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THE POPULIST CONSTRUCTION OF "THE PEOPLE" IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE: CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION

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The article offers a social- and political-philosophical analysis of the populist construction of "the people" in the digital public sphere. It proceeds from the premise that "the people" invoked by populism is not a pre-given demographic totality but a performatively constituted political subject produced through representation, boundary-making, and claims to moral unity. The study combines conceptual analysis of populism and political representation with a critical synthesis of research on platform society, algorithmic mediation, and social-media populism. It identifies the enduring structures of populist people-construction: articulating heterogeneous demands, establishing an antagonistic frontier (between the virtuous people and a culpable elite), attributing moral unity, concentrating representative authority, and performing a recurrent crisis that demands the restoration of popular sovereignty. It then demonstrates that digitalization transforms this construction along five interrelated dimensions: 1) the locus of production becomes partly distributed among leaders, influencers, and users; 2) mediation becomes hybrid, platform-dependent, and algorithmic; 3) political time becomes continuous and accelerated; 4) popular authorization becomes datafied through engagement metrics; and 5) the boundaries of "the people" become dynamically personalized and modular across overlapping digital publics. The resulting political subject is simultaneously more participatory and more dependent on opaque infrastructures of visibility, shifting from mass-mediated representation toward asymmetrical platform-mediated co-production. Digital platforms do not eliminate mediation between leaders and citizens; they conceal and reorganize it. The article concludes that contemporary populism combines the continuity of an antagonistic political logic with a profound transformation of the communicative conditions through which a unified people is made visible, measurable, and actionable.

Keywords: *transformation of populism, digital public sphere, political representation, political communication, algorithmic mediation, ontology of "the people", political identity, democratic legitimacy.*

ПОПУЛІСТСЬКЕ КОНСТРУЮВАННЯ "НАРОДУ" В ЦИФРОВІЙ ПУБЛІЧНІЙ СФЕРІ: ТЯГЛІСТЬ І ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ

О. О. Гордійчук

У статті здійснено соціально- та політико-філософський аналіз популістського конструювання "народу" в цифровій публічній сфері. Вихідним є твердження, що "народ", до

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якого апелює популізм, не є наперед заданою демографічною сукупністю, а постає перформативно конституйованим політичним суб'єктом, що твориться через представництво, встановлення меж і претензії на моральну єдність. Дослідження поєднує концептуальний аналіз популізму та політичного представництва з критичним синтезом розробок у галузі платформного суспільства, алгоритмічного опосередкування та популізму в соціальних медіа. Визначено інваріантні структури популістського творення "народу": артикуляцію гетерогенних вимог, встановлення антагоністичного фронту (між доброчесним народом і винною елітою), приписування моральної єдності, концентрацію представницького авторитету та повторюване інсценування кризи, яка вимагає відновлення народного суверенітету. Доведено, що цифровізація трансформує це конструювання за п'ятьма взаємопов'язаними вимірами: 1) локус виробництва стає частково розподіленим між лідерами, інфлюенсерами та користувачами; 2) опосередкування стає гібридним, платформозалежним і алгоритмічним; 3) політичний час набуває безперервного й прискореного характеру; 4) народне уповноваження датафікується через метрики залучення; 5) межі "народу" стають динамічно персоналізованими та модулярними в цифрових пабліках, що перекриваються. Отриманий політичний суб'єкт є водночас більш партисипативним і залежнішим від непрозорих інфраструктур видимості, здійснюючи зсув від масовомедіального представництва до асиметричного платформо-опосередкованого співвиробництва. Цифрові платформи не усувають медіацію між лідерами та громадянами, а приховують і реорганізують її. Зроблено висновок, що сучасний популізм поєднує тяглість антагоністичної політичної логіки з глибокою трансформацією комунікативних умов, у яких єдиний "народ" робиться видимим, вимірюваним та здатним до колективної дії.

Ключові слова: *трансформація популізму, цифрова публічна сфера, політичне представництво, політичні комунікації, алгоритмічна медіація, онтологія "народу", політична ідентичність, демократична легітимність.*

Introduction of the Issue. Populist politics is organized around a noun that appears self-evident and is anything but simple: "the people." Constitutions locate sovereignty in the people, elections count individual citizens, and democratic institutions claim to translate popular preferences into binding decisions. Populism enters this already crowded semantic field with a stronger proposition. It does not merely promise policies favored by a numerical majority. It claims to disclose a morally authentic people whose unity has been concealed, betrayed or silenced by elites. The political force of this claim depends on making a heterogeneous population appear as a collective subject capable of speaking in the singular.

