

## Populism, Media, and Journalism: The Guardian's New Populism Series as an Example of Democratically Engaged Journalism

### Popülizm, Medya ve Gazetecilik: Demokratik Şekilde Bağlanmış Gazetecilik Örneği Olarak Guardian'ın Yeni Popülizm Serisi

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#### Abstract

This article aims to focus on the Guardian's New Populism series, which seems to be very instructive in demonstrating the dynamic interplay between the concepts of populism, media, and journalism. Using the Guardian's New Populism series as a case/sample study, this paper attempts to critically analyze media discourse, paying due regard to representation, and construction of identities and relations. Within this perspective, the Guardian series' contributions to the contested concept of populism, the mechanisms used to achieve it, and the interests it serves for are the main issues at hand. This article argues that the Guardian's initiatives in the New Populism series can be approached in terms of democratically engaged journalism. Democratically engaged journalism is first and foremost a call for journalists to respond effectively to populism and to take responsibility for it. However, the Guardian and the team of populism experts behind the project have certainly inscribed into the liberal democracy in the series, which by and large seems to be the problem not the solution. The attempts to practice democratically engaged journalism has thus failed, culminating in considering all the opponents of liberal democracy as the enemies fed by populism.

#### Anahtar Kelimeler:

popülizm, Guardian  
Gazetesi, medya  
söylemi, demokratik  
şekilde bağlanmış  
gazetecilik, demokrasi-  
savunma-endüstrisi

#### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı popülizm kavramı, medya ve gazetecilik arasındaki dinamik karşılıklı etkileşimi sergilemek anlamında oldukça yol gösterici olarak görünen Guardian gazetesinin Yeni Popülizm serisi üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Guardian gazetesinin Yeni Popülizm serisini örnek olay incelemesi olarak kullanarak, makale temsil etme, kimlikler ve ilişkiler oluşturma girişimlerine gereken önemi göstermeye çalışarak medya söyleminin eleştirel bir analizine teşebbüs etmektedir. Bu çerçevede, Guardian gazetesinin Yeni Popülizm serilerinin tartışmalı bir kavram olan popülizm kavramına yaptığı katkılar, bu amaca yönelik olarak kullanmış olduğu mekanizmalar ve sonuç olarak hangi çıkarlara hizmet ettiği ele alınan temel meseleler olacaktır. Elinizdeki çalışma Guardian gazetesinin Yeni Popülizm serisindeki girişimlerinin demokratik şekilde bağlanmış gazetecilik doğrultusunda ele alınabileceğini ileri sürmektedir. Demokratik şekilde bağlanmış gazetecilik öncelikli olarak gazetecilerin popülizme karşı etkin bir karşılık vermelerine ve bu noktada sorumluluk yüklenmelerine yönelik bir çağrıdır. Bununla birlikte, Guardian gazetesi ve projede birlikte çalıştığı popülizm üzerine uzmanlar grubu seride büyük oranda çözüm olmak yerine sorun olarak görünen liberal demokrasi düşüncesi ile kendilerini bağlamıştır. Bu sayede, demokratik şekilde bağlanmış gazetecilik sergilemeye yönelik girişimleri liberal demokrasiye olan tüm muhalefeti popülizm tarafından beslenen düşmanlar olarak telakki ederek bir başarısızlık ile son bulmuştur.

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## Introduction

It is fair to argue that no concept is more central to political discourse and analysis than that of populism in contemporary times. Populism, on the other hand, seems to be a notoriously difficult concept to define, elaborate on, and operationalize. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the term was first widely deployed with respect to the Russian and U.S. cases, the concept of populism has been heavily debated, and it remains so.

Although Cas Mudde, the famous scholar of contemporary populism, directed attention to a “populist zeitgeist” in his 2004 article, it appeared that 2016 marked the turning point for the contemporary literature on populism. Especially the Brexit referendum and the victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. were seen as indications of the populist forces changing the political scene in the Western World (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017). Jäger and Borriello (2020, p. 1) present one statistic: Since the 1970s, the number of Anglophone publications featuring populism has increased from 300 to more than a thousand in 2010; in 2019, more than 500 academic publications on the subject have appeared in English; in 2017, a special journal dedicated exclusively to populism was launched; and many newspapers run special series on the subject.

The obsession with better understanding the causes and consequences of populism, especially after 2016, has also produced a “democracy-defense industry”<sup>1</sup>- in the words of Müller (2019). In this state of mind, the hegemonic understanding of populism in contemporary studies, without differentiating between its historical cases and different forms, has to a certain extent narrowed down populism into a threat or danger to democracy, especially to the liberal variant of it. For example, some scholars argue that populism is basically “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (Mudde, 2015). Within this vein, populism’s uneasy relationship with the rule of law, the separation of powers, the critical press, and its strong reliance on the Manichean view of politics are seen as problematic with pluralism and/or liberal democracy.

