**CONCEPTUALIZING A POPULIST NARRATIVE:
RATIONALES, ATTRIBUTES, IMPLICATIONS**

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Abstract

Narrative analysis represents the cutting edge in various domains of political communication research and has recently made its way into populism studies. Nevertheless, despite the growing academic interest in populist storytelling and populist narratives, a conceptual foundation of these phenomena remains scarce. Situated at the intersection of political communication and literary studies, the article fills this gap by proposing a systematized concept of a populist narrative. Building upon the minimum definitions of the background concepts, the study identifies a set of necessary attributes shared by populist narratives. It further discusses the effectiveness of populist narratives with the focus on four dimensions: archetypal structure, emotionality, suspensefulness, and ability to facilitate identification. Against the backdrop of the increasing role of storytelling in contemporary politics, the article facilitates a more coherent and meaningful examination of populist narratives.

Keywords: Populist Communication; Narratives; Political Storytelling; Concept Formation; Mediatization

Introduction

A growing body of research is turning to narratology¹ in quest of adequate tools to examine highly mediatized contemporary politics.² Particularly, narrative analysis is applied to the study of political decision-making,³ public policy,⁴ international negotiations,⁵ and collective action,⁶ among other things. Recently, narrative approaches have also made their way into populism research bringing new perspectives to this flourishing academic domain.⁷ However, most studies trying to marry populism and storytelling do so loosely and somewhat unsystematically. While having produced some interesting empirical results, they have done little in clarifying what exactly is meant by a populist narrative, what distinguishes it from other forms of political discourse, and what are the merits of a narrative perspective on populism, in the first place. As a result, the lack of a comprehensive conceptual understanding of populist narratives hampers the development of an otherwise promising approach. Therefore, the study aims to address this limitation by proposing a systematized concept of a populist narrative.

It is important to note from the outset that the present study does not attempt to redefine populism at a time when this contested concept has just started to enjoy relative

¹ Narratology is a branch of literary theory studying stories and story structures. For a concise overview see Fludernik, M. and C. Pirllet. "Narratology." In *English and American Studies* eds. M. Middeke, T. Müller, C. Wald, and H. Zapf (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2012).

² Polletta, F. *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*. Chicago, Ill., London: University of Chicago Press, 2006; Mayer, F.W. *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Shen, F., L. Ahern, and M. Baker. "Stories that Count: Influence of News Narratives on Issue Attitudes." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91 (1) (2014), 98–117.

³ Jones, M.D. "Communicating Climate Change: Are Stories Better than 'Just the Facts?'" *Policy Studies Journal* 42(4) (2014), 644–673.

⁴ Bansel, P. "A Narrative Approach to Policy Analysis." In *Education Policy and Contemporary Theory*, eds. K.N. Gulson, M. Clarke, and E.B. Petersen (London: Routledge, 2015), 183–194.

⁵ Narlikar, A. *Poverty Narratives and Power Paradoxes in International Trade Negotiations and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

⁶ Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*, op. cit.

⁷ Casullo, M. E. (2020). "Populism and Myth". In *The populist manifesto* eds. E. Eklundh and A. Knott (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers), 25–38; Ungureanu, C., and A. Popartan. "Populism as Narrative, Myth Making, and the 'Logic' of Political Emotions." *Journal of the British Academy* 8s1 (2020), 37–43; Freistein, K., and F. Gadinger. "Populist Stories of Honest Men and Proud Mothers: A Visual Narrative Analysis." *Review of International Studies* 46(2) (2020), 217–236; Seargeant, P. *The Art of Political Storytelling: Why Stories Win Votes in Post-Truth Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

distinctness.⁸ Instead, it is an effort to foreground, discuss and, hopefully, clarify a particular type of populist communication building upon the literature from the disciplines that rarely intersect. It is also not very useful for this study to take sides in the “populism as style-versus-content” debate because as will become clear further, neither is essentially the focus of this inquiry. The study does though repeatedly turn to the ideological content of populist communication but only to show how it informs the narrative *structure* of populist stories. Finally, while this is obvious that populist narratives can be of various genres, plot types, and styles, this article makes scarce reference to the stylistic aspects of populist storytelling as this goes beyond the answer to the question of what a minimum populist narrative is.

The article is structured around three principal issues: rationales, attributes, and implications. The section on *rationales* discusses the value of studying populist narratives in the context of contemporary media environments and political cultures. The section on *attributes* establishes the key attributes of a populist narrative, locates it among other related concepts, and proposes its conceptual definition. The section on *implications* employs an interdisciplinary approach to discuss the effectiveness of populist narratives concerning their archetypal structure, emotionality, suspensefulness, and ability to facilitate identification. The article is concluded with the discussion of the consequences arising from the proposed view of populist narratives and suggestions for further research.

⁸ For an overview of a long ongoing and at times painful process of populism conceptualization see Pappas, T. S. “Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* eds. T. S. Pappas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Rationales: Why Narratives? Why Now?

Stories have always played an important role in the political process. This held true for the antique world, with orators, then spin doctors, being prime influencers in political decision-making. This was also true for modernity when most political activities began to cluster around ideologies, i.e., system-constituting narratives.⁹ Yet the combination of political, technological, and media factors, peculiar for the current world, makes the understanding of how narratives shape politics and exercise power more relevant than ever.¹⁰

The increasing role of narrative logic in contemporary political communication can be best examined through the lens of the mediatization of politics.¹¹ Mediatization is a “long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations, and actors have increased”.¹² Mediatization is commonly viewed as occurring in four phases: (1) the rise of the relative importance of the media as the main source of political information (2) the rise of the relative autonomy of the media as a social institution (3) the tendency for the media to follow its own, rather than political logic, and (4) the tendency for political actors and institutions to be guided by the media, not political logic.¹³ This last phase is key to the understanding of how mediatization advantages political narratives. Even though the media has numerous different functions,¹⁴ the most basic of them is telling stories about the world. In fact, it is so essential that all other functions can only be carried out by means of storytelling. That is why the adoption of media

⁹ Lejano, R. P., and J. Dodge. “The Narrative Properties of Ideology: the Adversarial Turn and Climate Skepticism in the USA.” *Policy Sciences* 50 (2) (2017), 195–215.

