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FAKE NEWS AND DEMOCRACY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF DISINFORMATION ON BRAZILIANS' DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES

FAKE NEWS E DEMOCRACIA: UMA ANÁLISE DOS EFEITOS DA DESINFORMAÇÃO NAS ATITUDES DEMOCRÁTICAS DE BRASILEIROS

NOTICIAS FALSAS Y DEMOCRACIA: UN ANÁLISIS DE LOS EFECTOS DE LA DESINFORMACIÓN EN LAS ACTITUDES DEMOCRÁTICAS DE LOS BRASILEÑOS

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ABSTRACT: While advancements in information and communication technologies may foster democratization, they also facilitate the spread of disinformation. In Brazil, a democracy characterized by political instability and coups d'état, whose hybrid political culture combines institutional distrust and support for democracy, fake news gained prominence in the 2018 elections. In this article, we explore how fake news affects democracy from the attitudinal dimension, analyzing opinions, attitudes, and behaviors about media, social media, and fake news among Brazilians and their relationship with democratic attitudes. Using a mixed-methods approach, we analyze data from the World Values Survey, the "*A Cara da Democracia*" survey, and four focus groups. Our results indicate distrust in the media and low information verification. In addition, we identified that support for authoritarian forms of government is associated with fake news exposure and the perception that social networks have no political importance.

KEYWORDS: Fake news. Social media. Disinformation. Democracy. Political culture.

***RESUMO**: Embora os avanços nas tecnologias informacionais e comunicacionais possam fomentar a democratização, eles também facilitam a propagação da desinformação. No Brasil, uma democracia marcada por instabilidades políticas e golpes de Estado, cuja cultura política híbrida combina desconfiança institucional e apoio à democracia, as fake news ganharam destaque nas eleições de 2018. Neste artigo, exploramos como as fake news afetam a democracia a partir da dimensão atitudinal, analisando opiniões, atitudes e comportamentos sobre meios de comunicação, redes sociais e fake news entre brasileiros, bem como sua relação com atitudes democráticas. Utilizando uma abordagem mista, analisamos dados do World Values Survey, da pesquisa "A Cara da Democracia" e de quatro grupos focais. Nossos resultados indicam desconfiança nos meios de informação e baixa verificação de informações. Além disso, identificamos que o apoio a formas autoritárias de governo está associado ao recebimento de fake news e à percepção de que as redes sociais não têm importância política.*

***PALAVRAS-CHAVE**: Fake news. Redes sociais. Desinformação. Democracia. Cultura política.*

***RESUMEN**: Aunque los avances en las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación pueden fomentar la democratización, también facilitan la propagación de la desinformación. En Brasil, una democracia marcada por inestabilidades políticas y golpes de Estado, cuya cultura política híbrida combina desconfianza institucional y apoyo a la democracia, las noticias falsas cobraron relevancia en las elecciones de 2018. En este artículo, exploramos cómo las noticias falsas afectan la democracia desde la dimensión actitudinal, analizando opiniones, actitudes y comportamientos respecto a los medios de comunicación, las redes sociales y las noticias falsas entre brasileños, así como su relación con actitudes democráticas. Utilizando un enfoque mixto, analizamos datos del World Values Survey, de la investigación "La Cara de la Democracia" y de cuatro grupos focales. Nuestros resultados indican desconfianza en los medios de información y baja verificación de datos. Además, identificamos que el apoyo a formas autoritarias de gobierno está asociado con la recepción de noticias falsas y con la percepción de que las redes sociales carecen de relevancia política.*

***PALABRAS CLAVE**: Noticias falsas. Redes sociales. Desinformación. Democracia. Cultura política.*

Introduction

The advancement of digitalization and the refinement of communication and information tools have the potential to enhance processes and services, diversify the generation and access to information, and facilitate improvements in public policy. However, issues such as data security, hyper-surveillance, algorithmic bias, and the dissemination of fake news[3] raise alarms regarding the detrimental effects that the misuse of new technologies can produce on politics, society, and democracy. In terms of sustaining democracy and the integrity of its processes and institutions, the primary risks brought about by the growth of digitalization and emerging technologies are associated with misinformation stemming from the widespread use of new social networks.

These networks have become significant spaces for political socialization (Van Dijck, 2016; Vizcarra Castillo; Oliveira Santos; Castro, 2020), enabling instant social interactions and allowing unrestricted access to, production of, and consumption of information at a low cost, under conditions markedly different from those of previous mass communication. The characteristics of these virtual spaces can foster civic autonomy, political engagement, and the expansion of public debate, even generating individual well-being effects linked to freedom and happiness (Almeida Neto *et al*., 2021). However, hyper-individualization and algorithmic automation on these platforms have shaped public opinion within echo chambers and informational bubbles, facilitating the spread of misinformation, encouraging conflict and political polarization, and deteriorating public debate (Castro, 2015; Andreeva, 2019; Jungherr, 2023; Bennet; Livingston, 2018), while also being associated at the individual level with emotional states of anxiety and insecurity due to excessive cognitive and emotional stimulation (Sampson; Maddison; Ellis, 2018).

Misinformation in digital spaces primarily occurs through fake news. Bakir and McStay (2017) define fake news as pieces of information that mimic news, containing intentionally false or manipulated content, thereby adapting the political instrumentalization of rumors and slander (Domenach, 1973; Maquiavel, 2007) to the digital paradigm of contemporary social life. As a political phenomenon, fake news employs misinformation as a tool aimed at

[3] The appropriateness of the term *fake news* has been widely debated within the fields of communication and social sciences due to its diverse applications and interpretations (Egelhofer *et al.*, 2020; Hellman, 2024), including its use to delegitimize journalistic outlets, and its overlap with other concepts such as disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation (Segurado, 2021). In this article, we adopt the definition of *fake news* as a specific form of disinformation, characterized by content that seeks to resemble journalistic pieces, thereby disseminating false information under the guise of legitimate news (Bakir; McStay, 2017).

influencing behaviors and political preferences (Vizcarra Castillo; Piccinin; Castro, 2022), manipulating the conditions of public debate[4]. The persuasive capacity of fake news is linked both to discursive strategies and to social, psychological, and affective factors of individuals (Ecker *et al.*, 2022). They are more likely to be accepted as true when their content aligns with preexisting beliefs, values, and attitudes, mobilizes emotional appeals, and is shared within trusted social circles.

In the Brazilian context, concerns regarding the impact of misinformation on social networks and its implications for the quality of democracy are well-founded. The country's history is marked by political instability and coups d'état, with a political culture that paradoxically combines diffuse support for democracy with authoritarian tendencies and institutional distrust (Castro; Vizcarra Castillo, 2021; Baquero; Ranincheski; Castro, 2018; Castro, 2014). Furthermore, over the past decades, political, institutional, and economic crises have reinforced generalized attitudes of distrust and skepticism toward politics among the Brazilian population (Baquero; Castro; Ranincheski, 2016; Baquero; Ranincheski; Castro, 2018), creating space for anti-democratic and authoritarian alternatives (Castro; Oliveira Santos; Beal, 2020). This is compounded by a growing climate of affective polarization, which affects both public debate and private life (Nunes; Traumann, 2023) and is associated with the delegitimization of democracy (Borba; Ribeiro; Fuks, 2024). In other words, the historical, contextual, and political culture conditions that underpin the legitimacy and maintenance of Brazil's democratic political system are fragile and require careful attention in light of the risks of destabilization or regression posed by social networks.

Indeed, the negative effects of misinformation on Brazilian democracy are already observable. In the 2018 elections, the spread of fake news on social networks deepened political polarization and institutional distrust (Dourado, 2020). Despite subsequent efforts by the Electoral Justice system to combat misinformation[5], the 2022 elections were marked by fake

[4] Misinformation driven by algorithmic automation on platforms is not limited to political issues. The dissemination of fake news on social networks has also created challenges in public health (Andrade; Timmers, 2023; Vizcarra Castillo; de Oliveira Santos; Castro, 2020; Rocha *et al.*, 2021), environmental matters (Treen; Williams; O'Neill, 2020), and responses to natural disasters (Vizcarra Castillo; de Oliveira Santos, 2024; Chiodi *et al.*, 2024).