In this “democracy-saving mind”, citizens, progressive politicians, thought leaders, academics, and journalists<sup>2</sup> are called to take responsibility to provide an effective response to populism. For part of some journalists, the idea of “democratically engaged journalism” - systematized by Stephen J.A. Ward- is basically a call for journalists to deal with the consequences of contemporary populism for democratic politics. Although attempts to rethink the role of the media and journalists as a preventative measure against the dangers of populism have proliferated, it is not reasonable to make the media and journalism solely responsible for the rise of populism (Waisbord, 2019).

<sup>1</sup>Jäger (2019) notes that by coining this term, Müller directs the attention to an academic apparatus in which “an apocalyptic talk of authoritarianism” allows academics and thought leaders to publish dozens of books detailing “democracy’s sadly dimming prospects”. This democracy-defense industry helped to circulate the message “democracy is dying but you can save it... if you buy my book” (Müller, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>A Communication Professor from Oxford University, Robert G. Picard (2016), also notes the calls for journalists to shoulder the responsibility in a keynote speech. Picard’s words are worth quoting at length: “In covering populism, journalists who provide neutral reporting of slander, hate speech, and lies become complicit in attacks on democratic values and human rights. When journalists remain unreasonably neutral, they help spread falsehoods and lies and promote the causes of hatred and racism. When journalists stand above it all and don’t respond, they become partly responsible for the results”.

The inclination of the contemporary populism literature to consider populism “as a media and communication phenomenon” (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann and Stanyer, 2018; Waisbord, 2019) or “as a political communication style” (especially with the influences of political strategy, political style, discursive frame, and ideational approaches to populism) has brought the relations between media and populism at a pivotal point. The steadily growing scholarly interest in the media and populism has produced important studies dealing with “media’s coverage of populist parties, populist’s attacks on the media and journalists, journalist’s role in legitimizing populist ideas” etc. However, the journalists’ and media’s attempt at both clarifying the concept of and providing a response to populism and practicing a democratically engaged role is understudied. Responding to this discrepancy, this article focuses on the contribution the Guardian’s “The New Populism” series makes to the understanding of populism and democratically engaged journalism.

The Guardian, Britain’s leading (left-wing) liberal newspaper, has set out a mission to “define and defeat” populism in its pages. To that aim, Guardian has launched a new populism series in November 2018. The series was composed of 84 articles, a very popular online quiz, in-person political interviews, and reports measuring the populist messages of world leaders with the help of internationally known scholars who specialized in populism. As it is noted in the Guardian, there has been a sevenfold increase in the frequency of the term within its pages in the past twenty years. Thus, this “unprecedented attention” to the concept remains to be told.

Within this perspective, the research questions this study is handling are: “What contributions has the Guardian’s ‘The New Populism’ series made to the contested concept of populism, which mechanisms have been used to this end, and what purposes has it served?”.

This paper argues that the Guardian’s New Populism series should be considered an example of a project dedicated to the so-called democracy-defense-industry. The series has been used to practice democratically-engaged journalism for the Guardian and democratically-engaged scholarship for its collaborators, Team Populism. At this point, the words of Mathijs Rooduijn, an influential contemporary scholar who studies populism, a member of Team Populism, and the author of the introductory article of the Guardian series (Rooduijn, 2019) are very instructive:

So I have changed my mind and my approach. I will remain as neutral as possible in my academic work, but I increasingly feel obliged to take part in the public debate about this topic, and also to warn in the media of the *increasing tension between populism and liberal democracy*... Academics also have a *moral obligation to protect liberal democracy*. By promoting social and political pluralism, the system produces the circumstances under which researchers can do their jobs and science can flourish. Researchers depend on it (Rooduijn, 2016, p. 317).

Aside from considering the Guardian’s populism series to be an exercise of “democratically engaged journalism”, this paper has three-fold arguments. First and foremost, this study will argue that the Guardian, following a certain definition of populism

(known as an ideational approach) and through methodologically flawed surveys and reports, to a great extent, has fed liberal biases on populism. In this line of reasoning, all types of populism, both right-wing and left-wing, are considered enemies of liberalism. Secondly, its collaboration with leading scholars (although selectively) of contemporary populism literature has been an attempt to lend scientific/functional legitimacy to Guardian's ideological and political views and to reaffirm the popular tendencies in the contemporary literature (populism as a political rather than a socio-economic issue and the need to measure it). Finally, Guardian's interest in populism seems to focus more on the pathologizing populism and its adherents and less on the process that created them. As a result, in contrast to the advice of the head of Team Populism, with whom the Guardian collaborated on this series, it seems to be silencing populists rather than listening to them (Hawkins, 2019). All in all, rather than achieving the initial goal of better understanding the causes and consequences of populism, the series has contributed to conceptual confusion and reaffirmed hegemonic approaches in contemporary literature.

