DÍGITOS

Revista de Comunicación Digital

Populist communication and misinformation as threats to democracy and journalism in the Global South

La comunicación populista y la desinformación como amenazas a la democracia y al periodismo en el Sur Global

Danilo Rothberg
danilo.rothberg@unesp.br
São Paulo State University (Brasil)

Paulo Ferracioli
ferracioli.paulo@gmail.com
University of Bologna (Italy)

Abstract
Research indicates that populist governments often cultivate antagonistic relationships with journalists. While many studies have explored how populism affects journalistic practices, there has been less focus on how the communication strategies employed by populist governments—particularly the deliberate spread of misinformation—undermine journalism and negatively impact the quality of democracy, especially in regions of the Global South. This article aims to fill that gap by examining how Jair Bolsonaro's populist government in Brazil designed and used various communication tools to challenge the role of journalism in upholding democratic vitality. The methodology involves analyzing specific empirical cases through the lens of existing literature, highlighting how different theoretical frameworks of populism, such as ideology, strategy, and discourse, relate to Bolsonaro's administration. The article investigates the unique characteristics of Bolsonaro's communication methods, which included live streams on social media, spontaneous speeches, selectively granted interviews with allies, and impromptu remarks made in the informal setting of the Alvorada Palace, the official presidential residence. The findings are significant as they enhance our understanding of how government communication under populism can potentially weaken democratic institutions.

Keywords
Populism, populist communication, misinformation, democracy, journalism.

Resumen

Las investigaciones académicas indican que los gobiernos populistas a menudo cultivan relaciones antagónicas con los periodistas. Aunque numerosos estudios han explorado cómo el populismo afecta las prácticas periodísticas, se ha prestado menos atención a cómo las estrategias de comunicación empleadas por los gobiernos populistas—particularmente la difusión deliberada de desinformación—minan el periodismo y afectan negativamente la calidad de la democracia, especialmente en las regiones del Sur Global. Este artículo busca llenar esa brecha al examinar cómo el gobierno populista de Jair Bolsonaro en Brasil diseñó y utilizó diversas herramientas de comunicación para desafiar el papel del periodismo en el fortalecimiento de la vitalidad democrática. La metodología empleada analiza casos empíricos específicos a través del marco de la literatura existente, destacando cómo diferentes enfoques teóricos del populismo, como ideología, estrategia y discurso, se relacionan con la administración de Bolsonaro. El artículo investiga las características únicas de los métodos de comunicación de Bolsonaro, que incluyen transmisiones en vivo en redes sociales, discursos espontáneos, entrevistas selectivas concedidas a aliados y declaraciones informales realizadas en el entorno del Palacio de la Alvorada, la residencia oficial del presidente. Los hallazgos son significativos, ya que profundizan nuestra comprensión de cómo la comunicación gubernamental bajo el populismo puede debilitar potencialmente las instituciones democráticas.

Palabras clave

Academic dictionary; frequency of use; words list; professions and jobs; censorship and political correctness.

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Literature on populism reveals a lack of consensus regarding its definition. Due to the diversity of concepts aimed at understanding populism, authors such as Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson (2017), Moffit (2020), and Cassimiro (2021) suggest classifying the various studies into three main axes: populism as an ideology, as a strategy, and as a discourse.

While these different perspectives share similarities—particularly in their emphasis on maintaining a perceived divide between the people and the elite and viewing populism as a characteristic of a political actor—they also exhibit divergences in their analytical approaches. Some scholars focus on identifying central characteristics, such as personalist leadership (Weyland, 2017), while others investigate the consequences of the urgent need to highlight purported crises as opportunities for populism's emergence (Rooduijn, 2014). Additionally, some researchers examine how the exclusion of so-called dangerous others is constructed (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008).

Variations in the study of populist leadership communication carry significant implications. The differences in conceptualizations are important because they influence methodological and epistemological analyses of the phenomenon. This includes examining the intersections between populism, attacks on journalists, and spreading misinformation. The government of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) in Brazil serves as a compelling case study to explore these issues. This article aims to clarify how populism shaped both the form and content of Bolsonaro's communication strategies, including misinformation dissemination while attacking news media credibility.

Bolsonaro innovated in his public interactions and systematic attacks on journalism by integrating online and offline methods (Nicoletti & Flores, 2022). He employed populist communication to erode trust in news media, which became the first step in preparing the grounds for encouraging a belief in the misinformation he spread systematically. While this approach is not entirely new,

as we will show through the literature, it gained a unique character under Bolsonaro due to the diversity and consistency of his tactics. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic allowed Bolsonaro to enhance and broaden his practices.

Research in Brazil demonstrated the populist nature of the Bolsonaro government (Aggio & Castro, 2020; Albuquerque, 2021; Baptista et al., 2022; Luiz, 2020; Lynch & Cassimiro, 2021, 2022; Ricci et al., 2021; Tamaki & Fuks, 2020; Vazquez & Schlegel, 2022). This characterization has been reinforced by the government's actions during the pandemic (Penteado et al., 2022). Key features of this populism include the slogan "my party is the people", an antagonistic stance toward elites, the glorification of the "motherland", and the mobilization of hatred through the planned dissemination of misinformation, framing populist politics as a "cultural war" against the left, which is portrayed as a threat to family and national values (Baptista et al., 2022).

