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# Disinformation in the 2018 Elections

The debate about  
fake news in Brazil

**#observa2018**  
Digital Democracy Room



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Department of Public Policy Analysis Fundação Getulio Vargas

# Disinformation in the 2018 elections

*The debate about fake news in Brazil*

Rio de Janeiro

**FGV DAPP**

2019







Founded in 1944, Fundação Getúlio Vargas was created with the aim of promoting the social and economic development of Brazil, through the education of qualified administrators in both the public and private spheres. Over time, FGV has expanded its activities to other areas of knowledge, such as social sciences, law, economics, history and, most recently, applied mathematics, which is a benchmark in quality and excellence in all of its eight schools.

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This policy paper is a publication by the Digital Democracy Room #observa2018, an initiative with no political or partisan ties, produced by the Department of Public Policy Analysis of Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV DAPP) which aims to provide analyses of the Brazilian political scenario based on the public debate on the social networks.

The analyses produced by the Room do not aim to represent any electoral poll, but to assess the social perception in the digital environment regarding themes of the public agenda, such as political actors and topics on public policies. Therefore, their use for political or partisan purposes or endorsement of particular positions is not authorized. For more information regarding this paper, see: [dapp.fgv.br/observa2018/metodologia](http://dapp.fgv.br/observa2018/metodologia).

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# Introduction

In the past few years, democratic societies around the world have experienced the emergence of a new communicational actor which can shape, successfully or unsuccessfully, public opinion in political debates, elections, referendums and national crises: disinformation. The propagation of campaigns based on fake and/or biased news through social network platforms in key moments of a society's life, together with the capacity of propagation of automated accounts – the so-called bots, as highlighted in *previous studies* by FGV DAPP (RUEDIGER, 2017a; 2017b) –, has become a prime instrument in the strategies of certain groups for attracting digital traffic, engaging or even influencing debates, demobilizing the opposition and faking political support.

Although the artifice of lying as a political strategy is not a new issue, going back to sixth-century records about lies and attacks on the reputation of rulers (DARNTON, 2017), and the dissemination of false information on the internet is not new either, there are new ways to drive this phenomenon today; it has become commonplace, lucrative, far-reaching, and often unpunished.

The goal of this study is to understand how disinformation acts in a new organizational configuration, the network society (CASTELLS, 2000). To that end, we sought to comprehend how the dissemination of rumors and fake news in the political environment has gained an unprecedented dimension with the speed of information coming from the Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). In this context, the internet has brought a new interpretative framework for the public sphere<sup>1</sup> - the interconnected public sphere (BENKLER, 2006).



In November, 2016, the Oxford Dictionary established “post-truth” as Word of the Year, defining it as a noun “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”<sup>2</sup>. The term, chosen due to its recurrent use in the context of the Brexit vote and the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, demonstrates how the digital era can have a significant impact on the public debate, posing a threat to democracy.

A data collection by news website BuzzFeed<sup>3</sup> showed that, during the three last months of the presidential campaign in the United States, the 20 pieces of fake news with the most engagement had more shares, likes and comments than the 20 news pieces produced by the traditional media with the best performance on Facebook. Similar situations have been systematically observed in the past few years, in the democratic processes of countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, India and Kenya, with impacts of different natures. In Brazil, the 2018 elections did not escape this reality, as shown by studies published by the Digital Democracy Room and presented in this article.

Therefore, the advance of fake news, whether spread by individuals or bots, poses challenges for the society. The emergence of new technologies such as machine learning, artificial intelligence, cyber espionage, complex computational systems and statistical techniques, among others, makes the distinction between truth and lies even more challenging, and it becomes more urgent to understand the propagation of fake news, their origin, motivation and goal.

---

1. To understand the use of new technologies and the transition from the traditional public sphere into the inter-connected public sphere, refer to Policy Paper 1 of the Digital Democracy Room #observa2018. Available at: <<https://observa2018.com.br/posts/caderno-reune-as-principais-analises-da-sala-de-democracia-digital-no-1o-tur-no-das-eleicoes-2018/>>. Accessed on: January 15, 2019.

2. Available at: <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>> Accessed on: November 4, 2018.

3. Available at: <[https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm\\_term=.rxry341P2B#.et-waV6WDZq](https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.rxry341P2B#.et-waV6WDZq)> Accessed on: November 4, 2018.

# 1.

## Truth and lies in the political sphere

The phenomenon that became known as fake news – the propagation of news that may, for political reasons, manipulate public opinion (BARBOSA, 2018) – has been used as a political strategy in electoral periods. The use of this strategy in democratic societies had already been influencing some electoral races since the beginning of the 21st century, but the American (2016) and the French (2017) presidential elections and the referendum about the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union – Brexit – (2016) were the cases with the most repercussion.

In order to understand the theoretical framework that permeates the discussion about fake news and their consequences in public spaces and political results, we sought, in this section, to collect data on the relationship between truth and politics and on the truth as a form of political action. This theoretical foundation will be essential in understanding the concept of truth in the process of building the political life of democratic societies and how the phenomenon of disinformation and fake news may contribute for the deconstruction of this democratic model.

Regarding the concept of truth, Hannah Arendt (1997) argues that there are two types of truth: rational and factual. The

former is related to scientific truths, and the latter is related to facts and events that are consequences of the coexistence between people (BARBOSA, 2018). Factual truths are more fragile than discoveries and theories that can be reproduced over time. Therefore, factual truths are more susceptible to clashes with the political power because they are inside the same domain of politics, while rational truths transcend this limit.

This fragility may be explained by two circumstances. The first is the contingency of facts, and the second is people's freedom regarding the reality of facts (BARBOSA, 2018). Regarding contingency, it is the case that things happen a certain way, but could have happened any other way. Therefore, a distorted version of the facts may be as real as the truth. Regarding freedom, a person can lie about his or her observations of reality, which constitutes the confirmation of human freedom (ARENDT, 1997).

According to Arendt (1997), factual truths are usually more relevant in politics. This happens because rational truths are much harder to contest, considering that, in science, the opposite of a rationally true statement is error or ignorance. Another reason is the fact that deliberate falsehoods that oppose factual truths may have a significant role in politics. When the liar becomes



incapable of convincing others of a lie and, instead of insisting on his or her story, simply states that it is his or her opinion, this is a political act. The consequence of this act is the extinction of the distinction between fact and opinion (BARBOSA, 2018).

Political lies in traditional societies deals with secret intentions or facts, while political lies in modern societies are usually related to public facts that are verifiable through research (Ibid., 2018). If we take into consideration the reality of how easy it is to find information and content with the new ICTs, we will notice that fake news can be refuted with simple searches on the web. In Hannah Arendt's "Truth and Politics" interview for the New Yorker magazine in 1967, the philosopher highlighted the "recognition that there is a significant part of truth that is based on facts and can be verified and certified through experimentation" (GENESINI, 2018, p. 49).

The phenomenon studied by Hannah Arendt has four characteristics. The first one deals with the use of the then new means of communication – radio and TV – as propellers of facts and opinions for the masses. The second one refers to the fact that lies are not secrets anymore, but events that may be easily verified. The third one is the need to convince the sender that the lie being disseminated is real. Lastly, the fourth characteristic refers to the idea that modern lies seek to create a substitute for reality. This change should not be limited to an isolated fact, "but to a

whole part of reality that opposes the 'image' of what one wants to impose" (GENESINI, 2018, p. 10).

In Truth and Politics, Arendt explains that the more authoritarian a government is, easier it will be to control ideologies and images of the impact of reality and truth. However, even if an authoritarian government does everything power to spread lies, they can still be contested by facts that may emerge, compromising the image construed by it.

For Arendt, the danger is not that the mass dissemination of lies could substitute truth, but that it could destroy it. As society starts to refuse the truth, its subjects' judgment in distinguishing what is true from what is not ends (Ibid., 2018). The modern idea of post-truth and disinformation propelled by the new ICTs may cause a loss in the ability for political action in public spaces. Therefore, there is a dependency between political action and factual truth, which may cause individuals to consider freedom of speech to be a farce when used in situations where there is no factual information (ARENDT, 1997).

The modern phenomenon of post-truth and disinformation, which seeks to distort the past and the present, contributes to transforming uncertainty in the only reliable truth (CASTELLS, 2018). Disinformation contributes both to usurping the future possibility of political actions that lead to transformation and to undermining the strengthening of a free and democratic society.

## 2. Disinformation in the digital era

### *concept and definitions*

“Fake news” has become a commonly used expression to identify the spread of false information, especially on the internet. However, the evolution of this phenomenon in the network society has shown that the term is not able to explain the complexity of its practices, and often becomes the instrument of a political discourse that benefits from this simplification.

After a year of presidential campaign that was marked by the dissemination of false content on the networks, American fact-checking website PoliFact<sup>4</sup> defined, in December, 2016, the term “fake news” as the lie of the year, attributing their choice to an electoral context with a “prevalence of political fact abuse – promulgated by the words of two polarizing presidential candidates and their passionate supporters”.

In an article published in the beginning of 2017<sup>5</sup>, the column writer Margaret Sullivan, from The Washington Post, one of the most respectable and influential newspapers of the conventional media in the United States, described the concept as follows: “deliberately constructed lies, in the form of news articles, meant to mislead the public”. Moreover, the director of the MIT Center for Civic Media, Ethan Zuckerman, went beyond that: “it’s a vague and ambiguous term that spans everything from false balance (actual news that doesn’t deserve our attention), propaganda (weaponized speech designed to support one party over another) and disinformatyze (information designed to sow doubt and increase mistrust in institutions)”

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4. Available at: <<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2016/dec/13/2016-lie-year-fake-news/>> Accessed on: November 8, 2018.

5. Available at: <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/its-time-to-retire-the-tainted-term-fake-news/2017/01/06/a5a7516c-d375-11e6-945a-76f69a399dd5\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3e64e32f8fbc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/its-time-to-retire-the-tainted-term-fake-news/2017/01/06/a5a7516c-d375-11e6-945a-76f69a399dd5_story.html?utm_term=.3e64e32f8fbc)> Accessed on: December 19, 2017.

Sullivan and Zuckerman, who reject the term “fake news”, believe that, in the filterless environment of the internet and social networks, the expression is employed as a defense mechanism to arbitrarily discredit news pieces and institutions, often by politicians. In rejecting unfavorable news, the individual targeted by the news can easily refute the information by accusing it of falsehood, of being fake news, concentrating all the denials intended by the individual into a single expression, even if the news are confirmed through previous investigation and verification efforts, as is canonical in the editorial offices of renowned media vehicles.

This type of rhetoric is evident in the figure of president Donald Trump, whose declarations have become essential to the popularization of the expression “fake news”, not only because they are often the target of fact checking by vehicles such as The New York Times<sup>6</sup>, but also because they imprint a new semantic charge into the term, moving it away from its original meaning. By deliberately using fake news as an instrument of invalidation of information that is unfavorable from his own point of view, labeling information published by the press as fake or even questioning the reputation and professionalism of media vehicles, Trump ended up contributing to the generalization the concept.