¹⁰ Hagström, L., and K. Gustafsson. “Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32 (4) (2019), 387.

¹¹ Kepplinger, H. M. “Mediatization of Politics: Theory and Data.” *Journal of Communication* 52 (4) (2002), 972–986; Schulz, W. “Reconstructing Mediatization as an Analytical Concept.” *European Journal of Communication* 19 (1) (2004), 87–101.

¹² Strömbäck, J., and F. Esser. “Mediatization of Politics: Towards a Theoretical Framework.” In *Mediatization of Politics* eds. F. Esser, and J. Strömbäck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ Hanitzsch, T. “Deconstructing Journalism Culture: Toward a Universal Theory.” *Communication Theory*, 17 (4) (2007), 371.

logic by political actors inevitably leads to the increasing role of narratives in politics. Being dependent on media coverage, political actors adjust their professional routines and communication culture to meet the standards of newsworthiness, such as, for example, timeliness, proximity, surprise, and negativity.¹⁵ However, at a more general level, these criteria boil down to the capability of political actors to craft appealing political narratives.

A detailed account of what makes a political narrative is provided in the *attributes* section but for the sake of coherent discussion, a concise definition is needed here. A political narrative is a story “with a clear sequential order that connects [politically relevant] events in a meaningful way”.¹⁶ On a theoretical level, narratives are usually contrasted with arguments and descriptions¹⁷ but, of course, in actual politics, these forms of discourse constantly overlap, with some of them playing a primary and some a secondary role in every specific case. For instance, non-narrative communication mainly relies on logical reasoning, facts, and numbers and occasionally turns to stories for illustration.¹⁸ On the other hand, while not rejecting arguments per se, narrative-based communication employs stories strategically to wrap up political messages and structure content. Narratives have many advantages over other forms of political communication. They simplify and organize complex reality to account for the limited resources of media and its audience, build up drama according to the principles of good storytelling, adjust themselves to the requirements of rapidly changing media formats, and add a personal angle that abstract reasoning often lacks. Thus, when communicating politics in a narrative form, political actors imitate media language and

¹⁵ Mazzoleni, G., and W. Schulz. “Mediatization” of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?” *Political Communication* 16 (1999), 250.

¹⁶ Meyer, T., and L. P. Hinchman. *Media Democracy: How the Media Colonize Politics* (Oxford: Polity, 2002), XVI.

¹⁷ Fludernik and Pirllet. “Narratology,” op. cit., 225.

¹⁸ Yevseyev, V. “Measuring Narrativity in Literary Texts.” In *Narratologia. Narratology beyond Literary Criticism* eds. F. Jannidis, J. Pier, W. Schmid, J. C. Meister, T. Kindt, and W. Schernus (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 109.

increase the visibility and competitiveness of their messages in a highly mediatized environment.

Changes in the format of political communication also affect its content. Thus, in the course of mediatization, *politics* – a public side of the political process aimed at gathering electoral support – is becoming more salient compared to *policy* and *polity* which correspond to the substantial (ideological) and procedural (bureaucratic) facets, respectively.¹⁹ Many scholars ascribe this to the narrative structure of *politics*.²⁰ For example, one aspect of *politics* that, thanks to its high narrativity, receives arguably exaggerated media attention, is election campaigning.²¹ The conflict between groups of actors embedded from the beginning, the unpredictable storyline fueled by the media coverage of scandals and leaks, and the growing intrigue culminating on election day are all features of a typical election campaign foregrounding its story-like nature. The very term often used to describe such narrative-driven *politics* – “the politics of spectacle” – refers to “show” and “drama,” which themselves represent just another modus of (visual) storytelling.²²

When it comes to populist actors, they tend to favorably view opportunities offered by narrative-driven politics.²³ To a large extent, this is because the above-discussed media structures demand political communication and culture which are partly in tune with those practiced by populists.²⁴ For instance, as populists tend to discursively oppose themselves to

¹⁹ Strömbäck and Esser, “Mediatization of Politics: Towards a Theoretical Framework,” op. cit., 16.

²⁰ Polletta, *It Was like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*, op. cit.; Polletta, F. “Storytelling in Politics.” *Contexts*, 7 (4) (2008), 26–31; Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*, op. cit.

²¹ D'Angelo, P., F. Büchel, and F. Esser. “Mediatization of Campaign Coverage: Metacoverage of US Elections.” In *Mediatization of Politics* eds. F. Esser and J. Strömbäck (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 156–180.

²² Kellner, D. “Preface: Guy Debord, Donald Trump, and the Politics of the Spectacle.” In *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism* eds. M. Briziarelli, and E. Armano (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017), 1–13; Yates, H.E. *The Politics of Spectacle and Emotion in the 2016 Presidential Campaign* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot).

²³ Nadler, A. “Populist Communication and Media Environments.” *Sociology Compass* 13 (8) (2019), 3–7.

²⁴ Wirth, W., Esser, F., Wettstein, M., Engesser, S., Wirz, D., Shulz, A., ... Muller, P. “The Appeal of Populist Ideas, Strategies, and Styles: A Theoretical Model and Research Design for Analyzing Populist Political Communication.” *Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century* no. 28. National Centre of Competence in Research. Working Paper No. 88 (2016), 21–23.

the mainstream politicians, this is natural for them to also strive for a maximum distance from those politicians' routines and practices, including traditional channels and formats of communication. The need for alternative communication venues is often resolved through the use of highly non-formalized and unregulated platforms where political storytelling can be perceived as appropriate and disseminated unhindered. Another feature of populist political rhetoric is the emphasis on oneself's authenticity and resemblance to "ordinary people." Not surprisingly, this discursive commitment also bears implications for which style prevails in the populists' political communication repertoire. For example, it is reasonable to assume that the image of an average Jane/Joe can be best maintained when a politician uses the respective language when communicating with their electorate, that is the language of plain comprehensible stories rather than arguments or abstractions. This conditioning of the form of populist communication by its content serves as one of the explanations why populists often gravitate towards social media that rewards personalized and emotional storytelling.²⁵

The increasing role of narrative logic in contemporary politics is recognized both by practitioners close to the political backstage and academics observing politics from a distance.²⁶ Empirical data also evidence the rise in political storytelling over time in some Western countries, for example, in the US.²⁷ Mediatization, in turn, provides a useful framework for understanding factors and processes that alter politics towards higher narrativity. The acknowledgment of narrative as an important subclass of political discourse has implications for the concepts and methods researchers use. The conventional non-

²⁵ Jutel, O. "American Populism and the New Political Economy of the Media Field." *The Political Economy of Communication* 1(1) (2013), 30–31.

