

The Evidence of Populism in the Narratives of the President¹ of Brazil during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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In Brazil, the period of the Covid-19 pandemic was characterised by a crisis reflected in social platforms and the centralisation of information in the hands of the political leader. This article analyses former President Bolsonaro's political communication on Twitter (currently known as X) in a populist context. To achieve this objective, the research sets out from the idea that populist leaders have focused attention on publicising their popularity and approaching the public, a process expanded through social media. As a result of content analysis and studies by Engesser et al. (2017), five recurring narrative motifs were observed in Bolsonaro's communication: attacks on traditional media, advocate of the people, the basis of religion and faith as a doctrine, the sovereignty of the nation, and appeals to the heart and opposition to the dominant structure. Based on the findings, the article contributes to studies on populism, placing the phenomenon in a media environment composed of political, social and economic uncertainty.

Keywords: Bolsonaro, Twitter, populism, communication, Covid-19, Brazil, AI

¹ Bolsonaro was Brazil's 38th President, serving from 1 January 2019 until 31 December 2022.

Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Brazil attracted attention on the international stage not only because of the number of deaths related to the virus, but also for the repercussions to the negligent attitude of Jair Bolsonaro (without a party), who opposed the World Health Organization's (WHO) measures to combat Covid-19 and the Ministry of Education's isolation and vaccination campaigns. One of the reasons for the widespread dissemination of this politician's stance is the fact that the president, at the time stated, was one of the leaders who had the most contact with the population through publications on social media (Manfredi-Sánchez et al., 2021).

Bolsonaro, who is considered to be a right-wing populist, ignored scientific opinion on Covid-19 and downplays the severity of the pandemic in his speeches (Duarte, 2020). This context contributes to the populism scenario based on the rise of the extreme right, which, on the one hand, relies on discursive narratives, denying the politics of democratic institutions and the press, and, on the other hand, promotes militarism, nationalism and centralised power (Fernandes et al., 2021).

It is worth remembering that some studies indicate that charismatic leaders such as Donald Trump (United States) and Bolsonaro (Brazil) are part of the political spectrum of populism (Baptista et al., 2022; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), taking into account that contemporary populists use social networks as a means of mediation (Mudde, 2021; Mouffe, 2018; da Silva, 2020), extolling messages with persuasive capacity (Hameleers et al., 2017). Bolsonaro cited the deforestation of the Amazon as a fantasy of global elites aimed at weakening the country's sovereignty on environmental issues, attacked institutions and undermined multilateral regional cooperation schemes (Wehner, 2023).

In the context of the health sector crisis, there was a tendency for former presidential communications in social networks to focus on decision-making issues supporting political arguments (Manfredi-Sánchez et al., 2021, p. 83). In some ways, the pandemic has increased questions about populist leaders and the actions taken by these politicians, especially considering some speeches or political actions (Santos & Cesar, 2022).

It is evident that in Bolsonaro's speeches, the *ethos* typical of populist politicians is constructed, conveying the image of a predestined leader, a messiah who has the task of fighting to alleviate the suffering of his people (da Silva, 2020). In this regard, Bolsonaro mobilises the citizenry to fight against "everything that is out there", and thus, while promoting the fight against the symbols of the State, he also omits aspects of the regression caused by his politics through his information (Maitino, 2020), considering that populism does not define organisational politics, but articulates themes (Arditi et al., 2005).

Bolsonaro makes extensive use of social media to demonstrate his ideological bias to his supporters. In this sense his speech acts in the construction of meanings that dialogue with the desires of the public, and populist leaders as well (Mendonça & Caetano, 2021). The proliferation of digital content through communication has contributed to the rise of right-wing populist leaders in the West (Norris, 2020). These developments take place in a scenario in which the public sphere has evolved with digital media, leading to the acceleration of a communicative environment in which the power of media becomes

central, especially in electoral contexts (Fernández & Rodríguez-Virgili, 2019; Pérez Curiel, 2020).

In this sense, social media channels contribute to populism gaining strength and a global voice by enabling an atmosphere in which politicians and citizens expound their ideas (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Bartlett et al., 2011). The media has become an important vehicle for populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021) because the rhetoric of populism is reinforced through the use of discourse or written texts so that specific themes and arguments serve as a source of persuasion for supporters (Norris, 2020).

Considering the logic of the media ecosystem composed of the media, populism and the crisis generated by Covid-19, this article aims to provide a case study of presidential political communication published on the official page of President Bolsonaro on Twitter (currently known as X but referred to here as Twitter throughout) in the first nine months of 2021, one year before the elections. For this study, research focused on the methodology of Content Analysis and the Analysis of Automated Content, with the aim of answering the following questions: What are Bolsonaro's narratives as they emerged on Twitter, and how are these narratives in dialogue with populism?

The article addresses the most populist discourse and communication style through a social platform, bearing in mind that populism has a relationship with democracy and its rhetoric as we interpret it (Canovan, 1999; Hebling, 2021). Thus, the research follows the idea of populism as a style of political communication from political agents to the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In a mediatised environment, these social platforms contribute to the dissemination of populist narratives in which, in case of Twitter, the tool tends to contribute to bringing the figure of the populist leader and the people closer together, especially in the context of crisis such as the pandemic; whereas communication tends to be one of the main styles of populism (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017; Aalberg et al., 2017), considering that communication can be interpreted as an attempt to develop a direct relationship with citizens.

Through broad communication, social platforms such as Twitter tend to promote the dissemination of themes that are contrary to the repertoire of the political elites and traditional media (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017). Tweets become suitable as a tool for reaction, especially when it comes to current affairs and criticism of other politicians (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). Thus, *digital populism* becomes a central way in which political hegemony becomes mediatised, as social media enables the exchange of information without any need for intermediaries; in such a way, "messages on Twitter or WhatsApp may travel all the way to the president's smartphone" (Cesarino, 2019, p. 2).

Accordingly, the justification for elaborating this content lies in the fact that *Bolsonarismo* and its connection with populism in Brazil are little researched, as they are associated with the use of data and social networks, intended to mobilise followers (Fernandes et al., 2021). Moreover, there is evidence that the impact of populist messages on citizens is poorly studied (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

In this way, this article seeks to analyse Bolsonaro's Twitter posts as a public scene for populism and to provide reflections and insights on the use of social platforms as a communication tool for populism. After all, with this wide dissemination of information

through digital media, it is evident that populism in today's world affects not only economists and politicians, but also opinion-makers, such as those in academia and *the media* (Canovan, 1999). It is worth noting that this work was written a year before the Brazilian presidential elections, which marked the beginning of the building and redistribution of political electoral tactics for the year 2022. As a result, the purpose of this study is to redirect academia's attention to an age-old notion, populism, which has been modernised and digitised through social media and the pandemic situation, making this search unique.