Although the publication of fake news by the press is not anything new, the current context contributes to this argument. An article by David Ubenti for the Columbia Journalism Review cites examples<sup>7</sup>, beginning in the 19th century, of journalism that is fake, sensationalist or deliberately deviating from a certain fact or event, especially by printed media vehicles. There are cases such as the publication of the supposed discovery of life on the Moon, in 1835, or the death of dozens of Manhattan residents after animals escaped from the Central Park zoo, in 1874. Another famous case is the radio narration by Orson Welles of the supposed invasion of the Earth by Martians in 1938. Welles, who would later establish himself as a filmmaker with the release of *Citizen Kane*,

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6. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html>>. Accessed on: December 19, 2017.

7. Available at: <[https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/fake\\_news\\_history.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/fake_news_history.php)>. Accessed on: December 19, 2017.

participated of the dramatized broadcast of the science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds*, by H.G. Wells, on the CBS radio. However, by treating fictional narration as a legitimate journalistic bulletin, the program caused mass hysteria in different parts of the United States: millions of people actually believed that there was an extraterrestrial invasion on Earth.

Uberti's argument is clear: although examples of fake news in the press have become more scarce with the professionalization of journalism, public suspicions of the traditional media have grown after the emergence of new ways to obtain information. With that, the term "fake news" started being used by politicians and partisan publications in order to discredit the media at large, as well as by the printed media in order to discredit competitors.

In that regard, it is important to highlight one difference between journalistic error and use of virtual tools for disinformation campaigns: intentionality, as mentioned by The Washington Post column writer herself. Newspapers often publish incorrect or unverified information with no deliberate wish to lie at the genesis of content elaboration, starting with a nonexistent event with the purpose of disclosing it, with the author (or authors) of the disclosure aware of the lie. Still, we can conclude that channels of the traditional media have also become part of an environment of disinformation and propaganda; therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the occasional, unintentional (although harmful) actions of the press in the dissemination of disinformation in the social network era.

In an article for the *Columbia Journalism Review*<sup>8</sup>, researchers highlighted the almost daily amplification, caused by the press itself, of Trump's tweets during the campaign. In fact, many of these tweets highlighted information coming from sites with an explicitly partisan bias. The analysis of more than a million news pieces published by the press showed that, "although often critical, press coverage was centered on the agenda established by the far right: immigration". Consequently, news about Hillary Clinton's campaign were mostly focused on scandals, while those about Trump focused more on his agenda about employment and the market.

Ultimately, In March, 2018 (EC, 2018), the European Commission clearly and unequivocally abandoned the use of the term "fake news" due to its inability to explain the complexity of the phenomenon and its nuances by which researchers, political actors and news pieces refer to it. Disinformation was defined in the report as a phenomenon that includes as forms of false, inaccurate or misleading information created, presented or published deliberately in order to cause public damage or obtain profit. This definition excluded the dissemination of illegal content (such as slander, hate speech and incitement to violence) because it is subject to legislation already in force, and of satire and parody content that does not produce misleading distortions of facts.

Therefore, it is a complex phenomenon whose classification demands rigor and analysis of the context in which

it is inserted. In that regard, the distinction between types of information established by researchers Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan<sup>9</sup> offers an accurate overview of what composes the phenomenon classified as “information disorder”:

- **Mis-information:** Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.
- **Dis-information:** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.
- **Mal-information:** Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.

The study also proposes the specification of seven types of mis- and dis-information<sup>10</sup>:

- **Satire or parody:** no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool;
- **Misleading content:** misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual;
- **Imposter content:** when genuine sources are impersonated;
- **Fabricated content:** new content is 100% false, designed to deceive or do harm;
- **False connection:** When headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content;
- **False context:** When genuine content is shared with false contextual information;
- **Manipulated content:** When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.

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8. Available at: <<https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>>. Accessed on: January 3, 2017.

9. Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking (Setembro, 2017). Available at: <<https://shorensteincenter.org/information-disorder-framework-for-research-and-policy-making/>> Accessed on: November 7, 2018.

10. The authors did not specify the third type of information disorder, mal-information, because it is tied to other issues unrelated to false information, such as hate speech, harassment and information leaks.

The authors then classify the elements – agent (type, level of organization, motivation, automation, audience, damage and falseness), message (duration, accuracy, legality, imposter content and audience) and interpreter (interpretation of the message and actions taken) – and the phases – creation, production and distribution – that compose information disorder. As explained by the authors, “the ‘agent’ who creates a fabricated message might be different to the agent who produces that message – who might also be different from the ‘agent’ who distributes the message”. FGV DAPP brought up this notion in a previous study about the use of bots in political contexts, when automated accounts may operate for a political actor even if he or she is not aware of the fact.

Researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute (NEUDERT et al., 2017) also adopted the classification by the type of agent and message sent. In the series of articles about the dissemination of disinformation campaigns during the elections in Germany, France, United Kingdom and the State of Michigan (United States), the authors used different typologies to understand the contents shared by electors on Twitter. To that end, the distinguished quality information, produced by media vehicles, political institutions and think tanks, from those under the umbrella term “junk news”, which includes extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial and false content.

In another similar initiative, Facebook<sup>11</sup> detailed some “attempts to manipulate and deceive people” as part of their security policy against abuse in the platform. The authors highlighted that “the overuse and misuse of the term “fake news” can be problematic because, without common definitions, we cannot understand or fully address these issues.” The following classifications were adopted:

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11. WEEDON, Jen; NULAND, William; STAMOS, Alex. Information operations and Facebook. v. 1, p. 27, 2017. Available at: <<https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf>>. Accessed on: November 7, 2018.

- **Information (or Influence) Operations:** Actions taken by governments or organized by non-state actors to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome. These operations can use a combination of methods, such as false news, disinformation, or networks of fake accounts (false amplifiers) aimed at manipulating public opinion.
- **False news:** News articles that purport to be factual, but which contain intentional misstatements of fact with the intention to arouse passions, attract viewership, or deceive.
- **False Amplifiers:** Coordinated activity by inauthentic accounts with the intent of manipulating political discussion (e.g., by discouraging specific parties from participating in discussion, or amplifying sensationalistic voices over others).
- **Disinformation:** Inaccurate or manipulated information/content that is spread intentionally. This can include false news, or it can involve more subtle methods, such as false flag operations, feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information. Disinformation is distinct from

misinformation, which is the inadvertent or unintentional spread of inaccurate information without malicious intent. What differs disinformation from simple wrong information is intentionality, because disinformation networks have malicious intent when producing and sharing inaccurate information.

Therefore, these studies provide important contributions towards qualifying the different types of content which, when used in disinformation campaigns, have an impact on the public debate. Therefore, in line with FGV DAPP's research goals and with the Brazilian reality, we adopted a broad understanding of the disinformation phenomenon, as opposed to the simplification of the term "fake news", in the analyses of the several types of information distributed on the internet.



In this scenario, the world of digital networks became a strong multiplier of manipulated news, largely due to the low regulation of the content spread on the networks. In reaction to the political and cultural impacts caused by disinformation, social networks (such as Facebook) and governments – at least since 2016 – have been trying to respond to the demand for regulation.

Facebook, for instance, provided access to data information of its users for Cambridge Analytica. This data was supposedly used to feed a system capable of tracing a psychographic profile of the American population for use in Donald Trump's presidential campaigns (ALVES, 2018) and also to influence the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union (NETTO, 2018).

Facebook's response to these events was to create an independent research initiative on the role of social media in the elections and in democracy<sup>12</sup>. That was an unprecedented step taken from a new model of partnership between industry and academy with the intention of preserving democracy and combating both fake news and external interference on democratic societies. The social network established a partnership with foundations such as William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Omidyar Network for research funding.

In 2017, the world of post-truth was joined by another important actor of message propelling: WhatsApp. The fake news industry assumed a new proportion in the French elections (TRAUMANN, 2018). Disinformation took over the election since the primaries, when presidential hopeful Alain Juppé had his image tied to a supposed radical religious group. According to the author, the result of the photomontage had an influence on Juppé's defeat still in the primaries, even though the mosque mentioned in the WhatsApp messages never existed.

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12. Information available in articles published by partners of the digital democracy room #observa2018. See, for example: SCHRAGE, Elliot. Facebook launches new initiative to help scholars assess social media's impact on elections. Available at <<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/04/new-elections-initiative/>>; DRFLAB. Why we're partnering with Facebook on Election Integrity. Medium, 2018. Available at <<https://medium.com/dfrlab/why-were-partnering-with-facebook-on-election-integrity-19f0ca39db2e>>; and Hewlett Foundation. Hewlett, Knight, Koch foundations with other funders will support independent research on Facebook's role in elections and democracy. Hewlett Foundation, 2018. <<https://hewlett.org/newsroom/hewlett-knight-koch-foundations-with-other-funders-will-support-independent-research-on-facebooks-role-in-elections-and-democracy/>>. Accessed on: November 7, 2018.



The fake news industry, together with the global phenomenon of anti-politics and opposition to the traditional media, has the ability to drive public opinion, change the result of an election or mass-produce demagogues (TRAUMANN, 2018). Because of this phenomenon, for the first time in the modern history of France, the two main parties – Socialist and Republican – were not present in the second round of the elections. Instead, Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron made it to the second round.

In Brazil, the social networks also sought to respond to the recent cases of manipulation of public opinion in electoral periods. In 2018, Facebook published actions to protect the elections in Brazil. Their commitments included: fighting disinformation; being more transparent with the platform's advertisements; removing imposter accounts; removing "digital pamphlets" – used to deceive electors by placing a candidate's picture together with the number of a different party. These measures were taken to ensure the authenticity of content published on the platform<sup>13</sup>.

