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New Right 2.0: Teacher populism on social media in England

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This article is concerned with teacher populism on social media in England. This has grown in the last 10 years, facilitated by Twitter. While it appears to be a response to challenging working conditions and declining pay, it has largely been driven by conservative political strategy, an adaptation of the New Right coalition between social conservatives and economic liberals of the 1970s. *New Right 2.0*, as I frame it here, is a New Right project for the social media age, but also goes deeper into society to promote civic capitalism—so-called 'Big Society'. New Right 2.0, like its predecessor, is an attempt to create an aggregated passive acceptance of free-market ideology by creating division and indifference, setting one group against another, using the state to reward its proponents and to discipline its objectors. Teacher populism, though modest in numbers and specific to a particular public service, uses the language of populism to promote its cause, wanting to give voice to the ordinary teacher against a liberal educational elite which includes academics, local education authorities and teaching unions. This article contributes to an understanding of the social, cultural and political processes that are at play as part of a populist rupture.

Introduction

Populism appears to be on the increase globally (Rovira *et al.*, 2017). Manifestations of a pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist moment include Brexit and Donald Trump's election as President of the United States (Brubaker, 2017a,b). Further examples of the growth of the populist right include the near successes of Hofer in Austria, Le Pen in France and Wilders in the Netherlands. There have also been breakthroughs for the far right in Sweden and Germany, as well as the increasingly authoritarian populist regimes in Hungary and Poland (Brubaker, 2017b). Left populism has also been on the increase, with Bernie Sanders in the USA, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece (Brubaker, 2017b).

The purpose of this article is to investigate a particular manifestation of populism (this particularity I refer to as 'micropopulism'; Gutierrez, 2017) which involves mainly teachers in England using social media, especially Twitter. The aim is to understand how this form of micropopulism has emerged in the context of political economy, culture and technology, through diachronic (historical analysis) and synchronic (analysis of populist language and populist praxis) methodologies.

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Definitions, concepts and the language and discourse of populism

Here I draw on Mouffe's definition of populism (but see also Mudde, 2004): '... A discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilisation of the "underdog" against "those in power"' (Mouffe, 2018, pp. 10–11). This is similar to Rancière (2017), who identifies populism as addressing the people directly rather than through democratic institutions motivated by a concern that the interests of a ruling elite are prioritised over those of the people and the recognition of the 'other' as an object to fear or reject:

> Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy and even to the mixed form of representative system. (Rancière, 2014, pp. 155–156)

Definitions of populism tend to be remarkably convergent but the nature, causes and consequences of populism are contested (Panizza, 2005; de la Torre and Mazzoleni, 2019). It is argued that the increase in populism is motivated by '... the pressure of social and political transformations, [where] the dominant hegemony is being destabilised by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands' (Mouffe, 2018, Kindle pp. 143–144). '... populism tends towards political prevalence at key moments of state crisis and uncertainty, however vaguely both are defined' (Kelly, 2017, p. 513). Disillusionment and anger with an elite that is responsible for democratic institutions, and one that has been unable to address, for example, economic injustice, climate change and a growing refugee crisis, results in the emergence of a populist right and left (see e.g. Lewis *et al.*, 2019). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018) characterise the motivations for populism as a result of a combination of economic anxiety, a cultural backlash (especially for the political right), a limited capacity for local and national politicians to respond to voters' needs in the context of globalised political economy and political polarisation. Others see populism as a consequence of the inherent contradictions of liberal democracy (da Silva and Vieira, 2019). Some consider populism as a threat to liberal democracy (e.g. Abts and Rummens, 2016), while others see it as a necessary part of progress towards popular sovereignty (Kelly, 2017).

