

Social networks, the fabrication of popular manifestations, and attacks against democracy on January 8, 2023, in Brazil

As redes sociais, a fabricação de manifestações populares e os atentados contra a democracia em 8 de janeiro de 2023 no Brasil

Redes sociales, la fabricación de manifestaciones populares y ataques contra la democracia el 8 de enero de 2023 en Brasil

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Abstract: This article investigates how social networks have transformed themselves from the political power of popular expression to algorithmic bubbles and the fabrication of fascism in Brazil. It analyzes the spectacular aspects that led to the attacks of January 8 in Brasilia. This article is based on Paul Virilio's studies on space construction, Castells' assumptions about the advent of networks, and Yann Moulrier-Boutang's studies on capitalism and cognitive capitalism. Possible semiotics of the discourse is also discussed based on the provisions of narratives built on the networks in manufacturing the terrorist acts of January 8, 2023. In the end, a panorama was constructed from which, with the distancing of time and verification of layers of meaning, we may develop machinations that perpetuate political and mediatic models that weaken the potential of social groups and of democracy itself.

Keywords:

Democracy, Social Networks, Fascism, Brazil

Resumo: Busca-se neste artigo investigar como as redes sociais se transformaram de potência política da expressão popular às bolhas algorítmicas e a fabricação do Fascismo no Brasil. Analisa-se os aspectos especulares que levaram aos atentados de 8 de janeiro em Brasília. Este artigo fundamenta-se nos estudos de Paul Virilio sobre a construção do espaço, nas premissas de Castells sobre o advento das redes, nos estudos sobre capitalismo e capitalismo cognitivo de Yann Moulier-Boutang. Discute-se ainda uma possível semiótica do discurso a partir das disposições especulares de narrativas construídas nas redes no processo de fabricação dos atos terroristas de 8 de janeiro de 2023. Ao final foi construído um panorama com vários pontos de fuga a partir dos quais com o distanciamento do tempo e apuração das camadas de significação poderemos no futuro desvelar as maquinações que perpetuam modelos políticos e midiáticos que enfraquecem as potencialidades dos grupos sociais e da democracia.

Palavras-chave:

Democracia, Redes Sociais Digitais, Fascismo, Brasil

Resumen: Este artículo busca investigar cómo las redes sociales se han transformado de un poder político de expresión popular a burbujas algorítmicas y la fabricación del fascismo en Brasil. Analiza los aspectos especulares que llevaron a los atentados del 8 de enero en Brasilia. Este artículo se basa en los estudios de Paul Virilio sobre la construcción del espacio, en los supuestos de Castells sobre el advenimiento de las redes, en los estudios sobre el capitalismo y el capitalismo cognitivo de Yann Moulier-Boutang. También se discute una posible semiótica del discurso a partir de las disposiciones especulares de las narrativas construidas en las redes en el proceso de fabricación de los actos terroristas del 8 de enero de 2023. Al final, se construye un panorama con varios puntos de fuga desde el cual con el distanciamiento nosotros mismos desde el tiempo e investigando las camadas de sentido, podremos, en el futuro, develar las maquinaciones que perpetúan modelos políticos y mediáticos que debilitan el potencial de los grupos sociales y la democracia.

Palabras clave:

Democracia; Redes Sociales Digitales; Fascismo; Brasil

1. Perceptions of the historical-political context in Brazil

Like the numerous posts found on Twitter posted on January 7, 2023, we found a smaller profile, @patportobahia (PatGomes, 2023), without many followers, in which there is a video showing hundreds of tents and thousands of people camped in front of the Army HQ in Brasilia. The text of the post says, "We are in the largest manifestation in the history of Brasilia" (PatGomes, 2023), accompanied by the phrase, "disclose a lot because the red media will say that it failed because of the rain" (PatGomes, 2023). The profile @patportobahia, found randomly for this text, has only one thousand thirty-six followers. Already the front page of the portal Uol, on the same January 7, denounced that bolsonarista's buses arrived in Brasilia and continued announcing a tension still under control.

