive. The reason was that Donald Trump provided financially struggling news media with sensationalist and shocking content more than his competitors. The 2016 election was a stark example of the convergence of goals between news media organisations and populist politicians.

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Contents

Introduction

The last decade has seen the acceleration in support for populist parties and politicians. Even considering the steady rise of populism over the previous decade, 2016 was a landmark year for populists. The Austrian presidential election in April saw Norbert Hofer come remarkably close to being elected Western Europe's first far-right head of state since the Second World War. Two months later the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, a campaign led by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Yet the populist victory that caused the most consternation was the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in November 2016.

The election of Donald Trump prompted much soul searching within the media. Most news outlets laid the blame at the feet of "fake news". While "fake news" may have had its place in the election of Trump, to designate it as the overwhelming factor is unrealistic. Others pointed to the "norms" of American journalism which dissuade journalists from taking sides in a partisan debate (Robinson, 1976). It is this papers contention, that while these factors played a part, they do not explain wholly the rise of populism nor the victory of Donald Trump.

2015 was the worst year for newspapers, in terms of circulation and sales, since the Great Recession of 2008. Daily newspaper circulation declined 7% from 2014 with advertising revenue declining 8% (Pew Research Center, 2016). The economic downturn that thematised the late 2000s was not the genesis of the decline in news media. The period 2006 to 2011 saw daily print newspapers lose 20% of their paid subscribers to alternative news sources, most of which were free (Pattabhiramaiah, et al., 2016). This has resulted in newspapers and news media organisations turning to new strategies to attract readership and increase advertising revenue. The purpose of online news is no longer the quest for truth; rather it is driven by the need for page views which in turn generate advertisement revenue (Chen, et al., 2015, p. 1).

News media organisations have turned to strategies such as clickbaiting and tabloidization to attract viewers to their sites. Tabloidization comes as a direct result

of a commercialised media, pressurised by advertisers to reach larger audiences (Esser, 1999, p. 291). This has involved the trivialisation, info-entertainment, sensationalism and banalization of contents leading established or "elite media" outlets to drift towards a tabloid style in order to attract more readers (Palau-Sampio, 2016, p. 64). This has been coupled with other sensationalist marketing strategies such as the use online of clickbait, which refers to content "whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page" (Chen, et al., 2015, p. 1). This content is often misleading, unverified and a can be a vector for "fake news" (Silverman, 2015).

The merging of commercial and editorial interest poses real threats to discursive democracy (Couldry & Turow, 2014). The need to generate more readership and "clicks" tends news media organisations to the spectacle and thus to the populist. Populists seek to attract media attention through a number of tactics such as staging controversial rallies and engaging in verbal extremism (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 60). They inspire media events by introducing issues into the public discourse (Ociepka, 2005, p. 210).This symbiotic relationship can be viewed as a "'convergence of goals' in what has been labelled 'newsroom populism'" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 59).

The rise of the internet and Web 2.0 has changed the journalistic landscape. Technological convergence and the expansion of interactive media have deconstructed many of the barriers to entry of journalism and news media (Mythen, 2010, p. 45). These factors have transformed "citizens" from being exclusively consumers of news media to being "recorders and [the] creators of news" (Mythen, 2010, p. 45). The increased availability of free or low-cost production tools coupled with expanding internet access gave birth to the perception that ordinary citizens could usurp those in "privileged, professional domains" (Brooks-Smith, 2009, p. 72). Citizen journalism had the potential to challenge the "corporate take-over of public expression" (Schiller, 1989) by expanding "discursive democracy" online (Kperogi, 2011, p. 315). Furthermore with a majority of adults in the US get their news from social media (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 31), the market place has become increasingly competitive.

The rise of populism, particularly on the right, has been explained in academic literature by socioeconomic factors (Givens (2002), Givens (2004), van der Burg & Fennema (2005)), as well as macro factors (Betz (1992), Lubbers et al. (2002) and Golder (2003)), yet they have largely ignored the role of the media in facilitating populism. The combination of declining sales, an increasingly competitive market, and technological convergence has proved fertile ground for the populist message and "newsroom populism".

Days before the US election many experts were predicting a comfortable victory for Hillary Clinton. Just a week before the election *the Guardian* ran a story titled: "Hillary Clinton will win. But what kind of president will she be?" (Kettle, 2016). Few, if any, news media outlets were predicting a Trump victory. When he did emerge the winner, carrying almost all of the swing states, the reaction was one of confusion. From the "radicalisation of the white male" (Wilkinson, 2016, p. n.), to "fake news" (Read, 2016), none of the possible explanations examine the role the media played in Trump's success. It is this author's contention that there existed a "goldilocks effect" during each stage of the US presidential election. This comprised of declining media credibility, brought about by tabloidization, clickbait and fragmentation, and a surge in populist sentiment, fomented and fostered by the news media through a media-populist complex. This scenario coincided with a number of socio-economic factors, which resulted in the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. Therefore the aim of this paper is to examine the role of the news media in the rise and success of populism, focusing on the case study of the 2016 US general election. This analysis will have three parts. The first of these will deal with the decline of the news media and the strategies organisations have turned to in order to combat slumping revenues. The second section will consist of outlining a theoretical framework of populism and the relationship between it and the media. The third section will take the form of a case study of the 2016 US presidential election.

Literature Review

Academic literature often refers to the "difficulty, if not impossibility of providing [populism] with a neat definition" with it not being founded in any "analytic rigour" (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016, p. 68 & 49). Taggart (2000) describes the concept of populism as "quintessentially mercurial" (p. 2). Oliver & Rahn (2016), Müller (2015), Lefort (1988) and Canovan (1999) do not define populism as left or right on the political spectrum but rather provide a series of defining characteristics which will be used for the purpose of this paper. The first is a binary tone, in which the narrative is one of a struggle between "the people" and self-serving governing classes who are undeserving of their privileged position. The stated aim is to return "the people" to their deserved position where the government is more faithful to their aspirations (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 190). They claim to represent the silent majority of "ordinary decent people" who have seen their interests and opinions ignored by elites, corrupt politicians and vocal minorities (Canovan, 1999, p. 5). Populism could well be distilled down to a rejection of political pluralism. Rather than disagreeing ideologically or stating that their opponent's policies are misguided, populists question the legitimacy of their opponents to such an extent that they are willing to risk a crisis of liberal democracy (Müller, 2015, p. 86). The people, as opposed to the elites, should not be confused with the population. "For populists "the people" must first be extracted from within the population (Lefort, 1988).

When explaining the rise of far-right and populist politicians and parties previous studies have focused largely on socioeconomic factors (Givens (2002), Givens (2004), van der Burg & Fennema (2005))). Little research has been dedicated to the role of media in creating an environment in which right-wing populism and even less to the role of the media in the US. Mazzoleni (2003) states that "the scholarly literature about populism has paid very limited attention to the contribution of the media, especially the news media, to the surge of populism" (p. 2). Bulmer (2003) asserts that any analysis of populism that does not factor in the media will be "severely incomplete" (p. xvi).

Stewart et al. (2003) and Krämer (2014) outline a theoretical framework of how media coverage affects the success of populist parties and politicians. It proposes

a life cycle of populist parties and politicians. The framework separates the news media into tabloid and "elite" and attributes to them differing degrees of political significance. Initially there is a "ground-laying phase" during which the media contribute to creating a political environment where the populist message begins to garner more support. The second phase is the "insurgent phase". Here media coverage of the populist parties allows them to raise their popularity and increase their growth. The third, "established" phase sees parties achieve electoral success and cement their presence in the political landscape. The final stage is the "decline". This phase sees public support for the populist party decline. These models, while useful, have their limitations and they predicate that support for populists will dwindle prior to any major electoral success.

Stewart et al (2003) outlines a number of strategies employed by populists in the media to garner support and disseminate their message. These are namely; playing the underdog, use of professional expertise, rallies, free media publicity, staging events and tactical attacks on the media. Mazzoleni (2008) drawing on Stewart et al (2003) notes that these tactics have been successful for both Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen, Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi. Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2007) examines the role of news media content in the rise of anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe. The study, conducted between 1990 and 2002, showed a positively correlated relationship between immigration stories in national newspapers and the aggregate share of vote intentions for anti-immigration parties.

