

## **Fake News in Brazil – Bolsonaro Case Study**

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It is well-known that former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro used social media to spread fake news with the assistance of his public official supporters also known as the “hatred cabinet”. This practice started during his campaign and continued throughout his government. This political strategy was guided by a selected group influenced by Olavo de Carvalho and inspired by his far-right thinking. This paper aims to analyze Bolsonaro’s political strategy of using social media to manipulate his followers by applying Carlo Ginzburg’s evidence method. The theoretical reference is based on Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas from the vision of Mauro Wilton and Wilson Gomes, Zygmunt Bauman, Hanna Arendt, Yuval Harari, Pierre Lévy, Gilles Lipovetsky, Georges Balandier, among others. In the post-truth era, Bolsonaro and his supporters continue to disseminate fake news through a giant network in social media - such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook - about many different issues including politics, dictatorship, racism, homophobia, environment, COVID-19 treatment, and vaccines.

*Keywords:* fake news, social media, public space, digital communication, post-modernity

### **Introduction**

The habit of spreading the so-called fake news<sup>1</sup> has been known since the 6th century, according to historian and professor emeritus of Harvard Robert Darnton, in an interview with journalist Jorge Araújo, published in *Folha de São Paulo*, on 29 de Maio de 2012. According to Darnton in Araújo (2012), 6th-century Byzantine historian Procopius, famous for writing the history of Justinian’s empire, also wrote a secret text, called “Anekdotia”, in which by the spread of “fake news”, he ruined the reputation of Emperor Justinian among others. A very similar dynamic happened in the American presidential campaign in 2016.

For Darnton in Araújo (2012), the main disseminator of fake news, or “semi-fake news” (because the news contained a little bit of truth), was Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), a renowned journalist of the early 16th century whose career began

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<sup>1</sup>False reports of events, written and read on websites Fake news creates significant public confusion about current events. Compare to post-truth. OXFORD DICTIONARIES (2020). Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/fake-news>.

while writing short poems with slander and jokes that were handed out near Piazza Navona in Rome.

Darnton in Araújo (2012) explains that Aretino's work was "fake news" in the form of poetry, in which he attacked public figures that would pay him not to publish this kind of ancestral 'tweet'<sup>2</sup>. "I think those stories were much more scandalous than those of today. (...) You had this kind of fake news – they were like Facebook posts or tweets<sup>3</sup> – circulating everywhere in Paris and London on the eve of the French Revolution and for a good part of the 18th century," says Darnton (Araújo, 2012). However, with the dissemination of social networks, "fake news" began to propagate more easily, since the communication vehicles no longer were the main source of information.

We hypothesize the "hatred cabinet" – the group of the former president of Brazil (2019-2022) Jair Bolsonaro<sup>4</sup> – used fake news to manipulate his followers on social media by feeding them distorted information and creating communities politically aligned with the far-right president's ideologies.

Another hypothesis to be investigated is related to the transmission of this information that circulates in isolated groups. We understand that "reality bubbles" are formed by people who receive pieces of fake news and accept them without any critical analysis. This process is described by Plato in the Allegory of the Cave, in which prisoners accept the simulacrum as truth because they don't know the reality.

Our main objective is to understand the *modus operandi*<sup>5</sup> of the ideological group known as the "hatred cabinet", which acted in the dissemination of fake news aiming to favor the political interests of former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. We believe this practice, which was executed by a group influenced by the writer Olavo de Carvalho and his far-right thinking, started during Bolsonaro's political campaign, and continued throughout his government. Carvalho was mentored by the far-right chief strategist for Donald Trump, Steve Bannon<sup>6</sup>. The theoretical framework is based on Pierre Bourdieu, the vision of Mauro Wilton and Wilson Gomes on Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman, Yuval Harari, Georges Balandier, among others. This article intends to analyze those hypotheses

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<sup>2</sup>To post a tweet on Twitter. Tweet. Informal Dictionary (2019). São Paulo, 20 Sep 2019. Available at: <https://www.dicionarioinformal.com.br/tu%C3%ADte/>.

<sup>3</sup>Content published on a website, post. Meaning of post. Dicio – Online dictionary of the Portuguese language (2009-2023). Available at: <https://www.dicio.com.br/post/>.

<sup>4</sup>Jair Bolsonaro (1955) is an Army reserve captain and former president of Brazil. He was affiliated with the Social Liberal Party (PSL), when he was elected the 38th president of Brazil, for 2019-2022 term, with 55.13% of votes. In 2022 elections, he ran for re-election for PL (Liberal Party) and was defeated by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Frazão (2023). "E-Biography – Jair Bolsonaro." 03 Jan. 2023. Available at: [https://www.ebiografia.com/jair\\_bolsonaro/](https://www.ebiografia.com/jair_bolsonaro/).

<sup>5</sup>Word of Latin origin. The way in which a person or an institution acts or operates and develops its activities. Michaelis (2003). Portuguese Language Dictionary. Editora Melhoramentos. Available at: <https://michaelis.uol.com.br/busca?id=NyjYa>.

<sup>6</sup>At 68, Bannon is an ideologue of the populist radical new right and was Trump's main strategist. He has already stated that Bolsonaro is a "great hero". UOL (2022). "Former Trump adviser is 'oracle' of the Bolsonaro family: Who is Steve Bannon". <https://noticias.uol.com.br/internacional/ultimas-noticias/2022/10/21/quem-e-steve-bannon.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>.

through an investigative perspective according to the evidentiary methodology advocated by Ginzburg (2009).

### **Literature Review**

To understand the process of using dramatization resources to legitimize the political actions of Bolsonaro and his political group, we are inspired by the vision of George Balandier. “The great political actor commands the reality through the imaginary. He can keep one scene or another separate, govern them, and produce the spectacle.” (Balandier, 1981, p. 6). Historically, this dramatization resource has been appropriated by autocratic rulers to carry out social control. Balandier (1981, p.6) contextualizes Machiavelli in the intimate relationship between the art of government and the art of the stage. Dramatization techniques are not limited to theatrical performances, as they can also be applied in governing a city.

