

Disinformation at the Service of Chaos: Communication in Brazil after the January 8 attacks

Desinformação a serviço do caos: a comunicação no Brasil pós atentados de 8 de janeiro

Desinformación al servicio del caos: la comunicación en Brasil tras los atentados del 8 de enero

Rose Mara Vidal de Souza
Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo
Brasil
rosevidal@yahoo.com.br

Maria de Jesus Daiane Rufino Leal
Universidade Estadual do Piauí
Brasil
daianerufino@yahoo.com.br

Abstract: The creation and dissemination of false News in Brazil has become an instrument of political and electoral marketing in the country. With moral content and resorting to sexual, religious, and ethical themes, Fake News acts in the psychological field. It directly impacts the formation of public opinion in the process of Disinformation at the service of chaos in politics. The role of communication in the materialization of the attacks on democracy on January 8 in Brasília and its consequences, as well as the initiatives to combat Disinformation in the country, are analyzed from the perspective of the Narcotizing Effect of the Media (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948) and the Theory of Moral Foundations (Haidt, 2012).

Keywords:

Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, Fake News, politics, democracy, journalism

Resumo: A criação e disseminação de notícias falsas no Brasil tornou-se um instrumento do marketing político e eleitoral no país. Com conteúdo de cunho moral, recorrendo a temáticas sexuais, religiosas e éticas, as *Fake News* agem no campo psicológico e impactam diretamente a formação da opinião pública em um processo de desinformação a serviço de um caos na política. O papel da comunicação na materialização dos atentados à democracia no dia 8 de janeiro em Brasília e os seus desdobramentos, assim como as iniciativas de combate a desinformação no país são

analizadas pelos vieses da perspectiva do Efeito Narcotizante dos Meios de Comunicação (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948) e da Teoria das Fundações Morais (Haidt, 2012).

Palavras-chave:

Brasil, Jair Bolsonaro Fake News, política, democracia, jornalismo

Resumen: La creación y difusión de noticias falsas en Brasil se ha convertido en un instrumento de marketing político y electoral en el país. Con contenido moral, recurriendo a temas sexuales, religiosos y éticos, las Fake News actúan en el campo psicológico e impactan directamente en la formación de la opinión pública en un proceso de desinformación al servicio del caos en la política. Se analiza el papel de la comunicación en la materialización de los ataques a la democracia del 8 de enero en Brasilia y sus consecuencias, así como las iniciativas para combatir la desinformación en el país, bajo la perspectiva del Efecto Narcotizante de los Medios (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948) y la Teoría de los Fundamentos Morales (Haidt, 2012).

Palabras clave:

Brasil, Jair Bolsonaro Fake News, política, democracia, periodismo

1. Introduction

The attacks against Brazilian democracy that took place on January 8 in Brasilia, the capital of the country, can be interpreted under various sociological, political, psychological, and cultural but any analysis necessarily involves understanding the function of digital communication in the phases that preceded the coup acts, during the attacks and post-attacks. January 8 was a milestone in the political history of the West, along with the invasion of the Capitol, headquarters of the US Legislature, on January 6, 2021, which is the most significant and violent facts of threats to democracy in this early 21st century.

Both events, of brutal physical violence and the installation of chaos, meant the culmination of digital communication campaigns based on hate narratives, which used the dissemination of Fake News as their primary method. The attacks in the United

States and Brazil resulted from symbolic violence, built *with Disinformation, materializing into physical violence*.¹

Before being configured in the political space, the chaos is elaborated with psychological resources and built in the cultural environment, of meanings elaborated by the communicative practices, which in this era occurs primarily through digital communication. In this environment, information is abundant, but a lack of attention adds to neglecting objective perspectives. It is the post-truth, where public opinion is shaped by appeals to emotion and personal beliefs, supporting opinions, and ideologies.

The Internet, which had been proclaimed in its advent as a redemption for the plurality of ideas and the birth of a cyberdemocracy, became a weapon for politics. Appropriated by the Brazilian extreme right, the Internet gave way to discriminatory, segregationist, racist, misogynist, and xenophobic discourses previously restricted and "controlled" by an ethic of "politically correct." The virtual media networks, especially Telegram and *WhatsApp*, which remain foreign to national legislation, constantly placing themselves as transnational institutions above Brazilian legal norms, have collaborated to naturalize criminal narratives. Among these behaviors, hatred of the country's intellectuals as teachers and artists and hatred of journalists, servers of the Brazilian judiciary, and left-wing parties have been based on discourses based on moral and religious issues since the 2018 election campaign.

