

Mediating Bolsonaroism on Facebook: Religion, technopolitics and activism in Grassroots Digital Networks

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Gleice Mattos Luz¹**  **and Cláudia Álvares¹** 

Abstract

This study examines the intersections of religion and technopolitics in Bolsonaroism through an in-depth case study of a prominent digital moderator, Actor 1, who mediated between Jair Bolsonaro's leadership and grassroots supporters during Brazil's 2022 electoral period. By employing ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Framing Theory, this research explores a multilayered model of mediation that merges the strategic coordination of programmed campaigns with the emotional authenticity of grassroots spontaneity. Through the strategic exploitation of Facebook's algorithmic architecture, emotionally resonant content was widely disseminated, creating echo chambers that reinforced ingroup loyalty while excluding dissent. Religious framing was central to these efforts, positioning Bolsonaro as a divinely ordained leader whose political struggles integrated a larger spiritual mission. Actor 1 emerges as a paradigmatic intermediary, whose communicative practices integrate opinion leadership, moral-political curation, religious framing, and strategic activism. Religion plays an important role, positioning Bolsonaro as a divinely ordained leader whose political struggles were embedded in a broader spiritual mission. The study demonstrates how technopolitical strategies, intertwined with religious discourse, were used to adapt to regulatory pressures by casting institutional supervision as censorship. These practices shaped collective identities, sustained ideological cohesion, and rallied supporters within a polarized sociopolitical context.

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Introduction

The global rise of far right movements disrupts democratic norms, promoting authoritarian ideologies through nationalism, moral conservatism, and neoliberalism. These movements portray themselves as defenders of “the people” against a corrupt elite, mobilizing support through appeals to sovereignty and traditional values while rejecting inclusive reforms (Jenkins, 2023; Mouffe, 2018; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Wodak, 2015). In Brazil, Bolsonarism exemplifies far right ideology under Jair Bolsonaro’s leadership, driven by grassroots digital activism. Moderators of Facebook groups act as intermediaries, amplifying Bolsonarist discourse and fostering cohesion among supporters. Emerging from the 2010s political turmoil, Bolsonarism capitalized on discontent with corruption and economic crises, which Bolsonaro framed as a moral crusade against a “corrupt” elite (Cesarino, 2020; Hunter and Power, 2019; Laclau, 2005).

This article offers a focused case study of one such moderator – here referred to as Actor 1 – whose communicative practices exemplify the technopolitical, moral, and affective dimensions of Bolsonarist digital activism. Rather than analyzing the movement as a top-down phenomenon, we examine how this grassroots actor mediates between Bolsonaro’s political project and its digital public, constructing narratives and controlling information flows that reinforce ideological alignment.

Actor 1’s activities, situated within the broader mobilization efforts during Brazil’s 2022 elections, allow us to critically explore how individual digital intermediaries consolidate influence within far-right ecosystems by blending spontaneous ideological engagement with strategically programmed content curation. Through the curation of emotionally charged and morally coded content, such mediators frame political conflict in binary terms – good versus evil, patriotism versus betrayal –, thus serving as both amplifiers and architects of Bolsonarist discourse (Sarmet Moreira Smiderle and Belchior Mesquita, 2016).

We contend that Bolsonarism endures not merely through Bolsonaro or institutional power, but through grassroots communicative practices rooted in Brazil’s hybrid media environment. Moderators like Actor 1 operate as both activists and curators, merging spontaneous engagement with strategic messaging to shape public discourse and cultivate ideological belonging. As our primary case study, Actor 1 exemplifies this hybrid model, blending journalistic posture, populist authenticity, and ideological commitment with platform-savvy mediation. A central focus of our research are the digital tools that facilitate this type of activism.

The architecture of Facebook, intended to amplify connectivity and engagement, converts the platform into a resource that movements like Bolsonarism cannot do without. Grassroots actors strategically exploit the platform’s algorithmic mechanisms to maximize visibility and align ideology with surrounding emotionally resonant and polarizing content. This phenomenon corresponds to a manifestation of technopolitics, understood as the “strategic practice of designing or using technology to enact political goals”

(Hecht, 2011: 3), demonstrating the extent to which digital technologies have come to shift the practice of political communication. In the Bolsonarist case, technopolitics has not only contributed to the dissemination of populist rhetoric but also facilitated the emergence of digital echo chambers (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017) that isolate supporters from contrasting narratives.

Beyond the technological dimension, religion serves as a key mobilizing factor in the activist repertoire of Actor 1, intertwining Neo-Pentecostal and Evangelical narratives of moral principles and divine authority with political objectives (Chestnut, 2019). This alignment transforms grassroots activism into spiritual activism, elevating political practice into a sense of higher purpose and fostering cohesion among followers. In the case of Actor 1, religious symbolism and appeals to divine legitimacy are recurrently employed to frame Bolsonaro as a providential leader and to present political struggles as moral battles, intensifying affective investment and group loyalty.

While most studies on Bolsonarism have focused on the role played by political leaders, institutional frameworks, or macro-level dynamics (Anderson, 2021; Antunes, 2019; Cesarino, 2020; Nobre, 2020; Parzianello, 2020; Solano, 2018), this article narrows its focus to micro-level practices by examining how a single grassroots actor – Actor 1 – engages in the ideological reproduction of the movement through discursive, affective, and technopolitical means. The analysis locates these practices within theoretical frameworks of populism, technopolitics, and mediated communication to understand how ordinary citizens participate in the ideological project of the movement. Indeed, through the integration of ethnographic methods, qualitative interviews, and analytical frameworks such as Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2009) and Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), we aim to provide in-depth exploration of how Actor 1's practices embody and amplify the intersection of ideology, emotion, and technology in shaping contemporary digital activism in a polarized context.

The digital and political context of Bolsonarism during the 2022 elections

By 2023, Brazil had approximately 181.8 million internet users, with 64% accessing news through social networks like WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook (Newman et al., 2023; Statista, 2024a). Facebook remains a key platform for political mobilization despite increasing competition from Instagram (Statista, 2024b).