The prince must behave as a “political actor to gain and retain power. His image will thus be able to correspond to what his subjects wish to find in him” (Balandier, 1981). Machiavelli and Balandier (1981) emphasizes the government in Florence dominated public life without directly participating through institutions and managed to mobilize the people with the support of the arts.

Harmony, in a political setting, could be achieved through staging: “the collective imaginary is projected onto the scene where the lyrical drama unfolds, (...) where everything is in harmony. It produces the illusion.” (Balandier, 1981, p. 7).

Power results from majority rulings, according to Balandier (1981, p. 8), “It depends on art, persuasion, debate, the ability to create effects that favor the identification of the represented with the representative.” He further reports that new techniques, such as media resources, propaganda, and political polls, give even more advantages to what he classifies as “democratic dramaturgy,” as they reinforce appearances and link the fate of those in power to both the quality of their public image and their actions. The State, then, turns into a spectacle. We consider these practices cited by Machiavelli apud Balandier (1981) to be as well as the strategies adopted in post-modernity by Bolsonaro and his political group to engage their public in social networks.

Balandier (1981, p. 9) mentions what he classifies as “political theatricality” is accentuated by the circumstances of certain regimes. He also highlights the practices of many tropical states, such as Brazil, as excessively theatrical: “They set up their scenarios using as a foundation the poverty of the majority of their subjects, they mask uncontrolled powers”. He concludes: “Finally, all political power obtains subordination through theatricalization”. (Balandier, 1981, p. 10).

For Hannah Arendt, where there is a loss of power, there is the temptation to replace it with violent domination (1994, p. 43). According to this perspective, power requires legitimacy to maintain itself and cannot be sustained through violence (Arendt, 2000, pp. 41–44). Balandier (1981, p. 7) argues that the production of images, and the manipulation of symbols presents society and legitimize government positions.

Bolsonaro's utilization of media seduction strategy also involves drawing upon the works of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who conceptualized symbolic power as the "power to construct through utterance, to make people see and believe, to confirm or transform the vision of the world, and therefore the action on the world and the world itself." Symbolic power is defined as predetermined relationship between those who exercise power and those who are subject to it in the structure of the field in which the belief is produced and reproduced (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 14).

For Bourdieu (2005) what makes the power of words and slogans the power to "maintain order or to subvert it is the belief in the legitimacy of words and those who pronounce them, a belief whose production is not within the competence of words." Bolsonaro's group uses a symbolic legitimization of fake news to deceive their followers. They accept the information without critically questioning it, assuming it to be truthful, and sharing it in their personal networks.

Bourdieu compares political life with dramatization, like Balandier (1981), and states that the political man derives his political strength from the trust that a group places in him (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 188). He is "connected to his constituents by a sort of national contract united by a magical relationship of identification with those who put all their hopes in him." (Bourdieu, 2005). Our contention is that it's the enchanting rapport between the politician and his supporters that drives them to accept the deceptive material aimed at controlling them without questioning its validity.

We believe that during his government, Bolsonaro wanted to make people believe that his speeches and fake news were true, and, he tried to disqualify press vehicles and journalists, claiming he was the target of slander and persecution. Bolsonaro's group also targeted the ministers of Federal Supreme Court, in particular Minister Alexandre de Moraes who was investigating fake news.

Our argument is that Bolsonaro failed to acknowledge the symbolic influence wielded by mainstream journalists who use social media to propagate false news and create a distorted version of reality. This situation can be compared to Plato's (2006, pp. 210–212) Allegory of the Cave, where prisoners are trapped in a cave and can only see shadows on the wall, which they mistake for reality. When one of them escapes it takes him some time to grow accustomed to the light of the sun, which represents the source of real knowledge, as he had spent his entire life not knowing his reality was nothing but a replica of the original wisdom. Similarly, Bolsonaro's followers perceive the fake news circulated on social media as the truth, creating a distorted reality.

With this narrative Plato intends to show the difference between the real world, which he considers the world of ideas and light, and the sensible world, which is illusory and experienced by the prisoners of the cave. For Plato (2006, pp. 210–212), the ascent to upper world means "ascension of the soul to the intelligible world." He cites the idea of good as "the cause of what it is just and beautiful," and, in the intelligible world, this idea "is the mistress of truth and intelligence, and it is necessary to see it to be sensible in private and public life." This allegory demonstrates that Bolsonaro's followers remain in a "reality bubble" process in which they are under the constant influence of digital militia's half-

truths used to discredit institutions such as the Brazilian Supreme Court and the press.

The very ambiguity of political struggle, which is at the same time a fight for power and privileges, originates from the contradiction that “follows all political undertakings.” (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 210–212).

Martín-Barbero (1995, pp. 46–47) explains the media using the theory of mediations between system/structure and receiver, in which culture and meaning of life are intermediaries. Mediations are processes of social fragmentation that interfere with the receivers’ relationship with the media, which is strengthened when an individual’s family structure is weak.

Martín-Barbero explains the heterogeneity of temporalities by using Gramsci’s concept of hegemony (Rodrigues, 2005) to analyze the dynamics of social domination not as an imposition, but as a process in which the dominant class becomes hegemonic to the extent that it also represents the interests of subordinate classes. The media are hegemonic insofar as appropriate to in a symbolic way of the needs, aspirations, and meanings of life of the receptors.

We believe that modern social media have reduced the influence power of the mainstream press by allowing the common individual to become, in addition to being a receiver, a producer of content. This process of fragmentation and individualization of the postmodern man weakened interpersonal relationships, resulting in liquid interpersonal relationships, according to Zygmunt Bauman in his work “Liquid Modernity” (2001). Bauman explains this dynamic as “a redistribution and relocation of the melting powers of modernity.” (2001, p. 13).