This appearance should not be mistaken for the discovery of an already completed social body. Populations are divided by class, region, religion, generation, occupation, identity and political interest. No empirical inventory by itself explains why some grievances become equivalent, why particular groups are treated as exemplary of the whole, or why others are placed outside the legitimate people. The populist people is therefore constructed through political articulation. Laclau describes the emergence of a popular subject through the equivalential linkage of heterogeneous demands, while Panizza and Stavrakakis emphasize that the resulting identity is relational, hegemonic and performative [19; 24]. "The people" comes into political existence through acts that claim to name, represent and mobilize it.

The term *construction* does not imply that the people is fictitious or that popular grievances are unreal. Unemployment, cultural displacement, corruption, insecurity and unequal recognition may be experienced with great intensity. Construction concerns the operation through which these different experiences are assembled into a shared political identity, attributed to a common source and oriented toward a common antagonist. It also concerns the authority to decide which experiences count as representative. The people is socially grounded but politically configured.

Populism has always depended on media and organization. Pamphlets, newspapers, party branches, rallies, radio and television were never neutral

conduits placed between an already formed leader and an already formed people. They selected voices, staged proximity, synchronized attention and gave material form to claims of unity. The transition to digital media should therefore not be described as a movement from mediation to immediacy. It is a movement between regimes of mediation. Chadwick's account of the hybrid media system is useful precisely because it rejects a clean replacement of old media by new media and directs attention to interactions among platforms, broadcast institutions, political actors and users [6].

Nevertheless, the digital public sphere changes the conditions under which populist people-construction occurs. Political messages circulate through infrastructures that rank, recommend, personalize and quantify attention. Citizens can answer leaders publicly, redistribute fragments of discourse, create derivative content and assemble temporary communities around emotionally charged events. Engagement metrics make reactions visible as numerical signs of collective presence. These developments alter who participates in the production of "the people," how quickly its boundaries change, what appears to validate its existence and which actors control its visibility.

The philosophical problem is sharpened by a central paradox. Populist actors commonly present digital communication as direct contact with ordinary people and as liberation from party bureaucracies, professional journalism and institutional filters. Yet a social-media post reaches its audience through privately governed platforms, algorithmic ranking systems, commercial incentives, data infrastructures and hybrid flows involving traditional media. The performance of unmediated popular voice is produced by an exceptionally dense architecture of mediation. Urbinati's analysis of populist representation already shows that the claimed direct relation between leader and the "right" people does not abolish representation; it reorganizes representation around personal embodiment and exclusion [29]. Digital platforms add a technological layer to this political paradox.

The issue has broad democratic significance. The construction of a collective subject is unavoidable in politics: citizens must name common concerns and act together. The normative problem begins when one contingent image of the people is presented as the only morally legitimate whole and when its mechanisms of production disappear from view. Digital environments may expand participation and expose neglected grievances, but they may also reward boundary hardening, emotional escalation and claims that engagement statistics are equivalent to democratic authorization. A political-philosophical analysis must therefore hold together two questions: how "the people" is constituted and how digital infrastructures reshape the legitimacy of that constitution.

The present article addresses these questions through the distinction between continuity and transformation. Continuity refers to the enduring populist logic of antagonism, moralization, homogenization and representative claim-making. Transformation refers to changes in the locus, mediation, temporality, validation and boundary dynamics of people-construction in the digital public sphere. This distinction avoids both technological determinism and the opposite assumption that digital media merely provide new tools for unchanged politics. It allows the digital form of populism to be examined as a historically specific reorganization of a persistent political operation.

Current State of the Issue. Research on populism offers several influential ways of approaching "the people." The ideational tradition defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and demands that politics express the general will [22; 23]. Its analytical strength lies in identifying a recognizable normative grammar across ideological and regional differences. From this perspective, people-centrism and anti-elitism are not incidental rhetorical devices. They are

constitutive elements that make a communication recognizably populist.

