Public Sphere and Political Communication Changes in Latin America: Digital Media and Democracy in Brazil and Mexico

Esfera Pública y Cambios en la Comunicación Política en América Latina: Medios Digitales y Democracia en Brasil y México

Mudanças na Esfera Pública e na Comunicação Política na América Latina: Mídia Digital e Democracia no Brasil e no México

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Abstract: Digital media has brought consequences for democracies around the world. The ways media systems' changes affect different contexts are a rich object of analysis favoring comparative perspectives. This essay deals with the Brazilian and Mexican cases. In the first case, we point to fake news, radicalization, and equalization as new implications for Brazil's democratic dynamics. In the second, we focus on how Mexico's government captured the country's public sphere using digital media. Comparing the two scenarios, we make final considerations related to populism, the role of the media, and the use of digital media by new or non-conventional actors.

Keywords:

Digital media, democracy, populism, fake news, political communication, Mexico, Brazil, Bolsonaro, Lopez Obrador

Resumen: Los medios digitales han traído consecuencias para las democracias en todo el mundo. Las formas en que los cambios en los sistemas mediáticos afectan diferentes contextos son un objeto de análisis rico que favorece las perspectivas comparativas. Este ensayo trata los casos de Brasil y México. En el primer caso, señalamos la radicalización y la igualación de las noticias falsas como nuevas implicaciones para la dinámica democrática de Brasil. En el segundo, nos enfocamos en cómo el gobierno de México capturó la esfera

pública del país utilizando medios digitales. Comparando los dos escenarios, hacemos consideraciones finales relacionadas con el populismo, el papel de los medios y el uso de medios digitales por actores nuevos o no convencionales.

Palabras clave:

Medios digitales, Democracia, populismo, noticias falsas, comunicación política, Méjico, Brasil, Bolsonaro, López Obrador

Resumo: Os meios digitais trouxeram consequências para as democracias em todo o mundo. As formas como as mudanças nos sistemas midiáticos afetam diferentes contextos são um objeto de análise rico que favorece perspectivas comparativas. Este ensaio aborda os casos do Brasil e do México. No primeiro caso, apontamos a radicalização e igualação das notícias falsas como novas implicações para a dinâmica democrática do Brasil. No segundo, focamos em como o governo do México capturou a esfera pública do país usando meios digitais. Comparando os dois cenários, fazemos considerações finais relacionadas ao populismo, o papel dos meios de comunicação e o uso de meios digitais por novos ou atores não convencionais.

Palavras-chaves:

Meios digitais, democracia, populismo, notícias falsas, comunicação política, México, Brasil, Bolsonaro, López Obrador

1. Introduction

Digital media changed media systems worldwide, bringing new implications to politics and democracy in different national contexts. The transformations caused by similar applications and tools in various events and places incentive comparative perspectives. For Latin America, this type of study gains relevance in a region with similar media configurations and democratic history.

This article debates the implications of digital media in Brazil and Mexico's democracies. In the first case, we point to segmentation, radicalization, and equalization as digital phenomena impacting the Brazilian context. Concerning Mexico, we call attention to the governmental capture of the country's public sphere using digital media and partisan language.

In this path, the next section will debate aspects of digital media and politics in Brazil, indicating results from recent empirical studies. The analysis is marked by the election of the extreme right populist Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 and the riots against the country's Congress, Supreme Court, and Executive Office on January 8, 2023. The following section will discuss the Mexican context. In this scenario, the continuation of corruption scandals, antirepublican ways, and clientelist media-government relations opened a path for a left-wing populist platform, which threatens the independence of the electoral institutions, bypasses traditional journalism, and captures the public sphere using digital media.

Ultimately, this article will debate common and uncommon issues in the two contexts. Our first consideration points to populism as a common consequence with different characteristics. We also notice different media roles concerning journalism and media criticism in the two cases. At the same time, our third and last claim calls attention to the well-succeeded use of digital media by outsiders or non-conventional actors, some of them bringing new frontiers for political discourse and action.

2. Digital Media and Politics in Brazil

This section will present some results from recent studies in Brazil concerning digital media, elections, and democracy. The studies are part of a project that analyzes the consequences of digital media on elections and democracy in Latin America. Three specific points will be debated. The first is the naturalization of fake news by Brazilian digital campaigns. The second is the radicalization of Brazilian politics in parallel with the country's digital political communication development. Ultimately, we will show how digital media have been an instrument of equalization in Brazilian elections.

