Bolsonaro's hate network: From the fringes to the presidency
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Abstract: This chapter discusses the origins, development, and characteristics the hate network built around the President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro. How is it structured? How does it work? What factors have allowed it to exist? How does it affect the health of Brazilian democracy? It argues that Bolsonaro's followers took advantage from an institutional crisis taking place in the late 2010s. At that time, the legacy media provided a massive coverage associating PT (Workers' Party), which was ahead of the presidency, to corruption, thus fostering a hate campaign against it. In that scenario, Bolsonaro emerged as the leader of the far-right opposition to PT. His followers firstly built a network on Facebook, using fake profiles and mixing hate speech with humor. Coordinated unofficially by several cabinet staff members, this network articulates the official profiles of the Bolsonaro family to followers and sympathizers and a vast array of anonymous supporting pages. This structure allowed Bolsonaro's activists to blur the boundaries between official and spurious discourses, and powered a series of flaming wars against political adversaries and reporters perceived as hostile to Bolsonaro's interests.

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From the fringes to the presidency

1   Introduction

The first interview with Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's elected president, on November 1, 2018, was different from any other before. Its scenario was quite exotic: a handful of microphones positioned on a surfboard. Traditional news media outlets, such as the newspapers *O Globo*, *O Estado de São Paulo*, and *Folha de S. Paulo*, were not allowed to take part in it. Still, the most notable part of the interview was its content. Bolsonaro minimized the importance of the news media and praised social media. According to him, "the people will decide which media vehicles will survive, and which won't" (Andrade & Maia, 2018). Ten days later, Bolsonaro presented, through his Twitter account, a list "of excellent information channels on Youtube." It included notorious hate speech disseminators, such as Olavo de Carvalho, Nando Moura, and Bernardo Küster. Of course, Bolsonaro is not the only far-right leader of the executive branch who uses hate speech as a part of his political arsenal. Yet, the open manner through which he does it is remarkable. The coordination of his hate speech and fake news strategy is in the hands of a group known as "Gabinete do Ódio" ("Office of Hate"). The president's son Carlos Bolsonaro is a notorious member of this group.

This chapter analyzes Bolsonaro's hate speech network's nature and political impact. How is it structured? How does it work? What factors have allowed it to exist? How does it affect the health of Brazilian democracy? The chapter is organized as follows. First, it presents the political context of Bolsonaro's presidency. We argue that as authoritarian as he can be, Bolsonaro was not the prime guilty party in terms of the crisis of democracy. Instead, he benefited from an already existing crisis, associated with the "Lava Jato" ("Car Wash") operation, a major anti-corruption initiative that had a strong impact on the Brazilian political system by fostering a climate of distrust with regard to the representative institutions. The second section explores the building of Bolsonaro's hate speech network, and the third section analyzes the structure of this network.

2   The institutional context of hate speech in Brazil

Hate speech is a pervasive phenomenon. It exists in most societies, if not all. Conventional wisdom associates hate speech with fringe groups, rather than with representative institutions. Famous exceptions include Nazi Germany and the Rwandan genocide. In the first case, the defeat in World War I and a huge economic crisis provided a fertile ground for hate politics. In the other, longstanding ethnic rivalry and civil war did the same. None of these factors was present in Brazil. Less than a decade before, the future looked promising for Brazilian democracy. Brazil experienced an economic boom. Poverty diminished. The country adopted progressive policies aiming to promote racial and gender equality. Accountability institutions, such as the judiciary, the prosecutors' office, and the press, became more active than before (Praça & Taylor, 2012). According to political scientists, this would provide a solid barrier against human rights abuses (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Against this backdrop, Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency has been described as an "illiberal backlash" (Albuquerque, 2021; Hunter & Power, 2019). How could this happen?

