

Populism, presentism, emotions and spin doctoring on social networks: Jair Bolsonaro's digital communication

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Abstract

In this paper it will be defended the hypothesis that the digital communication of the then president of Brazil Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019-2022) used populist discourses to react to the worst moments of ratings on social networks, materialized through official statements, facts of the presidential agenda or factoids, published both in the professional press and on social networks. Thus, we will present data collected on Twitter between January 3, 2020 and March 18, 2021, regarding reactions and sentiments related to Bolsonaro. Additionally, we will take an analysis of the news that would have reacted to the downs of popularity of the then president in the mentioned social network. The theoretical framework of this work is anchored

in the concepts of populism and presentism and the relation of these phenomena with social media; in the concept of emotional media and in the practice of spin doctoring. From an analysis standpoint, it can be seen that Bolsonaro's strategy on Twitter was to take advantage of the contemporary phenomenon of presentism, by overlapping negative facts with news that used populist and emotional aspects. Despite of somewhat working for deeper crises in digital popularity, however, it failed to make the president mentions more positive than negative. This article concludes that it is necessary to be edited according to spin doctoring techniques. Without media regulation about that, the situation may degrade to levels difficult to recover from.

Keywords: Jair Bolsonaro; Twitter; populism; presentism; spin doctor; emotions; sentiments.

Introduction

The government of the then president of Brazil, Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019-2022), had as a political communication strategy the domination of the discourse on social media when crises arose in his term of office. In addition to him and his supporters, the Brazilian press, the government's opponents, and social media users were part of the dispute around digital narratives.

This paper will use data collected by the company AP Exata, which obtained four years' worth of Twitter posts, geolocated from the main 145 cities from all 27 Brazilian states, about comments dealing with the then president of Brazil. In this data sample, obtained through the analysis of sentiments/feelings and polarities, the emotions joy, confidence, fear and sadness were measured, with which it was possible to ponder whether the mentions of the president were positive or negative. AP Exata also evaluated

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the peaks and drops of the president's popularity, which oscillated between positive and negative until the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic (March 2020), when only negative evaluations were recorded up until the end of the data collection period.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Spin doctoring

Social platforms, however, carry other phenomena beyond the technological and emotional ones. Spin doctoring, for instance, is a practice of political communication that has been applied in digital media and uses emotions inside news to obtain its objectives.

The term refers to a variation of the press advisor's role, which deals specifically in the persuasion and publicity of the public image of the entity it represents. As Mateus (2022. 23) states: "the idea of spreading and amplifying messages in the public space taking into account the interest of public opinion for a product, service or, even, public figure."

The term "spin doctor" is an amalgam of "spin", meaning the interpretation or slant put on events (which is a sports metaphor, referring to the spin a pool player puts on a cue ball) and "doctor", derived from the figurative uses of the word to mean mending, patching together, and faking. The "doctor" part also derives from the employment of professionals rather than untrained amateurs to manage the spin. (Esser, 2008. 23)

The first time the term was used dates to the 1950s, specifically on the practice of *spinning* (turning the focus towards the expected goal) (Sumpter & Tankard, 1994). In the following decades, mentions of the practice of *spin* applied to politics appear, such as mentions of the practice in the presidential governments of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, James Carter, and Ronald Reagan. In 1984, an editorial in the New York Times commented on the debates of the then electoral race for the US presidency with the current expression, *spin doctoring*.

Thus, the term *spin doctoring* transitions between the performance of public relations, in which professionals define the framework of the facts they communicate to society; or even act as consultants specialized in political communication. In both cases, the practice aims at producing messages with matters that give advantage to a politician and trigger appropriate results in the public (Esser, 2008. 4783-4784). Ribeiro (2015), meanwhile, defines *spin doctoring* as the

positive projection to the public space of a particular subject or action, through the most sophisticated and updated techniques of manipulation and persuasion. In this process, the media stand out as the preferred channel for the distribution and induction of messages, having as an engine the interpersonal relationship with journalists. (2015. 20)

Of the numerous objectives, prerequisites, main tasks, techniques and instruments of the practice, the following stand out for this article (in Ribeiro, 2015. 10-19): defining and conveyance the media agenda; building a political personality; maintaining power/campaign permanent; finding the message; image management; personalisation of the politician; scandal management; use of social networks and buzz media; negative campaigning; manipulation of the truth; alternative-truth and over-promising; diversionary manoeuvres (firebreaking); "emptying the story"; testing public opinion; raising or lowering expectations; "throwing out the bodies"; bullying and intimidation.

