Reverse Influence: The Social Production of Disinformation in the 2022 Brazilian General Election

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Abstract

This paper examines the shortcomings of applying prescriptive notions of disinformation to the 2022 Brazilian general election. We unpack the disinformation framework based on the assumption of linear cascades of influence with three case studies drawing from the visual analysis of Facebook posts during the election, text analysis of posts by elected representatives on Twitter, and four in-depth interviews with Brazilian fact-checkers. The case studies show that the identification of disinformation in contentious electoral contexts is often at odds with the notion of disinformation as strategic deceptions and manipulation attacks. Our results show that 'bottom-up' forms of disinformation flow from sparsely distributed communities to the political elite and back, a diffusion mechanism at odds with the assumptions of the cascading flow of influence. The results also foreground the social production of disinformation, a process that is reversible and non-linear, as political elites and grassroots communities work together to weave meaningful if misleading narratives. We conclude by discussing the implications of our study and the limits of prescriptive notions of disinformation in contexts where the accuracy of the shared information is of limited importance to communities coming together in fellowship and commonality.

Introduction

The Brazilian general election of 2022 was marked by a slew of fraud allegations by the incumbent far-right president Jair Bolsonaro. With neither of the leading candidates having secured more than half of the valid votes in a tightly contested election pitting Jair Bolsonaro against Lula da Silva, a runoff election was held on 30 October 2022, when da Silva emerged victorious. Bolsonaro

supporters then flooded Meta's platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, with claims and conspiratorial narratives aimed at discrediting the electoral process (Ruediger et al. 2022). This disinformation campaign was heavily reliant on tropes of a perceived 'communist threat' (Burity 2021) and the depiction of Bolsonaro as a 'Messiah' tasked with warding off leftists and progressive movements in the country (Cunha 2023). More problematic, it included unsubstantiated claims of fake electronic ballots and vulnerability in Brazil's electronic voting systems, a set of claims later adjudicated in court that led to the blocking of Bolsonaro from seeking public office until 2030 (Nicas 2023).

The campaign organized by Bolsonaro supporters was a milestone in wall-to-wall disinformation that intensified towards the end of the campaign trail with calls for military intervention widely distributed across social media platforms with hashtags such as #SOSArmedForces. These events foreground the deliberate attempt to suppress voting and to challenge the results of the election in a country with the highest level of concern about disinformation measured by the Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2021). Rallies held by Bolsonaro supporters in the month that preceded the election were largely dedicated to advancing claims of electoral fraud, including the claim that the Brazilian constitution allowed for military intervention, a contested interpretation of the Brazilian constitution where the military, a neutral institution, would take over the government as a moderating power (Pacheco 2022). The discussion about Bolsonaro's attempt to interfere with election integrity, however, was often predicated on questioning the reliability of Brazil's voting system rather than advancing clear-cut disinformation about the election results.

It is against this backdrop that we explore how electoral disinformation in Brazil simultaneously leveraged democratic resources and stifled dissent to produce a contentious landscape that challenges prescriptive definitions of truthful information (Vinhas and Bastos 2022). While Bolsonaro's failed bid for the presidency sought to harden distrust toward public institutions, there is a growing body of scholarship that questions the prevalence of disinformation online (Altay,

Berriche, and Acerbi 2023) and cautions against a conceptual framework that is rapidly superseding the limited effects paradigm (Pickard 2021). This disinformation framework broadly focuses on examining the spread of false posts on social platforms and probing the varieties of deceptive or misleading messages (Broda and Strömbäck 2024), often applying elite-driven models of influence that overlook the dynamic production of false narratives (Egelhofer et al. 2022; Entman and Usher 2018). Similarly, experimental studies rely on clear-cut, often binary definitions of disinformation (Jones-Jang, Kim, and Kenski 2021) that overlook the bottom-up production of non-factual narratives that resonate with people's lived experiences and social identities (Tuters et al. 2024; Perach et al. 2023).

In the following, we review the disinformation framework and critical disinformation scholarship to unpack three case studies on the 2022 Brazilian general election showing that disinformation comprised primarily diffuse narratives that cannot be reduced to 'atoms of content'—i.e., textually or visually identifiable pieces of disinformation (Wardle 2023). These case studies show that disinformation is impervious to simple definitions and that it often stems from user-generated content later absorbed by political elites and social media influencers. Consistent with critical studies of disinformation (Marwick 2018; Anderson 2021; Abhishek 2021), we discuss the applicability of prescriptive notions of disinformation in the context of the Brazilian general election, highlighting methodological limitations and theoretical gaps associated with the disinformation framework originally devised by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017).

Previous Work

The integration of disinformation research with content moderation protocols has given rise to a sociotechnical information framework to manage highly dysfunctional social media platforms (Andersen and Søe 2019). This framework was designed to support communication conducive to democratic deliberation and prevent disruptive events such as the targeting of the 2016 US presidential election by Russian influence operations and the proliferation of conspiracy theories during the pandemic (Clare and Knight 2023). This framework also informed the implementation of

various detection and mitigation strategies aimed at combating online misinformation and disinformation, including fact-checking initiatives, stringent content moderation systems, and the enforcement of community guidelines to safeguard public discourse integrity (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Research informed by this framework is predicated on the perceived notion that disinformation is objective, unambiguous, and ostensibly linked to false or deceptive messages, which then rapidly spread through social media to generate disinformation disorders.

