

Saying “Shithole” in Vernacular and Vehicular Recontextualizing a Populist Vulgarity in Transnational Hybrid Media Space

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Rather than perceiving populism as a response to various kinds of democratic crises, recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes ‘crisis’ as constitutive to performing populism. Across the globe, successful performance and propagation of crisis often requires measures hitherto deemed ‘unconventional’ in the political sphere. ‘Bad manners’ - often conveyed through vulgarly vernacular register of language - have been suggested as ‘the populist style’ of narrating crisis sentiment in a manner that both forces and coaxes salient media coverage.

Focusing on this performative aspect of crisis propagation, this paper examines a particularly mediatized populist speech act we refer to as the “Shithole country controversy” of January 11, 2018. We analyze how transnational hybrid media space domesticates President Trump’s emotional and incredulous narrative on immigration from developing countries into an array of spectacular news events for local audiences. Endeavors to translate the vernacular essence of “the shithole controversy” from the vehicular *lingua franca* – as Serbian *vukojebina* (“the place where wolves copulate”) or as Taiwanese 鳥不生蛋的國家 (“the country where birds don’t lay eggs”) – underlines the crucial role of the staged vulgarity, through which the crisis is performed into the realm of banal entertainment.

We first illustrate and typify domesticated recontextualizations of the ‘shithole countries’ news coverage in hybrid media, collecting data from three mainstream news outlets (Wall Street Journal, Le Figaro and Helsingin Sanomat) and three countermedia outlets (Breitbart News, Dreuz.info and MV-lehti). The data consists of 2-3 articles per news outlet and the related discussions, covering the period from 11 January to 18 January 2018.

Employing the methodology of frame analysis, we then analyze the differences in how the original populist crisis performance is being domesticated and recontextualized – comparing the process both transnationally and between different forms of media. We conclude by discussing the extent to which collective *produsage* of online *reinforcement*, *the logic of media populism*, and *staging populist crisis performance* can address and explain the findings on convergence and divergence of domesticated and recontextualized discursive frames.