The populist allure of social media activism: Individualized charismatic authority

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Abstract
This article argues that the type of individualized social media activism that has been conceptualized as ‘connective action’ has affinities to populism, and may have detrimental consequences for democratic procedures and the bureaucratic structures that enable them. We trace the normative allure of individualized digital engagement to the libertarian roots of techno-utopianism and argue that this, in combination with a form of mobilization fueled by digital enthusiasm, has potentially dire democratic and organizational consequences. Digital enthusiasm generated on social media platforms entails self-infatuation, here conceptualized as a form of individualized charismatic authority in the Weberian sense. This individualized form of charismatic authority is fundamentally focused on personalized engagement, and simultaneously interconnected through the technological affordances of social media platforms. If individualized charismatic authority becomes institutionalized as a legitimate and predominant manner of organizing, it may have large-scale implications for societal organizing at large by promoting populism. In sum, we argue that digital enthusiasm not only provides democratic opportunities for protest and contention in civil society, but that the fickleness of the individualized charismatic authority it generates may also put democratic procedures and respect for bureaucratic structures at risk.

Keywords
Charismatic authority, connective action, digital enthusiasm, populism, social media activism

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**Introduction**

In this article, we show how the use of social media platforms to organize mass action contributes to a networked individualism driven by an emotional vocabulary, which promotes populism, and potentially undermines the legitimacy of the bureaucratic organizational structures that uphold liberal democracies. Drawing on the concepts of ‘connective action’ and ‘digital enthusiasm’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2016), Max Weber’s (1978) typology of authorities, as well as contemporary research on populism (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Mudde, 2004), we argue that there is an arbitrary demarcation separating populism in the traditional sense of the word, and various forms of networked individualist activism (Wellman, 2001).

The emotional fervor stirred on Facebook during the 2015 European ‘refugee crisis’ illustrates this argument. The fall of 2015 saw how the speedy rise of spontaneous voluntary initiatives to help refugees organized through ad hoc or existing Facebook groups and pages complemented and indeed sometimes frustrated more traditional efforts by civil society organizations and public administration. Different groups of participants used different strategies, and the use of certain tropes and symbolic uses of expressive and emotional language to mobilize and create cohesion (e.g. the *Refugees Welcome* action frame, among others). This enabled a concerted effort to help incoming refugees, but also brought about massive logistical challenges (Gustafsson, Weinryb and Gullberg, 2018).

This article is structured as follows. First, we describe techno-utopianism and its individualizing consequences, both in terms of the platforms themselves and on the level of ideology. Second, we outline how this combination of both technical and ideological individualism has populist tendencies. Third, we argue that the populism brought about by the networked individualist populism fueled by social media technology grinds down on established organizational structures. Finally, we argue that, this extreme process of individualized connectivity whirls into a form of networked individualized charismatic authority, propelled by a short-term emotional impetus challenging the legitimacy of bureaucratic authority in established civil society organizations. Ultimately, this has the potential to put the democratic core of our societies at risk.

**The ideological push for individualization through social media platforms**

To flesh out the broad argument concerning populism and social media that we put forward in this paper, we will begin by sketching the ideological push for individualization that emerged concurrently with the rise of social media platforms. A major body of research on mass engagement through social media follows the tradition of techno-utopianism, ideologically tinged by libertarianism, which has been a companion of public and scholarly debate on the Internet, digital media, social media, and their effects on the organization of human affairs (cf. Morozov, 2011; for a forceful and perhaps somewhat overblown account, see Morozov, 2013). This tradition was already implicit in thoughts about the potential of the Internet for societal change from the 1970s onwards, but grew in importance during the 1990s. The inspiration that social scientists interested in Internet research drew from these ideas created a set of uneasy bedfellows: Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, leftist activists, and social scientists all congregated around an enthusiastic project to make rigid governments obsolete by using the power of peers to organize (or *not* organize) an online society.

When technological thresholds for information exchange and coordination were lowered, individuals were described as being allowed to ‘self-organize and develop their individuality’ (Vinken, 2007: 51). Users could together create ‘collective intelligence’ as a cooperative collective (Lévy, 1997: 13) or a ‘wisdom of the crowds’ as an aggregate of individuals (Surowiecki, 2004). Through the virtual networks they would ‘organize without organizations’ (Shirky, 2008) and form ‘smart
mobs’ (Rheingold, 2002), seen as coordinated groups with common goals acting in a more cohesive fashion than ‘traditional’ mobs. A ‘virtual public’ (Negroponte, 1995; Papacharissi, 2002) or a ‘virtual agora’ (Lévy, 1997: 57) was thought to develop, functioning as a platform for political deliberation and digital direct democracy. Sometimes it was claimed that such a platform could replace representative government (Lévy, 1997). In its most extreme shape, it was posited that network structures could replace hierarchical organization and nation states completely (Castells, 2000).

