

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND POPULISM IN THE EU FOUR THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last years populist movements and parties across the EU have managed to use social networks increasingly as a platform for political communication and mobilization. The transformation of the media landscape and political communication by social networks has allowed them to communicate directly with a steadily growing number of followers and distribute their political content to a mass audience.

An analysis of social networks data confirms this upward trend. The data examined for this paper measure growth in fan numbers and interaction rates among populist parties and movements on Facebook between 2015 and March 2017 in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. In three of countries examined, the data from social networks show a clear upward trend in fan numbers and interaction rates. In the case of Germany, a particularly strong rise in interaction with "AfD" is connected to the refugee crisis of 2015. The Italian anti-establishment Five-Star Movement saw large gains linked to their mobilization against the Italian constitutional referendum in December 2016. In the case of France, Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon have been dominating social networks for the last two years and are relying on them heavily in the 2017 presidential campaign. In Spain, on the other hand, the mobilization of Podemos on social networks seems to have reached its peak and is now in steady decline.

Despite the high probability that populist parties are using social bots and other manipulation techniques to artificially boost their popularity further, the question remains: Why are populists seemingly so successful in communicating their messages via social networks? This paper offers an interpretation of populism as a political communication strategy. Due to the properties of social networks, a polarizing, exclusive political communication and mobilization strategy is particularly effective.

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1. Social networks change political communication — and politics

This paper presents data showing that populist parties and movements are making heavy use of social networks to increase their political communication reach across the EU. Social networks help them not only to distribute their political messages by speaking directly to “the people” but also to mobilize their followers and constantly connect them to a discourse of populist narratives. While there are many reasons for the recent electoral successes of populist parties in the EU and elsewhere, this paper raises the question whether their rapid success would have been possible without the transformation of the media and political communication by social networks. The first section gives background information on the transformation of the media landscape by social networks. The next two sections show how populist parties have managed to turn social networks into a political mass communication tool in the last two years. The last section offers an interpretation of populism as a political communication strategy which thrives on social networks.

1.1. Background

Almost 50 percent of the adult population in every European country now has a profile on Facebook, the most successful social network, and about half of them use it at least occasionally as a source of political news. Millions of Europeans follow politicians, journalists and political comedians on Twitter and Instagram or watch their videos on YouTube, whereby the use of social media as a source of (political) news is still more prevalent among young people. In all but one of the four countries examined in this paper (France, Germany, Italy and Spain), more than 50 percent of young people (under 35) now use Facebook as a source of news (see table one on the next page).¹

The advent of social media and especially of social networks has profoundly changed political communication, especially during election campaigns: Donald Trump’s reliance on Twitter for spreading his messages (and grabbing the attention of both his supporters and his adversaries) has only been the most remarkable use so far made of the micro-blogging service during election campaigns, just as Barack Obama’s ability to organize and mobilize grass roots supporters via social networks was in 2008. There are many other examples of the growing role of social media mass-communication for politicians from around the world: a non-Western example in the case of elections is that social networks played a substantial role in the 2016 elections in the Philippines.² And the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, shows that Donald Trump is by no means the only one who prefers direct communication via Twitter (20 million followers) and Facebook (34 million “likes”) to traditional communication channels.³

”ACROSS THE WESTERN WORLD A GAP IN TERMS OF TRUST IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IS EMERGING BETWEEN THE “MASS POPULATION” AND THE “INFORMED PUBLIC”.

At the same time there has been a gradual decrease in trust in traditional media, politics, experts and polls. However, the decrease in trust in the political system is unevenly distributed: the Edelman 2017-Trust Barometer finds that across the Western world a widening gap in terms of trust in the political system is emerging between the “mass population” (85 percent of the population) and the “informed public” (15 percent of the population).⁴ While it is impossible to establish a causal relationship between the two phenomena, the correlation between the loss of trust in the “establishment” (media, politics and experts) and the rise of social media is strong.

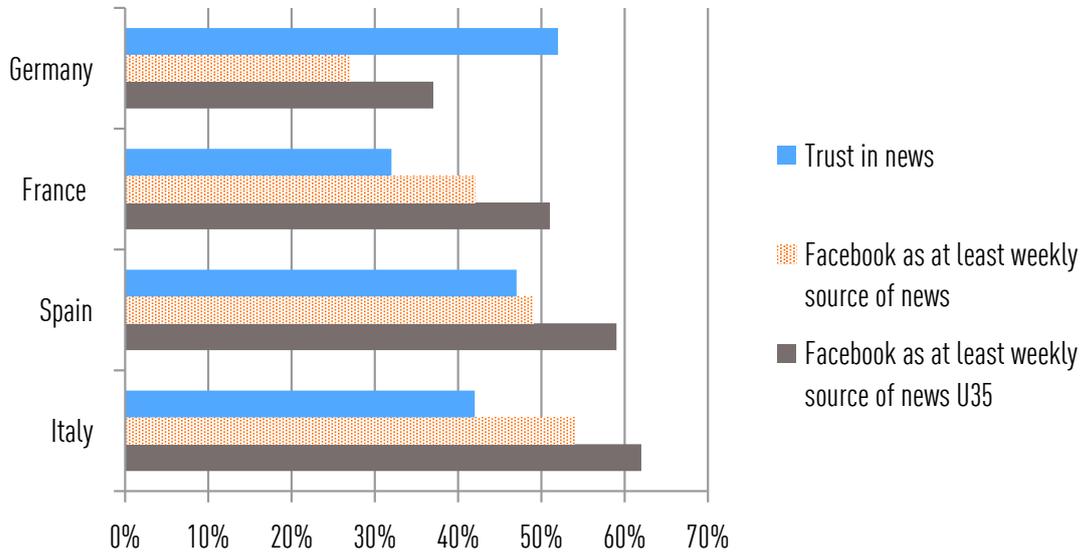
1. *Digital News Report 2016*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford

2. Aim Sempeng, “How Duterte won the Election on Facebook”, *New Mandala* [Online Magazine on Southeast Asia, hosted by the Australian National University’s (ANU) Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs]. The author points out that the secret of Duterte’s success on Facebook was the fact that he had the most committed follower base, which tended to “share” his posts at a much higher rate, giving him a superior reach for attention over his opponents.

3. Corinne Abrams, “5 Secrets of Narendra Modi’s Social Media Magic”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27.05.2016

4. Edelman Trust Barometer 2017, slides with the main results of the report can be [read online](#).

TABLE 1 ▶ Two-thirds of Italians under the age of 35 use Facebook as a weekly source of news



Note: The table shows the items “Trust in news” in general and “Facebook as at least a weekly source of news (U35)” in 2016 from the Digital News Report 2016 of Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, compilation by the author.

There is growing concern among policy makers that the transformation of the media landscape by social media has contributed to increased political polarization, undermined the legitimacy of traditional media and amplified existing prejudice among parts of Western societies. The public debates around filter bubbles, information silos, social bots or fake news testify to this growing concern, even though more scientific research is needed to determine the actual significance of each of these phenomena, especially in the context of election campaigns.⁵

1.2. Properties of social networks

” STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS ALIKE ARE EXPLOITING THE POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL NETWORKS.”

How exactly does communication on social media differ from “traditional media” such as TV, radio and newspapers? The most important differences are the inclusivity in the creation and distribution of content and the virtually non-existent entry barriers for creators of content or participants in a discussion. Instead of conveying news, analysis or political messages in a one-way fashion as the traditional media (TV, newspapers, radio) do, information flows on social networks go both ways. Each piece of information can be shared, commented on, criticized, “debunked”, edited or expanded ad infinitum, by everyone. The chaotic debates ensuing on social networks often lead to a greater

diversity of opinion and richness of information, but the information overflow can also cause growing confusion among discussion participants as to the underlying reality and the facts behind certain events or items of news. Important additional facts and views mix with rumour and outright lies to form a hodgepodge of information snippets, often leaving more people in a state of confusion than in one of clarity. State and non-state actors alike are exploiting the possibilities of social networks to distribute information and “alternative views” at zero marginal cost as a means of pushing their political agenda, as, for example, the Disinformation Review put out by the European External Action Service shows in its weekly reports.⁶

The political and social implications of these developments should not be underestimated: Due to the ability of social networks to spread information at almost zero marginal cost, citizens are nowadays much less dependent on the authority of traditional intermediaries of political and social reality (such as journalists, experts or

5. See for an overview on the discussion on the role of fake news in the 2016 American election campaign: R. Kelly Garrett, *Facebook’s Problem is more complicated than fake news*, The Conversation, 17.11.2016. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow give a detailed account on the actual numbers and economics of fake news during the 2016 American 2016 campaign: Allcott, Hunt and Matthew Gentzkow, *Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election*, NBER Working Paper No. 23089, January 2017.

