

A Blueprint for Digital Propaganda in the Majority World: Online Coordinated Attacks, Narratives About Content Moderation and Challenges to Electoral Integrity in Brazil

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I. Introduction

On January 8, 2023, approximately 4,000 individuals stormed public buildings in Brasília, Brazil's capital city, vandalizing the National Congress and the Supreme Court in an attempt to subvert public order and incite a military coup against the elected president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. This event was the climax of a radicalization process promoted during the previous government of Jair Bolsonaro, anchored on misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, antagonism with the Supreme Court, and unfounded claims about the integrity of the electoral process, especially regarding the reliability of electronic voting machines.

The invasion of Brasília is often compared to the storming of the Capitol Building in the United States, as both movements occurred after elections in which the defeated candidate cast doubts on the fairness of the electoral process. Bolsonaro himself said, a day after the invasion of the Capitol in DC, that “we will have something even worse here if there are no printed ballots and accountability in the 2022 elections.”¹

A closer analysis reveals significant differences between the movements in Brazil and in the United States, such as the digital platforms used for organizing the acts,

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¹ Daniel Carvalho & Matheus Teixeira, *Se Brasil não tiver voto impresso em 2022, vamos ter problema pior que os EUA, diz Bolsonaro* [If Brazil does not have a printed vote in 2022, we will have a worse problem than the US, says Bolsonaro], FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO, Jan. 07, 2021, at <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/01/se-brasil-tiver-voto-eletronico-em-2022-vai-ser-a-mesma-coisa-dos-eua-diz-bolsonaro-apos-invasao-ao-capitolio.shtml>.

the role played by the Armed Forces, and the consequences of the events, with a large number of arrests in Brazil² and the declaration of ineligibility of former president Jair Bolsonaro for eight years.³

The January “8th” events were linked almost immediately to the use of social media and instant messaging apps as the primary way for people involved in the violent acts to organize themselves.⁴ In an op-ed in the Washington Post, published exactly one year after the violent acts of January 8th, President Lula stated that:

The erosion of democracy is exacerbated by the fact that people’s news sources and social interactions are mediated by digital applications that were designed for profit, not democratic coexistence. The Big Tech business model, which prioritizes engagement and attention-seeking, promotes inflammatory content and strengthens extremist discourse, favoring antidemocratic forces that operate in internationally coordinated networks.⁵

In 2014, the Brazilian National Congress passed a comprehensive law on fundamental rights and guarantees on the Internet. Known as the "Brazilian Internet Bill of Rights" (Marco Civil da Internet, “MCI”), Law No. 12.965/14 addresses issues such as freedom of expression and the civil liability regime of digital platforms, privacy and data protection, and network neutrality. Internationally recognized as a pioneering law, the MCI was created out of a public

² As of January 15, 2023, 1,395 individuals have been arrested in connection to the acts of January 8th. *Sobe para 1.395 n^o de presos por atos em Brasília; leia nomes*, PODER360, Jan, 2023, at <https://www.poder360.com.br/brasil/sobe-para-1-395-no-de-presos-por-atos-em-brasil-leia-nomes/>. Out of the 1,395, 116 of them have been sentenced to periods of incarceration ranging from 3 to 17 years. Constança Rezende, *STF pune mais 15, e total de condenados pelo 8/1 chega a 116* [STF Punishes 15 more, and the total number of people convicted by 8/1 reaches 116], FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO, Mar. 1, 2024, at <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2024/03/stf-forma-maioria-para-punir-mais-15-e-totalizar-116-condenados-pelo-81.shtml>.

³ *Por maioria de votos, TSE declara Bolsonaro inelegível por oito anos* [By majority vote, TSE declares Bolsonaro ineligible for 8 years], TRIBUNAL SUPERIOR ELEITORAL WEBSITE, June 30, 2023, at <https://www.tse.jus.br/comunicacao/noticias/2023/Junho/por-maioria-de-votos-tse-declara-bolsonaro-inelegivel-por-8-anos>.