Systematic reviews of disinformation research have established that the field is largely data-driven, frequently investigating the prevalence, dissemination, detection, and characteristics of mis- and disinformation (Broda and Strömbäck 2024). The diffusion process is usually elite-driven and foregrounds the role of politicians in undermining the credibility of journalistic and democratic institutions (Entman and Usher 2018; Egelhofer et al. 2022). Brazilians, in particular, are mostly concerned about disinformation distributed by politicians, with Bolsonaro deemed responsible for the declining confidence in mainstream media (Newman et al. 2021; Newman et al. 2023). Reviews of this literature also found that the area conspicuously classifies disinformation based on source trust, with limited contextual information to quantify its prevalence (Pérez-Escolar, Lilleker, and Tapia-Frade 2023; Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2022). Informed by the cascade activation model, disinformation would typically flow from political elites to the broader population (Entman 2003) or stem from participating audiences setting the agenda (Starbird, Arif, and Wilson 2019) of the political debate through a linear contagion process, ultimately influencing or reinforcing misperceptions of real news and reducing trust in the media by distorting the political agenda through priming effects (Van Duyn and Collier 2019).

However the very theoretical framework informing disinformation is fraught with conceptual problems (Vinhas and Bastos 2022), including the challenge of defining the factual nature of events (Vraga and Bode 2020). Media literacy programs, broadly dedicated to enhancing individual's ability to identify and rectify erroneous, false, or misleading information, have similarly struggled to fend off attacks from conspiracy-theorizing groups who promptly hijacked

their training program to more nefarious ends (Boyd 2017). Information disorder and problematic content, broad categories that include misinformation and disinformation, are approached as undesirable deviations in individual behavior requiring individual-level remediation. Fact-checkers, media literacy initiatives, and content moderators are consequently enlisted to regulate highly dysfunctional social media ecosystems with individual-level interventions (Walker, Mercea, and Bastos 2019).

Regrettably, this framework overlooks several dimensions of misinformation and disinformation, including the gamification of partisan politics, where information that deviates from the mainstream window of discourse is shared and celebrated as meaningful narratives (Bastos and Tuters 2023). This social dimension of disinformation remains inadequately explored in prescriptive models of disinformation and has therefore received limited attention in policymaking dedicated to detecting and mitigating disinformation (Anderson 2021). These models remain committed to collecting the social network underpinning the information disorders, a task that lends insights into the social network underlying these communities, but that downplays identity-related motivations for sharing political information (Perach et al. 2023). Such models also overlook the supply chain of digital virality and the micropolitics of online oppositional cultures (Tuters et al. 2024).

In other words, the framing of disinformation as a behavioral problem is informed by population and network models where the unit of analysis, i.e., disinformation itself, is assumed to follow contagion growth patterns typical of population models (Aral and Walker 2012; Lerman and Ghosh 2010). This framework overlooks the social production of disinformation that cannot be reduced, and therefore cannot be corrected, by targeting ‘atoms of content’ (Wardle 2023)—that is, individual behavior isolated from the oppositional cultures and narratives where they flourished. The extent to which disinformation is integral to the consensus reality of fragmented communities is not part of the modeling, nor is the likelihood that disinformation may be foundational to oppositional subcultures. Mis- and disinformation are deemed to yield problematic behavior that needs to be corrected or purged with more information.

The opposition between factual and non-factual events is however problematic because social facts are not ontologically objective, but a function of their materiality and symbolism with texts offering possible depictions of reality rather than true or false statements (Silverman 2015). Facts are of course verifiable, but verification depends on human practices including the very production of traces and silences. The notion of facticity that informs this disinformation agenda, however, has no aspiration to be a society-wide event; at best, it is a rigorous form of editorial practice detached from society's affective and cognitive assumptions about the world. Those who do not share their fundamental assumptions of facticity are situated outside this register of reality.

In contrast to the sharing of lived experiences, disinformation studies are informed by behavioral and network models of propagation that are activated through cascade thresholds. The dissemination of disinformation would follow population growth models that do not account for uncertainty, with more nuanced models being predicated on complex contagion where social behavior requires multiple exposures to sources of reinforcement to trigger changes in behavior (Centola and Macy 2007). Complex diffusion models also explore the topology of the underlying network to establish whether they are conducive or resistant to rapid exposure to new information and behavior, including mis- and disinformation (Centola 2010). This approach to modeling the diffusion of social behavior is effective at identifying how disinformation spreads to large communities from influential actors, including political elites and influencers, but it is grounded on individual contagion that is of limited consequence to understanding the social production of disinformation.

In contrast to linear cascading models, we advance a conceptualization of 'reverse influence' in the consumption of disinformation. Instead of identifying each step of the cascade linearly and chronologically, this would entail monitoring communities that not only consume and engage with prominent social media influencers and political elites, but who set the agenda discussed by such influencers and elites. The reverse influence foregrounds content that appeared in user communities before it featured in the social media stream of elites and social media influencers. Instead of

tracing the diffusion path across large subgraphs of the network where the information percolates, it tracks the supply chain of influence across sparsely distributed communities and political elites and alternative media. This line of inquiry can further advance and provide a robust test for the 'amplification' hypothesis (Phillips 2018) and the related, but perhaps less studied, 'audience capture' hypothesis (Weiss and Winter 2018). In doing so, it advances a framework for complex contagion where the central point of diffusion often stems from loosely connected, leaderless online discussions supplying user-generated content that is subsequently absorbed, polished, and repackaged by elites for wider distribution.

Objectives

The research question of this study is whether prescriptive notions of disinformation can be applied to the contentious Brazilian general election of 2022. To this end, the first research objective (RO1) driving our study probes whether the distribution of disinformation follows the typical cascade activation process flowing from political elites to the broader population (Entman 2003), or alternatively stems from participating audiences that effectively set the agenda of the political leadership (Starbird, Arif, and Wilson 2019). We probe this RO1 against a database of visual disinformation on Facebook distributed during the Brazilian general election of 2022. Our second research objective (RO2) is to determine whether prescriptive notions of disinformation can account for the disruptive campaign that targeted the presidential election in Brazil. We inspect RO2 against a database of textual disinformation shared on Twitter during the Brazilian presidential campaign of 2022. Our third and last research objective (RO3) further investigates the strategies and constraints faced by Brazilian fact-checkers involved in identifying and labeling disinformation. We unpack RO3 from a set of interviews with Brazilian fact-checkers with extensive experience in moderating and checking divisive political content in a context of marked institutional distrust.