We point out in this article how the same event was presented in a profile with few followers and on the first page of one of the largest news portals. On one side, we had an oversized camp and an underestimation of its destructive power on the other. The temperature and the fear were increased throughout January 8, and perplexed, we watched, both in the hegemonic media and in the profiles of social networks and YouTube channels, the gratuitous destruction caused by an irrational mass that occupied the Esplanade of Ministries destroying with animalistic force the buildings of the three powers, world heritage of humanity. In addition, the destruction was followed by attacks on works of art, historical furniture, documents, and all sorts of objects. It was observed that the characteristic irrationality of the masses is to the detriment of the faith we had in the crowd, as dreamed by Hardt and Negri (2005).

By no means the bicolor stain of the so-called patriots could be compared with the movements of occupation of the streets with popular demands and demands initiated in 2001 in Genoa/Liguria/IT and described by Negri as "the recomposition of the struggles that happened under the sign of the crowd, and when one speaks (as Genoa imposed it to make it a new cycle of struggles), this is hegemonized by the Crowd" (Negri, 2002, p. 102). Negri affirmed this and began to build the epistemological arguments of a becoming crowd from the technologies and disclosures that occurred in Genoa. Until then, the demonstrations identified as popular claims were erased by the hegemonic media or reported to criminalize the people and ensure the maintenance of the status quo. In Genoa, 97 protesters were murdered, and these did not go unpunished precisely by the presence of camera cameras that recorded the violence of the police officers. With this, they built a different narrative from the hegemonic, denouncing the terrible events on social networks. At this moment, the belief in a

becoming multitude and in the potential of point-to-point communication that the internet would have been established.

In Brazil, the current context of the political and institutional legitimation struggle that led Michel Temer to the presidency in 2016 can be read through the analysis of recent years' transformations and political formations. The political-communicative transformation that the Movimento Passe Livre (MPL) marked in 2013 is strategic.

This movement was present in several cities in Brazil and had the effective democratization of access to urban space and its services as its objectives. The origin and performance of the MPL can be found with vast repercussions in social networks. This impact has generated other forms of political communication, which we define as transmedia. This form is not neutral but contributes to the political legitimation of the new government conformations, opening new forms of communication and new sociopolitical paths for opposition movements.

Everything that happens nowadays is no different from what happened when Getúlio Vargas was driven to suicide, or when they tried to prevent the possession of Juscelino Kubitschek and João Goulart (Jango) or when the coup of 1964; therefore, we are facing the same types of actors and the instrumentalization of institutions.

In 2013, Brazil was cornered by agreements, mainly from the opposition, which lost the elections for the fourth consecutive time. On that occasion, in 2014, they requested a recount of votes in the last presidential election; filed actions to annul the election; occupied the mass media to disseminate a series of non-existent accusations; bought official reports from judges who hid behind unknown acronyms as belonging to the new "social movements," such as the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) or the Movimento Vem para Rua (MVR), which inflated battalions of people to occupy the streets demanding the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, always amplified and magnified by the traditional media, and with the news that at this moment, led by large companies and financial power, they have expanded their space in the "Social Networks," reaching the population in a way never seen in Brazil. The media managed to disrupt political life and irresponsibly aggravate Brazil's economic and social situation, sabotaging it with its insistent daily news, resulting in a media, judicial and parliamentary coup.

For us, the crowd of the July days, the Movimento Brasil Livre, and other significant demonstrations that have taken place in Brazil since 2013 have undergone a process of data mining, reading the profiles of protesters, building bubbles in the networks, initially on

Facebook that ended up producing from what were plural and legitimate demonstrations a falsification of people/crowd on the streets.

The succession of events culminates initially with the protests against the government of Dilma Rousseff, and suddenly there is the birth of a mass, uniformed in yellow-green, which took for itself both the colors of the flag and the uniform of the Brazilian football team. This uniform and uniform mass walked strides towards the far right movements.

We know that virtually all institutions of the political system are affected and that all political parties have participated in one form or another in various corruption scandals, which we point out self critically does not exclude the Workers' Party (PT) as well as all political groups working to undermine the image of the party and thus obtain the power conferred on it by electoral rights. This narrative is a radical simplification of what is happening in Brazil. Perhaps it is better to call it propaganda, built to undermine a left-wing party that was frowned upon by national political elites and American interests from its origins.

