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FROM NEWSPAPERS TO NEWSFEEDS: How traditional media and Facebook legitimized antidemocratic discourses in Brazil and Argentina during the elections

Dos jornais aos feeds de notícias: como a mídia tradicional e o Facebook legitimaram discursos antidemocráticos no Brasil e na Argentina durante as eleições

De los periódicos a los feeds de noticias: cómo los medios tradicionales y Facebook legitiman discursos antidemocráticos en Brasil y Argentina durante las elecciones



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ABSTRACT:

In recent years, far-right populism has gained prominence in Latin America, intensifying anti-democratic rhetoric in countries like Brazil and Argentina. Both Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei employed similar discourses, questioning electoral legitimacy and promoting authoritarian interventions. This article analyzes the role of traditional media in legitimizing such rhetoric on social media platforms, examining how major newspapers present Bolsonaro and Milei's discourses in Facebook posts. Using a dataset from La Nación, Clarín, Estadão, and Folha de S.Paulo, the study explores how far-right populism is framed, circulated, and engaged with audiences during the second rounds of elections in Brazil and Argentina.

Key words: anti-democratic discourse, far-right populism, social media platforms, Facebook

RESUMO

Nos últimos anos, o populismo de extrema-direita ganhou destaque na América Latina, intensificando retóricas antidemocráticas em países como Brasil e Argentina. Tanto Jair Bolsonaro quanto Javier Milei empregaram discursos semelhantes, questionando a legitimidade eleitoral e promovendo intervenções autoritárias. Este artigo analisa o papel da mídia tradicional na legitimação de tais retóricas nas plataformas de redes sociais, examinando como os principais jornais apresentam os discursos de Bolsonaro e Milei em postagens no Facebook. Utilizando um conjunto de dados de La Nación, Clarín, Estadão e Folha de S.Paulo, o estudo explora como o populismo de extrema-direita é enquadrado, circulado e engajado pelas audiências durante os segundos turnos das eleições no Brasil e na Argentina.

Palavras-chave: discurso antidemocrático, populismo de extrema direita, plataformas de mídia social, Facebook

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, el populismo de extrema derecha ha ganado prominencia en América Latina, intensificando la retórica antidemocrática en países como Brasil y Argentina. Tanto Jair Bolsonaro como Javier Milei emplearon discursos similares, cuestionando la legitimidad electoral y promoviendo intervenciones autoritarias. Este artículo analiza el papel de los medios tradicionales en la legitimación de tales retóricas en las plataformas de redes sociales, examinando cómo los principales periódicos presentan los discursos de Bolsonaro y Milei en publicaciones de Facebook. Utilizando un conjunto de datos de La Nación, Clarín, Estadão y Folha de S.Paulo, el estudio explora cómo se enmarca, circula y compromete el populismo de extrema derecha con las audiencias durante las segundas vueltas de las elecciones en Brasil y Argentina.

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Palabras clave: discurso antidemocrático, populismo de extrema derecha, plataformas de redes sociales, Facebook

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Introduction

In recent years, the far right has significantly expanded in Latin America, accompanied by a populist rhetoric that attacks democratic institutions. Countries such as Brazil and Argentina, which endured violent dictatorships for decades, have witnessed similar strategies employed by far-right candidates who claim electoral fraud and attack democratic institutions. Both Javier Milei of the Libertarian Party and Jair Bolsonaro of the Liberal Party asserted that, should they lose the elections, it would be due to alleged systemic corruption. Furthermore, both expressed favorable opinions about military dictatorships and suggested the need for “intervention” (or “forceful actions”) if the elections were deemed fraudulent. In Brazil, these claims led to an attempted coup d'état by Bolsonaro supporters after his defeat by Lula da Silva (Workers' Party) on January 8, 2023, whereas in Argentina, they facilitated the election of Javier Milei.

This article focuses on the rise of such anti-democratic rhetoric and the role of traditional media in legitimizing these narratives, particularly through social media platforms, with a case study on Brazil and Argentina. Specifically, we are interested in analyzing how so-called “quality media” outlets reported on these issues through their social media platforms and thereby either challenged or reinforced these narratives.