⁴ *Em discurso no ato sobre 8 de janeiro, Moraes defende regulação das redes sociais* [In a speech at the event on January 8, Moraes defends regulation of social networks], UOL, Jan. 8, 2024, at <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2024/01/08/em-discurso-no-ato-sobre-8-de-janeiro-moraes-defende-regulamentacao-das-redes-sociais.htm>.

⁵ Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, *Opinion: Brazil thwarted a coup attempt. Here are our lessons to the world*, WASH. POST, Jan. 1, 2024, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/01/08/brazil-lula-da-silva-jan-8/>.

consultation run by the Federal Government between 2009 and 2010.⁶ A coalition of civil society actors, academia, the private sector, and the government itself supported the law's terms and propelled its approval.⁷

After ten years and one January 8th, a view gained traction in the Brazilian context that the Internet, which the MCI sought to regulate through principles and guarantees, was no longer the one of the late 2000s. This period represented a time when the promises of global and instantaneous connection would encourage more knowledge, entertainment, and communication. During the 2010s, this perception was replaced by the recognition of a darker facet of what it means to be connected, with an emphasis on the manipulation of personal data, scams, and mass disinformation.⁸

This scenario was partly built by the strategic use of the Internet, particularly social media, by governments to craft communication strategies that effectively mobilized supporters, neutralized opposition, and cultivated a leadership persona. The tenure of the Bolsonaro government in Brazil (2019-2022) provided a unique case study to understand how State actors could leverage social media for misinformation dissemination and institutional attacks, creating a sophisticated blueprint for digital propaganda.

This essay explores three key elements through which the Brazilian case exemplifies the development of a digital propaganda blueprint, particularly relevant to countries in the majority world.⁹

The first one is the identification of an antagonist. The strategic identification of a rival is crucial, directing the supporters' discontent towards a specific entity. In

⁶ Daniel O'Maley, *Argument: How Brazil Crowdsourced a Landmark Law*, FOREIGN POL'Y, Jan, 19, 2016, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/19/how-brazil-crowdsourced-a-landmark-law/>.

⁷ For more information on the public consultation process and the contributions of different stakeholders, see Carlos Affonso Souza, Fabro Steibel, & Ronaldo Lemos, *Notes on the creation and impacts of Brazil's Internet Bill of Rights*, in V THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF LEGISLATION 73-94 (Taylor & Francis 2017). See also Daniel Arnaudo, *Brazil, the Internet and the Digital Bill of Rights: Reviewing the State of Brazilian Internet Governance*, INSTITUTO IGARAPÉ WEBSITE, at <https://igarape.org.br/marcocivil/en/>.

⁸ Doug Allen & Daniel Castro, Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, *Why so sad? A Look at the Change of Tone in Technology Reporting from 1986 to 2013*, Feb. 2017, at <https://www2.itif.org/2017-why-so-sad.pdf> (Feb. 2017).

⁹ The term "Majority World" is used as a substitute for the group of countries traditionally referred to as "global South" or "developing world", stressing that in such countries live the majority of the population of the world. The term also challenges the idea that such countries share an uncompleted path (towards development) that has been already achieved by others. See Shahidul Alam, *Majority World: Challenging the West's Rhetoric of Democracy*, 34 AMERASIA J. 87 (2008).

Brazil, the Supreme Court was frequently positioned as an antagonist, thus channeling public dissatisfaction on social media and framing the Judiciary as overreaching its mandate.

The second element is the framing of content moderation as censorship. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bolsonaro administration prominently criticized social media companies for moderating the President and his supporter's stance on the pandemic. This narrative suggested that they were specifically targeted by these platforms, thereby infringing on their freedom of expression. Efforts to amend the Brazilian Internet Bill of Rights aimed to limit such moderation, highlighting the political maneuvering to reshape how social media platforms managed content.¹⁰

A third element is found in the allegations of electoral fraud. Unfounded claims of electoral fraud were a persistent theme throughout the Bolsonaro years, with the Brazilian context adding unique elements to these allegations. Brazil's compulsory voting system, paired with an almost entirely electronic voting process, fueled narratives of electoral fraud. This was exacerbated by the public's limited understanding of the technical aspects of electronic voting, such as cryptography and vote tallying processes.

