Platforms and the Normalization of Dorkness

Rafael Evangelista – Professor of postgraduate studies in Scientific and Cultural Dissemination and member of the Laboratory of Advanced Studies in Journalism, University of Campinas.

> *At the heart of our data services is Behavioral Microtargeting, our analysis and engagement methodology that segments target audiences based on psychographic attributes to influence behavior at the individual level.*
> – "Who We Are", from the promotional leaflet for Brazil by the SCL Group, parent of Cambridge Analytica, closed in May 2018.

I recently published, together with my friend and researcher Fernanda Bruno, an article aimed especially at the international public on the process that led to the result of the Brazilian elections in 2018. The text is the result of anguish with the result of the elections, a reflection of a wish to show ourselves and others that we are not like that. Or at least we weren't, we weren't being, we were walking at consistent steps to stop being a society that is either openly racist, homophobic and conservative moralist, or finds elaborate formulas, like calling itself "racial democracy", to deny its complex formulas of exclusion, even if claiming to be "different".

It can be pointed out that this has always been there, that we never settled the score with Brazilian fascism, as Vladimir Safatle (2020) says, but it is not a simple task to demonstrate the intricate process that led to the emergence of such explicit forms of neo-fascist manifestation. Aggressive expressions that not only guarantee persistent popularity with one third of the electorate even after a year in office, but are actively normalized or swept under the rug by a consistent portion of Brazilian opinion makers (does that expression still exist?). The shame of being a dork has been lost.

There are certainly reasons that go beyond the communicational field that help explain the process. Donald Trump's election cannot be attributed only to Cambridge Analytica's already well-demonstrated ability to use micro-targeting of political messages on Facebook. Undoubtedly, the economic disillusionment of a middle class that suffers the consequences of the country's deindustrialization played an important role. Likewise, the economic crisis that has worsened since 2015 in Brazil helped the disillusionment with traditional politics, in addition to significant changes in the profile of the Brazilian working class, increasingly distant from formal and unionized work.

However, these infrastructural changes alone do not explain the neo-fascist radicalization. They offer a material basis, a distasteful experience lived, but which ended up in a direction that did not necessarily need to be that one. Everything indicates that the final outcome was the result of a clumsy attempt by the center-right to regain control of the country, in which power ended up being handed over to eventual radical allies. The balance is a complete disaster for the historically most marginalized populations, international embarrassment for "civilized" intellectual elites and indecent profits for financial, extractive and exploratory capitalism.

But how does this process get out of control? A few months before the 2018 elections, almost no one was betting that Geraldo Alckmin, the candidate with the longest TV time and a contender for the historically rival party to the one who had been associated daily by the media with the "Car Wash" scandals and the economic crisis, could have a performance so meager. Which mechanisms of circulation of meanings cease to function as expected, so that a good part of the population embarks on the idea that historic rival parties PT and PSDB are birds of a feather, entitled to a delirious version in which they would be complicit in a plot to alternate in power? Some barrier needed to be removed so that historical political oppositions would no longer make sense and the response to the PT could not be "moderated" (either with Ciro Gomes for the center-left or Alckmin for the center-right), but extreme to the point of admitting someone discriminating, intolerant and violent like Bolsonaro.

The fact is that the informational environment has changed and has become an increasingly difficult territory to navigate, for the public and for researchers. Not all transformations are directly linked to the new information and communication technologies, although there is a certain derived relationship. Broadcasting, due to its own dynamics or to survive the new reality, has become much more sensationalist and predatory. The dial of the FM band is infested with frequencies rented from promoters and churches, or exploiters of sensationalism without restraint, be it the exploitation of violence or politics. The same goes for TV, to which must be added the lack of incentive and the political use of educational channels.

But the outstanding new element is actually the Internet. We salute, quite correctly, the plurality of channels provided by the novelty and the emergence of a niche culture, which promised enormous cultural diversity, derived from a more direct and broad contact between communicators and artists. We left aside, however, two complicators. This diversity necessarily also leads to a distance, in terms of common imagery, between different segments of the population. If we all see basically the same handful of soap operas and newscasts, we have a relatively common information field, either to embark on it or to criticize it. Otherwise, we have the famous bubbles, that is, each niche ends up constituting its own reality. Although the bubbles are not exactly hermetic – no one can only live among their peers: the other, the different, possibly enemy is necessary for us to constitute ourselves in this otherness. They are symbolically self-sufficient microcosms, constituting their own sources of legitimation and authority.

The second complicator was actually more difficult to predict and in a way offers the material, architectural basis for the phenomenon to gain the dimension it has gained. The Internet is now governed by surveillance capitalism companies (Zuboff, 2019; Evangelista, 2019). Its business model basically consists of retaining the audience (the eyes and ears) and the work of the users (the fingers that frantically strum the keyboard and click on the little hearts; the voices and faces that tell their own lives and everything else; the legs that go there and hunt for pokémons and good restaurants). By collecting, storing and analyzing these digital tracks, companies carry out forecasting and behavior change operations on the same users, for their own benefit or on behalf of marketing campaigns. For the maximum use of these "resources" – the lives of users –, they adopt algorithms, which with the justification of facilitating navigation and making it more attractive, largely regulate what the user is exposed to on the Web.