The structure of the paper is as follows: First of all, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks are briefly presented. The first part is followed by the concept of democratically engaged journalism, which, according to this paper, both the Guardian and expert group consider the series as an opportunity to give the impression of practicing such a role. Secondly, this study will briefly highlight the tendencies of contemporary scholarship on the concept of populism in order to show that the Guardian series both subscribed to and reproduced the mainstream understandings. The following part will focus on the New Populism Series' shortcomings and contributions. Finally, general remarks will be made.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

The theoretical framework of this paper should be considered in the context of the "critical analysis of media discourse" even if it is understood in a looser and broader way. Following the footsteps of the idea that "all discourse is not only socially constituted but it is also socially shaping or socially constitutive" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 55), studying Guardian's discourse on the New Populism is particularly functional in demonstrating the Guardian's ideologically potent assumptions and its inclination toward the dominant liberal mainstream understanding of contemporary populism.

Why use critical discourse analysis to examine media texts (in this paper The Guardian's New Populism Series)? First of all, Fairclough (1995, p. 5) argues that critical analysis of media discourse can help us reflect on the relationship between the use of language and the exercise of power. Analyzing the language of media texts "will be simultaneously representing, setting up identities, and setting up relations". According to Fairclough, representation corresponds to "how the world is represented", identities to "what identities are set up for those involved in the programme or story", and relationships to "what relationships are established between those involved" (1995, p. 5). Thus taken together, any media text will represent the broader frameworks, systems of knowledge/beliefs and will set up social identities and social relations (1995, p. 55). The language used in the texts should be constitutive in "conventional ways" – reproducing

and maintaining identities, relations, and beliefs – or “creative ways” – transforming them (1995, p. 55). In a similar vein, Mautner (2008, p. 32) highlights that the media, especially the major dailies and weeklies, “very much reflect the social mainstream and dominant discourses”. Regarding their effect, “dissemination to large audiences enhances the constitutive effect of discourse and its power to shape widely shared constructions of reality”. Second, Gulati, Just, and Crigler (2004, pp. 237-238) note that the media can use its influence on “agenda-setting” (bring important issues to the forefront), “priming” (lead followers to particular interpretations and shape their beliefs) and “image-building” (positively or negatively). The Guardian New Populism Series fits perfectly into these considerations and is a case in point in demonstrating the dynamic interplay between journalists and experts in spreading dominant discourses, agenda-setting, priming, and building a negative image of all populisms, without making a distinction between them.

### ***The Concept of Democratically Engaged Journalism***

Contemporary journalism seems to be more inclined to interpretive/investigative rather than descriptive reporting (Albæk, 2011; Soontjens, 2019). Interpretive journalism is considered as the media's new *raison d'être* to include an inherently subjective component in their coverage. Contemporary reporters' attempt to place issues in a broader context is seen as part of journalists' duty to educate the public about broader currents (Gulati et al., 2004, p. 243). The interpretive journalism directs attention “to a more central role of journalists' agency” (Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2019, p. 1146). This type of journalism is seen as “crucial for the development of informed public opinion and the proper functioning of the role of civil publics and of the citizenry as judges” (Arato and Cohen, 2019, p. 106).

Assuming that “all news is a construction of reality”, then it is clear that many actors are involved in this construction process. The journalists, media editors and experts play critical roles in the process of news-making. Reporting is also aided by punditry, which is especially important in interpretive journalism. Academic experts are invited to appear in constructing an impression of objectivity and the use of experts helps the media legitimize their discourse “by branding themselves as accredited institutions that rely on expert knowledge” (Venger, 2019, p. 1343). However, as each actor struggles to control how the news story is presented, the outcome depends on the relative power of the sources.

The notion of democratically engaged journalism is put forward by Stephen J. A. Ward, most clearly in the book *Ethical Journalism in a Populist Age: The Democratically Engaged Journalist* (2018), as an idea that calls for journalists to reconsider their roles in order to protect and advance democracy. Ward argues that contemporary democracy is in serious trouble and that journalists must do something about it. The author refers to the current era as the “time of Trump” in which the populist and strong-man approach in government prevails (Ward, 2017a). Although Ward concentrates on the U.S. in order to develop his thesis, he hints that the development of “the volatile mix of populism, authoritarianism, and narrow patriotism” is certainly a global phenomenon that should be



called the “age of populism”. According to Ward (2017a), the right response to this global trend necessitates journalists to take over certain responsibilities. In his words, “journalists should neither be partisans (subjective advocacy journalism) nor neutral reporters of fact. Instead, “they have to practice an engaged journalism dedicated to democracy” (Ward, 2017a).

The thesis of democratically engaged journalism mainly directs the attention to “replace the idea of journalism of fact with the idea of interpretive journalism beyond facts” (Ward, 2018). Ward’s ideas of democratically engaged journalism, however, promote a particular form of democracy—a pluralistic, egalitarian democracy. As he admits in his writings, journalists are social activists of pluralistic liberal democracy. In his words, in which a moral backing for a certain understanding of democracy is evident, “the future of this pluralistic liberal democracy—the best polity for a global world of media-linked differences—is at stake”. Journalists have to play a role in this context because, for Ward (2017a), “the future of democratic journalism depends on the future of pluralistic democracy”.