[5] Since the 2018 elections, the Brazilian Electoral Justice system has led initiatives to combat misinformation in electoral processes, including the Permanent Program for Combating Misinformation of the Electoral Justice (PPED), the Integrated Center for Combating Misinformation and Defending Democracy (CIEDDE), and the "Fact or Rumor" website.

news targeting electronic voting machines, electoral authorities, and the election outcome (Bentes, 2023). The severity of the risks to democracy posed by misinformation in this context was also evident in the political violence and attacks of January 8, 2023, events were permeated by polarization, radicalism, and extremism, facilitated by the conditions of communication on digital platforms (Shin, 2024), in what Rocha (2023) characterized as an "extremist mediasphere."

Building on previous research on fake news and political culture in Brazil, which has already indicated the mobilization of political-cultural characteristics in fake news circulating in the country (Vizcarra Castillo; Oliveira Santos; Castro, 2020; Vizcarra Castillo; Piccinin; Castro, 2022; Andrade; Timmers, 2023), this article explores how Brazilians' opinions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding information sources, social networks, and fake news influence democratic and anti-democratic attitudes. To this end, we adopt a mixed-methods approach, analyzing data from the World Values Survey (WVS) in Brazil and the *A Cara da Democracia* study, as well as data collected from four focus groups on fake news and elections conducted in 2019. Our analysis centers on how Brazilians access information through traditional media and social networks, and how these practices may be associated with attitudes toward democracy and authoritarian forms of governance.

In addition to the introduction and concluding remarks, this article is structured into six sections. The first section discusses the relationship between communication, society, and politics, addressing how advances in communication and information technologies reconfigure the challenges of this relationship. The second section examines fake news as a political phenomenon. The third section considers the impact of misinformation on social networks on democracy from a political-cultural perspective. The fourth section presents the methodological design, describing the data used and the analytical strategies employed. Finally, the results and discussion section highlight the potential risks of fake news for Brazilian democracy.

Communication, society, and politics in contemporary contexts

The right to participate in public debate constitutes a central element in distinguishing democracy from other forms of government from the twentieth century onward, with the inclusion of the horizontal layer of the masses in politics (Dahl, 2002; Morlino, 2009). Considering public opinion—understood as originating precisely from public debate and presupposing a free and organized civil society (Bobbio; Matteucci; Pasquino, 1998), and

serving as a key pillar of the legitimacy of political systems (Lane; Sears, 1964)—the development of mass media, the dominance of media conglomerates, and the blurring of boundaries between society and the state have raised questions about whether freedom of expression is genuinely effective and whether critical reasoning is truly exercised in public debate. Because information is an essential component in shaping citizens' perceptions, rationalizations, attitudes, and behaviors in the political arena, it has increasingly been employed as a tool in the struggle for political power within the context of mass communication (Lane; Sears, 1964; Castells, 2009).

Returning to Frankfurt School thought, Bilić (2024) reflects on the conditions of the relationship between communication and society in contemporary contexts. The author highlights the relevance of communication for the creation of meaning and social cooperation. However, under the logic of instrumental reason, digital platforms prioritize engagement and profit maximization through the integration of information production and circulation (Bilić, 2024), organizing communication flows via algorithms that favor content simplifying reality, thereby producing manipulation and domination. This dynamic mirrors Frankfurt School critiques[6], which argue that instrumental reason simplifies the world to make it more manipulable at the expense of critical reflection. Bilić (2024) further emphasizes the need to consider how different aspects of information and communication on platforms—content, producers, audiences, and technologies—mutually reinforce one another in producing simplified meanings that result in manipulation.

This critique is shared by Duff (2012), who argues that the information society is often regarded as a purely technical concept, a sociological thesis neutral in values, neglecting its political implications in shaping a new social normativity constructed through communication technologies. According to Duff (2012), the current communication context is that of a global information society, connected by a worldwide information infrastructure, characterized by the commodification of information and the privatization and intensification of intellectual property rights, occurring to the detriment of free access to information and knowledge, particularly due to inequalities in resources and access. Furthermore, Duff (2012) notes that while the industrial period was marked by strong normative political traditions that influenced

[6] Although grounded in the Frankfurt School, the proposition regarding the convergence of content production and circulation on digital platforms refers to an understanding of contemporary communication, situated within new dynamics that were not anticipated by the school.

socially shared beliefs and values and shaped the ways information and communication were constructed, the current information society lacks strong normativity, especially considering the overlap of communicational and informational transformations with cultural changes brought by post-industrialization (Inglehart; Welzel, 2005).

Analyzing how the current context produces cultural reconfiguration, Van Dijck (2016) observes that information technologies are reshaping social life in terms of socialization, sociability, and values surrounding connectivity. Although connectivity on platforms and social networks has its own dynamics, this does not mean that these spaces are separate from reality; rather, they are integrated into preexisting social, cultural, and political structures in society. In this sense, given that the digital and virtual spaces of social networks have become individuals' primary sources of information and reflect preexisting structures, they must also be understood as agents of political socialization (Vizcarra Castillo; Oliveira Santos; Castro, 2020), with the capacity to influence what people think and how they act politically.

Although communication has long played an important political role, the characteristics of digital and virtual spaces differ significantly from those observed in previous mass communication. Due to both the socializing function of communication on platforms and social networks and the way these enable instant interactions and allow individuals to access, produce, and consume information in an unlimited, continuous, and low-cost manner, there was an expectation that the advancement of digitalization and technology would favor democracy (Vizcarra Castillo; Piccinin; Castro, 2022). Indeed, they have the potential to promote civic autonomy, political engagement, and the expansion of public debate by increasing individual freedom of choice and democratizing access to information (Flaxman; Goel; Rao, 2016). However, hyper-individualization and algorithmic automation on platforms and social networks have facilitated exposure to echo chambers and informational bubbles, which personalize the content to which individuals are continuously exposed (Castro, 2015; Jungherr, 2023; Flaxman; Goel; Rao, 2016). This architecture of contemporary communication in digital spaces presents significant challenges to democracy, as it fosters political polarization, stimulates political conflict, deteriorates public debate, and, above all, facilitates the proliferation and dissemination of fake news.

Fake News as a political-communicational phenomenon

The potentially deleterious effects of current communication and information conditions on politics began to attract attention, particularly from the 2010s onward, with the spread of misinformation observed during the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States (Allcott; Gentzkow, 2017). In Brazil, it was during the 2018 elections that the widespread dissemination of fake news on social networks began to interfere with the conditions of public debate and political competition. In the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections, fake news targeted the defamation of political actors, impacting political polarization and institutional distrust (Dourado, 2020). In the 2022 elections, the primary targets of misinformation were the institutions, authorities, and processes of Brazil's democratic political system (Bentes, 2023).

Although rumors and slanders have long been instrumentalized for political purposes (Domenach, 1973; Maquiavel, 2007), the strategic use of fake news appears to have been amplified given the conditions of mass reach and continuous exposure to message content (Gaughan, 2017). Bakir and McStay (2017, p. 1, our translation) define fake news as informational pieces that mimic news but whose content is "entirely false or composed of deliberately misleading elements embedded in its content or context." Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) complement this definition by highlighting that the main characteristics of fake news are their publication and dissemination on digital platforms, with the aim of achieving profit or social and political influence. Segurado (2021) further distinguishes between misinformation—where there is no intent to cause harm—disinformation—where content sharing is guided by an intention to mislead—and malinformation—where information, even if true, is inadvertently shared and may negatively affect individuals or collective life. Due to their widespread use in influencing opinions, attitudes, and behaviors in the political sphere, fake news should be understood not only as a communicational phenomenon but, above all, as a political one.