Data & Methods

Data collection for the three case studies was carried out concomitantly during the 2022 Brazilian general election. The first case study detailed explores visual disinformation that circulated during

the election on Facebook. Visual disinformation leverages varying levels of modal richness to mimic news formats while distributing decontextualized images as evidence of alternative narratives (Hameleers 2024), which can lead to reduced trust in institutional politics (Weikmann and Lecheler 2023). We relied on Meta's CrowdTangle service to collect Facebook posts with visual content from pages, public groups, and verified profiles by searching for 'Lula OR Bolsonaro' and then filtering the content to include only images posted during the runoff election in October 2022. The filtered dataset yielded 509,219 public Facebook posts with rich content. Visual disinformation is reportedly rampant on Facebook and often features basic image manipulation techniques such as cropping or meme captioning but also more labor-intensive manipulation involving graphics editors such as Photoshop (Weikmann and Lecheler 2023).

We leveraged the image text datapoint provided by CrowdTangle to identify the most posted pictures on Facebook. Based on this datapoint, we created bipartite networks with Facebook entities (pages, public groups, or verified profiles) and image text. In this network, a Facebook entity is connected to a specific image text when the entity shares that image, and we relied on a modularity algorithm for community detection (Blondel et al. 2008) to identify clusters of entities sharing similar images on Facebook (for further information see Appendix 2). We also relied on weighted in-degree to identify the most posted images on Facebook and weighted out-degree to identify the most active Facebook entities in the network. Finally, we manually reviewed the most active nodes within each major cluster, including images, to identify the visual narratives promoted by this set of accounts, and how they were mobilized by Facebook users to reproduce and reinforce disinformation narratives. Lastly, we relied on the post creation date and timestamp data to identify the origin of the image and the subsequent resharing by activist groups and political elites.

For the second case study, we collected the totality of tweets posted by official Twitter accounts of Brazilian representatives in the lower (Deputados) and higher houses (Senadores) during the official period of the election campaign. There are in total 594 seats in the Brazilian National Congress, with 81 in the upper house (Senado Federal) and 513 in the lower house

(Câmara dos Deputados). The collected data include 208,217 tweets from elected deputies and senators (Bastos and Recuero 2023), from which we select 1815 messages that matched the criteria for content potentially supportive of a coup d'état or casting doubt on the electoral process, or just under 1% of the entire database. The tweets were selected by filtering tweets, retweets, quotes, and @-mentions with the terms 'army,' 'armed forces,' 'electronic ballot', 'military,' 'fraud,' 'stolen,' 'intervention', and '142.' The data was then manually classified to identify pronouncements that supported military intervention or that cast doubt on the electoral process (Saldaña 2016). The codebook was informed by content flagged as disinformation by Brazilian fact-checker Aos Fatos, which was then tested by two separate coders on a small sample of the data, then further refined to match the coding results, and then rolled out and applied to the entire database (see Appendix 1 for the coding scheme and the instructions provided to coders).

Several rounds of discussion between coders were necessary to establish whether the content entailed disinformation, whether it was merely false, whether it represented a legitimate stance, or alternatively a combination of all the above. From the initial binary categories that included only disinformation supporting the election fraud narrative or not, we expanded the categories to include content that clearly referenced the election fraud narrative without having any identifiable nugget of disinformation. Due to the challenges in coding this content, we devised category 1 (not disinformation per se but endorsing the election fraud narrative) for tweets that could not be considered disinformation based on the text alone, but that implied that the election was fraudulent. The database includes 100 tweets classified as 1 (disinformation casting doubt on the electoral process), 1628 messages coded 0 (no disinformation, notwithstanding the incidence of terms associated with support for a coup d'état), and a further 87 messages coded as 2 (disinformation openly supporting a coup d'état). Krippendorff's alpha between two coders of the research team was .95 for the binary classification between F (0) and T (1+2) (where T includes codes 1 and 2), .91 for messages coded 0, 1, and 2, and .75 for the coding agreement between categories 1 and 2.

The third and last case study draws from four in-depth interviews with fact-checking experts

working in Brazil. Participants provided written informed consent and the Human Research Ethics Committee from a large research university approved this project under the reference HS-E-21-31. We included experts working in various capacities in their respective organizations, including independent fact-checking agencies and mainstream media outlets (e.g., fact-checkers, editors, directors, and founders). Interviews ran between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Portuguese and subsequently transcribed and translated into English. We relied on Duke Reporters' Lab global fact-checking database to recruit fact-checking organizations (Stencel, Ryan, and Luther 2023) and subsequently snowballed to organizations that matched the inclusion criteria. From this list, we considered as legitimate fact-checking organizations those that met one of the following criteria: 1) listed as an active organization on Duke Reporters' Lab fact-checking database; 2) current signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN); 3) declared a consistent commitment to editorial non-partisanship and financial independence on their websites, along with a detailed description of transparent fact-checking methodologies.

Our interview protocol was designed to identify the social, linguistic, cultural, and political factors driving the identification of mis- and disinformation outside Western countries. Given the objectives of our study, the interview questions focus on the underlying factors influencing how disinformation is defined by seasoned fact-checkers in Brazil. One member of the research team processed the interview data by developing coding themes through iterative steps involving both deductive and inductive coding (Saldaña 2016). In the first coding cycle, codes were generated open-endedly based on the interviewees' responses regarding the characteristics of misinformation and disinformation in the country. This process focused solely on the semantic level of the interview responses without linking to any theoretical or conceptual assumption. Subsequently, salient and recurring topics were aggregated into three themes to reflect the roles of politicians, citizens, and platforms in shaping disinformation in the context of the Brazilian general election of 2022. In the following, we present the most salient findings from the three case studies underpinning this study.

