



Démasquer la propagande pour saisir les idéologies
 Unmask propaganda to grasp ideologies
 Desenmascarar la propaganda para captar las ideologías

Regulation of digital social networks, political propaganda and opposition discourse: a case study into the tension between Elon Musk and the Brazilian Judiciary

Duílio Fabbri Júnior

Centro Universitário Salesiano de São Paulo (Unisal), Brazil
 juniorduilio@uol.com.br

Cet article analyse le discours politique autour du conflit entre Elon Musk et le pouvoir judiciaire brésilien, en particulier le ministre Alexandre de Moraes, dans le contexte de la régulation des réseaux sociaux numériques. Il a pour objectif de comprendre comment les récits polarisés sont construits et diffusés à l'ère de la post-vérité, marquée par la désinformation et l'antagonisme idéologique. Fondée sur l'analyse du discours, l'étude justifie sa pertinence par l'utilisation croissante des plateformes numériques à des fins d'influence politique et par l'absence de réglementation spécifique au Brésil. Les résultats révèlent comment les deux camps emploient des généralisations, des appels émotionnels et des ambiguïtés pour légitimer leurs positions, transformant les réseaux sociaux en arènes de propagande politique plutôt qu'en espaces de dialogue démocratique.

Mots-clés : liberté d'expression, réseaux numériques, polarisation politique, Brésil.

This article analyzes the political discourse surrounding the conflict between Elon Musk and the Brazilian Judiciary, particularly Minister Alexandre de Moraes, in the context of digital social network regulation. Its objective is to understand how polarized narratives are constructed and disseminated in a post-truth era marked by disinformation and ideological antagonism. Grounded in discourse analysis, the study justifies its relevance by the growing use of digital platforms for political influence and the absence of specific regulation in Brazil. The results reveal how both sides employ generalizations, emotional appeals, and ambiguity to legitimize their positions, turning social networks into arenas of political propaganda rather than democratic dialogue.

Keywords: freedom of expression, digital networks, political polarization, Brazil.

Este artículo analiza el discurso político en torno al conflicto entre Elon Musk y el poder judicial brasileño, en particular el ministro Alexandre de Moraes, en el contexto de la regulación de las redes sociales digitales. Su objetivo es comprender cómo se construyen y difunden las historias polarizadas en la era de la post-verdad, marcada por la desinformación y el antagonismo ideológico. Basado en el análisis del discurso, el estudio justifica su relevancia por la creciente utilización de las plataformas digitales con fines de influencia política y por la ausencia de una regulación específica en Brasil. Los resultados revelan cómo ambos bandos emplean generalizaciones, llamadas emocionales y ambigüedades para legitimar sus posiciones, transformando las redes sociales en arenas de propaganda política más que en espacios de diálogo democrático.

Palabras clave : libertad de expresión, redes digitales, polarización política, Brasil.

Introduction

Since early 2024, the Brazilian Judiciary has been in conflict with Elon Musk — the founder of Tesla and owner of the social network X (formerly *Twitter*) — over his flouting of court rulings and his reactivation user profiles blocked by the courts for having spread fake information. Musk himself has in turn made claims about censorship and about the alleged involvement of Supreme Court Minister, Alexandre de Moraes, in the outcome of the 2022 presidential elections, echoing common statements made in the country by the group defeated in those polls, these, opposition groups with a center-right political-ideological orientation.

This conflict underlines the fact that Brazilians are living through a time of intense political polarization, marked by miscommunication and intolerance especially on digital social networks. In the context of hatred towards perspectives that differ from individuals' identities and preconceptions, the speaker often does not recognize the co-speaker as a legitimate partner in the communicative act; instead, they project onto the co-speaker the figure of an opponent. The latter, that is, the party opposing the act, serves as a form of resistance to a world that seems to be driven by its own ethical and moral principles. The speaker's real aim is therefore to engage the actual target of their enunciative act: the audience that shares the same polarized perspective.