As discussed previously, digital and virtual spaces transform the conditions under which information is accessed, produced, and consumed. The diffusion of fake news on social networks is facilitated by pecuniary incentives—given the low costs associated with monetizing

content circulation[7]—the format of the content itself—often brief and fragmented, which can affect recipients' judgment—and algorithms that structure the flow of information within echo chambers and informational bubbles (Allcott; Gentzkow, 2017). In this sense, these digital and virtual spaces have relativized "the traditional roles of senders and receivers" of information (Vizcarra Castillo; Piccinin; Castro, 2022, p. 61, our translation).

From the senders' perspective, social networks have removed the mediation and filtering previously provided by third parties, eliminating fact-checking mechanisms and making it impossible to hold entities accountable for information accuracy, as was formerly possible through print media, for example (Allcott; Gentzkow, 2017; Vizcarra Castillo; Piccinin; Castro, 2022). From the receivers' perspective, the persuasive power of fake news is related to social, psychological, and affective factors of individuals. Cognitive factors, such as confirmation biases, and socio-affective factors, such as emotional reactions and homophily—the tendency to associate with others sharing similar characteristics, interests, opinions, or values—generated by echo chambers and informational bubbles, contribute to the belief in false news (Ecker *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, fake news is more likely to be accepted as true when its content aligns with preexisting beliefs, values, and attitudes, mobilizes emotional appeals, and is shared within trusted social circles. Once disseminated through social networks and other digital platforms, fake news tends to have large-scale impacts due to the speed and breadth of its circulation.

Democracy, political culture, and fake news

To understand how democracy can be impacted by the dissemination of fake news, it is necessary to recognize that "democracy" is a polysemous term, whose meanings share a focus on the centrality of the citizen. Dahl (2002), for instance, emphasizes the capacity of the system to accommodate citizens' preferences, with the stipulation that citizens should have equal opportunities to formulate such preferences, express them in different spaces, and receive equal treatment from the government. Similarly, Urbinati (2023) argues that citizens' right to form opinions not only protects them from abuses of power but also promotes their empowerment. From the perspective of political culture, and in contrast to Almond and Verba's (1989) civic culture theory, Dalton and Welzel (2014) contend that critical and assertive—thus less

[7] This diminishes the importance of building a strong reputation for content producers, allowing them to benefit from short-term strategies aimed at ensuring profitability (Allcott; Gentzkow, 2017).

deferential—attitudes, with citizens actively expressing their demands and preferences, constitute an important political-cultural component of democracy.

In this sense, healthy democracies rely on an informed public and the existence of a public sphere in which political discussions can take place. Consequently, the ability of citizens to formulate and express demands and preferences, and of the system to accommodate them, depends largely on the information underpinning both citizens' opinions and actions in the political sphere and the very existence of public debate. Therefore, the primary risks posed by fake news to democracy concern how misinformation generates noise in citizens' individual decision-making and deteriorates public debate, exacerbating institutional, social, and communicational distrust while stimulating conflict and political polarization (Andreeva, 2019; Jungherr, 2023; Bennet; Livingston, 2018).

Analyzing how artificial intelligence may affect democracy, Jungherr (2023) reflects on the individual, social, institutional, and systemic impacts generated by algorithmic automation on social networks and the dissemination of fake news within them. At the individual level, fake news undermines the exercise of personal autonomy by falsifying and manipulating the information upon which political opinions, behaviors, and decisions are based. At the social level, algorithms that favor echo chambers and informational bubbles can reinforce preexisting biases and prejudices, perpetuating discriminatory patterns against minority groups and undermining social equity. At the institutional level, misinformation can create imbalances in electoral competition, influence election outcomes, and, most importantly, erode institutional trust. At the systemic level, fake news can not only shape public opinion in favor of autocratic forms of government but also be used as an instrument of social manipulation and control. Similarly, Farkas and Schou (2019) emphasize the need to consider misinformation as a political phenomenon rather than merely a technical issue, due to the risks of addressing it solely through rationalist solutions that place power in the hands of a system governed by technicians and experts—as in a technocratic government[8]—rather than through a delegated system of governance.

A central point in the dynamics between democracy and fake news concerns trust. Approaching this phenomenon from the perspective of epistemic trust, Reglitz (2022) argues

[8] The authors do not directly address the term "technocracy"; however, their argumentation reveals premises similar to those identified by Faoro (1973), such as the risks associated with a technocratic government in which technical experts would hold absolute primacy.

that the greatest threat posed by fake news lies in the distrust it generates among citizens. Reglitz (2022) emphasizes that the lack of epistemic reliability with respect to peers hampers the exchange of opinions, arguments, and worldviews, rendering the public debate environment less effective and less democratic. Beyond interpersonal trust, political fake news often targets political institutions and traditional media outlets, thereby affecting citizens' trust in them (Humprecht, 2023; Ognyanova *et al.*, 2020). Institutional trust is a crucial political-cultural factor for the legitimacy of political systems, yet it is situational, depending on government performance and being more volatile than other attitudes. Consequently, misinformation that undermines institutional trust has the potential to generate significant political instability. Trust in the media is equally fundamental for public debate and citizens' deliberation in democracy, as media outlets disseminate information that is closer to reality (Stromback *et al.*, 2020). A lack of trust in the media leads citizens to turn to content that may not be accurate and that reinforces their preexisting perceptions (Humprecht, 2023). Trust in institutions and media is essential to building resilience against misinformation. However, in politically polarized societies such as Brazil, this presents a challenge, as trust in the press is closely linked to how people perceive political institutions themselves (Hanitzsch; Van Dalen; Steindl, 2018).

Analyzing fake news in Brazil from a political-cultural perspective, Vizcarra Castillo, Piccinin, and Castro (2022) highlighted the role of a hybrid political culture, in which support for democracy coexists with institutional distrust. On one hand, this produces a vicious cycle in which institutions lose legitimacy to such an extent that they cannot recover it, a situation exacerbated by the proliferation of fake news on social networks that reinforces political polarization and distrust. On the other hand, the characteristics of this hybrid political culture—embedded in preexisting and socially shared beliefs, values, and convictions—are reinforced and mimicked in virtual spaces. In this sense, Brazilian political-cultural characteristics help interpret the peculiarities of fake news dissemination and impact on democracy, with a focus on distrust. As in Farkas and Schou (2019), the authors also express concern about the potential for authoritarian solutions driven by the spread of fake news, although their focus is on polarization rather than technocracy.

Considering fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, Vizcarra Castillo, Oliveira Santos, and Castro (2020) identified several characteristics of Brazilian political culture that made certain fake news narratives more permeable to the social fabric. The authors noted that COVID-19-related fake news articulated a cultural framework very similar to that of politically or electorally motivated fake news. In other words, relying on institutional distrust

and political polarization, these narratives mobilized a belief system already embedded in Brazil's hybrid political culture, which diverged from information disseminated by health authorities aimed at guiding the population during the pandemic (Vizcarra Castillo; Oliveira Santos; Castro, 2020). Similarly, Andrade and Timmers (2023) analyzed how the infodemic could affect Brazilian democratic stability. The authors found that institutional distrust observed among the Brazilian population has spilled over into social media interactions, intensifying animosities between individuals and groups and undermining the quality and stability of democracy.

Data and Methods

To analyze the relationship between opinions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding information sources, social networks, and fake news, and Brazilians' attitudes toward democracy and authoritarian forms of government, we adopted mixed methods (Bergman, 2008). This strategy derives from the use of both quantitative and qualitative data in the analysis. First, we analyzed quantitative data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the study *A Cara da Democracia*. Subsequently, we triangulated the results obtained from the quantitative analyses with qualitative data collected from four focus groups on fake news and elections conducted in 2019 within the framework of the seventh wave of the WVS in Brazil.