Disinformation, elaborated with lying content and disseminated by virtual groups, is not the work of chance or a spontaneous communicative dynamic. The documentary series "*Extremistas*" (Cavechini, 2023), produced by *Globoplay*, on² the attacks of January 8, showed that there was a financial gear responsible for maintaining the circulation of lies via digital communication networks that co-opted a portion of the Brazilian electorate to follow by political radicalism and adhere to the coup speech, ignoring the rules of democracy.

It is not the first time in the history of Brazil that communication drives coup acts. In 1964, when the world was still living in the analogical era of radio waves and printed as newspapers and magazines held the hegemony of information, Brazilian media outlets allied with national and international capital used the country's discourse

¹ The concept of symbolic violence was elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu (1989), a French sociologist, to describe the process in which certain cultural values are perpetuated and imposed. To the extent that its effects tend to be more psychological, symbolic violence differs from physical violence, although it can ultimately express itself in this form.

² Brazilian streaming service, product of Globo Communication Organizations.

of protection from a possible communist threat to support a coup that ousted the government of then, President João Goulart. They instituted a civil-military dictatorship that lasted 20 years, only in 1985, with the Brazilian re-democratization phase (Bahia, 2009).

After 38 years, interspersed with extreme political events, such as the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, supported by the country's TV stations in 2016, Brazilian democracy was attacked again in a brutal way. Although the attacks were inglorious and bypassed with the prominence of the close alliance between the Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary Brazilian powers, the attacks of January 8 continue to reverberate in the political and legal complexity of the country and the ideas that originated the attacks still echo in the extremist digital communication networks. In addition to the institutional reorganization that demonstrated unity and strength of national constitutional powers, communication companies and civil society institutions have sought to structure themselves to combat misinformation in the country.

2. The Narcotic Effect of Communication and moral foundations in Politics

When voters were dissatisfied with the result of the elections of October 2022 invaded and ravaged the headquarters of the three powers in Brasilia. These images circulated the world and showed the terror of those acts produced by the criminals through the cameras of their smartphone devices. The vast majority did not hide their faces or have any fears. They believed themselves to be national heroes, revolutionaries who would be saving the country from a government that would be, in their view, a threat, a judiciary, which, for them, would be inoperative, unjust, and corrupt, and an unfit legislature. They were people loaded with a blind and absolute "truth." They believed they were fighting for the good of the country. They believed that, by force, they would remove the government, which they said would result from electoral fraud.

The "truths" that terrorists believe were produced in series by a system of diffusion of Disinformation. It is proposed here that the consequences of this type of communication can be analyzed from two aspects, both from a psychological perspective: the effects of excessive information received by voters and the foundations used by voters in decision-making in the political field. The first one was called the narcotic dysfunction of the mass media, identified by functionalists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1948) in a post-war context (after 1945), where the Internet did not exist, and the most used media were radio, the cinema and the printed. The second

concerns the Theory of Moral Foundations elaborated by the American Jonathan Haidt (2012) to describe the behavior of conservative and progressive people concerning politics and religion.

The hypothesis was raised by reinterpreting Lazarsfeld and Merton's "narcotic effect" concept that the Internet potentiated this effect since the volume of information in circulation has increased dramatically. For Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), the side effect caused by the media to promote an excess of information makes individuals inert and confused in the face of events, and individuals "submerged" in this information begin to close in bubbles, considering personal emotions and beliefs. In this environment of bubbles, there is no room for contradiction. People are "fed" with information with ideological biases distorting the formation of public opinion.

Personal emotions and beliefs would be at the center of motivations for decision-making, as the "Theory of Moral Foundations" points out. From this perspective, human beings have innate structures of morality, and, despite the tremendous cultural variations, there would be certain moral intuitions derived from emotions inherent in human beings. For Haidt (2012), intuitions and emotions are the basis for our moral evaluations, "Intuition comes before, and strategic reasoning comes after," the reason being much smaller concerning intuition and emotions. An analogy created by the author illustrates that reason would be a conductor trying to control an elephant, which would be intuition and emotions.

