



**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

**POPULISM IN THE HYBRID  
MEDIA SYSTEM**

**Populist Radical Right Online Counterpublics  
Interacting with Journalism, Party Politics,  
and Citizen Activism**

**Niko Hatakka**





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### TIIVISTELMÄ

Tutkimus käsittelee populismin logiikkaa mediajärjestelmässä, jossa perinteinen eliittivetoinen tiedonvälitys on kietoutunut monien käsissä olevaan verkkoviestintään. Tutkimus esittää diskurssiteoreettisella otteella, miten viestinnällinen vuorovaikutus nykyisessä mediaympäristössä vaikuttaa puolueiden pyrkimyksiin kerätä laajaa joukkoa erilaisia yhteiskunnallisia vaateita yhteisten populististen merkitsijöiden ja poliittisten tunnusten taakse. Populistisen verkkoviestinnän sisältöjen sijaan tutkimus keskittyy eri toimijoiden vuorovaikutukseen, jonka kautta verkon populistisen viestinnän katsotaan vasta muodostavan käsityksiä populistipuolueista: Miten populististen liikkeiden edustama ”kansa” määrittyy, kun kuka tahansa voi puhua tai tulla kuulluksi sen äänellä?

Väitöskirja koostuu johdanto-osuudesta ja neljästä julkaistusta tutkimusartikkelista. Suomea, Ruotsia ja Iso-Britanniaa käsittelevissä osatutkimuksissa tarkastellaan verkkovälitteistä populistista viestintää ja siihen reagointia. Ensimmäisessä artikkelissa tarkastellaan poliittikkojen tapoja jakaa ja kehystää uudelleen journalismia osana populistista viestintää sosiaalisessa mediassa. Toisessa artikkelissa tarkastellaan populistipuolueisiin liitetyksi tulevan verkkovälitteisen viestinnän synnyttämiä rasismikohuja ja erityisesti sitä, miten puolueiden edustajat vastaavat näihin kohuihin valtavirran mediassa. Kolmannessa artikkelissa tarkastellaan puoluejohdon suhdetta puolueen hyödyntämään kiistanalaisen verkkoyhteisöön, ja erityisesti sitä, miten puoluejohdon tapa käsitellä julkisuudessa puolueen ja verkkoyhteisön suhdetta vaikuttaa verkkoaktivistien sitoutuneisuuteen. Neljännessä artikkelissa tarkastellaan oikeistopopulististen vastajulkisuuksien verkkovälitteistä kansalaislähtöistä valvontaa ja vastustusta.

Tutkimuksen pohjalta esitetään neljä päähavaintoa. Ensinnäkin, nykyisessä mediajärjestelmässä populistista viestintää olisi analyttisesti järkevä pitää luonteeltaan teknologisesti, organisatorisesti, ideologisesti, ja tyylillisesti sekamuotoisena. Toiseksi, samalla kun verkon vastajulkisuudet vapauttavat monimuotoista populistista viestintää, ne altistavat sen äärimmäisimpiin muotoihin liitetyksi tulevia poliittisia toimijoita valvonnalle ja kritiikille. Tutkimus osoittaaakin, kuinka nykyisen mediajärjestelmän logiikat korostavat populistisen viestinnän kaikkein kiistanalaisimpia tapoja esittää ”kansan” ja ”eliitin” jännitteistä suhdetta. Kolmanneksi, populististen puolueiden on tehokkainta vastata kiistanalaisten piirteidensä korostumiseen laventamalla diskursiivista kuilua ”kansan” ja ”eliitin” välillä. Ja tästä johtuen neljänneksi, populismin logiikkaa on vaikea hyödyntää nykyisessä mediajärjestelmässä sillä oletuksella, että sen kautta mobilisoituvaa liike pysyisi rakentavana väylänä perusteltujen yhteiskunnallisten vaateiden täyttämiseksi.

AVAINSANAT: populismi; viestintä; media; sosiaalinen media; journalismi; aktivismi; puolueet; radikaalioikeisto; perussuomalaiset

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History, and Political Science

Contemporary History

NIKO HATAKKA: Populism in the Hybrid Media System: Populist Radical Right Online Counterpublics Interacting with Journalism, Party Politics, and Citizen Activism

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## ABSTRACT

Media systems of the 21st century have been described as “hybrid”, referring to flows of information being increasingly disseminated, circulated, consumed, and interacted with in overlapping publics at various times by multiple actors with multiple voices. This research describes how the hybridisation of the media system affects populism as a political logic of articulation and how we should take this into consideration when researching populism as a political communication phenomenon. The main research question relates to the interconnection between populism as a logic of articulating a chain of equivalence and the hybrid media environment in which populist communication is being performed and reacted to by multiple actors with various agendas: What does it mean for the articulation of “the people” when anybody can speak or be perceived to speak in its name?

The research uses a discourse-theoretical approach to analyse mediated interactions between populist-party representatives, journalists, and citizen activists pertaining to populist radical right communication taking place in online counterpublics. The study’s main argument is that the logics of the hybrid media system affect what populist political communication ends up articulating – thus having an effect also on the form and viability of populist movements as a means for political change. The research arrives at four main conclusions. First, due to the hybridisation of the media system, it would be analytically beneficial to regard populist political communication as technologically, organisationally, ideologically, and stylistically hybrid. Second, out of the heterogeneous populist political communication emancipated by online counterpublics, it is likely that its least-appreciated elements will become the defining characteristic of affiliated organisational vehicles in mainstream publics. Third, public scrutiny arising from party organisations being affiliated with extreme online communication is most efficiently deflected by populist leaders by heightening the boundary of difference between the people and the elite. As the logics of the hybrid media system will make populist chains of equivalence brittle unless populist leaders adopt confrontational strategies for responding to critique, thus fourth, populist parties tend to gravitate towards becoming normalising agents for reciprocal antagonism and anti-pluralism. This makes populist logic less conducive to being a corrective for democracy.

The thesis consists of four research articles and a theoretical introduction that engages in depth with literature on populism, its relationship with media, and the role of online publics in facilitating political action. The four sub-studies investigate populist radical right online communication and different actors’ reactions to it in Finland, Sweden, and the UK, but the focus of the introduction is on the Finnish case. The first article analyses social media as platforms for populist remediation of political news. The second article compares populist parties’ media strategies for responding to racism accusations related to online hate speech. The third article discusses the political consequences and the necessary discursive negotiation caused by populist-party organisations trying to mobilise resources created in controversial online communities. And the fourth article investigates networked civic monitoring of online populist radical right counterpublics.

**KEYWORDS:** populism; political communication; media; social media; journalism; activism; parties; populist radical right; Finns Party

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In Turku, September 2019

*Niko Hatakka*



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# List of Original Publications

This doctoral thesis is based on the following publications:

- I Hatakka, Niko (2018) Facebook and the populist right: How populist politicians use social media to reimagine the news in Finland and the UK. In Laura Basu, Steve Schifferes and Sophie Knowles (eds) *The Media and Austerity: Comparative Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 237–247.
- II Hatakka, Niko; Niemi, Mari K. and Välimäki, Matti (2017) Confrontational yet submissive: Calculated ambivalence and populist parties’ strategies of responding to racism accusations in the media. *Discourse & Society*, 28:3, 262–280, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516687406>.
- III Hatakka, Niko (2017) When logics of party politics and online activism collide: The populist Finns Party’s identity under negotiation. *New Media & Society* 19:12, 2022–2038, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816660728>.
- IV Hatakka, Niko (2019) Expose, Debunk, Ridicule, Resist! Networked Civic Monitoring of Populist Radical Right Online Action in Finland. *Information, Communication & Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1566392>.

The publications are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

# 1 Introduction

“There is in our future a TV or Internet Populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.” (Eco, 1995)

In 1995, Umberto Eco wrote an anti-fascist essay in which he, among other things, contemplated the formation of “the people” in populism. The quotation can be regarded as a poignant vision into the future, to a time when populist radical right movements bolstered by both older and newer media seem ubiquitous and victorious. Eco’s quote is so compelling that it has been used as an epigraph in several books discussing the problematic effects of the Internet for democracy (e.g., Bergmann, 2018; Seymour, 2019). Eco and the authors quoting him are correct in that mediated communication is essential for the formation of an idea of “the people”. However, in the emerging hybrid media system, the articulation of “the people” is not merely a matter of political leaders communicating messages via media and individuals identifying with them. What is “presented and accepted as the voice of the people” is formed via a multitude of discursive interactions between multiple communicators across various media. Therefore to understand what populist claims made in the name of “the people” against “the elite” end up articulating, we must analyse how populist political communication is shaped by, interpreted in, and engaged with in the current media environment. Thus, instead of viewing populism as something that is “done” by political actors, this research considers how meaning-making around populist claims and articulations functions in an era of media hybridity and how this affects the viability of populist movements as means for institutionalising unmet societal demands.

## 1.1 Research problem

For anyone following politics, it must be clear that the world is going through a “populist zeitgeist” (Mudde, 2004) or a series of “populist moments” (Mouffe, 2018) during which especially nationalist right-wing populist parties and movements have made impressive gains. In the past four decades, European right-wing populist parties have, on average, doubled their share of votes (Inglehart and Norris, 2016:

23). In 2018, it was estimated that one in four Europeans vote for a party viewed as populist (Lewis et al., 2018). The list of political events pertaining to the rise of populist movements with nativist and authoritarian ideological contents and abrasive political styles is extensive. Just since 2016, the Hungarian liberal democracy has been put in jeopardy as Fidesz gained a supermajority, in the United States Donald Trump was elected president, the Brexit referendum led to the United Kingdom starting the process to leave the European Union, the Austrian FPÖ regained a place in the government and came in second in the presidential election, in Norway the Progress Party re-entered the government, in Italy Lega and the 5 Star Movement united to form a government, in Poland and France populist radical right parties enjoyed largest electoral victories in their histories, in Sweden the Sweden Democrats' electoral victory postponed the formation of a government for months, and in Finland the Finns Party<sup>1</sup> has remained a significant parliamentary party despite its newly elected populist radical right leadership having caused a governmental crisis leading to the party splitting up in 2017.

Populism scholars have approached populism by regarding it as a political logic of articulation or discourse (Laclau, 2005), as a thin-centred ideology or a set of ideas (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Hawkins, 2018), as a political style or a performative means of mobilising support (Moffitt, 2016; Jansen, 2011; Ylä-Anttila, 2017), and as communication (de Vreese et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2017). This thesis regards populism as a logic of discursive articulation that is inherently bound to communication and discourse and therefore is interested in the role of media in the production, dissemination, and public scrutiny of populist talk and performance. Until the 2000s, the media system was viewed as comprising the print press, television, and radio (Bennett, 1990; Castells, 2007: 240). Now, the view is that the widespread adoption of Internet-mediated communication has lowered the threshold for political participation, facilitated issue-specific collective action, increased interaction between different actors, and even changed some of the internal logics through which political movements form (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Chadwick, 2013; Treré, 2019). Regarding populism especially, it has been suggested that social media provide counterpublics for political movements to raise attention to unmet social and political demands (e.g., Dahlgren, 2013; Fenton, 2016; Mouffe, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012). The online voicing of previously unaddressed grievances has been regarded to foster new political consciousness that creates incentives, resources, and momentum for political changes that might not have had institutional channels

<sup>1</sup> The original English translation for the party's name was "the True Finns". The party changed the translation of the name in 2011 to "the Finns". "True Finns" is still used by some scholars (e.g., Jungar, 2016), but, in this study, the party is referred to as "the Finns party".



earlier – leading in turn to the reinvigoration of radical democracy (Mouffe, 2013; Fenton, 2016). Even though media are essential in the articulation and mobilisation of grievances to form political action, in populism research both traditional and newer media have largely been regarded as mere platforms for the broadcasting and adoption of political messages (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2018). Despite the connection between online communication technologies and populism is an increasingly salient topic of discussion in journalism and in academia, little research has been done on how the media environment affects the processes of discursive articulation that lie at the core of populist movements (Engesser et al., 2017; Krämer, 2017b).

The rise of populism – regardless of whether it is considered to be a set of ideas, a thin-centred ideology, a discourse, a political style, or a form of communication – has been given mostly structural explanations. The popularity of movements that question various elites have been explained, first of all, by the increase of economic disparity in society. According to the so-called losers of globalisation theory (Betz, 1994), the working middle class has not become wealthier at the same ratio as the least and most well-off economic classes (Piketty, 2014). As a result, the perceived economic hardships have been interpreted as providing populist parties and movements with easily usable discursive windows of opportunity (Taggart, 2004: 275). The second often-presented explanation is related to the hollowing of democracy or the so-called crisis of liberal democracy (Mair, 2013). This phenomenon encompasses a multitude of different political trends, including decreasing party attachment (Kölln, 2014), the detachment of political power from national parliaments to supranational political entities and corporations (Kriesi et al. 2006), the increasing electoral volatility (Borg, 2015), the ideological convergence of mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties (Mair, 2013), the political centre's failure to communicate its conservative stances (Lochocki, 2017), the overall dissatisfaction with the perceived inability of parliamentary institutions to respond to citizens' concerns and worries (Streeck, 2014), and the increased mediation of political crises and corruption scandals that gnaw away at the legitimacy of the political establishment in stable liberal democracies (Kantola et al., 2011). Another popular explanation has been the so-called cultural backlash theory, according to which the rise of right-wing populism is a result of a comeback of conservative values as a response to the hegemony of liberal ideology and policies of contemporary societies (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Some political scientists, like Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), have even explained the success and rise of the populist radical right by referring to the existence of grievances experienced by the parties' supporters, suggesting that such perceptions should be regarded as depictions of reality.

Even though structural explanations for the rise of populism have merit in explaining why populist movements have traction, these explanations do not really

engage in inquiring how populist ideas become associated with particular political movements. Especially when explaining populism as the result of perceived grievances, one dismisses that no populist actor in any context is automatically a channel through which any grievance-related protest can manifest. Even if the socio-political soil were ripe for the demand for populism to rise, this does not mean that populist actors would thrive solely on this demand. For the demand for populism to turn into action and to have an impact on the political status quo, there has to be time and space for the carrying out of a discursive process in which an actor – be it a political leader, a civic movement, a political party, a loose citizen movement, or some other organisational vehicle – unites various demands and grievances to form a political entity that can try to challenge the existing order with which people are discontent (Laclau, 2005). This means that to analyse how the demand and supply of populism meet in contemporary societies, we should look at populism as a political logic of articulation (Laclau, 2005) and as a communication phenomenon (Esser et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2018).

According to Ernesto Laclau (2005), populism is a logic of articulation in which actors discursively bring political subjects and objects into being via the construction of antagonism between “a people” and “the elites” (see also de Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2017). Laclau therefore suggests that historical subjects emerge via the construction of ideas of “us” and “them” – more precisely via the discursive articulation of the conflictual relationship and the oppositional characteristics of empty signifiers that are often, but not always, referred to as “the people” and “the elites”. A populist actor must rise and claim to represent multiple and heterogeneous grievances as a totality (Laclau, 2005), appointing oneself as the representative of a unitary “people” against “elites” and “others” that are actively trying to deny the people’s justified right to sovereignty (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 3). Populism can therefore be regarded as a contextually varying political logic of articulation that unifies groups and individuals in imagined alliances to advance unmet societal demands (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005). These “chains of equivalence” are bound together by discursive core ideas and symbolic performances that turn various actors with various demands and grievances into a “people”, a unitary political subject that organises around an empty signifier such as a political leader, party, or movement to wield counterpower against the hegemonic order (Laclau, 2005).

By “articulation”, Laclau (2005) refers to the discursive process in which things get their meaning through acts of signification. This process is essential to the formation of equivalential chains that unite unmet social demands, and it takes place through mainly mediated language, discourse, rhetoric, and communication of both political content and style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016; Reinemann et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018). Taking into

consideration that populist ideas cannot be separated from their discursive construction, it is useful to regard ideas of “the people” and “the elites” as a series of signification acts that can also be regarded as pieces of communication. Regardless of their evident overlap, there has been little effort to connect the Laclaudian discourse-theoretical conception of populism as a political logic of articulation to the communication approach, which until now has vested its understanding of populism as a pre-existing set of ideas that are mainly reflected in, but not manifested and brought to life via, communication (e.g., Hawkins, 2018; Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018). Populist political communication (de Vreese et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2017) has been regarded as consisting of the rhetorical expression of the thin ideational core of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) – anti-elitism, people-centrism, and the sovereignty of the people’s will – and of populist stylistic characteristics such as the rejection of the conventions of elite discourse and the use of narratives of crisis and threat (Moffitt, 2016). As Laclau is vague about the practical details of how populism as a logic of articulation facilitates the organisation of counterpower via discourse and various acts of signification, the communication approach has been a more than welcome addition to populism research.

The so-called politics of signification (Hall, 1982) – that is, the process in which discursive negotiation over social identities and their relationships takes place (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105; Laclau, 2005: 68) – is today largely mediated (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). Therefore, populist communication and the articulation of chains of equivalence are also things that take place in mediated form. Thus, it is no surprise that scholars of populism have gradually begun to regard the role of mediated communication as prevalently essential in establishing, disseminating, and gaining support for populist ideas (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Moffitt, 2016: Chapter 5; Krämer, 2017a; 2018). The latest global phenomenal success of the populist radical right coincides with the rise in the popularity of social media and the increase of the societal impact of Internet-mediated communication. Still, the extant main theoretical discussion concerning the relationship of media and populism does not really distinguish different types of media and is yet to properly acknowledge online media (e.g., Esser et al., 2017: 376–378). When it does so, social media are often assigned excessive responsibility for the rise of populism.

To an extent, new digital media, like the legacy media (Mazzoleni, 2008), have been regarded as platforms for the direct transmission and adoption of right-wing populist messages directly from populist leaders to populist voters (de Vreese et al., 2018: 432). In the time of the floating signifiers “fake news” and “post truth” (Farkas and Schou, 2018), social media have been often journalistically regarded as a primary contributing factor to the popularity of populist politicians and parties (e.g., Bartlett, 2018). In particular, the moral panic regarding the role of targeted digital

political marketing in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the Trump campaign has revealed the appeal of understanding social media as mind-control machinery (Simon, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018) that can be used by illiberal actors to turn citizens involuntarily and against their best interests into tools for undermining liberal democracy. I claim that these kinds of narratives contribute to understanding the rise of populism from a techno-determinist perspective as they represent populism as a technologically manifested pathology for which different actors' interactions and the previous theoretical work on the relationship of populism and media appear irrelevant. The Internet as media technology is thus often preloaded with a black-box-type expectation of it providing an all-encompassing explanation for the rise of populism. Therefore, by adopting this explanation, we would sidestep many of the more interesting questions pertaining to the current media environment' effects on – not the success of populist movements – but their form. This doctoral thesis investigates how the Internet has affected the ways populist acts of signification are made public and how they are responded to, as well as what this potentially means for the characteristics, democratic potential, and viability of populist mobilisations.

## 1.2 Research questions and sub-studies

We currently lack explanations for how the Internet contributes to the mediation of populism as a logic of articulation in the current media environment. Instead of assuming that online platforms are isolated informational ecosystems that act as counterpublics for disseminating alternative information, according to de Vreese et al. (2018) we should look at “social media platforms in context, as platforms of sharing, disseminating, emphasising, escalating, and expressing views as part of a larger information system” (p. 432). This doctoral thesis analyses populism as a political logic of articulation in a media system where traditional elite-driven news production has become intertwined with horizontal online political communication. Media systems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been referred to by Andrew Chadwick (2013; 2017) as “hybrid”, referring to the liminal characteristics of how information is disseminated, circulated, consumed, and interacted with in overlapping publics at various times by multiple actors with multiple voices and agendas. This research is especially interested in how populist political communication taking place in online counterpublics interacts with and is interacted with by other actors in the hybrid media system, including the legacy media, institutional political actors, and citizen activists. The main question of the thesis therefore relates to the interconnection between populism as a logic of articulating chains of equivalence and the hybrid media environment that provides the main stage on which populism is being discursively performed and reacted to by multiple actors with various agendas. If

populism is regarded as a discursive pursuit of establishing the “people” and its antagonistic relationship with the “elite”, it should be clear that this process is susceptible to various kinds of interventions when the core ideas of a populist movement are communicated not by a single actor on a single platform but by multiple actors with multiple voices based on differing motivations and understandings of desirable goals and appropriate means of action. In other words, how does the hybridisation of the media system affect populism as a political logic of articulation?