To understand what has gone wrong in Brazil, it is necessary to take a closer look at its political institutions. The web of accountability institutions, which includes, among others, the judiciary, the prosecutors' office, the federal police, and the press (Power & Taylor, 2011), deserves special attention in this respect. According to an influent view, the active role of these institutions is a key factor

in building a solid democracy, as they provide a barrier against the concentration of powers in the hands of the executive power (O'Donnell, 1998) and fight corruption (Power & Taylor, 2011). In this sense, they work as an immune system for democracy, preventing it from being infected by external, authoritarian agents (Albuquerque, 2021; Mounk, 2018). In line with this perspective, it is possible to suggest that the crisis of Brazilian democracy resulted from the passivity of these institutions. Still, this did not happen. In fact, these institutions have been very active in Brazil in the last decades. The problem is not that they refrained from acting but the manner in which they did it.

Autoimmune diseases provide a valuable metaphor for understanding this. In such diseases, the immune system mistakes parts of the body as foreign threats and attacks them. In extreme cases, this can lead to the death of the organism (Albuquerque, 2021). The "Lava Jato" ("Car Wash") operation provides a powerful example of how the autoimmune disease logic undermined Brazilian democracy. Conducted by Federal Judge Sergio Moro and a team of federal prosecutors led by Deltan Dallagnol, the operation originated as a judicial investigation aiming to tackle corruption in Petrobrás, the Brazilian state-owned oil company. However, its focus soon changed, and Lava Jato acquired a clearer political tone, as it became primarily oriented against the former President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, and the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, hereafter PT; Meyer, 2018). As a consequence of Lava Jato, Lula was imprisoned in 2018 and forbidden to run for the presidency (Engelmann, 2020; Silva, 2020).

The historical significance of Lava Jato has been disputed in the academic milieu. For some authors committed to the "web of accountability" perspective, it was a turning point for corruption control in Brazil. According to Professor Ana Luiza Aranha (2020): "The success of the Lava Jato investigations resulted from a historic level of coordination among Brazilian institutions of accountability, suggesting that Lava Jato might represent a turning point in the effectiveness of Brazil's web of accountability institutions" (p. 94). Recent evidence suggests that Aranha is right but for the wrong reasons. In 2019, a hacker accessed the messages exchanged by the team of prosecutors ahead of the case and leaked them to the news site *Intercept Brasil*, which published them in the "Vaza Jato" news series. These messages suggest that Judge Moro, the prosecutors' team, and journalists colluded in convicting Lula, motivated by political reasons (Duarte & Intercept Brasil, 2000).

The massive media coverage of Lava Jato systematically associated representative politics with corruption (Albuquerque & Gagliardi, 2020; Damgard, 2018). By doing this, it fostered political polarization and suspicion regarding the democratic institutions. In special, a hate campaign against Lula and his partisans ("petistas" and leftists, in general) took place. Digital haters even commemorated the passing of Arthur, Lula's seven-year-old grandson, who died from sepsis (Arias, 2019). Lava Jato provided the context that allowed the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff to take place in 2016. It also resulted in the condemnation of Lula in 2017, which put him in jail in 2018. Given that Lula was the clear favorite to win the 2018 presidential election, his removal from the dispute opened the way for Bolsonaro's victory. Bolsonaro invited Moro to serve as his minister of justice. Moro accepted and worked in his government for nine months. All in all, the institutions that were supposed to contain hate speech fostered it.

3   Building a hate network with public money

The election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 was a turning point for political communication strategies in Brazil. For the first time, a fringe politician won a national election without massive television electoral campaigning (Santos & Tanscheit, 2019). For almost three decades, Bolsonaro was known for violent statements and no significant legislation (Nascimento et al., 2018). How could a local deputy without any political power become the leader of a national far-right movement? In the aftermath of the Lava Jato institutional corrosion, Bolsonaro voiced feelings of distrust and anger. The digital communication strategy extended far beyond managing official social media profiles. In fact, the president spearheaded a vast network of operatives that was built many years before the 2018 election (Alves, 2019a). This section describes the early creation of Bolsonaro's digital communication network.