Jair Bolsonaro has relied heavily on Facebook and WhatsApp for political campaigning, exploiting their widespread usage in Brazil to mobilize supporters. Facebook has been crucial for spreading content and creating fan pages and groups to promote his political agenda, while WhatsApp's private and encrypted messaging features have facilitated the targeted, viral dissemination of information and misinformation. Although Twitter and YouTube were also part of Bolsonaro's digital strategy, the wide, engaged user base of Facebook and the encrypted, private nature of WhatsApp in Brazil have made these platforms central to his populist approach of connecting directly with voters.

Key to Bolsonarist political communication on Facebook is the labor of digital activists, who disseminate tailored contents within communities espousing radical right

ideologies. In this manner, Bolsonaro uses social media, and Facebook in particular, to maintain his radical support base sufficiently mobilized (Lellis, 2022).

Nevertheless, despite the widespread mobilization of Jair Bolsonaro supporters on digital platforms, the October 2022 electoral results favored the opposing candidate, Lula da Silva, albeit by a narrow margin. This led to a surge of movements that, starting on social media, incited demonstrations to spread across highways and city centers throughout the country. Protesters demanded the annulment of the second-round election and military intervention to prevent the establishment of the newly elected government. This scenario denoted the intensification of Bolsonarism and its effects on the country's polarization, an unprecedented phenomenon in Brazil's history.

The crisis culminated on January 8, 2023, when Bolsonarists invaded the National Congress, Presidential Palace and Supreme Federal Court, committing acts of vandalism (Formiga et al., 2024; Souto, 2023). This led to the arrest of several individuals on charges linked to armed criminal association, attempted coup d'état and destruction of protected heritage. These events were closely tied to Bolsonaro's presidency, whose first term began in 2018 amid pervasive dissatisfaction with corruption, economic instability, and institutional failures attributed to previous administrations (Hunter and Power, 2019). His campaign, bolstered by promises of economic reform and a return to conservative values, appealed to fractured public opinion. Moreover, his strategic use of social media to circumvent legacy media gatekeepers allowed him to craft an image of authentic representative of "the people," engaging in direct communication with his audiences (Cesarino, 2020; Mendonça and Caetano, 2021).

The importance of social media in pro-Bolsonaro protests met with resistance through the tightening of control by the Supreme Federal Court and the Supreme Electoral Court, with the objective of curbing the dissemination of disinformation and incivility online (Santillana, 2023). The role of social media in promoting Bolsonaro protests is significant, serving as tools for dissemination of Bolsonarist narratives and the creation of ideologically cohesive communities which amplified his message (Ozawa et al., 2024). However, the activities of such groups met with resistance through the tightening of control by the Supreme Federal Court and the Supreme Electoral Court, seeking to curb the spread of disinformation and incivility online (Santillana, 2023). This ultimately led to the deactivation of various Bolsonarist Facebook groups, such as the one explored in this article, for violating the democratic rule of law (Albuquerque and Alves, 2023).

The origins of Bolsonarism

Before we discuss the object of this study, we will present a brief overview of the ideological basis of Bolsonarist thought and, as a populist phenomenon, how it consolidated itself in Brazilian society. The revival of the radical right in Brazil began with events that occurred in the country in 2013 when the population's dissatisfaction with the Dilma Rousseff government triggered intense protests in the country's major cities (Hunter and Power, 2019; Singer, 2018). The various demands of the protesters mostly converged on a single argument as the predominant cause of the country's social and economic woes, namely State corruption (Rocha and Solano, 2021). This scenario opened space for populist discourses on the part of previously inconspicuous members of small political parties

in the National Congress, who presented immediate solutions for combating corruption. These solutions began to resonate among the popular classes who found in Jair Bolsonaro the real representative of the people's will (Rocha and Solano, 2021). Transfigured into a charismatic leader, Bolsonaro gained acclaim on social media as a "legend" and, later, as the "people's captain," an epithet that underscores his role as former captain of the Brazilian military (Turner, 2024).

Therefore, Bolsonarism arises from a popular demand whose origin is tied to the collapse of Dilma Rousseff's Government, driven by political barriers formed within the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate, the *laissez-faire* approach to the Rousseff's trial and impeachment process, as well as media coverage of events, including the arrest of President Lula da Silva (Albuquerque and Alves, 2023).

Bolsonaro's populist discourse emphasizes "elite versus people" and "us versus them," combining patriotism and conservative values. His ideologies draw from figures like Olavo de Carvalho and Paulo Guedes, who shaped his government's ideological and economic strategies (Tamaki and Fuks, 2020). Known as "Bolsonaro's Guru" (Felinto, 2023: 28), Olavo de Carvalho influenced Bolsonaro in the formation of his ministries. "Olavism" became a current of thought key to the advancement of the new right in Brazil, with Carvalho's ideas circulating since the 1980s but later gaining traction through the rise of social media and digital platforms (Felinto, 2023). The theses defended by Olavo de Carvalho were multiplied by followers through courses and study groups on conservatism that were formed on Facebook and YouTube channels. In turn, the economic policy advocated by Guedes met the demands of business elites and financiers through the defense of a neoliberal program (Goldstein, 2019). The support of Evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal churches also substantiated moral values taken as important guidelines for Bolsonaro's Government platform.

The rise of Jair Bolsonaro and Bolsonarism was initially disregarded both by the left and by quadrants to the right of the political spectrum. This scenario gave the radical right a prominent role in Brazilian politics, strengthened mainly by digital activism on social media platforms. Moderators and content administrators are part of the great machinery of the Bolsonarist movement in digital space. The messages shared by these social actors, grounded in individual belief and value systems, guide group debates through interactions among users, with each message conveying significant meaning.

Being a Bolsonarist means, on the one hand, differentiating oneself and opposing the forces promoting change to established values and hierarchies; on the other hand, it implies connecting with collectivities in a broader universe that goes beyond local social networks. Within this universe, individuals share similar experiences, create bonds, and formulate new narratives that revive Bolsonarist paradigms, frequently operating diffusely.