As a result, Internet entrepreneurs mired in techno-utopian libertarianism designed their platforms accordingly. However, although users adapted their behavior to the affordances created by the new technology, they also came up with novel ways to take advantage of these platforms that were not envisioned by their creators (Baym, 2015). For instance, Mark Zuckerberg did not foresee that Facebook would be used as a tool for organizing political protest as well as mass-coordination of volunteers. Neither did he foresee what the effects would be when activists’ engagement became visible to their peers and others in unexpected ways as a result of the algorithms producing the feed. We mean that these unforeseen consequences of mass action, not only for protest but also for logistical coordination of volunteers, pose specific populist challenges to the way society at large, and most pertinently civil society, is organized.

The normative allure of individualized digital engagement

With the rise of prominent social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the mid-2000s, subsequent studies of networked activism and social movements taking advantage of digital media, mainly focused on ‘good’ causes (the environment, human rights, democracy, social justice, anti-racism, feminism, and rights for asylum seekers), whereas ‘bad’ causes more often associated with ‘populist’ movements (racism, anti-feminism, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, anti-immigration) to a large extent went understudied. Perhaps this focus is the reason that the populist affinities of networked activism in and of itself, and the potential harms that a spread of this kind of populism could do to democratic systems, largely remained a blind spot for a long time.

In their seminal article and accompanying book, Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) outlined how the technical affordances of social and other digital media platforms can enable movements that are qualitatively different from previous forms of collective action in that they do not require participants to share a common identity or vision. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), ‘digitally enabled action networks’ entail ‘technology platforms and applications taking the role of established political organizations’ (p. 742). As a part of this development ‘personal action frames’, where individuals can buy into, customize, and share ‘frames’ or ‘memes’ like ‘We are the 99 percent’ in the case of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, or ‘Refugees Welcome’ in the case of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, replace collective action frames defined by organizations (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 37). They associate this development with a long trend of individualization in post-industrial democracies, where various types of organizational membership and loyalty to collectives have been steadily dwindling for the past 40–50 years (cf. Inglehart, 1977). Instead of channeling voluntarist yearnings through hierarchical organizations with a huge ideological and/or organizational baggage, new generations naturally choose to engage in a more flexible way, in which their individualism is preserved (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 744).

The relationship of social media platforms and networked individualism is thus not one of deterministic cause and effect, but rather an example of the ‘social shaping of technology’, in which societal trends and technology bounce off each other (Baym, 2015). The platforms themselves replace the organization (links, event calendars, likes, shares, etc., are enough to keep the movement going) and simultaneously fulfill the emotional needs of the individuals. As stated above, the
underlying techno-utopian ideology favors spontaneous ‘ad-hocracy’ (Tufekci, 2017: 53 with notes) over planned bureaucracy. In other words, connective action abandons the strive for a formal democratic and bureaucratic organization (Selznick, 1949) and replaces it with another type of organizational imperative, which is appreciated and sought after by the individuals who join.

In the case of the mobilization around the 2015 refugee crisis, there was clearly a strong force of enthusiasm driving engagement and emanating from the fast and large mobilization of volunteers. For example, an analysis of a large number of posts from Facebook groups and pages associated with both ad hoc networks and established civil society organizations who were mobilizing volunteers around the 2015 refugee crisis in Sweden reveals that words associated with positive emotions were used to a large extent in both categories, and also generated higher levels of engagement (Gustafsson et al., 2018). However, this engagement was frequently very short-sighted, competing with the refugee aid provided by established civil society organizations, and often seemed equally geared toward the needs of volunteers to be part of a cheering collective of ‘do-gooders’ as to the needs of the refugees (Gustafsson et al., 2018). In our view, this self-infatuated imperative to show, tell, and cheer engagement online may be labeled as charismatic: its individuality entails the boom and bust cycle of digital enthusiasm (Gerbaudo, 2016), and it peddles populist beliefs in the power of the individual in opposition to the elite.