Results

Case Study #1: The Social Production of Visual Disinformation

Our first case study entails an analysis of a network of polarized clusters and the most active Facebook entities within these clusters. The pro-Lula cluster includes 4,376 unique Facebook entities and 26,187 unique images, whereas the pro-Bolsonaro group entails 5,321 entities and 21,131 images. The weighted degree for these entities shows that the pro-Bolsonaro cluster was more active, with an average of 3.44 images compared to 2.73 in the pro-Lula cluster. This is also reflected in the most shared images in the dataset, as 36 out of the top 40 most posted images are within the pro-Bolsonaro cluster. Out of the top 100 most posted images, 69 are within the pro-Bolsonaro cluster and 31 are within the pro-Lula cluster. From the top 100 most shared images, eight reproduced content that has been fact-checked, with two having been flagged as disinformation by Facebook, and one including a warning message (the other five images were not flagged by Facebook but support the narratives described below). The flagged post reproduced the narrative that Lula was friends with organized crime in Brazil because he was photographed wearing a hat with the letters CPX (Figure 1a). This disinformation narrative claimed that CPX means *cupinxa*, or partner in crime, when in fact the acronym refers to the community of favelas *Complexo do Alemão* (Reuters Fact Check 2022a). Three other images also made direct reference to the same narrative but were not flagged by Facebook.

The other image flagged as disinformation by Facebook mentioned that Lula would tax the free instant payment system Pix (Figure 1b). This information was similarly fact-checked and deemed false (Reuters Fact Check 2022b). Figure 1c, finally, shows a set of visual messages promoting a conspiratorial narrative about election fraud attached to Facebook posts that featured a warning message from Facebook. Two other images directly mention this narrative, which was also fact-checked (Moura 2022). This set of visual posts is indicative of content that is not straightforward mis- or disinformation but is more properly situated as hyperpartisan tropes feeding organic narratives discrediting the electoral system in Brazil, the reliability of the democratic

institutions, and the mainstream media in the country. Specifically, out of the top 100 most shared images, twenty-seven reproduced content that contributed to disinformation narratives—all within the pro-Bolsonaro cluster.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Three main narratives emerge from these 27 images. Firstly, they argue that Lula da Silva is a criminal who has been jailed for his crimes, with over a dozen other images claiming that his supporters were members of his criminal gang (Figure 2a). This again is not a clear-cut case of mis- or disinformation, as Lula da Silva was indeed jailed, even if the sentence was later overturned due to irregularities with the case. Secondly, several visual posts contributed to the election fraud narrative by sharing polls indicating that Bolsonaro was leading the election and claiming that a victory was certain. This set of images also reproduced stories related to Bolsonaro's meetings to audit the election (Figure 2b). Thirdly are the groups of images associating Lula da Silva with communism, particularly the authoritarian regime in Venezuela, which was deemed to offer the blueprint for Lula da Silva's future clampdown on the Brazilian press (Figure 2c).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

By reviewing the date and time of Facebook posts in our dataset, we identified that the sharing of many of these images on Facebook preceded the distribution and validation of the content by the political elite, namely the Bolsonaro campaign. This offers evidence that disinformation narratives do not conform to the top-down and linear model of cascading activation (Entman 2003), suggesting instead a contagion process that is reversible and non-linear, as political elites and grassroots communities work together to weave meaningful narratives. The diffusion process in this case is particularly at odds with the cascade activation model given the reversed directionality of influence, flowing from accounts with quantifiably low numbers of followers who nonetheless successfully craft narratives ultimately picked up by the political elite. Figure 3a, for example, shows an image originally posted by a page of grassroots activists arguing that politicians joining Lula's campaign were engaging in criminal gang activity. The image was later reproduced in over

one hundred different posts in pages and public groups and was also repurposed by another page of Bolsonaro activists to create a meme (Figure 3b) shared across hundreds of Facebook posts that ultimately seeded the post in Figure 2a.

This process of repurposing images owes in part to quick image editing tools made available by social media platforms allowing users to create and edit images directly on Facebook (Weikmann and Lecheler 2023; Brennen, Simon, and Nielsen 2021). A case in point is the first occurrence of the image arguing that Lula is a thief, a message that originally appeared on a page of Bolsonaro activists and that received only 20 interactions (Figure 4a). The same image, however, would continue to circulate on Facebook and was later redistributed by Major Costa e Silva (Figure 4b), a candidate running for a seat in the lower house in the 2022 Brazilian general election, and Jose Medeiros (Figure 4c), a representative in the Brazilian Congress, another instance of a post that emerged in communities of grassroots activists and was subsequently distributed by political elites boasting substantial followership to garner thousands of interactions.

These examples entail a process where conspiratorial and radicalized content appears first in partisan communities and is later validated and distributed in a more polished package by the political leadership. This is in line with RO1 and the reverse influence model: instead of emerging from linear cascades that can be traced through each step of a distribution chain, the content first emerges in communities of grassroots activists and is later validated and distributed by political elites boasting substantial followership, with the directionality of influence moving backward. The rate of propagation bears a resemblance to the spread of conspiracy theories observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gruzd and Mai 2020), but we argue that the directionality of the contagion is fully reversible. These results not only deviate from the linear cascade activation (Entman 2003) and participatory disinformation (Starbird, Arif, and Wilson 2019) models; they foreground the diffusion of disinformation through nonlinear and reversible mechanisms that are integral to the participatory narratives they bring to bear. Ultimately, these Facebook visual posts reveal important limitations in the prevailing disinformation framework where disinformation diffusion is assumed

to be a top-down or bottom-up linear vector, as the narratives that percolate in the posts operate as a shared belief system in which political elites, grassroots activists, and the general public can participate.