Throughout his term, Bolsonaro introduced several innovative practices compared to his predecessors. Notably, he held weekly live appearances on social media where he interacted with his staff (Moraes & Silva, 2021). There, he discussed current issues in an improvised manner and made provocative statements directed at a variety of opponents, often supported by misinformation that fueled the "Bolsonaro effect"; this effect was seen in behaviors encouraged by the belief in conspiracy theories during COVID-19 pandemic, which was associated to a lower level of compliance with social distancing measures, low vaccination rates and higher death rates in cities more in favor of the former president (Biancovilli et al., 2021; Razafindrakoto et al., 2024).

Another key initiative was his daily engagement with supporters in an improvised area called the *Cercadinho* in front of the Alvorada Palace, the official residence. During these sessions, he greeted his supporters and, at the same time, addressed journalists' questions. However, over time, the treatment of journalists became so demeaning that the news industry collectively decided to suspend their presence in the area (Abreu, 2022).

Furthermore, Bolsonaro's Twitter account became notorious as a platform for spreading hate (Barbosa et al., 2022) and misinformation (Seibt & Dannenberg, 2021). He tended to avoid interviews with media outlets critical of his administration while engaging in lengthy discussions with selected hosts from more sympathetic broadcasters, who often demonstrated a pro-Bolsonaro editorial line despite benefiting from public concessions (Stycer, 2019; Mundim et al., 2022).

The article's methodology involves conducting a literature review and applying it to analyze specific empirical cases. This approach helps us illustrate how different interpretations of populism can sustain an assessment of government communication and its proclivity to spreading misinformation as a potent threat to journalism and democracy. In our review, we focused on the key contributions of prominent authors associated with each perspective, treating populism as an ideology (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2022; Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004, 2007; Müller, 2016); as a strategy (Jansen, 2011; Roberts, 2003; Weyland, 2001, 2017); and as a discourse (Laclau, 2013; Ostiguy, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

The word "misinformation" encompasses various complexities, resulting in detailed classifications (Chong & Choy, 2020). In this discussion, we will adopt the classification proposed by Wang et al. (2019), using misinformation as an umbrella term that includes all types of false information, regardless of language, purpose, or the ability to identify the intent to deceive.

We aimed to address the following research questions:

R1. *What is the role of misinformation in Bolsonaro's populist communication?*

R2. *How can Bolsonaro's communication strategies be interpreted as attacks on democracy, considering the various (and sometimes conflicting) definitions of populism?*

The article's relevance lies in its contribution to identifying how government communication

under populism can potentially damage democracy. It takes as its object of analysis an empirical reality from the Global South, which is rare in studies on the recent populist waves that have plagued Europe and the Americas. The results illuminate the particularities of contemporary threats to the independent practice of journalism as a support for democracy, focusing on events that had not yet been elucidated from this perspective.

2. POPULISM AS IDEOLOGY

Moffitt (2020) emphasizes that populism can be seen as just another "ism" among many other ideologies, such as liberalism and socialism. Its content is not particularly strong. It is "an empty ideology that considers that society is ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.' This ideology argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). It is "a way of perceiving the political world that establishes a morally pure and completely unified people – ultimately fictitious – against elites that are considered corrupt or morally inferior in some other way" (Müller, 2016, p. 19). Within this framework, the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite drives the quest to restore the people's sovereignty, which is understood as a cohesive entity whose will can be accurately captured and represented by populists (Abts & Rummens, 2007).

Populism, as an ideology, relies on other ideologies and is part of Freeden's (2003) framework that distinguishes between thin-centered and thick-centered ideologies. Thin-centered ideologies function as limited political concepts, resulting in reduced analytical power. In contrast, thick-centered ideologies provide a broader perspective on significant issues. Populism is often viewed as an empty ideology. Therefore, studying populist governments or leaders requires examining how effectively they have mobilized other ideologies in their actions, including their communication strategies.

Mudde (2004), Fieschi (2004), and Stanley (2008) converge on the proposal to study thin-centered ideologies that focus on verifying their coexistence with ideologies of other political actors since populism would not appear in isolation. This proposal was criticized by Aslanidis (2016) and Freeden (2017), who pointed out that, from this perspective, populism would be diagnosed as so light that it would not even be thin; that is, it would not have enough internal cohesion to be studied as an ideology in fact, as would, for example, ecology and feminism.

In this context, understanding populism as a thin ideology involves recognizing the presence of other ideologies in Bolsonaro's communication. Literature has highlighted conservatism, particularly regarding social customs (Almeida, 2019). However, this conservatism was often selective, as Bolsonaro did not advocate for certain freedoms related to the press or the autonomy of science (Lehmann & Zehnter, 2022).

Research on Bolsonaro's live streaming on social media identified distinct populist traits, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Monari et al. (2020) noted three key characteristics: the emphasis on ambiguities surrounding the scientific consensus on how to manage the disease, the overemphasis on personal experiences that fostered scientific denial, and the promotion of individual freedom of choice as a paramount value above all else.