The hybrid media system – as an idea – points out that it is not simply the reach or persuasiveness of online political communication that has started to affect politics. Instead we should take in consideration the intertwining of online communication with traditional media, and how the hybrid media system facilitates discursive interconnections between multiple actors involved in the larger communicational system (Chadwick, 2013). Trying to analyse populism as a political logic of articulation in the hybrid media environment is not just a question of the characteristics of populist online movements or the ideological or stylistic contents of populist communication. Following Chadwick, what matters in the hybrid media system is the mediated interconnectedness of different actors’ public acts of signification regarding populist communication. As Chadwick (2013) argues, the hybrid media system itself is created in the relationships between actors in society. Therefore, when looking at how the hybridisation of information flow contributes to populism as a logic of articulation, we should look at how populist communication is being produced, circulated and reacted to, not only in populist online counterpublics, but also in the wider media system where politicians, journalists, and activists interact with populist acts of signification. When looking at populism as a discursive logic of articulating “the people” and “the elites” and their characteristics, the theory of the hybrid media system provides a way to analyse the actual politics of signification that can be regarded as manifesting the ontology of populism in a particular historical context.

This doctoral thesis uses a qualitative discourse-theoretical approach to analyse communicative interactions between populist-party representatives, populist radical right online activists, political journalists, and the opponents of populist movements. The aim is to gain insight on the role of the hybrid media system in the process in which populism manifests as a logic of discursive articulation. How has the increasingly prevalent role of the Internet in the circulation of information in society and the increased communicative interactions between various actors affected how populist ideas and points of identification are created, disseminated, and responded to in the public sphere? What does the hybridisation of the media system mean for the overall process of communicating what populist movements represent, and how does this affect the perceptions of and reactions to populist mobilisations?



Furthermore, what does the hybrid media system mean for the implications that populism as a logic of articulation has for democracy – does the hybridity of the media system make populism more of a threat or a corrective (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Laclau, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2018) to democracy? And last, how should we take the hybridity of media systems into consideration when researching populism and its relationship with media?

The dissertation's main theoretical research task focuses on *populism*, based on an original theoretical framework that combines several populism research approaches. Put briefly, by "populism" I refer to the articulation process through which political actors are discursively assigned the position as representatives of "the people" via the communication (and scrutiny) of populist thin-ideology and populist style. The selected approach and the definitions of pertinent terminology are presented in detail in the second main chapter. The main research question about populism in the hybrid media system is empirically operationalized in the context of the populist radical right in three countries. According to Cas Mudde (2007), "the populist radical right" refers to a group of political actors that combine populism with at least nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism refers to an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited by members of the national group, and that non-national elements should be regarded as threat to the unity of the nation. Authoritarianism refers to supporting strictly ordered and policed society in which criminals should have fewer rights and in which social problems should be regarded as security issues. (Mudde, 2017: 4) However, there are different kinds of populisms and populist actors, and their character depends on the ideological and stylistic elements utilized in communicating the discursive divide between "the people" and "the elite" in different contexts. Therefore, it has to be stressed, I do not regard that populism can or should be equated with, for example, nativism, authoritarianism, nationalism, or any other individual ideological (or stylistic) contents that populism becomes contextually entangled with. Even though the empirical focus in this research is set on the populist radical right, the dissertation is not theoretically only about how radical right populism operates in the contemporary media environment. The main theoretical contribution concerning the functioning of populism as a political logic of articulation in the hybrid media system can – and should – be applied also to other contexts and types of populism. Therefore the literature review focuses on the extant discussions concerning populism in general, not just its right-wing or radical right forms.

The theoretical introduction to the sub-studies focuses on Finland, but this dissertation should not be regarded as a descriptive study of the Finns Party or the Finnish online populist radical right. The analytical focus is framed by the functioning of populism as a logic of discursive articulation in the hybrid media system rather than the context-specific manifestations, actors, backgrounds, and

contents of Finnish mediated populism. The aim of the sub-studies and the theoretical introduction is to analyse how the Internet has provided alternative means of political organisation and how populist parties and online protest movements with controversial views, unorthodox political styles, and abrasive communication strategies interact with more mainstream publics. Thus, the aim of the study is to not only highlight the interaction between different actors engaging in and with populist online communication but to provide insight on how the hybridity of contemporary media systems affects how populism is disseminated and reacted to and on how in the process populism articulates chains of equivalence. Based on this research task, this introduction aims to link previous discussions on populism and update them to accommodate the contemporary media environment in which populist logic currently operates. In the theoretical introduction, this is done by addressing and linking relevant research approaches to populism to research pertaining to the hybridisation of the media system and to research on online environments as facilitators and shapers of political action.

The thesis consists of four research articles and a theoretical introduction. Instead of analysing the contents of online populist political communication as such, the research focuses empirically on the multi-actor discursive interactions through which populist acts of signification are being formulated, circulated, and reacted to in the hybrid media system. The four sub-studies investigate populist online communication and different actors' reactions to it in Finland, Sweden, and the UK. Articles III and IV include only the Finnish case, Article I includes Finland and the UK, and Article II compares Finland, Sweden, and the UK. The methods employed in the individual sub-studies include qualitative and quantitative content analysis, frame analysis, and political discourse analysis. The analysed materials and data sets include pieces of mainstream journalism, social media data from populist politicians from Finland and the UK, and data from online anti-immigration activist groups and anti-radical-right activist groups in Finland.

Article I analyses how politicians of the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS) and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) have used journalistic representations of economic crises to communicate a populist understanding of the news flow regarding the Eurozone crisis between 2010 and 2015. The study looks at Facebook as a platform for populist remediation of political news, focusing on how populist actors use social media to remediate, reframe, and ideologically reconfigure news produced by the legacy media. The article informs us that, in the hybrid media system, pieces of journalism can be appropriated to support populist political communication via selective news sharing of confirmatory stories and reframing of dissonant stories. This suggests theoretically that the framing power provided by social media allows the populist remediation of journalistic content regardless of the original frames. This highlights that, in trying to understand the connection between journalistic

frames and the support for populist actors perceived to benefit from mediated crises, one should not only look at journalistic content but also at how that content is appropriated to support populist communication online.

Article II analyses how the visibility of populist radical right online communication makes populist parties susceptible to becoming targets for journalistic scrutiny and how populist parties respond to this scrutiny in the mainstream media in Finland, Sweden, and the UK. By providing a comparative analysis of the populist-party representatives' media strategies for responding to racism accusations derived from the parties' perceived association with racist online speech, the study provides a typology of the discursive strategies populist parties use to respond to such accusations. The article suggests that populist-party representatives circumvent direct association with scrutinised – and publicly deplored – online speech by combining submissive and confrontational damage-control strategies in ways that communicate an ambivalent stance towards the party's association with controversial online activism.

Article III expands on the theme, analysing how cooperation with online movements can provide traditional populist-party organisations with significant resources but also how they force the party leadership to take considerable pains to communicate in the mainstream media in a way that allows them to use the resources without losing the trust of the general public. Focusing on the interactions between journalists, the Finns Party leadership, and users of the anti-immigration platform Hommaforum, the study discusses the communicational consequences of populist-party organisations mobilising resources created in controversial online communities. The article highlights that, in most cases, the journalistic scrutiny of controversial characteristics of populist communication does not create conflict between a moderate leadership and a more extreme online faction unless the party leadership is forced to unequivocally distance the party organization from the acts of signification causing controversy.

Article IV analyses civic monitoring that targets online populist radical right anti-immigration activism in Finland to discuss whether outsourcing such monitoring to platform users is a feasible means of responding to exclusionary populist online communication. The study reveals that the materiality and visibility of online anti-immigration action allows it to be monitored by anti-radical-right activists to a certain extent and that online action aimed at resisting the prevalence of online radical right activism ranges from civil counter-arguing and the pursuit of deliberation to anti-racist hate speech and naming-and-shaming campaigns. That said, there are notable caveats that undermine the efficacy and viability of civic monitoring as a means of scrutinizing populist radical right online action. The main problems are related to the connective and anti-populist nature of the civic

monitoring that allows it to be used as fuel for populist victimisation campaigns in the online setting and to the potential harm to the activists involved.

### 1.3 Background: The Finns Party and the Finnish online populist radical right

The theme of this theoretical introduction focuses on the context of (radical) right populism in Finland, where the Finns Party's path from its centre-leftist anti-establishment populist beginnings towards becoming a nativist populist party has intertwined with forms of populist radical right online anti-immigration activism (Horsti and Nikunen, 2013; Maasilta, 2012: 14–15; Mäkinen, 2017; Ylä-Anttila, 2017; Niemi, 2013; Vaarakallio, 2015). The Finns Party was formed in 1995 on the ruins of the Finnish Rural Party (Suomen maaseudun puolue, SMP) that had combined socio-economically centre-leftist rural populism with traditional conservative values (Arter, 2012; Ruostetsaari, 2011). The Finns Party's rise from a relatively unknown political party to the second largest parliamentary party in 2015 was personalised in the leadership of Timo Soini (Niemi, 2013), who was party leader for two decades between 1997 and 2017. The Finns Party was founded to be distinct from the SMP, but party leader Soini was heavily influenced by the populist rhetorical style of his personal idol and mentor, the SMP leader Veikko Vennamo (Soini, 2008). Whereas Vennamo's and SMP's "people" referred to the underprivileged rural folk of the Finnish periphery, Soini and the Finns Party advocated for the "forgotten people" of Finnish semi-urban cities and suburbs (Soini, 2008; Niemi, 2013). Soini's self-declared populist rhetoric (Soini, 2008) focused on defending the average working taxpayer against the wrongdoings of morally corrupt "old parties" and EU-elites (Arter, 2010: 488–494; Palonen, 2017). Soini supported conservative values such as the traditional family model, but at no point during his political career did he publically regard immigration as a high-priority topic (Niemi, 2013; Palonen, 2017).

The Finns Party elected its first member to parliament in the 1999 parliamentary elections, and in 2003 the number of Finns Party MPs elected went up to three with the help of the significant number of votes brought in by the party's first anti-immigration candidate, Tony Halme. Apart from Halme's candidacy (Mattlar, 2009), immigration was not especially salient in the party's programmes until the 2007 and, especially, the 2011 elections (Ruostetsaari, 2011). The party's first significant electoral victory was in the European parliamentary elections of 2009, when it gained nearly 10 per cent of the national vote aided by the media's interest in Timo Soini's unconventional vernacular populist style (Niemi, 2013; Arter, 2010: 488). In the 2011 elections, the Finns Party achieved one of the most significant electoral victories in Finnish political history. Supported by the media salience of the

Eurozone crisis and a political scandal pertaining to election funding (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015; Kantola et al., 2011), the party gained 19.05 per cent of cast votes and 39 seats in the 200-seat Finnish parliament to become the country's third largest parliamentary party. According to survey studies, the Finns Party voters' party selection was influenced especially by their wish to protest against established parties and to oppose Finnish EU and immigration policies (Borg, 2012a; Borg, 2012b: 243). Of the Finns Party's selected candidates, nine campaigned on an anti-immigration agenda (Horsti and Nikunen, 2013). After refusing to join a government with the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party remained in the opposition for the entire electoral cycle. In 2015, the party retained its support, losing only one seat in parliament with 17.65 per cent of the vote. It then joined a coalition government with the Centre Party and the Coalition Party.

The Finns Party's rise to eventually becoming a governmental party coincided with the formation of a loose political movement whose supporters identified themselves as "immigration sceptics" (Horsti and Nikunen, 2013; Hannula, 2011). This loose movement was originally organised around networks of bloggers and activists on discussion platforms in the 2000s and then later spread to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the 2010s. The movement eventually fuelled the founding of a series of populist radical right activist groups, alternative media, and even political parties (Hannula, 2011; Ylä-Anttila, 2018; Noppari et al., 2019). As the various "immigration sceptical" online publics have operated under so-called connective logic (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013), they mostly have not had official party affiliations and have been linked to political parties only via individual party members or representatives. One of the original core online counterpublics for discussing problems related to immigration was *Hommaforum*, which originally formed in 2008 around the blog of Jussi Halla-aho, a scholar of linguistics and the most well-known "immigration sceptic" in Finland. Halla-aho had founded his blog, *Scripta – Writings from the Sinking West*, in 2003, and the blog became a hub for thousands of people who wanted to discuss perceived problems relating especially to multiculturalism, immigration policy, cultural Marxism, and Islam. In 2008, the blog's popular comment section was transformed into a separate online portal named Hommaforum by a group of the blog's active readers and commentators (Hannula, 2011). Halla-aho's success as an online opinion leader was also manifested outside the online environment when he became a nonpartisan candidate for the Finns Party in the 2008 municipal elections. Despite his lack of a proper offline campaign and his marginal media publicity, he was among the 20 most voted candidates in the whole country (Horsti and Nikunen, 2013: 496). Later, Halla-aho would become a Finns Party MP in 2011, an MEP in 2014, and finally party leader in 2017.

The ideas of the "immigration sceptical" movement had to be discursively created, disseminated, popularised, and mainstreamed before they had significant



political value for any political party. As Niko Pyrhönen (2015) has described it, online publics have been essential in “consolidating populist advocacy as a resonant collective identity via the mobilisation of exclusionary narratives” in Finland. The “immigration sceptical” identity, brought to life in overlapping online counterpublics, has been instrumental in the discursive construction of populist radical right signifiers that have been used in articulating chains of equivalence outside, within, and parallel to the Finns Party (Horsti and Nikunen, 2013; Mäkinen, 2017). These signifiers are populist radical right in the sense that they have been observed to attach populism in various combinations not only to nativism and authoritarianism but also to welfare chauvinism, islamophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, and racism (Horsti and Nikunen, 2013; Horsti, 2016; Pyrhönen, 2015; Vaarakallio, 2015). By focusing on immigration as a threat to Finnish and European culture, populist radical right online counterpublics have been used to create a shared framing through a division in which the leftist elites’ pandering to dangerous immigrants is an acute threat that needs immediate solving (Pyrhönen, 2015).

The core research problem of this thesis revolves around the process of how online counterpublics interacting with party politics, journalism, and activism contribute to the articulation of chains of equivalence – in other words, how populist logic plays out in the hybrid media system. The Finns Party’s ability to carve itself a niche in the Finnish parliamentary system has been partly based on the mediated discursive appropriation of “immigration sceptic” demands as part of the party’s chain of equivalence, that is, the list of societal demands expressed by the *Vox Populi* and championed by the party. I claim that this appropriation has taken place not only via the use of shared “immigration sceptical” terminology and the provision of candidacies for “immigration sceptics”, but also through the interactive journalistic and civic amplification of these discursive elements in the media system, crystallising “immigration skepticism” as a core element of the Finns Party’s collective identity and public image.

Following two years in government, on 10 June 2017 the Finns Party congress elected Jussi Halla-aho – the discursive leader of the party’s anti-immigration online faction – as the new party leader and three of his avid supporters (Laura Huhtasaari, Teuvo Hakkarainen, and Juho Eerola) as vice-chairmen to the party. The other coalition partners, the Centre Party and the Coalition Party, declared that the new leadership did not enjoy the trust of the other governmental parties, which would mean a governmental crisis. Three days later, 20 out of the 38 Finns Party MPs resigned from the parliamentary group to protest the comprehensive take-over of the party leadership. The underlying conflict between the party’s two factions that had been brewing for years (Jungar, 2016; Ylä-Anttila, 2017: 27–29; Article III) culminated in the SMP’s populist tradition, exemplified by ex-leader Timo Soini, losing the party to the populist radical right faction via a fully legitimate party

congress election. In the parliamentary elections of 2019, the Finns Party ran on a heavily immigration-focused party platform with nativist and welfare-nationalist emphases (Finns Party, 2018: 2–5, 10; 2019a: 3–5; 2019b; 2019c: 5; 2019d: 1, 3, 4–5, 8; 2019e: 1, 3–4, 6–13, 15).

## 2 Combining approaches to populism

In journalism and political rhetoric, “populism” is often used as a derogatory term to discredit opportunistic views or put down ideas with which the speaker disagrees. This suggests that, in its everyday use, populism is a floating signifier, one often ill-defined and used pejoratively (Bale et al., 2011; Herkman, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1668; Kovala and Palonen, 2018). Despite the significant convergence, especially in the latter 2010s, in the different research approaches to and definitions of populism, it is often suggested that populism is a contested or vaguely defined term also within academia (e.g., Kavada, 2018: 742). The main approaches to populism in research have regarded populism as a set of ideas or a thin ideology (Mudde, 2004; Hawkins, 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), as a political logic of discursive articulation (Laclau, 2005), as a political style (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016), and as a form of political communication (Engesser et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018). These approaches look at populism from slightly different angles, but there is increasing overlap between the traditions, and, in more than one sense, they are complementary. Therefore, interdisciplinary research that tries to grasp populism as a communication phenomenon would benefit from combining the insights from several existing theoretical approaches to populism (Sengul, 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Until now, the communication approach has implemented previous theories of populism as a thin ideology and as a political style (Engesser et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018) but has not engaged much with the discourse-theoretical approach of the Essex School even though their premise of regarding populism as a phenomenon related to signification is similar.

What all the approaches have in common is they regard populism as extant ideas or ongoing discursive formulations or negotiations over ideas that suggest that society is divided into two camps: “the people” and “the elite”. Whether populism is regarded as a discursive logic, frame, strategy, or set of ideas, it discursively simplifies the political playing field by constructing ideas of society being divided into two oppositional camps, one of which represents the people, whose will should be raised to the forefront of making political decisions (Laclau, 2005; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012: 8; Canovan 1999: 3). Populist talk suggests that the people

should be sovereign instead of the elites and, apart from the Essex School, that the people should be regarded as “good” and the elite “corrupt” (Mudde, 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). In all the approaches, the processes in which these camps are identified can take place in various political, cultural, social, and historical contexts (see, e.g., de la Torre and Anselmi, 2018). This means that different movements in different contexts share the ideational or discursive framework for populism but build on this framework with different contents: namely, who the people and elites are, what their main characteristics are, and what is the main problem related to the elites not acknowledging or allowing the people to become sovereign. As Emilia Palonen (2018a: 4) puts it, populism gets its content when it “becomes entangled with other things”, which are mainly ideological, contextual, and stylistic contexts. Because of this, the democratic value of populism is regarded by most researchers as ambivalent since populism can be both a threat and a corrective for democracy (Laclau, 2005; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2011; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

Regardless of their similarities, there are also some core differences between the mainstream research perspectives. As this thesis relies mostly on the ideational, style, discursive, and communication approaches, the insights and differences of these traditions are addressed in more detail in the three following subsections. The thin-ideological or ideational approach is pertinent to the argument and context of this thesis because of its ability to inform us about what populist ideas are. The approach has been invested in explaining populism as an ontology, in a sense trying to boil populism down to the minimal ideological core shared by all populist movements and identifying which actors should be regarded as populist. The Laclaudian approach of the Essex School, instead of being interested in pinpointing the minimal ontological requirements for populism or who the populists are, has been more interested in “what populism does” by suggesting that populism is a formal discursive logic for how social relations are articulated and, thus, a “royal road to understanding (...) the political” (Laclau, 2005: 67). As Laclau’s theory on populism is based on discourse theory, it has paved the way for formulating theories on populism, not as pre-set ideas but as something that can be observed in political style (Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Moffitt, 2016) and in political communication (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Esser et al., 2017).