INSERT FIGURES 3 AND 4 HERE

The co-existence of top-down and bottom-up influence chains in this participatory process is also apparent in a post from Carla Zambelli, a prominent figure in the Brazilian far-right who shared an image featuring a quote attributed to Bolsonaro asserting Lula's culpability and attributing his acquittal to the Brazilian press (namely to Brazilian newsreader William Bonner who is a recurrent target of far-right narratives). Figure 5 shows an image that would eventually appear across several Facebook entities, including pages and public groups, piecing together a narrative that portrays Lula da Silva as a criminal. These images lack explicit disinformation cues, but they are emblematic and provide scaffolding for commonly held beliefs frequently invoked in public discourse in Brazil. While discrete instances of false information may be readily resolved through fact-checking, these collective narratives are rooted in belief systems rather than verifiable information and they can be strategically employed to heighten skepticism towards democratic institutions in the country.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

Case Study #2: Innuendos, Insinuations, and Oblique Half-lies

We approach RO2 by inspecting the coding of nearly two thousand tweets that sought to identify content with clear markers of disinformation posted during the Brazilian presidential elections of 2022 by following the criteria detailed in our codebook (see Appendix 1). We note that these tweets are de facto public statements of elected officials, but they also reflect allegiances and identities through which social identities are formed in political narratives (Somers 1994). As these messages are imbued with broader narratives driving their resonance with political subcultures, we sought to track the extent to which members of the National Congress endorsed election fraud accusations, a narrative positing that the presidential election in Brazil was fraudulent and that military intervention under Article 142 of the Constitution of Brazil would be required.

While the database of tweets did not explicitly contain words connected to disinformation narratives, they frequently alluded to stories that pivoted along the military intervention axis. This points to the existence of a 'collective memory' (Wodak, De Cillia, and Reisigl 1999) ritualistically shared by Bolsonaro supporters on social media platforms. Such statements project an ideological value space where the election was fraudulent and where Brazil suffers from a conspiracy involving democratic institutions to steal the election from Bolsonaro—a narrative that is categorically problematic because it advocates for a coup d'état. Although these messages may not be disinformative in the strict sense, they engage with a disinformation narrative that frames the election as fraudulent and therefore indirectly supports military intervention.

Given these challenges, we created custom variables to classify not only tweets explicitly supporting a coup d'état. We identified numerous tweets that praised the army and called for their intervention to 'save democracy' in the country. These are not clear-cut cases of a disinformation campaign, nor are they conceivable cases of misinformation. But they connect anti-government rhetoric to disinformation narratives by referencing election fraud. More importantly, these are also not genuinely democratic claims in the Brazilian context, as such tweets echo the perceived notion that the military was the only legitimate and uncorrupted institution and that, through a coup d'état, they could confront other (corrupt) institutions and save the country. This narrative, albeit not explicitly calling for a coup d'état, often relied on historical revisionism, a value that Bolsonaro espoused for much of his political career, having asserted that Brazil was never under a military dictatorship but rather under a 'military government' to ward off corruption and uphold democratic institutions. It is against this backdrop that these tweets were shared. The political narrative supporting these claims is rarely overtly mentioned; they are nonetheless pervasive if conveyed only through innuendos and insinuations. Examples of this narrative include the following tweets:

#SOSAF #SOSBrazil #protest #PacificProtests #PTnevermore #LulaNationalShame

RT @GalizaAr: "Save my FUTURE, Armed Forces" #SOSAF [1]

[1] *#SOSFFAA #SOSBrasil #manifestacao #ManifestacoesPacificas #PTNuncaMais #LulaVergonhaNacional RT*

Another content trend identified in the data was the prevalence of tweets advocating for a 'legal military intervention,' purportedly permitted by Article 142 of the Brazilian Constitution according to this batch of messages. Despite being a narrative propagated by Bolsonaro supporters over several years, there is no legal backing for the measure. The Brazilian Congress, the Supreme Court, and legal scholars have consistently issued statements clarifying that this entailed a gross misinterpretation of the constitution (Câmara dos Deputados 2020). Despite the widespread distribution of these corrections, references to this claim persisted in the tweets of many Bolsonaro supporters, which proved pivotal to the resilience of this narrative. Examples of this type of content include the following messages:

> *RT @OsmarTerra: Where there's smoke... PT wants to change article 142 and limit the powers of the Armed Forces – Terra Brasil News [link]* [2]
>
> *@rodrigoaraufig @majorfabianadep The article 142 is part of the Federal Constitution and should, like the others, be respected. The president has made this clear and I respect the Constitution. What we cannot lose is our freedom because it is what guarantees all the others and it is for that I'll keep fighting! Hugs* 💚💛💚BR [3]
>
> *This thing of punishing business owners who support Bolsonaro for private conversations on WhatsApp, once again, has gone too far. Article 142 is in the Constitution. Is someone going to say it isn't? Everything has its limits!* [4]

Another narrative that frequently appeared in the data is that of the electronic ballot being prone to fraud. It claims that the electronic voting system used in Brazil was developed by leftists in Venezuela and programmed to ignore votes for Lula da Silva. A common trope associated with this narrative is that the Electoral Supreme Court was corrupt and

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@GalizaAr: "ēǵ Salve o meu FUTURO, Forças Armadas ēǵ🦾B 📣!!" #SOSFFAA

[2] *RT @OsmarTerra: Onde tem fumaça… "PT debate alterar artigo 142 e limitar poder das Forças Armadas - Terra Brasil Notícias" https://t.co/W48…*

[3] *@rodrigoaraufig @majorfabianadep O artigo 142 consta na CF e deve ser, como todos os demais artigos, respeitados. O PR já deixou isso claro e eu respeito a CF integralmente. O que nunca podemos perder é a liberdade pois é ela quem garante todo os restante e é por isso que continuarei a lutar! Abraço* 💚💛💚BR

[4] *Essa de punir empresários que apoiam Bolsonaro por conversa particular no whats, novamente, passou dos limites. O art. 142 está na Constituição. Ou alguém vai dizer que não? Tudo tem limite!*

had sided with Lula da Silva to keep their crimes concealed. The following tweets are indicative of this narrative, either claiming a conspiracy or raising issues that could only be solved by said 'military intervention.' Although the disinformation narrative is not spelled out in these messages, they effectively echo tropes that discredit democratic institutions. These examples highlight the limitations of a prescriptive notion of disinformation, as the problematic dimension of this content is not explicit, nor can it be promptly fact-checked.