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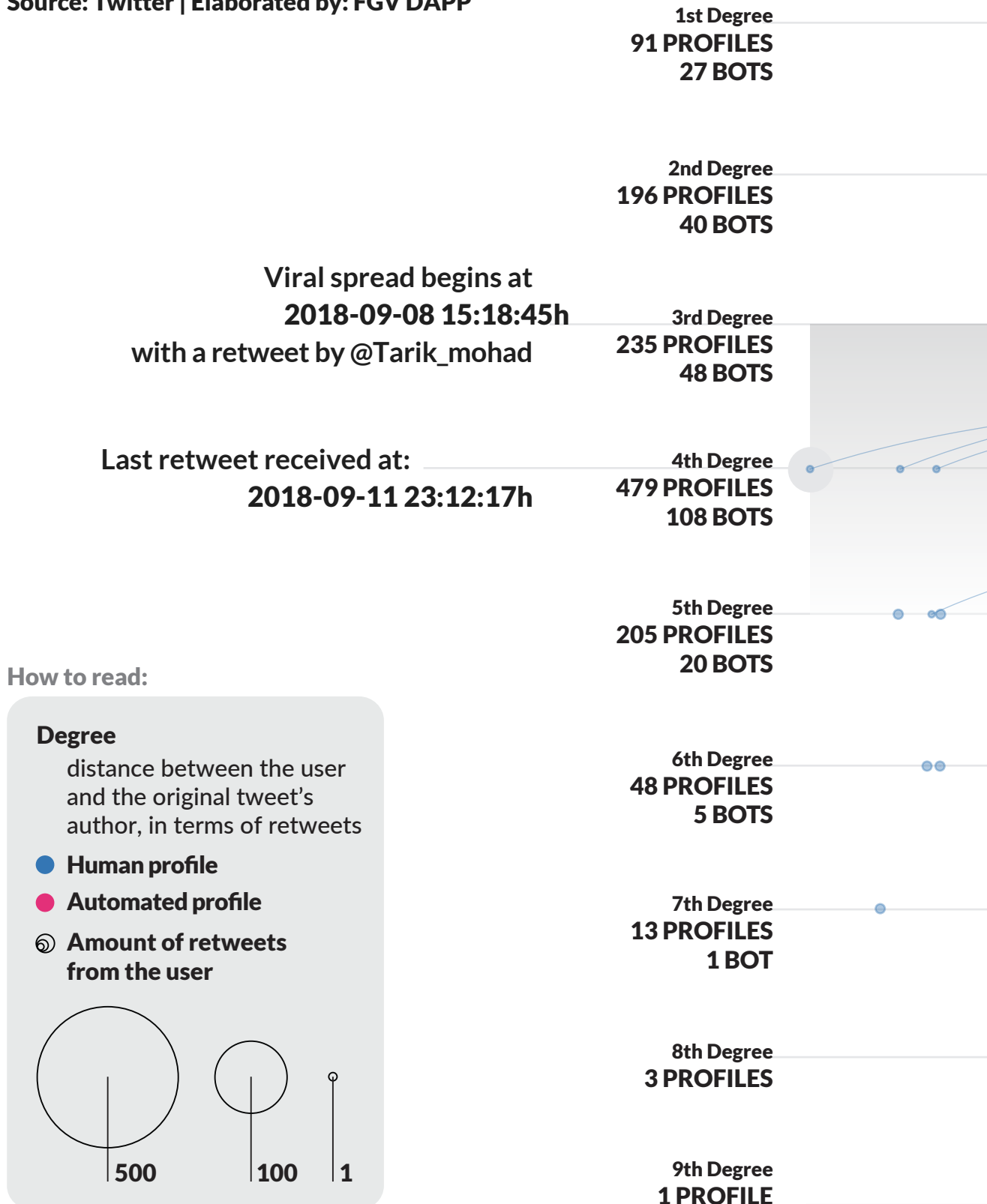
13. All the measures adopted can be checked at: Facebook. More actions to protect the election in Brazil Facebook, 2018 Available at: <<https://br.newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/09/mais-acoes-para-protger-a-eleicao-no-brasil/>>; Facebook. Fighting election interference in real time. Facebook, 2018. Available at: <<https://br.newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/10/combaten-do-interferencia-em-eleicoes-em-tempo-real/>>. Accessed on: Wednesday, November 7, 2018.

FIG. 1

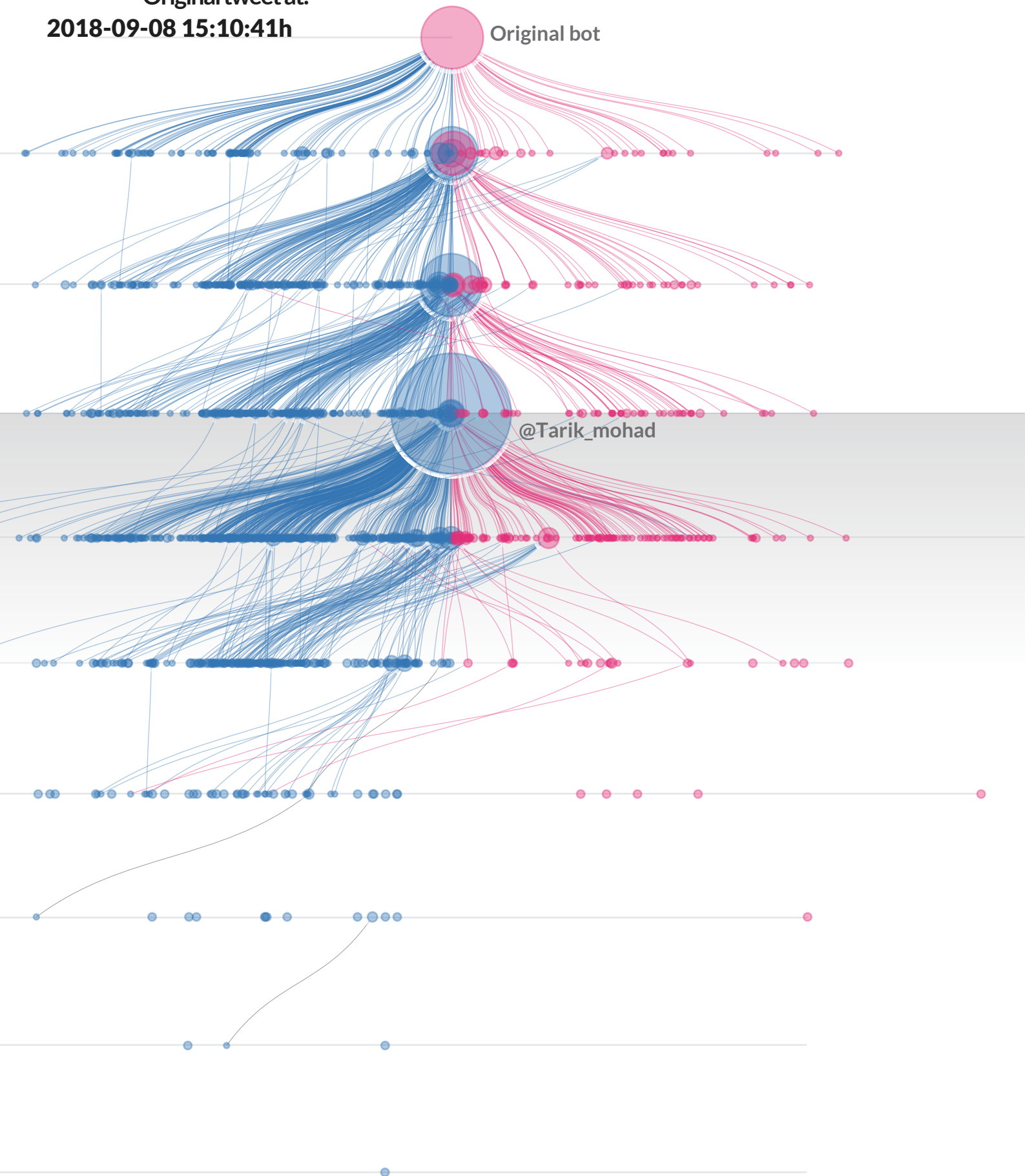
# Dissemination cascade

Date of analysis: September 5 to 11, 2018  
1,521 single users, including 250 bots (16.4%)

Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP



Original tweet at:  
2018-09-08 15:10:41h



# 3.

## Computational amplifications

The prominent position of bots and cyborgs on the political debate favors the dispersion of false information in social networks. This context of collective interactions aggregates: the easy production of content with no verification or checking by institutional or recognized sources; the ability of discursive propagation (through post sharing); the anonymity granted to the author (or authors) of virtual rumors; and the low cost of political/advertising strategy for capturing the public. Therefore, using a set of profiles programmed to carry out certain activities, it is simple, safe, cheap and fast to potentially reach millions of people and interfere with the public debate, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The organic debate on social networks about important public agendas – topics on politics, recent events, news articles by notable vehicles of the conventional press –, is manipulated quickly and efficiently, especially when a renowned actor works as a catalyst in the strategy of content spread. A politician or celebrity, for instance, who shares unverified information that is of their own interest. When this happens, not only can the “false” information reach a much larger audience, it also acquires an **illusion of verisimilitude**, especially because the source (the famous or popular actor) is known by those reached by the post.

However, this movement is not required for a piece of news/false information to be effective on the networks, especially when the false content has another attribute of verisimilitude: **it seems true** because it contains attributes commonly used by conventional media vehicles, universities and research institutions. Numbers; statistics; citations of real actors; incorrect authorship references; use of official data to establish imprecise causal relationships. Useful tools for the ill-intended elaboration of fake news.

It is important to highlight that there is still no explicit correlation between the use of bots on social networks and the sharing of false news by them. In fact, evidence indicates the opposite, based on consolidated sociological reasoning about the route of dispersion of information. For example, Granovetter's (1973) argument about the social organizations and the structure of weak ties that is necessary for a certain position, content or information to spread beyond the limited network of strong ties between actors (very close friends, relatives, etc.). The American sociologist identifies weak ties as actors who contact each other superficially, in different ways: either because they have friends in common, or because they have access to the same social interactions, or because the cascading actions of mem-

bers of a certain community make two or more members (who are not closely related) share an identical communicational space. Therefore, weak ties are essential for wide discursive dispersion, because, like bridges, they connect different social networks.

Cheng et al. (2014) resume Granovetter's main line of reasoning to study how rumors are spread in the scope of social networks. Aware of how the online environment (and digital platforms) make it immensely easy to share and spread unverified information at high speeds, the authors highlight a very important element in the dispersion process: the relationship of trust between the actors involved – which is not easily simulated by the mass use of bots. Aided by the easy redistribution of content via Facebook (sharing) and Twitter (retweeting), this relationship allows for the expansion of rumors with no prior checking mechanisms, and the social networks do not provide resources to filter fact from fiction (CHENG et al., 2014, p. 101).

The focus of the study by Cheng et al. (2014) is the sharing of images on Facebook mediated by the website “snopes.com”, which is dedicated to the verification of rumors, “urban legends”, conspiracies and true information. Their study measured the volume of shares of false and true images on the network before and after they were checked by the site (and the content in the images identified as true or false). Among their findings, they observed that, even with

the checking, a considerable number of people continued to share a false image, although the true ones are able to continue their dispersion for a longer time.

That is: the fact-checking mechanism, despite restraining the propagation of falsehood, has little strength to contain it completely. Even more so because some of the main reiterated topics in the repercussion of rumors are intrinsically connected by the **principle of belief** in the sources that shared them, regardless of the existence of data or scientific and pragmatic proof of the content that was shared (CHENG et al., 2014).

In line with this assessment, Guess et al. (2018) made an important empirical interpretation of the impact of fake news in the electoral process – a widely discussed issue by the political actors themselves and by the press, although there is limited evidence about the actual reach of fake news needed for a candidate to prevail over the others. The study selected a corpus of web page access history by a heterogeneous group of adults from the USA to measure the percentage of people who accessed a page from a fake news website. The results are in line with those observed by Cheng et al. (2014): 27.4% of the Americans older than 18, which corresponds to a little more than one quarter of the estimated electoral population, accessed a pro-Trump or pro-Hillary (her adversary from the Democratic party) website a short time before the 2016 vote.

