Divide et Impera? Populist Digital Anti-media Criticisms

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Abstract. This work aimed to determine how a core ideational dimension of populism and a component of its communicative framework - anti-elitism - was strategically conveyed through tactical attacks on the media via digital platforms. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of the understudied attacks against the press through digital means of a right-wing populist president from the Global South during his first year in office, it unpacks the strategic use of digital anti-media criticisms of the enemy construction and the polarization of the media. It confirms Twitter as the preferred platform for Jair Bolsonaro's anti-media attacks right from the outset of the term. The digital attacks portfolio ranged from discrediting media sectors for lying, displaying bias, and being the source of fake news that contradicted its foundational role of accurately informing the public to unduly assuming as an opposition political actor. Besides undermining journalism's epistemic legitimacy and raising questions about its social role Bolsonaro further committed himself to the enemy construction of the press and only indirectly polarized the news media between friends and foes.

Keywords: Right-wing populist anti-media criticisms · Digital/Twitter · Brazil

1 Introduction

Amongst the array of risks currently faced by news media, such as the collapse of the advertising model and with it its commercial value, and the precarization of labor conditions, recent technological developments have also impacted journalism. If UNESCO's 2022 World Press Freedom Day Global Conference, timely themed "Journalism under Digital Siege," had previously identified journalism and freedom of expression as the most impacted by the digital transformation, its draft concept note of World Press Freedom Day 2023 further confirmed that "attempts to silence the media continue to multiply around the globe, with old methods of censorship, violence, and harassment being accompanied by increasingly pervasive digital attacks" [1]. Moreover, another recent report also conveyed that digital attacks have grown in "frequency, severity and inventiveness" and are becoming "the weapon of choice to silence media" [2].

Adding to the already daunting challenges faced by professional journalism, the increasingly hostile political environment and anti-press attacks feature noteworthy sources of existential threat [3, 4]. Chiefly to such a disturbing trend are politicians seeking to silence critical outlets and journalists with more or less sophisticated attacks in the digital space. And populists, above all political actors, adopted digital criticisms as increasingly central within their communication strategies to undermine journalism's

epistemic legitimacy and raise questions about its social role [5–8]. Whether as outsiders striving for legitimacy in the mainstream political establishment or as elected power officials, right-wing populists, in particular, have mastered the digital environment to convey press criticisms.

Former President Donald Trump aptly illustrated this and marked a critical juncture in presidential-press relations with the levels of hostility displayed towards numerous media outlets [9]. Right to the point of making communication via Twitter a centerpiece of his administration by both depicting the media as a "public enemy" and its accompanying delegitimizing behaviors [10]. Furthermore, Trump selectively tweeted by privileging conservative news outlets while denigrating and attacking the rest of the mainstream media [11].

Bolsonaro later mirrored such use of the microblogging network to attack frequently the press while at the presidency of Brazil [12]. He was nicknamed "Trump of the Tropics" during the presidential campaign, given his similar social media campaigning, the rhetoric promotion of homophobic, racist, and misogynistic sentiment, and attacks of the media [13, 14]. Indeed, Bolsonaro also employed during the campaign allusions to news organizations as "fake news" and "enemy of the people" to undermine media trust and to deflect negative coverage [15]. But the connections regarding the use of social media and its relationship with journalists from traditional media to the Brazilian go beyond merely being a parallel of "Trumpism." [16].

Yet to our knowledge, there is still a lack of empirical studies that explore the exact nature of Bolsonaro's enemy construction of the media. Likewise, the role of social media as a medium of confrontation and attack that allowed him to divide between the supportive (friendly) and critical (unfriendly) journalists and media outlets remains poorly understood. Against this backdrop, this contribution examines Bolsonaro's populist enemy construction of the press while in office by analyzing the specific use of digital platforms to convey criticisms and polarizing attacks against the media.

This article is structured as follows: it builds on broader literature around the implications of the technological changes of the multimedia news ecosystem to the politician-press relationship and the enemy construction of the press. It then examines the current debates in the literature on anti-media as a derivation of a core ideational dimension of populism and a component of its communicative framework - anti-elitism - before outlining the strategic use of digital media by right-wing populist politicians to attack the press. Following the justification of the relevance of the Brazilian case and the data adopted the results are presented and discussed.