Since that period, much has changed concerning communications in Brazil. The place of street protests turned into other spaces of dispute, the Digital Social Networks, almost all owned by major platforms such as Google and Facebook. The movements built by groups that declared themselves "without a party," such as the MBL, among others, began a very fruitful army in the use of alternative media that appropriated the digital universe and began the processes of building an alternative communication never seen in the country since the military dictatorship.

These organizations can be classified in several ways. Still, with one point in common, they are born in digital networks and are not projects summarized in the format of a blog or pages on Facebook or Twitter. They conform as points of uninterrupted dissemination of news, primarily false, which are spread by everyday technological tools of the population, such as WhatsApp and Telegram. And from this conformation, we glimpse what happened in the 2018 elections, with an ocean of false news, using the symbolic place of fear of difference, fear of "customs," and intolerance to differences, the election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro.

The place of networks takes over Brazil, and it is no longer possible, at that time, any or any control because resources not regulated by the country are determined by other forms of reach, such as the categories of communication flow, density, distances and positions occupied in these spaces and the centrality. The widespread voice is that of lies, hatred, fear, prejudices, and atrocities.

When we talk about the tragic event of January 8, 2023, almost ten years after the first protests, we realize there is no way not to look at the past and all the work of deconstructing information to understand what is happening today. Yes, we can reflect on several and perhaps utopian thoughts about the power that the Internet would have for the (un)democratic construction in our country.

We open a parenthesis to punctuate such events to the semiotics of discourse. Jacques Fontanille (2019) brings again the reflection of the tradition of language studies in listing that language is the articulation of at least two dimensions called the plane of expression and the plane of content. This primary and initial statement in constructing semiotics of discourse allows us to intuit that to understand the production of discourses in social networks. It is necessary to understand how the expression happens and how these discourses are presented from the aesthetic point of view, style, temporal and territorial aspects. On the other hand, examining how possible meanings and readings emerge from these expressions is also necessary. In the case of manifestations in social networks, initially perceives if the discourses that captured the network users for the fascist algorithmic bubbles observed from the discourses of specific communities and groups whose weaknesses could be exploited by the bolsonarist discourse. Thus, in the networks, Bolsonaro was a true chameleon, able to defend extremely sexist positions as the numerous aggressions against women journalists and utter hate speeches in favor of minorities.

On the other hand, even women and minorities were captured by other discourses, such as within a logic of us against them, saying that women on the left displayed their breasts on public roads and were ugly, that women on the right were more beautiful and princesses. In addition, there was also a strategy to be a permanent agenda in the media, so the government, for the darkest reasons, from all sorts of contradictions, occupied the space of the news, not giving space to other subjects. Such a strategy of permanent presence in the media allowed the assembly of Fake News with fragments of speech both from the president himself and in the transformation of scientific and reasoned explanations of what was said, overturning his arguments.

Delving a little deeper into semiotic thought to understand the narratives gestated in Brazil that led to the terrorist acts of January 8, 2023, we return to Fontanille (2019)) when he builds a relationship between the Semiotics of Discourse, the emergence processes in culture and the Semiotics of Lotman culture (2000). Fontanille (2019) summarizes the concept of the Semiosphere in about four pages and proposes a correlation between the main characteristics found in the approach of Lotman (2000) with the principles of semiotics of discourse. For

him, it is possible to find relations of force of assumption and extension of recognition in the scope of the field of culture and in the semiosphere itself. He proposes a graph, similar to the Cartesian plane, containing an axis in x and y, in which the axis (y) of the abscissas is for the characteristics of the formation of the semiosphere that correspond to the intensities of the culture and the axis of the coordinates(x) characteristics of unfolding and cultural diffusion. The relations between these axes result in four possibilities of actions caused by discourses:

a. When, in a given semiosphere, a decrease in the intensity of discourse is observed, together with a decrease in the unfolding and diffusion of information, this relationship results in the exclusion of specific elements of information exchange in that culture. In other words, when a semiotic machine decreases the intensity of the generation of semiosis, and at the same time, the generated products are not disseminated with intensity, this results in the disappearance of the plurality of the distinctive elements characteristic of that culture.

b. When in a given semiosphere, there is an increase in the intensity of a discourse combined with an increase in the unfolding and diffusion, such actions result in universal unfolding, making that discourse reach other cultures.