Once Jair Bolsonaro was elected as the Brazilian president, his confrontational style did not diminish. On the contrary, his fiery speech was directed toward anyone who criticized his actions. Bolsonaro's digital network ("Bolsonaristas") spread hate against journalists, scientists, artists, and politicians (Mello, 2020). Not even members of his own government or the allied branch of the parliament was safe. In several noteworthy events, bolsonaristas harassed ministers and party members that were perceived as enemies. A group named the "Office of Hate" ("Gabinete do Ódio") was

referenced as the coordinator of the attacks. The Office of Hate was built by a group of digital-savvy young conservatives employed by Bolsonaro's family to create memes and videos on social media. Bolsonaro's official channels did not publish this inflammatory content. In fact, the Office of Hate owns many sock puppets—fake profiles dedicated to amplifying hate speech (Alves, 2019b; Lerner, 2020). This anonymous network mobilizes followers to smear political targets usually as a joke.

The Office of Hate is a shady operation composed of young supporters hired to manage fake parody profiles to increase Bolsonaro's visibility. The model dates back to 2013. It was designed by Carlos Bolsonaro, who began to monitor pages and Facebook groups that supported his father and his ideals. Carlos thought that the mass media had a strong left bias and ignored conservative thinking (Gaspar, 2019). Back then, Jair was one of Brazil's most voted for federal deputies in Rio de Janeiro. He also appeared sporadically on television in auditorium and humor shows. Fast-growing social media platforms, such as Facebook, provided a way to spread conspiracy theories or hate speech online. This was the main driver of Bolsonaro's popularity in the years to come, along with a network of WhatsApp groups.

At the same time, Bolsonaro had a relatively popular Facebook presence, not only on his official fan page but also in fan-club style parodies that replicated faster than content moderation efforts. In his research, Carlos Bolsonaro found parodies, such as "Bolsonaro Zuero" (Joker Bolsonaro) and "Bolsonaro Opressor" (Opressive Bolsonaro), which were anonymous Facebook pages that celebrated Jair Bolsonaro. These parodies framed his father as an authentic myth that challenged political correctness and spoke from the heart (Ribeiro et al., 2016). They were also quite popular, followed by circa 30,000 people at the time. Carlos posted to his page in April 2013: "I'm having a bad laugh with the page 'Bolsonaro Zuero.'"

Carlos was responsible for contacting anonymous managers and arranging meetings with Bolsonaro. In September 2013, Jair Bolsonaro joined a live interview transmitted by the YouTube channel "Reaça Zuero" ("Joker Reactionary"). He talked with three young people who appeared on camera wearing masks depicting a photo of the far-right politician and a crown for the "king of lulz." In October 2013, another live appearance took place when the deputy received one of the anonymous creators in his office at the National Congress. Five years before Bolsonaro was elected, the fake network managers had direct access to Bolsonaro's personal cabinet as a federal deputy. Again, the interviewer disguised himself, covering his face with sunglasses and a wig.

Figure 1: Reaça Zuero's live transmission of Jair Bolsonaro interviewed by anonymous creators of far-right content and Bolsonaro in 2013
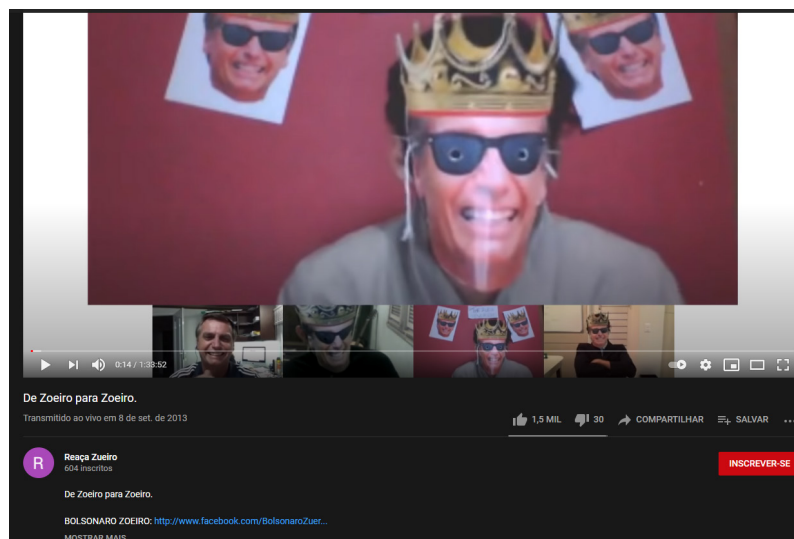
Source: *Reaça Zueiro (2013)*