2 The Media as Both Means and a Target for Populists

The recent (re)upsurge of populism, in particular, brought significant challenges to both the societal role of journalism and democracy [17]. Populists regularly accuse the mainstream media of overtly combating or downplaying populist actors and standpoints as contributing to their containment through displaying a 'sacerdotal' attitude towards the status quo as 'mouthpieces' or 'paladins' of the ruling political and economic elites [18]. Paradoxically, while populists aim at the legitimization by the media by courting its free publicity to their benefit, their communication strategy also combines strategic attacks on the press with the opposite goal of delegitimizing it [19]. Indeed, despite not dispensing the media as a source when the coverage fits the populist aims, verbal

harassment and physical attacks on journalists are also employed to flout any negative image propagated by the press and shore up support among followers who claim their voices are not represented by the mainstream media [18, 20].

Although accusing or blaming the elite for the malfunctions of democracy is a pivotal element of populism in general, such attacks on the media as a particular subsystem of society are said to be a distinctive facet of far-right populism in particular [8, 16]. Indeed, anti-media as a derivation of anti-elitism is becoming a major discursive component of the right-wing populist political communication framework. Ultimately, it responds to the interests of populist leaders and parties to deactivate the performance of the critical function of the press by promoting self-censorship and discouraging the investigation of sensitive populist content [4].

Despite not being an exclusive prerogative of right-wing populist actors, they have generally adopted the contemporary high-choice media environment as a privileged means of communication and have historically shown savvy use of it [21, 22]. New media allows them to self-communicate directly to the people, especially those aligned with their ideologies, along with users now curating their news consumption threatens the intermediary monopoly press once had [8]. Right-wing populists circumventing the media, or waving its mediation, combine with their perception of the press as representing the corrupt elites in opposition to the interests of the ordinary people [23–25].

2.1   Reconsidering Press-Politician Relationship and Enemy Construction

These recent shifts in the communications landscape and changes in news delivery and consumption had two further implications: they disrupted the politician-press relationship and made the media more susceptible to enemy construction. In the case of the former, the previous functional interdependence between political media and politicians seems to be a thing of the past [9]. As a result, the press went from being a "necessary evil" - within a cordial cooperative and mutually dependent engagement - to merely being "evil" because politicians are no longer in need of press cooperation and reputation [10]. Instead of tolerating aggressive media reporting to control media messages, now populist power holders opt for communicatively constituting unitary information management and control [26]. A strategic decision by populist actors to avoid untrustworthy media scrutiny of their messaging, for instance, consists in usurping the media's control of their political narratives [27].

Today's multimedia environment and the changes in the politician-press relationship closely relate to the latter in explaining why, unlike in the past, populist power holders such as presidents consider attempting the enemy construction of the press [10]. To a great extent, social media seem to offer them the freedom to uncontestably attack the press and spread their enemy construction messages of the mainstream media [28]. Indeed, populists adopt new media outlets - Twitter in particular - as ideal vehicles for criticism and adversarial behavior toward the press [29].

Although not restricted to him, former US president Donald Trump displayed high hostility and attacked news outlets applying "politics of debasement" by alienating the press as the "Other" or perceiving news outlets as one of "Them" whenever he felt attacked by the media or while addressing the ones he did not like [30, 31]. Indeed, Trump's tweets epitomize digital press criticisms and the delivery of the narrative of the media as a public enemy external to the people. His Twitter feed, both as a candidate and president, featured numerous assaults on the press. For instance, 990 of Trump's

tweeted press criticisms targeted both news organizations (over 350 tweets) and individual journalists (over 250 tweets), as tracked from 2015 to 2017 [32]. In addition, whereas "insults" (40 percent of the tweets) and "media bias" (28 percent) dominated the anti-press social media posts at the time of the campaign, the "denigrate media" tweets took over following the election [32].

Likewise, Sonja West composed a complete portfolio of Trump's anti-media on Twitter. It included accusations of bias and inaccuracy (occasionally purposeful), complaints of journalists trying to hurt him while helping his opponents, and insults by claiming they are "failing," (used to label a journalist or a news organization—most often The New York Times) their "ratings challenged," or soon to be "out of business" [33]. Otherwise, he conveyed on his personal Twitter on 5 December 2016 that traditional media had forced him to use alternative platforms to communicate to the people by being inaccurate and unreliable: "If the press would cover me accurately, I would have far less reason to "tweet." Sadly, I don't know if that will ever happen!'.

Also, of particular interest to this study is the argument that Trump displayed an old trend of selectively using his presidential power to harm news organizations he did not like while playing favorites with media "allies" [34]. To add support to Trump's duality of criteria of the friendly versus unfriendly press, West further contrasted the previous criticisms with his administration's treatment of media organizations like Fox News given Trump's frequent favorably tweets about its shows, such as on February 5, 2018: "Thank you to @foxandfriends for exposing the truth. Perhaps that's why your ratings are soooo much better than your untruthful competition!" [33].

