

The intentional production of disinformation through fake news in the Bolsonaro government: the dismantling of Brazilian federal universities

Caroline Lievore
Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná – UTFPR – Ponta Grossa – Brasil
carolievore1@gmail.com

José Roberto Herrera Cantorani
Instituto Federal de São Paulo – IFSC – Registro – Brasil
cantorani@yahoo.com.br

Priscila Rubbo
Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná – UTFPR – Pato Branco – Brasil
rubbo.priscila@gmail.com

Maria Eduarda Lievore
Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa – UEPG – Ponta Grossa – Brasil
madulievore1@gmail.com

Luiz Alberto Pilatti
Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná – UTFPR – Ponta Grossa – Brasil
lapilatti@utfpr.edu.br

Abstract

This study aims to analyse the attacks against Brazilian federal universities through the creation of fake news by President Bolsonaro's allies. This is a qualitative case study, and the analytical procedure used was content analysis. The research corpus consists of news articles containing statements by President Jair Bolsonaro and his Ministers of Education and Economy relating to federal universities and civil servants. We identified a discourse constructed through fake news by the Bolsonaro government that portrays universities as inefficient institutions that do not produce knowledge and waste public money. We conclude that fake news is a widely employed mechanism in Bolsonaro's ultra-neoliberal plan to privatize higher education and support the unschooling of the Brazilian population.

Keywords: fake news, Brazilian federal universities, Bolsonaro government.

1. Introduction

Since his campaign for the presidency of Brazil, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a declared supporter of the 1964 military dictatorship and anti-communist with a proto-fascist profile, made several statements against minority rights, democratic freedoms, and workers' organizations (Machado 2020; Castilho and Lemos 2021). The victory of the former deputy of the lower house for nearly three decades was the result of the use of far-right rhetoric and was supported by people with ultra-conservative beliefs and ultra-neoliberal economic thinking (Silva 2021).

In the almost non-existent Bolsonaro Government Plan, the area of education had no concrete proposals, but can be summed up by his criticisms of the school system, such

as: “More math, science, and Portuguese, WITHOUT INDOCTRINATION AND EARLY SEXUALIZATION” and “One of the greatest current problems is strong indoctrination” (Bolsonaro 2018). Through the “Schools Without a Political Party” Program, Bolsonaro aimed to “inhibit the practice of political and ideological indoctrination in the classroom”, “purge the ideology of Paulo Freire”, and support online and distance learning (Bolsonaro 2018).

After the election, Brazilian federal universities became the targets of continuous attacks from the group that assumed the presidency (Amaral 2019; Leher 2021). Supported by post-truths and fake news, the attacks were initially based on the ideas of the organic intellectual, Olavo de Carvalho, and his influence on the core Bolsonaro family, and were instilled with fundamental ideals from the new right (Silva 2021). The attacks were accompanied by defamatory statements by all four Ministers of Education appointed during the Bolsonaro government.

The first to take up the position as Minister was the Colombian theologian, professor, and naturalized Brazilian, Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez (January 1, 2019 – April 8, 2019), who was indicated by Olavo de Carvalho. In his inaugural speech, Vélez reaffirmed his commitment to fighting gender ideology, with a statement such as “Brazil will once again be a country free from ideological shackles”, and an educational proposal inspired by liberal-conservative values. Just 97 days later, he was fired on the grounds of “lack of expertise and management” and controversial statements (Shalders and Alvim, 2019).

Subsequently, the economist and professor Abraham Weintraub occupied the portfolio (April 9, 2019 – June 19, 2020). During the minister's inauguration, Bolsonaro highlighted that “we want kids to not start being interested in politics, as they are currently in schools, but really start learning things that might lead to Space in the future.” Always polemic, Weintraub based his actions on controversial statements and nonconformity with refined language. His administration was responsible for cutting the budgets for federal public universities, attacking science and civil servants, as well as offending the French President Emmanuel Macron, the Supreme Court (STF), and China. Weintraub left office with around 60 judicial interpellations and one investigation for the crime of racism (Gazeta do Povo 2019).

On June 26, 2020, the government announced economist and professor Carlos Alberto Decotelli as the third Minister of Education. However, Decotelli did not even manage to assume the position because fraudulent information was found in his curriculum, while suspected irregularities during his tenure at the National Fund for Education Development (FNDE) also came to light (Época Negócios 2020).