Concerning the first point, the naturalization of fake news by Brazilian electoral campaigns, the conclusion comes from 34 semi-structured interviews with campaign professionals (Ituassu et al., 2023). The interviews were conducted through Skype or Zoom between June and December 2020, during the Covid crisis and the Brazilian municipal election. The average duration of the interviews was 46 minutes, and we worked with five crucial questions: 1) How does digital media affect your work? 2) How does digital media affect Brazilian campaigns in general? 3) How do you evaluate Jair Bolsonaro's digital campaign in 2018? 4) How do you relate Bolsonaro's campaign with Donald Trump's campaign in the U.S. in 2016? and 5) How do you see the future of digital campaigns in Brazil? The professionals interviewed worked for nine different political parties. Most of them were between 30 and 40 years old. All of them had at least ten years of experience.

After the interviews' transcriptions, we developed a collective thematic analysis, with four researchers coding for themes and their meanings. We worked with several themes during this process until we reached three highly mentioned ones. Concerning fake news, the investigation suggested that Brazilian campaigns now consider it a strategic resource. "A fake news, to be efficient, has to have a strategy," said one of the interviewees. "It is a myth to think that you can invent anything, share on social media, and people will believe. For this to happen, the campaign must invest time, people, and resources," said another. "To professionally use fake news in a campaign, you have to have a specific structure," told one more. "Fake news only works if there is a perception of truth. There needs to be a possibility of truth," said another. "You need consistent work on fake news for it to bring positive results to a campaign".

"A fake news is not only to tell a lie", one of the interviewees said, "sometimes I want to create a doubt. A doubt about a candidate's moral character can make him or her lose an election". Another source said not to believe that most of the campaigns will use fake news strategically but that most will be able to monitor and answer it when necessary. In our view, these and other statements make clear that Brazilian campaigns deal with fake news as a strategic element that brings tangible results if time and resources are invested. Hence, campaigns calculate on using them or not, depending on the context and the dispute in place.

The other two points we intend to debate in this section are the radicalization of Brazilian politics and the equalization of Brazilian elections. Both come from research that analyzed digital media on elections and democracy in Brazil from a historical perspective from 2010 to 2020 (Ituassu, 2023).

Concerning radicalization, we relate the point to Barbara Pfetsch's idea of a "co-occurrence" of communication infrastructure transformation and political culture changes (Pfetsch, 2020). Through this framework, we see radicalization as a historical consequence related to digital media development in Brazilian politics, and the events of January 8, 2023, are a high point in this process.

A short timeline of events represents our argument. The Internet started playing a role in the Brazilian presidential elections in 2010. Before 2010, the legislation permitted only websites, and campaigns had few incentives to invest in interactivity or participation tools. Two events marked the transitional context of the 2010 presidential election: the Obama campaign in 2008 and the changes in the Brazilian electoral legislation in 2009, permitting the use of social media by candidates and campaigns.

In 2012, it was time for Facebook to become hegemonic, and researchers produced many studies concerning social media and the Internet. Candidates' use of social media was significant, with some studies pointing to a national rate of 89% (Braga & Carlomagno, 2018). Two years later, the Presidential balloting of 2014 was again a privileged research object of Brazilian scholars, including the first computational studies. The strategic use of Facebook and Twitter continued to gain scholarly attention, but new platforms and agendas emerged. The 2014 election also brought the first worries about polarization on social media. It was a polarized election marked by the popular protests in 2013 when millions took to the Brazilian streets to demonstrate. The country experienced demonstrations in over 500 cities, especially between June and October. In a similar context to the Arab Spring of the early 2010s and the Occupy movement, social media had a crucial role in the Brazilian protests.

Some authors found a radicalized right-wing ideology growing on Facebook in 2014 (Brugnago & Chaia, 2014). Others measured Jair Bolsonaro's interaction levels as 30 times higher than his colleagues running for Rio de Janeiro's seats in Congress (Murta et al., 2015). Scholars also found more than 500 fan pages disseminating content against the left, practicing tactics of "communication guerrilla" with flaming, hoaxes, and hate speech to an audience of 10 million followers (Santos, 2016). Concerning the computational studies, a report pointed to a growing polarization in social media fed by bots (FGV, 2018). It also pointed out that polarization and radicalization have not ceased after the left's victory in 2014, with bots reaching 20% of the interactions in specific clusters debating the President's impeachment just after the election. It was a turbulent moment for the country, which hosted the World Cup 2014 and the Olympic Games 2016, among corruption scandals and severe economic crises. There are reports of trolls, cyborgs, and bots related to all these events.