> *It is unacceptable that after the accusation of a possible fraud, the TSE (Superior Electoral Court) refuses to open an investigation into the case and even assumes that the president himself is committing an electoral crime. The potential flaw in the insertions is serious.* [5]
>
> *The President of the PL (Liberal Party), Valdemar da Costa Neto, asserts that at the beginning of the week he will file a complaint about the voting machines to the TSE. We have found serious problems, and the TSE will have to present a solution, he says. [link]* [6]
>
> *Minister Barroso, boarding for Miami, receiving all the affection from Brazilians who will be joining him on the flight. Only in his arrogant mind does he want to justify and say that it is a fascist minority that does not approve of the STF's (Supreme Federal Court) actions. Barroso and company, you shame Brazil! [link]* [7]

Case Study #3: The Context of Institutional Distrust

Our third and last case study examines four in-depth interviews with Brazilian fact-checkers to probe the extent to which the prevailing disinformation framework yields tangible benefits for fact-checkers (RO3). The interviewed professionals were in agreement that frameworks centered on informing the public have limited effectiveness against disinformation that is meaningful to communities and that is largely spread through social media. They also reasoned that the more salient features of disinformation in Brazil are indelibly linked to three layers related to production

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[5] *É inadmissível que após a denúncia de uma possível fraude, o TSE se recuse a abrir uma investigação sobre o caso, e ainda suponha que o próprio presidente esteja cometendo crime eleitoral. A possível falha nas inserções é grave"*
[6] *O Presidente do PL, Valdemar da Costa Neto, afirma que no início da semana apresentará denúncia sobre as urnas no TSE. Encontramos problemas graves e o TSE terá que apresentar uma solução, diz ele. https://t.co/URLY1MVvMe*
[7] *Ministro Barroso, no embarque para Miami, recebendo todo o carinho dos brasileiros que terão sua companhia no voo. Só na cabeça arrogante dele para querer justificar e dizer que é uma minoria fascista que não aprova a atuação do STF. Barroso e cia, vocês envergonham o Brasil! https://t.co/ZGLTyDJDGj*

and distribution: 1) top-down political propaganda and conspiracies present in politician's speeches; 2) the lived experiences of large sections of the population; 3) participatory disinformation that spreads bottom-up through social media and messaging apps. The points raised by fact-checkers in Brazil is consistent with and informative of the reverse influence model we posited in this study. Ultimately, the ritualistic dimension of disinformation in the Brazilian context intersects with historical, religious, and demographic dimensions that appeal to institutional distrust. In contrast to prescriptive notions of disinformation based on the intentions behind the distribution of false and deceitful information, Brazilian fact-checkers define disinformation by its potential to undermine the country's institutional capacity through the distribution of conspiratorial narratives.

The director of an independent fact-checking organization explained that their team originally focused on assessing the accuracy of factual information in politicians' speeches. This task entailed approaching information as an independent unity of analysis separated from its intended purpose: "Our method avoided classifying information as true or false. We deliberately avoided classifying whether a politician was lying or not because this implies intentionality, which is something we cannot account for" (Interviewee 1). However, the interviewee observed that this approach to correcting inaccurate claims and assertions would eventually prove inadequate to hold Brazilian politicians to account: "We encounter numerous challenges with politicians who circumvent our methodology. When an individual is fact-checked on multiple occasions and persistently reiterates the same claims, it ceases to be an error and becomes intentional" (Interviewee 1). Fact-checkers have therefore to contend with the intentions driving the dissemination of problematic information, but this can only be inferred from continuous engagement with false information.

The nature of political disinformation in Brazil, according to our interviewees, often involves false information that is purposefully layered with non-factual and sometimes conspiratorial content to undermine democratic institutions. According to the editor of an independent organization, most of the disinformation they come across is unverifiable according to

the objective standards outlined in their codebook: “What we can fact-check covers a limited range of cases. Around 90% of the cases we come across are effectively impossible to fact-check” (Interviewee 2). As the interviewee explained, what they label as disinformation is frequently muddled with opinions and ‘vague statements,’ a problem that hinders the prospects of fact-checking for assessing the accuracy of claims. Similarly, a fact-checker associated with a mainstream news outlet emphasized that political disinformation in Brazil is inextricably linked with partisan narratives that are positioned antagonistically against the country’s key civic and state institutions: “They combine three or four conspiracy theories that previously circulated separately. (…) All institutions in the country are lumped together in the same basket as their enemies: the church, universities and scientists, the press, governments, and private companies” (Interviewee 3).

Interviewees argued that politicians intentionally craft undemocratic narratives to exploit legitimate frustrations in a country perceived to be grappling with an economic slowdown and escalating violence. The editor of a mainstream news outlet contended that fact-checkers must proactively focus on countering these narratives upfront to prevent laypeople from falling prey to it: “We have to start doing an increasingly contextual work to identify how broader discourses are organized and explain the motivations behind them instead of simply addressing content in separate pieces” (Interviewee 4). However, these narratives resonate deeply with the lived realities of significant portions of the Brazilian population, as they effectively evoke anxieties associated with prevalent religious and conservative beliefs. The director of an independent organization highlighted that the proliferation of undemocratic narratives ultimately fosters participatory forms of disinformation, primarily achieved through the reinforcement of social bonds among citizens: “The primary motivations driving individuals to disseminate disinformation are fundamentally social in nature and they point to a desire to align oneself with a particular group and perpetuate their shared ideologies" (Interviewee 1).