Approaches that regard populism as style or communication are most useful for analysing populism as discourse that takes place in mediated form in the hybrid media system. I view this distinction of populism as discourse as extremely important because I agree with the assertion that it is not possible to separate the thin-ideological core of populism from how populism manifests in rhetoric, style, and political communication (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 334–338). These research traditions have made it possible to analyse how populism operates in action (e.g.,

Ylä-Anttila, 2017) and how populism is produced, communicated, and performed in various publics by various actors. The communication approach, which combines core insights from the ideational and the populism-as-style approaches, provides an excellent means for analysing the content and manifestations of populist discourse in media. But for this approach to inform us about “what populism does” and how the logics of the contemporary media environment affect the articulation of populist movements, the current communication approach to populism has to be theoretically connected to the Essex School’s discourse-theoretical approach.

## 2.1 Populism as a political logic of articulation

The so-called Essex School approaches populism as a political logic of discursive articulation, based on the discourse-theoretical theory of populism coined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and originally developed in the context of left-wing politics (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The Essex School views populism as part of a wider linguistic culture that shapes our socio-political world and that continuously evolves in interaction with other ideas and the material environment (Laclau, 2005). The post-structural discourse-theoretical background of the approach suggests that no idea regarding society or its members’ relationships is natural or normal (or even extant) without first having been articulated into being (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). According to Laclau (2005), populism is thus a political logic of articulation in which the speakers create an idea of “us” and “them” that is most often referred to as “the people” and “the elite”. According to Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014), the Essex School has thus focused on the processes through which populism articulates social meaning “with an emphasis on the political and often antagonistic character that different discourses acquire through their articulation around distinct nodal points (such as ‘the people’) and their differentiation from other discourses in a bid to hegemonise the public sphere and to influence decision-making” (p. 122). Therefore, by populist discourse the Essex School refers not to populist stylistic characteristics (e.g., political incorrectness) or underlying populist attitudes (e.g., anti-elitism) but to series of signification practices that articulate in- and out-group identities via the discursive construction of antagonism and the establishment of a clear frontier of difference (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014: 122).

The core argument of the Laclaudian approach is that this constitutive logic of articulating the people, the elites, and their characteristics creates political agency that facilitates the emergence of historical subjects that can challenge hegemony (Mouffe, 2018). Populism can therefore be regarded as a political logic of articulation that unifies groups and individuals with various societal demands to form imagined alliances or “chains of equivalence” around empty signifiers that



eventually constitute “a people” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005: 69–72, 161–163, 171). The construction of equivalential chains is therefore at the very core of what populism does: using discursive core ideas and symbolic performances to transform heterogeneous actors with various unmet demands and grievances into a “people”, a unitary subject that can organise itself against the illegitimate existing order portrayed by the “elite” (Laclau, 2005; de Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). Laclau’s “populist reason” (2005) refers to the formal constitutive logic or discursive mechanism that is inherent in populist articulations: the discursive forming of “a people” by creating a discursive boundary of difference between the people and their enemies to help organise counterpower against prevailing hegemony. This differs from the ideational approach in that, even though the Essex School also regards populism as ideas, it is less interested in the ideological contents that populism becomes attached to than the process by which those contents, whatever they may be, are articulated (de Cleen et al., 2018: 652).

For the Essex School populism is the process of articulating “collective subjectivity” (Palonen, 2018a: 4). Populism is therefore about the discursive drawing of boundaries for the purpose of forming political subjects as distinctive points of political identification that are essential in the discursive pursuit of hegemony (Palonen, 2018a). According to Laclau (2005), political forces create chains of equivalence and chains of difference between actors via the discursive linking of ideas behind particular signifiers, namely the people and the elites. Therefore, populism should be regarded as a means of uniting individuals and groups with potentially heterogeneous societal demands as one in a way that highlights the united actors’ conflictual relationship with their perceived adversaries (Laclau, 2005: 74). Ardit (2010: 489) breaks down this process described by Laclau into six steps. In the first step (1), social demands form that cannot be absorbed by or responded to by societal institutions. As these demands are unmet, they (2) “enter into a relationship of solidarity or equivalence with one another” and (3) “crystallise around common symbols” that (4) can be “capitalised by leaders who interpellate the frustrated masses and thus begin to incarnate a process of popular identification” that (5) constructs “the people” as a collective actor to confront the existing regime with the purpose of (6) demanding “regime change”.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggest that there is nothing inevitable about struggles against hegemonic power. Following this idea, it would be inappropriate to claim, for example, that the rise of populist radical right parties is a result of increasing ethnic and cultural variety in European countries (e.g., Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Instead, individual material phenomena (real or perceived) can be regarded as factors contributing to the success of a political mobilisation only after they have become discursively attributed to portray hegemonic power as oppressive (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Laclau (2005: 200) points out that the emergence of “a people” is

therefore not automatic but requires a complex construction process and that this process can also fail. It is debatable as to what extent the success of this process is a matter of ideological entrepreneurship or the resources available for identity creation or just a matter of being at the right place at the right time. But, despite viewing the articulation of grievances as the core of populism, also according to Laclau, “some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism” (Laclau, 2005: 88, 177).

Laclau regards political leaders as vital unifying symbols (2005), but charismatic leadership is not regarded as inherently necessary to the formation of populist movements as people can “project their will” (Laclau, 2005: 158–159) to, for example, a leaderless civic movement or any other organisational vehicle with which they identify (see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: Chapter 3; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). The strength of Laclau’s theory of populism is that it doesn’t regard populism as an extant ontology, as the ideational approach does, but as the discursive process of uniting unmet social demands to form a chain of equivalence. Therefore, the approach manages to highlight that no populist political entity can form without the articulation of its populism. The downside to the Laclaudian approach is that its theoretical insight on how the articulation of the people and its opponents contributes to the forming of populist entities is rather vague about the actual contents of populist acts of signification, which makes the approach rather difficult to operationalise in empirical research. Also, Laclau’s way of using populism as an example of the “royal road to understanding (...) the political” (Laclau, 2005: 67) is somewhat ambiguous regarding what constitutes populism and what does not (see, e.g., Arditì, 2010; Moffitt, 2016: 22–23). This ambiguity is probably one of the reasons why the thin-ideological and communication approach scholars have seemed to sidestep Laclaudian theory even though it has many similarities to their core ideas. The Essex School’s anti-essentialist approach to populism suggests that ultimately there is no shared content to all populism except for the discursive logic through which the political subjects of “us” and “them” are created and which allows hegemony to be challenged. Laclau’s theory describes how populism operates as a logic of articulating the political, but it tells us little about the discursive strategies or contents of populism, and this is where the other approaches come in. Rather than regarding any of these approaches as a discrete alternative to the discourse-theoretical approach to populism, I suggest they can be regarded to a certain extent as complements to Laclaudian theory.

## 2.2 Populism as a set of ideas

The “ideational approach” is an umbrella term covering different aspects of research that regard populism as a set of ideas, boiling populism down to its minimal ideational core (Mudde, 2018; Hawkins, 2018). Even though Cas Mudde (2018: 29) suggests, somewhat ambiguously, that all research approaches that regard populism “as ideas” belong to the ideational approach, here the term “ideational approach” is used to describe approaches that regard populism as a thin-centred ideology or as extant ideas and attitudes that contain the thin-ideological core of populism. According to the most commonly accepted minimal definition by Cas Mudde (2004), populism is a thin-centred ideology that considers “society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (p. 543). The ideational approach therefore suggests that there is a shared substance or content – even if thin – in all types of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 6). This thin-centred ideological core or set of populist ideas is a common denominator for all populist actors that represents societal events as a struggle between the “will of the people” and corrupt elites. (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). According to Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), populist ideas are inherently dualistic or Manichean as they represent two clearly defined sides of society that are in constant, even cosmic (Hawkins, 2018), conflict with each other.

The thin-ideological (Freedon, 2003) minimal definition of populism succeeds in explaining the chameleonic adaptability of populism (Taggart, 2004: 275–276). As populism is regarded ideologically only as thin-centred (Mudde, 2004), it requires attachment to some thicker ideological contents. This is also why distinguishing populist ideas from thicker ideologies is useful: doing so helps explain the various sub-types of populism evident in the world (Hawkins, 2018: 69). In different contexts, these thin-ideological core elements are attached to more-congruent ideological bases, which explains, for example, why populist radical right movements tend to be conservative, authoritarian, and nativist (Mudde, 2007: 22–23) and left-wing populist movements are more often liberal, egalitarian, and reliant on some kind of socialism (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; March, 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). However, the ideational approach is rather strict about what kind of actors are regarded as populist: to be clearly labelled populist, a movement or party must check all the boxes of populist thin ideology, including anti-pluralism (Hawkins, 2018). Whereas, for the Essex School, “the people” and “the elite” can be replaced with pretty much any signifier, in the ideational approach “the people” tends to refer to average citizens and “the elite” is mostly used to refer to political and financial elites (e.g., Hawkins, 2018; Mudde, 2018). This also explains why, for

example, the terms centrist or elitist populism (Palonen, 2018b) are somewhat oxymoronic for some ideational scholars.

Unlike the Essex School, the ideational approach expects populism to be moralistic, exclusionary, and anti-pluralist. Jan-Werner Müller (2016), for instance, presents a polemic understanding of populism that defines it through its illiberal and radical right forms. He suggests that populism as a political logic is inherently monist, moralistic, and anti-pluralist. In his use of “monism”, he refers to the idea that populism regards only “the people” as being worthy of making political decisions in society. By the “moralism” of populism, he refers to the moral superiority of “the people” over others. And by “anti-pluralism”, he refers to the populist tendency to deny the validity of competing political groups as part of, say, parliamentary democracy. As such, Müller regards populism as an imminent danger to not just liberal democracy but also democracy. Müller’s definition of populism has been criticised for its normative outlook, which makes it only applicable to analysing mainly far right populism (e.g., Stavrakakis and Jäger, 2017). Most ideational scholars are not as prepared as Müller to equate populism with anti-democratic ideation but instead regard populism as democratic but simultaneously illiberal, suggesting that the totality of the people’s will makes populism unavoidably anti-pluralist (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1670). Exclusion therefore is seen essentially as part of the building of “the people” (Butler, 2015), as it is impossible to wholly sever the articulation of the “people” from the discursive exclusion of the “elite” and its allies (Waisbord, 2018).

The ideational approach argues that societal events such as the rise of populist parties derive from the innate ideological attitudes and characteristics of political actors. As this suggests that populism as an ontology can exist without its articulation, the approach is not the strongest in explaining how populism manifests in action. For example, Kirk Hawkins argues that “behavioural attributes are products of the underlying set of ideas” (Hawkins, 2010: 39) and because of that the ideational approach “treats populism as a set of ideas that exists in the mind of the voters and politicians” (Hawkins, 2018: 62). Therefore, the ideational approach treats populist ideas in the abstract and as a given, and, even though the approach suggests that the salience of underlying populist ideas can be measured in texts (Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018), ideational scholars have not been especially interested in how populist ideas are created, reproduced, and disseminated to form chains of equivalence (e.g., Hawkins, 2018: 66). The ideational approach does suggest that there must be a material context of political, cultural, or social failures (Inglehart and Norris, 2016) that accommodates the “activation” or “mobilisation” of populist attitudes (Hawkins, 2018: 62; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019: 5). But regardless, the need for activation or mobilisation of a set of ideas does not explain how particular political actors are able to communicate that a crisis or policy

failure should be attributed to the elite and how giving sovereignty back to the people would solve the situation.

Therefore, the downside to the ideational (or thin-ideological) approach is that it regards populism as a set of exogenous attitudes and ideas already present in the minds of citizens and politicians and therefore does not consider the processes involved in communicating these attitudes. Instead, it sidesteps the process in which the supply and demand of populism meet. Populist attitudes are regarded as widespread in the Western world, and a large share of the citizens believe that the ordinary people are somehow oppressed and betrayed by some elite (Rooduijn, 2014; 2018). Even though ideational-approach researchers admit that, on top of the material context, the activation of populist attitudes necessitates rhetoric and discourses (e.g., Hawkins, 2018: 62), the ideational approach is not very interested in how populist ideas are communicated by particular actors. Therefore, it is crucial to ask where these “underlying populist ideas” come from and, especially, why populist ideas channel themselves via particular movements in the ways they do. This is where the approaches to populism as discursive performance, style, and communication are useful: they explicate how there cannot be a set of populist core ideas without their discursive construction and do so with a greater specificity than Laclau.

## 2.3 Populism as political performance, style, and communication

Following the Laclaudian idea of populism as articulation, approaches that regard populism as performance, style, or communication suggest that it should not be viewed as a binary descriptive quality of political actors but as more of a sliding scale (de Cleen et al., 2018). As Laclau (2005: 176) suggests, all actors can be populist, but some actors are more populist than others. Benjamin Moffitt (2016) extends the discursive understanding of populism, defining populism as a political style that relies on symbols, aesthetics, and performances that are expressed via the (mass) media. Like the ideational approach, Moffitt offers a minimal definition of populism. However, his is not based on the thin-ideological content of the message but on the manner in which the message is presented. Also, whereas the ideational approach focuses on populism as something that *is*, these approaches suggest that populism is something that *is done* (Moffitt, 2016: 22; 2018b: 3). The approach to populism as a style – like the discourse-theoretical approach – suggests that the signifiers for the “people” and “elites” are inherently empty of meaning before they are performed and discursively filled up via a political style that includes appeals to the people, bad manners, and the performing of crisis and threat (Moffitt, 2016: 45). This approach suggests that populism is not an ideology but in some instances also

an instrumental or strategic toolkit of sorts that any political actor can use to compete in politics (see also Ylä-Anttila, 2017; Barr, 2018). This suggests that populism can also be a communicative strategy that frames political discussions as a battle of irreconcilable differences between two sides, highlighting populism as discursive work rather than a sincere articulation of strongly held beliefs (Waisbord, 2018: 244).

Populism as a style asserts that populism can be regarded as a collection of “the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to navigate the fields of power that comprise the political” (Moffitt, 2016: 38). Moffitt thus adds the valuable idea of mediation to Laclau’s theory of populism and focuses on the performative, moving away from the purely textual towards nonverbal communication (Moffitt, 2016: 39–40; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). Moffitt’s idea of populism as a political style binds together “matter and manner, message and package” (Pels, 2003: 45), suggesting like Laclau (2005) and Palonen (2018a: 4) that there is no content to populism without its performance. Therefore, populism as a political style complements the Laclaudian approach. I would also argue that the aesthetics and nonverbal elements of populist performance can be regarded as discursive acts that have the power to signify, and thus it might not be vital to recognise whether the means of constructing the populist superstructure or framing is literally “textual”. Nevertheless, populist style has been regarded to include unconventional rhetoric that differs from mainstream political speech by being colourful, uncivil, emotional, crass, direct, and colloquial (Waisbord, 2018: 225; Moffitt, 2016: Chapter 3). Populist style also includes “mentioning the unmentionable” that is claimed to challenge elites’ interests, being hostile towards the media, and questioning established spheres of knowledge (Waisbord, 2018: 244; Ylä-Anttila, 2017). Perhaps the most salient characteristic of the populist style is the fostering of a belief in the presence of crisis or threat that requires immediate and possibly drastic action (Moffitt, 2016: Chapter 7). Crises have been argued to allow the maintaining of “populist hype” necessary to make populist claims salient in the public sphere (Palonen, 2018a: 4–5; Herkman, 2018). A crisis serves the core purpose of simplifying political space by creating a sense of urgency that heightens the attribution of blame to various elites that have denied the people their sovereignty. Creating a heightened sense of crisis also allows speakers to present themselves as a direct means for solving the crisis and thus restoring the people’s sovereignty via ousting of the elites (Moffitt, 2016: Chapter 7; Taggart, 2004: 278–280).

The latest arrival in populism research is the communication approach to populism (Aalberg et al., 2017). Among the first to regard populism explicitly as communication were Jagers and Walgrave (2007), who suggest that populism is a “communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to

speak in their name” (p. 322; see also Aslanidis, 2018). Jagers and Walgrave (2007) were also first to suggest that, in populism, the boundary of difference between the elites and the people can be communicated differently by focusing on constructing the people, on criticizing the elites, or on creating exclusion. Whereas “empty populism” is pure people-building and “anti-elitist populism” focuses on criticizing and othering the elites, “exclusionary populism” is more focused on defining who the people are not. The communication approach combines the ideational approach (populism as thin-ideological minimal content) with the political-style approach (populism as stylistic performance) and suggests that populist political communication consists of the expression of the thin-ideological and stylistic components of populism (de Vreese et al., 2018). These components have been broken down into analytical tools that can be used to evaluate the salience of populist ideas and style in all kinds of texts and performances. However, the approach is still less recognised in political science. The salience of populist communication can be measured in, for example, textual mediated communication forms such as journalism (Wettstein et al., 2018) and online communication (Engesser et al., 2017) and in more non-textual instances such as politicians’ appearances on television shows (Ernst et al., 2019) or online memes (Schwarzenegger and Wagner, 2018).

Even though researchers of populist political communication do not explicitly say so, their approach can be regarded not only as a convergence of the ideational and stylistic approaches but also as an attempt to provide an empirical way to analyse the discursive practices related to the discursive articulation processes described by Laclau (2005). Until now, the communication approach has created tools for empirically analysing the salience of populist thin-ideological and stylistic elements appearing in, prevalently, textual communication (Engesser et al., 2017; Wettstein et al., 2018) and what effects populist communication has on individuals’ attitudes (e.g., Müller et al., 2017). However, if combined with the Laclaudian perspective, the communication approach could help us better understand what ends populism works towards and what its outcomes are, that is, how the manifestations of populist communication contribute to the formation of equivalential chains. Therefore, a theoretical connection between populist political communication and populism as articulation must be made.

From the Laclaudian perspective, the populist logic of articulation leads to a historical actor emerging via the construction of a chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005). Similarly, the communication approach suggests that populist communication connects voters to populist parties or that “populist ideas must be communicated discursively to achieve the communicators’ goals and the intended effects on the audience” (De Vreese et al., 2018: 425). I suggest that populism both as a logic of articulation and as communication is therefore directly related to acts of signification. But, whereas populist communication can exist by itself by being

encoded into speech acts, the articulation of a populist movement and its equivalential chain – in the sense of the emergence of a historical subject – cannot be expected to take place solely through the broadcasting and receiving of populist ideas and style via mediated populist communication. Therefore, I argue that a missing theoretical link exists between the Laclaudian idea of populism as a constitutive force that creates historical subjects (Laclau, 2005) and the performative-communicative-stylistic aspects of populism (Moffitt, 2016; Reinemann et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018). Especially regarding a media system where communication is horizontal and can be easily subject to various interventions (Chadwick, 2013), we must ask how we get from populist communicators disseminating populist messages and performing populist style to the articulation of a populist chain of equivalence that can pursue change. I suggest a theoretical starting point of regarding the articulation of populist movements to be based not only on the contents of populist political communication but also on the discursive public interactions pertaining to that communication. This means that, to understand how populist political communication affects populist organizational vehicles' form, trajectory, and ability to successfully challenge hegemony, we must look especially at how political parties, journalists, and citizens interact with populist political communication in the public sphere.

The main task of the thesis is to provide insight on how the hybridisation of the media system affects the articulation of populist chains of equivalence, and this necessitates connecting the Laclaudian idea of populism as a logic of articulation to the idea of populism as mediated communication. There has been little effort to connect Laclau's theory of populism as a political logic of articulation to the emerging theoretical and empirical tools that regard populism as a communication phenomenon, probably in part because most of the populist political communication researchers have set up camp in the ideational approach. Both the populism-as-style and populism-as-communication approaches allow us to assume that the heart of populism lies in the ways and practices in which the ideational-stylistic structure of populism is discursively created and disseminated. However, there is a slight but significant difference here compared to the Laclaudian theory. The conception that populist ideas are visible in but not manifested by communication asserts that populism as a phenomenon is somehow external to communication. As Reinemann et al. (2017) put it, "populism is mostly *reflected* in the oral, written, and visual communication of individuals, politicians, parties, and social movements" (p. 13). Laclau's theory of populism would suggest that populist ideas are not only reflected in communication but that they are also made politically alive and relevant via communication. I would suggest combining these ideas to argue that the discursive articulation of populist chains of equivalence takes place not only via populist political communication but also in the interactive process of other actors responding



to it. Therefore, a distinction must be made between what populist parties or organisations try to communicate and what their communication articulates after the communication has gone through a series of discursive negotiations in the public sphere. And this is where the role of media as a facilitator, scrutiniser and producer of populist communication comes in.

