

Article

## Journalist-Twitterers as Political Influencers in Brazil: Narratives and Disputes Towards a New Intermediary Model

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Submitted: 30 January 2022 | Accepted: 11 July 2022 | Published: 28 July 2022

### Abstract

The ascendancy of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil in 2018 put the role of traditional media companies and journalists under the spotlight. Bad news or opinions against his government have been officially treated as fake, inaccurate, or false information. In this context, data show a decrease in news trust and growing news consumption through platforms. According to the 2021 Reuters Institute report on news trust, only 21% of Brazilians trust the press as an institution, with 71% using social media platforms to be informed. As part of a broad and complex crisis of the traditional intermediary model, several journalists appeared in the Brazilian public sphere as influencers on social media platforms such as Twitter. Based on a qualitative perspective, this article aims to research the role of journalists as political influencers and their use of Twitter to express their voices. A sample of 10 journalists with more than 10,000 followers on Twitter, five working for traditional media and five from native digital media, were interviewed in depth. We realized that they use their digital capital in two political directions. On the one hand, as part of a digital strategy promoted by media outlets to gain attention and call the audience, journalists share their spots and comments on daily issues. On the other hand, in a polarized political context, journalists have found Twitter a means to express their voices in a context of increasing violence and restrictions on free expression among this collective.

### Keywords

Brazil; freedom of the press; influencers; Jair Bolsonaro; journalists

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Journalism, Activism, and Social Media: Exploring the Shifts in Journalistic Roles, Performance, and Interconnectedness,” edited by Peter Maurer (Trier University) and Christian Nuernbergk (Trier University).

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### 1. Introduction

The Brazilian 2018 election and Bolsonaro’s political communication strategy represent an important case to discuss the crisis of journalism and the consolidation of new structures of informational powers. After his inauguration, the violence against journalists increased by 218%, with President Bolsonaro himself being responsible for 34% of these cases in 2021 (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas, 2022). According to the Report Without Borders Index, between 2020 and 2022, Brazil has become “the second most lethal country in the region for reporters” (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Also, censorship in all its manners (persecutions, threats, lawfare) has increased, making Brazil a country classi-

fied as having “restricted” freedom of expression and media (Article 19, 2021). In addition, to Human Rights Watch (“Brazil: Bolsonaro blocks,” 2021), the Brazilian President’s action across social media—blocking opponents or influential political journalists’ critics of him—corroborates the downplaying of free speech in Brazil.

This article assumes that journalists’ precarious and vulnerable position in Brazil has forced them to use or combine social media platforms, such as Twitter, to express and share their production and views. To discuss this, we designed the following research questions:

RQ1: Are Brazilian political journalists using Twitter to influence political narratives due to Bolsonaro’s communication strategy?

RQ2: What are Brazilian political journalists' concerns and perceptions of free expression using Twitter on political issues?

Although citizens still recognize journalism as a crucial contributor to understanding the complexity of our times, the press is an institution that struggles to inspire sufficient confidence in several countries such as Brazil, Spain, Mexico, and the US, among others (Toff et al., 2021). The use of social media by former US President Donald Trump and its relationship with journalists from traditional media (until his banishment from Twitter and Facebook) should be mentioned as a paradigmatic example (Gutsche, 2018; Morini, 2020; Ouyang & Waterman, 2020), with connections to the Brazilian case.

In fact, Trump's communication strategy, designed by Steve Bannon, has changed the basis of political communication, not only during an electoral campaign but before, during, and after it (Morini, 2020). As explained by Feffer (2021), Bannon, based on his experience as creator and editor-in-chief of Breitbart News, idealized an international movement of right-wing leaders. Most of them, such as Bolsonaro in Brazil, adopted his strategies. Based on a populist, fragmented and partial edition of facts, manipulation of truth, and against everything that ethical journalism stands for, the idea was to create propaganda instead of news, to engage the social media audience by offering supporters shareable material to legitimize their political views; paraphrasing Petre (2021), news designed as clickbait to polarize, despite the moral consequences. All these right-wing leaders, such as Trump or Bolsonaro, continuously discredit traditional journalism critics or report on politically sensitive topics. They blamed it for not being neutral and supporting new media outlets or traditional media that expressively helped them, such as Fox News TV or Record TV, in the US and Brazil (Almeida, 2019; Morini, 2020).

