

MOBILE NETWORKS AND THE BRAZILIAN 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: FROM TECHNOLOGICAL DESIGN TO SOCIAL APPROPRIATION

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By 2018, 120 million people in Brazil were using WhatsApp. Given the economics of internet access in Brazil, it is not difficult to understand why. WhatsApp offers access to mobile services with no need for users to purchase additional data plans, usually via voice plans from phone companies. For millions of Brazilians who had thus far been digitally excluded, WhatsApp has become the entry gate to the world of digital connectivity.

But while WhatsApp enables free access to digital tools, it also enables a dangerous one-way misinformation bias. Newspaper and fact-checking sites still rely on paid internet access, making it harder for people receiving misinformation through mobile phones to compare that information with reliable sources. Also, unlike Facebook or Twitter, the original sources of messages forwarded through WhatsApp are absent, and only receivers can access or delete these messages, which remain largely opaque to public scrutiny or any legal accountability.

In 2014 the political appropriation of this application turned WhatsApp's opaqueness into a serious democratic threat when a fake news message went viral, reaching mobiles on a national scale less than 24 hours before the polls opened. The message (falsely) stated that Mr. Alberto Youssef, a financial operator arrested in the corruption investigation "carwash," had died in jail, presumably killed by the Workers' Party not to reveal the participation of party members in the corruption scheme^[i].

It was clear that the use of WhatsApp for misinformation and fake news would be considerably more pervasive in the 2018 elections. According to the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report^[ii], from 2014 to 2018 the number of people using smartphones as a news source in Brazil rose from 35% to 65%, while the number of computer users decreased from 64% to 62%. The use of Facebook as a news source fell 17 points between 2016 and 2018, reaching 52% of the Brazilian sample, while the use of WhatsApp grew, reaching 48%. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents reported using both networks, and 85% had concerns about fake news online.

But WhatsApp's cyphered private architecture makes the idea of misinformation scaling up so quickly and so widely

sound quite counterintuitive: How could an application that has no visibility algorithm or paid microtargeting tools, has no cumulative social information aggregated to messages forwarded, limits message forwarding, and caps the maximum number of people in each group to a few hundred be used to spread encrypted information quickly and recurrently on a national scale and to go viral?

To understand this phenomenon, we studied the flow of messages in WhatsApp groups created in support of six major political campaigns in the Brazilian 2018 presidential elections. We developed methods allowing for the reconstitution of network structuration processes, cross-referencing of data, and analysis of content flow over time, in an effort to overcome the obstacles posed by WhatsApp's private/encrypted information sharing design. We also applied concepts, methods and algorithms originally developed in studies of complex networks, some of which predate the internet^[iii]. Lastly, we focused on the social appropriation of WhatsApp tools by political activists and campaigners. In other words, we looked at how the application's design features acquire political relevance through the use of specific political action know-how.

We concluded that misinformation and the diffusion of fake news through WhatsApp in Bolsonaro's campaign followed the structure of a "bipartite polycentric network," in which multiple groups were interconnected by common participants. This network structure allowed for information to flow and gain visibility exponentially, notwithstanding the "private" communication design that characterizes the application. We were able to identify patterns ruling this network behavior, reconstituting and graphically representing part of this network's topology, as well as to analyze its metrics, dynamic of misinformation diffusion and preferential pathways of content flow over time^[iv].

Figure 1, below, illustrates our findings. The image reflects the circulation of a fake news message, which stated that Brazilian Superior Electoral Court had "nullified 7.2 million votes given to Bolsonaro, preventing him from winning the elections in the first round"^[v]. The message flowed across several WhatsApp groups, transmitted by individuals who belonged to more than one group. In less than 4.5 hours,



it was forwarded 118 times and reached 6,756 out of 9,812 people inside the network analyzed. The relationship among groups was asymmetrical, with some groups being more central than others in the process of fake news diffusion.

