

ARTICLE

“TRASH!”, “LEFTIST!”, “SCUMBAG!”, “#FAKENEWS”, BUT NOT SO MUCH:

attacks and criticism towards
media institutions and strategic use
of journalism by online far-right
activism in Brazil



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ABSTRACT – This article analyzes the relationship between far-right activism and Brazilian media institutions in the digital environment. The research is based on the content published by two far-right Twitter profiles – Direita Brasil and Verde e Amarela – over the course of 18 months, and 2.872 posts were published during this period. Our findings reveal a complex relationship between far-right activism and media institutions. While attacks directed to the traditional Brazilian press or journalists are common, several posts use the same journalistic model and coverage of the Brazilian media to attack other politicians or institutions.

Key words: Activism. Far-Right. Press. Twitter. Media institutions. Media criticism.

“LIXO!”, “ESQUERDISTA!”, “CANALHA!”, “#FAKENEWS”, MAS NEM TANTO: ataques e críticas à imprensa em meio ao uso estratégico do jornalismo pelo ativismo de extrema direita online no Brasil

RESUMO – Este artigo analisa as articulações do ativismo de extrema direita no ambiente digital no que diz respeito ao modo como se relacionam com as instituições midiáticas brasileiras. A pesquisa tem como base a atuação de duas contas de extrema direita - Direita Brasil e Verde e Amarela - no Twitter, durante 18 meses, com 2.872 postagens no período. Os resultados mostram que há uma relação complexa nas dinâmicas do ativismo de extrema direita quando se trata das instituições midiáticas, com os ataques direcionados à imprensa e seus agentes, mas que também estão atrelados a um uso estratégico do modelo jornalístico e da própria cobertura.

Palavras-chave: Ativismo. Extrema-direita. Imprensa. Twitter. Crítica da mídia.

“¡BASURA!”, “¡IZQUIERDISTA!”, “¡TRASTE!”, “#FAKENEWS”, PERO NO MUCHO: ataques y críticas a las instituciones mediáticas y el uso estratégico del periodismo en la actuación del activismo digital de extrema derecha en Brasil

RESUMEN – Este artículo analiza las maneras cómo el activismo de extrema derecha en el entorno digital se relaciona con las instituciones mediáticas brasileñas. La investigación se basa en el análisis de dos páginas de extrema derecha – Direita Brasil y Verde e Amarela – en Twitter, durante 18 meses, con 2.872 publicaciones durante todo el período. Los resultados muestran que existe cierta complejidad en la dinámica del activismo de extrema derecha cuando se trata de las instituciones mediáticas. Fueron encontrados ataques dirigidos a la prensa y sus agentes, pero también se ha verificado el uso estratégico del modelo del texto periodístico. Al mismo tiempo, las cuentas se utilizan de la propia cobertura que realiza la prensa convencional para destinar ataques a otros políticos y instituciones.

Palabras clave: Activismo. Extrema derecha. Prensa. Twitter. Crítica a los medios.

1 Introduction

The Brazilian scenario combines low levels of trust in traditional news media, particularly towards established communication groups (Newman et al., 2020), alongside widespread institutional distrust (Ribeiro, 2011). However, a new element has emerged in this scenario, namely a steady series of attacks on professionals and organizations that have spread through various mechanisms – officially and unofficially – above all in the online

environment. On the one hand, the political elite targets institutions (Fenaj, 2022) and journalists (Tuzzo & Temer, 2021). On the other hand, attacks stem from a robust set of social media profiles, not belonging to official authorities, and comprise what has been called far-right online activism, the focus of our article.

While research studies have largely analyzed activism as a typical action of groups associated with the left advocating for social rights, the literature has begun to incorporate new groups operating in the digital environment. Thus, we understand digital activism as “political participation, activities, and protests organized in digital networks beyond representational politics” (Karatzogianni, 2015), and right-wing activism when the actions of groups convey conservative discourses and distance themselves from the demand for social rights and progressive agendas. It is important to note that in Brazil the concept of ‘new right’ is commonly employed (Messemberg, 2017; Bolognesi et al., 2015) to designate a right-wing conservative wave that has increasingly gained strength in the online environment in the last decade. In this research, however, we use the term ‘far-right’ to refer to these groups, in tandem with the international literature (Freelon et al., 2020; Bennet & Livingston, 2018).

The presence of far-right groups in the online environment dates back at least 20 years, above all in Europe (Chagas & Massuchin, 2022). This trend gained more visibility in Brazil in 2014 (Dos Santos Junior, 2016), became central in 2018 (Mitozo & Mont’Alverne, 2019), and expanded during the covid-19 pandemic (Recuero et al., 2021). Myriad far-right websites and social media profiles organize around a strategic action repertoire, ranging from discrediting (Prudencio, 2020) to “anti-PTism” (Messemberg, 2017). In this article, we refer to a set of social media profiles as far-right due to their propensities towards anti-communism, intolerance of diversity, and discursive violence, akin to groups previously mapped by Castelli and Pirro (2019).

Grounded on data analysis, our article contributes to understanding a complex – and even paradoxical (Haller et al., 2019) – element in the repertoire of far-right activism in Brazil, which specifically involves journalistic institutions. On the one hand, we find a behavior predicated on attacks and efforts to discredit the press and its agents, an issue already extensively investigated (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Fernandes et al., 2021; Forsberg, 2021; Carlson et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018, 2019; Cesarino, 2019). On the other hand, there is a strategic use of the traditional media itself when targeting other groups, such as agents of other

powers, a particularity that the literature has largely neglected. We strive to expand the argument further by suggesting that digital far-right groups have an ambivalent relationship with the press, simultaneously incorporating attacks in their strategies as much as dependence and convenient use of media contents and formats.