The lack of a dialog between political opponents has been common and well-documented throughout history, nevertheless it has taken on new features on digital social networks. This trend is connected to the era of the so-called "post-fact", "fake news" and the crisis over the credibility of journalistic institutions. All these elements seem to intensify the antagonism between different parties, desensitizing even the most extreme moments of the human condition, such as death.

Brazil's current polarization, despite being a multi-party country can be summed up in a stereotyped and reductionist way, around a presumed "left-wing" and "right-wing" division. We can therefore think of Charaudeau (2008), who states that, in democratic regimes, political discourse results from encounters and tensions between the influential gaze of the political body, in charge of action, and the demanding gaze of the citizen body, which chooses their elected representatives. Hence, keeping the distinctive features of different social groups well separated seems to be "profitable". It encourages political disputes and radicalization, allowing controversy to be exploited so as to reach the voting public more directly. These polarized manifestations are mainly present on digital social networks. Furthermore, there is an asymmetry of intentions between these bodies. Thus, analyzing political discourse not only consists of being interested in what is produced by those players with political responsibility; but also requires looking at what is produced by public opinion, bearing in mind that in Brazil there is no regulation of digital social networks.

For us to understand the political situation in Brazil, we must consider this political context. Only then can we think about Elon Musk's exchange of accusations against the Brazilian judiciary and vice versa, the topic of this paper.

In a country historically marked by dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, discussions around the regulation of digital social networks become the target of emotional speeches (Robert, 2018) that are often poorly grounded in law or political science.

The current case took place at a time of growing use of these platforms for political and electoral purposes and of the Brazilian Congress's subsequent discussion about how to regulate digital

social networks. In this context, this paper seeks to understand what was at stake in the battle for power, aiming to analyze the political discourses about the role of digital social networks in the democratic state back in April 2024 comparatively, considering the standpoints of the Supreme Court Minister, Alexandre de Moraes, and Elon Musk. The analysis focuses on the discursive exchanges between conflicting parties from April 3 to April 10, 2024, a period marked by intense rhetorical activity on the social network X (formerly *Twitter*). It also seeks to shed light on the political and ideological importance of this case beyond being a decision concerning the quality of information disseminated. The publication in *Carta Capital* magazine, a weekly publication in Brazil with a strong political bias, was taken as a basis for this study. All the statements discussed in this paper are taken from the article entitled: “Musk accuses Alexandre de Moraes of promoting censorship (April 6, 2024)”.

On April 6, 2024, Elon Musk commented on a post made by Alexandre de Moraes congratulating Minister Ricardo Lewandowski on taking over the Ministry of Justice and Public Security. The comment reads: “Why are you demanding so much censorship in Brazil?”, said Musk.

These words came shortly after journalist Michael Shellenberger published the so-called “*Twitter* files Brazil” on April 3, 2024. The latter contain messages exchanged by *Twitter* (now X) staff between 2020 and 2022 – just before Musk’s take-over of the platform – where they report and complain about the alleged decisions of the Brazilian justice system, which called for the deletion of some users’ content. According to Shellenberger, the documents show that Alexandre de Moraes and the Superior Electoral Court in Brazil:

- illegally demanded that *Twitter* reveal personal details about *Twitter* users who used hashtags he did not like.
- demanded access to *Twitter*’s internal data, in violation of *Twitter* policy.
- sought to censor, unilaterally, *Twitter* posts by sitting members of Brazil’s Congress.
- sought to weaponize *Twitter*’s content moderation policies against supporters of then-president@jairbolsonaro¹.

These complaints reached Elon Musk, who shared them on *Twitter* with the following message: “This aggressive censorship seems to violate the law and the will of the Brazilian people” (my emphasis). Musk’s statement regarding Shellenberger’s complaints suggests criticism towards an act of censorship and places himself against it, defending legality and the will of the people. The word “seems” indicates an epistemic modalization, suggesting that the speaker is not categorically stating that censorship violates the law and the will of the people, but rather that there is a perception or a possibility this being the case. This may be a strategy to avoid an outright statement that could be legally or politically contested. At the same time using the adjective “aggressive” to describe the so-called censorship reinforces a negative charge, suggesting that the action is excessive or unfair. Furthermore, this adjective contributes to a dubious image of censorship, influencing the audience’s perception: if censorship can be aggressive, is there another form of censorship that does not have such characteristics? Is “censorship” not enough to be “aggressive”? These are the effects of meaning enabled by the way discourse is constructed.