To date much of the academic literature has focused on populism in Europe (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2007), Deacon and Wring (2016), Mazzoleni (2008)). This paper seeks to address the paucity in academic literature surrounding the media role in populism in the United States, with particular reference to the 2016, US general election. Another deficiency in the model of Stewart et al (2003) is that it does not take into account the Web 2.0 technologies such as "social networking sites, podcasts, blogs, open-source software and wikis", in the facilitation of populism (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016). Kim (2008) analysed internet culture and its effects on direct participation. It found that while the widespread

availability of information technologies, such as the aforementioned Web 2.0 technologies, does afford citizens more opportunities to engage in politics. However, Kim (2008) also describes the paradox of information technologies causing more acrimony as well as "abusive" online debate, something it defines as "digital populism" (p. 6).

The news media landscape has undergone drastic change over the previous three decades. Following decades of growth and increasing revenues, the newspaper industry has faced crisis after crisis since the beginning of the 21st century. These crises are numerous but are generally characterised by three related factors, namely; declining sales, falling advertising revenues and job-losses (Pew Research Center, 2016). Dimmick et al (2004) showed that the internet had a competitive displacement effect on traditional media with regard to daily news. The largest of these displacements took place in the television and print media sectors. However since then internet advertisement revenues have declined sharply in what Athey et al (2013) defined as a "collapse".

The media coverage of the 2016 US presidential elections was widely documented by a series of reports from Media Tenor. This was contextualised in a four part series by Patterson (2016 a-d). This paper will make use of the Media Tenor data sets and the commentary of Patterson (2016 a - d). The reports and statistics range from the 1st of January 2015 to November 7th 2016, the period of the US general election and monitor the amount, tone and nature of coverage afforded to each candidate.

While there exists an abundance of literature on populist movements, the 2016 US election, the media role in populism and the decline of media credibility, there does not exist a comprehensive case study foregrounded in a theoretical framework. This paper seeks to address this paucity.

Chapter 1 - The news media landscape

1.1 - An industry in decline

The market for newspapers has always been subject to shocks. The 1960s saw television usurp newspapers as the major source of news and the most credible mass medium (Reagan & Zenaty, 1979, p. 168). It was the market shock brought about by the widespread availability of the internet that truly sparked the decline in newspapers. The introduction of classified advertising websites, such as Craigslist, decimated the classified sections of newspapers. The entry of Craigslist into the classifieds market cost the newspaper industry $5.4 billion between 2000 and 2007. This had the knock on effects in increasing subscription prices, a decline in advertising rates and altering online strategies for newspapers.

Advertising online, which once gave hope to flailing newspapers as an advertising stream, has developed into a "volume game, dominated by large players such as Google and Facebook" (Nielsen, 2015, p. 8). These sites can offer geographically targeted advertising at low rates, cutting into the market for online news media (Nielsen, 2015). Google and Facebook also act as news aggregators, collecting news from print media sources and communicating them without the capital expenses associated with the publication of newspapers (Alterman, 2008). This problem is compounded by the fact that a full quarter of advertising revenue comes from online streams, up from just 5% in 2006 (Pew Research Center, 2016). Furthermore, a majority of consumers are disinclined to pay for news online; a phenomenon most prevalent in the English speaking market (Levy, et al., 2016). The already highly competitive market has been intensified by the embracing of social media sites by news media organisations. A majority of adults in the US get their news from social media. This number has risen from 49% in 2012 to 62% in 2016 (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). As the search for viable business models continues a number of phenomena have emerged as a result of the decline of news media and movement online.

1.2 - Tabloidization

Most academic literature would assert that the tabloidization has been detrimental to professional journalism and those in the "mainstream media" (Esser (1999), Nice (2007), Silverman (2015)).On the other hand, "Soft news" as it is often described, has been pointed to as a positive in engaging the inattentive public (Baum (2002), Baum (2006), Gripsurd (2000)). Yet Prior (2003) found that while "soft news" might engage the inattentive in certain aspects of politics, there is limited evidence to suggest that they learn anything (p. 149).

Tabloid newspapers tend to focus on lurid crime stories, the personal lives of celebrities and those in the public eye which often include details on their alleged sexual practices and illicit drug use. An example of the difference in coverage can be seen in the case of the suicide of former American Football player Aaron Hernandez. In discussing rumours that Hernandez was gay, the Boston Globe, a mainstream media outlet, ran the headline: "Swirling speculation about Hernandez alarms gay-rights advocates" (Levenson, 2017). The same story was also covered in Radar Online, a gossip website owned by American Media Inc. who are also the owners of tabloid newspapers such as the *Star,* the *National Enquirer* and the *Globe.* The headline in Radar Online read: "Aaron Hernandez Begged To Share Cell With Alleged Gay Prison Lover" (Bacchiocchi, 2017). Here the difference in coverage of the same event can be seen. Yet a distinction must be drawn between what is tabloid news and tabloidization as a marketing or promotional strategy.

Tabloidization can be defined as "a shift in priorities within a given medium away from news and information toward an emphasis on entertainment" as well as "the shifting boundaries of taste within different media forms" (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000, pp. 10-11). The reasons for this shift are simple. News outlets must compete for market share and audience attention to secure profits from advertising. In order to make news appear "relevant, urgent or unusual…[news outlets] customise news through selectivity or enhancement, generalisation or simplification, emotionalism or sensationalism" (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013, pp. 173-174). In order for your audience to consume your product you must first gain their attention. Well-intentioned news pieces are important but are ultimately fruitless if they are ignored or dismissed out

of boredom. As a result the entertainment aspect of news media is "high on the list of news values both as an end in itself and as a means to other journalistic ideals" (Golding & Elliot, 2000, p. 635).

As with the merging of editorial and commercial interests, tabloidization is "ultimately detrimental to democracy" (Allan, 2004). Tabloidization asserts negative effects on democracy through a number of interwoven channels. Firstly a diversion from serious issues to the sensationalist and trivial hampers civil literacy; defined by Milner (2002) as the "knowledge and ability capacity of citizens to make sense of their political world" (p. 1). By focusing on celebrity scandal and sensationalist crime stories, the news media are not fulfilling one of their primary roles as the means with which debate is informed. Tabloidization is most prevalent in the United States and United Kingdom, where "respected newspapers exclude by no means the private life of their politicians but rather tell their readers confidential details" (Posche, 1996, p. 40). This is in contrast to Germany and Scandinavia where "if an MP is caught with a lady in unambiguous circumstances, one laughs but does not print it" (p. 40). The countries that are ranked in the lowest categories of civil literacy are English speaking countries along with France. Those ranked highest in civil literacy are Scandinavian countries, German speaking countries and the Netherlands (Milner, 2002, p. 104). The correlation between sensationalism and dramatization, and civil literacy is clearly visible. When civil literacy declines so too does political engagement and knowledge of political debate. This lack of engagement and information is damaging to discursive liberal democracy.

The second channel with which tabloidization threatens democracy is through erosion of trust in the press. A 1956 American National Election Study found that two thirds of people in the US thought newspapers were fair and reliable while less than a third felt they were unfair. In 2008 the General Society Survey found that close to half of all Americans had "hardly any" confidence in the press. McDonald Ladd (2010) found that tabloid style news coverage reduced overall media evaluations, and also found it to be a likely source of "the public's increasing antipathy toward the media" (p. 173). Similarly, Burleson-Mackay and Bailey (2016) found that tabloidization damaged the credibility of news sources. In the study, soft

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news stories that were written with a tabloid style headline were rated more credible than hard news stories with tabloidized headlines (Burleson-Mackay & Bailey, 2014).

1.3 - Clickbait

Most online viewers come via a link on a social media site (Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 31). As a result, making the content appear as attractive possible, through the display image and headline has become of the utmost importance. Discovering and exploiting what it is that makes a reader click on an article, thus has become "the single most important issue for a journalist when writing headlines for online news media" (Blom & Hansen, 2015, p. 87). Potthast et al. (2016) defines clickbait as a type of content specifically tailored to entice readers into clicking and viewing. The problem with this definition is that it does not discern non-clickbait headlines from those which are clickbait. The purpose of any headline is to draw attention to the story and draw readers in. Chen et al. (2015) developed a model to identify clickbait headlines based on linguistic patterns such as: "the use of suspenseful language, unresolved pronouns, a narrative style, forward referencing, image placement, reader's behaviour and other important cues" (p. 5). Chakraboty et al (2016) clarify further by outlining examples of "clickbait language" including "*Will Blow Your Mind*", and "*You won't believe*" as well as hyperbolic words such as "*Awe-inspiring*", *"gut-wrenching"* and *"breath-taking"* (p. 3). Another signifier of clickbait, and one that is more pervasive in mainstream media, is the use of numerical referening (Kuiken, et al., 2017, p. 12).