The live streams became a platform for Bolsonaro to mock experts and journalists who were attempting to approach the COVID-19 crisis rationally. He labeled these individuals as part of an elite group that did not truly care about the general population (Monari et al., 2020). By discrediting the disease, he also discredited science, fueled by skepticism toward scientific knowledge and the belief that true understanding comes from religion—traits commonly associated with populism (Staerklé et al., 2022). In this context, the notion of freedom of choice was framed around democratic values such as autonomy and individual freedom, allowing populists to present themselves as champions of democracy.

Bolsonaro's live streaming on social media primarily deepened the divide between ordinary

citizens, who were often depicted as virtuous supporters of the president, and opposition elites entrenched in academia and the media, whom he accused of pursuing hidden agendas. Bolsonaro considered this confrontational approach necessary because he viewed these elites as illegitimately claiming to be the source of truth, a notion contradicting his populist agenda. This strategy does not tolerate differing opinions and aims to eliminate opposing viewpoints from the discourse (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). By portraying the press as part of this arrogant elite, Bolsonaro's communication strategy may have undermined democracy.

Smith (2020) notes that Bolsonaro's communication strategy consistently portrayed the pandemic not as a health crisis but as a public relations challenge. In this approach, it became essential to project an alternative narrative that the public would accept. He aimed to manipulate voters' emotions and preferences, transforming perceptions of objective facts into personal concerns. This tactic sidelined traditional sources of authority in contemporary society, such as science and mainstream journalism, ultimately undermining their credibility and social acceptance.

3. POPULISM AS A STRATEGY

Another interpretation of populism views it not as an ideology but as a strategy, identifying it as a mode of political practice (Jansen, 2011). This perspective suggests that the study of populism does not require researchers to focus on the beliefs that underpin it, which would pertain to its ideological aspect, nor on the rhetoric used, which relates to discourse. Instead, it emphasizes how political actors engage in governance and make authoritarian decisions (Weyland, 2017). Populism is a "political strategy through which a personalist leader seeks or exercises governmental power based on direct, unmediated, and non-institutionalized support from large numbers of followers, most of whom are not organized" (Weyland, 2001, p. 14).

In this perspective, the leader plays a crucial role by employing a populist strategy to wield political power (Weyland, 2017). To connect with a diverse audience, this strategy enables the leader to utilize media channels that bypass traditional industrial journalism, facilitating direct interaction with the public. This approach creates an illusion of authenticity, as the leader appears to be 'opening up' to the people. As a result, all supporters are included in the concept of the 'people,' despite the one-way communication flowing from the leader to the public (Waisbord & Amado, 2017).

One criticism of this approach is that the literature tends to focus primarily on Latin American populism throughout its various waves, such as the cases of Perón and Cárdenas, Menem and Fujimori, and Chávez and Morales (Crouch, 2019). As a result, these analyses may not apply to studying movements or parties that are more prominent in Europe (Moffitt, 2020).

The concept remains relevant for analyzing Bolsonaro's communication, mainly due to his innovative online approach that bypassed journalists who might ask uncomfortable questions. One aspect of this strategy was an improvised area at the Alvorada Palace, known as the Cercadinho do Alvorada, where Bolsonaro directly interacted with his supporters while expressing disdain for reporters (Abreu, 2022). His threats to press freedom were part of a broader strategy to deepen social divisions that were essential for maintaining his populist agenda, ultimately affecting journalism in the country (Marques, 2023).

Brazilian journalists implemented several strategies to combat the attacks initiated by the then-president. They restructured their editorial projects and launched advertising campaigns emphasizing the link between journalism and the public interest. Additionally, they increased the visibility of their news organizations in their coverage, highlighting them as victims of Bolsonaro's assaults. Journalists also leveraged their social media profiles to expose presidential abuses directed at them, marking a significant departure from traditional journalistic values such as impartiality and objectivity (Marques, 2023).

Bolsonaro utilized a network with a broad reach, leveraging other profiles to promote what

has come to be known as Bolsonarism, particularly within the digital landscape (Cesarino, 2019). He explicitly instructed his supporters to stop consuming mainstream news from industrial journalism and to rely solely on his live-streaming sessions on social media for their information (or misinformation). This approach aimed to strengthen his strategy of eliminating intermediaries in his communication with the public (Monari et al., 2020).

Press conferences typically involve interactions with journalists who act as defenders of the public interest. This dynamic is often at odds with the goals of populist leaders (Curcino, 2019). By avoiding such interactions and encouraging the public to dismiss traditional journalism, these leaders explicitly attack democratic institutions like the news media. Consequently, journalism as an institution becomes a target of the head of state's disdain (Kaplan, 2006; Lawrence, 2006). In the case of Bolsonaro and his allies, their attacks extended beyond mere insults directed at individual journalists, which unions have well documented. Their strategy also undermined the influence and credibility of journalistic media (Fenaj, 2023).