### 3 Media and populism

Even though the role of journalistic media in increasing the popularity and reach of populist actors was addressed already in the early 2000s (Mazzoleni et al., 2003, Mudde, 2004: 553–554), the relationship of media and populism has been sparsely researched, especially in the political science literature (Moffitt, 2018a: 236). In political science, this deficiency is partially explained by the dominance of the ideational approach that regards populism as a set of ideas already prevalent among the populace (Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018). Cas Mudde (2010; 2007: 296–297) argues that, even though the populist radical right has been regarded as a pathology, that is, an alien acute condition gnawing away at the foundations of liberal democracy, the thicker ideological contents and attitudes that characterise the populist radical right are rather common and “normal” in European societies (see also Rooduijn, 2014). Approaching populism from the media and communication perspective does not mean that “real-world” structures, events, and attitudes would not matter – quite the opposite. One can argue that focusing on mediated communication processes in which chains of equivalence are articulated is a methodologically sound means of investigating how “real-life events” contribute to the support and form of populist parties and movements. The relationship of media to populism as a political style and communication provides a way to analyse the process in which the populist organizational vehicles connect widespread attitudes and grievances as part of their message, emancipating the signifiers that refer to and unite their “people”. This is more an important distinction than it may seem: instead of interpreting the structural explanations for various grievances to be the underlying reason for the form and success of, for example, the populist radical right (e.g., Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018), we should focus more on the discursive process through which the parties appear as channels for alleviating perceived grievances. This is also why media have become an increasingly important factor in populism research in the last decade and why, for example, Silvio Waisbord (2018) believes that the causes and consequences that populism portrays for democratic politics “cannot be properly understood without addressing media and communication issues” (p. 201).

As the main research question of this study is based on populism as discursive articulation, performance, and communication, I regard media as the “central stage upon which contemporary populism plays out” (Moffitt, 2016: 14). As Gianpetro Mazzoleni (2014) suggests, “the media undeniably appear to be key players in the rise and the fall of populist movements” (p. 52). In a sense, one could regard the media environment as the engine of populist communication and articulation of chains of equivalence: it keeps populist ideas churning and moving by providing populist movements with momentum, discursive windows of opportunity, and possibilities for developing and disseminating populist ideas (Mazzoleni, 2014: 53). Media provide the platform for not only populist political communication but also for populist communication becoming challenged and scrutinised, making the media environment essential to defining what kind of societal demands populist communication ends up articulating. By “media”, I refer to all platforms that allow the mediation of ideas and discourse. In most populism research, “the media” refers to traditional channels of mass communication, that is, the legacy media or professional news organisations previously represented mainly by the print press, radio, and television. Therefore, when using “the media”, I am referring to the journalistic professional news media. As news organisations are also online, the term “online media” does not really distinguish journalistic content or platforms from politicians’ or citizens’ online communication taking place on, for example, social media. Still, for the sake of readability, I use the term “online media” when specifically referring to non-journalistic online media, be it alternative online media, a social media platform, or an activist discussion forum.

### 3.1 Populism by and through the media

The relationship of journalistic or legacy media and populism has been studied to a certain extent, suggesting that the media themselves can be populist (Krämer, 2014) and that the media are complicit in the dissemination of populist messages by providing platforms for populist actors (Mazzoleni, 2008, 2014; Krämer, 2017a). Esser, Stepinska, and Hopmann (2017: 367–369) describe these two perspectives as “populism by and through the media”. The first perspective of “populism by the media” is based heavily on Benjamin Krämer’s (2014) idea of media populism. According to Krämer, journalistic media can participate independently in the creation and upholding of an understanding of a people whose interests are irreconcilably different from those of elites that hold power. This phenomenon is parallel – and sometimes even contrary – to partisan populism, and it is often related to the role of journalism as the watchdog of liberal democracy (Krämer, 2014: 42) or to the commercial nature of contemporary media (Mazzoleni, 2008). Media populism can be observed, for example, in the ways in which the media appear to

speak in defence of the people against the potential and likely wrongdoings of the political elites (Plasser and Ulram, 2003), representing itself as “the voice of the people” (Krämer, 2014). Also, Moffitt (2016: 74–76) addresses the complicit role of the media in the dissemination of populist ideas, asserting that populist style overlaps with the logics of commercial media, following Gianpetro Mazzoleni’s (2008) idea of the complicity of the logics of populism and commercialised media.

According to Mazzoleni (2008: 51–52; 2014), the logic of populism aligns well with the commercial media logic, which is often characterised via terms such as personalisation, spectacularisation, tabloidisation, sensationalism, and attraction to conflict-driven and simplified rhetoric. He suggests that because of the commercialisation of the media, there is an indirect alliance of complicity between media logic and populist logic (Mazzoleni, 2008; 2014). Therefore, Mazzoleni asserts that especially tabloid media have been prone to hosting a parallel populist style, suggesting that the types of media with more pronounced commercial imperatives will contribute more to the allure of populist communication – for example, because they are more likely to frame politics through anti-elitist confrontation, scandal, and conflict. In quantitative analyses of the salience of media populism in different types of journalistic media, the results regarding the supposed disproportionate salience of populist statements in the popular press have appeared contradictory. Whereas Akkerman (2011) finds that tabloids do not share an anti-elitist bias alongside populist parties, the extensive content analysis conducted by Wettstein et al. (2018) reveals that tabloids do host more populist statements than quality media. However, as Benjamin Krämer (2014; 2018) has pointed out, a more detailed qualitative difference between different media types can be detected by interpretive analyses not based strictly on measuring the salience of people-centrist and anti-elitist statements (see, e.g., Herkman, 2017). Also, Hameleers et al. (2017) suggest that interpretive journalistic genres such as editorials and columns are especially prone to attributing blame to elites. Nevertheless, the consensus among researchers remains that mainstream media’s commercial logics, which tend to increase the salience of political scandals, crises, and affective framings of politics in general, can cultivate the discursive soil for the benefit of populist parties (Moffitt, 2015; Esser et al., 2017; Ellinas, 2018; Stewart et al., 2003; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: Chapter 5).

The role of the media in the rise of populism has also been approached from the perspective of the media providing a platform on which populist actors perform and connect with potential supporters (Mazzoleni, 2014: 47; Moffitt, 2016: Chapter 5). Therefore, the perspective of “populism through the media” (Esser et al., 2017: 369) focuses on the media as arenas for the dissemination and amplification of populist parties’ communication and agendas. Regarding the relationship between the agenda of the media and the populists’ electoral success, Ellinas (2018) suggests that

populist parties benefit from the legitimacy and momentum provided by media coverage regardless of its tone. Boomgaarden and Vliegenhart (2007; 2009) suggest that populists benefit when the media discusses topics of which they have ownership even if they are not present in the coverage (see also Walgrave and de Swert, 2004). However, according to Wettstein et al. (2018), in some European countries where effective “cordon sanitaires” have been established around populist parties, these parties appear to be underrepresented in the media even in coverage of topics they have ownership of (see also Esser et al., 2017: 366). This finding goes somewhat against the grain of the often-presented argument that, because of the complicity of populist and media logic, all populist political actors would gain disproportionate media coverage when compared to non-populists. Especially regarding the United States, it has been suggested that, while the conservative media were essential in creating a political parallel utilized first by the Tea Party movement and later by Donald Trump (Waisbord, 2018: 228; Krämer, 2014), the liberal quality media were especially key in the unprecedented salience of the Trump candidacy (Pickard, 2018). Unsurprisingly, it would also appear that less-successful populist parties tend to receive less coverage in the news (Esser et al., 2017). However, as a contrary example, the Finns Party gained a disproportionately large share of the mainstream media’s attention during electoral competitions even before it became a major parliamentary party in 2011 (Niemi, 2013; Railo and Välimäki, 2012b: 124–130).

There are several reasons why it is extremely difficult for journalists to sidestep populist communication, especially populist radical right communication. As Moffitt (2016) puts it, “the collision between media logic and political logic finds its most pure expression in contemporary populism” (p. 62). For journalism to fulfil its task in a liberal democracy, it has been regarded to host a certain ethos and professional responsibility to act as the defender of liberal democracy (Krämer, 2018). As populist radical right communication is drastically in conflict with journalists’ professional values and considerations of civil political discourse, it is nearly impossible for journalists to ignore the populist radical right when it breaches those values (Wodak, 2013; 2015). Populism’s abrasive stylistic characteristics and anti-pluralism are also elements that make populist speech newsworthy. Therefore, journalistic liberal-democratic sensibilities and commercial practices have been regarded to inadvertently bolster the diffusion of populist radical right communication in the public sphere (Wodak, 2013; Krämer, 2017a). Some of the research on the relationship of populism and the media holds to this argument to the extent of being normative: for example, Victor Pickard (2018) directly asserts that “commercial imperatives drive news organisations to popularise dangerous politics” (p. 195). Thus, in some studies there is an underlying assumption that journalists should be somewhat able to prevent the harms of populism. Still, the elite or quality media have largely ignored or refused to acknowledge their contribution to the

populist radical right's electoral successes in the Western world. For example, in Finland, quality papers' editorials and columns did not consider that the media had boosted the Finns Party's success before the landslide electoral victory of 2011 (Hatakka, 2012a; Herkman, 2015). Also, according to Des Freedman (2018), in the UK and the US, despite the liberal quality media being aghast at the election of Donald Trump and the result of the Brexit referendum, they did not really reflect on their role in the outcomes until after the elections (Freedman, 2018: 1–2).

### 3.2 The media challenging populism and populism challenging the media

Even though the media often are populist themselves or act as amplifiers for populist communication, in qualitative terms, coverage especially of the populist radical right tends to be negative in tone (Herkman, 2017; Esser et al. 2017). In some European countries, e.g., Belgium (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) and Sweden (Hellström and Nilsson, 2010), journalists have even established cordon sanitaires around populist radical right parties, thus denying them an uncritical platform. Especially the elite or quality media can be extremely critical in their coverage of populist parties (Mazzoleni, 2008; Strömbäck et al., 2017) because of exclusionary populist communication's tendency to breach liberal democratic values of which journalists regard themselves guardians (Krämer, 2018). However, such negative coverage does not appear to affect the populist parties' ability to garner support (Esser et al., 2017: 366), especially if a populist party has gained a reasonable level of legitimacy (Herkman, 2017; Stewart et al., 2003), as happened, for example, in Sweden (Hellström and Nilsson, 2010) and Finland (Hatakka, 2012b). Nevertheless, exclusionary ideational content and politically incorrect stylistic elements make populist radical right communication especially prone to being targeted by journalistic reporting and continued scrutiny (Article II and III; Herkman, 2018).

Even though it appears that the critical scrutiny of populist actors may contribute to their success, there have been few attempts to theorise why this happens. The most common explanation is that negative publicity benefits the populist radical right because populism thrives on antagonism and conflict (Mudde, 2007: 252). Gianpetro Mazzoleni has suggested that, even though populist parties' communication attracts hostility from the mainstream media, "they can turn this into an opportunity to fuel greater visibility by responding in ways that both the hostile and friendly media cannot ignore" (Mazzoleni, 2014: 52). As populist-party voters often regard journalists as part of the elites, negative publicity can be regarded as proof of political weight and legitimacy (Wodak, 2015), which also explains the prevalence of the populists' strategies of using negative coverage for their own communication purposes (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 8–11; Pickard, 2016). This practice can

include intentional provocation through the use of scandalous but calculated ambivalent rhetoric that amasses attention without an unequivocal affiliation with, for example, ethnic nationalism or racism (Wodak, 2013; Article II and III). According to Benjamin Moffitt (2016), because of the intertwining logics of commercial media and populist style, populist politicians can become “quasi-celebrities, known as much – or sometimes more – for their media performances and stylistic outbursts than for the ‘content’ of their politics” (p. 57). Juha Herkman (2018) argues that the complicity of moral transgressions by populist politicians and the logic of the media is inherent in “neo-populist scandals” that allow populist parties to play the underdog and thus benefit from even negative publicity, especially in their insurgent stage. Therefore, in the hybrid media system, social media are exceptionally important birthing grounds for giving rise to these kinds of populist transgressive outbursts, which then are amplified in the mainstream media (Herkman, 2018: 351–352; Herkman and Matikainen, 2016; Moffitt, 2018a: 243–244; Engesser et al., 2017: 1113; Article II and III).

Ruth Wodak has suggested (2013; 2015) that there is a particular discursive mechanism that leads the media to become amplifiers for populist radical right communication. Her idea of the “right-wing populist *perpetuum mobile*” suggests that the populist radical right is intentionally baiting the media to cover their transgressions of liberal democratic norms and values. The *perpetuum mobile* suggests that populist radical right rhetoric is constructed in a way to create alarm among liberal journalists and political opponents, causing it not only to be noticed but to be kept on the agenda of discussion for extended periods that usually end with a quasi-apology for the originally ambivalent phrasing of the statement that caused controversy. According to Wodak, journalists are in a difficult predicament as they are professionally inclined to cover controversial statements but at the same time they can be aware of providing the populist radical right a visible platform for their ideas. Regardless of how strategically calculated the ambivalence is, the exclusionary and transgressive discursive elements allow the populist radical right to use the media to create extended and highly visible media spectacles via the scrutiny of their statements.

Despite receiving plenty of coverage and arguably having been provided with the discursive windows of opportunity needed for the people’s dissatisfaction to be channelled towards populist parties, taking an antagonistic approach to the mainstream media is a key discursive element in most populist radical right movements (Esser et al., 2017: 375–376). Whereas left-wing populism often aims its media hostility at “media empires” and ideologically questionable media representations, right-wing populism focuses its criticism of the media on the ideological alliance between media workers and liberal causes and values (Waisbord, 2018). When being attacked by the media, right-wing populist actors often repackage

their discourse, policies, and rhetorical defence against such attacks using liberal tropes and arguments, articulating what Benjamin Moffitt (2017) refers to as “illiberal liberalism”. It is also worth noting that populists often refer to the media as a single institution portraying the elites’ interests and values (Waisbord, 2018). This is evident in the creation of signifiers that condense and transmit the idea of vilified and morally bankrupt journalists as lapdogs of the liberal elites, signifiers such as “fake news” for Trump (Farkas and Schou, 2018) or “lügenpresse” for Pegida (Holt and Haller, 2017) or “eliittimedia” for the Finnish online alternative media (Noppari and Hiltunen, 2018; Noppari et al., 2019). Journalists and mainstream news organisations are therefore regarded as part of compromised “elite spheres of knowledge” (Ylä-Anttila, 2017), and their motives and political agendas are actively and constantly denounced by populist politicians and their supporters. Contrary to mainstream media, populist actors praise the achievements of alternative media that challenge mainstream sources of news and information (Ylä-Anttila, 2017; Noppari and Hiltunen, 2018; Noppari et al., 2019).

Moffitt (2016: 55) makes the point that the ability to control political communication is vital for populists. Populist actors thus appear to oppose all media that represent views they dispute. In European populist radical right contexts, this kind of anti-media populism has manifested, for example, as a wish to limit public broadcasting services that operate under particular sets of values, such as support for multiculturalism (Noppari et al., 2019). In countries where authoritarian populists have risen to power, they have started to crack down on press freedom. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez restricted press freedom to ensure the “truthfulness” of the opposition press (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), and in Hungary free press no longer exists (Palonen, 2018a). These attacks on press freedom are in all cases a serious undermining of liberal democracy. In Western Europe, though, authoritarian populist actors have not gained enough power or resources to restrict the freedom of the press via changes in legislation or to own significant parts of the media system (see Silvio Berlusconi’s case: Moffitt, 2016: 55–57).

What are the consequences of the antagonistically tense relationship between the mainstream media and populist movements for the institutionalisation of populist parties? Overall, the complicity of the media and populism has not been attributed to individual media or journalists but to a wider phenomenon in society that has been discussed as the mediatisation of politics (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014), which is the phenomenon of political actors adjusting their actions to fit “media logic”. Benjamin Moffitt (2016: 52–54) has addressed how the complicity of media logic and populist political style has become so evident that even non-populist politicians apply elements of populist style in their media performances. Especially regarding the context of the populist radical right, it has been suggested that mediatisation could lead to populist actors trying to appear moderate in the eyes of the wider public, thus



making their policies and rhetoric less threatening and leading to a toning down of the more extreme exclusionary elements in their communication (Niemi, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2014: 52). Adapting to media logic has also been suggested as meaning that populist parties have professionalised when it comes to dealing with the media – for example, by hiring communication professionals as spin-doctors and communication officers (Esser et al., 2017). Still, in many cases, despite hiring professionals, populist parties’ communication is intentionally unpolished so as not to break the illusion of authenticity and closeness to the people (Moffitt, 2016: 55). Overall, it has been suggested that, in the long term, the pressure of the media would in fact push populist radical right parties towards the mainstream of politics, leading them to abandon their most extreme styles of expressing division between the people and elites (Waisbord, 2018: 227). As later explicated in this thesis, public mediated pressure and scrutiny indeed have direct effects on the communication processes taking place within and around populist movements, but these effects are not likely to make populist radical right parties any less radical.

### 3.3 Internet-mediated communication and populism

In the past few years, the unrestricted, cheap, and inclusive access to communication provided by social media has become a frequent explanation for the rise of populism. Some claim that the rather rapid disruption of the media environment, especially regarding the transformation of financially struggling news journalism and the rise of social media, would have bolstered populist politicians’ and parties’ claims to power (e.g., Crilley and Gillespie, 2019; Schroeder, 2018). The often-heard argument is that the major shift towards a horizontal media system combined with decreased trust in institutional actors and experts have made citizens more prone to accepting populist ideas and to channelling their distrust via populist parties and extra-parliamentary movements that communicate and organise via social media (e.g., Davies, 2016; Bartlett, 2018). However, this argument has been insufficiently researched as “the populist literature is still firmly set in its analysis of old media” (Moffitt, 2016: 51). Therefore, even though much has been said about how online media contribute to political populism, the topic has been sparsely researched (Esser et al. 2017: 376–378).

The bulk of the academic work on online populism has stressed the role of online media in providing a means for circumventing traditional media gatekeepers and thus boosting populism via increasing its reach. New online media have been discussed as communication platforms, especially for populist leaders, with a focus on the characteristics of immediacy and intimacy of online communication being complicit with making appeals directly to the people (Moffitt, 2016: 60; 2018a: 240; Ellinas, 2018). Most empirical studies on populist online action have focused on how and to

what extent populist parties and politicians have used online platforms in their communication (Esser et al., 2017: 377; Waisbord and Amado, 2017). Populist online texts have also been researched from discourse-analytical perspectives by focusing on particular discursive elements of populism such as the construction of otherness or exclusion (e.g., Sakki and Pettersson, 2015; Horsti, 2016; Pyrhönen, 2015). It has been hypothesised that online platforms allow populist actors to appeal to younger voters especially (Bartlett et al., 2011; Heiss and Matthes, 2017) and that they cater to mediating rather mundane frustrations that can be channelled to populist parties (Bartlett et al., 2014). It has been also suggested that social media provide platforms for homophilic and identity-based communication that suits populist movements especially well (Nilsson and Carlsson, 2014). It has also been claimed that social media provide platforms for the cultivation of populist ideas and strategies (Bartlett et al. 2011; Krämer, 2017b), as they provide cheap, accessible, and efficient platforms or “stages” for populist performances (Moffitt, 2018a: 239). Analyses of the salience of populist communication across parties and different online media have revealed that the extreme left and right use populist communication strategies more often than the political centre and that Facebook appears to be more conducive to populist political communication than Twitter (Ernst et al., 2017).

