



The Brazilian Far-right and New Media Models: the Role of Disintermediation in Bolsonaro's Discourse

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Abstract. This paper is based on a study of Jair Bolsonaro's disintermediated discourse, specifically his Instagram account during the pre-electoral period leading up to the 2022 presidential elections in Brazil. By communicating directly with his audience, Bolsonaro exemplifies how new technology disrupts traditional media models. This analysis seeks to comprehend the communicative significance of disintermediation within the discourse of the Brazilian far-right. Disintermediation, as a recent phenomenon, alters the communicative logic with respect to traditional media systems. Utilizing critical discourse analysis, pragmatic analysis of language, visual analysis, and Grounded Theory, we employ a qualitative methodology to examine Bolsonaro's discourse. Data collection spanned from February to May 2022, preceding the official campaign period in Brazil. This study holds particular importance in understanding the present state of discursive construction within projects associated with the far-right, including phenomena such as fake news, filter bubbles, disinformation, political polarization, and the absence of truth control mechanisms. We conclude that the old Brazilian media model has not yet perished, and a fully formed new model has not yet emerged, enabling authoritarian figures.¹

Keywords: Bolsonaro, Disinformation, Disintermediation, Instagram, Political Polarization.

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1 Introduction

On a fateful day in early November 2022, a dramatic turn of events unfolded in Brazil. Left-wing Workers' Party (PT) candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had one month earlier narrowly defeated the incumbent and right-wing Social Liberal Party candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro to become the President of Brazil. Voices cried out for army intervention in parliament, accusing the PT party of corruption and vehemently rejecting its victory in the election.

In the aftermath, thousands of Bolsonaro supporters camped outside various military headquarters, rallying for military intervention. A week after Lula da Silva's inauguration on 1 January 2023, the protests reached a climax. Protesters in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, with no resistance from the Military Police, stormed the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial powers, reminiscent of the shocking scenes of the 2021 US Capitol invasion. This attempted coup embodied the escalating violent rhetoric that had become increasingly prevalent during the last two electoral campaigns.

The Bolsonaro campaign, much like in 2018, relied on a deluge of memes, images, and viral TikTok videos of political influencers disseminated through social media. These campaign messages often exhibited cognitive dissonance, distorting reality and blurring the lines of truth. Unprecedented elements dominated the campaign, including demonstrations in favor of military intervention, claims of electoral fraud and communist conspiracies, denial of scientific facts and climate change. The campaign dehumanized the other candidate, Lula da Silva, portraying him as a monster through a relentless barrage of character attacks.

Aggressive rhetoric and open attacks on democracy spread throughout the country, fueled by information bubbles and segmented algorithms that intensified political polarization. This normalization underscores how the structure of digital capitalism facilitates radicalization. During Bolsonaro's years in government, he frequently used his social media platforms, such as his characteristic weekly live broadcasts, to strengthen and rely on a support base to whom he offered an unfiltered, highly polarized narrative.

This research is based on the study of Bolsonaro's disintermediated discourse, with focus on his Instagram Live videos during the pre-electoral period leading up to the 2022 presidential elections in Brazil. Given the loss of credibility of traditional media, several politicians take advantage of these online platforms to speak directly to citizens, constructing disintermediated speeches. Through this case study, we propose a discussion of the understudied role of disintermediation on the Brazilian extreme right.

1.1 The new media ecology: From traditional media system to disintermediated political communication

The Brazilian media sector has been characterized by the formation of traditional media conglomerates of reference, such as *O Globo* or *Folha de S.Paulo*, the so-called "big media" sustained on the pillars of the fourth estate during the 20th century [1]. One of its main peculiarities lies in the fact that the media in Brazil have been, for the most part, privately owned [2]. Following the proposals of [3, 4], researchers tended to interpret and classify the Brazilian media system from a polarized pluralist perspective,

derived from a model applicable to countries that experienced anti-democratic processes in the past and are trying to rebuild their autonomy and freedom.

This media system involves a relationship between media and partisan politics mediated by an active and conditioning presence of the state [5]. [6] explains how legislators acquired radio and television concession companies in a private capacity, and then participate in the legislative committees that regulate the media in Brazil and provide public media service. This practice contributes, therefore, to maintaining political power [7, 8], restoring their authority over the control of information. All these factors make difficult to categorize the Brazilian traditional media model [9].