Potthast et al. (2016) provides a number of examples of typical clickbait headlines:

– *A Man Falls Down And Cries For Help Twice. The Second Time, My Jaw Drops*

 – *9 Out Of 10 Americans Are Completely Wrong About This Mind-Blowing Fact*

– *Here's What Actually Reduces Gun Violence*

(p. 1)

The use of images is another defining feature of clickbait. Similarly to headlines, images are used to attract attention to the article and entice the reader. Yet they are

often processed prior to the full article being read (Ecker, et al., 2014). Chen et al. (2015) found that images used in clickbait articles often contained emotional content, and were frequently incongruent with the headline itself.

Clickbait and tabloidization are very much interwoven. In a quest to have their content stand out above all, sensationalising headlines as well as content play their part. Palau-Sampio (2016) found that 18.5% of headlines in *El País*, considered a newspaper of record and the most-circulated daily in Spain, contained numerical references as a lure (p. 15). Despite being a newspaper of record and boasting the largest daily circulation of any newspaper in Spain, strategy of clickbaiting was pervasive, bordering on ubiquitous. The use of this strategy "raises serious questions about the future of the quality press as a democratic guarantee" (Palau-Sampio, 2016, p. 76). As with tabloidization, clickbait as a promotional strategy damages press credibility. Hurst (2016) found that when reading science news stories, readers had a more negative view of story sources when they utilised clickbait as opposed to traditional headlines (p. 33). With press credibility already at its lowest ever ebb, the increased use of clickbait tactics will only further damage trust in the press, further diminishing civil literacy.

1.4 - Fragmentation

The expansion of Web 2.0 technologies including "social networking sites, podcasts, blogs, open-source software and wikis"(Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016), has deconstructed many of the barriers to entry in the news media market. This, coupled with the increased availability of free or low-cost media production tools gave rise to the view that ordinary people could enter the "privileged, professional domains" (Brooks-Smith, 2009, p. 72). Citizens were transformed from being exclusively consumers of news media to being "recorders and [the] creators of news" (Mythen, 2010, p. 45). Citizen journalism, as it became known, had the potential to challenge the "corporate take-over of public expression" (Schiller, 1989) by offering alternative views to those in the corporate media. It was hoped that this would increase competition and expand discursive democracy online (Kperogi, 2011, p. 315).

Rather than expanding discursive democracy, the expansion in online media intensified the process of fragmentation, which had been on-going since the introduction of cable news (Morris, 2007, p. 707). While it was hoped that the multiplicity of sources would encourage people to adopt a pluralist approach, the opposite was true. The fragmentation of news sources permitted and even encouraged readers to constrict their focus in order to satisfy their own interests and needs (Tewksbury, 2006). Both Lee (2009) and Stroud (2011) found that a reader's predisposed view will predict their exposure to specific news sources. As a result, when a reader holds a particular world view or political opinion, this will prejudice them to seeking confirmation rather than critically engaging with it. This results in political homophily, otherwise known as the "echo chamber".

As with both clickbait and tabloidization, fragmentation is contributing to a decline in perceived news credibility. Political homophily widens the gap in political discourse. In a study of blogs and citizen journalism sites, Gilbert et al. (2009) found there to be little dissent between contributors and commenters as a result of polarisation. As a result those inside the echo chamber "will become more polarized and more entrenched in their positions" (p. 9). As the entrenchment of opinion deepens, so too does the distrust of that outside of it. Stroud & Lee (2013), Garret (2009), Gilbert et al. (2009) and Morris (2007) showed that predisposition to a particular view manifested itself in mistrust of opposing sources.

1.5 - The future of the news media

The notion of the media as the Fourth Estate, an institution that existed as a public watchdog over those in public office, was grounded in preventing powerful states overstepping their bounds (Coronel, 2009, p. 3). The importance of an independent, viable media cannot be overstated. Without an independent media "the lights go out in democracy, meaning the government is left to police itself while promoting its own activities, through public relations, propaganda or spin" (Bennet, 2016, p. 5). However the independence of news media is hinged upon its financial viability. More established media companies will tend to undertake investigations only when the expected gain from exposure is large enough to justify the expenditure (Coronel, 2009, p. 9).

The decline of perceived media credibility has knock on effects for democracy. Golan & Kiousis (2010) found there to be "a positive relationship between domestic [media] credibility and support for democracy" (p. 94). In a study of countries in the Western hemisphere, the US ranked 15th in terms of support for the political system, behind Mexico, El Salvador and Honduras, countries with "shorter democratic histories and lower levels of economic development" (Smith, 2016). While this does not suggest that Americans are giving up on democracy for want of an authoritarian leader it does have significant implications. Firstly, a functioning democracy requires "a creative interplay between new and traditional politics" (Dahlgreen, 1999, p. 168) intermediated by the news media, thus they play a central role in facilitating change. Secondly, the media act has the "ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda." (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002).

Former executive editor of *The New York Times* Bill Keller believes the future of news media lies in a hybrid model of print and online channels; "My expectation is that for the foreseeable future our business will continue to be a mix of print and online journalism, with the growth online offsetting the (gradual, we hope) decline of print" (Keller, 2009). Several newspapers have already ceased production of print editions and moved content solely online (Pérez-Pena, 2009). As outlined, moving content online produces a fresh set of challenges for the news media. While, as Keller outlines, it is the only option to keep businesses afloat financially, it also contributes to their demise.

The increasingly desperate search for a viable business model and promotional strategy has left behind it the cycle of tabloidization, fragmentation, clickbait and decreasing media credibility. The entry of new competitors to the market is frequent and easy, and traditional media outlets are increasingly turning to more desperate promotional strategies. Discerning what it is that will entice readers to click on an article has become "the single most important issue for a journalist when writing headlines for online news media" (Blom & Hansen, 2015, p. 87). It is an "established cycle: Clicks and shares drive traffic and revenue, and increase the perceived value of the journalists who've created the content" (Silverman, 2015, p. 69).

The most widely circulated US daily newspaper, *USA Today*, created a director of social and strategic brand marketing, specifically to refine this strategy. This director is responsible for training journalists on how to understand social media and asses likely audience reactions to different stories and ways of telling them (Bennet, 2016, p. 237). As a result, reporters compose stories utilising dashboards which evaluate which angles are of most interest to readers that bring in ad revenues (Bennet, 2016, p. 237). This is a particularly stark example of the merging of editorial and commercial interest, which Couldry & Turow (2014) highlight as a threat to the role of news media in democracy.

The pressure of ensuring financial viability is creating a vicious sequence. When the news media is forced to place more content online in an incredibly competitive environment, the instances of clickbait and tabloidization are likely to increase. This in turn diminished the credibility of the news media, which harms circulation and thus revenue.

Chapter 2 - The role of the media in populism

2.1 - The populist message

When distilled to its purest form, populism is a method of political rhetoric that pits a virtuous, morally pure and unified "people" (*populo*), against reprehensible elites and minorities (Oliver & Rahn, 2016) (Müller, 2015). Populism has a number of distinctive features. The tone of populism is binary, in that it creates the narrative that politics is a struggle between "the people" and self-serving governing classes (the establishment) who are undeserving of their privileged position. The proclaimed goal of populists is to replace the corrupt elites with an order that returns "the people" to their deserved position where the government is more faithful to their aspirations (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 190). Populists in established democracies claim to represent the silent majority of "ordinary decent people" who have seen their interests and opinions ignored by elites, corrupt politicians and vocal minorities (Canovan, 1999, p. 5). "The people" is not to be confused with the population. For populists "the people" must first be extracted from within the population (Lefort, 1988). "The people" are often defined by what they are not rather than what they are. As a result, nationalism, xenophobia, and racism are often features of populist appeal, particularly in European and North American societies with seemingly high levels of immigration (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 191). For populists the driving force is anger and resentment (Müller, 2016, p. 88). Another distinguishing difference between populists and more conventional politicians is that populists will continually deny the legitimacy of their opponents. Rather than disagreeing ideologically or stating that their opponent's policies are misguided, populists question the legitimacy of their opponents to such an extent that they are willing to risk a crisis of liberal democracy (Müller, 2015, p. 86).