6. Disinformation Review of the European External Action Service, *official homepage*.

politicians) when it comes to the interpretation of political events.⁷ They can instead follow events live on Periscope, read blogs and watch YouTube videos offering conflicting and alternative interpretations of events. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter thereby often act as central nodes of information networks, since most (audio-visual) content is at some point being shared on them. There are also other distinguishing aspects of social networks in their current form:⁸

- **Anonymity:** On social media it is very simple to cover one's traces in anonymity. Even though some social networks (like Facebook) require their users to create real-name profiles or else they will be deleted, it is in fact very easy to post content under a pseudonym or use legions of bots to create artificial hype.
- **Subjectivity:** Social networks favour subjectivity over objectivity. Studies have found that information shared on social networks tends to confirm a user's confirmation bias, reinforces existing prejudices and favours homogeneity (the infamous "echo-chamber" effect).⁹ Objective analysis and reporting is often replaced by subjective, emotional and unverifiable news that tends, however, to do well if it confirms an existing ideology in the minds of the users, for example, a bias against migrants, the euro or "elites" in general.
- **Lack of Regulation:** Online content not only undergoes no editorial scrutiny: numerous instances of hate speech, defamatory statements or instigation of violence are posted daily on social networks, largely without any legal consequences. If and how social media can become a more state-regulated space for respectful political discourse will remain one of the most important legislative and civic challenges for the years to come.
- **Attention Economy:** Social networks theoretically hand over the power of political spin to everyone without quality- or veracity-checks. However, the laws of the attention economy apply: a well-designed gif or a catchy slogan will travel around social networks much faster than any public statement, official press release or carefully formulated but dull tweets about a political issue.

2. Populists have surged on social networks across the EU in the last two years

” THE DATA CLEARLY SHOW A LARGE SURGE IN ACTIVITY BY POPULIST PARTIES.”

Over the last two years, populist parties and movements have increasingly been able to turn social networks into effective political communication platforms. To throw light on this development, this paper uses Facebook data from four countries (France, Germany, Italy and Spain) between January 2015 and March 2017. The data clearly show a large surge in activity by populist parties in all four countries examined. Whether looking at fan growth, shared content or the overall interaction rate, the picture is quite clear: in all four countries populist movements have managed to grow a much larger base of followers or fans than "traditional" non-populist parties. This has enabled them to share their content and their messages directly to a steadily growing mass audience. Populist parties and movements like Podemos, Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) or Jean-Luc Mélenchon have managed to create entirely new platforms for political communication which were virtually non-existent before the ascent of social media. These new, low-cost communication platforms allow them to distribute political messages which bypass established media outlets, constantly mobilize their supporters and speak directly to "the people".

How did this surge in fan numbers and interactions unfold? Social network data are usually analysed by looking at "Key Metrics" or "Key Performance Indicators" (KPI's) such as likes, comments and shares of a particular post. These KPI's are measured daily by social networks and can be ascertained by third-party players via APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). The performance data gathered in this way are used

7. See also, on this argument, Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the rest of today's user generated media are destroying our economy, our values and our culture*, Crown Business, 2008.

8. See for an extended overview of properties of social networks for communication also Ari-Matti Auvinen, *Social Media – The new Power of Political Influence*, Centre for European Studies and Suomen Toivo – Think Tank, 2012

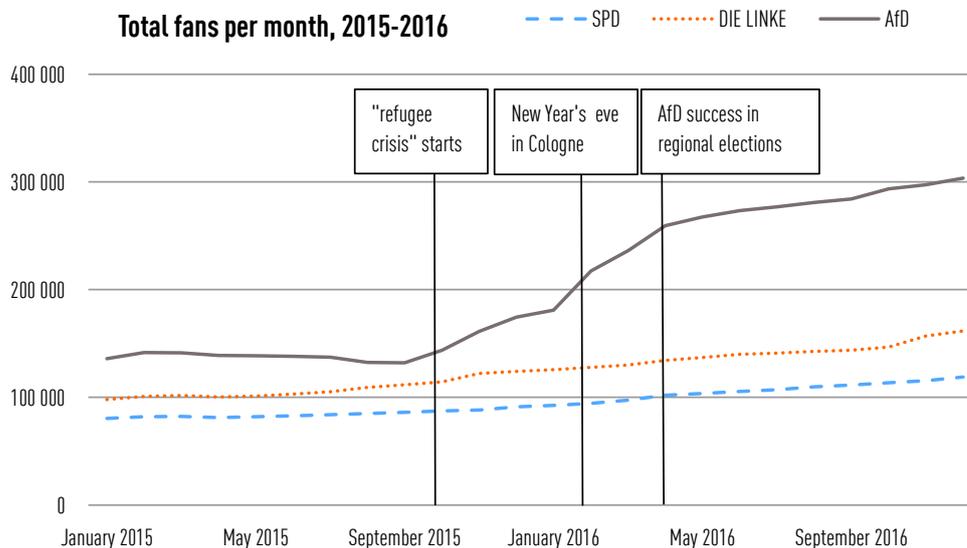
9. On patterns of homogeneity and polarization effects (echo-chambers) for the spread of news see: Michela Del Vicario et al. *The spreading of misinformation online* PNAS 2016 113 (3) 554-559; published ahead of print January 4, 2016.

by corporations, governments or NGOs to track and constantly improve the reach of their messages on social networks. The data used for this study were ascertained and courteously made available by quintly, a Cologne-based social media analytics start-up. This section examines the fan growth of populist and non-populist parties on Facebook between 01.01.2015 and 31.12.2016 in Germany, Italy and France, and the next section looks at the interaction rates of the party profiles. The countries were chosen for closer examination owing to their importance for the EU in 2017 (elections in France and Germany and possibly Italy) and, in the case of Spain, the rapid electoral success of Podemos, which took many by surprise. A quick search on social networks, however, reveals that the same tendency can be observed across the EU: whether we look at Syriza in Greece, Kukiz15 in Poland, FPÖ in Austria or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, in all European countries a comparatively strong performance on Facebook, Twitter and in some cases YouTube can be observed.

2.1. AfD profits from the refugee crisis

A large increase in fan numbers on social networks often occurs following particular political or social events: in Germany, a rise in the number of fans of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) set in with the large influx of refugees from Syria to Germany in the fall of 2016, dubbed by parts of the media as the “refugee crisis”: After initially losing some support in 2015, the party’s online popularity soared following the opening of the German borders to Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in September 2015. In the weeks following the events in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2016 and state elections in three German states in March 2016, another jump in support occurred. Since March 2016, however, the party has not managed to attract new followers at the same pace and had stagnated at around 320 000 fans on Facebook by the beginning of April 2017. Overall, Germany shows by far the lowest numbers of followers of populist politicians and parties in the four countries examined (. Notable German politicians with a comparably large number of followers (as of April 2017) include Sahra Wagenknecht (360 000), Martin Schulz (309 000) and Frauke Petry (210 000). Angela Merkel has more than two million fans on Facebook. However, her account is professionally managed by a social media team and is used to distribute official political statements of the German chancellor.

GRAPH 1 ► Between September 2015 and April 2016 AfD doubled its fan base on Facebook



Note: The chart shows total fans per month between 01.01.2015 and 31.12.2016 of the Facebook-profiles of SPD, DieLinke and AfD. Lines have been smoothed.

Source: quintly, compilation by the author. Data of CDU and the Green Party were not available at the time of research.

2.2. Movimento 5Stelle and a network of “alternative newspapers”

Italy is the country where the connection between internet communication and populist movements is maybe the closest and most obvious. Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) was conceptualized by its founders from the outset as an internet-enabled party with, for example, regular internal online referenda for the party members.