The WVS data were used to analyze the longitudinal behavior of variables related to trust in media and television. These data were collected from nationally representative samples of the Brazilian population and cover the period from 1989 to 2022, specifically waves 2 (1990–1994, n = 1,782), 3 (1995–1998, n = 1,143), 5 (2005–2009, n = 1,500), 6 (2010–2014, n = 1,486), and 7 (2018–2022, n = 1,762) of the survey in Brazil. Data from the study *A Cara da Democracia* were used to examine opinions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding information sources, social networks, and fake news. These data were collected from a representative sample of the Brazilian population in 2019 (n = 2009)[9]. Using descriptive statistics, we analyzed variables related to information sources used to obtain political information, social media behavior for expressing opinions on political issues, trust in and perceived importance of social

[9] The Institute for Democracy and the Democratization of Communication (IDDC) also provides access to the surveys conducted in 2018 and 2020; however, these data were not utilized in this article.

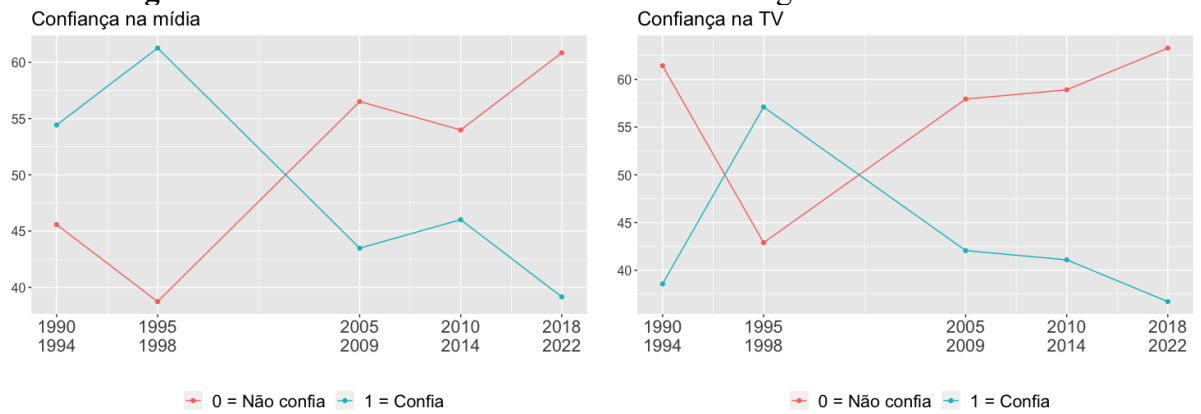
networks, and opinions and behaviors regarding fake news. Furthermore, these data were used to investigate how variables related to opinions, attitudes, and behaviors about media, social networks, and fake news are associated with attitudes toward democracy, military coups, and institutional trust, employing Spearman correlation tests and logistic regression models to examine preferences for democracy and support for military coups under conditions of high crime or high corruption.

Qualitative data from focus groups on fake news and elections, conducted in 2019 as part of the seventh wave of the WVS in Brazil, were also analyzed. Transcripts were examined using an inductive methodology based on grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2006). Data were collected from four in-person focus groups held between August and September 2019 in Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, and Recife. Each group included eight participants, recruited according to sex, age range, and educational level, with gender parity maintained across all groups. The two groups in Brasília consisted of participants aged 25–35 with either completed or incomplete higher education, while the groups in Rio de Janeiro and Recife comprised participants aged 50–60 with completed secondary education. Participants received financial compensation and signed informed consent forms. Focus groups were conducted in mirrored rooms during evening hours, lasted approximately ninety minutes, and were moderated by a lead moderator supported by an assistant moderator.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 presents longitudinal data from the WVS on trust in the media and television among Brazilians from 1990 to 2022. As observed, the majority of Brazilians trusted the media between 1990–1994 (54.4%) and 1995–1998 (61.3%). However, there is a decline from 2005–2009 onward, reaching 39.2% in the latest WVS wave, 2018–2022. Trust in television was initially low in 1990–1994 (38.2%), increased in 1995–1998 (57.1%), and then progressively declined from 2005–2009, reaching levels similar to the first wave of the survey, with only 36.7% of Brazilians reporting trust in TV in the last wave, 2018–2022.

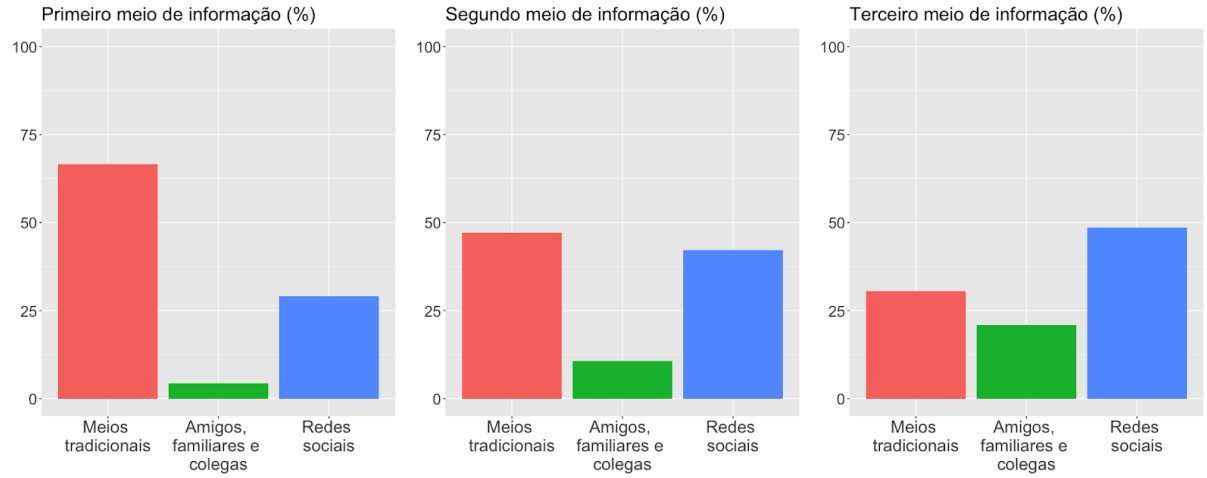
Figure 1 – Trust in the Media and Television among Brazilians over Time



Source: authors' elaboration based on World Values Survey – Brazil data (WVSA, 2022).

Despite the growth of social networks and the decline in trust in traditional media, these outlets remained the main sources of political information in 2019. Figure 2 presents the results regarding the first, second, and third sources of political information. The findings indicate that 66.6% primarily obtain information through traditional media, 29.1% via social networks, and only 4.3% from friends, family, or colleagues. Although social networks are not the primary source for most respondents, they gain prominence as the second or third source, reaching 42.2% and 48.5%, respectively. Friends, family, and colleagues rank lower, being the second source for 10.6% and the third for 20.9%. This finding is noteworthy because, although interpersonal trust is higher than institutional or media trust among Brazilians (Vizcarra Castillo; Piccinin; Castro, 2022), social circles are not necessarily the first choice for political information. Furthermore, approximately 8% reported that they do not seek information about politics. In the focus groups, many participants reported difficulties in finding political information, perceiving it as a complex subject: "So, politics, it is very difficult. That's what I think about politics" (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Rio de Janeiro).

