Unveiling Disinformation: Mapping Attacks on Brazil's Electoral System and the Response of the Superior Electoral Court (2018–2023)

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Falsehoods targeting political parties and candidates have long been entrenched in Brazilian politics and monitored by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE). Since the rise of the far right in Brazil, the TSE has itself become a disinformation target. This study aims to unveil disinformation that has been directed at the Brazilian electoral system since 2018 and explore the court's responses. First, we quantitatively analyzed 420 verification articles from the TSE's *Fato ou Boato* website to identify the falsehoods' origins, targets, narratives, and deceptive strategies. Second, we conducted expert interviews and qualitatively examined official documents to explore counteraction strategies, particularly collaborations with fact-checkers. The findings indicate that disinformation primarily revolves around the alleged vulnerability of the electronic voting system (25%) and supposed illegal actions that have been committed by the TSE (15%). Supreme Federal Court ministers, notably Luís Barroso and Alexandre de Moraes, have become frequent targets. Assaults on the TSE surged from 15% (2018) to 27% (2022). Strengthened collaboration with fact-checkers enhances their societal recognition and significance in the Brazilian public sphere.

Keywords: disinformation, Brazilian elections, fact-checking, electoral court, institutionalization, political communication

Globally, political discourses are undergoing significant shifts as digital media reshapes public communication (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2022). The legitimacy of governments, science, and news media is being questioned (Neuberger et al., 2023), which has cast doubts on their authority. In Brazil, the Superior

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Electoral Court[2] (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, TSE) has keenly experienced this phenomenon. While electoral disinformation, which is defined here as the intentional spread of falsehoods (Wardle, 2020) about political parties and candidates, has long been part of the political landscape and addressed by the electoral court, the focus of false statements began to shift in 2018. With the rise of right-wing populism in Brazil, a parallel strategy emerged involving widespread attacks on the TSE. This approach has involved the dissemination of disinformation to undermine the institution and its participants by fostering suspicion about the Brazilian voting system (Bastos & Recuero, 2023; TSE, 2019, 2021).

In response to systematic attacks on the electoral process, the TSE launched a program to combat disinformation, which was formalized in 2019, based on nonregulatory and multisectoral strategies. This program focuses on three pillars: quality information dissemination, capacity building, and response. To achieve these goals, the TSE collaborated with nine Brazilian fact-checkers to verify rumors related to the electoral process. Additionally, the electoral justice introduced the *Fato ou Boato* (Fact or Rumor) webpage, which serves as a centralized platform for verified information. Through collaboration with mobile phone operators, this webpage was made exempt from data traffic charges (zero rating), which enabled citizens to access it at any time. This disinformation-combating program has 49 partners, including Google, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and political parties (TSE, 2019, 2021).

Aimed at combating electoral process disinformation, this partnership between an electoral superior court and fact-checking organizations is unprecedented globally. While most of the literature on disinformation responses focuses on legal countermeasures (Funke, 2021; Schuldt, 2021), our study introduces a program led by a judicial state branch and involving multiple stakeholders. As policy makers grappled with the intricate task of defining and mitigating disinformation challenges (Nash, Shipley, Roblot, & Wilson, 2023), the TSE collaborated with independent fact-checkers. Unlike the approach adopted by the Brazilian federal government (Duchiade, 2023) and other nations such as India (Smalley, 2023), Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand (Schuldt, 2021), and China (Zeng, Burgess, & Bruns, 2019), which have instituted state-operated fact-checking endeavors susceptible to perceived biases, the TSE's 2024 resolution asserts a distinct stance: "The classification of content by fact-checking agencies that have signed a cooperation agreement with the [TSE] will be conducted independently and under the responsibility of those agencies" (TSE, 2024).

Considering the contextual components of disinformation (Hameleers, 2023), the literature review presented here first outlines the Brazilian information landscape by highlighting why the country is a compelling case for studying disinformation flows and responses. Factors such as robust Internet penetration (CIA, 2022), the predominant social media use for accessing news over television (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson, & Nielsen, 2023), and the widespread use of WhatsApp (Mello, 2023) have contributed to Brazil's status as a hub for disinformation. The review then demonstrates how right-wing actors have exploited this information infrastructure to propagate problematic content, which aligns with literature that suggests an affinity between populism and post-truth politics (Waisbord, 2018a). Finally, given TSE's collaboration with fact-checkers, the review examines the emergence and role of these professionals.

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[2] The TSE is the highest authority within the Brazilian electoral justice system; its primary powers are outlined in the Constitution and the Electoral Code.

We analyzed the disinformation attacks against the electoral system to illuminate the court's motivation for action. Specifically, we scrutinized the origins of disinformation, key narratives, and deception strategies while observing temporal variations. To achieve this, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of verification articles from the *Fato ou Boato* webpage between 2018 and 2023, which encompassed three Brazilian elections,[3] presidential (2018 and 2022) and municipal (2020). This analysis empirically demonstrated the right-wing assaults on the Brazilian electoral system and provided a foundation for understanding the TSE's responses. Subsequently, we sought to elucidate the strategies that the Superior Electoral Court has employed to combat disinformation by focusing on its collaboration with fact-checking organizations. Thus, we conducted six in-depth interviews with TSE members and key informants, which we supplemented by analyzing reports and promotional materials that had been published by the electoral court.

Our contribution to the literature is multifaceted. By addressing gaps in disinformation research (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024), we present longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data from a non-Western country, which expand the geospatial scope of existing analyses. This approach demonstrates how macrosystemic levels impact disinformation circulation and responses. We have also included data from qualitative interviews to respond to calls for more qualitative insights into disinformation studies (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Furthermore, the article explores a nonregulatory, multistakeholder approach, which is a less commonly observed response mechanism in the literature. Finally, we contribute to the scholarship on fact-checking and journalistic responses to disinformation (Kyriakidou & Cushion, 2021) by examining the innovative collaboration between fact-checkers and the Brazilian electoral justice system.

The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere in Brazil

The rise of digital media has significantly impacted the public sphere (Habermas, 2022) by lowering the barriers to entry and allowing direct communication between various speakers, including politicians, judiciary members, experts, and influencers (Sevignani, 2022). This disintermediation process has disrupted the traditional gatekeeper model (Bruns, 2017) since professional journalism once held exclusive access to information sources and played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion (Waisbord, 2018a). The widespread use of social media for news has raised concerns since it can amplify disinformation by aiding populist actors in building networks of followers who share biased perspectives that are unsupported by facts. This exacerbates media fragmentation, degrades public debate, erodes media trust, and deepens polarization.