Two years later, Brazil had 110 million people accessing the Internet. Brazilians were third among world Facebook users and sixth on Twitter. Almost 50% of the population used WhatsApp to share and discuss news. In 2018, Bolsonaro's presence on Facebook was enormous. At least 115 Facebook pages promoting Bolsonaro posted 41 thousand messages, with 38 million shares and 112 million interactions in the first 40 days of the campaign (Ortellado & Ribeiro, 2018). Bolsonaro also had his weekly live events every Thursday on Facebook, reaching millions of people in each transmission.

Besides Facebook, WhatsApp also played a relevant role in 2018 Brazilian election. The application gained a dimension never seen before in the country due to the spread of messages, including fake news and disinformation, from groups of Bolsonaro's supporters to other non-political groups. There were more than 100 WhatsApp public groups of

Bolsonaro's supporters. Some research studied 120 groups, 12 thousand users, and 700 thousand messages to indicate a "digital astroturfing" phenomenon on WhatsApp, with the participation of actors from the professional field of politics emulating spontaneous behavior (Chagas, 2022). Others analyzed almost 200 thousand messages from 21 groups of Bolsonaro supporters and found that few participants functioned as super-posters. The research also pointed to a centralized behavior to neutralize the negative campaign against Bolsonaro and support Bolsonaro's candidates for the Brazilian Congress (Piaia & Alves, 2020). Scholars suggested that WhatsApp groups favoring Bolsonaro were crucial in forming a polarized and aggressive political context, using frames to inspire fear (Chagas et al., 2019).

As we have seen, it is easy, in the end, to characterize Brazilian political communication as postmodern or hypermediated, working in a hybrid media system with multiple media spaces, actors, and logic (Chadwick, 2017). In this context, ours and other studies identify a growing radicalization in Brazil since the protests in 2013, with particular social media roles in this process. The protests of 2013, the polarized reelection of left-wing President Dilma Rousseff in 2014 and her subsequent impeachment in 2016, the series of corruption scandals, the problems in the Brazilian economy, and the arrest of former President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva in 2018 characterized a moment of institutional and communication disruption, which favored the election of Jair Bolsonaro and culminated in the riots in Brasília on January 8, 2023, when the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary branches were stormed.

The last point to debate here refers to the equalization phenomenon or the role of digital media in empowering minor or new parties and politicians. In this matter, it is impossible not to think about Jair Bolsonaro and the *bolsonarismo* as significant equalization cases. There are numerous examples of radical conservatives elected in 2018 having an enormous performance on social media, most newcomers to professional politics. Some examples were congressmen Eduardo Bolsonaro, Pastor Marco Feliciano, Luiz Philippe de Orleans e Bragança, and congresswomen Carla Zambelli and Joice Hasselmann, all from the state of São Paulo. In Rio de Janeiro, Congressman Otoni de Paula, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, and City Council Carlos Bolsonaro. Jair Bolsonaro himself left the place of an isolated congressman who praised the military regime and torture for being elected President in a small party and a cheap campaign communication centered on social media and WhatsApp groups.

The equalization phenomenon is not exclusive to the right or the extreme right. There is also the case of Guilherme Boulos, for example, from the small left-wing party PSOL. He

was the top candidate of the State of São Paulo elected Congressmen in 2022 using social media, especially focusing on young people. With the same strategy, his party grew 366% between 2010 and 2022 in the Brazilian Congress.

Concerning the 2022 election, our preliminary data shows that among the top 25 candidates on Facebook interactions elected to the Brazilian Congress, 68% were newcomers or newcomers 2018 re-elected in 2022. Besides that, 76% of the top 25 most-voted candidates for the Brazilian Congress were newcomers in 2022 or newcomers in 2018 re-elected in 2022. Nikolas Ferreira, for example, was the most-voted candidate for the Brazilian Congress in 2022. Born in 1996, he is an extreme-right politician and YouTuber and was elected for the first time as Congressman.