Figure 2 – Information Sources Used to Learn about Politics[10]

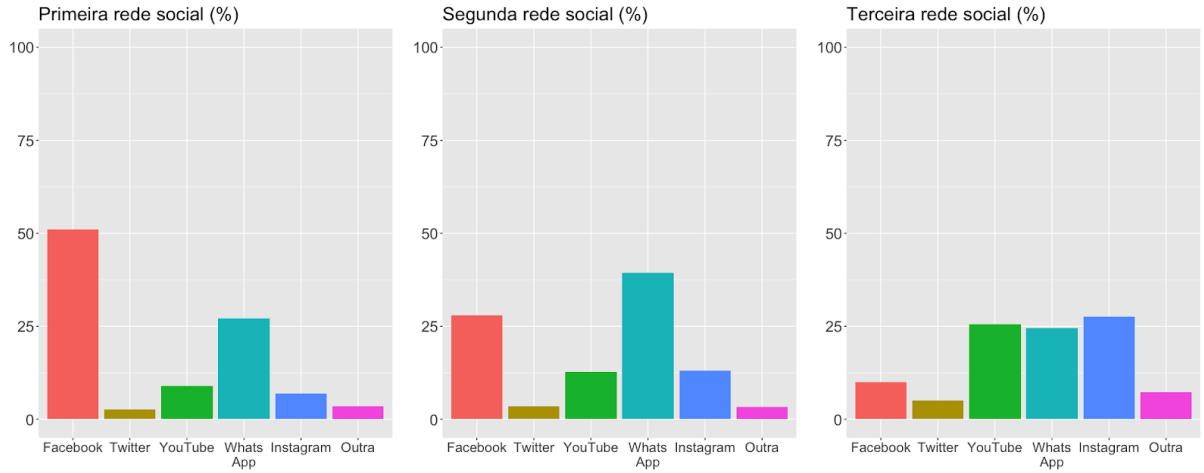


Source: authors' elaboration based on data from *A Cara da Democracia* (INCT IDDC, 2019).

Among social networks used to obtain political information in 2019, Facebook and WhatsApp stand out. Figure 3 presents the results for the first, second, and third most accessed social networks for political information. About 20% reported not using social networks at all. Among those who do, Facebook was identified as the primary social network by 51%, followed by WhatsApp at 27.1%. These two platforms were also the most accessed as the second choice, at 28% and 39.4%, respectively. Regarding the third choice, 27.7% reported using Instagram, 25.5% YouTube, and 24.6% WhatsApp. Younger respondents, aged 18–24, are the least likely to use messaging applications as their main source of political information (18.6%), in contrast to older respondents, aged 55 or above, who are the group most likely to use WhatsApp for political information (33.5%).

[10] Color translation: Red - somewhat traditional; Green - friends, family, and colleagues; Blue - social networks.

Figure 3 – Social Networks Used to Obtain Political Information[11]



Source: authors' elaboration based on data from *A Cara da Democracia* (INCT IDDC, 2019).

Despite the predominant use of traditional media and the social networks Facebook and WhatsApp, this does not necessarily indicate trust in these media outlets. Only 10% of respondents reported high trust in traditional media, while 31.5% stated they did not trust them. When asked about the television networks Globo and Record, distrust increases: 51.7% do not trust Rede Globo, and only 8.4% trust it highly; 38.7% do not trust Rede Record, while 10.5% trust it highly. The lack of trust in traditional media is also evident when respondents are asked about the main sources of fake news. For 37%, television is the primary producer of false news, followed by politicians (16.4%) and political parties (13%). Regarding social networks, 57.3% do not trust Facebook, with only 3.1% expressing high trust. While there is also distrust regarding WhatsApp—42.2% reported low trust—it remains the most trusted communication medium, with 16.3% expressing high trust. These findings draw attention due to the previously identified association between exposure to fake news and low trust in traditional media outlets (Ognyanova *et al*., 2020). However, as Stromback *et al*. (2020) emphasize, trust (or distrust) in organizations and institutions does not necessarily reflect trust (or distrust) in the content they disseminate.

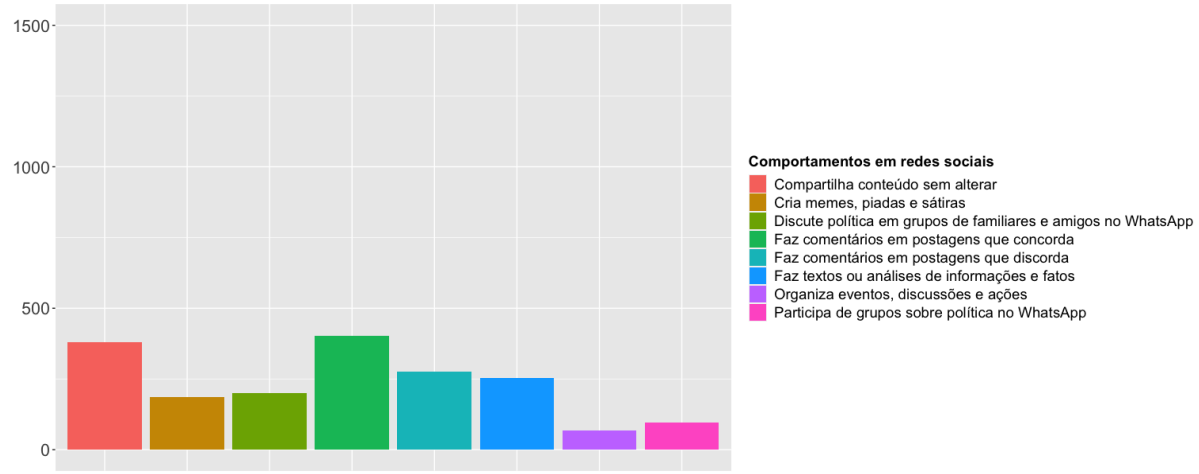
Data from the focus groups reinforce this perception of distrust toward traditional media and social networks. Across all groups, mentions of both traditional and digital media were associated with negative perceptions and uncertainty regarding the reliability of the information

[11] Translation from right to left: First social network; Second social network; Third social network. Translation of colors: Red - Facebook; Brown - Twitter; Green - YouTube; Aqua green - WhatsApp; Blue - Instagram; Pink - Other.

provided, suggesting a shared concern about being misled, particularly by traditional media outlets. This sentiment was present among both less-educated and more-educated groups, who perceived television broadcasters as biased—"[…] Globo presents it in a certain way, right? […] I think everyone spins it the way they want, right?" (25–35 years old, completed or incomplete higher education, Brasília); "Each network […] can present the same fact, but they will frame it the way they believe. Record is sensationalist, right? So, they present it and do a sort of brainwashing (laughs)" (25–35 years old, completed higher education, Brasília)—and expressed skepticism about journalistic impartiality—"They [the news from traditional media] are manipulated, they are shaped" (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Rio de Janeiro); "I see that the media sometimes does not always bring the whole truth, right?" (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Rio de Janeiro); "Journalists create fake news, Joice Hasselmann has been sued for that several times" (25–35 years old, completed higher education, Brasília). Social networks were perceived similarly, though the agents manipulating information were not identifiable: "Through the internet, we only get what they want us to get" (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Rio de Janeiro); "Behind an internet device […] those who direct information are the ones with interests" (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Rio de Janeiro).

Even though social networks are widely used to obtain political information, online engagement among users is not frequent. Figure 4 presents the results for variables related to the frequency of different behaviors on social networks. The most common actions include commenting on posts with which users agree (25.5%) and sharing content deemed relevant without modification (24.2%). These results are notable as they may reflect both cognitive confirmation biases and a tendency toward homophily in individual behavior (Ecker *et al*., 2022)—that is, interacting with posts that reflect similar characteristics, interests, opinions, or values—as well as the configuration of the social network platforms themselves as echo chambers, reducing the diversity of content to which users are exposed (Flaxman; Goel; Rao, 2016).

Figure 4 – Social Media Behaviors (At Least Once per Month)[12]



Source: authors' elaboration based on data from *A Cara da Democracia* (INCT IDDC, 2019).

