DOSSIER

THE AGENDA OF DISINFORMATION:

"fake news" and membership categorization analysis in the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections

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ABSTRACT – One of the main aspects of public debate in Brazil in the period that preceded the 2018 presidential elections was the dissemination of false stories via social media and messaging apps. Disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information – phenomena that comprehend elements such as wrongful, out of context, distorted and fabricated information, among others – were a major concern in the election, highlighted by the number of false stories debunked by independent fact-checkers. In the 20-day period between the two rounds of the presidential election, six fact-checking websites posted 228 verifications of false stories disseminated on social media and/or messaging apps, covering a range of about 132 different topics. This article aims to analyze the categorizations enunciated in their discourses. In order to do so, the methodological perspective utilized was the Membership Categorization Analysis, affiliated with the tradition of Ethnomethodology.
Key words: Disinformation. *Fake News.* Membership Categorization Analysis.

A PAUTA DA DESINFORMAÇÃO:
"*fake news*" e análise de categorizações de pertencimento nas eleições presidenciais brasileiras em 2018

RESUMO – A disseminação de histórias falsas em aplicativos de mensagens e redes sociais da internet foi um dos elementos centrais da conversação civil no Brasil no período que antecedeu as eleições presidenciais brasileiras em 2018. A preocupação com a disseminação

da desinformação – fenômeno que se compõe, entre outros elementos, por informações erradas, descontextualizadas, distorcidas ou falsificadas – se refletiu na quantidade de histórias falsas verificadas e desmentidas por agências independentes de checagens de fatos. No período de 20 dias entre as votações de primeiro e segundo turnos das eleições, as seis principais agências do país publicaram 228 verificações de histórias falsas disseminadas em redes sociais da internet ou aplicativos de troca mensagens, referentes a 132 diferentes pautas. Neste estudo foram analisadas as categorizações enunciadas nos discursos dessas histórias falsas, com a utilização da Análise de Categorização de Pertencimento (ACP), ferramenta teórico-metodológica de origem na Etnometodologia.

Palavras-chave: Desinformação. Notícias falsas. *Fake News*. Análise de Categorizações de Pertencimento.

LA PAUTA DE LA DESINFORMACIÓN:
"*fake news*" y análisis de pertenencia categorial
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RESUMEN – La propagación de historias falsas en servicios de mensajería instantánea y redes sociales de Internet fue uno de los elementos centrales de las conversaciones civiles en Brasil durante el periodo previo a las elecciones presidenciales brasileñas en 2018. La preocupación con la diseminación de la desinformación – fenómeno compuesto por informaciones erróneas, descontextualizadas, distorsionadas o falsificadas, entre otros elementos – fue visible en la cantidad de historias falsas verificadas y refutadas por organizaciones de fact-checking. En el período de 20 días entre las votaciones de la primera y segunda vuelta de las elecciones, las seis principales fact-checkers del país publicaron 228 verificaciones de historias falsas difundidas en redes sociales de Internet o servicios de mensajería instantánea, relativas a 132 pautas diferentes. Este artículo trata de analizar las categorizaciones enunciadas en los discursos de esas historias falsas con el auxilio del Análisis de Pertenencia Categorial (Membership Categorization Analysis – MCA), herramienta teórico-metodológica que proviene de la Etnometodología.

Palabras clave: Desinformación. Noticias falsas. *Fake News*. Análisis de Pertenencia Categorial.

1 Introduction

The dissemination of rumors and false accusations on political adversaries is not a new phenomenon. However, there is something unique in the way we understand it today, it is the particularity of the environment set by the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and their mostly non-foreseeable consequences in forms of interaction, in communicative circuits and ultimately in social life itself. Considering these issues, this article presents a reflection on the false stories (so-called "fake news") disseminated in the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections. We used the naturalistic perspective of Ethnomethodology, its theoretical and methodological tools, to analyze the false stories disseminated in that time period according to the Membership Categorization Analysis. The analysis we present in this article is part of a broader research (Chaves, 2019).

The starting point to our observation is the changed communications scenario that arose after the consolidation of ICT. One of the consequences of this environment is the setting of a new form of civil conversation (Gomes, 2006) in the communicative circuits that are formed on social media platforms and, more recently, on messaging apps. This was the context that inspired our research: the dissemination of false stories on messaging apps and social media platforms as a key element of public debate in Brazil in the weeks leading up to the presidential elections. Disinformation – which we shall define later in this text – has been seen in numerous false stories, checked and debunked by six fact-checking agencies from October 8th to 28th, the period between the two rounds of the election. During this 20-day period, fact-checkers posted 316 verifications on political themes, 228 of which were refutations of false stories disseminated on messaging apps and social media platforms. This article analyzes the membership categorizations circulating such false stories.