In turn, journalists' presence on social media changed their traditional roles as gatekeepers. Some of them assumed the category of political influencers (Casero-Ripollés, 2020), and journalistic outlets stimulated an apparently win-win process, incorporating journalists-influencers in newsrooms as well as encouraging their employees to use their reputation and credibility to create active profiles on social media platforms (Pérez Serrano & García Santamaría, 2021). Progressively, journalists are becoming an essential part of the message. Reframing and mixing McLuhan's thesis with enunciation theory, the medium, and the enunciator is (also) the message. In particular, in this article, we assume the statement that Twitter is now a central intermediary place—although not the only one—for political debates (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020).

Taking this context as a background, as mentioned earlier, this article aims to explore the role of journalists as political influencers using Twitter in Brazil after Jair Bolsonaro became President (in January 2018). As part of the populist spectrum of extreme right-wing politi-

cians, even before his election to the presidency of Brazil, Bolsonaro has had a hostile relationship with the press, openly supported censorship, and suggested throughout his digital platforms, including Twitter (where he has up to 7,2 million followers), actions against media outlets or journalists considered subversives, communists, or bad professionals. As sustained by Article 19 (2021, p. 33), "populist leaders and those who seek to entrench their own power hate accountability, which is why we have seen attacks on journalists and online censorship intensify in many countries," and Brazil was mentioned as a paradigmatic exemplum of these threats. After the arrival of Bolsonaro, as argued by Silva and Marques (2021), Brazilian journalists became more vulnerable to harassment and violence. Brazil's situation goes beyond merely being a parallel of "Trumpism." According to Nemer (2021), Bolsonaro's supporters could attempt to reproduce the US Capitol invasion if he were defeated in the 2022 Brazilian presidential election.

The extensive available literature mainly discusses Bolsonaro's tactics of using WhatsApp to share disinformation (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Chagas, 2022; Chaves & Braga, 2019; C. Machado et al., 2019; Moura & Michelson, 2017). However, news production, distribution, and consumption in a polarized public space like Brazil have changed (J. Machado & Miskolci, 2019). As a result, social media platforms appeared as a real-time source of information for Brazilians. Consequently, political journalists have become more attached to their social media networks. As in many other countries and contexts, Twitter has become a new form of interaction with political journalism and its audiences (Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019). Based on a qualitative perspective, we questioned journalists on their use of social media as political influencers to control narratives and hold on to their voices under rampant violence and increasing restrictions on free expression.

## 2. Literature Review

In this article, the epistemological lens requires different layers to achieve the designed objective. Hence, firstly, we will review social media's impacts on news production, distribution, and consumption, particularly on political journalism. Secondly, we will also discuss it based on the idea of influence or the creation of an indirect system of influence. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, among others, have created the category of influencers. However, we argue that this peer position, applied to political journalists, can be better explained by the "two-step flow" theory. Finally, we will review studies on how political journalists have been using social media platforms, especially Twitter, to circumvent restrictions on freedom of expression in critical regimes.

As an institution, journalism faces a defining moment while being in a state of disarray. According to Zelizer et al. (2021, p. 14), "in journalism, the institution ends up being disconnected from the everyday realities of

everyone who matters,” which means failing to keep in tune with journalists, sources, and subjects of news, and audiences. Many layers can be employed to explain it. Social media’s impact on news presentation is an essential one, as explained by Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019). Among other social media platforms, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp transformed journalism and its effect on society, from production to consumption (Steensen & Westlund, 2020). Social media turned the agenda-setting and the meaning of public interest (Napoli, 2019), opening up the struggle to set a new intermediary model. Also, it changed the gatekeeper process. In the US context, Singer (2014) explored and described how editors of digital newspapers understood the role of users as secondary gatekeepers. According to his study, social media, journalists and editors perceive the value of users in news production, resulting in a “two-steep gatekeeping process,” in which one editor’s decision to include a topic as news is followed by users’ participatory capacity—allowed by technology—to downgrade or upgrade the visibility of the information piece.

Social media impacts on political journalism have been framed from different angles in this context. For example, Bruns and Nuernbergk (2019) suggest creating new structures and forms of power relations, influence, and information flows among political journalists, their audiences on Twitter, and other stakeholders. Although circumscribed to Germany and Australia, they identified that journalists’ voices throughout social media competed with experts, commentators, and other sources for the same space. These new power structures are part of a new media ecology or a “hybrid media system” in which boundaries between traditional and new media are blurring. As a consequence, both are becoming more interdependent, and taking politics as an example, the “news cycle” should be replaced by the “political information cycle” (Chadwick, 2017).