Literature review

Technopolitics and religion in digital populism

Far right movements increasingly rely on technopolitics – the strategic use of technology to further political objectives (Hecht, 2011) – to shape political engagement and disseminate ideology through digital platforms. Platforms such as Facebook have become

essential for mobilization, enabling such movements to circumvent the habitual media gatekeepers and communicate directly with their publics, challenging established hierarchies. By merging digital and traditional media, hybrid media ecosystems are reconfiguring political participation, amplifying populism by encouraging like-minded communities and prioritizing emotionally engaging content that helps form collective political communities (Chadwick, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2018; Jenkins, 2006).

The interplay of technology, ideology, and grassroots mobilization foregrounds a broader trend in which digital platforms facilitate the expansion and evolution of radical ideologies. Hybrid media systems, as discussed by Chadwick (2013), allow movements like Bolsonarism to capitalize on the convergence of digital and traditional media to reshape political participation (Cesarino, 2020). Platforms like Facebook, with their user-driven architecture and extensive reach, have acted as important catalysts for Bolsonarist activism, enabling the movement to steadily increase its presence in the digital public sphere. This transformation illustrates the capacity of far right populism to adapt to digital tools, sustaining its influence while reinforcing its resilience.

This ability to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers and amplify agendas is further bolstered by the rapid proliferation of online counterpublics, which defy elite dominance and persist beyond social media regulation (Schroeder, 2019). The elimination of intermediaries – a process known as disintermediation – reinforces direct engagement between political actors and civil society (Schroeder, 2019), reshaping the dynamics of political communication.

Platforms like Facebook are central to this transformation, as their algorithmic architecture promotes connectivity and participation, while simultaneously enabling the creation of echo chambers. Echo chambers (Pariser, 2011) reinforce biases by exposing users to content aligned with their views, allowing far right narratives to gain traction. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Bolsonarist activism, where Facebook groups serve as hubs for the diffusion of ideological rhetoric. Such groups not only extend Bolsonarist narratives, but also maintain ideological coherence by creating a sense of collective identity among followers. By harnessing the tools and affordances of Facebook, Bolsonarist actors transform digital platforms into instruments of ideological dissemination, blurring the lines between grassroots spontaneity and organized propaganda (Gunning and Baron, 2013).

A characteristic trait of Bolsonarist activism is its integration of religion as both a thematic and strategic element. Evangelical Christianity provides a moral base for Bolsonarist rhetoric, which frames conflicts as spiritual battles and opponents as threats to Christian values (Chestnut, 2019; Lacerda, 2018; Tamaki and Fuks, 2020). This framing aligns deeply with followers' opinions, who tend to view their political engagement as an integral part of a larger mission to defend traditional principles and restore moral order in Brazil.

In the digital sphere, the emotional and symbolic power of religion is further amplified. Wahl-Jorgensen (2018) highlights the prioritization of affective content by social media algorithms, which enhance the mobilizing potential of emotionally charged narratives. Bolsonarist activists competently assimilate religious symbolism – such as references to divine justice, family sanctity, and national redemption – into their digital communication practices, crafting narratives that mix spiritual devotion with political

allegiance. This incorporation of religion into political discourse not only augments intragroup cohesion but also deepens divides among social groups, as such narratives tend to frame supporters as morally righteous and opponents as morally corrupt. These practices demonstrate how faith, emotion, and digital technology intertwine with each other to shape the contemporary Bolsonarist movement. This analytical grounding supports our case study of Actor 1, whose communicative practices exemplify how digital populism is enacted through the intertwining of technopolitical strategies and religious moral framing.

Intermediaries, moderators, and gatekeeping in platform politics

The role of moderators and administrators in Bolsonarist Facebook groups, such as Actor 1, further illustrates the changing dynamics of opinion leadership in the platform age. These individuals act as gatekeepers and mediators, curating content and actively molding the ideological narratives of their communities. Brosius and Weimann (1996) describe these actors as “information gatekeepers” who filter and amplify messages to align with ideological goals. In the Bolsonarist context, this role is expanded through the process of reintermediation, where grassroots actors bridge the gap between political leaders and their audiences (Moreno and Sepúlveda, 2021). These mediators not only disseminate content but also actively manage the group’s ideological boundaries, using strategies such as framing (Entman, 1993), and argumentation to reinforce ingroup cohesion and delegitimize conflicting viewpoints.

Such dynamics are further illuminated by Barzilai-Nahon’s (2008) theory of networked gatekeeping, which introduces a more relational and distributed understanding of gatekeeping within digital platforms. She refers to “the gated” (1493) as individuals or groups whose participation or communication is subject to gatekeeping control. Crucially, the gated are not passive recipients but active participants who can resist, negotiate, or influence the flow of information, rendering mediation a dynamic and contextual process.

The theory identifies four attributes that enhance the agency of the gated within digital networks: political power, the capacity to produce information, the nature of their relationship with the gatekeeper, and the availability of alternatives to bypass control (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008: 1498, 1507). These elements help explain how grassroots gatekeepers, such as moderators in Bolsonarist Facebook groups, sustain ideological coherence and reinforce the resilience of the movement’s discourse.

Early communication effects studies (Lasswell, 1935; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) already indicated the central role of opinion leaders, demonstrating how certain individuals influence others within the two-step flow of communication process. These individuals were considered capable of shaping behaviors and affecting the ways message recipients act and think within public space. Building on this model, many studies have since applied the two-step flow to contemporary contexts. Among them, Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) extend this framework to contemporary political campaigns, arguing that the influence of opinion leaders is contingent on the size of their social network, their reputation and expertise on subject-matter, characteristics considered fundamental for ensuring reach, trust and recognition. As they note (Nisbet and

Kotcher, 2009: 332), opinion leaders not only determine what is made visible, but also “signal how others should in turn respond or act” (332).

These characteristics remain relevant in the platform era, offering a useful lens for understanding how grassroots actors, like moderators in Bolsonarist groups, mediate political discourse and mobilize affective communities. The study distinguishes between two forms of digital activism identified during the investigation: planned and spontaneous activism (Gunning and Baron, 2013). Planned activism involves coordinated, commodified practices aligned with electoral campaigns, characterized by standardized, pre-scheduled content. Spontaneous activism, in contrast, emerges from grassroots participation driven by strong emotional and ideological commitments. We contend that a hybrid model, combining elements of both planned and spontaneous activism, is visible in Bolsonarist digital activism, the latter being simultaneously strategic whilst deeply personal.

