

Weaponised Information in Brazil: Digitising Hate

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Abstract

In the last few years, the world information ecosystem has been flooded by the “fake news” phenomena, augmented by the widespread use of social media. The fragmentation and scale of the new communication tools help spread old ideologies, that uphold racism, homophobia, and oppression. This phenomenon particularly afflicts developing countries, because of the persistent inequality and political polarisation. The results of this socio-economic inequality, like the digital divide, high rates of illiteracy and the lack of trust in institutions, pave the way to an expansion of indiscriminate hate as a political tool. Christian evangelicism provides a conducive environment for neoconservatism and intolerance. This policy brief analyses the weakest points in Brazilian information ecosystem and demonstrates how that structure created a nurturing environment for disinformation and hate speech before and after the 2018 elections. It concludes with short- and medium-term strategies for governments, institutions and civil society, as well as tech and social media companies that will mitigate the negative societal disturbances of hate speech and disinformation.

Background

Brazil is the largest democracy in Latin America, with a population of approximately 208 million people. The country is classified as a “flawed democracy” by the Democracy Index 2018¹ and ranked 105 out of 175 on the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index². Although 66% of Brazilians have access to the Internet, 49% access the Internet only through mobile phones. According to a survey developed by the Center of Studies on Information and Communication Technologies, (CETIC.br), the classes C, D and E predominantly access the Internet through mobile, having no access to computers³ or game consoles. These data

¹ Unit, E.I., 2016. Democracy index 2010. Available at <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

² Corruption Perception Index, International Transparency 2018. Available <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>

³ *Domicílios T.I.C.*, 2017. São Paulo, Centro Regional de Estudos para o Desenvolvimento da Sociedade da Informação (Cetic. br) do NIC. br e CGI. br, 2016.

reflect a continental country with one of the highest rates of inequality in the world and an equivalent violence rate. The understanding over the contextual size of Brazil is key to comprehending the disinformation phenomenon in the country, for it is deeply connected with its social and economic contrasts. Brazil is a country in which the democratic system has not yet settled in⁴, paving the way for cycles that alternate between violent and repressive governments and more democratic and participative periods. Even within the latter, repression and violence take place from the perspective of minorities, like LGBTQ and indigenous peoples. Structural violence and inequality, not yet fully addressed by government authorities, continue to rise, and it is now boosted by a strong political polarisation⁵ and social media dynamics, characterising the weaponisation of certain platforms. The Internet ecosystem, especially social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube, has been used to spread disinformation and incentivise hate and prejudice against minority and marginalised groups, a role that has been particularly and historically conducted by traditional institutions, such as the media, that has played a crucial role in creating imagery against African-descendants, indigenous peoples, LGBTQ communities and women, depicting them in a way that creates division and prejudice. The role of the media in spreading prejudice and boosting hate has therefore been replaced by new/digital media, due to stronger regulations and public and government scrutiny over TV, radio and newspapers. The same dynamics apply to certain religious groups that also maintain a misogynistic and homophobic discourse. These old systems were easily transferred to social media, where there is fertile ground for the fortification of previous/offline networks. The Social Confidence Index, which measures the Brazilian general public confidence in institutions has seen traditional media outlets lose 20 points in less than 10 years, from 71% in 2009 to 51% in 2018⁶.

In 2016, a BuzzFeed Brazil report⁷ showed that the top 10 disinformation stories on Facebook outperformed verified stories, in the case of news on the anti-corruption operation called “[Car wash](#)”, (or *Lava Jato*). Anti-corruption motivated populist campaigns, feeding rising demands for responsive institutions, as in other moments of the Brazilian democracy⁸, but also transforming these demands to hate mongering using internet campaigns. As the economic crisis worsened, a 2017 report by the *Public Policy Research Group on Access to Information of the University of Sao Paulo* (GPOPAI/USP), led by Professor Pablo Ortellado, mapped over 400 Facebook groups deemed “political” and claimed that 12 million people⁹ in Brazil were, at some point, involved in spreading “fake news” in that social media

⁴ Power, Timothy J. “Brazilian democracy as a late bloomer: Reevaluating the regime in the Cardoso-Lula era.” *Latin American Research Review* (2010): 218-247.

⁵ McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. “Political polarization and income inequality.” *Available at SSRN 1154098* (2003).

⁶ “Confiança Do Brasileiro Nas Instituições é a Mais Baixa Desde 2009 | IBOPE Inteligência,” accessed November 5, 2019, <http://www.ibopeinteligencia.com/noticias-e-pesquisas/confianca-do-brasileiro-nas-instituicoes-e-a-mais-baixa-desde-2009/>.

⁷ “The Top Fake News Stories Outperformed Real News About A Major Scandal In Brazil, Too,” accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alexandrearagao/noticias-falsas-lava-jato-facebook-1>.

⁸ Carlos Alberto Milani Bertozzi, “Collor de Mello: A Brazilian Neopopulist Leader?” (Ohio University, 2001), https://etd.ohiolink.edu/pg_10?::NO:10:P10_ETD_SUBID:62163.

⁹ “Na web, 12 milhões difundem fake news políticas - Política,” *Estadão*, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,na-web-12-milhoes-difundem-fake-news-politicas,70002004235>.

platform alone. Facebook is part of an ecosystem composed mainly of WhatsApp, the most used chat app in Brazil (120 million users); Instagram, an images platform fuelled by sub-celebrities; YouTube, for free videos; and alternative sites, blogs and forums, used to host and nurture the core of a growing hate community. Additionally, social and economic factors play a key role in setting the stage for disinformation campaigns in Brazil. These main factors are: the advanced capacity to use and control social media by certain actors in Brazil, attributed to the inequality in education and bad distribution of computational resources¹⁰, allied to the high functional illiteracy rates (55% among scholars, according to the National Literacy Assessment - ANA) and previously existent networks of discrimination, formed by churches, sexist and misogynist, or white supremacist groups, among others.