The democratic-theoretical tradition places this grammar within tensions internal to democracy. Canovan distinguishes democracy's pragmatic face, composed of institutions and procedures, from its redemptive promise of rule by the people [5]. Populism repeatedly activates the gap between these faces by accusing institutions of obstructing popular sovereignty. Arato and Cohen extend the discussion to constitutional democracy and civil society, showing how populist movements, parties and governments can transform a claim of constituent power into an enduring challenge to pluralism and institutional limitation [1]. These approaches explain why populism cannot be treated simply as an external pathology: it draws energy from democratic principles even while narrowing their plural meaning.

Discursive theory moves from the content attributed to the people to the process of its formation. For Laclau, a people emerges when heterogeneous demands are linked through a logic of equivalence and condensed in signifiers capable of representing an absent social fullness [19]. The unity of the people is not sociologically given before articulation. It is achieved provisionally against an antagonistic frontier. Panizza and Stavrakakis develop this insight by emphasizing the relational and hegemonic character of populist identification [24]. The question is not only which groups objectively compose the people but how a part becomes capable of claiming the name of the whole.

Theories of political representation clarify the performative dimension of this claim. Saward conceptualizes representation as a dynamic process in which a maker presents a subject as standing for an object to an audience [25]. Representatives do not merely transmit the preferences of a fully constituted constituency; representative claims help shape the constituency they purport to represent. This approach is particularly relevant to populism because populist leaders claim both to reveal and to embody the people. Urbinati argues that contemporary populism constitutes a specific form of representative government organized around a direct relation between a leader and the morally "right" people [29]. The apparent rejection of mediation is itself a mode of representation.

The performative approach adds style, embodiment and crisis to this construction. Moffitt treats populism as a political style characterized by appeal to the people against the elite, transgressive performance and the enactment of crisis or threat [21]. Crisis is not only an objective context to which political actors react; it is selected, narrated and performed. Through repeated staging, dispersed problems can be presented as evidence of one overarching betrayal. The people then appears as both victim of the crisis and source of the decisive restoration that will resolve it.

Research on populist political communication translates these theoretical insights into the analysis of messages, actors and media environments. De Vreese and colleagues conceptualize populism as an expression of communication content and style and call for interactive models connecting political actors, media and citizens [7]. Engesser and colleagues show that social-media communication often presents populism in fragmented form: individual elements such as people-centrism, anti-elitism or exclusion may circulate without the entire ideological package [8]. Ernst and colleagues similarly demonstrate that populist elements vary across actors, platforms and political positions [9]. These findings are important because they suggest that the digital construction of the people may be modular rather than doctrinally complete.

Studies of online practice identify an affinity between populist claims and social-media affordances. Krämer argues that internet applications support the representation of closeness between leaders and the people, the exclusion of outgroups, the elaboration of identity and the circumvention of traditional gatekeepers [18]. Gerbaudo describes

social media simultaneously as the people's voice and the people's rally, joining personalized expression with the formation of online crowds [10]. Hameleers demonstrates that citizens themselves reproduce the boundary between a blameless people and culpable others in online communities [13]. The audience is therefore not simply a receiver of a completed populist identity.

Recent work further complicates assumptions about direct effects. Hameleers and colleagues find that emotional and personalized styles can stimulate user engagement even when the substantive content is not fully populist [14]. Boulianne, Koc-Michalska and Bimber show that broad claims linking social-media use directly to right-wing populist support are not consistently supported across Western democracies [3]. Lorenz-Spreen and colleagues' systematic review likewise concludes that the political consequences of digital media are variable: participation and information consumption may increase, while political trust can decline and polarization or populism can intensify under some conditions [20]. Digital media should therefore be treated as a structured environment of opportunities and pressures, not as an autonomous cause.

Platform and algorithm studies explain why that environment is not neutral. Gillespie shows that algorithms participate in the production of public relevance by selecting what becomes visible and knowable [11]. Bucher conceptualizes algorithmic power as relational and situational rather than as a single deterministic force [4]. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal describe a platform society in which public values become entangled with privately operated infrastructures of datafication, selection and commodification [30]. These works redirect analysis from individual messages to the conditions under which some representations acquire reach, repetition and apparent social confirmation.

The concept of the public sphere provides the normative framework for evaluating these changes. Habermas's renewed analysis of structural transformation argues that social media multiply voices while fragmenting public communication into platform-shaped pseudo-publics [12]. Sevignani distinguishes hegemonic, populist and popular communication flows and emphasizes that digitalization changes the relation between integrating and antagonistic publics [26]. Waisbord connects the breakdown of the mass-media order and the growth of disaggregated mediated spheres with an affinity between post-truth communication and populist Manichaeism [31]. The digital public sphere thus expands expressive access while weakening shared procedures through which claims are tested, generalized and made accountable.