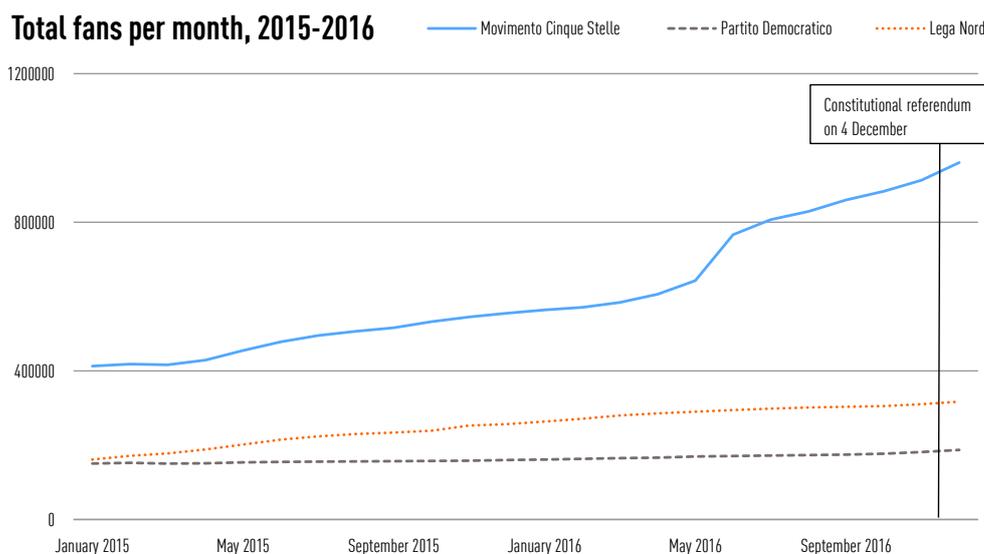
”M5S HAS NOT ONLY BECOME A LARGE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION BUT HAS ALSO DEVELOPED A VERY POWERFUL COMMUNICATION PLATFORM ON SOCIAL NETWORKS.”

The focus on internet-enabled forms of participatory democracy by the movement was the brain child of the late Gianroberto Casaleggio, an internet marketing entrepreneur who co-founded M5S with Grillo in 2009 and died in 2016. Casaleggio’s declared intention was to use the internet as a political communication tool in order to uproot the existing political system in Italy and replace it with an internet-enabled direct democracy.¹⁰ In April 2017, the “movement-party”, which combines elements of left- and right-wing populism, is the leading party in most polls for the next national Italian elections. Under its leader Beppe Grillo, whose blog (beppegrillo.it) is one of the most widely read blogs in Italy, M5S has not only become a large political organization but has also developed a very powerful communication platform on social networks where it constantly rallies its followers.

The social networks data for the last two years confirm this observation. M5S has seen a rapidly growing fan base (from 400 000 to almost one million fans) during the period from January 2015 to December 2016 (in April 2017 it had more than one million followers). A particularly strong surge in follower growth on Facebook coincided with the run-off towards the country’s constitutional referendum, which took place on December 4th 2016 and against which M5S mobilized heavily. From May to December 2016 alone, the Facebook profile attracted more than 300 000 new fans. Leading figures in the party have hundreds of thousands of followers as well, with Beppe Grillo (almost two million) and Luigi Di Maio (more than one million) on top of the list. It is interesting to note that the Lega Nord, another populist party, almost doubled its number of followers in the same period of time, whereas the party of then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the Partito Democratico, basically stagnated.

In addition to its social media presence, M5S also controls a network of officially independent internet newspapers and blogs, which are highly successful on social networks as well. Covering topics from alternative medicine to politics, M5S has in fact managed to create its own social media news empire with the help of this network of online newspapers, which was used as a communication tool in the mobilization for a “No” vote in the constitutional referendum. The largest of the sites connected to M5S, *Tze Tze* (1.2 million fans on Facebook), has been accused of regularly disseminating conspiracy theories and Russian propaganda.¹¹ The creation of a universe of online (alternative) news outlets closely connected to a populist party has also been seen in Austria, where the FPÖ even launched its own online TV-channel, FPÖ-TV.¹²

GRAPH 2 ► Movimento Cinque Stelle gained 400,000 fans in the run-off to the 2016-referendum



Note: The chart shows total fans per month between 01.01.2015 and 12.01.2016 of the Facebook-profiles of Movimento Cinque Stelle, Partito Democratico and Lega Nord. Lines have been smoothed.

Source: quintly, compilation by the author.

10. John Hooper, *Italy’s web guru tastes power as new political movement goes viral*, The Guardian, 03.01.2013.

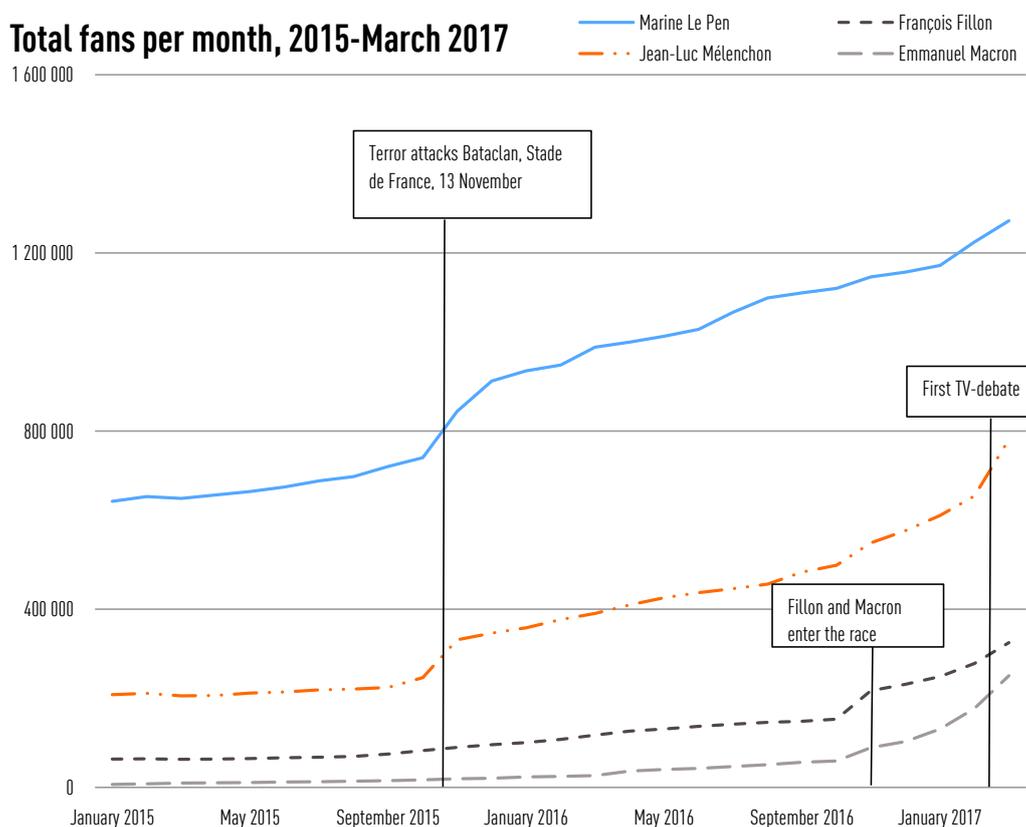
11. Alberto Nadelli, Craig Silverman, *Italy’s most Popular Party is Leading Europe in Fake News and Kremlin Propaganda*, BuzzFeed, 29.11.2016.

12. See Jakob Winter, Ingrid Brodnig, *FPÖ im Internet: Tag für Tag ein Propagandastück*, profil, 24.05.2016 for a graphic depiction of the different news-outlets.

2.3. Le Pen and Mélenchon in the lead in the virtual presidential race

France serves as an interesting case for a closer examination of social network dynamics as the country holds presidential elections in April/May 2017. Mirroring the performance of populist parties in Italy and Germany, both the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen and the far-left contestant Jean-Luc Mélenchon have by far the most followers on Facebook. As in the other two countries, fan growth can be tracked to political and social events: Marine Le Pen's fan growth accelerated remarkably after the terrorist attacks on the Bataclan and the Stade de France in November 2015. The same month also saw a large rise in fan numbers for Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Another interesting observation from the data is that both Le Pen and Mélenchon seem to have started building a strong follower base from November 2015 onwards, which is long before the other two main candidates in the race, Emmanuel Macron and Francois Fillon, started to gain more attention on the social network. Both Macron and Fillon's follower rates jumped after announcing the candidacy / winning the party primary in November 2016 and have been on a strong upward trend only since then.¹³

GRAPH 3 ▶ Le Pen and Mélenchon on a constant upward trend since November 2015



Note: The chart shows total fans per month between 01.01.2015 and 28.03.2017 of the Facebook-profiles of Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Francois Fillon and Emmanuel Macron. Lines have been smoothed.