Focus group data corroborate and complement these findings by indicating how such behaviors are also associated with the dissemination of fake news. However, participants' accounts reflect the lack of epistemic trust discussed by Reglitz (2022). In the groups, participants could identify behaviors of individuals within their social circles who share information they consider relevant without verifying its accuracy—"[…] often, they… just feel the need to be there and pass on the news. Sometimes they don't even read it. 'Did you read what you sent?' 'Ah, I didn't read it. I got it from so-and-so, but I passed it on.' Sometimes they don't even see what it is about. […] then they send it without reading" (25–35 years old, completed higher education, Brasília)—as well as discern the intentionality behind such behaviors: "I think some people wake up already wanting to know what disaster is going to happen. […] Whether it's fake news or reality. But they take pleasure in… in the morning, the first thing they do is turn on… Facebook to see if there's something to spread" (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Recife). Nevertheless, as Reglitz (2022) warns, participants did not perceive themselves as potential disseminators of misinformation.

Furthermore, participants also associated these online behaviors with political polarization and the electoral preferences of those who share information on social networks. This perception aligns with the notion of homophily, as reflected in statements such as: "And

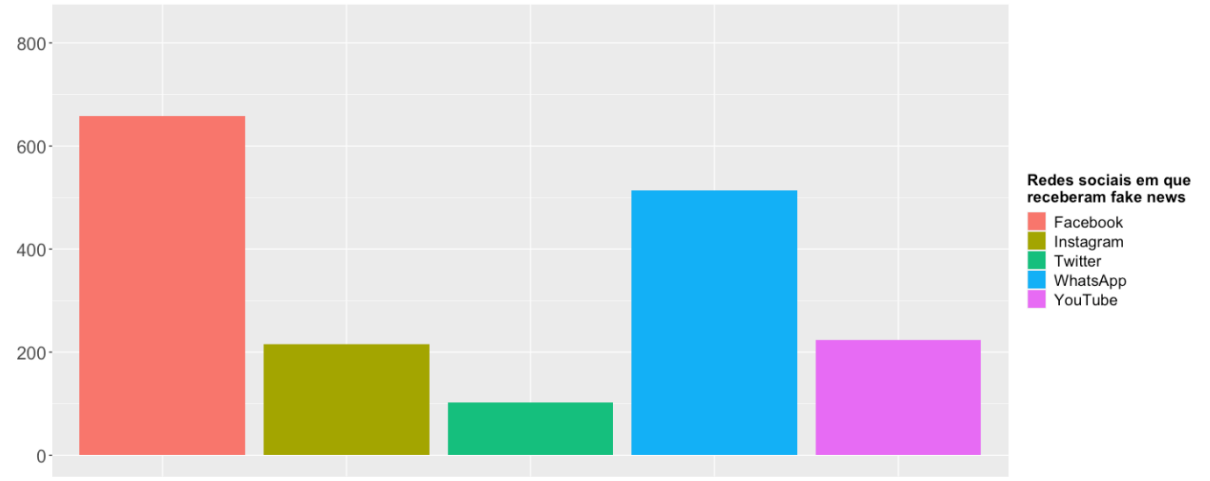
[12] Translation of colors: Red - Shares content without changing it; Brown - Creates memes, jokes, and satire; Dark green - Discusses politics in family and friend groups on WhatsApp; Green - Comments on posts they agree with; Aqua green - Comments on posts you disagree with; Blue - Writes texts or analyses information and facts; Purple - Organizes events, discussions, and actions; Pink - Participates in political groups on WhatsApp.

they simply pick up some random information and immediately start blaming Party A or Party B, depending on what they want to defend or attack, right? But they don't actually try to verify the information" (25–35 years old, completed or incomplete higher education, Brasília). It also reflects cognitive confirmation biases:

> [Participant 1]: […] usually, people already believe what they are going to see, right? They already have […] an idea of what they will see, whether it is fake or true, they […] already have an opinion formed. [Moderator]: Do you think it's like that as well? [Participant 1]: I do, yes, I think so. [Participant 2]: I think so too. […] Most of the time, it is like that. [Participant 1]: Because they already have a formed opinion; they won't change it. [Participant 3]: If you are going to vote for someone and suddenly some bombshell comes out, something the person finds out… It happens. Doesn't happen to you, but there are people who already have a formed opinion (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Rio de Janeiro).

Regarding fake news, nearly half of respondents (41.5%) reported having encountered political news on social networks in 2019 that they suspected to be false. Figure 5 presents the social networks where they encountered potential fake news. Likely because Facebook and WhatsApp were the most widely used platforms in 2019, these were also the networks where respondents most frequently encountered false content, with 79% reporting having read fake news on Facebook and 61.6% on WhatsApp. The presence of fake news on these social networks was also confirmed in the focus groups: "So… I receive a lot, mainly on WhatsApp. Facebook, I must admit, I've distanced myself a bit. Because I couldn't handle so much, so many fake news, really" (25–35 years old, completed higher education, Brasília). Participants also noted that the circulation of false news primarily occurs within trusted social circles: [Participant 1]: This issue of trust, right? When you receive a message from someone you care about, […] you don't think they are sending you something wrong. [Participant 2]: […] fake news circulates mostly in family WhatsApp groups (25–35 years old, completed or incomplete higher education, Brasília).

Figure 5 – Social Networks Where Fake News Was Encountered[13]



Source: authors' elaboration based on data from *A Cara da Democracia* (INCT IDDC, 2019).

Despite the circulation of false news, only 20.5% of respondents accessed fact-checking websites or applications. This finding highlights the need for information literacy as part of developing strategies to respond to the dissemination of fake news, including skills related to recognizing informational needs, assessing current knowledge and gaps, devising strategies to locate information, ethical access, evaluation, and organization of information, and applying acquired knowledge (Bent *et al.*, 2011). In the focus groups, some participants reported verifying information through traditional media, while others consulted people close to them: "News would appear like: 'Ah, politician X is doing this and that. Politician Y is doing this and that.' Then I discuss it, like, both with my boyfriend and my sister, to see: 'Look, could this be true?'" (25–35 years old, completed higher education, Brasília). A strong concern was also expressed regarding the difficulty elderly people face in discerning the veracity of received content:

> I gave my mother a cell phone; she is 85 years old, and now she has discovered Facebook. […] Then she comes to me like, 'Look, look at what's happening,' and I say, 'Mom, this might be false, it could be fake news.' 'Really, my daughter?' […] she believes everything; she is amazed by everything there, she believes. Then I have to stop her, 'Mom, that could be a lie, understand?' Some people just believe everything (50–60 years old, completed secondary education, Rio de Janeiro).

[13] Translation of colors: Red - Facebook; Dark green - Instagram; Green - Twitter; Blue - WhatsApp; Pink - YouTube.

The role of social networks and fake news in shaping political debate is also recognized by Brazilians. Approximately half of respondents (48%) considered social networks to be very important or important for current politics, and for many, the spread of false news on these platforms represents a threat to democracy (Md = 7, SD = 3.05). The political objectives of fake news and their influence on politics were also highlighted in focus group discussions, as illustrated below:

> [Participant 1]: What is fake news? Ahn… it's false news, invented with the aim of […] right? To lead society somewhere that… some leader wants, I think. It's always with a political purpose, not just a joke; it's meant to herd society in a direction that a powerful actor wants. Could also be a company, not necessarily a politician, right? [Moderator]: So there's a specific direction? [Participant 1]: Yes. A direction (25–35 years old, completed higher education, Brasília).

To explore how these factors may relate to democratic attitudes, we analyzed the results of bivariate correlations and logistic regressions, presented in Table 1 and Figure 6. As observed, satisfaction with democracy shows a statistically significant positive correlation with trust in the media and WhatsApp, and a negative correlation with the perception that fake news poses a threat to democracy. Preference for democracy exhibits a statistically significant negative correlation with trust in Facebook, and a positive correlation with having previously encountered fake news and with the perceived importance of social networks in politics. Support for a military coup in contexts of high corruption shows a statistically significant positive correlation with trust in the media, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Conversely, support for a military coup in situations of high criminality demonstrates a significant positive association with trust in the media and a negative association with the perceived importance of social networks in politics. In addition to the negative correlation with satisfaction with democracy, the perception that fake news constitutes a threat to the democratic system is also significantly positively associated with exposure to misinformation, engagement in fact-checking, and the perceived importance of social networks in politics.