In 1968, a conference considered the different ways in which the concept of populism was used (Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.*, 2017). Subsequently, in the 1980s, Canovan attempted to draw together a wide range of empirical work to generate a sevenfold typology (Canovan, 1981). Twenty years later, Laclau suggested that attempts to formulate a political theory of populism had reached an impasse (Laclau, 2005a), and argued that this was to do with a lack of clarity on whether we treat examples of populism as (a) movements, (b) ideology, or (c) political practice (Laclau, 2005b). Similarly, Frank argues that the processes of populism (i.e. *praxes*) are often obfuscated by concerns with identification of who the people are (Frank, 2017). And as Laclau argues:

> [It is] the limitation of the ontological tools currently available to political analysis; that 'populism', as the locus of a theoretical stumbling block, reflects the limits inherent in the ways in which political theory has approached the question of how social agents 'totalize' the ensemble of their political experience. (Laclau, 2005a, p. 4)

The conceptualisation of populism in this research is informed by Laclau's perspective; to understand populism we need to know how individual aggrievement becomes aggregated. The aggregation of individual unfulfilled demands is through a *chain of equivalence*; individual demands become equivalent demands, which are abstracted and become symbolic and collectivised, substituting for unfulfilled personal claims against political institutions (Laclau, 2005b). The condition for a populist rupture requires the creation of a 'frontier' characterising the 'us' and 'them'—it is the distinction that creates a populist antagonism. But it is a necessary condition that individual demands become aggregated.

Teacher populism as an example of micropopulism

This research examines the emergence of a populist teacher movement on social media in England. I refer to this as 'micropopulism' (Gutierrez, 2017) to distinguish the phenomenon from larger-scale formulations of populism which orientate around nation, nationalism or at national-level political parties. Brubaker (2020) identifies a 'small-p populism' which does not always align with nation or nationalism; he argues that scholars often conflate the idea of 'the people' and 'the nation' in characterising populism. Teacher populism is a small-p populism or micropopulism, where 'the people' are a particular community concerned with an aspect of human life, namely school education.

Social media and populism

There is evidence that the recent growth in populist parties and movements in the UK is related to the advent of social media (Bartlett *et al.*, 2011). It is argued that this came from the emergence of Web 2.0 and the social web in the early 2000s, where ordinary people could express themselves without the mediation of traditional media (Gerbaudo, 2018). It is important to resist the claim that social media is a main cause of populism (see Bruns, 2019, for example). There is a complex relationship between social media, populism and old media (Postill, 2018), with a hybridization of legacy and social media (Chadwick, 2017; Bruns, 2018, 2019) where '. . . our current media environments are a web of old and new media technologies, practices and actors interacting in emergent, non-teleological ways' (Postill, 2018, p. 761). Print and broadcast media act as sources of information that users circulate through social media (Bruns, 2018, 2019). Peer networks on social media with similar perspectives and interests amplify their interpretations of information that comes from traditional sources (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). In instances of small-p micropopulism, information from traditional media becomes entwined with personal perspectives and narratives (Das, 2018). Social media in a Habermasian sense should provide a public sphere that transforms democracy in a positive way, however, this requires that 'participants contribute facts and arguments that get exposed to critical examination' (Bailey, 2018, p. 16). However, social media like Twitter work on user attention and affect rather than through rational deliberation (Papacharissi, 2015; Paasonen, 2016; Seymour, 2019).

> ... affective attunement demonstrated through liking a post on Facebook, endorsing an item in a news aggregator, uploading and sharing a YouTube video, or using a meme generator to create and share a simple message via a photograph is indicative of civic intensity and thus a form of engagement. (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 25)

This affective attunement goes much further—social media prompts (whether by accident or design) moral outrage (Crockett, 2017) or heightened emotions in response to expressions of moral position or values. This can lead to emotional contagion, where strong affective responses, which are attached to moral positions, spread (Lelkes, 2016; Crockett, 2017). This serves the formation, growth or consolidation of in-groups (i.e. echo chambers, filter bubbles and antagonistic polarisations between opposing groups; Flaxman *et al.*, 2016). Those who are already committed to an ideological position become increasingly polarised (Lelkes, 2016). However, it is also suggested that research into the existence of echo chambers and filter bubbles is inconclusive and sometimes contradictory (Bruns, 2019). Although Bruns (2019) concedes that polarisation does exist, but that there is more connectedness between groups than suggested in the research into echo chambers and filter bubbles. Online ideological polarisation or a 'culture war' (Hartman, 2015) involves a social and political conflict over morality, attitudes and identity (Nagle, 2017). Social media results in a stronger emotional experience of a populist movement than everyday contact with people on the other pole (Das, 2018).