Thus, in this article, we explore how online far-right activism references Brazilian media institutions and their agents. While we acknowledge the fundamental cornerstone of far-right attacks, based on an “us x them” binarism (Fernandes et al., 2021), we seek to understand the complex relationship between the tactics of this activism and references to the traditional press, in tandem with Haller et al. (2019).

Our empirical analysis stems from content published in two far-right Twitter profiles over the course of 18 months, totaling 2.872 posts, between 2020 and 2021: Verde e Amarela and Direita Brasil. Using content analysis as a research technique (Bauer, 2002; Krippendorff, 2004), we analyzed these posts from the following variables: presence and types of attacks, targeted institutions, date of posting, the tenor of the discourse, and links shared. Following this introduction, we explore the hostility regarding the press and how the far-right organizes online. We then detail our methodological approach and discuss the data. We conclude with our final considerations.

2 From centrality to a visibility crisis and distrust of institutions

Media institutions fall within a broad range of social institutions (Braga, 2018) whose main activity includes communication, and operation according to certain rules and guidelines (Fontes & Marques, 2022). The evolution from partisan journalism to information journalism (Gomes, 2004) entailed the emergence of large media conglomerates, which not only bear responsibility for the specific characteristics of Brazil’s media system but have also historically controlled the productive chain of institutionalized communication in Brazilian society (Albuquerque & Pinto, 2019).

Nonetheless, digital information flows have led to changes in traditional media, as Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) have shown, culminating in a third era of political communication marked by information abundance and the emergence of actors responsible for decentralizing the flow of communication (Dos Santos Alves; Albuquerque, 2019). Empirical research has located this scenario in

2018 (Dos Santos Alves, Albuquerque, 2019) and 2014 (Alves, 2016), in which disruptions stemmed from far-right unofficial channels capable of more social media engagement compared to traditional media websites.

The online environment alters existing power relations insofar as it hinders the institutions' capacity to control narratives and their visibility (Thompson, 2005). This in turn leads to a process of institutional distrust. According to Moisés and Carneiro (2008), this can be a worrying factor insofar as individuals who do not trust the press tend to show less support for democracy. The latest edition of the Digital News Report (2022) shows that overall consumption of news websites has dropped considerably in many countries, from 63% in 2017 to 51% in 2022. The report also registered declines in trust in practically all countries analyzed, while the share of the population that claims to avoid the news, sometimes or often, has doubled in Brazil since 2017, as the country occupies the first place in the ranking in this category, followed by the United Kingdom and the United States. A 2019 survey by Datafolha found that, over 10 years, distrust in the press increased from 18% to 32% among Brazilians. The GfK Verein survey (2015) also revealed that Brazilians consider the press less reliable than other institutions, such as the church or government.

Furthermore, amid a polarized scenario, the search for the truth (Correia, 2019) – or for a reference closer to the truth – has mattered less, which further erases media institutions from the scene. Distrust in traditional media outlets reiterates the persuasive power of disinformation content (Teixeira & Costa, 2020), which finds more room to spread. The covid-19 pandemic has shown, for example, that shared dogmas matter more in the dispute for the notion of truth (Sacramento, 2018).

While this context puts media institutions at a disadvantage, recent studies have also emphasized the responsibility of these institutions for the emerging anti-democratic scenario. Critical research approaches regarding the media's role have questioned the emphasis on depoliticization (Rizzotto et al., 2017), the smaller distance between opinion and information – as in the case of the newspaper *Gazeta do Povo*¹ (Tavares, 2018) –, and the amplification of discourses by populist leaders in lieu of democratic values (Fontes & Marques, 2022). These investigations have argued that, through this behavior, the media violates the very concept of journalistic ethics, particularly objectivity and impartiality. Furthermore, the Western press has undergone a historical crisis, rooted in changes in the core values of journalism as well as in the “tabloidization” of newspapers (Zelizer, 2009; Anderson

et al., 2015). Precisely for this reason, the media has been the target of criticism even before the rise of the internet and the actions of far-right groups, which have since intensified the problem.

Lastly, while we do not assert any causal relationship between attacks on the press and media distrust, we argue that the emphasis of activist groups on framing the press as an enemy is an additional variable to an already critical scenario for media institutions. Furthermore, the literature has shown that far-right activist discourse mostly spreads through social media. In other words, the rhetoric of right-wing activism further intensifies a relationship with the media marked by lower visibility, distrust, and questionable actions. We explore this issue below.

3 Right-wing activism and relationship with the press

Social media offers tools for a diverse variety of activist groups, fostering debates and content sharing, including content that rejects dialogue or denies rights and the inclusion of minorities. Grounded on social interactions made possible by the internet, the Brazilian far-right has since reorganized itself (Miguel, 2018; Rocha, 2021) within a network that became known as online right-wing activism.

As such, a series of discourses have gained visibility and ground in the public debate, promoting reactionary, conservative, and often anti-democratic agendas (Messenberg, 2017, Freelon et al., 2020; Solano, 2018; Oliveira et al., 2021). This is further fueled by disinformation practices and the discredit of institutions. Efforts to shape and manipulate public opinion emerge from the use of troll factories and targeted messages based on big data analytics (Cesarino, 2019; Bennett & Livingston, 2018), spreading through the use of astroturfing strategies (Chagas & Massuchin, 2022).

On top of the abovementioned discourses, national and international research on far-right activism has shown that another common trait of these groups includes routine attacks on the traditional media in online environments (Forsberg, 2021; Carlson et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018, 2019; Cesarino, 2019; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Carlson et al. (2021) explored how Trump and his allies helped to erode the media's legitimacy. In Brazil, digital profiles also dispute narratives about different facts (Lerner, 2018; Chagas, 2021), including against the press, to secure their own position in contemporary far-right politics. These groups, moreover,

tend to accuse the traditional media of spreading disinformation when news coverage disfavors them or does not align with their demands (Dourado & Gomes, 2019; Mendes & Mendonça, 2019).