While high social media usage and the rise of radical right-wing populism are not phenomena that are exclusive to Brazil, the country presents a particularly extreme case due to a combination of factors. In Brazil, Internet penetration stands at approximately 81%, which surpasses that of countries such as India (46%) and the Philippines (53%; CIA, 2022). The use of social media for news (57%) has already overtaken the use of television (51%; Newman et al., 2023). Brazil leads globally in WhatsApp usage, particularly in voice messaging (Mello, 2023). In 2018, about 44% of the electorate relied on WhatsApp to receive political information (Nemer, 2021). Moreover, 62% of Internet users in Brazil access it solely through mobile phones (Nemer, 2021). Despite these changes in public communication, Brazil lacks a robust regulatory framework

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[3] During presidential elections, the electorate casts vote for the president, the national congress, governors, and the legislative assemblies of all the federative states.

for online content. In 2018, approximately 20 bills were proposed in Congress to address this issue, which drew criticism from press freedom organizations since crafting legislation to counter misinformation entails risks, particularly about the determination of "truth" (Funke, 2021).

The consequences of the evolving mediascape and the absence of regulation became apparent during the 2018 election. The Organization of American States (OAS), which observed this electoral process, noted a shift: "The traditional media campaign, where most candidates had minimal television and radio exposure, moved to the Internet," with political discourse predominantly occurring on social networks and extending to WhatsApp during the runoff election (OAS, 2018, p. 2). Despite restricted political advertising, Bolsonaro effectively connected with voters in 2018 through social media and messaging apps. Brazil had experienced disinformation campaigns during previous elections, but their impact had been comparatively limited. The emergence of right-wing forces exacerbated the issue, as detailed in the following section.

Disinformation and Right-Wing Populism: The Brazilian Far-Right Fake News Machinery

Researchers have linked the increase of online disinformation to the rise of far-right populism (Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018a). Hameleers (2023) defined disinformation as a deliberate, context-bound act through which actors covertly deceive recipients by decontextualizing, manipulating, or fabricating information to maximize utility with the goal of misleading recipients (p. 6). Brazil also experiences significant right-wing populist disinformation (Recuero et al., 2022).

Understanding Bolsonaro's populist disinformation playbook requires examining the political context that preceded his administration. From 2013 to 2016, Brazil faced escalating political challenges, including protests against transport prices, public expenditures before the World Cup, and the Car Wash[4] corruption scandal (Smith, 2020; Sponholz & Christofoletti, 2019). Rousseff's removal from office in 2016 marked the end of Brazil's pink tide era, which led to the consolidation of right and center-right forces around conservatism and opposition to the Workers' Party (PT; Sponholz & Christofoletti, 2019). Bolsonaro's 2018 election symbolizes the "rightist victory in Brazil's culture wars" (Smith, 2020) across various "communities of beliefs" (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 21).

Churches and social media were instrumental in Bolsonaro's victory (Santini, Tucci, Salles, & Almeida, 2021). Bolsonaro leveraged the widespread use of WhatsApp, where millions of private groups disseminated fact-less pro-Bolsonaro messages. Bolsonaro's campaign investors illegally obtained phone number lists to create multiple WhatsApp groups for the widespread dissemination of disinformation, particularly about the electoral system (Mello, 2020a). In response, the electoral court prohibited the mass dissemination of WhatsApp messages and the payment of influencers to endorse candidates (InternetLab, 2022).

After the 2018 election, given WhatsApp's popularity, messaging apps became a "weapon to governmental propaganda" (Ozawa et al., 2023). A government-led campaign known as the "Office of Hatred" used these apps to spread disinformation (Ozawa et al., 2023, p. 3). During the COVID-19 crisis, Facebook and

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[4] The Operation Car Wash case (2014–2021) investigated corrupt ties among the government, state-owned entities, and private firms. It resulted in the 2018 arrest of the former president, Lula. Yet, it drew criticism for sacrificing criminal process guarantees in its anti-corruption endeavors (Mendes, 2021).

Instagram deleted some of Bolsonaro's livestream videos, and WhatsApp prohibited automated messaging (InternetLab, 2022), which led to a surge in the number of far-right groups on Telegram. Bolsonaro's Telegram channel, which became one of the world's largest with more than one million participants, seeks to undermine the Brazilian Supreme Court's legitimacy and question the electoral system by following Trump's playbook (Bastos & Recuero, 2023). Thus, the TSE implemented measures to safeguard the electoral process. Despite these efforts, the widespread dissemination of false information persisted during the 2022 election, as noted by the OAS delegation, much like it had during previous elections (OAS, 2022). Researchers observed a rise in extremist rhetoric within Bolsonaro's support base during the 2022 campaign that indicated broader mobilization efforts with potential coup implications were occurring (Bastos & Recuero, 2023).

The Fact-Checking Global Movement

The collaboration between Brazil's electoral court and fact-checkers exemplifies the growing importance of these professionals in combating disinformation, not only in Brazil but also around the world. Fact-checking organizations have been thriving worldwide since 2016, and they now represent a global movement (Graves, 2018). In disrupted public spheres, fact-checkers meticulously examine information from external sources as part of a process that Vos (2019) called "gate bouncing." This term describes the retroactive selection technique that fact-checkers use to distinguish verifiable facts from alternative facts. In 2014, there were only 44 active organizations worldwide; by 2023, this number had reached 417 organizations (Stencel, Ryan, & Luther, 2023).

These organizations can operate independently as nongovernmental organizations, within established newsrooms, or as parts of academic projects (Graves & Cherubini, 2016). Their activities focus on providing information verification and media literacy to enhance the quality of public discourse. Fact-checking organizations persistently strive to identify, debunk, and diminish the visibility of disinformation and occasionally collaborate with governmental bodies and platform companies. Fact-checkers have demonstrated a clear mission focused on institution-building through reforming or fortifying democratic institutions (Bélair-Gagnon, Graves, Kalsnes, Steensen, & Westlund, 2022). To monitor the online environment, some organizations have collaborated with Meta through the Third-Party Fact-Checking project. This collaboration provides financial support and AI-based tools for social media policing to these organizations (Cazzamatta, 2024).

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) has established principles to govern global fact-checking practices. These principles emphasize nonpartisanship, fairness, and transparency. Unlike populist fact-less subjective beliefs, fact-checking supports fact-grounded truth-telling by adhering to specific "processual norms to determine the truth as verifiable statements about reality" (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 4). In some countries, government-run fact-checking websites serve as communication tools, and this approach has sparked debates about their effectiveness and impartiality. In Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, researchers have found (Schuldt, 2021) that these websites play a crucial role in strategic political communication, which has paved the way for restrictive legislation. In China, individuals trust independent fact-checkers more than official news corrections (Zeng et al., 2019). Since government-linked fact-checkers can influence and reinforce political narratives, they are not part of the IFCN or Meta partnership.