Therefore, the following research question guides this work: How did journalistic outlets cover far-right discourses about electoral fraud? To address this question, we worked with a dataset from four traditional newspapers and their official Facebook pages, two from each country (La Nación and Clarín in Argentina; Estadão and Folha in Brazil), obtained via CrowdTangle during the second round of each election. We analyzed the posts and interactions to understand the frames used by the outlets and their impact on readers.

Theoretical Framework

Far-right Populism

One of the main theoretical contributions to the study of far-right populism comes from Cass Mudde (2004, 2007). He conceives populism as a “thin-centered” ideology that could be combined with others, based on a binary division between the virtuous “people” and the corrupt “elites” (Mudde, 2004). Moffitt (2016), on the other hand, sees populism as a performance—or “political style”—adopted by leaders, rather than an ideology per se. He agrees with Mudde on the “us versus them” rhetoric and emphasizes the creation of crises and the disruption of norms as central features. Mudde (2016) discusses the “populist radical right,” describing it as parties that combine nativism, authoritarianism, and populism at the core of their worldview. Nativism posits that only “native” groups should inhabit the state; authoritarianism values a strictly ordered society, treating social issues as criminal threats; and the populist component claims to “speak for the people,” accusing institutions of corruption. Although they claim to represent the majority, these groups frequently reject pluralism and attack checks and balances fundamental to liberal democracy.

European populism differs from its Latin American counterpart in key aspects. In Latin America, strong leaders often adopt a developmentalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, typically from the left (Moffitt, 2016). In Europe, the phenomenon emerges more from the right, focused on anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiments, often with xenophobic undertones. Another distinction lies in emphasis: Latin American populism often centers on economic issues such as social justice, inequality, and poverty. The characteristics of the Latin American far right ties to a history of violent military dictatorships, long-standing leftist alignment, and economic crises (Kaltwasser, 2024). Kestler (2022) highlights religious values (as in Bolsonaro’s case) and regional references such as Artiguism. A critical point is the radicalization of the electorate and the anti-institutional, often anti-democratic, rhetoric (Alenda, 2024; Arias & Burt, 2024). There are stronger authoritarian tendencies, reminiscent of military regimes. Bolsonaro, for instance, praised the dictatorship as a model of discipline and order (Alves Jr. et al., 2023). These leaders portray themselves as “saviors” and advocate law-and-order policies to combat crime, corruption, and social unrest.

Both Argentina and Brazil experienced polarized presidential elections featuring strong far-right candidates who reproduced these discourses (Venturi, 2024). In Argentina, Javier Milei of the far-right coalition La Libertad Avanza won the 2023 elections (55.6% to 44.4% over Sergio Massa, from the center-left Unión por la Patria). Milei advocated for radical free-market policies, state reduction, and dollarization, using anti-establishment rhetoric (Rojas, 2024; Zilla, 2024). In Brazil, the 2022 election pitted Jair Bolsonaro (PL, far right) against Lula (PT, left), with Lula winning by 50.9% to 49.1%. Bolsonaro emphasized on nationalism, religious conservatism, and anti-establishment discourse (Lima-de-Sousa, Gómez-Iniesta, and Herranz-de-la-Casa, 2023). Both Milei and Bolsonaro exemplify “radical right-wing populism” (Kestler, 2022; Mudde, 2007, 2017).

Far-Right Populism as Discourse

Wodak (2015) understands far-right populism as a discursive strategy rather than a fixed ideology. According to her, populism is constructed through language and communication, where political actors employ narratives, rhetoric, and specific symbols to create a division between “the people” and “the elite” or “the others.” In this context, “the good people” are often portrayed as victims of elite corruption and external threats. Wodak explains that populist discourse tends to simplify complex political issues into binary oppositions, often through processes of binaries forms and antagonism. These strategies frequently center around key elements such as: (1) emotions, particularly fear of “the other”. (2) Exclusion of undesirable groups from the imagined “nation,” such as immigrants. (3) A sense of victimhood, in which far-right supporters portray themselves as oppressed by the corrupt political elite and political correctness. (4) The narrative of a “pure” nation, in which the good people who build the country or community are depicted as threatened by outsiders (immigrants, refugees) and internal enemies (political elites, minorities). These discursive articulations are crucial in forging identity within this ideology, fostering affiliation through identification. Another key aspect of far-right populist rhetoric is its anti-pluralism (Müller, 2016). By excluding those considered undesirable—those “against” the “pure people”—far-right populism can erode democratic norms and institutions. Populists often undermine checks and balances, attack the media, and weaken judicial independence in their pursuit of power. As a result, far-right populism has the potential to delegitimize all other political actors and perspectives.