There is a diverse repertoire of attacks on traditional media. Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019, p. 904) argued that in some contexts “critics position themselves as “representatives of the ‘people’, in other contexts as experts criticizing emotional, moralistic popular opinion and discourse, [...] and in other moments, as victims of the same media (outsiders)”. And, while media criticism has historically been seen as part of the democratic system, today it is difficult to define what is criticism and cynicism in relation to the press (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Part of the scholarly literature, on the other hand, finds a paradoxical situation (Haller & Holt, 2019) by which far-right profiles act to discredit these journalistic institutions while simultaneously agreeing with them in certain contexts. Haller and Holt (2019), for example, compare how the PEGIDA², in Germany and Austria, references the press. The group quotes alternative and mainstream media with the same intensity, quoting the latter in an affirmative and non-challenging way 66% of the time. That is, despite their attacks on the credibility of mainstream media, the profiles make positive mentions of content they deem convenient.

Likewise, the far-right also makes use of credibility strategies – such as writing style, news links, teasers, headlines, photographs, sources, credits, and similar hallmarks of the journalistic field, as well as websites with layout, design, and URLs akin to a press outlet, etc. – to give the impression that its contents are newspaper publications (Bennet & Livingston, 2018). The literature has named this action journalistic mimicry (Dourado & Gomes, 2019). This, in turn, implies tacitly recognizing the authority and credibility (Grossi & Soares dos Santos, 2018; Lisboa & Benetti, 2015; Mick, 2019) of journalism as an institution that produces factual and truthful information.

The use of links, in particular, is a tactic to grant more credibility to the shared content insofar as it provides the source of information, offering the reader the possibility of checking the information. Creators and disseminators of disinformation, for example, strive to engage in what Dourado and Gomes (2019) have called double counterfeiting, “either by inventing or changing the facts to which their stories refer, or by camouflaging the narrative through language, according to the style and semblance of journalistic reports” (s.p.). Disinformation narratives are widespread in far-right hyperpartisan media, which “resemble information

outlets, but produce content that favors a specific ideology, often through the use of strategies such as sensationalism, anonymity, and clickbait to enhance the circulation of what they publish” (Recuero et al., 2021, p. 27).

Lastly, attacks may also come from political representatives. Although the tweets analyzed in this article come from impersonal profiles, many of their retweets come from content published by politicians. This reveals an environment that merges attacks from different directions, as has happened in the US with Donald Trump (Carlson et al., 2021). For example, in a publication dated January 23, 2021, the profile Direita Brasil published a video from Jair Bolsonaro’s official YouTube channel titled “The reason why Globo hates every Bolsonaro and wants to oust the President from Brasília”. As such, this additional factor corroborates the need to devise a complex equation to understand the relationship between far-right groups and the media.

4 Theoretical approach, object, and variables

The object of analysis of this article is Twitter. Despite the existing social bubbles, Twitter is a social network in which conversations about politics stand out amid the flow of messages, aggregating a diverse spectrum of political conflicts (Campos-Domínguez et al., 2021). Furthermore, diverse groups who organize themselves in the online environment use this social network to gain visibility and engage in discussions within the political landscape.

For this study, we analyzed posts from two profiles – Direita Brasil and Verde e Amarela – over the course of 18 months. The behavior and repertoire of these two profiles align with other far-right groups, propagating conservative values and using the communicative strategies detailed in our previous section. We selected these profiles from quantitative and qualitative criteria. In an exploratory analysis, we selected the profiles Verde and Amarela (@verdeeamarela, 403.5 thousand followers) and Direita Brasil (@direitabrasil, 75 thousand followers) because they are far-right groups native to Twitter, with a high number of followers and a daily flow of publications, mentions, retweets, and shares (Massuchin et al., 2022), which allows us to identify certain characteristics over time. We also justify our selection as these profiles self-identify as right-wing, constantly engaging with actors of the same ideological spectrum in their discourses, and sharing content from profiles belonging to prominent leaders of Brazil’s right-wing political elite.

Data scraping was performed a posteriori with the aid of the

R Software, which allowed us to include posts from up to 18 months earlier. We justify this time frame as the software limits the collection to 3.200 tweets, dating back to 18 months in the case of the selected profiles. The analyzed period is also relevant due to its convergence with the most critical period of the covid-19 pandemic in Brazil.

Two researchers who also sign this article conducted the content categorization, (Bauer, 2002; Sampaio & Lycarião, 2021). Thus, based on variables and categories defined a priori, we analyzed 2.872 posts in total: 1.872 from Direita Brasil and 920 from Verde e Amarela, published between January 2020 and June 2021. We were unable to analyze ten posts from this period as the contents were unavailable. The database is part of a broader survey, led by the Research Group on Political Communication and Public Opinion (CPOP), which has systematically monitored Twitter profiles that label themselves far-right.

As the focus of our article is the relationship between far-right activism strategies and their relationship with the traditional media, we included the following variables in the analysis: the presence of attacks, type of attack, targeted journalistic institutions, date of posting, the tenor of the discourse, and links shared. While the first variables identify the attacks, the last two indicate the use, whenever convenient, of the format or content itself. The reliability test for the manually coded variables registered the following percentages: 95% for the type of attack (institutional, values, ideological, general, and media); 85% for attacks on the media, and 88% for the tenor of the discourses (ironic, radical, or journalistic).

We divided the variable type of attack into five groups (institutional, values, ideological, general, and media). The variable attack on institutions is a significant element in far-right messages (Ruediger et al., 2021), as these groups use online platforms to direct harsh criticisms toward representative institutions and their agents. The category attack on values demonstrates how these groups behave towards minorities, lower classes, and democracy in general (Froio & Ganesh, 2019). Our variable attack on ideological values establishes a dialogue with the scholarly literature – both national and international – which has identified discourses from self-identified right-wing groups in the online environment against 1) the left and 2) communism, in a global scenario. For an analysis of the Brazilian scenario, we may include other targets of attacks: 4) the Worker's Party (PT) and 5) other national parties.

