

## MEDIA, DISINFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY: how the media influence presidential elections in Brazil

MÍDIA, DESINFORMAÇÃO E DEMOCRACIA: como os meios de comunicação influenciam as eleições presidenciais no Brasil

MEDIOS, DESINFORMACIÓN Y DEMOCRACIA: cómo influyen los medios de comunicación en las elecciones presidenciales de Brasil

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### RESUMO:

This article aims to analyze the coverage of Brazilian media in the presidential elections held in the country after democratization, starting with 1989 and ending with 2018. The study was based on reflections on disinformation, manipulation, fake news and democracy, from the perspective of authors such as Serrano (2008; 2010), Abramo (2003), Ramonet (2007), Luhmann (2005), Mello (2020), Bucci (2019), Bobbio (2006) and Casara (2018). The research shows that historically the media tries to interfere in the election results, using strategies of manipulation and misrepresentation of the facts, which weakens the democratic system.

**KEYWORDS:** Media; Disinformation; Democracy; Presidential elections; Brazil.

### Introduction

If the press, radio or television say something is true, it is true ... even if it is false. The recipient does not have other evaluation criteria, since, as he has no concrete experience of the event, he can only orient himself by confronting the different means of communication with each other. And if everyone says the same thing, you have to admit that it is the correct version of the facts, the news "official truth"<sup>1</sup>.

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary chose the term post-truth as the word of the year, a noun defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion or personal belief"<sup>2</sup>. In 2018, from the digital dictionary Dictionary.com pointed to the term misinformation as the word

<sup>1</sup> RAMONET, 2007, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Definition translated by the newspaper O Globo, in a report published on November 16th, 2016. Available at <<https://g1.globo.com/educacao/noticia/pos-verdade-e-eleita-a-palavra-do-ano-pelo-dicionario-oxford.ghtml>>. Accessed on Sep. 18th, 2020.

of the year. What separates the crowning of these two nouns is a war of untrue, distorted, manipulated information, a strategy that is part of the world of disinformation.

If in 2016 the post-truth was the basis for the election of Republican President Ronald Trump in the United States and the Brexit referendum in Europe, in 2018, the mass sharing of false news set the tone for the presidential elections in Brazil. In the American elections and Brexit, the channel for the dissemination of fake news was Facebook, while in Brazil, WhatsApp. The two networks are part of the same business group, which also owns Instagram, which represents an industry giant, as the company controls the three largest social networks in the world.

This combination of fake news and social networks has given rise to a method of making politics that has been fully affecting democracy, a model that, notably, appropriates the post-truth, uses emotional and personal beliefs, which contribute a lot to the spread of hatred and promotes the murder of reputations by producing untrue information. A method focused on disinformation. Jair Bolsonaro's victory for president of Brazil in 2018 is seen as a clear example of this movement. There are indications that, on the eve of the first electoral round, the Bolsonaro campaign has illegally fired thousands of fake news against his opponent, PT Fernando Haddad. The best known are that Haddad, when Minister of Education, created the gay kit and the 'penis' baby bottle. The first that would be distributed in schools for children of 6 years, while the second - whose beak would have the shape of a penis - would be delivered in daycare centers throughout Brazil. Both charges are false.

On October 18th, 2018, ten days before the second round of the presidential elections, journalist Patrícia Campos Mello published, in the Folha de S. Paulo newspaper, a report that revealed a scheme of mass sharing of fake news by Bolsonaro's allies and funded by entrepreneurs<sup>3</sup>. The practice is illegal, since the legislation prohibits the donation of companies to political campaigns and, in addition, the donation has not been declared to the Electoral Court. Another illegality pointed out in the article is the fact that companies have acquired a user base from digital strategy agencies. "When they use third-party databases, these agencies offer segmentation by geographic region and, sometimes, by income. They send delivery reports to the client containing the date, time and triggered content", highlights an excerpt from the article.

The mass shares - which were repeated in the second round of the presidential election - were sent by WhatsApp and would have favored Bolsonaro's victory, a reason

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<sup>3</sup> Available at <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/10/empresarios-bancam-campanha-contra-o-pt-pelo-whatsapp.shtml>>. Accessed on Sep. 18th, 2020.

that led parties allied to Fernando Haddad's candidacy to file a lawsuit in the Superior Electoral Court to investigate possible illegalities in the process.

In the modern version of authoritarianism — in which rulers do not tear up the Constitution or strike classic *coups d'état*, but corrode institutions from the inside —, there is no need to censor the internet. In “illiberal democracies”, according to the vernacular of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, it is enough to flood the social networks and WhatsApp groups with the version of the facts that one wants to achieve, so that it becomes true — and muffles the other narratives, including and especially the real ones (MELLO, 2020, position 177).

But this movement of disinformation is also present in the traditional media. Eugênio Bucci (2019) quotes the journalist Claire Wardle, from Harvard University, who defends the existence of an ecosystem of disinformation, composed of the three basic characteristics. The first is the false connection, which occurs “when headlines, captions or illustrations do not confirm the content of the report, article or news”. The second is the false context, “when the content shared is adulterated” (BUCCI, 2019, position 164). In other words, misinformation does not happen exclusively when using fake, untrue news, but it can happen from the manipulation and framing of information. About this subject, Pascual Serrano (2008) quotes the historian Michael Parenti, for whom

The most effective propaganda is based on framing rather than falsehood. By twisting the truth instead of violating it, using emphasis and other auxiliary resources, communicators can create a desired impression without resorting to an explicit pronouncement and without straying too far from the appearance of objectivity. Framing is achieved by the way the news is packaged, the length of the exhibition, the location (front page or inside burial, main or last article), the tone of the presentation (open and disdainful attitude), headlines and photographs and, in the case of audiovisual media, image and sound effects. (PARENTI, *apud* SERRANO, 2008, p. 37).

And it is this aspect, the manipulation, that most interests us in this context of disinformation, since we are willing to present how the Brazilian corporate media has been acting ideologically in the post-democratization presidential elections in Brazil.

