DIGITAL MEMORY IN BRAZIL

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY: POLITICS, ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN NETWORK COMMUNICATION

The *Digital Activism and Society: Politics, Economy and Culture in Network Communication* series focusses on the political use of digital everyday-networked media by corporations, governments, international organisations (Digital Politics), as well as civil society actors, NGOs, activists, social movements and dissidents (Digital Activism) attempting to recruit, organise and fund their operations, through information communication technologies.

The series publishes books on theories and empirical case studies of digital politics and activism in the specific context of communication networks. Topics covered by the series include, but are not limited to:

- the different theoretical and analytical approaches of political communication in digital networks;
- studies of socio-political media movements and activism (and 'hacktivism');
- transformations of older topics such as inequality, gender, class, power, identity and group belonging;
- strengths and vulnerabilities of social networks.

Series Editor

Dr Athina Karatzogianni

About the Series Editor

Dr Athina Karatzogianni is an Associate Professor at the University of Leicester, UK. Her research focusses on the intersections between digital media theory and political economy, in order to study the use of digital technologies by new sociopolitical formations.

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<div align="center">Forthcoming Titles</div>

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A Fragmented and Elastic
Negationist Remembrance of the
Dictatorship

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my parents.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI-5	Institutional Act 5 – Ato Institucional Número 5
BNM	Brazil Never More Project – Projeto Brasil Nunca Mais
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CIE	Army Information Center – Centro de Informação do Exército
CNV	National Truth Commission – Comissão Nacional da Verdade
GSI	Institutional Security Office – Gabinete de Segurança Institucional
LAI	Access to Information Law – Lei de Acesso à Informação
OAB	Brazilian Bar Association – Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil
PF	Federal Police – Polícia Federal
PGR	Attorney General Office – Procuradoria Geral da República
PT	Workers' Party – Partido dos Trabalhadores
STF	Supreme Federal Court – Supremo Tribunal Federal

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leda Balbino is a journalist with experience in coordinating Foreign Desk teams at print, digital and broadcast newsrooms in Brazil, including at O Globo, Folha de S. Paulo, and Estado de S. Paulo newspapers and GloboNews all-news cable television. She was selected as a fellow of the World Press Institute in 2012, when she covered the Democratic National Convention and the United States presidential election. In 2013, she reported the 68th Session of the UN General Assembly as a fellow of the Dag Hammarskjöld journalism programme. She has also reported from Cuba, Ecuador, Estonia, Israel and Jordan. In 2021, she completed with Distinction the Masters in International Relations and Global Communications at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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PREFACE

IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS

While in concluding phase of this book, a quote from the 1982s book *Memorial do Convento* (*Baltasar and Blimunda*, in the English version) by the late Portuguese writer and Nobel Literature winner José Saramago emerged from the back of my memory: 'Everything in the world is giving answers; what lingers is the time of the questions'. As it spontaneously re-played in my mind, it layered another meaning in my past interpretation of first solely relating it to life's truthful significance as missed while we inattentively carry on. Resurgent in a present where I was attentively trying to articulate answers for a changing political scenery in my home country, Brazil, it made me remember when I started to intuit the need for questions.

The year was 2013 when national mass protests mobilised through social media, later called the June Days, spiralled against the political establishment after police violence, with the first street signs of authoritarian reminiscence. I remember a specific discomfort while watching on TV demonstrators in Brasília taking the Esplanade of the Ministries, occupying Congress's marquee and trying to invade Itamaraty (the Brazilian Foreign Ministry), including by breaking some of its window panes. With heterogenic agenda and actors, they seemed a catharsis for the sake of protesting, a movement aiming to replace the status quo without a clear picture of how and why. In the following years, political instability increased with the Car Wash anti-corruption operation and an impeachment movement against the left-wing president Dilma Rousseff. Plus, there was also an overwhelming economic crisis and recession. During this time, the first spread-out mobilisation grew around the former captain Jair Bolsonaro, who managed to homogenise and centralise a disperse discontentment feeling in his far-right figure.