Far-Right Populism and the Media

Far-right populism deeply connects to the ability to mobilize and use both traditional media and social media platforms to amplify and legitimize its rhetoric. Moffitt (2016) argues that populist leaders are skilled at using the media to broaden their messages, mobilize supporters, and bypass traditional communication channels. The performative aspect of this political spectrum aligns well with the sensationalist nature of contemporary media, which often favors the dramatic and controversial. Thus, far-right populists manipulate traditional media to their advantage by employing sensationalism and emotional appeals (Wodak, 2015), using provocative statements and actions to attract coverage. These performances are crucial for maintaining visibility, influencing public discourse, and shaping perceptions of political candidates (Fuller, 2018).

Traditional media also plays a vital role in normalizing far-right discourse (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022). By targeting journalistic outlets to create controversy and gain visibility for their ideas, far-right populists often find that the media inadvertently grants credibility and helps to naturalize their narratives. Editorial choices—such as themes and framing—can impact audiences’ perceptions of elections and candidates’ proposals (Guazina et al., 2024).

Finally, it is important to note that actors from this political view tend to maintain a strong relationship with social media platforms, allowing their discourse to bypass traditional news outlets, often portrayed as biased or part of the elitist establishment. This relationship enables the construction of alternative media ecosystems (Krämer, 2017; Kakavand, 2023; Williams, 2023). In this context, both Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei made extensive use of social media platforms during their campaigns. Bolsonaro became known for using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to share live speeches, mobilize supporters, and reinforce anti-establishment rhetoric. Milei, likewise, adopted similar digital strategies, livestreaming, posting videos on TikTok and Twitter, and seeking to engage voters through provocative and simplified messages. In both cases, social media was essential for disseminating far-right ideas, rapidly reaching large audiences, and bypassing traditional media, reinforcing the populist discourse and the image of “outsiders” fighting the “old politics.” Additionally, these platforms were also used to attack institutions (Santos & Felliti, 2024). This amplification also ends up influencing how newspapers themselves cover such events (Ituassu et al., 2023). Based on this, we aim to focus on the role traditional media may have played in propagating the anti-institutional, far-right populist discourse during presidential elections in both countries through social media platforms. These platforms remain an important source of information and, while they offer visibility to journalism that publishes content there, they operate under governance algorithms (Poell, Nieborg & van Djick, 2019) that prioritize different aspects (such as emotions—see Ziyada & Shanoi, 2024) and may influence editorial decisions, as well as the circulation and validation of such posts.

Methodological Approach

Our aim is to examine how traditional media covered the anti-institutional discourse of Bolsonaro and Milei in their Facebook posts. We seek to understand how these discourses were framed in the content shared on the

platform. To this end, we selected two of the main traditional journalistic outlets from each country: *La Nación* and *Clarín* from Argentina; and *Estadão* and *Folha de São Paulo* from Brazil. These outlets represent the "quality media" of their respective countries and are comparable in terms of size and influence.

Our approach adopts a multi-method design, combining Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and framing analysis (Entman, 1993), along with a quantitative analysis of engagement based on the total number of interactions for each post. In the following sections, we provide a more detailed description of this analytical framework.

Data Collection

We used CrowdTangle to access Facebook and collect all posts related to the runoff campaigns of each election. Our initial search focused on posts containing the words "eleição" and "eleições" (Portuguese and Spanish for "election" and "elections"), specifically restricted to "local relevance," that is, geographically limited to Argentina and Brazil.

We collected the data from Argentina from October 23 to November 20, 2023. Although the election took place on November 19, we included an additional day to ensure we captured all relevant election-related posts. Similarly, data from Brazil were collected from October 3 to October 31, 2022, following the same reasoning, since the runoff was held on October 30.