However, when we refer to the new media ecosystem [10, 11], we emphasize multimedia and interactive communications, of which disintermediated political communication is a part, as well as informational disorders [12, 13, 14].

This scenario, which began to emerge with the digital transformation since the end of the twentieth century, has led to profound changes in the production, distribution and consumption of media content [15], to the point that young people inform themselves mainly through social networks [16].

Networked digital technologies achieved considerable penetration in less than two decades. Technological and cultural convergences have favored many-to-many communication and broken the broadcasting model [11]. By breaking the paradigm in which traditional media held the reins and freeing the transmitting pole, online platforms enable anyone to produce and distribute content [15]. Thus, since the early years of the 21st century, online social networks have also enabled political campaigns.

The disintermediated communication strategies of Bolsonaro [17] and other politicians such as President of Mexico Andrés Manuel López Obrador [18], to communicate directly with citizens, work mainly due to the liberation of media production and transmission [15] and the creation of media platforms [19, 20].

Bolsonaro built fertile ground for communicating directly with citizens by discrediting the press and journalists during his political campaign in 2018 and throughout his term as President of Brazil [21]. He criticized the work of journalists, accused them of lying, and, during the Covid-19 pandemic, refused to attend press conferences, grant media interviews, or update data, leaving journalists with virtually no official information for months and contributing to disinformation processes [22]. His Instagram profile is an example of this: there he creates a discourse loaded with attacks on the press and the political opposition and flattery for his government and his allies, generating disinformation and political polarization [17, 23, 24].

1.2 **Bolsonarist far-right influencer**

Over the past decade, research on personalism, supremacy, and their relationship to the phenomenon of far-right influencers in Latin America has expanded significantly [25]. These studies aim to critically examine the concept of "influencer" and understand its regional nuances within historical, social, and political contexts [26].

Describing political leaders as influencers acknowledges their capacity to shape people's opinions and behaviors through these platforms, much like influencers do in other domains [27]. Contemporary political leaders often work on crafting their own personal brand, akin to influencers. This involves establishing a well-defined public

image, employing a specific communication style, and engaging consistently with their audience [28].

Media disintermediation is a central characteristic of the influencer ethos. It allows these influencers to bypass traditional media intermediaries and engage with their audience in what appears to be a more direct relationship [17]. These influencers act as mediators between order and disorder within the social sphere [29]. Some influencers accompany their disintermediated discourses with narratives that reinforce various forms of political heroism [30, 31]. In the case of Brazil, since 2013, the Brazilian media system has been profoundly affected by a loss of trust among viewers [32]. The traditional media industry, under scrutiny, laid the groundwork for a polarized society that no longer believes in the traditional media model [33]. Instead, people turn to social media for trustworthy information, triggering a parallel process of truth production to replace that of traditional media [34].

Bolsonaro-aligned far-right politicians who act as influencers are not entirely independent and can be defined as political influencers since they cultivate audiences on social networks and 'sell' an extremist ideology [27, 28]. One of the most significant communicative activities of influencers close to Bolsonaro is their activism on social networks, contributing to the construction of an "outsider" identity compared to traditional forms of politics [35].

As authorities in digital spaces, these influencers claim to purvey truth, and their audiences claim that their opinions and testimonies are legitimate sources of knowledge [36, 37]. It is in this intermediate space of constructing alternative models, that the figure of the political influencer takes on particular value, meaning, and significance.

2 Methodology

This study derives from a series of investigations we carried out of Bolsonaro's live broadcasts, transmitted by the Brazilian television network *Jovem Pan* and shared simultaneously on social networks during his presidential term. Bolsonaro's construction of a media structure parallel to conventional media was a form of institutionalization. We used that institutionalization as a starting point to understand the political communication strategy of disintermediation that reached its peak in the 2022 election campaign.

To select the sample of live videos, we turned to Bolsonaro's Instagram profile (@jairmessiasbolsonaro), an official account that rose from 19.5 to 25.2 million followers from when we conducted a preliminary study, in December 2021, until we concluded our research in September 2023, a figure close to 12% of the country's population.