Mainstream media accepted new forms of collaborations from citizens, blurring the frontiers of news production in the context of alternative platforms’ and alternative media’s growing credibility (Salaudeen, 2021). Moreover, under the empire of networked society and the rampant social media presence in daily life, digital influencers appeared and got the capacity to battle to set public opinion on matters of interest (Fernandez-Prados et al., 2021).

Before defining what a digital influencer—or political journalist influencer—is and what is their capacity to influence (the public opinion or the public or political agenda), the meaning of influence must be contextualized in the light of media studies. Katz and Lazarsfeld (2017) offer an opening view. Published originally in 1955, *Personal Influence* proposed that the mass media effect should not be explained in terms of a direct effect on the audience. Instead, they defended the thesis of the existence of an “indirect system of influence,” turning the focus from general media effects to what people do with it as an audience. Therefore, the so-called two-step

flow of communication defends that the primary group of socialization in a given community or group is decisive in building opinion on any specific topic. This primary group of opinion leaders is responsible for receiving and processing information from the mass media and interacting with it. This group is responsible for mediating and sharing (ideas or information) with the other audience members, the second flow. As Livingstone (2006) explains, although it proposes a shift from direct to an indirect system of effects based on a mass media mindset, it is not limited to it. In the age of media convergence, with a globalized and even more personalized media environment, some insights should be considered, especially that “processes of media influence are mediated by social contexts, including community and face-to-face interactions” (Livingstone, 2006, p. 243). In addition, to support the inquiry on contextual-textual mediation in the new media environment, Livingstone suggests the importance of including artifacts or devices, activities and practices, and social arrangements employed to communicate or share information.

O’Regan (2021) suggests that Katz’s assumptions constitute an essential raw material for discussing how social media influencers emerged and have become, in some cases, political influencers nowadays. Social media, according to Lindgren (2017, p. 29), “enables the co-creation and constant editing by multimodal content, that is, content that mixes several modalities (written text, photographic images, videos, and sounds).” The revolutionary possibilities generated by web 2.0 created a new media ecology or, as mentioned before, a hybrid media system where information and its circulation gained a central place. Reviewing it with a sociological lens, Manuel Castells (2009) coined the idea of “self-mass communication” to explain the potential capacity that web 2.0 and social media gave to individuals to make their voices reach a mass audience. As an optimist, the same author analyzed how these voices became capable of organizing social movements and taking actions that trembled political structure during the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, or the 15-M Indignados Movement (Castells, 2012). However, he did not explain what it is to be a relevant figure in social media or an influencer in a networked society.

In the context of new media ecology, while limited to a profit-driven theory, marketing analysts figured out earlier new media potentiality and developed a tiny theory of influencers. In the early days of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, Paul Gillin (2007) offered an attempt to explain the emergent role of digital influencers, the majority of whom at that point were bloggers. It goes on a similar marketing theory, such as Keller and Berry’s (2003) thesis that there is an indirect system of opinion leaders able to persuade others on a micro-scale his peers. According to Taillon et al. (2020, p. 768), “social media influencers are social media users who have built a substantial network of followers by posting textual and visual narrations of their everyday lives and hold

influence over a group of viewers.” In addition, it is considered essential that these influencers must use their networks to show their “human brands.” Advertising a product or presenting a political opinion is considered the same “selling” process, based on platforms’ capacity to “earn profit from the human brands they create.”

If digital influencers were able to manufacture a particular audience of followers, engaging them with their content production and influencing and persuading them to consume any product, political leaders and their spin-doctors visualized a fertile field to conquer. The connections between marketing and politics are not new. However, social media has changed the way it is done. According to Highfield (2016), it has politicized the personal on an everyday scale and made politics even more personal. Throughout social media, politicians got an audience to comment daily on news and any occurrences, from the most serious to the most trivial fact.

By extension, political journalism also turned. Casero-Ripollés (2020) argues that, recovering Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (2017) thesis, one of the most relevant changes introduced by social media in the field of political communication “is the emergence of political influencers or digital opinion leaders” (p. 171). The two-step flow re-appeared in a more complex relationship between producers and audiences. Lou (2021) argues for the need for a “trans-parasocial relation—to capture a collectively reciprocal, (a)synchronously interactive, and co-created relation between influencers and their captive followers” (p. 3). In the social media age, the audience was classified by many as fragmented by new technologies, interactional opportunities, and pitfalls. But, as Huertas Bailén (2021) explains, more than this, we face an even more personalized consumption experience.

