

Abstract

In the Essex School tradition (comprising the theoretical work of Laclau and Mouffe as well as an expanding set of empirical analyses), *discourse analysis* refers to the scientific practice of capturing, mapping, and accounting for the mechanisms that attempt to partially fix the identity of subjects and objects through discursive articulation. The units, the building blocks, utilized in these articulatory practices can be of various types. The collection and analysis of such data, the mapping and interpretation of the ways in which they produce distinct discourses, prioritizing particular meanings and excluding others, can enlist a variety of linguistic techniques as well as other qualitative methodologies. The POPULISMUS research project purports to draw on material collected in a variety of contexts in Europe, Latin America and the US in order to examine the benefits and assess the prospects of methodological cross-fertilization between such traditional discourse-theoretical methods of analysis, computer-assisted text analysis (drawing on corpus linguistics) as well as qualitative research interviews (especially expert interviews). This is still work in progress and thus only a general outline of the attempted confluence is provided.

The *POPULISMUS* project: Populist discourse and democracy

The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated globally in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of ‘populism’ and to develop an approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to:

- explore the multiple expressions of populist politics,
- highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism, and
- assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy.

Background: The Essex School

- The Essex School (Townshend 2003) belongs to a bundle of theoretical and analytical approaches that have highlighted the importance of ‘discourse’ within socio-political research.
- Initiated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, discourse theory combines a theoretically sophisticated grasping of the processes through which social meaning is articulated with an emphasis on the political and often antagonistic character that different discourses acquire through their articulation around distinct nodal points (such as ‘the people’).
- Here, the term ‘discourse’ does not refer merely to words and ideas, but denotes all ‘systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’ (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 3-4) through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers in a bid to hegemonize the public sphere and to influence decision-making.
- From a methodological point of view, the Essex School is committed to interdisciplinarity, enlisting a multitude of disciplinary and theoretical resources (from semiotics and deconstruction to post-analytical philosophy and psychoanalysis) in the service of a diversified (Gramscian) theory of hegemony.
- The analysis of populism as a discourse that (a) dichotomizes the social field into two blocs (the establishment vs the underdog; the elites vs the people), and (b) purports to represent popular interests by constructing a hegemonic popular subjectivity, has been a major preoccupation of the Essex School (see, for example, Laclau 2005).

Contact

www.populismus.gr

Objectives

The units, the building blocks, utilized in the articulatory practices constructing political discourses and identities constitute the ‘data’ collected and analyzed. These include but are not limited to: ‘speeches, reports, manifestos, historical events, interviews, policies, ideas, even organisations and institutions’ (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 4).

POPULISMUS has extended this list to encompass expert interviews, something that has not been much practiced within the Essex School literature.

In the last few years, it has also been proposed that corpus driven lexicometric procedures (such as frequency analysis, analysis of specificities, and the analysis of co-occurrences) and the analysis of narrative patterns (contextualizing the findings of lexicometric approaches based on closed corpora) can also greatly assist in this endeavor; thus, in his thoughtful analysis of francophonism, Georg Glasze has argued that a triangulation of these two linguistic methods ‘is appropriate to reveal temporary fixations’ and provide the Essex School with a more rigorous methodology (Glasze 2007: 663-4).

In developing an Observatory of populist discourse, POPULISMUS purports to explore a series of *computer-assisted text analysis methods* that may be of use in this field (Alexa 1997, Brier & Hopp 2011).