Bolsonaro utilized digital communication to create an illusion of spontaneity and intimacy with the public. He employed techniques that mimic amateurism, such as blurred images, sudden camera movements, and fluctuations in audio volume (Curcino, 2019). This aesthetic helped shape his image as the "man of the people," presenting him as someone who shunned elaborate sets, makeup, and filters to reveal his true essence—boldness, courage, and a willingness to challenge the elite. This strategy appeared effective; viewers often failed to recognize that the so-called improvisation was just as carefully crafted as the polished aesthetics of professional journalism (which it was) and that the closeness he projected was a meticulously planned outcome (Carreon & Baronas, 2020).

The scene was meticulously arranged to evoke an impression of improvisation, casualness, and simplicity. Bolsonaro leaned over a table cluttered with a variety of items: ordinary BIC pens, numerous papers, cell phones, handouts, adhesive tape, chargers, glasses, an assortment of magazines, cups, miscellaneous plastic items, an electric racket for swatting mosquitoes, a tennis ball, pliers, a crystal snow globe souvenir, and a can of condensed milk (Curcino, 2019). In addition to these objects, the selection of books is carefully curated to reflect the partisan beliefs and individual ethos of the politician, as well as those of his electorate. Among the titles showcased and discussed were "The Double Life of Fidel Castro: My 17 Years as Personal Bodyguard to El Lider Maximo," in which a soldier recounts his experiences of imprisonment and torture for allegedly falling out of favor with Castro. Another notable book is "In Defense of Socialism: On the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Manifesto," authored by Fernando Haddad, the Workers' Party candidate who lost to Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections, and a professor in the political science department at the distinguished University of São Paulo. Curcino (2019, p. 476) notes that "the tone adopted is one of denunciation, with the book serving as 'proof' of the PT candidate's ties to socialism."

The Bible could not be overlooked, as it was presented as evidence that Bolsonaro and the truth were effectively one and the same. During a live broadcast, it was prominently displayed on the table, its verses cited, and its significance explained: "After all, I took our flag and slogan from what many refer to as the toolbox for mending men and women, which is the Holy Bible. We referred to John 8:32: 'And you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free'" (Curcino, 2019, p. 482).

In other instances, the live broadcasts helped enhance Bolsonaro's image as a leader with vision and influence. He sometimes repeated widely recognized clichés from Brazilian society, delivered with a moralistic tone, such as, "A good criminal is a dead criminal," "I prefer a prison full of miscreants to a cemetery full of innocents," and "God does not choose the capable, but empowers the chosen" (Curcino, 2019, pp. 473-474).

The approach also facilitated the avoidance of in-depth discussions about public policies. It concentrated on isolated events presented episodically, which was convenient for reinforcing the populist leader's personalist image (Curcino, 2019). Most importantly, this method effectively created short clips that enhanced cross-media visibility, particularly on platforms like WhatsApp

and X (Carreon & Baronas, 2020).

4. POPULISM AS DISCOURSE

Populism can be examined primarily as a form of discourse, as Laclau (2013) has argued. This perspective is supported by authors such as Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014), who view populism as a means of constructing identities within the context of power struggles. Aslanidis (2016) concentrated on how discursive framings influence populism, while Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) explored how demands are articulated through discourse.

Laclau (2013) expressed concerns about how the concepts of 'people' and 'elite' are discursively constructed, highlighting the dynamics involved in including and excluding allies and oppositions. However, this discursive pathway could actually benefit political representation, as it may support vectors of political resistance (Mendonça, 2019) or provide a means to address the limitations of contemporary democracies in organizing and expressing dissenting voices (Mouffe, 2018). In the context of populism, Bolsonaro cannot be accurately labeled a populist; the 'people' he references in his discourse is a reductionist and pejorative simulacrum. This representation is far removed from the essential characteristics of populism, which should ideally reflect social segments that have been historically excluded from politics and are now striving to regain their influence over public policy formulation (Parzianello, 2020).

After all, the label "populist" can encompass different levels of meaning. An individual might be labeled as such in one context but not in another (Moffitt, 2020). Critics of this perspective argue that it is too abstract and struggles to provide adequate tools for analyzing specific situations beyond their semantic aspects (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). To address these criticisms, some researchers have developed practical analytical frameworks. For example, Aslanidis (2016) focused on identifying the symbolic frameworks leaders and governments utilize.

Bolsonaro's populism, when studied as a discursive strategy, has proven to be a powerful tool for establishing a connection with his voters. He encourages them to see him as a politician who speaks freely and independently, allowing for interaction through comments and likes. His live streams on social media consistently portray him as the bearer of truth, positioning himself against the mainstream media. This strategy involves several key elements:

(i) He presents himself as the target of lies and slander, asserting that he is the only one telling the truth.

(ii) He uses selective data and statistics to substantiate his claims, often spreading misinformation.

(iii) He implies close relationships with other public figures beyond formal interactions.

(iv) He repeatedly identifies a common enemy in the left.

These rhetorical strategies aim to undermine the role of the press and establish the populist as the sole relevant voice in communication.

