Fighting Disinformation

The Role of Civil Society and Collective Intelligence in the Brasilian Presidential Election

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Disinformation increasingly threatens democracy. How can this be prevented? Regulating platforms is often not enough to contain the dangers of disinformation for political processes. Thamy Pogrebinschi, Maria Dominguez and Mariana Borges Martins da Silva have examined the role civil society and collective intelligence can play in the fight against disinformation using the example of Brazil.

Disinformation became one of the greatest challenges to democracy in recent years. The intentional spread of falsehoods – often aimed at advancing non-democratic goals and associated with the rise of populist and far-right parties and politicians – has had in recent years a growing impact on elections, referenda, party support, and political trust. Usual measures to contain it seem insufficient to refrain the dangers misinformation poses to political processes.

A prolific bulk of research has been dedicated to analyzing the risks and impact of disinformation in democracies, as well as the specifics of platform governance and content regulation. The expectation is high that both national and international legislative and regulatory bodies will be able to curb the political damage caused by

disinformation. The role of other counter-information actors and responses remain less known.

Civil society's organizations and initiatives aimed at fighting disinformation are rising in Europe and elsewhere. Recent reports show that civil society's approach to disinformation focus mostly on fact-checking, media literacy, capacity building, investigative journalism, and research. Research on the topic is growing together with the number of civil society organizations and initiatives designed to tackle disinformation, but very little is still known as to how civil society can counteract misinformation directed to disrupt political processes and institutions, in particular elections.

Looking into Brazil, a country highly impacted by disinformation in previous years especially due to the leadership of far-right authoritarian president Bolsonaro, this article seeks to examine the part played by civil society in fighting disinformation in electoral processes. We turned to Brazil's recent presidential election to observe how its civil society engaged to avoid the spread of disinformation and what was the impact of using collective intelligence through digital technology.

Brazil's 2022 Elections

When the Brazilian Presidential campaign officially started in August 2022, many hoped that the country would be better prepared to combat misinformation than it was during the 2018's campaign season. Four years ago, Brazilians were struck by an avalanche of fake news. After this experience, Brazilian institutions, such as the Judiciary and the Congress, the press, and civil society, took several actions to avoid repeating the same scenario. Early in 2022, the Judiciary stroke a deal with social media platforms to help stop the spread of false content. During the campaign period, Brazil's Electoral Supreme Court acted quickly. They issued hundreds of decisions demanding social media platforms to remove inaccurate content and ban channels and profiles that disseminated lies about the electoral process.

Nevertheless, the efforts to combat fake news have not been enough to tackle the problem. One possible reason is that misinformation stories have become more sophisticated. As in 2018, overt lies about candidates have been spread, especially about moral issues. While these blatant lies played still a significant role in the 2022 electoral process, they were complemented by more sophisticated misinformation strategies, such as using misleading statistics and factual information to raise doubts about scientific methods and findings. For example, Bolsonaro used misleading statistics to claim that deforestation had not increased in his government. He also used images of his crowded campaign rallies to raise doubts about the electoral polls that consistently indicated that he would lose the election.

The more sophisticated strategies used to disinform during the Brazilian electoral process of 2022 show the importance of understanding the fight against misinformation beyond state institutions, and beyond content regulation and fact-checking.

Fighting Disinformation with Collective Intelligence

Brazil is a major consumer of social media and has seen in recent years the emergence of far-right groups that use internet platforms and messaging services to spread misinformation. On the other hand, Brazil has historically a very active civil society, which became a key propeller of democratic innovations in recent years due to the expansion of digital technology.

Like in other Latin-American countries, Brazil's civil society has relied largely on collective intelligence during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to respond to social and political problems resulting from the health crisis. In the absence of effective governmental responses, civil society generated verified information and reliable data, geolocated problems, gathered resources to address those problems, connected demand and supply, implemented, and monitored responses, and supported vulnerable groups.

Collective intelligence draws on digital technology to generate knowledge by sourcing, aggregating, and sharing information, expertise, and data in order to tackle public problems, as well as to formulate more legitimate policies. A rising number of civil society initiatives around the world seek to fight disinformation by relying on collective intelligence to fact-check information. Initial evidence shows that collaborative knowledge can work as an effective tool against the spread of fake news.

We actively searched, coded, and analyzed civil society initiatives that used collective intelligence tools based on digital technologies to counter disinformation. We found that throughout 2022, at least 70 initiatives were advanced by Brazil's civil society. Some of these organizations or initiatives were previously active in the fight against disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic and extended their scope to fight disinformation in the electoral process, others were newly constituted. Based on our dataset and interviews with leaders of some of these civil society organizations, we identified five uses of collective intelligence to fight disinformation.

First strategy: Generating Accurate Information

The generation of accurate information and data about the issues that were object of fake news was one of the main strategies of Brazilian civil society to fight disinformation during the electoral process. As the electoral opinion polls and the voting machines became objects of fake news, for example, several civil society initiatives focused on the production of scientifical and historical information. They produced and shared information on the history of Brazilian elections, the functioning of voting machines, the specifics of electoral processes, the science behind opinion polls, among others. One example is Politize, a digital platform created by a collaborative network of journalists, students and academics.