So far, there is no evidence that Bolsonaro funded this video. However, it is worth noting that Bolsonaro's political district is São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which are Brazilian southeastern states. The first youngsters hired were actually from Ceará, a northeastern state. It is quite improbable that Bolsonaro initiated the strategy of parody accounts at the very beginning. All the available federal and journalistic evidence found suggests that he later hired the creators to work as members of his staff (Gaspar, 2019). Even so, there is no doubt that Bolsonaro's family was responsible for orchestrating and financing the managers, greatly enhancing their production and reach. The once playful humorous accounts became a central part of Bolsonaro's network of hate.

Bolsonaro Zuero stands for a model of recruiting young people in public offices to create unofficial content. Journalistic investigations found that phantom workers were employed by Bolsonaro's family as early as 2015 (Ghirotto et al., 2019). In 2019, José Mateus Sales Gomes (Bolsonaro Zuero) and Tércio

Arnaud Thomaz (Bolsonaro Opressor) held positions as the president's advisors. This strategy expanded beyond the two parodies, coordinating a vast network of fakes and copycats.

The core idea was to create several political personas as a humorous parody of Bolsonaro. Members of the communication team anonymously coordinated several false profiles. The strategy attracted the spotlights when Bolsonaro was elected president. In July 2020, Facebook deactivated an inauthentic network attributed to the Bolsonaro family. It had 35 accounts on Facebook and 38 on Instagram aimed at spreading misinformation and harassing opponents. Among the accounts deactivated was "Bolsofeios" ("Ugly Bolsonaros"), which had hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram. Bolsofeios was an active collaborator of the group that defined targets and coordinated digital attacks on Bolsonaro's behalf. The account manager, Eduardo Guimarães, served as a direct advisor to Eduardo Bolsonaro (Rezende, 2020). He created the persona from the deputy's office using his personal email.

Among multiple hate speech cases driven by the network, Bolsofeios took part in the persecution of *Folha de São Paulo* reporter Patricia Campos Mello. During the 2018 election, her stories revealed business owners' illegal donations to finance services of message forwarding against the Workers' Party on WhatsApp. Other accounts, such as Bolsonewsss and Bolsonaro Opressor 2.0, administered by Tércio Thomaz, are examples of this pattern. Investigations also found false profiles managed by communication advisors from federal and state deputies who support Bolsonaro, such as Alana Passos and Anderson Moraes.

One of the most significant outcomes of this political communication model was Gil Diniz (Baptista Jr., 2020). Diniz was a poor postal service worker. His life changed when he created the Facebook page Carteiro Reaça (Reactionary Postman), which enthusiastically praised Bolsonaro. He introduced himself to Eduardo in 2014, who hired him for his parliamentary staff. Diniz was responsible for operating false profiles to share memes and positive news on social media. In the 2018 election, São Paulo elected him as state representative with over 214,000 votes. Diniz's support relied mainly on the far-right wave that elected several digital influencers. During his term, the public prosecuting office accused him of an illegal salary deduction. The investigation discovered that the deputy had created his fake news operation to harass political opponents (Dal Piva & Saconi, 2019).

4   Bolsonarista network structure on Facebook

The Brazilian news media coined the term "Office of Hate" when far-right activists flooded social media with attacks against democratic institutions. It represents the staff in charge of digital communications that occupy a room close to Bolsonaro's. The investigation held by the National Congress raised a large trove of evidence, such as payments to advisors and companies. However, this strategy is certainly not the only method used by Bolsonaro's communication network. In this section, we will present the empirical results of a social network analysis of the connections between dozens of false pages that amplify far-right hate speech in Brazil.

The operation of the Office of Hate represents the strategizing head of a vast fake news network. The main feature is hiring young people with public resources to operate fake profiles and spread hatred on social media. It is an ideological community articulated on digital channels by Bolsonaro's family and allies, who define political targets and schedule the messages. In general, these publicly funded fake news networks are part of the parliamentary quotas for hiring staffers. In this sense, these profiles are the most faithful and are closely supervised by the family.