Brazilian Internet Ecosystem: How Hate Digitises

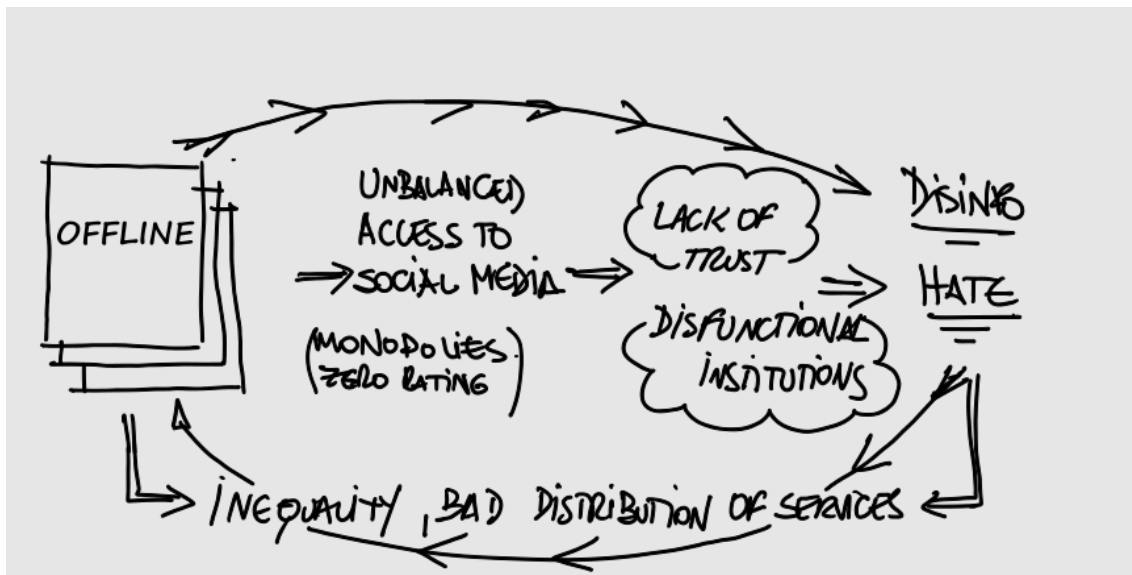


Fig. 1. Graph shows the internet ecosystem of hate in Brazil.

The uneven distribution of resources plays well with the Brazilian polarised society. Bad business practices and inefficient institutions are crucial elements in the spread of online hate.

Harmful business practices

a) Zero Rating

Facebook was the first app to circumvent the net neutrality rules in Brazil. By partnering with telecommunication companies, Facebook App and WhatsApp (also Instagram, recently), are pre-installed on mobile phones and are free of charge, in terms of broadband access. This practice transformed Facebook into a behemoth, which since 2012 has been

¹⁰ Abdin, Latifa. "Bots and Fake News: The Role of WhatsApp in the 2018 Brazilian Presidential Election." *Casey Robertson* 41: 1.

able to spread disinformation and organise protests, mobs and political actions¹¹. Brazilians do everything over WhatsApp, since it's "free". From music classes to e-commerce and medical appointments, the app became central to the functioning of business and family life, especially for the most vulnerable communities. Brazilian citizens are some of the highest social media users in the world, behind only the Philippines¹². Citizens, however, are often limited by the content they receive via WhatsApp, and therefore, they lose the context, and the opportunity, to check for different versions online or expand their knowledge.

The viralisation of pseudoscience pieces on WhatsApp, for example, was so virulent, spreading false cures and fear over the Zika virus and other diseases, that the company had to make algorithmic changes in order to diminish the number of forwards available inside the app¹³. The dynamics around health information are particular: researchers found that information about the Zika virus that arrived via WhatsApp was mostly wrong and deceptive¹⁴. The fact that everything going through WhatsApp is free of internet charges makes it easy for people to spread audios or YouTube videos (that open inside the WhatsApp). Due to this design, WhatsApp can be considered a conduit to disinformation in many formats, but is especially harmful for audios and videos. "Either platform had plenty of weaknesses on its own. But, together (YouTube and WhatsApp), they had formed a pipeline of misinformation, spreading conspiracy theories, campaign material and political propaganda throughout Brazil." (Fisher, 2019)

b) Algorithmic imbalance

A representative of the Brazilian Congress elected in 2018, Kim Kataguri, explained for a documentary that "YouTube is the perfect environment for the Brazilian right-wing community"¹⁵. The video sharing website both offers free content and rewards video producers in dollars with Google Ads, creating incentives for viral content that engages, and becoming the main repository of video disinformation for the far right, as Harvard research showed in April 2019. Researchers found that the algorithm used on the recommendation system systematically learns to suggest far-right videos, falling in the rabbit roles of extreme content. Other research¹⁶ that analyses implicit bias on channels and comments on the platform shows that channels have bias against immigrants and Muslims in captions and a higher bias against LGBTQ people among comments. YouTube favours content that is questionable, not just in politics but also for health issues, presenting pseudoscience as a

¹¹ Barbosa, Sérgio (2017), WhatsApp e ciberativismo: novos espaços na democracia, in Guilherme Godoy, Maria João Inácio e Steven S. Gouveia (org.), *Pensar a Democracia*. Charleston, USA: Guilherme Godoy, Maria João Inácio e Steven, 227-254

¹² "Digital in 2018: World's Internet Users Pass the 4 Billion Mark - We Are Social," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018>.

¹³ Kieron O'Hara and Wendy Hall, "Four Internets: The Geopolitics of Digital Governance," December 7, 2018, <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/four-internets-geopolitics-digital-governance>.

¹⁴ Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, "How YouTube Misinformation Resolved a WhatsApp Mystery in Brazil," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/the-weekly/how-youtube-misinformation-resolved-a-whatsapp-mystery-in-brazil.html>.

¹⁵ "The Weekly | What Is YouTube Pushing You to Watch Next?," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2019, sec. The Weekly, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/the-weekly/youtube-brazil-far-right.html>.