According to Ward (2017b), democratically engaged journalists today protect their values by fulfilling three duties: a) to promote democratic dialogue across racial, ethnic, and economic divisions, b) to explain and defend pluralistic liberal democracy against its foes, and c) to apply the method of pragmatic objectivity. According to Ward, the third duty, pragmatic objectivity is of vital importance. As the guiding principle of democratically engaged journalism, pragmatic objectivity demonstrates the potential of journalists being both involved and objective:

Democratically engaged journalists have a dual commitment: they are committed to impartial methods as a means to their partial commitment to plural democracy. They commit themselves to rational and objective methods for deciding what to publish and how to persuade. Their desire for objective belief is part of a desire for reason-based democratic processes.

In a nutshell, the call for democratically engaged journalism renders journalists into players/actors rather than observers in actively advancing (liberal) democracy (Panievsky, 2021). This responsibility has a dual commitment, both to objectivity and to undertaking the mission of defending democracy. However, the balance between objectivity and the defense of democracy is not an easy and carries the possibility of strengthening one at the expense of the other.

### **Contemporary Populism Literature**

The concept of populism continues to mean a variety of different things to a variety of different authors and perspectives. In contemporary literature, however, there seem to be certain tendencies. Following in the footsteps of Rooduijn (2019, pp. 263-265), these tendencies (though not exhaustive) should be noted as follows:

First, even though the definition of populism is still contested, certain sets of definitions (a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004), a political strategy<sup>3</sup> (Weyland,

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<sup>3</sup>According to Weyland (2001, p.14) populism “is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic

2001), a political discourse/logic<sup>4</sup> (Laclau, 2005a; 2005b) and a political style<sup>5</sup> (Moffitt, 2016) prevail over others in the contemporary literature. What is striking about these definitions is that populism is now primarily regarded as a political phenomenon, as opposed to prior generations' perception of it as a reflection of a certain state of social and economic contexts. In the introductory chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, the authors note that "definitions centered on the economy are deliberately excluded" from the conceptual approaches (Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo and Ostiguy, 2017, p. 14). In this hegemony of political definitions, the political scientists who deal with populism have been more active in the debate than the historians and sociologists.

Second, due to the consensus on the hegemony of political definitions in the recent literature, intellectual interest is increasingly focused on the question of how populism can be operationalized/measured. Especially relevant for the mainstream ideational definitions that consider populism as a set of ideas, political actors' relations with populism have been narrowed down to the issue of a degree, such as measuring their increasing or decreasing populist messages discursively.

Third, there is a shift of focus in the literature from supply-side (parties, politicians) to demand-side (voters) explanations. Supply-side explanations focus primarily on leaders and parties providing mechanisms to channel active resistance of the citizens. On the other hand, the demand-side<sup>6</sup> of public opinion deals with voters' attitudes, values, and opinions as sources of mass support for populism (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

Fourth, the studies of communication and media scholars have contributed significantly to the contemporary understanding of the phenomenon of populism. Especially relevant to approaches of populism as discourse, strategy, and style, that understanding populism as political communication has placed the media and related issues at the central dimension of contemporary debates on populism. Thus, it is argued that "without addressing media and communication issues, the contemporary phenomenon of populism cannot be properly understood" (Waisbord, 2019, p. 221). Understanding populism as a communication phenomenon paves the way for empirical operationalization and measurement. The increasing salience of media studies has also shifted the focus from "what constitutes the ideology of populism to how it is communicated" (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 425).

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leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers".

<sup>4</sup>Laclau (2005b, pp. 43-44) considers populism as an "ontological rather than an ontic category". According to Laclau, the structural "defining features of populism" (politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject, the emergence of such a subject is the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps, the logic of this division is dictated by the creation of an equivalential chain between social demands, and the consolidation of the equivalential chain by an *empty signifier*) are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation.

<sup>5</sup>The features of populism understood as a political style are "appealing to 'the people' versus 'the elite'", the reliance of populist leaders on "bad manners" and politics as driven by "the perception of crisis, breakdown or threat" (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 43-45).

<sup>6</sup>According to Inglehart and Norris (2016, pp. 12-13), the "economic inequality/insecurity perspective" directs attention toward the increasing income inequality, the erosion of organized labour and neoliberal austerity policies, and the "cultural backlash" thesis – that explains the support for populist parties because of a reaction against cultural change – are the two most common demand-side explanations.

Finally, the authors pay greater attention to the evaluation of populism in power. Until quite recently, it was widely assumed that populism, because of its anti-elitist and anti-establishment characteristics, was an ideology of opposition, and that if it became part of the government, populist parties would not be able to sustain their discourses either because of their fate “was to be integrated into the mainstream” (Meny and Surel, 2002, p. 18) or “were forced to become less populist, become riven with internal conflicts or simply collapses” (Taggart, 2000, p. 100). However, the increasing electoral successes of populist parties, which paved the way for them to become much more experienced with government participation, has naturally made populism in power an object of study. More importantly, the focus on populism in power has brought to the fore the relationship between populism and democracy.