Hence, news media outlets and journalists are reframing social media in many ways. On news production, Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) highlight how Twitter and Facebook made news presentations more interpersonal and subjective. Canter (2015), focusing on Twitter, supports the thesis on how it has affected news-making, news-gathering, live reporting, verification; although the uses of Twitter to drive traffic to news companies did not feature in her study, she did present the idea of “personal branding and journalists presenting a personalized—but not personal—account of their job via their tweets” (p. 888). Studies on journalists’ personal branding on Twitter identify a new form of social capital for journalists in a field of dispute for the audience attention and visibility among peers and media outlets (e.g., Brems et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2014).

Also, Twitter or the activity of microblogging has become part of the journalists’ routine and provided them with a new way to be accountable and to share and engage with user-generated content (Lasorsa et al., 2012); however, with a transparency paradox, whether they disclose more about how news is produced and less on their personal lives they get fewer interaction claims (Hedman, 2016). To Saipera and Iliadi (2015),

Twitter has opened an affective news relation redefining the boundaries between audiences and journalists into one in which professional authenticity, personal repertoire, and responsibility become central pieces of journalists’ labor and presence on digital platforms.

Twitter and social media platforms have allowed a new space for dissident voices to reach an audience to express their thoughts (Castells, 2012). According to Hintz (2016), the paradox of using commercial social media to express dissident voices has generated an intermediary model where protestors or activists articulated social mobilization by it. Though, these private companies can restrict the circulation of messages and surveil them. In short, what was a public right—free expression—becomes subordinated to a private interpretation and will. However, as explained by Price (2015), the new architecture of information flows allowed a reshaped marketplace of ideas where social media can contribute to journalists, and activists, among others, to circumvent political and authoritarianism temptations to limit free expression. Undoubtedly, a side effect of it is that journalists become more exposed to private and public (including police) surveillance (Thurman, 2018) in an ambiguous context where, apparently, they can express their opinions more freely.

### 3. Methods

This article aims to research the role of Brazilian journalists using Twitter to become political influencers. A sample of 10 journalists with more than 10,000 followers on Twitter, five working for traditional media outlets, and five with labor activities in native new media were interviewed in depth.

#### 3.1. Sampling Procedures

As a qualitative study, the number of interviews (10) was defined by saturation. To reach the journalists, we used a snowball technique. We must point out that we did more than 60 contacts with potential participants until we achieved the sample. Most journalists contacted declined, and anonymity was a natural condition requested by participants. Since 2018, the Federal Police, the Ministry of Justice, and other institutions from the Brazilian government have started to pressure or intimidate activists, journalists, scholars, and internet influencers, among others, who publicly show critical positions with Bolsonaro’s government. Bolsonaro’s hostility especially targeted female journalists. A historical barometer on violence against journalists in Brazil, released in 1990, has indicated that since Bolsonaro’s inauguration, the number of cases has been increasing: 58% more in 2019 and 105% more in 2020 compared with the previous years, respectively. The President himself, in 2021, was considered responsible, in person, for 34% of the 430 cases (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas, 2022).

Therefore, to protect participants of the study, we took some measures: a) all the interviews were conducted using an encrypted open-source videoconferencing system to avoid external interference or unauthorized recording; b) a pseudonym was attributed to all participants in any materials, including this article; c) all data that could potentially identify any participant were encrypted and protected by passwords; d) hence, along with this article, any mention that could professionally compromise any participants was omitted. For this reason, in Table 1 and throughout this article, we avoid linking any name to the company or independent project that participants were collaborating on. Interviews were carried out from 26 October till 28 November, 2021. All the discursive material produced was in the Portuguese language.

The sample from traditional media includes at least one journalist from *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *Estadão*. These are the three most influential newspapers in Brazil. Participants from native new media include journalists from *UOL* (the most significant content site), *Agência Pública*, and *The Intercept.br*, among other independent journalists. In this sense, although there is a historical field of alternative and popular community media in Brazil (including radio and newspapers), it is important to point out that, in Brazil, most alternative media in recent years has used new media or born as native (Cavalcante, 2021). For that reason, the new media sample included journalists from digital native alternative media projects. All the journalists interviewed had from eight up to more than 30 years of experience. Regarding gender, six were men, and four were women.