²⁶ Olson, R. "How Trump Won the Election by Using Core Narrative Techniques." *The Business of Story*, November 9, 2016. <https://www.convinceandconvert.com/podcasts/episodes/how-trump-won-the-election-by-using-core-narrative-techniques/>; Shen, Ahern, and Baker, "Stories that Count: Influence of News Narratives on Issue Attitudes," op. cit.

²⁷ Weber, S. "In a Political Game All About Storytelling, Which Candidate is Using Narrative to Get Ahead?" *Quantified Communication*, July 14, 2020. <https://www.quantifiedcommunications.com/blog/storytelling-in-politics/>; Franch, P. "Praising the Fallen Heroes: Storytelling in US War Presidential Rhetoric, from Johnson to Obama." *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 27 (4) (2018), 311–328.

narrative approaches, for example, a rational-choice approach, have been criticized for insufficient attention to the role of emotions in political communication and decision-making,²⁸ the inadequate conceptualization of the political persuasion process,²⁹ and the failure to capture the full range of sources and platforms that disseminate politically relevant information nowadays.³⁰ Thus, adopting a narrative lens helps to address this criticism when studying contemporary political communication in general and populist communication in particular.

Attributes: Towards Conceptualization of a Populist Narrative

The label “populist narrative” implies that the concept in hand has two sets of attributes – one related to its populist content and another to its narrative structure. These “sets” are to be discussed successively following the minimum definition approach, which means that all attributes mentioned further are necessary *and* sufficient for a case to be considered a populist narrative. Such an approach helps to ensure that the concept is broad enough to be applied to cases from various socio-political contexts.³¹ This is especially important as populist narratives are already an example of a “low” concept focusing on some specific instances of political communication, which are, however, of particular theoretical and practical interest for the reasons discussed in the previous section.

The three basic attributes of a political narrative are (1) a plot, (2) character(s), and (3) a political meaning.³² A plot is a sequence of events that occur naturally one after another. Thus, the sentence “The king died, and then the queen died because of grief” would classify

²⁸ Clarke, S., P. Hoggett, and S. Thompson, ed. *Emotion, Politics and Society* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

²⁹ Hamby, A., D. Brinberg, and J. Jaccard. “A Conceptual Framework of Narrative Persuasion.” *Journal of Media Psychology* 30 (3) (2018), 113–124.

³⁰ Holbert, R.L., O. Pillion, D.A. Tschida, G.G. Armfield, K. Kinder, K.L. Cherry, and A.R. Daulton. “The West Wing as Endorsement of the U.S. Presidency: Expanding the Bounds of Priming in Political Communication.” *Journal of Communication* 53 (3) (2003), 427–443.

³¹ Mair, P. “Concepts and Concept Formation.” In *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences*, eds. D. Della Porta, and M. Keating (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 177–197.

³² Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*, op. cit., 53–64.

as a protozoan plot.³³ The understanding of a plot as a meaningful structure with a beginning, middle, and end dates back to Aristotle and remains in use today.

Characters are “actors who make things happen or to whom things happen”.³⁴

Usually, political narratives revolve around human characters such as politicians, taxpayers, and candidates, but inflation, democracy, viruses, and other abstract phenomena can also be characters. The prototypical characters found in most narratives are, for instance, heroes, villains, and victims.

To define political meaning, two steps are needed. The meaning is the main point of a narrative, its moral and a more or less explicit answer to the question “so what?”.³⁵ For example, one of the meanings drawn from the Cold War “story” might be about the inadmissibility of using the nuclear ultimatum in international politics. Narrative meaning does not result exclusively from input; rather, it is also influenced by how individual recipients “read” a story. Hence, different people often reach opposite conclusions after being exposed to the same narratives. As for the definition of political, this study adheres to the broad understanding of the term, which is, again, well reflected in Aristotle.³⁶ In particular, “political” is viewed here as having to do with the lives and organization of community/society as opposed to private lives. Adopting such an inclusive definition, leads to many cases from popular culture qualifying as having political meaning. The recent *Netflix* movie *Enola Holmes*, for example, can be considered as having feminist political meaning; the documentary *Before the Flood* starring the UN goodwill ambassador Leonardo DiCaprio can be regarded as having an environmental meaning. It is crucial for students of political

³³ Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 86.

³⁴ Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action*, op. cit., 61.

³⁵ Riessman, C. K. *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, Calif., London: SAGE Publications, 1993).

³⁶ Aristotle, and C. Lord. *Aristotle's Politics (Second Edition)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), VII–VIII.

storytelling to be aware of such cases on the boundaries as they illustrate how contemporary political communication unfolds in novel formats and from unexpected platforms.

Thereby, a political narrative is a piece of discourse that has a plot, character(s), and a political meaning. This definition is suitable for multi-level analysis: Depending on the research question, one can adhere to it when scrutinizing a specific political narrative or identifying multiple narratives within bigger chunks of discourse, such as the whole election campaign. In both cases, the attributes remain the same, what changes is the degree of granularity.

Moving on to the populism-related attributes, what constitutes the lowest common denominator of populism? After decades of conceptual discussions dedicated to this question, scholars tend to agree on (1) people-centrism, (2) anti-elitism, and (3) view of “the people” and “the elites” as homogeneous entities.³⁷ These three attributes are discussed further with some narrative-dictated adjustments.