All political actors require access and some degree of control over the flow of information in the public sphere, but for the populist radical right, this need is even more pronounced as their non-pluralist communicative elements clash with the values of media gatekeepers (Krämer, 2018). The key value of the Internet for populists has thus been its ability to facilitate radical alternative media for populist communication (Atton, 2006). In countries where the mainstream media have been especially critical towards populist actors, online platforms have been essential in establishing networks of alternative media that allow one to share information, negotiate identities, establish relationships and coordinate collective action (Krämer, 2017b). For example, in Sweden, where the mainstream parties and the media have constructed a cordon sanitaire around the Sweden Democrats, there is an active scene of multiple populist radical right anti-immigration alternative media (Holt, 2018). In Finland, a similar scene exists (Noppari and Hiltunen, 2018; Noppari et al., 2019; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Even though it is worth noting that populist parties have circumvented mainstream media before the Internet (Moffitt, 2018a: 238), online media provide a direct connection with the people that populist parties claim to represent on platforms that provide very minimal content moderation and thus allow the use of divisive and politically incorrect language (Atton, 2006; Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016). The online populist radical right’s rhetoric regarding their own alternative online media is celebratory in tone. These media are often described as the tools by which the populist radical right takes back control over

“truth” that has been hijacked by the elites (Holt and Haller, 2017; Noppari and Hiltunen, 2018; Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

Despite online media being viewed as a significant factor in the rise of populism, few populist parties or movements have used online platforms as their primary mode of organisation. Prime examples of so-called techno-populism (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018), which attempts to implement populist ideals of direct democracy via digital participation platforms, are the Italian 5 Star Movement (Pirro, 2018) and the Indignados movement that later transformed into Podemos (Gerbaudo, 2018b). Most populist parties, however, remain in the mode of off-line populist communication (Moffitt, 2018a: 236). Despite this, populist leaders and parties tend to be comparatively popular on social media platforms when it comes to numbers of followers (e.g., Moffitt, 2018a: 239). This is the case in Finland, even though the Finns Party candidates have used social media platforms significantly less in political campaigning than candidates from other parties (Strandberg, 2012; 2015; Marttila et al., 2015: 124). Therefore, as a sounder argument than asserting that populists happen to be especially social media savvy, it has been posited that the architecture of social media works especially well with the underlying logic of populism (Engesser et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018a).

Paulo Gerbaudo (2018a) suggests that social media has “an elective affinity” with populism, be it from the left or the right. His argument is reminiscent of Mazzoleni’s media complicity theory (2008) but updated to the digital age, suggesting that the architecture and logics of social media contribute to populism becoming the most noticeable form of political style. Online platforms have been suggested to suit the logic of populist communication well because online discussions are often antagonistic due to discussants not being bound to “good manners” or political correctness and because common sense is often followed online at the expense of expert knowledge being dismissed (Moffitt, 2016: 61). The aggregative effects of algorithms have been seen as connecting individuals with similar grievances (Gerbaudo, 2018a: 746), and the overall emotional architecture of social media (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: Chapter 7) has been argued to suit the dense and scandalizing emotional labour at the core of online populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017). Scholars have especially highlighted the drastic contrast between the slower deliberative nature of parliamentary politics and the virality, divisiveness, and immediacy of online discussion (Kaun, 2015; Moffitt, 2016: 62), which can be regarded as making it more attuned to populism.

Jonathan Bright suggests, through a systematic analysis of Twitter discussions over 26 countries, that the farther away political groups are from each other ideologically, the less they interact (Bright, 2018). It has been argued that, to a certain extent, populist radical right online counterpublics act as “echo chambers” or “self-protective enclaves” (Hall Jamieson and Cappella, 2010) where minimal interaction

with other publics combined with cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias ensure that competing frames do not displace populist explanations of the world. According to the group polarisation theory suggested by Cass Sunstein (2011), in these kinds of environments “where people find themselves in groups of like-minded types, they are especially likely to move to extremes” (p. 2). However, the early idea of the Internet contributing to the utter balkanisation of the public sphere, where political groups are discursively isolated entirely from each other, has been disproved (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Pariser, 2015). For example, the significance of purely algorithmic news selection in the creation of filter bubbles has been regarded as being rather marginal (Bakshy et al., 2015). John Postill (2018) has criticised the idea of a particular affinity between populism and social media by noting that non-populists are also social media savvy and that social media should not be regarded as a “realm apart from the rest of the media environment” (p. 761). Postill’s argument is especially valid when one considers how important the role of the so-called “filter bubble” effect (Pariser, 2011) has been considered for populism.

The argument regarding filter bubbles leading to populism suffers from the forced narrative of online media facilitating isolated publics that broadcast highly specialised ideas into insulated echo chambers in which people accept the presented information as a given (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Schroeder, 2018). De Vreese et al. (2018: 432) criticise approaching online platforms as a means of direct transmission of populist messages from populist leaders to citizens (de Vreese et al., 2018: 432). Also, Emiliano Treré (2019: 2) has characterised the mainstream approach of regarding online media as being instrumental for the formation of populist political action as “communicative reductionism”. Especially after the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump, journalistic analyses have assigned disproportionate responsibility to social media over the global rise of populism, even birthing entire meta-discussions about post-factuality and post-truth (e.g., Davies, 2016). Traditional media and academia went into a frenzy around the idea of social media creating a “post-truth” or “post-factual” world in which new information and communication technologies are being used to circumvent the rational deliberation on which democratic decision-making is based (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Farkas and Schou, 2019). This interpretation can be regarded partially as backlash to the celebratory interpretations of social media’s emancipatory powers that were prevalent during the Obama campaign and the Arab Spring (e.g., Castells, 2012). But even in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Simon, 2018), it is worth noting that, alongside fake news, computational propaganda, and targeted political marketing, “there is the everyday online production and circulation of information that is exaggerated, sensationalised, selective, or assembled from a web of partial truths in hybrid networks and less reputable sources” (Chadwick et al., 2018: 4). Instead of assuming online platforms are isolated informational

ecosystems, de Vreese et al. (2018) assert we should look at them “as part of a larger information system” (p. 432). Therefore, I view the frameworks provided by the discussions regarding “fake news” (Farkas and Schou, 2018), “post-factual” and “the age of post-truth politics” (Davies, 2016) – regardless of how interesting the discussions are – as being not especially useful in analysing populism as a logic of articulation in the hybrid media system, not least because these frameworks contain the strong normative position of regarding (online) populism as being inherently harmful.

Previous studies on the relationship of digital communication technologies and populism have been vital in revealing that populist parties use online media to connect with their constituencies and that there is a noteworthy affinity between the architecture of social media platforms and the antagonistic elements of populist communication. Social media are emancipatory for populist actors, but our understanding of the relationship of media and populism has yet to be updated to accommodate the idea of online media as an integral part of the wider media environment. So far, there has been plenty of research on *what populists do online*, but there is little research on *what does the online do to populism*. One of the better attempts at such research was that of Benjamin Krämer (2017b), who suggests that social media platforms allow (right-wing) populists to hone their discursive practices in a way that makes their populism ideologically thicker. Still, we lack research efforts to describe how the hybridisation of the media system and the rise of Internet-mediated communication affects the discursive articulation process of populism and how this influences the mainstreaming and normalisation of populist movements. There has been little research on how other actors and publics interact with online populist communication; for example, we know little about the role of online publics in challenging populist communication. Therefore, future studies must consider the role of people, not only as consumers but as producers and interpreters of populist content (Moffitt, 2016: 61), and that online media are not autonomous from but part of the media system (e.g., Herkman and Matikainen, 2016). This requires us to analyse populist logic in the context of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013).

## 4 Analysing populism in the hybrid media system

The premise of this doctoral thesis is to analyse populism as discursive signification practice taking place in a living-and-breathing hybrid media system where various actors with differing motivations participate in producing and interacting with populist messages. Online environments are particularly interesting in the context of populism as discourse, style, and communication because they allow more than just political and journalistic elites to get involved in the discursive labour that eventually articulates populist chains of equivalence – for better or for worse. I argue that populist online communication is not a matter of the mere transmission and adoption of messages but a process of discursive negotiation through series of actions and counter-actions, which in turn can be hypothesised to affect how populist movement supporters and opponents evaluate the societal worth of populist parties or movements. Therefore, the process in which various actors interact with populist communication can affect not only *how populism is communicated* but more interestingly *what populist political communication ends up articulating*. We know little about the discursive interactions between populist online communicators and other actors active in the media system, but we know even less about how these interactions affect the form of populist mobilisations. The literature discusses the relationship of populism and media mostly in the context of the traditional journalistic media with a single “media logic” (Mazzoleni, 2008; 2014; Esser et al., 2017). To analyse how populist communication taking place in online counterpublics interacts with party politics, journalism, and activism, several theoretical issues regarding the multiple logics of contemporary media systems must first be clarified.

### 4.1 Hybridity of media systems

Until about the 2000s, the media system was thought to comprise the print press, considered to be the main information producer; television, viewed as the main means of diffusing information to large audiences; and radio, which provided a means of direct interaction with audiences (Bennett, 1990; Castells, 2007: 240). The

central theories on the role of media in democratic politics formed around the assumption “about inclusive and relatively well-functioning public spheres in which communication from legitimate institutions passes through press organisations to affect the opinions and actions of citizens” (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018: 243). According to Bennett and Pfetsch (2018), this underlying assumption regarding the media system has started to lose its explanatory value in the so-called fourth age of political communication, where sources, communicators, locales, and moments of reception are abundant and where the core relationships between the main actors taking part in political communication have been reconfigured (Blumler and Coleman, 2015: 111). Social media have become an inherent part of the political public sphere by integrating citizen- and politician-controlled online media with traditional spaces for news production, dissemination, and commentary (Chadwick, 2013).

One of the main theories concerning contemporary politics and media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been Andrew Chadwick’s (2013; 2017) *hybrid media system*. Its key characteristic is that, in the hybrid media system, the spread of information takes place in multiple publics at multiple times and is done by multiple actors with multiple voices (see also Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 9). The hybrid media system provides actors with voices and a means of producing, circulating, and reframing information of their own and therefore has been described as reconfiguring the flow of politically relevant information in society (Chadwick, 2011; 2013). Chadwick’s idea of the hybrid media system presents a holistic understanding of media. Instead of just focusing on, for example, how online technology is being used in political campaigning, Chadwick suggests that we focus on the everyday politico-cultural practices in which technology is embedded. Therefore, the study of politics in the hybrid media system is the study of how the various logics and actors of politics and media interact with each other regardless of their character or platform of mediation.

Chadwick suggests that, in the hybrid media system, power is fragmented, relational, plural, and dispersed, and therefore hybridity has brought chaos and nonlinearity to political communication (Chadwick, 2013: 210). The Internet and the birth of a web culture based on social interaction have opened the way for parallel public spheres that are partially independent of the traditional gatekeepers of the professional news media. These online publics have become an inherent part of the political public sphere by integrating citizen- and politician-controlled online action with traditional journalistic production and dissemination of news. Chadwick suggests that, in this kind of a hybrid media system, the traditional political news cycle has transformed into the so-called political information cycle in which the non-elites have greater ability to participate and intervene in the mediation of societal events via digital communication technologies. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter enable activists, citizens, and fringe politicians to get more involved in the

mediation and ideological articulation of different policy options within their own political communities. Chadwick is optimistic about the consequences of the media system's hybridisation for democracy due to the fact that a more horizontal media system can be "more expansive and inclusive than those that prevailed during the twentieth century" (Chadwick, 2013: 210; see also Jenkins, 2006: 240–260). But we are still rather unaware of how this expansive inclusiveness and horizontality affects populism as a political logic of articulation. That is, what does it mean for the articulation of "the people" when anyone can speak for or be interpreted as speaking for "the people"? Andrew Chadwick defines the hybrid media system as follows:

"The hybrid media system is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organisational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics. Actors in this system are articulated by complex and ever-evolving relationships based upon adaptation and interdependence and simultaneous concentrations and diffusions of power. Actors create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable others' agency, across and between a range of older and newer media settings. (...) Hybrid thinking thus provides a useful disposition for studying how political actors, publics, and media of all kinds interact." (Chadwick, 2013: 5)

The hybrid media system – as an idea – focuses on the integration of online communication with traditional media and on the discursive interconnection between multiple actors involved in the communicational system. Attempts to explain how populism operates in the current media environment must go beyond the characteristics of populist online movements or populist online rhetoric and the ideological or stylistic contents of populist communication. Following Chadwick (2013), what matters in the hybrid media system is the mediated interconnectedness of different actors' public actions participating in or reacting to populist communication. Therefore, when looking at how the media system's hybridisation contributes to populist logic, we should look at how populist communication is being produced, circulated, and reacted to, not only in online publics but also in the wider media system where politicians, journalists, and activists interact with populist communication.

Most literature on populist online communication has stressed that online platforms have provided populist movements with independence from traditional gatekeepers, from traditional norms for acceptable speech, and even from the restrictions of "truth" (Bergmann, 2018; Schroeder, 2018). John Postill (2018) points out that communication taking place via social media does not take place in isolation,



as social and mainstream media “feed off one another in recursive loops of ‘viral reality’” (p. 756; see also Postill, 2014). Also, in Chadwick’s hybrid media system, it is not independence but interdependence that creates the most interesting political media phenomena in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the ability to interact and intervene make instability and conflict inherent in the hybrid media system. Therefore, research is emerging that is interested especially in the implications of the dynamic mediated interrelations between media platforms, actors, and practices (Treré 2018, 145). The study of populist online communication thus should be the study not only of action but also of reflexive reaction. The notion of interdependence informs us that, to answer the question of how online platforms affect populist parties’ efforts to construct chains of equivalence, analysing the contents of populist communication does not suffice – we have to look at the “recursive loops” (Postill, 2018) of how actors interact with populist communication in the hybrid media system.

The idea of the hybrid media system challenges Altheide and Snow’s classic idea of “media logic”, which posits that there is a single dominant logic to mass media that influences how politics become public (Altheide and Snow, 1979). Altheide and Snow (1979) suggest that “social reality is constituted, recognised, and celebrated with media” (p. 12) and that the logic of the media will also affect how politics operate, resulting in an increased media dependence in politics. Now new digital information and communication technologies are changing the basic theoretical assumptions about the importance of traditional mass media as the main source of political information. This change has made obsolete the assumption of an underlying unitary media logic as the main force to which political actors must adapt their actions. It has been suggested that, instead of a single logic, the newer media system has several intertwining logics (Chadwick et al., 2016; van Dijk and Poell, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2017). The hybrid media system suggests that multiple logics are at play, as media logics comprise “bundles of technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organisational forms” (Chadwick et al., 2016: 8). Chadwick suggests we should direct our focus at “the liminal, in-betweenness, and flux”, referring to media logic as something co-created by different political actors, media, and publics (Chadwick, 2013). Therefore, when looking at the relationship of populism and media, we should direct our gaze at how the interrelations of different actors in the media system contribute to how populism plays out. As Jay Blumler (2015) aptly describes it, “the traffic between media and politics does not run along a one-way street but comprises instead a multiplicity of reciprocal interactions with varying consequences” (p. 430).

The theories of the hybrid media system and populism as a political logic of articulation have rarely been connected in research. John Postill (2018) has theorised that, in the hybrid media system, “populists never operate in a vacuum, or indeed a filter bubble” (p. 762). Instead he claims that populists share mediated space with

other actors and that over time these actors will become fully aware of one another and develop media strategies to accommodate the situation. Also, Benjamin Moffitt mentions the “increasing hybridity” of populism, referring to how populist actors are communicating across older and newer media (Moffitt, 2018a: 244–245; see also Vaccari et al., 2015). The notion of hybridity in which people can join in the articulation of the political has been used in research mostly to convey the idea that online environments have given populist actors broader chances to communicate their message (Moffitt, 2018a). But this does not go far enough, that is, it does not explain how the media system’s hybridisation has affected the discursive process in which populist chains of equivalence are created, how populist claims form, what kind of conflicts they cause, or how these conflicts are negotiated. To investigate these questions, we must analyse the mediated interactions between the different actors involved in producing, disseminating, and criticizing populist political communication.

## 4.2 Online platforms facilitating populist counterpublics

The discourse theory of the Essex School suggests that meaning is formed through discursive articulation, referring to the process of signification in which ideas are placed in relation to each other via language and social interaction. Discourses are constantly negotiated systems of fixed meanings attached to things via language and social interaction, and at the core of politics is the constant discursive battle over which systems of meaning enjoy hegemony over others (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The public sphere therefore has the important task of organising a forum for this process to take place. As an ideal, the public sphere should facilitate inclusive and rational deliberation on the optimal political solutions acceptable to all parties (Habermas, 1989). Yet, a public sphere based on fully rational, inclusive, and functional deliberation has been criticised as utopian (Fraser, 1990; Geuss, 2019). Chantal Mouffe’s (2013) idea of agonism suggests that the public sphere should be regarded as a stage on which political actors, journalists, and citizens engage in a conflictual but respectful symbolic rhetorical struggle for acceptance of their preferred definitions of the topics of discussion. The ones who get their definitions accepted wield more power over those pushed to the side-lines. This symbolic struggle for hegemony is entirely a discursive process, which the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1982) calls the “politics of signification”. The discursive struggle for hegemony via the politics of signification is the process in which the political emerges (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), and today the process of formulating and challenging hegemonic discourses takes place in mediated form (Dahlgren, 2013: 19).

Online political communication – as an act of individualised effort seeking to influence decision-making processes – is strongly connected to the politics of signification, the historically changing series of acts giving meaning to societal phenomena (Hall, 1982). Today, this struggle for how political issues should be viewed takes place mostly in the mediated public sphere. In societies in which politics are mostly mediated, the ways in which politics are understood depend heavily on which issues are salient, how issues are framed, and how their representations receive their meanings. As Peter Dahlgren (2013) puts it, “Discourse theory is engaged in exploring the conditions that make specific identities, meanings, and practices possible, and how the dynamics of power support or alter them. Public spheres become not just sites of political communication, but rather the spaces that discursively construct specific political subjectivities” (p. 71). As media have an ability to provide mental guidelines for understanding the world beyond our physical realm, the mediated portrayal of politics affects how people experience political realities (Dahlgren, 2013; Mouffe, 2013: 143–144).

The study of populism as a political logic of articulation is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings and significations within political discussion. The power to signify – to give meaning to things – is not a force free of ideology. According to Dahlgren (2013), “Discourses can serve to help engender and sustain social order – as well as to challenge it – by solidifying patterns of meaning. Thus, discourses are more than just text or performance; they are ‘manifestations of (collective) social practice’” (p. 173). Signification affects perceptions of conflicting social issues and therefore affects their outcomes, as it is the means through which social understandings form – and therefore signification is also the means of mobilising support for political causes or organisations. In Laclau’s theory of populism as discursive articulation (2005), the construction of chains of equivalence facilitates the building of the political momentum necessary to enable counter-hegemony. Populist online communication can be regarded as part of the counter-hegemonic signification struggle over how societal situations are viewed. Therefore, people participating in online counterpublics can be regarded as agents of signification (Snow, 2004) who contest hegemonic understandings of social reality. And thus, online platforms can serve as counter-hegemonic spaces where people can get involved in communicating marginalised, for example populist radical right, understandings of society and its members’ relationships. These kinds of publics have been discussed in the literature as counterpublics (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Fenton and Downey, 2003; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002).

Counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated publics invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990: 67). Theoretically, counterpublics have been seen to coexist with mainstream publics that

do not grant “subaltern” or “marginalised” groups access to the public symbolic contestation and forging of solidarities that could lead to challenging the hegemony (Fraser, 1990; Nikunen, 2019). Counterpublics have been regarded as important for allowing the “recognition of the public struggles and political innovations of marginalised groups outside traditional or state-sanctioned public spaces and mainstream discourses” (Squires, 2002). Counterpublic research has focused heavily on spaces for progressive political struggle (Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2002: 446), but counterpublics are ambivalent in their contents (Alvarez and Dahlgren, 2016). Regardless of what kinds of solidarities and contestations they facilitate, counterpublics are thought to “expand discursive space” (Fraser, 1990: 67, 76–77). Counterpublics offer platforms for communication that challenges societal power relations (Warner, 2002) as they “offer space for critique for the dominant order and action to transform that order” (Squires, 2002: 447). Therefore, counterpublics are crucial for criticizing hegemonic discourses and for forming collective identities without the imminent threat of being silenced or compromised (Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2002: 450).