Source: quintly, compilation by the author. Benoît Hamon of the Parti Socialiste (PS) is missing from the chart due to unavailability of the full data.

Since the beginning of 2017, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Emmanuel Macron have had the largest total rise in fan numbers. By the beginning of April 2017, Marine Le Pen had around 1 275 000 fans on Facebook followed by Mélenchon with 800 000, Fillon with 330 000, Macron with 260 000 and Hamon with 155 000. According to the

13. Emmanuel Macron announced his candidacy on 11 November 2016 and Francois Fillon won the Républicain primaries on 27 November.

French web site politilogue.com, Mélenchon showed the strongest momentum in terms of rising fan numbers, especially after the first presidential TV-debate, which saw him add more than 100 000 new fans in about a week.¹⁴

2.4. Are populists really “successful” on social networks?

Even though there is a clear trend for populist parties and movements to be able to turn their Facebook profiles into platforms for political mass-communication, it is important to raise some caveats as to whether and how this success can help populists to translate Facebook fans into “real-life” support and actual votes in an election. First of all, it would take a much more sophisticated computational social science analysis to determine how many of the people like a certain political profile because they are really in favour of it. Interested users might just like a page in order to stay up-to-date or even to monitor it. Secondly, the analysis of the Quintly-data showed that usually between 20 and 30 percent of the likes do not come from the country of origin of the respective party. In the case of France, for example, 40 percent of Marine Le Pen’s “likes” come from foreign countries, which could be explained by the international popularity of the politician as a leading figure in the global right-wing movement. Macron, on the other hand, also has around 35 percent of his likes coming from other countries, which could be explained by the high media attention he has received from outside France compared to the other presidential contestants, or by a high preference for him among French people living outside France. Lastly, and connected to the second point, there is the question of social bots. It is possible and in fact quite likely that a part of the likes of and interactions with populist profiles does not come from humans, but from paid bots. As became clear in the aftermath of the American presidential elections in 2016, it is very inexpensive to buy entire “armies” of bots (though much more on Twitter than on Facebook) and have them create artificial hypes or create the illusion of mass support where there is none. The question of bots and other social media manipulation techniques will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

3. Social networks are a direct channel to “the people”

**” IN CONTRAST
TO LIKING OR COMMENTING,
SHARING IS THE MOST
EFFICIENT WAY TO SPREAD
A POLITICAL MESSAGE.”**

In addition to a high rate of followers, users also interact much more with populist profiles than with non-populist profiles. Why is that important? Even though likes on Facebook are an important first indicator in estimating support for and the reach of a Facebook-profile, the much more important KPI is the interaction rate (likes, comments, and shares of specific posts). The higher the interaction rate of a profile’s posts, especially the rate of shares, the more people eventually get to see posts of a specific profile beyond the regular fans of a page who see the post anyway (the so-called “fan reach”).

In contrast to liking or commenting, where the information remains stuck to the wall of the page, sharing is the most efficient way to spread a political message. In online marketing, the sharing rate is usually used as the benchmark to determine the online success of a brand strategy. How can reach be measured? While it is difficult to exactly compute the reach of a specific post without first-hand access to a profile, a good rule-of-thumb is that on average each user on Facebook has around 150 friends, so that multiplying any specific post’s sharing numbers by 150 could give a (very) crude estimation of the maximum amount of users who could possibly see a post. That would mean, however, that a single post which gets shared 10 000 times could theoretically be seen by 1.5 million people, though the real number would probably be much lower.

Recent research suggests that success on social media can have a self-reinforcing effect. Each Facebook profile and post contains a lot of “social information”: every user can immediately see the apparent success or non-success of certain posts and profiles by looking at the number of shares, likes and followers which Facebook always provides. A high number of interactions can thus signal the high importance and validity of certain messages. This in turn increases the confidence and trust of users in those messages and profiles and is also one of the reasons why populists might be using social bots to artificially boost their relevance and reach on social media (see Box 1).

14. Politilogue.com is a French website that tracks the performance of hundreds of French politicians on Facebook.

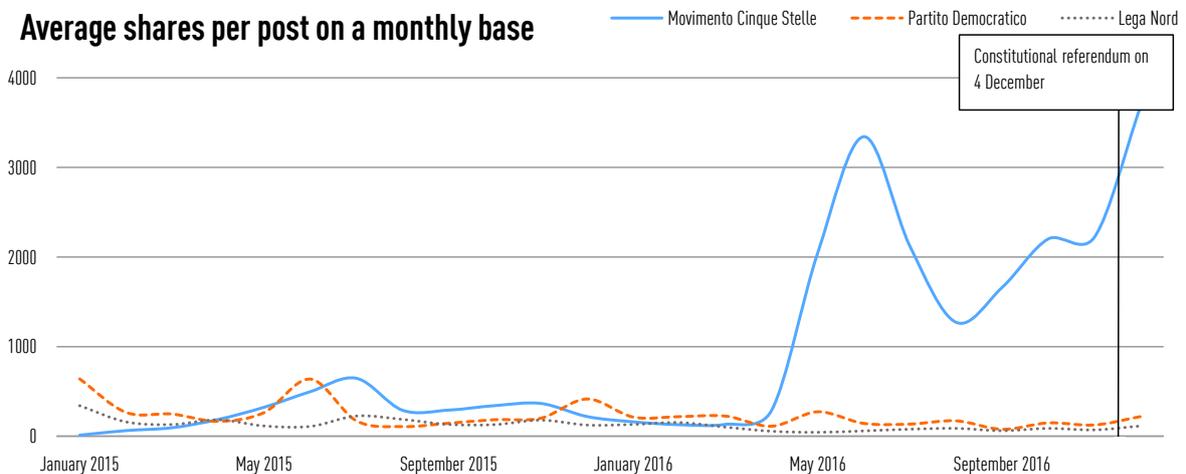
What do the data show about the interaction and share rates of populist parties and politicians? The picture is very similar to the numbers given in the previous section: not only do populist parties have much larger numbers of followers, these followers also interact on average much more with the content shared by populists than followers of non-populist parties do.

3.1. Mobilizing for a “No”: M5S and the constitutional referendum

“IN SOME MONTHS THE FACEBOOK-PROFILE OF M5S HAD MORE THAN TWO MILLION TOTAL INTERACTIONS.”

How do these dynamics play out in the countries under scrutiny from 2015 to 2016? Again, Italy and the Five-Star Movement (M5S) seem to be the most impressive case of the use of social networks to spread political messages and mobilize support. From April 2016 onwards, the average share rate of each post by the populist movement jumped to an incredibly high level, compared to the share rate of other political parties. This is all the more interesting considering that Italy was in an election campaign for a referendum to amend certain parts of the country’s constitution from the second half of 2017 onwards, but M5S seems to have been the only party whose Facebook profile was heavily interacted with during that campaign. In conjunction with the fact that Beppe Grillo and other M5S politicians also have hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook, it is possible that they reached millions of Italians daily with every single post during a critical time in the referendum campaign. Even though it is impossible to determine the exact effect of this constant appearance in the Facebook feeds of so many people, it seems reasonable to argue that this substantial social media presence helped turn the tide against amending the constitution, which was the eventual outcome of the referendum. In some months the Facebook-profile of M5S had more than two million total interactions. The page often shares content by Beppe Grillo or other M5S-politicians.

GRAPH 4 ► High share rates for the Five-Star Movement before the referendum



Note: The chart shows average share per post on a monthly base between 01.01.2015 and 12.01.2016 of the Facebook-profiles of Movimento Cinque Stelle, Partito Democratico and Lega Nord. Lines have been smoothed.