Brazilian Fact-Checkers and the Electoral Court Verification Coalition

Brazil has the second-highest number of fact-checking organizations in Latin America with nine organizations; Chile leads the list with 12 (Stencel et al., 2023). Two prominent Brazilian units, *Agência Lupa* and *Aos Fatos*, emerged in 2015; they were founded by former journalists from reputable newspapers. The surge in Brazilian fact-checking activities coincided with the 2014 and 2018 elections. In 2017, fact-checking organizations that were associated with traditional media outlets emerged, such as *UOL Verifica* (2017), *AFP Checamos* (2018), and *Estadão Verifica* (2018).

Scholars have noted that fact-checking units, much like traditional journalism organizations, face economic and political pressures (Lelo, 2022). Despite these challenges, their political significance and legitimacy as neutral mediators have grown. In 2018, after becoming a target and being overloaded by disinformation campaigns, the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court launched a fact-checking website that features material from various agencies and primarily targets disinformation against the court and the electoral process. Nonetheless, scholars have argued that "the court failed in its role to oversee the 2018 electoral process to ensure its integrity" (Santos, 2020, p. 441). Subsequently, in 2019, this pilot project evolved into a more official collaboration between the electoral court and fact-checkers working under the "Verification Coalition—Elections 2020" program (Table 1). This initiative collects and presents all verifications that are related to the electoral process on the *Fato ou Boato* webpage by compiling verifications and clarifications on false information. The page offers an overview of the verification process and provides hyperlinks to detailed articles from each fact-checking institution on respective topics (OAS, 2022; Santos, 2020; TSE, 2019, 2021).

Table 1. Fact-Checking Organizations That Officially Support the TSE.

Organization	Type-Structure	IFCN Signatory	Meta Partnership	Foundation Year
Lupa	Independent	Yes	Yes	2015
Aos Fatos	Independent	Yes	Yes	2015
E-farsas	Independent/Ad Revenue from Portal R7	No	No	2002
Boatos	Independent	No	No	2013
AFP Checamos	Media	Yes	Yes	2018
UOL	Media	Yes	Yes	2017
Fato ou Fake	Media Globo Conglomerate	No	No	2017–18
Estadão Verifica	Media	Yes	Yes	2018
Comprova	Media Consortium	No	No	2018

The reasons for involving independent fact-checkers are manifold. They are viewed as unbiased in discerning electoral disinformation in comparison to state-led initiatives. Because of their professionalism, expertise, and collaborations with platforms, they boast greater capacities than the court for monitoring online activities (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2023). Finally, researchers have demonstrated that more than legislation alone or government-led fact-checking is needed because of the declining trust in government institutions and psychological bias (Goh & Soon, 2019). Thus, a collaborative, multistakeholder approach that involves non-state

actors has been proposed as being more effective and sustainable in combating political deceit in comparison to a government-judicial-centric strategy (Schuldt, 2021).

The program does not verify disinformation that targets candidates and political parties. However, in 2022, the opposition coalition, led by PT, urged the TSE to eliminate or correct inaccurate information about the party through fact-checking verdicts (Pires, 2022). While not necessarily admissible as evidence in court, these verifications held some validity within a broader sociopolitical context, which legitimized certain arguments (Interviewee 1, personal communication, 2023). Notably, the 2024 TSE resolution (Art.9-A §2) has established that verifications that are conducted by fact-checking agencies that have signed the cooperation agreement can be used as parameters in judicial proceedings (TSE, 2024).

Research Questions

To build on the theoretical discussion, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: *What were the primary origins (sources), thematic narratives, and deception strategies of disinformation campaigns that targeted the Brazilian electoral process from 2018 to 2023?*

RQ2: *To what extent did the sources, targets, and narratives of electoral-related disinformation vary throughout the 2018–23 timeframe?*

RQ3: *What communication strategies, particularly those that relate to fact-checking, did the Brazilian Supreme Electoral Court use to combat disinformation?*

Methods

To address RQ1 and RQ2, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of 420 clarification articles that were published on the TSE's website, *Fato ou Boato,* from 2018 to 2023. This period covers various elections, including local ones for authorities such as childcare councils, along with the presidential elections in 2018 and 2022 and the municipal elections in 2020.

To ensure coding accuracy, we had two proficient Portuguese coders assess a subsample of 12% (50 articles) during a pretest. After minor adjustments had been made to the codebook, we calculated intercoder reliability, which is presented in the following sections, along with agreement levels and variable descriptions. The codebook with all variables and coding instructions is available in the supplementary material file[5].

Coding Scheme and Reliability

Origins (sources) and targets of falsehoods: The sources were categorized as "anonymous/unknown," "media actors," "political actors," "civil society groups," "individuals," and "business elite" (agreement = 92%; Cohen's Kappa = 0.61). The falsehood targets were categorized as "single actors"

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[5] https://osf.io/8r5m9/?view_only=fcc1fe8dca284708a3ac3bc878b67a33

(which included a list of the TSE's presiding ministers), "groups of actors," "institutions," "organizations" (which also comprised the electoral court), "policies and legislation," "the electronic voting system," "the electoral system in general," and "unspecified targets" (agreement = 78%; Cohen's Kappa = 0.81).

Observed platforms (channels of dissemination): The channels were coded as "traditional media," "alternative," "partisan websites," "tabloids," "blogs," "specialists' platforms," "official politicians' websites," "offline communication," and "specific social media channels" (agreement = 94%; Cohen's Kappa = 0.92).

Analyzed topics and deception strategies: The pretest, which was conducted on a 12% subsample, yielded a list of 23 subtopics that related to the Brazilian electoral process. Several prominent narratives were included: (a) "irregularities in electronic voting systems"; (b) "voting procedures, schedules, and counting"; (c) "alleged illegal actions by the electoral justice"; and (d) "COVID-related protocols during elections, etc." (agreement = 86%; Cohen's Kappa = 0.79). The superior court's website addresses falsehoods that exclusively relate to the electoral process, not general candidates. Furthermore, deception strategies that were employed in compromised online information were categorized (agreement = 86%; Cohen's Kappa = 0.81). These encompassed several categories: (1) "complete fabrication," (2) "manipulation," (3) "imposter," (4) "misleading information," (5) "decontextualization," (6) "false connection," and (7) "satire, parody, and internet jokes" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Key Actors' Interviews as a Complementary Method

To address RQ3, we conducted semistructured interviews with six key informants. Our aim was to explore the emergence of the collaboration between the TSE and fact-checking organizations and identify relevant strategies that had been used by the court to counter disinformation. These interviews, which were held in Portuguese between July 2023 and February 2024, lasted 35 to 60 minutes each. The interview guide covered various dimensions, including the context of disinformation in 2018, previous responses, the inception of the program to counter disinformation, the development of the collaboration with fact-checking organizations, and routine operational procedures.