Populists employ a number of communication tactics that set them apart from "conventional" politicians. Firstly, they do not label themselves as politicians at all. Populist politicians and their supporters claim only to partake in politics due to the "crises", that they purport to be fighting against (Taggart, 2000). These "crises" are not always material but are a means to create tension. This "dramatization" of the political reality "generate[s] tension in order to build up support for the party…by

denouncing the tragedies that would befall the community if it were to be deprived of its defences' (Albertazzi, 2007, p. 335). The populist is keen to portray themselves as the authoritarian "crisis manager" (Bosa, et al., 2013, p. 194) with an ambivalent attitude to the democratic leadership (Taggart, 2000). Populists also employ an everyman style in their communications. The language used is that of the "man in the street" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 2) and in keeping with their binary view of the struggle between "the people" and elites, they maintain a "friend versus foe" rhetoric (Weyland, 2001, p. 11). For "the people", the populist's dearth of decorum and departure from civility represents authenticity, distinguishing them from a "typical politician" (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 191).

2.2 - Securing Media Attention

The news media can be loosely bisected into the "established media" and "tabloid media". The tabloid media participate "unhesitatingly" and with "no moral ambivalence" with the populist message (Stewart, et al., 2003, p. 225), in keeping with their favour for the sensationalist and garish. The elite media largely ignore populists or voice disdain for their tendency to the sensational (Stewart, et al., 2003).

Anand (2017) likened political campaigns to "marketing campaigns, aimed at selling a product" (p. 2). Populists are often shrewd marketing operators, carefully refining their message to secure media attention. Outside of their defining rhetoric previously outlined, populists favour several strategies to cultivate media attention:

1. Portraying themselves as the underdog;
2. Utilising professional expertise;
3. Rallies;
4. Free media publicity;
5. Staging events; and
6. Tactical attacks on the media.

(Stewart, et al., 2003)

The underdog motif serves a number of purposes. While it is not always successful, it has seen certain populists, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, gain support as negative

news coverage increases (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 56). The scrutiny from elite media is portrayed as an attack of the elite, who are determined to maintain the status quo, as well as a demonization of the people. The underdog persona also serves to "discount [the populist's] elite status by emphasizing their own underdog struggle on behalf of the people against a different, even more elite opponent, ranging from domestic bankers, media, and interest groups" (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2009, p. 824).

The use of professional expertise is widespread in populism. As securing media attention is critical for populists, employing a media advisor is a key step in the embryonic stages of a populist's career. This is a tried and tested strategy. Flemish populist party *Vlaams Blok* implemented a "pronounced communication strategy" put in place by their professional leadership to "[strike] the anti-political chords of the population" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 56)((Jaegers & Walgrave, 2003).

Rallies are a staple of populist communication strategies and a means to attract free media attention. Rallies provide a platform for "nationalist rabble-rousing; [and] moralistic denunciations of corrupt vested interests" (Kinght, 1998, p. 237). This, given the spectacle and tendency for the media (particularly the tabloid media) to gravitate towards spectacle, provides a significant amount of free media publicity. The use of irreverent and controversial speech, atypical of "normal" politicians, also gains them support among their constituents and further defines them as the crisis manager of "the people". This has worked successfully for leaders such as Jean-Marie Le Pen of *Front national* in France and Umberto Bossi of *Lega Nord* in Italy (Mazzoleni, 2008). Such is the free-publicity afforded to populist parties that *Lega Nord* made the decision to refrain from spending much in campaign propaganda (Mazzoleni, 1992).

The staging of events is another tactic in communicating the populist message. These events are usually routine including "party conferences, press conferences, policy launches…and speeches" and are all "accompanied by massive publicity arrangements" (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 214). What would be a routine event for the majority of politicians is transformed by the populist into "must-see political spectacles and events that defy media intervention, aiming to take them directly to

the people, unmediated by editors, producers, and reporters" (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 220). The events serve the purpose of injecting issues into the public consciousness, unmediated by the "elite" media and news editors. Inspiring media events and "introducing issues into the public discourse" plays a role in "the process of opinion building" (Ociepka, 2005, p. 210), within a society and legitimises populist policy ideals regardless of their sincerity.

Populists are often supported, explicitly and implicitly, by tabloid media outlets. Elite media are often passive or attempt to contain populist support and are thus subjected to attacks by populists. This is a tactic designed to "shore up support among followers who claim their voices are not represented by the (mostly) mainstream media" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 2008) and to further discern the populist from the elite.

2.3 - The media life cycle of populists

The tactics to secure media attention may be successful for a time, yet as support and recognisability grows, these tactics must evolve. Stewart et al (2003) developed a theoretical framework which outlined the media life cycle of the populist. There are four stages; namely, the ground laying phase, the insurgent phase, the established phase and the decline phase. The tabloid media and elite media influence the life cycle of the media at the various stages. This model implies that different media respond to different logics with tabloid media responding to the "media logic" of "drama, conflict and controversy", while the elite media responds to the "political logic", focusing on events where "social importance and institutional power are much more central" (Deacon & Wring, 2016, p. 5).

2.3.1 - The ground-laying phase

The ground-laying phase of the populist media life cycle is predicated by political malaise. This is can itself be instigated by the media through spreading "anti-establishment reactions and political disaffection" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 59). Part of this disaffection may come through denying the legitimacy of the political class. This legitimacy crisis is reinforced by the media which creates the preconditions for the rise of an authoritarian populist politician (Cristova, 2011, p. 226). According to

the Stewart et al (2003) model, tabloid media co-operate with populist politicians and parties during this phase. Tabloid media caters to the message of the populist by "dramatization of the country's ills" and by "catering to the entertainment needs of their audiences and/or by highlighting negative stories that might stimulate public unrest" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 59). The media also play a role in fostering support for emerging populist parties by increasing their coverage of crime stories. This is a cycle in which a sense of urgency and danger is amplified by the news media, populists take advantage of the increased fear and the media in turn reports more crime (Chevigny, 2003, p. 79). The increased coverage of crime stories results in a wave of "penal populism" (Pratt & Clark, 2005) and is correlated with a rise in support for far-right populism (Walgrave & Swert, 2004). While the tabloid media actively cooperate with populists in this phase there is little engagement from elite media, who generally engage in "passive containment".

2.3.2 - The insurgent phase

The insurgent phase of the media life cycle is usually preceded by a degree of support among the electorate. This support has come with the help of the tabloid media and a campaign of "penal populism" and "newsroom populism". This stage is characterised by two main features. Firstly, populist politicians make a concerted effort to secure media attention, using the strategies outlined in this chapter such as tactical media attacks, rallies and playing the role of the underdog. Secondly, the treatment of these populists by the tabloid and mainstream media diverges greatly with respect to their attempts to secure media attention (Mazzoleni, 1992, p. 60).

With populists staging provocative events and using them as a platform to court controversy is guaranteed to attract a degree of media attention. At the United Kingdom Independence Party's (UKIP) first Welsh conference, its then leader, Nigel Farage, blamed immigrants for his tardiness. Farage remarked: "It took me six hours and 15 minutes in the car to get here. It should have taken three and a half to four. That has nothing to do with professionalism. What is does have to do with is a country in which the population is going through the roof, chiefly because of open-door immigration, and the fact the M4 is not as navigable as it used to be" (Rawlinson, 2014, p. n.). This was a deliberately provocative statement, which

gained a lot of media attention and gave UKIP a platform to spread their populist message.

During the insurgency phase, tabloid media still actively cooperate with populists through sensationalism and dramatization of news stories as well as focusing on the entertainment factor (Stewart, et al., 2003, p. 225). Elite media on the other hand attempt to contain the populist storm by exhibiting "considerable angst in attempting to conform to the statutes of good journalism while avoiding contributing inadvertently to the rise of anti-establishment forces" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 60). In an attempt to contain the populist message, elite media may adopt a mocking tone or one of outrage (Mazzoleni, 2008). This would serve to further disenfranchise voters and drive them to the message of the populists. Furthermore, the mocking tone would further highlight the distinction between "the people" and the media elite, adding more fuel to the populist fire.

2.3.3 - The established phase

The established phase comes after a degree of electoral success or even governmental presence. During this phase we begin to see diminishing marginal returns as populists lose their "power to scandalise" (Stewart, et al., 2003, p. 223), and the media lose interest. The media market is so saturated with attempts to scandalise and draw controversy that any attempt to do so is seen as being "chiefly directed towards the movement/party's constituency" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 61). In other words, the party has gained as much support as they will with their populist message.