People-centrism emphasizes the fundamental role of “the people” in the political process.³⁸ Ideologically, people-centric messages are based on the proposition that ordinary people are authentic, moral, and right-minded. At the communication level, this is manifested through a positive assessment of “the people” without which the call for popular sovereignty would not have been justified. However, when being operationalized in the context of populist narratives, the people-centrism label becomes somewhat narrow. For one thing, populist stories are not limited to those describing political processes and speculating about citizens' authority. Many narratives tend to refer to political issues metaphorically so that a specific message about popular sovereignty may not always be articulated. A similar problem

³⁷ Rooduijn, M. “The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator.” *Government and Opposition* 49 (4) (2014), 573; Aalberg, T., F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, and C.H. de Vreese, eds. *Routledge Research in Communication Studies: Vol. 1. Populist Political Communication in Europe* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

³⁸ Canovan, M. *Populism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

occurs with the term “people.” Just as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* does not need humans to make political statements, a populist narrative can also do well without explicit reference to “the people”. To solve these problems without departing from people-centrism, one may turn to the concept of an *in-group*.³⁹ An in-group is a constructed entity that unites actors, or in our case characters, according to certain features; in populist studies, this term has already been used in respect to “the people” and other collective entities shaping the populist “We”. Bringing people-centrism to the more abstract level allows us to operationalize the first attribute of a populist narrative – a positively depicted in-group.

Anti-elitism, to put it simply, is a belief that elites are bad. Depending on the context, the elites can be political (the establishment), economic (the rich), intellectual (academics), media (journalists).⁴⁰ In populist communication, the claim that elites are bad is usually supported by accusations of corruption, inefficiency, selfishness, and immorality. Elites are also accused of stealing political power from “the people”, so these two groups are presented as being in conflict. As with people-centrism, one needs to decontextualize anti-elitism to be able to express it in narrative terms. Following the logic explained in the previous paragraph, anti-elitism can be thought of as a negative depiction of an out-group.⁴¹ However, such operationalization would overlook the structure of power relations between “the people” and “elites,” which is intrinsically implied by the term *elites*. Particularly, elites are not simply bad but, according to populists, are also somehow more privileged than “ordinary people.” Thus, it is important to acknowledge that in populist narratives, the relations between a positively depicted in-group and a negatively depicted out-group are not only antagonistic but

³⁹ Tajfel, *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Norris, P., and R.F. Inglehart. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3–31.

⁴¹ Sanders, K., M.J. Molina Hurtado, and, J. Zoragastua. “Populism and Exclusionary Narratives: The ‘Other’ in Podemos’ 2014 European Union Election Campaign.” *European Journal of Communication* 32 (6) (2017), 552–567.

also hierarchical, with the out-group being more advantaged than an in-group according to some criteria.

At this point, one might ask if a *positive* in-group and a *negative* out-group is not a tautology, i.e., can, for example, an out-group be positive? From the perspective of populism, it cannot, and the reasons why will be discussed further. As for non-populist political narratives, out-groups are not automatically negative just as in-groups are not always positive. Like identities, both in- and out-groups are multiple, relational, and incomplete.⁴² In practice, it means that the in-groupers and out-groupers, according to one criterion, can find themselves in the same group, according to another criterion. For instance, the citizens of a state formally constitute an in-group while incoming foreigners form an out-group in relation to them. This does not, however, mean that conflict is the only possible type of relations between these groups. The other options would be competition, partnership, coexistence, and assimilation to name just a few. In fact, members of these two different groups might turn out to be in-groupers as parents, professionals, sport fans, etc. In such cases, the “former” out-groupers may be assessed neutrally or even positively. Thus, in principle, positively depicted out-groupers and negatively depicted in-groupers are possible yet rarely encountered in populist rhetoric, which brings us to the issue of homogeneity.

In populist communication, in-groups tend to be uniformly positive, and out-groups – uniformly negative because both are presented as homogeneous entities while the fact of multi-membership is either ignored or rejected.⁴³ Populists are prone to depict *all* ordinary people as “pulling together” and being “of good and honest character”.⁴⁴ When certain groups, such as minorities or migrants, threaten the constructed homogeneity of “the people”, they are discursively excluded from the in-group, and this is especially peculiar to right-wing

⁴² Panizza, “Populism and Identification,” op. cit., 3.

⁴³ Taggart, P. A. *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Schulz, A., P. Müller, C. Schemer, D.S. Wirz, M. Wettstein, and W. Wirth. “Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 30 (2) (2018), 316–326.

populism. Likewise, homogeneity is evident in the populist portrayal of an out-group. Following the Manichean division of the world into absolute good and evil, populist actors tend to consistently present elites in a negative light.⁴⁵ For populist narratives, Manichean logic means that each character has to belong either to a positively depicted in-group or to a negatively depicted out-group. Therefore, populist narratives are characterized by homogeneous in- and out-groups, as well as nominal “black and white” characters.

By integrating narrative- and populism-related attributes, one arrives at the following definition: A populist narrative is a politically relevant story about the conflict between a positive homogeneous in-group and a negative homogeneous out-group with the latter being hierarchically higher than the former. When not all attributes of this definition are present, it can be argued that a case has *some* features of a populist narrative. For example, the film series *The Hunger Games* (2012–present) lacks the feature of group homogeneity to classify it as a populist narrative (i.e., its in- and out-group characters are contradictory, from the normative perspective). Similarly, *Joker* (2019), while possessing all other populist narrative attributes, is created around a psychopathic and cruel protagonist hence fails to construct an unequivocally positive in-group.

The proposed definition is deliberately minimalistic and not overly sensitive to the potential variance of populist storytelling. At the same time, it is theoretically grounded and provides a conceptual starting point for those studying the topic. Importantly, the definition can be extended by incorporating extra attributes, such as, for example, the crisis rhetoric already mentioned. While adding “unnecessary” attributes is undesirable for the formation of a generalized concept, this is perfectly justified when the concept is applied in a specific context, for instance, in a case study.⁴⁶ Defined this way, populist narratives represent a

⁴⁵ Hawkins, K. A., and C. Rovira Kaltwasser. “The Ideational Approach to Populism.” *Latin American Research Review* 52 (4) (2017), 513–528.