It is important to highlight that most of these fake news websites favored Trump and few favored Hillary, but that did not necessarily lead to undecided voters changing their vote. Although there was a much higher volume of accesses to misleading facts intended to benefit the Republican candidate, most of the accesses (58.9%) to fake news also came from the more conservative electorate, who tend to support Trump over Hillary (GUESS et al., 2018). These accesses did not lead to the expansion of the Republican candidate's voting base, but operated as reiterators of a previously established opinion.

Another relevant point is the position of fact-checking websites among the electorate, which was almost identical to the number of accesses to fake news: 25.3% of the people included in the sample accessed a website dedicated to the verification of information on the web. The problem is: the two groups do not mingle. Those who read fake news do not look for information on the accuracy of those news, and vice-versa. Only half the public who accessed fake news consulted a link verifying those news (GUESS et al. 2018), and nobody in the corpus accessed a piece of fake news and the verification about those same news.

# 4.

## The debate about fake news before the electoral period

In Brazil's 2018 electoral cycle, the dissemination of fake news in different public and private social networks played an unprecedented role in the country, as well as the public debate on the web about the emergence of the fake news phenomenon as a political marketing and disinformation tool. With the different sides of the Brazilian political atlas questioning or reiterating information, news articles, memes and publications as false or true (from their respective points of view), with no consensus or widely accepted sources, any potential dialogue between adversaries became very fragile, and so did the ability of the traditional press to operate as an interlocutor between adversaries.

Towards the end of the electoral calendar, with the ramifications of the campaigns and the release of news articles about the use of social networks to produce content with no legitimacy – especially WhatsApp –, the protagonism of disinformation in politics became more evident for the Brazilian civil society. However, even before the official start of the campaigns, fake news were already present in the public debate as topics of discussion,

following the impact and repercussion they obtained in other recent electoral races, such as in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and especially the United States – where the use of the term by Donald Trump expanded the concept of “fake news” internationally in the threads of online conversation and as a topic of public interest.

Between August 1st and 15 – the last 15 days before the official electoral campaign –, we verified 387.9 thousand publications on Twitter about the dissemination of fake news; among those, there were 206.6 thousand retweets, which compose the following map of interactions. At this moment in the debate, the main groups of the general political debate in the country remained as protagonists: the red group, with profiles supporting candidates from centre-left (PT) and left (PC do B) parties; the pink group, with critical or comic discussions usually opposing PSL's right-wing candidacy, but no alignment with any party; and the blue group, which supported PSL and proved to be very cohesive, active and articulate through specific and established influencers of the network environment.



FIG. 2

## Map of interactions in the debate about fake news before the electoral period

206.574 retweets | Analysis date: August 1<sup>st</sup> to August 15<sup>th</sup>

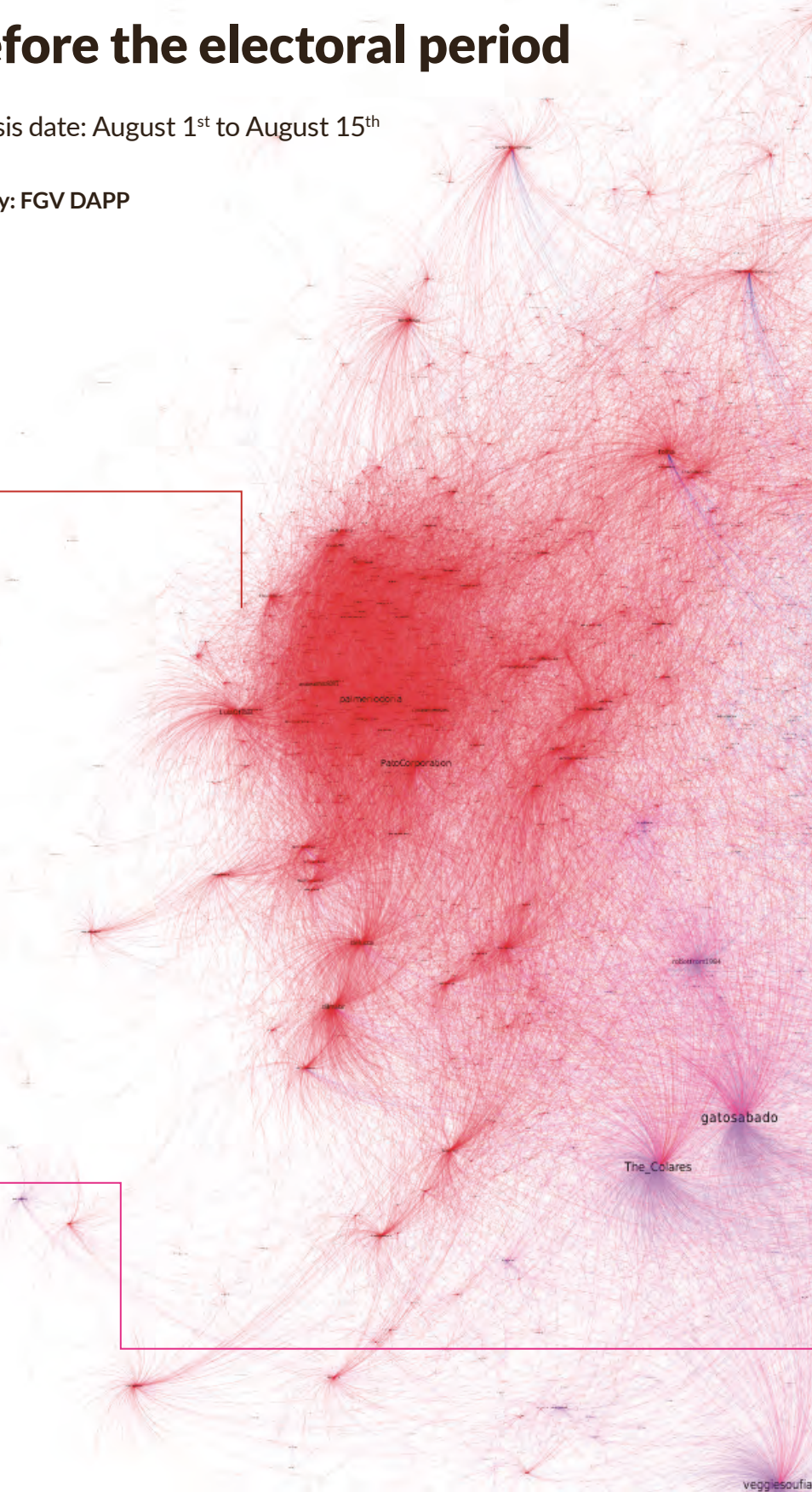
Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

### Red Group 16.8% of the profiles

Profiles aligned with the left wing, discuss the participation of bots and foreign agents in the release of fake news

### Pink Group 27.7% of the profiles

Profiles opposed to Bolsonaro but not aligned with the left wing, questions the impact of fake news on the elections in Brazil and make jokes about everyday situations







**Blue Group**  
**21.5% of the profiles**

Bolsonaro's support group, criticize the release of news and information that they consider false about the then-candidate

DaniloGentili  
Desesquerdizada  
leandroruscher  
filgmartin  
Smith\_Hays  
bernardopkuster  
JoelAlexandreM  
CarlosBolsonaro  
FlavioBolsonaro  
jairbolsonaro

Anitta

07h13

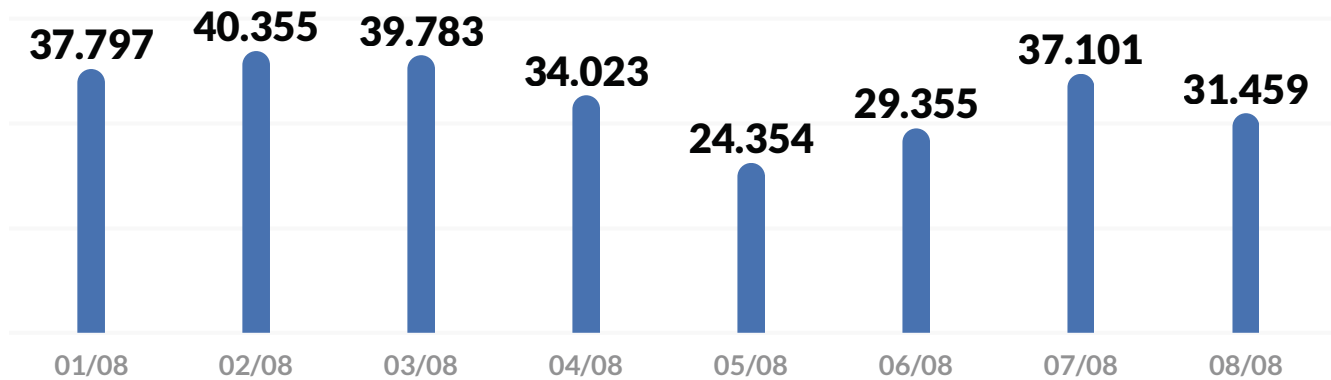
dudashonorio

exulane

FIG. 3

## Evolution of mentions about fake news on Twitter

August 1<sup>st</sup> to August 15<sup>th</sup>



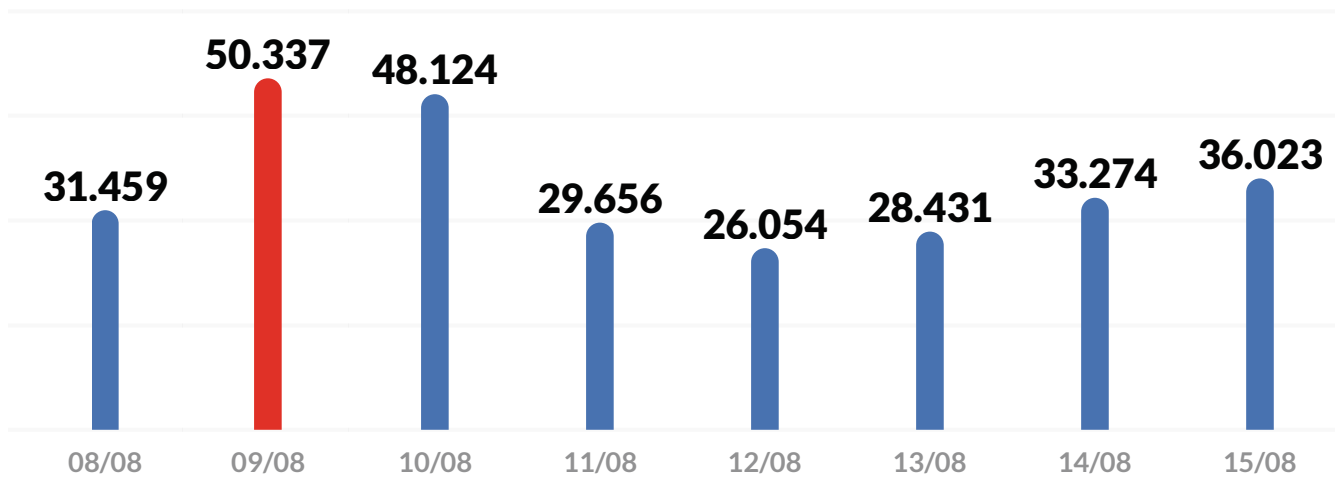
Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

Although it garnered the highest number of profiles in this graph (27.7% of the total), the pink group, the only major group in the political map of the networks which moved away from the left/right polarization, mobilized the least interactions about fake news, which accounted for only 17% of their retweets. The group was organized around tweets that approached the topic of disinformation in a non-polarized way, often jokingly. A common meme used by the group, for example, is the phrase “the biggest fake news this year was...”, which was completed by users with different themes, such as relationships, job interviews and diets, among other non-political topics; an appropriation of the debate for the ironic discussion of everyday life topics.

