

Are Algorithms Affecting the Democracy in Brazil?

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I. INTRODUCTION

BRAZIL is going through elections that are marked by Populism and Radicalism that are currently spread through all runners. After a first round of voting the two remaining candidates, right-wing Jair Bolsonaro, and the left-wing Fernando Haddad fight to reach more voters both online and offline.

The electoral process is under intense polarization that has increased through the years and show unprecedented behaviors of collective fight and hate. Among the peculiarities of this year's presidential run is that television which was traditionally the main campaign method, had much less influence than in previous years. On the other hand, campaign on social networks like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter had the most impact on the public opinion.

In this paper we discuss the impacts caused by social networks and its algorithms on Brazilian elections and democracy. We discuss and exemplify scenarios where algorithms were confronted or influenced by the users with the intention of promoting a certain political view.

II. BRAZILIAN ELECTORAL SCENARIO

The voting in Brazil follows a secret direct form, this means that each voter casts its vote to a candidate using the electronic ballot. For main office positions, like mayor, state governor and president, Brazil adopts an absolute majority system to elect the incumbent. Thus, any candidate that gathers 50% plus one vote is elected. If in the first round of voting none of the candidates reach absolute majority, a second round is held between the two most voted candidates.

Television time is distributed among Brazil's 35 official political parties, based on the number of elected deputies in the previous election. To increase television time, these parties create coalitions. In the current scenario however, we observe that Jair Bolsonaro, a candidate from a small party with little resources and short television time, turned to internet and social networks as the main mean to do his campaign.

Several specialists affirmed that the 2018 presidential election will be decided by social networks. These affirmations are reinforced by events like Facebook removing a disinformation network from Brazil. According to a press, release the network was composed by 72 groups, 50 accounts and five pages, having violated community policies, spam, encouraged and allowed the collection of followers and likes, besides performing

page exchanges [1]. This was a milestone in Facebook actions, since the company shut down pages of many groups that had strong political actuation since the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff.

The presidential candidates understood that they needed to become active in social networks. Their social media pages became more active, speaking directly to the voters. Furthermore, the voters and followers created new pages and profiles backing the candidates and attacking its opponents. The campaign then turned into an online battleground, characterized by the spread of fake news flowing into the larger social media through smaller WhatsApp groups. Concurrently, many research and platforms pointed that candidates from all political views started inflating their campaigns using bots [2]. The research also points unethical means of campaigning and methods that do not follow the current Brazilian electoral laws.

Backers of candidates with larger voting pools attacked the opponent candidates based on hate and, most of the time, fake news. Jair Bolsonaro and Fernando Haddad, the candidates in the second voting round, have large difference in social media support. For example, Bolsonaro has close to 8 million followers on Facebook and 1.8 million followers on twitter. Haddad has 1.5 million followers on Facebook and approximately 900 thousand followers on twitter.

Rumours have also been a major problem in the 2018 elections. The major published during the first voting round, when many WhatsApp groups spread videos that inferred that the election was rigged through the electronic voting system. This rumour caused disruption in the voting process and many complaints were filed to the electoral authorities. The Brazilian supreme electoral authority had to intervene, creating a campaign that informed voters that the fraud news was fake [3].

III. A WAR OF ROBOTS

Robots (or simply bots) have been present in online interactions since the early days of the internet. Bots are computer programs that replicate a behavior or action automatically. In social networks we observe more complex bots, such as accounts that replicate user behavior. Computer bots are being widely used in viral marketing and consequently in elections, most commonly used to propagate spam or inflate the influence of a given topic. It is demonstrated that by using simple automated strategies a user or a robot can become an influential social network account [4]. Moreover, although bots may not have direct influence on debates, users might be influenced to replicate their messages, especially when that message is trending or is mass replicated by other accounts [5].

Although robots are driven by computer programs, they are not the social network algorithm itself, but agents that

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can influence the algorithm behavior. This kind of account might help propagating fake information, inflating campaign and creating sentiments that might not be true about a topic.

A 2018 study shows that since 2014 bots had been used to create bot-human networks in politics. Automated interactions might account to 10% of the interactions and are used by both the right and left-wing parties. More recently, it was revealed by the press that users were voluntarily infecting their accounts and computers with a robot that would automatically post and re-post media related to the right-wing candidate. That characteristic was pointed by researchers previously, where there were accounts that were only partially automated [2].

IV. THE FIGHT AGAINST THE SOCIAL NETWORK ALGORITHM

One of the phenomena observed among social network, especially Twitter and Facebook, was *the fight against the algorithm*. Many news outlets published that the right-wing candidate Bolsonaro was using bots to inflate his popularity. The users then learned that they could avoid inflating his popularity when talking about him by not using his name in the posts. They initially tried the term “Bosonaro” in reference to Bozo the clown. They soon learned that the search engines detected the typo. The users then proceeded to refer to Bolsonaro by various terms: “Coiso” (he thing), “Bozonoro”, “Bonoro”, “solnorabo”, to list some.

The fight against the algorithm also motivated the tag “#Elenao” (#nohim), reproduced by many national and international personalities. The hashtag was created by the feminist movement Women United Against Bolsonaro, which was created through a private Facebook group with more than 2 million members. The hashtag “#elenao” and its variations generated more than 1.6 million mentions on Twitter [6]. Another outcome was that Bolsonaro backers tried to *hijack* the hashtag, changing the sentiment of it by including the hashtag in posts that praised their candidate.

V. AVOIDING CENSORSHIP

Because of the presence of hate speech, spam and fake news and spam created by personal attacks from voters to the candidates, Facebook and WhatsApp had to intervene. This culminated in the banishment of more than 100 thousand of WhatsApp accounts in Brazil. Besides, Facebook had to setup a “War Room”, to monitor the content in the social network [7].

Since the start of the campaign, the right-wing tried to gather followers to Gab; branded as a “social network that champions free speech”. This same network was used by Trump followers in the 2016 American elections. According to [8] the Gab is mostly dominated by right-wing users. The authors also find that 5.4% of the posts are related to hate-speech, which is more than double of the posts of the same nature found on Twitter. The goal of using Gab was to avoid the “censorship” of platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Although Brazil became the second most active country on Gab, with active users more than doubling in less

than a month [9], the real platform used in the elections to spread information was WhatsApp.

Users on WhatsApp could create groups and freely spread information without worrying of restrictions. Moreover, they could easily spam news, true or fake, to other users easily. This resulted in many false news reaching the public without the moderation efforts created by the most popular social networks. Moreover, a network of disinformation was created, which was mainly used to cause panic and fear to the population through fake news [9].

VI. CONCLUSION

Algorithms, especially those in social networks, are meant to allow users to interact socially and show users what matters. However, these algorithms are susceptible to manipulation by its users and bots.

In this paper we present the general context of Brazilian elections and how algorithms are affecting the electoral process. We give three main examples: i) the use of robots to influence social networks; ii) the use of hashtags to or the omission of them to fight for a cause; and iii) the social phenomena of avoiding the algorithm or the moderation in online settings.

With this work we want to raise awareness of how algorithms affect the interactions between users in political settings. We also want to encourage the discussion of fairness in the use of algorithm governed environment in democratic settings.

We invite the reader to reflect about the following questions: Are social networks a safe platform for political campaign? How can we make these networks a fair place for democracy? When not everyone has the same access to a platform, how to ensure that the entire population has access to information?

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