Bauman (2001, p. 15) says that modernity begins when “space and time are separated from the practice of life.” It happens when they cease to be as they were in pre-modern centuries with “aspects intertwined and hardly distinguishable from lived experience.” Thus, what leads us to talk about the “end of history, post-modernity” or to articulate the intuition of a radical change in the human arrangement is “the fact that the long effort to accelerate the speed of movement has reached its natural limit.” (2001, pp. 17–18). He argues it no longer matters “where the caller is – the difference between ‘near’ and ‘distant’ or between ‘wild space’ and ‘civilized’ is about to disappear.”

In “Confidence and Fear in the City” Bauman (2009, p. 45) says the process of forming a coherent idea of community includes “the desire to avoid any real participation.” For the author even when they can feel the bonds that unite them with others, “people do not want to live them because they are afraid to participate, they are afraid of the dangers and challenges that participation implies and they are afraid of suffering.” Therefore, drive towards community of equals is a sign of withdrawal from “the otherness that exists outside, but also from the commitment to internal interaction” (Bauman, 2009, p. 45). Consequently, people “forgot or neglected to learn the skills necessary to live with difference.” (Bauman, 2009, p. 46).

This reflection largely explains the easy adherence of Bolsonaro’s followers and his political group to the digital communities created to disseminate narratives with fake news. In our liquid-modern age, the world around us is “distributed into poorly coordinated fragments, while our existences are sliced into a succession of

fragilely connected episodes.” (Bauman, 2005, p. 18). For this reason, few of us are “capable of avoiding passing through more than one ‘community of ideas and principles,’ whether genuine or not, well-integrated or ephemeral.” and that being totally or partially ‘dislocated’ “can be an uncomfortable and sometimes disturbing experience.” (Bauman, 2005, p. 18). Therefore, one can complain about all the discomforts, and in “desperation seek redemption (...) in a dream of belonging.” (Bauman, 2005, p. 20).

We believe that Bolsonaro’s group took advantage of this fragmentation and individualism of people to create virtual “reality bubbles” as the prisoners in Plato’s cave in which they are fed fake news. To fully grasp how this process of discourse persuasion takes place it is important to understand the concept of public space and how it moved to the private sphere both in modernity and later in post-modernity.

Public space has now been shifted to the media. Habermas in Gomes (1998) states that “there was no more public space since the means of communication were private companies.” When the public sphere ceased to exist there remained only “public pseudo-sphere, staged and fictitious, whose main characteristic was being dominated by mass communication and culture.” Submission configures the degeneration of modern public sphere.

According to Habermas in Gomes (1998) communication is a process derived from three moments: the systemic world, the world of norms, and the lived world. The systemic world is a capitalist society. The world of norms reproduces the systemic world, and the lived world is what is experienced by people throughout history. “The lived world is colonized by the systemic world”. There is a concealment of the rules of the game, of interests (ideology<sup>7</sup>). What is absent in the whole process is the lived world, in which cultural practices, that are more important than ideology, are located. In this perspective everyday practices are life’s great filters, and they are much more important than social structures.

In this representativeness crisis provoked by the minimal state<sup>8</sup> which does not supply the basic needs of the citizens, society’s traditional spaces deteriorated. The media is replacing politicians and basic institutions of society, thus becoming a public space for debate. JM Salaün declares “the media is no longer a place of confrontation, of arguments, but a place of symbolization of a society. Every community needs a place to build its image.” (Sousa, 1995, pp. 34–35). Lipovetsky (1989) in *The Empire of the Ephemeral* seeks inspiration in fashion among other senses related to culture to reformulate Habermas’s concept of the public sphere in terms of viewing its end through the domination of the media and culture mass.

Habermas (1984, p. 14) explains public sphere which was more evident to the Greeks as a “kingdom of freedom and continuity,” although he considered it was

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<sup>7</sup>In Marxist conception, ideology (Chauí, 1986) is one of the instruments of class domination and of class struggle. Ideology is one of the means used by dominant to exercise domination, so it is not perceived as such by the dominated.

<sup>8</sup>From 1970s onwards welfare state – State supplying basic social needs – entered a crisis in Europe and the United States. In Brazil, this system was never implemented (Burke, 2002),

not exercised by them in the agora<sup>9</sup> since Athenian society was stratified – foreigners, slaves, and women could not participate. The true public space was exercised in the French cafés of the late Middle Ages when the rising bourgeoisie could match the aristocracy through the power of dialogue and rhetoric. Social differences disappeared at that moment (Habermas, 1984), however, warns of bourgeois interests. In modern times, there is a tendency for the public sphere to decay. “While its sphere expands more and more, its function becomes less and less forceful.” (Habermas, 1984, p. 17).

According to Pierre Lévy, “the appetite for virtual communities finds an ideal of deterritorialized human relations,” and, for this reason, virtual communities are “the engines, the actors” (2001, p. 130). However, he warns that “collective intelligence is more a cause of problems than solutions” (Lévy, 2001, p. 131). The best use we can make of cyberspace is “to synergize the knowledge, the imagination, the spiritual energies of those who are connected to it.” (Lévy, 2001, p. 131). Unfortunately, this is not what we observe in the case study of the inappropriate use of electronic media to spread fake news by Bolsonaro and his political group to manipulate his followers.

Therefore, “cyberculture is simply not controllable because, most of the time, different actors, projects, and interpretations conflict.” (Lévy, 2001). He had already anticipated the use of cyberspace for conflicting activities to society's interests, and the very fact that there is conflict confirms “the open character of the technological development and its social implications”. For Lévy (2001), on a large scale, the development of cyberspace is also “a dispute of competing projects and interests.”

### **Post-truth and Fake News**

Yuval Harari in “21 Lessons for the 21st Century” (2020, p. 276) says anyone talking to you will have their own agenda, therefore “you will never be able to fully believe what they say.” He further explains today we have global problems without having a global community. “Neither Facebook nor nationalism or religion come close to creating community.” According to him “all existing human communities are engaged in advancing their particular interests and not in understanding the global truth” (Harari, 2020, p. 286).