¹⁶ Raphael Ottoni et al., "Analyzing Right-Wing YouTube Channels: Hate, Violence and Discrimination," *Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Web Science - WebSci '18*, 2018, 323-32, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3201064.3201081>.

cure for diseases like Zika, Dengue and Malaria, all predominant in Brazil¹⁷. The researchers highlight the fact that the lack of good content is also a problem for spreading disinformation, concluding: “This, in the end, also highlights the double-edged sword that is the recommendation algorithm: often times contentious issues will be targeted by the creators of disinformation. And if there is little content, YouTube will recommend whatever is available, no matter the source.”

c) Media paywalls versus free content

Another economic incentive for user-generated content and widespread disinformation in Brazil is the challenge of the paywall. Even if the user is willing to use their phone credits to access the internet and check information, they face the paywall as another barrier to finding credible fact-checked information on any subject. This creates yet another incentive for users to resort to websites and blogs that host and share “alternative facts” for free. Blogs and alternative facts websites are often connected to underground networks, that play a key role in spreading hate and disinformation in the country. One example was the RFA¹⁸ Network, uncovered by an investigation by Avaaz/Estadão¹⁹. The investigation revealed that in a period of just 30 days, a network of 28 pages on Facebook connected to 15 blogs and websites managed by this group, reached 12.6 million Facebook interactions (posts, comments, shares) and had a count of 16 million people following their Facebook pages. This underground network was then excluded by Facebook, which published a note saying there was a total of 68 pages and 43 accounts excluded from the platform²⁰.

Another example is the existence of the Chans, anonymous image boards which originated in Japan but are very popular in the English-speaking internet, where users can share any type of content without needing to disclose their identity. Such image boards are often an online meeting point for misogynistic communities, like the one that has been attacking the Brazilian feminist blogger Lola Aronovich and other internet content producers²¹. The use of Chans to attack individuals online and run character assassination campaigns has sparked a debate in Brazil that led to the creation of a law that transformed gender violence into a federal crime in 2018. The Chans and alternative media websites operate as a meeting place to exchange ideas with other radicalised users, like a headquarter, that then spread content throughout the internet in social media platforms. Paywall practices are, indeed, an alternative source of revenue for news outlets other than advertising. However, the practice in countries like Brazil, with no available open educational resources, a lack of good content

¹⁷Fighting Zika with Honey: An Analysis of YouTube’s Video Recommendations on Brazilian. Jonas Kaiser, Berkman Klein; Adrian Rauchfleisch, National Taiwan University; Yasodara Córdova, World Bank Group (forthcoming)

¹⁸ RFA stands for Raposo Fernandes Associates, surnames of the husband and wife in charge of the whole operation of this disinformation network.

¹⁹“Rede Pró-Bolsonaro Engaja Mais Do Que Madonna e Neymar - Política - Estadão,” accessed November 5, 2019, <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/eleicoes,rede-pro-bolsonaro-engaja-mais-do-que-madonna-e-neymar,70002544629>.

²⁰“Maior rede pró-Bolsonaro do Facebook é excluída após denúncia do ‘Estado’ - Política,” Estadão, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/eleicoes,maior-rede-pro>

²¹Patrícia Elena Santos Escobar, “Misoginia e internet a manifestação do ódio contra mulheres no ambiente virtual e as possíveis implicações da Lei nº 13.642/2018,” April 30, 2019, <https://repositorio-rio.ufpb.br/jspui/handle/123456789/14671>.

on Wikipedia (in Portuguese-BR) and with a lack of funding for public libraries, is extremely excluding, reinforcing knowledge bubbles.

d) Use of personal data/infringing privacy laws

By law, every telephone number in Brazil has to be linked to a CPF (cadastro de pessoa física), the taxpayer number for Brazilians. This number is somewhat public²², available to credit checking and other uses, not yet defined by the law. The telecommunications system in Brazil allows for the fraudulent registry of mobile numbers with CPFs of deceased or “*laranjas*”²³, since these taxpayer numbers are relatively easy to obtain. Once these numbers are registered with fraudulent IDs, they are used to automate messages on WhatsApp groups. The automation is only possible because WhatsApp has a feature that allows people and machines to find groups on the web, the “invite link”²⁴. Technically, the invite links work as a gate to everything that is published inside a group: from telephone numbers to messages, and allows viralisation of content.

Brazilian journalist Patricia Campos Mello reporting for Folha de S. Paulo uncovered several contracts with social media agencies and advertising companies related to then candidate Jair Bolsonaro. According to Mello's report, up to 300,000 WhatsApp accounts could have been used to automate broadcasts of disinformation and coordinate non-reported political advertising to thousands of WhatsApp groups.

Benevenuto et al (2019)²⁵ mapped over 350 WhatsApp groups in Brazil, labeled as “public groups”, and offered journalists and fact-checkers access to private communications within groups in a so called “WhatsApp Monitor” interface. During the 2018 elections, the WhatsApp Monitor was said to be one of the main sources for journalists and fact-checkers to pinpoint disinformation. We would like to stress that further analysis is required to explore whether WhatsApp's invite link feature is in breach of the Brazilian General Data Protection Law, as well as a gate for further scrutiny onto private communications. Recently the company admitted that automation was used for disinformation campaigns during the 2018 Brazilian elections²⁶, and “The platform also denounces public groups in the platform that are accessed through links, urging users not to join these groups”.

Focal Points of Hate and Disinformation

Regulations against hate crimes already exist in Brazil, including criminalization of racism, homophobia and severe penalties for violence against women. However, institutions fall short in enforcing the legislation. Therefore, hate spreads in many different directions and

²²“CPF: One Database to Rule Them All - Privacy International - Medium,” accessed November 5, 2019, <https://medium.com/@privacyint/cpf-one-database-to-rule-them-all-6343d802705c>.

²³ Laranjas are usually people that have their names and IDs used by criminals in the practice of fraudulent stratagems, like money laundry for example. Usually, illiterate and poor people have their IDs used in these schemes, unaware that they are being used to such schemes.

²⁴“WhatsApp FAQ - How to Create and Invite into a Group,” WhatsApp.com, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://faq.whatsapp.com/ko/android/26000123/?category=5245251>.