Since July 16, 2020, the Minister of Education in Brazil has been the theologian and pastor Milton Ribeiro. Although in his inaugural speech he committed to following the “secular state” and to maintain an “important dialogue with academics and educators”, Ribeiro has been rekindling ideological agendas to guarantee support from Bolsonaroist militants. In one of the many recent controversies, which in this case involved the National High School Exam (ENEM), several civil servants resigned as the minister declared that the ENEM would have the “face of the government” in terms of competence, honesty, and seriousness. “This is the face of the government. We have no ministers in prison, no cases of corruption. This is important” (Carta Capital 2021).

The minister's statements, which always have repercussions in the media, invariably sought to weaken the credibility of federal universities by conveying the idea that they are inefficient and responsible for wasting a significant amount of public money. Civil servants have also been, and continue to be, targets of processes of systematic devaluation.

Another important core of power in the Bolsonaro government is the liberalizing economics led by the Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes. Guedes has never been affiliated with any political party and frequently argues that the country continues to feel the

effects of the 2014 recession, which in his liberal view stems from excessive public spending (Oreiro 2017), comparing civil servants to "parasites" (G1, 2020).

The dismantling of Brazilian federal universities is very similar to what has been happening in many other countries governed by the far right. The anti-education (or university) discourse has been strengthened and gained aggressive support among conservative and neoliberal political and business elites. In this movement, Sukarieh and Tannock (2020) see a program of unschooling from above, organized by the global capitalist elite (neoliberal), to discredit higher education and universities. This scheme is usually associated with another discourse that focuses on technical and professional training of an uneducated workforce.

Attacks on universities have been identified in studies that analyze such movements and consider a range of issues, including: state control of higher education (Forrat, 2016); the lack of state support for public universities (Reiff 2014); right-wing conservative attacks on science and the social significance of knowledge (Andrea 2018; Arben Fox 2007; Hill et al. 2004; Ochkina 2018; Watson 2000); right-wing conservative attacks on academic freedom (Orzeck, 2012); neoliberal attacks on the idea of public higher education (Holmwood and Bhambra, 2012); the use of social media to manufacture neoliberal political identity (Collier et al. 2019); public harassment and political repression of academia and the neoliberalization of higher education (Doğan and Selenica 2021; Dönmez and Duman 2020; Ferber 2018; Mandell, 2018); neoliberal attacks on teachers and training directed at political consciousness (Giroux 2016; Riemer 2016); the precarity of work in higher education, and weakening of institutions and union organizations (Mancebo et al. 2020); the commodification of higher education (Loveday 2021); and Trump's attacks and the use of fake news (Paik 2020; Swartz 2020).

The association between Bolsonaro and fake news has also been examined in previous studies. Lery and Santana (2021) investigated statements made by Bolsonaro as a presidential candidate about the existence of a "gay kit" distributed in Brazilian public schools, while Ribeiro (2020) analyzed incidences of fake news, including those related to the "gay kit". Both found that Bolsonaro's assertions were unfounded. Davis and Straubhaar (2020) found that during the Bolsonaro campaign, illegal methods were used, including fake news spread mainly through messages via the application WhatsApp. Rodrigues and Ferreira (2020) showed that the Bolsonaro government strongly encourages the practice of disseminating fake news in the construction of its narratives, so as to create a division with its opponents. Viscardi (2020) argued that in most cases, Bolsonaro defines everything that is said by political opponents and the press as lies and fake news, exclusively attributing the truth to what he and his allies say and do. To date, the fake news directed at Brazilian federal universities has not been the object of any study.

Considering this gap in the literature, this study aims to analyze the fake news attacks made by Bolsonaro's allies against Brazilian federal universities. Clearly, the concept of fake news is recent and poorly explored academically. Its incorporation into the Scopus and Web of Science databases only took place in 2018, and its dissemination is mainly due to former US President Donald Trump.

2. Methods

This study was designed as a case study and focuses on the controversies produced by the current Brazilian government relating to federal universities and civil servants with an emphasis on the media.

The research corpus consists of news articles containing statements by President Jair Bolsonaro and his ministers of Education and Economy in relation to federal universities and civil servants, in the period from January 2019 to November 2021. To

avoid bias, we opted to extract the statements made by these actors from the selected documents. All materials used were triangulated. Additionally, scientific articles related to higher education in Brazil were surveyed.