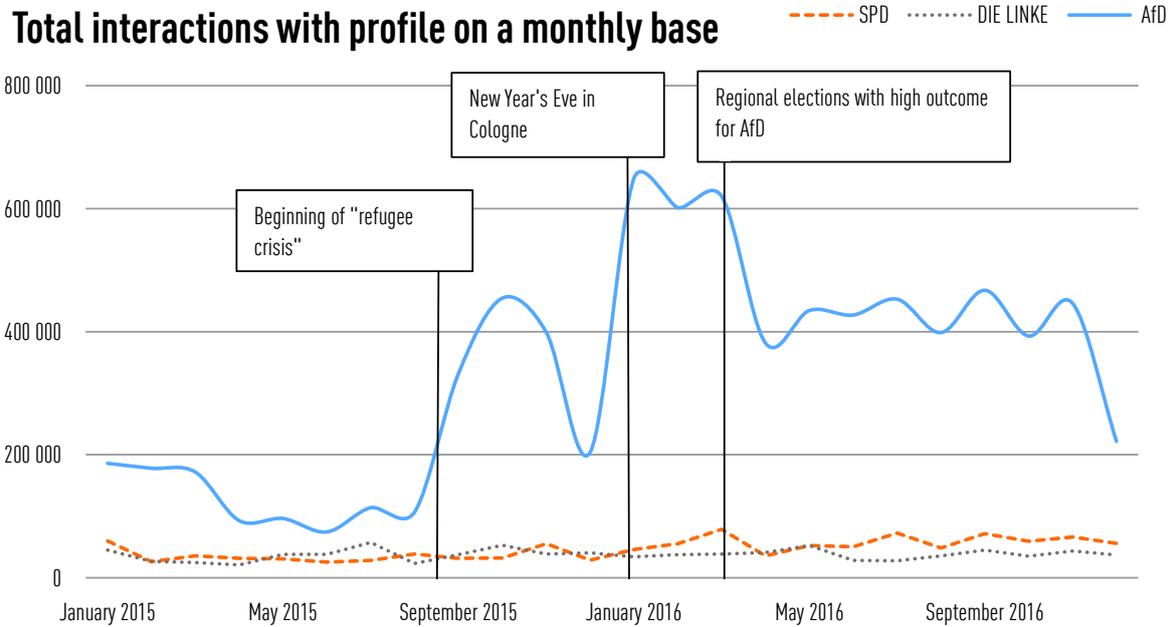
Source: quintly, compilation by the author.

3.2. AfD: Interactions are high, but weak compared to the rest of Europe

In Germany, there is a similar dynamic at work in high populist interaction rates, albeit with much less force. In compiling the following chart, total cumulated interactions for each month were used instead of the average rate of share. Just as with their growth in followers, users started interacting with AfD’s profile much more after the start of the “refugee crisis” in September 2015. The chart shows that the interactions then reached their peak in the three months following the events in Cologne on New Year’s Eve

up to March 2016, when AfD managed to secure an unexpectedly high share of votes in three regional elections. During that time, AfD had around 600,000 interactions each month.

GRAPH 5 ➤ AfD's interaction rate rose with "refugee crisis" and peaked after 2016 regional elections



Note: The chart shows total interactions (likes (reactions), comments, shares) each month between 01.01.2015 and 12.01.2016 with the Facebook-profiles of SPD, DieLinke and AfD. Lines have been smoothed.

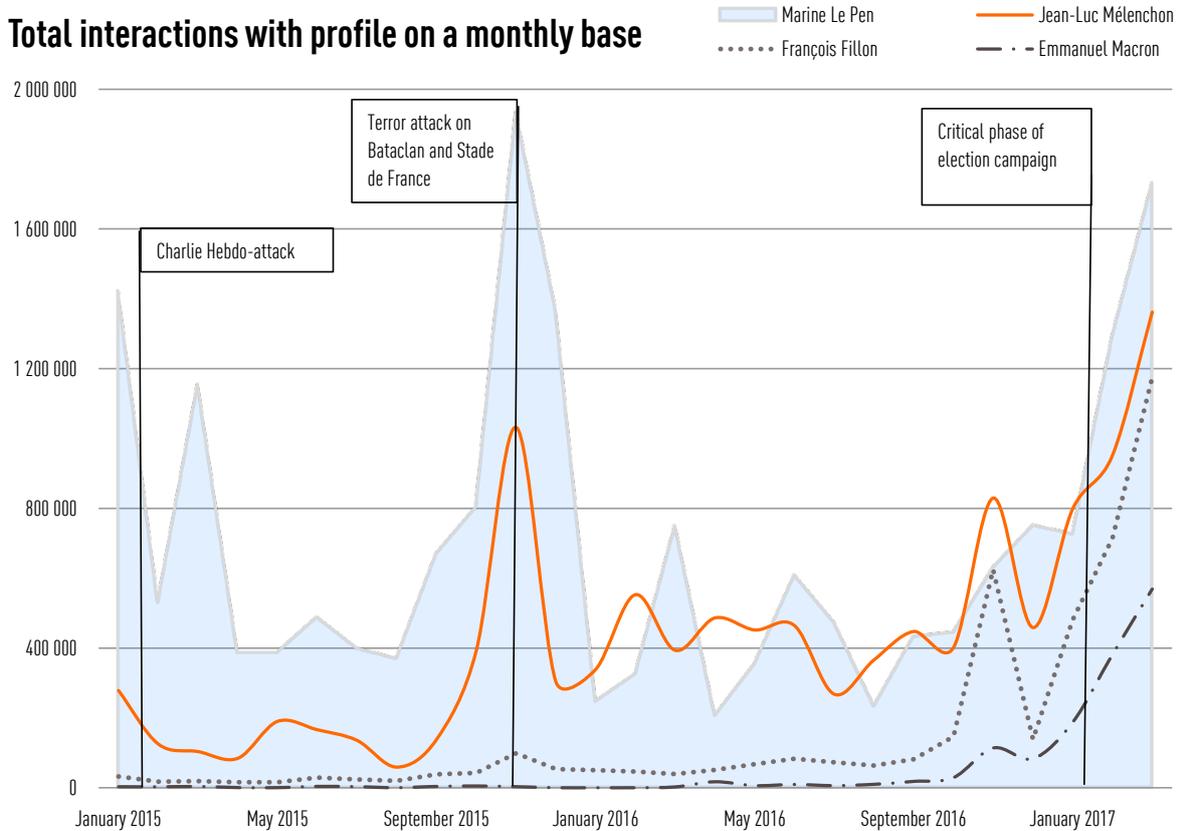
Source: quintly, compilation by the author. Data of CDU and the Green Party were not available at the time of research.

Since March 2016, however, interactions with AfD's Facebook profile have flatlined, in parallel with the slowing down in fan growth. It appears that at least for now AfD is not able to turn Facebook into a device of mass political communication on the same scale as populists in Italy, France or Spain.

3.3. Fillon and Macron are late to the game

In France the correlation between populist, anti-establishment candidates and heavy reliance on social networks as communication tools is very strong. In the presidential elections of 2017, two candidates with a dedicated populist, anti-establishment message are in the race: on the far right, Marine Le Pen of the Front National and, on the far left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who founded his own political platform and movement "La France insoumise" (the unsubdued France). Both are more successful in getting their message across unfiltered to their followers on social networks than the other three promising candidates in the race.

GRAPH 6 ▶ Marine Le Pen with highest interaction rate in almost every month, Macron weak



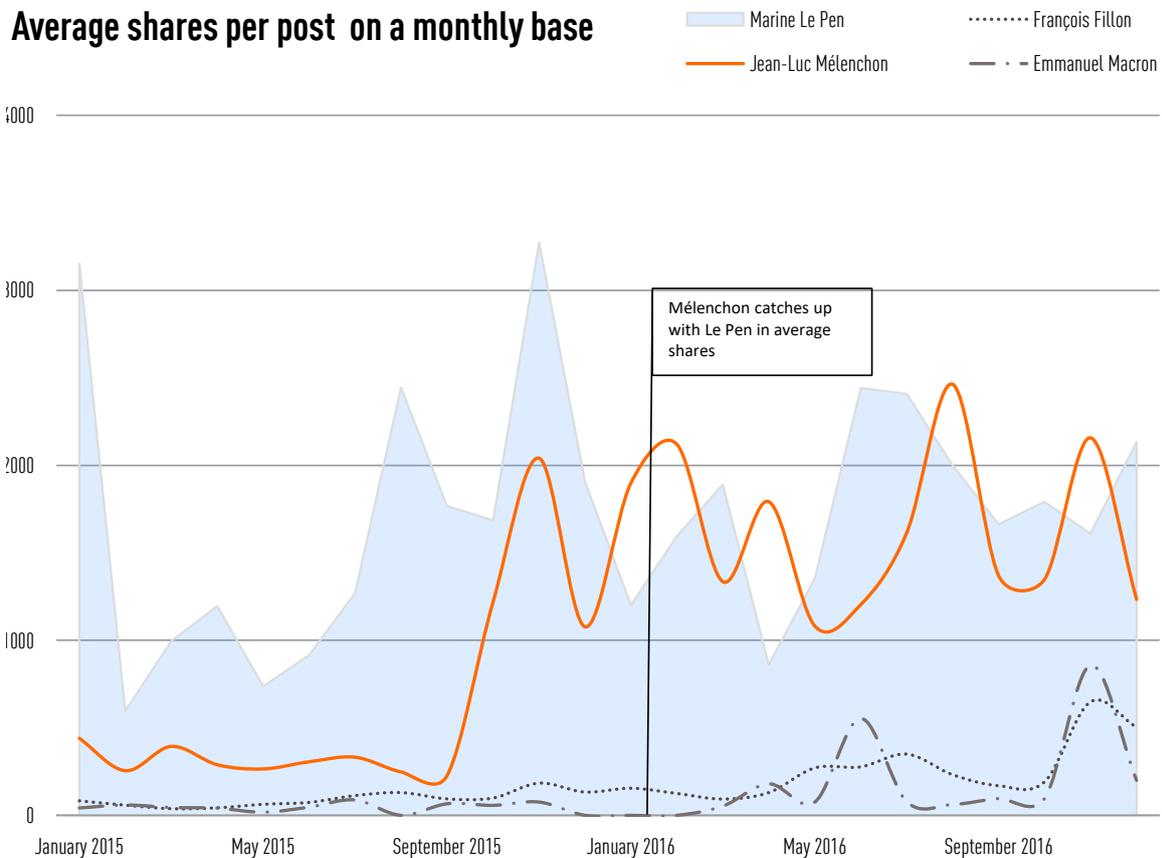
Note: The chart shows total interactions (likes (reactions), comments, shares) each month between 01.01.2015 and 28.03.2017 with the Facebook-profiles of Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, François Fillon and Emmanuel Macron. Lines have been smoothed.