⁴⁶ Sartori, G. “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics.” *The American Political Science Review* 64 (4) (1970), 1034–5.

classical subtype of political narrative, meaning that they are full instances of the root concept (political narrative), but can be differentiated vis-à-vis other subtypes within this concept, i.e., vis-à-vis non-populist political narratives.⁴⁷ Yet, students of populism may prefer to approach populist narratives from the perspective of their discipline. In this case, it would be equally valid to view populist narratives as a subtype of populist communication. Such flexibility is possible due to the conceptual duality of populist narratives that are defined simultaneously by their content (populism-related attributes) and format/structure (narrative-related attributes).

One more aspect deserving a brief discussion is the negative concept of a populist narrative.⁴⁸ Just as with identifying the root concept, this problem can also be approached in two different ways following either a content- or a format-centric approach. Since the opposite of a narrative as a format of political discourse was addressed under the section on *rationales*, here the focus is on *non-populist* political narratives. In one sense, all political narratives that do not contain minimum populism attributes can be regarded as non-populist. In some of these cases, relevant attributes would be expressed differently than populism prescribes (e.g., the in-group depicted as more privileged than the out-group; in- and out-groups are heterogeneous); in other cases, some of the attributes would be absent (e.g., a narrative does not depict any out-group). However, when it comes to a single conceptual opposite, most scholars identify *pluralism* as an epistemological counterpart of populism.⁴⁹ Pluralist ideology rejects the Manichean worldview and, unlike populism, acknowledges diversity and multiplicity at the individual, group, and intergroup levels. When “translated”

⁴⁷ For classical and diminished subtypes see Collier, D., and S. Levitsky. “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research.” *World Politics* 49 (3) (1997), 435.

⁴⁸ For negative concepts see Schmitter, P. C., and T.L. Karl. “What Democracy Is and Is Not.” *Journal of Democracy* 2 (3) (1991), 75–88.

⁴⁹ Akkerman, A., C. Mudde, and A. Zaslove. “How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters.” *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (9) (2014), 1327; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ideational Approach to Populism,” *op. cit.*

into narrative settings, this would mean plurality (i.e., variety) in how characters are depicted (complex rather than black and white), and plurality in how groups of characters are constructed (hetero- rather than homogeneous). As far as intergroup relations are concerned, if characters are ambiguous and groups of characters are heterogeneous, it does not matter anymore if the groups are in conflict or not. Anyway, that would not be a Manichean-like conflict peculiar for populist narratives. Table 1 integrates conceptual attributes of a populist narrative discussed in this section. It also shows how pluralist narratives represent an adequate opposite to populist narratives with respect to all of the attributes. As can be seen, both types of stories are not expected to contain any specific ideological messages but rather to reproduce general narrative structures implied by populist and pluralistic worldviews, respectively.

Table 1: Populist versus pluralist political narratives

	Populist Narratives	Pluralist Narratives
Characters	Black and white, nominal, either with positive or negative characteristics	Complex, “real”, often ambiguous, with both positive and negative characteristics
In-group	Homogeneous, made up of characters with exclusively positive characteristics	Heterogeneous, made up of complex characters with positive but also negative characteristics
Out-group	Homogeneous, made up of characters with exclusively negative characteristics	Heterogeneous, made up of complex characters with negative but also positive characteristics
Intergroup Relations	Out-group-led hierarchy Antagonism	Diverse, e.g., coexistence, cooperation, competition, conflict

It is useful to conclude this section by recapping the discussed populist narrative attributes using an example from actual political communication. One of such examples would be *Servant of the People*, a Ukrainian fictional political drama series (2015–2019) that is believed to have played an important role in Volodymyr Zelensky's victory in the presidential elections of 2019.⁵⁰ The series has all attributes of a political narrative: a plot depicting the election of a school history teacher as the president of the country followed by his selfless struggle with a mysterious club of oligarchs; characters including protagonist Vasyl Holoborodko played by Zelensky himself; and political meaning, or more precisely, a set of political meanings spread throughout the series in a form of explicit or implicit messages. At the same time, the series also has all required populism-related attributes: the in-group, including Zelensky and his personal surrounding, is mainly depicted positively – when rarely not, the cases of negative behavior are positioned as a person's weaknesses rather than manifestations of their devious nature. The out-group, consisting of the conspiring oligarchs, corrupt politicians, and their puppets, is unambiguously negative, homogeneous, and more powerful than the in-group (the out-group-led hierarchy). Finally, the two groups are in existential conflict as they have opposing interests – the state's salvation versus its total capture – and none of the sides will give up. Of course, such description misses out a lot of nuances, but it does reflect a narrative structure of this piece of political communication. The next section will discuss some of the implications which the populist narrative structure has on our perception of populist storytelling.

Implications: On the Effectiveness of Populist Narratives

By coincidence or not, many successful populists, such as Ronald Reagan, Silvio Berlusconi, Donald Trump, or the above-mentioned Volodymyr Zelensky, have entered

⁵⁰ Mashtaler, O. “The 2019 Presidential Election in Ukraine: Populism, the Influence of the Media, and the Victory of the Virtual Candidate.” In *The Politics of Authenticity and Populist Discourses*, eds. C. Kohl, B. Christophe, H. Liebau, and A. Saupe (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 143.

politics from the domain of entertainment where they either managed the production of stories or directly participated in them as performers or hosts. Aware of the basic show-biz rules, these and other populists with a storytelling background managed to capitalize on their professional skills and win considerable media attention and electoral support.⁵¹ However, it would be short-sighted to claim that the aspiration of political actors to storytelling is only peculiar to populists or those with professional storyteller experience. Barack Obama, as an obvious counterexample, is commonly considered a great storyteller, and his narrative strategies have been studied in detail.⁵² So, while acknowledging that populism and storytelling often go hand in hand, this section does not try to claim that the use of narratives (versus non-narratives) is typical for populists (versus non-populists). Instead, it overviews the features that make populist political stories particularly competitive in the political arena. These features are effects, or implications, that result naturally from the populist narrative structure. Therefore, it is important not to confuse them with the conceptual attributes of a populist narrative discussed in the previous section.