The newest meta-research confirms both the maturity and fragmentation of the field. Tóth and colleagues review 122 quantitative studies of social-media populism and organize findings around message content, stylistic packaging, user engagement and emotional reactions [28]. They also show that results depend substantially on research design and context. Sørensen's account of populist disruption in a fourth age of political communication adds an ontological dimension: contemporary populist performance treats directness as a privileged route from political appearance to authentic reality [27]. Together these studies create a strong basis for empirical research, but they leave room for a synthetic philosophical account of how continuity and transformation coexist in the construction of "the people".

Outline of Unresolved Issues Brought up in the Article. The first unresolved issue concerns the relationship between a perennial populist logic and historically specific media forms. Studies often begin either from stable definitions of populism or from transformations attributed to digital communication. The former can understate changes in political subject formation; the latter can imply that social media invented directness, personalization or antagonism. A conceptual framework is needed that specifies what remains structurally continuous and what is genuinely transformed.

The second issue is the persistent language of disintermediation. Populist leaders and some scholarly descriptions portray social media as channels that allow political actors to bypass intermediaries and speak directly to citizens. This formulation identifies the declining monopoly of professional gatekeepers but obscures the emergence of platform owners, recommendation systems, data analytics, influencers and user networks as new mediators. The philosophical question is not whether mediation exists but how it is organized, legitimized and concealed.

The third issue concerns the agency of audiences. Classical accounts of populist leadership tend to privilege the actor who names the people. Digital research documents engagement but often treats likes, shares and comments as dependent variables measuring message success. Less attention is given to their constitutive meaning. By repeating slogans, attaching personal testimony, producing memes or policing group boundaries, users participate in making the represented people appear present. Their activity neither eliminates leadership nor becomes fully autonomous; it reorganizes the relation between representative claim and audience reception.

The fourth issue is the status of digital metrics. Visible counts of followers, views, reactions and shares are commonly treated as technical indicators. Politically, however, they can function as miniature plebiscites: signs that "the people" has spoken before any institutional decision has occurred. These numbers are generated within platform-specific systems, are vulnerable to manipulation and do not correspond to an equal electorate. Yet they contribute to perceived authenticity, momentum and majority. Their role in populist authorization requires conceptual analysis.

The fifth issue concerns the simultaneous fragmentation and homogenization of the people. Personalized feeds and networked communities divide attention among multiple publics. Populist discourse, by contrast, presents the people as morally coherent. Digital populism does not simply choose one side of this tension. It can deliver different fragments of a political identity to different audiences while allowing each fragment to signify the same imagined whole. The people becomes modular in circulation but singular in claim.

The sixth issue is normative. The participation of users in constructing collective identity can widen democratic expression, especially for experiences ignored by established institutions. The same process can intensify exclusion, replace public justification with affective recognition and make privately controlled visibility appear equivalent to popular sovereignty. Evaluation therefore cannot rely on a simple opposition between participatory digital politics and manipulative populism. It must examine whether people-construction preserves plurality, contestability and accountable mediation.

Aim of the Research. The aim of the article is to conceptualize the populist construction of "the people" in the digital public sphere through the relationship between continuity and transformation. The research pursues four tasks: to reconstruct the pre-digital political logic through which populism constitutes the people; to identify the specific changes produced by platformization and algorithmic mediation; to explain the constitutive role of user participation and engagement metrics; and to assess the democratic implications of a collective subject that is simultaneously represented, co-produced and datafied.

The study is theoretical and interpretive. It combines conceptual analysis of populism, political representation and the public sphere; comparative reconstruction of mass-mediated and platform-mediated people-construction; and critical synthesis of contemporary research on populist communication, social media and algorithmic power. The analysis does not claim that all populisms use identical strategies or that digital media have uniform effects across political systems. Its purpose is to formulate an analytical

model that can guide comparison while preserving contextual variation.

Results and Discussion. The analysis begins from a distinction between population, public and people. A population is an administratively or territorially defined set of persons. A public emerges through attention and communication around matters of common concern. "The people" is a political name that claims unity, authority and the capacity for collective action. These categories overlap but are not interchangeable. Populism operates by converting selected experiences within a population and selected voices within publics into a claim about the authentic people as a whole.