This hybrid model aligns with findings from McKenna and O'Donnell (2024), who describe how satellite political movements supporting leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro depend on semi-autonomous grassroots networks. These networks not only strengthen the leader's ideological narratives but also adapt dynamically to specific issues, localized in scope, revealing the intertwining of centralized coordination and grassroots spontaneity. Indeed, Bolsonarist activists demonstrate how the strategic use of digital platforms can contribute to blending grassroots spontaneity with coordinated propaganda, creating narratives that channel individual faith into collective political action. By drawing on the emotional and symbolic power of religion, such actors mobilize followers and harbor a sense of belonging, simultaneously intensifying polarization by reinforcing ideological divides.

The sociocognitive dimensions of Bolsonarist discursive practices clarify the mechanisms underlying their appeal and effectiveness. To analyze these practices, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed to examine how moderators and administrators utilized language as a representational and performative tool. Drawing on Fairclough's (1992) conception of discourse as a site of ideological struggle and Van Dijk's (2008) framework of sociocognitive processes, the analysis focused on how moderators framed their content to construct and legitimize Bolsonarist narratives, while shared mental models and beliefs served to shape group identity and guide the diffusion of messages. This includes the strategic use of religious language, moral binaries, and emotionally evocative themes to reinforce group cohesion and delegitimize opposing viewpoints.

Framing Theory further complements this analysis by exploring how moderators structure their messages to emphasize specific aspects of reality while downplaying others. Entman's (1993) conception of framing as selection, emphasis, and omission provided a lens for understanding how moderators frame political struggles as inseparable from a moral and existential dimension, often employing religious and nationalist themes to resonate with their audience. This framing not only mobilizes supporters but also reinforces the ideological consistency of the movement within the echo chambers created by Facebook's algorithmic features.

Van Dijk's (2008) sociocognitive approach emphasizes the role of shared cultural and religious schemas in shaping collective identities and guiding political behavior. In

Bolsonarist discourse, shared cultural and religious schemas (Van Dijk, 2008) translate as moral binaries such as “truth versus falsehood” and “good versus evil.” They thus serve as foundational elements that resonate with supporters’ deeply held beliefs, shaping collective identities and guiding political behavior. These schemas are built and sustained through the discursive practices of digital activists, who use language and imagery to articulate grievances, mobilize support, and legitimize the movement’s ideological framework. The repeated use of religious language, symbolic references, and moral absolutes not only reinforces the movement’s emotional and moral appeal but also solidifies its cultural and symbolic foundations. Such dynamics draw attention to the intersection of technopolitics, religion, and digital activism in defining the contemporary Bolsonarist far right movement. These dynamics, as seen in the communicative strategies of Actor 1, illustrate how grassroots mediators reinforce ideological coherence within digital populist movements.

Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive qualitative research design to investigate the communicative practices of digital activists supporting Jair Bolsonaro during Brazil’s 2022 electoral period, with particular focus on a critical case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of Actor 1, a paradigmatic digital moderator. Recognizing the complexity of digital activism, the research integrates ethnographic techniques, semi-structured interviews, an in-depth case study approach (Tobin, 2010), supported by analytical frameworks such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Van Dijk, 2008) and Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) to capture the multi-dimensional dynamics of Bolsonarist Facebook groups.

These groups, managed by grassroots actors identifying as Bolsonarists without formal political affiliations, serve as hubs for mediation between political leaders and their audiences while shaping and amplifying ideological narratives. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select five highly active Facebook groups based on their significant user engagement and alignment with Bolsonarist rhetoric. This approach ensured the collection of rich data from a representative subset of Bolsonarist online spaces, enabling the exploration of their communicative practices. The study unfolded over a period of 15 months, beginning with ethnographic observation of these groups. This immersive engagement provided insights into the roles and strategies of moderators and administrators, whose activities included curating content, filtering information to align with Bolsonarist narratives, and fostering a sense of in-group solidarity. Ethnographic participation revealed recurrent practices, such as the use of emotionally laden language, religious symbolism, and polarized frames, which indicated the mediators’ centrality in shaping the group’s discursive environment.

Semi-structured interviews with five moderators revealed diverse motivations for Bolsonarist activism, including ideological alignment, financial incentives and personal ambition. For instance, three participants described use of Facebook’s monetization tools, such as programmed posts and bots, to increase engagement and generate revenue, while another used their group to support their own political campaign as well as that of other Bolsonaro-aligned politicians.

Within this broader framework, Actor 1 was selected as a “critical case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 229) due to distinctive communicative practices, which blend spontaneous grassroots participation with the strategic planning reminiscent of programmed activism. Actor 1’s posts, often resembling journalistic articles, incorporated professional-style reporting to lend credibility and influence to content. This hybrid positioning, combining ideological messaging with the stylistic conventions of news media, converts Actor 1 into gatekeeper and amplifier, curating contents so as to reinforce group identity at the grassroots level while optimizing impact through data-driven practices.

The study engaged with Actor 1 over 2 years through interactions on Facebook and WhatsApp, allowing us to understand their ideological motivations, identity construction, and audience engagement strategies. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with ISCTE’s Ethics Committee approval (Final Ethics Review no. 04/2025), which granted formal clearance to interact with five members of Bolsonarist Facebook groups, including moderators and key participants. Previously selected on the basis of communicative profile and strategic influence exercised within their group’s discursive and affective dynamics, Actor 1 agreed to participate in recorded interviews and provide informed written consent, as stipulated in the approved ethical protocol.

While other participants contributed indirectly through informal exchanges and public content, the case study of Actor 1 offered a singular opportunity to explore the entwining of individual agency, ideological mediation, and platform affordances within Bolsonarist activism. All personal data were pseudoanonymised and are stored securely on institutional servers, with no directly or indirectly identifying information disclosed in any publication.