In this case study, the digital communication of the then President Bolsonaro and its effects, it is believed that the use of populist and emotional resources (Araújo & Prior, 2021) in his messages were a strategy to react to the worst moments of evaluation in social networks, materialized through speeches, facts or factoids, published in the professional press or in social networks.

1.2 Presentism as a pillar of populism

In contemporaneity, the classical idea of harmony was subverted following the shattering of categories (Hall, 1992 Bhabha, 1994). Thus, the narratives taken as references until then were called into question, namely on History, with consequences at the level of identity, a fact which Jean-François Lyotard (1986) underlines as having resulted in the loss of credibility of the founding metanarratives. The notions of fragmentation and heterogeneity gave more importance to the so-called margins of knowledge, increasing diversity. As already mentioned, the contemporary stamp is inscribed only in the present, to which we are all summoned (Martins, 2011). In this regard, the writer Javier Cercas warns not to simplify the present to the point of ceasing to understand it. In an interview to the Portuguese newspaper *Expresso*, he sustains that what is not of today is already past, and what happened three weeks ago is pre-history. This is a situation that creates a totally falsified vision of reality, because, in truth, the past is an active dimension of the present, without which the present is mutilated (Leiderfarb, 2020). Which summons up the idea of “presentism”, a concept coined by François Hartog (2003) and based on the idea that there is a risk that everything that is history is compressed into contemporary history. The “modern regime of historicity” would have been broken around 1989 with Francis Fukuyama's (1992) idea of the “end of history”, “surely a caesura of time” (Hartog, 2003, p. 188), leaving behind Koselleck's (2006) ideas about the trend of modernity away from experience and expectation, which are configured as “the main features of this multiform and multivocal present: a present monster. It is at the same time everything (there is only present) and almost nothing (the tyranny of the immediate)” (Hartog, 2003, p. 259).

Looking, then, at history in a banal way, underlining the unrepeatability of its moments, as well as the fact that they are irreproducible, or from simplified and predictive models of causality, Jerónimo and Monteiro (2020) point out that there is room to think from other concerns. Even if, as happens with other ways of producing knowledge, “it does not have to be immediately useful” and much of its usefulness proves even useless. And, in the face of political, institutional, and also academic anxiety, they refer to the need to reiterate this fact, “which leads to subordinating the production of knowledge to criteria of ‘application’, of ‘innovation’, of ‘market’ or of ‘technology’, or even of a given ‘greater cause’” (Jerónimo and Monteiro, 2020, p. 11).

This intersects with the ideas of Daniel Innerarity (2019), who links the little understanding of a society to the measures aimed at making it measurable since, as he observes, almost everything can be quantified, in a true regime of omnimetry. And, despite the constant invocation of international good practices that underline that blocking or banning the media does not constitute an answer to the problem of the existence of false news, the fact is that, in recent years, the opposite has been observed. This has worsened due to the Covid 19 pandemic, in which several countries have sponsored laws to punish the authors of fake news, which has alarmed the UN and the OSCE about the fact that these dynamics can potentiate censorship. Which does not mean to stop fighting them, being good to remember that this is a problem that captures more and more journalists, in an attempt to seek the truth based on fact-checking. To promote a kind of a new light on it, Innerarity proposes that pluralism is always guaranteed and that the fight against fake news is not made the focus (Innerarity, 2021). More so because, as Innerarity tells in the book *A Theory of Complex Democracy - Governing in the 21st Century*, we are not living in a world of evidence, but of ignorance, where truth is not the same as objectivity and rigour and there is little verifiable verification of what circulates around us.

Political leaders thus take advantage of the dynamics of presentism, in which everything that emerges in society seems to have started today and there is no history to contextualise it. This means that simultaneity will have been responsible for a new regime of historicity, a kind of continuous present, characterised by acceleration, in which the present and the past are shown in a disruptive way. It is in this framework that Enzo Traverso (*Observing Memories*, 2018) underlines the urgency in freeing presentism from its cage - as if it produced a world locked in the present without the capacity to look to the future - accommodating existing memories.

It is no coincidence that Peter Dahlgren (2014) states that social networks are platforms with a great deficit of democracy, since they function on the basis of the replication of similarity and not the promotion of difference; which enhances the emergence of an apparent consensus, moulded into uncontested bubbles in the relationships between individuals intermediated by these online platforms. José Pedro Zúquete (2022) compares populism to a chameleon. Perhaps this is why populist politicians direct their discourse almost exclusively towards the new media, relegating the traditional media to an irrelevant place, altering the ecosystem that has been in force regarding the scrutinising role of the media. José Tavares (2022) observes that “the populism of others is not an excuse to ignore problems but should rather serve as a pretext to talk more and better about the problems”.