For this article, attacks on the media are more central. As such, we defined the following categories: Globo, Folha de S.Paulo, Veja, Estado de S.Paulo (AKA Estadão)³, the media in general, journalists,

and others. This variable focuses on the relationship between right-wing activism strategies and their relationship with the traditional press, which far-right groups both activate and discredit. A prior analysis of the material allowed us to create the categories above, based on the recurrent incidence. Thus, we included attacks on the main communication groups within Brazil's media system, generalized attacks without a defined target (such as the press in general, without mentioning names), and attacks on communication professionals who work in different media companies (Tuzzo & Temer, 2021).

As for the tenor of the discourse, we sought evidence regarding the replication of the journalistic format, which can result in one of three possibilities – irony, hate speech, and journalistic format – and these variables are binary and co-occurring. Chagas (2021) previously identified how memes – spread in WhatsApp groups comprised of Bolsonaro supporters – make use of humor, irony, and radicalization. Likewise, prior studies have shown how right-wing activism discursively mimics journalistic formats (with the use of teasers and quotes) in their messages and texts (Massuchin et al., 2021). These profiles employ journalistic formats in their posts as part of a repertoire of political strategies (Sponholz, 2020), among which the use of humorous tones based on internet memes to mock opponents and ridicule them through comic effects (Oliveira & Maia, 2020). In turn, extremist groups may also stem from a radical format, a widely used communication strategy to attack political opponents and minorities, to sow enmity and solidify an antagonistic narrative (Darmstadt et al., 2019).

The journalistic format variable allows us to investigate how far-right activism has appropriated the journalistic format. Part of the studies on right-wing activism demonstrates that, in online environments, contents are formatted to give the impression that they are newspaper stories. This happens through the use of certain typefaces, headlines, photos (sometimes even credits), links, and teasers. Additionally, the use of this format often coexists alongside fake news and disinformation content, shared virally among groups to create an unofficial press channel, a direct line with the population (Bennet & Livingston, 2019).

The variable that maps the links to tweets shared from other profiles also serves as an indicator of content appropriation, allowing us to perceive how far-right groups appropriate the mainstream media news coverage. Thus, we cannot define this complex relationship solely by a similarity in language, but also by the use of the materials themselves, through the sharing of links published by the conventional

media. Thus, we considered the internal links to Twitter in the extraction worksheet, i.e., when content from other profiles on the platform is cited and shared. We divided these profiles with shared content into groups, one of which comprised “traditional media and journalists”. Subsequently, we correlate the use of links (from the media and other sources) to the presence or absence of attacks.

5 Analysis and discussion: attacks, use of media coverage, and journalistic model

5.1 Attacks on the press and its agents

Our initial data confirmed the presence of attacks – in general, without distinguishing targets – in the two Twitter profiles under analysis, in almost half of the publications (45%). Regarding the Brazilian scenario, Prudêncio (2020) and Fernandes et al. (2021) previously identified the consistent and generalized process by right-wing activists to discredit the media, which corroborates our initial findings.

It is important to emphasize that while this categorization does not distinguish how radical the messages are, examples such as “Retire, you old hag!!! Sucking up a senile communist who can’t even speak properly should be the end of your career!! <https://t.co/coXszLh7yu>” and “How can someone be as shitty as this guy?? Of course he’s a PT supporter <https://t.co/Zjj8rfzHLC>” reveal some of the typical criticism and attacks by far-right groups in the online environment. The data also reinforces that opposition to traditional media and its discrediting do not operate alone. Furthermore, this communicative trait is not exclusive to Brazilian activism, as Siapera and Veikou (2016), Lobanov (2019), and Nouri and Lorenzo-Dus (2019) have also verified verbal aggression in countries such as Australia, Greece, and Italy.

Table 1

Data on attacks and general criticism in the profiles

Attacks/Criticisms	Number	Percentage
No	1581	55
Yes	1291	45
Total	2872	100

While the data indicates that generalized discrediting is a typical action of online far-right activism, profiles may differ in intensity, especially given particular agendas and demands (Castelli & Pirro, 2019). Thus, by comparing both profiles, we find variations in the intensity of attacks: more common in Direita Brasil, as confirmed by the standardized residuals⁴ (4.6 for the relationship between attacks and the Direita Brasil profile and -6.7 for the relationship between the presence of attacks and the Verde e Amarela profile). The positive and negative signs show the proximity and distance, respectively, between the type of profile and the presence or absence of this type of behavior. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Verde e Amarela, which registered the lowest presence of attacks, still has 30% of its content with this type of evidence. That is, it continues to be a relevant trait, even if less intensely activated.

Table 2

Comparison between profiles regarding attacks

Attacks	DireitaBrasil	verdeeamarela38	Total
No	939	642	1658
%	48.10%	69.80%	57.70%
Std. Res.	-4.1	6	
Yes	1013	278	1214
%	51.90%	30.20%	42.30%
Std. Res.	4.6	-6.7	
Total	1952	920	2872
%	100%	100%	100%

Chi-square: 118.751 p=0,000

Following a more general analysis of the presence of attacks in both profiles, we categorized the targets of these attacks, which may vary enormously. Although the same post may attack and criticize a diverse set of actors simultaneously, we noticed a higher percentage of posts containing attacks on political institutions (18.2%). The media – its main groups and actors – ranked second place, appearing in 15.7% of the publications, followed by ideological attacks, found in 10.6% of the contents. Attack on values was found in 10.1% of the tweets and, finally, general attacks in 4.1% of posts.