Our discussion focuses on a social issue that emerged when digital media, especially the internet, was consolidated. However, we should clarify that it is not our intention to establish causal nexus between the usage of messaging apps and the voting choices of the Brazilian public. We also do not intend to suggest that there is a direct correlation between the way Brazilians communicate with each other via *WhatsApp*, the most used app in the country, and the widespread dissemination of false stories. In the words of Peters, it is about trying, in a way, "to write a really good history of technics and civilization (Peters, 2017, p. 29), without confusing the necessary conditions with sufficient ones".

Additionally, it is important to mention that even though the ICT has broadened the possibilities for human interaction – people can now connect with others who share similar interests – the result was not a more democratic society, nor did it create radically different forms of social interaction. The technologies are being used to enhance pre-existing interaction patterns, as Braga (2008) analyzed in her study about interactions on social media platforms. One of the issues presented in her work is the usage of different technologies and platforms to emulate, on digital environments, the conditions that better suit the conditions for interactions regarding a user's specific communications needs. Thus, media complementarity is defined as:

> Forms of complementary use of distinct media (mobiles, emails, instant messenger, cameras etc.) by participants of digital environments. Online interactions spreads in many places and many distinct media are employed complementarily at the service of communication between participants. (Braga, 2008, p. 279).

The dynamics of civil conversation in the digital age are also based on pre-existing forms of interaction. Originally, social media platforms and messaging apps were designed to make personal communication easier. But they eventually became tools for sharing news stories and other pieces of information. Thus, interactional protocols were adapted to fit the digital environment. These interactions, however, never fully achieved their expected potential when the ICT arose. Its predicted global reach was never actually observed. Quite the contrary, we saw the appropriation, in the digital environment, of shared cultural and social grounds. Therefore, the reach of online communicative interactions is limited by elements such as language barriers.

In this context, *WhatsApp* groups were the *loci* for communicative circuits where most of the false stories were shared during the pre-electoral period. These groups united people with like-minded interests who may or may not have previously known each other. They constitute an environment formed by circuits with up to 256 people (a limit set by the app itself) who are interconnected, with one person being able to participate in as many groups as he or she wants, thus being able to forward messages from one group to another. So, the production of meaning on *WhatsApp* occurs from small circuits to larger ones, and so forth.

The communicative circuits, like others that are formed on different online platforms (such as social media, blogs, and news outlet websites), are established from a perspective where the production and reception poles are commutable and transitory, as conceptualized by Sbardelotto:

> It is not about fixed and unchanging roles such as "producer" and "recipient" since it is almost impossible to define a single stage for production and reception. Although the circulation can only be understood within the complementarity between production and reception, the producer pole and the recipient pole cannot be defined *a priori*. (Sbardelloto, 2017, p. 15, free translation).

In addition to the environment in which the false stories were spread, we also considered the correlation between journalism's crisis of credibility and the information disorder environment as a background to the categorizations enunciated by those circulating false stories, as we will look at further ahead.

2 The credibility crisis in journalism and information disorder

In 2009, Fidalgo and Canavilhas argued that the press media was going through a severe crisis and that the future of information is on the online platforms. According to them:

> There will be no idle moments, nor unreachable places where news never comes. [...] They are delivered by a medium that is also a personal communications channel. [...] To comment, share ignore and delete the pieces of news are actions that constitute the news-making process, which is especially social, but which is also enhanced by the cell phone's hybrid nature in a way that redefines the news status itself. For example, a piece of information is more worthful as it gets more reactions from one's personal contacts. (Fidalgo & Canavilhas, 2009, p. 117).

The ongoing changes in the traditional model of news broadcasting are interconnected with a crisis in the social role of journalists and, by extension, in journalism itself. According to Braga, Aguiar & Bergamaschi, the structural changes in society brought up new forms of production of journalistic content, which had an impact on the professional education of journalists (Braga et al., 2014, p. 116). Carvalho & Bruck, for that matter, seek to identify how leaks were established as a journalistic technique as they do not follow the ethical or legal principles considered essential for the press (Carvalho & Bruck, 2018, p. 3). One of the possible effects of those changes might be journalism's credibility crisis (see Lisboa & Benetti, 2017; Träsel et al., 2018).

Due to the complexity of this phenomenon, it is too soon to state that there is a causal relationship between the changes to the news broadcasting model and journalism's credibility crisis. However, we can say that the social contract that, over the last two centuries, has granted the press the prerogative of truth is increasingly being questioned. Although this article aims to analyze issues related to the credibility crisis in journalism, it is important to point out that this phenomenon is unrelated to other kinds of distrust, which are not limited to Brazilian society. Nevertheless, in Brazil, its effects are perceived in a very sharp manner. The Social Trust Index (ICS, in Portuguese), run by Ibope Inteligência research institute, reached its lowest level in 2018: 48 points on a scale from zero to 100. Even institutions that have always been at the top of the trust ranking, such as Firefighters and churches, have dropped their levels of trust (Índice de Confiança Social, 2018).

