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Original Research Article

## The mechanisms by which online populism induces ideological risks and corresponding counterstrategies

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**Abstract:** The proliferation of online populism in modern information society poses unprecedented challenges to social stability and ideological security. Through emotionalized and dichotomous communication methods, it not only exacerbates social division but also aggravates ideological polarization and the spread of disinformation. To effectively address this issue, a multi-faceted approach incorporating measures such as network supervision, legal regulation, and public opinion guidance must be adopted to fundamentally curb the spread of extremist rhetoric and safeguard social cohesion and stability. Confronted with the complexity and decentralized nature of cyberspace, the state and society must strengthen the governance of the online environment, enhance public media literacy, and promote rational discourse to ensure the healthy development of mainstream values and social order.

**Keywords:** online populism; ideological risks; emotionalized communication; binary opposition

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### 1. Introduction

The shift of political discourse to decentralized digital platforms has created significant ideological risks, chiefly through the rise of online populism. This phenomenon leverages emotionalized, oppositional rhetoric to intensify social divisions and threaten ideological security, exploiting an online environment where extremist views can proliferate without restraint. Understanding the mechanisms of this process is therefore critical for developing effective internet governance, reinforcing mainstream ideological frameworks, and enhancing public media literacy to mitigate the impact of radical discourse.

### 2. Online populism and its development

#### 2.1. The meaning of online populism

Online populism is a form of modern populism that relies on the Internet, especially social media platforms, for its development. Its core lies in leveraging the binary logic of "the people" versus "the elite" to attract and mobilize a large audience. It differs from traditional populism in that online populism is a "thin-centered" ideology<sup>[1]</sup>. Through the openness and anonymity of virtual space, online populism facilitates expressions that are more emotional and extreme in nature. By employing exaggerated rhetoric and radical content, it can swiftly arouse public sentiment, offering audiences a form of psychological catharsis against authority and societal norms. Within this framework, "the people" are endowed with moral superiority and symbolize "justice", while "the elite" are depicted as alienated and oppressive. Adherents typically believe that societal "elites" monopolize resources and power, thereby obstructing the rights and interests of ordinary people; consequently, confronting the "elite" is portrayed as a moral imperative to protect the interests of "the people". This logic, rooted in emotionalism and binary opposition, not only deepens social fissures but also fuels the propagation of populism in the online sphere. Therefore, online populism can be regarded as an emerging form of expression that, through Internet technology platforms, has become a potent social force due to its capacity for rapid mobilization and dissemination.

#### 2.2. The main characteristics of online populism

Online populism is characterized by its pronounced emotionalism, binary opposition, and exclusivity.

First, emotionalization is one of its most salient features. By simplifying complex social issues and utilizing extremist language, online populism stimulates emotional responses in its audience, such as anger, resentment, and fear. This emotionalized expression disregards the complexity of issues, making the content more readily digestible for users with fragmented reading habits and promoting the widespread circulation of such rhetoric. For instance, during high-profile public events, the emotionalized expressions of online populism often intensify the irrational stances of the audience, sometimes even escalating social conflicts.

Second, it frequently simplifies social contradictions into a confrontation between "the people" and "the elite", thereby diminishing the multifaceted nature of the issues at hand. As noted in existing research, Anti-elitism and the claim of representing the will of the people have been identified as core elements of populism<sup>[2]</sup>. In this logic, "the people" are imbued with righteousness, while "the elite" are demonized. For example, populist rhetoric online often incites social conflict through narratives of "the grassroots versus the upper class". This "us-versus-them" framing makes it easier for the audience to accept a simplified social worldview, fostering a sense of group identity and the conviction that they occupy a "just" position in defiance of power.

Furthermore, exclusivity is a critical feature of online populism. It lacks inclusivity and pluralistic perspectives, rejecting dissenting voices. It may even brand those who do not conform to certain national or traditional identities as dissidents, treating them as "enemies" or "impure members" who, therefore, do not deserve what they demand<sup>[3]</sup>. This exclusionary nature not only diminishes the space for rational discussion but also aggravates social division and further promotes the spread of extremist discourse.

### **2.3. Reasons for the development of online populism**

The rapid development of online populism stems from a confluence of technological, socio-economic, and psychological factors. Technologically, the proliferation of the internet and social media serves as a primary catalyst, empowering every individual to act as an information disseminator. This architecture allows the emotional and extremist rhetoric of online populism to achieve "viral" dissemination.

Socio-economically, frustrations arising from globalization-induced wealth inequality and social stratification create fertile ground. For marginalized or economically aggrieved groups, online populism offers an outlet for catharsis and emotional validation, allowing them to find resonance in its inflammatory narratives. Finally, this dynamic is fueled by a pervasive distrust of government and social institutions.

Online populism capitalizes on publicized social incidents or corruption cases, amplifying isolated events into perceived systemic failures to intensify public opposition to the established order, thereby posing a direct risk to social stability and ideological security.