The essay concludes by briefly examining how these key elements inform the broader challenges encountered in other majority world nations. It assesses the Judiciary's role, the intricacies of content moderation, and the issues of electoral integrity. These elements provide insights into the operational dynamics of governments employing a digital propaganda strategy.

¹⁰ Not unique to Brazil, the criticism toward content moderation in social media have gathered traction among conservative voices in stating that the removal of contents or accounts was due to a political/ideological bias by social media employees and leadership. In the United States, the laws of both Florida and Texas, currently challenged under the Supreme Court, spearhead this understanding. See Daphne Keller, Platform Transparency and the First Amendment (Mar. 3, 2023) (draft for Stanford Cyber Policy Center), *available at* <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4377578>. Although there is a growing concern for more than a decade about how internet companies might be turned into proxies for State censorship ("new school censorship"), when addressing the debate about censorship on the Internet in this essay we are referencing to the narratives that seek to encompass all sort of content moderation as a form of political/ideological censorship. For the concept of old school/new school censorship, see Jack M. Balkin, *Old School/New School Speech Regulation* (Yale Law School, Public Law Research Paper No. 491, 2014), *available at* <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2377526>.

II. The Digital Propaganda Blueprint in the Bolsonaro Years

A. The Supreme Court as a Main Antagonist

The Bolsonaro Presidency provided a series of institutional confrontations, with its tumultuous relationship with the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF) being a stand-out. This confrontation was not an isolated event but a series of acts and statements that evidence a strategy of misinformation and an attack on democratic institutions.

The relationship between Bolsonaro and the STF began to deteriorate significantly in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The Executive faced criticism for its management of the health crisis, and the STF was called upon several times to arbitrate conflicts between the federal government and the states regarding social isolation measures and other public health policies. Bolsonaro, in turn, interpreted these decisions as limitations on his powers, fueling a narrative that the Court was usurping his presidential prerogatives.¹¹

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Bolsonaro's approach was to downplay the effects of COVID-19, opposing social isolation measures and the use of masks and criticizing vaccination. Bolsonaro advocated treatments lacking scientific support,¹² and he frequently positioned himself against restrictions on the movement of people and commercial activities, arguing that the economic effects of such measures would be more harmful than the pandemic itself.

The STF played a crucial role in the institutional response to the pandemic, especially through decisions that reinforced the concurrent mandates of States, the Federal District, and municipalities to adopt public health measures aimed at fighting COVID-19. In April 2020, the court unanimously decided that these Government spheres had autonomy to establish rules for isolation, quarantine, and restrictions on transportation and traffic on highways, without prejudice to coordinated actions at the Federal level.

The clash between Bolsonaro and the STF over COVID-19 containment measures also provided an opportunity for public criticism and direct attacks by the

¹¹ Felipe Amorim & Alex Tajra, *STF dá poder a estados para atuar contra COVID e impõe revés a Bolsonaro* [STF Gives States Power to Act Against COVID-19 and Imposes Setback on Bolsonaro], UOL, Apr. 15, 2020, at <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/04/15/stf-tem-4-votos-a-favor-de-autonomia-de-governadores-durante-a-pandemia.htm>.

¹² Kiratiana Freelon & Shanna Hanbury, *Goats and Soda: Brazil's Main COVID Strategy is a Cocktail of Unproven Drugs*, NPR, June 15, 2021, at <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/06/15/1006198151/covid-pseudoscience-is-choking-brazil>.

President and his supporters against the Court and its justices. The peak of this tension occurred on September 7, 2021, during the celebrations of Brazil's Independence Day. In a speech delivered in a demonstration in São Paulo, in front of thousands of supporters, Bolsonaro directly attacked the STF and, more specifically, Justice Alexandre de Moraes. The President declared that he would no longer comply with judicial decisions issued by Moraes, whom he accused of acting outside the limits of the Constitution. This act represented an unprecedented escalation in institutional confrontation, suggesting a willingness to disregard judicial orders, jeopardizing the separation of powers and the rule of law.¹³

Previously, Bolsonaro had already expressed dissatisfaction with the STF for various reasons, including decisions that contradicted the Government's interests in areas such as the environment, indigenous rights, and gun policies. Furthermore, the so-called “fake news inquiry” led by Justice Moraes investigated the spread of misinformation and attacks on democratic institutions made by Bolsonaro’s supporters and, indirectly, by Bolsonaro himself and his family. The investigation itself is unique as it was launched in 2019 to assess the coordination of online attacks directed towards the Supreme Court and its justices. The President of the Supreme Court at the time, Justice Dias Toffoli, appointed Justice Moraes as the rapporteur for this initiative.