Source: quintly, compilation by the author. Benoit Hamon of the Parti Socialiste (PS) is missing from the chart due to unavailability of the full data.

Mélenchon and Le Pen constantly interacted with and mobilized their followers, years before the actual election campaign for 2017 started. Le Pen’s high interaction rates date back to at least the beginning of 2015, when she had almost 1.5 million interactions in January 2015, the month of the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket in Paris. However, it is also clearly visible from the data that Mélenchon started to experience high interaction rates as early as the last quarter of 2015. The interaction peak for Le Pen was in November 2015, the month of the terrorist attacks on the Bataclan and the Stade de France. Fillon had a forceful leap forward in interaction rates in November 2016 (over 500 000) when he won the Républicain primary, while Emmanuel Macron only achieved a comparatively small bump on declaring his candidacy. Since then François Fillon, up to March 2017, had almost managed to reach the same level of interactions as Le Pen and Mélenchon.

” IN 2016, MÉLENCHON WAS GRADUALLY ABLE TO CATCH UP WITH LE PEN IN THE NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS.”

In 2016, Mélenchon was gradually able to catch up with Le Pen in the number of interactions, despite the fact that the Front National candidate had around twice the number of fans during most of 2016. A look at the figures for average shares over the same period confirms that Mélenchon achieved about the same reach on social networks as Le Pen throughout 2016, at least without taking into account the fact that Marine Le Pen has a much higher number of fans, which in turn bolsters her organic reach.

GRAPH 7 ▶ In 2016, Mélenchon's content got almost as many shares as Le Pen's

Note: The chart shows average shares each month between 01.01.2015 and 31.12.2016 with the Facebook-profiles of Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Francois Fillon and Emmanuel Macron. Lines have been smoothed.

Source: quintly, compilation by the author. Benoît Hamon of the Parti Socialiste (PS) is missing from the chart due to unavailability of the full data.

3.4. Mélenchon's internet strategy against the "système officiel"

Ongoing direct communication and mobilization of followers bypassing traditional intermediators is one of the most important features of a populist social media communication strategy: Mélenchon started building up a strong social media presence as early as 2015, focusing particularly on Facebook and YouTube.¹⁵ His entire election campaign is largely internet-based. The candidate has a very popular YouTube-channel (for a politician), which features weekly broadcasts of him wrapping up the main topics of the week and other videos from the ongoing election campaign. With more than 250 000 subscribers, his channel is the major personal political channel in France (Macron and Le Pen both have fewer than 25 000 followers) and among the 50 most popular politics channels worldwide on the online broadcasting site. Mélenchon himself described the importance of social networks for him and his 2017 campaign on his own blog (jlm2017.fr): in January 2017 he wrote that his increasing popularity in social networks, which had (in his view) gone largely unnoticed by the "official media", was one of the main assets of his campaign. According to him, his popularity online helped him to slowly bypass the "official media system".¹⁶ Like M5S or Bernie Sanders, Mélenchon started building up local offline groups of his grassroots movement across the country at an early stage. They are connected with each other and the official campaigns by apps like NationBuilder and leverage the power of social networks to distribute their content and to further mobilize support online and offline. At the beginning of April 2017 there

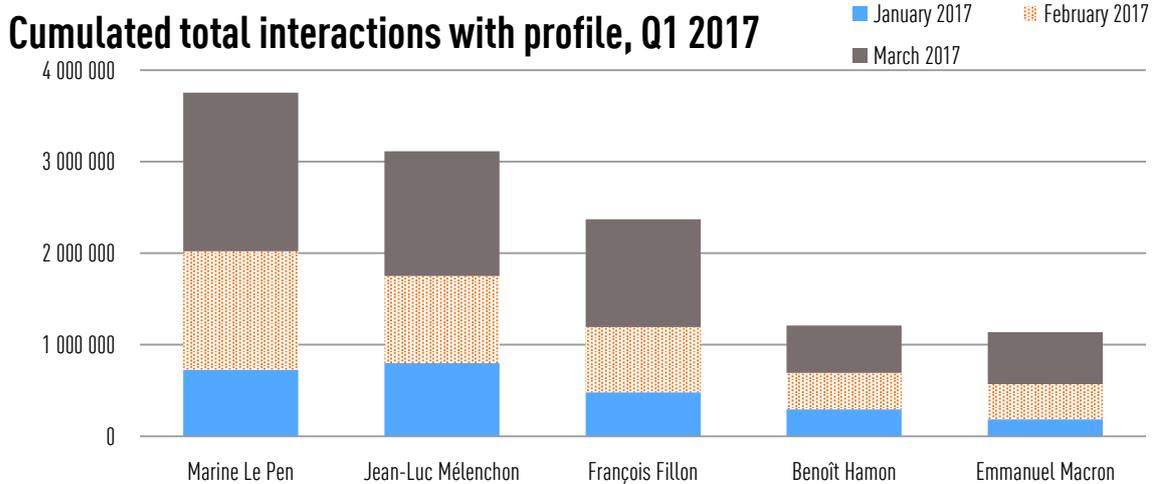
15. Mathieu Dejean, *Comment Antoine Léaument a révolutionné la communication web de Jean-Luc Mélenchon*, Les Inrocks, 05.02.2017

16. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, *Réseaux et mouvements*, blog post on the official blog of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 05.01.2017.

are more than 350 000 “Insoumis” registered on the website, with more than 1000 local groups.¹⁷ Emmanuel Macron’s grassroots movement, En Marche!, by comparison has around 200 000 supporters.¹⁸

As the next chart shows, the dynamics on social networks changed somewhat in the first three months of 2017 when the election campaign started to go into full swing. Le Pen and Mélenchon are still the two profiles most interacted with, but Fillon’s interactions have gone up markedly since January 2017. Fillon’s high interaction rate since the beginning of 2017 is even more impressive given the fact that he has far fewer fans than Le Pen and Mélenchon. Emmanuel Macron, on the other hand, had the lowest interaction rate of the five presidential candidates from January to March, despite his being one of the two or three favourites in the opinion polls throughout most of 2017.

GRAPH 8 ▶ Fillon stronger in 2017, with more interactions than Macron and Hamon combined



Note: The chart shows total interactions (likes (reactions), comments, shares) between 01.01.2017 and 28.03.2017 with the Facebook-profiles of Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Francois Fillon, Benoît Hamon and Emmanuel Macron.