This conversion contains a synecdochal movement: a part assumes the right to represent the whole. Such a movement is present in all representative politics, because no representative can literally reproduce the entire plurality of the represented. Populism becomes distinctive when the partial character of the claim is denied. One representation is moralized as the people's own unmediated voice, while competing representations are attributed to corruption, alienation or external interests. The central issue is therefore not that populists construct the people while other political actors merely discover it. The difference lies in how construction is disavowed and how contestation over the people is closed.

Five continuous structures organize this operation across different media environments. The first is antagonistic boundary-making. Populism creates a vertical frontier between the people and the elite and may add a horizontal frontier between insiders and stigmatized outsiders. The content of these categories varies, but the relational operation remains. A group becomes "the people" not only through shared attributes but through a common relation to what allegedly blocks its sovereignty [22–24].

The second structure is moral homogenization. Citizens may disagree about policy, identity and material interest, yet populist claims treat legitimate differences as secondary to a deeper moral unity. The people is good, productive, honest or authentic; the elite is corrupt, parasitic, deceptive or detached. This moral asymmetry transforms political disagreement into a question of belonging. An opponent can cease to be a legitimate representative of another constituency and become an enemy of the people.

The third structure is representative embodiment. Populist leaders do not only promise to listen to popular preferences. They present their own speech, body and style as evidence that the people has entered politics. Transgressive manners can authenticate this relation by marking distance from institutional conventions [21]. The leader's singularity and the people's imagined unity reinforce one another: the leader appears capable of speaking plainly because the people is assumed to possess one essential voice.

The fourth structure is the performance of crisis. Diverse problems are synchronized into a narrative of exceptional danger or betrayal. Crisis makes the boundary of the people urgent, shortens the acceptable time for deliberation and supports the demand for decisive representation. It also supplies an explanation for plurality: internal dissent can be reframed as failure to recognize the emergency. The recurrent declaration that ordinary politics is no longer adequate prepares the ground for a more concentrated claim to popular authorization.

The fifth structure is the promise of immediacy. Populism depicts institutional mediation as distortion and political authenticity as direct access to the popular will. Canovan's redemptive face of democracy helps explain the appeal of this promise [5]. Yet immediacy has always been staged through media, organization and representation. A rally requires choreography, a broadcast requires selection, and a party requires mechanisms that elevate some voices over others. What is continuous is not actual absence of mediation but the political devaluation of mediation.

The pre-digital mass-media environment gave these structures a

particular form. Political parties, newspapers, radio and television organized relatively centralized flows of public communication. Editors and broadcasters exercised gatekeeping power; audiences could be vast but were weakly visible to one another; feedback was delayed and aggregated through polls, membership, demonstrations or elections. Populist leaders could use mass media to perform proximity, but the communicative event retained a recognizable separation between producer, channel and audience.

This environment should not be idealized as a unified rational public sphere. Access was unequal, news values rewarded personalization and conflict, and commercial media could amplify populist performance. Still, editorial responsibility and institutional authorship were comparatively identifiable. Statements appeared within channels that possessed stable public identities, and audience response was not continuously displayed beside every message. The people was constructed through mass address: many dispersed individuals were invited to imagine themselves as one audience.

Digitalization does not erase this structure but hybridizes it. Broadcast clips circulate through platforms; online controversies become television news; speeches are optimized for shareable fragments; users interpret events through both interpersonal networks and professional media. Chadwick's hybrid model and Klinger and Svensson's concept of network media logic capture the mutual adaptation of older and newer communicative patterns [6; 17]. The relevant transformation is therefore not a chronological break in which television disappears, but a redistribution of power among political organizations, media institutions, platforms and connected users.

The proposed model identifies five dimensions of this transformation: locus of production, architecture of mediation, political temporality, mode of validation and dynamics of boundaries. These dimensions are analytically separable but operate together. They explain why the digital people is not simply the old mass audience transferred to a screen.

The first transformation concerns the locus of production. In mass-mediated politics, the central message was produced mainly by parties, leaders and media institutions. Digital communication allows users to recirculate, annotate, remix and localize the populist distinction between people and elite. Hameleers's analysis of online communities demonstrates that citizens themselves construct boundaries between blameless people and culpable others [13]. Gerbaudo's image of social media as both voice and rally likewise captures the convergence of expression and assembly [10].