### **Manipulation and (post)democracy**

About manipulation, the researcher Perseu Abramo (2003) presents us with a book, small in size, but large in importance, for making us understand that not all content published by the traditional media reflects the reality of the facts. Often, these contents may even be related to reality, but they are still distorted. “It is an artificial, non-real, unreal

reality, created and developed by the press and presented instead of real reality" (ABRAMO, 2003, p. 23-24). This is how information becomes a manipulation of reality, a topic of study also by Niklas Luhmann.

In the classic discourse of truth, but also in the everyday understanding of truth, people would be interested in knowing whether or not what the media reports is true or not. Or if it is half true, half not true, because it "manipulates itself". But how can this be seen? In isolated cases, this may be possible for one or the other observer and especially for the systems of which it is informed, but for the mass of communications that are transmitted daily, this is naturally impossible (LUHMANN, 2005, p. 20/21).

Perseu Abramo (2003) points out at least four patterns of manipulation present in the work of all mainstream media and a fifth pattern specifically for radio and television. The first is the pattern of concealment, which has to do with the absence and presence of real facts in news production, something that is commonplace in the daily life of newsrooms and it happens without the reader noticing. "(...) what it will make journalism a fact does not depend on its real intrinsic characteristics, but rather depends on the characteristics of the press agency, its worldview, its editorial line, its 'project'" (p. 26). In this case, the real fact is replaced by something fictional, giving rise to an artificial reality created by the communication vehicle.

The second method is the fragmentation pattern, it happens when the fact is dissolved in parts disconnected from each other, losing its truth value and also becoming a fiction. This type of manipulation implies two operations: selection of aspects of the fact and decontextualization. Perseu Abramo also cites the pattern of inversion, which works in conjunction with fragmentation and decontextualization. According to the author, this happens from the "reordering of the parts, the exchange of places and the importance of these parts, the replacement of one for another, destroying the original reality and creating another artificial one, another reality" (p. 28).

There is also the pattern of induction, which happens when the public is led to consume a distorted reality, a world not as it is, but as the media wants it to see it. In this method, we can find the other patterns of manipulation, since, in it, it is possible to reorder and recontextualize the fragments of reality, underestimate and / or overestimate a fact. Aspects such as the graphic layout of the news also define the induction, from the layout, of the highlights that the fact has in the newspaper, on the radio and on TV, in the headlines etc. Finally, the fifth pattern of manipulation pointed out by Perseu Abramo is the global pattern, which is specific to broadcast journalism. This type of manipulation is

included in the presentation of the facts, which can use resources such as spectacle and/or sensationalism, appealing to the sentimentality of the public, the weight that is given to the characters, the sources used and the sides involved in the news that they are heard, in addition to the relevance of the authority exposed in the fact, transferring to this character the responsibility of decision-making when the news fails to make it.

What makes manipulation an essential and characteristic fact of the majority of the great Brazilian press today is that the skillful combination of cases, moments, forms and degrees of distortion of reality subjects, in general and as a whole, the population to the condition of excluded from the possibility of understanding the real reality and inducing it to consume another reality, artificially invented (ABRAMO, 2003, p. 33).

Another author who brings great contributions to the misinformation category is Pascual Serrano. He recalls that the media is part of the capitalist structure and that its owners impose self-censorship in newsrooms, which works according to their interests. In the book *Desinformación – Cómo los medios ocultan el mundo* (2008) (translated as: *Disinformation: how the media hides the world*) - which had a summarized version and translated to Brazil in a booklet published by the publisher Espalhafato/Union of Engineers of Rio de Janeiro (2010) -, Serrano explains how the information is silenced by the media. "Newspapers started to exist to tell the truth and today they exist to prevent the truth from being told" (SERRANO, 2010, p. 13). The author cites four filters used by the press that distort the facts.

The first filter is the magnitude, ownership and orientation of the benefits of the media, which happens when media owners are large economic groups that do not have information as their main activity and, therefore, treat it as a commodity and not as a public goods. "On the boards of directors of these communication companies sit bankers and business executives who have nothing to do with information" (SERRANO, 2010, p. 24). The second filter suggested by the author is advertising as the main source of revenue. This topic is widely discussed among communication researchers, this filter allows us to understand that not only is information a commodity, but the audience is also negotiable. The media sell their audience to advertising agencies and, consequently, they will not hesitate to omit unfavorable information to their advertisers, as well as publish content that interests them. "We believe that they offer us content, but in fact, they offer viewers to advertising companies; the object is us (SERRANO, 2010, p. 26).

Serrano also highlights how news is delivered to the media, which would be the third filter. He recalls that almost 80% of the information published by the press are the

result of declaratory acts, which, most of the time, do not bring with them the various versions of the facts and do not match the factual truth. We add one more element to this data: most of the information reaches the newsrooms by official bodies, which are received as real and, often, are not rigorously checked, which compromises the total veracity of the news.

Finally, Pascual Serrano speaks of “countermeasures” and various remedies as a method to discipline the media. These are lobbies of political and economic groups so that a certain subject is excluded from the news, a way of not tarnishing the image of sectors that are behind the lobbyists. We add to this filter, the performance of think tanks, entities that, increasingly, act to guide the media with general themes that meet the interests of the ruling class. The author states that media manipulation is the new form of censorship.

We continue to think, out of habit or intellectual laziness, that censorship is only exercised by authoritarian governments, dictatorships that practice it ostensibly, highly visible, amputate, forbid, cut, suppress, truncate, restrict. In summary, they mutilate and leave a work or information castrated and dismembered. We refuse to ask ourselves the problem of knowing how censorship works in democracy. (...) In fact, we must start from the principle that censorship is the property of power, of all power (SERRANO, 2008, p. 12).