The analytical procedure employed was a content analysis; within the logical-semantic field, the method follows the steps outlined by Bardin (1977). According to the model, the steps included categorizing the statements and documents into units (words, sentences, paragraphs) and grouping them thematically into initial and final categories. Of the 28 initially defined categories, three final categories were obtained: “University is not for everyone”; financing for higher education; and fake news. The final categories were used to process the results and infer and interpret significant and valid data to achieve the intended objectives.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 “University is not for everyone”

Among the controversies that mark the Bolsonaro government, the narrative that “University is not for everyone” stands out. This statement was defended by Ministers of Education Véllez Rodríguez, Weintraub, Ribeiro, and the Minister of Economy Guedes. The statements that “the idea of a university for all does not exist” and that higher education should be reserved only for the “intellectual elite” were given by Véllez Rodríguez to the newspaper *Valor Econômico* (Passarelli 2019) and used to justify the continuation of technical training as one of the main pillars of education (Basilio 2019). Weintraub used the same narrative to revoke the inclusion policy for Black and Indigenous people and those with disabilities in graduate studies a few hours before leaving the position of minister, which was done without justification (Oliveira 2020). Ribeiro declared to TV Brasil that the “university should [...] be for a few, in the sense that it should be useful to society”, thus defending that the future should be focused on Federal Institutes (technical colleges) that train mid-level technicians. The minister also claimed that “there are many engineers or lawyers driving Uber because they cannot get the proper placement. If they were computer technicians, they could get a job [...]” (Pinho 2021). Guedes reinforced this narrative by criticizing the programs that guarantee access to higher education, stating that the Fies¹ student loan program is “a scholarship for everyone” (NDB Notícias do Brasil, 2021).

The ministers' statements show the government's interest in dismantling public education in Brazil, especially higher education, which underlies debates on the privatization of education, censorship of program curricula, interference in the appointment of Chancellors by the president, in addition to reducing financial resources for education (Lusa et al. 2019).

The project of discrediting universities converges with the privatization of higher education and consequently to its elitization, in addition to being completely at odds with the National Education Plan (2014-2024) (Echalar et al. 2020; Minto 2018). As president, Bolsonaro has done little to fulfil his promise to prioritize science and technology and increase Brazil's spending on R&D from 1% to 3% of the GDP (Angelo 2019; Escobar 2019a). Discourse that reinforces greater investment in technical-vocational education are constant in the Ministry of Education's portfolio (Baptista 2021), despite the absence of a clear policy for technical training programs (Saldaña 2021). Recent reports from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2018; 2021) show that the increase in number of enrolments in higher education in Brazil reflects trends observed

¹ Fies is a program of the Ministry of Education to grant loans to students regularly enrolled in private higher education institutions. The program was implemented in 2001, under the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and has been reformulated over the years.

in other member countries, albeit from a lower starting point. Brazil still has education rates considered insufficient by international standards: 21% of its young people were enrolled in higher education in 2018, compared to an average of 34% for other OECD countries (OECD 2021).

In the 2021 Report, the OECD highlighted that public policies, such as Fies, ProUni², and the quota system, were essential to ensure equitable access to higher education in recent years (OECD 2021). Additionally, the report contests the view of the Ministers by stating that holders of higher education diplomas in Brazil have an income expectation remarkably higher than the average for OECD countries. A bachelor's degree in Brazil can guarantee a salary 2.4 times higher than with a high school diploma (OECD average: 1.5), and a master's or doctoral degree can lead to an almost 4.5 times higher salary (OECD average: 2.0).

The actions and statements mentioned above violate the fundamental right to education, guaranteed by Article 6 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Brazil (Brasil 1988). Furthermore, Articles 205 and 206 of the Constitution reiterate that education is a right for all and a duty of the State, guaranteeing access to free, quality education based on ideological pluralism, pedagogical concepts, and the democratic management of public education.

The process of dismantling of universities and transformative and emancipatory education creates barriers to, or even impedes, the realization of the right to higher education for all and relieves the State of its constitutional duty. From the perspective of capital, a private higher education is projected for those who can afford it in Brazil.

3.2 Financing for higher education

In April 2019, President Bolsonaro tweeted that his Minister of Education Weintraub “will study the retraction of investment in faculties of philosophy and sociology (humanities) [...] The objective is to focus on areas that generate immediate returns to the taxpayer, such as: veterinary science, engineering, and medicine” (G1 2019). However, Weintraub went further and decided to slash university budgets, constructing a justification that they did not obtain the expected results: “Universities that, instead of looking to improve academic performance, have been creating confusion, will have their funding reduced”. Among the universities initially affected were the University of Brasília (UnB), Fluminense Federal University (UFF), and the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) (Agostini 2019). These three universities were ranked among the best in Brazil, according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2020 (Times Higher Education 2020), and are among the 11 Brazilian institutions that published the most scientific articles between 2008 and 2017 on the Web of Science (Saldaña 2019). Later, when the resources were cut, all federal universities suffered a significant reduction in their budgets (BBC 2019). The cuts were successive and affected low-income students due to substantial reductions to Student Assistance Programs (Madeiro 2021).