Due to political polarization, the interviews were anonymized. Five interviewees, who were current or former TSE public servants during the analysis period, contributed to the program's macroconceptualization or operationalization. Additionally, a director from an independent Brazilian think tank that specializes in digital democracy offered an external perspective on the program.

After transcribing the interviews, we conducted a qualitative analysis using NVivo; this was guided by our third research question and literature insights. This approach involved extracting codes from the data through a hierarchical coding process (Tracy, 2013). Initially, we meticulously read the interview transcriptions to identify primary general codes that represented recurring ideas about TSE's strategies against disinformation. These codes were then organized into meta-categories, such as "principal strategies," through an inductive process; the emerging specific codes were corroborated and observed. Subcategories (e.g., "partnership with fact-checkers" and "collaboration with tech companies") were identified in subsequent steps until theoretical saturation was reached.

Findings

As depicted in Figure 1, the fact-checking articles increased significantly from 73 during the 2020 municipal elections to 239 during the recent and notably polarized 2022 presidential election. This increase aligns with the TSE's adoption of a more robust disinformation-combating program, which was notably initiated during the 2020 regional elections on August 30, 2019, under Minister Rosa Weber's presidency. The official collaboration with fact-checkers notably bolstered verification capabilities, especially during critical electoral periods.
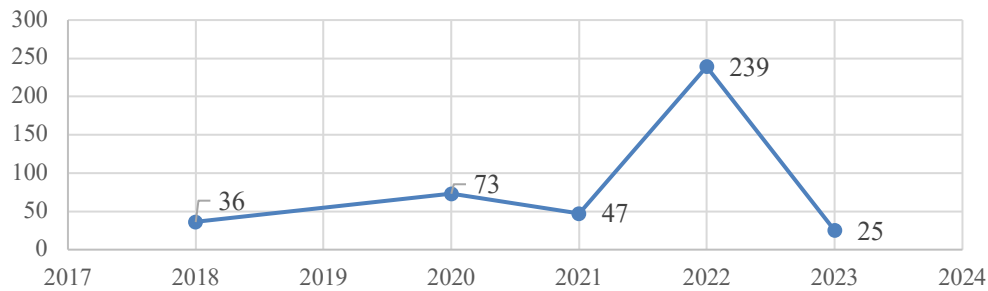
Figure 1. Number of verification articles published by TSE's **Fato ou Boato** *website.*

Sources and Targets of Disinformation Over Time

By focusing on the origins of falsehoods over time, we found that anonymous or unknown online sources were the primary disseminators of disinformation, ranging from 79% in 2021 to 89% in 2018 (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). This highlights the difficulty in identifying disinformation and its intent because of its elusive nature, which is aimed at deceiving discreetly (Hameleers, 2023). Coordinated inauthentic behaviors, as identified by Keller, Schoch, Stier, & Yang (2020), further obscure the origins of falsehoods. For instance, such tactics have been employed to amplify narratives of electoral fraud that have been associated with Bolsonaro (Ozawa et al., 2023; Santini et al., 2021).
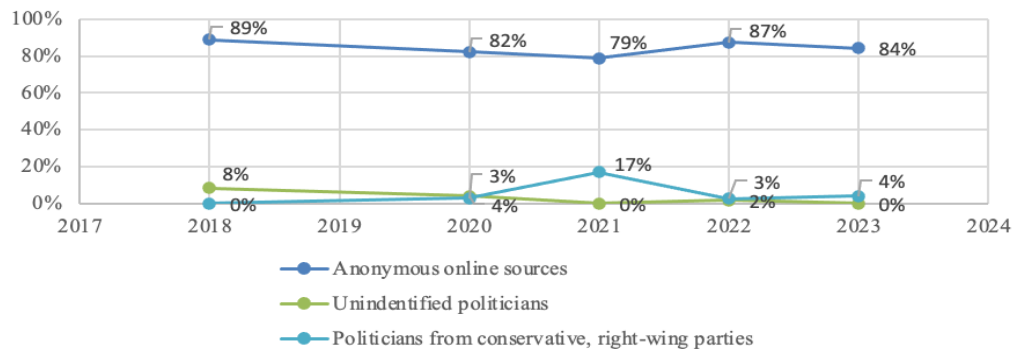

Figure 2. Sources of falsehoods over the years.

In 2021, under Bolsonaro's administration, politicians who were linked to conservative right-wing parties contributed to 17% of the dissemination of electoral falsehoods (Figure 2). Specifically, the Liberal Party, Bolsonaro's party, accounted for 12.8% of the debunked electoral falsehoods. This finding confirms the previously observed prominence of Brazilian far-right actors as disseminators of misinformation (Bastos & Recuero, 2023; Recuero et al., 2022; Santini et al., 2021).

Targets

In 2018, the Brazilian electronic voting system was the primary target of disinformation, which constituted 46.2% of the total, as depicted in Figure 3. This thematic focus aligns with Bolsonaro's insurrectionist rhetorical strategy, which heavily relies on accusations of electoral fraud, which were consistently emphasized in his political campaigns (Bastos & Recuero, 2023). During this period, false claims circulated on social media that asserted that electronic voting machines could be manipulated, the source code was flawed, and the machines were connected to the Internet, which made them vulnerable to hacking. Political falsehoods expanded beyond candidate rivalries and evolved into a detrimental assault on the integrity of the electoral system (Interviewees 1, 2, and 4).
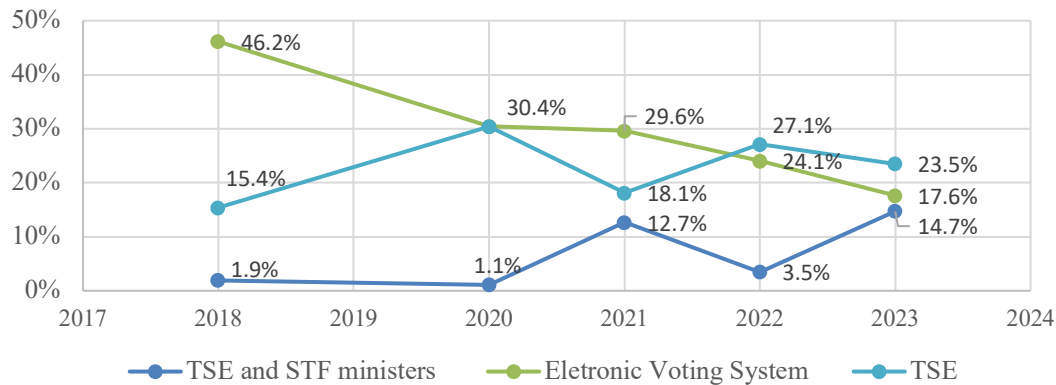
Figure 3. Targets of disinformation over the years.