A fact to consider also about the new censorship format in so-called democratic regimes is an excessive flow of information, which, however, does not reverberate in the plurality and diversity of information. According to Ignacio Ramonet, this excess of content leaves the impression that we are well informed and that there is more freedom, when in reality, what happens is the opposite. According to the author, there is an emptying of the sense of democracy.

What happens is that there is a lot of information that does not circulate, because there is counter-intelligence. There is so much information that the same information prevents us - like a screen or a barrier - from accessing the information that interests us. In dictatorship, it is power that prevents us from accessing information. In democracy, it is the information itself, due to saturation, which prevents us. In other words, in a democracy, censorship works by asphyxia, by suffocation, by delay. They offer us so much information and we consume so much information that we no longer realize that some of it (just the one I would need most) is missing. Concealment and dissimulation, in that mass of information that is consumed, are the forms of censorship today. And that <<invisible censorship>> is what the major media groups and governments practice. In total impunity. We are, therefore, in a situation where we think that, because we have more information, we have more

freedom; when, in fact, if we analyze it well, we have as little information as at other times (RAMONET *in* SERRANO, 2008, p. 12/13).

An increasingly common practice on a global scale, post-truth, fake news and other methods of disinformation have been naturalized, directly and indirectly affecting the democratic system. In the case of Brazil, democracy is still very fragile, since the country's history is rooted in another 300 years of slavery, *coups d'état*, repression and violation of human rights, privileges of a political and economic elite and social exclusion. This state of affairs led writer Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1995) to declare that "democracy in Brazil has always been a regrettable misunderstanding" (160), since a rural elite - the Brazilian structural base - and the urban bourgeoisie - who assumed the hegemonic direction from industrialization and economic development - they always tried to accommodate it, where and when it was possible, as long as it did not affect their class privileges.

This characteristic of Brazilian democracy makes some authors classify it as a democracy of low intensity or, as Rubens Casara (2018) did, to affirm that we live in a post-democratic moment. Likewise Norberto Bobbio (2017), Casara puts the existence of limits as one of the pillars of democracy. "Unlimited power, whether from the State or private, generates oppression and arbitrariness, making any democratic claim impossible. In other words, the existence of limits to power is essential to democracy" (position 78). The author uses this definition of post-democracy based on the analysis of the greed of neoliberalism in the world and the advance of conservative forces that, in the case of Brazil, was accentuated in 2016, with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (PT) and consolidated in 2018 with the election of Jair Bolsonaro.

From the tension between the claim to the absence of limits typical of "capitalism without gloves" and the limits inherent to the material conception of democracy, the "crisis of democracy" was generated - which was real, but which today persists only in the field of the narratives that intend to produce real effects. To speak of "democracy crisis" today is a hoax to hide the fact that democracy was overcome by an authoritarian model at the service of the holders of economic power: the so-called "post-democracy" (CASARA, 2018, position 97).

Regarding the concept of democracy, Norberto Bobbio (2017) says that this is not limited to "attributing to a large number of citizens the right to participate directly or indirectly in collective decision-making, nor the existence of rules of procedure like the majority" (P. 37). According to the author, the degree of democracy is measured by the displacement of limits. "Where the limits increase, the democratic system is changed, where its freedoms are suppressed, democracy ceases to exist" (p. 117). Likewise Rubens

Casara (2018), Bobbio relates democracy and (neo) liberalism, an intersection that is not always compatible. To the author,

(...) liberalism and democracy – which at least for a century have always been considered the second as the natural continuation of the first – show that they are no longer fully compatible, since democracy has been brought to the extreme consequences of mass democracy, or rather, of the mass parties, whose product is the Welfare State. (...) Keynesian politics was an attempt to save capitalism without leaving democracy, against the two opposite solutions of slaughtering capitalism by sacrificing democracy (Leninist practice) and of slaughtering democracy to save capitalism (fascism). Now it would be said that for the liberals of the new generation the problem is, on the contrary, to save – if still possible and in the name of that much that can still be saved – democracy without leaving capitalism. During the crisis of the 1930s it seemed that capitalism was putting democracy in crisis; now, for those new liberals, it seems that democracy is putting capitalism in crisis (BOBBIO, 2017, p. 196).

One of the possible thermometers for measuring the intensity of democracy is a free press, committed to factual truth. As already mentioned, it is not only in authoritarian regimes that we can face censorship. In a low-intensity democracy, censorship is imposed by economic power, the privileged locus of the Brazilian elite, where the owners of the media are also located. According to Eugênio Bucci (2019), there is an internal understanding of the Unesco Declaration which states that “the quality of communication and information is directly proportional to the quality of democracy and the density of the culture of peace” (position 642).

The author points out that democracy depends on factual truth, a term he borrowed from Hannah Arendt, synthesized by Bucci as the truth extracted from honest verification and the reliable account of facts and events. “Hannah Arendt did not shy away from pointing to power as an enemy of factual truth. The further away from democracy, she says, the more power tends to reject reports about events” (BUCCI, 2019, position 783). Regarding the role of communication in a democracy, Ignacio Ramonet (2012) recalls that the press has been dubbed the “fourth power” for being a body that oversees power and defends citizenship, but that, at present, it acts as a “counterpower”. For the author, “the dominant media no longer contribute to expanding the democratic field; on the contrary, they work to restrict it, attack its bases and undermine it” (p. 53).

### **The role of the media in the presidential elections in Brazil**

After 21 years of civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985), Brazil began a new historical cycle, thirsting for direct elections for President of the Republic. The first only happened

in 1989, with a large number of candidates<sup>4</sup>, some remaining from the military regime (Paulo Maluf, Aurelino Chaves, Ronaldo Caiado etc), others who symbolized resistance to the dictatorship (Leonel Brizola, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, Fernando Gabeira , Ulysses Guimarães), a group that presented itself as a center (Mário Covas and Roberto Freire) and the winner, Fernando Collor de Mello, appointed by the media as outsider of the political world - the same characteristic given to Jair Bolsonaro almost 30 years later. The two most voted in the first round in 1989 were Collor and Lula, who started to dispute vote by vote in the second round. What was the media performance not only in this first direct election for president of Brazil, but in the other seven that followed (1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018)? The direction given by the major Brazilian communication groups and how this influenced the election results is what we propose to reflect on from now on.

