

Regressive publics and militia rationality in the Brazilian digital public sphere

Exploratory analysis of disinformation networks in
parliamentary and judicial inquiries on fake news



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Vitor Blotta and Daniela Ramos
(University of São Paulo, Brazil)

Questions

- I. What are the logics and rationale of publics involved in the production and propagation of disinformation in present day Brazil?

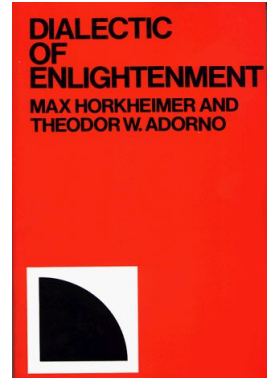
- II. How have state institutions and digital media companies been dealing with disinformation, and how do they relate with the logics and rationale of these publics?

Structure

- I. Theoretical Study: Epistemic crisis and regressive publics: from instrumental to militia rationality
- II. Empirical study: parliamentary inquiry on fake news, judicial inquiries on anti-democratic acts, and fake news chapter of the covid 19 parliamentary inquiry
- III. Preliminary conclusions

I. **Theoretical Study - Epistemic crisis and regressive publics:
from instrumental to militia rationality**

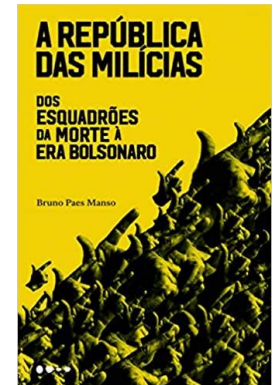
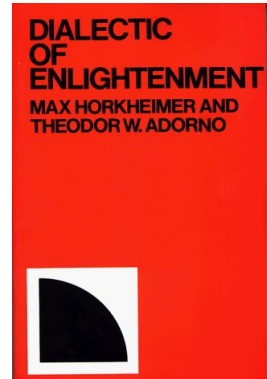
Strategic and instrumental rationalities
success of neoliberal agenda and ideology
(Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947; Habermas, 1981)



I. Theoretical Study

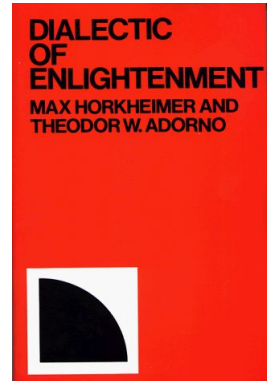
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Regressive publics and militia rationality
backlashes of neoliberal crisis (Voirol, 2020;
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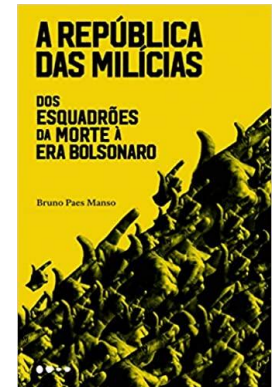


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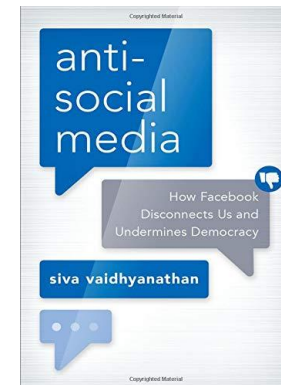
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Regressive publics and militia rationality
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Regressive media (Vaidhyathan, 2018;
Empoli, 2019; Cobbe, 2020)
and regressive institutions (Soares, 2019)



II. Empirical study: anti-democratic acts inquiry, fake news parliamentary inquiry and pandemic parliamentary inquiry report

Methodology (exploratory study)

- No automatic research techniques, focus on legal proceedings (parliamentary and judicial inquiries)
- Collection, reading and interpretation of documents from parliament and supreme court websites
- Combination of theoretical and empirical approaches

Data description

Fake news parliamentary inquiry (August, 2019 to March 2020 - suspended)

- 159 documents (reports, legal proceedings, research papers, requests and answers from social media representatives and lawyers, statements, prints of social media posts etc.)

Supreme Court (STF) Anti-democratic acts Inquiry (April, 2020 to July, 2021)

- 25 documents (Legal proceedings, two Federal Police reports, one General Prosecutor's Office petition and final STF ruling)

Fake News Chapter of the Covid-19 Parliamentary Inquiry (219 pages of 1289)

Analysis and discussion - Fake news parliamentary inquiry

Presence of diverse actors (mediatic, members of parliament, public officers and Communications Office of the Presidency, influencers, intermediaries) - use of terms “digital militia”, offensive and digital lynchings

Official advertising in inappropriate websites and disinformation channels (economic network - monetization)

Interest of specific members of parliament who were intensively attacked (former Bolsonaro supporters)

Legal, self-defensive, generic and technical answers from digital media (not supportive of the inquiry)



Analysis and discussion - STF Anti-dem. Acts Inquiry

Investigation of protests in Brasilia against institutions

Use of exceptional investigative and judicial instruments, and national security norms for the defense of ministers and the court - against coordinated right wing influencers, public agents and relatives



Defamation campaigns against opposing politicians (“satanizing Maia”). Resources from government, individual supporters and Platform monetization; possible money laundering



Decisions repeatedly stressing an organization that defends and instigates institutional rupture, and animosity between powers

Analysis and discussion - Covid-19 Parliamentary Inquiry

- Extensive and clear documentation on the disinformation ecosystem around pandemic, involving specific political actors, digital influencers, digital media channels and funders;
- Reveals how the government fostered this disinformation ecosystem that reinforces regressive publics;
- Problematic recommendations for criminalizing fake news on public health



III. Preliminary conclusions

Social and political actors involved relate to regressive publics and militia logics - organizational approach with political and economic goals, public mobilization of negative emotions and external enemies, search for control over “virtual territories”, digital lynchings and death threats

Digital media act like regressive media - unaccountability, no support to local institutions (colonial attitude), permissiveness to hate speech and disinformation; monopolization over public interest - not only “anti-social”

State shows regressive institutions/public agents - exceptional measures, deployment of national security norms, surveillance and punitive approach, creation of “enemies of the state”, self-defense

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