### 3.2. Analysis Procedures

We adopted Thompson's (2011) depth-hermeneutics (DH) as a methodological perspective considering that it allows an extensive articulation between the theoretical framework mobilized and its analytical possibilities. The DH incorporates the socio-historical conditions of production, circulation, and receptions of discourses as symbolic forms. Following that, we divided

the methodological proceedings into three stages (socio-historical analysis, formal or discursive analysis, and re-interpretation), "which must not be seen as separate stages of a sequential method but rather as analytically distinct dimensions of a complex interpretative process" (Thompson, 2011, p. 137). Therefore, we articulate the findings' explanation with the results of the interpretative analysis. To do so, using Atlas.ti software, we classified hermeneutic units according to their relevance for the analysis. Interviews were analyzed individually and then in relation to each other and in light of the socio-historical context. Theories mobilized in the previous section offered the epistemological lens to interpret the data and create clusters. Figure 1 summarizes the analysis procedure under the DH perspective.

Thompson (2011) sustains that DH is not a research method but a perspective that allows theory-method articulation and the creative combination of different research techniques. Thus, we could combine a discursive analysis with contextual/historical interpretation in the light of the theories reviewed.

### 3.3. Scope and Limitation

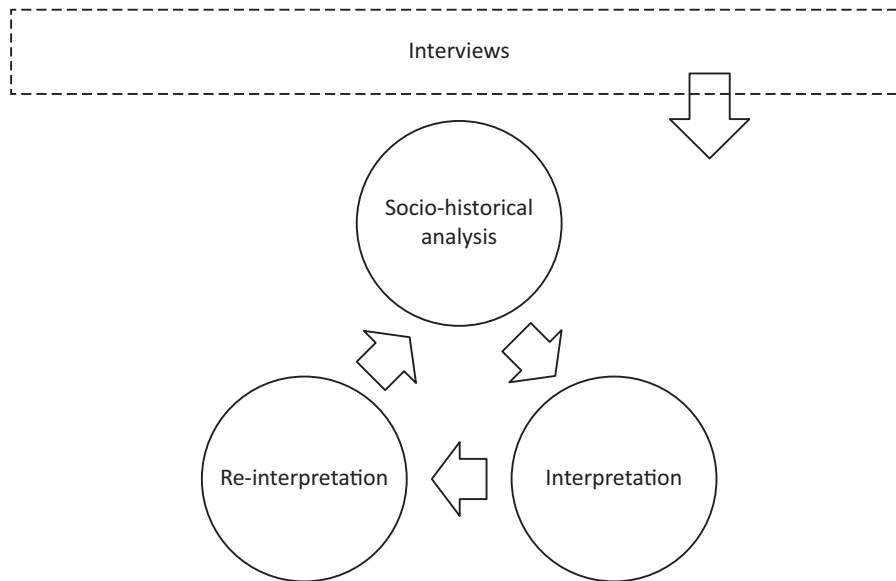
As Bourdieu (1999) argues, qualitative interviews are an interactive procedure. Therefore, the discourse produced results from a social interaction process between researcher and participant. It is a constructive social process where the meanings of a linguistic exchange are negotiated.

Qualitative analyses are essential to offer a close view of an object but do not allow generalization. Moreover, although necessary to access participants, anonymity reduces the possibilities for interpretation and discussion. Therefore, the analysis does not include participants' social networking analysis. Nevertheless, findings and discussion offer possibilities to figure out the uses of Twitter by Brazilian journalists in the context of a right-wing authoritarian government as part of an accentuated dispute to control political narratives and change the intermediation model, but they are also limited.

**Table 1.** Sampling profile.

Code	Name (Fake)	Experience	Media Company	Twitter Followers	Day of Interview (2021)
1	Gabriel	< 18 years	New media	140 K	26 October
2	Pedro	13 years	Traditional	10.7 K	31 October
3	Carlos	< 25 years	New media	70.8 K	4 November
4	Amanda	< 10 years	New media	11.7 K	8 November
5	Cesar	33 years	Traditional	13.1 K	8 November
6	Ronaldo	< 30 years	Traditional	18 K	9 November
7	Roberta	19 years	Traditional	22 K	9 November
8	Juliana	11 years	New media	19.1 K	10 November
9	David	20 years	Traditional	22.4 K	10 November
10	Mariana	8 years	New media	49.6 K	28 November





**Figure 1.** Depth-hermeneutics and analysis procedure.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. The Context of “Bolsonarism” and Its Social Media Uses in a Polarized Brazil