Messages pointing to the risk of spreading fake news not directly associated to

the political field were also relevant in the group. The most frequent example mentioned by these users was a supposed case of pedophilia in which the photo of the “suspect”, released on the network, almost led to his lynching. There were also complaints about the reproduction of fake news in WhatsApp groups and messages that point to the need of combating this practice – taking into consideration the risk of “negative” influences in voting decisions. The initiatives by Facebook and Twitter of blocking pages/users suspected of releasing fake news were considered important by the group.

The second group with the highest number of profiles, garnering 21.5% of the total number of users present in the map of interactions, the group supporting the candidate from PSL mobilized the most interactions (47.4%). Then candidate Jair Bolsonaro, his sons Flávio and Carlos and



comedian Danilo Gentili are the main influencers in the group, whose main narrative line is the idea that the candidate was a victim of a fake news “factory”, which supposedly involved traditional media vehicles.

The suspension of pages and profiles appeared in the blue group in complaint posts and was seen as a sabotage of PSL’s campaign. However, some of the users stated that the candidate would be able to fight this “persecution”, while other profiles pointed out a “narrative” construed by the left wing to disqualify a potential victory of a candidacy at the right: according to them, the adversaries would attribute the victory to a “false” dissemination of fake news by the then federal deputy.

The red group was as polarized as the blue group, but much less cohesive due to some profiles; it accounted for 16.8% of the profiles and 19.9% of the interac-

tions registered in the map. The main influencers in this group were Dilma Rousseff and Lula. The discussion about the use of automated accounts associated with the spread of fake news appeared was highlighted the most in this group, which often reinforced the idea of a supposed interference of bots from foreign countries in the political debate.

News checking done by agencies or by the traditional press were often shared. However, the media in general was frequently criticized; similarly to what happened in the blue group, it was accused of producing fake news, although the red group defends that these news were intended to demoralize political actors from the left and the centre-left. Other pre-candidates could also be found in this group, especially due to their publications associating the right with fake news.



# 5.

## Overview of the 2018 elections

Social networks became the axis of political discussion in the 2018 presidential campaign, with the impact of disinformation as a central theme. Analyses by FGV DAPP resulting from social network monitoring in the 2018 elections, which were developed inside the scope of the Digital Democracy Room and will be presented below, point to the massive use of these strategies in all political fields, using different procedures of virtual campaign, with the identification of the presence of automated accounts and fake news on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

### 5.1. The reach of fake news

During the electoral period, in the final weeks of the race, FGV DAPP analyzed the references to the main pieces of fake news on open social networks – Twitter, Facebook and YouTube – between September 22 and October 21, to measure the reach they obtained in each platform and what was the response by the network to the content – that is, whether they were subjected to fact-checking and the refuted facts shared, or the false information continued to have an impact after appearing on the web.

Among the pieces of fake news, the supposed fraud in the electronic ballot boxes was mentioned the most on Twit-

ter: there were 1.1 million tweets about the supposed insecurity of the devices, spread both in posts requesting a return of printed votes and in reports of “errors” that were supposedly seen by electors in the first round. The so-called “gay kit” also mobilized around 1 million references on the network. The posts spread the fake news that Fernando Haddad, during his administration of the Ministry of Education, supposedly authorized the creation of the material. The third piece of fake news with the most mentions on Twitter – with a much less significant volume of references – was related to lies about one of the books published by the PT candidate: “In defense of socialism”. There were 48.7 thousand references.

False publications associated with the right had a more limited reach. Speculation about the candidate having “simulated” the attack against himself in order to disguise a cancer surgery was the most mobilized rumor in the period, with 34.6 thousand references. The change of Brazil’s patron saint, falsely spread as if proposed by him, was mentioned 16.7 thousand times. An article stating that a right-wing candidate was the most honest politician in the world had 6.5 thousand mentions.

FIG. 4

## Mentions about fake news on Twitter

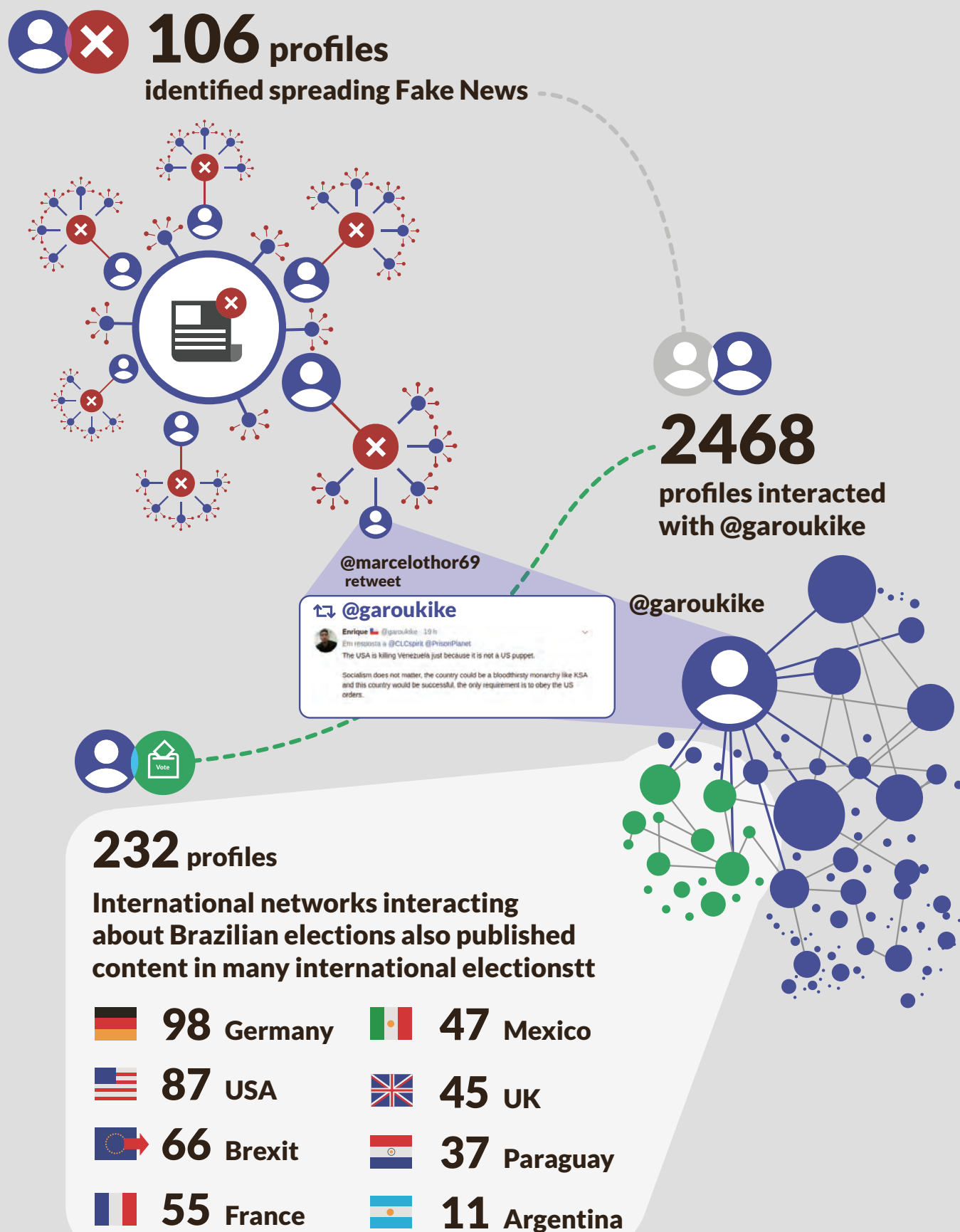
September 22<sup>nd</sup> to October 21<sup>st</sup>



Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

FIG. 5

## Fake News about pedophilia



## 5.2. International networks and disinformation

Studies by FGV DAPP also identified that foreign networks acted with the intention to influence the Brazilian electoral debate. An initial analysis identified, from disinformation content on pedophilia, a group of 232 profiles which made 8,185 publications in Portuguese in the period between 08/01/2018 and 09/26/2018, related to Brazilian politics.

The influencer with the most interactions in publications on the network of 232 profiles was the profile @RT\_com, a Russian state television channel. Spanish language profiles owned by RT, @ActualidadRT and @SputnikInt, a Russian news channel, also appeared with a high number of mentions; Out of the 232 profiles, 99 released their location data, which could be used to view the distribution of their tweets in the world according to the image on the left.

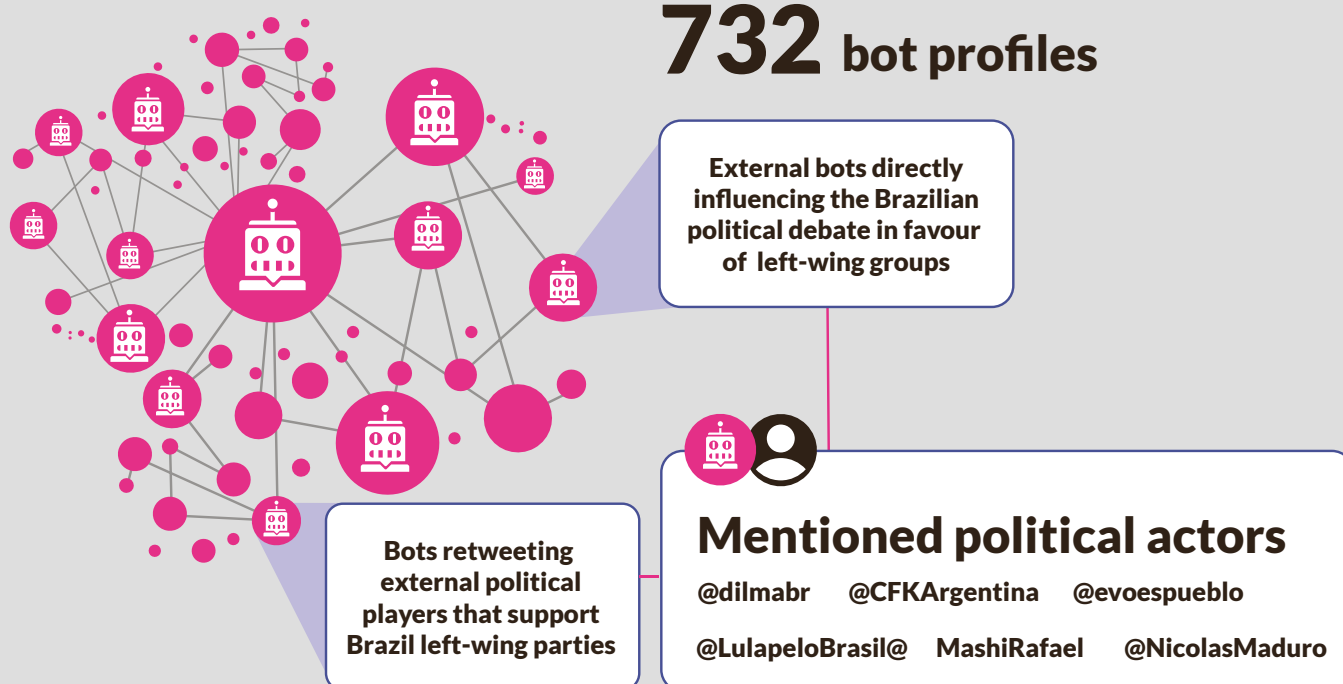
A second analysis revealed actions intended to influence the debate coming from countries in Latin America. In the period between August 14 and 24, 2018, FGV DAPP identified 117 automated profiles coming from Venezuela, which made 332 publications. We also found 11 profiles coming from Argentina with 18 publications; 6 Cuban accounts with 39 publications; and 4 profiles coming from Ecuador with 11 publications, publishing content in favor of the PT candidacy, adding up to 138 profiles;