In addition, Carreon and Barronas (2020) argue that populism in this context emerges when Bolsonaro characterizes the opposition as the "other." This characterization reinforces his status as the sole representative of the "people" and legitimizes his actions, which he frames as necessary for saving the "people" from their enemies (Kissas, 2020).

5. CONCLUSIONS

To address R1 (*What is the role of misinformation in Bolsonaro's populist communication?*), we highlight that the persuasive impact of Bolsonaro's frequent live appearances on social media benefited from the spread of misinformation. He skillfully utilized these streams to reinforce his populist stance. This strategy allowed for simplistic confrontations and selective attacks,

enabling him and his followers to focus only on the disputes that interested them. We echo Baldwin-Philippi (2019), who noted that controlled interactivity and the easy dissemination of misinformation motivate populists to engage with these platforms.

Besides, studying populism as a form of communication requires an examination of the spread of misinformation within a broader context rather than focusing solely on descriptive aspects. This phenomenon interacts with various factors, such as users' desires, the unique characteristics of each platform, and the ways political actors engage with these increasingly complex environments. Social media has provided populists with visibility, allowing them to distinguish themselves and gather audiences with shared interests. This dynamic likely expanded the engagement initiated by Bolsonaro, reinforcing the connection between social media, populism, and misinformation (Gerbaudo, 2018).

To address R2 (*How can Bolsonaro's communication strategies be interpreted as attacks on democracy, considering the various and sometimes conflicting definitions of populism?*), we examine how populism—whether viewed as an ideology, strategy, or discourse—has been studied in research areas that enhance our understanding of authoritarian communication. This communication often undermines journalism and democracy through strategies such as spreading misinformation (de Vreese et al., 2018; Guazina, 2021; Ernst et al., 2019; Zulianello et al., 2018). Our research indicates that Bolsonaro's populist message should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon. Its content embodies anti-elitism and a façade of connection with the 'people,' while its form utilizes a distinctive style that combines language and rhetorical resources (Bos & Brants, 2014).

In common, the three currents defining populism also maintain that it reveals itself as political communication and not always as an attribute of the political actor, which brings epistemological and methodological implications. The political phenomenon can be understood more clearly when it is seen in its communicative layer (Blassnig et al., 2018). While, in the social sciences, populism is explicitly studied as a matrix for reconfiguring (and sometimes dismantling) public policies (Gomide et al., 2023), it is as communication that the populist attack on journalism and democracy is most clearly evident. The communication toolbox Bolsonaro designed and its appeal for spreading misinformation exemplify such a strategic attack.

In the Global South, the process of political engagement exhibits unique characteristics that recent studies are beginning to highlight, as discussed in this article. In this context, populism—whether understood as an ideology, strategy, or discourse—should be analyzed in relation to the opportunities social media offers for its promotion and reinforcement (Engesser et al., 2017). Social media platforms operate within an economy of limited attention, contributing to bubbles and echo chambers forming. Additionally, these platforms amplify messages that create the illusion of a direct connection with populist leaders, enabling these messages to reach a broad audience, as seen in the case of Bolsonaro.

From a populist ideological perspective, misinformation was employed to simplify complex realities. Bolsonaro framed society as being divided between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," a narrative supported by his strategic use of misinformation. This approach perpetuated the us-versus-them storyline, depicting elites—such as scientists, journalists, and political opponents—as self-serving and out of touch with the needs of the public. It was also used to challenge institutional authority and promote alternative "truths", as his communication constructed a fictional homogeneity among "the people", disregarding evidence and factual complexity.

From a populism strategic perspective, misinformation played a key role in Bolsonaro's direct and unmediated communication with his supporters, allowing him to bypass institutional checks and balances. His live streams and social media platforms became primary channels for spreading falsehoods and escaping journalistic scrutiny. Additionally, by encouraging his followers to rely solely on his communication channels, Bolsonaro reduced the influence of traditional democratic institutions, including the media, which are essential for fact-checking and holding leaders accountable.

Under the perspective of discursive populism, Bolsonaro's approach relied heavily on misinformation to reshape societal debates and establish himself as the ultimate authority. By eroding trust in the expertise of scientists, journalists, and other specialists, Bolsonaro leveraged misinformation as a means to challenge institutional arrogance.

From this, we can identify important research directions. The impact of media populism on industrial journalism should raise concerns among researchers. Journalists may unintentionally take on three roles that can be harmful to democracy: they can act as involuntary gatekeepers by opening up space for populist discourse to gain prominence in public debate; interpreters, who are not always well prepared when they evaluate populist attitudes positively or negatively, without adequate basis; and naïve initiators, when they present sectoral demands as 'popular' (Wettstein et al., 2018).

A future research question involves examining how industrial journalism operated in three distinct roles while reporting on Bolsonaro's live streams. Did journalists unintentionally serve as disseminators of the then-president's falsehoods, or did they actively seek critical sources to provide context for his anti-science statements?

Current research indicates that journalism's initial contribution was not particularly positive in Bolsonaro's Brazil. According to Fontes and Marques (2023), major Brazilian newspapers engaged in adversarial coverage of Bolsonaro, focusing on conflicts and amplifying his populist appeal. This editorial strategy, aimed at maintaining credibility, inadvertently projected the populist leader's distortions without adequate criticism or context.