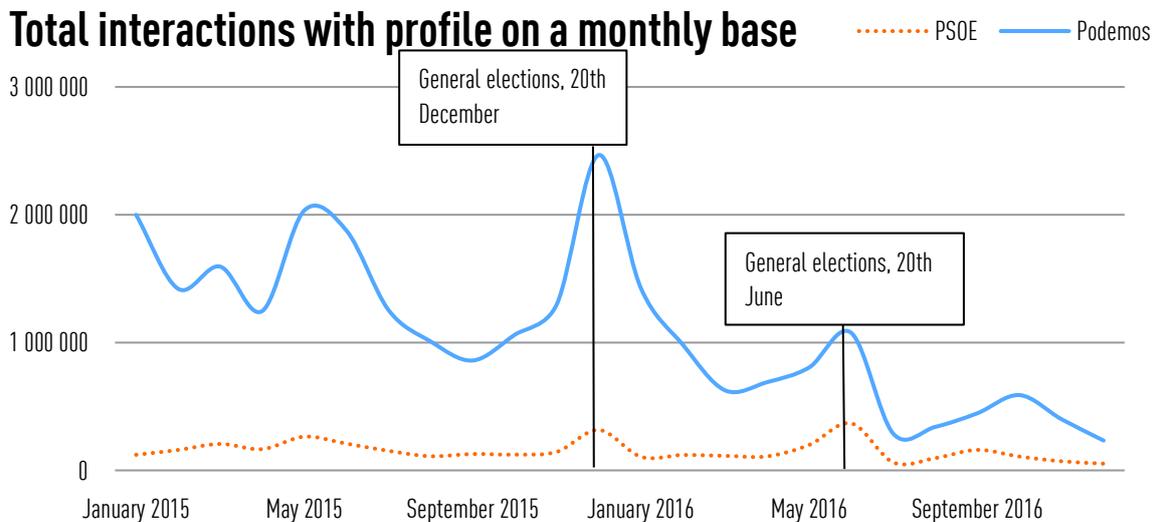
Source: quintly, compilation and calculation by the author.

3.5. High volatility and social bots

How important is a larger “buzz” on social networks, and could it potentially become a game changer in elections? At the moment this seems far-fetched. Whether and how success on social networks can actually be translated into votes is unknown. Most researchers still tend to view social networks as complementary tools in an election campaign. Social bots and other manipulation techniques might be used by populists to create an artificial impression of interaction, thus overstating their real communicative reach (see the box on the next page). Support on social networks can also be very volatile. As the case of Podemos in Spain shows, initial success on social networks does not necessarily translate into durably successful mobilization. The Spanish protest-party Podemos applied a strategy very similar to that of M5S or Mélenchon: strong interaction with followers on social networks was combined with local support groups and a decisive populist, anti-establishment rhetoric. After rapid and unexpected initial success (with 20.7 percent of the vote in 2015-general elections) the movement-turned-into-a-party has experienced an almost constantly decreasing interaction rate for two years now (albeit gaining 21.2 percent in the June 2016-elections). AfD’s lower interaction rates in Germany since March 2016 could point to a similar trend.

17. Official Map of “groupes d’appui”, La France Insoumise.

18. En Marche! Official Homepage.

GRAPH 9 ▶ Podemos' interaction rate is on a downward trend, despite electoral success

Note: The chart shows total interactions (likes (reactions), comments, shares) each month between 01.01.2015 and 12.01.2016 with the Facebook-profiles of SPD, DieLinke and AfD. Source: quintly, compilation by the author.

Yet despite the unclear effect of high social network interaction on specific political events such as elections, the analysis of Facebook data from 2015 and 2016 presented still suggests that populist parties and movements have managed to create new ways of communicating and interacting with citizens. In the populist narrative, social media have provided them with a direct channel to “the people”. What is more, in combination with large grassroots and protest movements, social networks can act as important tools for political mobilization.

BOX 1 ▶ On Social bots and other manipulation techniques in social networks

Since the US elections in 2016, social bots and the manipulation of political discourses on social networks in general have been high on the agenda. Many researchers have shown how entire armies of fake profiles can be bought on Twitter or Facebook. Bots that imitate human behaviour on Facebook by liking profiles or sharing content are in fact very cheap: 1.000 likes on Facebook can be bought for around \$ 100. Twitter in particular is very bot-prone. By some estimates around 15 percent of all profiles on the micro-blogging service could in fact be bots.¹⁹ Many public figures, especially politicians, have hundreds of thousands of fake followers on Twitter. Facebook on the other hand has fewer automated profiles, although their number is still estimated to be around 65 million (Facebook had close to two billion total profiles by March 2017). While simple bots only like certain pages or post hashtags, more sophisticated ones can actually appear very human-like and write, for example, comments under posts and react to other users.

Apart from bots, there are many other ways to manipulate the interaction rates and fan growth of specific profiles on social networks. Human influencers can create multiple profiles under pseudonyms or even get paid to interact constantly with profiles. The bottom line is that the total number of followers or interactions on a public profile in social networks should never be taken at face value. Furthermore, populist actors would have a strong motive to use social bots and other techniques in order to artificially boost their support on Facebook, thus seemingly vindicating their claim to have the support of large parts of “the people”. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that Jean-Luc Mélenchon could be using either bots or human influencers: analysis of the Quintly data showed that about a dozen top followers of Jean-Luc Mélenchon had shared his content more than 1.000-times – which would be very unusual behaviour for a human follower, even for an ardent fan. According to TwitterAudit, which monitors fake followers on Twitter, around 23 percent of his followers on the micro-blogging site are fake.²⁰ Social bots could also explain why a specifically high rate of follower growth and interactions seems to align with political events, as bots are often used to amplify existing trends.

On the other hand, it is also quite unlikely that the entire surge in interactions and the growth in the numbers of fans of populists observed in the last two years and demonstrated in this paper are only attributable to bots. That would mean that numerous populist parties and movements across the EU started using huge numbers of bots almost simultaneously around 2015/2016 on Facebook (not on Twitter). While social bots are very active on Twitter, on Facebook they are less prevalent.²¹ Plus, it would be politically dangerous even for populist parties to build large parts of their fan base on bots. Looking at the gradual decline in interactions of, for example, Podemos, the question arises why the party would not use bots to keep their interaction high. Last, but not least, even if populists use social bots or other manipulation techniques strategically, this might still have helped them attract many more human followers. Since every post and every profile contains “social information” about their popularity, a particularly strong hype initiated by bots could later attract more human fans to the same post or profile.

19. Onur Varol et al. *Online Human-Bot Interactions: Detection, Estimation, and Characterization*. Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research, Indiana University, Bloomington, US 2 Information Sciences Institute, University of Southern California, Marina del Rey, CA, US, 22.03.2017

20. Twitter-Audit.com Jean-Luc Mélenchon

21. Sonja Kind et al., Social Bots. *Thesenpapier* zum öffentlichen Fachgespräch “Social Bots – Diskussion und Validierung von Zwischenergebnissen”, am 26. Januar 2017 im Deutschen Bundestag.

4. Populism is a political communication strategy

This section examines populism as a political communication strategy propelled by the dynamics of social networks. It tries to answer some of the questions raised in the previous sections, above all: why are populist actors seemingly so successful in their attempt to mobilize and communicate with their followers on social networks?

In 2013, M5S had won 25 percent of the votes in the Italian general elections, coming from below ten percent in the polls just a couple of months earlier. It was one of those election outcomes which most opinion polls had missed and few experts had anticipated. “The medium and the message fit hand to glove,” one observer from *The Guardian* wrote shortly after the election: Beppe Grillo and the Five-Star Movement had managed to combine wide support in social networks with old-fashioned meet-ups of supporter groups around the country and a brutal populist rhetoric online against the “Establishment”.²² In the light of the findings in this paper about populist success in social networks, it appears possible that the strong electoral outcome for M5S in 2013 foreshadowed an EU-wide transformation of political communication and mobilization associated with the transformation of the media landscape by social networks.

How exactly do the hand, populist communication, and the glove, the medium of social networks, fit together? “Populism” as a political phenomenon is not easy to define or put into a single research framework. Researchers working on the phenomenon usually tend to focus on different aspects of the phenomenon such as strategy, organization, narratives or ideology, categorizing populism as at the same time a communication and an ideological phenomenon. Examples for ideological categorizations are euro-scepticism²³, EU-scepticism²⁴, anti-immigrationism, anti-elitism etc..

” THE PRINCIPAL OF SOVEREIGNTY (OF THE PEOPLE) IS CENTRAL TO BOTH RIGHT-WING AND LEFT-WING POPULISTS.”