Table 1 – Bivariate correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Ideology	1															
2. Satisfaction with democracy	**0.133 (<.001)**	1														
3. Preference for democracy	**-0.137 (<.001)**	-0.022 (.502)	1													
4. Military coup: crime	**0.245 (<.001)**	0.013 (.690)	**-0.259 (<.001)**	1												
5. Military coup: corruption	**0.300 (<.001)**	0.042 (.194)	**-0.269 (<.001)**	**0.668 (<.001)**	1											
6. Trust: political parties	-0.022 (.505)	**0.077 (.018)**	-0.008 (.795)	-0.040 (.218)	-0.025 (.441)	1										
7. Trust: Congress	-0.016 (.612)	**0.086 (.008)**	0.007 (.825)	0.006 (.842)	0.015 (.639)	**0.409 (<.001)**	1									
8. Trust: president	**0.352 (<.001)**	**0.280 (<.001)**	**-0.097 (.002)**	**0.192 (<.001)**	**0.290 (<.001)**	**0.148 (<.001)**	**0.185 (<.001)**	1								
9. Trust: media	0.046 (.156)	**0.104 (.001)**	0.021 (.515)	**0.073 (.022)**	**0.075 (.020)**	**0.239 (<.001)**	**0.284 (<.001)**	**0.130 (<.001)**	1							
10. Trust: Facebook	0.019 (.564)	0.051 (.116)	**-0.069 (.031)**	0.029 (.370)	**0.062 (.053)**	**0.218 (<.001)**	**0.162 (<.001)**	**0.165 (<.001)**	**0.305 (<.001)**	1						
11. Trust: WhatsApp	**0.094 (.004)**	**0.122 (<.001)**	0.005 (.868)	0.057 (.074)	**0.086 (.007)**	**0.105 (.001)**	**0.121 (<.001)**	**0.141 (<.001)**	**0.303 (<.001)**	**0.363 (<.001)**	1					
12. Media used	0.041 (.205)	0.024 (.459)	-0.004 (.893)	0.002 (.950)	0.024 (.459)	-0.012 (.719)	**-0.089 (.005)**	0.021 (.511)	-0.058 (.069)	-0.001 (.964)	-0.015 (.647)	1				
13. Received fake news	0.043 (.186)	0.023 (.478)	**0.069 (.030)**	0.024 (.449)	0.062 (.051)	0.006 (.857)	**-0.068 (.034)**	**0.102 (.001)**	0.049 (.127)	-0.043 (.184)	**0.116 (<.001)**	**0.180 (<.001)**	1			
14. Checked fake news	-0.008 (.802)	-0.056 (.085)	0.042 (.193)	-0.019 (.564)	0.006 (.852)	0.014 (.667)	-0.028 (.386)	0.059 (.066)	-0.007 (.826)	-0.009 (.789)	0.008 (.796)	**0.224 (<.001)**	**0.366 (<.001)**	1		
15. Importance of social media in politics	0.062 (.054)	0.035 (.275)	**0.177 (<.001)**	**-0.087 (.007)**	-0.022 (.505)	0.040 (.210)	0.011 (.735)	**0.111 (.001)**	**0.124 (<.001)**	**0.091 (.005)**	**0.144 (<.001)**	**0.172 (<.001)**	**0.278 (<.001)**	**0.239 (<.001)**	1	
16. *Fake news is a threat to democracy*	0.055 (.092)	**-0.101 (.002)**	-0.006 (.855)	0.036 (.266)	0.019 (.556)	-0.046 (.153)	-0.033 (.308)	0.021 (.507)	-0.020 (.533)	-0.014 (.653)	-0.000 (.996)	-0.040 (.216)	**0.071 (.026)**	**0.097 (.002)**	**0.095 (.003)**	1

Source: authors' elaboration, based on data from *A Cara da Democracia* (INCT IDDC, 2019).

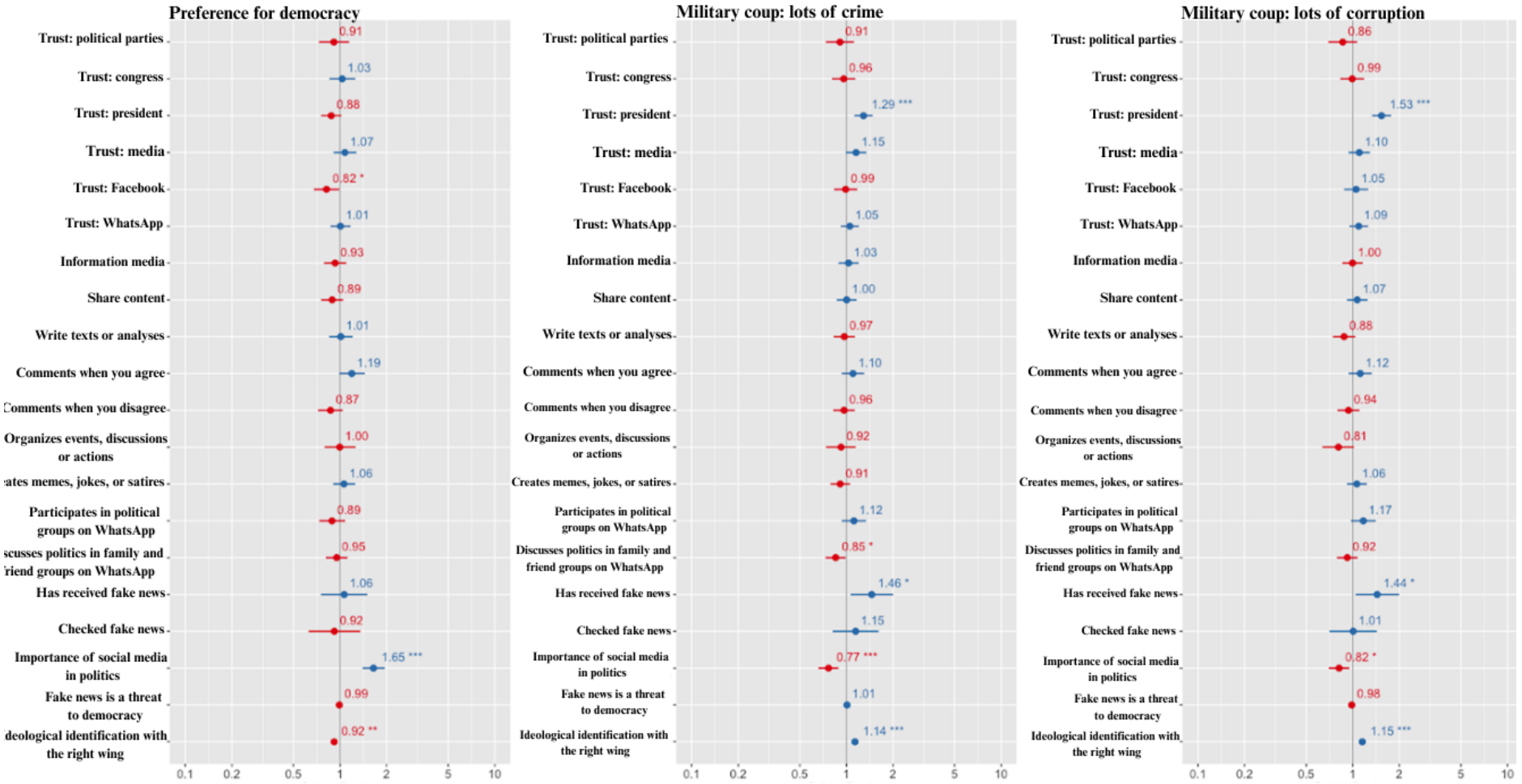
We also included the variable of ideological self-positioning in the correlation tests. Ideological identification is an important variable for understanding the dynamics of fake news, as echo chambers and informational bubbles often have an ideological character (Flaxman; Goel; Rao, 2016; Allcott; Gentzkow, 2017), which complicates the discernment of false news circulated on social networks, given that it often aligns with individuals' preexisting attitudes. Furthermore, exposure to fake news among conservatives and liberals tends to produce different effects on institutional and media trust (Ognyanova *et al.*, 2020). As shown in Table 1, regarding information-related variables, only trust in WhatsApp presents a positive and statistically significant correlation with ideological identification with the right.