Harari (2020, pp. 287–288) states we are currently “living in a new and frightening era of post-truth and we are surrounded by lies and fiction” and “whichever side you support, it really seems like we are living in a terrible post-truth era.” A superficial analysis of history reveals “propaganda and disinformation are not new and even the habit of denying entire nations and creating fake countries has a long pedigree.” (Harari, 2020, p. 289).

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<sup>9</sup>Agora according to the New Aurélio Dictionary of the Portuguese Language (Ferreira, 1986) means the square of ancient Greek cities where the market was held, and citizens' assemblies often met.

Humans have always lived in the post-truth era. “Homo sapiens<sup>10</sup> is a post-truth species whose power depends on creating fictitious stories and believing in them.” Since the Stone Age “self-reinforcing myths have served to unite human collectives” (Harari, 2020, pp. 289–290).

Harari (2020, p. 290) explains we are the only mammals capable of cooperating with a multitude of strangers because “only we are capable of inventing, spreading and convincing millions of others to believe in fictional narratives.” Bolsonaro and his political group spread fake news on social media to rally their followers. Harari (2020) states that if we all believe in the same fiction “we all obey the same laws and therefore cooperate.”

For millennia much of what was considered a “fact” on human social networks were “narratives about miracles, angels, demons, witches.” Billions of people have believed these narratives for thousands of years as “some fake news lasts forever.” (Harari, 2020). Fiction is among the most effective tools in Humanity’s toolbox, according to Harari (2020, pp. 291–294). “The fact is truth has never been high on the agenda of homo sapiens,” Harari (2020, p. 295). Therefore, in the social media era it can be hard to decide which version of an event is true. In addition to religions and ideologies, corporations also rely on fiction and fake news.

For Harari (2020, p. 296) the power of human cooperation depends on a delicate balance between truth and fiction. He claims that “efficiently organizing large groups requires reliance on some form of mythology”. False stories have an intrinsic advantage over the truth when it comes to bringing people together. (Harari, 2020, pp. 297–298). Truth and power can only go together to a certain extent because sooner or later they will go their separate ways (Harari, 2020, p. 299). As humans, we often prioritize power over truth. (Harari, 2020, p. 300).

## Methodology

The research uses the evidentiary method developed by the Italian theorist Carlo Ginzburg (2009) based on studies carried out at the end of the 19th century by Giovanni Morelli. Morelli’s objective was to identify forgeries of famous paintings by analyzing negligible characteristics such as the earlobes, the nails, and the shape of the hands and feet (Ginzburg, 2009, pp. 143–144). Morelli's books are unusual when compared to other art historians because they have illustrations of previously mentioned details which can identify a certain artist just like a criminal is identified by his fingerprints. “Any art museum studied by Morelli immediately acquires the aspect of a criminal museum” (Ginzburg, 2009, pp. 143–144).

Castelnuovo in Ginzburg (2009) correlates Morelli’s evidentiary method to that attributed to Sherlock Holmes by his creator Arthur Conan Doyle. “An art connoisseur is comparable to a detective who discovers the author of the crime (art forgery) by using evidence imperceptible to most people.”

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<sup>10</sup>From Latin homo sapiens means “wise man”. A species of hominid from the primate family of which modern man and his ancestors are part; homo rationalis. The human species to which we belong is only 30,000 years old. DICIO – Online Portuguese dictionary (2009-2023). Available at: <https://www.dicio.com.br/homo-sapiens/>.



For Ginzburg (2009) modern psychology would be on Morelli's side because our unconscious gestures reveal our character more than actions or words. Freud according to Ginzburg referred to the method used by Morelli in his essay "The Moses of Michelangelo" (1914). Freud and Ginzburg (2009) states his method is closely related to the medical psychoanalysis technique. Evidentialism is used by doctors to identify diseases by the study of symptoms, and it originated thousands of years ago when early humans tracked their prey (Ginzburg, 2009, p. 154).

### **In-Deep Investigation Methodology Applied to the Study**

To avoid being tracked by Artificial Intelligence algorithms when we did the search results in order to be impartial in this study, we selected carefully among thousands of articles available at internet and google website only articles written by professional journalists from well-known and reliable sources as press vehicles, newspapers, TV Networks, blogs and websites, as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Official Brazilian Federal Congress website and scientific articles published by professors and researchers from well-known universities in Brazil.

Thus, the articles were divided in three different categories: from journalists hired by different press vehicles, NGOs, official sources as the Federal Congress website and professors, students and researchers of universities who published articles in scientific publications. Also, for the study were selected nine articles from the press and three scientific articles from professors and students at Brazilian Universities and one from the official Brazilian Federal Congress website for the section finds and results and five articles from the press and NGOs for the discussion. These articles were published between the 2018 and 2022 presidential election campaigns as well as during the period Bolsonaro was president of Brazil (2019-2022). The analysis took place from December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022, to March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

This evidence methodology from the Social History was applied in this study because we understand the journalists and the researchers are careful and search for the truth looking in details in their investigation that sometimes are not visible to everyone when they want to write their stories or scientific articles. Of course, this was just a small study and it was difficult to extend it to a larger and longer study due to limitation of time. Although this issue needs deeper studies in future due to its relevance.

### **Results**

When performing an online search on December 18, 2022, for "Bolsonaro and fake news" there were 20,600,000 results<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, we will analyze some selected cases of fake news published on social networks by Bolsonaro's "hatred

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<sup>11</sup>Google. Search for Bolsonaro and the fake news. Available at: [https://www.google.com/search?q=fake+news+de+Bolsonaro&rlz=1C1GCEU\\_pt-BRBR907BR907&oq=fake+news+de+ Bolsonaro&aqs=chrome..69i57.13997j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=fake+news+de+Bolsonaro&rlz=1C1GCEU_pt-BRBR907BR907&oq=fake+news+de+ Bolsonaro&aqs=chrome..69i57.13997j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8).

cabinet,” stories written by journalists, and scientific articles published by renowned academic institutions.