What began as an investigation into attacks on the STF was later broadened to a legal proceeding against individuals involved in all sorts of acts considered anti-democratic, such as challenging the integrity of the electoral system. The investigation culminated in several individuals being sanctioned with their social media accounts blocked and some being arrested, prompting questions about the extent of the measures taken. The severity of some decisions and the fact that most of them were delivered under seal prompted a backlash against Justice Moraes and the STF.¹⁴

¹³ NPR, *Brazil's Bolsonaro Rallies His Followers Against the Courts in a Major Demonstration*, NPR, Sept. 7, 2021, at <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/07/1034812245/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-rally-supreme-court>.

¹⁴ Jack Nicas & André Spigariol, *To Defend Democracy, Is Brazil's Top Court Going Too Far?*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 26, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/26/world/americas/bolsonaro-brazil-supreme-court.html>. Elon Musk, owner of the social media “X”, joined the questioning of the decisions issued by Justice Moraes, initially stating that the company would no longer comply with judicial orders requesting the blocking of social media accounts or the removal of contents from Bolsonaro supporters. Musk himself has mocked Justice Moraes and called for his impeachment. After a week of peak engagement in social media and widespread coverage by the Brazilian press, Justice Moraes opened an investigation on Musk’s acts. David Biller & Gabriela Sá Pessoa, *Elon Musk will be investigated over fake news and obstruction in Brazil after a*

On the other hand, the investigation prominently targeted the so-called "Office of Hate," a name given by the press to a group of advisers linked to the Bolsonaro government, supposedly operating from the Planalto Palace, with the function of coordinating disinformation campaigns and online attacks against political opponents, democratic institutions, and the mainstream media. This group is said to have used social media strategies to spread narratives favorable to the government, while systematically attacking opponents and critics, including Supreme Court justices.¹⁵

The amplification of attacks against STF's justices included the usage of bots to spread memes, edited videos, and contents aimed at discrediting the justices and their decisions, creating an environment of hostility and disrespect towards the institution.¹⁶

The arrest of Federal Representative Daniel Silveira, who made threats against STF justices on social media, further exemplified the clash between executive prerogatives and judicial authority. In a video published in 2021, Silveira uttered insults and incentivized violence against the Justices, advocating for their removal. Such statements were interpreted as threats to the Rule of Law, a crime under the National Security Law and the Penal Code.

In April 2022, the STF sentenced Silveira to eight years and nine months in prison, in addition to determining the loss of his mandate as deputy and disqualification from holding public office for a period for inciting the practice of anti-democratic acts against the Court and its members. Following the announcement of the decision, Bolsonaro pardoned Silveira. The pardon, granted

Supreme Court order, AP, Apr. 9, 2024, at <https://apnews.com/article/brazil-musk-x-supreme-court-investigation-a645757b95a66ee658832802908466ab>. X Brasil petitioned to the STF confirming that X Corp would comply with the judicial orders, but that it has been required to render the judicial orders it has received under seal to the Judiciary Committee of the United States' House of Representatives. All orders were promptly published in a report issued by the Committee. *Brazilian Government Forced Censorship on X: New Report Reveals*, U.S. HOUSE OF REPS. JUD. COMM. WEBSITE, Apr. 17, 2024, at <https://judiciary.house.gov/media/press-releases/brazilian-government-forced-censorship-x-new-report-reveals>.

¹⁵ Andrew Rosati & Mario Sergio Lima, *In Hunt for 'Office of Hate,' Brazil's Supreme Court Closes In*, BLOOMBERG, June 22, 2020, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-22/in-hunt-for-office-of-hate-brazil-s-supreme-court-closes-in?embedded-checkout=true>.