In 1989, after more than two decades supporting the dictatorship, the Brazilian media embarks on the Fernando Collor de Mello campaign. Former governor of Alagoas, Collor was introduced to society as a modern politician, as opposed to his main opponent, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, known as Lula, a former union member with no college degree. Collor seemed to be the only name with a chance of defeating Lula, Leonel Brizola and Ulysses Guimarães, names that did not please the ruling class.

The media decided to support Collor because other applications were not competitive. Mário Covas (PSDB) was the darling of the media and there was no lack of manipulation strategy to help leverage the Tucan candidacy. In an editorial published on the cover of O Globo, on June 29, 1989, the newspaper, right in the title, says that "Covas will give 'capitalism shock' if elected". The text was practically a copy of the candidate's speech - who was a senator - read the previous day in the Senate gallery. According to Paulo Henrique Amorim (2015), the speech was the result of an agreement with businessman Roberto Marinho, owner of Globo Organizations, who would have committed himself to highlight Covas's speech in the Jornal Nacional, live, when he was speaking at the Senate. In addition, the text was written with the help of Jorge Serpa, personal friend of Roberto Marinho.

According to Amorim, the toucans showed Covas' speech to Jorge Serpa, who did not like it and demanded something more forceful, suggesting that the title dealt with

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<sup>4</sup> Twenty-two candidates competed in the 1989 presidential elections, according to the website of the Regional Electoral Court of Pernambuco (TRE-PE). Available at <<http://www.tre-pe.jus.br/eleicoes/eleicoes-anteriores/eleicoes-1899/candidatos-1989>>. Accessed on Sep. 09, 2020, 10:15 am.

“capitalism shock”, as it was published on the cover of O Globo. The effort of this task force, however, was unsuccessful, since Mário Covas' candidacy ranked fourth, behind Collor, Lula and Brizola. Realizing that the toucan's name did not take off, the media invested to elect Collor.

The most emblematic example of this media performance in 1989 is the edition of the debate between Collor and Lula, on the eve of the second round, held on Friday night, December 14th. On Saturday, *Jornal Hoje*, broadcast by Globo daily in the early afternoon, aired an article considered balanced with the summary of the debate, which irritated Collor and the hard core of his campaign. As soon as the news was over, the president of PRN - Collor's party - Daniel Tourinho, went to the Globo studio and sent Roberto Marinho the information that Collor was upset with the report. The network's journalism director at the time, Albérico de Souza Cruz - Collor's trusted man - also went to the station to follow closely a new edition of the video, which would be shown in the *Jornal Nacional*, at night. Roberto Marinho himself had the edition redone, with the order to include “the good of Collor and the bad of Lula”. Result: 3 minutes and 34 seconds of Collor beating Lula and 2 minutes and 22 seconds in which Lula appeared in a vexing way (AMORIM, 2015), which added up to almost 6 negative minutes for the PT presidential candidate, while Collor was 100% spared.

After showing the material of the debate, the anchor, at the time, of the *Jornal Nacional*, Cid Moreira, presented a public opinion poll, made by telephone, about the performance of the debate of the two candidates, giving Collor an advantage. Following this, journalist Alexandre Garcia read an editorial in which he stated that Globo Organizations work in an exempt manner in electoral coverage, with the objective of “perfecting democracy”. In other words, after the manipulation, the station reads a note claiming to be exempt, in an attempt to convince the public that what it had just released was real. Analyzing the debate edition, it is possible to associate it with the pattern of manipulation by induction, which leads the reader, listener and viewer to believe in a distorted fact, without realizing that they are being deceived (ABRAMO, 2003).

Here are other episodes that marked news coverage in the 1989 elections. The first is the kidnapping of businessman Abílio Diniz, who had his captivity broken the day before the second round. The hijackers - eight foreigners and only one Brazilian - were shown wearing PT shirts, which, of course, related criminals to Lula's campaign. Without a rigorous investigation to find out why political shirts, the fact massively conveyed by the media. The strategy worked: Collor obtained 53.03% and Lula 46.97%.

(...) the media give a special coloring to what they report and the way they report; therefore, they decide on what should be forgotten, what can be meaningful only in the moment and what should remain in the memory. Known or created new schemes are used to perform the recursions, the effectiveness of which does not depend on whether or not they are confirmed in each case by specific situations (LUHMANN, 2005, p. 66-67).

In late 1992, after being accused of involvement in a corruption scheme and responding to an impeachment process in the Chamber of Deputies, Collor was removed from office and had his political rights forfeited for eight years. Who takes over the government is Vice President Itamar Franco, who appointed PSDB sociologist, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), as Minister of Finance, author of Plano Real and future president of Brazil for eight years (1995-2002). The media soon saw FHC as its representative and not only supported the currency change, but his two presidential campaigns and his two governments.

In the 1994 elections, FHC had guaranteed media even before the start of the electoral process for having implemented the Real Plan. And he also benefited from the electoral legislation, which prohibited external images in the electoral guide and the holding of exit polls on election day - two important resources for the PT campaign, which ended up in a cast. The PT had an arsenal of images of the Caravan of Citizenship - trips made by Lula across the country -, which cannot be displayed. Meanwhile, the effects of the newly implemented Plano Real were always present in the news.

This prohibition, in addition to any other observations, will imply, as it did, a cold electoral schedule, without any enthusiasm. This anticipated and shifted the campaign to enthusiastic, celebratory coverage of government actions by the hegemonic media - and particularly to the spectacular paraphernalia of the new currency, the real. (...) It also involved an operation to value rational speech against the emotion of the streets. Using journalism techniques, simulating coverage, the hegemonic media participates decisively in FHC's campaign (JOSE, 2015, p. 72).