In this context, scholars around the world are raising their concerns about the credibility crisis in journalism, while the dissemination of false, out-of-context, distorted and falsified information reaches alarming levels (Delmazo & Valente, 2018). These phenomena are labeled by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan as *information disorder*. Their definition of information disorder covers two dimensions: intent to harm and falsity. The authors present three types of information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5):

a)   *Mis-information*: when false information is shared, but no harm is meant;
b)   *Dis-information*: when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm;
c)   *Mal-information*: when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

It is worth noting that the Portuguese language does not have different words to refer to these three concepts. They are interchangeably adopted in the dictionaries. As a result, in the original version of this article, we adapted the translated term for *disinformation* to broadly refer to the three types of information disorder discussed by Wardle and Derakhshan. We also avoided the use of the ordinary expression "fake news", since it is "inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of information pollution" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5). In addition to that, we believe it is important to problematize the use of the word "news" – by definition, a description of something that has happened – paired with the adjective "fake". Thus, for reference purposes, the misleading, falsified or manipulated contents, known as "fake news", are referred to in this article as *false stories*.

The use of false stories as a campaign strategy is raising concerns in many countries. A report from the Rand Corporation described a new propaganda model called *firehose of falsehood*. The report states that this technique consists of "high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions" (Paul & Matthews, 2016, p. 1). Moreover, it is rapid, continuous, repetitive, and lacks a commitment to consistency.

There is also a complementary vision of these issues presented by Paul Levinson. He analyzed "fake news" (he uses this term) in the 2016 U.S. elections. He states that, unlike journalistic news, which reports on facts, false stories appeal to emotions. That makes them more similar to propaganda, the purpose of which is to influence and not to inform. Levinson also mentions McLuhan's tetradic theory as a possible explanation to the phenomenon: "fake news 'retrieves' the severance from truth which typified government propaganda and news in general in pre-democratic monarchies and subsequent totalitarian or otherwise non-democratic states" (Levinson, 2016, s.n.).

Levinson's 'McLuhanian' perspective also interprets the impact of false news in the light of another issue brought up by ICT: the tendency people have to seek out like-minded points of view on the Web. He also goes on to say that this human characteristic

precedes the internet and was described in Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. Afterward, it was also analyzed by McLuhan, with his notion of narcissus narcosis, which is described as "the fondness we have for reflections of our own ideas and feelings in the media we encounter" (Levinson, 2016, s.n.).

In this regard, Silvia Lisboa and Marcia Benetti demonstrate the justification processes of journalistic news in search of credibility with the audiences in an article that also presents a discussion about the notion of truth. According to them, "journalism must meet three conditions to become knowledge: belief, truth, and justification. Basically, one must believe that journalism tells the truth, and this truth must be justified in the journalistic discourse itself" (Lisboa & Benetti, 2015, p. 11).

It is to this background of extreme distrust towards information shared online that Brazil started the second half of 2018 and the presidential campaign. How the information disorder was categorized by disseminators of false stories during the second round of the elections will be further analyzed.

3 Methodological procedures

Ethnomethodology's object of study is the logic underlying people's day-to-day actions. This field in Social Sciences observes and analyzes the methods through which people make sense of the world out of their interactions. From this perspective, conversational interaction is a phenomenon that provides a wide framework for interpreting society. In a book that summarizes the theoretical and methodological studies on the field, Rod Watson & Édison Gastaldo (2015) argue that Ethnomethodology aims to uncover the rules and principles that people adopt in their daily interactions.

The aforementioned authors present Harold Garfinkel's founding notion for the field. Garfinkel rejected structuralism and argued that the social actor is an agent that adopts methods for making sense of the world out of their cultural and procedural knowledge. Far from being "cultural dopes", people act in society according to the context they are in, or, as Juliana Guimarães argues in her study on membership categorizations that emerged from journalistic discourse, "in society, we all are interpreting other people's activities, making sense of what they do and basing our own activities in the process" (Guimarães, 2017, p. 159). Watson & Gastaldo summarize Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology as "the study (*logos*) of the

methods used by persons or groups of people (*ethnos*) in their daily lives, seen as making-sense processes" (Watson & Gastaldo, 2015, p. 13).

Although Ethnomethodology led to the founding of Conversation Analysis in the 1960s and '70s, it also presents a set of methodological tools for studying forms of social interaction other than face to face conversations. One of the pioneers of the Conversation Analysis method was Harvey Sacks. He identified membership categorization as one of the ethnomethods used by people. The categorization relies on procedures that people adopt to describe one another, objects and events or situations. Categorizing people and things reveals our perceptions and shows how we understand them.

There are different ways one can apply Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) to study social interactions. For the purposes of this research, we picked four specific rules of application, summarized below, as presented by David Silverman, and two description apparatus used by the enunciators, which we shall explain further ahead.