Lastly, the "Trumpification" of anti-media digital discourse also had a spill-over effect on fellow populist presidents elsewhere, such as Bolsonaro in Brazil, developed in the next section.

3 Methdology and Corpus

The study attempts to connect the communicative strategy and the constitutive element of populist ideology to the dynamics that characterize contemporary political communication in digital platforms. In line with previous authors [22, 29, 35–40], this work combines two of the main approaches in the literature on populism: the thin-centered ideology definition with the communicative style. Indeed, one core ideational dimension of populism is anti-elitism that derives from the Manichean ideological view of politics and society that opposes 'the pure' or 'good people' to the' bad' or 'corrupt elites' [24, 41]. Such antagonism fits well the rhetorical construction of the friends – the 'people' - against the foes - the 'elites' or the 'dangerous others' - within a "us versus them" logic [42–44].

To some extent, it is such a dynamic mix of substance and style that seems to be the winning formula of populist current success in democratic politics [45]. More concretely, stemming from such an anti-elitist dimension is a specific form of hostility toward the media of interest to this work. Accordingly, anti-media or making tactical attacks on the press also matches the us-versus-them rhetoric construction [18, 25, 46, 47].

Although aware of such previous findings, the decision was to conduct a qualitative deductive examination of the tactical attacks against the media via digital platforms by Bolsonaro during his first year in the presidential office, a time frame traditionally associated with the honeymoon period of the presidential-press relationship usually

characterized by cordial and fewer criticisms [48]. Accordingly, Bolsonaro's attacks against the press in 2019, as reported by the most relevant national monitoring body: the Brazilian National Federation of Journalists (*Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas – FENAJ* [49], was conducted. Indeed, the FENAJ yearbook report compilation of the anti-press attacks as they took place throughout the year and quoting the precise words used in the relevant sources has proven to be a reliable source of the assaults on freedom of the press and direct violence against journalists [15].

The initial step consisted of identifying out of the original 121 Bolsonaro-related assaults denounced by the FENAJ in 2019, the ones digitally perpetrated. The resulting 40 digital presidential attacks against the press, mostly conveyed through Twitter, constitute the corpus of the qualitative grounded theory analysis [50]. The preliminary open coding and categorization of the data through identifying keywords (or groups of words) resulted in up to six categories related to the digital attacks: lying, displaying bias, enemy construction, being the source of fake news, and failing to perform its informational role while also assuming political actorness. Instead of assessing the frequency of each attack, however, the aim was to unpack the various delegitimizing criticisms employed to discredit some sectors of the media. Parallelly to decipher the different discursive ways of media delegitimization, it also explores whether he further accentuated his divisive and polarizing anti-media attacks by conveying at the same time favorable comments to favorite or allied media outlets.

Although less studied than other Western counterparts, Bolsonaro offers a relevant example of digital anti-media criticisms by a right-wing populist president. A former army colonel from the fringes of the political establishment, Jair Bolsonaro grabbed media attention at parliament as a far-right congressman from Rio de Janeiro state by making derogatory speeches combining hate speech and incivility against group minorities [51]. A political crisis culminating with the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the principal opposition candidate, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, jailed for corruption and prevented from participating in the forthcoming 2018 presidential voting, created the context that favored Bolsonaro's election prospects.

In the office, Bolsonaro too disrupted traditional relationships with the press and how presidents communicate via social media. Apart from public appearances and (in)formal press conferences, he amplified his presence by repeatedly resorting to Twitter. Following his inauguration, attacks against media and journalists increased by 54%, with President Bolsonaro being responsible for 58% of these cases during the first year of his term [49].

4   Analysis

The first finding regards Bolsonaro's frequent use of Twitter to attack the Brazilian press above the criticisms conveyed during public appearances or at (in)formal press conferences. As early as the third day after his inauguration, he accused the Brazilian press of "omitting" information without providing further due justification [52]. Less than two weeks into his presidential mandate Bolsonaro had repeated the "omission" criticism aggravated by questioning their "honesty" in avoiding the insinuation of nepotism in the reporting of the nomination of Victor Nagem for a public company on the ground of friendship and closeness to him [52].

Worse than that, he seized the news report of a heated discussion with minister Fernando Hadad by Metrópoles – one of the most read Brazilian online newspapers – to

accuse some media sectors of "lying 24 hours a day" and having "no commitment with information" [52]. Such accusations were resumed on several occasions throughout the first year of his mandate, with slight variations regarding the arguments surrounding the "lies" and "selective omissions" by the press [53]. To further denigrate the press, Bolsonaro often employed harsh insults and name-calling through epithets such as "cheap," "scoundrels," "sewer" or "garbage." [53].