The prevailing opinion on the risks of social media engagement often focuses on the use of hate speech, anger, and resentment, especially in relation to ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism. However, we mean that also the usage of ‘positive’ emotional expressions (related to love, heroism, solidarity, etc.) on social media, exhibits similar populist traits. By focusing on the medium, we propose that populism is not only inherent in the populist messaging, but rather in the organizing itself. We argue here that the individualism and personal action frames facilitated by social media pose populist threats to established organizations and institutionalized forms of organizing. This is done primarily through the belief in the power of individualized mass engagement on social media, disregarding its fickleness and boom and bust cycle. In this process, established civil society organizations stand in the first line of fire in terms of seeming obsolete and overburdened with administrative procedures in comparison to spontaneous networked engagement (Gustafsson et al., 2018), although a similar absence of belief in the relevance of public administration is very likely the next step.

**Online populism and the democratic and organizational consequences of individualization**

The populist idea that ‘the people’ are fighting against ‘the establishment’ or ‘the elite’ is not only found in specifically ideologically driven movements, for example, right-wing or left-wing populism. In fact the very medium of contemporary social media platforms facilitates specific populist forms of engagement by basing this engagement on short-term, emotional, and individualized rhetoric. Although often associated with party politics, populism has been pointed out in other spheres, for instance, the media and social sciences (Mudde, 2004: 542). Mudde (2004) has defined populism as ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into […] “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people’ (p. 543). However, rather than being an essential characteristic of political movements, populism can be seen as a repertoire of strategies, or as a discursive style, which can be used at different points in time and to a larger or lesser extent (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). It is a ‘thin-centered’ ideology which can be connected with any other ideology, and stands in opposition to pluralism—the idea that society is made up of a ‘heterogeneous collection
of groups and individuals’ with different ideas, interests, and goals (Mudde, 2004: 544). Mudde (2004) finds a combination of factors underlying this, among which most notably he points out the development of the media and the emancipation of individuals (p. 552 ff).

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012) claim that populism can be both positive and negative for democracy. Positive because of its focus on the political views of ‘ordinary’ citizens, negative because of its undermining of the ‘bureaucratic’ elements of democracy: rule of law, human rights, and so on. The ‘people’ are not the entire people, but an imagined community representing ‘a virtuous and unified population’ (Taggart, 2000: 95 cit. in Mudde, 2004: 545). A core belief in populism is that the people do not need to be educated or have their views altered; they already have common sense and thus know best (Mudde, 2004). Mudde finds a ‘populist Zeitgeist’ caused by the undermining of the political elite’s bureaucratic authority as defined by Max Weber (1978), instead making way for a reintroduction of charismatic authority (Mudde, 2004: 556).

According to Weber (1978), charisma ‘arises from collective excitement produced by extraordinary events and from surrender to heroism of any kind’ (p. 1121) The power of charisma rests upon the belief in revelation and heroes’ (Weber, 1978: 1116). In the context of digital activism, charismatic authority can be interpreted as digital enthusiasm, defined as ‘intense occasions of online interaction in which the emotions of thousands of Web users fuse into a collective sense of possibility’ (Gerbaudo, 2016: 256). However, as Gerbaudo (2016) points out, this enthusiasm is short-lived, following a boom and bust cycle of engagement that puts long-term protest as well as established civil society organizations following in its footsteps in peril (p. 270). For populism, there can be no cost–benefit analysis of conflicting goals: compromises are impossible, since the conflict is the one between good and evil. Taggart (2000) links populism with charismatic leaders because of its lack of key values, but as we are going to show in the what follows, charismatic authority can be projected onto the networked individualized engagement itself.