²⁵ Philippe Melo et al., “WhatsApp Monitor: A Fact-Checking System for WhatsApp,” n.d., 2.

²⁶“WhatsApp Admits Illegal Mass Messaging Used in Brazil's 2018 Elections | The Rio Times,” accessed November 5, 2019, <https://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/brazil/whatsapp-admits-to-illegal-mass>

with impunity, boosted by the disinformation ecosystem. Often, as described above, it springs out of the acute political polarisation of the country and deep routes of conservatism and religious fundamentalism. This section identifies three different categories or focal points where hate and disinformation intertwine.

1. Women as a target

Brazil has one case of violence against women every four minutes, according to official data from the Ministry of Health²⁷. Gender discrimination, misogyny and violence migrate from the offline culture to the online culture. We bring a few cases to illustrate it:

Fabiane de Jesus was killed by an angry mob after the popular Facebook page Guarujá Alerta (then with 50,000 followers) endorsed a disinformation piece saying that a woman was kidnapping babies to perform 'black magic' rituals and provided a drawn description of the alleged woman. The page was well known among the locals in that beach town, and a reliable source of news. Some people thought Fabiane looked like the woman in question (she didn't). The mob then performed a lynching that led to her death. Fabiane's husband was able to bring five men to justice who were involved in the lynching, but was not able to get the owner of the Facebook page (later disabled) to take responsibility for sharing the fake drawn description.

Bruna da Silva, the mother of Marcos Vinicius da Silva, a teenager who was killed by the police in Rio de Janeiro, during a raid at the favela Complexo da Maré while wearing his school uniform had her life devastated twice. Once with her son's death, and another when fake news about him started to spread on social media. After he was killed, at least 17 Facebook profiles²⁸ accused the boy of drug trafficking, and several fake photos and texts started to spread on social media, including a photo shared by thousands of people of a boy who allegedly looked like Marcos Vinicius holding a gun. To the BBC²⁹, Bruna said that this defamation by fake news was a "second death" of her son. Days after he was killed, a court decision³⁰ demanded Facebook remove the disinformation from the platform and identify those spreading it. As the lawsuit is confidential, it is impossible to determine which links were comprised in the judicial decision. But, despite which links were targeted or not, it is worth mentioning that it is still possible to find two types of disinformation connected to

²⁷“Brasil registra 1 caso de agressão a mulher a cada 4 minutos, mostra levantamento,” Folha de S.Paulo, September 9, 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2019/09/brasil-registra-1-caso-de-agressao-a-mulher-a-cada-4-minutos-mostra-levantamento.shtml>.

²⁸“Justiça Determina Que Facebook Remova Fake News Contra Estudante Morto Na Maré - 29/06/2018 - UOL Notícias,” accessed November 5, 2019, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2018/06/29/justica-determina-que-facebook-apague-fake-news-contra-menino-marcos-vinicius.htm>.

²⁹“Brasil registra 1 caso de agressão a mulher a cada 4 minutos, mostra levantamento,” Folha de S.Paulo, September 9, 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2019/09/>

³⁰Luiza Franco, “‘Ele morreu duas vezes’: a batalha de uma mãe para tirar da internet ‘fake news’ que acusam filho morto de ser traficante,” BBC News Brasil, March 11, 2019, sec. Brasil, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-47518522>.

this case online: 11) Facebook posts that were removed from the platform, but are still available through VPN tools³¹ or from outside Brazil; and b) Facebook posts that are still published and reachable without VPN³² at all. Although it is not possible to find total reach of the disinformation against Bruna's son (as many posts were deleted), one of the main posts is still accessible via VPN. It is also possible to find shares of this post, accessible without VPN and open to the public³³. A second post was shared in a popular Facebook group called "NOTÍCIAS DE NOVA IGUAÇU E REGIÃO" with more than 100,000 members and is still reachable by members of the group.

Aninha Moura³⁴, a conservative young woman from a small town with 14,000 inhabitants was forced to do HIV testing and publish results on her Facebook page, after WhatsApp rumours in her own small town spread saying that she was infected by the virus and was intentionally having sexual relationships with men in the town without protection, and without letting them know her status. This is a case about a very common practice of disinformation that adapts fast, given that the author of the story created a photo of Aninha to illustrate a fake WhatsApp profile, together with a fabricated conversation where she allegedly confirms her intention. The story was adapted to different contexts several times. Aninha was able to identify that the fake news piece about her had been edited (whenever it reached another small town, people changed the name of the city where she would allegedly reside to update the fake story and cause panic in the local community). Despite reporting this to police authorities, Aninha was never able to identify the original creator of fabricated screenshot.

Women's health at the center of disinformation. In 2016, Fabiane Vasconcellos, who was running for a seat at the Brazilian National Congress, made a video claiming that the mammography exam causes thyroid cancer, and that it is an effect of the "medical mafia bosses". This is a case in which a woman distributes disinformation on an issue related to women's health, based on conspiracy theories spread on the web. While the original video cannot be found, the rumors restarted in 2017³⁵.

Women political figures are an even greater target. Amongst them, we could cite vice-president candidate Manuela D'Ávila, Rio councilwoman Marielle Franco, former Environment Minister Marina Silva:

³¹ VPN (Virtual Private Network) is a system to enable internet users to extend a private networks towards a public or shared network, channeling data in and out of this private network with privacy, hiding the Internet Address (IP number).

³² "Justiça Ordena Que Facebook Retire Fake News Que Apontam Jovem Morto Na Maré Como Traficante - Jornal O Globo," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://oglobo.globo.com/rio/justica-ordena-que-facebook- retire-fake-news-que-apontam-jovem-morto-na-mare-como-trafficante-22837526>.

³³ "Adriano Lima," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/152117161598126/permalink/1159149004228265/>.

³⁴ "Jovem Decide Colocar Exame de HIV Negativo Em Perfil Do Facebook Para Negar Boato: 'Não Dava Nem Pra Sair de Casa' | É Ou Não é? | G1," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://g1.globo.com/e-ou-nao-e/noticia/jovem-decide-colocar-exame-de-hiv-negativo-em-perfil-do-facebook-para-negar-boato-nao-dava-nem-pra-sair-de-casa.ghtml>.