¹⁶ While the Bolsonaro government officially denied the existence of a formal structure dedicated to these activities, evidence suggests deliberate coordination to attack and weaken democratic institutions, using social media and instant messaging apps as key tools in this process. See Joao V.S. Ozawa et al., *How Disinformation on WhatsApp Went From Campaign Weapon to Governmental Propaganda in Brazil*, SOC. MEDIA + SOC'Y 9(1) (2023).

in such unprecedented circumstances, generated widespread criticism and fueled the antagonism between the former President and the Supreme Court.¹⁷

The choice of the STF, and particularly Justice Moraes, as antagonist was part of a broader strategy by the Bolsonaro camp to mobilize his electoral base against what he called "threats to freedom." This narrative, often amplified by misinformation campaigns on social media, aimed to portray the Government as a victim of a supposed conspiracy by the elites and the "system," in which the STF was often cast as one of the main protagonists.

B. Fighting Content Moderation Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms intensified their content moderation policies to fight the spread of false and harmful information about the virus, unproven treatments, and vaccines. In this context, Bolsonaro had content removed or flagged as false or misleading by major social networks.¹⁸ Such content moderation episodes generated significant controversy and provoked direct reactions from Bolsonaro and his supporters, highlighting tensions between freedom of expression and the platforms' responsibility to limit the spread of misinformation.

There were numerous cases where the President himself had content labeled as false or that was simply removed for promoting the use of indigenous tea against COVID-19, or stating that vaccines are ineffective (or jokingly suggesting they could turn people into crocodiles¹⁹) or that masks should not be used, in addition to several posts about chloroquine as a supposedly effective treatment against COVID-19. Moderating Bolsonaro, at the time, had become a matter of public health. Bolsonaro's reaction ranged from public condemnation of these companies to attempts to introduce legislation to limit their ability to moderate content, such

¹⁷ Mauricio Savarese, *Brazil's Bolsonaro Pardons Lawmaker Convicted at Top Court*, AP, Apr. 22, 2022, at <https://apnews.com/article/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-ff35cc192ce19df786119c7fcc2ddcbe>.

¹⁸ BBC, *YouTube removes Bolsonaro's video for Covid misinformation*, BBC, July 22, 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-57923862>.

¹⁹ Louise Hall, *Bolsonaro says COVID Vaccine May Turn People Into Crocodiles iIn Bizarre Rant*, INDEPENDENT, Dec. 20, 2020, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/bolsonaro-covid-vaccine-brazil-crocodiles-b1776753.html>.

as the Provisional Measure²⁰ (“*medida provisória*” or “MP”) that sought to change the Brazilian Internet Bill of Rights (MCI).

The Provisional Measure, MP no. 1068/2021, was issued on the eve of the demonstrations Brazil's Independence Day (in the same demonstration where Bolsonaro delivered the speech attacking the STF mentioned earlier) and proposed significant changes to the MCI. The changes aimed to make it more difficult to remove content and accounts from social media, requiring detailed justifications for such actions and establishing a set of exceptions in which content could not be removed, even if it violated the platforms' terms of use.²¹

The MP created a list of topics that could lead to the moderation of accounts and content. Article 8-B of the MCI, as amended by the MP, would allow social networks to moderate a user's account if they were in default (most social media do not require payment for access), pretended to be someone else (unless for humoristic purposes), used bots to gain visibility, violated intellectual property, repeatedly violated moderation rules, or if there was a judicial decision ordering the account's removal.

Article 8-C dealt with the scenarios in which platforms could moderate the publications themselves. Content moderation would have "just cause" when a publication violated the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, contained scenes of nudity or sex, promoted "pedophilia, terrorism, or trafficking," incited acts of violence, showed how to manufacture drugs, incited acts against public safety, etc.

The article also provided that violations against image, honor, the protection of personal data, and intellectual property could be moderated, but only if requested by "the offended party, their legal representative, or their heirs." Content could also be moderated if there was a judicial order for its removal.

