

Session 8

Playing With Fire: Media, Populism, and the Challenge to Democracy

In recent years, the collaboration between certain media moguls and far-right populist political figures has become increasingly apparent. From the billionaire and media-mogul Vincent Bolloré's backing of French far-right firebrand Eric Zemmour and the rise of Georgia Meloni in Italy eased by the media empire of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, to the symbiotic relationship between Donald Trump and Rupert Murdoch's Fox News, large media empires have provided populist movements with the opportunity to disseminate and legitimise both their discourse and their leaders. Moreover, large digital platforms have been shown to have been complicit in the spread of disinformation, most often to the benefit of far-right populists. While figures such as Eric Zemmour did not ultimately achieve electoral success, the growing popularity of another far-right French populist, Marine Le Pen, is proof of the continued appeal of their brand of politics. This presents challenges to democracies and democratic processes on a number of levels from viral misinformation to the populist tendency to undermine the legitimacy of national institutions. This session will discuss trends in populism in relation to media and the media's role in facilitating the rise of populist leaders worldwide.

Discussion Themes

- **How have populist movements benefited from corporate mainstream media (through misinformation, disinformation, and fake news) worldwide? Is there a media policy failure behind this phenomenon? How can media deficits be addressed, and what is the role of public broadcasting services in such a process?**
- **Is far-right populism exclusively a Western problem? How do populist leaders succeed (or fail) in sustaining their electoral success? What role does the media play in their success?**
- **What is the nature of the threat to democracy and democratic processes posed by the rise of far-right populism? Has media-ownership concentration compounded these challenges?**
- **What is the importance of media literacy in combatting populist discourses? How can media literacy be instilled at an early age?**
- **How can we empower the potential of digital technologies to increase the quality of democracy in the context of rising populist sentiments?**