Following this process, we separated the general posts from the official pages of each media outlet, which allowed us to search within the dataset for election-related posts by the four selected outlets (as all of them used hashtags associated with the elections). This procedure enabled us to determine where these posts were shared. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the number of results from the data collection based on these criteria for each media outlet.

Table 1 - Total number of posts collected

Media Outlet	Total Posts
<i>La Nación</i>	626
<i>Clarín</i>	212
<i>Folha de São Paulo</i>	162
<i>Estadão</i>	109

From this initial pool of election-related posts, we selected those specifically focused on the object of this study: the candidates' anti-democratic discourse. The main criterion was the identification of content that questioned the electoral process. Based on this selection, Table 2 summarizes the data.

Table 2 - Posts focusing on anti-democratic discourse by the candidates

Media Outlet	Total Posts
<i>La Nación</i>	25
<i>Clarín</i>	4
<i>Folha de São Paulo</i>	7
<i>Estadão</i>	13

Data Analysis

For this study, we analyze the selected posts through the theoretical lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2001), particularly employing strategies of legitimation and framing analysis (Entman, 1993). CDA aims to analyze the relationships between the discourses that are proposed and legitimized and the broader society. In this sense, discourse not only reproduces but also transforms, legitimizes, or challenges social and power relations in a given society (Wodak, 2015).

To support this discussion and provide analytical elements that underpin the evaluation of discursive impacts, we draw on Entman's (1993) classic framework of framing functions, which includes four main components: (1) defining problems, (2) diagnosing causes, (3) making moral judgments, and (4) suggesting remedies. Defining problems involves articulating what a causal agent is doing and the costs and benefits associated with it (p. 52), while diagnosing causes identifies underlying issues. Making moral judgments refers to evaluating the involved agents, and suggesting remedies deals with proposing solutions to the identified problems. These strategies are crucial in helping

us understand how these outlets, via Facebook, choose to highlight or emphasize certain elements over others

Case Study

When analyzing news articles addressing attacks on institutions by both candidates, we observed a significant difference in the number of posts focusing on such attacks (Table 2). *La Nación* (Argentina) and *Estadão* (Brazil) stood out, dedicating significantly more posts than the other two outlets, which devoted less attention to the topic.

Among the Argentine outlets, we observed generally non-explicit framings, as such: they frequently used third-party quotations, reproducing Milei's statements. This was particularly common in *La Nación*, which included quotes and comments in almost every article. *Clarín*, on the other hand, leaned more towards narratives about the statements, although it occasionally included direct quotations. In Brazil, the media outlets adopted a narrative approach when reporting Bolsonaro's remarks, emphasizing the context rather than simply reproducing his claims. Although some headlines were declarative, the strategy overall prioritized providing background information. Thus, the framings of attacks on institutions varied across the outlets.

Table 3 - Framing analysis by theme.

Categories	La Nación	Clarín	Estadão	Folha de SP
Attacks on institutions	Problem definition	Problem definition	Problem definition, Moral judgment	Problem definition, Moral judgment

The most common framing in the Argentine outlets when reporting Milei's attacks on institutions and democracy was "problem definition." This resulted from their tendency to reproduce his statements, allowing Milei to set the tone. Most posts on these topics had a declarative character, with headlines featuring his remarks and the use of emotional language (adjectives), a typical strategy of right-wing populism (Wodak, 2015).

In *La Nación* (Figure 1), for instance, the headline "Colossal Fraud" stands out. The article reports that *La Libertad Avanza* filed an electoral fraud complaint with a judge in Argentina, preserving Milei's emotional language and attracting readers. The content circulates on Facebook just as it does in the print version, although the website may offer additional context.

Figure 1: Post by La Nación from the dataset. The headline reads: "Discomfort and surprise within PRO (political party) due to Javier Milei's accusation against the Gendarmerie (a federal security force operating under the Ministry of Security)."