Materials & Methods

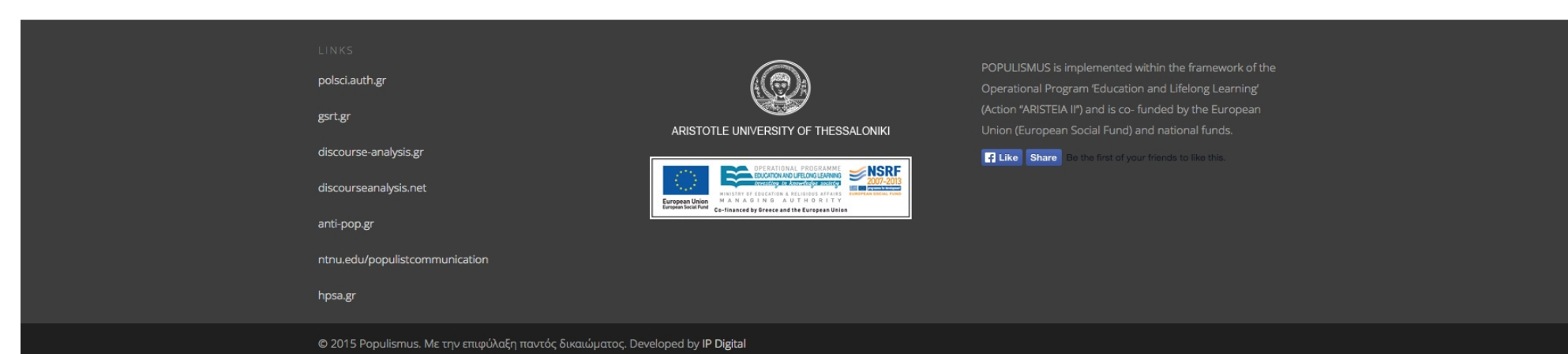
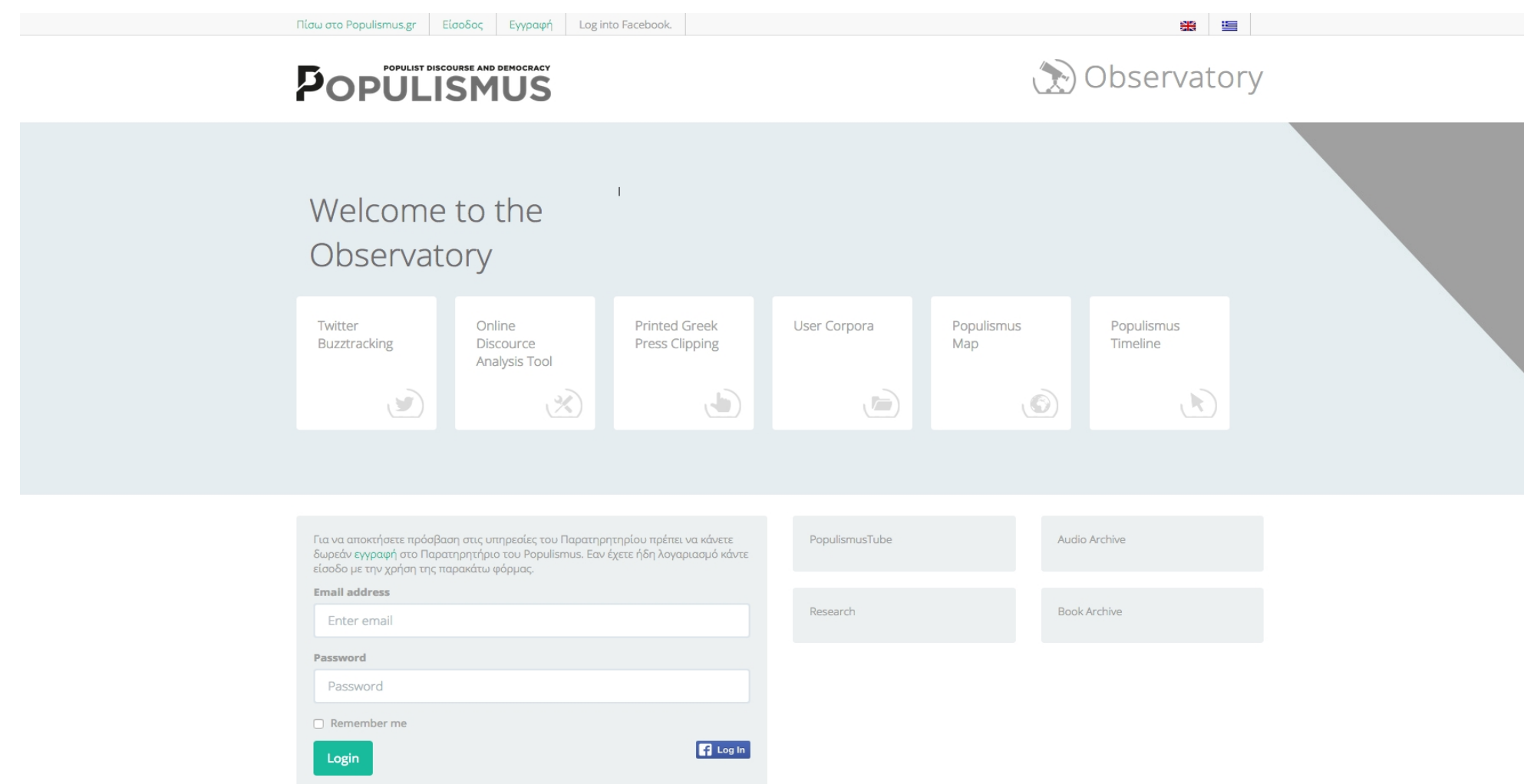
EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Academic discussions regarding expert interviews as a distinct method of collecting data is rather recent (Bogner, Littig & Menz 2009: 1). At the heart of these discussions one finds from the very beginning the notion of the ‘expert’ itself, as well as her/his role within the context of a given research. One cannot, of course, regard the notion of the ‘expert’ with the naivety that allows for her/him to be perceived as the basic source of ‘objective information’ (Bogner, Littig & Menz 2009: 5). Nevertheless, an ‘expert’ can indeed provide us with a multitude of primary and secondary information, with much-needed documentation, as well as with a theoretical and empirical grounding, giving a valuable push to inquiries that might otherwise demand much more time and energy.