Theoretical framework

A brief look at the discussions of the concept of populism

Populism has gained relevance over the years both in the U.S. and Europe, there being a populist style present in political communication (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017). The concept is one of the most studied topics in the field of social sciences (Tóth, 2021) because it emerges in various forms in fractured instances and has become popular in recent years (Taggart, 2004; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populism becomes a tenuous ideology that generally tends to consider society as separated into two spheres, homogeneous and antagonistic, composed of *the people* and a *corrupt elect* (Akkerman et al., 2014; Brown & Mondon, 2021), and therefore makes interpreting the people as a homogeneous mass going against the elect part of its discursive strategy (Waisbord, 2018; Brown & Mondon, 2021). In a scenario in which populism is composed of an illiberal understanding, it ultimately becomes anti-democratic in terms of representative democracy due to an internal logic that brings together popular demands and actions in a particular way (Muller, 2014).

The phenomenon is applied to various disparate movements, from the left to the political right, which can be used pejoratively to describe a threat to the status quo as defined by liberal democrats (Brown & Mondon, 2021). Populists differ according to the context – which in turn depends on the nature of the elite and the dominant discourse – and therefore claim legitimacy with regard to their speaking to the people by claiming to represent a sovereign ideal and not an interest, which is why populist politics explores the possibilities of the existing rhetoric (Canovan, 1999). A discourse can be more or less populist if we take into account the way it is articulated by equivalent logic, or rather in the way it articulates differences (Arditi et al., 2005). In one particular case, versions of right-wing populism rely on the common people, the patriotic nation, which is set in opposition to the opposition, that is, the ruling elite, left-wing parties, the media, universities, foreign interests, and other categories (Waisbord, 2018). In this way, the vision of *the people* as a collective of interests is constructed on one side (Wettstein et al., 2018; Waisbord 2020, 2018; Canovan, 1999), while the other side is then viewed as illegitimate (Muller, 2014).

Meeting point: The leader and the spread of populism and the media

Social media helps politicians spread populist messages around the world by providing a broad space for politicians and citizens to expound their ideas, which helps connect people, especially populist leaders and their audiences (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Engesser et al., 2017). The media acts by spreading populism and becoming a catalyst for public sentiment, which strengthens the bond of complicity between these populist leaders and the media by spreading populist information and ideas (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni, 2003). Politics is associated with the figure of the politician empowered by their public via social networks, which is part of the composition of the media repertory (Pérez Curiel, 2020).

Populism is defined as a specific type of leadership used by actors across the ideological spectrum that cannot be defined as a left–right criterion, as it is a rhetoric of the right form of government allocation used in a society with minorities, migrants, businessmen and political elite, in the name of the people (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Norris, 2020; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Based on this theory, populist movement leaders share the fact that their attention is focused on spreading their popularity, and on incidents involving politics and the media, and in view of the fact that they are charismatic and provocative, the media reinforces their recognition (Mazzoleni, 2008). As a result, the phenomenon is related to authoritarian leaders who tend to enforce the narrative of the rights of the people in contemplation of weakened institutions, such as the judiciary, the media and Congress (de Albuquerque, 2021).

Recently, populism is believed to be related to strong leaders who have a direct connection to the people by circumventing the authority of democratic institutions (de Albuquerque, 2021). Thus, communication becomes a means and an essential tool for populism to counter power-driven social interests (Waisbord, 2018). Through the media, populists seek to mobilise their constituencies to oppose those in power and opinion leaders (Canovan, 1999).

Taking into account that in the last few years some politicians have gained space in the media, they are recognised as populists with deep dimensions and political causes (Moffitt, 2016; Mouffe, 2018; Reynié, 2016; Soffer, 2022), which is consistent with some common ideological references to Bolsonaro. The hero figure conveyed by Donald Trump in the North American Republican Party, which “can step in from outside and solve the problems that Washington and politicians have created” (Kellner, 2016, p. 26), has contributed to the repercussions of the spectacularisation of media (Schwartzberg, 1977; Kellner, 2016).

In addition to the populist discourse, part of the right-wing communication of the policy of Marine Le Pen’s French National Front is presented in direct and emotional language, with an emphasis on claims “in the name of the people” with references to collective memories (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017; Hebling, 2021; Reynié, 2016; Soffer, 2022). Another illustration of this contemporary environment that covers the growth of populism in Europe (Tóth, 2020), is the right-wing populism evident in Hungarian political communication, such as that from Viktor Orbán (Tóth et al., 2019; Maitino, 2020).

Populists are attracted to social media because it provides an ideal opportunity framework for populist communication (see Engesser et al., 2017). In certain cases, social media platforms act as tools to connect people, allowing those in power to bypass the journalistic filter, favouring freedom of ideological articulation through information and messages (Engesser et al., 2017). In other cases, politics and the media focus on the “celebrity politician” style (Street, 2004, p. 436).

As its basis, populist ideology rests on four key issues: *popular sovereignty*, *the people* who are characterised as pure, *the corrupt elite* and *adverse threats*. From this, populist communication comprises of an emphasis on the sovereignty of the people, the idea of advocating for the people, attacking the perceived elites, and invocations to the heart through the idealisation of the community (Engesser et al., 2017). The language of populists is constructed, justified in the name of the people, and tending to disarm critics and dismantle liberal democratic restrictions (Norris, 2020). The people become an essential tool in communication because a populist leader’s rhetoric is based on the *will of the people* and *the enemy of the people in the establishment*, therefore democratic values prevail, legitimising the idea that power resides in the people (Norris, 2020, p. 699).

In this environment and with the resources of digital technology, populist political leaders secure public notoriety through their visibility in the media, which they use as political capital in pursuit of their goals in the political arena (Mazzoleni, 2008). The social media creates a parallel schedule based on the publications posted by political candidates on their profiles (in the form of *tweets*) and the publications spread by their followers through *likes* or *retweets* (Pérez Curiel, 2020).

Thus, when looking at politics from the perspective of populism and from the digital and technological aspect, the persuasive language in which the rhetoric of symbolic statements is used as a form of power is evident (Norris, 2020). However, studies suggest that populism disregards the public sphere, in which politics is an agonistic dynamic with actors in constant conflict, which explains why populists regard criticism in the context of journalistic reporting as fake news (Waisbord, 2018).

Through communication, populists express a close relationship with the people in order to reinforce the needs and demands of their audience and portray them as untouchable (Engesser et al., 2017). Populist actors take upon themselves the idea of restoring the sovereignty of the people and make this the central theme of the populist narrative (Engesser et al., 2017). In this way, populist authors make their tale reach its target audience and the public’s desires, i.e. the “call to the heart” (Taggart, 2004).

Through the use of communication, there are studies that claim that Twitter is the foremost medium for populist parties (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). Populism can also be considered a political strategy that does not focus on the content of the policy or political discourse but on the relationship of the leader to the people, that is, the voters who support the party structure around the leader (Serrano, 2020). In this way, the construction of the people is established in relation to the subjects and their oppressors, which is part of the communicative process, as the phenomenon produces the existence of *the people* (Waisbord, 2018).

Most populist politicians are charismatic, consider themselves to be a part of the people, and manage to deal with the media by addressing controversial issues that attract media attention (Serrano, 2020). There are studies that indicate that populism is characteristic of a mood of enthusiasm that attracts people outside the political arena because the idea is that the emotional factor contributes to the sense of salvation or renewal of the country, which is why emotions are intensified and associated with the figure of a charismatic leader (Canovan, 1999).

It should be remembered that ideological and social factors are conditions that promote populist ideas (Serrano, 2020). Some authors argue that there are three factors that currently support the viable conditions for populism: the crisis of political parties, the personalisation of power, and the influence of the media (Serrano, 2020; Mény & Surel, 2002).