According to Bourdieu (2005, p. 26), “journalists, roughly speaking, are interested in the exceptional, they are interested in what ruptures with the ordinary.” It is important to point out in contemporary times television, radio, and printed newspapers have migrated to electronic media, although the newsmaking process, its filters, and criteria remain the same (Wolf, 1999, pp. 177–249).

There are different approaches to fake news topic such as the scientific article “Fake news, truth, and lies from the perspective of Jair Bolsonaro on Twitter” by Viscardi (2020). In the article, the author analyzes how Jair Bolsonaro uses the words ‘fake news’, ‘lie’ and ‘truth’ on his official Twitter account both as a candidate during the 2018 campaign and as president-elect of Brazil to understand how Bolsonaro fits these elements into his speech, decoding the strategies in the construction of his message.

In the article of Maranhão et al. (2018), the authors analyze how the production of fake news boosted Jair Messias Bolsonaro’s (Social Liberal Party-PSL) presidential campaign culminating in his victory in the 2nd round of the 2018 elections. Through bibliographic-documentary research they demonstrate how his campaign used discursive strategies that associated the candidate with the defense of the “traditional Brazilian family” through opposition to “gay kit” and “gender ideology.” The analogy of “reality bubble” caused by Bolsonaro’s fake news and Plato’s (2006) cave was also analyzed by Lemos et al. (2022).

Google search also found several links to reports released by the press reflecting the dissemination of fake news by Bolsonaro and his political group. An article on the Electoral Sentinel website with the title “Bolsonaro’s Fake News about Lula ending MEI goes viral – Fake versions of PT’s speech had 500,000 interactions on Facebook,” by Barbosa et al. (2022). The report was made in collaboration between Public Agency NGO (Agência Pública Ong), Radar to Facts NGO (Radar Aos Fatos), and Journalism Nucleous Blog (Núcleo Jornalismo) for the coverage of the 2022 elections. These organizations are specialized in tracking and denounce fake news. The report informs a tweet by Jair Bolsonaro on October 29, 2022, helped “making the main theme of his supporters’ social networks a speech taken out of context by his opponent Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva about MEIs (individual micro-entrepreneurs).” According to the article a survey by Radar to Facts NGO (Radar Aos Fatos Ong) shows lies and attacks related to subject totaled more than 500,000 interactions on Facebook between October 28 and 30, 2022.

An article published on November 6, 2022, on the Estado de Minas newspaper website with the title “From Moraes imprisonment to Lady Gaga: check out Bolsonaroist groups’ fake news,” by journalist Ana Mendonça discusses the 2022 presidential elections. The report informs several of Bolsonaro’s supporters dissatisfied with his defeat and victory of President-elect Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT) have been meeting in front of military barracks across the country to ask for military intervention.

In addition, several different pieces of fake news are circulating among Bolsonaroist groups. One of these theories is the singer Lady Gaga in fact is an

employee of the International Criminal Court of Hague. A fake picture in which Gaga (Figure 1) appears to be in a videoconference with Jair Bolsonaro went viral on Twitter. The message says Stefani Germanotta - the singer's real name, who is supposedly the "Prime Minister of the Hague Court" - would be analyzing a fraudulent election in Brazil.

Figure 1. Use of a Photo of Lady Gaga in Fake News on Twitter



According to the messages “a federal intervention will take place to recheck votes from ballot boxes” after 72 hours of mobilization by Bolsonaro followers’ groups. The report highlights the non-existence of the “prime minister” position in the International Criminal Court and it is wrong to say Article 142 of the Constitution allows for federal intervention in Brazil.

Another situation cited by the report is the circulation of a video on social media in which supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro (PL) react to false news of the arrest of the President of the Federal Supreme Court (STF), Minister Alexandre de Moraes. The recording was made by Cid Martins of Gaúcha Radio. In the images, which were replaced by a warning of fake news<sup>12</sup> (Figure 2), supporters heard of the arrest of the minister for a flagrant offense and celebrated Moraes’ arrest.

<sup>12</sup>Cid Martins, Rádio Gaúcha Video about Celebration of Minister of Supreme Court Alexandre de Moraes. Available at: <https://s1.dmcn.net/v/UMBjr1ZOPfqUzoH8A/x360>.

Figure 2. Image is Replaced by the Fake News Warning



Also, a screenshot of a report broadcast by Ponta Negra TV, an affiliate of SBT Network in Rio Grande do Norte, has been facing repercussions on social media. The image shows an elderly man holding a sign in an anti-democratic demonstration which contests pretend to be the result of the presidential election. In the poster, he wrote ‘Federal Intervention on November 2, 2022, in Natal City in the State of Rio Grande do Norte (RN), Brazil,’ in Portuguese it is ‘Intervenção Federal 02/11/2022 Natal/RN — Brasil,’ but what really caught people’s attention was the way he translated the message into English “Federal intervention already,” followed by the date and the name of the city Natal that means “Christmas” in a literal translation from Portuguese to English (Figure 3). With the poster he had the intention to make people believe Bolsonaro had won the election, what was fake.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Fake News on TV Ponta Negra/SBT



These reports on fake news dispersed by Bolsonaro’s supporters show how important journalists’ work as the defenders of the truth and society’s interests are to communication vehicles. Gramsci in Resende (Rodrigues, 2005, p. 38) states that every man is an intellectual, but not everyone plays this role in society. An example of an organic intellectual in the Gramscian conception is the journalist who opposes the traditional intellectual. “The journalist can also play an organic role by contributing to changing society or even to maintaining the current hegemony.”