This participation is constitutive rather than merely distributive. A user who attaches a personal story to an anti-elite claim supplies experiential evidence that the people exists. A meme compresses a complex antagonism into a recognizable cultural sign. A comment that identifies betrayal polices the moral boundary of the group. A share carries the claim into another network and invites further identification. Through these acts, users help produce the collective subject that the original message claimed to represent.

The result is distributed but asymmetric co-production. Political leaders and professional organizations retain agenda-setting capacity, financial resources, data access and recognizable authority. Influencers and highly connected accounts possess disproportionate reach. Platforms control technical conditions of visibility. Ordinary users contribute attention, affect, testimony and circulation. The construction of the people is therefore neither simply top-down nor spontaneously bottom-up. It is a stratified process of co-production.

Bennett and Segerberg's logic of connective action clarifies part of this change [2]. Digital participation can be organized through personalized content sharing without requiring strong collective identity or formal membership. Populism can exploit this logic by offering symbols broad enough to accommodate different personal grievances while

retaining a common antagonistic direction. Individuals need not accept an entire doctrine; they can connect through one fragment that places their experience within the story of an injured people.

Empirical findings on fragmented populism support this interpretation. Engesser and colleagues show that populist elements circulate separately on social media [8], while Ernst and colleagues identify variation across platforms and political actors [9]. Fragmentation is not necessarily a weakness. It allows different components to reach different users and later be recombined as evidence of one broader conflict. The coherence of the people can be produced at the level of opposition even when the substantive demands remain heterogeneous.

The second transformation concerns the architecture of mediation. Populist digital communication often presents itself as the removal of intermediaries. Leaders announce that they can finally speak without hostile journalists, and followers experience replies or live streams as proximity. Krämer shows that online practices are used to represent the leader-people relation and circumvent traditional media [18]. Sørensen identifies directness as a central ontological claim of contemporary populist disruption [27].

Yet digital directness is an appearance generated through reintermediation. Platforms determine available formats, rank content, recommend connections and regulate accounts. Algorithms infer relevance from behavioral data, predicted engagement and commercial objectives. Gillespie's analysis shows that algorithmic selection participates in defining what becomes publicly relevant [11]. Bucher further demonstrates that algorithmic power emerges relationally through the situations in which algorithms become actionable and consequential [4]. The citizen may receive a leader's message without a journalist, but not without mediation.

This reintermediation matters because its authority is difficult to contest. Editorial decisions can at least be attributed to identifiable institutions, while algorithmic selection is dynamic, personalized and partially opaque. The same message can appear central to one user and absent to another. A political actor can interpret high visibility as proof of popular resonance without acknowledging how platform design and strategic optimization produced it. The hidden mediator thus reinforces the performance of immediacy.

Platformization also changes the relation between public and private power. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal show that platforms embed public communication in infrastructures governed by corporate models of datafication, commodification and selection [30]. Questions of democratic visibility become inseparable from business decisions and technical standards. Populist actors may denounce traditional media elites while depending on platform companies whose power over public attention is less visible and less democratically accountable.

The third transformation concerns political temporality. Mass-mediated populism was organized around campaigns, broadcasts, rallies and news cycles. Digital communication creates a continuous present in which leaders, supporters and opponents can react at any hour. The people must be repeatedly activated through posts, controversies, threats and demonstrations of response. Silence risks disappearance from the flow; visibility requires recurrent performance.

This acceleration favors crisis narration. An isolated event can be attached immediately to an existing antagonistic frame, while emotional reactions become part of the event's public meaning before verification or institutional interpretation is complete. Waisbord's account of the affinity between post-truth communication and populist politics identifies the consequences of disaggregated mediated spheres for collective truth-telling [31]. Hameleers's work on populist disinformation similarly shows how anti-media accusations and evidence-free people-centric communication can reinforce one another [15].

Continuous communication also makes identity provisional. The digital people is not constructed once and then maintained unchanged. It is updated through sequences of attention. A new scandal can redefine the elite; a security event can intensify an exclusionary boundary; an economic controversy can foreground a different segment as exemplary of ordinary people. The basic antagonism persists, but its concrete content is adjusted rapidly.

The fourth transformation concerns the mode of validation. Traditional populist claims invoked election results, rally attendance, party membership or opinion polls as evidence of popular support. Digital platforms add visible metrics: followers, views, likes, shares, comments, reactions and trending positions. These numbers provide immediate signs that a message has encountered a public. They can make an abstract people appear present on the screen.