YouTube recommendations

One of the best examples is YouTube, which has become a hotbed of radicalism and conspiracy theories. The recommendation algorithm, which is already responsible for 70% of traffic on the platform, seeks engagement, unceasing viewing and reaction to content. The more engagement, the more ads are shown and the more producers are rewarded, which is good for the platform and a formula for success for those who live on the content posted there. One of the strategies employed by the algorithms to increase views is to suggest something progressively more radical or provocative. This is how the system suggests that a particular user who likes online guitar lessons might be interested in the videos of a controversial instrument teacher who talks about politics and heavy metal.

Studying the channels of the American alternative right, the so-called alt-right, the researcher of the Data & Society Institute, Rebecca Lewis, discovered some strategies used by this radical political group to collectively boost views on YouTube. More radical members and others that pass for more moderates exchange participations in diverse productions, which helps in the popularization of all and pulls the audience from one to another. Even though they have occasional disagreements, they all contribute to the popularization of the same extreme political field. The strategy takes advantage of characteristics of the recommendations algorithm to exponentialize its effect.

Something similar was discovered by Brazilian researchers, from the group of computing professors at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Virgilio Almeida and Wagner Meira Jr. In a

study on the American extreme right, they demonstrated how viewers of more traditional conservative channels ended up migrating to channels that defend white supremacy. In another work, this time focusing on Brazilian YouTube during the elections, they researched 55 political channels, from all ideological spectrum. They found messages of hatred and conspiratorial tone more associated with the videos of the extreme right, precisely those that had greater exposure during the electoral period.

The data analysis company Novelo (Ghedin, 2019) analyzed more than 17,000 video ratings "on the rise", highlighted by YouTube, in the last half of 2018. The criteria for a video to appear in this list are not exactly clear, but the platform says that objective criteria, such as number and rate of growth of views, are mixed with qualitative criteria determined by the platform's proprietary systems, such as being surprising or interestingly different. Novelo discovered unusual actors popping up on that list, far-right and fake news channels, such as Folha Política, Giro de Notícias and Mega Channels 2.0, going from almost zero appearances in the ranking in July to an explosion in the month before the elections.

The WhatsApp black box

Since the Brazilian truckers strike of 2018 I have been ethnographically following the platform that was the great controversy of these elections, WhatsApp. By this I mean that I penetrate the right-wing political groups and silently read the flow of messages, videos and memes for as long as my stomach can handle. It was this fieldwork that supported part of the article's observations that I quote at the beginning of this text. WhatsApp is important because it is perhaps the best representation we have today of a context of disorganization and informational and symbolic disaggregation that is very difficult to analyze and combat.

Many people have done heroic data mining, which offers us a quantitative and macro overview of what happens in open political groups. Perhaps the best example comes from the UFMG group already mentioned (Resende et al., 2019), which discovered a coordinated structure of action in the groups, a scheme that is invisible to the innocent and organic member, but that commands the flow of content. This analysis is completely consistent with several journalistic information that was released even before the elections, in reports that account for a professional messaging scheme and political micro-targeting aimed at WhatsApp.

WhatsApp is a messaging application in which the "groups" function gives you social media characteristics, and which was used as a political weapon in the last Brazilian federal elections. To this is added the notorious zero-rating practice of Brazilian telephone companies (Ramos, 2015). Data plans sold especially to the poorest populations offer unlimited free data browsing to certain applications and social networks. Along with Facebook, WhatsApp is the most popular app in the country. The aggravating factor is that the messages which arrive through it are received as more "intimate" or more familiar than those of other networks. The application environment does not simulate a public place, but a protected, reserved, encrypted place. Even if you are in a free entrance group, that is a space managed and exclusive to the participants, which works in the same environment where messages are exchanged between family and friends (Cesarino, 2019).

A peek into any supermarket queue, waiting room or bus stop will find people with their faces buried in the cell phone screen, most likely following WhatsApp chats about the most varied subjects. The groups end up functioning as media distribution mini-channels, with content curation by the participants and managed by the administrators. In the case of the far-right groups investigated, most of the cured content appears to come from the organization set up to win the elections. Evidence even indicates that several channels of the extreme right that came to blast on YouTube on the eve of the election were driven by an intense sharing in these groups – a peculiar combination of attempts at political radicalization and click-hunting for monetized videos.

WhatsApp chats as media channels are not exactly a new phenomenon. Four years ago, the "underground world of content" was discovered (Wiedemann, 2016), thematic groups in which

people paid to participate and in which they received the most diverse contents with professional curation. Paid or free, these channels still exist and are a very relevant part of the informational diet of the average Brazilian.

What is the role of the consumption of these new media in the radicalization of the Brazilian electorate that elected a far-right government in the last elections? Socially, is Brazil becoming more fragmented, more likely to shelter social groups that build parallel, irreconcilable and paranoid informational realities? If economic transformations, such as precariousness, and social transformations, such as the growth of neo-Pentecostalism, weigh as an engine of symbolic changes, the new channels of information, governed by algorithms and platforms of surveillance capitalism, are the means by which they materialize. Understanding these transmission architectures and the diversity of information consumption is as relevant a task as reflecting on the economic, urban, and job realities of the population.

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