We conducted a preliminary study of the live videos broadcast in December 2021 to identify the main themes addressed by the president and to generate initial codes. We used those in subsequently applied qualitative methods of discourse analysis. This provided inferences on subjective and intersubjective issues arising from an asymmetrical relationship between the ruler and the people, which allowed us to identify initial categories of the contents of the Instagram Live videos [17].

To deepen our analysis, we selected a sample of 10 videos broadcast between February and May 2022, which made up a total of 8 hours, 3 minutes, and 11 seconds

of broadcasting. Our main objective was to identify Bolsonaro's predominant speech techniques from the recording of the main codes and language resources, as well as the topics addressed. For this purpose, we applied a narrative and thematic analysis, including manifest and subliminal contents, and critical discourse analysis from a postpositivist hermeneutic approach [38, 39, 40, 41].

We identified seven categories for the messages: informative, ideological, paternalistic, negationist, authoritarian, aggressive, and discrediting of the media [24].

In the next stage, we analyzed Bolsonaro's non-verbal communication, with the aim of revealing its influence on Bolsonaro's image-making as a political leader. We used an analysis technique based on various visual methodology works, considering the image as a central sociological element capable of generating force fields [42, 43, 44]. Likewise, we applied Grounded Theory [45] according to the proposals of [46] and [47] for the analysis of visual products, finally focusing the study on aspects such as the environment, kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage, and physical appearance, all contextualized through the author's ethnographic work in Brazil during the electoral period with Bolsonaro supporters.

The analysis proved the hypothesis that Bolsonaro's nonverbal communication strengthens the leader's credibility and normalizes his violence as a man of the people, contributing to the construction of a *bolsonarista* subject around him and justifying the action against the system itself like the present impugnation of the democratic process [23].

In the last stage of the research, we identified the discursive elements used in the consolidation of Bolsonaro as an influencer candidate. Our main objective was to understand the strategic relationship between the communicative elements in the Instagram Live videos and a possible populist discourse.

From a triangulation of qualitative methods that integrated Grounded Theory and visual studies, already employed in previous stages, with the pragmatic analysis of language [48], we concluded that the figure of Bolsonaro as an influencer and political leader combines several elements of digital populism [49, 50] that promote closeness and identification with the figure of the man of the people [51].

The main objective of this study is to analyse the role of disintermediation with respect to traditional media structures: although we have pointed out that the Brazilian media system is unique, we believe it is worth considering communication parallel to the standard model, such as Bolsonaro's performance as news anchor and protagonist of his own TV show, communicating with a wide audience through different channels, such as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube. To this end, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Bolsonaro's live videos were used as a tool to reinforce polarization, promoting the discrediting of the media through a disintermediated communication strategy that, based on an ideological, paternalistic, negationist, authoritarian and aggressive discourse, has promoted disinformation in the country.

H2: The concentration of traditional media power responds to a pre-existing authoritarian media culture, but we are facing a new parallel model of political communication, characterized by disintermediation through social networks.

3 **Results: Characteristics of Bolsonaro's disintermediated political communication**

Bolsonaro's Instagram Live videos (@jairmessiasbolsonaro) are configured as an audiovisual program, broadcast on Thursdays at 7 p.m., which reaches citizens directly, without any kind of intermediation, and which at the same time is rebroadcast live by the television channel *Jovem Pan*. This channel functions as a direct, disintermediated political communication tool, with elements that reinforce political polarization and disinformation during the pre-campaign of the Brazilian presidential elections.

3.1 **The politician-influencer as a central figure**

Bolsonaro's disintermediated communication on Instagram represents a bet on himself as the central figure. In the live shows, Bolsonaro uses his authority as head of state to become a politician-influencer. In this role, he informs, explains, and comments on the country's political current affairs under his filters based on the political ideology of the extreme right. Among other things he reviews the press and interviews guests allied to his government.

In this case, the former president eliminates the figure of the journalist as a mediator and communicates directly with citizens, trying to convince them that their social media accounts are the best channels for information. Thus, he dismisses the media and journalists, occupying a central role in this process of disintermediated political communication.

The politician-influencer Bolsonaro characterizes himself as a man of the people by his suits and accessories, and his use of foul language and exaggerated facial expressions, who, as head of state, is there to defend and protect his people [23, 24]. This figure, moreover, draws on elements of digital populism [49, 50] to promote closeness with citizens.