The data signals an important point: far-right groups identify many enemies. Moreover, the discourses always oppose any institution or agent that, for some reason, disagrees or diverges from the values and beliefs embraced by the group. Furthermore, we find that the targets themselves have very varied characteristics: they may be more abstract – such as democracy – or more personalized, such as political representatives. The following tweets exemplify the plurality of targets: “THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS!!! THEY’RE ARRESTING PROTESTERS!!!! AND PEOPLE SAY THE PROBLEM WAS THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP! AS IF THINGS WERE GREAT NOW... SHAME @alexandre!! SCUMBAG!! <https://t.co/bTmM7MFkyS>” and “HE REALLY IS A FUCKING BUM!! HE SHOWS NO SUPPORT AT ALL FOR OUR GOVERNMENT/COUNTRY!! @RodrigoMaia YOU BASTARD!! <https://t.co/3xvPgmzNXP>”.

Table 3

Data on attacks in general by the profiles

Type of attack	Quantity	Percentage
On institutions	523	18.2
On the Media	450	15.7
Ideological	303	10.6
On values	289	10.1
General	119	4.1

Media institutions are second only to political institutions and agents. Furthermore, behavior towards the press stems from other types of attacks, sometimes very radical by incorporating hate speech and the use of offensive terms. An example is a tweet from April 26, 2020, published by Direita Brasil: “I’ve been saying this for a long time! The media’s insistence on this is unbelievable! They are crooks of the worst kind! And the idiots and opportunists sheepishly replicate. And they dare to call us the “sheep”! HA! <https://t.co/52mjpkhMEB>”. The post is a retweet of a video published by Eduardo Bolsonaro and contains an explicit attack on the press with the use of offensive and disrespectful terms. As shown above, in terms of content production, the profiles also replicate information originating from representatives of right-wing political parties to discredit their targets.

Attacks on values and ideology follow a similar tone. The tweet “When the MST, ‘Indians’, and all sorts of leftist activists invaded and destroyed public buildings in Brasília, I never saw this

same pathetic and insistent CAMPAIGN against ‘anti-democratic acts’ <https://t.co/qGB6PnN22S>” exemplifies the category “attack on values”. For ideological attacks we may list the following example: “They put the #ChineseVirus out there, then they make sure that tests can’t detect infected people, causing the virus to kill many more people. @EmbaixadaChina Ge-no-ci-dal <https://t.co/d7YgIS5zAF>”. Lastly, we have attacks in general, such as against universities and other agents, which while less frequent, were significant during the covid-19 pandemic, as detailed in other studies (Massuchin et al., 2021).

It is worth mentioning, however, that attacks on the media have more specific targets, i.e., not all institutions suffer attacks with the same intensity, even if more general attacks comprise almost 25% of the total – as in the tweet “Contemporary journalism is simply DISGUSTING! <https://t.co/y9eYBO1Pt1>”. Significantly, representatives of traditional national newspapers and communication groups in Brazil rank in the top positions. Such is the case of Grupo Globo, the target of 40% of posts. We could cite several posts that target the Globo television network, the newspaper, the online news portal, etc. The following tweet exemplifies attacks on reputation and legitimacy: “We received the video with Marcelo Cosme from @GloboNews in over twenty WhatsApp groups. This is PROOF that @RedeGlobo is nothing but hypocrisy and lies. The people have awakened and they’re TIRED! This is exactly WHY people stand by @jairbolsonaro. It’s that simple”. Despite the similarity with findings by Forsberg (2021), and Carlson et al. (2021), some media organizations tend to be more present than others in the far-right’s attempt to discredit media institutions.

The table below helps us understand the convergent or divergent behavior within far-right activism. The literature points to the plural nature of right-wing actors in how they present themselves (Fonseca, 2014; Oliveira et al., 2021; Solano, 2018; Salles, 2017). The analyzed profiles’ attacks on media institutions vary in intensity and targets, which underlines the wide range of right-wing actors with different behaviors.

Table 4

Distribution of types of attacks on media institutions

	<i>Direita Brasil</i>	<i>verdeeamarela38</i>	Total
Globo	156	17	173
%	38.30%	39.50%	38.4%
Std. Res.	0	0.1	

Folha de S.Paulo	27	0	27
%	6.60%	0.00%	6.0%
Std. Res.	0.5	-1.6	
Veja	12	7	19
%	2.90%	16.30%	4.20%
Std. Res.	-1.3	3.8	
Estado de São Paulo	29	0	29
%	7.10%	0.00%	6.40%
Std. Res.	0.5	-1.7	
Media in General	92	10	102
%	22.60%	23.30%	22.7%
Std. Res.	0	-0.1	
Journalists	55	7	62
%	13.50%	16.30%	13.80%
Std. Res.	-0.1	0.4	
Other	36	2	38
%	8.80%	4.70%	8.40%
Std. Res.	0.3	0.2	
Total	407	43	450
%	100%	100%	100%

Chi-square: 23.333 p=0.001

Our analysis indicates variances in how the two profiles articulate themselves in their attacks ($p=0.001$). One exception is the Globo Media group, as confirmed by the standardized residuals which did not show significant differences, meaning both profiles attack this media outlet in equal measure. The weekly magazine *Veja* is more frequently attacked by *Verde e Amarela*, with a significantly positive standardized residual of 3.8. This is the most striking difference between the profiles, even though *Direita Brasil* more commonly attacks the media just as it was responsible for most attacks in general, considering any category of targeted enemies. In the case of *Verde e Amarela*, despite its most expressive attacks towards *Veja* magazine, the profile did not mention other institutions such as the newspapers *Estado de S.Paulo* and *Folha de S.Paulo* – at least in attempts to discredit them.