Attacks on electronic voting systems decreased from 46% in 2018 to 24% in 2022, while assaults on the TSE as a regulatory institution increased from 15% (2018) to 27% (2022). These false allegations pertained to inappropriate court actions, nominations, and the institution's alleged inability to ensure a fair democratic process; one of these allegations claimed that deceased individuals were permitted to vote. Notably, there was an increase in falsehoods targeting ministers of the TSE and the Supreme Federal Court, which was mainly observed after the initiation of the disinformation confrontation program, particularly in 2021 (12%) and 2023 (14%).

This surge can be attributed to the media visibility of minister-presidents who actively engage in the country's polarized politics (for more information about the politicization of the Brazilian judiciary, see Albuquerque, 2023; Mendes, 2021). Accordingly, the primary subjects of falsehoods were prominent figures, such as Luís Roberto Barroso (8.3% in 2021) and Alexandre de Moraes (8.8% in 2023), who served as

presidents of the TSE from 2020 to 2022 and from 2022 to 2024, respectively. In contrast to Rosa Weber (who held office from 2018 to 2020) and her discreet posture, Barroso maintained a significant presence in the press and on social media, which made him a preferred target of the far right (Miazzo, 2023).

Alexandre de Moraes, who led controversial investigations into disinformation, has evoked mixed perceptions. Some see him as a hero, especially following the events of January 2023 when Bolsonaro's supporters stormed government headquarters in Brasília. However, others have criticized what they perceive as his accumulation of excessive power and his disregard for constitutional guarantees, which they have argued compromise the democratic system. His actions against disinformation have also made him a target of the far right (Schreiber, 2023).

Circulation Channels

The primary channels for disinformation were WhatsApp (12.80%), Facebook (11.40%), and X (6.80%). However, from 2022 onward, additional platforms came under scrutiny, including TikTok (5.1%), Instagram (4.4%), Kwai (2.6%), YouTube, and Telegram (both 0.7%). Notably, WhatsApp's share decreased from 27.2% in 2018 during Bolsonaro's election victory that was fueled by widespread disinformation disseminated through automated messages to 12.9% during the subsequent presidential election in 2022 (Figure 4). This decline could be attributed to WhatsApp's ban on automated and bulk messages (InternetLab, 2022) and the TSE's prohibition on mass messaging for political purposes. However, reports indicate that the industry of electoral messaging via WhatsApp and the extraction of voters' data by Instagram and Facebook persists (Mello, 2020b).
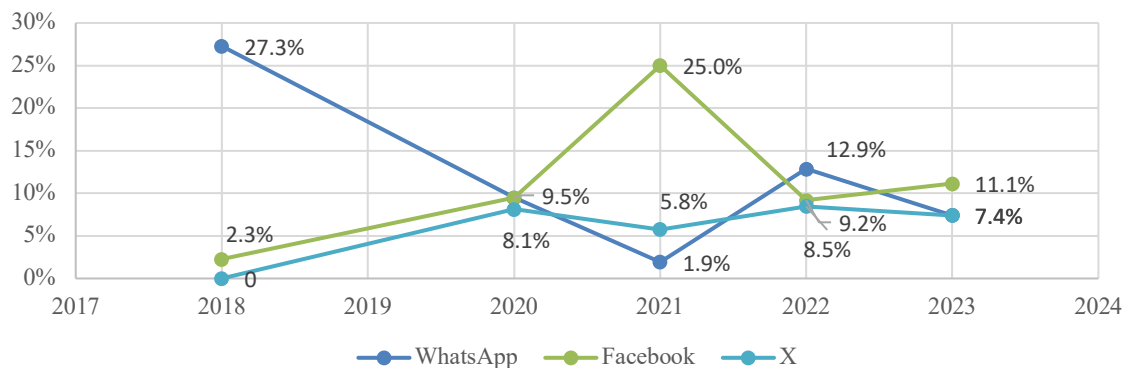
Figure 4. Most monitored disinformation channels.

Figure 4 depicts a significant increase in verified content from Facebook in 2021 (25%), which occurred a year before the primary presidential election. This increase has been attributed to the establishment and consolidation of Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking project, which was launched in Brazil in 2018 in collaboration with *Aos Fatos* and *Agência Lupa*. This partnership facilitated platform monitoring, which greatly enhanced the scrutiny of online disinformation.

Narratives and Deception Strategies

We identified five key topics in the examined electoral disinformation (For a detailed list, see the supplementary material.[6]). First, echoing Bolsonaro's and the far right's narratives, numerous claims alleged that irregularities and vulnerabilities existed in the electronic voting system (26%), which fostered suspicions about its integrity (Table 2). Following this idea, we identified allegations of illegal actions that involved members of the electoral justice system, personnel, and poll workers (16%). Falsehoods about voting procedures, schedules, and counting methods were also prevalent, highlighting potential flaws in these critical aspects of the country's political system (9%). Additionally, unsubstantiated claims of electoral fraud or irregularities (8%) reflected broader skepticism about election outcomes. Finally, the misuse of metrics or data to question the credibility of election results (7%) emerged as another significant theme, which showcased the diverse nature of disinformation surrounding electoral processes.

Table 2. Top Five Topics of Electoral Falsehoods.

Topics 2018–23	Frequency	Percentage
Alleged irregularities and vulnerabilities in the electronic voting system	108	25.70
Alleged illegal actions committed by electoral justice system members, personnel, and poll workers	66	15.70
Falsehoods about voting procedures, schedules, and counting	39	9.30
General allegations of electoral fraud or irregularities	35	8.30
Misuse of metrics or data to question the legitimacy of election results	31	7.40
Others	141	33.60
Total	420	100.00

Allegations of electronic voting system vulnerabilities were widespread in 2018, which coincided with the sustained dissemination of this narrative since the prominent rise of the Brazilian far right also occurred in that year. Conversely, accusations of illegal actions, including those directed at the TSE, its personnel, voting procedures, and schedules surged during electoral years, particularly between 2018 and 2020 and again in 2022 (Figure 5). Allegations of electoral fraud intensified in early 2023 following Lula's victory since Bolsonaro refused to accept the election results.