³⁵ FaçaM Mamografia Com Proteção, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5F1lrmvbyA>

Manuela D'Ávila, vice-president candidate on the Workers Party ticket in 2018 was considered one of the biggest targets of disinformation in the Brazilian elections. On one occasion only, Manuela's attorney requested the Brazilian Electoral Justice remove 33 Facebook publications that accumulated 146,480 shares and 5,190,942 visualizations³⁶. Pieces included alleged connections of Manuela with Jair Bolsonaro's stabber, abortion claims, fake materials accusing her of pedophilia and many more.

Marielle Franco, the Rio councilwoman, who was ambushed by armed militia and killed, suffered a massive disinformation campaign in the next few hours after her death. Stories included a disinformation piece spread on WhatsApp saying that Marielle had been married to a top drug dealer of one of Rio's favelas and was associated with the traffic. This story was shared on Facebook by Rio de Janeiro court judge Marília Castro Neves and tweeted by Federal Representative Alberto Fraga (DEM-DF). In another case, a YouTube video with more than 3,000 views claimed that she had received campaign money from the Red Command, one of Rio's biggest criminal groups³⁷. The original story of her alleged involvement with the Red Command was posted by alternative fact website *Ceticismo Político*³⁸ and before being removed, had more than 400,000 shares³⁹.

Marina Silva, former presidential candidate by REDE, suffered severe disinformation attacks by the Workers Party in the 2014 elections. During the 2018 campaign, the same disinformation pieces were recycled by the far-right in 2018. Pieces included news that her husband was involved in grave deforestation accusations (for context, Marina Silva is considered a champion on anti-deforestation efforts in Brazil, reducing it by up to 80% in the 7 years she stayed in office). But disinformation about Marina also covered themes like her involvement with evangelical groups, claims that she would make abortion a crime for any case in Brazil and that she herself involved was in corruption scandals.

2. Homophobia and disinformation for political gain

One of the key characteristics of disinformation in the last Brazilian elections is its ability to tokenise LGBTQ minorities in order to exploit the positions of the two major polarised political groups of the country for political gain. While left-wing politicians and social media pages and groups condemn far right's accusations against LGBTQ people and use this to seduce the progressives' vote, far-right groups often resorted to disinformation and hate speech towards LGBTQ celebrities and personalities of the Brazilian political and cultural life to rally their bases.

One of the major disinformation pieces involving the LGBTQ community is the "gay kit case" that dates back from the period in which Fernando Haddad, then a Minister of Education

³⁶ "TSE Manda Facebook Tirar Do Ar 33 Links Com Notícias Falsas Contra Manuela D'Ávila," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://extra.globo.com/noticias/brasil/tse-manda-facebook-tirar-do-ar-33-links-com-noticias-falsas-contramanuela-davila-23141190.html>.

³⁷ "Marielle não foi casada com Marcinho VP nem eleita pelo Comando Vermelho," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/confere/ultimas-noticias/2018/03/18/marielle-foi-casada-com-marcin>

³⁸ "Ceticismo Político," Ceticismo Político, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://ceticismopolitico.com/>.

³⁹ "Post mais compartilhado sobre Marielle Franco é um 'fake news' comprovado," *Pragmatismo Político* (blog), March 27, 2018, <https://www.pragmatismopolitico.com.br/2018/03/ceticismo>

(2005-2012), intended to issue a book on gender education for public schools. However, conservative evangelical forces like Pastor Silas Malafaia, positioned themselves against the publication of such a book, labelled the "gay kit", that intended to "teach kids how to turn gay". The gay kit case was widely reported by the media, and the book was never published. However, the "gay kit" is possibly one of the most well documented disinformation campaigns from Brazil, having repositories all over the web, including the blogspot of the President Bolsonaro and his family. It takes only a web search to find the description of the false story, videos and other pieces that are used to deceive users.

It is important to note that the presence of alternative sites and blogs populating the web with disinformation campaigns is crucial to successful viralisation of false information. Blogs on Wordpress, Blogspot, images on Flickr and other well-maintained structures guarantee the life of these stories beyond the life of posts on Facebook or even WhatsApp message chains. Furthermore, these documented stories fuel Google's search algorithm, that feeds from metadata and SEO strategies, also weaponised by radical groups. Due to that, years later, the "gay kit" story came back to life just before the election campaign started. Suddenly, old news clips about the case went viral on social media, and fabricated photos with Fernando Haddad and a so-called print copy of the "gay kit" went viral, with incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro bringing an alleged copy of the book to a major TV news interview at Globo TV (Brazil's biggest TV channel). According to an Avaaz/IDEA Big Data poll run during the second round of the elections in October 2018, the story was so widespread that 85.2% of Bolsonaro's voters reported that had seen it, and 83.7% of them said they believed it. Of Haddad's voters however, a lower score (61%) reported that they saw this disinformation piece, and only 10.5% believed it.⁴⁰ According to internal monitoring from Avaaz, this was one of the biggest stories of the election day on October 28, 2018 with Facebook posts (still available) reaching 275,000 views and 30,000 shares.

⁴⁰ "Estudo Diz Que 90% Dos Eleitores de Bolsonaro Acreditaram Em Fake News | Política | Valor Econômico," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://valor.globo.com/politica/noticia/2018/11/02/estudo-diz-que-90-dos-eleitores-de-bolsonaro-acreditaram-em-fake-news.ghtml>