Musk’s statement also evokes two important values: legality and the will of the Brazilian people. By mentioning Law, Elon Musk seeks to legitimize his criticism from a legal perspective. By referring to the will of the Brazilian people, he tries to mobilize a feeling of injustice and popular discontent. These words suggest that censorship is not only illegal but that it goes against

1. Available on: <https://x.com/leiatheinvestor/status/1775544521096343856>. Accessed on: Ago 20, 2024.

the wishes of the population. The discursive strategy here delegitimizes the censorship action, presenting it as something that is not only potentially illegal, but also anti-democratic. Musk thereby seeks to forge an alignment between his position and that of the public, suggesting that both are on the same side against an oppressive action.

On April 7, 2024, Musk published another tweet commenting on the accusations:

We are surveying all the restrictions. This judge has applied massive fines, threatened to arrest our employees and cut off access to X in Brazil. As a result, we will probably lose all revenue in Brazil and have to shut down our office there. But principles matter more than profit.²

These statements contain modalizations to express uncertainty and probability (we will “probably” lose all revenue in Brazil) while also communicating injustice. They create the sense that, although the speaker is concerned about the consequences, there is still a degree of uncertainty about the ultimate impact. The clauses “massive fines” and “threatened to arrest” carry a strong emotional charge, portraying the judge’s actions as harsh and unfair. In addition, they focus on actions that are easily perceived or felt by the interlocutor, creating an emotional bond. Providing examples such as fines and arrests strengthens a sense of injustice, which is a typical strategy for convincing public opinion and creating complicity, as explained by Charaudeau (2016).

Musk’s discursive strategy contrasts with his person as businessmen driven by profit. The final line, “But principles matter more than profit”, is a statement of values. Here, the speaker is stating that, despite the negative financial consequences, he is committed to his principles. It reinforces the image of an Elon Musk committed to ethics and values more than to profit. Here we see a twofold discursive strategy: on the one hand, delegitimizing the judge’s actions by presenting them as excessive and harmful; on the other, reinforcing the company’s image as ethical and driven by principle. In so doing, Musk seeks to attract the sympathy and support of the public by presenting himself as a defender of important but also generic values. Saying you have principles is not the same as saying what those principles are. But opposing this statement to the idea of profit, strengthens the appeal to the discursive memory that condemns greed and unbridled profit.

While reality is made up of facts, it is their representation that becomes an argumentative strategy and a way of creating a sense of complicity with public opinion. McComiskey (2017) shows that it is the loss of grounding in logos that exposes us to the dangers of post-truth. As logos is the realm of fact, logic, truth, and valid reasoning, Western society faces increased risks—including violence, unchecked libel, and tainted elections—when the value of reason is diminished, and audiences allow themselves to be swayed by pathos and ethos. Evaluations of truth are deferred or avoided, and mendacity convincingly masquerades as a valid form of argument. In a post-truth world, where neither truth nor falsehood has reliable meaning, language becomes purely strategic, without reference to anything other than itself. This scenario has serious consequences not only for our public discourse but also for the study of composition. In post-truth political discourse, persuasion is often detached from factual verification and becomes a strategic deployment of emotionally charged rhetoric. This is particularly evident in Elon Musk’s public statements and their reception.

Moreover, it is important to stress that the conditions under which these statements were produced helped to create a favorable reception for Musk’s speech. This is particularly the case among some parts of the population who, for political reasons, see Alexandre de Moraes as a

2. Available on: <https://www.poder360.com.br/poder-midia/midia/em-nota-oficial-x-diz-que-vai-recorrer-a-justica/>. Accessed on: Ago 20, 2024.

controversial man or an opponent of democracy, due to a disagreement over positions involving electoral campaigns.