c. When we observe an increase in intensity combined with the decrease or constancy of unfolding and diffusion, this results in the explosion of what is considered foreign. This means that when at the same time that discourse is intensified but impoverished both in the generation of semiosis and, therefore, a decrease in diffusion, an explosion occurs. Such an explosion comes from studies by Lotman (2000) on the resurgence of certain signs in culture through more violent processes. In other words, for this process to occur, there is a group that exchanges little with other diverse groups and, at the same time, is constantly being bombarded by a given discourse. This process generates a dystopia, a difference in temperature, and like a pressure cooker, this group, bombarded and disconnected from reality, tends towards violent and gratuitous action.

d. Still, in a last possibility, when a speech assumes a movement of constancy or decrease of intensity and increase of the unfolding and diffusion, what at first was accepted and familiar to a group becomes an idea or a discourse familiar to more and more subjects belonging to this culture and unlike item three allows exchange and growth without violence.

It is Umberto Eco (2018)) that in the text "Contra el Fascismo," explains to us that the irrationality of fascism, from the profusion of speculative fragments, in the movement of the

construction of world simulacra, ends up generating a process of the cult of action against action. For such groups, thinking is a form of castration. Thus, the logical and coherent discourse, the academic studies, the works of art, the construction of culture and knowledge of the world, more than a threat, leave the castrated man less virile. In a way, all the discussions and political debate, in the sense of politics as mediation between two to reach a common one, fell to the ground in Brazil of the Bolsonaro government. Who can tell a head of State that a vaccine would have the power to turn a man into an alligator? Dystopian times that only a deep reading of the power of the human being, the communicational processes, and the discursive powers of the networks can elucidate in the future.

It is important to emphasize that Manuel Castells observes three determinant processes of social articulation in the Informational Society from the emergence of the network paradigm as a new organization model. On the one hand, the need for economic flexibility in management in the face of the globalization of capital, production, and trade. On the other, the demands of a society in which the values of individual freedom and open communication become an indisputable basic foundation of democratic coexistence. And finally, the technological advances that gave rise to new technologies with the Internet mark the predominance of immaterial work and cooperation as the basis of the new development model (Castells, 2003).

Paradoxically, despite the realization of this new environment, political organizations have long remained at the margins of the structural transformations that the new reticular paradigm of social organization points out and suggests.

However, political networks cannot be considered unknown or new. As we have said, since the 1950s, public policy analysis has developed similar concepts to identify the map of interpersonal relations, interconnections, and dependencies between actors and government forces to represent and intervene in planning and social change (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Unlike, however, the early systems-functionalist formations, today, the proliferation of political networks inevitably represents a substantial change, and not determinant, in the way of conceiving public policies and the role of the State as the center of the decision of all forms of agency, since it presupposes a break with the monolithic conception that has historically prevailed in the development of the modern nation-State (Bonafont, 2004).

The concept of a political network, implicit in the work of Porras (2003), presupposes, for example, a structure shaped by links, more or less stable, which maintain among themselves a certain number of political actors, both in the public and private spheres, exchange of material and immaterial resources and a significant configuration of the public

agenda. From another point of view, Bonafont (2004) develops the concept of political networks as "a set of relatively stable relations between public and private actors that are integrated through a non-hierarchical and interdependent structure to achieve common goals concerning politics."

The principle of interdependence presupposes, at this point, a process related to the need to maintain stable relations between the various social actors, regardless of their typology - members of government, civil servants, interest groups, media, experts, etc. - to achieve specific policy objectives (Bonafont, 2004). In other words, every community of actors would gradually become a specialized forum to exchange resources and information. Proposals are elaborated and discussed, from the negotiation and transaction inherent to all political materialization, in this case, according to the principle of diversity and systemic complexity, which requires, directly or indirectly, citizen participation.

However, to understand the role of the citizen and his possibilities of action in a political network, it is necessary to highlight the various types of political networks, analyzing the permeability potential that this network presents in constructing social reality. The idea, until long ago, sought, from technological resources, to reduce the distance between participants through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and generate a strategy of citizen participation in which bills are shared so that citizens can interact, analyze, contribute and pronounce on these proposals intuitively, as well as having access to records of participation of all actors involved.