Explaining why Bolsonaro got elected, in 2018, as President of Brazil and his political movement known as “bolsonarism” is a complex endeavor and goes beyond the objective of this article. However, some contextual elements can be highlighted. Brazil faced a unique election process for several reasons. A few years before, in 2013, massive protests occurred when young people went to the streets to protest against all the established political institutions and parties (Machado & Miskolci, 2019). In 2016, a parliamentary coup d’état impeached president Dilma Rousseff from the Worker’s Party and a former prisoner of the dictatorial military regime in Brazil (1964–1985; Fagnani, 2017). Polarization and political hate divided Brazilian society. During the mentioned impeachment, Bolsonaro, a former military member, and an MP with more than six consecutive mandates without any political achievement, praised the members of the military who had tortured Rousseff with a misogynist tone (Possenti, 2018). In addition, an anti-corruption judiciary operation targeted the former Brazilian President, Lula da Silva, also from the Worker’s party, using lawfare tactics (Santoro & Tavares, 2019). Lula was sent to jail in 2018 when he was his party’s candidate and led all the polls for the 2018 presidential election (“Lula se entrega,” 2018). Without Lula as a real competitor, Bolsonaro used the polarization and the hate against the Worker’s Party (and the political establishment) in his favor, framing himself as a political outsider because he had never been in a major political party. Ideologically, he generated a narrative of anti-corruption, ultraconservative (anti-LGBT rights and misogyny) fitting with evangelism perspectives, and

painted himself as a victim after having suffered an assassination attempt in September 2018, one month before election day (Almeida, 2019).

Bolsonaro also used social networks and a systematic method of spreading fake news to gain attention, support, and control the narrative during the 2018 presidential campaign (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2019; Statista, 2020). In this context and since, alongside his continuous threats to traditional media outlets (Silva & Marques, 2021), he did not attend any debates or interviews with professional journalists. Rather, his social media profiles were used to comment on any topic of his interest (Lopes et al., 2020).

##### 4.2. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Journalists and the Influencer Paradoxes

Not only the internet but social media appearance changed the daily activities of journalists. “It’s not easy” was a common argument used by participants to explain daily activities, both in traditional and native digital newsrooms. Pressure and the convergence of modalities made journalists multimedia. Digitalization was a significant event for those with more than 20 years of experience. Downsizing, which was considered a natural consequence, occurred to an even greater extent. As Ronaldo explained:

When I was editor, in the first decade of this century, I remember sending a journalist and a photographer to a political event and my colleague, editor of the site, doing the same. Now, we have both lost our position, there are fewer editors in all newsrooms, and we send only one journalist, and s/he feeds our site, digital TV, platforms, and print paper with all the content. In addition, s/he also tweets!

Being resigned to this state of affairs was a common feature of all participants' opinions.

With this context as a given fact or a background, many good aspects of social media, in general, and Twitter, in particular, emerged in the field. "Twitter is the most journalist social media," said Carlos. "For me [César], it is a great source of information and keeps me up-to-date." According to informants, forecasting issues and scoops is another good aspect. In other words, to Pedro, Twitter allows him "to set a kind of information playlist to monitor facts and sources, and then, to reply or share it with my audience." Not only in the political context of Brazil, where many politicians, including Bolsonaro, use social media to make firsthand statements. "Press conference? I never attended," said Mariana. The political spectacle takes place in the digital sphere.

Becoming an influencer, however, for all of them was a natural happening in their professional lives. None of them assumed the role of influencer in terms of "human brand," as marketing theories described (Taillon et al., 2020). "Journalist can never be the news," said Carlos. To Amanda, "we are not celebrities; we inform!" However, after some discussion, the interviewees described what being an influencer means to a political journalist. Although all of them made a vigorous defense of information as a protagonist, they recognized the journalist's role in explaining or influencing people in their growth. All interviewees mentioned the information disorder and the growth of fake news in Brazil to explain "my responsibility to explain better and help people to get the meaning of the news," as said by Pedro. The liberal mindset that shapes most journalism theories also came up. "Yes, in some way, I am an opinion leader. But I just bring my view. People need to make their own conclusions. But in Brazil, the educational divide and the polarization make it hard," explained Roberta.