As far as contemporary literature on populism is considered, a group of scholars (D’Eramo, 2013; Foster, 2017; Jäger, 2017) argue that the contemporary hegemonic understanding of populism is hardly new. Especially under the aegis of the historical revisionist school of the Cold War Liberals in the U.S., the concept of populism was liberated from its 19<sup>th</sup> Century origins. Under the authoritative leadership of writers such as Arthur Schlesinger, Richard Hofstadter, and Daniel Bell, the exercise of historical revisionism began to describe the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American populism as a “proto-fascist movement”. This negative re-evaluation of the concept of populism is “seen as conforming to the coordinates of the theory of totalitarianism” (Foster, 2017) - the idea that fascism and communism are opposites but similar, in that both are totalitarian (D’Eramo, 2013). In this understanding, any opposition to the liberal democratic administration of capitalist society is to be “viewed as illiberal totalitarian tendencies” (Foster, 2017). The image of populism as fascist, inherently authoritarian, and harbouring totalitarian tendencies has become a “new orthodoxy in the international academy and hegemonic view in political science ever since” (D’Eramo, 2013). Following the end of the Cold War, “the discourse of twin totalitarianisms (fascism and communism) has been transformed into the theory of extremes which ground populism in the notion of the centre versus opposite extremes”. The centre in this discourse (the near-universal acceptance of liberal democratic management) is put forward as the sole bulwark against totalitarian tendencies of extremes and is said to encompass three trends since 1989 according to D’Eramo (2013): 1) social classes and class politics have become unmentionable; 2) the supremacy of the market and its power has increased; and 3) the scope for democratic decision-making has become tightly circumscribed. Thus, any deviation from these centrist trends (from whatever direction they come and without making any differentiation among them) is labelled as populist.

According to Löwy (2019), using the term populism in this “deliberately mystifying way” is also critical to bring about an amalgamation between the far right and radical left, both of which oppose centrist neoliberal policies. According to Jäger (2017, p. 310), this understanding of populism can still be visible in the contemporary literature on populism which “tends to cast populism and pluralism as ideological opposites and views populism an existential threat to liberal-democratic politics”.

This hegemonic understanding of populism seems to be a “euphemism”, for not



speaking of far-right, xenophobia, ultra-nationalism, and fascism. This “safer notion of populism” is applied to very diverse issues in the contemporary period. It assists “journalists in avoiding overheated references to the far-right, accusing someone of demagoguery without openly saying the word, while academics draw grant money from an anti-populist consulting industry” (Jäger and Borriello, 2020, p. 4). According to Löwy (2019), populism has become a “pseudo-concept”, and seems to have lost its former analytical usefulness.

### **The Guardian's New Populism Series**

As part of an attempt to grasp the meaning attributed to populism, this part of the study discusses as comprehensively as possible the stance adopted by the Guardian and its' collaborators – an international network of researchers, known as Team populism. In doing so, the op-eds, articles, quizzes, and reports published by the Guardian will be the main tenet of the data. The reason for focusing on opinion articles (such as editorials, op-ed pieces, and long reads, etc.) is “because they constitute one of the most central spaces in which public debates are carried out”. It is argued that these opinion articles written by editors, journalists, and academics “will not be prone to expressing populist messages” (Rooduijn, 2014, pp. 727, 730). In addition, Ward (2021, pp. 25-26) argues that a newspaper's editorials and the opinion of a newspaper's columnist are the primary examples in which perspectival-engaged journalism can be investigated. Therefore, not all the 84 articles but the core and key opinion articles<sup>7</sup> along with a very popular online quiz and reports that measure populist discourses of world leaders will form the backbone of the study at hand.

In November 2018, the Guardian newspaper launched its “New Populism Series”, a six-month investigative series aimed at exploring the rise of populism. The series was intended as an “exploratory” project to help us better understand populism. To that end, the series' core questions were intended to be “Who are the new populists?”, “What factors brought them to power?”, and “What are they doing in office?”. To bring the project to fruition, the Guardian worked with scholars, an international network known as “Team Populism”, specialized in populism, and used the data from “YouGov Cambridge Globalism Project”, “a survey conducted in 23 of the world's largest countries to explore populism, globalisation” etc. (Lewis and Duncan, 2019). The motivation of the Guardian behind such an exclusive collaboration was acknowledged by Paul Lewis, the series editor, in a long article in the Guardian (Lewis, 2019). The status of “populism studies as being very much in vogue”, “the exasperation of scholars at how the term is overused and/or misapplied” and “the lack of empirical research” on populism seemed to motivate the Guardian. As Lewis, also, highlighted in this article (albeit indirectly), the series on populism should be considered in the context of the Guardian's overall thinking about journalism “in a time of crisis”. Editor-in-chief, Katharine Viner's article (2017), seems instructive in articulating out a mission for the Guardian in particular and for journalists in general. Viner (2017) argues that “we are living through an extraordinary period that may demand journalists do more than adapt”. In a constant assault by “those in powers