In *The expulsion of the other* (2018), Byung-Chul Han underlines the standardisation of globalisation and the blurring of the ‘other’, whatever it may be. He does not see positive things in the dissemination of that which is equal, and which reacts to the stimuli that capitalism determines in the same way. He states that the proliferation of the equal, presented as growth, makes the social body pathological. In the chapter entitled “Listening”, he predicts that in the future there will be a profession called “listener”, who will be paid to listen to the other, with listening gives back to each person what is his or hers, reconciling, healing and redeeming. Han maintains that the noisy society of tiredness is deaf, so that, in contrast, a future society could be called a society of listeners and those who pay attention. Which will pass through a temporal revolution that makes a totally other time begin: rediscovering the time of the other. Which will be a good time.

Moisés de Lemos Martins points out that human practices “are in direct relation with temporality and have a local time, which is the time of experience”, although they also have a contextual time, being that “between the time of experience and the contextual time walks the time of practice” (Martins, 2011, p. 64). Which means that it will not be by chance that Umberto Eco defends the idea that, even for philosophers, lies are more fascinating than the truth, a fact that justified his dedication to semiotics. For Eco, what makes signs interesting is not that they serve to tell the truth, but that they can be used to lie or to talk about things we have never seen: “A language reveals its importance when it is used to refer to things that are not there. In my collection you will not find Galileo, but Ptolemy, because he was wrong” (Leiderfarb, 2015, p. 28-30). Moreover, the philosopher, resorting to Wittgenstein, notes that what cannot be theorized must be narrated, having no doubt that people prefer the lie to the truth.

2. Methodology

During the period of four years, a set of algorithms collected and analysed posted content on Twitter about the president of Brazil Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019-2022), using the methodology of Sentiment Analysis and polarities. Based on artificial neural networks, and by receiving human feedback through sample appraisal, this methodology uses the concept of emotions from evolutionary psychology. According to this theory (Plutchik, 1984), human beings express themselves from eight basic emotions that, when associated, generate dozens of compound emotions. In this framework, four emotions were measured in real time: happiness, confidence, fear and sadness, as well as positive and negative mentions (the sentiments/feelings).

Through the analysis of keywords, and their association with other terms contained in the texts published online, it was possible to calculate the emotions present in each sentence and analyse oscillations of the feelings produced by them. For this, we searched for data published on Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Based on the netnography approach (Kozinets, 2020), it was also analysed qualitative data from social networks, profiles and pages related to the universe of interest related to the themes in question.

AP Exata also carried out evaluation of the peaks and drops of the president's popularity, which oscillated between positive and negative until the start of the covid-19 pandemic (March 2020), when then only negative evaluations were recorded. The data shows positive mentions for 275 days (34.03% of the total data collection), 463 negative days (57.30%) and 70 neutral days (8.66%).