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[6] https://osf.io/8r5m9/?view_only=fcc1fe8dca284708a3ac3bc878b67a33
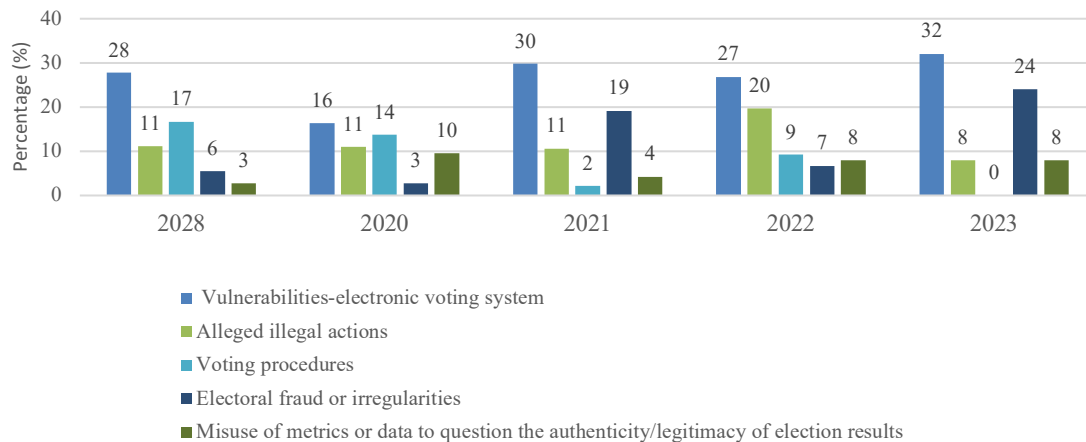
Figure 5. Five main topics of falsehoods over the years.

Finally, while analyzing deception strategies that have been used over the years, we observed that decontextualization emerged as the most frequently employed tactic, ranging from 40% to 72% of all the manipulative approaches that we observed, which is consistent with previous research (Cazzamatta & Santos, 2023; Hameleers, 2023; Wardle, 2020). Complete fabrication, devoid of any basis, became more prevalent in 2022 (23%) and 2023 (32%) and can be attributed to Bolsonaro's and his supporters' delirious narratives and conspiracy theories (see graphic in the supplementary material).

The Electoral Court Fights Back: Strategies and Responses to Disinformation

A Short Chronological Evolution of Responses

The disinformation landscape outlined in our content analysis suggests that the electoral system and the electoral court have faced recurrent deceptive campaigns. During the interviews, TSE's employees conveyed a sense of vulnerability in response to the attacks directed at them.

> I often say that we were hit [in 2018] by a tsunami, for which we were unprepared—no warnings or sirens. Perhaps the alarms woke us up, but we did not comprehend the magnitude of the following avalanche. While we had been facing attacks throughout the 2018 campaign, we were truly struck by it on the day of the first [election] round. . . . We could not provide answers as disinformation reached people and could not reach them to the same extent. . . . The phone was ringing constantly, emails were pouring in . . . it was chaotic—videos of people voting at the ballot box with a gun, pressing keys on the ballot box keyboard with a gun. (Interviewee 4)

The press department, which is responsible for responding to journalists and verifying information, faced overwhelming challenges and had to adjust its working hours. During Bolsonaro's administration, the department designated an individual to monitor the ex-president's live broadcasts every Thursday evening

to counter his attacks against the electoral system. On one occasion, an employee answered a call from a Bolsonaro-supporting blogger conducting a live stream:

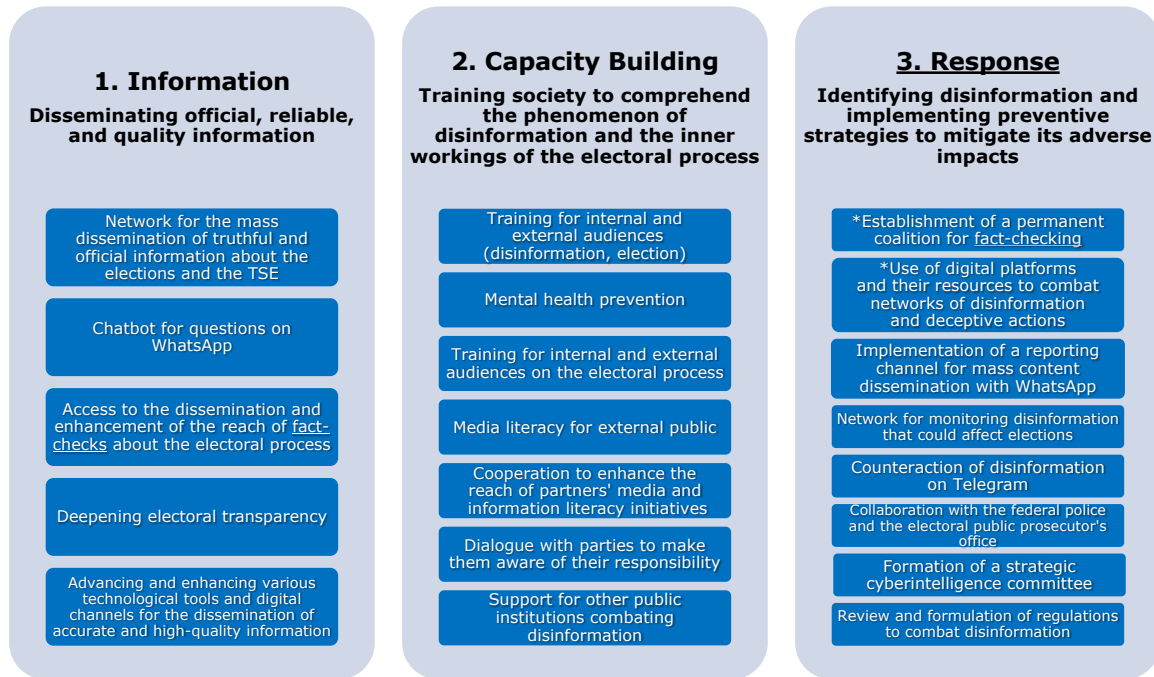> He asked me questions, attacking the TSE, as if I were a spokesperson for the TSE. I'm a press officer; my role is to answer journalists' questions. When I realized that I was live, I said, "Look, I'm sorry, but I can't give you an interview; I don't give interviews." He responded with, "So, you... look here, guys, Mrs. [anonymized] is speaking for the court, but the court won't provide information." (Interviewee 4)

Various TSE departments collaborated on strategic planning after the 2018 election's first round (see Figure 6). In the 20-day interim between the first and second rounds, a precursor to the current *Fato ou Boato* webpage was established to centralize official clarifications and refute falsehoods and was incorporated into the TSE website's news section, as mentioned previously and noted by Interviewees 1, 2, and 4. Subsequently, in 2019, the TSE hosted an international seminar, "Fake News and Elections" (TSE, 2019), to better apprehend this global phenomenon. On August 30, 2019, the program addressing disinformation in relation to the 2020 election was officially initiated (TSE, 2021) and gained permanent status on August 4, 2021 (TSE, 2022).