To start with, populist narratives are often described as *archetypal*,⁵³ the term used in literary analysis, behavior, and psychology. For a narrative, archetypal denotes having a structure of meaning following a typical pattern for a specific culture.⁵⁴ Some familiar archetypal narratives found in the Western World are the story of *David and Goliath* from the *Old Testament* (inventiveness beats physical strength) or the myth of *Daedalus and Icarus* about (un)limited human progress. Describing a populist narrative as archetypal implies that

⁵¹ Mazzoleni, G. "Mediatization and Political Populism." In *Mediatization of Politics*, eds. F. Esser and J. Strömbäck (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 52–53.

⁵² Hammer, S. "The Role of Narrative in Political Campaigning: An Analysis of Speeches by Barack Obama." *National Identities* 12 (3) (2010), 269–290; Norrick, N.R. "Stories of Vicarious Experience in Speeches by Barack Obama." *Narrative Inquiry* 23 (2) (2013), 283–301.

⁵³ Saurette, P. "Populism as Good Storytelling: Populist Stories are Powerful. Let's Use Them to Champion Progressive Climate Change Policy." *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, July 02, 2019. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/populism-good-storytelling>; also see how Casullo views populism as a myth in Casullo. "Populism and Myth," op. cit.

⁵⁴ Roesler, C. "A Narratological Methodology for Identifying Archetypal Story Patterns in Autobiographical Narratives." *The Journal of Analytical Psychology* 51 (4) (2006), 576.

it is based on the more or less universal set of plots recognized elsewhere. Indeed, when broken down into separate stories, populist discourse is about good versus evil, the self-made hero sacrificing themselves for the people, the villain betraying people seduced by power.⁵⁵ All these patterns are deeply embedded in most world cultures.

The archetypal structure of populist narratives gives populists an important advantage over other storytellers in politics: Populist stories are familiar and can be easily understood as they refer to the whole stock of similar stories told and retold in the past.⁵⁶ In contrast, some other political stories, for instance, present-day liberal stories, barely qualify as archetypal because they are essentially progressive. They advocate for a change in the status quo and rely on plots that are not yet part of an established cultural canon. For instance, when it comes to the problem of *otherness*, stories about danger, caution, and rivalry, are much older than the story about tolerance. Such “progressive” political narratives are relatively more difficult for us to make sense of and sympathize with as they require more cognitive effort. Thus, Chernus claims, because republican stories are conservative and hence more recognizable by the mass public, the Republican Party of the US is generally better at storytelling than its liberal rival.⁵⁷

Darren Kelsey, who studies what he calls “archetypal populism,” provides numerous illustrations of how archetypes and myths are made use of in populist storytelling.⁵⁸ One of his examples concerns Nigel Farage, the former UKIP and Brexit Party leader, turning to the *Hero's Journey* myth when framing Brexit and his own role in it shortly after the referendum. In the address to the European Parliament Farage said: “When I came here 17 years ago, and

⁵⁵ Casullo, “Populism and Myth”, op. cit., 26–29.

⁵⁶ Freistein and Gadinger, “Populist stories of honest men and proud mothers: A visual narrative analysis,” op. cit., 222.

⁵⁷ Chernus, I. “Karl Rove's Scheherazade Strategy.” *Mother Jones*, July 7, 2006.
<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2006/07/karl-roves-scheherazade-strategy/>

⁵⁸ Kelsey, D. “Archetypal Populism: The ‘Intellectual Dark Web’ and the ‘Peterson Paradox’.” In *Discursive Approaches to Populism Across Disciplines*, eds. D. Kelsey (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020), 171–195; Kelsey, D. *Media and Affective Mythologies*. Springer International Publishing, 2017.

I said I wanted to lead a campaign to get Britain to leave the European Union, you all laughed at me. Well, I have to say, you're not laughing now, are you?"⁵⁹ Kelsey's analysis of the audience's perception of Farage's speech showed that while many people disagreed with the politician ideologically, almost all could personally identify with the archetypal narratives he employed, those of a *thorny path* and a *triumph in an unequal fight*. Recognition of such grand common themes by the audience could potentially contribute to smoothing out ideological differences between them and a political actor and creating a sense of solidarity.

Another important aspect is the *inherent emotionality* of populist narratives,⁶⁰ and here it is necessary to clarify what is meant by "inherent." Usually, the emotionality of populist communication is regarded as an optional characteristic related to style rather than content.⁶¹ According to this paradigm, it depends on a specific actor's rhetorical techniques whether a piece of populist communication should be considered emotional or not. However, recent experimental studies have shown that populist appeals elicit significantly stronger emotions than, for instance, pluralist appeals when controlling for the style of messages.⁶² In other words, populist stories are not only emotional because a specific narrator uses emotionally charged language but, first and foremost, due to their narrative structure (an inevitable conflict between the good and the evil). This finding is in line with the appraisal theory suggesting that even *unemotional* communication of certain situations and events, which are also called "core relational themes," can evoke discrete emotions in a recipient.⁶³ In the case of populism, one of such themes would be the confrontation between ordinary

⁵⁹ Ibid, 76–77.

⁶⁰ Clarke, Hoggett, and Thompson, *Emotion, Politics and Society*, op. cit., 103–104; Skonieczny, A. "Emotions and Political Narratives: Populism, Trump and Trade." *Politics and Governance* 6 (4) (2018), 62.

⁶¹ Ernst, N., S. Blassnig, S. Engesser, F. Büchel, and F. Esser. "Populists Prefer Social Media Over Talk Shows: An Analysis of Populist Messages and Stylistic Elements Across Six Countries." *Social Media + Society* 5 (1) (2019), 4.

⁶² Wirz, D.S. "Persuasion Through Emotion? An Experimental Test of the Emotion-Eliciting Nature of Populist Communication." *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018), 1114–1138.

⁶³ Lazarus, R. S. "Relational Meaning and Discrete Emotions." In *Appraisal Processes in Emotion: Theory, Methods, Research*, eds. K.R. Scherer, A. Schorr, and T. Johnstone (Oxford University Press, 2001), 37–67.

people and corrupt elites willing to prosper at the expense of the majority.⁶⁴ Even when being communicated without using (non-)verbal emotional expressions, such a message is expected to trigger anger, fear, and anxiety in a recipient.