Similar patterns have been observed in other contexts. Benkler et al. (2020) argue that Trump exploited the newsworthiness of presidential statements to disseminate misinformation, knowing that anything a president says is likely to make headlines, thereby giving his lies about electoral fraud a veneer of neutrality. These findings can inform further investigations into the effects of Bolsonaro's live streams, particularly regarding how they may have influenced industrial journalism, which, paradoxically, contributed to increased populist attacks on journalists themselves. There is an opportunity for further research into this issue in countries led by populist leaders.

While populism has been widely studied in the literature, the communication strategies employed by populist leaders, particularly over the past two decades, remain a rich area for investigation. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the significance of this research, as populist communication played a role in undermining public perception of the importance of health measures during this time. Future research should focus on preparing for upcoming epidemics and emphasize the importance of strengthening press autonomy and freedom as key factors in enhancing democratic societies' resilience to misinformation in challenging circumstances.

Finally, we acknowledge a limitation in our study design: some argue that social media should not be considered essential for populist communication. Critics note that while populists may prefer social media, politicians across various styles also utilize this platform within hybrid media ecosystems (Chadwick, 2017). Therefore, examining official statements made during public appearances could yield more fruitful insights.

REFERENCES

Abreu, T. O. de. (2022). Cercadinho do Alvorada: uma ameaça ao ethos do jornalista e à liberdade de imprensa. *Miguel*, *6*(6). https://doi.org/10.17771/PUCRio.MIGUEL.59455

Abts, K., & Rummens, S. (2007). Populism versus Democracy. *Political Studies*, *55*(2), 405–424. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00657.x

Aggio, C. D. O., & Castro, F. (2020). Meu partido é o povo": Uma proposta teórico-metodológica para o estudo do populismo como fórmula de comunicação política seguida de estudo de caso do perfil de Jair Bolsonaro no Twitter. *Comunicação & Sociedade*, *42*(2), 429–465. https://doi.org/10.15603/2175-7755/cs.v42n2p429-465

Albertazzi, D., & McDonnel, D. (2008). *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Albuquerque, A. de. (2021). Populismo, Elitismo e Democracia. *Mediapolis – Revista de Comunicação, Jornalismo e Espaço Público*, *12*, 17–31. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-6019_12_1

Almeida, R. de. (2019). Bolsonaro presidente: conservadorismo, evangelismo e a crise brasileira. *Novos Estudos - CEBRAP*, *38*(1). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25091/S01013300201900010010

Aslanidis, P. (2016). Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective. *Political Studies*, *64*(1_suppl), 88–104. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12224

Baldwin-Philippi, J. (2019). The technological performance of populism. *New Media & Society*, *21*(2), 376–397. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818797591

Baptista, É. A., Hauber, G., & Orlandini, M. (2022). Despolitização e populismo. *Media & Jornalismo*, *22*(40), 105–119. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_40_5

Barbosa, L. M., Machado, D. M., & Resende Miranda, J. I. de. (2022). Presidência virtual: uma análise do discurso político de Jair Bolsonaro no twitter. *Perspectivas Contemporâneas*, *17*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.54372/pc.2022.v17.3365

Benkler, Y., Tilton, C., Etling, B., Roberts, H., Clark, J., Faris, R., Kaiser, J. & Schmitt, C. (2020). Mail-in voter fraud: anatomy of a disinformation campaign. Berkman Center Research Publication, 6.

Biancovilli, P., Macszin, L., & Jurberg, C. (2021). Misinformation on social networks during the novel coronavirus pandemic: A qualiquantitative case study of Brazil. *BMC Public Health*, 21, 1200. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11223-2

Blassnig, S., Ernst, N., Büchel, F., & Engesser, S. (2018). Populist communication in talk shows and social media. A comparative content analysis in four countries. *Studies in Communication | Media*, *7*(3), 338–363. https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2018-3-338

Bonikowski, B., & Gidron, N. (2016). The Populist Style in American Politics: Presidential Campaign Discourse, 1952–1996. *Social Forces*, *94*(4), 1593–1621. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sov120

Bos, L., & Brants, K. (2014). Populist rhetoric in politics and media: A longitudinal study of the Netherlands. *European Journal of Communication*, *29*(6), 703–719. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323114545709

Carreon, R. de O., & Baronas, R. L. (2020). Lives presidenciais: reflexões iniciais sobre o discurso político digital. *Revista Da ABRALIN*, *19*(3), 1. https://doi.org/10.25189/rabralin.v19i3.1731

Cassimiro, P. H. P. (2021). Os Usos do Conceito de Populismo no Debate Contemporâneo e Suas Implicações sobre a Interpretação da Democracia. *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, *35*. https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-3352.2021.35.242084

Cesarino, L. (2019). Identidade e Representação no Bolsonarismo. *Revista de Antropologia*, *62*(3), 530–557. https://doi.org/10.11606/2179-0892.ra.2019.165232