October 2018
clarification page to quickly react to falsehoods

May 2019
international seminar on fake news and elections

August 2019
program to confront disinformation (focus on the 2020 election)

August 2021
permanent programm to confront disinformation (focus on the 2022 election)
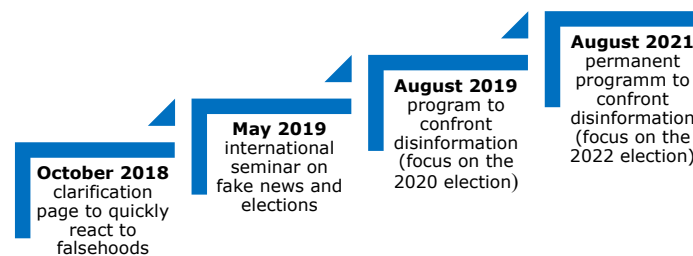
Figure 6. The TSE's initial responses to disinformation.

The anti-disinformation program is structured around three pillars (Figure 7). The "information" component focuses on disseminating accurate information about the electoral process and the impact of disinformation on public perception. This aims to foster informed political participation among Brazilians by increasing their awareness of the electoral process and thereby building confidence in its legitimacy and credibility. The second component, "capacity building," seeks to improve media and information literacy through educational initiatives and training programs for both the internal audience of the electoral justice system and the public. The third component, labeled "response," aims to implement measures for identifying, containing, and discouraging disinformation practices and other forms of information manipulation.

1. Information
Disseminating official, reliable, and quality information

Network for the mass dissemination of truthful and official information about the elections and the TSE

Chatbot for questions on WhatsApp

Access to the dissemination and enhancement of the reach of fact-checks about the electoral process

Deepening electoral transparency

Advancing and enhancing various technological tools and digital channels for the dissemination of accurate and high-quality information

2. Capacity Building
Training society to comprehend the phenomenon of disinformation and the inner workings of the electoral process

Training for internal and external audiences (disinformation, election)

Mental health prevention

Training for internal and external audiences on the electoral process

Media literacy for external public

Cooperation to enhance the reach of partners' media and information literacy initiatives

Dialogue with parties to make them aware of their responsibility

Support for other public institutions combating disinformation

3. Response
Identifying disinformation and implementing preventive strategies to mitigate its adverse impacts

*Establishment of a permanent coalition for fact-checking

*Use of digital platforms and their resources to combat networks of disinformation and deceptive actions

Implementation of a reporting channel for mass content dissemination with WhatsApp

Network for monitoring disinformation that could affect elections

Counteraction of disinformation on Telegram

Collaboration with the federal police and the electoral public prosecutor's office

Formation of a strategic cyberintelligence committee

Review and formulation of regulations to combat disinformation

Figure 7. Summarized pillars and corresponding program measures for combating disinformation. Source: (TSE, 2022)

The Development of the Fact-Checking Alliance

Fact-checking organizations play a prominent role in developing program reports, particularly concerning actions related to the first pillar (information quality) and the third pillar (response to disinformation). Collaboration with these agencies began before the formal partnership. Fact-checkers who recognized the increased disinformation activity during elections approached the TSE in 2018 with a proposal to form a WhatsApp group (The Fact-Check Coalition) consisting of various fact-checkers. The aim was to involve the TSE in the verification process by allowing them to submit items for scrutiny, ask questions, and provide updates on monitoring efforts.

> It was a highly beneficial initiative since we could track the verification landscape and understand ongoing developments. This process significantly enhanced our response time since we were well-informed concurrently with the fact-checkers, expediting the process. Simultaneously, within the electoral court, we formed a dedicated group tasked with addressing and responding to these [disinformation] issues. (Interviewee 4)

As part of tailoring its response to different attack types, the communication office forwarded inquiries to designated individuals within relevant TSE departments (e.g., the judicial secretariat, presidency, electoral management, or information technology) to expedite responses. The verified findings were then shared within the WhatsApp group and with the fact-checkers. The interviewees noted that this

symbiotic setup enabled the court to promptly address fact-checkers' requests while monitoring falsehood dissemination.

After the 2018 elections, disinformation concerning the electoral process persisted, even beyond the election cycles. In response, the electoral court launched a comprehensive program to combat disinformation by formalizing its partnerships with fact-checking organizations (Figures 6 and 7). Under this coalition, each fact-checking entity independently verified potential disinformation about identified or reported issues. Their autonomy was respected within the limits of their capacities, which ensured complete autonomy and independence (TSE, 2021). The court's communication department oversaw the information dissemination with support from the program's executive team, while regional electoral courts (TRE) designated representatives to participate in the verification process and provide necessary information.

In 2020, the previous clarification webpage evolved into the *Fato ou Boato* website, which consolidated fact-checks on the electoral process from various institutions. This site became the primary platform for disseminating verified information and was shared through the TSE's official networks (Interviews 1, 2, and 4). As one interviewee noted, the current website format includes explanatory text and links to fact-checks by the participating agencies. While the WhatsApp group, which comprises 85 fact-checkers and TSE/TRE representatives, remains active, formal e-mail requests are now required for proper routing to technical teams (Interviewee 4). Nonetheless, the WhatsApp group continues to function as a parallel communication channel.

> For example, some fact-checker will say, "Guys, you have seen this here; it is growing a lot. It is out of the bubble, gaining traction rapidly, expanding beyond the usual audience. And then we light up a flashlight, an antenna . . ." Then, we know we are going to have to disprove it. Then, we gather information. If we put it on *Fato e Boato*, it goes out to everyone; then we post it on WhatsApp. Nevertheless, if it is a request from a specific fact-checking organization, we respond individually to each email. (Interviewee 4)

When dealing with falsehoods, it is better to have more individuals debunking false content. This ensures that there is no exclusive treatment, which sometimes occurs between journalists and communication offices. In essence, the partnership involves a streamlined workflow between fact-checkers and the court: (1) swift communication between fact-checking agencies and TSE and TRE representatives via a WhatsApp group, (2) regular updates about verified information on a Google Drive spreadsheet that is used for monitoring, and (3) the publication of verification results on the court's *Fato ou Boato* page.

In the 2022 strategic plan report (TSE, 2022), fact-checkers are included in the "quality information" framework, which focuses on pre-bunking strategies. These strategies aim to provide proactive information or preemptive warnings to reduce citizens' vulnerability to disinformation. For instance, explaining how disinformation operates helps preempt disinformation by raising awareness concerning potential threats and enhancing citizens' critical skills so they can identify manipulation techniques (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2021, p. 5). Additionally, the report outlines a series of actions that envision a permanent verification coalition for enhancing and refining the aforementioned strategies.

Strategies for Fact-Checks' Dissemination

The electoral court adopted various strategies to promote and distribute verifications through independent partners. First, *Fato ou Boato* provides free access to fact-checks, ensuring their broad availability, even for users who do not have mobile data. Verifications are shared through the TSE's social networks, program partners, and affiliated institutions. They are also replicated on the WhatsApp chatbot to address citizens' queries. After recognizing that traditional news organizations have ceded much of their gatekeeping power to search engines and social media, the TSE collaborated with tech companies. Partnerships were forged with Google, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram for the strategic dissemination of reliable information on election processes.