It is necessary to highlight that never, or rarely, the alternatives of joint action and the alternative of choice of relations and social bonds are considered through the sense and cognitive horizon of the agents of social development, processes of modernization, and transformation of the territory.

Thus, the impact of new information technologies, civic culture, and citizens' social participation in cyberspace tends to be measured, recorded, and observed from the changes associated with digital culture. Attention should be given to latent, subjective, phenomenological, and interaction forms or public policy's procedural and creative dimensions.

In summary, we could point out that to understand the various movements and flows of information currently established, a methodological design would be necessary to address both the social and economic, as the physical-territorial, political, and organizational, and base it on the symbolic-cultural field. But the theory does not follow the praxis or the

emergence of fast movements linked to communication strategies that do not follow traditional models.

Still, to discuss the symbolic-cultural field, we believe that in the light of the semiotics of culture, from the thought of Iuri Lotman (2000), we can make some notes about the functioning of a given semiosphere that will allow us to understand how the asymmetry between theory and practice also comes from an asymmetry of knowledge, a certain opposition between illiteracy and semiotic literacy networks. As we will explain below, the lack of knowledge, the numerous layers of expression, machinic processes of message making, construction of oppositions between groups, and data mining processes end up delimiting this becoming a more politically literate crowd.

Rancière (2014) defines today's democratic man as selfish, for whom democracy exists solely to fulfill his consumerist and liberal desires. In opposition to this idea, the author states that:

Thus, democracy, far from being the way of life of individuals engaged in their happiness, is the process of fighting against this privatization and expanding this sphere. Expanding the public sphere does not mean, as the so-called liberal discourse states, demanding the increasing intervention of the State in society. It means fighting against the public and private division that guarantees the double domination of the oligarchy in the State and society. (Rancière, 2014, p. 72)

2. The digital aestheticization of Brazilian Fascism

That digital social networks are at the center of how the events of January 8 took place is no surprise. They are part of the telematic structure that connects us instantaneously and continuously, in a flow of information replacement, in a structure in which the New is always presented to us faster than we can process the information individually (McLuhan, 2008), in a communication solely based on patterns that are presented to us by models that are not very understandable and, often, without us even being able to perceive that they are there.

The *feedback of news* and the algorithmic organizations of information are presented to us in order, as Paul Valéry put it almost a century ago, “to respond to our needs through an almost zero effort. Thus, we will be fed with visual and auditory images being born and evanescent to the minimum gesture, almost to a sign” (Virilio, 2014, p. 57). This passage from the communicational structure to a structure essentially dialectical and responsive, that is, it can respond immediately to the stimuli and yearnings of all those who interact with

these structures. It brought a new range of possibilities for political action, whether active or passive.

As there is more accessible access to information, it is expected that, in some way, citizens' political action will be amplified. However, as we know, access cannot be reduced only to the availability of this information: we must also consider that Brazil is a deeply unequal country, where digital reading presents itself as a serious and that knowledge structures are generally subordinated to companies and governments with specific objectives and means of controlling the entire chain of operation and processing of this data (Moulier-Boutang, 2012).

All this general context is linked to a sense of powerlessness, in which we feel that even if we know that things are bad, all our means of political action seem ineffective (Fisher, 2009) and culminate in the reaffirmation of a status quoting more and more unsatisfactory. However, if there is political action within a universe of mass communication, it can and will be co-opted by the agent who mobilizes more strongly.

In the specific case of digital social networks, the big techs themselves have effective access to inject money into a semiotic machine of speech production, that is, the bourgeoisie and its ability to manipulate the dissemination of information through algorithmic processes. The process itself is not new. Communication conglomerates and manipulation by capital have existed for a long time. What is put here is the evolution of Medium and technology that allows new visualizations for almost cyclical phenomena.

This is how the rhetoric and the fascistized discourse of the productions of representatives of liberalism and the far-right resonate with the imaginaries of a people in a time: they can only do so because they are organized on extensive forms of financing of bourgeois business. The success of this process depends on leniency, a permissiveness with which the liberal-bourgeois State has dealt with fascism. Fascism gains space precisely because it is structured in the sense of detachment, false neutrality, apathy, and, above all, impotence.