Source: authors' dataset

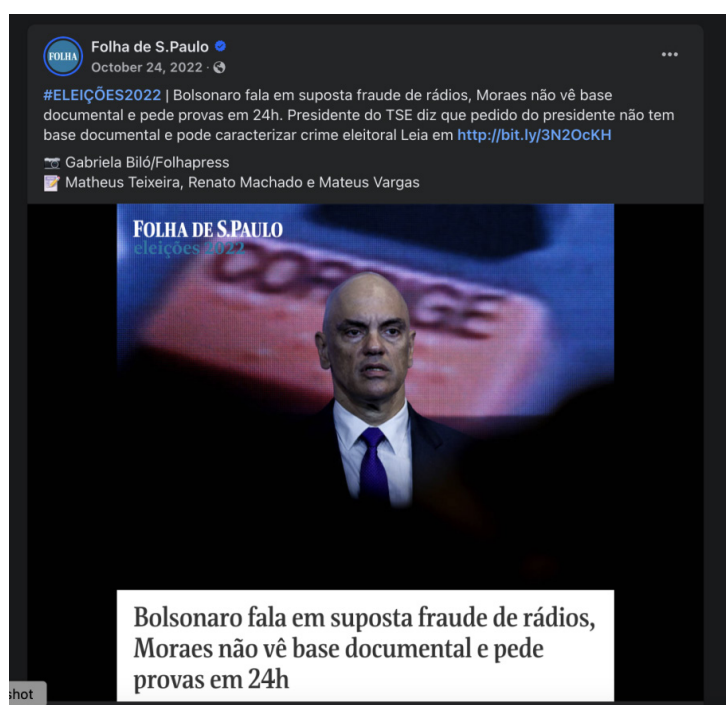
Clarín also employed a similar strategy. One of the posts focusing on Milei's campaign stated: "MILEI'S MESSAGE TO JUNTOS POR EL CAMBIO – After confirming that he would face Sergio Massa in the runoff election for the presidency, Javier Milei accused the Radicals of being "traitors" for allegedly supporting the Unión

por la Patria candidate in Sunday's election. However, he urged Juntos por el Cambio to "build an opposition that will definitively end Kirchnerism" (Source: Authors' dataset, 2024, translated from the original in Spanish, "EL MENSAJE DE MILEI A JUNTOS POR EL CAMBIO Tras confirmarse que definirá la presidencia en un balotaje frente a Sergio Massa, Javier Milei acusó de "traidores" a los radicales por un supuesto apoyo al candidato de Unión por la Patria en las elecciones del domingo, pero le pidió a Juntos por el Cambio "construir una oposición que termine definitivamente con el kirchnerismo").

The message highlights how Milei accused his opponents of being "traitors" and asserted the need to "definitively end" his political adversaries, indicating an anti-institutional discourse in which the opposition is framed as complicit in the alleged fraud. This emotional discourse (Wodak, 2015), characterized by strong language and strategic quotations, is frequently reproduced by the media. Such statements imply that the fraud was not merely an allegation, but a genuine possibility.

In Brazil, however, although the initial framing strategies were similar, they resulted in a different context. When addressing attacks on institutions more broadly, the posts displayed a critical framing of moral judgment, in stark contrast to the Argentine coverage. The following image (Figure 2), for instance, is from Folha de S. Paulo. The post explains that Bolsonaro claimed fraud in radio broadcasts, asserting that certain stations had excluded him from their transmissions. However, the text contextualizes this claim, noting that the Superior Electoral Court gave him 24 hours to present evidence. Furthermore, the article explains: "The president of the Court stated that the request lacks documentary basis and may constitute an electoral crime." The text is also careful to state: "Bolsonaro speaks of an alleged fraud," and avoids reproducing his words verbatim.

Figure 2: Postagem do Folha de S. Paulo sobre as alegações de Bolsonaro e as eleições do conjunto de dados. O título diz: "Bolsonaro fala sobre suposta fraude e Moraes (juiz do Tribunal Superior Eleitoral) não vê provas e pede-as em 24h."



Source: authors' data

We also observed a similar approach in Estadão's posts. Although the outlet discussed Bolsonaro's allegations, it frequently used expressions such as "alleged fraud" and rarely reproduced his statements verbatim. In fact, some posts even included fact checking of various claims made by Bolsonaro (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Post by Estadão fact-checking Bolsonaro's claims. The deadline states: "It is false that the total vote count, every 12%, indicates fraud during the first round of the election."