The rules of application we used to analyze the *corpus* of this study were:

a)   The *economy rule*: the categorizations are understood in a "referentially adequate" manner. That means if one refers to a "mommy" and a "baby", it is not necessary to state the mother's occupation or hair color (Silverman, 1998, p. 79).

b)   The *consistency rule*: if a certain category is used to describe a person from the same category – or other categories from the same collection – it should be used to categorize further members of that population (Silverman, 1998, p. 80).

c)   The *consistency rule corollary*: this is used to resolve ambiguities in situations where one category may be associated with more than one collection. For instance, "baby" may be part of the "family" or the "stage of life" collection. But if the categorization is enunciated in relation to "mommy", we know it belongs to family, and not stage of life. (Silverman, 1998, p. 80).

d)   *Category-bound activities and predicates*: activities that are done by/attributed to members of specific categories, based on the assumption that *these people do those things*, even if, of course, every description contains a certain degree of ambiguity (Silverman, 1998, p. 83).

In general, we can conclude that adding the rules of application to a collection gives us the Membership Categorization Device (MCD).

There are two aspects to consider regarding the descriptions of members of a collection:

a)   The category descriptions of persons stem from *standard relational pairs* (SRPs), or paired relational categories such as "mother-child", "client-vendor", and "voter-candidate".

b)   The *inference-rich* apparatus triggered by the acknowledgment that the description of some member is the only one possible in a given context (Guimarães, 2017, p. 171).

In addition to that, we considered the indicial indicative expressions that make sense only when analyzed in context, such as "this/that", "me/you", "yesterday/today/tomorrow", etc. These expressions are important because they indicate the context in face to face or digital interactions and in pieces of news.

Braga and Gastaldo propose that Membership Categorization Analysis might be a useful analytic tool for Social Communications studies. They argue that categorizations may be attributed to subjects and "social practices, ideas, laws, activities, and institutions". Therefore, MCA can be applied to different expressions of human communication:

> A praxiological approach when circumscribing a mass media product (a radio show, TV, interview, news show, comics, advertisements, etc.) will find an empirical fact, as a starting point. This piece was broadcasted in that context. Who presents it? To whom s/he addresses? How are there categorizations applied? Which predicates, collections, relational pairs and hierarchies are evoked on it? Which rhetoric resources are achieved by these categorizations? (Braga & Gastaldo, 2018, p. 13).

The *corpus* of this article is composed of 228 news pieces posted by six fact-checking websites (*Agência Lupa*, *Aos Fatos*, B*oatos. org, E-farsas, Fato ou Fake*, and *Projeto Comprova*) between the first two rounds of the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, from October 8th to 28th. We decided to analyze the material published by fact-checkers due to the fact that social media platforms and messaging apps like *WhatsApp* do not grant direct access to the content shared on them. Thus, the fact-checkers who curated false stories and disseminated them on digital platforms during that time period were of great value to this research.

After a preliminary mapping of the content, we gathered 316 posts on "Politics" and/or the "2018 Elections" as each fact-checking agency groups their content differently on their websites. Some of them do not even group their content by themes, so there were many posts referring to events unrelated to the elections. In other cases, they published debunked stories on candidates to parliament or state governments. These non-related stories were discarded from the *corpus*. What's more, we did not consider traditional fact-

checking, which is the verification of declarations made by public figures (politicians or others) to the press; instead we chose to focus on debunked false stories shared on social media and messaging apps.

After excluding the posts that did not exactly match the analysis criteria, we were left with 228 news pieces. However, some of them covered the same topics but were published on more than one website. In an attempt to avoid repetition, we grouped the posts by topic, finishing with a total number of 132 topics. This meant that, after eliminating the repetitions, there were 132 false stories disseminated in a 20-day period. This is the agenda of disinformation we are analyzing in this article.

4 Analysis

To conduct the Membership Categorization Analysis we identified a group of agents we named Disseminators (of false stories). It should be noted that the discourses they enunciated were analyzed, partially or fully, from the reproductions of false stories posted by fact-checkers. That being said, we proceed to the analysis itself.

a) **Lula as a criminal**

We identified the occurrence of the "criminal-good citizen" relational pair, as well as category-bound activities related to the "crime" collection. Former president Lula is described as "the country's most illustrious prisoner" or "inmate Lula". These categorial descriptions of Lula as a criminal can be seen in a *Fato ou Fake* post, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: picture debunked by *Fato ou Fake* and labeled as false. Subtitle: "The 60s and 70s: this photo is priceless... Lula the tramp being beaten."

Source: G1.

Figure 2: original picture by photojournalist Evandro Teixeira.

Source: G1.

The subtitle in Figure 1 leads to the economy rule, as it defines the bearded man as "tramp", an expression inferentially-rich if related to the "crime" collection since the situation portrayed in the picture portrays such a context. In Brazilian Portuguese, the word tramp ("*vagabundo*") is used derogatorily in reference to dishonest people. In addition to that, the phrase has the verb "*apanhar*", which means "to be beaten" and is also related to the "crime" collection, especially if we consider the relational pair "police-bandit" and the activities "beat" and "be beaten" respectively related to each member of the pair. It is important to notice that *Fato ou Fake* pointed out that the bearded man in Evandro Teixeira's photo is not Lula, but a Medicine student in a protest in Rio de Janeiro, at 1968.