On April 6, Musk shared several messages calling for freedom of expression and criticizing Minister Alexandre de Moraes. One of the posts featured the new X network logo, with the expression ‘free speech’ making up the image, in a style commonly known in Brazil as a visual poem:



Figure 1: Elon Musk post – Free Speech

Source: screenshot taken by the author.

In the caption, Musk said: “For the people of Earth”. Elon Musk also shared the post on the Global Government Affairs profile, accusing the Brazilian justice system of acting against the country’s Constitution:

X Corp. was forced by court decisions to block certain popular accounts in Brazil. We informed these accounts we have taken such measures. We do not know the reasons these blocking orders have been issued. We do not know which posts are alleged to violate the law. We are prohibited from saying which court or judge issued the order, or on what grounds. We are prohibited from saying which accounts are impacted. We are threatened with daily fines if we fail to comply. We believe that such orders are not in accordance with the *Marco Civil da Internet* or the Brazilian Federal Constitution, and we will challenge the orders legally where possible. The people of Brazil, regardless of their political beliefs, are entitled to freedom of speech, due process, and transparency from their own authorities.

In a retweet, Musk added, “Why are you doing this @alexandre?”. Replying to a post made by the DogeDesigner profile, Musk stated that the content restrictions had been removed. However, after a check done by the newspaper *A Gazeta do Povo*, the profiles remain blocked.³

3. Available on: <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/vozes/polzonoff/elon-musk-resolve-enfrentar-xandao-o-que-vai-acontecer-no-mundo-real/>. Accessed on: Ago 20, 2024.

Discursive Strategies: The Reaction to Musk's Posts

As befits digital social networks as a public sphere for discussions, there were reactions both in favor of and against Elon Musk's posts. We will analyze these posts next:

Favorable Positions

The nephew of former US president John F. Kennedy, Michael Shellenberger shared a video criticizing Minister Alexandre de Moraes and other instances of censorship in the US and commented: "Never in my lifetime has freedom of expression been so threatened as it is today. Thank you @elonmusk". Journalist Silvio Navarro commented: "A historic day in Brazil in defense of freedom of expression and civil rights. If Congress gets its way, it could mean the rescue of the much-trampled Federal Constitution."

Both positions for and against Musk's comments are grounded in the same imaginary: the idea of freedom. In an enunciative process similar to Elon Musk's own words, these two excerpts use general concepts and also slips of meaning. In the same way that Musk created ambiguity by using the expression "aggressive censorship", here the idea of "freedom of expression" is used to produce an equivalence with the idea of being able to say anything, without being held responsible. It is the myth of unrestricted freedom that people are looking for. According to Freud (2010), the individual feels unpunished and therefore thinks it is possible to dominate his senses and say everything. The illusion of this power and impunity produces this drift around the idea of freedom: "An illusion is not the same as an error; nor is it necessarily an error" (Freud, 2010, p. 86).

Opposing Positions

In response to Musk, Gleisi Hoffmann, the president of the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil - which President Lula belongs to, and which by discursive memory, is associated with the left—, wrote:

Pathetic is the weakest adjective to describe Elon Musk's response to Minister Alexandre de Moraes, inflaming the far-right by implying that there is censorship in Brazil, while at the same time his network allows hate speech and the large-scale propagation of fake news. As long as they try to undermine democracies, we will resist. And demand that no one be amnestied!

Federal deputy André Janones also commented:

There are no X or Elon Musk principles, their interests are very clear: Here in Brazil, we were the only country to defeat the far-right on the networks and we managed to win an election in which the entire state machine was misused and, finally, there was even an attempted coup. We are ready for as many more battles as necessary.

The speeches opposing Musk are built on approaches that mention political ideologies more directly. It is worth highlighting that the Trump's opponents link him to ideological perspectives associated with the far right, such as nationalism, populism and economic nationalism. Whereas Trump's supporters describe him as pragmatic. As Baron (2017, online) explain:

"Trumpism" endeavors to rebalance American prosperity to the benefit of working-class interests long disparaged by legal, financial, and creative elites. In achieving this goal, Trumpism prioritizes tangible results (e.g., creating domestic manufacturing jobs) and dismisses ideology (e.g., principled objections to government intervention in private-sector decision making).