Emiliano José refers to what he calls the engagement of the Judiciary and the media to elect FHC. Result: Fernando Henrique won the election in the first round, with 55.22% of the valid votes, while Lula had 39.97%, followed by other candidates who obtained a negligible vote. In the 1998 campaign, FHC is running for re-election and, again, has in his favor yet another reform in the electoral legislation, which added to the almost exclusive media coverage of his candidacy. The new rules reduced the campaign from 60

to 45 days, in addition to changing the electoral schedule for candidacies for president every other day, reducing the appearance of presidential candidates in the guide.

Globo decided not to do electoral coverage, just the essentials. In addition to this decision, Paulo Henrique Amorim says that, for many years, Lula's voice was banned from appearing on the station's news and, when the PT's image was inevitable, it would be by covered note, when the only voice that appears is the of the journalist describing the image displayed on the screen. Even with all this favorable scenario to FHC, Lula's candidacy threatened, reaching the technical tie four months before the first round. That was when FHC's first blackmail came. According to Amorim (2015), he called a meeting with the "barons of the Brazilian elite" - according to an aide to the then president - and he would have said: "I am not a candidate for myself. That doesn't exist with me. Either I have the support or I come home and leave the party to you. Then you choose the candidate you want" (p. 375).

On another occasion, FHC demanded from the Marinho family the amount of reports on the drought in the Northeast and on unemployment, shown in the *Jornal Nacional*. He threatened to resign and let Globo "elect Lula". Immediately, the negative news disappeared from the news. Again, Fernando Henrique was elected in the first round, with 53.6% of the valid votes, and Lula was in second, with 31.71% of the vote.

Finally, in the 2002 elections, Lula emerged victorious from the polls, defeating the toucan and candidate of the situation, José Serra. However, for that, he needed to renew himself and be palatable to the elite, of which media owners are included. There was no room for a unionist Lula, considered by many to be illiterate because he did not have a college degree. There was no more room for a Lula who did not speak good Portuguese and who printed grotesque grammatical errors. A new Lula was needed to approach the media and calm the market. As part of this strategy, the ex-unionist chose to form broad alliances - including with conservative parties - and hire marketer Duda Mendonça - one of the most renowned in the country - to command the campaign's advertising.

As a tactic to become acceptable to the ruling class, Lula presented to society the *Letter to the Brazilian People*, a document whose aim was to calm the market. Before the text was released, Antonio Palocci - one of the coordinators of the PT campaign and future Minister of Finance of the Lula government - participated in a meeting at Globo to present the document to the Marinho family. Ricardo Kotscho (2006) explains that, unlike previous elections, in 2002 the media started with a balanced coverage, being more complacent with Lula's candidacy. Perhaps this truce happened because the polls indicated that Lula's departure for the second round seemed irreversible, and, before, he needed to get other

candidates out of the way of José Serra, a media candidate. The first target was Senator Roseana Sarney (PFL), second in the polls. Without Roseana, Serra had a chance to take second place and compete with Lula for the second round.

It so happens that, seven months before the first electoral round, the Federal Police broke out the so-called Lunus Operation, which found in the office of Roseana Sarney's husband, Jorge Murad, the amount of R \$ 1.3 million in cash, an episode difficult to explain. "The effect was overwhelming. Roseana sank in voting intentions and gave up the candidacy" (KOTSCHO, 2006, p. 220). The scandal was treated to exhaustion by the mainstream press. This whole onslaught worked. Serra takes second place and takes the dispute to the second round.

However to defeat Lula, it was necessary to act quickly and more aggressively. In the final stretch of the campaign, the toucan rescued some facts, weakening the PT's candidacy. One of them was the occupation that the MST carried out on Fernando Henrique Cardoso's farm in March of that year. Serra's campaign associated Lula with the movement and spread fear, stating that the PT would allow land invasion if he were elected. Another subject unearthed was the investigation into allegations of corruption in the Santo André City Hall, which was governed by the PT. Facts widely reported by the media. The onslaught, however, was not enough to take victory from Lula, who obtained 61.27% of the valid votes, against 38.73% of José Serra.

Since the beginning of Lula's administration, the treatment has been one of hostility on the part of the press, which has not even considered the period given to all presidents to wait at least 100 first days of administration to begin criticism.

(...) The media 'manipulate' public opinion. They pursue interests that are not served together. They produce 'trends'. It may be that everything they write or emit is correct, but that does not answer the question: what for? It may be for commercial success, promotion of the social status quo (and this especially through narcotizing distractions for increasingly new developments) or simply your own commercial success. So that the media take care and at the same time bury their own credibility. They 'deconstruct' themselves, as they reproduce with their own operations the continuous contradiction between the constituent and performative components of the text (LUHMANN, 2005, p. 75).

If the media were looking for negative guidelines against Lula, they found it at the beginning of the second year of the government, with the scandal involving Waldomiro Diniz, advisor to José Dirceu - the government's most important minister. It was the first corruption case involving PT's management and was reported by *Época* magazine. Diniz was accused of charging bribes to raise money for the PT campaign in the 2002 election.

In 2005, an even bigger scandal broke out: the *mensalão* (known as big monthly allowance), which consisted of paying an allowance to parliamentarians who voted in favor of the government in the National Congress and reached not only the PT, but many other captions. However, the headlines were mostly directed to the PT. It is important that we make it clear that our intention here is not to dwell on the veracity of the crimes committed in the PT governments, but to seek to show the media coverage of the facts.

The big monthly allowance was the embryo of what was revealed in 2013, in the days of June, and in 2015 and 2016, in the demonstrations that called for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. But until it got there, it was necessary to build a narrative against the PT that would guarantee consensus in society. One of the strategies was the creation of a new vocabulary, inserted in the journalistic texts and incorporated by common sense. Venício Lima (2006) highlights some of these new terms: recipients of big monthly payments, political allowance party, post big monthly payments, valerioduto, PT money changer, Cuban connection, Paraguay operation, Lisbon connection, Ribeirão Preto republic, among others. Years later, this vocabulary was expanded, gaining a term as a *petrolão* (known as big oil).