Metrics therefore acquire a quasi-plebiscitary function. A highly shared post can be presented as what the people thinks; a trending slogan can be treated as the spontaneous agenda of society; a follower count can be converted into a claim of political authenticity. Yet these indicators do not meet democratic conditions of equality, territorial inclusion, verified membership or transparent procedure. One person can operate multiple accounts, automated activity can inflate attention, and platform algorithms influence which actions are invited and counted. Engagement is real social behavior but not equivalent to popular sovereignty.

The political meaning of metrics lies precisely in this ambiguity. They are neither meaningless fabrications nor legitimate votes. They are platform-produced traces of attention that can be rhetorically transformed into authorization. Hameleers and colleagues find that personalized and emotional styles are especially capable of triggering user behavior [14]. Tóth and colleagues' 2026 synthesis shows that research increasingly treats engagement and emotional reaction as central stages in the social-media populism process [28]. The construction of the people becomes datafied when these traces are used to define what the collective subject wants and who credibly represents it.

Datafication introduces a feedback loop. Political actors adapt messages to visible reactions; platforms amplify content expected to sustain engagement; users encounter popular content partly because it has already been marked as popular. Visibility becomes both outcome and input. This loop can privilege messages that simplify boundaries or intensify affect, although the strength and direction of the effect vary across contexts. The systematic evidence reviewed by Lorenz-Spreen and colleagues warns against universal causal claims while confirming that digital media can be associated with changes in participation, trust, polarization and populism [20].

The fifth transformation concerns boundary dynamics. Populism constructs unity by distinguishing the people from elites and, in some variants, from external or internal outgroups. Digital personalization allows these boundaries to be communicated differently across networks. One audience may receive economic anti-elitism, another cultural exclusion, another anti-media resentment. Each module can be linked to the same broad signifier of the people without requiring every participant to share identical priorities.

This produces the paradox of personalized homogeneity. The content delivered to users is differentiated, yet the political claim remains that the people is one. Algorithmically organized publics can support this paradox by clustering attention around partially overlapping grievances. Habermas describes the fragmentation of digital communication into self-enclosed or weakly connected pseudo-publics [12]. Sevignani shows how platform-mediated transformations can strengthen antagonistic and networked-individualistic flows of populist communication [26]. Populist unity can thus be asserted above a

communicative environment that is increasingly segmented.

The boundary is also performed through affect. Anger at betrayal, fear of loss, pride in authenticity and resentment of condescension supply experiential coherence where policy interests diverge. Emotional expression is not an irrational residue outside political construction. It tells participants how membership in the people should feel. Digital reactions make this affect publicly visible and imitable. The emotional tone of a comment field can become evidence that a community shares the same injury even when its members disagree about remedies.

At this point continuity and transformation can be stated more precisely. Antagonism remains continuous, but its objects can be updated rapidly. Homogenization remains continuous, but it is assembled from personalized fragments. Leader-centered representation remains continuous, but it is supplemented by distributed user labor. Crisis performance remains continuous, but it becomes permanent and accelerated. The promise of immediacy remains continuous, but it is produced by platform infrastructures of unprecedented complexity.

The resulting people has a double ontology. It exists symbolically as a singular moral subject and operationally as data points, network clusters, audience segments and engagement events. These forms reinforce each other but never fully coincide. Symbolic unity supplies political meaning to the data; data supplies visible confirmation to the symbolic claim. Populist construction succeeds when this gap is obscured and platform traces are experienced as the self-presence of the people.

This model also clarifies why digital populism cannot be reduced to persuasion. Persuasion assumes a relatively stable audience whose opinions change in response to messages. People-construction helps constitute the audience as a political subject before any specific policy agreement is reached. The message does not only say what should be done; it tells recipients who "we" are, why "we" have been ignored, who prevents "our" will and whose reactions confirm membership.

The democratic assessment of this process must remain differentiated. Digital participation can expose experiences excluded from elite discourse, reduce entry costs and enable rapid collective action. Jungherr, Rivero and Gayo-Avello emphasize that digital media retool multiple stages of politics without producing one uniform democratic outcome [16]. Boulianne and colleagues likewise challenge simple claims that social-media use automatically produces right-wing populist support [3]. The capacity to construct a people can be emancipatory when it gives political form to neglected demands.