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<sup>7</sup>For these key and core articles, you should consult the Guardian references, sub-headed in the References part.

who have exploited distrust of media actively undermine the role of journalism in the public interest in a democracy”. This made it necessary for journalists to reconsider what they do and why they do it. The series on populism seems to be seen as a rethinking from this point of view. For Team Populism, the project was seen as very functional in “better communicating their scientific research to a broad audience” and “in correcting the problematic consideration of populism by the media” (APSA Conference, 2019).

The project completed in May 2019. The Guardian series has not gone unnoticed. Although considered one of the best and most ambitious examples of interaction between journalism and academics, the series harboured important shortcomings. Burtenshaw and Jäger (2018) provided a thorough critique of it. Among other things, they argued that Guardian’s attempt was basically to “define populism as the enemy of liberal politics” (Burtenshaw and Jäger, 2018) rather than illuminate the concept. In addition, Brown and Mondon (2021) “examine the way in which the Guardian both bought into and contributed to the populist hype”. In particular the authors argue that the Guardian contributed to what they called the populist hype through by “amplifying, whitewashing/euphemising, deflecting and legitimizing” (Brown and Mondon, 2021) the concept. Although these studies made significant contributions, this paper believes that it is still necessary to note the series’ broader implications and shortcomings, paying due regard to the problems raised by a specific definition of the term, the controversial conclusions of how populist are you quiz, and the series’ absorption by mainstream tendencies in contemporary populism.

### **Analysis and Discussions**

In accordance with the theoretical framework of this paper, the series will be primarily analyzed in terms of its contribution to “representation, the construction of identities, and relationships”.

In approaching the series on “*representation*”, it should first be emphasized that the definition provided by Cas Mudde (known as the ideational approach) forms the basis of the entire series. In the words of Mudde (2004, p. 543), populism is “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. Although authors working in this vein admit that the ideational approach is increasingly dominating the contemporary literature (Mudde, 2017; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017), the debate over the definition of populism is still alive and the Guardian is almost silent on its choice. Paul Lewis (2019), the Guardian’s series editor, acknowledged that they decided to “stay faithful to this broadly accepted definition” without any further elaboration. According to Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 528), the ideational approach is put forward to bring “normative motivations and philosophical standpoints” to the contemporary debate on populism and is considered a corrective to the “economic view of politics”, which directs attention to the material interests of voters, that much of the contemporary political science follow. By this choice, the Guardian, to a great extent, has both subscribed to the hegemonic understanding of populism in contemporary literature

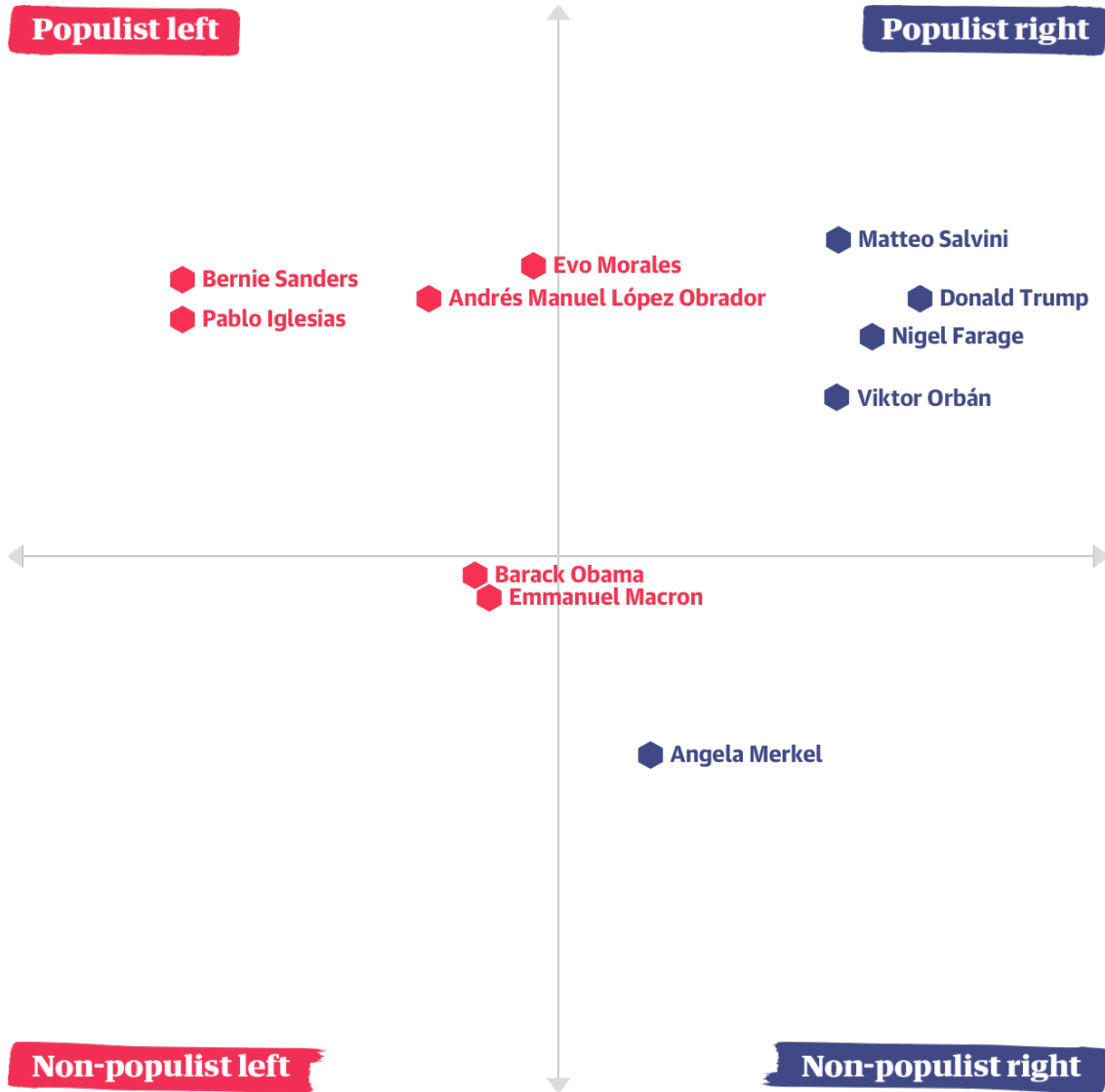
and freed the discussions on populism in its pages from the broader economic and social context, especially neoliberalism and capitalism.