Moreover, we observed that ideological identification with the right is positively and significantly associated with satisfaction with democracy. However, similar associations observed for support for military coups and trust in the President at the time—Jair Bolsonaro—as well as the negative correlation with preference for democracy, suggest that satisfaction with the democratic system may be circumstantial, given that the incumbent at the time of the survey was a far-right politician. Although it could be argued that situational satisfaction with democracy could also occur among left-leaning individuals if the administration were ideologically aligned with them, the remaining results concerning the relationship between ideology and democratic attitudes—preference for democracy over authoritarian regimes and support for military coups—indicate anti-democratic attitudes among individuals ideologically aligned with the right in the sample. This finding aligns with evidence reported by Oliveira Santos and Jost (2024) and Borba, Ribeiro, and Fuks (2024), highlighting the risks that anti-democratic misinformation may resonate with authoritarian values and attitudes among right-leaning individuals.

Figure 6 presents the results of logistic regressions for preference for democracy and support for military coups. All models were adjusted for sex, age, education, income, color or race, and residential area. In the model for preference for democracy (Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 = 0.13), we observed that individuals who trust Facebook less, perceive social networks as politically important, and identify ideologically with the left tend to favor democracy over any other form of government. In the model for support of a military coup under conditions of high criminality (Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 = 0.16), those who discuss politics less in family and friend groups on WhatsApp, report having received fake news, and consider social networks less important in contemporary Brazilian politics tend to support a military takeover in such circumstances. Finally, in the model for support of a military coup under conditions of high

corruption (Nagelkerke Pseudo-R^2 = 0.22), exposure to fake news and the belief that social networks are not important in current politics are also statistically significant predictors. It is noteworthy that higher trust in the President at the time, Jair Bolsonaro, and ideological identification with the right also predict support for a military coup in both models.

Figure 6 – Regressions for Preference for Democracy and Support for Military Coups



Source: authors' elaboration, based on data from *A Cara da Democracia* (INCT IDDC, 2019). * = significant at 0.01; ** = significant at 0.05; *** = significant at <0.001. Negative effects are shown in red, positive effects in blue.

In sum, the results reinforce the understanding of Vizcarra Castillo, Oliveira Santos, and Castro (2020) and Bilić (2024) that fake news should be understood as a political phenomenon, not merely a communicational one. The regression models indicate that political authoritarianism, in the form of military coups, is associated with exposure to fake news and a lack of critical awareness regarding the risks and significance of such news in contemporary Brazilian politics. In this regard, our findings align with previous studies highlighting how the dissemination of false news can negatively impact democratic political systems (Jungherr, 2023; Farkas; Schou, 2019; Humprecht, 2023; Andreeva, 2019; Bennet; Livingston, 2018; Flaxman; Goel; Rao, 2016; Allcott; Gentzkow, 2017) and advance the literature by empirically establishing the relationship between fake news and attitudes toward democracy. Our results also indicate a clear ideological asymmetry between individuals who prefer democracy and those who support military coups. This evidence not only complements previous findings on the association between right-wing ideology and anti-democratic tendencies (Oliveira Santos; Jost, 2024; Borba; Ribeiro; Fuks, 2024), but also provides insights into the potential influence of political polarization in Brazil (Nunes; Traumann, 2023)—a factor integral to the repertoire of political misinformation in the country (Vizcarra Castillo; Piccinin; Castro, 2022)— and the mediating role of ideology in the effects of fake news consumption on democracy. Considering studies on the impact of partisanship on the correction of misinformation in the Brazilian context (Batista Pereira *et al.*, 2022), interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of fake news on democracy must account for the ideological dimension.

Conclusions

The reconfiguration of the relationship between communication, society, and politics brought about by social media raises concerns regarding the maintenance and stability of the democratic political system, particularly due to the risks posed by misinformation disseminated via fake news on social networks. In this regard, it is crucial to understand that fake news should not be viewed solely as a communicational phenomenon. The instrumentalization of false news for political purposes, as well as its impact on citizens' agency and on public debate itself, suggests that it must also be regarded as a political phenomenon. This necessitates a deeper reflection on contemporary forms of communication, as well as on the political-cultural elements that facilitate the reinforcement of particular narratives underlying fake news.

Accordingly, the present study approached this issue from the perspective of political culture, analyzing opinions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding media, social networks, and fake news, while also considering their potential impact on democracy. More specifically, we examined the Brazilian case, where quantitative and qualitative data provided a comprehensive portrait of how these relationships are established within Brazilian society.

Overall, our results indicated that, in 2019, the majority of Brazilians relied on both traditional media and new social networks to obtain information about politics, yet they did not trust the information provided by these outlets. This lack of trust was due both to the difficulty in understanding political issues and to the circulation of misinformation. Regarding online behaviors, the findings showed that most Brazilians adopted a relatively passive stance, with low engagement in expressing their opinions in virtual spaces. However, when engagement did occur, there were indications of potential confirmation biases, homophily, and informational echo chambers. Furthermore, despite the high prevalence of fake news on Brazilians' social networks, the data analysis revealed that few individuals accessed fact-checking websites or applications to verify the veracity of the content to which they were exposed. While these are not the only ways to assess information, this finding provides evidence supporting an interpretation of low information literacy in the country. The ambiguous relationship between recognizing false news and not seeking to verify it intensifies epistemic distrust, as individuals may acknowledge that others can be affected by fake news, yet fail to recognize their own susceptibility.

These findings alone highlight the potential impact of misinformation on public debate. However, the results of multivariate analyses suggest an even more concerning scenario. They show that support for authoritarian forms of government is also associated with exposure to fake news and a lack of critical awareness regarding the risks and significance of social networks and misinformation in contemporary Brazilian politics. This indicates that, beyond influencing electoral preferences and destabilizing the democratic playing field, fake news is also associated with authoritarian political attitudes, with citizens unable to accurately perceive the extent of the risks these phenomena pose to democracy. Moreover, correlations and logistic regressions indicate that ideological identification with the political right plays an important role in the association between misinformation and support for democracy, potentially mediating the relationship between opinions and attitudes about social networks and fake news and (anti)democratic attitudes. This hypothesis should be considered in future research, particularly in comparative studies investigating how the dynamics between ideological

identification, misinformation, and support for democracy may be influenced by the ideology of the incumbent.

The horizontal dynamics of information dissemination on social networks, characterized by decentralized communication processes, could, in theory, promote more democratic forms of communication. However, there is a gap between the content shared and individuals' capacity to develop strategies to identify information and data critically. Consequently, the absence of mediation on these networks ceases to be an opportunity to foster public debate and instead becomes a space for misinformation, obfuscation of the truth, and manipulation, with effects on trust, behavior, and citizens' decision-making processes, which may, in turn, impact the rules of the democratic political system and its legitimacy in the eyes of public opinion.

As fake news on social networks implicates both the senders and receivers of information, countering it also requires attention to these two dimensions of the communication process. Therefore, the effectiveness and resilience in addressing misinformation and its deleterious effects on democracy depend both on the actions of institutions committed to truth and on the development of individuals' informational skills, enabling them to critically evaluate and process the information they receive.

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