## **3. The mechanisms by which online populism induces ideological risks**

### **3.1. Emotionalized communication and ideological polarization**

Online populism primarily relies on emotionalized content to attract attention. This mode of communication not only heightens antagonism in cyberspace but also exacerbates the trend of ideological polarization. Emotional content is particularly effective at evoking strong emotions like anger and fear, which makes individuals more susceptible to radical viewpoints while bypassing rational deliberation. As emotionalized information accumulates and circulates, ideological disagreements progressively transform into hostile relations, driving ideological polarization within society and making it difficult for different groups to reach a consensus. By amplifying oppositional sentiments, online populism reduces complex social issues to a binary structure of "us" versus "them". This antagonistic narrative fosters a strong "us-versus-them" mentality among certain segments of the population, who come to view groups with differing standpoints as "enemies" or "outsiders", thereby reinforcing social cleavages and eroding tolerance for diverse perspectives.

### **3.2. The spread of disinformation and ideological confusion**

Online populism also introduces the cultural risk of nihilism, manifested primarily as a disregard for truth. As Karl Marx noted, Once the holy form has been unmasked, the task of history is to establish the truth of this world<sup>[4]</sup>. In contrast, a key feature of online populism is the propagation of disinformation. Through false information, online populism effectively manipulates public opinion, steers public sentiment, and even

manufactures a sense of crisis, adversely affecting social governance and ideological coherence. It often exaggerates the impact of specific events to create social panic, thereby reinforcing anti-establishment emotions. For instance, isolated social incidents are exploited to magnify the supposed "corruption" or "collapse" of the entire social system. Such rhetoric spreads rapidly online, eroding government credibility and deepening public mistrust of the system. Disinformation is often ambiguous, making it difficult for recipients to quickly verify its authenticity. This leads to cognitive confusion, obfuscates the ideological landscape, interferes with mainstream ideology, and makes it challenging for the public to distinguish between factual information and falsehoods.

### **3.3. Anti-elite discourse and opposition to mainstream ideology**

At the core of online populism lies the questioning and criticism of "elite" groups. The "simple people" in the rhetoric of online populists can be relatively disadvantaged groups or so-called victims of vested interests. They appear to represent the common people, taking it as their mission to replace the authority of elites and intermediary institutions, but in reality, they mostly come from elite groups themselves, because ordinary people lack the capital and ability to mobilize society<sup>[5]</sup>. Through anti-elite discourse, online populism directly challenges mainstream ideology, causing segments of the population to doubt or even develop hostility towards mainstream values. This anti-elite discourse creates a divisive effect in the ideological sphere, fostering antagonism between the populace and the dominant ideology. It stimulates a general mistrust of authoritative institutions such as the government and the media, portraying the values and ideologies they represent as deceptive or hypocritical. As this mistrust deepens, supporters of online populism become more inclined to exhibit behaviors that resist mainstream ideology.

## **4. Strategies for countering the ideological risks of online populism**

### **4.1. Strengthening network supervision and legal norms**

Improving network supervision mechanisms is a prerequisite for addressing the threat of online populism. Existing Internet laws and regulations must be updated to keep pace with the times, strengthening controls on disinformation, malicious incitement, and extremist rhetoric. At the legislative level, it is necessary not only to refine the definition of online populism to ensure the legality and seriousness of supervision but also to improve information dissemination systems by introducing verification mechanisms to reduce the channels for false information. At the judicial level, severe penalties should be imposed on malicious incitement through legal means, tightening control over online speech to ensure that ideological risks are effectively managed.

### **4.2. Enhancing public media literacy**

The spread of online populism is inextricably linked to the public's lack of media literacy. First, it is crucial to deeply analyze users' value orientations and ideological preferences, and assess the audience's real needs and inner expectations... so that they can receive positive value guidance and clarify ideological confusion amidst leisure and entertainment<sup>[6]</sup>. Second, media literacy courses should be offered across various educational platforms to help the public enhance their ability to discern online information and prevent them from being misled by disinformation and extremist rhetoric. Third, public awareness campaigns should encourage rational thinking and discourage emotional reactions, thereby reducing the influence of online populism. Finally, fostering critical thinking skills is essential to improving public media literacy, enabling citizens to approach and analyze online information more rationally and thus reducing their susceptibility to emotional and extremist rhetoric.

### **4.3. Purifying cyberspace through positive public opinion guidance**

The report of the 20th National Congress of the CPC stated the need to build a socialist ideology with strong cohesive and guiding power<sup>[7]</sup>. Positive public opinion guidance is key to weakening the influence of online populism. Through the leadership of mainstream media and government agencies, positive and healthy values can be cultivated in cyberspace to prevent the erosion of ideology by online populism. By leveraging new media technologies, diversified promotional activities can be launched online, presenting mainstream values through videos, images, and text to enhance their appeal and influence. A healthy public opinion environment should be encouraged through features like "likes" and "shares", thereby diminishing the propagation capacity of online populism.

## 5. Conclusion

In the era of intelligent media, online populism, as an extension and mutation of modern populism in cyberspace, is growing in influence. This trend leverages emotionalized and extremist communication strategies, exploiting and amplifying the "people-versus-elite" narrative to intensify social conflicts, thereby posing multiple risks to our countrys ideological security, online ecosystem, and social stability. In view of this, systematically deciphering the mechanisms by which online populism induces ideological risks in the intelligent media environment, and seeking effective governance solutions to overcome the resulting predicaments and crises, holds significant theoretical and practical importance.

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