A vivid example of how a political narrative can be increasingly emotional without adhering to emotionally charged language is a Republican political ad *Defenseless* from the National Rifle Association.⁶⁵ A thirty-second video clip depicts a woman hearing an intruder in her house, reaching to call 911 but eventually failing to protect herself because Hillary Clinton had confiscated guns. The ad is voiced in a calm and news-like manner with almost no adjectives or other expressive means. However, the ad's plot, as well as the core relational themes it depicts, do well in eliciting fear and anxiety in a viewer. The inherent emotionality of populist narratives is important as in political communication, high emotionality is associated with increased persuasive power.⁶⁶

Populist narratives are also *suspenseful*. Suspense can be defined as “a blend of fear and hope coupled with a state of uncertainty.”⁶⁷ People “are thought to experience suspense when they lack knowledge about the outcomes of events that have reasonably important consequences.”⁶⁸ When applying this definition to populist narratives, it is easy to notice that all the conditions for suspense are met. As mentioned, populist communication generates fear and anxiety through categorization, blame, and crisis rhetoric.⁶⁹ The emotion of hope, in turn,

⁶⁴ Mudde, C. “The Populist Zeitgeist.” *Government and Opposition* 39 (4) (2004), 541–563.

⁶⁵ McManus, D. “The Best Political Ads of the 2016 Campaign.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 2016. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-mcmanus-best-ads-20161026-snap-story.html>

⁶⁶ Gross, K. “Framing Persuasive Appeals: Episodic and Thematic Framing, Emotional Response, and Policy Opinion.” *Political Psychology* 29 (2) (2008), 169–192.

⁶⁷ Ortony, A., G.L. Clore, and A. Collins (2011). *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 131.

⁶⁸ Gerrig, R. J. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 77.

⁶⁹ Hameleers, M., C. Reinemann, D. Schmuck, and, N. Fawzi. “The Persuasiveness of Populist Communication: Conceptualizing the Effects and Political Consequences of Populist Communication from a Social Identity Perspective.” In *Communicating Populism. Comparing Actor Perceptions, Media Coverage, and Effects on Citizens in Europe*, eds. C. Reinemann, J. Stanyer, T. Aalberg, F. Esser, and C.H. de Vreese (London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 143–167.

is activated when populists promise to defend “people” and their interests against the out-group members such as elites or different minorities.⁷⁰ Finally, in the democratic political process, as election results are revealed only at the end, some degree of uncertainty is always present. However, populist actors tend to sharpen the intrigue by emphasizing the fatefulness of concrete political episodes, such as elections, and securitizing the political process in general.⁷¹

It should be noted that the suspense factor is not limited to the narratives *by* politicians but also extends to the narratives *about* politicians. Not surprisingly, those narratives can also be populist. A recent example of a suspenseful populist narrative *about* a politician is Donald Trump's first impeachment process in January and February 2020. Although it is logical to assume that at least some of Trump's supporters could doubt their candidate following the allegations made against him, this did not happen.⁷² On the contrary, the then-president's ratings even slightly improved during the trial. Some observers attribute this to the suspenseful “challenge-fight-victory” narrative that Trump managed to push through the media. From the perspective of narratology, suspense is important as it is regarded as one of the key characteristics that make any text story-like.⁷³ According to the structural-effect theory, suspense is also a significant predictor of narrative enjoyment.⁷⁴

Finally, populist narratives provide exceptional conditions for *identification* – both with an in-group (“We”, “The People”) and a populist leader. For group identification,

⁷⁰ Wirz, “Persuasion Through Emotion? An Experimental Test of the Emotion-Eliciting Nature of Populist Communication,” op. cit., 1118.

⁷¹ Yanchenko, K. “‘We Won’t Have Another Chance if We Lose This Battle Now’: Populism on Ukrainian Television Political Talk Shows ahead of the Presidential Elections 2019.” *East/ West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 8 (2) (2021), forthcoming.

⁷² Jones, J. M. “Trump Job Approval at Personal Best 49%.” *GALLUP*, February 4, 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/284156/trump-job-approval-personal-best.aspx>

⁷³ Brewer, W. F., and E.H. Lichtenstein. “Event Schemas, Story Schemas, and Story Grammars.” In *Attention and Performance IX*, eds. J. Long, and A. Baddeley (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1981), 369.

⁷⁴ Brewer, W. F., and K. Ohtsuka. “Story Structure, Characterization, Just World Organization, and Reader Affect in American and Hungarian Short Stories.” *Poetics* 17 (4-5) (1988), 395–415.

populists “construct and give meaning to ‘the people’ as a political actor.”⁷⁵ This construct is most of the time quite vague, which allows recipients of populist communication to identify themselves cognitively, i.e., reinforce the knowledge of their formal belonging to “the people”, “the citizens”, “the workers”, etc.⁷⁶ As the constructed in-group tends to be depicted in a positive light (“ordinary people are virtuous, pure, and beneficial”), the recipients of populist communication are also encouraged to identify affectively, which means to attach emotional significance to their in-group membership, for instance, through feeling pride.⁷⁷ The process of identification is boosted even further when the construction of an out-group takes place. At this stage, consumers of populist communication are forced to choose between “us” and “them”. Considering that both positive in-group and negative out-group are presented as homogeneous,⁷⁸ humans, according to the social identity theory, are bound to unconsciously identify with the former and distance themselves from the latter.⁷⁹

Apart from identification with an in-group, recipients can also identify with a populist politician.⁸⁰ The identification with a politician X can be expressed in recipients understanding the political developments in line with how X comments on them, recipients sharing the emotions portrayed by X, recipients wanting X to succeed in achieving their goals, etc.⁸¹ While clear that identification may occur between any politician and a citizen, populists facilitate this process by highlighting their similarity to “ordinary people,” i.e., their

⁷⁵ Panizza, F. “Populism and Identification.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* eds. C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P.A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

⁷⁶ Johnson, M. D., F.P. Morgeson, and D.R. Hekman. “Cognitive and Affective Identification: Exploring the Links Between Different Forms of Social Identification and Personality with Work Attitudes and Behavior.” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 33 (8) (2012), 1142–1167.

⁷⁷ Hameleers et al., “The Persuasiveness of Populist Communication: Conceptualizing the Effects and Political Consequences of Populist Communication from a Social Identity Perspective,” op. cit., 153–154.