In sum, the affective dimensions of social media facilitate a Laclausian chain of equivalence of aggregated grievance, which is strengthened and expanded through moral outrage and moral contagion. Polarisation creates the conditions for the identification of the 'other' as part of the online populist rupture.

While there is a growing body of research into social media and populism, the research in this article is intended to contribute by looking at a populist—or *micropopulist*—formulation on social media, but also in the context of wider political discourse and debates about educational philosophy and practices in the state sector. This research locates social media polarisations or culture wars in the context of a historical perspective on political economy, culture and ideology.

The New Right

Origins of the New Right and its role in education

The ideological polarisation that has been evident on social media involving teachers and educators in England has been between those who hold traditional or conservative perspectives and those with progressive child-centred educational perspectives. The beginnings of these debates can be seen in the five polemical Black Papers published between 1969 and 1977, which disparage progressive education:

> Learning needs discipline, not the atmosphere of a Butlin's Holiday camp. Great scholars, good salesmen, reliable operatives need to be trained from birth to finish a task, not to give up when they are bored, and they must realise the real prize is the final achievement, not fun on the way. (Boyson, 1969, p. 62)

The Black Papers were part of a range of New Right activity (Jones, 2014) at the end of the Cold War from the late 1960s through the 1970s. The New Right brought together two distinct ideologies: neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. The intention was to challenge the post-war consensus on social democracy and the welfare state (Kaye, 1987; Weiler, 1991). In the UK this was effective in helping bring Margaret Thatcher to power and in the USA, Ronald Reagan:

> ... fragmented groups of free market enthusiasts, libertarians, anticommunists, and social conservatives found common interest, shaping a movement that rapidly became a force in political life. (Blee and Creasap, 2010, p. 287)

A key area of interest for the New Right was state education. Sir Keith Joseph—one of Margaret Thatcher's principal advisors—described a left-liberal ideological grip on education in a speech to the Oxford Union in 1975 as a 'left-wing ratchet' (Chitty, 1989, p. 16). The education system had been taken over by '... alien, progressive, morally relative and socialistic doctrines' (Dale, 1989, p. 92). But there was opportunity in schools for 'moral regeneration' (Dale, 1989, p. 92) by promoting self-respect and self-responsibility, as a corrective to 'a nannying and intrusive Welfare State' (Dale, 1989, p. 92).

Hall (1990) explained the New Right project as 'authoritarian populism', fostering mass support leading to the election of Thatcher in 1979. However, the success of the New Right and Thatcherism was through a subtler process; while Thatcher was electorally successful, she was not popular. It is argued that the New Right made use of ideology to imbue passivity by dividing the population into 'two nations' (Jessop *et al.*, 1988), promoting divisions in society between the 'strivers' and the 'shirkers'. The New Right and Thatcherism was a 'limited hegemony' (Gallas, 2016):

> It brought a 'passive revolution', that is, 'the reorganization of social relations ("revolution") while neutralizing and channelling popular initiatives in favour of continued domination of the political leadership [i.e. Thatcherism]. (Gallas, 2016, p. 20)

The success of the New Right and Thatcherism was a result of constructing division in society and promoting a passive acceptance of free-market economics and using the state to 'reward' the 'productive' and discipline the 'parasitic' in the market (Jessop *et al.*, 1988). 'Passivity' can also be equated with a passivity in relation to class politics and inequality; in other words, political antagonism shifts from material politics toward issues of identity, attitudes and values (for an elaboration of this argument, see Inglehart, 1990; Fraser, 2013).

New Right 2.0: 'Think and do' tanks, social media and 'Big Society'

New Right 2.0 is a term I use to characterise a contemporary adaptation for the social media age of the New Right strategy of the 1970s. In the previous section, I argue how the New Right developed hegemony through ideology. New Right 2.0 takes this further by taking conservative and economically liberal thinking into civil society through public services. To achieve this there were new formulations of the think tanks (Blee and Creasap, 2010; Pautz, 2012), think tanks that take a more active role

in building support for civic capitalism by making use of the hybridised media context (Exley, 2014).