As in European fascism in the last century, here we see an extension of the aestheticization of politics, as Benjamin (2012) described, in which the mass is empowered by seeing their face in a symbolically controlled image. This phenomenon ensures that there is, to some degree, a will to change with the status and the conservation of the same relationships when they are represented in a media spectacle that affirms the power of structures exogenous to the people. Shows, such as the one on January 8, need to be presented accelerated and urgently so there is minimal criticism about them.

Therefore, when it comes to social networks, the constant acceleration not accompanied by a legislative regulation that rules human rights and the collective and makes fascistization possible cannot be seen as a chance. It is, yes, a project. Its success or failure means, above all, a political act. It is important to mention that, in dealing with a fascistization here, one considers a Marxist view of fascism as a generalized bourgeois dictatorship (Bobbio et al., 2008).

These placements reinforce the need and possibility of acting intentionally on the symbolic universe that underpins this process. We must understand the design behind the images and codes we use in political actions. In practice, regardless of how we identify ourselves and what approaches we use, we act as mediators of information to the world and political affections that materialize by the language of the image whenever we put ourselves in a role of citizenship.

It is necessary, therefore, to understand that all aesthetics (*perception*, sensitivity) is tied to an ideology, that is, *an*

The specific social conception of the social world is neither false nor true, corresponding to the facts of objective reality. However, its grammar and way of arranging the ideas may contain false or basic elements, fact findings, and value judgments. (Codato, 2016, p. 323)



Figure 1. January 8. Senate Reflections - 100 days of the invasion. Source: Barreto (2023).

By invading the monuments linked to public power and translating the events of the invasion of the North American Capitol, one has the ideological perception that the people who are there are different from the people who are represented by those structures. Symbolically the cell phone here is a weapon against the "system." It is a torch shouted to

open the way, reveal and ratify its ideals for everyone who watches. At the same time, the individual reaffirms his popular participation and acts politically to be integrated into a mass plastically controlled by fascism.

When we speak of controlled mass, we refer to a guided crowd, a particular aesthetically *impoverished* flash, expressing their anger at what they believe to be, as Eco (2018) states, the castrator of their virility. Although the cell phone is a semiotic machine endowed with connection with the whole world that could produce a desiring and pulsating subject of knowledge, power, and able to access and emanate all kinds of information and thoughts, in this movement, he, the cell phone, is reduced to a recording machine of a succession of actions by action, in which all thinking all knowledge has been jettisoned.

The "popular" fascist-bourgeois uprising differs from the genuine popular uprising in several points, either by aura/authenticity or by the associated structure, but mainly by the images of war evoked in a shallow way. As brought by Nascimento et al. (2022), in their work on the role of the extreme right in message groups in Brazil, mentions the ideas of the coup, insurrection, military intervention, jaguar figures (associated with the army) and the need to prepare for a supposed war are common within Telegram groups. Still, they are never explicitly explained or explained in truth.

This ensures that, in a coded universe, a sense of us *against them* is evoked, of actual battle. The fetishization of war as a work of art to be contemplated, in which the destruction of itself the structures generate enthusiasm, therefore generating political action, *likes, e shares* for the participating citizen. Still, not effectively the war waged by him changes his reality. All the performance and digital exposure mediated and driven by these echo cameras, in the end, only erodes trust in institutions without effectively generating political change because it is part of the fascist structure to guarantee a simulacrum in which the general population is deceived and disarmed (Degras, 2013) while ensuring an illusion of participation.

3. Closing remarks

Considering the numerous situations that Brazil has been going through in the last ten years, we can say that we must observe the complex reality that is imposed. The systemic process cannot be answered by a few variables analyzed. Still, undoubtedly communication plays a central role in the debate because, on the one hand, Information and Communication Technologies expand the right to participation and gives voice and expression to citizens, Considering the potential of connectivity, communication, and mediation, on the other hand,

may represent a significant problem where the disarticulation of society concerning the lived reality prevails, immense in inequalities.

Thus, to construct a less unequal Brazil, we must be vigilant concerning the movements on legislation and control of digital structures, especially Bill 2630/2020, which establishes the Brazilian Freedom Law, Accountability, and Transparency on the Internet. The text of this bill aims to combat the spread of fake news on digital social networks such as Facebook and Twitter and private messengers such as WhatsApp and Telegram. It is believed that such measures are fundamental to improving the conditions of digital communication in Brazil.

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