Faced with the media's freedom and the articulation of populist leaders, electoral and ideological engagement occurs, causing voters to refrain from opinions while still absorbing them. As a result, personalised leadership becomes a natural factor in the reaction against the prevailing policies in certain cases, rejecting institutional structures, including layers of bureaucratic organisation. This helps populists celebrate both the spontaneous action of their base and the close personal relationship between leader and followers (Canovan, 1999).

It is worth noting that populist leaders tend to glorify personalities that are somewhat flamboyant and contribute to the agenda in the media (Mazzoleni, 2008). These leaders also position themselves as democrats, and express their popular opinions and grievances that are ignored by the government, political parties and even the media (Canovan, 1999).

In some ways, there is a tendency for populist leaders to use similar communication strategies (Fontes & Marques, 2022), despite having different goals (Norris, 2020). Contemporary studies on media indicate that populist communication is limited to the figure of the leader, located in the political spectrum between right and left, and often constructed through memes, slogans and *emojis* that dialogue with the leader's speech and consequently bring him closer to citizens through personalised messages, mainly through *emoticons* and *hashtags* (Manfredi-Sánchez et al., 2021, p. 84).

What contributes to populism being defined mainly by the state of political communication while being close to the people is the adoption of an anti-establishment position, and the emphasis on the homogeneity of the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). If, on the one hand, emotions are reinforced on social media when dealing with populism, then, on the other hand, they also exalt affectivity based on feelings (Mendonça & Caetano, 2021).

The rise of communication media in modern times has made it possible for politicians to create a *modus operandi* for showing more loyalty to a person, an idea, an institution, or an organisation, which makes it easier for political actors to show their power to thousands of media outlets with just the click of a mouse (Bartlett et al., 2011; Bourdieu, 1989). If the media's role is to disseminate a country's public agenda, it is also true that in some cases they tend to foster political distrust and disinterest, contributing to the spread of populist ideas related to these factors (Mazzoleni, 2008).

When it comes to the narrative of populism, the expressions are characterised by a democratic language aimed at the general population, often simple and frank, using tabloid-style communication that also offers solutions and analyses social issues (Canovan, 1999; Mazzoleni, 2008). Despite the great inconsistency and ambiguity that surround the phenomenon of populism, the subject has proven to be resilient when dealing with a variety of concepts that surround the phenomenon, especially when it comes to the present and past of Latin America (Waisbord, 2003).

The case: Brief contextualisation of the Brazilian scenario

Jair Bolsonaro started his presidential term in 2018 at a time when the country's political parties and leaders had been discredited by corruption scandals such as Operation Lava Jato, an investigation carried out by the Federal Police of Brazil that was supported by the president (Fernandes et al., 2021). In recent years, there has been a decline in Brazilian democracy, which resulted in the rise of Bolsonaro (de Albuquerque, 2021); evidence of this can be found in the public demonstrations of 2013, the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff (Workers' Party) in 2016, the arrest and, later release, of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers' Party) in 2018, and in the election of Bolsonaro (no party) with 55.13% of the votes (Souza, 2020). Bolsonaro's presidential campaign made extensive use of social media engagement, which served to facilitate interaction between voters and the repercussions of ideas (Cesarino, 2019; Viscardi, 2020).

Elected with the campaign slogan "Brazil above everything, God above all", former federal deputy Bolsonaro faced the pandemic in his first term, and his media-mediated speech became one of the most important sources of information for the population. Add to that his engagement on other social sites and the loyalty of some of his followers (his Twitter account had 8.1 million followers), who share the same ideals and call him *Bolsomito* or *mith* (a combination of his name and the word *myth*). The term "myth" in this context refers to the idea of a hero, someone who is perceived as extraordinary, almost legendary, by the view point of his supporters.

This position as leader of the nation occurs in a scenario in which Brazil is one of the five countries with the highest number of Covid-19 cases, according to data from the *Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center*, there were 594,653 deaths by the end of September 2021. As stated on the website of the *United Nations Brazil*, the pandemic has affected the economic, social and political development of several countries and, above all, the lives of many people, since the crisis in the health sector has increased inequalities and structural problems, including economic problems, unemployment and recession (Furstenau et al., 2021).

The president's argument against the isolation and lockdown policies was based on the fact that the Brazilian economy could not stall in the face of the virus because if it did, people would die of hunger and poverty (Recuero & Soares, 2021). Consequently, Bolsonaro's attitude in relation to the pandemic was one of the factors that triggered the serious situation of the country in the face of Covid-19; particularly given that 2021 was the epicentre of the crisis, with about 300,000 deaths in March (Fernandes et al., 2021).

With his speech marked by parodies and an eccentric performance, Bolsonaro's narratives allow the recurrence of an ambiguous, ironic and humorous account, part of the populist performance (Mendonça & Caetano, 2021) that also exhibited traces of criticism and a neglect of dialogues with social transgressions (Bakhtin, 1984; Mendonça & Caetano, 2021). A discourse that tends to go beyond the limits established by language, norms and values, and consequently affects power structures (Bakhtin, 1984).

Bolsonarism creates a narrative based on the figure of the *good citizen*, who becomes the narrative key for mobilisation and articulation for Brazilians (Maitino, 2020). It is important to highlight the populist style in Latin America, promoting the ascension of individuals, criticising politicians, parties, and the use of media repercussions on digital platforms (Waisbord & Amado 2017). In this regard, Bolsonaro mobilises citizens to fight against *everything that is out there*, and thus, whilst promoting the fight against the symbols of the state, he omits to mention the aspects of regression caused by his politics (Maitino, 2020).

The President's position contributed to a split in the political environment. Considering that Bolsonaro's speeches led to tensions between the government and his health ministers and state governors because they disagreed about what to do against Covid-19, this contributed in some way to an extensive media agenda (Santos & Cesar, 2022), all in an environment where social platforms served as a scene for controversial positions related to the crisis in the health sector.

Considering this, Brazil stands out in this unprecedented context of a politically polarised environment, in which a leader with populist traits opposes the press (Fontes & Marques, 2022). It should also be recalled that over the years Bolsonaro had tried to avoid the traditional media, and his first words as President in 2018 were said in a live broadcast on Facebook and not at the party headquarters or in a public place, as had been common in previous elections in the country (Fernandes et al., 2021).

Bolsonaro's charismatic use of his social platforms to engage and spread his ideas on the pandemic resonated with his supporters. Bolsonaro's media communication, as a right-wing populist leader, may have played a significant role in the substantial increase in the number of deaths. This becomes evident when we observe that the president did not provide adequate grounds for claiming that the economic impact of social isolation policies would result in more deaths than those directly resulting from the pandemic (Soares, 2020). Therefore, according to Soares's analysis (2020), this political stance may have played a crucial role in the high mortality rate.