The temporal scope of this study, ranging from 2021 to January 2023, allowed for a detailed analysis of the dynamics before, during, and after the election. The 2 months preceding the election were marked by a surge in activity on the part of Actor 1, with the attempt to frame political conflicts as moral and existential struggles. The 3 months following the election provided an opportunity to observe how Actor 1 responded to Bolsonaro’s defeat, with the subsequent mobilization of Bolsonarist supporters.

The selection of this time frame also aligns with Actor 1’s peak activity and evolving communication strategies, allowing us to trace how digital mediators responded to escalating political and platform constraints. This period was marked by heightened political polarization and intensified scrutiny by the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE). Moderators and administrators of Bolsonarist Facebook groups generally responded to this environment by framing their practices as mechanisms of defense against censorship and political persecution, crafting narratives that reinforced Bolsonarist identity while contesting the actions of regulatory authorities. This politically charged context provided fertile ground for observing how digital activists – and Actor 1, in particular – adapted to and thrived in a climate of regulatory and ideological challenges.

Discussion

In digital media, the power to filter news has shifted from traditional outlets to ordinary citizens on social networks. This transformation in gatekeeping dynamics reveals that the role of mass media in controlling information flow is increasingly diluted by the

action of platform users, who have emerged as protagonists in curating messages within media ecosystems. Through “the production, selection, filtering, annotation, or framing of content” (Thorson and Wells, 2016: 310), these users assume significant control over what becomes public on the web.

Networked gatekeeping and opinion leadership in Bolsonaro Networks

Despite the challenges posed by digital transformations, Gatekeeping theory remains essential to comprehending the processes of news selection and distribution. Nevertheless, an updated conceptualization is required to account for the changing dynamics of information flows “in an era with multiple gates and enormous digital capacity” (Vos, 2015: 9). Building on Barzilai-Nahon’s (2008) theoretical framework of networked gatekeeping, this section explores how Actor 1 enacts grassroots mediation within Bolsonaro Facebook groups. Gatekeeping, traditionally relegated to institutional actors, is here redefined through the practices of non-elite users who shape public discourse by producing, selecting, and circulating information. Actor 1 exemplifies this change by simultaneously assuming the roles of content producer, curator, and moderator, strategically reinforcing ideological group cohesion.

These practices reflect broader dynamics that become even more complex when considered in light of the affordances of social media, which shift flows from one-to-many to many-to-many models, allowing both human and algorithmic agents to shape visibility. In this context, mediation is no longer a top-down but relational and interactive process, involving actors whose agency varies with network position. From this perspective, information control in networked environments serves three strategic functions: reinforcing user loyalty by “locking in” the gated within the gatekeeper’s network, protecting the community from external interference, and ensuring consistent activity flows (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008: 1496).

Applied to the Bolsonaroist groups mediated by Actor 1, the theory of networked gatekeeping allows us to better understand the dynamics of mediation through various forms of information control, including original content production, selective dissemination, visual framing, deletion of oppositional views and debate moderation. Censorship mechanisms also include blocking or silencing dissenting members. These informal practices maintain discursive dominance over radical right-wing agendas and foreground the interplay between power and information in Actor 1’s networked gatekeeping.

Although this study does not include a formal reception analysis, ethnographic observation of Actor 1’s group reveals consistent user participation and alignment with the group’s ideology. Members reflect Actor 1’s curatorial logic, suggesting a relationship of reciprocity and shared purpose.

Far from passive, group members demonstrate agency through their alignment, content production, and enforcement of group norms, embodying many attributes identified by Barzilai-Nahon (2008) as central to networked gatekeeping. Positive reactions to dominant Bolsonaroist narratives are visible in comments that reinforce key messages and in the active promotion of contents such as hostility toward the Workers’ Party (PT), historical and scientific denialism, and the cult of Jair Bolsonaro’s persona, illustrating the group’s capacity for information production and dissemination. Beyond amplifying

ideological content, members engage in internal monitoring by reporting dissenters, practices that form decentralized yet coordinated mode of gatekeeping sustaining the group's discursive boundaries.

Actor 1's gatekeeping practices operate in tandem with platform affordances that prioritize high-engagement content, contributing to an ecosystem of "multiple curated flows" (Thorson and Wells, 2016: 310). Circulation results from algorithmic filtering and user activity, shaping visibility and public opinion. As Bruns (2025) notes, users shape these flows both through participation and acts of resistance.

The theory of networked gatekeeping helps explain how mediation in Bolsonarist groups, distinguished by strong ideological control, operates as a technology of power that reinforces boundaries and contributes to polarized echo chambers (Pariser, 2011). Gatekeeping is subjective, shaped by the mediator's "experiences, attitudes, and expectations" (White, 1950, cited in Al-Rawi, 2019: 3). Mediation is thus permeated by political, historical, and emotional interpretations.

The dynamics of gatekeeping and ideological curation are embodied in the communicative practices of Actor 1, positioned simultaneously as self-acclaimed journalist, a citizen concerned with the future of his country, and a spokesperson for the truths ignored by mainstream media. Indeed, Actor 1 consolidates legitimacy through follower engagement and recognition. Rather than occupying a traditional elite role, Actor 1 uses Facebook affordances to shape discourse from within. Content production is carefully molded by using persuasive rhetoric and appealing to shared values, simplifying complex issues such as Bolsonaro's relationship with the Courts, the invasion of Congress, and the radical right's moral agenda.

By reinforcing these contents, Actor 1 reproduces the radical right's agenda while mobilizing emotions that foster group belonging. Actor 1's curation thus activates affective publics on social networks, connected and mobilized around the expression of political sentiment. As Papacharissi (2015: 125–126) observes, these are "publics . . . transformed by networked technologies" into collectives shaped by "the interaction of people, technology, and practices."

Bridging programmed and spontaneous activisms

Ethnographic observations of Facebook groups revealed that moderators acted as mediators between Bolsonaro's ideological messages and grassroots supporters. Among them, Actor 1 stood out for curating content to amplify Bolsonarist values while strategically controlling the flow of information. The effectiveness of this mediation is evidenced by the high engagement generated by posts and the significant membership in the groups administered and moderated, indicating a position of trust and skill in influencing public opinion.