By the end of the term of Conservative government led by John Major (1992–1997), it was believed that think tanks like the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) which had supported economic reforms effectively had not paid sufficient attention to conservative thought on civil society and family (Civitas—Powerbase, n.d.; Pautz, 2012). Civitas (the Institute for the Study of Civil Society) started life as the IEA Health and Welfare Unit and became independent in 2000. Its philosophy is based on the free-market delivery of public services, but with a strengthened civic involvement based on rationalism, morality, voluntarism and influenced by classical liberalism (see e.g. Green, 1993). While in opposition in 2005, the Conservative Party began a programme of modernisation under newly elected leader David Cameron. Central to this was promoting civic conservatism, referred to as 'Big Society' (Corbett and Walker, 2012; Fenwick and Gibbon, 2017). Policy Exchange, founded by Michael Gove (Conservative Secretary of State for Education, 2010–2014) and Nick Boles in 2001, was effective in promoting and developing civic conservatism and civic capitalism as policy (Pautz, 2013). The new generation of think tanks, like Civitas and Policy Exchange, have also been characterised as 'think and do' tanks, since they look to turn ideas into entrepreneurial action (Exley, 2014). Examples of 'social' entrepreneurship include New Schools Network (NSN), headed up by Rachel Wolf (former advisor to Michael Gove), which controversially received an uncontested £500,000 from government in 2010 (Exley, 2014). NSN promotes the establishment of 'free schools' outside the influence of local authorities. The expansion of Citi and Canary Wharf Group-sponsored Teach First, a third-sector initial teacher education provider, is a further example of civic capitalism and the product of 'think and do' tanks. In 2010, the government announced £94 million of funding for a major expansion of Teach First (Exley, 2014).

Having introduced concepts and contexts, in what follows I present a theoretical account of the emergence of micropopulism amongst teachers and educators on social media, principally in England.

Methodology

This explanatory research is a historical account of political economy, culture and technology (diachronic) as well as a network ethnography (Ball, 2016) and digital ethnography (Pink *et al.*, 2016) (synchronic). The diachronic aspect locates the contemporary social and political formulation of teacher populism on social media within a historical context of politics, economic policy and emergent technology. The synchronic aspects consider the networks of actors, institutions and their relationships alongside the language and practices within the populist movement on social media. The latter provides an analytic account of micropopulism informed by existing theory and concepts and taken with the diachronic aspect; an analytic narrative of teacher populism is presented. This contributes to theory and understanding of populism in this particularity, but also more generally.

The digital ethnography took place between 2014 and 2017. I engaged in discussion on Twitter with individuals aligned with the teacher populist movement and with

those who opposed them. My initial research questions were concerned with understanding the polarisation of educational perspectives on Twitter. Having completed the digital ethnography in 2017, while analysing the data, I researched networks and developed the diachronic aspect.

In researching social media, researchers often make a choice between the investigation of structures and networks that emerge in social worlds (e.g. social network analysis) and the nature of interactions between agents and groups (e.g. corpus linguistics) (Pink *et al.*, 2016). While I have initiated research into the language used in the discussions between educators on Twitter and carried out simple network analysis to explore relationships, I decided on a broader brush approach. Rather than consider separately or together 'sentiment' or 'networks', I use Postill's (2017) notion of a *movement field* as the unit of analysis:

> [A movement field is] a highly dynamic political domain in which variously positioned field agents (activists, hackers, journalists, politicians and so on) struggle over a small set of pressing issues and rewards and often through digital media. (Pink *et al.*, 2016, p. 113)

By characterising the object of my research as a movement field, no distinction is made between interactions and structures; the teacher populist movement on- and off-line is the movement field that I use as the unit of analysis in this research.

The analytic approach is abductive, which contrasts with the inductive (the general from the particular) or the deductive (the particular from the general). It is the process of seeking explanations, concepts and theory that elucidates observations (Agar, 2010). It is an iterative process where theories are tested while in the field and rejected or adapted and developed (see a previous iteration in the following working paper: Watson, 2017). Much of the research has involved going back to tweets and discussions, the blog posts of participants, ministers' speeches and education press articles to develop a theoretical account.

Limitations

This research presents an analysis of a complex issue in a broad context. There are limitations in this; there is no detailed analysis of sentiment, no precise count of numbers of participants and no detailed network analysis. Further research could be undertaken by carrying out a more detailed analysis of social and other media content, and of networks and interactions to develop and provide more detail to this theoretical explanation of teacher micropopulism. The extent to which social media micropopulism is influencing educational policy and practice requires further investigation.