The true meaning of these new words/expressions can only be understood in the concrete contexts in which they arose and started to be used, as they are attempts to express synthetically, in a simplified way, complex, ambiguous and multiple and controversial issues. They seek to reduce a wide range of meanings to just one easily meaningful 'umbrella meaning'. A kind of label (LIMA, 2006, p. 15).

John B. Thompson (2008) complements this logic, stating that

By taking messages and routinely incorporating them into his own life, the individual is implicitly building an understanding of himself, an awareness of what he is and where he is located in time and space. (...) We are actively changing ourselves through messages and meaningful content offered by media products (among other things). This process of personal transformation is not a sudden and unique event. It happens slowly, imperceptibly, day after day, year after year. It is a process in which some messages are retained and others are forgotten, in which some become the basis for action and reflection, a topic of conversation between friends, while others slide down the drain of memory and get lost in the ebb and flow of images and ideas (THOMPSON, 2008, p. 45-46).

Associated with the neologism created around the big monthly allowance, the slogan emerges: never before in the history of Brazil has there been so much corruption, also inserted in the media discourse. As Gramsci recalls, the changes that society

undergoes from these mediations take place slowly. According to Venício Lima (2006), *Folha de S. Paulo*, between 2005 and 2006, had a fixed section just about the big monthly allowance. *Veja* magazine, in a period of seven months, dedicated more than 20 covers incriminating Lula and his government. In *IstoÉ*, there were fourteen covers about the scandal and *Jornal Nacional* dedicated more than two thirds of its edition exclusively to the big monthly allowance.

The scandal anticipated what was already planned for 2006, when Lula would be a candidate for reelection: a media coverage that overvalued agendas related to the PT government's corruption. This situation became fuel for public opinion, especially of the middle class, to generate hatred for the PT government and its leaders, which some experts define as class hatred and selective indignation. The presidential dispute, again, was polarized between the PT and the PSDB, which this time launched the name of Geraldo Alckmin, former governor of São Paulo.

According to Paulo Henrique Amorim (2015), from April to October 2006, in 101 editions of the *Jornal Nacional*, Alckmin appeared much more than Lula, even though PT was president of the Republic. And yet, Lula appeared on more negative than positive lines, unlike Alckmin. One of the scandals that guided the 2006 elections was the leech mafia, an overpricing scheme for the purchase of ambulances by the Health Ministry. The scandal broke out at the end of Lula's first term, but it started in FHC's administration, when the Minister of Health was José Serra, from PSDB. However, with rare exceptions, the media mostly associated the scandal with PT's management.

In his book, Paulo Henrique Amorim cites a cover of *IstoÉ* magazine, from September 2006, in which there is an interview with businessmen Luiz Antônio Vedoin and Darci Vedoin, father and son, owners of Planam, a company that sells overpriced ambulances. According to them, between 2000 and 2004 - the FHC government ended on December 31, 2002 - 891 ambulances were sold to the Ministry of Health, 681 of which were negotiated in the management of José Serra, who left Barjas Negri in office when he needed to decompatibilize joined the ministry in early 2002 to run for President of the Republic.

(...) When the media decide to stigmatize and criminalize a leader, the first step is to make him or her constant news. It is the informative policy of silence/coverage, which consists of keeping on the agenda what should be discredited and silencing the docile ruler, although, in fact, what is silent are his policies and any mobilization or criticism against them by the citizens from that country what is silent are his policies and any mobilization or criticism against them by the citizens from that country (SERRANO, 2008, p. 156).

Amorim also cites the letter of resignation of former Globo reporter, Rodrigo Viana, which made clear the broadcaster's preference for the PSDB candidacy and the manipulation so that the leech operation did not spill over into Geraldo Alckmin's campaign. The document reveals the existence of a report with the profile of Abel Pereira, a businessman linked to Negri. The article, edited and generated for Rio de Janeiro - Globo's headquarters -, showed Serra and other toucans delivering ambulances to state governments, but nevertheless never aired. "Upon receiving Serra's video at the Planam ambulance delivery ceremony, Ali Kamel - executive director of Central Globo de Jornalismo - would have said: 'We are not interested in having this tape. For all intents and purposes, we don't have it'" (p. 453). Comparing the campaign to the re-election of FHC, in 1998, and Lula, in 2006, Antônio Albino Rubin and Leandro Colling (2006) affirm that, with Fernando Henrique,

The allegations appeared, but there was no effort by the press to investigate them. As a result, they were soon forgotten and quickly left the public scene, despite numerous allegations: the episode of parliamentarians buying votes to approve reelection; allegations of corruption involving privatizations; the rest of the slush fund of the FHC campaign; the allegations of corruption against Cássio Taniguchi (PFL), mayor of Curitiba and ally of the President; sending R\$ 5 billion abroad by Banestado, the biggest money laundering in the history of Brazil etc. (...) In the Lula government, allegations were widely reported and, since May 2005, they became the central, if not the only, topic on the media agenda (p. 72).

Even so, the polls gave victory to Lula, who was reelected with 60.83% of the valid votes, against Alckmin's 39.17%. At this point, the anti-PT sentiment dominated the main newsrooms and many journalists were trained in this environment, as explained by Emiliano José (2015):

(...) Anti-PT and antilulism of young reporters were developed, characteristics that gained much greater intensity from the episode called big monthly allowance, in 2005. Here, antilulism and anti-PT spread virotically. It became fashionable among journalists to be against Lula and against the PT. Neoliberal ideology has strengthened this fashion. It was almost no longer necessary orders from above for Lula and the PT to be fought, and for both the criteria of journalism, as the rigorous investigation of the facts, became a kind of prop. The pre-established agenda, the hypothesis test, was more valuable, the combat-oriented version was more valuable (p. 117).