Our interviewed cohort also drew attention to the fact that social media platforms serve as pivotal infrastructures facilitating the emergence of participatory disinformation in Brazil. The

editor of a prominent news outlet argued that messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram, but also social media platforms like Facebook, foster alternative information ecosystems wherein close-knit connections develop among partisan news outlets, political figures, and their respective supporters: “The base tends to perceive mainstream media as unreliable sources of information (...) Their objective is to cultivate an alternative information ecosystem insulated from other perspectives” (Interviewee 4). According to a fact-checker affiliated with a mainstream news organization in the country, social platforms enable partisan factions to weaponize information and antagonize the press rather than seeking out news from credible sources: “Some political groups hate fact-checkers to the extent that they have even established their own organizations dedicated to fact-checking the fact-checkers” (Interviewee 3). The methods employed to authenticate information and foster political cohesion in such contexts must follow principles fundamentally distinct from the standards of factual accuracy and objectivity that underpin conventional fact-checking and journalistic practices.

Discussion & Conclusion

The case studies discussed in this paper offer an indictment of the framework informing much disinformation research. The first case study identified several instances of visual disinformation distributed on Facebook, a set of problematic content that was only rarely taken down by the platform. Albeit problematic, this type of content often blurs the lines between straightforward disinformation and the peddling of narratives that are simultaneously unhinged and not entirely fabricated. Having managed to flag only two posts as disinformation and given the steady rate at which these messages were shared on the platform, it seems that Facebook’s models for fact-checking interventions—which rely on detecting the viral spread of individual messages—are ill-equipped to limit the circulation of such narratives.

More importantly, the distribution of this content calls into question the strategic use of disinformation whereby the population is infected through linear contagion processes by political elites who deliberately distribute false information (Broda and Strömb□m□mck 2024). This

disinformation framework entails the orchestration of adversarial activity where actors employ strategic deceptions and manipulation tactics to advance political goals. While such campaigns are implemented through the strategic and predetermined direction of attacks, our findings foreground the reversed flow of disinformation, with messages emerging initially from grassroots activists that are only later voiced by the political leadership. This two-way process where both grassroots activists and political elites, including influencers, are simultaneously influencing each other in the social production of disinformation foregrounds the reversibility of this inherently participatory process. This puts into sharp relief the limitations of the linear cascade activation (Entman 2003) and participatory disinformation (Starbird, Arif, and Wilson 2019) frameworks. Instances of reverse influence also highlight that the diffusion process is not hindered by the relative absence of influential users or the low social capital of disinformation purveyors, who effectively partake in disinformation narratives as a shared belief system alongside political elites, activists, and the public.

Our second case study shows that the coding process of tweets associated with the election proved challenging to binary, prescriptive definitions of disinformation, as most tweets did not explicitly advance the 'election fraud' narrative, offering instead implicit connections and innuendos through the use of hashtags. We also struggled to distinguish between what was a 'clear call for military intervention' and messages that called into question democratic institutions. The separation between these variables proved porous at best and often context dependent. At any rate, disinformation could only be identified in reference to the evolving narratives, with the content analysis quickly escalating to a context analysis that speaks to the 'collective memory' supporting these narratives (Wodak, De Cillia, and Reisigl 1999). The relatively lower Krippendorff's alpha between categories 0 and 1, although still acceptable for the purposes of this study, is indicative of the difficulties in separating what was clearly disinformation from what was at times legitimate, if ill-informed and perhaps ill-intentioned discussion about democratic institutions. We ultimately argue that disinformation might be best understood as diffuse narratives as opposed to textually or

visually identifiable information, with the tweets posted by Brazilian representatives often not featuring tangible disinformation under any prescriptive definition, even though they proved instrumental to the evolving narrative about election fraud.

Our third and last case study incorporated interviews with fact-checkers with extensive experience in the verification of political claims in Brazil. These experts made a forceful case that disinformation in Brazil stems primarily from institutional distrust, a result in line with Humprecht et al.'s (2023) findings about the US context. Although experimental studies often portray disinformation as the primary cause of low institutional trust (Jones-Jang, Kim, and Kenski 2021), survey findings indicate that confidence in institutions varies depending on partisan control of institutional power (Ognyanova et al. 2020). Brazil nonetheless presents a unique and nuanced case regarding the association between institutional trust and disinformation, as the country's key institutions are perceived as increasingly partisan and fragmented. Indeed, a survey conducted during the 2022 Brazilian general election indicates that trust in Brazil's armed forces is associated with electoral disinformation beliefs, whereas trust in the judiciary is negatively associated with such beliefs (Rossini, Mont'Alverne, and Kalogeropoulos 2023). As such, while trust in democratic institutions may act as a shield against disinformation in Western countries (Humprecht 2023), the absence of a coherent and consensual institutional backdrop in Brazil's institutional landscape challenges the notion of institutional trust, as trusting one institution may imply distrusting another.

This problem invariably pivots along contentious issues such as national history, weak institutional authority, and the fragile balance between institutional actors—including journalism. The fraught social cohesion between opposing political and religious groups, but also across populations from diverse demographic backgrounds, renders it impractical for fact-checkers and social platforms to counter disinformation through binary truth parameters for content moderation. This was particularly salient in the 2022 Brazilian election when Bolsonaro supporters took up a central role in promoting narratives antithetical to democratic principles and that endorsed 'alternative facts' with self-validating participatory disinformation ecosystems, originally crafted

via messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram and eventually shared as publicly visible posts on Facebook and Twitter (Ozawa et al. 2023). The falsehoods ultimately disseminated by politicians transcended mere fabrications; rather, they encapsulate broader issues deeply entrenched in the social fabric of the country conjured up through the expressive sharing of disinformation.