This position, however, cannot be reduced to a single mode of political intervention but rather embodies two distinct types of digital activism. On the one hand, programmed activism involves highly coordinated campaigns that use standardized content and tools such as bots to disseminate messages aligned with the technopolitical strategies of the radical right. Spontaneous activism, on the other hand, is characterized by individuals like Actor 1, who operate without formal affiliations but act as part of a broader

community united by emotional and ideological commitments to Bolsonarism. Actor 1's activities exemplify how spontaneous activism frequently adopts techniques from programmed activism, reflecting how digital platforms aggregate individual actions into collective political movements (Gerbaudo, 2018). Although such moderators claim a strong sense of independence and disinterest in financial incentives, their practices include monetization strategies, using Facebook tools to generate revenue through engagement metrics. Actor 1, while downplaying the role of financial incentives, acknowledged the intersection of personal branding and activism:

My goal is to create a brand around what I do. That's why, for me, the best way to do it is to be present, putting myself out there.

This integration of personal ambition, financial motivation, and ideological alignment translates the multifarious nature of Bolsonarist digital activism, showing how group moderators simultaneously furthered Bolsonaro's political agenda while pursuing their individual goals within the broader movement. In short, the hybrid nature of spontaneous activism merges personal commitment with strategic practices to sustain and amplify Bolsonarist narratives, adapting these messages to resonate with grassroots audiences. Central to these practices are framing strategies that evoke moral and religious values, portraying Bolsonaro as a divinely ordained leader combating corruption and moral decay. Actor 1, for example, emphasizes the importance of faith in mobilizing supporters:

Faith is what keeps us united. Without faith, we wouldn't have the strength to fight for what we believe in. When I share something, I make sure it reminds people that this isn't just a political battle – it's a spiritual one too.

This moral framing, combined with algorithmically driven engagement strategies, amplifies content that reinforces ideological alignment and emotional connection with audiences, not only serving to mobilize supporters but also justifying controversial actions, such as anti-democratic behaviors, as defensive responses to alleged persecution. Hence, the ultimate power of moderators, as gatekeepers, lies in their capacity to build narratives on the basis of the promotion of certain angles to the detriment of others (Entman, 1993), often presenting Bolsonarist perspectives as counterpoints to mainstream media. Actor 1 describes this selective approach as follows:

When you engage with your audience on social media, you learn to identify what they're looking for, what they're consuming. Then, within that content, you find people with authority on those topics to present what the audience is waiting for.

The moderators' ability to curate, amplify, and gatekeep content reflects their central role in shaping the Bolsonarist movement's digital presence. By aligning their activities with both programmed strategies and personalized ideological messaging, they blur the lines between organized and spontaneous activism. This ability to bridge grassroots mobilization with technopolitical strategies contributes to the flexibility and resilience of Bolsonarist digital mobilization.

Digital activism as authenticity

Amidst the interplay of dimensions within Bolsonarist digital activism, authenticity emerges as a central theme in fostering engagement levels, loyalty, and influence. Authenticity in this context invokes a strategic construction of credibility and relatability. This dynamic is exemplified by Actor 1, who convincingly blends personal and emotional narratives with ideological alignment, so as to present himself as authentic representative of the movement, a practice consistent with Wahl-Jorgensen's (2018) analysis of affective identity-building. This hybrid model (McKenna and O'Donnell, 2024), characterized by the dynamics of genuine belief and spontaneous engagement on the one hand, alongside strategic planning and calculated efforts on the other hand, showcases the duality of authenticity in digital activism. In the process, they close the gap between Bolsonaro's leadership and grassroots followers, guaranteeing ideological consistency while consolidating their own influence within the digital ecosystem.

Actor 1 illustrates this connection between authenticity and strategy. By stressing independence and personal dedication to the Bolsonarist cause, a persona is created that seeks to establish emotional connection with group members:

It's not just about posting; it's about understanding what people want to see and when they want to see it. I check the analytics to know what's working and adjust accordingly, but it always has to come from a place of truth and conviction.

Authenticity is also important in resisting criticism and building a sentiment of trust among followers. As moderators circumvent regulatory challenges and external scrutiny, they often frame their actions as extensions of personal values and beliefs, reinforcing their authenticity. Actor 1's reaction to the deactivation of their Facebook groups during the 2022 elections exemplifies how authenticity becomes a tool for framing adversity as an attack on shared values, reminiscent of Wodak's (2015) analysis of the exclusionary strategies in populist discourse: "They keep trying to silence us, but they're not just censoring our words – they're censoring our faith." By aligning personal narratives with the collective grievances of their audiences, moderators actively engage in building a sense of solidarity and reciprocal trust among supporters and their wider networks, resorting to shared cultural and ideological schemas as presented by Van Dijk (2008).

This strategic exploitation of authenticity extends to the production and diffusion of content. As previously seen, moderators like Actor 1 take recourse in journalistic styles, religious framing, and emotionally invested language to come across as reliable sources of information, whilst simultaneously appealing to the emotions and values of audiences. Their capacity to adapt the tone and content of messages to correspond to audience expectations while maintaining a sense of conviction demonstrates the performative dimension of authenticity in digital activism. Despite being programmed, this performance is highly effective in maintaining engagement and mobilizing followers.

Authenticity is thus ultimately used as both a personal and strategic tool within Bolsonarist digital activism, enabling moderators to build a relationship of mutual trust with audiences and bypass challenges while amplifying personal influence and contributing to the movement's ideological consistency. The intertwining of authenticity and

strategy emphasizes the sophistication of contemporary digital activism, offering perspectives into how authenticity is constructed and mobilized in polarized political contexts.

Framing religious digital activism: From spiritual warfare to persecuted voices

The 2022 electoral period in Brazil provided a politically charged environment that revealed the critical role of Facebook in disseminating Bolsonarist narratives. As the Federal Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) intensified their efforts to regulate online disinformation and uncivil behavior, digital actors such as Actor 1 adapted their strategies to these constraints while maintaining ideological coherence within their groups. Ethnographic observations demonstrate how Facebook's algorithmic features and ability to amplify emotionally resonant content created opportunities for Actor 1 to construct and reinforce narratives that framed the election as an existential and moral conflict.