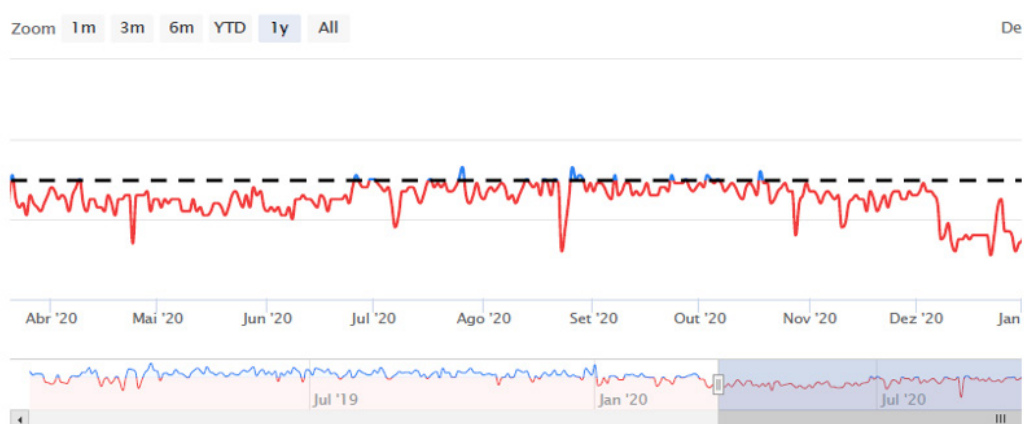


Figure 1 – Daily assessment of Jair Bolsonaro's government performance

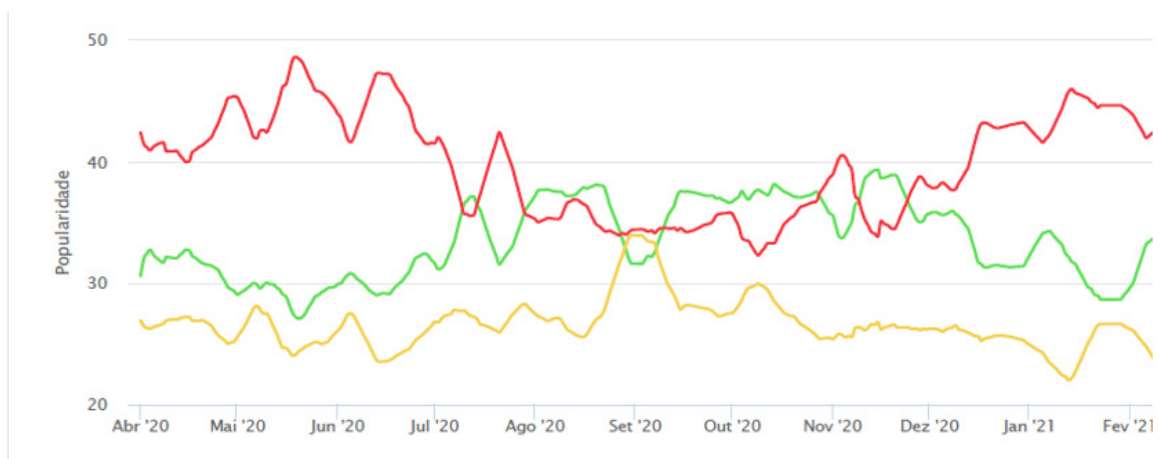


Figure 2 - Assessment of the government according to “Excellent/Good” in green, “Regular” in yellow and “Bad/Terrible” in red

The most used *hashtags* during 2019-2020 connected to the president dataset were #Bolsonaro, #ForaBolsonaro, #BolsonaroGenocida, #LulaPresidente2022, #BBb21, #Lula, #ForaBolsonaroGenocida, #Lula2022, #LulaVergonhaDoBrasil, #BolsonaroPresidenteAte2026, #COVID19, #BolsonaroPresidente2022, #NemLulaNemBolsonaro, #VacinaParaTodosJa and #ElesNao (AP Exata, 2020).

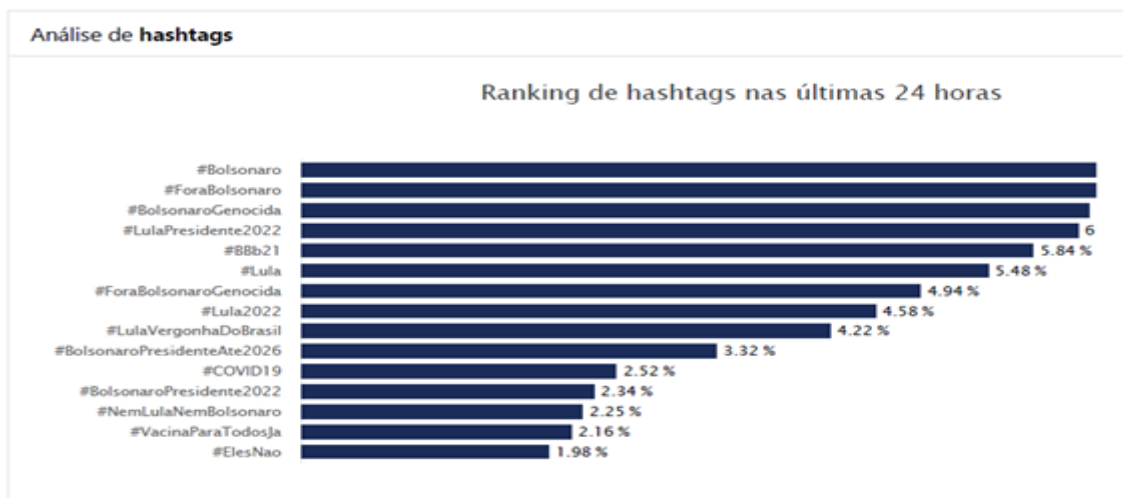


Figure 3 - Most used hashtags

3. Case study with emotional news and spin doctoring practices

For this text, it was collected related news after the drops of sentiment measurements exhibited previously, which will be analysed according to the concepts presented in the theoretical framework. These news reports contextualise some crises of Bolsonaro government, which stimulated political communication with traces of presentism, populism, and spin doctoring techniques.