On May 31, 2020, in an article published on the BOL website, based on information from Estadão News Agency of State of São Paulo Newspaper, with the title “The biggest fake news is the ‘hatred cabinet’ says Bolsonaro after Federal Police operation,” Bolsonaro attacks the press, denying the existence of a group of

allies who participate in a network of attacks on social media. According to the report, the former president's son Carlos Bolsonaro, who is the councilor of Rio de Janeiro, is the commander of the 'hatred cabinet'. The group's performance is the subject of an investigation by the Supreme Court (STF), which investigates threats, offenses, and the dissemination of fake news against members of the Court and their families. A Supreme Court (STF) minister ordered searches and seizures of Bolsonarist businessmen and bloggers, defining the 'hatred cabinet' as a "criminal association".

"Hatred cabinet and presidential advisors are cited in Moraes' decision on an operation against fake news" was published on May 27, 2020, by *Diário de Pernambuco* (State of Pernambuco Daily Newspaper), based on information from the Folha Press News Agency of the *Folha de São Paulo* Newspaper. The article mentions one of the reports which were transcribed in STF decision to carry out search and seizure operations is by Heitor Freire (PSL-CE), who directly mentions advisors to the President as main members of so-called 'Hatred Cabinet', which specializes in producing and distributing fake news against various authorities, personalities and even members of the Federal Supreme Court. This cabinet coordinates the propagation of false or aggressive messages, counting on the interconnected action of many pages on social networks.

According to STF Minister Alexandre de Moraes, the 'hatred cabinet' is "a criminal association dedicated to the dissemination of false news, offensive attacks on various people, authorities, and institutions, among them, the Federal Supreme Court." The Minister informed the messages have "flagrant content of hate, subversion of order, and encouragement to break institutional and democratic normality".

Bolsonaro's former ally, Federal Congresswoman Joice Hasselmann, in testimony to the Fake News CPMI (Federal Congress Investigation Commission), reported the use of robots to leverage hashtags for BRL 20k per tweet on Twitter. Hasselmann not only revealed the scheme for distributing fake news but also how the group raised funds in an article written by José Carlos de Oliveira for the House of Representatives website on 12 April 2019 named "Joice Hasselmann reports 'militia' and 'hatred cabinet' in the distribution of fake news."

According to Oliveira (2019), the Congresswoman confirmed the existence of a "digital militia" that spreads threats and attacks on the reputation of critics of the Bolsonaro government. She also identified congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro (PSL-SP) and councilor of Rio de Janeiro, Carlos Bolsonaro, along with other state representatives and their advisors, as the leaders of what she called a "criminal organization".

In the report, Hasselmann, cited by Oliveira (2019), exposed the use of closed social media groups, especially on Instagram and Signal, by the "militia". "They select one person, and that person is attacked. They hide behind profiles like 'Ódio do Bem - Good Hate', 'Isentões - Exempts', and 'Left Dex'." The congresswoman, in Oliveira's article (2019), revealed to investigation the 'Ódio do Bem' profile had recently attacked 'Lava Jato' Car Wash Operation to protect Senator Flávio Bolsonaro. According to Hasselmann, these groups aim to "attack those considered traitors". Another profile used in this strategy, as per Hasselmann, is 'BolsoFeios'

(in English means Ugly Bolsonaroist), managed by an advisor to Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro.

Hasselmann revealed that a plan was in place to produce a meme or a specific publication every day to destroy reputations. The attacks targeted government officials. Twitter was also used as an instrument by the so-called “militia”, with bots making profiles go viral. ‘Botometer’ data presented by Hasselmann showed that out of Jair Bolsonaro’s Twitter account with 5.4 million followers, over 1.4 million were robots, and out of Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro’s 1.7 million followers, 468,000 were robots. Hasselmann suggested these attacks were financed by public money. Hasselmann’s testimony before the Congress Investigation Commission (CPMI) investigating fake news confirmed robots were used to promote and spread fake news on social media in favor of Bolsonaro’s supporters. The article identified the names of some groups created for this purpose and the possible use of BRL 500,000 in public funds to finance the scheme.

On October 20, 2021, an article titled “Bolsonaro is ‘leader and spokesperson’ for ‘fake news’ in the country, says final report of the Pandemic CPI.” was published in the newspaper *El País* by Joana Oliveira. According to the article, the final report of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission (Pandemic CPI) concluded Bolsonaro and his sons lead a hidden and complex organization that spreads false news in Brazil, aggravating COVID-19 pandemic through disinformation campaign using fake news. The report accuses public agents of criminal conduct and highlights Bolsonaro’s responsibility for encouraging disobedience of lockdown,<sup>13</sup> use of chloroquine, and discouraging use of masks in public places.

The CPI identified that not only public media “omit themselves in their mission to combat rumors and disinformation, but they also actively participated in the process of creating and distributing fake news”. The report indicates that disinformation campaigns were initiated on Facebook with posts made by fake accounts and then digital influencers were hired to disseminate this information. Many of these influencers were paid by agencies hired by the Special Secretariat for Communication (Secom), in expenses that added up to more than four million reais.

The report concludes that these publications are evidence of the practice of the criminal offense of inciting the crime of non-compliance with a sanitary norm. Furthermore, Bolsonaro declared that the vaccine against COVID-19 would cause “death, disability, anomaly”, and on November 26, 2020, he said he would not take the vaccine and urged people not to receive it either, because they would be “harming themselves”.

On July 8, 2020, Facebook removed 73 accounts associated with the offices of Jair Bolsonaro and his sons Flávio Bolsonaro and Eduardo Bolsonaro, who promoted political attacks and hate speech. 35 Facebook and 38 Instagram

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<sup>13</sup>Lockdown” means confinement or total closure. It designates a more radical measure for social distancing, a kind of total blockade for people to stay at home. Federal Health Council (2020) – Ministry of Health. Federal Government. “What is lockdown?”. Brasilia, May 11, 2020. Available at: <https://conselho.saude.gov.br/ultimas-noticias-cns/1165-lockdown-e-isolamento-social-serao-tema-de-encontro-online-do-cns-oops-and-fiocruz-this-wednesday>.

accounts were removed, according to the article “Facebook removes fake accounts linked to Bolsonaro’s office,” published by ‘Meio & Mensagem’ Media & Message Magazine based on information from Reuters News Agency.