In 2010, the PT elected the former Minister of the Civil House, Dilma Rousseff, defeating the PSDB, which again launched the name of José Serra. The campaign was guided by a moralistic agenda, in which themes such as abortion and religion emerged, once again, fed by the media. Now Dilma was presented as “Lula’s light pole”, now as a person who represented danger, because she actively participated in the fight against the dictatorship. Meanwhile Serra was highlighted as a defender of an active and lean State with investment capacity.

In 2009, when Dilma Rousseff’s name already pointed out as a candidate for the situation in the elections of the following year, Folha de S. Paulo published a story, highlighted on the cover, under the title: “Dilma’s group planned kidnapping of Delfin Neto”<sup>5</sup>, with a photo of Dilma Rousseff’s record at the Dops<sup>6</sup>, at the time she was arrested by the military in the lead years. The article, which had a negative repercussion for Dilma and the PT, was denied, timidly, days later by the newspaper itself.

During the campaign, the media did not lack a sexist speech, like the Folha de S.Paulo headline of June 14th: “In the shadow of Lula, Dilma promises ‘woman’s soul’”. This stance was inserted in the moralistic debate that started among the candidates. With the rise of an increasingly conservative society that was asleep and with a religious fundamentalism that was gaining an overwhelming dimension with the growth of neo-Pentecostal churches - especially in the most popular layers -, Dilma was charged for her religious and moral convictions. To the point that she needed to comment on these issues, since her opponent presented himself as a Christian and disclosed that Dilma was in favor of abortion and that she did not have a defined religion. Dilma then said she was Catholic and opposed abortion.

In addition to the conservative agenda of the 2010 campaign, an episode that marked the manipulative role of the media was a small paper ball thrown in the head of José Serra. The event took place in Rio de Janeiro, on October 20th, a few days before the second round of elections. It was during a demonstration by the employees of the National Health Foundation, who denounced the dismissal of almost 6,000 workers, which occurred in the management of the toucan at the Ministry of Health. One of the demonstrators threw a paper ball at the candidate, who soon put on a show and the fact was transformed by the mainstream media into an aggression carried out by PT activists. The Jornal Nacional, for example, gave great emphasis to the episode, stating that the object thrown was a roll of masking tape and showing scenes in which José Serra was

<sup>5</sup> Available at <<http://acervo.folha.com.br/fsp/2009/04/05/2/>>. Accessed on Jul 27th, 2015, 23h.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS).

admitted to a clinic to be treated. "(...) [The] brown press and the radio (...) make it possible to promptly provoke outbursts of panic or fictitious enthusiasm, which allow the achievement of certain objectives, as, for example, in the elections" (GRAMSCI, 2011, p. 283).

The episode of the paper ball/roll of masking tape can be associated with the pattern of manipulation of the inversion, which fragments and decontextualizes the fact, pointed out above by Perseu Abramo (2003). It also finds an echo in the ideology of the show, so analyzed by Guy Debord (1997). The show is the ideology par excellence, because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of the entire ideological system: the impoverishment, subjection and denial of real life" (p. 138). Even with this series of events, Dilma Rousseff wins the election in the second round, with 56.05% of the votes, while José Serra had the preference of 43.95% of the voters.

After an election marked by the dogmatic debate, associated with the emergence of a conservative street movement still in its infancy and the neo-Pentecostal avalanche, gradually a social extract that is gaining strength in the fight against the political left in Brazil is solidifying, following a widespread conservative wave globally. From this, Dilma faces an unprecedented hatred in her first term, as in the demonstration that occurred in 2013, at the opening of the Confederations Cup. When the president participated in the opening of the sporting event, she was not only booed, but was the target of slangs and swear-word, broadcast live and replayed on the news by all the media. "The show is not a set of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images" (DEBORD, 1997, p. 14).

That same year, the June Conference emerges, a movement that started with a protest by students in São Paulo against the increase in bus fares and, soon, it became a growing wave of attack not only against the PT, but against any political left force. In the beginning, the protests were not political right-wing. That was when the media highlighted the debate about PEC 37, which limited criminal investigation activity to the federal and civil police and excluded the Public Ministry from this type of action, linking the proposal to the PT government, which would be interested in the issue of fleeing with corruption crimes. From then on, the press began to call the population to the streets, often interrupting television programming to broadcast the live demonstrations.

Even with this scenario, in 2014, the PT re-elected Dilma Rousseff - with 51.64% of the votes -, defeating the toucan Aécio Neves - who obtained the vote of 48.36% of the voters. As an example of how this dispute took place, let us recall just one episode of manipulation, which occurred on the eve of the second round. On the evening of the

Thursday before the vote, *Veja* magazine anticipates and launches issue 2,397 on the internet and, on Friday, the publication was already on newsstands, although traditionally the magazine only went into circulation on Saturday. All this haste is explained with the headline on the cover: "They knew everything", with photos of Dilma and Lula. *Veja* accused Lula and Dilma of knowing about big oil, a corruption scheme at Petrobras and the target of an investigation by *Lava Jato* Operation (known as Operation Car Wash). The report cited a possible award from the money changer Alberto Youssef, who allegedly accused the PT of being aware of the operation. The information was later denied by the money changer's lawyers.

In a short time, *Veja*'s cover was already published in the main internet portals and blogs and had repercussions in all newspapers and electronic news. It barely helped Dilma's campaign lawyers called the TSE for the magazine to remove the publication from the internet, guaranteeing the right of reply through an injunction. The damage was already done. Saturday's edition of *Folha de S.Paulo*, the eve of the election, featured in its headline "Doleiro accuses Lula and Dilma, who speaks of electoral terror" and, in the subtitle, "Both knew of deviations in Petrobras, says the informer; for Aécio, the case is "extremely serious". On the same Saturday, *Jornal Hoje* also highlighted the issue, as did *Jornal Nacional* in the evening, both from *Globo*.

If someone can lie about a certain subject without the media being sanctioned, do not rectify, nor do the victims have the ability to make the denial reach at least as many audiences as the one who suffered the lie, we will be facing what Ignacio Ramonet called informational insecurity (SERRANO, 2009, p. 172).