Haidt developed a classification in which he identified six elements of moral sensitivity that would be common to the most diverse societies: 1- care/harm; 2- equity/cheating; 3- loyalty/betrayal; 4- authority/subversion; 5- holiness/degradation; 6- freedom/oppression. These moral tendencies are manifested with intensity in politics and religion.

Transporting these premises to Brazilian political communication, we observe the materialization of both interpretative perspectives: the excess of information in circulation and the emotional appeal to stimulate moral positions in front of attitudes and political proposals, the production and dissemination of Fake News.

"False news" is not a new phenomenon in the history of societies. Historian Robert Darnton (2017) identified its existence since the Ancient Age. Procopius was a 6th-century Byzantine historian famous for writing the history of Justinian's empire. But he also wrote a secret text called 'Anekdotia' and spread 'Fake News,' completely ruining

the reputation of Emperor Justinian and others. It was very similar to what happened in the American election campaign.

Nowadays, Fake News has similarities and distinctions concerning old rumors, especially how they are presented and disseminated. Fake News copies, the journalistic style, in the structure of the texts and presentation, can be written in audio or video and are often camouflaged amid accurate information. As well as rumors, Fake News is inaccurate, used in various situations and contexts, does not present known and credible sources, appears and disappears several times on the network, and is composed of content with strong emotional appeal, encouraging feelings such as resentment and revolt.

Fake News has received attention from researchers in the second decade of the 21st century, given its belligerent political power in information societies. Over the years, the term Fake News has gained several nomenclatures. See the main ones in the table below:

Term	Author	Meaning
Fake News	John Paul Meneses (2018)	Actions agreed to deceive individuals.
False News	John Paul Meneses (2018)	Actions poorly ascertained, with errors, but not intended to harm someone or something.
<i>Mis-information</i>	Ireton, Cherilyn & Posseti, Julie (2019)	Incorrect information that is replicated spontaneously without intent to harm someone or something
<i>Dis-information</i>	Ireton, Cherilyn & Posseti, Julie (2019)	Disinformation is synonymous with the concept of Fake News pointed out by Meneses (2018)
<i>Mal-information</i>	Ireton, Cherilyn & Posseti, Julie (2019)	Malicious is when the information, although accurate, is sprayed to harm someone or something.

Quadro 1. Taxinomia das Fakes News. *Source: Produced by the authors.*

Some scholars have made classifications that categorize the different types of Fake News. Tandoc et al. (2017) divide Fake News into six categories: Fabrication (Without factual basis, but with a journalistic style. Ex: Pope Francis supporting Trump and Marielle married to drug dealer Marcinho VP); photo manipulation (manipulation of videos and photos and use out of context. Ex: Michelle and Barack Obama strip video); parody (journalistic format to make humor. Ex: Sensacionalista); propaganda (Content created by politicians to influence public opinion. Ex: Kit Gay); advertising

(advertising reports that pass as journalistic text or releases and are published as News. Ex: Walmart and its new facilities) and satire (They use the format of real news and transform it into entertainment, usually criticizing politicians. Ex. Greg News).³

Meanwhile, journalist Claire Wardle (2018) divided Fake News into seven different categories: satire or parody (she doesn't want to cause harm, but she can deceive the reader); false connection (the call does not match the content); misleading content (false content intended to defame other content or person); false context (the content is true but is shared with false context); impostor content (use the name of a person or brand, but statements are untrue); manipulated content (manipulation of content) and fabricated content (information 100% false and built to cause harm and spread a rumor).

The speed and scope of its delivery are as important as the format of Fake News. To optimize the spread of Fake News, promoters of this type of content use so-called robots, which are mechanisms programmed to act in an automated way. In the case of Brazil, these robots spread extremist content on networks (manipulating algorithms that increase the reach of posts) in addition to creating the false impression that millions of real people follow specific profiles. In addition, robots encourage "real" people to engage (repeating herd behavior when people react to posts because they already have engagement).

A research work by journalists Carol Pires and Tiago Rogero (2023) for the Podcast *Rádio Novelo Apresenta* shows in a didactic way that Fake News has been used in Brazil as the primary fuel of political radicalization. Fake News is presented sensationally in virtual groups and on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube because the content that clashes also generates clash and discussion among users of networks is content that engages. The business model of these platforms, which collaborate with engagement, further boosts the content that generates emotions such as indignation and hatred.