The bots we identified complemented our previous data collection, with a database from October to December, 2017, in which we also identified mentions made by accounts from Argentina, Venezuela and Ecuador in interactions with the official profiles of Brazilian political actors and actors associated with parties and political figures, aligned with the left wing in these countries; Out of the 732 automated profiles in the 2017 database, 102 accounts were tagged as having mentioned South American political actors.

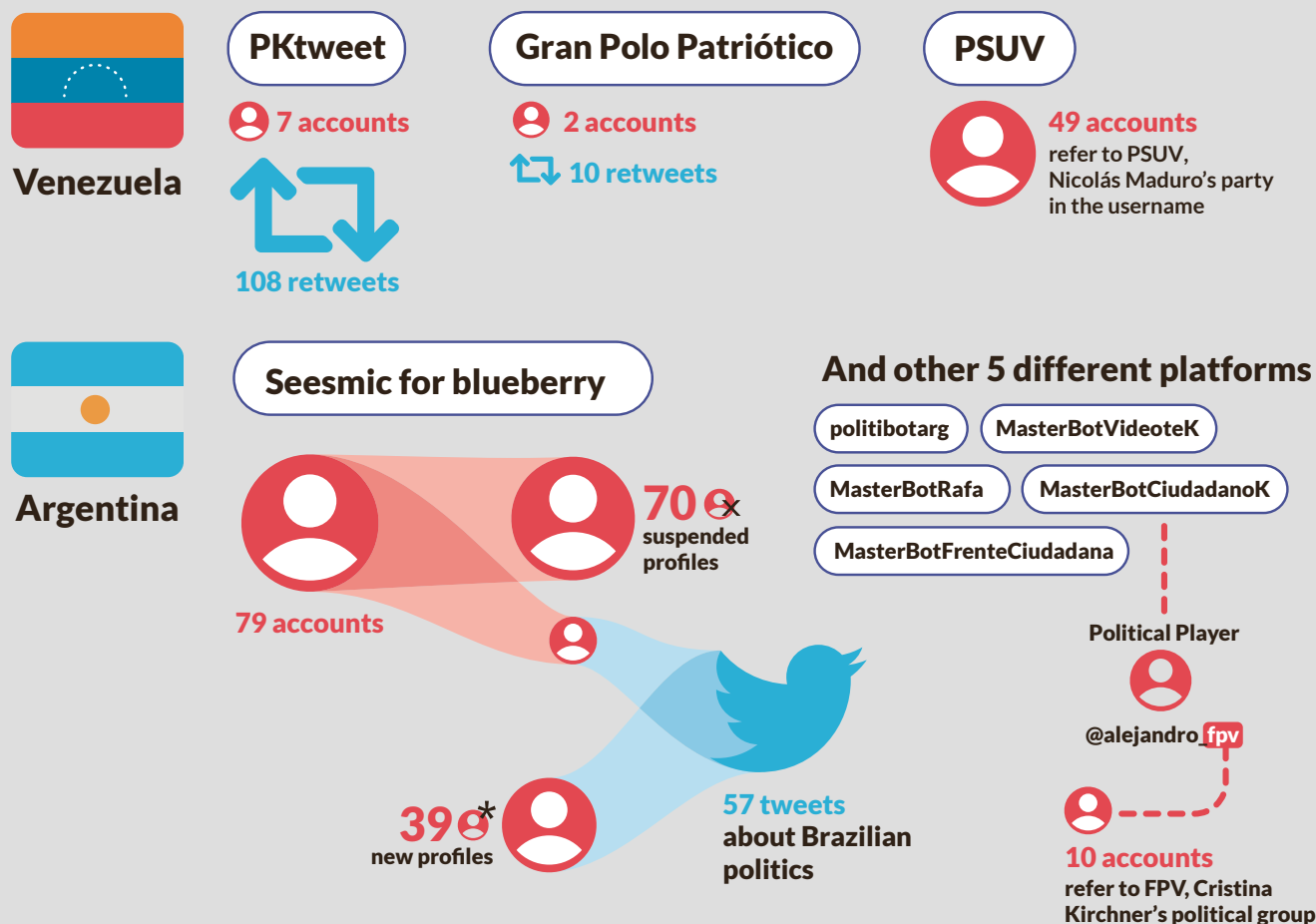
FIG. 6

## Bot analysis in Brazilian elections

**732** bot profiles



### International bots used automation platforms to tweet in favour of left-wing politicians





### 5.3. Fact-checking

Analyses by FGV DAPP in partnership with fact-checking agency Lupa demonstrated that at least three pieces of fake news figured among the links with the most engagement on social networks in the past few months. In the repercussion of the first presidential debate, broadcast by Band, a news piece stating that Twitter supposedly removed hashtags in support of one of the candidates had almost 13 thousand interactions on Facebook, figuring among the ten main links. On Twitter, there were 32 thousand references to the supposed “takedown”<sup>14</sup>.

News pieces stating that the *Veja* magazine supposedly received R\$ 600 million to defame PSL’s candidacy also had large repercussion on the networks. Since September 24, when the rumor started, 16 links about the case were identified, mobilizing 117.6 thousand interactions on Facebook and Twitter, and none of those links came from traditional press vehicles.

An analysis of the news pieces with the most engagement on the social networks and the demonstrations by the two movements organized to oppose and support the right, which took the streets in Brazil and in dozens of cities around the world on September 29 and 30, also indicated a significant presence

of disinformation. The most frequently shared link on Facebook and Twitter in the period between September 28 and October 1st, with 182.6 thousand interactions, was a news article by newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* from February, 2017, about the occupation of the public square Largo da Batata by carnival goers. As reported by the newspaper itself, there false affirmations circulating on WhatsApp and other social networks stating that images used in news articles about the act organized by the left at Largo do Batata, in São Paulo, on Saturday were “actually carnival images”.

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14. Together, FGV DAPP and Agência Lupa verified whether the supposed removal of mentions to presidential hopeful Jair Bolsonaro was true or false. Available at: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2018/08/10/verificamos-twitter-nao-removeu-mencoes-bolsonaro-durante-debate-na-band/>. Accessed on: January 15, 2019.

## 5.4. Suspicion and discussions about the electoral process

The elections were also the target of disputes and different narratives, and one of the fronts was the suspicion of fraud in the vote results. Some episodes were crucial in the mobilization of that debate, such as the suspension of the implementation of the printed vote by the Supreme Federal Court on June 6 and the denial of former president Lula's candidacy.

In one month, from August 19 to September 18, suspicions about the integrity of the elections mobilized 841,800 mentions on Twitter. The debates were polarized between at least two lines: one questioned the electoral process with the absence of a candidate from a leftist party; the other questioned the reliability of the electronic ballot boxes and of the whole process surrounding the race. The peak of debate happened on August 29, with around 205 thousand tweets about the topic after a GloboNews interview with one of the candidates, in which the presidential hopeful stated that he did not believe in electoral polls.

The mentions associating Lula's denied candidacy with a potential fraud in the elections were more intense in August, especially in repercussion to the note issued by the UN Human Rights Committee recommending that the Brazilian State allowed the former president's candidacy. The hashtag #eleiçãosemlulaéfraude ("elections without Lula are a fraud") garnered the majority of the mentions.

In turn, other comments referenced the assumptions of electronic ballot box adulteration in previous races and a statement in which he attributed his potential loss in October to fraud in the voting system. A video released by a candidate in his Facebook page, in which he spoke about the possibility of fraud in the elections, prompted more than 470 thousand comments.

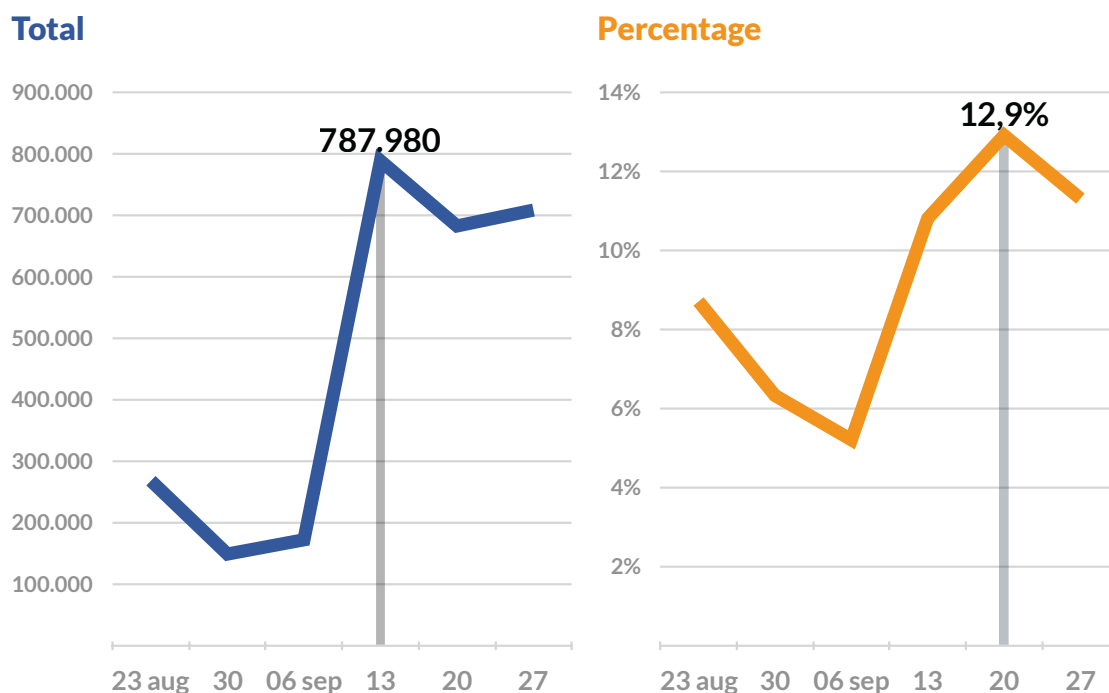
## 5.5. Bots and disinformation

FGV DAPP carried out daily analyses on the presence of automated accounts in the electoral debate. Starting from September 6, we observed an increase in the percentage of interactions (retweets) motivated by bots in the discussions about the presidential hopefuls, which remained above 10% every week in September. The absolute volume also increase, reaching a total of 3,258 accounts in September 27, despite the efforts made by the platform.