Generality and labeling such as "democracy", "coup" and "far-right" are deployed to disqualify Elon Musk's speech.

In each case, whether in favor of or against Musk, the speaker's title is essential to producing meaning. The author's name, as Foucault ([1969] 2010) explains, is a strategy for grouping

discourses and conferring credibility. Although he has a personal account on X, Alexandre de Moraes did not respond directly to any of the posts, despite having his profile (@alexandre) mentioned in some of them.

Freedom and Censorship: Effects of Meaning

On April 7, Elon Musk also shared a post by journalist Michael Shellenberger. With the title “Brazil is on the Brink”, Shellenberger wrote that “It is not an exaggeration to say that Brazil is on the brink of dictatorship at the hands of a totalitarian Supreme Court Justice named Alexandre de Moraes.” Shellenberger also accused president both Lula da Silva and Alexandre de Moraes of violating human rights:

President Lula da Silva is participating in the push toward totalitarianism. Since taking office, Lula has massively increased government funding of the mainstream news media, most of which are encouraging increased censorship. What Lula and de Moraes are doing is an outrageous violation of Brazil's Constitution and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. At this moment, Brazil is not yet a dictatorship. It still has elections, and the Brazilian people have other means at their disposal to confront authoritarianism. But the Federal Supreme Court and the Superior Electoral Court are directly interfering in those elections through censorship. But I can say things that many Brazilians do not feel safe saying: Alexandre de Moraes is a tyrant. And the only way to deal with tyrants is to confront them. It is up to Brazil's senators to confront the tyrant. And it is up to the people of Brazil to demand that their senators do so.

Elon Musk prefaced the shared post saying: “This is all accurate”. A few hours later, Musk published another post accusing Alexandre de Moraes of violating the Brazilian Constitution and called for his impeachment:

Coming shortly, X will publish everything demanded by @alexandre and how those requests violate Brazilian law. This judge has brazenly and repeatedly betrayed the Constitution and people of Brazil. He should resign or be impeached. Shame @Alexandre, shame.

Brazil's troubled history has an important impact on its current discourse about censorship. Since 1889, the beginning of its Republican history, Brazil has experienced two periods marked by dictatorship, with the accompanying suppression of individual freedoms and the right to vote, as well as media censorship. The first of these was the so-called *Estado Novo* (1937-1945), during the Getúlio Vargas government. The second was the Civil-Military Dictatorship, established after a coup, which lasted from 1964 to 1985.

In this context — in a country historically marked by periods of dictatorship — debates about the regulation of digital social networks, and consequently about the limits of freedom of expression, often revolve around the “right to honor” and the “duty of responsibility” for one's speech. In the Brazilian legal tradition, the “right to honor” refers to an individual's right to protect their reputation and dignity from harm caused by false or offensive statements, while the “duty of responsibility” emphasizes legal and moral accountability for what is said. These discussions frequently become the subject of passionate, yet often poorly grounded arguments from the standpoint of either law or political science.

As Hannah Arendt (2004) warned in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it.”

This insight reinforces the notion that, in environments vulnerable to authoritarianism, factual truth becomes subordinate to the narratives imposed by those in power. Such conditions are

increasingly visible in digital environments where the strategic use of language often aims not to inform, but to persuade through distortion.

In both Moraes's and Musk's statements, meaning is derived through expressions that lack conceptual discussion. With words like "authoritarianism" and "tyrant" the interlocutor produces effects of meaning based on an emotional experience due to pre-construction. If something is classified as authoritarian or tyrannical, it must naturally be bad. This is the intended, projected meaning. Therefore, the search for public support rests on the idea of convictions, which is typical of the post-truth era. Evidence to the contrary or reflection matters little if it has nothing to do with individual beliefs. This is what Francis Bacon was referring to in his discussion of opinion:

The human understanding, when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself), draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number of contrary instances, it either does not observe or it despises them, or else by some distinction sets them aside and rejects them, not without great and pernicious prejudice. Thus the authority of those first positions remains inviolate (Bacon, [1620] 2017, p. 15).