In this context, the head of state openly displayed his rejection of the effectiveness of vaccines and tended to question scientific research, moving in the opposite direction to the measures proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to combat Covid-19. In some of his social media speeches, Bolsonaro criticised WHO as he did in the *Correio Brasiliense* newspaper: "Our WHO has left something to be desired. It talks so much about focusing on science, the WHO has the least science", and then tried to reiterate his position against the vaccine in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper: "I am not going to get vaccinated and that's the end of it, my problem." Furthermore, Bolsonaro again reiterated his position in videos on his YouTube channel, proposing an end to isolation as follows: "Let us work, the virus will not go away." In speeches, at events,

in conversations, and on social media, Jair Bolsonaro emerges as a critic of the *Ministry of Health's* policies: according to him, the Covid-19 virus was just a “little flu” (Recuero & Soares, 2021). As followed, the spread of disinformation and the role of traditional media in this scenario cannot be separated from issues in the political arena, especially in case of Brazil, given Bolsonaro’s speech which downplayed the significance of Covid-19, the so-called “little flu” (Santos & Cesar, 2022).

Even without the support of economic and scientific arguments, the president’s statements were constant throughout the year and had a significant impact on public opinion, as they tended to reinforce disinformation (Recuero & Soares, 2021). Therefore, the issue of populism is important for Brazil due to the current situation of the country in a time of crisis (Ricci et al., 2021).

Bolsonaro and the media: A love-hate relationship

Bolsonaro views his Twitter profile as a source of *true* information and promotes the notion that the traditional media works by propagating “fake news about his government” (Costa & Bernardi, 2020, p. 89). This political strategy contradicts the logic of media spectacle (Goffman, 2011; Schwartzberg, 1977; Thompson, 2008; Souza, 2018), in which the media becomes an actor in the formation of reality and perception in the world.

Thus, Bolsonaro’s attack on the media intersects with the politics of spectacle (Pajnik & Sauer, 2017; Costa & Bernardi, 2020), in which social networks like Twitter serve as significant instruments for alignment with their followers and for putting information of interest to people on the agenda. Bolsonaro used the media to rally the public against democratic institutions like the legislature and the judiciary (Costa & Bernardi, 2020, p. 89). Consequently, the politician affected the relationship between the administration and the media from a perspective in which it began to question the veracity and engagement of information from the communication vehicles (Marques, 2023).

Based on the idea of constructing reality, individuals base their actions and define meanings, contributing to the course of events between social fields (Bourdieu, 1989; Thompson, 2008; Souza, 2018). Faced with this social construction, the Brazilian media ended up reporting divergent information with a tendency towards polarisation between supporters of the politician versus critics. In these vehicles, we see defenders of the Jair Bolsonaro regime attempting to shelter the politician from the crises and scandals, as well as criticism of the government, Covid-19 and corruption (Botelho et al., 2022).

Bolsonaro employs the strategy of openly saying that traditional sources of information, such as newspapers, broadcast inaccurate information about him and his government and, as a result of this narrative, he proposes that his audience avoid traditional media (da Silva, 2020). Therefore, Bolsonaro tries to use the social media to strengthen his connection with his audience by appealing to the people and the heart, and by targeting the media (da Silva, 2020).

Moreover, social media becomes the main tool in promoting *appeals to the people*, making use of Twitter as one of the main tools and sources of information in Bolsonaro’s

political speech in a context in which these platforms legitimise the rhetoric of leaders (Costa & Bernardi, 2020). These dynamics highlight the growing importance of digital platforms in shaping public opinion and in the communication strategy of contemporary political leaders.

Methods

Considering that contemporaneously the announcements and the communication of the Brazilian President (2019–2022) were made through social sites, in a scenario where digital tools were used as a reference both for the population and for the press, this work uses the methodology of content analysis and computer-assisted content analysis (CACA) for 611 tweets on the official page of President Jair Messias Bolsonaro in the first nine months of 2021 (1 January to 30 September), these were intended for the president's target audience, such as Brazilians, the nation, voters and non-voters.

The research makes use of two software programs that allow the semi-automatic collection of content with the use of software for text analysis, prioritising computer-assisted content analysis, in which reading and coding (by the machine) provide the collection and mapping of recurring narratives in tweets. To extract and map the content, the work used the software *SentiOne*, a tool that monitors free and global social media through algorithms, mentions and insights, allowing a better *overview* of posts. And *T-Lab*, a software that allows the semi-automatic analysis of keywords, which makes the analysis more effective through informative graphics.

The use of these two software programs aids in the visualisation and mapping of the most common themes in the posts, as well as serving as a foundation for the systematic categorical construction of the data, as proposed by Bardin (1977), which encourages content categorisation and segmentation to elaborate the analysis. In this regard, the goal was to develop the primary narratives about the former president, which is exactly the classification process utilised by Waisbord and Amado (2017).

The choice of Twitter as the base reference for this research was related to the influence of this communication platform on the daily lives of Brazilians, since Bolsonaro's Twitter account had 8 million followers at the time of this research (Figure 1). Twitter was created in 2006 as a multidimensional *microblogging* platform, in which it opens space for the discussion of different topics (Viscardi, 2020).

The 280 character limit for posts applies to all users, with the aim of information getting straight to the point with precision and effectiveness. This format allows politicians to deliver a short, direct and unambiguous message when compared with the previous traditional style of messaging, which allowed for nuances in information (Van Kessel & Castelein, 2016). We should also take into account that on Twitter, visibility and the possibility of an immediate response are factors that increase the political influence of the social platform (Pérez Curiel, 2020).

Furthermore, according to *Statista*, Brazil is among the top five countries in the ranking of users of the social platform according to surveys, hence highlighting

the influence of the platform in the construction of public opinion, particularly in decisive moments or crises.



*Figure 1:
Bolsonaro's Twitter*

Source: Twitter photo of the former president in September 2021, during his government.

With automated content, the survey has advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages, the chosen method contributed to effective, reliable and close-to-reality results, in addition to allowing for the analysis of a large amount of data in a relatively short period. The disadvantages are that failures in searches may occur, especially when it comes to words and their meanings. Therefore, in an attempt to remedy this gap, the research relies on Computer-Assisted Content Analysis (CACA), in which, after the searches performed by the two software programs, the analysis and measurement of the content is carried out in order to address the categories.

After the *SentiOne* had been collected in the period demarcated in the analysis, the most recurrent words (machine search) were mined using T-Lab, which enabled a broader aspect through mining. Then the data were analysed empirically, qualitatively and quantitatively in order to arrive at the most recurrent categories through secretion and mining.

The words that make up the categories were chosen according to the recurrence of each category, and because it is a quantitative and qualitative research, after the searches carried out by the software, content mining was carried out in order to filter the meanings that best validate the framework of each one. Categories are giving shape to the main recurrences (Figure 2).

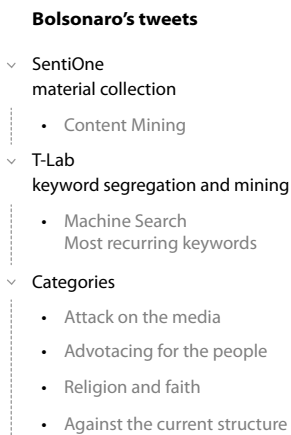


Figure 2:

Methodological map

Source: MindMeister – from the content of this research.