However, it is unlikely that all the channels are sock puppets orchestrated by the president's family. Cesarino (2019) argues in favor of a layered organization of Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups. This idea is quite useful for understanding their general communication network. At the center is the family itself and its closest advisors. They control the official accounts and groups, as well as anonymous profiles, on a wide range of platforms. Digital activists and supporters are in the intermediate circles. They manage most of the parodies and amplify the attacks and frames initially created by the advisors. Finally, profiles of ordinary people contribute by sharing content with their friends. In this sense, the network is orchestrated by the family and its closest allies, advisors, and employees. Nevertheless, the network overlaps with independent activists who share the ideology and causes of the far-right.

To determine the pages of an extended Bolsonarista network, we sought to retrieve and organize digital traces. This study analyzed the following network between right fan pages on Facebook. The data collection procedure used was automated snowball sampling. From a list of 500 right fan pages discovered by previous studies (Alves, 2019a), a crawler extracted the following network (i.e., the pages followed by the seeds). This is a network mapping technique that adds

new nodes to the initial sample. Data cleansing procedures kept only the pages that mentioned the term "Bolso" in the title. We selected this word because most formerly known channels used some adaptation of the name "Bolsonaro" online, such as Bolsonaro Zuero.

Finally, Gephi's social network analysis software processed the connections to identify the network structure. Figure 2 shows the result of the application of the Force Atlas 2 layout on the network composed of 85 nodes and 1,255 edges. The size of the nodes represents the degree of input, that is, how many network pairs follow that page.

Figure 2: Bolsonaro's expanded communication network on Facebook

The result shows a very cohesive network structure organized around the Bolsonaro family members. Jair, Eduardo, Flavio, and Carlos had by far the highest indegrees. This pattern indicates their reference role with regard to the other channels. However, the network of fake news and hate speech operates far beyond official profiles. A large number of parodies, hyper-partisan media, and meme factories increases the numbers of flaming wars waged against the adversaries.

One of the main puzzles in terms of understanding Bolsonaro's digital communication is the dynamic relations between the official discourse and the apocryphal content. This does not mean that the president and his family are not themselves producers of hate speech. The aggressive behavior is constantly observed on social media and in interviews. One example is the smear campaign against journalists who revealed the Flavio Bolsonaro illegal scheme of improper salary deductions (Mello, 2020). One point to note is that there is an infrastructure carefully set up to guide favorable themes and frameworks in the public agenda.

In this network, specific roles are performed by different types of Facebook pages. The combination of social network and engagement metrics shows some hierarchies between official and anonymous support pages. The "talking about" metric counts external mentions on Facebook, and indegree is a connection metric that counts how many followers a node has in the studied sample.

Figure 3 shows how the members of the Bolsonaro family stand out both in terms of metrics of popularity and as a reference in the network. They are the only pages located in the upper right quadrant. However, SomosTodosBolsonaro, Bolsonéas, Operation Bolsonaro (Bolsonaro's Operation), and Bolsonaro Opressor 2.0 are in the lower right quadrant, which means they yield large popularity but are not followed to a great extent by other pages. They are the parodies and political personas that act as mobilizers and agitators of sympathizers. Bolsonaro's communication staff operates anonymously through some of the pages, investigative reporters have shown. Bolsonéas, for example, was run by the team of state representative Alana Passos (Brandt et al., 2020). Many of these accounts are financed by entrepreneurs (Toledo, 2018) and benefit from the monetization of content on YouTube, and some receive advertising resources from the federal government.