Another category-bound activity is mentioned in a false story on Fernando Haddad, the candidate who replaced Lula after he was convicted on allegations of corruption, thus prevented from running for the presidency. Due to the consistency rule, which states that "any member of any category is presumptively a representative of the category for the purpose of use of whatever knowledge is stored by reference to that category" (Sacks, 1992, p. 41), we were able to group the categorization made about Haddad under the same Membership Categorization Device (MCD) as Lula. The false story at issue enunciates that "Andrade[1] slips it and confesses that Lula will be the actual president in case of victory". Here the consistency rule appears again from the verb "confess", which is used in relation to the "crime" collection, instead of "religion".

The relational pair "criminal-good citizen" is activated in this post: "Check out what Haddad said today when he left Curitiba's Federal

Police [the Regional Supervision of the Federal Policy is the facility where Lula serves his sentence]! It's a campaign pledge: Lula will go up the ramp with him on Jan, 1st 2019 [the Brazilian Presidential Palace has a ramp and the presidential inauguration is on January 1st]! This is an insult to the *good citizens of Brazil*" (emphasis added). The enunciation of this false story mentions Haddad's visit to Lula in the Federal Police's building, which triggers the category "visit to jail" as part of the "crime" collection. In contrast, the Disseminator uses the term "good citizens" to categorize the group of people that would be "insulted" by Lula's possible return to the executive power if Haddad had been victorious.

b)   **Leftists as enemies**

The categorization of left-wing individuals (more specifically, Workers' Party members) as enemies relates to the "war" collection and to the "enemy-ally" relational pair. In many cases, the MCD is triggered by category-bound activities, as in the post where the Disseminator enunciates: "Some audio files from the Workers' Party leadership together with Ciro Gomes, Guilherme Boulos, and William Bonner[2], were leaked. These files contain all their *strategies* to justify seizing power" (emphasis added). The false story also relates to the war context when it mentions inference-rich categories: "The evil left-wing plan will free political prisoners and make it easier for Venezuelan military to enter our *territory*, fighting a truly *bloody battle* against our army, which has already pledged to *fight til death* and defend the *true* Brazilian people and our leader Bolsonaro" (emphasis added). Since the Disseminators enunciated the false stories using the terms "territory", "bloody battle" and "fight til death", they triggered the "war" collection. Jair Bolsonaro ("our leader") is positioned into the relational pair "enemy-ally" as the ally, therefore putting his political adversaries in the position of the "enemy". It is also worth noticing that the Disseminators use the category-bound predicate "true" in relation to "Brazilian people", which entails the existence of "fake Brazilian people" that would be the internal version of the aforementioned "enemy".

This other false story describes an event that allegedly happened with Fernando Haddad: "PETISTAS[3] called HADDAD a TRAIDOR and shouted OUT HADDAD! Oooout" (emphasis added). The MCD used in this description also correlates with the Workers' Party candidate and the "war" collection, especially when the consistency rule corollary is applied to solve a possible ambiguity regarding the "love relationships" collection (in Portuguese, the word for "cheating" is the same as "betraying").

In regards to the category-bound activities, we would like to draw attention to this post: "The Workers' Party will fake an attack on

Haddad to cause a national stir three days before the elections!!" Share this!!! Even if this [information] is a lie, at least we'll be prepared!!!" Again, we should consider the consistency rule corollary to understand the expression "be prepared" in the context of a battle. It is also worth noticing the use of the article "we", which includes the readers into the action of "being prepared". Also, the Disseminators encourages the readers to keep sharing the piece of disinformation, even if it is "a lie".

Another debunked post reads: "Audio leaked: Haddad and Manuela[4] plotting against the Army and Bolsonaro". The MCD trigged here is the categorization of the left-wing candidates as "enemies" involved with "plotting" activities. In other words, they were accused of conspiring against the Brazilian Army, an inference-rich element associated with the category of Bolsonaro's "allies", since he was a former captain of the parachuting regiment.