Misinformation about COVID-19 treatment and unfounded claims about electoral integrity, considered popular topics on Bolsonaro's and his supporter's social media activities, didn't make the list. Social media companies would have to resort to the Judiciary to moderate such content. The moderation list revealed more by what was not included than by what was effectively on it.

The MP also changed the Copyright Law (Law No. 9610/98) in a unique way, entangling issues related to copyright to the fight against content moderation. According to Article 2nd of the MP, “the holder of content protected by copyright

²⁰ *Medida provisória* is a normative act issued by the Presidency. It has legal enforceability but requires urgency and relevance. It must be analyzed by the Congress, generally, in a 60-days term. CONSTITUIÇÃO FEDERAL [Constitution] art. 62 (Braz.).

²¹ Brasília (AFP), *Bolsonaro Issues Decree Limiting Social Media Moderation*, France24, Sept. 7, 2021, at <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210907-bolsonaro-issues-decree-limiting-social-media-moderation>.

made unavailable on social networks without the just cause ... may request the responsible authority, to be defined in regulation, to apply the penalty provided in Art. 28-A of the said Law, and the reinstatement of the content, without prejudice to applicable compensation."

Since there was no "just cause" in the MP for the removal of content related to COVID-19 misinformation or electoral integrity, this provision—out of an exotic view of copyright—gave the author of the publication the right to request the "responsible authority" to sanction the social media company for having removed the content. The penalties included warnings, suspensions, and fines that could reach up to 10% of the company's revenue in the country. The responsible authority could also demand the reinstatement of the content while still safeguarding the author's right to file a compensation lawsuit against the company.

The MP faced immediate opposition from various sectors of society, who argued that the proposed changes threatened freedom of expression and could facilitate the dissemination of online disinformation.²² Critics also pointed out that the MP was issued without any sort of public debate.

Several political parties challenged the MP at the Supreme Court and Justice Rosa Weber granted an injunction suspending its effectiveness.²³ Weber's decision highlighted the importance of the Internet Bill of Rights as a "bulwark of freedom of expression" and questioned the urgency and relevance of the MP. Subsequently, the National Congress decided not to proceed with the analysis of the MP, which ultimately expired.

The episodes of content moderation involving Bolsonaro during the pandemic and his attempt to change legislation highlight how the handling of COVID-19 became a popular theme in the digital propaganda agenda. Upon realizing that foreign platforms began to reduce visibility or even remove content posted by the President and his supporters, it became convenient to question the legitimacy of such actions by a private entity and promptly reinforce theories about foreign interference on domestic issues and censorship.

²² Conectas, *How Bolsonaro's Provisional Measure Promotes Disinformation on the Internet*, CONECTAS, Sept. 13, 2021, at <https://www.conectas.org/en/noticias/how-bolsonaros-provisional-measure-promotes-disinformation-on-the-internet/>.

²³ PEDRO DE PERDIGÃO LANA, FLAVIO RECH WAGNER, & PAULO RENA DA SILVA SANTARÉM, *INTERNET IMPACT BRIEF – PROPOSALS TO REGULATE CONTENT MODERATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN BRAZIL (2022)*, at <https://www.internetsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/External-IIB-Content-Moderation-Brazil.pdf>.

C. Challenging Electoral Integrity with False Claims of Electronic Voting Fraud

During his term, Bolsonaro launched a series of attacks against Brazil's electronic voting system, promoting the idea that electronic voting machines were susceptible to fraud and advocating for the adoption of a printed vote as an alternative. These claims were repeatedly made without the President presenting any concrete evidence to support that there had been fraud in previous elections, fueling distrust in the integrity of the Brazilian electoral process and democratic institutions.²⁴

Bolsonaro's live broadcasts and statements about printed voting and alleged fraud in electronic voting machines were a recurring element, especially in the period leading up to the 2022 elections. On such occasions, Bolsonaro reiterated claims that the electronic voting system could be easily rigged. In one of his most controversial statements, he even claimed that "the fraud is in the TSE ("Tribunal Superior Eleitoral" or the Superior Electoral Court),"²⁵ suggesting that the body responsible for organizing elections in Brazil was involved in schemes to manipulate the results.