As for “setting up identities,” the Guardian’s opinion “on the opponents of populism” is rather controversial. Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair, and Matteo Renzi presented as “centrist-heavyweights”, were interviewed by the Guardian about “how they lost to (right-wing) populists and what could be done to stop them” (Wintour, 2018a). As Burtenshaw and Jäger (2018) argue, the “hard-working families” discourse of Tony Blair’s New Labour, Hillary Clinton’s calls to “curbs on immigration” in the pages of the Guardian (Wintour, 2018b), and Matteo Renzi’s “Italian’s first policy” hardly seem convincing arguments to label these figures “anti-populist”. Paradoxically, a careful analysis of these discourses reveals that they fall within the realms of “believing in pure people”, one of the central pillars of the Guardian’s definition of ideational approach. However, the Guardian’s attempt to label them as centrists opposition to right-wing populists has only served to blur the issue at hand. In addition, it is interesting that the Guardian analysis of the YouGov Cambridge Globalism Survey concluded that “in an age of extremes and opposites (read it as populism, the author), most people are pretty normal... If there is one word that captures (most people’s) politics, it is probably ‘moderate’” (Rice-Oxley, 2019). Based on the analysis of the Guardian journalists, it is believed that the survey concludes that “the majority cluster towards centre ground in a classic bell curve” (Rice-Oxley, 2019). This analysis led Burtenshaw and Jäger (2018) to claim that the Guardian set up the identities of people as “liberal democrat centrist” and the populists as the “enemy”.

Another contribution of the series that drawn heavy criticism from researchers is the online quiz “How populist are you?” (Guardian, 2018a), created by Team Populism. These pieces are very instructive in “*setting up relations*” between the readers and the newspaper. The quiz is extremely popular, and as Lewis (2019) noted, one and a half million Guardian readers participated. As noted in the Team Populism methodological memo behind the quiz (Castanho Silva, Clarke, Hawkins, Lewis, Littvay and Wiesehomeier, 2018), the questions were constructed paying due regard to the three dimensions of populism, understood as an ideational approach, in mind: praising common people, anti-elitism and anti-establishment sentiments and a good-versus-evil view of politics. The questions such as “Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people”, “Politicians don’t have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job”, “The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves”, “You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics”, “The people I disagree with politically are not evil” etc. are created to measure readers’ attitudes toward populism together with whether or not they agree with “patriotism, nationalism, free market, free tared” etc., in order to locate them on the left-right axis.

The quiz inserted certain political figures such as Evo Morales, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, etc. as reference points in the chart. However, the placement was done by “asking a group of experts on each politician to complete the same survey as if they were that politician” (Clarke, Kalia and Lewis, 2018) rather than a careful analysis of their policy positions and overall discourses and statements. This choice led Burtenshaw and

Jäger (2018) to argue that it was “a form of telepathy” rather than political sophistication. The most interesting point in the quiz was the conclusions it produced (see Figure 1).