Amidst the controversy generated by the cuts, Minister Weintraub launched the controversial Future-se Project. This project foresaw the creation of a private fund to finance federal universities that adhered to the program. To be a member, the administrative management of these institutions – and, to some extent, management of teaching – should be carried out by social organizations. The project was rejected by the National Association of Directors of Federal Institutions of Higher Education (Andifes) and by almost all University Councils, scientific organizations, and those committed to

² ProUni (University for All Program) is a program of the Ministry of Education that offers full and partial scholarships in private higher education institutions, encouraging private institutions to allocate 10% of their vacancies to low-income students free of charge. The program was implemented in 2005 under the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva government.

university autonomy (Leher 2021). In essence, the proposal would promote the reorganization of federal universities by intervening in their administration thus paving the way for a reduction in the government's participation in their maintenance (Quiroga, 2020). Another measure adopted by Weintraub was to halve the resources allocated to the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), which is responsible for the distribution and payment of master's and doctoral scholarships in Brazil and abroad (Revista Forum 2019).

In addition to violating the constitutional principle of university autonomy, attacking courses in the humanities, and cutting funds under the pretext that "the government's role is to respect taxpayer money, teaching young people to read, write, and do math" (Borges 2019), these acts are in line with anti-intellectual discourse and are used in the ambit of the privatization of higher education. The process of privatizing higher education is multifaceted and interacts with a governance network that is strongly linked to entrepreneurs in education (Almeida 2019; Santos and Chaves 2020). For Daniel Cara, coordinator of the National Campaign for the Right to the Education, the arguments used by the government to reduce university funding are false, adding that economic return is not directly generated by university programs, but through economic growth and the consequent use of this intellectual and technical development (Basilio 2019).

Another controversy over funding for higher education was caused by the Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, when criticizing Fies. According to Guedes, "[...] scholarships were given to those who didn't have any capacity. They accepted everyone... They exaggerated. They went from one extreme to the other. So, I'm saying this because we have to be very careful when we go into accreditation". When comparing the private system with the public, the minister also called the Fies a "disaster" and added that the program was a "voucher for the poor" (G1 2021). Access to higher education has become more equitable in recent years due to policies such as Fies, ProUni, and the quota system. Even so, graduation levels from higher education in Brazil are low and centered on private institutions (OECD 2021). Of all enrolments in higher education, approximately three quarters occur in private institutions, while the OECD average is below one-third. Postgraduate training is even lower; less than one percent of the population aged 25 to 64 years has a master's degree, while the OECD average is 13% (OECD, 2021). Nevertheless, Fies is of fundamental importance in subsidizing low-income students, whose access to higher education would not be feasible without this program as it works to mitigate the accentuated social inequality that exists in Brazil (Becker and Mendonça 2021).

Despite the exponential growth in the number of enrolments in Brazil, the issue of public investment in private institutions is controversial. In 2011, Congress started to debate the concepts of "total public investment" and "direct public investment" (Nwabasili 2014). The adoption of public investment in education, in addition to financial aid to students (scholarships and student loans), allowed for the arrangement of transfers to the private sector of a percentage of the budget that should be used in education (INEP, 2020).

In another controversial statement, Minister Weintraub told the newspaper O Globo that: "For each undergraduate student, we could pay for 10 in day care". The statement was based on the cost of a student at a federal university (approximately US\$6000 per year, according to the minister) compared to that of a place in a child day care center (approximately US\$600 per year) (O Globo, 2019), without explaining the methodology used by the ministry to arrive at this estimate. Almeida (2019) identified a methodological error in the hypothesis of the high cost of public university students as the costs in the calculation for all public universities include: hospitals, university restaurants with discounts or subsidies for low-income students, museums, centers for scientific outreach, radios, science parks, retiree salaries (social security expenses), and student assistance,

among others. Thus, for the author, the calculation used is incorrect and overestimates the cost of higher education for each student. Public universities conduct extensive research and outreach activities and making a choice between the two would be unquestionably wrong, as both institutions are necessary.

In Brazil, public universities are responsible for more than 90% of scientific production, according to data from the Web of Science database and compiled by Clarivate Analytics. Of the 50 institutions that produced the majority of scientific research published in the country, 44 are universities (of these 36 are federal, seven are state, and only one is private) and five are publicly funded research institutes (Cross et al. 2018; Escobar 2019b).