The expansion of the interference of automated profiles with the political debate coincided with the approximation of the first round and with the revival of the "useful vote" as an argument of persuasion and recruitment of followers and influence on the social networks.

FIG. 7

## Evolution of automated interactions in the electoral debate



Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

The interferences caused by bots often happened in an articulated and synchronized way through botnets. In the pre-campaign period, at least three botnets were responsible for publishing 1,589 tweets in one week. In general, those messages sought to propel and/or demobilize candidacies, especially inside the most polarized groups: PSL-PT.

Attention must also be paid to the fact that the presence of bots in any group of discussion (or in positive or negative engagement about political parties and political actors) **does not necessarily require intentional action by the campaigns or these actors in conducting disinformation strategies.** The re-

search developed by FGV DAPP does not aim to assign to citizens, governments or business entities the coordination of digital actions of content automation in social networks.

The pro-right and pro-left support groups also presented most of the bot interference in the campaign period. For example, we collected 7,465,611 tweets and 5,285,575 retweets regarding the candidates from September 12 to 18. Inside this database, FGV DAPP's bot detection methodology found 3,198 automated accounts, which prompted 681,980 interactions – 12.9% of the total amount of retweets in the graph below.

FIG. 8

## Map of interactions with bots about the presidential hopefuls

5.285.575 retweets | Analysis date: September 12<sup>th</sup> to September 18<sup>th</sup>

Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

### ● Bots

#### Green Group 7,2% of the interactions

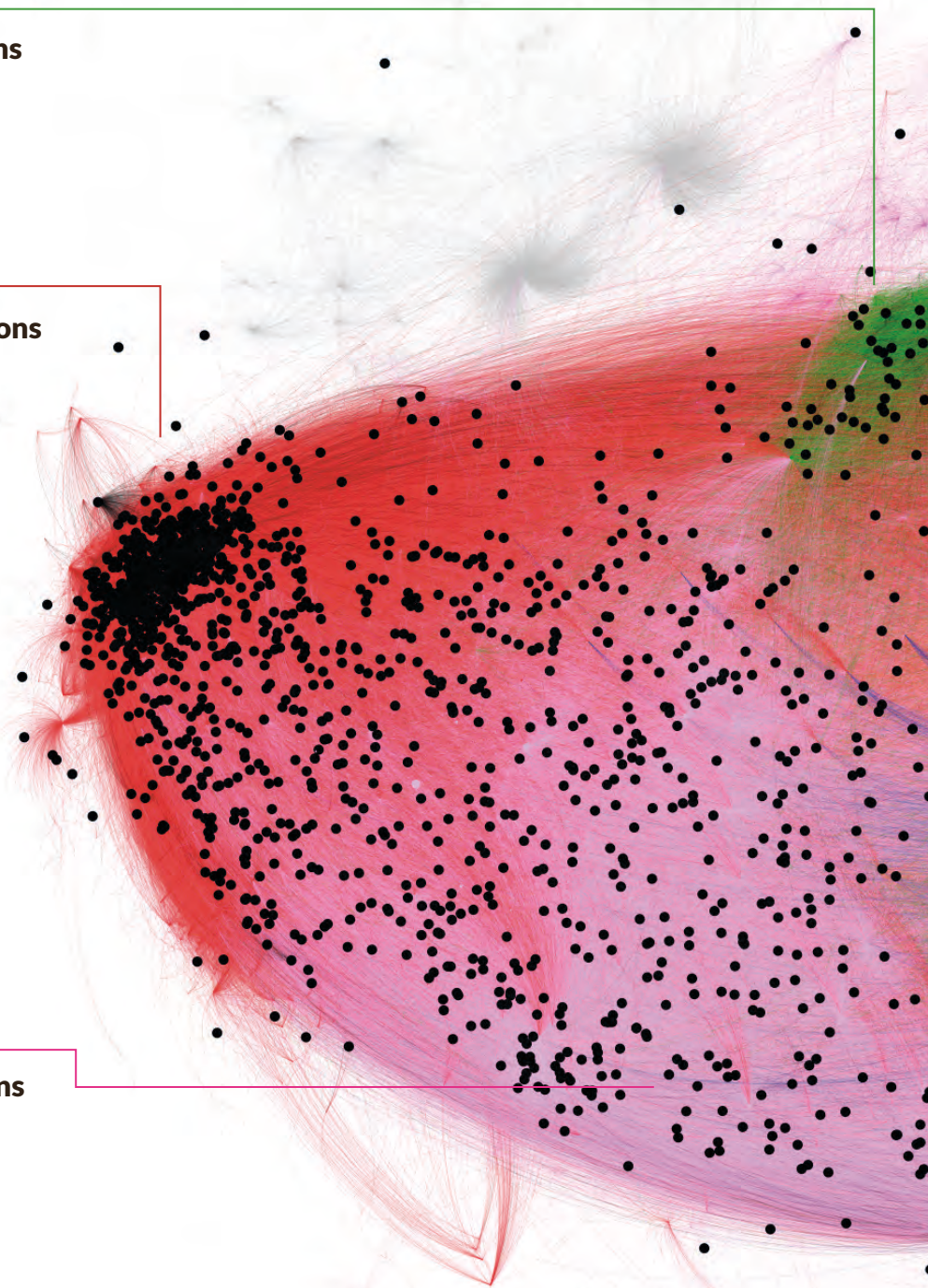
Supports a centrist candidate.

#### Red Group 13,2% of the interactions

Left and centre left candidates.

#### Pink Group 2,2% of the interactions

Supports a centre-left candidate.



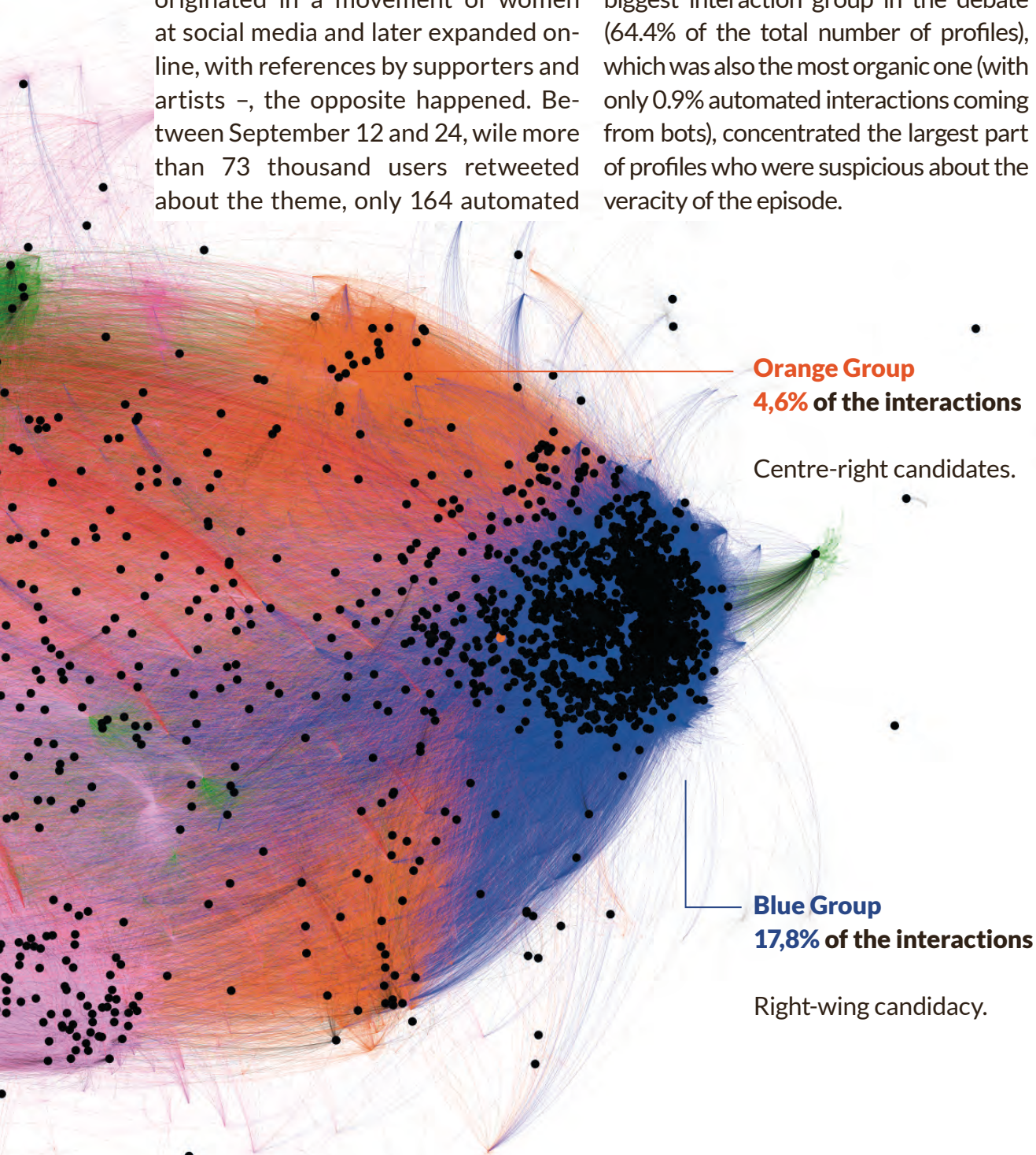


On the right side, automated accounts were responsible for 17.8% of the retweets in the group; on the other side, the interactions aligned with left and centre-left candidacies accounted for 13.2% of the retweets.

However, in moments of more organic debate, such as the mobilization of the hashtag #elenão ("not him") – which originated in a movement of women at social media and later expanded online, with references by supporters and artists –, the opposite happened. Between September 12 and 24, while more than 73 thousand users retweeted about the theme, only 164 automated

accounts did so as well, representing 0.22% of the debate.

In the period analyzed, we did not identify any automated mass distribution of fake news. Disinformation was present throughout the electoral race, but bots were not the biggest responsible for its dissemination. In the week of the knife attack against Bolsonaro, for example, the biggest interaction group in the debate (64.4% of the total number of profiles), which was also the most organic one (with only 0.9% automated interactions coming from bots), concentrated the largest part of profiles who were suspicious about the veracity of the episode.