The TSE invited the Armed Forces to join the Election Transparency Commission ("CTE"), which was created with the aim of increasing the transparency and security of the electoral process, allowing various sectors of society to follow and audit the voting system. The participation of the Armed Forces, however, created more tension. On several occasions, representatives of the Armed Forces presented technical questions about the voting system, which were interpreted by critics as a way to echo the unfounded doubts raised by Bolsonaro, himself a former member of the Army. These questions ranged from the security of data transmission to the integrity of the software used in the voting machines.

The TSE responded by organizing technical presentations and publishing detailed documents. The Court also reinforced the security and reliability of the Brazilian electoral system, highlighting the multiple levels of audit and oversight that ensure the integrity of the elections.

²⁴ Jack Nicas, Flávia Milhorance, & Ana Ionova, *How Bolsonaro Built the Myth of Stolen Elections in Brazil*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 25, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/25/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-misinformation.html>.

²⁵ Ingrid Soares, *Bolsonaro volta a atacar as eleições: 'A fraude está no TSE'* [Bolsonaro attacks elections again: "The fraud is in the TSE"], CORREIO BRAZILIENSE, July, 9, 2021, at <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/politica/2021/07/4936558-bolsonaro-volta-a-atacar-eleicoes-a-fraude-esta-no-tse.html>.

In July 2021, Bolsonaro held a live broadcast on social media promising to present evidence that the 2018 elections had been rigged (even though he won in that election). During the two-hour broadcast, the President displayed a series of videos and claims that had been previously debunked by the TSE and information security experts. The live broadcast was widely criticized for attacking the electoral system without evidence.

Another significant moment of challenge to the electoral system was the meeting with foreign ambassadors held at the Alvorada Palace in July 2022. Bolsonaro repeated his unfounded accusations about vulnerabilities in the electronic voting machines, suspicions about the actions of the STF and the TSE, and the possibility of electoral fraud, seeking international support for his claims. This event was widely publicized and broadcast live, reinforcing the narrative of distrust in the electoral process.²⁶

Bolsonaro's actions, especially the meeting with ambassadors, had significant repercussions.²⁷ The TSE, under the presidency of Justice Moraes, initiated an investigation into the attacks on the electoral system as potential threats to democracy and the rule of law. These investigations culminated in a decision that, by 2024, rendered Bolsonaro ineligible for abuse of political power and misuse of media to attack the electoral system and sow unfounded doubts about the integrity of the elections.

The TSE's decision to declare Bolsonaro ineligible was unprecedented, representing the first time a former Brazilian president was sanctioned with the loss of political rights for attacking the electoral system. This judgment was based, in part, on the President's actions and statements that sought to discredit without evidence the electronic voting system, including the live broadcast and the meeting with ambassadors.

Bolsonaro's attacks on electronic voting machines and his demands for an auditable paper ballot generated intense public debate about the security and transparency of the Brazilian electoral system. Despite electronic voting machines being used in Brazil since 1996 and multiple security verifications and tests confirming their reliability, the President's unfounded claims contributed to sowing doubts among part of the population, fostering distrust in institutions, and reinforcing the presidential narrative that there was a conspiracy to defeat him.

²⁶ Daniel Carvalho & Simone Iglesias, *Bolsonaro calls ambassadors to cast doubts on electoral system*, BLOOMBERG, June 18, 2022, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-18/bolsonaro-calls-ambassadors-to-cast-doubt-on-electoral-system?embedded-checkout=true>.

²⁷ Andrew Downie, *Bolsonaro attack on Brazil's electoral system sparks outrage*, GUARDIAN, July 19, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/19/bolsonaro-attack-on-brazil-electoral-system-sparks-outrage>.

III. From Brazil to the Majority World: Three Elements of a Digital Propaganda Blueprint

The Bolsonaro administration's tenure has provided a template for understanding propaganda strategies, particularly those that resonate with similar patterns in various countries of the majority world. Out of the Brazilian experience, three critical elements exemplify the use of digital platforms for political influence and control, which might be adaptable or observable in similar political contexts.