Taken together, these case studies illustrate forms of disinformation where the reading and writing of stories sit in opposition to the framework where disinformation entails 'atoms of content' (Wardle 2023). They also underscore the limitations of extant definitions of disinformation that overlook contextually meaningful narratives underpinning problematic information. The central insights gleaned from seasoned fact-checkers, but also from the limits of text and visual classification of disinformation, also speak to the shortcomings of subsuming disinformation to a cascade process that downplays how social media mobilizes social groups through the representation of shared beliefs. These examples underscore ritualistic practices of communication whereby the information being shared, often misleading, is of limited import to groups dedicated to drawing people together in fellowship and commonality (Carey 2009).

Further research would benefit from exploring disinformation as a collective narrative effort similar to attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned, and where no information is essentially accurate, but in which a particular view of the contending forces in the world is portrayed and confirmed. While this line of inquiry has been introduced in previous work (Marwick 2018; Abhishek 2021), it has been largely sidelined by the disinformation framework informed by cascade activation thresholds focused on individual-level interventions and behavioral corrections on social media (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Even though the drivers of information misperceptions and institutional distrust can be assessed at the individual level, disinformation remains fundamentally bounded to collective deliberation, anchored in identity, and waived through shared experiences that often emerge in antagonism to experts and institutional facts (Tuters et al. 2024). In the Brazilian context, this translates to commonly held beliefs rooted in historical revisionism that are prevalent within the political consciousness, including notions of the

communist menace and skepticism towards democratic institutions. It also brings into sharp relief fact-checkers' efforts to engage local communities directly and to address narratives that cannot be strictly verified. This approach contrasts substantially with the endless task of moderating social platform content using available evidence (Vinhas and Bastos 2023).

In the end, the reduction of disinformation to information that is false fails to acknowledge that the social role of disinformation for these groups is not to convey information, but to provide a stage for dramatic forces and actions that invite participation. The 2022 Brazilian election highlights that disinformation can support the sharing of alternative senses of reality that may differ in substantive ways from generally accepted beliefs. As such, it should not be surprising that these narratives are dedicated to the maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action; a container that is often repressive, and a cultural world that can be markedly reactionary. Such ritualistic consumption of disinformation is ultimately less dependent on the accuracy of the information because it foregrounds reading and sharing as a ritualistic and dramatic act.

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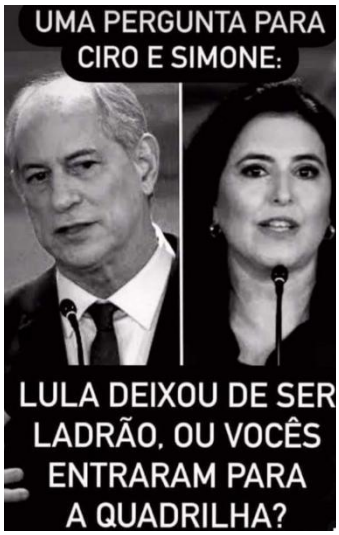

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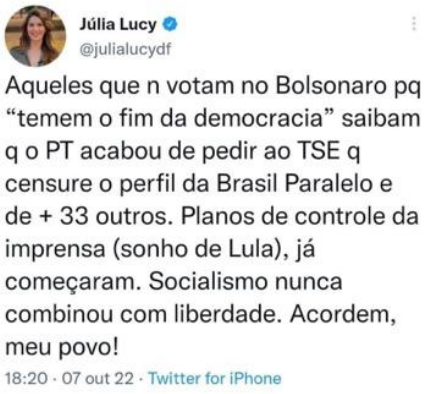

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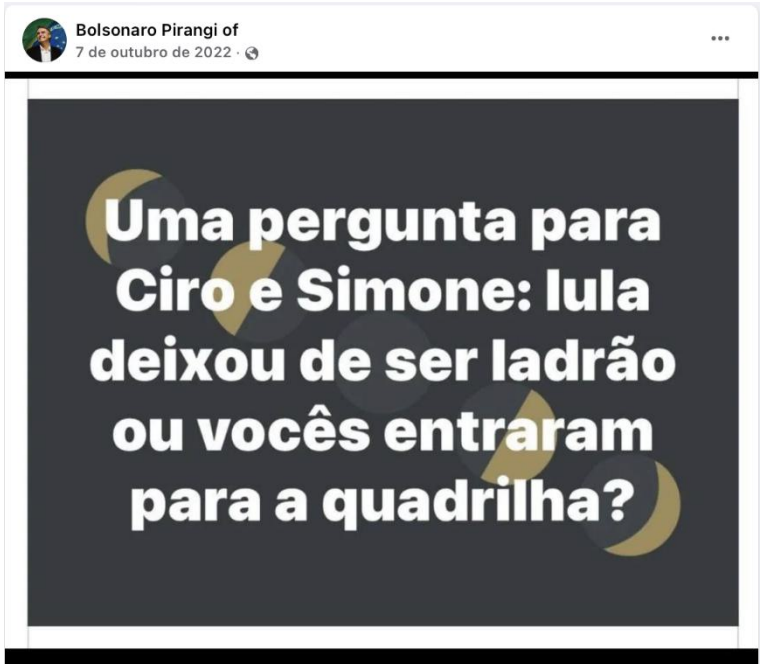

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Figure 5: Visual campaign claiming that Lula is a criminal by Carla Zambelli (the original post garnered over 127,000 interactions)