Dissatisfied with the results of the elections, Aécio request the Superior Electoral Court to recount the votes and began to defend the impeachment of the elected president, clearly exposing the difficulty of exterminating the PT project through democratic channels. "As soon as the dominant social group has exhausted its function, the ideological bloc tends to fragment and, then, 'coercion' can replace 'spontaneity' in less and less disguised and indirect ways, even the police measures and coup d'etats" (GRAMSCI, 2011, p. 318). In 2016, Dilma undergoes an impeachment process and, in August, she is permanently removed from office.

After the impeachment, the next step would be to imprison former President Lula, who was emerging as the favorite franc for the next presidential elections. Lula's arrest comes months before the election, in April 2018, taking the political right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro to the top of the opinion polls, being confirmed at the polls with 55.13%

of the votes against Fernando Haddad's 44.87%. An atypical election, considering that the corporate media had lost its prominence to social networks, which guided the ideological dispute of this election.

The post-truth strategy that marked the elections in the United States and the Brexit referendum in Europe, two years earlier, was repeated in the race for president of Brazil, so much so that one of Ronald Trump's strategists, Steve Bannon, was hired by the campaign from Bolsonaro. The disinformation industry would be responsible for the results of the polls, so much so that, a year after the election, WhatsApp recognized the irregular use of the platform in the election.

The scheme showed how easy it was to influence an election. An internet connection and a credit card or PayPal account were enough, and thousands of WhatsApp messages were sent for the benefit - or detriment - of any candidate. Any agency anywhere in the world could be called (MELLO, 2020, position 583).

Parallel to the fake news industry, the ruling class, in the second round, united around Bolsonaro's platform, adding to the bolsonaristas who already financed the war of disinformation. "(...) most of the owners of the money, fearful of a return of the PT and its economic policy, closed ranks in favor of Bolsonaro, betting on the promise of adopting pro-market measures." (MELLO, 2020, position 435). Among the wealthy were the owners of the media, who historically are also pro-market.

An favorable episode to Bolsonaro that was exhaustively broadcast by the corporate media without a more rigorous investigation was Antônio Palocci's Leniency Agreements, which had been one of the strong names of PT governments. Less than a week before the first round of elections, judge Sérgio Moro - who later took over the Bolsonaro Ministry of Justice - decided to suspend the secrecy of Palocci's Leniency Agreements and divulge it to the press, transforming the information into the great event of the dispute. In August 2020, the Second Panel of the STF recognized that Sergio Moro acted politically in publicizing Palocci's Leniency Agreements and that the decision interfered in the 2018 elections.

## Conclusions

As demonstrated throughout the text, the Brazilian media has a central role in the country's destinations, from its performance in the presidential elections. In all the presidential disputes after the re-democratization, the so-called big press was decisive in the result of the polls, despite the 2018 election, considered atypical in view of the

protagonism of social networks and the massification of disinformation. And all the resources used to mask the factual truth take place in a subtle way, without common sense realizing it, as stated by Pascual Serrano (2010):

Just as the media like to present themselves as a simple reflection of reality in terms of journalistic coverage, when they express their opinions or editorialize, they try to make citizens understand that this opinion or ideological position is only a reflection of the majority feeling, <<the clamor >>, as they often point out. It is a clear example of intellectual cowardice and public deception, since they do not announce it as their own ideology or political proposal, but rather they try to make us believe that citizenship is the one who participates in this position and actions, without rigorous information elements that support it (p. 58).

Serrano points as one of the alternatives to face the disinformation of the hegemonic media the creation of communication channels that promote the disconnection between dominant informative message and citizen thought. In other words, In other words, introducing doubts to people in the face of the omnipresence of corporate media. According to the author, it is important to contrast the news, which helps to develop citizens with independent and conscious thinking.

Rubens Casara (2018) also contributes to the disinformation debate, mainly the dissemination of fake news on the world wide web and its virtual platforms. According to the author, we live in a “perverse, if not paranoid, society, in which, for example, the value 'truth' is replaced by a commodity called 'post-truth', a privileged source for the manufacture of delusional certainties and fake news”. (CASARA, 2018, position 197). A difficult scenario, but not impossible to combat, in search of the recovery and intensification of democracy and the overcoming of a post-democratic and post-truth context.

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**RESUMO:**

Este artigo visa analisar a cobertura dos meios de comunicação brasileiros nas eleições presidenciais realizadas no país a partir da redemocratização, começando com a de 1989 e finalizando com a de 2018. O estudo tomou como base teórica reflexões sobre desinformação, manipulação, fake news e democracia, sob a ótica de autores como Serrano (2008; 2010), Abramo (2003), Ramonet (2007), Luhmann (2005), Mello (2020), Bucci (2019), Bobbio (2006) e Casara (2018). A pesquisa mostra que historicamente a mídia tenta interferir no resultado das eleições, recorrendo a estratégias de manipulação e deturpação dos fatos, o que enfraquece o sistema democrático.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVES:** Mídia; Desinformação; Democracia; Eleições presidenciais; Brasil.

**RESUMEN:**

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la cobertura de los medios de comunicación brasileños en las elecciones presidenciales celebradas en el país tras la redemocratización, empezando con la elección de 1989 y finalizando con la de 2018. El estudio se basó en reflexiones teóricas sobre desinformación, manipulación, fake news y democracia, desde la perspectiva de autores como Serrano (2008; 2010), Abramo (2003), Ramonet (2007), Luhmann (2005), Mello (2020), Bucci (2019), Bobbio (2006) e Casara (2018). La investigación muestra que históricamente los medios intentan interferir en el resultado de las elecciones, utilizando estrategias de manipulación y tergiversación de los hechos, lo que debilita el sistema democrático.

**PALABRAS-CLAVES:** Medios; Desinformación; Democracia; Elecciones presidenciales; Brasil.