As we have seen, Brazilian politics nowadays deal with new elements such as fake news, radicalization, and equalization. These and other unique features are linked to digital media. They are rich objects of analysis that demand research that does not isolate communication from politics and favors comparative perspectives to improve regulation and sustain democracy in Brazil and Latin America.

3. The Transformation of The Digital Sphere in Mexico

In Mexico, the nature of the digital political conversation has dramatically changed between the late 2000s and the early 2020s. From being perceived as a horizontal space for dialogue alternative to legacy media and characterized by increasingly critical views on the establishment and the political elites, it became a partisan and polarized arena in the dispute of the political narrative between the government and its critics. A space where it is increasingly difficult to agree on what is truthful and relevant. This dispute reflects a bigger struggle between the political elites who arrived in power after the 1996 Reform that opened the electoral arena and the current government headed by President López Obrador. Groups of intellectuals, elite journalists, and some academics have also taken sides in a dispute that has also tried, at least, to instrumentalize and weaponize other legitimate movements that use social media as means of expression and organization, such as feminists, ecologists, and groups of victims of the organized crime. This section analyses the reasons why digital and social media transformed from being spaces characterized by the critique of power and the general dissatisfaction with the political elites to become the crucial arena for a partisan dispute on the narrative about Mexican public life.

Between the 1990s and 2000s, the technological revolution brought about by the Internet in terms of accelerating and increasing our capacities to communicate and exchange

volumes of information and data at faster speed and lower costs associated these features with unseen possibilities for furthering civic participation. From Negroponte's digital manifesto to the collective creativity and advance of knowledge in Jenkins and Shirkey, the digital ecosystem was seen in the light of its undisputable positive contribution to improving our lives (Jarvis, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Negroponte, 1999; Shirkey, 2010). Moreover, technology was considered, in many important ways, a natural ally of democracy because its decentralized configuration made it the perfect public sphere that could authentically channel the voices and interests of new groups and sectors, especially the youth, reduce the costs of reaching out to elected officials and facilitate civic engagement.

Though some of these views may seem over-optimistic about the role of technology in democracy and civic participation considering today's trends in disinformation, uncertainty, and polarization, many people insist that the digital landscape offers better chances for spontaneous civic and democratic participation. Thus, it was unsurprising that in 2011, movements like #OccupyWallStreet, Movimiento 15M in Spain, the "Estudiantazo chileno" in Chile, and of course, the Arab Spring were presented as examples of these new civic engagements. And Mexico was no exception.

In 2012, the Mexican students' movement #YoSoy132, which irrupted into the presidential campaign, was taken as an example of a more politically engaged and participatory youth. In May of that year, Enrique Peña Nieto, the candidate of the *Compromiso por México* alliance, was leading the polls after five months of campaigning. He went to the Universidad Iberoamericana, where he confronted students protesting against the violence perpetrated by the security forces against peasant demonstrators in San Salvador Atenco when he was the state governor in 2006. Peña Nieto was forced to leave the university amid protests from the students. That evening, Televisa's main news program presented the episode as an attempt by supposed infiltrators to sabotage the event. This false reporting angered the students, who organized themselves through social media to expose the manipulation of information. This led to student movements such as @Másde131 and #YoSoy132, which organized large-scale protests and an additional presidential debate using digital platforms with logistical support from Google. Peña Nieto did not attend this debate.

The movement's original demand for media accountability remained a key demand for the rest of the campaign. Under pressure, Peña Nieto promised to propose a new media law that would include criteria and limitations on public spending on social communication and how public funds should be distributed. The movement also profoundly impacted socio-digital networks, which became increasingly relevant in public debate, especially after two

scandals marked the public agenda: The student massacre of Ayotzinapa involving local authorities, the army, and drug cartels in September 2014 and a journalistic report, released in November that year, uncovering how the President and his wife obtained a 7 Million Dollar house from a contractor (the "Casa Blanca scandal"). In contrast to conventional media, whose coverage of these issues was scarce and cautious with the presidential figure, social media were marked by an increasingly critical spirit against the president and the political elites. The horizontal nature of digital communication circumvented the coverage of traditionally pyramidal and gatekeeping structures of the largest mass media corporations, which had historically sided with the government. By the end of President Peña Nieto's administration (2012-2018), the predominant deliberation in social media was expressing strong dissatisfaction with the status quo due to rampant violence, corruption, and abuse.