Second strategy: Detecting Misinformation

One strategy to make disinformation viral is the use of bots on social media. Automated accounts can viralize information and hinder the public debate using coordinated action and pretending they are organic movements of common citizens. In order to identify bots, an initiative called Pegabot ("catch the bot") was created using public information from Twitter. Citizens can use the tool by copying and pasting a Twitter account, while the platform calculates the chances of such an account being actually a bot.

Although created in 2018, the recent electoral process triggered the initiative to collaborate with programmers, journalists, designers, researchers, students, and professionals through hackathons aimed at finding creative solutions to combat misinformation. Pegabot enables citizens to detect misinformation by themselves, turning social media users into active players against disinformation, as they contribute to the identification of inauthentic behavior and may help prevent harmful content viralization.

Third strategy: Fact-Checking

Fact-checking is one of the most well-known measures to combat disinformation and the most common one amongst civil society's efforts to tackle the problem in Europe. In Brazil, several specialized fact-checking organizations have been created since 2018, relying on collaborative work among journalists and specialists. These organizations also benefit from citizen input, acting upon citizens' demands for verification of social media content. During the TV debates among the candidates running for presidency, those organizations made a strong effort to fact-check in real time, relying on digital collaborative work.

Other civil society organizations with no tradition of investigative journalism also launched initiatives to fact-check information during the electoral process. This effort has been notable among environmental organizations. These organizations reacted to both the spread of fake news regarding Bolsonaro's environmental policies and the circulation of disinformation among populations living in the Amazon. An initiative called Fakebook.Eco was launched based on a collaboration of environmental organizations (Observatório do Clima) to verify false information on environmental issues. Other initiatives such as Protocolo Ipê relied on large collaborations between environmental organizations, fact-checking organizations, and local communities to monitor and correct disinformation spread in the Amazon area.

Fourth strategy: Creating Counter-Narratives

In a country where racism is pervasive and ingrained in society, where 56 percent of the population is black, but only 21 out of 513 legislators are black, fighting disinformation in

electoral processes implies generating counter-narratives that make black people visible and the election of black representatives feasible. The same is true for women who are constantly target of gendered political violence and only managed to elect 77 female representatives besides 436 congressmen in the previous legislature. Civil society initiatives that provide information about those groups and promote their candidates are creating counter-narratives in a setting where dominant narratives undermine and distort their images.

During the recent electoral process, digital platforms were created to make visible the biographies, ideas, and proposals of candidates that identified as women, black, black women, LGBTQIA+, and indigenous. Instead of focusing on groups, similar initiatives aimed at disseminating information on candidates that supported policy issues which are also underrepresented in legislatures, such as climate change. The shortage of reliable and visible information on those groups and policy issues can be understood as a form of disinformation.

Fifth strategy: Making Reliable Data Accessible

The 2022 Brazilian elections were the most expensive in the country's history. Close to 1 billion Euros from public resources have been used in political campaigns. The country has a long history of sophisticated corruption schemes in party funding. Monitoring public spending in electoral campaigns is a challenge, since there are multiple sources that fund political parties and huge amounts of money raised.

Disinformation can proliferate in face of the absence of reliable data. Seeking to make campaign finance more transparent, a civil society organization developed a dashboard (Siga o Dinheiro) that enables citizens to track how resources have been distributed among the 32 political parties. The interactive platform uses public data collected from the country's Electoral Court. It makes data on campaign finance accessible to common citizens by providing interactive data visualizations and several user-friendly tools for data analysis.

Expanding Counter-Disinformation Strategies

The legal regulation of internet platforms and social media, as well as the use of artificial intelligence to control the quality and dissemination of information, have all been proving difficult. While the democratic damage caused by disinformation grows everywhere, one must expand the repertoire of responses and actors involved with counteracting the political dissemination of falsehood.

Civil society plays a crucial role in democracies, but also in populist and authoritarian countries, where the government itself may be a source of disinformation. Populist leaders are known to use the state apparatus to generate and spread misinformation

seeking to impose undemocratic policies and perpetuate in power. In countries where the civic space has not been undermined by authoritarian governments, bottom-up approaches and civil society initiatives may play a democratizing role in the fight against disinformation.

The Brazil case examined in this article highlights the role of civil society and collective intelligence in the fight against disinformation. It also points to the need to understand disinformation as meaning more than dissemination of fake news. Disinformation also comprises the lack of accurate information, the invisibility of underrepresented groups, and the inaccessibility of public data. Therefore, civil society's responses to disinformation should imply more than fact-checking and correction of misleading information. They should be able to generate and communicate scientific information, involve citizens and local communities, give visibility to undermined groups and underestimated policy issues, and ensure public data is reliable and accessible. They should act before the fact and not only after it.

You find the website of the joint project of WZB and Oxford University here.

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Image description: There is often talk of bubbles when people increasingly live in groups with similar attitudes without touching other milieus. Pavel Nekoranec used the artificial intelligence software Midjourney for this image. He entered the following keywords: „diverse people inside of floating bursting bubbles, translucent holographic bubbles, some bubbles bursting, futuristic human interaction, under the high density of -population, change the social habit to fulfil population, insane detail, stage cinema lighting, photorealistic, 4K, octane render --ar 2:3 --test –creative".