Thus, the categories emerge based on the research of Engesser et al. (2017), Taggart (2004), Waisbord (2018), who discuss the political actor as a populist and present some key ideological elements that serve the following five categories (Table 1) created by this research according to the data collected from the analysis: 1. attack on the media; 2. advocating for the people; 3. religion and faith; 4. sovereignty and appeal to the heart; 5. opposing the dominant structure.

Following the work done by Engesser et al. (2017) that proposes categories to shape populism, in a pedagogical way this work divides Bolsonaro’s narratives on Twitter into five categories that dialogue with contemporary studies about populism, taking into account the qualitative research of the text, which addresses the idea that populism manifests itself in a fragmented way in social networks (Engesser et al., 2017).

From this categorisation and the translations done by the author, the material was framed according to the segmentation in the period of the first nine months of the year 2021, corresponding to the third year of Bolsonaro’s first term as president, in an attempt to analyse and regulate Bolsonaro’s main narratives on Twitter and how these narratives dialogue with populism. Brazil has a presidential electoral system, in which elections are held through mandatory voting every four years. The election would be held on 2 October 2022.

Table 1:
Categories worked on in this research

Category	Meanings based on each category	Machine search
Attack on the media	Criticising the media, as well as the information disclosed by these media. Opposition/ Adversity to the means of communication.	“media”, “traditional media”, “press”, “newspapers”, “television”, “newspaper without information”, “misinformation”, “uninformed”, “media hypocrisy”, “the press beats me”, “lie”, “press lies” “disinformation”, “false information”, “lying political opposition”, “fake news” (published by the media)
Advocating for the people	Positioning himself as the defender of the people, intermediation of problems and issues in favour of the people.	“right to come and go”, “the climate of fear that does not help”, “appeal to the people”, “appeal to Brazilians”, “guarantee the dignity of Brazilians”, “radical”, “irrational”, “irresponsible”, “right of the nation”, “liberty”, “democracy”
Religion and faith	Exaltation of themes of religions, the Bible and God.	“religion”, “faith”, “God”, “Jesus”, “bible”, “glory”, “bless”, “resurrection”, “João” (John: the New Testament), “God above all”
Nation’s sovereignty and appeal to the heart (heart invocation)	Exaltation of the homeland and the nation with an emotional background.	“the nation”, “our country”, “a better Brazil”, “a better country”, “Brazil above everything”, “Brazil is ours”, “Brazil is green and yellow”, “change Brazil”, “Brazil of the Brazilians”, “trust in Brazil”, “Brazilian people”, “people of the nation”, “the Brazilian people”, “long live our Brazil”, “the will of the Brazilian”, “our country wants”, “national sovereignty”
Against the current structure	Opposition to the current structure of the country.	“army day”, “armed forces”, “military”, “aeronautics”, “army”, “general”, “dictatorship”

Source: Data extracted from the content of this research.

Thus, the reflection of the research is not populism as a concept but rather how the media promote the populist narrative and, in case of Bolsonaro, at what points this discussion stands out through the categories, starting from the point that these media serve as a structure for populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017; Gründl, 2022).

From this perspective, the temporal selection is marked by a moment of crisis in the face of the inconveniences caused by the pandemic and also the initiation of the construction of the electoral scenario. One of the limitations of the research is the fact that it does not cover the period of one year, nor does it make comparisons with other media, given the large amount of data collected for this work and the deepening of the analysis of the different segmentation of political communication found.

Results

Bolsonaro's narrative on Twitter and his interaction with the public

In the period investigated, contextualised in the period when Bolsonaro was president, he wrote 611 posts, which had different reaches in different months. The highest reach was in May, with 276,078,617 number total of unique users who saw a post, and the lowest in July, with 152,058,371 (Figure 3), which clearly shows the interaction of users with the official profile and its publications, that is, the engagement.

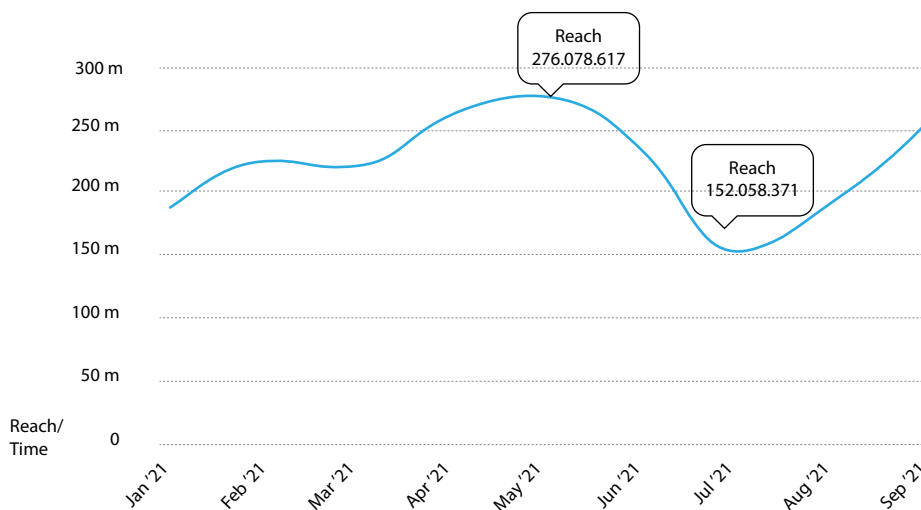


Figure 3:
Scope of publications made by Jair Bolsonaro on Twitter
 Source: SentiOne – data extracted from the content of this research.

These posts consist mostly of sentences followed by pictures and videos and were published weekly in the form of live streams in which the President addressed the nation to keep the public informed. The contact between politicians and the public on Twitter serves both as a communication tool and a means of revealing ideas and opinions related to public and administrative management, strategies and self-promotion of the government.

In general, when it comes to the content analysed, there is a tendency for Jair M. Bolsonaro to be, in a certain way, exalted or criticised through his posts by the social platform's users. On the other hand, the politician tries to coordinate with his followers when he expresses opinions and reveals ideas. It is through this interaction between the politician and the public that the major response to the official site takes place, constantly putting controversial issues and the daily life of Brazilians on the agenda. In this way,

Twitter made it possible to synthesise communication strategies and the ‘feedback’ of information between the head of state and his people.

Since this is a study about populism, it is worth mentioning here that the focus was on the search for an automated analysis when the collected contents were put in dialogue with the word ‘people’. In this sense, the people become the central issue of populism (Engesser et al., 2017). Arguing that they speak for the people, populists build their legitimacy by claiming to be democratic sovereigns not bound to the interests of the economic class, usually translating problems into democratic issues (Canovan, 1999).

References to people run like a thread through all the categorical segments studied – the attack on the media, advocacy for the people, religion and faith, sovereignty and appeals to the heart, as well as resistance to the ruling structure. This fact shows that Bolsonaro connects several themes to popular aspirations, such as religion, democracy, thanks, recognition and congratulations, defence, media, support, work and others (Figure 4).



Figure 4:

The keyword “people” and its relationship network in the posts
 Source: T-Lab – data extracted from the content of this research.

Through the content analysis of Bolsonaro’s posts, 29% attack the media, 24% advocate for the people; 21% are related to the subject of religion and faith, 14% speak up against the current structure, 12% appeal to sovereignty and invocation of the heart (Table 2).