# 6.

## The debate about fake news after the elections

After the final outcome of the elections, from October 29 to November 12, the debate about fake news gained a new contour and increased in volume significantly, with 1,444,369 tweets identified, of which 1,026,306 were retweets – five times more than in the two weeks before the start of the electoral campaign. The group with the biggest number of profiles on the network in this period was the green one, with 38.4%, and accounting for the second highest number of interactions (25.9%).

### Green Group 38,4% of the profiles

Profiles not politically aligned make jokes using the expression fake news in association with everyday events.

### Light Green Group 21,2% of the profiles

Also uses humor to debate fake news, but includes memes with a more openly political tone

### Red Group 14,8% of the profiles

Criticizes the impact of fake news on the election results and attacks against the traditional press

FIG. 9

## Map of interactions in the debate about fake news after the elections

1.026.306 retweets | Analysis date: October 29<sup>th</sup> to November 13<sup>th</sup>

Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP





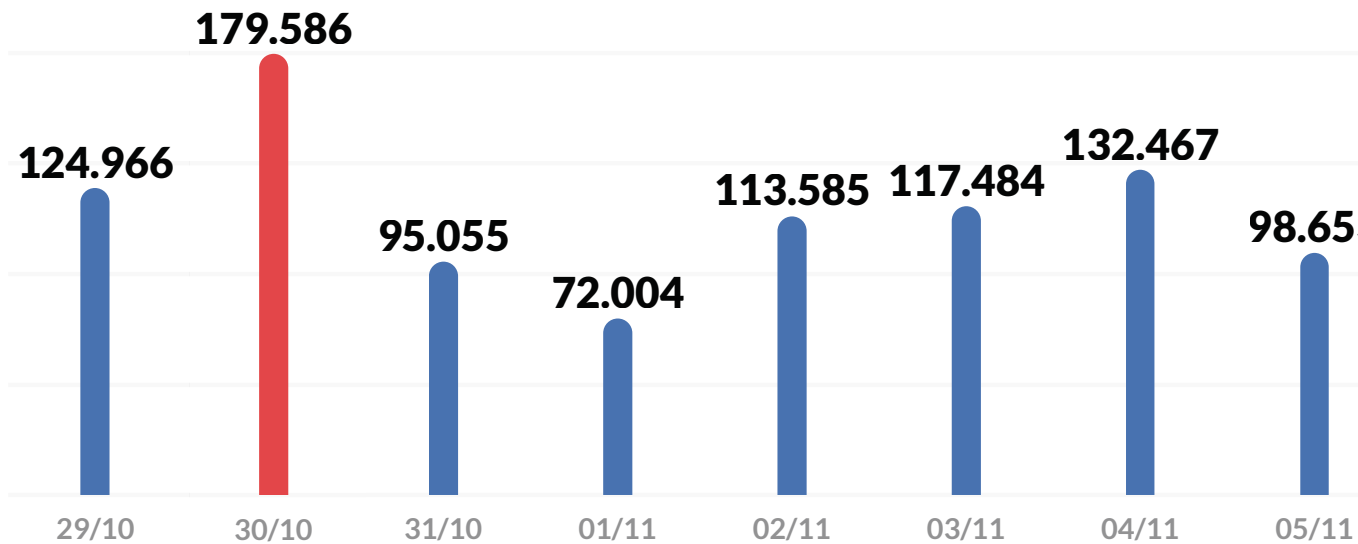
Questions press coverage during the elections, specifically the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo



FIG. 10

## Evolution of mentions about fake news on Twitter

October 29<sup>th</sup> to November 12<sup>th</sup>

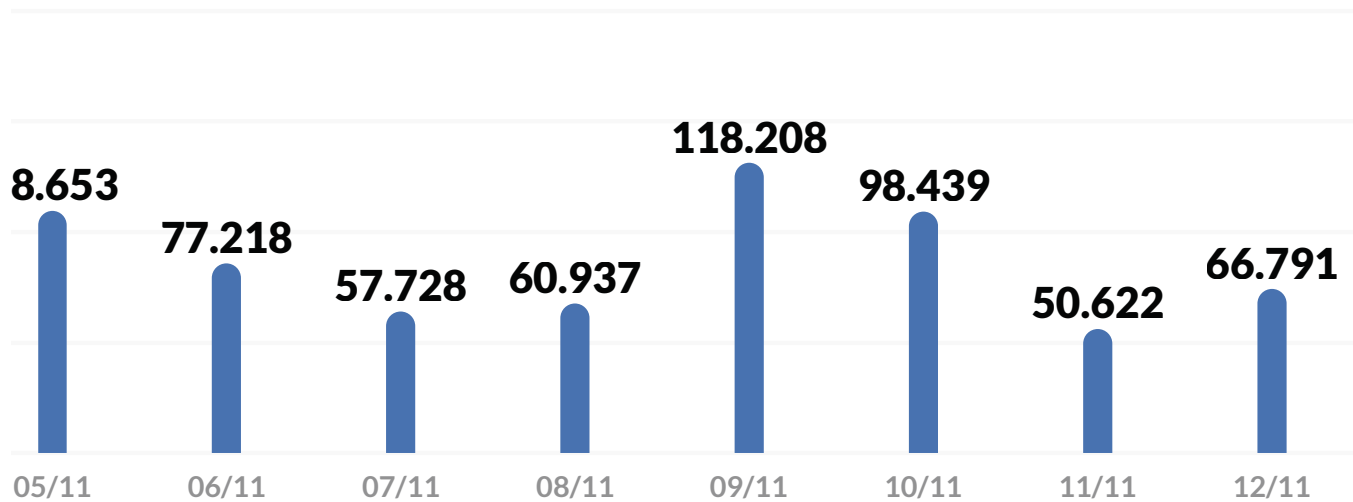


Source: Twitter | Elaborated by: FGV DAPP

This group maintained discursive and thematic similarities with the pink group (which was predominant in the pre-campaign period), containing publications using the term fake news jokingly on the network. The appropriation of the expression “fake news” as slang, incorporated to everyday vocabulary, was a phenomenon already observed before the electoral race; after the elections, the green group resumed the satire “the biggest fake news this year”, which has been used in situations of personal frustration since the beginning of August. In general, what differs the green groups from the pink one is the more explicitly comic contour of their internal debates, with less subgroups that use the expression “fake news” in a “literal” and critical sense.

The blue group garnered the highest number of total interactions (29%, with 14.3% of the profiles), while the red group – the third in number of total interactions (20.5%, with 14.8% of the profiles) – concentrated publications opposite the president elect and supporting press vehicles, integrating politicians and actors aligned with left-wing parties, but also influencers from other areas of the political spectrum who were opposed to right-wing candidates.

The blue group produces attacks to the press and to the left wing, criticizing the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo and stating that the media has published false information about him. Comedian Danilo Gentili stated that the Folha de S. Paulo lied when saying that was denied access at a press conference during the



electoral campaign. Due to the acts of these influencers, who are very strong in the blue group, the attacks against the newspaper are highly significant in this part of the debate about fake news, which materializes in the spread of several hashtags, such as #folhafakenews and #folhafalhamasnaoemplaca (roughly translated as “the Folha fails and does not make an impression”).

In turn, the red group criticizes the manipulation of information as a decisive factor for the elections. The gay kit topic became a highlight, exemplified as a paradigm of the effect of disinformation on the outcome of the electoral race. In addition, profiles in the group called attention for the use of WhatsApp in the spread of fake news, which they argue was strategically

by candidacies. Lastly, they also criticized the low effectiveness of the Superior Electoral Court in combating disinformation on the network. The clashes with the press – especially with the Folha de S. Paulo – are a reason for concern in this group.

Differently from the map of interactions in the period before the official campaign, a fourth highlighted group was configured, with smaller expression in the total interactions (16.7%), but with the second highest number of profiles (21.2%), in light green. Also with a comic tone regarding the use of expressions associated with fake news, the main theme in this group was the spread of more critical memes (with more open political association) than the ones present in the green group.

# Recommendations

This scenario indicates that social networks have shaped – and will continue to deeply shape – politics since the beginning of the decade of 2010. Ruediger (2018) highlights that “the constant monitoring of networks should be sought both by society and by the market and the structure of the State, who should incorporate in their decision-making and management dynamics the strategic understanding of the impact of these new media”.

It is worth mentioning that, in addition to the impact of disinformation on social networks that are more open to academic, media and social scrutiny, a strong debate about the role of WhatsApp in the fragmentation of the national political environment was configured from the second round of the elections in Brazil. Given the particularities of the platform, such as its nature of private communication, reduced social scope (family, friends, co-workers), and the less direct interaction between influencers and ordinary citizens, there was a different phenomenon of spread and viralization of political content of other recent (national and international) scenarios, in which Facebook and Twitter were more prominent.

The many social networks that are now popular among Brazilians, widely used to debate the elections and the political conjuncture, have peculiarities re-

garding the process of production and interaction with content. However, all strategies for spreading information are adapted to the properties of each platform, and there are multiple ways to for disinformation and the sharing of false information to manifest. Not only from links or pages that simulate journalistic activity, but also with intense use of videos, tutorials, blogs, memes, apocryphal texts and sensationalist publications; therefore, there are various subtypes of fake news.

Traditional institutions of democratic systems around the world have been losing the society’s trust, namely the political class, the press, legislative and legal bodies, unions and public administrators. This is very evident in Brazil and was reflected in the electoral choices of the public and in the profound structural change in the way successful campaigns were organized – social networks became the main axis of communication between the electors and the elected. With less mediating power, the usual channels of dialogue between society and public authorities must share space with the platforms, and the same is true in the business and private environment.

Among the many consequences of this paradigm shift, we highlight: 1) the greater demand for transparency in the institutional relations of politics; 2) the

ability to act quickly and interfere in the decision-making process of State agents and elected representatives through direct contact with them on the Internet; 3) and the expansion of the potential role that citizens can play in conducting public policies and acts of interest to them. With the acceleration of feedback and speed of content transmission, sharing and production, improvements in the way journalism and the political debate respond to these new paradigms are equally imperative.

For that purpose, constant dialogue between the different actors involved is necessary: the press, the platforms, the public authorities, the politicians, the administrators. Disinformation can have powerful negative impacts on democracies, as has already been widely documented in situations related to many countries, and the Internet, as a multiplier of information and active participants in the political debate, enables, at the same time, the fragmentation and

unification of social groups. It breaks borders and organizes polarizations that tend to become extreme, suppressing possibilities for consensus.

The fight against networks of dissemination of false or inaccurate news, regardless of the format in which they propagate, poses an essential challenge for the next electoral cycles in Brazil, and already is an important concern for legislators, heads of state and authorities in the United States, the European Union, Latin America and India, to name a few places. With WhatsApp, Brazil has introduced a new typology of disinformation, which requires extensive study, reflection and response by the entities involved. Understanding what fake news are (as well as understanding what defines them and what amplifies them on social networks), avoiding generalizations and inaccuracies, is a contribution made by FGV DAPP to this effort, which should be of interest to all the Brazilian society.

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**PAPEL**

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**FONTE**

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