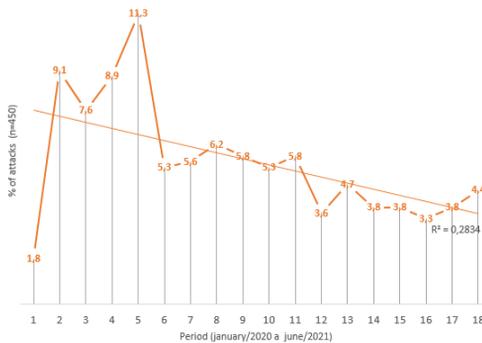
The data also allows us to draw comparisons over time, as

shown in the graph below. We find a greater presence of attacks in 2020, possibly related to the surge of covid-19 infections and the fact that the media discourse on this issue contradicted right-wing groups. In other words, insofar as the media’s narrative about the pandemic clashed with activist groups, media institutions became targets, as in this example: “Social distancing has NOTHING to do with it! If lockdown works, why are we doing it again now???? If it DOESN’T work, why are we doing it again??? Globo is trash!! <https://t.co/VsUtzL9nME>”.

In 2020, the media strongly opposed the use of hydroxychloroquine, following the guidelines of health organizations and in contention with far-right behavior. As an example, we cite the tweet by Verde e Amarela from July 4: “People whine that chloroquine causes side effects. I took it for 15 days and had ZERO side effects 🐔👏 #BolsonarolsRight #Bolsonaro2022 BR <https://t.co/LvesUk6sWR>”. Recuero et al. (2021) have shown how the media and partisan groups have taken opposing stances (pro and against) in this debate, which in turn triggers direct attacks against opponents.

Graph 1

Attacks over time



When vaccines became an issue on the public agenda, closer to the end of 2020, the profiles shifted their discursive focus from pro-chloroquine to anti-vaccine messages, continuing their opposition to the press, as exemplified in a post published by Direita Brasil, on October 31, 2020: “Oh my God! They only “analyze facts” when it interests them, hahahahahahaha!!!!!! @RedeGlobo employees will be the first to open their asses for the Chinese vaccine! <https://t.co/FTCT7yTbDL>”. A post on the Verde e Amarela profile, published on December 3, 2020, reveals similar behavior: “The attached link shows that the so-called “vaccine” was produced IN CHINA! Stop being a LIAR, this is goddamn

#fakenews! Observation: I don't even have to say that this vaccine story is a FABRICATION. The news story itself says that it HELPS in recovery. It's nothing but a vitamin! 😊 <https://t.co/CJn6ACTcdy>". The data, therefore, indicates that moments of crisis heighten the antagonism between the media and the far-right, as the latter intensifies their attacks.

5.2 Neighboring the journalistic model

Our data gathered thus far is consistent with the findings of other studies that have explored this type of attack on the media, both in Brazil (Cesarino, 2019; Alves, 2019; Almeida, 2018) and in other countries (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Darmstadt et al., 2019). However, we argue that there exists a more complex relationship between agents, as also inferred by Haller and Holt (2019), mainly through the use of journalistic references to reiterate opinions, positions, and attack other actors and institutions. In addition to this affirmative use of the mainstream media, we could also argue that there is a mimicry of journalism (Dourado & Gomes, 2019) in the production of messages, i.e., grounded and inspired by the journalistic writing model. As such, these interactions are not restricted to antagonism and distancing by way of attacks.

While our data indicate a lower percentage of attacks on the press when compared with representative institutions and their agents, we seek to further explore this relationship with the media and reveal this complexity.

Regarding this issue, our research seeks to verify how the profiles make use of the journalistic model, especially in comparison with other types of discourses which the literature categorizes as typical of these groups, such as the use of humor and irony or the radical tenor of the content (Eddington, 2018; Massuchin et al., 2021; Ekman, 2014; Lobanov, 2018; Reis et al., 2020; Penteadó & Lerner, 2018; Chagas, 2021; Nouri & Granjeiro, 2021).

Table 5

Data on the tenor of the content

Tenor	Quantity	%
Humor/Irony	513	18%
Radical	418	15%
Journalistic	263	9%

As shown above, messages may appear in three formats: humor and irony, hate speech, and based on journalistic format. The latter was not predominant, appearing in just under 10% of tweets. However, the other two formats were also not far behind, with 18% for humor/irony and 15% for radical tenor. The remaining content, to a large extent, did not resemble any of the three as they were just retweets without any commentary from the profile and, as such, we were unable to categorize the format of the messages based on these three criteria.

A tweet dated January 4, 2020, from the Verde e Amarela profile is an example of the use of the journalistic model: “Public works have arrived throughout the Northeast. In the video, artesian wells in the state of Maranhão, the only state governed by declared communists in Brazil. <https://t.co/a88r97rMji>”. In this case, the text resembles a news headline, appropriating the legitimacy of journalism to emphasize construction works during Bolsonaro’s administration, while criticizing the governor of Maranhão. Conversely, some posts make use of radical tenor, as in the following examples “Stop being a LIAR!! What kind of shit journalism is this?!???? Scumbag! <https://t.co/DU25zpmv1l>” and “Do you know how much evidence he has on this?!? NONE! SCUMBAG! <https://t.co/7w0WNszFrZ>”, which usually contain offensive terms that suppress any hope of dialogue. Hence, while the use of journalistic models was not predominant in the analyzed profiles, it shares common ground with radical content and humor and irony.

5.3 The convenient use of journalistic coverage

We may also approach the complex relationship between the media and the far-right by observing the latter’s use of references, in an affirmative tone, of conventional media groups. This tactic, we argue, mainly serves to reiterate right-wing opinions, political stances, and even attack other agents. That is, beyond the usual attacks against the press, when convenient these groups may activate this institution for other purposes. We can observe this in the content published by the profiles by quantifying and categorizing the links shared in the tweets, as shown in the table below, which allows us to gauge the use of the press by the far-right.