*Table 2:
Result of categorisation*

Categories	Recurrence percentage
Attack on the media	30%
Advocating for the people	24%
Religion and faith	21%
Against the current structure	14%
Nation's sovereignty and heart invocation	11%

Source: Data extracted from the content of this research.

In the subchapters, the study then looks at these five categories that appear in the former president's tweets to consider populist communication in the media and how it appears in political communication. In this way, it aims to show how these contemporary narratives are inextricably linked to populism, which aims at a new contemporary scenario composed of the factor of a global crisis in health, reflected in all sectors of Brazilian society, especially at a time when access to information is determined by digital communication through social platforms.

Attack on the media: Disinformation and distrust of traditional media

On Twitter, Bolsonaro made it clear that his deviation from traditional media was real, as can be read in one of his tweets: "If you do not read the newspaper, you are without information, if you do read, you are uninformed." In 30% of the analysed content, the former president attacks the media, mainly when it comes to the alignment of the media. Populism is usually associated with a certain type of communication between the people and the leader, manipulation of the media, and representative discourse between the people and the nation (Waisbord, 2003).

These findings support the theory that Bolsonaro attacks the media in order to divert attention away from unfavourable or controversial issues related to his government, or even for personal gain. Given that, as previously discussed, the main speeches targeting the media are tied to the legislative investigation primarily centred on corruption associated with opposition parties, such as the PT and their political adversaries, referred as the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) (Botelho et al., 2022). Primarily because it is a context that must consider the consequences of false content from social actors (Carvalho et al., 2021) in an environment where Bolsonaro makes use of multiple media attacks, engaging in demagoguery to encourage disorder in times of crisis (Costa & Bernardi, 2020).

From the perspective in which the Bolsonaro Government was marked by democratic setbacks in sectors such as public policies, the environment, the press and the judiciary (Avritzer et al., 2021; Avritzer, 2020), the use of denialism in a democratic environment (Guerreiro & Almeida, 2021), together with the use of belief in the myth of racial

democracy (Oliveira et al., 2020; do Nascimento, 1978), the attack on the media through Twitter becomes one of the main narratives of political engagement, in which criticism of the media contributes to the discredit of the traditional media of information, enabling disinformation, corroborating denialism, and opening paths for the spread of fake news, added to the fact that this attack was not aligned with the social demands and desires of the population in the face of the crisis.

The president criticises the attitude of newspapers and magazines, in that he explicitly and repeatedly contests various pieces of information disseminated by these media. On the one hand, Bolsonaro wants to gain the media's trust, but on the other hand, he accuses them of being malicious, and attacks their credibility by questioning their honesty and alleging that they are spreading disinformation (Leschzyk, 2021). This occurs at a moment when the pandemic has increased questions about populist leaders and the actions taken by these politicians in an environment of crisis, especially considering some speeches or political actions (Santos & Cesar, 2022).

In this sense, there is a gap in traditional media due to this divergence, enabling the emergence of populism in the fact that politicians know how to use digital media to their benefit, claiming the centrality of information by becoming real opinion makers. This is evident in the first "live" broadcast of 2021, posted as a tweet. In this video, Bolsonaro highlights the importance of "live" during his term, seemingly seeing this form of communication as a strategy to make people understand what is happening in the federal government, without distorting information from other media, since his government does not count on the support of traditional media.

Digital communication, through Twitter, becomes a fundamental basis for disseminating information about the presidency. And since Bolsonaro is the central source of information on social media, when he discredits the traditional media, he becomes the epicentre of government communication and, above all, the information filter itself. It can be concluded that the politician is aware of the great impact of his social media page and the importance of the information he transmits to his followers about reducing the distance between the population and its representative.

As the politician points out, "when the media does a good job, the representative is praised", while on the other hand, "the work of our government is done seriously, that's why we get beat up by the media". Bolsonaro mentions the repercussions for his government spreading misinformation by the media. In contrast, the content presented shows that the former president also criticises some reports published against him by the *Revista Época* and, contrary (adverse) to this means of communication, advocates the use of misinformation related to the president's vaccination card. Introducing an extroverted and charismatic manner in a frank and popular dialogue, Bolsonaro clarifies that the vaccine problem is of a bureaucratic nature and it is not his intention to prevent the vaccination campaign in Brazil.

The criticism of traditional media also extends to blogs: for example, in one of his tweets, Bolsonaro criticises the positioning of some Brazilian digital influencers. According to Bolsonaro, these influencers put on masks when they approached him during the pandemic, and therefore, for him, this attitude is a form of attack on the presidency because it is linked to the "hypocrisy of most of the media" – regarding the

use of masks. Keeping the focus of criticism on the media, the president criticises it by making a comparison in which he mentions that every thirty-six seconds a military policeman is hit by a stone, but in his opinion, this is not revealed by the media because “for the traditional media, everything is normal”.

In his tweets Bolsonaro endorses the notion that “the press beat me from the beginning”, citing the newspaper *Correio Brasiliense* that published a report on the high number of hungry people in Brazil, relating it to government administration. In the dialogue, Bolsonaro argues that the foreclosure policy contributes to this type of reporting and is also responsible for the high inflation, misery and rising unemployment in the country. Given this view of the pandemic and the country’s scenario, the president believes that the media is spreading panic, creating a climate of mistrust and misinformation (Leschzyk, 2021).

Bolsonaro claims in one of his tweets that the country will soon have a huge crisis and therefore he reminds the population that he is unjustly on trial, accused of genocide, which is contradictory from his point of view, since he did not shut down businesses, shops, or public spaces. Finally, he argues, “I am not threatening anyone, but soon we will have a serious problem in Brazil”. The president deliberately claims that his communications network “is one of the most interactive in the world”. Bolsonaro praises freedom, the use of information and social media.

This constant criticism of the media by Bolsonaro puts the media in a delicate situation that leads to the dilution of the content disseminated by it. Therefore, Bolsonaro’s analysed tweets tend to discredit the media when it comes to issues related to the president, the government and even the pandemic – placing himself at the centre of information, insofar as there is an expansion of social media, as in the case of Twitter, in which the politician becomes the voice of truth that he himself delivers to the population.

Advocating for the people: The issue of Covid-19 ‘versus’ face-to-face work

The figure of the leader who stands up for the people appears in 24% of the tweets, with the main theme being face-to-face work in a pandemic scenario, in which Bolsonaro points out the restrictions against the virus by positioning himself against the lockdown, the use of masks, vaccines and the *stay at home* virtual campaign. The justification offered by Bolsonaro is that if Brazilians adopt these measures, such as the lockdown, the country will go through a crisis; according to him, “Brazil cannot stop” in the face of the pandemic. In this sense, Bolsonaro assumes the role of advocate for the people in the face of Covid-19 restrictions established by WHO.

Despite the lack of scientifically sound arguments, Bolsonaro’s tweets make his narrative clear: he positions himself as a defender of the interests of the population in the face of the adversity caused by the pandemic, and consequently, the politician appears as a mediator possessing the supposed solution to the crisis facing the country, even without scientific basis. In this case, populism places itself in the position of the expressive democrat, raising questions and ignoring ideas in an attempt to mobilise its base through the media (Canovan, 1999).