⁷⁸ Mudde, “Populist Zeitgeist,” op. cit.

⁷⁹ Tajfel, H. “Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations.” In *European Monographs in Social Psychology: Vol. 14*, eds. H. Tajfel (London: Academic Press for European Association of Experimental Social Psychology, 1978).

⁸⁰ Panizza, “Populism and Identification,” op. cit., 7.

⁸¹ Cohen, J. “Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters.” *Mass Communication and Society* 4 (3) (2001), 256.

belonging to an in-group – a constructed social entity discussed above. Building upon the proposition that there is a singular will of “the people”, populists claim to be representatives of this will.⁸² Using the pronoun “we” while addressing the public, populists elevate the notion of identification to its literal meaning, that is, to “indistinguishability.” This aspect of identification was vividly illustrated by Volodymyr Zelensky's first new year address as Ukrainian president. To emphasize his commonality with the people, Zelensky turned to video editing: In the midst of the pathological speech, he suddenly disappeared from the TV screens and the address was taken over by actual “ordinary Ukrainians” – men and women of various appearances speaking in the voice of President Zelensky thereby positioning him, literally, as the voice of the people.⁸³ For political storytelling, identification is an important category associated with developing a liking of the characters in the story and increased narrative enjoyment.⁸⁴ Political narratives that elicit identification are thought to be more persuasive and help people reduce uncertainty and increase self-esteem.⁸⁵

The conducted analysis reveals that from the perspective of narratology, a *populist* story and a *good* story do have a lot in common. Particularly, there are both theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that populist narratives stand out among other political narratives due to the former's archetypal structure, inherent emotionality, suspensefulness, and ability to facilitate identification. Importantly, this is not to say that a non-populist political narrative cannot possess some or all of these features, rather than in the case of a populist narrative, these features are implied by its very structure and, therefore, are likely to manifest themselves strongly and systematically.

⁸² Abts, K., and S. Rummens. “Populism versus Democracy.” *Political Studies*, 55 (2) (2007), 415.

⁸³ UATV English. “President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky Congratulates on New Year 2020!” December 31, 2019, 0:51 to 2:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qo7JDweEAYs>

⁸⁴ Cohen, “Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters,” op. cit.

⁸⁵ Johnson, Morgeson, Hekman, “Cognitive and Affective Identification: Exploring the Links Between Different Forms of Social Identification and Personality with Work Attitudes and Behavior,” op. cit.

Conclusion

This article proposed a conceptual account of a populist narrative building upon previous work in political communication and literary studies, and such a conceptualization has certain implications. First, the concept allows us to classify and subsequently scrutinize cases, that until now, were discussed *either* as examples of political storytelling *or* as instances of populist communication but without acknowledging of the integrity of populist narratives as a phenomenon. The parallel examination of populist content and narrative form found in the literature indicates a long ongoing demand for a concept to cover such a phenomenon. Some cases previously described as having both populism- and narrative-related “ingredients”, yet never identified as belonging to a specific subclass of political communication, are Ronald Reagan's television ad series *It's Morning Again in America*;⁸⁶ Silvio Berlusconi's electoral booklet *Una Storia Italiana (An Italian Story)*;⁸⁷ Beppe Grillo's political blog *Il Blog Di Beppe Grillo (Beppe Grillo's Blog)*;⁸⁸ Donald Trump's TV ad campaign *Two Americas*;⁸⁹ Hugo Chavez's TV show *Aló Presidente*,⁹⁰ and many more. Thus, the concept of populist narrative names and describes a phenomenon that, apparently, plays a significant role in political communication and promotes its more systematic examination.

Second, the concept outlined here empowers expanding the conventional scope of populist communication research by incorporating cases from journalism, social media, popular culture, interpersonal communication, and other venues where political storytelling takes place, yet is rarely studied. This becomes possible as the concept operates with decontextualized attributes of populism and relies on the broad understanding of the *political*.

⁸⁶ Kazin, M. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 262.

⁸⁷ Ruggiero, C. “Forecasting in the Politics of Spectacle, From Berlusconi to Grillo: The Narrative of Impolite Politics.” *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 4 (2) (2012), 310.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 313–315.

⁸⁹ McLaughlin, B., and Velez, J. A. “Imagined Politics: How Different Media Platforms Transport Citizens Into Political Narratives.” *Social Science Computer Review* 37 (1) (2019), 22.

⁹⁰ Torre, C. de la. “Hugo Chávez and the Diffusion of Bolivarianism.” *Democratization* 24 (7) (2017), 1271–1288.

Such an open approach accounts for the dynamics of increasing politicization and mediatization peculiar to contemporary Western societies and allows a more complete picture of various processes, such as the formation of populist attitudes. Individual studies focusing on the cases from popular culture have already shown that even completely fictional narratives affect real political attitudes not to mention narratives that are wholly or partly non-fictional.⁹¹ This research domain should be developed further with specific attention to populist narratives.

Finally, when populist communication is examined from the perspective of narratology, the whole array of theories and concepts from literary studies and related disciplines may be employed. For instance, the relative appeal and persuasiveness of populist stories may be studied through the proxy of the narrative transportation effect – a flow-like psychological state strongly associated with narrative enjoyment and story-consistent attitudes of a recipient.⁹² Besides, narratology can enhance our understanding of various character types peculiar to populist stories, such as victims – “the people,” heroes – populist leaders, villains – the elites, etc. The advances in the field of computer-assisted narrative analysis promises better opportunities for quantifying narrativity degrees hence, more insights into such important questions as to whether populists use narratives more intensely than other politicians. So, be it qualitative or quantitative approaches, populism studies can benefit from adopting a narrative lens.

⁹¹ Holbert, R. L., O. Pillion, D.A. Tschida, G.G. Armfield, K. Kinder, K.L. Cherry, and A.R. Daulton. “The West Wing as Endorsement of the U.S. Presidency: Expanding the Bounds of Priming in Political Communication.” *Journal of Communication* 53 (3) (2003), 427–443; Manoliu, I. A. “Watching House of Cards: Connecting Perceived Realism and Cynicism.” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 27 (5) (2019), 324–338.

⁹² Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*, op. cit., 2–17.