To this end, we identified internal links to Twitter shared by both profiles (Direita Brasil and Verde e Amarela) and divided them

into groups: other similar profiles (usually profiles that support a particular cause, albeit non-institutionalized and impersonal), traditional media and their agents (including the media and journalists), political institutions and political groups (such as profiles belonging to government ministries, institutionalized movements, legislative or judicial authorities, etc.), political elite (personal profiles of politicians), and bloggers (known for the opinionated bias of their content). Overall, 44% of the publications contained some type of link, i.e., they mentioned one of the above groups. This signals that such profiles do not operate alone and articulate themselves through a network that encompasses different sources, among which the traditional media. Through the most cited labels (over 10 citations), we devised a ranking with 28 different sources, reminding that this case considers only internal links to Twitter shared by the profiles, such as a Twitter post by Folha for example.

Table 6

Type of Twitter profile in the shared links

Type of profile	Profile label	Number of links	Total
Impersonal profile	2022eleicoes	17	46
Impersonal profile	Bolsonaro2022__	15	
Impersonal profile	verdeeamarela38	14	
Traditional Media	JornalOGlobo	116	365
Traditional Media	Estadao	99	
Traditional Media	Folha	50	
Traditional Media	veramagalhaes	32	
Traditional Media	OGloboPolitica	22	
Traditional Media	g1	21	
Traditional Media	UOL	13	
Traditional Media	UOLNoticias	12	
Political Institutions/Groups/Parties	SF_Moro	16	
Political Institutions/Groups/Parties	MBLivre	14	42
Political Institutions/Groups/Parties	STF_oficial	12	

Political Elite	RodrigoMaia	36	
Political Elite	BolsonaroSP	27	
Political Elite	joaoamoedonovo	20	
Political Elite	jairbolsonaro	18	
Political Elite	rmotta2	17	184
Political Elite	arthurmoledoal	16	
Political Elite	wilsonwitzel	15	
Political Elite	KimKataguirí	14	
Political Elite	Biakicis	11	
Political Elite	JanainaDoBrasil	10	
Bloggers/Columnists	o_antagonista	39	
Bloggers/Columnists	diogomainardi	23	86
Bloggers/Columnists	FMouraBrasil	14	
Bloggers/Columnists	felipeneto	10	
<hr/>			
Total up to 10 citations	-	723	56.40%
With links from profiles	-	1281	44.60%
Without links from profiles	-	1591	55.40%
<hr/>			
Total	-	2872	100%

Even though the media ranks among the most attacked institutions, it is also the source of the greatest number of links shared by both profiles (365 cases), considering the 28 most cited sources, which together represent over half (56 % - 723) of the links referenced in the 18 months monitored by our survey (out of a total of 1281). Among the most cited links, eight came from the media and journalists, particularly by sharing Twitter posts from representatives of Brazil's leading communication groups such as O Globo, Estado de S.Paulo, UOL, and G1.

In second place we find links shared by the political elite, with 184 appearances, followed by bloggers/columnists with 86 appearances, and institutions with 42 occurrences. In this case, the political elite is largely comprised of far-right representatives, such as the Bolsonaro family and allies. Equally noteworthy is that right-wing alternative media⁵ did not rank among the most cited by the Twitter profiles in our analysis, in contrast to the study by Haller and Holt (2019) in their analysis of the PEGIDA. In our analysis, we found only sparse references to Jornal da

Cidade OnLine, Gazeta Brasil, and Revista Oeste⁶, for example.

The data in the table above, however, does not allow us to discern whether the citations of the links served to reinforce preceding attacks or other purposes, such as their convenience with the discourse of the groups themselves. The table below shows the crossed data, dividing all categorized tweets between “attacks on the press”, “other targets of attacks”, and “post without any type of attack” and related with “presence of other links”, “links from traditional media”, and “content without any type of link”. We thus find two strategies. In the first strategy, the profiles use news links from traditional media sources to attack and criticize their content, which is not surprising given that attacks on the press are a hallmark of the analyzed groups. In the second strategy, however, the profiles use links from the traditional media as a means of attacking other agents, which entails a convenient use of the press, but only when the content published aligns with some interest of these far-right activist groups.

Table 7

Relationship between links and targets of attacks

	Attacks on the press	Other attacks	No attacks	Total
No links	196	428	965	1589
%	12.30%	26.90%	60.70%	100%
Std. Res.	-3.4	-1.7	3.1	
Links From Trad. Media.	157	164	167	473
%	33.20%	33.20%	33.60%	100%
Std. Res.	9.6	1.6	-6.3	
Other Links	97	256	457	810
%	12.00%	31.60%	56.40%	100%
Std. Res.	-2.7	1.2	0.8	
Total	450	841	1581	2872
%	15.70%	29.30%	55.00%	100%

Chi-square: 167.043 p=0.000

These strategies become more manifest when we look at standardized residuals. Attacks on the press are largely accompanied by links from the traditional media (Std. Res. 9.6), i.e., the attack occurs

through replicating content, almost as a response or replica to the information published by the journalistic outlet. An example of this type of strategy is the following tweet: “People are free to joke about the death of the President AT WILL. But we react, then @folha acts outraged! DON’T THEY HAVE AN EDITOR IN THAT SHITHOLE???? FFS, THE BRAZILIAN PRESS IS FINISHED!! <https://t.co/DI9VQPmbF8>”, in which Direita Brasil responds to a publication by Folha de S.Paulo and inserts the link at the end of the post.