The self-infatuation generated on social media platforms

In his foundational work on authority, Weber (1978) contrasted the modern phenomenon of bureaucratic authority with that of traditional and charismatic authority. Whereas bureaucratic authority, the foundation of modern liberal democracy, adheres to rationalized modern tenets such as specified rules, spheres of competence, and the systematic division of powers, the other types do not. Traditional authority derives from hereditary claims to power, whereas charismatic authority is based on the specific charismatic traits of the leader, as defined and recognized by her or his followers. Charismatic authority exists when it is understood as such in the eyes of its adherents. For the purposes of this article, we do not mean that digital enthusiasm necessarily implies the existence of one specific charismatic leader, who stands as an ideal type at the core of Weber’s idea of charismatic authority. Instead, we mean that this authority becomes inherent in the form of engagement itself. We call this individualized charismatic authority. This type of authority differs from that presented in the work of Le Bon (2017 [1896]), viewing the crowd as obliterating the unique actions of single individuals, or the transcendence beyond individual action in Durkheim’s (1976 [1912]) concept of collective effervescence (Lindholm, 1992; Pope et al., 1975; Tiryakian, 1995). Instead, we mean that the relevant unit of analysis in the case of social media is the populism generated by each individual’s focus on their own engagement, and at the same time the interconnected individualism that the technical affordances of social network sites make possible. As self-centered social media usage enables the exhibition of narcissistic behavior (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008; Leung, 2013; Mehdizadeh, 2010), individual social media users become their own ‘crowd crystal’ (Canetti, 1984) or their own ‘mirror hungry personality’ (Post, 1986).
Using *personal* action frames (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), each individual activist simultaneously becomes a charismatic subject/follower of their own actions. Digital enthusiasm replaces the external singular leader with an individualized charismatic authority, where individuals coalesce around themselves, seduced and blown-away by their own engagement as much as by the movement itself. This is somewhat reminiscent of Pasini et al.’s (2015) reinterpretation of Weber’s (2015) concept in ‘leaderless’ organizations of the digital era by focusing on the charismatic situation rather than the charismatic leader (p. 85). The charismatic leader from Weber’s original conceptualization is thus replaced by the self-infatuation enabled by contemporary technological platforms. This is also in line with recent research pointing to social media platforms as promoters of narcissistic behavior (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008; Leung, 2013; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Rather than merging into a collective conscience (Durkheim, 2018 [1893]) the social aspect of social media is its interconnected self-infatuation; the central aspect is the focus on the ‘me’ showing, cheering, and being cheered in this public or semi-public setting. The social media platforms simultaneously enable both extreme individualization, and profound connectivity, creating the basis for the individualized charismatic authority.

**The fickleness of individualized charismatic authority**

The proliferation of individualized charismatic authority poses risks to democratic organizations and societies. Weber described challenges for organizing based on charismatic authority, primarily related to its durability, eventually leading to its transformation or demise. According to him, ‘[e] very charisma is on the road from a turbulently emotional life that knows no economic rationality to a slow death by suffocation under the weight of material interests: every hour of its existence brings it nearer to its end’ (Weber, 1978: 1120). Charismatic authority is thus inherently unstable. In this respect, it is similar to the boom and bust cycle described by Gerbaudo (2016), outlining the short-term peaking of digital enthusiasm and its accompanying evanescence.

There is risk in a disproportional belief in the importance and ability of each individual activist’s engagement: *I* can judge what is important, *I* can judge what is true, *I* can judge who and what is wrong, stupid, and bad. *I* am the superior judge of the faults of our society, and without the wish to coordinate collective action with respect for bureaucratic organizational processes, I can demand change at any price as long as I am cheering others and being cheered in return. In its online format, charismatic authority is a direct threat to the bureaucratic authority as the prerequisite of modern states and representative democracy (Suleiman, 2013). A democratic state needs a functioning bureaucracy in order to attain state capacities necessary to implement decisions:

> The rich and powerful have ways of looking after themselves, and if left to their own devices will always get their way over nonelites. It is only the state, with its judicial and enforcement power, that can make elites conform to the same rules that everyone else is required to follow. (Fukuyama, 2014: 56)

The reason that bureaucratic authority is the cornerstone of representative government is that it replaces demagoguery and emotional responses to societal problems with a system designed to produce binding decisions based on a legal framework guaranteeing the rule of law and the equal treatment of citizens (du Gay, 2000). Conversely, civil society initiatives that are driven by individualized charisma rather than bureaucratic organization run the same risk of ending up as either entities kidnapped by powerful interests, or by becoming deadlocked in a tactical freeze (Tufekci, 2017), unable to coordinate action and wield negotiating power.

A normative tilt toward charismatic authority as a way out of the bureaucratic iron cage has gradually crept into discourse on public and civil society organizations in recent decades, often
attributed to the spread of managerialism and the hyping of Silicon Valley entrepreneurialism (du Gay, 2000). A dominant idea in this line of thought is that bureaucracy traps individuals and societies in inhuman and rigid systems, and fragments different parts of the human experience, excluding emotions, love, compassion, creativity, and so on. Similar versions of this critique emanate from different directions, including both post-structural thinkers and neoliberal managerialists (du Gay, 2000). We mean that this tilt toward charismatic authority should be viewed on a broader scale, tracing it to the individualistic roots of the ideological and technological features of online platforms. Charismatic authority replaces organized democratic decision-making with trust in the leader doing the right thing. It is the same phenomenon in the type of individualized charismatic authority we describe here—it stipulates that each individual by definition knows and does what is right. This mirrors the libertarian ideas surrounding such enterprises as Wikipedia, where the alleged operating procedure is that the best and most neutral text on a subject will arise naturally from the cooperation between peers: the wisdom of the crowd relies in this sense on charismatic authority, which is fueled by emotional fervor and cheering crowds, rather than on democratic decisions and a structured distribution of responsibility and accountability.