The examples we analyzed in this item indicates that the Disseminators use bias when describing the pre-electoral context as an "information war". Some of the false stories even suggest that a real war could happen if Fernando Haddad had won the elections.

c)   **Electronic ballot boxes as fraud**

In the following items, we will address membership categorizations enunciated by the Disseminators about objects, social practices, and ideas, but not about people. The first one is the categorization of electronic ballots as being a scam. This discourse was used in many false stories. The word "scam" is mentioned in correlation with "ballots" in different stories, as the following examples show (our emphasis):

1) Story #1: Beware of the *scam*. 777 voters and 9,909 votes for Haddad (*sic*). Share immediately. Story #2: Can someone explain what is going on with this electoral report???? 9,909 votes for Haddad but there are only 777 voters????? It smells like *a scam*. Story #3: Is someone able to explain how, in a section with 477 votes, Bolsonaro received 0 votes and Haddad received 9,909 votes? There was no *scam* at all, right, my friend?! Story #4: Reposting: BALLOT REPORT: OUT OF THE 777 ABLE VOTERS IN THIS BALLOT, HADDAD RECEIVED 9,909 VOTES AND BOLSONARO RECEIVED NONE. ABSURD. Story #5: A BALLOT WITH 777 VOTERS RECEIVES 9,909 VOTES FOR HADDAD! HOW COME? #SAYNOTOSCAM

2) *A SCAM* GOING ON RIGHT NOW THIS GUY WENT TO VOTE FOR PRESIDENT AND THE BALLOT SHOWED GOVERNOR 17 [Bolsonaro's

Party number, which is typed in the ballot box] LOL... WE WARNED (*sic*)... OCTOBER 28TH 2018.

3) Guys, they'll tamper with the ballots, PT [the Workers' Party] is not the only enemy; they are part of the system! I wish I was wrong, but I'm like Saint Thomas [skeptical]! 2) You can all see Bolsonaro's advantage [in the polls]! If the ballots are rigged, and if the PT wins, it's up to us to make this country stop! 3) We are now forbidden to expose fraudulent ballots! What kind of a f... democracy is that?

4) The Patriotic Pro-Bolsonaro groups are asking for everybody to get the Result Ticket (individual) and take a picture with the number 17 highly visible and send it to the Bolsonaro camp via social media. Thus, they will have proof of vote by session, location, etc. If they can account for more than 60 million valid votes [to Bolsonaro] and the results are different from that number, the scam will be proven. Then the lawyers will contest the Elections and they will have to redo it in paper cells (sic) [meaning paper ballot, since the two words in Portuguese have a similar spelling]. This is a good tactic. Share this idea with as many people as you can. 50+1 is enough to prove a scam if it happens.

5) Congressman Jair Bolsonaro's Office Square of the Three Powers [location of the Congress Building] Annex III – Office 482 CEP [ZIP Code]:70160-900 – Brasília-DF Phone.:(61) 3215 5482 – Fax.:(61) 3215 2482 e-mail: NOTE: REPOST NON-STOPPING, IF POSSIBLE SEND IT VIA WHATSAPP, OK? LET'S HELP THE CAPTAIN TO AVOID BEING VICTIM OF A SCAM!

In post number 1 we observe five variations of the same topic. In four of them, the story enunciates "scam" as an activity bound to "ballot box", "electoral report" and "result ticket", and thereby linked to physical objects. One of them claims that wrongdoings occurred in the "section", and even though this is an abstract notion, it is easy to identify from the context that the enunciator is referring to a polling location. Post number 2 also makes a correlation between the activity "to commit a scam" and the physical object "ballot box", as also does the story shown in post number 3.

Even though post number 4 does not directly refer to a material "electronic ballot", the object that is allegedly being defrauded ("ballot") is elicited through the context, since the reader of the false story is supposed to have previous knowledge about the "scam" activity, thus understanding the frame of reference pertaining to the story. Through

this MCD, the term "result ticket" (4) is enunciated as part of the collection "elections" and understood as a reference to the proof of vote, which is a piece of paper printed after the voter ends the voting process, even if the document does not show, for obvious reasons, the "result" of the voting. The false story shows poor use of the Portuguese language and has no clarity. It was debunked by *Aos Fatos*. According to fact-checkers, the goal appears to be "making Jair Bolsonaro's voters write down the candidate's number (17) in their proof of vote documents, photographing it and sending it to a website that supports the candidate".

Moreover, post number 4 shows different expressions that can only be understood by triggering inference-rich categories, that is to say the only possible ones in such context, as in the excerpt "(…), they will have proof of vote by session, location, etc", in which "they" refers to Jair Bolsonaro's team, "session" means "electoral session" and "location" means "polling station". The excerpt "50+1 is enough to prove a scam if it happens" is also understandable only if the reader has previous knowledge of the subject. The false story makes reference to the percentage of valid votes needed to win majority elections in Brazil, which is 50% of the valid votes (ruling out void and blank votes) plus one. However, it is not clear how this aspect of the Brazilian electoral law relates to the tactic to fight the alleged scam. It is worth mentioning that even Bolsonaro's campaign team denied that they were collecting such photos with the goal of monitoring possible electoral scams, as the false story suggested.