More specifically, in the course of seven field-trips, the POPULISMUS research team has conducted 50 semi-structured in depth expert interviews in Spain (3), the Netherlands (11), Greece (3), France (3), Belgium (2), USA (10), Venezuela (6), and Argentina (12).

They combine three different types of interview (Bogner & Menz 2009: 46-47, 72-73):

- Exploratory expert interview*, during which the researcher is at the phase of preliminary research and orientation within a field that might be recent or lacking relevant literature (e.g. the interviews with Spanish academics about the PODEMOS party).
- Systematizing expert interview*, during which one aims at a systematic and very specific drawing of information concerning a specific subject on which an expert is considered an ‘authority’ (e.g. the interviews with populism experts like Dick Pels and Tjitske Akkerman in the Netherlands).



Observatory: Digital environment & tools for registered users

Theory-generating expert interview. With this type of interview we insert a reflexive element in our methodology, since the ‘expert’ per se is regarded now as a subject of research, with the researcher focusing on the specific systems of interpretation and analysis that he/she utilises (e.g. the interviews with the philosophers Jacques Rancière in France and Simon Critchley in the US).

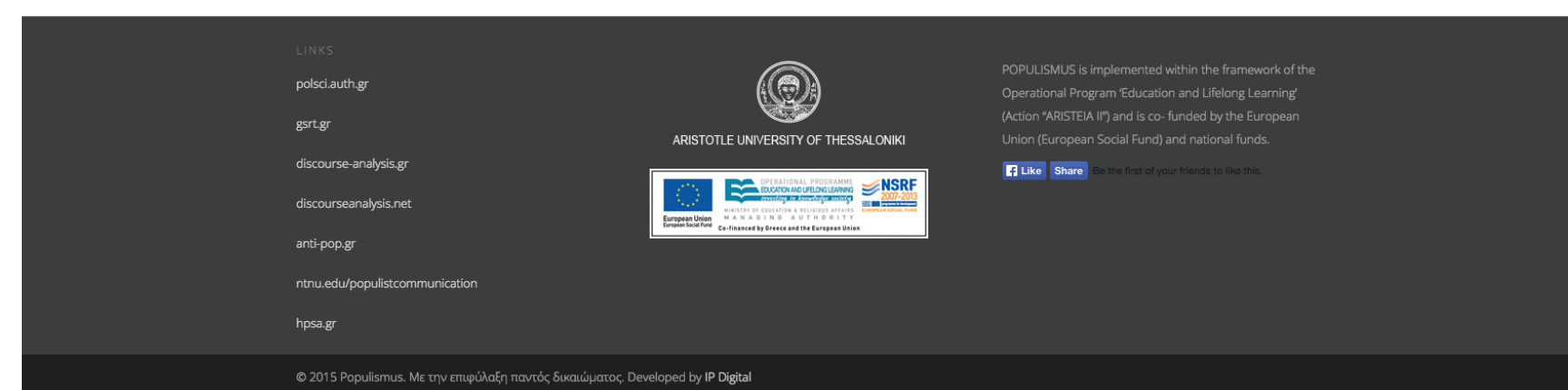
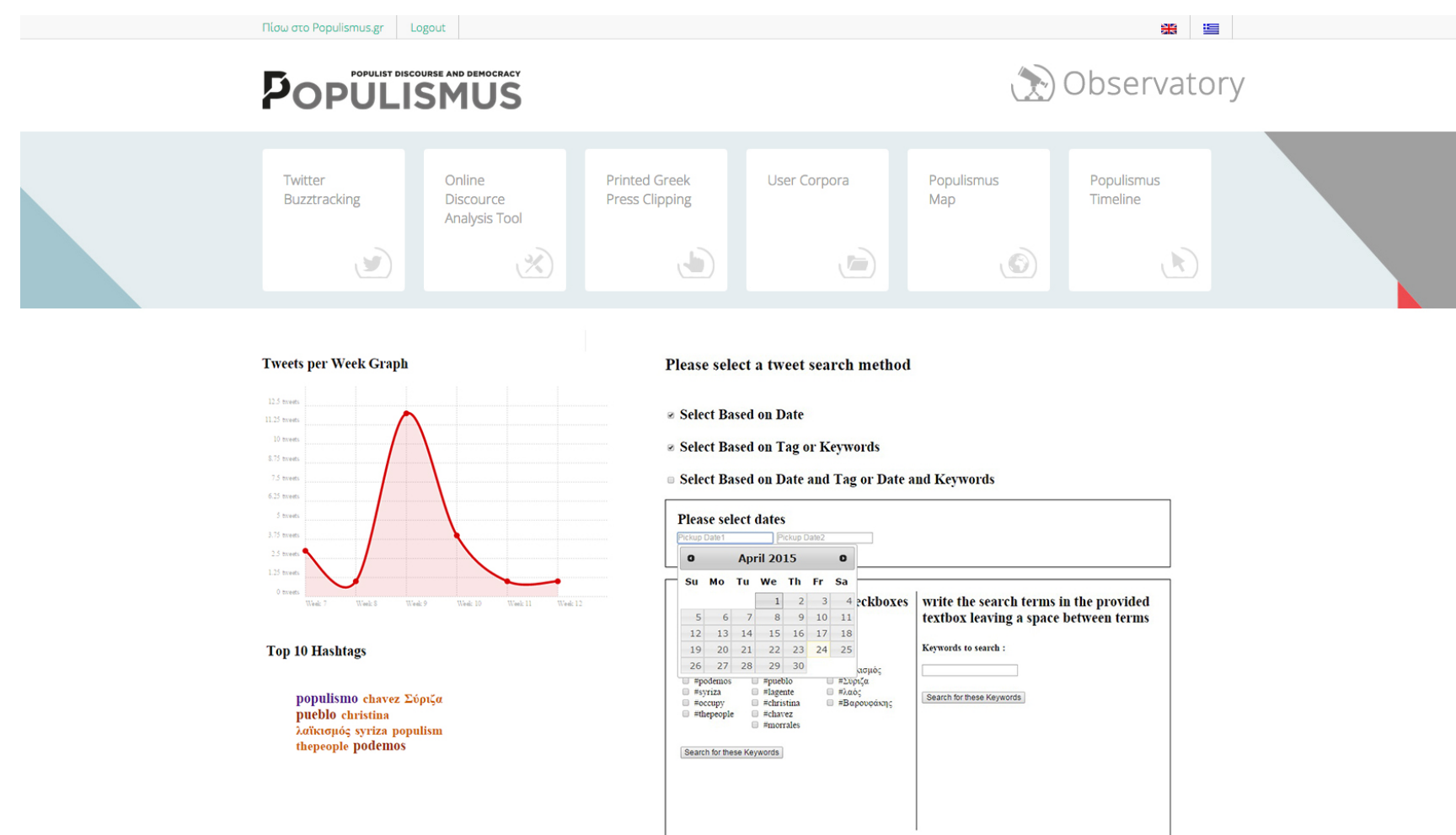
WEB-BASED TWEETS COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS TOOL WITH EMBODIED TWITTER API