**Figure-1:** The Conclusions of Guardian’s *How Populist Are You* Quiz (Guardian, 2018a)

Particularly striking were the conclusions that “Barack Obama and Emmanuel Macron are situated to the left of Evo Morales”, “Donald Trump is further to the right than Victor Orbán and “Jeremy Corbyn does not appear in the chart”. In response to the criticism that “Evo Morales was misplaced on the chart”, Kaltwasser, one of the experts who assisted in positioning Latin American leaders, argued that “some of these left-wing presidents in Latin America, while very left-wing in terms of economic policy, are pretty conservative on cultural issues – particularly compared with Europe” (Clarke and Jones, 2018). Even if the Kaltwasser’s response seems to be an approach to populism through a “combination of economic and cultural questions”, the result is hardly convincing.

To be fair to the cause, the Guardian's New Populism Project is one of the best examples of the collaboration between media and academic scholars. It has produced dozens of evidence-based articles, up-to-date data measuring populist discourses by the world leaders since the 2000s, and a very popular online quiz and has acted conduit to bring the work of academics to a wider audience. However, rather than achieving the series' initial goals of better understanding the causes and consequences of populism and clearing the term's misapplication and overuse, the series unquestionably subscribed to the mainstream understanding of populism in contemporary literature, as evidenced by the following points: the obsession with measuring populism, accepting the hegemony of ideational approaches, making no reference to broader social contexts - particularly the effects of neoliberal restructuring of capitalism giving way to populism, and portraying all types of populism (without distinction) as the enemy of liberal democracy. Moreover, the project seems to be instrumentalized to reiterate the Guardian's own ideological stance. For some time, the Guardian (2015a; 2015b) has underlined the overlap between the far right and far left and directed attention toward the common tendencies of left and right-wing populists<sup>8</sup>. The New Populism series is not devoid of such an understanding. Most notably, the Guardian editorial on the series makes clear that "the arrival of populism as a political force grounded in the notion of the centre versus opposite extremes" (Guardian, 2018b) certainly fosters liberal prejudices.

## Conclusion

In response to recent calls in the literature that directed attention to the roles of media and journalists in responding to populism, this paper aimed to provide modest qualitative evidence by analysing key articles, quizzes, interviews, and reports of the Guardian's New Populism Series using the theoretical traits drawn from media discourse analysis. Considering representation, setting up identities and relationships, this study's attempt to critically analyze Guardian's discourse has provided important insights for the growing literature dealing with the interrelationships between populism, media, and journalism. Consistent with the arguments about the contemporary inclination of journalists to interpretative reporting, the Guardian and its collaborating journalists acted as actors rather than neutral reporters. The series was seen an exercise in informing the public about the causes and consequences of populism. However, consistent with the hypotheses of scholars engaged in the critical analysis of media discourse, the series, from the outset, reinforced commonly held views about populism in relation to liberal democracy. In addition, this study argued that the series on New Populism was seen by the Guardian as a vital opportunity to engage in democratically engaged journalism. However, such an attempt at providing democratically engaged journalism created more confusion than clarity in developing a response to populism, as it limits itself to the liberal

<sup>8</sup>The editorial pieces of Guardian (2015a; 2015b) are very instructive in showing its attempt at bringing an amalgamation between left and right-wing populists, as in line with the liberal hegemonic idea of placing populism in the theory of extremes. Mainly framed SYRIZA and Podemos from the left and UKIP and Marine Le Pen from the right as "anti-establishment movements", the discourse in these pieces highlights the shared tendencies among them such as worrying xenophobia, politics of redemption, an indivisible, uncorrupted people against wealthy elites or powerless minorities. Rather than highlighting the differences among these movements, Guardian argued, "it would be dangerous and short-sighted not to point out the existing overlap between many anti-establishment movements".



understanding of democracy.

This paper has two important limitations. Since it is a study focused exclusively on the Guardian New Populism Series, there seems to be a need for more illustrative examples to support the ideas put forward. In addition, the sample in this study is limited to the main articles in the series as well as a very popular online quiz, interviews, and reports. Despite these shortcomings, it is believed that the critical analysis of media discourse in the paper provides some vital arguments for the literature regarding the role of journalists' in (de)legitimizing populism. Along with the exercise of a kind of democratically engaged journalism, the Guardian's New Populism Series is also noteworthy, albeit controversial, in terms of its conceptual contributions, the mechanisms employed to that end, and the purpose it serves.

**Etik Beyanı:** Yazar çalışmanın etik kurul izni gerektirmeyen çalışmalar arasında yer aldığını beyan etmektedir. Aksi bir durumun tespiti halinde Kastamonu İletişim Araştırmaları Dergisi'nin hiçbir sorumluluğu olmayıp, tüm sorumluluk çalışmanın yazarına aittir.

**Yazar Katkı Oranı Beyanı:** Çalışma tek yazarlı olup, yazarın katkı oranı %100'dür.

**Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı:** Yazar herhangi bir çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmektedir.

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