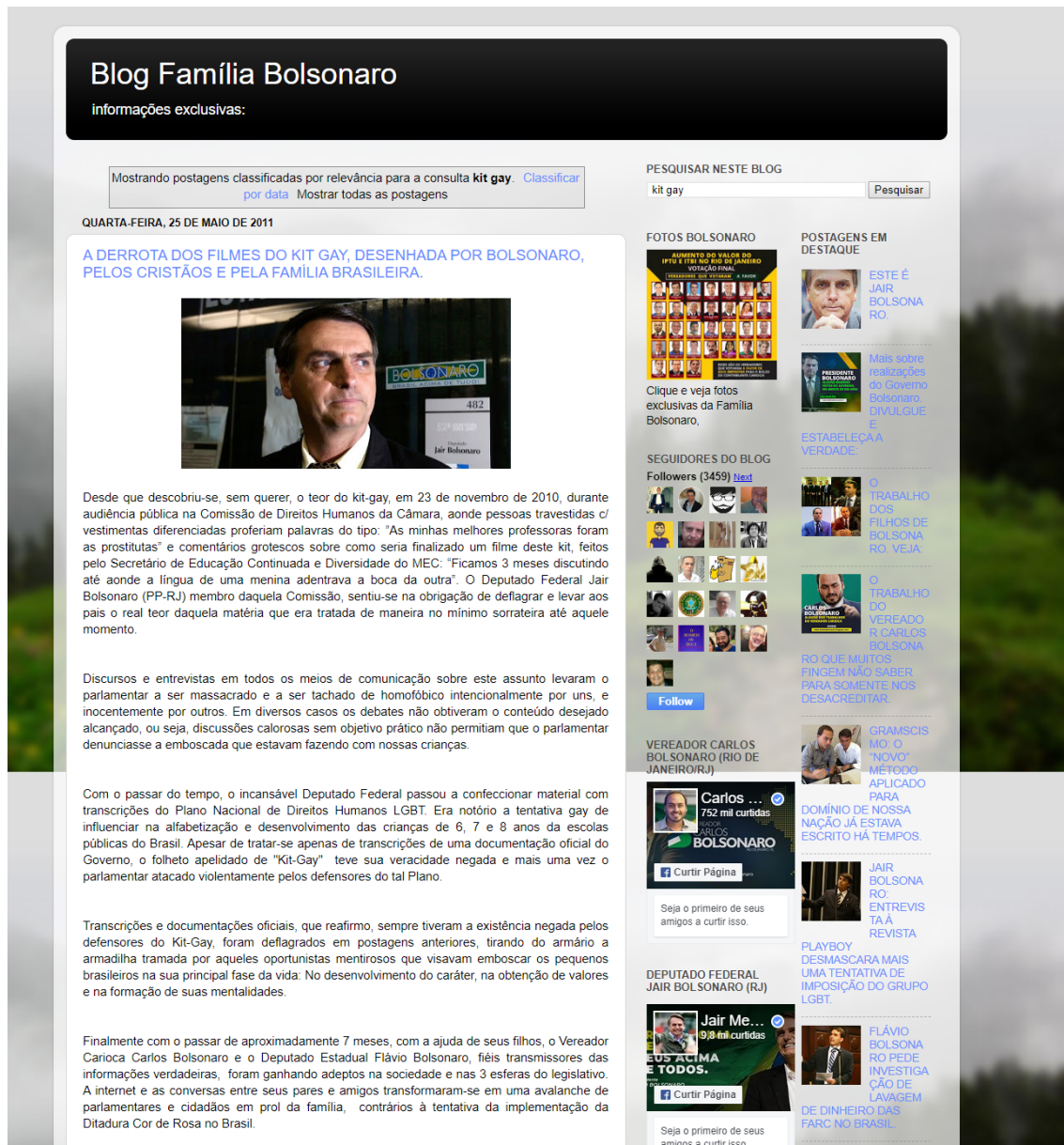


Fig. 2. Image from a search performed on Bolsonaro's personal blogspot on 10/09/2019 available on: <https://familiabolsonaro.blogspot.com/search?q=kit+gay>

Another major target of LGBTQ-related disinformation is Jean Wyllys, a former Brazilian member of Congress who escaped the country after several death threats and disinformation. Most of the disinformation on Jean Wyllys explores his sexuality as a gay politician. Claims include that he was going to be Fernando Haddad's Minister of Education (to implement the "gay kit" mentioned above), that he was a pedophile or that he had "waged war on Christianity". Another grave example of fake news tried to connect Jean Wyllys to the stabber of candidate Jair Bolsonaro, and said he was leaving the country not because of death threats but to escape justice. On the latter, the investigative journalism website "A Pública"⁴¹

⁴¹ "Rastreamos a hashtag que espalhou fake news sobre Jean Wyllys," *Agência Pública* (blog), February 11, 2019, <https://apublica.org/2019/02/rastreamos-a-hashtag-que-espalhou-fake-news-jean-wyllys/>.

looked over 300,000 posts on Twitter, and publications on Facebook, YouTube and GAB⁴² (an alternative social network similar to Twitter, described by the New York Times as a "new digital safe space" for the far-right) and concluded that most of the disinformation about this claim had been shared by bots and promoted by far-right political figures connected to the incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro.

Below are listed common titles of LGBTQ-related disinformation stories that were widespread during the elections in 2018 in order to attack progressives or LGBTQ-friendly candidates:

1. The government promoted a LGBT seminar for kids
2. "Gender ideology" is a way to teach boys to be girls and vice-versa
3. Fernando Haddad will change the gender of 5-year-old children
4. Jean Wyllys will create a law to force churches to marry gay couples
5. Fernando Haddad posted photo holding a rubber dildo
6. Fernando Haddad will distribute a baby bottle with a penis shape to nurseries
7. Manuela D'Ávila used a t-shirt saying "Jesus is a transvestite"
8. Pedophiles are part of the LGBT+ community.
9. In the city of Juiz de Fora, a drag queen has been hired to teach gender ideology to children
10. Pablo Vittar, is a trans-artist will become the Minister of Education, and force a "gay agenda" into primary schools in Brazil

3. Marginalised communities

Marginalised communities in Brazil are both a target, and a product of disinformation. Brazil's favelas' residents, for example, are very vulnerable to the disinformation ecosystem. Rumours about abducted children are not unusual in Brazil, and have been taken to another level due to the spread of cheap phones in favela communities and zero-rating practices. Rene Silva, a leading voice of one of Rio de Janeiro's biggest favelas, affirms that WhatsApp disinformation is a disturbing reality of such communities⁴³. In collaboration with journalists, he does constant fact-checking and verification of disinformation pieces that are spread by residents.