The 2018 elections arrived as challenging times. I became obsessed with following political news and going down the rabbit hole of Facebook pages with right-wing content. They revealed an unknown Brazil, where concepts of democracy, communism and socialism seemed disrupted, concerning a different language than mine. Foremost, the then-polarised electoral context

disclosed colleagues and relatives having the corruption topic as a tie-breaker for their votes. Although a crucial matter, the non-negotiable aspects for me were the principles of human rights and not voting for someone praising the Brazilian dictatorship. Or the manipulation of religion for political gains, putting aside the secularism feature of the state. Or the apology for bearing arms as a solution to security problems. In a random encounter at a bakery, I discussed with a former school-time acquaintance because I had seen her sharing disinformation on social media. At the time, journalists denouncing irregular electoral campaign tactics in the digital environment became a target of online militias. During a trip, I felt sad after knowing a person I have always admired would vote for Bolsonaro out of his aversion to the left-wing party not long ago in power.

Despite not being an enthusiast of this left-wing party myself, evaluating it needed restructuring within the progressist camp, leadership renovation and most self-criticism concerning the series of errors, ethical misdemeanours and mismanagement committed while governing Brazil, I felt an urgency for what I considered as at stake at the time. The democracy recovered over three decades ago, at the corner of Brazilian history, was at risk. And this fear moved me passionately. Although a military coup like the ones staged in South America during the Cold War seemed unthinkable, the fraying of the democratic tissue was at reach. There were multiple examples outside Brazil, with the rising of radical right populism in Europe, the United States, Asia and the Middle East. Thus, Bolsonaro was not a phenomenon limited to Brazil. His emergence told a story far-reaching than my country. As many people choosing to vote for him were reasonable and intelligent, the puzzlement of why he constituted a large base of support within Brazilian society became more pressing. One day at the newsroom, I told a friend: 'We need to study what is happening'. Hence, the urge for understanding put me on track for writing this book.

In 2019, the first year of Bolsonaro in power, I stopped delaying the plan of studying abroad and moved to the United Kingdom to undertake my MA in International Relations and Global Communications at Manchester Metropolitan University. It was a challenging journey of learning and discovering theories, concepts and studies previously uncharted. Above all, it was a privileged time in which I could distance myself from Brazil to encounter the best instruments to assess it with brand-new eyes. Brazil under Bolsonaro became my dissertation topic, which I had to finish in my home country due to the pandemic and personal issues, cutting short my planned stay in the United Kingdom up to the expiration of my student visa.

This MA final work is the base for the present book. It adds 2020, the first pandemic year, to the 2019 data concerning how Bolsonaro and two of his

sons constructed the digital memory of the Brazilian dictatorship. After returning, I sometimes resented not staying abroad as long as I wished. But this research in this final format made me perceive Brazil as the only place I could write this book, applying the foreign tools gathered in my lived reality, eye-witnessing the implications of this government from inside. It was a process of unravelling to myself the discoveries made through this journey, with a mist of anguish and joy for transforming the initial seemingly unattainable distress into logical words on paper. I made something out of the initial discomfort, not letting it settle down, which turned into a source of humble pride. First, I could translate to myself a language seemingly unlearnable at the beginning. With the apprehension of its populist mechanisms, the facts evolving in 2021 and the last election in 2022 stopped feeling nonsensical. The performative acts of Bolsonaro's government had their own rationality and logic, as pointed out by Lacan (2005) concerning populism. Thus, after dwelling on it, I could finally attain what they mean when saying democracy, communism, coup, dictatorship, the people, popular sovereignty and liberty.

Consequently, it was a personal task but hopefully useful for a larger crowd than my own mind. By bringing this book to the public, I hope it is a helpful tool to explain relevant aspects of the Presidency of Bolsonaro, primarily concerning the digital environment and how his movement can still be alive even with him out of office after losing the 2022 election. Besides, this work can handle applicable instruments for researchers in other countries who testify to the ascendancy of far-right movements, especially concerning memory use in the digital space. In that sense, it would be a never-ending work. While potentially enabling conversations with researchers inside Brazil and outside, it can result in better questions. Without, expectantly, lingering on the world's answers.

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