In 2018, during the presidential campaign, this atmosphere was profited by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who, presenting himself as an outsider, based his message precisely on fighting corruption and abuse and reducing violence. His message resonated with many voters and echoed the claims that were present in social media. He won a landslide victory with 53% of the votes against 22% of his closest contender. His party, Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional –whose acronym, MORENA, both evocates the predominant skin color of Mexicans and a reference to the Virgin of Guadalupe, also called "the *morena* Virgin"—also won control of the two chambers in Congress and most state and local governments in dispute.

The coming to power of López Obrador in 2018 was presented by the president himself as a new era in Mexico, a "fourth transformation" after those of the independence (1821), the Reform Wars (1858-61), and the Revolution (1910-1920), whose aims were to accomplish the social justice principles that have not been reached by the former ones, to fight corruption and inequalities, and to dismantle privileges. The motto of the government is "First, the poor ones" (*Primero, los pobres*), and based on it there have been launched a large number of social actions based on a redistribution of public funds through a direct transfer of money to the beneficiaries and aggressive spending cuts in other public programs that have implied the layoff of a large number of public servants.

The downside of these actions is that, in reality, they have not implied a reduction of structural inequality or a true fight against corruption. The social distribution of public resources is not based upon public policy programs based on public and reliable registries of the beneficiaries, and there is no diagnosis, assessment, or evaluation of the impact of these actions. They seem to respond more to traditional clientelist measures to ensure political

support than to resolve inequalities since no fiscal reform has been proposed. Moreover, the public spending cuts have meant not only the disappearance of many public programs that have been defunded but the actual dismantling of the public administration with all the negative consequences that such measures imply. As for the fight against corruption, reform has yet to be proposed to the justice system or to foster the professionalization of public prosecutors. Regarding security, López Obrador has created a National Guard under the operative control of the military to substitute the police forces –instead of reforming them— with dangerous consequences for human rights.

Most of these measures the administration of López Obrador has taken with the explicit exclusion of the opposition parties (except in the case of the National Guard) and with the precise resistance of civil society organizations. Most of his style has been cataloged as populist attempts to concentrate power, especially his latest proposed electoral reform, which attempts to defund the National Electoral Institute, disappear its professional civil service, and transfer most of the electoral organizational functions to the Federal Secretariat of Governance.

López Obrador has represented a change in Mexican politics that, though not necessarily altering the structural inequalities or fighting corruption, has brought about a deep impact on the way people think and talk about politics and on the way the most important public issues are framed, whose most evident outcome is the partisanship that characterizes the public debate as reflected on the media and the digital arena. Behind such impact lies the government's communication strategy, crafted around three main aspects.

First, the modification of the old pattern of relationships between the government and the most important media organizations based on the clientelist exchange between relatively favorable coverage in return for official advertising. According to data from NGOs FUNDAR and Article19 (Article 19 MX-CA, 2020), the Mexican government under President Peña Nieto spent 89% more than what was budgeted on official advertising, with 52% of that expenditure going to just ten media organizations. In 2018, during President Peña Nieto's last year in office, the budgeted spending on official advertising was 1,160 million pesos, but the actual spending increased by 449% to 6,373 million. Most of this spending responded to historic clientelistic exchanges between the media and the government. Thus, in response to public criticism of this practice, President López Obrador promised during his campaign to promote a new bill on official advertising and announced it as one of his 100 commitments during his inauguration speech in December 2018.

In January 2019, the Mexican government published the "General Guidelines for the Registration and Authorization of Social Communication Programs of Federal Agencies," followed by the "Agreement Establishing the Social Communication Policy of the Federal Government" in April. These measures aimed to reduce spending on official advertising by 50% in relation to the budgeted amount for 2018 and adjust to this reduction in the years to come. They also limited annual contracts with media outlets, forbidding the concentration of more than 25% of advertising in a single media outlet for a single campaign. Additionally, the Agreement explicitly prohibits using social communication resources to promote any exchange of benefits for support –an anti-clientelist clause. And it contains explicit prohibitions against pressuring, punishing, rewarding, privileging, or coercing communicators or media outlets, paying for news or images for journalistic purposes, covertly granting public resources that benefit the media, receiving payments for advertising services, or disseminating advertising content with other prohibited purposes.