A key tactic during the Bolsonaro years was the deliberate selection of an antagonist to channel a wide range of attacks online. In the case of Brazil, the Judiciary served as a convenient adversary to galvanize support and justify attacks against perceived overreaches in constitutional attributions.

By positioning judicial decisions detrimental to the President's interests as breaches of the separation of powers—allegedly overstepping the constitutional boundaries—this narrative fostered a perception of regular controls set forth by the Judiciary as threats to democracy. The portrayal of Supreme Court justices, who typically serve lifelong appointments, as detached from societal realities further amplified this divide, easily framing them as emblematic of an aloof, privileged, and systemic elite.

This scenario is readily replicable in majority world countries where the role of the Executive is prominent, while the Judiciary is perceived as a more distant power, one whose members do not undergo public elections unelected and generally unknown to the general public.

In certain cases, the Judiciary can become an ally of the Executive, and its co-optation may serve to reinforce abuses committed by the Government. On the other hand, as observed in the recent Brazilian experience, the Judiciary, particularly the Higher Courts, can become the most crucial barrier to preventing democratic erosion.

However, the assertive actions of the Judiciary in such control mechanisms also make it tempting to perceive it as acting beyond its functions, accumulating investigative and sanctioning powers, or even making decisions with predominant political intents. In this context, the mobilization of followers on social media against judicial institutions, or even against judges themselves, becomes a low-hanging fruit for digital propaganda strategies that seek to portray the Judiciary as the antagonist of a popular political figure in power.

A second element of this blueprint for digital propaganda is to question the role of foreign-owned digital platforms in moderating content, raising concerns about censorship and external interference in national politics. This discourse is often

framed as a struggle against censorship, suggesting that content moderation by platforms suppresses political expression that goes against some vested group. The bureaucratic layers involved in decision-making within these platforms, spanning different jurisdictions and time zones, add complexity and potential bias in handling sensitive content related to high-profile political figures.

When the discussion over content moderation is transposed out of the United States, home to some of the major social media companies, to majority-world countries, it takes on new dimensions concerning how moderation tools and staff actually work.

Automated moderation tools may not be adequately prepared to identify and understand issues presented in the local language and context. Even when addressing moderation conducted by humans who speak the language, a lack of knowledge about the local context, in its nuances and current affairs, can lead to more errors than would occur in an English-speaking country with a more widely understood political context.

Additionally, social media companies may not have operational offices in the country, or their local employees may not have the clearance to act on content posted by a public authority, escalating a content moderation decision to higher levels that are likely not in the same time zone and will need to be briefed on the discussion. This can lead to delays in decision-making that might allow harmful content to remain online longer, or even lead to a decision being made without a full understanding of the situation.

Therefore, in majority world countries, the inclusion of content moderation and allegations of censorship are a key part of a digital propaganda strategy.

Finally, the increasing integration of technology in electoral processes provides fertile ground for sowing doubt and spreading misinformation about the reliability and security of voting mechanisms. Misconceptions and misinformation can be strategically amplified to question the integrity of the electoral process, potentially undermining trust in democratic institutions. The critique often focuses on the opacity of the technology used in elections, suggesting that it could be manipulated or that its security protocols are insufficient.

Together, these elements craft a narrative that can be leveraged to consolidate power, manipulate public perception, and challenge the legitimacy of opposition. Such strategies, while prominent in the Brazilian context under Bolsonaro, offer a blueprint for understanding similar tactics in other nations where digital platforms play a significant role in political discourse and where political figures may utilize technology to influence public opinion and electoral outcomes.

Sorting out an adversary to channel attacks online, fighting content moderation under the premise of foreign interference or political censorship, as well as

challenging the technology that runs the electoral process are three elements of a digital propaganda blueprint. This set of elements are very familiar to several countries, but they are especially powerful when deployed in the context of majority world countries, with more recent democracies and untested institutions.

The very concept of a blueprint implies its replication. The technique that popularized the term, based on a method of presenting technical drawings with a blue background and white lines, was specifically used for reproduction purposes. This essay aimed to describe, out of the recent Brazilian context, some of the master lines of this design. By better identifying the recurring patterns, it may also become easier to prepare and empower the tools for its containment.