In his tweets, Bolsonaro preaches that the *stay at home* campaign is a danger to Brazil and, above all, to the people, which can lead to unemployment, depression, inflation and the destruction of the country's economy. It follows that in these nine months' worth of posts, a direct and transparent emphasis can be observed, opposing the *stay at home* campaign in the country, and advising the population to forgo safety measures.

In a charismatic way, by calling his audience to participate in personal work through tweets, the politician positions himself as a voice in the fight against unemployment and consequently assumes a role of appealing to the public against the prevailing social structures, as his political opponents, in the fight against unemployment related to the Covid-19, such as the media, academia, experts and even health organisations. This is because populist discourse corresponds to the idea of appealing to the people, which tends to be directed against established power structures and even values (Canovan, 1999).

In the analysed content, it is worth mentioning the weekly "live" broadcast of 01/04/21, in which Bolsonaro mentions the procedures to validate the use of the vaccine in the country, based on the security requested for the release of the vaccine by the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa), and confirms the problems that the country is facing with the closure of trade in São Paulo. Next, Bolsonaro points out the "bad faith" of his opponents, blaming the federal government for the death toll from Covid-19 and clarifying that the lockdown policy. He also states that "the *stay at home* is a part of more restrictive powers than the 'state of siege'", a number of bureaucratic and political emergency measures according to which the President of the Republic at the time suspends the activities of legislative (deputies and senators) and judiciary powers. According to Bolsonaro, religious freedom and the "right to come and go" are sacred to the people, which is why isolation campaigns in the country are inadmissible.

At another time, in the live broadcast of 08/04/21, when specifically addressing the issue of Covid-19 in relation to the vaccine and the isolation of the virus in the country, Bolsonaro pointed out that in the face of the crisis, "the climate of terror does not help save lives". This statement is in dialogue with the panic among the population, given the high mortality rate associated with the virus.

In one of the tweets critical of the measures taken against Covid-19, the former President, posting a photo of a woman with a child on the beach (open environment), questions his followers about the need for isolation, asking where a person is better protected, on the beach or at home. In contrast to isolation, the former president also says that Brazil is one of the countries with the most vaccinations in the world. From this narrative, it can be concluded that populism in contemporary societies should be considered an appeal to the people directed against established structures and prevailing values, which leads to the legitimisation of this political style.

With simple vocabulary and examples from the everyday lives of the people, Bolsonaro traces his role as an advocate of the people against health measures and isolation campaigns in a time of crisis and uncertainty. Added to this, the politician endorses the position against the lockdown and the isolation policies triggered by some states and cities, including measures of protection against Covid-19. As an advocate of the people, the politician reiterates his commitment against restrictive measures that

are “radical, irrational and irresponsible” because “in addition to fighting the virus, it is necessary to guarantee the dignity of Brazilians who have to work”. As a result, the theme of personal work is important in the tweet speech to motivate the public to go to work despite the challenges posed by the pandemic and its constraints.

Religion above all

Based on the Instituto DataFolha, the population of Brazil adheres to the following religions and denominations: 50% Catholics, 31% Evangelicals and 10% without religion; thus, the evocation of religion is a strong ally in the political game. In Bolsonaro’s posts, appeal to religion is the third most recurrent narrative, with 21% of tweets, in which he quotes biblical verses and religious greetings, such as “God bless our Brazil!”.

According to data from the Instituto DataFolha, from a survey carried out before the 2018 elections (conducted in 2017), at the time of the electoral decision 81% of Brazilians do not usually consider the position of their religious leader in choosing candidates to be supported. Through Twitter, the former president seeks to spread his faith as one of the characteristics of his personality, and mainly associates it with his truthful and honest conduct. Thus, one of the most important themes in Bolsonaro’s pronouncements is the interaction between political and religious discourse, as it is part of charismatic dominance (da Silva, 2020).

The exaltation of God is part of Bolsonaro’s routine in the media, where he makes his faith clear to the population, as can be seen in the following sentences: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, will live’; John 11:25”; “God bless Brazil and keep our freedom!”; as well as the evocation of his campaign motto “Brazil above everything! God above all!”.

In a charismatic manner and with popular words, the former president captivates not only his religious audience but also those who aspire to honesty, good behaviour and morality, making religious discourse not only a strategy but also part of the populist narrative. In this sense, ideological manipulation contributes to the construction of behavioural paradigms that lead to a process of social unity associated with a charismatic, constructed authority figure, in which values are reinforced through this figure of the political leader (da Silva, 2020).

Bolsonaro’s posts endorse particular thanks as exemplified by the text, “My most noble reverence to the Redentoristas Nuns, who live in the cloister in Formosa-GO. Without the fight you fight, mine would be nothing”. Religious alignment is constantly on the political page on Twitter; at times they are linked to visits, comments, events and commemorative dates. On one occasion, a video was posted in which the former president displayed children playing religious songs, and at the end stated, “I thank all those who believe in Brazil and have God in their hearts for the invitation!”.

When making political links in which to mention dialogue with religion, Bolsonaro cites the former president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and says he supports the idea of opening the economy to generate work. To finish the post, Bolsonaro cites a verse from the Bible, recalling the story of the apostle John (John 8:32). Another phrase with biblical

reference tweeted by the politician cites the G1 report journal, which has disclosed that the Minister of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) granted a pardon to the ex-minister of the civil house, José Dirceu; however, the minister has remained in prison due to the accusations of Lava Jato. The religious narrative as an element in Bolsonaro's posts forms, in a sense, a shield for the behaviour, morality and honesty that he repeatedly expresses to his followers. This strategy for triggering religiosity, especially in times of crisis, is also in dialogue with the fact that Brazil is one of the countries with the highest percentage of Catholics, and the issue resonates strongly in the media.

Against the existing structure: Participatory military in front of democracy

Populism tends to question the institutional order by designating the press as an agent and a part of history (Arditi et al., 2005). Bolsonaro being a retired army captain, the glorification of the military is another theme that is present on Twitter in 14% of the analysed content, focusing on the mention of bodies of power such as the army, the military police and the air force. This finds also dialogue with the 21-year history during which Brazil lived under a military dictatorship after a coup d'état in 1964. Despite the country's historical past and the strained relationship between the military and political power since the coup, the former president praises the military in several tweets, for example, congratulating the army for the military technology of Brazil. He also endorses the military's participation in the pandemic scenario, as shown in the following excerpt: "The military is involved in the transport and vaccination against Covid."

The former president makes this glorification and opening to the military's participation in power clear by showing the government's involvement with the following text: "I present the new commanders of the Armed Forces"; "Today, at 11 a.m., General Paulo Sérgio takes command of the Armed Forces. Brazil above everything! God above all!"; "April 19, Brazilian Army Day". In Twitter messages, Bolsonaro highlights the link between the government administration and the ever-present partnership with the military to improve the country, as can be seen in some excerpts, such as "Belém residents have 2 more posts opened in the military of the organizations"; "in the states of Goiás and Amazonas there are more than 100 schools trained by the respective military police, always highlighted in the most varied tests, such as the ENEM".