This stage is also marked by a role reversal in tabloid and elite media. Tabloid media enters a phase of "passive containment", losing interest in the populist scandal. Elite media on the other hand, enter into a phase of co-operation or active containment. Given the electoral success of the party they can no longer ignore them, yet the elite media attempt to retain a degree of ambivalence (Deacon & Wring, 2016). This can be seen in Italy when populist party *Lega Nord* entered a coalition with Silvio Berlusconi in 2001 and began to receive greater media attention, despite its being mocked during its insurgent phase (Biorcio, 2003).

2.3.4 - The decline phase

The final phase is the decline phase. This stage does not apply to all populists as some enjoy success for long periods after their established phase and still attract media attention (Mazzoleni, 2008). During the decline phase, elite and tabloid media devote less attention to the populist parties and thus make a "return to the status quo" (Stewart, et al., 2003, p. 225). During this phase both tabloid media and elite media engage in "passive containment" with elite media displaying some elements of residual active containment (Deacon & Wring, 2016).

2.4 - The blurring of tabloid and elite

While the Stewart et al (2003) model is useful it is based upon a distinctive line existing between the elite and tabloid media. As outlined in chapter 1, the elite media are increasingly traversing this line and tending to the tabloid. While the distinction still exists in theory, from a practical perspective elements of tabloid "media logic" have permeated the "political logic" of the mainstream/elite media. Despite that, the framework is still useful as it demonstrates the media effect on populism and provides a theoretical framework for Chapter 3.

2.5 - Do the media contribute to populism?

In short, there exists some considerable evidence of a correlation between "media centred processes" and the "political phenomenon of populism" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 62). Each stage of the media life cycle of a populist could be viewed as a reaction to a media-driven stimulus and thus the two are intrinsically linked.

2.6 - The media populism complex

The relationship between the media and the populist is symbiotic. The decline of the news media industry has left organisations desperately searching for viable business models that will attract readers and thus increase profits. This strategy has resulted in tabloidization and clickbait, which pose a serious threat to democracy and the "watchdog" element of news. Yet sensationalist content and tabloidization as a marketing strategy are tactics to keep news media financially viable. The decay of the news media has coincided with an explosion of populist success in Europe and North America, which itself has threatened democracy.

In the past decade there has emerged a "media populism complex". There has been a "convergence of goals between the media and populists" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 62), in which "the relationship between the media and populist politicians is reciprocal. Both sides in the relationship are conscious of possible manipulation, but at the same time are fated to cooperate" (Ociepka, 2005, p. 223). Populists court the media to spread their message, gain support and establish a foothold in societies. Where once the tabloid media courted the populists to satisfy their diet of "drama, conflict and controversy" and mainstream media maintained their "political logic of social importance" by ignoring them (Deacon & Wring, 2016, p. 5), there now exists a new media landscape. Mainstream media, or elite media, are continuously courting drama, conflict and controversy in to drive "clicks and shares" which in turn "drive traffic and revenue, and increase the perceived value of the journalists who've created the content" (Silverman, 2015, p. 69).

Chapter 3 - The case of the 2016 US general election

3.1 - Donal Trump the populist

At the beginning of his campaign, which he officially launched on June 16th 2015, there were few political scientists and commentators who labelled Donald Trump exclusively as a populist. Muddle (2015) claimed that Trump did not "hold a populist radical right ideology", yet admitted that his campaign clearly "caters to populist radical right attitudes, and his supporter base is almost identical to the core electorate of populist radical right parties in (Western) Europe" (p. n.). Part of the reluctance to label Trump a populist was down to the lack of a conclusive definition of "populism". While there is no definitive definition, populists do share similar characteristics, which were explored in Chapter 2. These characteristics include:

- Claiming to represent the silent majority of "ordinary decent people".
- Pitting these "ordinary decent people" against corrupt, self-serving elites and minorities (the establishment).
- Denying the legitimacy of their opponents.
- Refusing to label themselves as "politicians", claiming only to be entering the political arena due to a crisis.
- Portraying themselves as the authoritarian "crisis manager".
- A departure from normal political discourse, replaced with a lack of decorum and civility.

Taking these definitions into account there can be little doubt that Donald Trump is a populist. Hawkins, et al. (2016) conducted a textual analysis of all US presidential candidates' speeches and found that Trump's speeches were scored consistently high on the populist scale. For example his speech at the Republican National Convention scored 1.3, to Hilary Clinton's 0.2 at the Democratic National Convention (p. 98).

The characteristic which was visible most often with Trump was the departure from civility and normal political discourse. While his policies were "remarkably unimaginative and centrist…his campaign [was] unique in the vitriol of its rhetoric and its hostility towards established institutions of American politics" (Eiermann,

2016, p. 34). Trump's lack of civility swung wildly from personal attacks, to sexism, xenophobia and sweeping generalisations.

This was the tone from the outset of his campaign. During his announcement speech on June 16th 2015 Trump said of Mexican immigrants: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Trump, 2015, p. n.). This statement, which received a large amount of media coverage, displays a number of populist characteristics, some of which are more subtle than others. Firstly, the statement is deliberately provocative to gain media attention. Secondly, Trump draws a distinction between the silent majority of "ordinary decent people" and the elites, corrupt politicians and vocal minorities who have ignored their interests (Canovan, 1999, p. 5). He portrays his supporters as a virtuous, morally pure and unified "people", juxtaposing them with the others.

A major theme of Donal Trump's campaign was attacking the legitimacy of his eventual opponent, Hillary Clinton. Trump consistently referred to Clinton as "crooked Hillary" both in campaign speeches and in vociferous Tweets. Such was the persistence of this strategy, #CrookedHillary trended on Twitter a number of times during the campaign and Trump attempted to reach a deal with the social media company to create a "Crooked Hillary" emoji (Fortes, 2016). Labelling Clinton as "crooked" was an attempt to portray her as one of the kleptocratic elite as well as drawing attention to her alleged malpractice while Secretary of State. Trump went as far to say that Clinton should not be "allowed" to run, denying her legitimacy as a candidate and saying that should she be elected it would create "an unprecedented and protracted constitutional crisis" (Trump, 2016).

Many of the communication strategies employed by Donald Trump mirror that of populists. Throughout the campaign, Trump played the underdog, claiming the elections were rigged against him. Weeks out from the ballot, Trump's campaign manager Kellyanne Conway admitted that he was not the favourite to win: "We are behind. She [Clinton] has some advantages but we're not giving up" (BBC, 2016, p.

n.). Donald Trump went to great lengths to avoid labelling himself as a politician. Given the levels of vitriol he reserved for "very stupid politicians" and "corrupt politicians" (Trump, 2016, p. n) and his desire to draw distinction between "the people" and the "Washington Swamp", this is unsurprising. Trump portrayed himself as a crisis manager with business expertise explicitly stating: "As you know, I am not a politician. I have worked in business, creating jobs and rebuilding neighbourhoods my entire adult life" (Trump, 2016, p. n.) . Trump's use of Twitter was a free means of gaining media publicity. His social media posts were often littered with controversial speech and unverified assertions regarding sexual assault in the US military and crime statistics for African Americans. While the staging of campaign rallies does not set Trump apart from other candidates for the US presidency, even since his election Trump continues to stage "campaign rallies". These are to give the appearance of popularity and to "cobble together signs of support wherever he can" (Bump, 2017, p. n.). They also give Trump the opportunity to inject issues into the public consciousness unfiltered and mediated by the mainstream news media. The tactical attacks on the media are another communication tactic that has outlasted the campaign. At one of his post-election rallies in Florida, Trump said of the media: "When the media lie to people I will never ever let them get away with it. They have their own agenda, and their agenda is not your agenda" (Trump, 2017, p. n.). Here Trump is setting the media apart from the people as well as labelling them "dishonest", displaying two separate populist tactics.

Donald Trump bares all the characteristics of a populist. While some have been reluctant to label him as such (Muddle (2015), Barr (2016)), going as far as to rebrand populism as "Trumpism", there can be little doubt that his communication style and rhetoric would place him firmly in the category of populist. Though these examples would not constitute populism in isolation, their repeated use demonstrates a campaign tactic and significant pattern of behaviour. These tactics and behaviours do comprehensively define Donald Trump as a populist.

3.2 - The media and the election

The first question regarding news media coverage of the 2016 US presidential election is: did the news media contribute to the rise of populist sentiment, and thus the rise of Donald Trump? And secondly, did the news media contribute, implicitly, to the Trump campaign and consequently his election as President of the United States?

This occurred in two stages which will be analysed in the following section. The first of these stages is the declining credibility of US news media, which laid the ground for election coverage. The second stage is the election coverage itself and how it contributed to the election of Donald Trump.