In this context, all of them expressed how Twitter helped them to produce more personalized content. "I don't look at metrics. But I learned empirically, tweeting, what my followers like and engage with," said Gabriel. However, the personalized or sectorial specialization shaped in Twitter is not enough to be an active influencer. All of the participants convey the idea that the more you use your personal touch, the more followers, reputation, and influence you get. The two-step flow model seems to be an accurate model to explain how using Twitter journalists influence political opinions as part of an indirect system of influence.

Although for those working on traditional media outlets, it seems easier to establish a boundary between personalized content and personal life, the Brazilian political landscape, since 2018, due to Bolsonaro's communication strategy, makes it hard. "You lose the right to be human," says Gabriel as he explains the bad side of being a twitterer who is considered a political influencer. This perception was shared by all participants working for new media. According to Juliana, "the journalist's online life is much more fragile and susceptible to harm than in

other physical spaces." She added that when reporting on government scandals, for example, the journalist must be prepared to receive a huge amount of virtual attacks.

The ugliness became clear when all participants from new media described virtual harassment, canceling, and continuous aggression. "Brazil's reality is ugly. It is not a safe place for journalists. Especially if you are women, gay, black, or other minority groups that the President and their digital militia continuously attack," said Amanda. She describes how she receives daily threats of sexual violence, among other violent acts. Gabriel, who was attacked several times by what he called "Bolsonaro's digital militia," added that reporting these issues in Brazil requires strong mental preparation.

#### *4.3. Social Capital, New Intermediaries, and the Political Information Cycle*

"I don't know when it has happened, but Twitter in Brazil has become the journalist curriculum vitae," said Amanda. All of the interviewees agreed upon this to some degree. Some explained their decision to erase old posts, considering that someone could use them to cancel, discredit, or harass. However, political volatility in Brazil puts journalists under constant scrutiny. "When you disclose some political scandal of this [Bolsonaro] government, you know that you become the target immediately," explains Pedro. If this could happen in the past, all participants agreed that it has become more violent in the present. Protecting reputation seems to be a core issue for all of them to hold on to their positions as influential journalists.

New media journalists are proud of their social capital and their potential audience on Twitter. All the participants, however, identified a "new intermediary model." David criticized those journalists who become bigger than the media companies, but in general, all of them explained from their field Chadwich's thesis on a "hybrid model" where the news cycle was replaced by the political information cycle. The way to inform about politics has changed. In a more polarized and informed social media, Roberta explains that she takes notes from sources, during interviews, in the format of tweets. Similar practices were described and, in general, participants explained that they first publish the headline, then expand the narrative in a fluid content relation from/for social media. According to all, reporting becomes a real-time activity. Hence, similar to Singer's (2014) findings, a secondary gatekeeper seems to articulate editors/journalists and user's roles, making them more attentive to this collaboration on the re-distribution of news and, as mentioned by Mariana, "building the news in a real-time mood, with more transparency," in line with Hedman's results (2016).

For that reason, it was no surprise when journalists from traditional media outlets explained that "the newspaper (traditional media) helps us to tweet what is good. Twitter Brazil, for example, has an agreement with the

company. They organized a course in our newsroom to help us to be (or act) as influencers,” said César. Despite that, as Gabriel expressed, “traditional media companies used to see social networks and digital media as enemies, as one who has stolen something that belongs to them.” New media journalists—even those who are not in new media outlets—agreed that traditional media still uses the mindset of competitors. As Mariana says:

When you publish a political issue using Twitter and your media site, you can expand it and connect with others’ work...and the story can become bigger. But traditional media still wants all the audience for them, all the credits, etc.

#### 4.4. *Tweeting and the Journalism Crisis in a Collapsed Democracy*

The continuous attacks perpetrated by Bolsonaro harassing journalists, as described earlier, created a sort of precaution or self-care protection feeling when talking about them. Without mentioning Bolsonaro’s name, carefully, Pedro said that “this government crossed a red line on institutionalism. Since 2018 (maybe a bit before), in Brazil, the press and journalists have lived a sort of permanent under-pressure state.” In this context, as expressed by Juliana, “people in Brazil tweet very passionately.” All participants mentioned that, because of these elements, they do not polemicize on Twitter, which means they do not answer unpolite comments or engage in rhetorical disputes with followers or other twitterers. “I have my voice and, as a public figure, I need to act responsibly,” said Ronaldo.