Research ethics

The research ethics for this study required careful consideration. At no time was any consent sought from the people referred to in this research. I assumed that tweets and blog posts were intended for public discourse: 'Seeking consent would not normally be expected for data that have been produced expressly for public use' (BERA, 2018, p. 10). However, I attempt to treat prominent actors civilly and respect their views

and beliefs, even where I strongly disagree. For less prominent actors, I chose to hide their identity and not quote their tweets verbatim to prevent a Twitter search revealing their identity. Overall I have been guided by the principle of maximising benefit and minimising harm; respecting the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values and dignity of individual groups and communities (BERA, 2018).

Teacher populism on Twitter in England

A group consisting primarily of teachers and self-identifying as 'traditionalists', 'neo-traditionalists' or simply 'Trads' appeared on Twitter from around 2011. At the same time an opposing progressive group, the 'Progs', also emerged. Since Twitter was established in 2006, teachers and educators have increasingly used the site to make contact with colleagues at home and abroad, sharing encouragement, mutual support, curriculum materials and teaching ideas (Forte *et al*., 2012). Thomson and Riddle (2019) characterise social media as facilitating teachers' voices; a platform where teachers can generate content and express opinion to other teachers and beyond. They also recognise 'antagonism in, through and with social media' (p. 128) between those with traditional views about education and those with progressive views. As with the research presented here, Thomson and Riddle (2019) recognise that many encounters between teachers, on a debating forum identified as '#EduTwitter', are good-humoured and constructive, but that there is a polarisation between 'Trad v Prog' that is aggressive and confrontational.

The number of teachers active on #EduTwitter has not been precisely determined. There are approximately 425,000 teachers in England (BESA, 2019). A leading proponent of traditionalism, Tom Bennett has 75,000 followers on Twitter (as of 31 May 2020). As an approximate estimate, based on this and my experience in the field, around 5% of teachers in England may be active in—or may have observed debates on—social media. As a result of coverage in the education press, around 20% of teachers might be aware of the polarised debates between Progs and Trads. Although a relatively small proportion of teachers in England participate on #EduTwitter, Trads and Progs also include academics, teacher educators, consultants and parents from beyond England and the UK. During 2014, I estimated that a discussion on a 'hot' issue might involve up to 30 or 40 participants. It is also difficult to know how many were 'lurking'; that is, observing the debate but not taking part.

Although relatively few in number, social media-based Trad micropopulists are having an impact on practice, especially in supporting recent traditionally oriented education policy reforms introduced by the Conservative former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove. This conclusion is based on observations of practices, approaches and changing priorities in partnership schools in the initial teacher education partnership at the University of Cambridge since 2013.

In the following sections, I argue that the Trad movement is a populist formulation since it uses populist language and the cultural, political, economic and technological context contributed to its precipitation. I then show that it is the nature of Twitter that facilitates an amplification of the aims of the Trad movement, but that this is a component in a hybridised media. Finally, I consider the philosophical and political perspectives presented by Trads and Progs.

The language of populism in Trad discourse

The language of Trad micropopulism echoes definitions of populism presented previously, a people against an elite. Tom Bennett characterises Trads in these terms, but as the ordinary teacher against an academic elite:

> . . . it is in social media, not the rarefied hierarchies of the academy, that these arguments have broken out like wildfire, and rightly so. We have witnessed a reformation of the church of education, and its revolutionaries are to be found online. . . (Bennett, 2018).

He goes on to explain how '. . . the high priests of the past fight to retain their status, as gatekeepers of every generation do before being overthrown. . .' The academic elite include academics and teacher educators in faculties and schools of education, who were significant in promoting child-centred progressive approaches. In his book, *The behaviour guru: Behaviour management solutions for teachers* (2010), Bennett stresses the importance of teacher authority in the classroom and criticises university-based teacher training programmes, run by progressive elites, for not training teachers adequately; for emphasising progressive approaches. This echoes Gove's hostility towards the progressive educational establishment, notoriously portraying a teaching establishment of academics, teaching unions and local education authorities as the 'blob' (Hunter, 2013). The blob, according to Gove, were the legacy elements of post-war social democracy, who advocated child-centred practices and who resisted New Right 2.0 reforms, especially the privatisation of state education and the introduction of traditional approaches to teaching (Sewell, 2010). Bennett, from the perspective of the teacher, articulates a populist rupture between the progressive educational elite and the ordinary teacher, and is allied to Gove and New Right 2.0 in respect of restoring teacher authority and traditional teaching. Bennett is praised by Gove for amplifying the voice of the ordinary teacher:

> I also hugely enjoy the always provocative work of Tom Bennett, the Behaviour Guru, who champions teachers at every turn while challenging them to up their game. (Gove, 2013)

The progressive position is defended by the Progs on social media and therefore they are seen to represent the elite which Bennett characterises. I have been referred to as a 'gatekeeper' by a Trad blogger when, as an academic, I was defending progressive education on Twitter. I argue that confrontations between Trads and Progs on social media are enactments of the populist rupture. This can be characterised as on online culture war, involving a confrontation of those with socially liberal views and those with socially conservative views (Watson, 2019).

The conditions for a micropopulist rupture

Rather than being critical of austerity and the financial pressures that teachers have experienced, Bennett's criticism is of progressive education as the main cause of teachers' loss of authority and negative experience. The Laclausian logic of aggregated aggrievement and the chain of equivalence (Laclau, 2005a) is useful in understanding the conditions in which Trad populism proliferates. Since 2010, there have

been major cuts in public-sector funding (Curtis, 2010). Teachers' annual pay increases were frozen for 2 years and then subsequently capped at 1% (Pyper *et al.*, 2018). In 2010, the main school grant was frozen and capital funding was cut by a third between 2010 and 2015 (Williams and Grayson, 2018). Overall, teachers' work experiences were becoming more negative and increasingly stressful (Worth and Van den Brande, 2019). This is on top of longer-term changes in teachers' professional lives (Day *et al.*, 2000; , 2007; Galton and MacBeath, 2008). These longer-term changes can be categorised as follows: (a) increased government intervention to change the conditions under which students learn; (b) challenging teachers' existing practices and often creating temporary destabilisation; (c) increasing teacher workload; and (d) lack of attention to individual teachers' identities (see e.g. Day and Smethem, 2009). Under these conditions, teachers' dissatisfactions and aggrievements can become aggregated through a chain of equivalence into a micropopulist movement that is concerned not with political economy but with philosophical perspectives on education.

Moral outrage, moral contagion and polarisation

The level of virality of particular debates on #EduTwitter is dependent on how much moral outrage the issue prompts; the escalation and level of involvement proliferates through moral contagion. An example of this is the #BanTheBooth debate (~2017–2020) on the use of isolation booths for discipline purposes in schools. Progs were outraged at their use and Trads were outraged with the Progs' view that their use was outrageous. The debate was polarised and escalated. Trads and Progs form distinct echo chambers, reinforcing their own beliefs, but are connected in their polarised opposition to each other on a number of issues.

A Twitter thread in 2012 featured an argument about the nature of children's motivation in the classroom. The question revolves around teacher authority and the nature of learning, but after a few exchanges, the debate turns into a dispute. On the one side Progs argue that teachers should motivate children through engaging and inspiring them; and on the other side, Trads argue that children should be pressed into learning a series of facts. Teachers, in practice, use approaches based on both, using both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, so in a practical sense, there is truth in both positions. The argument comes to an end when one of the Prog participants withdraws, explaining that the fundamental disagreement will not be resolved. In situations like this, Trads often accuse Progs of shutting down the debate. Discussions on an issue of complex practice become reductive, polarised and dichotomised, and this energises the moral outrage and contagion.

The 'debates' can become aggressive; during this research it was reported that solicitors had been involved as a result of trolling and a potential libel. There is increased activity on #EduTwitter during school holidays, and it is observed that the confrontations between Trads and Progs become emotional. An #EduTwitter participant tweeted in July 2018: 'Most schools break up today for the summer holidays, or, as it's known here on EduTwitter, "the six-week hate".'