3.3 - Declining news credibility

News media in the United States is at crisis point. The number of news media companies reporting losses increased in 2015 and again in 2016, which resulted in large scale layoffs. (Pew Research Center, 2016). As outlined in Chapter 1, the realities of plummeting revenues have forced the news media to turn to increasingly desperate marketing strategies. The most prominent of these are clickbaiting and tabloidization. While declining standards and declining revenue (processes which are very much interlinked) are not universal for all of the elite media, the reactions to them have consequences for all in terms of credibility.

Tabloidization has a significant negative impact on news credibility (Burleson-Mackay and Bailey (2016), McDonald Ladd (2010)). *The New York Times* is the best example of elite press in the US. Faced with declining revenues in the 1970s *the New York Times* decided to change their marketing and content strategies. This included expanding and creating new sections such as a Home section, a Science section and a Business section. Asked why they did this, broadcasting veteran, George Wallace remarked:

"Why did they do that? For the news? Hell no! They did it because the New York Times was in financial trouble, and they needed to get a certain kind of audience, and a certain kind of advertising" (Kurtz, et al., 1998, pp. 44-47).

The converging of editorial and commercial interests has evolved over time and can be tracked with a number of seminal moments. One such "significant breakthrough" (Foerstel, 2001, p. 124) was the first publication of the word "fuck" by *The New York Times* on September 12th 1998, as part of the Monica Lewinsky- Linda Tripp tape transcripts. The deliberate publication of the lurid phone calls, which included details of Lewinsky's sexual life and her affair with Bill Clinton, was a decline in the overall standard of the *New York Times* and an attempt to attract readers with tabloid-like strategies. The process continued into the 2000s with Harris (2006) finding "examples of tabloid formatting and reporting… in the supposedly moderate newspapers *New York Times, Tampa Tribune, Charlotte Observer* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, a practice shared with their tabloid counterparts" (p. 101). This tabloidization of the *New York Times*, considered the paper of utmost record in the US, shows the overall declining press standards as a result of the convergence of editorial and commercial interests.

Clickbait has also played a major role in the decline of standards and thus credibility. The widespread use of clickbait, even among the elite media, "raises serious questions about the future of the quality press as a democratic guarantee" (Palau-Sampio, 2016, p. 76). The pervasive use of "right-wing clickbait headlines" by Breitbart has proved to be a successful business model for the far-right news, opinion and commentary website (Wilson, 2016). Yet Breitbart is widely accepted to be a politically motivated, unreliable source. As "traditional media organizations [including the New York Times, Washington Post and The Guardian] have started to use clickbait techniques to attract readers and generate revenue" (Rony, et al., 2017), they too find their impartiality questioned and their credibility declining.

Fragmentation, along with tabloidization, has had the most profound effect on media credibility. The mass expansion of Web 2.0 technologies such as blogging platforms, social media networks and open-source production software led to a mass expansion of news sources. Citizens were transformed from being exclusively consumers of news media to being "recorders and [the] creators of news" (Mythen, 2010, p. 45). This expansion had the potential to challenge the "corporate take-over of public expression" (Schiller, 1989) and provide consumers with a wider range of

perspectives. The problem with this fragmentation of news sources has been that it has increased polarisation. As polarisation intensifies, so does the cynicism of opposing sources. Stroud & Lee (2013), Garret (2009), Gilbert et al. (2009) and Morris (2007) all found that a tendency to a particular viewpoint resulted in distrust of an opposing view. In the United States, where there exists a plethora of ideologically skewed news organisations such as Breitbart, Fox News as well as a blurring of what is opinion and what is news seen on primetime magazine programmes which emphasise the sensational and even the untrue (Schudson, 1979). This phenomenon was identified by veteran news broadcaster Ted Koppel in the aftermath of the election. Koppel stated that he felt such blurring of opinion and news: "attracted people who are determined that ideology is more important than facts" (Koppel, 2017).

While a majority of Americans trust the news media more than their own President (Kurtzleben, 2017), those who have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust has declined again for the twelfth year in a row (Swift, 2016). Just 32% of Americans have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in news media. This number is even lower among Republican voters, 14% of whom have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the news media, down from 32%. The collapse in trust was also profound among middle aged Americans with trust declining from 54% in 2007 to 38% in 2016. The decline in trust in the media amongst supporters of the GOP has been put down to the belief among them that "the 'mainstream media' are too hyperfocused on every controversial statement or policy proposal from Trump while devoting far less attention to controversies surrounding the Clinton campaign" (Swift, 2016). The attacks on the US media by Donald Trump could explain some of the decline in press credibility; given that middle aged Republicans (Trump's constituency) had the lowest levels of trust of any demographic. But the determined attacks on the "dishonest media" could not be a decisive factor as the trend in press credibility has been downward since the 1980s.

Tabloidization, fragmentation and clickbait all have negative effects on democracy, which in turn provides fertile ground for the populist message. One possibility is that Trump, as populists do, has taken advantage of a ubiquitously declining news

media to disseminate his message without scrutiny. There exists a self-reinforcing cycle of depleting revenue, leading to desperate marketing strategies and a convergence of editorial and commercial interests. This affects the overall standards of news media, leading to its credibility suffering which, in turn, results in declining circulation and less revenue. With the media acting as the mediators in the "a creative interplay between new and traditional politics" (Dahlgreen, 1999, p. 168) and having the "ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002), they play an important role in democracy. The absence of such checks and balances allowed Donald Trump to control the narrative of the election campaign and forced the media into entertaining and furthering his campaign topics.

3.4 - Press coverage of the 2016 US general election

The election process for presidential elections can be broken down into four steps:

1. Pre-primary campaigning.
2. Primary-campaigning.
3. National Conventions.
4. General Election.

Each one of these stages constituted a "convergence of goals' in the form of 'newsroom populism'" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 59), and the creation of a media-populist complex[1]. The result of this convergence and complex was a failure on behalf of the news media to fulfil their function as the fourth estate.

3.4.1 – Pre-primary campaigning- brewing up a populist storm

The campaign of Donald Trump did not evolve into a populist one. The campaign was, from the very outset, defined by its populism. During his declaration of candidacy speech, Trump's platform of defending the virtuous people against the minorities and self-serving establishment was very much established. His tendency for sensationalism and scandal was also established during this speech[2]. What was not established was his worthiness as a candidate. Prior to the 1972 general

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[1] See section 2.6
[2] See section 3.1

election, the McGovern-Fraser commission had changed the ways in which candidates were selected for each of the major parties. The selection process was replaced by state primaries and caucuses which removed the influence of party bosses, who previously could screen and pick potential candidates (Smith & Springer, 2009, p. 2). With this screening process removed, it was the press who filled the void, deciding which candidates are most newsworthy and thus deserve the most attention. This is typically the candidate at the top of the polls (Patterson, 2016 (a)). The level of a candidate's coverage can be measured fairly accurately in monetary terms. The measure assumes that column inches have the dollar equivalent of the cost of advertising space in the same publication. The coverage that is included is that which is either positive or neutral in tone, as even neutral coverage is positive as it goes some way in elevating a candidate's profile (Lauter, 2016).

Having never held elected office, Trump could not count on a constituency base to galvanise his campaign in its embryonic stages. As a result, Trump identified that "[journalists] and not the electorate were [his] first audience" (Patterson, 2016 (a), p. n.). To attract this audience Trump followed populist tactics on securing media attention[3]. This involved deliberately provocative statements about minorities (in particular Mexican immigrants and Muslims), women, his opponents and the Obama administration. In his very first town hall meeting in New Hampshire Trump told the crowd: "Day 1 of my presidency, they're [Mexican immigrants] getting out and getting out fast" (Trump, 2015, p. n.). While many outlets covered Trump's rallies and events (another populist tactic of securing free media attention), it was his inexhaustible use of Twitter that returned the most dividend. After the Iowa caucuses Trump used the platform to accuse one of his opponents, Ted Cruz, of winning the vote illegitimately: "Ted Cruz didn't win Iowa, he stole it" (Trump, 2016, p. n.). All of these populist tactics worked well. Ahead of the first Republican primary debate on August 6th 2015, one of the debate moderators Chris Wallace said: "We don't want to make it the Donald Trump show…but it is." (Miller, 2015).