Yet, traditional media have “style manual” and compliance guidelines for their journalists on what they can and cannot do in their personal social media profiles. It was expressed as something natural or a professional agreement by those who work for traditional media. Contrarily, journalists from new media criticized that. “Social media profiles must have our face! I would never ever accept censorship,” said the youngest participant, Mariana. For some, the existence of guidelines is a way to censor and control what can be published. “I still have colleagues working on traditional media, and they call these ‘documents’ ‘Social Media AI-5,’” explained Gabriel. During the military dictatorship period (1964–1985), the AI-5 was an institutional act imposed to suspend rights and freedoms, particularly those related to press and expression.

It was not unanimous. On the contrary, the idea that all journalists have a responsibility embodied in their function, especially when they become influential figures on Twitter, indicates that the discussion is not precisely on the existence of rules but its legitimacy (imposed by employer or platform). Moreover, for those who work for new media companies, the perception that Twitter profiles are part of themselves is stronger than for those who work for traditional media. Also, political

journalists settled in new media naturalized the perception that their Twitter profiles are something exchangeable with news outlets.

Some convergent views on the weakness of Twitter’s terms of use appeared in all interviews. Hate speech and the platforms’ incapacity to control attacks on journalists emerged in all interviews. “The law exists. Crime is crime inside or outside Twitter. But it seems that for some people, they will never be punished by Twitter or by the authorities,” explained Mariana. It arose in all interviews that platforms and Twitter contain disinformation, hate speech, and all types of continuing violence against journalists, and anyone who expresses a political opinion in Brazil has to deal with it.

Amanda, Ronaldo, Gabriela, Pedro, Paulo, and Roberta explained violent situations with credible details, including one in which they suffered a coordinated digital attack on Twitter by the “hate cabinet” after comments that criticized or disclosed a scandal regarding Bolsonaro, his government, or family. The existence and actions of a “hate cabinet” are under investigation by Brazilian Supreme Court (STF Inquire Nº 4.781, under secret). Furthermore, it was the object of analysis by a Special Parliamentary Commission in the Brazilian Congress (*CPI das Fake News*). In short, it would be a complex of sites and trolls used to attack Bolsonaro’s opponents since the electoral campaign in 2018.

The “hate cabinet,” according to the participants mentioned above and the available information released by institutions, can spread fake news about a person or change the truth using a disinformation technique. We consider it a nightmare for democracy which exemplifies the attacks on journalists and journalism as an institution. Also, it illustrates that audiences are no longer confident in the traditional intermediary model. Under this kind of attack, as said by informants, the only thing that works is to have a prominent position on Twitter where you can explain your situation, sources, and views. Therefore, being an influencer helps a lot.

## 5. Conclusions

Although it is not a novelty, it is convenient to point out that social media has changed political journalism. In a globalized world with new information flows and networks, extreme right-wing political leaders such as Bolsonaro in Brazil followed the Bannon–Trump strategy to set new forms of political communication. In the Brazilian context, this includes the extensive use of fake news, hate speech, harassment, and other forms of violence against journalists.

Journalism, as a practice or an institution, and democracy, in Brazil and other parts of the globe, are at a defining moment. Social Media in general, and Twitter in particular, are playing a core role. As Bruns and Nuernbergk (2019) suggested, new power structures emerged from political journalists’ relations with social media audiences. Brazilian journalists who participated in this study



exemplify different forms of Twitter's use to influence political narratives (setting the public or political agenda or building the public opinion). It has become part of their daily role, changing news production routines, offering a secondary gatekeeper to distribute news, and providing a more transparent process in the context of rampant fake news and pressure from the government.

Results indicate the existence of a similar two-step flow system, similar to Katz and Lazarsfeld's (2017), based on journalists/influencers–audiences/followers relation as part of a new intermediary model. We have identified that participants use their digital capital in two political directions. On the one hand, journalists share their spots and comments on daily issues as part of a digital strategy promoted by media outlets to gain attention and call the audience. On the other hand, in a polarized political context, as we inquired about in RQ1, journalists found in Twitter a path—although not the only one—to fight on the same battlefield (social media platforms) that Bolsonaro uses to communicate. The fluid connections between different media are reshaping the intermediary model. As we inquired in RQ2, participants indicated threats to freedom of expression in the digital landscape and the importance of being a digital influencer, which means having a prominent position across social media platforms. They indicated it as the best, and sometimes, the only way, to control narratives about their productions or themselves while they are faced with continual harassment, hate, and a fake news storm promoted by Bolsonaro and his supporters against journalists and media outlets.

### Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the insightful and constructive comments of both the anonymous reviewers and the academic editors.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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