Comparing the discourse of both Elon Musk's opponents and his defenders, we can see identical discursive strategies used to reinforce convictions and make them circulate as truths. These include generalizations, abstractions and emotional elements, configuring the digital political discourse as propaganda, since these features are also central to persuasive advertising discourse.

As Noam Chomsky (2002) observes in *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, "propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state." This insight reveals how, even within democratic systems, subtle discursive manipulation can serve to shape public opinion and suppress dissent through persuasion rather than coercion. In the case analyzed, digital platforms operate as tools of influence where both political actors and private entities compete to frame reality in a manner that aligns with their interests.

Alexandre de Moraes' Response and Support for Musk

Supreme Court Minister Alexandre de Moraes included Elon Musk as an investigated party in the Digital Militias inquiry in April 2024. Set up in Brazil by the Supreme Court in 2021, this inquiry is tasked with investigating organized anti-democratic groups and the financing of such actions. Moraes's decision followed a series of public statements and actions by Musk — made after the exchange of messages analyzed in this study — which, in the Minister's view, amounted to a disinformation campaign about the actions of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) and the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) and "instigated disobedience and obstruction of Brazilian justice" (STF, 2024, online). At this point, CNN reported that the STF ministers were evaluating the possibility of an institutional response to X but considered Musk's threats to be a "bluff." By positioning himself through this action, Moraes draws on the discourse of the performative magistrate, whereby his saying (or not saying) is, on its own, an action (Austin, 1990).

Since this move, Elon Musk started posting tutorials on his profile encouraging people to use X through the VPN, which is a virtual private network. Doing so would allow people to access the X platform in Brazil, even in cases of blocking. Musk's strategy is yet another feature of the post-truth era. "The main attribute of social networks is the ease of exchanging and rapidly sharing information. However, the side effects of speed do not take long and do not fail: networks have ended up becoming nests and breeding grounds for misinformation." (Santaella, 2021, pp. 96). In

terms of power relations, the proposal to use an alternative channel is a way of positioning oneself as the resistance and helping to argue that the government resembles a dictatorship.

Alexandre de Moraes delivered only one speech on the subject from the STF's rostrum a few days later, on April 10:

The Supreme Court, the Brazilian population and good people know that freedom of expression is not freedom of aggression. Freedom of expression is not freedom to proliferate hatred, racism and homophobia. They know that freedom of expression is not freedom to defend tyranny. Perhaps some aliens are unfamiliar with it, but they have learned and become aware of the courage and seriousness of the Brazilian Judiciary.

This was followed by the opinion of Minister Gilmar Mendes: "I believe that the demonstrations on social network X only prove the need for Brazil, once and for all, to regulate the virtual space more precisely, as it is done in most European democratic countries".

The discussion then turns to its main cornerstone, namely the domain of freedom of expression. It is precisely at this point that Musk's speech promotes the drift of meanings between regulation and censorship. Thus, the manipulation of information not only works by hiding something, but also by (re)affirming its opposite. Discourses of support for Elon Musk have also appeared among Brazilian politicians, based on political polarization. Former deputy Roberto Freire, for example, used his profile on the X platform to be incisive: Former deputy Roberto Freire, for example, used his profile on the X platform to make a sarcastic remark: "Be careful and abuse your high authority with nationalist braggadocio."

In an interview published in one of the largest newspapers in the country, "O Estado de S. Paulo", Deltan Dellagnol – a former congressman and former prosecutor in the ongoing 'Lava-Jato Operation', an investigation of government corruption — reaffirmed that Alexandre de Moraes' position is one of censorship:

A modern version of cutting out people's tongues because you censor them beforehand. (...). Accounts cannot be censored, and ideological content cannot be censored. It has been happening in Brazil. It brings us closer to countries that have a dictatorial profile.