The example presented in post 5 is even more unintelligible unless the reader activates the apparatus of inference-rich categories, since the story begins with Jair Bolsonaro addressing parliament (before he was elected president, Bolsonaro was a congressman). Then, it summons the readers to "REPOST NON-STOPPING (…) LET'S HELP THE CAPTAIN TO AVOID BEING VICTIM OF A SCAM!" (their captions). The text does not directly relate the word "captain" to candidate Bolsonaro, but the inference is made contextually. Thus, "scam" is a category related to the electoral process and to the object "electronic ballot", even if the expression does not appear in the false story's text.

d) **Communism as a threat**

In this topic, the category made relevant by the false stories' discourse is "communism", which is described as a "threat" to one's wealth and to family values. This category intersects with the categorizations of relational pairs such as "criminal-good citizen" and "enemy-ally", as evoked by the consistency rule. According to that rule, categories are understood in a referentially adequate manner, which means that when the disseminators

activate the MCD that categorizes communism as a threat they are also evoking the aforementioned collections "crime" and "war". Despite this intertwining relation between the categorizations made on "leftists" and "communism", it makes sense to present them separately since the enunciations about "leftists" describes individuals and the ones about "communism" describe an idea, and therefore trigger a different MCD.

One case in point is a story about an alleged confiscation of rooms in houses and apartments for the purpose of housing homeless families, combined with a mandatory cap on consumption expenditures. The false story was reproduced in full by the fact-checker, as shown below (emphasis added).

The campaign has just entered its final stage and I want to talk about two real atrocities in the Workers' Party (PT) government program. They are: the community savings account and social housing. If you type "community savings" ("poupança fraterna") in Google you will be directed to the Parliament's website in Brasilia. According to it, the goal of this project is to end poverty in Brazil. Its aim is to limit, for seven years, the individual monthly consumption of each Brazilian to 700 reais. Any household or individual income above this amount will be confiscated and put into a community saving account for seven years.

Supposedly, the money will be returned to the owner after a 14-year period with half the interest rate of a regular savings account. Now, think about it, a family with a father, a mother, and a child, a three-person family with a monthly income of 3,600 reais. This family will be able to spend 2,100 on their livelihood. The excess amount (1,500 reais) is confiscated to this savings account. The PT only failed to pass this bill because of the Mensalão scandal [the accusations of the PT buying off the votes of congressmen to approve the government's bills]. They lost their parliamentary base which was bought off. Now, think about it, if they did it once, they'll do it again. They want to take your money.

The second evil deed is the so-called social housing. It's a beautiful name, but this is a serpent's nest. This is not lip service, I've seen this happen in Venezuela. The aim of social housing is to end the housing crisis. But how does it work? Social assistance from the government, together with social movements, go from house to house assessing how many people live in each home.

So, let's say that a father, a mother, a son and a daughter live in a 3-bedroom house. When they come, they'd determine that the father and

the mother need one bedroom, the children need another one, and that that house has a spare room. The house is then made into a social housing. The movement decides who is going to live in that bedroom. Look, today you're scared of the homeless invading empty buildings. Tomorrow, you're at risk of waking up with a homeless person living in your home. Someone whose culture, values, and principles you don't know anything about, all of this supported by a Labour ("petista") government.

The discourse in the false story correlated the category "threat" with "communism", meaning evil deed and intimidation, both category-bound predicates. In the regards to "evil deed", we highlighted two enunciations: "(…) I want to talk about two real atrocities in the Workers' Party (PT) government program" and "(…) this is a serpent's nest". The former uses the word "atrocity" linked to the PT government, a left-wing political party. Thus, when we apply the rule of consistency, this discourse is a category-bound predicate ("atrocity" is an attribute associated with the "PT government" or "leftists", members previously categorized as "enemies"). The latter uses the "serpent's nest" as a distorted description of the Social Housing project, referred by the indicial expression "this". It is worth noticing that the indicial expressions only make sense when analyzed in context, so we can argue that by using the indicial expression "this" the Disseminator gave a description of the social housing program and referred to it as a "serpent's nest", or the place where evil is born.

The categories linked to "fear" are enunciated in the excerpts "[t]hey want to take your money" and "[l]ook, today you're scared (…) [t]omorrow you're at risk of waking up with a homeless person living in your home". The second excerpt triggers the chronological continuity apparatus through the collection of "time" ("today"/ "tomorrow") to suggest a growing "threat".

e)   Attack as concealment

The attack on candidate Jair Bolsonaro, claiming he was concealing a serious disease, was the subject of many reports during the pre-electoral period. The post below shows the transcription of a very elaborate story from which we have highlighted the excerpts we consider to be most relevant to this analysis (emphasis added):

Rumors have it that Bolsonaro is, in fact, terminally ill with gastrointestinal cancer and that he is not in good health. (…) Remember the fake blood on the shirt and all the lies created by both sides. We have to think about how conveniently inconvenient this attack is. (…)

I don't think that the whole situation is made up, but we cannot rule out the possibility of it having been used to cover up a more serious health issue. (...) If there's even a trace of truth in this story it's not only the candidate's obligation, but also his doctor's, to disclose the real diagnosis to the Nation. To lie or to omit such a serious condition at such a grave moment in our history would be a crime against our democracy.