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[3] See section 2.2

Between the 1st of January and 31st of December 2015 Donald Trump gained the advertisement space equivalent of $55 million in positive or neutral coverage from just eight news outlets (CBS, Fox, the Los Angeles Times, NBC, The New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post) (Media Tenor, 2016). Trump's level of coverage was over one and half times that of his nearest competitors, Jeb Bush[4], Marco Rubio[5] and Ted Cruz[6], more than twice that of Ben Carson[7], and over three times that of John Kasich[8]. Cruz was highly critical of the free publicity provided by the media to Trump claiming that it was in excess of $2 billion, labelling it a "lovefest" (Cruz, 2016, p. n.). While there does not exist a comprehensive dataset to support Cruz's claim, the level of coverage from just eight outlets would deem his assertions possible if not plausible. Journalists of the elite press have offered two refutations of the media-populist complex. Firstly, they claimed to be in "watchdog mode", asserting that Trump's coverage was largely negative (Patterson, 2016 (a)). This is untrue. In the coverage of all of the elite media in the dataset (USA Today, Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times)Trump's coverage was favourable. The most favourable was USA Today with 74% of their coverage being neutral or positive in tone. The least favourable were the Washington Post (65%) and New York Times (63%) (Media Tenor, 2016). Overall Trump's coverage was at least two-thirds favourable. The second defence proffered by the elite media was that the media-populist complex existed only in the cable news networks, which tend to the tabloid more than the elite. There is no evidence to support this claim either. The New York Times supplied Trump's campaign with $16 million in ad-equivalent space, the same amount that John Kasich managed across the eight news outlets.

During the pre-primary campaigning, Trump's ground-laying and insurgency phases, the elite media did not follow the Stewart et. al (2003) framework of "passive containment". Rather they engaged rather wholeheartedly in turning the pre-primary campaigning phase of the election into the "Donald Trump show"

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[4] $36 million
[5] $34 million
[6] $32.5 million
[7] $24 million
[8] $16 million

affording him $55 million in free publicity and causing his rise through the opinion polls and establish himself as a candidate.

3.4.2 – Primary campaigning – The Trump Show

With Trump's campaign well and truly established the media life cycle of populists, as established by Stewart et al. (2003) asserts that the elite media would engage in a policy of "active containment", challenging populist rhetoric and increasing the negative tone of the coverage. The traditional populist means of securing media attention begin to exhibit diminishing marginal returns in this phase and the message fades, reassuring only their voter base. The reality in the primary campaigning of the presidential election did not follow this framework.

As had been the case in the pre-primary campaigning, Donald Trump continued to receive more media coverage than any other candidate. Furthermore, his coverage was the least negative of any of the other Republican candidates, as well as his eventual opponent in the general election, Hillary Clinton. The tone of Trump's coverage varied wildly between the start of the primaries and his naming as presumptive nominee. During the period of time when Kasich, Cruz, Bush and Rubio were still contesting the Republican nomination, Trump's news coverage was net-positive. Yet the final five weeks of the primary, during which Trump was the presumptive nominee, his positive coverage plummeted to just 39% with negative coverage at 61% (Media Tenor, 2016). On average, Trump's positives were nearly equal to his negatives throughout the primary race (49% positive to 51% negative). The nature of Trump's positives aligns with populist characteristics. As populists are keen to portray themselves authoritarian "crisis managers" (Bosa, et al., 2013, p. 194), any positive portrayal as such strengthens the populist message. The media narrative had been that Trump "was strong and decisive" (Patterson, 2016 (b), p. n). Another narrative, one born from the horse-race nature of election coverage, was that Trump was doing "better than expected, which is a positive narrative" (ibid.). Horse race journalism is political coverage of elections that resembles coverage of a horse race, as it focuses not on candidate's policies but rather their polling data and public perception. In terms of election coverage "the horse-race metaphor provides a framework for analysis. A horse is judged not by its own absolute speed

or skill, but rather by its comparison to the speed of other horses, and especially by its wins and losses" (Broh, 1980). This is also congruent with populist strategies of securing media attention, insofar as it plays to the motif of the underdog.

What is most condemning of elite news media is not the tone but rather the amount of news coverage that Donald Trump received in this period. During the Republican primary campaign there "was not a single week when Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio or John Kasich topped Trump's level of coverage" (Patterson, 2016 (b)). Throughout the campaign period Trump received twice as much coverage as Rubio and four times more than Kasich. This is further compounded by the fact that in the last weeks of the primary races, during which Trump was already the presumptive nominee for the Republican party, he received more news coverage than either Clinton or Sanders, a phenomenon which "has no possible explanation other than journalistic bias" (Patterson, 2016 (b), p. n.).

The amount of coverage was largely down to the "Donald Trump show" effect of the pre-primaries as Trump continued to use the same tactics to attract media attention. It was during this period that Trump intensified his xenophobic rhetoric and crime populism. On December 7th 2015, in the wake of the San Bernardino attacks, at a campaign rally Trump said: "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on"[9]. This, coupled with his persistent comments on Mexican immigrants and his pledge to build a wall on the US-Mexico border (another deliberately provocative statement), appealed strongly to a populist base of supporters, who were working-class with a negative view of immigrants and minorities (Public Religion Research Institute, 2015).

The primary campaigning period of the presidential election was another in which the media failed to engage in any meaningful containment of populism. The lines between tabloid and elite responses to populism were significantly blurred during this period. The fact that Trump's positives tumbled after he became the presumptive nominee may point towards a degree of active containment within the

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[9] (Johnson, 2015)

elite media, as it was then he became truly established. However this is incongruous with the fact that despite there no longer being a contest, Trump continued to receive more media coverage than either Sanders or Clinton, who were still competing for the Democratic nomination. This is the best example of the media-populist complex. Journalists are enticed by stories of "the sensational, the outrageous, the type of story material that can catch and hold an audience's attention" (Patterson, 2016 (b)). In essence, even when there was no "political logic" in reporting on Donald Trump, the "media logic" determined that he deserved more coverage. A convergence of commercial and editorial interest decided that Trump received 43% of the coverage, compared to 37% for Clinton and 20% for Sanders (Media Tenor, 2016).

3.4.3 - The national conventions – drama, conflict and controversy

The news coverage of the national conventions finally saw an end to Donald Trump's period of positive coverage. Yet his levels of coverage were still higher than those of his opponent Hillary Clinton. The convention period was one in which participation in active containment by the elite media was more prevalent. Even tabloid outlets and ones which are favourable to conservatives and Republicans tended more to active containment. A third of the coverage Trump received on Fox was negative, compared to two thirds positive. The content of his coverage too was unfavourable. The horserace-coverage, which had been a source of increased media attention in the previous two phases, was now 70% negative. His policies were receiving more attention, almost 90% of which was negative. Another source of positive media coverage in previous stages of the election, his leadership skills, received less than half as much attention as his personal qualities, which were 80% negative. (Media Tenor, 2017)

Despite the overwhelmingly negative tone, Trump continued to receive more news coverage than his opponent. For the full period of the convention he received a third more coverage, 27% to Clinton's 20%. This continuation of the media-populist complex. The Republican convention had one over-arching theme; the illegitimacy of Hillary Clinton (Weaver, 2016). Attacking his opponent over her alleged mishandling of sensitive emails and painting her as "crooked Hillary" and a criminal,

tread along populist lines. Moreover, attacking Clinton proved to be a successful media tactic. "Speaker after speaker at the Republican convention tore into Clinton. Meanwhile, speaker after speaker at the Democratic convention spoke her praises. Nevertheless, when it came to convention news coverage, she played second fiddle to Trump" (Patterson, 2016 (c)). Again the media were attracted to the spectacle driven by their media logic of drama, conflict and controversy. The media-populism complex was still driving the Trump campaign. Journalists from elite media outlets were searching for stories that could "catch and hold an audience's attention. Trump meets that need as no other presidential nominee in memory" (Patterson, 2016 (c)). As clicks and shares drive traffic and revenue, and increase the perceived value of the journalists who've created the content" (Silverman, 2015, p. 69), Trump provides journalists with the perfect opportunity to increase their worth, as well as that of their employer. Despite the increase in active containment from both sectors of the media, something that usually signifies the decline of the populist, the overdue coverage still represents a media failure in affording more free publicity to a populist.