Likewise, he resorted to "authoritative" sources to further discredit the media: an oil specialist devoid the *Globo News* journalist, Leilane Neubarth, critical questioning of the president or even another journalist, Luis Lacombe, to validate his biased accusation of the press when stating that "journalists usually omit good news and exaggerate bad ones" [53]. Not even the independent investigative journalist website aligned with the right, *Antagonista*, is spared from the "lying" with "malice" in trying to hurt him [53]. On the extreme, by rhetorically questioning whether the role of the press was to publish "bad news and gossip" [53].

In April, Bolsonaro inaugurated (at least online) another of his frequent attacks on the press regarding the "fake news" labeling [54]. The allegation served multiple purposes. Usually, to deflect any critical or unfavorable reporting on him either from individual journalists, such as Guilherme Amado from *Época* newsmagazine, or news outlets and chief among those *Folha de São Paulo* as "champions of fake news" or "100% fake news" [53, 54]. But also, as ex negativo, when ironically congratulating *Folha de São Paulo* that for once did not publish fake news when conveying that the President avoided eating raw fish and opted for instantaneous noodles during his Asian tour [53].

In addition, the president politicized critical news reporting: he frequently attributed to the press the role of a political actor in opposition; equaled it to some opposing governors from the North East part of the country [55]; conveyed that it was still campaigning against him [56]; or associated it with the stigmatized left-wing Labour Party's (*Partido Trabalhista – PT*) that had formerly ruled the country [54].

Another facet of Bolsonaro's digital criticism of the press regards the strategic discursive enemy construction. He started to claim that not reporting the "historical mark" of the Brazilian Bovespa Index stock market was detrimental to the country [52]. Then in April, while dismissing the press reports that his intention to transfer the Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel could have negative consequences for Brazilian meat exports to the Arab world, he depicted the press as attempting to "create chaos" and "destabilize" the country [54]. And whereas a month later, he made several references that the press followed its "own interests" and agenda to the detriment of the national interests, in October by stating that Brazil was "succeeding despite the press" he implicitly reinforced the idea of the press as the enemy [53]. Even a few weeks before, he had no qualms in not only calling part of the big media an "enemy" but also purporting that "it will not leave us alone" and it "will be the end of us" if we believe in the press" [57].

Lastly, although no such thing as direct divisive attacks against the media could be found, combined with favorable comments to favorite or allied media outlets, there were nevertheless some indirect pieces of evidence of polarization of the press. Besides employing "good" journalists as authoritative sources to criticize their counterparts, as displayed above, he used alternative media as a reliable substitute for the mainstream elite media at least on two occasions. On one of those occasions, Bolsonaro advised his followers to always search for alternative media to get informed [58]. Then, he resorted to an ongoing seminar on fake news by the highest body of the Brazilian Electoral Justice,

the Superior Electoral Court, as an alibi to further incriminate the traditional press while campaigning for alternative media [59]. On both occasions, however, he did not mention the benefits of alternatives and was unable to name any specific titles.

5   Discussion and Conclusion

This work contributed to filling the gap of empirical studies that explore the nature of the right-wing populist president's enemy construction of the media in the Global South. In addition, it helped to further understand how digital platforms can be used as a medium of confrontation and attack against the press.

The example of Bolsonaro corroborated that right-wing populist hostility toward the media while in office and in the case of the Brazilian president without even granting a one-week honeymoon to the press. He started his tactical attacks on the elite mainstream media as soon as the first days of his term which only increased over time. Such antagonism displayed by Bolsonaro fitted well the rhetorical construction of the elite mainstream press, or at least parts of it, as foes within a "us versus them" logic in line with previous findings of the typical populist playbook acknowledged in the literature.

Above all, the study confirmed Twitter as Bolsonaro's weapon of choice to convey his assaults on the Brazilian media. Moreover, digital anti-media criticisms were employed to discredit some sectors of the media for lying and being biased by omitting information either through unsubstantiated accusations or through the selective use of authoritative sources. In addition, he frequently disputed the foundational *raison d'être* of the press – to inform- and the journalistic ethical standards – accuracy and impartiality - by the fake news labeling and the allegations of usurping the functions of the political actor in the opposition of his government. Finally, he committed to the enemy construction of the press and polarized the country's professional journalism on the basis of the media outlets while campaigning for alternative media.

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