

# Fake news, moral panic, and polarization in Brazil: A critical discursive approach

Original study

Paulo Roberto Gonçalves-Segundo (paulosegundo@usp.br; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5592-8098>)  
*University of São Paulo, Brazil*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to discuss the motivations and effects of the production, distribution and interpretation of fake news stories, which draw on moral panics in contemporary Brazilian society. To do so, the article combines recent research on fake news, mainly from Media Studies, Sociology and Political Science, with the Critical Discourse Analysis perspective on meaning-making. The main hypothesis advanced is that this kind of fake news story lies in the tension between the evident and the absurd, as they seem to be oriented towards eliciting different readings and reactions from the endo and the exogroup. In terms of the endogroup, they may function as a means both to foster social cohesion and induce affective responses that intensify the dichotomization of identities. Regarding the exogroup, they may act as a means of drawing antagonism towards progressive groups and political parties, in a process that aims at diverting public debate to topics that not only keep the polarization aflame, but also shift the focus of attention away from the issues and policies that the neoconservative agenda deems problematic.

**Keywords:** Fake News, Moral panic, Critical Discourse Analysis, Polarization, Brazil.

## INTRODUCTION

Every new sociosemiotic phenomenon has the potential to generate a series of academic controversies. More so when it impacts politics, economy, culture, and society, as the fake news phenomenon does. It becomes an object of attention in multiple fields, such as Media Studies, Linguistics, Semiotics, Discourse Analysis, Sociology, Political Science, and Computer Science, among others. The result of this process tends to be, on the one hand, an increasing variety in the number of proposed definitions and typologies, not only between, but also within fields, and, on the other hand, an intense disparity in the theoretical groundings and in the methodological procedures that guide the analyses and support the findings.

This paper represents, thus, another attempt at interpreting and explaining the fake news phenomenon. Drawing on the perspective of Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA), which considers orders of discourse as structuring of meaning-making, both in textual production and interpretation<sup>1</sup> (Fairclough 2003), the article explores a set of three fake news stories produced in Brazil during the rise of the conservative agenda that culminated in the election of the current president, Jair Bolsonaro, in 2018. These texts have in common the construction of a conservative stance towards children's development of gender and sexual (orientation) identities, which draws on – and contributes to – moral panics and crusades consolidated in Brazil in recent years (Balieiro 2018; Gonçalves-Segundo 2020a).

This article advances two hypotheses about the functioning of this sort of fake news, derived from the conception that these texts are strategically oriented towards promoting different readings and reactions from the endo

<sup>1</sup> The term 'text' is used, throughout the paper, to refer to any product of discursive activity. Following both Social Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis, texts are seen to be constitutively multimodal.

and the exogroup (van Dijk 2003). In terms of the endogroup (*us*), they may function as a means both to elicit social cohesion, tying together an ideological group that inculcates discourses which are, in general, less open to alternativity, and to induce affective responses that intensify the dichotomization of identities, processes that may lead to the impoverishment of public debate. In regard to the exogroup (*them*), they may act as a means of drawing antagonism towards progressive groups and political parties, in a process that aims at diverting public debate to topics that not only keep the polarization aflame, but also shift the focus of attention away from the issues and policies that the neoconservative agenda deems problematic to be under the spotlight.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section presents a brief review of the different perspectives on fake news, in which we discuss definitions and typologies, as well as some of the sociopolitical implications of the phenomenon (Bakir, McStay 2017; Tandoc et al. 2018; Wardle, Derakhshan 2018; Gomes, Dourado 2019). The second section describes the mechanics of fake news in Brazil, with special regard to the context of the 2018 presidential election (Baptista et al. 2019; Piccinin et al. 2019; Mont’Alverne, Mitozo 2019; Lelo 2019). The third section presents an analysis of the three aforementioned fake news stories produced and distributed in 2018 and 2019, focusing on the interpretation and explanation of their potential motivations and effects<sup>2</sup> (Fairclough 2003; Gonçalves-Segundo 2018). The last section summarizes the main results of the study and discusses some possible avenues of research.

### 1. ON FAKE NEWS AND INFORMATION DISORDER

As stated before, the fake news phenomenon is hard to grasp due to its social, communicative, discursive, interactional, computational, economic and political nature. Thus, reaching a relatively consensual definition seems to be a fruitless endeavor. However, there must be some minimal parameters to control the semantic and the referential dispersion of the term.