3.4.4 – The general election

The proportion of negative to positive coverage for Donald Trump increased the frequency of his attacks on the media, as well as his self-portrayal as the underdog. The accusation that news media was "an extension of Clinton " (Hannity, 2016) and that the election itself was rigged contradicts the extensive negative coverage that Clinton was subject to. During the general election period of August 8th to November 7th 2016, Clinton's coverage was 64% negative (Media Tenor, 2016) and concerned "everything from her speaking style to her use of emails" (Patterson, 2016 (d), p. n.). In the same period Trump's coverage was 77% negative, yet for the whole election campaign (January 1st 2015 to November 7th 2016) Trump had more favourable coverage than Clinton. For the full campaign Trump's coverage was 56% negative and 44% positive, while Clinton's was 62% negative and 38% positive. When horse-race topics are excluded, the ratio of negative to positive is identical for both candidates, 87% negative and 13% positive. When horse race topics are

excluded, the coverage for each candidate, which related to their suitability for office, was equally negative for both candidates (87%) (Media Tenor, 2016).

This election was not unique in its tendency to the negative. Every election since 1984 has been net negative in the tone of its coverage. 2016 was not even the most negative election in history, that accolade belongs to the 2000 Bush and Gore race. Yet this election was unique in the content covered and the tendency to the logic of drama, conflict and controversy. The tone of coverage surrounding many of Donald Trump's key populist policies, such as immigration, Muslims in the US, the Affordable Care Act and the economy were overwhelmingly negative. A key campaign message for Trump was "illegal immigrants, incipient economic turmoil and the threat of a terrorist attack in the United States" (Healy & Martin, 2016).The most negative was immigration (84% negative to 16% positive) (Media Tenor, 2016). Trump's populist message was also helped by coverage of the economy. Under the Obama administration, the economy had been slowly improving; yet the tone of coverage surrounding the economy has been two thirds negative. This is yet another example of the media-populist complex. The bias of the media is not toward Democrats or liberals but rather it is to the negative. The elite media focus predominantly on what is erroneous in the political system without contextualising it with positives. This negativity is intertwined with declining media credibility, another aspect of the election coverage that aided Trump. Journalism has "slipped from [scepticism] toward cynicism" (Hamby, 2013, p. 93). Negative reporting has a damaging effect on news media credibility. The plethora of negative news stories means that elite news media organisations "set themselves up to be as credible as the boy who repeatedly cried wolf" (Patterson, 2016 (d), p. n.).

Despite there being underlying elements of "active containment" in the elite press, Trump still received the most media attention. Over the period of the general election, Trump received 15% more coverage than Clinton. In what is essentially a two horse race, this has significant consequences. The free media publicity provided Trump with greater opportunity to define his opponent. When a candidate was discussing Clinton, it was more often Trump doing so. Yet when a candidate was discussing Trump, he was still more likely to be doing so. The campaign

slogans of "Make America Great Again" and the unofficial campaign slogan of "Lock her up" were the predominant messages of the campaign and were heard more often than "Stronger together" and "he's unqualified" (Patterson, 2016 (d)).

One defence mounted by elite press was that Trump was more accessible to the press. USA Today's Washington Bureau Chief, Susan Page, said that Donald Trump deserved credit for the fact that "he was available" (Hepworth, et al., 2016). Yet this logic does not hold. If availability to the press is what determines the levels of coverage than third party candidates would have a much greater share. The reality is that Trump's availability was seized upon more vigorously than that of his opponents. His domination of media coverage "stemmed from the fact that his words and actions were ideally suited to journalists' story needs. It's about what's new and different, better yet when laced with conflict and outrage. Trump delivered that type of material by the cart load" (Patterson, 2016 (d)). Trump represented the perfect convergence of commercial and editorial interest. He was a candidate who supplied news organisations, struggling for attractive content to drive views and revenue, with the content they needed.

Conclusion

The success of populism in the year 2016 has been stark. As populism has risen, the news media has declined. 2015 was the worst year for newspapers, in terms of circulation and sales, since the Great Recession of 2008. The desperate search for a viable business model, as well as the expansion of Web 2.0 technologies, has meant that the online strategies of news media organisations have become increasingly desperate. Discovering and exploiting what it is that makes a reader click on an article and thus drive readership and ad revenue, has become "the single most important issue for a journalist when writing headlines for online news media" (Blom & Hansen, 2015, p. 87). Clicks and shares drive traffic and revenue and they increase the "perceived value of the journalists who've created the content" (Silverman, 2015, p. 69). Tabloidization of the elite press and clickbait are a direct result of this convergence of editorial and commercial interests. These phenomena, combined with fragmentation of news sources, have resulted in damaging news media credibility. The decline in news credibility has in turn caused decreased circulation and revenue. This leaves news media in a revenue and credibility tailspin.

Since the Great Recession, which sent news media outlets into a financial nosedive, there has emerged a "media-populism complex". News media outlets rely on the outrageous, sensationalist content that populists deliver so readily in order to maintain their financial viability. Populists too rely on the "primordial power" of the news media (White, 1973, p. 237), in focusing and directing the public's attention. "Both sides in the relationship are conscious of possible manipulation, but at the same time are fated to cooperate" (Ociepka, 2005, p. 223). This complex has played out in tandem with declining news credibility, another source of the populist surge. The media tactics of tabloidization, fragmentation and clickbait have damaged press credibility, and thus the role of the press as the watchdog of democracy. With the media acting as the mediators in the "a creative interplay between new and traditional politics" (Dahlgreen, 1999, p. 168) and having the "ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002), they play an important role in democracy. A weak and unreliable

news media allows populists inject their message into the public arena without scrutiny. The media-populist complex is a media logic that "that rewards a particular brand of politics. When everything and everybody is portrayed as deeply flawed, there's no sense making distinctions on that score, which works to the advantage of those who are more deeply flawed. Civility and sound proposals are no longer the stuff of headlines, which instead give voice to those who are skilled in the art of destruction" (Patterson, 2016 (d)).

Nowhere are the results of the media-populist complex and declining news media credibility more evident than in the media coverage of the 2016 US presidential election and the campaign of Donald Trump. At each stage of the presidential campaign, the elite news media failed to fulfil their role as the fourth estate. The failures came in several different forms. The first was that Trump was continually afforded more news coverage than his opponents. While it is not reasonable to expect news coverage to be split evenly between all candidates in a race, this still does not explain the preference of the elite media for Donald Trump. This is best exemplified by the fact that despite the Republican primary race no longer being contested and Trump being considered the presumptive nominee, he still received more coverage than Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, both of whom were still involved in a contested primary. During the later stages of the election Trump continued to dominate coverage and thus the narrative. The greater deal of coverage afforded Donald Trump far more opportunity to define his opponent. The campaign slogans of "Make America Great Again" and the unofficial campaign slogan of "Lock her up" were the predominant messages of the campaign and were heard more often than "Stronger together" and "he's unqualified" (Patterson, 2016 (d)).

Another elite media failure during the US election concerned the tone of media coverage. During the primaries and pre-primaries Trump's coverage was overwhelmingly positive in tone. This positivity came despite injecting bigoted rhetoric and falsehoods into the public domain. Even when the tone of coverage swung from positive to negative in the convention and general election stages of it still played to Trump's advantage. Trump's positives aligned closely with populist

characteristics. As populists are keen to portray themselves authoritarian "crisis managers" (Bosa, et al., 2013, p. 194), any positive portrayal as such strengthens the populist message. The media narrative had been that Trump "was strong and decisive" (Patterson, 2016 (b)), in other words an authoritarian crisis manager. The tone of coverage of key areas of Trump's campaign also aided him. A key campaign message for Trump was "illegal immigrants, incipient economic turmoil and the threat of a terrorist attack in the United States" (Healy & Martin, 2016).The most negative was immigration (84% negative to 16% positive) (Media Tenor, 2016). Trump's populist message was also helped by coverage of the economy. Under the Obama administration, the economy had been slowly improving; yet the tone of coverage surrounding the economy had been two thirds negative. The high levels of negativity during the election are intertwined with declining media credibility, another aspect of the election coverage that aided Trump. Journalism has "slipped from [scepticism] toward cynicism" (Hamby, 2013, p. 93). Negative reporting has a damaging effect on news media credibility. The plethora of negative news stories means that elite news media organisations "set themselves up to be as credible as the boy who repeatedly cried wolf" (Patterson, 2016 (d)).

There existed a number of factors that led to the election of populist Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States". The combination of declining media credibility, brought about by tabloidization, clickbait and fragmentation, and a surge in populist sentiment, fomented and fostered by the news media through a media-populist complex, played a significant role in facilitating Trump's rise. Certain socio-economic factors combined with the media factor contributed to a "goldilocks effect" and the election of Donald Trump in November 2016.

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