Anti-bureaucrat critiques as well as critiques of representative democracy (Beitz, 1989; Pateman, 1970) play a major part in the anarcho-libertarian ideology that underlies a lot of intellectual development related to movements associated with the Internet, the web, and social media. It is for this reason that the prospect of organizing without organizations (cf. Shirky, 2008) holds such a great promise for anti-authoritarians. As a result, formal decision-making is avoided altogether in these social media initiatives, or rather, decisions are taken all the time, but on an ad hoc basis, which paradoxically reinserts the same kind of informal power that riddles traditional organizations, but without the legitimacy and stability rendered by a formal structure (Brunsson, 2007; Cyert and March, 1963; Selznick, 1949). For example, the various ad hoc efforts put together during the 2015 refugee crisis had no way of deciding on how they should interact with government authorities, and so proved to be difficult partners both to public agencies and traditional civil society organizations (Turunen and Weinryb, 2018).

For Weber (1978), the transformation of charisma into established organizational forms contains the seeds leading to its demise. The instability of charismatic authority is relevant in relation to other forms of authority: ‘in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in statu nascendi. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized or a combination of both’ (Weber, 1978: 246). However, although charismatic authority may dissipate or transform with time, we suggest that the recurring bouts of individualized charismatic authority brought about by digital enthusiasm may perpetually challenge the very legitimacy of bureaucratic forms of organizing. If the way to bring about large-scale digital engagement is through individualized charismatic authority, and if its digital enthusiasm becomes institutionalized as the predominant legitimate manner to organize (albeit in short time spans), this may challenge previous ideas on what it means to be a legitimate organization (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Indeed, trust in existing democratic institutions may drop as bureaucracy loses out and populist movements gain ground, thereby making the functioning of democratic society even more difficult. Since this drop in trust has arguably already begun, any further losses in legitimacy could have dire consequences (Marozzi, 2015).

**What lies ahead?**

In contrast to most contemporary organizational research pointing to (and often implicitly criticizing) the ever-proliferating bureaucratic organizing of society (Bromley and Meyer, 2014; Meyer and Bromley, 2013), the large-scale proliferation of networks organized through social
media entail the spread of individualized charismatic authority as a radically different organizational imperative. If populist tendencies of individualized charismatic authority become institutionalized as a legitimate and prevalent manner to bring about collective action in society, this has implications not only for existing civil society organizations, but for democracy and bureaucracy at large, especially as digitalization increasingly prevails in many societal spheres. In their long-term panel study of the political socialization of Swedish youth, Amnå and Ekman (2014) found that many potential activists were ‘standby citizens’: interested and engaged, but remaining passive until a window of opportunity or a catalyzing event in society transforms them into activists. But if these standby citizens can only be mobilized for short bursts of action and attention, oscillating in and out of ad hoc connective action networks driven by digital enthusiasm, will they be an independent force for societal change, or will they rather be numbers to be exploited by more or less populist interests?

The problem is not that a group of people are only active or attentive to societal affairs during limited periods of time; the danger lies in whether the lure of connective action and the massive scope and energy that can be mobilized for short periods of time: moments of enthusiasm becomes a dominating yet capricious way of organizing in democratic societies. In addition, individualized charismatic authority may occur in any normative contexts, and is as such an unpredictable and populist manner of engagement. Whereas some populism may appear as being benevolent from a democratic perspective, the same mechanisms may entice populism based on, for example, ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism. Digital enthusiasm does not merely provide democratic opportunities for protest and contention. Its very evanescence may put civil society and the established benefits of democratic procedures at risk.

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Notes

1. Of course, bureaucratic organizations are run by people who have emotions. It can even be posited that a set of emotions underlie bureaucracy itself (cf. Altbrow, 1992).
2. Wikipedia has since its early days moved toward a more hierarchical mode of operation, but that really only proves our point.

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**Author biographies**

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