Initially, of four news attesting Bolsonaro's public reactions on Twitter (3 negative and 1 positive, indicate that there are facts with potentiality to change the emotional bias of Twitter users' comments. Such considerations suggest that the digital communication of the then president tried to reverse the negative perception of the facts addressed with the latest news:

1. *Queiroz case turns tide of Bolsonaro clan's popularity on Twitter. Source: Exame Magazine (21/01/2019);*
2. *Tweets reveal Bolsonaro supporters' relationship with religion. Source: O Estado de S. Paulo (20/05/2019);*
3. *Bolsonaristas change tone on Twitter and attack on media turns to support for Lava Jato. Source: Exame Magazine (11/06/2019);*
4. *UN speech increases positive mentions of Bolsonaro on Twitter. Source: O Antagonista (24/09/2019);*

Then, 9 news items were collected right after the day of the worst evaluations about government, recorded by sentiment analysis of *tweets*, between January 1, 2020 and March 31, 2021. These indicated that there is modulation of the president official speech and agenda when verified popularity drop on Twitter. Of the preconditions for the execution of spin doctoring work, the characteristic identified by Ribeiro (2015) that relates to this article, is the ability to control public opinion through monitoring and reaction. Already among the objectives of the practice identified by the author, the maintenance of power through permanent campaign is what stands out in the news collected. In this analysis, it was noticed that among the biggest recurrences of *spinning* activities are permanent campaign; increase

decrease expectations; image management and media agenda conduction; right after in the number of recurrences, the personification of the politician; “emptying the story”, diversionism maneuvers and truth manipulation.

1. *Bolsonaro says he is in favour of any measure to combat terrorism. Source: Folha de S. Paulo (03/01/2020);*
2. *In Regina Duarte's nomination, Bolsonaro talks about “valorizar” Rouanet law. Source: Exame Magazine (04/03/2020);*
3. *Bolsonaro issues MP¹ and decree to define essential activities. Agência Brasil (03/21/2020).*
4. *Bolsonaro pays tribute to covid-19 victims with “Ave Maria” at the sound of accordion. Source: DN/Lusa (26/06/2020);*
5. *Questioned about checks from Queiroz to Michelle, Bolsonaro tells journalist: ‘My desire is to beat you up’. Source: G1 (23/08/2020);*
6. *Bolsonaro says he will not send Renda Brasil proposal made by economic team. Source: Valor Econômico (21/01/2019);*
7. *Bolsonaro gives a speech on TV for 7 September and reactivates “panelaço”². Lula releases video on social networks. Source: El País Brasil (07/09/2020);*
8. *Covid-19. Bolsonaro says Trump will beat virus and come out stronger. Source: RTP Notícias (03/10/2020);*
9. *Fachin's decision on Lula made ‘one of the biggest crooks’ eligible, says Bolsonaro. Source: G1(18/03/2021)*

3. Final considerations

As presented earlier, the then president Bolsonaro used populist and emotional resources to react to the worst moments of assessment on social media, materialized through speeches, facts or factoids, published in the professional press or on social media. It also seems clear the implementation of spin doctoring techniques in the agenda, statements and factoids of the then president of Brazil, to emotionally reach his digital followers.

According to the journalist Maria Ressa, winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, co-founder of the website Rappler, internet platforms have put an end to shared reality and are destroying democracy. In an interview with Folha de S. Paulo, she maintains that “facts are boring, they don't spread - that's why the incentive structure of social media platforms is completely wrong” (Melo, 2022).

João Carlos Correia, states that communication needs facts but it also needs an interpretative effort, of hermeneutics: “Journalism needs to be oriented to facts but it also needs a good context, editorial considerations and an efficient narrative that helps to give a cultural meaning to the chaos of experiences of daily life”. Even more so since “disinformation in all its extent is a buzzword and a condition of all human societies” (2022, p. 9). Quoting Nelson Traquina (2020), he notes that it is impossible to establish a radical distinction between reality and the media that should reflect that reality, because the news helps to construct reality itself. Even if reality is constructed, so the media show their own construction of that reality (Berger & Luckman, 1999).

If there are no measures to reverse this *status quo*, such as increasing media regulation, the situation may degrade to levels that are difficult to recover from. Even if indignation, when exercised by citizens, continues to contribute to resolve conflicts and problems (Innerarity, 2019). Which may, on

1. Provisional law.

2. Protests made by making noise with pans during the duration of Bolsonaro's speech.

the other hand, mean that the social networks that helped pave the way for Bolsonaro, may also unseat him, should he fail to live up to the expectations of those who elected him (Fernandes, 2018). Hate, for its part, will make its way in social networks and at the speed of the internet.

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