Figure 4. Example of Page Removed by Facebook Because of False News



In this Reuters News Agency (2020) article was revealed that individuals attempted to conceal their identities, but Facebook’s investigation uncovered links to the Bolsonaro family. At least one Instagram account had over 917k followers, and more than 880k followers on Facebook. Facebook stated that the network consisted of “various clusters of activity that relied on one or more fake and duplicate accounts to create fictional personas that impersonated media outlets and reporters”.

On June 4, 2022, a report titled “Bolsonaro gave seven false or distorted information per day in 2021, indicates ‘Aos Fatos’ Radar to Facts.” In a June 4, 2022, report titled “Bolsonaro gave seven false or distorted information per day in 2021, indicates Aos Fatos”, journalist Guilherme Mendes revealed that President Jair Bolsonaro made a significant number of false or distorted statements in recent years.

According to the Radar to Facts Agency cited by Mendes (2022), Bolsonaro made 606 false or distorted statements in 2019 (an average of 1.6 per day), 1592 false statements in 2020 (4.36 per day), and 2516 false statements in 2021 (6.9 per day). More than half of these false statements were about COVID-19, with a total of 2183 since the start of the pandemic.

The president also made false or distorted claims about the Brazilian economy and elections, including Brazil created a greater number of formal jobs in 2021 compared to 2020, that it is impossible to audit votes, which has been proven false, and emphasizing his support for the reinstatement of printed voting.

## Discussion

Several influencers and websites specialize in analyzing fake news on the internet, not only to clarifying false information but also to attract more traffic and followers on social media. This role is also played by the mainstream press, with

specialized columns dedicated to fact-checking social media content and reporting fake news. The UOL website<sup>14</sup> is an example of such a platform.

However, due to the crucial role of journalists and media outlets in exposing fake news, President Bolsonaro has been attacking the press and journalists. On June 7, 2022, UOL published an article titled “On Press Freedom Day, Bolsonaro suggests closing Brazilian media,” by journalist Beatriz Gomes (2022). According to the report, President Bolsonaro (PL) once again attacked the Brazilian media when World Press Freedom Day was celebrated. The statement was made during the “Brazil for Life and Family” event at the Planalto Palace, where Bolsonaro defended Fernando Francischini (União Brasil-PR Party), a convicted state representative who had claimed ballot boxes were rigged to prevent votes for Bolsonaro.

In the video available on YouTube<sup>15</sup>, not only did Bolsonaro attack the press but also the TSE (Superior Electoral Court) and electronic voting machines. He admitted to making similar fraudulent claims about the electronic voting machines as the convicted congressman, claimed there is no criminal offense for spreading fake news, and accused the press, especially Globo Network and Folha de São Paulo Newspaper, of being a “factory of fake news”.

This incident is like a previous incident where, according to an article published by R7 website on December 18, 2020, President Bolsonaro attacked the press during the ceremony of Completion of the Training Course for Military Police Officers of Rio de Janeiro. In the report, entitled “The biggest fake news factory is in the mainstream press,” by Marcelino (2020), Bolsonaro declared that “the biggest fake news factory is in the mainstream press, this is a shame for the world”.

On June 6, 2022, Correio Braziliense reported that journalist Lucas Neiva from Congresso em Foco (Congress in Focus) Website was threatened with death after publishing an article exposing a fake news production scheme intended to benefit President Bolsonaro during 2022 election campaign. The article “Reporter is threatened after denouncing pro-Bolsonaro fake news scheme,” by Martins, informs the scheme involved users of the anonymous forum Imageboard, who were willing to pay for the creation of false content to go viral. As a result, Lucas Neiva received numerous threats and had his personal data leaked, and the Congresso em Foco website was taken down by a hacker attack for nine hours on 5 June 2022. The Union of Journalists of the Federal District and the National Federation of Journalists issued a statement of support for Lucas Neiva and condemned the increasing attacks on Brazilian journalists, with 430 attacks recorded in 2021, the highest number since the 1990s.

In response to the attacks on journalists, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) raised Brazil's ranking in the press freedom index, moving the country to 110th position out of 180 nations surveyed. RSF used a new method to develop a

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<sup>14</sup>UOL ‘Confere’ Check (2022). UOL news online. Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/confere/>.

<sup>15</sup>YouTube Channel (2022). “Bolsonaro attacks press and STF after the 2nd Panel upholds the impeachment of Congressman Francischini.” Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iWhxWL66lw&t=12s>.



classification, based on five indicators - political context, legislative framework, economic context, sociocultural context, and security. According to the article “RSF considers Brazil a ‘problematic’ country due to fake news and Bolsonaro’s attacks on the press,” by Abd (2022) from the Associated Press, Brazil’s media scenario remains marked by a strong concentration of private initiatives and interference from government, especially after the arrival of Jair Bolsonaro to power in 2018. The president mobilizes armies of supporters on social networks to discredit the media, being presented as an enemy of State, in a strategy aimed at discrediting the independent work of journalists.

Despite the guarantee of press freedom in Brazil’s 1988 Constitution, the broadcasting and telecommunications structure was deemed old, permissive, and ineffective according to Reporters without Borders (Abd, 2022). RSF notes that the business diversifications of main Brazilian media groups, in response to competition from online platforms, have increased the potential for conflicts of interest and loss of editorial independence. The local press is also increasingly weakened. Furthermore, Brazil remains the second most dangerous country in the region for journalists, with around 30 murdered in the last decade. The most vulnerable are bloggers, radio presenters, and independent journalists who investigate corruption and local politics in small and medium-sized cities. RSF also identified an increase in violence against women journalists.