In the context of Covid-19, Bolsonaro makes clear the importance of helping the sector in its journey through the crisis, and reinforces the support of military sectors: "Military members of the Planalto Joint Command have already transported more than 420 tons of cargo in support of health agencies"; "After the 9th Motorized Infantry Battalion started to support vaccination against Covid in Pelotas (RS)". Thus, the dialogue between the government and the military makes up this section of the politician's Twitter narrative, in that he highlights the unity between his government and the sector, and his support when he presents the services rendered and tributes paid to his followers. In this way, Bolsonaro makes the military an integral part of his power.

Sovereignty and invocation of the heart: Unity of the nation in saluting the Brazilian people

Bolsonaro exalts Brazil as a homeland and as a nation, thus positioning himself in favour and support of the country's development: "Brazil above everything!" and "Brazil is ours!" These mentions of the country tend to exalt nationalism and unity, and appear in 11% of the tweets, highlighting excerpts such as, "Brazil is green and yellow"; "together, we can change the destiny of Brazil".

The former president recurrently cites the country as a way of thanking and recognising the population in relation to his government, and claims that his conscience and adoration toward the people are expressed through his administrative and political decisions, as in, "Thank you for your trust in Brazil"; "A hug for my Brazil". Thus, he suggests a strong positive relationship between the politician, the people and the nation. In one of the invocations in which he juxtaposes the country's past and the present, Bolsonaro recalls the "Brazil of a few years ago, when corruption guided our infrastructure".

The exaltation of the people is also part of the former president's narrative; after all, as the politician quotes, the "moderating power is the people", creating the illusion that people have power. In this sense, the sovereignty of the people is a central issue of populism (Engesser et al., 2017). It is thus evident that, on his Twitter page, Bolsonaro dialogues with the Brazilian people supporting the nationalisation of the homeland, congratulating and thanking them: "With the people, wherever the people are"; "Congratulations to the Brazilian people. Democratic elections only with public counting of votes"; and "Long live our Independence! Long live our Brazil! Long live the Brazilian people!"

Conclusion and discussion

Political communication via Twitter has contributed to the expansion of populism. From the analysis of Bolsonaro's 611 tweets in the first nine months of 2021, it is clear how important the social platform is for the politician's engagement and his way of disseminating administrative political information, as well as – mainly – reaffirming positions discussed in the traditional media. Bolsonaro's Twitter account plays a crucial role in disseminating information and legitimising his leadership in an era in which communication tools play a growing role in shaping and disseminating political messages. Thus, the media promotes the engagement of public feelings in the face of populism, in a context in which social and political aspects are guided (Mazzoleni, 2003; Serrano, 2020).

Given the five categories analysed, the main and most relevant aspect of this work lies in pointing out the contrast between the predominant category, *attack on the media*, in relation to the others, especially when it comes to *advocating for the people*; it might be stated that this is the present work's main finding. Criticism of the media, exercised

by the politician on the social platform, is more prominent than the dialogue about the needs and desires of the population in a time of crisis.

Bolsonaro attacks the media as a way to divert attention from unfavourable or controversial issues facing his government. The forming of close online (parasocial) relationships can be seen in how the populist leader uses social media to form ties with his audience, thus painting the picture of an approachable leader while preserving the idea that he is addressing social demands. This narrative, expertly crafted by Bolsonaro, also pushes his supporters to distrust traditional media outlets.

In addition to this, by advocating for the people through the media, Bolsonaro seeks to strengthen his connection with his supporter base and consequently, social media emerge as key actors, serving not only as communication vehicles, but also as catalysts of the *appeal to the people*. The appeal to the people amplifies the evidence proving that populists use people-centrism. Thus, Bolsonaro supported himself by attacking the media and his opponents through social networks during his political career, even though he had a government involved in political scandals and fake news (Avritzer, 2020).

In this sense, this becomes a political strategy in which the focus is not the content of policies but the link between the leader and the people (Serrano, 2020) as a basis of support through the media. As a populist, Bolsonaro used his Twitter account as a major means of communication, repeatedly falling into certain patterns such as attacking the media, advocating for the people, appealing to religion and faith, sovereignty, appealing to the heart and opposing the dominant structure. In an environment of crisis such as that caused by the pandemic, these categories contribute to strengthening ideas, and the values of the populist discourse focused on the people.

In an extroverted manner and with the goal of improving Brazil, the politician uses his involvement on the social media page not just as a political tool, but also as an ideological one in addressing issues oriented to the nation and that affect his influence in the media. In the end, ideological and social factors facilitate populist ideas (Serrano, 2020). As observed, the media is one of the main topics in Bolsonaro's repertoire on Twitter, in which the politician reveals to his followers his distrust of the traditional media. On the one hand, the politician questions the information disseminated by traditional media; on the other hand, he reinforces the information on his social media pages. Thus, Bolsonaro takes the position of a source of truth when it comes to various areas such as politics, economy, science, health and even restrictive measures against Covid-19, for example.

Bolsonaro opposes the country's traditional media, claiming that he does not have the support of the main means of communication, as well as raising questions about the truthfulness and honesty which are traditionally associated with the media. This adds credibility to his approach to the people, especially in the context of a crisis, in which the politician assumes the role of advocate for the people, taking a stand against isolationist measures in the fight against the virus. Bolsonaro, allegedly to prevent the collapse of the country and to avoid unemployment and hunger, assumes the role of advocate in favour of face-to-face work, opposing the recommendations of the World Health Organization or the Brazilian Ministry of Health.

Religion is another theme that the former president repeatedly addresses in his tweets to show his religiosity, honesty and morality in the face of the adversity that his government is going through. Using verses from the Bible, giving thanks and praising God, Bolsonaro positions himself as a man of tradition and faith. In his tweets, faith is one of the elements that brings him closer to his audience, to his followers.

The involvement of the military in the government is another category that appears in the tweets in which Bolsonaro praises the contributions of the military and their importance in the development of the nation, opposing the current democratic structure of a country that experienced two years of dictatorship. This connection appears not only in the praise of the military's work during the Covid-19, but also explicitly in the publication's commemorative days of the Army and Armed Forces and politics, resolutions and decisions.

Politicians frequently bring up the nation and people's sovereignty. In his posts on Twitter, Bolsonaro makes it clear that this communication reduces the distance between the leader of the nation and the people, which contributes to the politician's engagement on social sites. This all takes place in an environment in which the democratic audience fashions politics in a spectacle managed by the mass media (Arditi et al., 2005).

By linking his posts to the categories of attacking the media, standing up for the people, religion and faith, sovereignty and appeal to the heart, and resistance to the ruling structure, it becomes clear that populism is part of the narrative construction of Jair Messias Bolsonaro's communication. In a way, political discourses, whether linked to populist logic or not, contribute to the construction of the image of public figures (Viscardi, 2020).

Furthermore, this study paves the way for reflection on future research: considering that criticism of the media is a more prominent category for Bolsonaro than advocating for the people or any other category, this contradicts the large body of evidence proving that populists use people-centrism much more often than antagonism (Blassnig et al., 2019; Van Leeuwen, 2019; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011).

It is, therefore, important to reflect on three factors that constitute the phenomenon in the contemporary period: the reach of new digital media, the pandemic, and the crisis and insecurity created in this context. The composition of these factors underscores the importance of studies that examine political communication, crises and the narratives of heads of state in the context of populism.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to the SentiOne team for providing the software for this research.

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