These measures represent a historical break with a decades-long relationship model that has fostered collusion between the largest media organizations and the regime. However, these are limited to the current administration since these measures have yet to translate into new legal reforms. The General Law of Social Communication of 2018 has remained the same regarding the discretionary and unequal allocation of resources, so the agreement and the guidelines can be easily reversed. Moreover, while there has been a significant reduction in official advertising spending, one-third of the total expenditure goes to three media organizations, and 52% of the advertising expenditure concentrates on just 15 media outlets. Thus, there is less expenditure but the same discretionary criteria for allocating public resources.

Second, President López Obrador has centralized the government's communication in his daily morning conferences that are transmitted by all public networks and stations (with different re-transmissions during the day), by social media channels supportive of the president and amplified by a wider number of non-official accounts that comment his main remarks along the day.

As part of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's learning over time and, above all, of his assessment of the role social media began to play after 2012, his main communication strategy during the years before his 2018 electoral victory was based on these platforms. Moreover, during his inaugural speech on July 1 in Mexico City´s main square, he thanked what he called "the blessed social networks" for his decisive contribution to his victory. Largely, his social media strategy responded to his distrust in a conventional media structure

that, in previous years, but especially during the 2006 campaign, echoed the propaganda that portrayed him as a "danger to Mexico," setting a negative tone in the coverage he received in the news and eventually closing him these spaces.

As said before, the widespread indignation towards the previous administration on social media was used by López Obrador to channel in his favor the desire for change. The intensity of the social media debate during the campaign reflected a highly participatory society determined to push for change. Once in office, López Obrador decided to bypass conventional media and keep the public conversation within the realm of social media. Two teams were erected to be officially in charge of digital communication in the Office of the Presidency: one of them overseeing the president's digital accounts (Twitter, FB, Instagram, YouTube) under the General Directorate of Digital Communication of the President, and the other in charge of the Federal Government accounts (@GobiernoMx) under the General Directorate of Communication and Digital Strategy.

However, this is not all, since according to an investigative report on the weekly *Proceso*, the digital campaign structure, a whole network of active supporters, apparently without official link to the government, has continued in operation too, functioning both as a sounding board in favor of the government's positions and as a swarm to counteract criticism (San Martín, 2020). According to the report, unlike President Peña Nieto's government, when a strategy of automation (bots) was used to replicate favorable messages, in López Obrador's government, the aim is to attack and silence the president's critics and create informative fences that capture the digital public discussion.

In this way, this social media display reinforces the main communication channel of the president: his daily morning conferences that start at 07:00 AM and usually last between two and three hours, which, in theory, should explain government actions and decisions and openly answer journalists' questions. In theory, governmental communication should seek consensus, unite wills, and use verifiable data and inclusive perspectives to implement public policy. However, the space is often used for propagandistic purposes through a polarizing discourse based on simplistic dichotomous categories.

Third, and related to this last point, is noticeable the populist and confrontational tone that usually characterizes the messages in the daily conferences. This tone is based on strong class elements, often pitting the "good poor people" represented by the President's project against the "neoliberal" and "conservative" groups associated with corrupt interests, which often includes national and international press outlets, as well as academics, journalists, intellectuals, and general critics of the president. Moreover, since 2021 every Wednesday,

there is a space in the morning conferences devoted to unmasking what the Office of the Presidency considers to be "fake news", called "Who's who in the lies" (with even a Twitter account @QEQMentiras), a section presented by the director of Social Networks of the General Coordination of Social Communication of the Presidency. The section includes not only the correction of some data but the direct naming and pointing to individual journalists and commentators as liars. His supportive social media groups then amplify such criticisms throughout the day.

President's López Obrador communication strategy to centralize the government's communication, set the public agenda, and control the public conversation by circumventing the media through the intense use of direct communication and amplification through social media has ended up polarizing the debate and fracturing specific digital spaces, like Twitter, into a partisan arena where truthfulness depends, not on data and facts, but on the feelings provoked by the president himself. After half of the six-year presidential term mandate, most of the debate on the public agenda seems polarized at the elite level without visible dialogue between increasingly confronted positions.