On October 10, 2022, Folha de São Paulo published on its website “TSE takes journalistic content off the air and talks about fake news,” by Pinho and Mandino. The article stated the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) ordered the removal of five journalistic contents released since December 1, 2022, on the eve of the first round of Brazilian election. TSE claimed they contained fake news about former President Lula, including allegations linking him to the case of Celso Daniel, the murdered PT (Worker’s Party) mayor, Nicaraguan dictatorship, PCC criminal faction, and Satanism. The list of contents included an interview with Jovem Pan, articles by ‘R7’ news website and ‘O Antagonista’ news website, a reproduction of ‘Jovem Pan’ radio interview, and a post by ‘Gazeta do Povo’ news website on Twitter on another topic.

According to the Folha de São Paulo newspaper article, specialists are divided on whether this was a correct action against fake news or a threat to press freedom. Bolsonaro’s supporters opposed the measure, citing a risk to press freedom, while TSE President Alexandre de Moraes defended the decision, claiming that “traditional media can also commit fake news”.

These examples illustrate the use of fake news by Bolsonaro and his political group to manipulate supporters with ideological content on social networks, creating a “reality bubble” like Plato’s (2006) Allegory of the Cave in which prisoners lived in illusion, mistaking it for reality or truth.

## **Conclusions**

This article aimed to investigate the use of fake news by Jair Bolsonaro and his political group, known as the “hatred cabinet”, as a political strategy to

manipulate his followers and control them through social networks. To do this, we examined articles published in traditional media outlets, blogs, and fact-checking sites fed by journalists, as well as some scientific articles about Bolsonaro and fake news.

We used the evidentiary methodology of Ginzburg (2009), which seeks answers in traces, clues, and signs, such as prehistoric hunters, doctors analyzing symptoms to treat patients, psychoanalysis looking for the origins of traumas, and journalists investigating events to report them to readers and audiences.

Through this analysis, we verified the existence of a “Hatred Cabinet”, linked to President Jair Bolsonaro and coordinated by his sons, who are also holders of political positions. This group is inspired by the extreme right ideas of the writer Olavo de Carvalho and is responsible for disseminating fake news on various topics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, gay school kits, homophobia, racism, employment rates, political issues, among others.

We were also able to verify the use by Bolsonaro and his political group of artificial intelligence resources (robots) to boost the dissemination of ideological content with fake news to manipulate his supporters and attack his political enemies on social networks, through “digital militias”. This was confirmed by investigations from Federal Police, decisions of TSE (Superior Electoral Court) and STF (Supreme Court), and reports of CPMI (Parliamentary Investigation Commission) of Federal Chamber and National Congress on fake news and COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on analysis of press articles, we concluded these contents with fake news fed a network of followers who were manipulated into believing and accepting this false information as truth (post-truth) due to the symbolic power of the president, as supported by Bourdieu (2005), as well as the power of discourse.

We believe Bolsonaro’s followers were kept in “reality bubbles” on social networks, just like the prisoners in Plato’s cave (2006). This scheme operated successfully during the campaign and in Bolsonaro Government until it was exposed in the National Congress by the CPMI (Parliamentary Investigation Commission) of fake news and COVID-19, which gathered testimonials and evidence against President Jair Bolsonaro’s allies and sons.

Through press reports, we also verified the decisions of TSE (Electoral Court) and STF (Federal Supreme Court) against the dissemination of fake news by the “hatred cabinet” and allies of President Jair Bolsonaro. The reports showed that the president’s enemies and his political group were the targets of cyber-attacks. One of the main targets of so-called “digital militias” was Minister of Supreme Court, Alexandre de Moraes.

In this paper, we have demonstrated there is no public space for free debate, as argued by Habermas (1984; 2002) and Habermas in Gomes (1998), due to the manipulation of a network of interests, as illustrated by the reports analyzed on the activities of the “hatred cabinet” and digital militias in spreading fake news. The public space where the power of dialogue and rhetoric prevailed has been extinguished in post-modernity, and in its place, an addicted and controlled public sphere has emerged, dominated by economic interests (the owners of communication vehicles) and politicians, such as President Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters.

The main contribution of this article is to emphasize the need to develop a critical sense concerning the contents circulating on social networks, to distrust this information, and to seek reputable sources, as Harari (2020, pp. 287–303) recommends in the chapter “Post-truth – Some fake news lasts forever” from “21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” To avoid being brainwashed, Harari (2020, pp. 300–301) suggests recognizing that distinguishing fact from fiction is “a much more difficult problem than we suppose, and we should make even more effort to distinguish fact from fiction.” Harari (2020, p. 301) further states while no politician says, “all the truth and nothing but the truth,” some politicians are better than others. Similarly, “no newspaper is free of biases and errors, but some make an honest effort to discover the truth, while others are a brainwashing machine.”

According to Harari (2020), it is the responsibility of “all of us to invest time and effort to expose our biases and prejudices and to verify our sources of information”. To avoid being brainwashed and to distinguish fact from fiction, Harari (2020) recommends two general rules: paying for reliable information and reading relevant scientific literature on any subject that seems important. Peer-reviewed articles, books published by renowned academic publishers, and professors’ texts are among the recommended sources.

We also recommend consulting specialized websites that verify fake news, such as UOL Check, and columns created by the main press vehicles with the same objective, as well as blogs and websites that verify information, such as Radar Aos Fatos, Agência Pública, ‘Public Agency’, and the Fact Check Agency which were cited in the reports analyzed in this article. Other initiatives to combat fake news, such as “Hearts and Minds” by Bernardo Sorj and Alice Noujaim (2020) and “Surviving on the Networks – Guide of Citizen” by the same authors (Sorj and Noujaim, 2018), are also recommended. These publications are initiatives of the Democratic Platform, created by Fernando Henrique Cardoso Foundation and Edelstein Center for Social Research, to strengthen democratic culture and institutions in Brazil and Latin America.

In conclusion, we have only scratched the surface of this important topic in this paper. We aim to awaken critical thinking and encourage further research on the phenomenon of post-modernity, including fake news and post-truths in the digital environment and social networks, as well as cyber-attacks and digital militias that manipulate and use these tactics as political strategies.

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