Some nodes have few public mentions but several connections in the network: Familia Bolsonaro, Jair Bolsonaro #President, and Criei essa página pra ver se o Bolsonaro me paga pela Zueira (I created this page to see whether Bolsonaro would pay me for the lulz). They are not financed or contracted by the Bolsonaro

Figure 3: Scatterplot of Bolsonaro's network
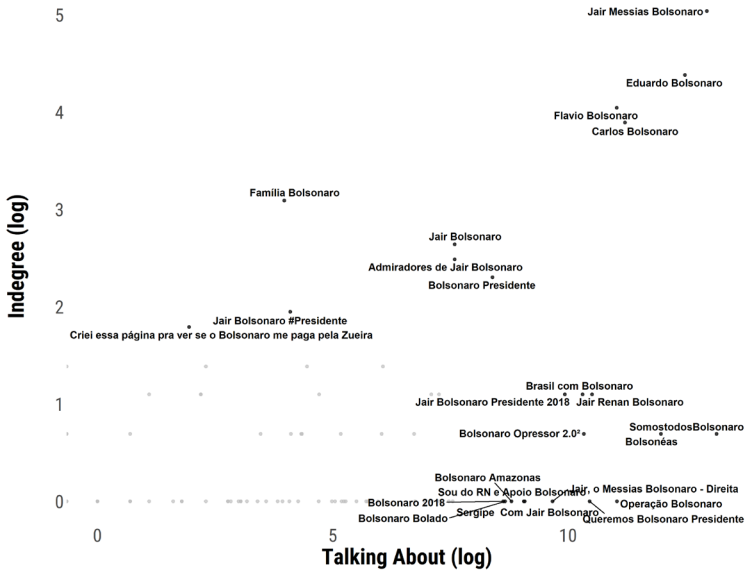
family or its political supporters. However, these smaller pages follow the general trends and frames advanced by the far-right network. This facet of the problem portrays acts of the co-creation of meaning by the sympathizers themselves.

There is an assemblage of strategies created by the supporters themselves. Before the 2018 election, Carlos Bolsonaro promoted a meeting with several participants to articulate this coordination strategy. Leaders of the movement for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, digital influencers, and content creators attended the meeting. Often, activists cite the hashtag #MarketeirosdoJair or refer to themselves ironically as robots as an internal community joke to articulate actions.

This broad network is very active and engaged in content production, usually using memes and conducting flaming wars. One example of such an orchestration was the harassment and hate speech against the investigative journalist and award-winner Patricia Campos de Mello. The reporter published a series of news

pieces revealing that Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign benefited from illegal services of bulk messages sent to the WhatsApps of Brazilian citizens in the second turn. In response to the publications, Bolsonaro's support network resorted to a massive public shaming campaign, spreading multiple sexist and misogynous attacks, including saying that the reporter had exchanged the scoop for sexual favors (Neder, 2021). This type of smear campaign against female journalists is a pattern emerging from Bolsonaro's family that has been repeated very often by the president himself. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has tallied 580 attacks against media in Brazil during 2020, with most of them directed toward female journalists (2021).

5   Concluding remarks

Jair Bolsonaro revolutionized Brazilian political communication, both in terms of its formal aspects and content. For the first time, a candidate won a presidential dispute without having the mass media as his campaigning backbone. Instead, he used social media as his main communication resource. Even during his term ahead of the presidency, he has privileged social media over mass media. His communication style is extremist: Bolsonaro often expresses racist and misogynistic views. Hate speech and fake news are important elements of his rhetorical toolkit. How could this happen? To start with, Bolsonaro took advantage of a previously existing institutional crisis. The same institutions that were supposed to defend citizens' rights attacked them. This provided hate speech groups with tremendous opportunities. Social media offered them the means to exploit this situation. Bolsonaro used these groups for his own benefit. In exchange for their support, he hired them as part of his government's communication team.

In this paper, we demonstrated how Bolsonaro's ferocious hate speech campaigns are orchestrated on social media by multiple anonymous accounts that enhance the visibility of sexist and misogynous attacks by the president and his family. This network is funded and supported by public resources since some of its administrators were hired to work in the deputy cabinet of Bolsonaro's family elected members. Upon his election as president, Bolsonaro increased this modus operandi to harass, persecute, and publicly shame anyone considered an enemy or a traitor. Social media platforms should enforce policies against hate speech to moderate and deplatformize such speech coming from elected officials in Brazil.

Further research is necessary to understand how Bolsonaro's family coordinates the attacks and how alt-tech platforms are used to determine targets and spread hate speech in Brazil.

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