In the contemporary media environment, online platforms play an important role in the forming of counterpublics. From the early 2000s onwards, the Internet has been regarded as facilitating issue-specific collective action, lowering thresholds for political participation, and affecting how political movements organise (Castells, 2007; Coleman, 2017). Some have suggested that political movements organising via social media have been able to raise social and political issues and motivate people to call for political alternatives (e.g., Mouffe, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012). The online voicing of previously unmet political grievances has been regarded as enabling a new consciousness that creates incentives and momentum for political change that previously may not have found any institutional channels (Mouffe, 2013). These communities or movements often have liquid forms of leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012), and their participants contribute from their individualised perspective to building a collective identity within the public (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Like counterpublics in general, online movements have been researched, especially in the context of left-wing or otherwise progressive and radical democratic movements (Juris, 2008; Gerbaudo, 2012; Castells, 2012; Fenton, 2016; Nikunen, 2019). But in this thesis, various online platforms, social media, and online alternative media are regarded as facilitating counterpublics for populist radical right communication. By referring to populist online counterpublics, I am not asserting that the architecture of online platforms is inherently populist (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2018a) but that online platforms can be used to facilitate subaltern public spaces for populist political communication.

Counterpublic theory has recognised that counterpublics are rarely homogenous and, that when discussing them, we should be thinking of several overlapping publics

instead of a singular one (Warner, 2002). According to Rita Felski (1989), who worked on feminist movements, counterpublics are formed of “coalitions of overlapping sub-communities, which share common interest in combating (...) oppression but which are differentiated (...) often by institutional locations” (Felski 1989: 171). Also online populist radical right counterpublics are characterised by their many forms and locations, as populist counterdiscourses can be fostered in a wide range of locales, including populist politicians’ blogs, Facebook pages, news comments sections, alternative news platforms, Twitter networks, YouTube channels, and discussion platforms. Participation in online counterpublics can range from low-key mundane discussions to direct political campaign practices or from the “pre-political” to “para-political” to “full blown political”, and therefore online participation often has only remote links to institutional decision-making processes (Dahlgren, 2013: 18–19). According to Dahlgren (2013: 20), political participation in online counterpublics is thus very much subjective, and its affective intensity can range from mild to extremely emotional. In the same sense in which various online spaces overlap to form counterpublics, the various populist signification practices taking place in these locations overlap to contribute to the articulation of populist chains of equivalence.

### 4.3 Connectivity and materiality of online action

Researchers have suggested that online platforms not only facilitate political counterpublics but actively shape the form and mechanics of political action (Poell and van Dijk, 2018; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Milan, 2015a). According to Manuel Castells (2012: 225), digital networks can transform how activism plays out by facilitating leaderless cooperation and solidarity between individuals who do not necessarily share common goals and motives for participating. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2013) have gone even further to suggest that online platforms facilitate what they refer to as connective, instead of collective, action. According to their theory of connective action, the affordances of social media allow people to work together to produce action frames without any pre-existing connection or notion of solidarity. This can occur because connective action networks rely on the self-motivated sharing of personalised ideas, images, and resources (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 752–753). In connective logic, individuals can contribute horizontally as autonomous agents to the discursive construction of political subjects (Fenton, 2016: 106), be they protest movements (Dahlgren, 2013: Chapter 3) or political parties (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016). For populism as a logic articulation, the decentralised and horizontal nature of online communication (Fenton, 2016) means that the discursive labour carried out in online counterpublics will most likely affect the process in which societal demands are articulated into a

chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005). And, as this thesis shows, the multitude of autonomous communicators articulating party identity is a boon and a burden for party organisations.

Online counterpublics hosting a multitude of individuals communicating the thin-ideological core of populism can be an invaluable resource for party organizations trying to connect the supply and demand for populism at a historical moment. There are certain characteristics of online communication that have been regarded as being especially beneficial for online platforms in facilitating radical politics. Natalie Fenton (2016) suggests that the Internet allows activists to respond rapidly to events as they unfold with minimal bureaucracy and resources (pp. 26–28) and that online action’s connective elements make it possible for them to voice concerns and societal demands that otherwise might never be heard (p. 25). Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) suggest that digital media enables political parties to “renew from the outside in” by allowing activists to breathe new life into the old form of party politics (pp. 286–290). Many of the activists taking part in online counterpublics have been observed to portray a sort of “dual identification” (Heaney and Rojas, 2015) in which individuals regard themselves simultaneously as movement activists and party activists. Vaccari and Valeriani (2016: 295) suggest that online publics can deepen and broaden party-related engagement by providing new channels for party members to provide feedback, resources, and support and by enabling involvement for individuals who are not party members. Online counterpublics therefore complement professionalised political communication with grassroots citizen-initiated campaigning that is based on a loose, informal supporter network structure (Gibson, 2015: 191–192).

Connective political participation in online counterpublics can produce a wealth of discursive artefacts to be circulated and used for political campaigning both in online and legacy media as “activists simplify complex narratives of injustice into sound bites, images, and memes” (Treré, 2018: 147). This is highly relevant for online publics acting as agenda-setters as it has been suggested that online communication often spills over to mainstream media, increasing its societal effect many times over (Pfetsch et al., 2013; Zhou and Moy, 2007). For example, this spill-over, which results in the amplification of online discourses, can happen when journalists select pieces of online communication in their coverage or when politicians adopt arguments and frames from online discussions (Pfetsch et al., 2013: 12). Pfetsch, Silke and Bennett (2013) suggest that online counterpublics are especially likely to trigger spill-over into other parts of the public sphere if they have developed “strong issues and dominant frames in the online world” (p. 12). They propose that the strength and dominance of a frame is related to 1) the fact that the online coalition involves actors who are strongly connected and strongly prioritise a particular issue on their agenda, 2) that the coalition has a master frame that connects

the involved groups, and 3) that there are prominent frame sponsors to accelerate the spill-over (Pfetsch et al., 2013: 14).

As this thesis reveals, the spill-over of communication from online counterpublics to the mainstream media can be problematic for party organisations, as individuals' understanding of appropriate means for expressing the divide between the people and the elites might not be in line with what is regarded as acceptable for a parliamentary party in a liberal democracy. While populist radical right communication is especially prone to clashing with the values of liberal democracy (Krämer, 2018), it is also susceptible to being targeted with surveillance and scrutiny as, according to Eric Carlsson (2014), "in the realm of social networking media (...) the whole point of this form of communication is to watch and to be watched" (p. 43). The online actions of various populist radical right actors can therefore be regarded as taking place in a "digital enclosure" (Andrejevic, 2007: 212) of social media platforms on which data and information about individuals and groups interested in populist radical right parties or candidates' agendas are being constantly accumulated, archived, and surveilled. Stefania Milan has asserted that, because of the materiality and visibility of online political communication, online political action will inescapably become affected with what she calls the "politics of visibility" (Milan, 2015a). According to Milan, the politics of visibility has three consequences related to surveillance. First, it makes an online movement transparent to its opponents, making it easier for it to be targeted for scrutiny. Second, the politics of visibility causes self-surveillance as movement actors will react to external and internal communication that is discordant with the movement's core ideas, which can lead to conflict (see also Dahlgren, 2013: 28; Treré, 2015). But, third, public scrutiny and surveillance can also be turned into discursive opportunities for activism as the ones being targeted with surveillance can turn to inverse surveillance tactics (Milan, 2015a; 2015b).

Populism as a logic of articulation creates unity between groups and individuals who previously might not have had anything in common through the discursive construction of an imaginary of a people and its antagonism with elites (Laclau, 2005). As explained above and further elaborated later, the logics of online platforms as counterpublics can be argued to support the discursive placing of unmet societal demands into a populist chain of equivalence, but at the same time the same logics can prove to be challenging for the political party acting as the organisational vehicle of the equivalential chain. In the Laclaudian sense, unless they are identified as a channel for opposing the prevailing hegemony, populist parties in representative democracies cannot become channels for institutionalising any unmet societal demands. But at the same time, if their core message becomes widely perceived in public discussion as unacceptable, their chances of obtaining power to institutionalise those demands are likewise weakened. Therefore, investigating

discursive interactions pertaining to online populist communication between activists, politicians, and journalists is essential to understanding how the hybrid media system affects populist movements' viability as channels for political change.



# 5 Methodological approach

## 5.1 Qualitative multi-actor and multi-platform analysis of discursive interactions pertaining to populist political communication

The research question of this thesis – how does the hybridization of the media system affect populism as a political logic of articulation? – is operationalised through a cross-disciplinary post-structural discourse-theoretical approach. Populism in the hybrid media system is thus analysed from the perspective of meaning-making as discursive articulation (Laclau, 2005). This approach is essentially influenced by post-Marxist discourse theory, which suggests that the formation of “the political” is articulated via discourse instead of economic or structural factors being the prime historical determiners of identities and their transformations (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Articulation here is understood, from the Laclaudian perspective, to be the struggle to fix meaning and define reality in “the politics of signification” (Hall, 1982), that is, the process through which the meaning of things is negotiated in society (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105; Laclau, 2005: 68), a process that takes place today largely via media (Dahlgren, 2013: 19; Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). Therefore, populism as discursive articulation is regarded as a formal constitutive logic through which meaning is negotiated in a manner that allows political actors to represent “a people”, that is, a heterogeneous alliance of actors with grievances and unmet societal demands unified in a chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005).

As a methodological innovation, this approach connects the Laclaudian idea of populism as a logic of discursive articulation to theory that regard populism as communication (Esser et al., 2017; de Vreese et al., 2018) which suggests that populism can be observed in acts of signification that contain the thin-ideological or ideational (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Hawkins, 2018) and stylistic elements of populism (Moffitt, 2016). As a departure from previous studies that have viewed populism as a communication phenomenon, the study’s objective is not to examine the contents of populist communication or its salience in mediated political discussion. Instead, the goal is to describe how the hybridity of the media environment in which the politics of signification take place affects how populism as a formal logic of discursive articulation operates and plays out (see also Palonen

and Saesma, 2017: 33). Populism provides the discursive glue that connects societal demands and resentments around a signifier such as a political party or a movement that provides a shared point of identification for the collective effort to rectify these resentments against the wishes of an undeserved elite (Laclau, 2005). For a party or movement to be regarded as the “organisational vehicle” (Hawkins, 2018: 63) or carrier for a populist chain of equivalence, it needs to connect unmet societal demands and resentments to the movement, and this pursuit is what makes populism inherently steeped in communication (de Vreese et al., 2018: 427–428; Reinemann et al., 2017:16–19).

I argue that populist communication taking place in various online counterpublics has become part of the discursive process in which populist chains of equivalence are formed, diffused, and maintained in contemporary media systems (e.g., Krämer, 2017a; 2017b). As the hybrid media system provides chances for various kinds of interventions to communication (Chadwick, 2013), it also opens online populist political communication to intervention by other actors. Therefore, I suggest that it is not only populist communication that articulates populist chains of equivalence but also the ways in which different publics interact in producing and reacting to populist communication. More than just asking how online platforms are used to communicate populist ideas and style, this study asks how online populist communication is being interacted with by other actors in the hybrid media system and how this affects for the articulation of populist movements’ chains of equivalence. This doctoral thesis analyses the role of the media system’s hybridisation in the discursive articulation of the Finns Party as an “organisational vehicle” for populist mobilisation (Hawkins, 2018: 63). In the study, the Finns Party is regarded as the main carrier for an equivalential chain in which different unmet political demands are joined via discursive interaction processes taking place on various platforms provided by the hybrid media system. The aim is therefore to analyse how the democratisation of communication due to the rise of the Internet and social media has affected the discursive process in which the Finns Party became the institutional channel for the most successful and influential populist mobilisation in Finland, leading the party all the way in and out of government in the 2010s.

I argue that, for one to analyse successfully the articulation process of populist signifiers in the hybrid media system, the focus of the analysis must be shifted from populist political communication itself to the nature of the interactions with populist communication in the public sphere and how this reciprocally feeds back into populist communication. Therefore, I suggest that we update our understanding of the relationship of media and populism to include the idea of hybrid interactivity into heuristic models of how populist political communication is diffused in the public sphere. The model suggested by Esser et al. (2017; see also Reinemann et al., 2017: 22) presents populism by and through the journalistic media, but it largely sidesteps

the role of Internet-mediated communication and does not adequately consider reciprocal interactivity, which I claim is relevant to explaining how populist logic ends up articulating populist movements in the contemporary media environment. I suggest that the most pertinent permutations for analysing the diffusion of and interactions pertaining to populist political communication in the hybrid media system are as follows:

- 1) *Media populism*: Mainstream media communicating populist ideas and style independently of political actors (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Esser et al., 2017).
- 2) *Populist communication circumventing gatekeepers*: Populists communicating populist ideas and style independently of the mainstream media (e.g., Krämer; 2017b; Schroeder, 2018; Moffitt, 2016: 59–62).
- 3) *Populist remediation of media content*: Media content remediated by populists to communicate populist ideas and style (Article I).
- 4) *Journalistic amplification of populist communication*: Mainstream media covering populist communication and simultaneously participating in its dissemination (Esser et al., 2017; Wodak, 2015; Krämer, 2017a; Articles II and III).
- 5) *Civic amplification of populist communication*: Political opponents and activists discussing populist communication and simultaneously disseminating it via online and mainstream media (Article IV).
- 6) *Resistance backlash*: Populist communicators feeding on the mainstream media's and political opponents' mediated criticism of populist political communication in order to communicate populist ideas and style (Articles II, III and IV).

The sub-studies of this doctoral thesis focus on the permutations that explicitly pertain to the interaction between actors participating in producing and reacting to populist political communication. These types of interactions are evident in the populist remediation of media content, in the journalistic and civic amplification of populist communication, and in populist communicators' efforts to appropriate the mediated scrutiny that targets them. The method, then, for investigating how the media system's hybridity affects populism as a logic of articulation is to analyse the discursive mediated interactions between populist-party leadership, lower-level party representatives, journalists, anti-immigration online activists, and online opponents of the populist radical right. Therefore the method is based on a variety of qualitative textual analyses of texts from legacy and online media pertaining to populist communication produced by multiple actors on multiple platforms.

## 5.2 Sub-study datasets and types of analysis

The type of interaction in which populists act as remediators of media content is analysed in Article I. The questions of how journalistic media and activists react to online populist communication and of how populist communicators react to and deal with external scrutiny are analysed in Articles II, III and IV. Each of the four sub-studies has its own set of data, gathered especially for the research tasks of the individual articles. The different types of texts in these data sets include pieces of journalistic texts and textual online communication by populist-party politicians and individuals participating in online political activist groups. The textual analyses carried out in the sub-studies do not follow any formal pre-set text analysis methodologies, but the methods used do include characteristics of qualitative and quantitative content analysis, political discourse analysis, and frame analysis.

Article I investigates how populist-party politicians are using social media to share and reframe political news. More specifically, it analyses how populist politicians appropriate and adjust journalistic framings of the news to support the construction of a populist chain of equivalence in the context of a salient crisis viewed as providing an especially fruitful discursive opportunity for nationalist populist parties (Ylä-Anttila and Ylä-Anttila, 2015; Railo and Välimäki, 2012a). Article I contains a set of Facebook posts and news stories pertaining to the Eurozone crisis shared by Finns Party and UKIP MPs and MEPs who were in office between 2010 and 2015 and had a public Facebook page. The public Facebook posts were gathered using Netvizz, initially by gathering all posts from 43 MPs' and MEPs' public Facebook pages from the pages' activation until the end of 2015. From this larger data set, all posts that did not include a reference to the Eurozone crisis and a link of some sort were filtered out. The final data set consisted of 296 posts that included a link to a news-like source covering the Eurozone crisis. The next step was to analyse the news stories for their hegemonic frames pertaining to the Eurozone crisis and then compare them with the framing (or lack of) appearing in the texts the politicians attached to news items.

Article II analyses how right-wing populist-party representatives discursively manage accusations of racism on mainstream media platforms. The article provides a two-fold typology of responses populist-party representatives use to maintain an ambivalent rhetorical stance towards the use of exclusionary elements of populist radical right communication. The data set in Article II contains journalistic pieces from three countries' public broadcasting services' online news that contained an accusation of racism or extremism towards the Finns Party, the UKIP, or the Sweden Democrats. The criteria for collecting these items were as follows: the piece had to be published between 1 January 2010 and 31 August 2015, the piece had to contain an allegation or accusation of racism or xenophobia targeted at the party and the piece had to contain a quote from a party representative responding to the accusation.

The journalistic pieces were collected manually using search engines to find articles in which words related to racism and xenophobia appeared in tandem with the name of one of the three parties. The data collection was further extended with a snowball method by searching more articles relating to particular relevant media events. The final data set consisted of 58 articles on the Finns Party, 47 on the Sweden Democrats, and 40 on UKIP. The news pieces were coded by focusing on what kind of discursive damage-control strategies populist-party representatives were using to respond to allegations of racism. The categories of discursive damage-control strategies were partially derived from existing theories on racism denial (van Dijk, 1992; 1993), image repair and crisis communication (Benoit, 2015), and populist-party media strategies related to affiliations with racism (Wodak, 2013; 2015). These existing categorisations were adapted during the research process to better accommodate the political context of populist parties and racism accusations. The comparison between the parties and the clusters of strategies used played an important role in the analysis. Therefore, variables describing the contexts of the accusations and the stature of the accused actors and quoted representatives were implemented in coding the news pieces.

Article III investigates what kind of conflicts related to the construction and upkeep of populist chains of equivalence can form when a political party becomes affiliated with controversial online activism. The article investigates the mediated scrutiny arising from the cooperation between the Finns Party and the anti-immigration online discussion platform Hommaforum. It asks how journalists framed the party's association with Homma, how these accusations were dealt with by the party leadership, and how the activists on Homma responded to different types of party leader responses. The data collected had to be conducive to an analysis of the dynamics between journalistic coverage, the Finns Party leader, and the Hommaforum activists. The data in Article III therefore consist of news articles in which the party leader Timo Soini answered racism accusations and the comments by online anti-immigration activists written in response to the news articles discussed on Hommaforum. The heuristic process of gathering the data involved searching through 45,000 discussion threads on Hommaforum, locating all thread titles in which the name of the party leader or the party's name was present. As a first step, 1,074 threads were collected. Of these threads, 204 were selected that began with a mainstream media story in which the political party was accused of affiliation with online racism, prejudice, or xenophobia. Only threads in which Hommaforum users commented on Timo Soini's comments on the racism accusations were selected for the final analysis. The final data consisted of 78 news pieces and 1,298 individual comments. The articles were analysed to identify the main underlying causes for the racism accusations. Next, Timo Soini's responses to the accusations were analysed using the typological categorisation tool created in Article II. Last, each comment

was coded for whether the author disapproved or approved of Soini's responses or dismissed the accusations as media bias. This allowed the cross-tabulation of Soini's response strategies and the Hommaforum activists' reactions.

Article IV analyses the practices and strategies of civic monitoring that target populist radical right online action and how the populist radical right online counterpublics react to these monitoring practices. The study investigates the varieties, strategies, and reception of online action that opposes the populist radical right in Finland in the context of Rasmus, the largest and most active explicitly anti-racist Finnish Facebook community. The objective was to define civic monitoring as a type of online activism and to analyse its contents and potential consequences as a means of responding to online populist radical right communication. The data set for Article IV contains data collected from the public Rasmus Facebook group and several radical right Facebook groups. The full data set of almost 200,000 posts was filtered to locate posts that discussed the online actions of the Finnish populist radical right. The final data set consisted of 486 discussion threads on the Finns Party, 135 on MV-lehti, 126 on the Soldiers of Odin, 105 on the Rajat Kiinni movement, and 83 on Suomi Ensin. A qualitative content analysis was done on the threads to identify the main targets and strategies used. The Facebook pages of the five most targeted populist radical right actors were also collected for an analysis of how the actions of Rasmus activists were perceived and appropriated by the populist radical right.