However, the response of most conventional media has been equally disappointing. The reduction in public spending on official advertising that was historically allocated to the media has not generated the healthy distance that should ideally be expected in democratic regimes between media and government. Instead of using this new scenario to expand their number of readers by improving the quality of their journalism and investing in strengthening the professional skills and abilities of their reporters, editors, and collaborators, they have continued to rely on their traditional ways of news coverage based mostly on politicians' statements, attractive headlines without substance, stories with few sources and follow-up, the scandal of the moment, and now, the daily highlight of the president's many obsessions, contradictions and gaffes. So, in the end, they are also contributing to amplifying the president's voice and the polarizing atmosphere.

Despite this situation, it is important to note that, though partisanship defines public conversation, polarization is extended mostly among certain elite-level sectors, including political actors. In a large study on polarization and Twitter, researchers Ortega, Nieto, Dorantes, and Sotomayor found that the most polarizing Twitter messages were attributed to two groups, intellectuals and journalists critical of the government and politicians and supporters of the president (Ortega et al., 2022). In many ways, these are responses to the actions and decisions of the president among elite groups. And this means that, among the wider public, there may still be room for understanding and keeping the bridges open for

dialogue. There may be a chance for independent and autonomous professional journalism to raise the bet.

4. Comparing the two contexts

This article has debated some consequences of digital media on politics and democracy in Brazil and Mexico. We have pointed to segmentation, radicalization, and equalization as digital phenomena impacting Brazilian democracy, and we have called attention to the governmental capture of Mexico's public sphere using digital media and partisanship language. The analysis of Brazil's case was marked by the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 and the riots against the country's Congress, Supreme Court, and Executive Office on January 8, 2023. Similarly, the one within the Mexican context pointed to a left-wing populist platform, using digital media to control the public sphere and polarize politics and society, threatening the independence of the electoral institutions and bypassing traditional journalism.

After that, this article proposed to debate common and uncommon issues in the two contexts. Our first consideration points to populism as a common consequence with different characteristics. Many scholars have studied the relationship between digital media and populism, which is a traditional political issue in Latin America. If in Brazil we had a populist right-wing actor threatening democracy and the institutions being elected President using digital media, in Mexico, a left-wing populist captured the public sphere with partisanship and polarized speech, attacking the independence of the electoral institutions and bypassing traditional journalism. Both cases open a path for researchers interested in Latin American populism in digital media. Besides Bolsonaro and Obrador, Nayib Bukele developed a well-succeed campaign in El Salvador in 2019 heavily based on the Internet and breaking decades of dominance of traditional parties. After that, he also behaved aggressively against liberal institutions and democracy in the country.

Our second consideration indicates media roles concerning journalism and media criticism. In the Mexican context, we have stated a disappointing response from most conventional media to Obrador's actions concerning the country's public sphere and democracy. In this context, it is relevant to notice Rede Globo's fierce opposition against Jair Bolsonaro and his attempts contrary to the independence of political institutions and democracy. The TV network had a crucial role in Bolsonaro's defeat when disputing his reelection in 2022.

The third consideration calls attention to the well-succeeded use of digital media by outsiders or non-conventional actors, some of them bringing new frontiers for political speech and action. As we have noticed, after two failed attempts in 2006 and 2012, López Obrador profited from a disenchanted atmosphere with politics in 2018 to present himself as a reformer committed to solving the country's most urgent problems. His campaign team extensively used digital and social media and successfully placed López Obrador at the crest of the waves of criticisms against the abuses committed by the traditional political classes and the ineffective responses to punishing crime and corruption. Presenting himself as an outsider, Obrador based his message on fighting corruption and abuse and reducing violence, which resonated with many voters and echoed the claims in social media.

Similar cases occurred in Brazil, although favoring mostly right-wing politicians. As we have indicated, numerous examples of radical conservatives elected in 2018 had an enormous performance on social media, most newcomers to professional politics. Jair Bolsonaro himself left the place of an isolated congressman who praised the military regime and torture for being elected President in a small party and a cheap campaign centered on social media and WhatsApp groups.

Populism through the social media, the role of the press in hybrid media systems, and digital media favoring outside actors and parties are phenomena related to the new public spheres. By pointing to them, we hope to incentive comparative studies concerning digital media, politics, and democracy in Latin America. Besides that, we also encourage academic analysis that does not isolate the Internet or digital media from the political and social contexts where they develop.

5. References

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