Actor 1's communicative practices epitomize a dual strategy that combines personalized content creation with alignment to the standardized script of radical right-wing populism. This approach indicates capacity to balance spontaneity with a calculated adherence to established narratives, effectively engaging audiences while amplifying Bolsonarist rhetoric. Their declaration, "We use the Holy Bible as the foundation for what we learn, how we do things, and what we teach (. . .)," demonstrates the centrality of religious discourse as a cornerstone of their activism. This reliance on religious framing aligns with Laclau's (2005) theory of populist dichotomies, which thrive on binary oppositions, and Wodak's (2015) analysis of the horizontal exclusions that characterize right-wing populist movements.

Religious framing within Actor 1's activism depicts Bolsonaro as a defender of divine truths and opponents as threats to Christian values, resonating with supporters and reinforcing perceptions of institutional bias. Critical Discourse Analysis reveals how such claims were constructed to emphasize a dichotomy between "us" (truthful and righteous conservatives) and "them" (corrupt and oppressive opposition), a recurrent feature in Bolsonarist discourse. Wahl-Jorgensen's (2018) concept of affective identity-building further demonstrates how such framing encouraged a sense of belonging among Bolsonarist followers, consolidating cohesion within the ingroup while excluding those perceived as outgroup members.

Facebook's algorithmic prioritization of emotionally charged and polarizing content further reinforced these dynamics. The platform enabled the formation of echo chambers (Pariser, 2011) where group members were shielded from dissenting perspectives and continuously exposed to content that aligned with their ideological beliefs. Chagas et al. (2019) draw attention to how fear-inducing memes, disseminated on WhatsApp, contribute to macro-level emotional framings, mirroring the micro-level strategies here analyzed, where Actor 1 uses religious and moral dichotomies to heighten engagement and polarization. Ethnographic observations showed that moderators strategically curated posts to amplify this effect. Religious and moral themes played a central role in these

narratives, with moderators often invoking divine justice and biblical authority to frame Bolsonaro's political struggles as spiritual battles against secular and immoral forces.

The combination of religious symbolism and populist rhetoric for strategic purposes extends beyond framing, permeating Actor 1's content production and dissemination practices. For example, the selective editing of congressional debates, alongside the portrayal of progressive policies as threats to Christian values, indicates a deliberate construction of narratives designed to reconfirm preexistent audience bias. As Actor 1 asserts, "We show the real motivations behind these so-called progressive policies. People need to see how far removed they are from the values we hold dear." This approach not only strengthens ideological divides but also exemplifies Entman's (1993) framing theory, which emphasizes the power of selective emphasis in shaping public perception.

Such framing ultimately links religious and nationalist values to Bolsonarist activism, revealing a sense of moral urgency among group members. By emphasizing themes of divine intervention and moral absolutes, moderators position Bolsonaro, on the one hand, as savior of traditional values and opponents, and, on the other hand, as existential threats to Brazil's Christian and national identity.

Framing disinformation as censorship

After the January 8, 2023, events, Actor 1 played a key role in coordinating narratives around electoral fraud and anti-democratic protests, often invoking conspiratorial ideas about institutional interference and media manipulation. For instance, Actor 1 criticized mainstream media coverage of the January 8, 2023 invasion of Government buildings by Bolsonaro supporters, on the grounds of deliberate bias, flagging up TV Globo, Brazil's largest media conglomerate, through the derogatory label "Globotrash":

Globotrash only shows what makes you praise what they want you to praise, or criticize, what they want you to criticize. So, if you look for information in left-leaning media outlets, they'll show you what they want. On YouTube channels, there are people with phones showing what's really happening. And the vandalism that occurred was caused by the police throwing tear gas at protesters who had taken over the area.

These statements illustrate the counter-narratives employed by Bolsonarist moderators to deflect blame and sustain group cohesion in the face of public criticism. Removal by the Supreme Federal Court and the Supreme Electoral Court of aggressive and defamatory content shared by Bolsonaro supporters was framed by Bolsonarist moderators as attacks on freedom of expression and conservative voices. Actor 1, for instance, described the removal of their Facebook groups as politically motivated censorship, stating:

All my groups and all my pages were deleted by Facebook three days before the elections. Without any justification, without any accusations of fake news. Without any criticism from the Supreme Federal Court magistrates, without any criticism from the institutions. This goes against our freedom of expression. They want to silence us. We are living under censorship in Brazil. (. . .) This is what happens to conservatives' social accounts across the country.

The regulatory environment introduced by the Supreme Federal Court and Electoral Supreme Court further shaped the communicative practices of moderators and administrators. Indeed, amidst increasing legal scrutiny, Bolsonaroist moderators adapted their strategies to comply with platform rules while maintaining audience engagement. Actor 1 reflected over this narrative shift:

They keep trying to silence us, so we have to be smarter. Instead of calling out the corruption directly, I focus on the idea of censorship and how they're trying to suppress the truth.

This narrative shift not only contributed to maintaining engagement levels within the groups but also reinforced the narrative that Bolsonaro's movement was under siege by hostile forces. Hence, as authorities intensified efforts to remove disinformation and incendiary content, moderators adapted by increasingly focusing on themes of censorship and persecution, in line with Actor 1's affirmations. While earlier content often included overtly provocative language, the weeks leading up to the election witnessed a transition to more subtle framing techniques that emphasized institutional bias against conservatives.

A critical dimension of this strategy involved reframing "fake news" as an external problem rather than an internal issue. Moderators argued that disinformation was used as a tool by the opposition to mislead voters and discredit the movement, rather than a strategy deployed by Bolsonaro supporters. Actor 1 represents this perspective:

Do you know what fake news is? It really exists. But it's not the Bolsonaro supporter who creates fake news. It's Lula's supporter who creates fake news in line with what Bolsonaro supporters expect, and this less-informed Bolsonaro supporter starts sharing it without knowing.