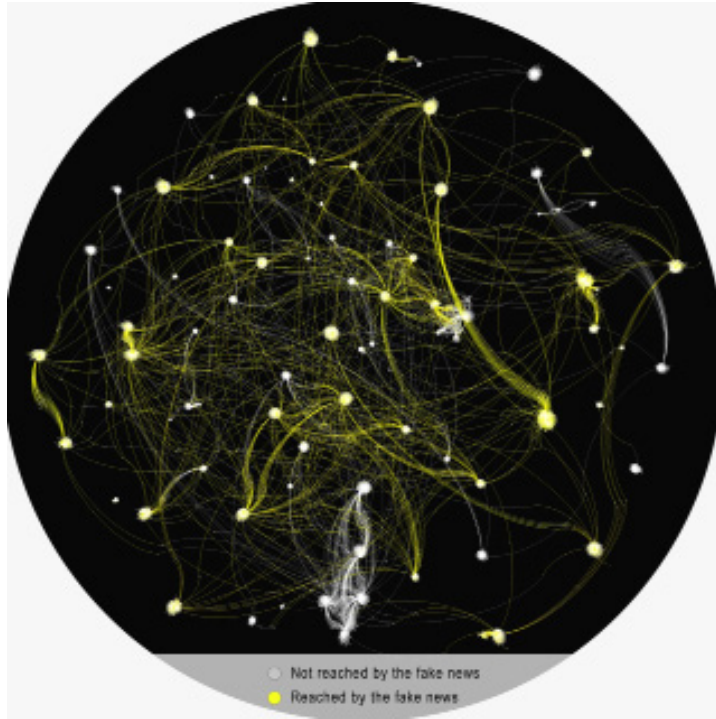


Figure 1. Dissemination of a fake news message in a network of interconnected WhatsApp groups.

Such network structure also makes it possible for segmented campaigns to be undertaken via WhatsApp, even if this application does not allow for the use of targeting algorithms. The message reached only groups in support to Bolsonaro, not affecting groups campaigning for the other candidates in our sample.

In light of our previous studies^[vi], we argue that Bolsonaro supporters neither discovered nor began to use this network structure overnight. Rather, their social appropriation of WhatsApp is part of a longer-term learning process in other online networks.

In 2011 neo-Pentecostal fundamentalist leaders allied with Bolsonaro made similar use of Twitter to mobilize diverse interconnected religious groups quickly against a draft bill seeking to criminalize homophobia and to attack the PT government on the (false) grounds that it was distributing “gay kits” in public schools. The same tactics and themes have been constantly used to exert pressure in Congress ever since, and they have now been turned against the presidency. It is no coincidence that misinformation and fake news involving gay kits and pedophilia were widely publicized against Bolsonaro’s main contender in 2018, Fernando Haddad.

Another important segment became visible in 2014, when a series of Facebook pages focused on punitivism, politically incorrect humor, anticommunist paranoia and military pride started urging Bolsonaro to seek the presidency. This paranoia was particularly present in attacks against judges and federal courts accused of plots to prevent his election, as in the example in figure 1 above.

In the 2018 election, the misinformation strategy was centered around raising opponent rejection among undecided voters and polling abstention^[vii]. Bolsonaro started the campaign as a clearly rejected candidate—around 35-40% of the electorate stated that they would not vote for him under any circumstances. The campaign needed to raise opponent rejection and abstentions dramatically to have a chance, and it succeeded. According to Datafolha, Haddad’s rejection rose from 20% in August to 41% in October, while Bolsonaro was rejected by 44%. Haddad’s rejection was particularly high in an electorally relevant segment: neo-Pentecostal protestants (63% rejected Haddad and 32% rejected Bolsonaro).

Advances in methods for analyzing such phenomena can offer both new research issues and new possibilities of institutional accountability against this serious threat to democracy.

Notes

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[i] https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2014/10/26/interna_politica,583531/boato-nas-redes-sociais-diz-que-youssef-esta-morto-policia-federal-desmente.shtml

[ii] Reuters. Digital News Report (Oxford: Reuters Institute/University of Oxford, 2018). <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf>.

[iii] Luther Gerlach’s study on polycentric networks and Anatol Rapoport’s study on large sociograms are examples.

[iv] The paper, discussed at the Latin American Social Sciences Council (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales) and the Brazilian National Science and Technology Institute for Digital Democracy (INCT.DD), will be presented at the Brazilian Association of Political Communication Scholars, and published as a journal article and a book chapter, in the coming months.

[v] <http://www.tse.jus.br/hotsites/esclarecimentos-informacoes-falsas-eleicoes-2018/anulacao-voto-justica-eleitoral.html>

[vi] Dos Santos, João Guilherme Bastos, Karina Silva dos Santos, and Vanessa Cristine Cardozo Cunha. La red del “mito” 2018: Articulaciones políticas de grupos de extrema derecha en Whatsapp. Paper presented at the Conferência Latino-Americana de Ciências Sociais, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2018.

Dos Santos, João Guilherme Bastos, and Vanessa Cristine Cardozo Cunha. “Bandido bom é bandido morto”: A função da retórica da intransigência na construção da identidade política do deputado Jair Bolsonaro no Facebook.” Paper presented at the Congresso Brasileiro de comunicação e marketing político, São Bernardo do Campo: UESP, 2014.

Alde, Alessandra, and João Guilherme Bastos dos Santos. Petições Públicas e batalhas digitais. Paper presented at the XXI Compós, Juiz de Fora/MG, 2012.

[vii] This move had already been perceived in interviews conducted in 2017 by the “Technologies of Communication and Politics Research Group,” at the Rio de Janeiro State University.

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