Even though the case of Fabiane de Jesus mentioned above was widely reported by the media, it all happened again a few years later in a favela community. A report from *A Voz da*

⁴² Amanda Hess, "The Far Right Has a New Digital Safe Space," The New York Times, November 30, 2016, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/arts/the-far-right-has-a-new-digital-safe-space.htm>

⁴³ Felipe Souza - @felipe_dess, "Força usada para difundir 'fake news' pode ser redirecionada para algo benéfico, diz professora eleita a melhor do Brasil," *BBC News Brasil*, March 12, 2019, sec. Brasil, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-47501445>.

*Comunidade*⁴⁴ showed in 2018 how this kind of fake news were causing panic. Before that, in 2015, EXTRA⁴⁵ also showed how parents of children in some neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro and cities close to the capital were changing their routine and even carrying knives to protect their children after reading false news on kidnappings. The most serious case occurred in 2017 in the city of Araruama. Disinformation about a couple kidnapping children in a white car has spread through local WhatsApp groups⁴⁶, and as a consequence, Luiz Aurélio de Paula and Pamela Martins, falsely accused of being kidnappers, were attacked by a crowd.

Venezuelan migrants have also been a target of disinformation in Brazil. Due to an influx of migrants at the border with Brazil just months before the election campaign, far-right groups fuelled by hate speech candidate Jair Bolsonaro started to spread disinformation about these marginalised community, including that they were bringing back long eradicated diseases like measles to Brazil. The Brazilian north region, where the border with Venezuela is situated, is one of the Brazilian states most aligned with far-right and conservative values.

Indigenous people are also key victims of disinformation in this highly polarised context. Disinformation against the indigenous include claims that their own indigenous leaders are selling off their lands to foreign companies.⁴⁷ Another piece claimed that indigenous leaders were mining gold and selling it to other countries. One particular video shows men performing a check on a load of gold that was allegedly mined in indigenous lands and was being shipped to France. The video emerged amidst the recent diplomatic crisis around the September 2019 wildfires in the Brazilian part of the Amazon⁴⁸ and the global community's response, including strong criticism from French president Emmanuel Macron. The video was accompanied by a text that claimed that NGOs were also a part of the scheme. However, that same video has been checked by French newspaper Liberation, which reported that the video had already been used to spread disinformation saying President Macron had involvement with gold traffic and other accusations⁴⁹.

Chief Raoni Metuktire, a 89-year old indigenous leader nominated for the 2019 Nobel peace prize, is a constant victim of attacks by hate groups and far-right individuals on the web.

⁴⁴ "Boatos Sobre Sequestros No Alemão Geram Polêmicas Nas Redes Sociais e Causam Medo Entre Moradores – Voz Das Comunidades," accessed November 5, 2019, <http://www.vozdascomunidades.com.br/geral/boatos-sobre-sequestros-no-alemao-geram>.

⁴⁵ "Boatos de Sequestro de Crianças Se Espalham Pelo Rio; Polícia Nega Ocorrências," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://extra.globo.com/noticias/rio/boatos-de-sequestro-de-criancas-se-espalham-pelo-rio-police>

⁴⁶ "G1 - Multidão Tenta Linchar Casal Após Boato de Sequestro Em WhatsApp - Notícias Em Região Dos Lagos," accessed November 5, 2019, <http://g1.globo.com/rj/regiao-dos-lagos/noticia/2017/04/multidao-cerca-carro-e-tenta-linchar-casal-suspeito-de-sequestrar-crianca.html>.

⁴⁷ "Onda de desinformação sobre índios inclui falsa venda de reserva para empresa irlandesa," *Estadão Verifica* (blog), accessed November 5, 2019, <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/estadao-verifica/onda-de-desinformacao-sobre-indios-inclui-falsa-venda-de-reserva-para-empresa-irlandesa/>

⁴⁸ "Amazon Fires: What's the Latest in Brazil? - BBC News," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-49971563>.

⁴⁹ "(1) Non, La Douane Du Mali n'a Pas Démantelé Un Trafic d'or Effectué Par Des Militaires Français Sous Les Ordres de l'Elysée - Libération," accessed November 5, 2019, https://www.liberation.fr/check-news/2019/09/10/non-la-douane-du-mali-n-a-pas-demantele-un-traffic-d-or-effectue-par-des-militaires-francais-sous-les-1750514?fbclid=IwAR2STGCH3e1Vluyfeq49DTs1vW4uxgbVDsqGFSama8po_xAY7EqfcU03sXs.

Often, it is spurred by conspiracy theories involving NGOs and foreign governments working together with the indigenous to take over the Brazilian part of the Amazon rainforest. As an example, the YouTube channel BomNoticiasTV (with 275,000 subscribers) has spread several disinformation pieces about chief Raoni, the latest being his alleged involvement in a scheme to raise funds with Prince Albert of II of Monaco to take over indigenous lands of the Xingu tribe. The video already has 12,000 views on YouTube and uses as the title "Raoni, traitor of the motherland"⁵⁰. In another video from September 25, 2019 the same YouTuber published a story saying Chief Raoni was involved in another scheme with NGOs to export gold to France. The video, published right after president Jair Bolsonaro's speech at the United Nations General Assembly, which is now set to 'private' mode in the channel's settings and no longer accessible to the public, had over 460,000 views in less than two days.

First-hand accounts from indigenous leaders also indicate disinformation spread by political enemies like farmers and land-owners who, in trying to turn different indigenous communities against each other, spread rumours that entire communities have been facing hunger, which is not true, in an attempt to try to seduce indigenous leaders into illegal mining or deforestation⁵¹. To Avaaz, several indigenous leaders reported hearing from henchmen in their own communities claims that the new administration of Jair Bolsonaro was following through on his campaign promises to revoke indigenous land rights, a promise that has not yet been realised by the Brazilian president, causing fear and anxiety amongst indigenous communities.