The danger arises when construction is immunized against contestation. If critics are defined in advance as enemies of the people, disagreement cannot test the representative claim. If platform popularity is treated as sovereignty, those who are inactive, disconnected or algorithmically invisible disappear from the political body. If personalized messages allow incompatible promises to circulate without common scrutiny, the apparent unity of the people avoids the burden of public justification.

Saward's approach helps formulate an alternative democratic standard [25]. Representative claims require audiences, but audience acceptance is not the only criterion of legitimacy. Claims must remain contestable, and the represented must be able to dispute both the image offered of them and the authority of the claimant. In digital settings, this requires transparency not only from political leaders but also about the infrastructures that organize reception. A visible audience is not automatically an inclusive public.

The public-sphere perspective adds the requirement of generalization. A democratic public sphere does not demand complete consensus, but it must allow claims arising from partial publics to encounter other experiences, reasons and counterclaims. Platform fragmentation can support identity formation, yet democracy suffers when circulation within like-minded networks

is mistaken for validation by the political community as a whole. The task is not to eliminate affect or collective identity but to preserve passages between identification and justification.

The distinction between popular and populist construction is therefore normative rather than merely numerical. Every democracy needs ways to constitute collective agency. A popular construction remains open to plurality within the people, recognizes mediation and permits revision of its boundaries. A populist construction tends to moralize one representation as exhaustive, conceal the contingency of mediation and treat opposition as external to legitimate sovereignty. Digital technology can support either tendency, but platform incentives and metrics can make the latter especially visible and rewarding.

For research, the continuity-transformation model suggests a comparative agenda. Studies should examine not only the presence of people-centric or anti-elite words but the complete process through which a political subject becomes visible. Relevant questions include who initiates the representative claim, which actors recirculate it, how platforms rank it, which metrics are interpreted as authorization, how boundaries vary across audience segments and whether counterclaims can enter the same communicative space.

Methodologically, this agenda requires combining discourse analysis, network analysis, platform studies and reception research. Textual analysis can identify chains of equivalence and antagonistic categories. Network analysis can reveal distributed circulation and influential intermediaries. Platform analysis can clarify affordances and selection mechanisms. Interviews or digital ethnography can examine how users interpret participation in the people. No single method can capture a subject that is simultaneously discursive, performative, infrastructural and datafied.

The model also recommends historical comparison. Claims about digital novelty should be tested against earlier populist uses of newspapers, radio, television, party organization and public spectacle. The question is not whether older forms contained mediation, emotion or audience participation—they did—but whether digital infrastructures change their scale, visibility, speed and interdependence. Historical analysis protects research from mistaking intensified or recombined features for entirely unprecedented ones.

Conclusions and Prospects for Further Research. The populist construction of “the people” predates the digital era and was never genuinely immediate, historically requiring symbols, representatives, and communicative forms. Its enduring logic rests on articulating heterogeneous demands, constructing an antagonistic people-versus-elite frontier, attributing moral unity, concentrating authority, and performing recurrent crises to demand restored sovereignty.

Digitalization transforms rather than originates this process across five dimensions: 1) a locus of production distributed among leaders, influencers, and users; 2) hybrid, platform-dependent, and algorithmic mediation; 3) accelerated, continuous performance; 4) datafied authorization through engagement metrics; and 5) dynamic, modular boundaries within overlapping digital publics. This marks a structural shift from mass-mediated representation to asymmetrical, platform-mediated co-production, rendering “the people” visible, measurable, and actionable in new ways.

The central paradox is that performances of direct immediacy depend on exceptionally dense technological infrastructures. The populist claim to embody the people is reproduced through an assemblage where personal leadership, user activity, and algorithmic power become mutually dependent.

This conceptual framework has two main limitations: it does not assume uniform digital strategies across political ideologies, nor does it ignore national, linguistic, and regulatory variations. The proposed dimensions should therefore be treated as comparative questions for empirical testing.

Future research should examine the impact of generative AI, short-video platforms, platform migration, and citizens' ability to distinguish genuine participation from algorithmic amplification, alongside comparative-historical studies on digital versus traditional mass-political practices.

The democratic task is not to eliminate collective identity construction, but to expose it as a claim rather than a natural fact, preserve plurality, and ensure accountability among mediators of visibility – enabling citizens to scrutinize the representations through which they are made to appear.

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