Source: authors' dataset

These data reveal differences between the Brazilian and Argentine media coverage. Although both reproduced statements, Brazilian outlets were more critical of Bolsonaro, offering more context and adopting distinct framing strategies. In contrast, Argentine media were less critical, often reproducing Milei's speeches while emphasizing emotional language and specific word choices.

The emphasis on "moral judgment" in Brazil undermines the credibility of Bolsonaro's fraud allegations, whereas in Argentina, Milei's claims are reinforced through "problem definition" (Edelman, 1993). A significant contrast is also observed in the frequency of news reports on attacks against institutions. In Brazil, there was broad coverage of Bolsonaro's claims. In Argentina, although Milei repeatedly alleged fraud and referred to the state as a "criminal organization," and local media rarely published these statements.

These differences may stem from Brazil's prior experience with a far-right president and the critical reactions following the previous election, which led to changes in editorial guidelines (Miguel, 2019; Chagas & Cruz, 2022). Argentina has not undergone a comparable context.

Regarding audience reception, mentions of Milei generated significantly more interactions on Argentine platforms (Table 4). In *Clarín*, such posts nearly tripled (2.8x) the average engagement compared to other topics; in *La Nación*, the figure was 2.5x higher. Focusing specifically on institutional attacks, interaction levels also increased. In *Clarín*, interactions were 2.1x higher than the average for election-related posts (though lower than general posts about Milei). In *La Nación*, the average interaction rate for these attacks was even greater: 2.2x higher than posts about Milei and 5.5x higher than the average election-related posts.

Table 4 - Average number of interactions per post – Argentina

Outlet	Avg. interactions – Milei	Avg. interactions – all posts	Avg. interactions – institutional attacks
Clarín	331	117	251
La Nación	681	272	1500

In the Brazilian case, the numbers are similar (Table 5). While *Folha* received twice more interactions when mentioned Bolsonaro, *Estadão* had a 1.2x increase. However, in posts about attacks on institutions, the trend of above-average interaction remained (1.08x for *Folha*, 1.11x for *Estadão*), but these posts received fewer interactions than those simply mentioning the candidate.

Table 5 - Average number of interactions per post – Brazil

Outlet	Avg. interactions – Bolsonaro	Avg. interactions – all posts	Avg. interactions – institutional attacks
Folha	2297	1089	1186
Estadão	188	158	176.5

These data show that when media outlets focused on far-right populist candidates, they attracted significantly more attention than for other electoral topics. This suggests that by centering their coverage on these candidates, outlets gained greater visibility and engagement, partially due to the emotionally charged rhetoric, provocative statements, and a polarized environment (Wodak, 2015).

A relevant difference emerges when comparing posts on institutional attacks in both countries. In similar cases, such posts outperformed the average interactions of electoral news, but in Brazil, they generated less engagement than posts about the candidate himself, whereas in Argentina, they generated more. This may be related to coverage styles: Argentine media were more inclined to reproduce Milei's speeches rather than contextualize them, while Brazilian outlets adopted a more critical stance by offering broader context to Bolsonaro's declarations.

Discussion

Our analysis highlights key points regarding how the media covered attacks on institutions and democracy by the far right in Brazil and Argentina. First, media outlets in both countries used controversial or impactful statements, though with different framing approaches. This type of coverage may benefit media organizations, as the content tends to circulate widely (Massuchin et al., 2022).

Although posts rarely employed adjectives, they reproduced the candidates' words and emotional tone, particularly in anti-democratic statements, which was a shared feature in both cases (Alenda, 2024; Arias & Burt, 2024). Nonetheless, significant differences emerged. Coverage of Milei rarely focused on attacks against institutions and, when it did, it generally replicated his discourse (Rojas, 2024; Zilla, 2024). In this context, declarative journalism has been associated with legitimizing and lending credibility to such discourse. Furthermore, while candidates gain visibility, they also benefit from the media's credibility, as media attention reproducing their claims amplifies their message (Soares & Recuero, 2021). This strategy may often legitimize far-right discourse through emotional tone (Wodak, 2015) and foster affiliation (Mudde, 2016).

In contrast, Bolsonaro's coverage was centered on attacks against the establishment and institutions (Guazina et al., 2024; Alenda, 2024; Arias & Burt, 2024), but with more critical context. In Brazil, media coverage was more critical of the far-right populist rhetoric, frequently contextualizing Bolsonaro's allegations and pointing out their inconsistencies.