The set of information promoted by the Ministers of Education and Economy, demonstrate the pre-disposition for the intentional production of disinformation and the existence of a program to privatize federal universities. Clear actions by the federal government have reduced financial resources for education and limited the autonomy of universities. Evidence indicates that the path being followed is toward discrediting and dismantling this patrimony of Brazilian society.

3.3 Fake news

Além In addition to criticizing Fies, during a ministerial meeting and unaware that he was being recorded, Minister Guedes attacked public universities claiming that they teach sex to five-year-old children, and equated universities to marijuana, drinking, and drugs (Naldis 2021). Guedes repeated the same ideas that resulted in Weintraub being sentenced in court and the undertaking of a case for administrative impropriety filed by the Federal Public Ministry (Varela and Ribeiro 2021). Following the Bolsonarist logic, in an interview published on the YouTube channel *Jornal da Cidade Online* (2020), Weintraub questioned university autonomy:

A fallacy was created that federal universities need to have autonomy [...] But this autonomy ended up being transformed into sovereignty. So, what do you have? You have marijuana plantations, but there aren't three marijuana plants, there are extensive plantations in some universities, to the point where they use a pesticide sprayer, because organic is good to criticize soy, so that there is no agroindustry in Brazil, but for their marijuana they want all the technology they have at their disposal.

The minister also said that Departments of Chemistry were not centers of indoctrination, but they are "developing laboratories for synthetic drugs, of methamphetamine, because the police cannot enter the campus [...]" and he called universities a "madrasa of indoctrination", in reference to Islamic schools (*Jornal da Cidade Online*, 2020). In a statement, Andifes argued that such a statement "crosses all boundaries [...] offending at the same time the entire academic community and the Muslim faith" (ANPED 2019).

The aggressive rhetoric of the ministers seems to be part of the Bolsonarist script as commanded by the president, who has declared such things as "I wish I could smash your mouth", when questioned about fraud among cabinet ministers (*Gazeta do Povo* 2020), and when speaking about the Covid-19 pandemic that it was like "suffering from a mild flu or cold" (BBC, 2020), "if someone dies, they die [...] everyone will die someday", and "[...] I am not a grave-digger" (Gomes 2020). The pattern of narratives like these is a distortion of reality, which is also evident in the statements by Guedes when he said that he considers private education more efficient than public education (Naldis 2021). They are affirmations that contradict current data. Based on data from the Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP 2021), of the 245 public universities evaluated, 44% obtained the highest grades of 4 and 5 in the General Course

Index (IGC), and no public institution obtained a grade of 1. Among the 1,821 private institutions evaluated, only 21% reached the highest grades, with six institutions receiving a score of 1, and 232 a score of 2. Along the same lines, and also absolutely incorrect, in an interview with Rádio Jovem Pan (2019), President Bolsonaro stated that: “[...] in universities, if you go to the issue of research, you don't have it, few universities have research, and, of these few, most are in the private sector, like Mackenzie in São Paulo”. In response to this statement, the president of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences, Luiz Davidovich, highlighted that research carried out in public universities benefits the population and contributes to national wealth, such as the discovery of pre-salt oil, technological advances in agriculture, responses to epidemics such as the Zika virus, as well as the development of new drugs, energy alternatives, among others (Moura 2019).

In an article published by The Intercept, the tactics used by Bolsonaro's allies in the propagation of fake news through his “cabinet of hate” are clear, showing that statements by Minister Weintraub against public universities led to supporters of the Bolsonaro government continuously disseminating photos and videos of naked people via the application WhatsApp, followed by captions such as: “See what our Federal Universities have become! IT'S ABSURD” (Pavarin 2019).

In another statement, Bolsonaro said “I won't go into details, but the state was very bloated. I'm not saying that there is no need for teachers, but the excess gets in the way” (Revista Forum 2021). The statement, as is common, comes without any supporting data and is incongruent with reality. The clear intention of spreading disinformation can be seen in the process. The path that becomes clear is that broadly disseminated and sequentially repeated fake news becomes a post-truth. Based on this logic, a dysfunctional university can be dismantled for privatization

4. CONCLUSION

In line with an ultra-neoliberal economic view, the allies of Brazil's presidency use the media, including social networks, often with fake news, to manufacture a collective idea of the ineffectiveness of universities and that teachers (public servants) are bad for the country's economy. Among the objectives of these attacks is the privatization of higher education and unschooling. We cannot underestimate the power of this type of action, which goes against the basic principles of a Democratic Rule of Law.

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