Media hybridisation

The debates and disputes on #EduTwitter rely on content that presents an educational issue. This content can come from new or legacy media including social media, blogging, video, print and broadcast media, government minister speeches and conferences. Content can be provocative and prompt a polarised debate (an extreme example of this is described in Watson, 2019). The use of content reflects the complexity and the hybridisation of media (Chadwick, 2017; Bruns, 2018, 2019; Postill, 2018). The production of legacy media that promotes Trad perspectives can be traced back to the Black Papers. More recent examples have been sponsored and promoted by the new think tanks or by not-for-profit educational enterprises. Robert Peal, a former Teach First graduate and then a research fellow at Civitas, published the book *Progressively worse: The burden of bad ideas in British schools* in 2014 and presents educational issues in polarised terms:

> Should children learn from the wisdom of an authoritative teacher, or should they learn independently and discover things for themselves? Should children learn an academic curriculum, or is this just filling their heads with 'mere knowledge' where 'skills' would be more useful? Should children be driven by the structure of rewards and examinations, or should they be motivated by lessons that are 'relevant' and 'fun'? Should children be sanctioned for misbehaving and not working, or is such a practice cruel and authoritarian? (Peal, 2014, p. 1)

In 2014, the then Head of Assessment at the ARK academy chain of schools, Daisy Christodoulou, published *Seven myths about education*, challenging the excesses of progressive education. ARK is a charity founded in 2002 by a group of hedge-fund managers; its model of philanthrocapitalism blurs the boundaries between profit and not-for-profit (see e.g. Junemann and Ball, 2013).

Conflicting ideology, New Right 2.0 and online culture wars

Bennett's book, *Teacher proof: Why research in education doesn't mean what it claims and what you can do about it* (2013), is an attack on what he characterises as pseudo-science in education research, and which, according to him, resulted in quackery such as 'learning styles', Brain Gym, neuro-linguistic programming, group work, emotional intelligence and gamification. All of these have undermined teachers' authority in the classroom and he explains his motives as: '. . . calling HOAX on the educational cabals of orthodoxy. . .' (Bennett, 2013, from the acknowledgement).

An underlying philosophy of Trad micropopulism is a positivistic perspective on educational research. This is contrasted with the 'pseudo-science'—or what is sometimes portrayed as post-modern or relativist approaches, that might include small-scale qualitative interpretative research. And while there are examples of poor educational research, Trad micropopulism characterises all research as a fundamental binary between science and not science, and as 'good' or 'bad' research.

This is strategically exploited through the organisation researchED, which was established in 2013 as a 'grassroots' movement for teachers interested in engaging with research. It advocates a 'what works' approach to education research based on scientific evidence. ResearchED connects the Trad micropopulist movement with

epistemological, ontological and methodological perspectives. According to Bennett, researchED arose out of a '... chance discussion with Sam Freedman [former advisor to Michael Gove, later Director of Research and Impact at Teach First and currently CEO of Education Partnerships Group, which is part of the UK academy trust, ARK] and Ben Goldacre [author of *Bad science* and *Bad pharma*]' (Our Story—ResearchED, n.d.). Bennett says that within hours of suggesting the idea on Twitter, he had 200 offers of help from teachers. ResearchED grew in popularity after 500 teachers attended its inaugural conference in 2013. There have been over 50 conferences in the UK and abroad. However, Ulam argues that researchED is an 'astroturfed' movement; that it is an artificial grassroots movement established as an 'outrider' for Gove's education reforms (Ulam, 2017). He claims that the supposedly casual Twitter conversation between Freedman, Bennett and Goldacre was a distraction from the fact that 4 days before the 'chance' conversation, Goldacre delivered a report to Gove arguing for the use of randomised control trials (RCTs) in education research and the establishment of research networks like those used in the health service, to get teachers involved and to understand more clearly what it means to 'know' in research terms (Goldacre, 2013). The emphasis on 'what works' or evidence-based practice is associated with the privatisation of state schools, because schools become more like businesses through emphasising reductive outcomes rather than through educational values (Cribb and Ball, 2005).