Additionally, it is important to note the issue around the indigenous right-wing YouTuber Ysani Kalapalo, a central figure in this struggle of indigenous communities to fight disinformation and hate. Ysani, who has close ties with president Jair Bolsonaro, appeared on a Facebook livestream with the president taking the blame on behalf of the indigenous people for the wildfires in the Amazon. The video caused a stir in the indigenous communities who criticize Ysani Kalapalo for siding with the government, to say that the indigenous, and not criminals, were behind the fires.

Lastly, we would like to also point to vaccine disinformation as having a key effect on marginalised communities in the country. The Brazilian Immunization Society and Ministry of Health have reported that national vaccination rates for measles have decreased due to anti-vaccination movements and WhatsApp disinformation. A recent report⁵² suggested that Polio vaccination in 2019 is on average at 52%, with 100 cities having less than 1% of children vaccinated, growing the risks of long eradicated diseases coming back to life.

⁵⁰ ATENÇÃO BRASIL : CACIQUE RAONI TRAIADOR DA PÁTRIA!! ENTREGOU TUDO PARA Príncipe Albert II AMAZÔNIA, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJU26W809s>.

⁵¹ "Comunicadores indígenas contra as fake news," ISA - Instituto Socioambiental, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.socioambiental.org/pt-br/blog/blog-do-rio-negro/comunicadores-indigenas-contra-as-fake-news>.

⁵² "Baixa Cobertura Vacinal Acende Alerta Para Novos Casos de Pólio No Brasil - 25/10/2019 - Cotidiano - Folha," accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2019/10/baixa-cobertura-vacinal-acende-alerta-para-novos-casos-de-polio-no-brasil.shtml>.

Solving the Problem: Policy Recommendations

Fixing the disinformation and hate epidemics on social media should be a collaboration between tech companies, legislators and government authorities, and civil society. However, any solution must be grounded in shared values of freedom of expression, protection of privacy and transparency and ensuring net neutrality rules are preserved. Responsibility of all players involved is key. Therefore, the following recommendations should be taken into account:

To governments

1. Government authorities are key to upholding the relevant legislation against crimes committed on social media. Therefore, both Federal government and the Brazilian Judiciary should work together to better enforce the current legislation and to curb fraudulent activity and identity theft in social media platforms that aim to produce disinformation in public debates. Authorities should also ensure net neutrality rules are respected, to create a healthier internet ecosystem in the country, curbing zero-rating and monopoly practices.
2. The Brazilian Judiciary should also invest resources to train judges to make better decisions in cases where disinformation and hate speech is central. This should not be isolated to election periods. Actions could include seminars and training about the threat of disinformation for electoral processes and the public debate, as well as updating the Judiciary's norms towards electoral money spending on social media platforms during an election period.
3. Enforce the legislation to ensure identity theft and fraudulent activity on SIM card registration for mobile phones is reduced, in order to curb WhatsApp bot creation and fraudulent activity in messaging apps that use mobile phone numbers as a registration requirement. ANATEL (Brazil National Telecommunication Regulator) should work with telecommunications providers to offer zero-rating policy to news media outlets during the election period, to ensure internet users could get quality information and access to fact-checking for free. Introduce legislation to give the digital user more freedom towards their data, including rules for data portability, as well as introduce legislation to bring accountability and responsibility to platforms, including, but not only, a duty to cooperate with public authorities and publicise solutions and transparency measures.

To tech and social media companies

1. Adopt a "correct the record" policy, working with independent fact-checkers and traditional media to ensure fact-checked corrections on disinformation and hate speech reach users who have seen or interacted with it. Providing swift factual responses to disinformation on social media is a key factor in raising public awareness about its threats and educating the populace.
2. Adopt a stronger transparency policy, informing users of political and non-political advertising expenditure, including making available to everyone complete sets of ads that they're being targeted in during electoral periods. It is essential that governments,

civil society and the general public be informed by tech companies about the nature and scale of the threat of disinformation and the measures being taken to protect their services against it.

3. **Correct the Algorithms:** Algorithm prioritisation can increase user engagement with disinformation and other harmful content as seen in the radicalisation of hate in YouTube channels in Brazil, deepening the political polarisation and spreading pseudoscience. Platforms need to be proactive in correcting algorithms to ensure that they are not accelerating disinformation.
4. **Transparency on the Bot and automation policies:** Bots are used for good reasons and fill the gaps of a crescent demand for automation. Users should be aware that they are interacting with service bots whenever they interact with automated content online.
5. **Zero tolerance toward automated bots in social media,** including Facebook malicious accounts and non-registered Twitter bots.
6. **Transparency over WhatsApp deleted accounts in Brazil.** WhatsApp deleted nearly 1.5 million account in the last Brazilian elections that were to some extent engaging on automatised of content, or any other malpractice, and should continue to do so on a regular basis, but in collaboration with the Brazilian authorities in order to facilitate the identification of malicious players, especially during elections.

To media outlets

1. Media outlets and independent media professionals should invest in coverage of disinformation victims' personal stories, ensuring that the narrative of disinformation goes beyond political/partisan "fake news". This includes investigative pieces on underground networks, far-right radicalised groups and other malicious actors that could be taking advantage of hate for political gain.
2. We strongly recommend the media drop the paywall during election periods, ensuring that their content can be easily accessible to lower-income citizens, and vulnerable individuals who could fall prey to disinformation and hate speech. Outlets should encourage news desks to promote fact-checking practices and stories, and distribute this through their social media channels.

To other relevant actors

1. Associations of minority groups (LGBTQ, indigenous, women's rights associations and others) should work in partnership with NGOs and digital rights movements such as the *Coalizão Direitos na Rede* (Coalition Rights in the Network) to deepen their knowledge of their digital rights, online freedom of expression and disinformation, and devise a strategy together to provide firsthand accounts of disinformation to policy-makers and the media, as well as to tech companies.
2. We encourage telecommunications companies operating in the country to expand their service offers of applications to go beyond social media companies, and include media outlets as potential partners. Furthermore, telecommunications companies need to update their privacy and security practices, aimed at protecting the identity of the owners of phone numbers. The phone number itself needs to be considered personal data, therefore protected by the General Data Protection Law.

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