On the other hand, through demonstrating this affirmative and convenient use, i.e., when the content corroborates arguments or serves to discredit other agents – in tandem with Haller and Holt (2019) – we find the relationship between links from traditional media and other attacks (1.6). One example is the tweet “Long live socialism! Long live the regime supported by the PSOL, PT and the like! You must be VERY stupid to vote for people like Freixo, Luciana Genro, Maria do Rosário... <https://t.co/eGuY6jdXcT>” (January 13, 2020), which targets political parties and other politicians, while at the same time linking a news story from O Globo to reinforce the argument of the extremist group. While the residual is not above the limit (+1.96), the direction of the signal shows that this is a typical action of the analyzed profiles, especially because our article does not work with a sample. The data, therefore, reiterates the 33% of “other attacks”, which are directed at myriad agents and backed by sharing links from traditional media profiles. These may occur without the inclusion of any link (27%) or with another type of link (31.6%), such as posts made by blogger profiles for example, but there is a predominance of links from traditional media profiles (33.2%). Hence, the profiles commonly use both strategies, which further complexifies their relationship with the press, which exists beyond just attacks.

6 Final considerations

In this article, we sought to discuss how far-right activist groups organize themselves in the online environment, more specifically in their relationship with media institutions. Our research stems from the Brazilian case and the actions of two representative profiles regarding the far-right’s modus operandi within the online environment. We analyzed 2.872 Twitter posts in an 18-month time span, which allowed us to identify behaviors that comprise the action repertoire of this form of activism, especially in social media.

Our data is in tandem with the theoretical debate, which points to the existence of a paradoxical and complex relationship that goes beyond the “us x them” identified by some studies, especially in

the Brazilian case (Fernandes et al., 2021). While the data presented in this article corroborates this statement, we identified nuances in how far-right social media profiles make use of journalism in their practices. Although not predominant, the textual production may replicate a journalistic model, including links from the press as sources and employing a textual style akin to mainstream news formats.

Additionally, the content feed of the profiles is largely based on journalism produced by the traditional media. This serves two clear purposes. First, to use this content – through links in the post – to justify attacks against media institutions. Disputes over the media's approach are what usually prompt the attacks in the first place. However, another use stems from reaffirmation. This happens when the profiles target other actors and institutions, and thus news stories no longer appear in a negative light but instead serve to reiterate and approve the content produced. That is, insofar as the profiles deem the journalistic production advantageous, they will articulate this particular content.

Therefore, while there exists a hostile relationship towards the media and attempts to discredit journalistic work, this is not an isolated phenomenon. Some practices appropriate the same model as well as the contents themselves, the latter mainly when they provide arguments to discredit other targets. The data points to important nuances in the relationship between far-right groups and the traditional media, which goes beyond merely identifying enemies and reveals a paradoxical situation.

One limitation of our research is the impossibility of considering the analyzed Twitter profiles as representative of all far-right online activism. We systematically monitored two profiles, but far-right activism includes an extremely heterogeneous set of groups. On the other hand, our analysis supports the argument that we must further complexify our understating of how media institutions and the far-right articulate themselves.

Lastly, our results fill a gap in the scarce attention to this interface, found only tangentially in previous studies. We indicate that radical far-right groups maintain a continuous relationship with the media they distrust. Furthermore, our findings enunciate a future research agenda that may include: (a) expanding the range of researched profiles; (b) a targeted investigation of the actors comprising the far-right alternative media network; and (c) a discussion of the variables that corroborated the current situation of generalized discredit of the notions and references of truth. Furthermore, the

media institutions themselves may serve as explanatory variables for this scenario and should be understood as such by future research.

NOTES

- 1 Gazeta do Povo is a century-old regional newspaper, based in the city of Curitiba. In the last decade it has undergone both structural changes, ceasing daily print editions, as well as editorial changes, leveraged by the Operation Car Wash Investigations. This prompted the media outlet to seek ground on the national scene through broader coverage, among which hiring controversial columnists and taking a conservative stance on various topics (abortion, freedom of expression, politics), which went beyond op-eds and entered the realm of journalistic production itself. Tavares (2018), when interviewing professionals who worked at the company at the time of transition, showed the nuances of this process and the presence of editorialized content.
- 2 A group founded in late 2014 as a protest movement called ‘Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident’, known as PEGIDA (Haller & Holt, 2019). The protests targeted the Islamic influence in the European community, revealing the racist bias of the group, which also did not speak to the press, and could be labeled as populist. Furthermore, similar groups have emerged in other countries (Haller & Holt, 2019).
- 3 In this research, we found references with some type of attack against the four leading representatives of traditional Brazilian media, considering print and television. The Globo category includes mentions to the largest Brazilian media conglomerate, including newspapers, television, radio, and publishing houses. Folha de S.Paulo is one of the main Brazilian national newspapers in print. Veja is a weekly magazine, edited by Grupo Abril, also with national circulation, created in 1968 and whose main subjects includes political issues. O Estado de S. Paulo is a renowned Brazilian daily print newspaper.
- 4 “A statistical test to identify which pairs of categories of two variables register a concentration or absence of cases above expected if the variables were independent, identifying which categories tend to be more or less associated. Standardized residuals are statistically significant when they are above |1.96|, positively or negatively”, the first being indicative of proximity between the categories and the second of distancing (Massuchin et al., 2018).
- 5 Although our focus is not on alternative media, we understand that

other outlets oppose the traditional content production model and which, over the last decade, have “emerged to challenge the authority of what they commonly refer to as ‘the mainstream media’” (Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2018, p. 1), a phenomenon also observed in Brazil (Recuero et al., 2021). Other authors have referenced these groups as hyper-partisan media, insofar as they not only oppose the traditional press, but aim to serve political groups (Dos Santos Junior, 2022).

- 6 These are examples of websites that claim to be news outlets, with formats and contents similar to the journalistic model, but stand out in the Brazilian scenario for their hyper-partisanship. They have emerged within a very contemporary scenario, especially from 2015 (Dos Santos Junior, 2022). Other works have also observed their proximity to right-wing political groups, in addition accusations of producing fake news and neglecting scientific evidence, as observed during the covid-19 pandemic (Recuero et al., 2021; Massuchin et al., 2021; Chagas & Massuchin, 2022).

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