What we observe here is a conflation of New Right 2.0, ideological polarisation (culture wars), micropopulism and social media mobilisation in a hybridised media context. The manifestation of this on social media can be observed in the following Twitter discussion from 2014 about synthetic phonics—a way of learning to read by learning the sounds that groups of letters make (i.e. through phonemes; for an elaboration of this debate, see Wyse and Goswami, 2008). Trads defend the approach, claiming that there is evidence that it 'works', while Progs generally argue for a 'real books' approach, claiming that phonemes need to be learnt in context. Evidence from RCTs does support the value of synthetic phonics, but not necessarily a 'phonics only' approach (Torgerson *et al.*, 2019). This creates the opportunity for polarised debate; on the one hand, there are 'hard facts' supported by science and on the other hand, there is a recognition of the complexity of each individual. The Prog position is criticised as emotional and relativistic. Arguments like this can escalate into angry exchanges which generate moral contagion.

> Prog: *No, I am not saying that the use of phonics is wrong. I just think that there are lots of things to take into account and that different children might need different things.*
>
> Trad: *But have you got any evidence to support this assertion?*
>
> Prog: *Can't we focus on the issue rather than get involved in the philosophical debate over what we know and don't know?*
>
> Trad: *What you are doing is making an emotional response to genuine debate. Have you got any evidence to support your position?*

Trads often take uncompromising 'evidence-based' positions on a range of issues. Progs are treated as an embodiment of the 'elite', since they defend the perspectives of the supposed progressive elite. The online antagonism becomes a virtual embodiment of the populist rupture. Trads and Progs can experience an online simulated

political struggle, often with heightened emotion and in heated debate. The arguments on Twitter can become infuriating for participants on either side, and while it is exasperating there is an affective need that encourages people to persevere. It is like being locked in the grip of a mutual but oppositional outrage: ideologically divided but emotionally connected and engaged in mutually assured outrage. Social media is an artificial reality, a simulation of real physical encounters. Twitter is adequate at the level of a few written words, but this is not the entirety of our communication in person; we communicate through an almost inconceivable number of verbal and non-verbal channels. On social media we interact, but with attenuated bandwidth compared to the considerable bandwidth that we have when we are interacting in person. We struggle to find meaning from conversations on social media. The non-verbal and affective nature of face-to-face communication illustrates a requirement for multiple channels of communication. Communication must be *felt* in order to make meaning. Because of the attenuation on social media, communications can easily be misunderstood, and this can be exploited to prompt strong emotional responses. Attention and affect are the basis on which social media companies, like Twitter, extract value (Srnicek, 2017; Seymour, 2019).

Conclusion

A conflation of teachers' worsening pay and working conditions and a New Right 2.0 political project has been fruitful in generating teacher micropopulism; this is then energised and catalysed by social media hybridised with traditional media. New Right 2.0 attempts to promote civic capitalism and volunteerism, including the privatisation of public services. Like its predecessor, the New Right, its approach is not populist; it seeks to create and exploit division in the electorate, rewarding its supporters and proponents and setting them against proponents of the welfare state and universalism: 'strivers' against 'shirkers'. The fostering and support of social media micropopulism, the Trads, has been a part of the New Right 2.0 project. The Trads use populist language to attempt to recover teachers' authority in response to a progressive liberal educational elite who have supposedly dominated educational discourse and forced the implementation of progressive child-centred approaches in the classroom. The Progs emerged on social media to oppose the traditional, teacher-centred approaches advocated by Trads. The Prog vs Trad encounter has many features of a culture war involving the socially conservative against the socially liberal. This polarised encounter serves to divide teachers and educators on issues that are often falsely dichotomous. The arguments between them on social media are often intractable. The polarisation is problematic, since practicing teachers recognise that teaching is complex and that they need to draw on a range of approaches in the classroom and neither traditional nor progressive practices sufficiently characterise the complexity of learning.

What this research tells us about populism is that it confirms existing views that it is facilitated by social media and is prompted by political, cultural and economic contexts. But it also develops the idea of micropopulism; that populist ruptures can emerge over issues that are not primarily about nations and nationalism. We also see how populism can be used within liberal democracies to achieve change—a populist

rupture can be used to help change policy and change practices; even a relatively small number can use social media and hybridised media to create an influential polemical space and support, and even influence policy. However, there is a danger that the affective aspects of populism come to dominate at the expense of considered agonism, rational deliberation and with an acknowledgement of complexity.

Ethical guidelines

This research followed the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). No institutional ethical approval for this research was required.

Conflict of interest

There was no conflict of interest in undertaking this research.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

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