In Argentina, this discourse was far less challenged, with attacks generally framed in declarative or neutral terms. As a result, Argentine media, by focusing on quotes and statements without offering context, may have inadvertently fueled extremist discourse (Alves Jr. et al., 2023), normalizing such statements (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022).

Moreover, the tone of these declarations amplifies polarization, as simply reproducing the candidates' words in such posts may deepen divisions. This rhetoric often emphasized an "us versus them" narrative. While this was contested in Brazil, the opposition was clearly present (Alves Jr. et al., 2023).

Coverage of these candidates also received much greater audience attention, with significantly more overall interactions, confirming the notion that the far-right has more effective ways of reproducing and engaging with discourse on these platforms (Krämer, 2017; Kakavand, 2023; Williams, 2023), whether due to algorithmic influence or strategic action. This also suggests that in the platform context, differences in engagement may influence editorial decisions, privileging content that generates more interaction—particularly emotionally charged posts, such as those from the far right.

Another important point is that Brazilian media, through more critical coverage, managed to provide important context to Bolsonaro's declarations, challenging both his extremist rhetoric and attacks on democratic institutions. The fact that these posts criticized and negatively framed Bolsonaro's discourse (even fact-checking it) and highlighted contradictions may have played a crucial role in countering his attempts to undermine democracy. This type of coverage may have helped demobilize his supporters during the attempted coup on January 8 by casting doubt on the legitimacy of his claims (Alves Jr. et al., 2023; Bastos & Recuero, 2023).

Unlike in Argentina, where Milei's extremist statements often went uncontested or were presented without context, Brazilian media took a more assertive role in holding Bolsonaro accountable. This critical approach not

only provided the public with a clearer understanding of his problematic claims but also exposed weaknesses in his populist performance (Moffitt, 2016). The visibility granted to Bolsonaro was tempered by criticism that weakened his ability to leverage media platforms.

Finally, we observe that the number of interactions—directly influencing platform engagement—shows that coverage of far-right candidates generates higher metrics for media outlets. This may be related to the type of discourse used by these actors, which is often emotionally driven (as seen in Milei’s reproduced statements) (Ziyada & Shanoi, 2024). This suggests that those editorial decisions - mainly about who and what to feature in coverage – can be influenced by posts that garner the most attention. These findings underscore the influence of platform governance structures (Poell, Nieborg & van Dijck, 2019) on editorial decision-making.

By opting for a more critical coverage, Brazilian outlets saw lower engagement compared to Argentine ones with more declarative approaches—highlighting a potential trade-off where there is a sacrifice in interaction. Furthermore, platform algorithms that favor the reproduction of more emotional discourse—such as that of the far right—may be driving higher circulation.

This comparison between the two countries highlights how media framing and journalistic approaches can either legitimize or undermine far-right populist narratives, with critical implications for the role of the press in safeguarding democracy. Observing the divergent paths taken by the Argentine and Brazilian media reveals that responsible journalism—centered on context and critical evaluation—is fundamental to preventing the normalization and empowerment of anti-democratic figures.

Conclusion

This article examined the coverage by traditional media on social media platforms and its role in legitimizing attacks on institutions within the discourse of far-right populism in Brazil and Argentina. The study focused on a case analysis of two major newspapers from each country and their interactions on Facebook during the electoral periods. The analysis showed that far-right candidates Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei had their attacks on institutions reproduced by the media outlets, although with different framings. Brazilian media adopted a more critical stance toward Bolsonaro’s anti-democratic rhetoric, frequently challenging his statements. In contrast, Argentine outlets presented Milei’s discourse in a neutral or declarative manner.

This contrast underscores how media coverage can either reinforce or challenge far-right populism, significantly shaping public discourse and democratic institutions. By amplifying such narratives, media outlets play a crucial role—either normalizing or resisting extremist rhetoric—and consequently influence political outcomes in both countries.

Although the structures of coverage differed, the fact that posts focusing on far-right discourse generated higher engagement suggests that this type of content draws attention from social media algorithms. This dynamic raises important questions about the relationship between algorithmic logic and the ethical principles of journalism.

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