There are currently companies in Brazil that specialize in producing Fake News, providing services to politicians and candidates in producing *memes*, gifs, videos, and texts, and disseminating these contents in robot programs, which make thousands of shares every day. The contents are not made randomly. The criteria for creating each

³"Deep Fake News", or "deep Fake News". Read more in: <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/ideias/este-video-falso-de-obama-mostra-como-a-manipulacao-de-conteudo-esta-cada-vez-mais-frightening-3nty2y4gcr713id6blx2kvy9o/>.

false news consider issues related to sex, religion, and corruption, themes that cause indignation that reach certain social groups' moral principles. Referendando a Teoria das Fundações Morais de Haidt (2012).

Pires and Rogero (2023) reveal that the creative teams of *Fake Newsuse* computer programs that hakeiam various social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which allows robot profiles to enter virtual groups with many people, where the presence of this new profile is not noticed, from there robots spread links, memes, and videos with Fake News. With robots, there is the possibility of entering hundreds of groups at once. The robots are configured, which he [interviewed] calls "neurobots," to interact alone within groups. It stands out in the quote transcribed below, which details how the Fake News creation teams act in Brazil:

In the case of an election, everything begins when a politician in the campaign hires a marketer to take care of the communication strategy, ranging from monitoring regions where the candidate goes wrong to think what kind of message this target audience needs to receive to vote for this candidate.

...

Many marketers have two teams, has side A, official, which has advertisers, journalists, and researchers, setting up strategies to publicize the campaign promises and win votes, but sometimes the class side B of the campaign, which has a much less honorable mission: take votes from opponents, make the voter, who already has candidate be in doubt.

...

Political campaigns always do vote intent research and can identify the groups where the candidate goes better or worse. For a hypothetical example, let's assume that the survey showed that a candidate is not well-listed among voters of a particular neighborhood there. Side A of the campaign will organize a march and distribute pamphlets with public safety proposals. The B side will create false news against the candidate who has more intention of voting in that neighborhood to try to take votes from him. (Pires and Rogero, 2023)

Fake News in Brazil is used as a strategy for political management and the formation of public opinion during elections and to support governments. The terrorist attacks of January 8 in Brasilia represent the culmination of violence that thousands of people can commit, encouraged by the hatred implanted in virtual networks.

3. Professional journalism and democracy threatened in Brazil

Amid the Disinformation that flooded Brazilian public opinion in recent years, professional journalism, represented by media companies such as radio and television stations and news portals, sought to re-signify their role and affirmation of its function as the democratic pillar of society. That day and in the days that followed, it was up to the professionals of the press to fight the false news and clarify the facts to the Brazilian population and the world.

The *Globo TV* Network, the broadcaster with the highest audience in the country, in live transmission, called "terrorists" those who ravaged the buildings and "terrorist acts" the action that developed on the second Sunday of January, one week after the inauguration of President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. Using the same images produced by the terrorists and aerial images, the journalists described that day with a narrative that condemned the acts, pointing out the crimes committed and the aggressions against Brazilian democracy. It is worth highlighting the words and expressions used repeatedly on the 8th and following days by Brazilian journalists: "attacks on democracy," "terror in Brasília," "terrorist acts," "degradation of public property," "terrorists." Using these words to classify the criminality of what was happening was essential for Brazilian society to assimilate gravity and the senses. It was not a legitimate manifestation of the Brazilian people but of criminal acts against the country itself.

Journalism sought to interpret the facts beyond the report. The coverage of national journalistic companies on television, radio and the Internet sought to explain and contextualize the facts and project the developments. The following Sunday, January 15, Fantastic, the Sunday news program of *Rede Globo de Televisão* showed the images of the security cameras of the National Congress, showing how the invasion of that building by the terrorists took place, showing the violence and brutality with which, they acted. Throughout the month of January, the media scheduled the theme to show the losses to the public treasury and Brazilians' institutional and cultural heritage.

However, journalism no longer holds the hegemony of the circulation of news information, and the ubiquity of virtual social networks in the lives of Brazilians has impacted the credibility of the press. According to a report by Fundação Getúlio Vargas (Ramos et al., 2017), there has been a change in the media reliability scenario in recent years. According to the report, only 35% of respondents trust the written press, 30% in TV stations, and 37% in social networks.