This tool has been designed, within the scope of the POPULISMUS web-based Observatory, in order to collect tweets from all over the world, selecting only those which contain specific keywords according to a keyword list (associated with ‘populism’ and ‘democracy’).

The list contains words from three different languages as we decided to gather tweets in English, Spanish and Greek only. When a tweet contains a specific keyword it is saved in our database automatically.

The Twitter API allows us to open a streaming channel and gather all the available tweets in real time. All tweets are saved temporarily in a database and then each one is parsed and if it contains a matched keyword then in it is stored permanently.

A researcher may select to present tweets by date, by a list of predefined tags or both. Furthermore, the user can download all of them in a simple text file. We also provide a tag cloud which displays the top-15 tags gathered and a graph which shows the number of tweets for the weeks chosen.



Observatory: Twitter Buzztracking

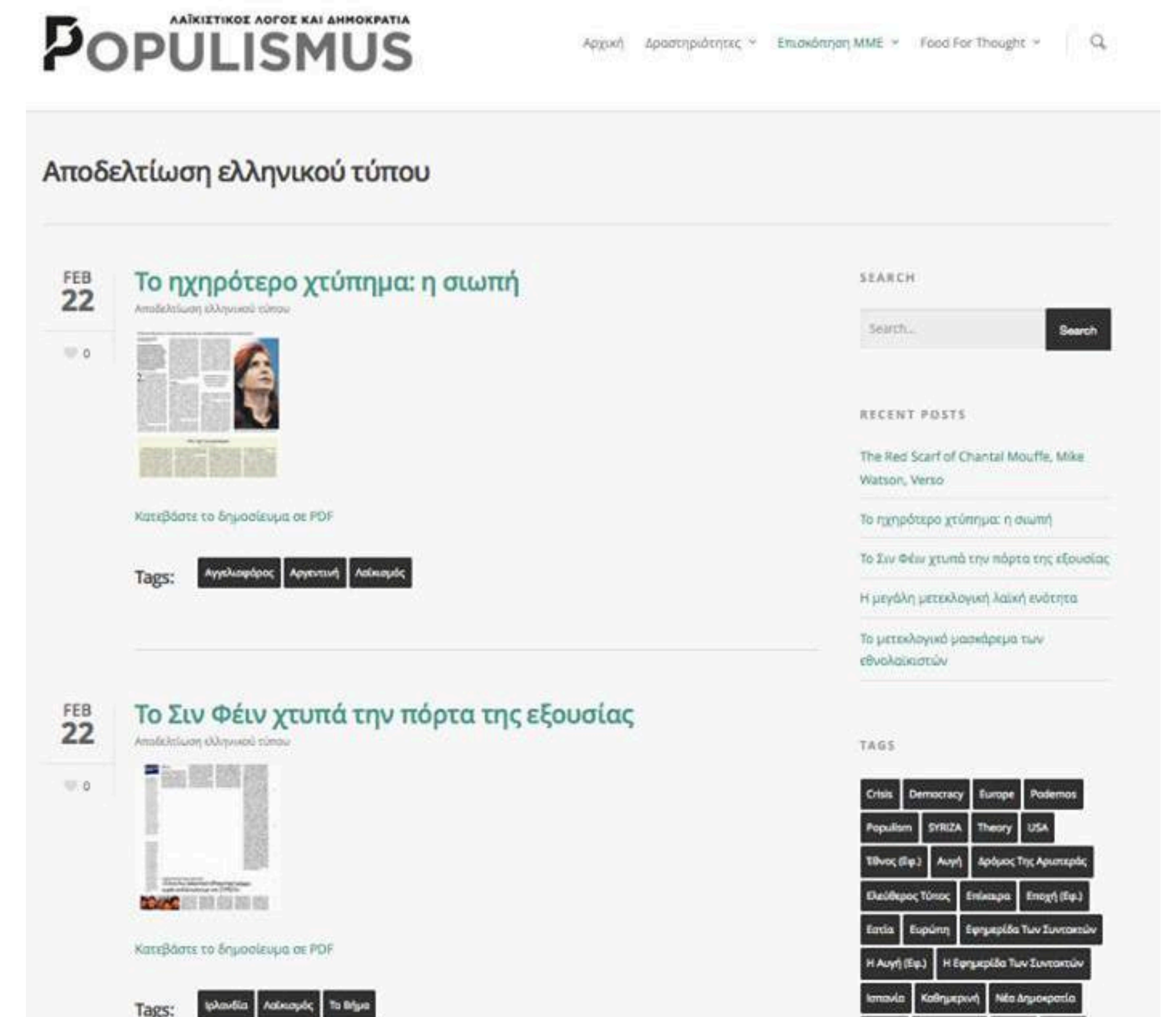
WEB-BASED TEXT ANALYSIS TOOL

With the text analysis tool we provide the user an application allowing her/him to view how words and phrases are used in their own text files.

The user can enter her/his simple text file by uploading it to the website and then the application runs text analysis and concordancing procedures. These texts may be a sum of tweets which the user downloaded previously from the Twitter API or any other text files (corpus). After uploading the text file, the user has to include specific keywords (single words or phrases) in which s/he is interested (for example ‘populism’, ‘the people’).

The output takes many different forms. The most simple output is a list of phrases or sentences, which include the specific keywords given by the user. The user gets a list of phrases or sentences with the search word or phrase centered. This allows someone to look for patterns, such as whether the word usually or frequently comes at the beginning of a sentence or whether it is followed by certain words, like prepositions. In addition, a word counter is in operation, which presents all the different words contained in a text file and their frequencies.

More specifically, in the framework of the POPULISMUS Project we are also monitoring the Greek printed media, collecting automatically all the articles containing certain keywords relative to populism. Then, with the use of an OCR program we are producing a plain text document for the articles of every day, automatically importing the articles into a corpus, which can be analysed with the use of our text analysis tool.



Observatory: Printed Greek Press Clipping

To Conclude

All in all, POPULISMUS is set to advance further the cross-fertilization between the Essex School, qualitative techniques like expert interviews and corpus-based approaches as well as other orientations within this field, something that is anticipated to enhance our conceptual apparatus, our research tools as well as help us develop web-based procedures related to the development of a user-friendly interactive Observatory open to registered researchers of populism. The first results of this endeavor will be presented in the POPULISMUS international conference (Thessaloniki, 26-28 June 2015).

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