In the light of the findings presented in the earlier sections, this paper examines populism as a political communication and mobilization strategy for a “thin ideology” that works around a “rather small set of ideas about the world”.²⁵ In the centre of this set of ideas is the concept of *sovereignty*, with inter-relating concepts of *the people*, *the elites*, *the populist* and *the others* grouped around them.²⁶ The principal of sovereignty (of the people) is central to both right-wing and left-wing populists. Democracy is conceptualized as the rule of the “will of the people”, which should manifest itself as the direct, undiluted force of the collective opinions and wishes of voters and citizens. Crucially, the “will of the people” framed in this way should be expressed without diversion by representation or intermediation, as it is otherwise prone to fall victim to the vested interests of a deeply corrupt establishment. This is why populists favour elements of direct democracy such as referenda and prefer the power of the executive to the checks-and-balances of parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and a free press. It is also why many populists reject parties and instead mobilize “movements” working towards their political goals. In the case of journalists and the media, populist ideology accuses the fourth estate of distorting reality in favour of the agenda of the rich and powerful (“lying MSM” (mainstream media), “Lügenpresse” in Germany). The distinction between the pure, unaltered will of the people and the intermediated compromise a representative democracy produces often culminates in the populist narrative of “the betrayed people” versus “the corrupted elite”. The antagonism between the elite (la casta, the Establishment etc.) and the “people” (the silent majority, hard-working people etc.) is one of the most defining narratives of populist communication and is derived from the central principle of sovereignty.

The principle of sovereignty and the adjunct concepts of the people, the elite and the other are prevalent among both left-wing and right-wing populists. However, left-wing and right-wing populists offer different images and narratives surrounding these concepts. Left-wing populists such as Podemos, Jean-Luc Mélenchon or, to some extent Movimento 5 Stelle, usually put forward a concept of *the people* as an economic class (the

22. Jamie Bartlett, *How Beppe Grillo's Social Media Politics took Italy by Storm*, *The Guardian*, 26.02.2013.

23. For an overview on radical left and radical right populism see Dr. Maurits Meijers, *Radical right and radical left euroscepticism: a dynamic phenomenon*. Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin, Policy Paper Nr. 191, 07.04.2017.

24. Yves Bertoncini and Dr. Nicole Koenig, *Euroscepticism or Europhobia: voice vs. exit?*, Jacques Delors Institut - Berlin Policy Paper Nr. 121, 27.11.2014.

25. S. Engesser et al.: *Populism and social media: how politicians spread a fragmented ideology*. *Information, Communication and Society* (2016)

26. *Ibid.*

99 percent) suppressed by international or European power and financial elites, which also constitute *the other*. Right-wing populists also use these economic concepts of the people to a lesser extent; however, they define *the people* and *the other* mostly along ethnic criteria. This is exemplified by Marine Le Pen’s demand to offer social welfare benefits only to French people born in France or the demand to strip migrants of their citizenship if they commit acts of terrorism.²⁷

4.1. How to communicate as a populist?

With the proliferation of social networks, a new resonance chamber for political communication and mobilization has arrived, one which bypasses traditional intermediaries of political communication. Within such a resonance chamber, a populist “thin ideology” makes a lot of sense for those using social networks strategically for their political messages. Interestingly, that is also how many strategists and players within populist campaigns themselves describe populism. Alexis Corbiere, for example, the main organizer of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s 2017 presidential election campaign and his spokesperson, expressed his views on the matter in a radio debate in January. According to him, populism is above all a strategy,²⁸ and its main tool is communication. The table below sums up the differences between populist and non-populist actors as regards the ideal typical features of politics.

TABLE 2 ► Ideal-typical features of populist versus non-populist actors

	Non populist, “mainstream” political actor	Populist political actor
Main channels of communication	Radio, TV, newspapers	TV, blogs, vlogs, social networks
Communication style	Indirect, inclusive	Direct, exclusive
Intermediaries	Many, established	Few, if any
Idea of representation	Political parties, media, institutions	Peer-to-peer politics, “will of the people”, anti-elites
Manifestation	Political party	Movement, anti-party
Political practice	Consensus-driven	Confrontational, logic of escalation
Interactions with public	Tend to react to events	Attempt to set agenda and manipulate the news cycle
Political ideology	Centre-left / centre-right	“Neither left nor right”, issue-oriented

Note: author’s compilation.

” ON SOCIAL NETWORKS THE “WILL OF THE PEOPLE” CAN BE DIRECTLY ADDRESSED AND AN ILLUSION OF “PEER-TO-PEER-POLITICS” CAN BE PRACTISED.”

While non-populist politicians usually rely on the press, radio or TV to get their messages across to their voters, populist operators make heavy use of social networks to share their views directly with their followers. The style of the communication often follows the medium used: non-populist politicians usually try to come across as inclusive towards an unknown radio or TV-audience, using politically tempered and restrained language. Populists communicating directly with their followers on social networks, on the other hand, are not constrained at all. On the contrary: due to the attention economy and the subjectivity bias of social networks, the more polarizing and “authentic” a political message comes across the higher the interaction rate. While non-populist politicians use established intermediaries to communicate their messages, populists gain from the direct exchange with followers on social networks. This fits squarely with the “thin ideology” of people’s sovereignty described above: on social networks the “will of the people” can be directly addressed and an illusion of “peer-to-peer-politics” can be practised. It is hence not surprising that populists often form movements instead of political parties: it is much easier to mobilize supporters around a common cause within a movement than within the cumbersome mechanics of a political party. And social networks have proven to be successful in mobilizing and organizing

27. Alasdair Sanford, *What are Marine Le Pen’s Policies?*, euronews, 09.02.2017.

28. Anne Soetemondt, *Débat du jour: Jean-Luc Mélenchon: phénomène YouTube ou phénomène tout court?* Radio debate between Alexis Corbière, spokesperson of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Jean Numa Ducange, university teacher for contemporary history at the University of Rouen, broadcast 24.01.2017.

(protest) movements, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street and the Movimiento 15-M in Spain.²⁹ In their daily political practice populists tend to act within a very confrontational logic of escalating rhetoric, especially if they are in the political opposition. By attempting to set the agenda and to manipulate the news cycle, populists both rally their supporters and alienate their adversaries, which further increases polarization. This is often done by playing a ping-pong game of insults, denials and accusations between social networks (followers) and traditional media (adversaries). Apart from the obvious case of Donald Trump, this strategy has also been used by AfD or Marine Le Pen. It is deliberately intended to discredit the authority of the “legacy media” as a traditional intermediary of politics. Lastly, populists prefer not to be called left- or right-wing anymore and instead mobilize their supporters around changing issues: immigration, Islam, euro, the EU etc. This also fits the logic of communication on social networks: Followers can be mobilized with a maddening issue every other day, exploiting the tendencies of the networks to increase confirmation bias and subjectivity.

Apart from the communicative advantages that social networks offer populist actors over traditional media, there might also simply be practical reasons why populists rely heavily on mobilization and information distribution on social networks:

1. **Efficiency:** social networks offer a potentially huge audience at almost zero cost. Both attracting and maintaining a large audience can be very cost-effective as there are almost no logistics and it only takes a very small content team to manage even very large accounts on social networks. For new populist movements this is an attractive option compared to established parties with a large communication apparatus.
2. **Building of a community of followers:** social networks allow for a new type of community beyond the traditional membership of a party.
3. **No path dependency:** most current populist movements in the EU appeared only after the Global Financial Crisis and the ascent of social networks. They thus have virtually no institutional and moral constraints on their political communication strategy, as compared to established parties with strong roots in the representative institutions and the democratic consensus in their countries.

4.2. Concluding remarks

What are the long-term consequences of the success of populists in using social networks for political communication? The authority of journalists and other intermediaries could be further fading away, as social networks become a platform for anarchic political debate and populist parties and movements are increasingly able to offer an alternative world of news and political (mis-)information to their followers on social networks. Due to social media success, populist movements may also appear initially to be more important than they really are which can then have a self-reinforcing effect. In reality they might often be a small but loud minority (potentially even boosted by social bots) instead of the often invoked “silent majority”. However, there remains the danger that institutionalized forms of democratic debate, decision-making processes and supervision of governments may be seriously undermined should the success of populists in using social networks as political communication platforms stabilize.

In view of the novelty of the phenomenon, however, it seems too early to jump to any fixed conclusion as to how large and how lasting the influence of social networks on political communication and populism will be. More research, particularly in the field of computational social science, is certainly needed if the implications are to be studied in depth. It might certainly also be advisable for political parties to closely monitor the dynamics on social networks as complements to classic opinion polls.

²⁹ Helen Margetts et al. *Political Turbulence. How Social Media shape Collective Action*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

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