During the 2020 elections, the TSE boosted the visibility of verifications by placing a banner on the YouTube homepage that directed users to *Fato ou Boato*. This initiative, which was done at no cost to the court, aimed to counter postelection disinformation and garnered more than 400 million impressions. By collaborating with Facebook, the TSE used the Megaphone tool to convey essential messages to Brazilian users about the 2020 elections. This feature provided users with direct access to the official election portal, which offered fact-checks on fake news, COVID-19 protection tips, and voting procedure clarifications. Twitter introduced a "Know the Facts" prompt in related searches that guided users to the official election portal. Additionally, Twitter facilitated the live streaming of key TSE events, such as press conferences on voting days, thus boosting the dissemination of the electoral court's content. Further collaborations were initiated with TikTok, Google, and WhatsApp (TSE, 2021).

The electoral court's communication strategy has been adapted to match social media trends. One interviewee noted, "We opted to utilize social networks as our main countermeasure." Initially, official denials were presented in institutional language on the website but were later transformed into audio and, notably, videos consisting of short, lively, and animated content tailored for social networks (interviewee 4). By acknowledging the spread of online falsehoods, the court recognized the need to employ similar tools to enact effective responses.

Discussion and Conclusion

Digital media has profoundly transformed political communication by shifting news economics, undermining traditional gatekeepers, and empowering right-wing populists' counternarratives (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2022). In Brazil, a potent convergence of factors, including extensive Internet penetration, low governmental trust, and prevalent news consumption on social media, has transformed the nation into a disinformation hub. Analyzing Brazil's susceptibility to electoral disinformation during heated campaign periods (2018–22) and its electoral court's nonregulatory response provides valuable insights to scholars and policy makers in analogous regions (Rossini, Mont'Alverne, & Kalogeropoulos, 2023).

Our quantitative content analysis ($N = 420$) has reaffirmed the interdependence between right-wing populism and posttruth politics in Brazil and is consistent with prior research (Waisbord, 2018a). This longitudinal study of electoral disinformation since 2018 emphasizes the necessity for using sustained actions to counter disinformation, which frequently arises well in advance of electoral campaigns. Ensuring

effective and continuous responses is imperative in confronting disinformation campaigns that are aimed at both the electoral process and the judiciary.

Data from the quantitative analysis also highlight the partnership between nine fact-checking organizations and the TSE, which has bolstered the institution's verification and monitoring capabilities, as evidenced by the surge of fact-checking articles that were published in 2022. This suggests the TSE's improved preparedness against disinformation in comparison to 2018. Before the 2021 presidential election, there was a rise in disinformation from conservative politicians (17%). The TSE expanded its denunciation channels and collaborated with platforms to counteract inauthentic behavior. Primary targets of these falsehoods included the electronic voting system (with a decrease from 2018 to 2022), the TSE, and its ministers, notably Luís Barroso and Alexandre de Moraes, possibly because of their media appearances, social media presences, and political involvement. These findings align with Brazil's judicial populism trend (Mendes, 2021), which reflects the Brazilian Supreme Court's growing role in critical political debates, including those concerning disinformation (RQ1/2).

The primary disinformation narratives focused on unproven vulnerabilities in the Brazilian electronic voting system and alleged illegal acts by the court and its officials. Other prevalent falsehoods concerned voting procedures, election timing, and the tabulation process, alongside general allegations of electoral fraud or irregularities. Additionally, metrics or data were manipulated to cast doubt on election outcomes. Most of the falsehoods employed decontextualization as a deceptive strategy, which is consistent with previous research (Cazzamatta & Santos, 2023; Hameleers, 2023). Studies based on truth default theory suggest that lies that contain some truthful elements are more persuasive. However, we identified up to 32% of entirely fabricated narratives with no connection to reality through our analysis (RQ1/2).

In response to the surge in electoral disinformation that has impacted Brazilian democracy (RQ3), which partly influenced Bolsonaro's rise in 2018 and the government headquarters' invasion in January 2023, the electoral court has adapted to the evolving media landscape. Owing to the decline of traditional political gatekeepers and the increasing role of the Internet, the TSE has partnered with independent fact-checkers. This strategy ensures that verified electoral information is accessible on the TSE's website and is disseminated through multiple channels. By recognizing fact-checkers as impartial mediators, the TSE has enhanced their institutionalization and social recognition.

Our analysis emphasizes the crucial role of independent, credible actors such as fact-checkers in identifying disinformation, particularly in highly polarized contexts. Independence from governmental influence is essential for these actors when assessing the truthfulness of claims that have been made by those in authority. To safeguard the electoral process in a media system that lacks comprehensive legal regulations for governing big tech companies, the TSE has adopted a multistakeholder approach that involves platforms, journalists, and civil society. Judicial systems must expedite their efforts and enhance collaboration with diverse actors to exchange best practices (Nash et al., 2023).

Although fact-checkers may occasionally collaborate with governments (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022), this close partnership with Brazil's Superior Electoral Court represents a pioneering effort, to our knowledge. This reflects a broader trend: Various public and civil society entities, including those at the

highest level of electoral justice, are increasingly recognizing fact-checking as a legitimate profession that holds shared values, standards, and practices. Despite earlier researchers suggesting the limited effectiveness of distributing corrective messages at the individual level (Walter & Murphy, 2018), this collaborative effort underscores the macrosocial significance of fact-checking organizations. As Reese (2022) argued, an organization achieves true "institutional" status when other institutions recognize it. In this case, the TSE's partnership has solidified the legitimacy and impact of fact-checkers in Brazilian society.

Another takeaway from this article is that evaluating the effectiveness of fact-checking in countering disinformation should not solely rely on its potential for individual behavioral change, as seen in experimental studies. The analysis of collaboration with the TSE emphasizes how fact-checking organizations are being increasingly acknowledged by the state and other institutional actors as impartial mediators in digital, fragmented, and polarized public spheres, and this approach has enhanced their macrosocietal impact. Furthermore, collaborations between fact-checkers, institutional bodies, and information technology companies aim to disseminate verified, high-quality information, which showcases the multifaceted nature of countering disinformation. The TSE's response is consistent with Waisbord's proposal (2018b, p. 9) to develop a "toolkit of solutions" that incorporates measures such as bolstering news literacy, fact-checking, and pressuring digital giants to participate in disinformation countermeasures by cleaning up social media.

The TSE has adjusted to media and political changes since 2018 by responding promptly, prioritizing fact-checking, emphasizing platform engagement and transparency, and improving reporting channels. These observations are purely descriptive and do not allow for direct causal inference. Our conclusions are subject to these limitations. Further analyses are needed to explore causal relationships more thoroughly. Future researchers should also assess other strategies that have been used by the electoral court and evaluate their effectiveness.

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