In his analysis, Dellagnol promotes another derivation of meaning widely used in Brazil by the most conservative groups namely the word "ideological". For conservatives the latter would be the characterizes those who are on the margins, on the left, or who are against the preservation of the *status quo*. Once again, the stance is political – and more than that, it is "from" a politician — and its enunciative features are typical of propaganda: generalization, categorical affirmation, disqualification of the other, and synthesis. Reinforcing this perspective there is the emphasis on the performative. As a former prosecutor, Dellagnol builds statements with the linguistic traits of a law. The phrase "cannot be censored" is a typical statement of this position.

The discursive strategies used by both sides are central to building arguments. On the one hand, Elon Musk positions himself as a supporter of freedom of expression, seeking to legitimize his actions based on widely recognized values such as legality and the will of the people. On the other hand, his opponents, including Brazilian political figures, present Musk as an agent of disinformation who is trying to undermine democracy. The manipulation of information and the constant redefinition of the boundaries between regulation and censorship turn the social network environment into a battleground where convincing the public takes precedence over the search for truth. As van Dijk (2006) points out, "manipulation is a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests" (p. 360). This notion clarifies how digital discourse may subtly guide public perception under the guise of democratic expression. For this purpose, the most primitive method

of fixing a belief is used: tenacity (Peirce, apud Santaella, 2021), which is based on repetition to exhaustion, until it is naturalized or normalized.

In a post-truth era, authority lies not only on institutions, but also in people who have set themselves up as guardians of the truth. In a polarized situation, this position is naturally occupied by two very distinct profiles, summed up by the images of Elon Musk and de Moraes. In short, disinformation is being created and then perpetuates itself leading to slander, increase disqualifying characteristics, or transfer meanings from one subject to another.

Final Considerations

This paper demonstrated that digital social networks have amplified political polarization in Brazil, becoming spaces where hate speech, disinformation, and intolerance thrive through a variety of discursive mechanisms.

The clash between Elon Musk and the Brazilian Judiciary, marked by mutual accusations of censorship and authoritarianism, exemplifies this tension. Musk accuses authorities of restricting freedom of expression, while Minister Alexandre de Moraes and other critics argue that content moderation is essential for protecting democracy and public order. Such a scenario reveals the complex relationship between technology, power and freedom.

The case highlights the urgent need for deeper reflection on the regulation of social networks in Brazil, especially in a country historically marked by authoritarian regimes. The ongoing tension between freedom of expression and social responsibility remains at the core of this debate. There is a delicate balance between preserving individual rights and preserving a legitimate democratic space that safeguards both the rights of individuals and those of institutions. This balance is critical whether these rights are aimed at maintaining the democratic state itself or the public's interest in being informed and producing opinions.

References

- Arendt, H. (2004, c1951). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Schocken Books.
- Austin, J. L. (1990, c1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Bacon, F. (2017, c1620). *Novum Organum*. Open Court Publishing.
- Baron, J. M. (2017). *Understanding trumpism: nationalism, populism and industrialism*. Retrieved from <https://www.baronpa.com/library/understanding-trumpism-nationalism-populism-and-industrialism>
- Charaudeau, P. (2008). *Discurso político: Problemas de análise*. São Paulo: Contexto.
- Charaudeau, P. (2016). *Discurso das mídias*. São Paulo: Contexto.
- Chomsky, N. (2002). *Media control: The spectacular achievements of propaganda* (2nd ed.). Seven Stories Press.
- Freud, S. (2010). *O futuro de uma ilusão*. Imago.
- Lopes, J. (2023). *Freedom of expression and distributive justice: A capability-based approach*. Retrieved from <https://www.conjur.com.br>
- McComiskey, B. (2017). *Post-truth rhetoric and composition*. Utah State University Press.
- Robert, A.-C. (2018). *La stratégie de l'émotion*. Lux.
- Santaella, L. (2021). *De onde vem o poder da mentira*. Estação das Letras e Cores.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359-383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>