3.2 **Use of the press and rejection of journalists**

While Bolsonaro uses the media as a source to explain and comment on issues that suit him, he discredits the work of journalists. In the first case, he makes use of publications in the Brazilian press to delve into issues of interest to him, reinforcing the positive aspects of his figure as president or to develop a commentary, to praise the actions of his government or an ally of his. In the second case, Bolsonaro not only rejects journalists and the media but attacks them directly. This happens especially when he reads live a report that questions some action related to the government, jeopardizing his reputation. In these cases, he refers to the media, for example, as a "rotten gang" and "liars."

By discrediting the work of journalists and attacking most media publications, Bolsonaro lays the groundwork by which he and his official accounts on social networks become the best channels of information for citizens. By criticizing the press, in addition to undermining the trust Brazilians have in the media, he enables the dissemination of false content, such as hoaxes and fake news. It is important to note Bolsonaro's use of disinformation in several speeches, especially on issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis of the following years.

On the one hand, by disseminating disinformation, Bolsonaro contributes to information disorders [12, 13] and, on the other hand, by using disintermediated communication and attacking journalists and the opposition, he discredits the media and contributes to the lack of pluralism of sources, curbing diversity of thought, and harming democracy.

3.3 Elements of a polarizing discourse

Bolsonaro's discourse is ideological, paternalistic, denialist, authoritarian, and aggressive. When attacking the press and the opposition, Bolsonaro uses an aggressive tone, in which he emphasizes the contrast between good and evil, in a game in which "we" are the good guys, and "they" are the bad guys.

Bolsonaro's aggressive tone incites violence through the ideological defense of the extreme right in favor of his political interests, such as the legal carrying of firearms to protect "good" citizens. To do so, moreover, he does not mind using a paternalistic discourse to justify the protection and care for the Brazilian people, emphasizing that this is his duty as president.

To assert what Bolsonaro considers right and best for the Brazilian people, on the one hand, he uses authoritarianism, which is frequently manifested in his speech, such as when he emphasizes that he is the head of the armed forces or threatens to exercise control over the Brazilian electoral system. On the other hand, he falsifies and distorts history to persuade citizens of his government's actions or to justify some misunderstanding, above all when communicating issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic, fuel inflation or fires in the Amazon.

The emergence of a discourse that is part of a disintermediated political communication system, constructed from the ideology of the extreme right, that combines an aggressive tone with elements of paternalism, authoritarianism, and negationism is a potential channel to generate political polarization and disseminate disinformation [24, 51].

4 Conclusions: Brazilian traditional media model and the new disintermediated political communication

Brazilian traditional media is an expression of the accumulation of capital and media structures by a series of families with close ties to political power [7, 8], who have been building an ecosystem of privatization, clientelism, and information manipulation [6]. Despite the structural transformations of the last decades, this authoritarian logic is still in force in the media culture of social networks, strengthening a political polarization that organizes the logic of special interests, and that the extreme right incorporates as a defining part of its ethos.

Considering Bolsonaro's discursive techniques and communication strategies during the electoral pre-campaign in 2022, we observe a series of mechanisms that foster and reinforce political polarization through messaging in a communications structure parallel to conventional media. In a media scenario characterized by disintermediation, Bolsonaro systematically questioned the media reporting and the appropriateness of leftist policies, relying on an ideological framework from which he composed the news

and transmitted it according to his own interest. With this practice, Bolsonaro weakened and supplanted the power of the media, giving free rein to disinformation.

In this sense, the figure of the political influencer has revealed the validity of a control exercised in parallel to conventional media, including claims to the only possible truth, the one transmitted by the President of the Republic through his own channels. We conclude that this validates H1 and H2, portraying a communicative scenario sustained by disinformation, polarization, and fake news.

Bolsonaro-aligned influencers find themselves, in Gramscian terms, in a specific kind of crisis: the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear [52]. The results indicate that we find ourselves in an impasse where the old Brazilian media model has not yet perished and a fully formed new model has not yet emerged, thereby giving rise to authoritarian figures. In this way, Bolsonaro, along with a dedicated ecosystem of like-minded influencers, present themselves as the real producers of truth. They claim to offer credibility and the construction of polarized opinions through a discourse that is disintermediated, simple, direct, and violent, all while leveraging their own public image.

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