60

Chadwick, A. (2017). *The Hybrid Media System*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199759477.001.0001

Chong, M. & Choy, M. (2020). An Empirically Supported Taxonomy of Misinformation. In K. Dalkir & R. Katz (Eds.), *Navigating Fake News, Alternative Facts, and Misinformation in a Post-Truth World* (pp. 117-138). IGI Global Scientific Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-2543-2.ch005

Crouch, C. (2019). 10. Post-Democracy and Populism. *The Political Quarterly*, pp. *90*, 124–137. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12575

Curcino, L. (2019). "Conhecereis a Verdade e a Verdade vos libertará": livros na eleição presidencial de Bolsonaro. *Discurso & Sociedad*, *13*(3), 468–494.

de Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*(4), 423–438. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218790035

Engesser, S., Fawzi, N., & Larsson, A. O. (2017). Populist online communication: introduction to the special issue. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(9), 1279–1292. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328525

Ernst, N., Esser, F., Blassnig, S., & Engesser, S. (2019). Favorable Opportunity Structures for Populist Communication: Comparing Different Types of Politicians and Issues in Social Media, Television and the Press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *24*(2), 165–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218819430

Fenaj (2023). Violência contra jornalistas e liberdade de imprensa no Brasil. Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas.

Fieschi, C. (2004). Introduction. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *9*(3), 235–240. https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263492

Fontes, G. S., & Marques, F. P. J. (2023). Defending democracy or amplifying populism? Journalistic coverage, Twitter, and users' engagement in Bolsonaro's Brazil. *Journalism*, 24(8), 1634-1656. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849221075429

Freeden, M. (2003). *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Freeden, M. (2017). After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *22*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1260813

Gerbaudo, P. (2018). Social media and populism: an elective affinity? *Media, Culture & Society*, *40*(5), 745–753. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718772192

Gomide, A. A., Silva, M. M. S. & Leopoldi, M. A. (2023). Desmonte e reconfiguração de políticas públicas (2016-2022). IPEA. http://dx.doi.org/10.38116/978-65-5635-049-3

Guazina, L. S. (2021). Populismos de direita e autoritarismos. *Mediapolis – Revista de Comunicação, Jornalismo e Espaço Público*, *12*, 49–66. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-6019_12_3

Hawkins, K. A., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2022). The Ideational Approach to Populism. *Latin American Research Review*, *52*(4), 513–528. https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.85

Jansen, R. S. (2011). Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism. *Sociological Theory*, *29*(2), 75–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2011.01388.x

Kaltwasser, C. R., Taggart, P., Espejo, P. O., & Ostiguy, P. (2017). *Populism* (C. R. Kaltwasser, P.

Taggart, P. O. Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (eds.); Vol. 1). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.34

Kaplan, R. L. (2006). The News About New Institutionalism: Journalism's Ethic of Objectivity and Its Political Origins. *Political Communication*, *23*(2), 173–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600600629737

Kissas, A. (2020). Performative and ideological populism: The case of charismatic leaders on Twitter. *Discourse & Society*, *31*(3), 268–284. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926519889127

Laclau, E. (2013). *A Razão populista*. Eduerj.

Lawrence, R. G. (2006). Seeing the Whole Board: New Institutional Analysis of News Content. *Political Communication*, *23*(2), 225–230. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600600629851

Lehmann, P., & Zehnter, L. (2022). The Self-Proclaimed Defender of Freedom: The AfD and the Pandemic. *Government and Opposition*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.5

Luiz, T. C. (2020). Populismo e desinformação no contexto da Covid-19. *Mediapolis – Revista de Comunicação, Jornalismo e Espaço Público*, *11*, 57–70. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-6019_11_4

Lynch, C., & Cassimiro, P. H. P. (2021). O populismo reacionário no poder: uma radiografia ideológica da presidência Bolsonaro (2018-2021). *Aisthesis Revista Chilena de Investigaciones Estéticas*, *70*, 223–249. https://doi.org/10.7764/Aisth.70.10

Lynch, C., & Cassimiro, P. H. P. (2022). *O populismo reacionário: ascensão e legado do bolsonarismo*. Contracorrente.

Marques, F. P. J. (2023). Populism and Critical Incidents in Journalism: Has Bolsonaro Disrupted the Mainstream Press in Brazil? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612231153110

Mede, N. G., & Schäfer, M. S. (2020). Science-related populism: Conceptualizing populist demands toward science. *Public Understanding of Science*, *29*(5), 473–491. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662520924259

Mendonça, D. De. (2019). DEMOCRATAS TÊM MEDO DO POVO? O populismo como resistência política. *Caderno CRH*, *32*(85), 185. https://doi.org/10.9771/ccrh.v32i85.22403

Moffitt, B. (2020). *Populism: key concepts in political theory*. Polity Press.

Monari, A. C. P., Santos, A., & Sacramento, I. (2020). COVID-19 and (hydroxy)chloroquine: a dispute over scientific truth during Bolsonaro's weekly Facebook live streams. *Journal of Science Communication*, *19*(07), A03. https://doi.org/10.22323/2.19070203

Moraes, A. S. de, & Silva, D. P. (2021). A pandemia nas lives semanais: o uso de atenuadores na retórica anticrise de Jair Bolsonaro. *Topoi (Rio de Janeiro)*, *22*(48), 740–762. https://doi.org/10.1590/2237-101x02204806

Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a Left Populism*. Verso.

Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2012). Populism and (liberal) democracy: A framework for analysis. In C. Mudde & C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge University Press.

62

Müller, J. W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mundim, P. S., Gramacho, W., Turgeon, M., & Stabile, M. (2022). Viés noticioso e exposição seletiva nos telejornais brasileiros durante a pandemia de COVID-19. *Opinião Pública*, *28*(3), 615–634. https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-01912022283615

Nicoletti, J., & Flores, A. M. M. (2022). Violência contra jornalistas no canal de Jair Bolsonaro no Youtube. *Brazilian Journalism Research*, *18*(1), 4–35. https://doi.org/10.25200/BJR.v18n1.2022.1438

Ostiguy, P. (2017). Populism: A socio-cultural approach. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. O. Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford University Press.

Parzianello, G. L. (2020). O governo Bolsonaro e o populismo contemporâneo: um antagonismo em tela e as contradições de suas proximidades. *Aurora. Revista de Arte, Mídia e Política*, *12*(36), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.23925/v12n36_dossie3

Penteado, C. L. de C., Goya, D. H., Dos Santos, P. D., & Jardim, L. (2022). Populismo, desinformação e Covid-19. *Media & Jornalismo*, *22*(40), 239–260. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_40_12

Razafindrakoto, M., Roubaud, F., Castilho, M. R., Pero, V., & Saboia, J. (2024). Investigating the 'Bolsonaro effect' on the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic: An empirical analysis of observational data in Brazil. *Plos One*, 19(4), e0288894. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0288894

Ricci, P., Izumi, M., & Moreira, D. (2021). O populismo no Brasil (1985-2019) Um velho conceito a partir de uma nova abordagem. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, *36*(107). https://doi.org/10.1590/3610707/2021

Roberts, K. M. (2003). Social Correlates of Party System Demise and Populist Resurgence in Venezuela. *Latin American Politics and Society*, *45*(03), 35–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2003.tb00249.x

Rooduijn, M. (2014). The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator. *Government and Opposition*, *49*(4), 573–599. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2013.30

Seibt, T., & Dannenberg, M. (2021). Pandemia, desinformação e discurso autoritário: os sentidos das declarações de Jair Bolsonaro no Twitter a partir de checagens do Aos Fatos. *Liinc Em Revista*, *17*(1), e5687. https://doi.org/10.18617/liinc.v17i1.5687

Smith, A. E. (2020). Covid vs. Democracy: Brazil's Populist Playbook. *Journal of Democracy*, *31*(4), 76–90. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0057

Staerklé, C., Cavallaro, M., Cortijos-Bernabeu, A., & Bonny, S. (2022). Common Sense as a Political Weapon: Populism, Science Skepticism, and Global Crisis-Solving Motivations. *Political Psychology*, *43*(5), 913–929. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12823

Stanley, B. (2008). The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *13*(1), 95–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310701822289

Stavrakakis, Y., & Katsambekis, G. (2014). Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *19*(2), 119–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2014.909266

Stycer, M. (2019, December 3). Bolsonaro deu 13 entrevistas exclusivas à Record e nenhuma à Globo em 2019. *UOL*. https://www.uol.com.br/splash/colunas/mauricio-stycer/2019/12/03/bolsonaro-deu-13-entrevistas-exclusivas-a-record-e-nenhuma-a-globo-em-2019.htm

Tamaki, E. R., & Fuks, M. (2020). Populism in Brazil's 2018 general elections: an analysis of Bolsonaro's campaign speeches. *Lua Nova: Revista de Cultura e Política*, *109*, 103–127. https://doi.org/10.1590/0102-103127/109

Vazquez, D. A., & Schlegel, R. (2022). Covid-19, Fundeb e o populismo do governo Bolsonaro nas relações federativas. *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, *38*. https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-3352.2022.38.255785

Waisbord, S., & Amado, A. (2017). Populist communication by digital means: presidential Twitter in Latin America. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(9), 1330–1346. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328521

Wang, Y., McKee, M., Torbica, A., & Stuckler, D. (2019). Systematic Literature Review on the Spread of Health-Related Misinformation on Social Media. *Social Science & Medicine*, 240, 112552. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112552

Wettstein, M., Esser, F., Schulz, A., Wirz, D. S., & Wirth, W. (2018). News Media as Gatekeepers, Critics, and Initiators of Populist Communication: How Journalists in Ten Countries Deal with the Populist Challenge. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*(4), 476–495. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218785979

Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics*, *34*(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/422412

Weyland, K. (2017). Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. O. Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*.

Wodak, R. (2015). *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. SAGE.

Zulianello, M., Albertini, A., & Ceccobelli, D. (2018). A Populist Zeitgeist ? The Communication Strategies of Western and Latin American Political Leaders on Facebook. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*(4), 439–457. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218783836