### 5.3 Research ethics

Several ethical questions related to the gathering and analysing of the social media data must be addressed. Sets of social media data are analysed in Articles I, III, and IV. In Article I, where the data consist of elected politicians' public Facebook pages, the ethical considerations arising from using the social media data are not as significant. All the data gathered and analysed in Article I were pieces of publicly available online texts written by elected representatives (MPs or MEPs). As professional politicians, these individuals can be regarded as public figures and their online communication as acts of political campaigning. The analytical use of such social media data for research purposes can be compared to analysing politicians' texts published in, for example, newspapers.

In Articles III and IV, the analyses were partially based on public social media data. These data sets include pieces of content produced by individuals who are not public figures but who are still taking part in political campaigning and online political discussion. I recognise that online discussion platforms such as Facebook pages or Hommaforum can be considered as public spaces only to a certain extent. People taking part in public online discussions might not actively recognise that they are speaking in public and that their messages will be archived (Markham and

Buchanan, 2012). Also, taking into consideration the political combustibility of the research context, I recognised that an individual's right to remain anonymous is extremely important. Therefore, I also recognised that highlighting individuals' online actions might theoretically cause them harm – for example, by making them targets for online harassment or abuse, or even by putting them in physical danger (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). Because of this, all research data pertaining to non-politicians' real or screen names have been anonymised. As most analyses focused on quantitative content, the individuals' identities and textual inputs were not visible in the findings reported. In cases where textual excerpts from non-politicians were needed to illustrate the findings, the speakers' identities were anonymised, the quotes were translated into English and, in the process, rephrased to prevent the speakers' identification via search engines, as suggested by Annette Markham (2012).

Sets of social media data were gathered manually (Hommaforum) or by scraping, using software that allows access to Facebook's Application Programming Interface (API). All data collection from Facebook was done using Netvizz, which is software used strictly for academic purposes that allows the collection of data from public Facebook groups and pages (Rieder, 2013). Netvizz does not collect, store, or share any of the data being collected by researchers using the application. In the process of scraping texts and metadata from large Facebook pages and groups, data that is irrelevant to answering the research questions is unavoidably gathered. Therefore, the larger sets of Facebook data were heavily filtered to weed out such irrelevant data.

## 6 Summaries of the original publications

In the following segment, the core empirical findings of the sub-studies are briefly summarised. The full studies can be found in the appendices. In the last chapter of the thesis, the findings of the individual sub-studies are further elaborated and synthesised with the previously outlined academic discussions to answer the main question of how populist logic operates in the hybrid media system.

### 6.1 Article I: Facebook and the populist right: How populist politicians use social media to reimagine the news in Finland and the UK

Article I investigates the role of social media in the populist remediation of financial crisis journalism. Crises provide populist parties with discursive windows of opportunity, but we know little about social media's role in the process in which the mediated salience of economic recession or crisis, especially regarding coverage that is highly elite-driven, is appropriated to contribute to populist political communication. The article analyses how politicians from two parties – UKIP and the Finns Party – have utilized news sharing on Facebook to construct grievances, attribute blame, and mobilise support in the context of the Eurozone crisis between 2010 and 2015. The findings suggest that social media provided populist politicians with an alternative means for rewiring the ideological contents of mainstream news through selective news sharing and active challenging of news frames. The study reveals that the studied populist-party MPs rely heavily on mainstream – instead of alternative – media sources, but they also actively reframe stories to provide a parallel populist interpretation of the news agenda. This process of running the news flow through a populist filter can be regarded as contributing to the news flow becoming more resonant and compatible with the populist demands to replace elites with representatives of the people.

The findings let us re-evaluate the role of news frames as factors independently contributing to the appeal of online populist political communication. In some studies, the relationship between media and populism has been evaluated based on



the amount of anti-elitist and people-centrist communication presented in different media (Esser et al., 2018; Wettstein et al., 2018). Theories on the role of framing in the relationship of politics and the media have largely focused on elite-driven frame contests where the focus has been directed at how the news frames political events and thus conveys a specific understanding of society (Entman, 2004). However, as Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) suggest, in the hybrid media system, the framing power has to be rethought because “growing numbers of citizens seldom follow these contests attentively and (...) can select their own frames from sources beyond legacy media” (p. 248). Gianpetro Mazzoleni (2014) has suggested that, especially in the ground-laying phase of populist movements, “social media (...) have acquired a very special function (...) of picking up the populist output of the mass media and relaunching it in the wider context of the electronic public sphere, thus generating a favourable climate of opinion” (p. 51). Article I’s findings partially confirm this idea, as most pieces of crisis news do not have to be reframed by populist politicians for them to convey a populist idea. But the findings also make it clear that populist ideas can be conveyed in news sharing regardless of whether the frames of the shared pieces support populist thin ideology or style. Shared mainstream media content therefore does not have to be ideationally or stylistically populist for it to contribute to populist political online communication. As news content can be discursively reframed to support populist communication, the role of journalistic framing of individual grievances can be regarded perhaps as being less relevant to the constructing and maintaining of populist equivalential chains.

As Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) have eloquently pointed out, in “networked framing” online publics can actively participate in creating and disseminating frames in society. The fact that mainstream news coverage is constantly being discursively reattributed to contribute to populist framing of news events somewhat questions the validity of content analyses that presuppose an existing connection between the hegemony of particular news frames and any real-world political developments. The mainstream media should therefore be regarded as significant in setting and priming the discussion agenda, but we should also recognise that the framing of the discussed topics can be highly specialised online (see also Zhou and Moy, 2007). Contrary to the idea of decentralisation of information sources in the hybrid media system (Mazzoleni, 2014: 44) and the rise of so-called “fake news” (Farkas and Schou, 2018), online populist communication by parliamentarians and MEPs appears as the relatively mundane and repetitive dissemination of information pieces from popular mainstream sources reframed to support the idea of elites denying the people their sovereignty.

## 6.2 Article II: Confrontational yet submissive: Calculated ambivalence and populist parties' strategies of responding to racism accusations in the media

Article II analyses how the materiality of populist radical right online communication makes affiliated political parties susceptible to being targeted for journalistic scrutiny and how populist parties respond to this scrutiny in the mainstream media. The article provides a typology of the strategies used by populist-party representatives to respond to racism accusations on mainstream media drawn from a systematic analysis of the responses of UKIP, Finns Party, and Sweden Democrats representatives in public service media between 2010 and 2015. The study reveals that journalistic scrutiny of populist radical right online communication is responded to in a way that communicates an ambivalent stance towards breaches of liberal democratic norms. This ambivalence is maintained using combinations of submissive and confrontational discursive damage-control strategies that serve different functions. The submissive strategies aim to appease the wider public's concerns regarding racism by distancing the party from the actors causing controversy in action and rhetoric, by providing excuses for individual speech acts, and by issuing quasi-apologies. The confrontational strategies aim to appeal to voters who support populist radical right communication. These strategies include reversing accusations, not answering journalists' questions completely, and claiming accusations are false.

The study reveals in detail how, during elongated media scandals, populist parties can maintain ambivalence towards controversial party-affiliated communication. This ambivalence is maintained on the individual-representative level by combining submissive and confrontational strategies and on the entire-party level by using contradictory strategies from multiple communicators. The use of different strategies was observed to be linked to the organisational position of the representative giving the statement and of the person under accusation. The closer the representatives giving the statement are to the party core, the more submissive their responses are – that is, whereas party leaders, parliamentary group leaders, party secretaries, and party communication specialists tend to be submissive, the national and local politicians tend to be more confrontational in commenting on the party's affiliation with (online) racism. Also, the stature of the person drawing the accusations affects the confrontational or submissive nature of responses. For example, cases involving low-ranking party members were significantly more likely to be responded to in a submissive manner, one that highlights the party's denunciation of racism, compared to scandals that involve major parliamentarians. There were also notable differences between the parties. For instance, it appears that the more legitimate the party's position is in the parliamentary system, the more

leeway it has to remain confrontational towards criticism over breaching liberal democratic norms.

The study provides a practical analytical tool for analysing the discursive brokerage that is essential for populist parties to remain viable while utilizing the so-called populist *perpetuum mobile* (Wodak, 2013; 2015). The study explains how controversial online utterances can discursively keep contributing to a party's chain of equivalence without risking the loss of legitimacy among constituencies that might be less resonant to extreme or controversial rhetoric. A party's stance towards exclusionary-populist online utterances can therefore be regarded as being articulated in the interplay of multiple communicators communicating different messages on multiple platforms. A continuation study that includes an analysis of the use of different strategies across mainstream and party-controlled media (Hatakka et al., 2018) found that Finns Party representatives tended to be significantly more confrontational on online media compared to mainstream media. This finding further confirms the key role of online counterpublics as facilitators of double-speak, spaces where a party organisation can utilize online populist radical right discourses while simultaneously claiming to denounce such talk, and, as elaborated later in the discussion, this process is crucial to what populist logic ends up articulating in the hybrid media system.

### 6.3 Article III: When logics of party politics and online activism collide: The populist Finns Party's identity under negotiation

Article III continues the theme of Article II, focusing on the mediated interactions pertaining to the Finns Party's affiliation with populist radical right online action. The analysis focuses on the interactions between journalists, the Finns Party leader Timo Soini and anti-immigration activists on Hommaforum between 2008 and 2015. The article suggests that utilizing an online political movement's discourse and providing candidacies to core discursive leaders of an online movement can provide the party organisation with resources it might not otherwise be able to access. But cashing in on these resources also means that the heterogeneous styles and ideological contents of the online actors' communication will start contributing to the articulation of the party's chain of equivalence in the mediated public sphere – for better and for worse. Therefore, the party leadership must broker internal and external conflicts that arise due to the party-affiliated populist radical right communication being scrutinised by journalists and political opponents. On the one hand, the party leader must denounce extreme rhetoric but doing so risks losing support among anti-immigration supporters who identify with the party.

Article III's findings suggest that the most effective way to retain the support of anti-immigration voters is to use confrontational discursive strategies when responding to accusations – especially by reversing accusations, answering vaguely, or not answering at all. The other option of choosing to take journalists and political opponent's concerns over party-affiliated extremism seriously and responding to accusations in a submissive manner has the opposite effect – potentially leading to the party's equivalential chain to start disintegrating. The analysis shows that in cases where Timo Soini was confrontational, his statements gained approval or the accusations were regarded as biased fabrications on Hommaforum. In cases when Soini was quoted as giving submissive statements to the media, he was met with vitriolic disapproval among the online anti-immigration activists. The article therefore reveals that journalistic scrutiny of a party's affiliation with controversial online communication creates conflict between a more moderate leadership and the party's more extreme online faction only when the party leadership is publicly forced to take distance. In all other cases, journalistic scrutiny of the party's affiliation with online exclusionary rhetoric was observed to discursively tie the more radical activists closer to the party. Thus, even though there is an inherent disparity between the logics of party politics and connective online activism, the mixing of online and traditional media spheres in the articulation of chains of equivalence can be beneficial for an organisational vehicle from the point of view of gathering resources at the cost of increased scrutiny.

#### 6.4 Article IV: Expose, debunk, ridicule, resist! Networked civic monitoring of populist radical right online action in Finland

Article IV analyses the targets, strategies, and caveats of online civic monitoring of populist radical right online action in the context of Rasmus, the largest explicitly anti-racist activist group on Finnish Facebook. This study proposes the term *civic monitoring* as a form of online connective action in which individuals or groups voluntarily participate in the individualised scrutiny and challenging of manifestations of online action they evaluate as societally harmful. Civic monitoring can be regarded as an extension of the institutional and journalistic scrutiny targeting online populist radical right communication that breaches liberal democratic norms, and the article discusses whether civic monitoring could complement other forms of monitoring in those aspects in which the latter have been observed to be inadequate. The study uses a content- and discourse-analytical approach to analyse 1) what forms of radical right online action Rasmus has monitored, 2) what kind of strategies the activists have employed, and 3) how these monitoring actions have been perceived and reacted to within radical right online publics. The findings reveal that civic

monitoring can agilely target various types and manifestations of radical right online action, compromise radical right counterpublics as safe spaces, mobilize counteraction and, in some cases, provide relevant information on the institutional linkages between online extremism and party politics for further investigation by journalists.

The study reveals that when confined to a public architecture of corporate social media, unmoderated civic monitoring might not aid in decreasing the salience populist radical right action. In many cases, civic monitoring contributes to the visibility of cases of online extremism already exposed by journalists, providing momentum for the populist perpetuum mobile. Even though the inherent visibility of controversial online action has made far right action susceptible to scrutiny, civic monitoring alone – especially when it involves anti-populist preaching to the choir that can be easily appropriated for rhetorical counterattacks – might not have its intended effect of undermining the appeal of populist radical right online action. In particular, forms of civic monitoring that can be interpreted as hateful can prove counterproductive because they are easily used to reinforce a populist boundary of difference between a people and the malicious elites that oppose them. Overall, this could mean that, whereas civic monitoring provides visibility for populist radical right agendas and makes anti-racist activists targets for malicious counterattacks, it does not necessarily discourage people from sympathizing with parties that act as organisational vehicles for the demands expressed by the online radical right.

## 7 Conclusions and discussion: Populism as a political logic of articulation in the hybrid media system

The task of this doctoral thesis was to investigate how the media system's hybridisation affects the discursive articulation of chains of equivalence that act as the backbone of populist mobilisations and how this affects the form, contents, and perception of populist parties. In other words, it was analysed how the Internet's increasingly prevalent role in the interactive circulation of information in society has affected how populist ideas are communicated and responded to in the public sphere, how this interactive process affects what populist organisational vehicles are perceived to represent, and to what extent this affects the ability of populism as a discursive logic to articulate viable channels for the institutionalisation of unmet societal demands. The questions were explored from different points of view in four research articles focusing on the interaction between populist-party representatives, journalists, and citizen activists producing and reacting to populist online communication in three countries. In the theoretical introduction of the thesis, the scope of the analysis was limited to the Finns Party and its discursive affiliation with online populist radical right communication.

Populist radical right online counterpublics emancipate previously marginalised political ideas and styles of expression. The Internet has democratised the production of information, making it easier to produce and circulate ideas and political styles that appear anomalous compared to the mainstream. Online counterpublics contribute to communication between populist politicians and their supporters. The latter not only identify with the politicians' message but also participate in contributing to communicating parallel messages in heterogeneous ways. While online counterpublics provide populist parties with much-needed resources for articulating their message, they also provide material contexts for journalistic and civic surveillance and monitoring. Because of the journalistic media's attraction to the controversial, especially illiberal or otherwise counterhegemonic acts of signification tend to spill over from online counterpublics to the hegemonic public

sphere. Due to the way journalists and political opponents interact with online populist communication, the most controversial online acts of signification are likely to be targeted with public scrutiny. This leads the most exclusionary or otherwise unappreciated acts of populist communication to start affecting the public's perception of the equivalential chain articulated around its organisational vehicle – in this case, the Finns Party. The dynamics between online populist communication, its public scrutiny, and the organisational actors' responses to criticism affect how populism as a logic of articulation is likely to play out and how populist movements develop over time. This informs us that it is not only the media environment but also the populist communication itself that has become hybrid and that we should take this into consideration in populism research.

## 7.1 Hybrid populist political communication

The emergence of more horizontal, inclusive, and accessible means for political communication has widened the boundaries of how communities come into being via the populist logic of discursive articulation (Laclau, 2005). Populism provides political agency to groups of individuals through the discursive production of ideas of “us” and “them” or of “the people” and “the elites” (Canovan, 2002). These placeholder terms act as empty signifiers used to unite various grievances and societal demands to form chains of equivalence, meaning they link together various actors with various views as an imagined community, a “people” that aims to restore the sovereignty taken by “the elite” (Laclau, 2005). The media environment in which populism is discursively produced and performed has drastically changed towards a media system described as hybrid (Chadwick, 2013). In the hybrid media system, the spread of information takes place in multiple publics at multiple times and is carried out by multiple actors with multiple voices (see also Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 9). The fact that the hybrid media system has many actors with multiple voices and the means to produce, circulate, and reframe information has been central to describing the reconfigurative power of social media (Chadwick, 2011; 2013).

Online, individuals have more power to define why and how they participate in political action and what they are trying to accomplish (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). This means that populist movements organising around any empty signifier gather a large number of people with differing views and motivations to share same political insignia or political identities. As online platforms allow these individuals to publicly communicate their ideas of what their movement represents, I argue that the multi-voiced nature of populist communication will affect the evaluation of the societal worth of any affiliated political insignia, that is, the signifiers used in populist logic to unite actors in alliance to demand rectification of unmet societal demands. In non-hybrid media systems predating the Internet, people identified with

political (and populist) movements and participated in political action based on differing motivations and understandings of desired courses for action. Still, a distinguishing feature was missing: these individuals' discursive actions were rarely public and did not gain any mediated form. Most often, extreme or otherwise anomalous statements made from the ranks of a movement or party would go unmediated and undiscussed as the communication of the movement's collective goals and means for action was organised through identifiable official core movement organisations, leaders, and party media. Before the hybrid media system, individuals' relatively mundane expression of ideas did not contribute to a similar extent to the public negotiation over a movement's characteristics. Therefore, the hybridisation of the media system contributes to populist discursive logic in a way that allows a broader array of acts of signification made in online counterpublics to become part of the public discursive articulation of populist chains of equivalence. Taking this into consideration, I argue that, in the hybrid media system, populist communication should be regarded as hybrid in more than one sense – at least technologically, organisationally, ideologically, and stylistically.

First, the production, dissemination, and scrutiny of populist political communication can be regarded as *technologically hybrid*, that is, there is no clear-cut divide between old and new media populist communication as the logics between types of media and media technologies are increasingly interconnected. Party-affiliated online communication affects acts of signification made on legacy media and vice versa: journalism feeds online populist communication and populist online communication feeds journalism. The wider mosaic of populist acts of signification – and also the articulation of the populist movement – is therefore formed in the interaction between multiple technologies and platforms of mediation. The creation and diffusion of populist online communication should be regarded as hybrid in terms of its dissemination and reach, as journalistic practices, various political logics, social media algorithms, and individual choices in engaging with content all affect what kinds of political acts of signification from the ranks of populist movements gain the most attention. Therefore populist logic does not only have an affinity with the logics of *social media* (Gerbaudo, 2018a; Van Dijk and Poell, 2013) but with those of the wider hybrid media system. The populist logic of articulation is affected by multiple interconnected logics, only some of which can be regarded as merely technological. Therefore, it is not only digital communication technologies and Internet-mediated communication that populism scholars should pay attention to when researching the role of the Internet for populism.

Populist political communication should also be regarded as *organisationally hybrid*. As suggested in this thesis, populist political communication constitutes signification acts from multiple sources: party leaders, national level politicians, low-level party politicians, party supporters, parallel civic movements' activists, and



other actors claiming to represent or viewed as representing “the people”. The online setting thus allows parallel communications that contribute to the same populist chain of equivalence by legitimate institutional actors and less legitimate extra-parliamentary actors without any clear institutional connection between the two. The hybrid media system therefore makes online commenters, low-level party members, intra-party dissidents, and even malicious trolls potentially visible agents of signification participating in the public defining of the people, of the elites, and of the elites’ allies. These actors’ communication is not necessarily officially affiliated by organisation with any political party, nor is it in many cases in line with the party’s official platform or communication strategy. Still, they constantly contribute to the parallel articulation of the people and the elites in a way that may resonate with the party’s message and appeal to its constituencies, even though the content and style of the online populist radical right communications would be regarded as unacceptable were they made, for example, by a party MP on any mainstream media platform. In other words, controversial online action can become discursively affiliated with a populist organisational vehicle without direct organisational affiliation. Therefore, it can be increasingly difficult to clearly define where and when acts of populist communication stop contributing to the articulation of a chain of equivalence. This also makes the journalistic scrutiny of politicians utilizing the discursive field cultivated by parallel online populist communication rather challenging.