These frames serve to delegitimize criticism of Bolsonaroist content as disinformative, reinforcing the perceived legitimacy of the group's narratives in a context of institutional and regulatory pressures. Disinformation narratives were further amplified through strategic exploitation of Facebook's algorithms, with moderators seeking to provoke reactions by disseminating emotionally charged content, a strategy indicative of the reshaping of public agendas by populist movements through digital platforms (Schroeder, 2019). Actor 1 recognized the deliberate attempt to tailor content in alignment with algorithmic preference for high-engagement posts:

The more emotional the content, the more likely it is to be seen. So, I focus on content that moves people – whether it's anger at corruption or pride in our country. That's what gets shared, and that's what makes the movement grow.

By combining themes of persecution with narratives that emotionally resonated with audiences, moderators not only maximized the reach of their content but also insulated followers within ideological echo chambers (Pariser, 2011). These digital spaces, shaped by Facebook's algorithm, bolstered shared beliefs and excluded dissenting outlooks, ensuring the movement's resilience against external criticism, a phenomenon rooted in technopolitical strategies (Hecht, 2011).

In effect, while Bolsonaro's own posts were central to his communication strategy, grassroots actors curated his messages so as to frame Bolsonaro as a protector of Christian and national values, in contrast to his political antagonists, framed as existential threats to democracy, morality, and truth. Actor 1, for example, strategically amplified these themes, often adopting a journalistic tone to lend credibility to posts. The role of grassroots actors in adapting and disseminating Bolsonarist narratives mirrors the dynamics observed by McKenna and O'Donnell (2024) in satellite political movements, where semi-autonomous activists translate leader-centric narratives into localized and emotionally resonant frames. This shows how hybrid activism blends centralized coordination with grassroots adaptability, ensuring ideological consistency while promoting audience engagement.

The aftermath of Bolsonaro's defeat in the 2022 presidential election demonstrated the adaptability and persistence of these digital strategies. Ethnographic observations and interviews revealed how moderators and administrators mobilized narratives to contest the electoral results and sustain the loyalty of Bolsonaro's base. Actor 1, for example, posted content that emphasized the righteousness of these actions, framing them as grassroots demonstrations of the people's will. While protestors are described as "heroes" fighting for democracy, any incidents of violence or vandalism are attributed to external forces or infiltrators:

The vandalism that occurred was caused by the police throwing tear gas at protesters who had taken over the area. (. . .) Since the media wants the world to see pro-Bolsonaro protesters in a bad light, they're saying it was the protesters who caused destruction and theft. A Bolsonaro supporter doesn't do that.

This narrative, which sought to absolve Bolsonaro supporters of responsibility, served as a deliberate framing strategy to preserve the moral integrity of the movement while discrediting prevalent mainstream media and institutional narratives.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complex dynamics of Bolsonarist digital activism, where the combination of technopolitical strategies, emotional mobilization, and religious framing act together to form a resilient and ideologically consistent populist movement. By focusing on a case-study of a moderator and administrator (Actor 1) of a Bolsonarist public Facebook group, this research emphasizes their role as gatekeeper, intermediary, and amplifier of Bolsonarist narratives. Such actors not only translate Bolsonaro's political rhetoric into emotionally engaging messages, capable of instilling a sense of action among followers, but also contribute to form a cohesive ideological community, united in belief and linked by ties of loyalty and trust.

Five dimensions – opinion leadership, moral-political curation, religious affect, hybrid activism, and networked mediation – reveal how Actor 1 sustains ideological cohesion in Bolsonarist groups. As an intermediary figure, Actor 1 amplifies discourse while crafting an emotionally charged, morally framed environment that reinforces ingroup identity and delegitimizes external critique. This layered mediation underscores

the complexity of grassroots digital activism and its interdependencies with platform affordances, ideological control, and affective mobilization.

Intersections between programmed and spontaneous activism further emerged as a central element of Bolsonarist digital strategies. Moderators like Actor 1 illustrate this hybrid approach, blending data-driven practices with deeply personal and ideological commitments. By deploying Facebook's algorithms to amplify emotionally charged content, these actors optimize the latter's visibility and engagement level, creating a digital ecosystem where shared beliefs are reinforced, dissent is marginalized, and ingroup loyalty is enhanced.

Religion underpins Bolsonarism, using biblical references and moral absolutism to frame politics as spiritual battles. This framing not only mobilizes followers, but also legitimizes Bolsonarist narratives as an integral part of a more ambitious agenda, ensuring ideological consistency and emotional investment in a conjuncture of political instability and regulatory challenges.

The adaptability of Bolsonarist digital activism should be noted. In the face of regulatory scrutiny and electoral setbacks, Actor 1's curatorial logic proved especially agile, reframing narratives to emphasize themes of censorship and persecution, whilst portraying Bolsonarists as defenders of truth and morality under siege. This strategic counter-narrative emphasizes the resilience of Actor 1 in maintaining high engagement and mobilizing support, indicating digital activism's ability to thrive in conflictuous political environments.

Moreover, the commodification of activism adds another layer to the latter's complexity. While deeply ideological, Bolsonarist digital activism also reveals a practical dimension, with moderators seeking to exploit their influence for financial profit and wider political aspirations. This dualism reflects the diverse nature of contemporary digital movements, where personal ambition, ideological commitment, and economic considerations intertwine.

The Bolsonarist case study exemplifies the transformative potential of digital platforms in the reconfiguration of political communication, public engagement, and ideological dissemination. As this analysis indicates, grassroots digital activism does not merely reproduce traditional political mobilization, but rather innovates and adapts, resorting to technology to create new forms of persuasion and control. Mobilization on the basis of moral and emotional appeals, accompanied by the strategic use of technopolitical instruments, guarantees the endurance and impact of Bolsonarism within Brazil's polarized political context.

Future research could extend this approach to other ideological movements or platforms where moderation practices and affective publics shape political communication. The case study presented offers a grounded framework for examining how grassroots actors and platform structures interact to sustain ideological communities, providing parameters for comparative analyses of digital populism.

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