The loss of the hegemony of traditional journalism is due to three crises, according to Tavares (2017): that of **technology**, that is, users themselves now have the same dissemination and production tools available to professional journalists. Newspapers can no longer act as gatekeepers⁴, a function currently exercised by non-journalistic actors, such as Google and Facebook, of the **institutions** and **losses of journalistic values** as a distinction of the news (the latter two are related. Journalistic credibility is based on the modes of news production, which constantly seek impartiality and objectivity. These modes of production are indifferent to the public since, in the context of social networks, actual news and Fake News are presented in the same environment with practically the same format. Thus, the dissemination of Fake News gains autonomy, as they are independent of the major media to become meaningful information.

4. Initiatives to combat misinformation in Brazil

Faced with the avalanche of Fake News that has nourished the formation of Brazilian public opinion in recent years, government institutions, communication companies, and third-sector organizations have made initiatives, from campaigns to programs and checking projects, to raise awareness and combat misinformation.

The Federal Supreme Court - STF, which had its headquarters destroyed in the attacks of January 8, had already developed a Program to Combat Disinformation since 2021. The program "was created to combat practices that affect people's confidence in the Supreme, distort or alter the meaning of decisions and endanger fundamental rights and democratic stability" (STF, s.d.).

Resolution No. 742 of August 27, 2021, establishing the Program to Combat Disinformation (PCD), was issued in harmony with the system of protection of freedoms of communication provided for in the Federal Constitution of 1988 and with the American Convention on Human Rights, which determines that every person has the right to information and ideas of all kinds, but stresses the need to curb advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, crime or violence.

The Program also observes Marco Civil da Internet (Law 12.965/2014) and the General Data Protection Law (LGPD). In contrast, the adverse effects produced by

⁴ Gatekeeper é aquele que define o que será noticiado de acordo como valor-notícia, linha editorial e outros critérios.

misinformation can be potentiated by the distorted use of resources provided by information and communications technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet. (STF, s.d.)

Brazilian journalistic companies also came since 2018 with projects to combat Fake News. Traditional news outlets on the Brazilian Internet, such as UOLe and G1, created specific Fact-Checking editorials. In addition, independent agencies such as *Lupa*, *Truco*, and *Aos Fatos* gained prominence in the media environment (Vargo et al., 2018). Another example is *Comprova*, a coalition of 24 journalistic organizations, including *Folha de S. Paulo*, *SBT*, *AFP*, and *Estado de S. Paulo*, which aims to combat false news. With the same objective, *Grupo Globo* lançaram the *Fato* or *Fake*, an initiative of fact-checking involving *O Globo*, *Valor Econômico*, *G1*, *CBN*, and *GloboNews*.

During the period of the Covid 19 Pandemic was established in Brazil the National Network to Combat Disinformation - RNCD (s.d.) which practically brings together collectives, initiatives developed within universities, agencies, communication networks, magazines, social projects, educational communication projects for the media and social networks, disinformation monitoring application, observatories, *fact-checking* projects, research projects, scientific institutions, scientific journals, among others.

The RNCD (s.d.) organization demonstrates that Brazil currently has dozens of initiatives to combat Disinformation in all regions. All initiatives are responses of society to the offensive of false news that has been instituted in Brazil in recent election campaigns to manipulate the political field, a phenomenon encouraged and maintained during the four years of the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, who made systematic attacks on the country's democratic institutions, including professional journalism. The spread of Fakes News was boosted by the extreme right in the country during the Coronavirus pandemic, leaving the political frontier also to reach public health. All these episodes added to the fateful January 8 put Brazil as a territory of risk to democracy.

5. Closing remarks

Despite the arrests and police inquiries instituted to investigate the perpetrators and financiers of the attacks, Brazilian January 8 did not end, just as the invasion of the Capitol in the United States did not end. The symbolism of these extreme acts

reverberates to this day and must remain for a long time. There is a mass of people who continue to be contaminated by a real epidemic of Fake News. Brazil remains under political and social tension. On the one hand, disinformation mechanisms continue to act in the political and religious fields. On the other hand, civil organizations are developing strategies for the survival and maintenance of democracy. Permanent vigilance is needed because symbolic violence based on moral foundations permeates all social structures.

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