It would be analytically useful to regard populist communication – also in the case of a single party or movement – as *ideologically hybrid* as different people participating online in the articulation of a movement bring different ideological contents. The transformation of the Finns Party exemplifies how a populist party can be just moderately anti-elitist and simultaneously radically exclusionary and nativist in its populism, depending on whose acts of signifying the “people”, the “elites”, and the elites’ allies one focuses on. This ideological hybridity resulting from multi-voiced articulations made on multiple platforms by people with differing understandings of the same issues can be the reason why populist movements that use online media as key organisational tools – such as the 5 Star Movement – have been regarded as ideologically “polyvalent” (Pirro, 2018). Therefore, in the hybrid media system, the organisational vehicles for a chain of equivalence are likely to become attached to multiple thicker-ideological frameworks or their variations.

And lastly, populist communication should be regarded as *stylistically hybrid* as the discursive ideational framework of a populist movement can be communicated using different styles on different media platforms and in different contexts by different – and sometimes even the same – actors (Hatakka et al., 2018). Finns Party MPs, for example, can attach similar ideological contents to their populism and use identical terminology as more extreme far right online activists, but the two can be

entirely different stylistically. Whereas core-party representatives tend to refrain from anti-pluralist or uncivil styles of expression especially on mainstream media platforms, online activists' communication can range from well-argued and sourced contributions to illogical conspirationism and clear-cut racism. While only the institutional representatives' style remains within the borders of acceptability, they both contribute to the articulation of a shared idea of society that is inherently divided into a particular corrupt elite and an oppressed people. This finding also pertains to the validity of the arguments and the factuality of the pieces of information used to back up populist political communication. Despite journalistic and semi-academic analyses of the "post-Trump era" having associated populism with computational propaganda, disinformation, and malicious disregard for "the truth", this is clearly the case only for a fraction of all populist online communication. In particular, established populist-party politicians largely rely on pieces of information that can be regarded as accurate and factual. But at the same time, this does not mean that uncivil, misleading, or ideologically combustible manifestations of party-affiliated populist online communication would not contribute to how other parties, citizens, and the media perceive and react to populist parties.

Taking the above into consideration, I argue that not only populist political communication but also the populist logic of articulation is inherently hybrid in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we wish to understand populism in a media environment with multiple actors on multiple platforms negotiating meaning interactively, I suggest that it could be beneficial to pay closer attention theoretically to this: it is via a plethora of individual mediated acts of populist communication – which can vary in their ideological and stylistic content depending on who is speaking and in what context – that populist movements and their organisational vehicles become attached to thicker ideologies and to other contextually relevant systems of belief. Also, it should be recognised that only when they are brought together can individual pieces of populist communication be regarded as forming a larger communicational mosaic that articulates the chains of equivalence pertinent to the populist movement. This suggests that the understanding of what a populist party represents is not dictated by the party leader or by the party's programmes but is formed in the complex discursive interaction between all actors participating in producing and reacting to populist communication. Following this argument, it is only in its articulation via multiple acts of mediated communication that populism becomes extant, alive, material, and real, that is, something that can be discussed, denounced, or be identified with.

As the hybrid media system allows the overlapping and parallel communication of the ideas unifying unmet social demands into a chain of equivalence, this raises questions about the value of evaluating contemporary populist political communication only from the perspective of political leaders or institutional platforms (e.g., Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018). Different representatives of the

same political party and its adjacent online communities are contributing to the articulation of the same people and its enemies very differently, and the same empty signifiers are given different meanings by various actors in different mediated publics. The underlying problem for political parties or leaders is that they are required to act as the organisational vehicle for multiple fragmented demands that are articulated as part of the equivalential chain beyond their direct control. The multi-voiced communication of the Finns Party's identity in the hybrid media system shows that a populist party can simultaneously be civil and uncivil, moderate and extremist, inclusionary and exclusionary, tolerant and plain racist. Therefore, populism research should recognise the inherent ambiguity of both populist communication and populist logic in the hybrid media system as populist movements conjure support from a wide array of grievances using multiple actors, rhetorical styles, and ideological contents. Therefore, the positivist attempt to reduce the essence of a party's populism into few variables (e.g., Norris and Inglehart, 2019: Chapter 7; Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2018) is problematic.

## 7.2 Emancipation, scrutiny, and normalisation of controversial populist communication

Taking into consideration the fact that populist political communication is hybrid and consists of various ideological and stylistic contents presented on multiple platforms by various actors, we should address how this affects how populist organisational vehicles are perceived. The normalisation of the populist radical right takes place through a discursive communication process involving reactions and counter-reactions of party organisations, activists, party supporters, journalists, political opponents, and the general public. The public mediated negotiation over the legitimacy of the populist radical right aims to define the parties' or other organisational vehicles' identities, that is, before they are accepted as legitimate and accepted players in representative politics, the hybrid media system provides the platforms for figuring out the ideological composition of the parties and their factions, how they wish to change society, and what kinds of values and worldviews they represent. Especially because populist parties and movements are often newcomers to political systems, they tend to have to run the gauntlet of public criticism, and I suggest that the ways in which this gauntlet is organised and how the movements defend themselves against scrutiny are factors that shape their form and direction.

While it is clear that online counterpublics have many benefits for the collective discursive effort of constructing populist chains of equivalence around organisational vehicles, the hybridity of the communication makes it nearly inevitable that there will also be uncivil and contextually reprehensible

communication that will be linked back to the organisational vehicle or some other core signifier used by the movement. This means that populist communication manifesting in online publics provides stimuli, motivation, and material targets for public scrutiny and criticism of populist parties for journalists and political opponents. The populist parties' adversaries have a special interest in framing their political rival's association with questionable political ideas and style to their most extreme capacity. Taking into consideration their high journalistic value, potential to go viral, and suitability for being used in political smearing, the most controversial aspects of party-affiliated communication thus often become more salient in public discussion via their journalistic and civic amplification.

I claim that, in the hybrid media system, the originally empty signifiers for the "people" are less likely to remain empty because the most polarising elements of populist communication taking place online are very likely to start tainting the mediated representation of "the people" as a whole. In other words, empty signifiers that are pivotal for any populist mobilisation cannot be expected to remain empty for long in a system where signification is horizontal and where attention is directed towards acts of signification that breach norms of what is regarded as acceptable. Thus, a political party or movement cannot expect to utilize loose populist empty signifiers that articulate the people and the elites for long periods before these signifiers are assigned meaning via the increased mediated scrutiny that targets controversial online communication that discursively contributes to the party's equivalential chain. For the Finns Party, this meant changing from being regarded as a folksy anti-establishment populist party to being viewed as a populist radical right anti-immigration party.

Following this, I argue that because of the media's commercial and watch-dog logics, because of the algorithmic amplification of the controversial, and because populist online communication is also monitored by political opponents and concerned citizens, it is the most controversial aspects of populist communication that are likely to become the most visible, discussed, and interacted-with forms of populism in the public sphere. The scrutinised elements of populist communication are therefore rarely related to the inclusive elements of populist communication but instead are related to particularly counterhegemonic acts of signification that contain exclusionary and illiberal ideas or an abrasively uncivil style. In the context of the populist radical right in liberal democracies, these elements are almost always related to nativism, authoritarianism, and racism. I suggest that this means that, in the hybrid media system, the societal merit and value of the signifiers that act as carriers for an equivalential chain will be mostly likely evaluated based on their most controversial counterhegemonic elements. For example "the Finns Party" and "immigration scepticism" as signifiers used to form an equivalential chain have become strongly associated with racism, extremism, islamophobia, and xenophobia because the

online setting amplified by traditional media has allowed these elements to contribute continually to the articulation of the party's identity, and the party leadership has not yet to take clear action to unequivocally discourage and denounce such talk.

As Articles II and III reveal, public mediated scrutiny can be useful for populist parties depending on their chosen discursive strategy when responding to criticism. Populist parties do have tools for brokering scrutiny to maintain an ambivalent stance that allows them to hold on to controversial online discursive assets without risking the loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public. Institutional leaders of populist parties therefore can discursively broker to what extent online articulations are given power to contribute to the understanding of what the party represents. This also means that populist leadership in the hybrid media system is not only about producing and disseminating populist communication but increasingly a task of brokering internal and external conflict (Article III) that emerges from the visibility of controversial affiliated acts of communication that are useful for gaining support but can be detrimental to the party's public image.

The brokering of conflict between the parts of the chain of equivalence could be regarded as the cost of cashing in on radical communication taking place in online counterpublics, and this brokering necessitates constant discursive maintenance of the unity of "the people". If a party wishes to hold on to a loose understanding of "the people" and to keep benefitting from ideologically or stylistically controversial online communication, it must communicate a permissive stance towards illiberal communication acts. If party leadership selected a confrontational discursive strategy for responding to criticism over the scrutinised communication acts, this would likely mean that controversial online communication would remain associated with the party and be normalised over time. Public scrutiny targeting the party therefore can create conflict between the party and the actors causing the mediated controversy only if the party leadership were to take distance and condemn the criticised actions. The problem is that populist leaders might not be willing to do so as it is cost-effective to remain confrontational or even openly hostile towards criticism regarding extremism. Therefore, populist leaders dealing with accusations are prone to using confrontational discursive strategies that rely on heightening the boundary of difference between "the people" and "the elite" to explain why their party is artificially being smeared with journalists' and political opponents' biased allegations. Therefore, even long-lasting and prevalent mediated scrutiny targeting the most controversial elements of populist parties' communication seems ineffective in ridding them of their ability to successfully cater to constituencies that are drawn in by radical right communication. In fact, it is likely to do just the opposite, causing populist parties to spiral further into antagonism and anti-pluralism.

By remaining confrontational towards accusations of extremism, the populist radical right can be regarded as being in a win-win situation. If potential supporters are attracted to exclusionary or anti-pluralist elements of populist communication, then they are likely to support the party for expressing them. If individuals feel that the highlighted exclusionary acts of signification amplified by the media are not at the core of what their movement represents, then they will likely perceive or at least entertain the idea that the media's and political opponents' portrayal of their "people" has been a misrepresentation. This perception could make individuals more attuned to accepting populist communication that claims that elites are trying to invalidate justified societal demands by presenting bastardised versions of them. When this effect of perceived misrepresentation is combined with populist-party representatives' confrontational strategies for responding to criticism by heightening the discursive divide between "the people" and "the elite", the hybrid media system is likely to contribute to making the party's equivalential chain more focused and pronounced – contributing to the party's gravitation towards more extreme forms of populism that cater to the logics of news values, algorithms, and reciprocal political agitation. The intertwining of the logics of populism and the hybrid media system therefore could be used to partially explain why the most successful populist movements of the 2010s tend to verge on the radical and are openly hostile towards opposition.

### 7.3 Is populist logic less likely to be a democratic corrective in the hybrid media system?

As the hybrid media system increases the salience of the least-appreciated elements of populist communication as core characteristics of populist movements, how does this affect populist movements' ability to institutionalise unmet societal demands in liberal parliamentary democracies? The mainstream media and political opponents participate in providing populist empty signifiers with meaning by scrutinising controversial populist discursive actions made visible and material on online platforms. The scrutiny arising from the hybridisation of the media system reduces the vagueness of empty signifiers as uniting symbols, which means they are likely to become less effective as tools for gathering support as widely as possible. This thesis suggests that, for populist parties, the best way to counter the disintegration of their populist chain of equivalence is to discursively heighten the antagonistic frontier between the people and the elites – for example, by reversing accusations and claiming that the media are biased (Articles II and III). As controversial acts of signification and their rebuttals are made more prevalent, the hybrid media system facilitates the unceasing creation of mediated micro-events that feed into the performing and intensifying of antagonism especially because, for the populists,

being confrontational is the most functional strategy for responding to external attempts to break the populist chain of equivalence. The phenomenon of media hostility among parties and movements could therefore be viewed as a discursively effective response to journalists' and activists' efforts to make populist empty signifiers less vague. This explains why hostility towards the media is such a prevalent feature in especially most populist radical right movements.

The individual studies of this thesis do not comprehensively answer the question of why the hybrid media system tends to highlight controversial populist communication. The answer is most likely related to journalistic values and practices, to the logics of political competition, and to the algorithmic design of online platforms that promotes content that gathers the most interactions. I encourage further populism research that recognises that it is not only the logic of social media as a technological means of circumventing gatekeepers that contributes to the normalisation of radical right populism, but that it is also the mediated interactions between actors in the hybrid media system that do so. Therefore, when analysing or discussing populist online communication and its role in the rise of populist political parties, one must consider that there are different ways of communicating populist ideas and style within populist parties and that certain kinds of communications are more alluring in terms of being amplified by the media and political opponents. It is not populism overall that should be (or is) challenged, but the fact that when populist actors insist on keeping their identification requirements loose, that is, remain permissive or ambivalent towards controversial affiliated or parallel acts of signification, that the logics of the hybrid media system turn their institutional organisations into carriers for the most unappreciated elements of populist communication. As argued above, this process can be extremely relevant for the future direction and corrective democratic potential of populist movements. Party leaders have a key role in deciding what articulations are allowed in the party and thus in defining to what extent the more extreme ideas of, for example, the online radical right are normalised in the public sphere and ultimately institutionalised via elections. This means that the ways in which populist-party representatives respond to criticism regarding their party's affiliation with exclusionary, illiberal, or even illegal communication do not just affect the public image of the party, they also affect the process of discursive articulation in which these acts of signification are normalised as part of the movement's chain of equivalence. In other words, parties' public communication regarding their perceived affiliation with extreme action will affect what the parties are likely to become institutional channels for.

Because of the hybridity of populism in the hybrid media system, a non-radical-right populist movement that allows populist radical right communication from within its ranks is likely to eventually become populist radical right in nature unless the movement's leadership publicly and unequivocally denounces such

communication, thus limiting its access to contributing to the movement's collective discursive construction of the people and the elites. Therefore, public scrutiny – be it journalistic or civic – targeting controversial elements of populist communication should be framed such that politicians have difficulty in constructing ambivalence via, for example, confrontational strategies. As this thesis shows, merely increasing the salience of online extremism can contribute to these elements becoming an inherent part of a party's equivalential chain via the interactive discursive process described above. The most efficient way to decrease political parties' chances of being able to utilize online extremism is not to make the controversial parts of the chain of equivalence more visible but to create intra-party discussion and conflict. The key is to force party actors and voters into introspection regarding whether these elements represent what they as individuals are willing to support. This would require populist leaders to respond unambiguously regarding their party's affiliation with exclusionary and anti-pluralist communication, which is easier said than done. And for leaderless and more abstract populist movements – ones that organise around hashtags, for example – this problem is even more pronounced.

I agree with most scholars that populism can be a threat and a corrective for democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Making this evaluation is entirely contextual and a derivative of the ideological contents to which populism is attached and of how the conflictual nature of the people, the elites, and the elites' allies is stylistically performed. Populism can correct deficits of representation by providing legitimate channels for institutionalising unmet societal demands (Laclau, 2005), but populism can also attach itself to movements and ideological bases that are directly against democracy, or at least its liberal components (e.g., Müller, 2016). This study shows that the articulations voiced by and attributed to a particular movement form a hybrid mosaic of multiple voices, of which some can be highly exclusionary. Some of these voices can be directly linked to the party organisation; some are involved only loosely. Some of the voices might not have any organisational connection whatsoever but can still contribute to an ideologically and stylistically parallel articulation of a populist equivalential chain. As described in the main argument of this dissertation, these acts of signification are interacted with in the hybrid media system in a way that could make populism less conducive to fulfilling its theoretical promise as a means of institutionalising unmet societal demands.

In populism, the signifiers for the people and its adversaries are vaguely constructed because this is key to the signifiers remaining effective in being able to unite heterogeneous unmet societal demands (Laclau, 2005: 40). This thesis points out that mediated scrutiny of the contents of populist movements in the hybrid media system tends to deny populist signifiers the ability to remain empty and thus makes them less vague and, as such, less effective in uniting a wide spectrum of different unmet political demands. According to Laclau, the success of a populist mobilisation



is the “crystallisation” of empty signifiers into a permanent system of identification that affects the whole field of politics (Laclau, 2005). In the Finnish case, the “people” represented by the Finns Party has started to crystallise around a base of online populist radical right communications made salient by mediated scrutiny as the mediated responses from the journalists and activists to this communicational mosaic have weighted heavily toward exclusionary communication. The hybrid media system empowered populist radical right communication within the Finns Party’s chain of equivalence and helped establish a parliamentary channel for responding to grievances and demands related to immigration. The populist radical right ideas and style voiced online were originally marginal, but as they were picked up by the media, they ended up key attributes or hegemonic frames by which people denounced or identified with the party. The Finns Party losing its place in government is thus directly linked to how the hybrid media system affects populism as a political logic of articulation.

Chantal Mouffe (2018) – like Laclau – views populism as the pursuit of challenging hegemony. According to her, society is inherently “divided and discursively constructed through hegemonic practices”, and therefore all that is political contains “a dimension of radical negativity” (pp. 10, 87). She states that there can be no politics without populism and that democracy needs the expression of competing visions to remain healthy. Therefore, the “populist moments” we are witnessing could be regarded as the “return of the political” after decades of post-politics. But Mouffe (2018) also points out that this struggle should not be antagonistic in the sense that it would create conflict that is incompatible with pluralism. Her idea of agonistic democracy suggests that the public sphere should be a space of vividly expressed competing ideas based on conflictual values but free of wishes to eradicate the opposition. This dissertation’s findings on the polarising effect of the hybrid media system on the logic of populism suggest that there are inherent dangers in trusting that populism as a logic of articulation can be contained to remain constructive, inclusive, and pluralist in the contemporary media environment.

To increase their chances of becoming popular, a populist party or movement must keep the signifiers for its “people” as loose as possible, making it possible for a wide range of individuals to identify with the core symbols and signifiers that link political demands into a chain of equivalence. But as the hybrid media system lowers the threshold for various actors to participate publicly in the articulation of these core symbols and signifiers, populism itself – as a discursive logic of articulating the people and its adversaries – will become technologically, organisationally, ideologically, and stylistically hybrid. And in this hybrid articulation, it is the most controversial elements of populist communication that form the basis for evaluating the societal worth and acceptability of populist movements. By making the most

controversial elements more salient, the media system also facilitates their political use as points of identification, which can lead to the normalisation of these elements as the hegemonic mode of discourse through which populism is articulated. Therefore, when populist logic is unleashed in a media environment where the politics of signification are horizontal and public, it can be nearly impossible for the articulation of populist chains of equivalence to remain agonistic.

According to the main theoretical contribution of this thesis, the hybrid logics of engaging in and with multi-voiced populist communication in the current media environment contribute to controversial articulations of populist chains of equivalence becoming hegemonic. The hybrid media system encourages evaluations of the worth of populist movements based on the scrutiny of the least-appreciated elements used in communicating the ideas of “the people” and “the elites”. And if the hybrid media system acts as an amplifier and facilitator for mainly antagonistic forms of populist communication, this can make movements following populist logic less viable to institutionalise their political demands successfully. Recognising how populist logic operates in the hybrid media system could help resolve the theoretical dispute between the Essex School and the ideational approach regarding the prevalence of anti-pluralism at the core of populism. Theoretically populist movements do not have to be anti-pluralist, but because of the way populist logic manifests itself in the hybrid media system, they will most likely appear like they are. This likely leads either to the disintegration of populist movements’ chains of equivalence or to the further consolidation of confrontational antagonism as one of the movements’ core discursive elements. Therefore, populism as a political logic of articulation functions in the hybrid media system in a way that encourages populist organisational vehicles to gravitate towards extreme forms of populism.

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