In this false story, the relational pair "truth-lie" reveals the MCD applied by the agent. The enunciator describes what he/she considers "cover up": the stabbing of Bolsonaro is categorized as an attempt to cover up an existing disease, more specifically, "gastrointestinal cancer". Thus, we see the expressions "in fact", "trace of truth" and "real diagnosis" in opposition to "fake blood on the shirt", "lies created", "made up" and "to lie or to omit" shaping a frame of reference that counters "truth" and its synonyms with "lie" and its synonyms.

The story also triggers the categorization of the attack as "concealment" as part of the relational pair "disguise-disclosure" in two sentences. The first one is the passage "(...) to cover up a more serious health issue", where the verb "to cover" evokes the category-bound activity of "concealing" (in Portuguese, the verb and the noun have the same root). The second one is shown in the expression "inconvenient convenience", in which the paradoxical figure of speech is used to unite two contradictory notions in a single premise, which leads to the enunciation of "a truth with the appearance of a lie", as defined by the Brazilian linguist Rocha Lima. He believes that "ultimately, every paradox contains an antithesis, but a special kind of antithesis that, instead of opposing, binds contrasting ideas together". It is through the paradox between "convenience" and "inconvenient" that the agent creates a referentially adequate description. The false story debunked by fact-checkers suggests that the attack may have been forged, but even if it were not, it serves the purposes of concealing, as proclaimed in the text. It is worth noticing that even though fact-checkers claimed the story was false in October 2018, due to the facts verified until that moment, the questions involving the circumstances of the attack on Jair Bolsonaro remained unclear even after he assumed the presidency in 2019.

5 Conclusions

This article analyzed five membership categorizations enunciated in the discourses of false stories that were disseminated during the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections. In this perspective, the categories arise

from the data. The first pattern we identified was the recurring mention of alleged fraud or scams with the electronic ballot boxes, creating a framework that gives the idea that tampering was conducted as an attempt to damage Bolsonaro's candidacy. This topic was mentioned in 26 different posts, making electronic ballots the most common topic reported on in the false stories. In addition, the alleged scam surrounding the electronic ballots was also the most debunked one, with 53 posts made by fact-checkers. This discourse was endorsed by the candidate himself and his sons, two of whom also ran in the 2018 elections and were elected to Parliament. Their adhesion to the allegations of fraud contributed to this topic garnering a lot of attention in the civil conversations during the electoral period. The categorization of "electronic ballot boxes" as "a scam" was, thus, the first of five topics enunciated by the Disseminators.

The second category that gained relevance from the descriptions enunciated by the agents was the depiction of former president Lula as "criminal". Lula was the main supporter of Haddad's candidacy. This categorization was strongly interrelated with two equally negative categorizations, from the Haddad/Lula/PT group's perspective: the categorizations of "leftists" as "enemies" and of "communists" as a "threat". The only category that negatively reflected on Jair Bolsonaro was the one about him "concealing" a possible cancer diagnosis.

The membership categorization analysis of the false story topics demonstrates that both candidates were targeted with falsehood, but we must take into consideration the disparity between the two sets of negative stories about each of them. Even though the two candidacies were damaged by false stories, it is possible to conclude that both the range of negative topics and the negative attribution of meanings to the candidate and his supporters weighed in favor of Bolsonaro's candidacy, whether directly or indirectly.

Lastly, it is important to consider that the disinformation elements cannot be analyzed only in the context of the environment created by the ICT. Rumors and lies targeting political adversaries have been used for many centuries. Our intention with this study was to identify the membership categorizations enunciated in the false stories disseminated during the 2018 electoral period in Brazil. In order to accomplish this, we could not ignore the circumstances where they were made. Thus, we verified that the ITC environment associated with their use and appropriations made by Brazilian users had an effect on the country's political and social life. Information disorder was central in the public debate during the electoral period and afterward. Its implications are, to a large extent, the result

of unforeseen consequences coming from technologies such as social media and messaging apps. On the other hand, apparently, a deliberate tactic was performed during the campaign, one that aimed to create a stir and confuse, and to serve the political agenda of a candidacy that seemingly made a strategy out of disinformation.

NOTES

1   "Andrade" is a nickname given to Fernando Haddad because of its phonetic similarity to the Brazilian Portuguese pronunciation of his last name, which has Arabic origins (his father is an immigrant from Lebanon).

2   Ciro Gomes and Guilherme Boulos were candidates of two other left-wing parties in the first round of the elections. William Bonner is the chief editor and anchorman of Rede Globo's prime time TV news. Rede Globo, the most important TV network in Brazil, has a conservative editorial line.

3   This is how the members of the Workers' Party are referred to. The word is formed from the way the acronym for Workers' Party sounds in Portuguese: Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT – "*petista*s".

4   Manuela D'Ávila is a Brazilian female politician who ran for the vice-presidency alongside Fernando Haddad.

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