Tandoc et al. (2018, 147) examine the use of the term “fake news” in 34 academic articles from 2003 to 2017 and conclude that the definitions consider two basic domains: the **level of facticity**, which refers to “the degree to which fake news relies on fact”, and the **author’s immediate intention**, which involves “the degree to which the creator of fake news intends to mislead”. By crossing variables from each dimension, they

arrive at the following typology, highlighting the third quadrant (*fabrication*) as the most prevalent conception amidst the corpus of papers they considered.

Table 1. A typology of fake news

Level of facticity	Author’s immediate intention to deceive	
	High	Low
High	Native advertising Propaganda Manipulation	News satire
Low	Fabrication	News parody

Source: Tandoc et al. (2018, p. 148).

Wardle and Derakhshan (2018, 44), in turn, prefer to avoid the term “fake news” altogether, arguing that “the phrase is inherently vulnerable to being politicized and deployed as a weapon against the news industry, as a way of undermining reporting that people in power do not like”. Instead, they prefer to use the expression “information disorder”.

**Information disorder** covers three different phenomena: **misinformation**, **disinformation** and **mal-information**. The criteria for their differentiation are similar to Tandoc et al. (2018): **level of facticity** (whether the information is true or false) and **intention to harm** (whether the text is oriented towards attacking the image of a social actor, a group or an institution). It can be said, though, that the **awareness of facticity** (whether the distributor knows if the information is true or false) is also relevant in the authors’ conception of information disorder, since it is the main aspect distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation. Typically, **misinformation** concerns texts which are based on false data, but are disseminated without intention to harm, since the distributors are not aware of the falsehood and usually do not intend to attack the image of the represented actors, groups or institutions (unlike the producers, who are likely to have had that intention). **Mal-information** applies to texts based on real data, but produced with the intention to harm, independently of the distributor’s awareness of the content’s facticity. **Disinformation** involves texts that are deliberately produced without concern for reality and are both prototypically produced and distributed with the intention to harm<sup>3</sup>.

Stemming from this initial division, the authors propose the following typology:

2 This paper does not embark on a detailed description of the linguistic and the visual resources deployed in the selected texts. For an elaborate discussion on the semiotic component and the discursive strategies of this kind of fake news in Brazil, see Gonçalves-Segundo (2020a).

3 This seems to be the case regardless of the distributor’s knowledge about its facticity, although – it may be said – that the tendency for knowing about its falsehood is higher when the distributors are member of the exogroup, as we will discuss afterwards, or tactical readers, i.e., those that are not particularly invested on the text from an affective or ideological point of view and, thus, are able to assume a more nuanced and distanced stance on the subject.

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Table 2. A typology of fake news

Low level of facticity (false)		High level of facticity (based on reality)	
Intent to harm (variable)		Intent to harm (high)	
Distributor's awareness of the level of facticity (low)		Distributor's awareness of the level of facticity (variable)	
Misinformation		Disinformation	Mal-information
False Connection Misleading Content		False Context Imposter Content Manipulated Content Fabricated Content	(Some) Leaks (Some) Harassment (Some) Hate Speech

Source: Adapted from Wardle and Derakhshan (2018, 44)

Since the three texts analyzed in this paper are instances of **fabricated content**, it seems important to distinguish the four types of **disinformation** proposed by the authors. **False context** refers to the recontextualization of a statement or an image to frame the focused situation through a perspective that impinges harm. **Imposter content** refers to the use of an institution's logo or an author's name to subtract or add credibility to a certain piece of false information. **Manipulated content** involves changing pictorial or verbal aspects of a real event, which is thus reported distortedly in order to cause harm. Finally, **fabricated content** refers to texts whose content is completely invented; it is a fictional narrative constructed as if it were real and distributed with the intention either to harm the social actor, group or institution represented in the text or to harm another referent, when compared to the represented social actor, group or institution<sup>4</sup>.

Gomes and Dourado (2019) draw attention to the political use of disinformation, framing it as a strategy of informational guerrilla. According to the authors, informative disputes between polarized ideological groups may lead to distortions and groundless narratives, which are used by political groups to keep the social tension high and to direct collective attention toward certain perspectives. These perspectives reflect ideological positions and are part of an "alternative media ecology" (Gomes, Dourado 2019, 37) where facts and opinions are (and must be) in accordance with the group's principles and values. The authors relate this phenomenon to the discredit of traditional media and to the emergence of the new right, which chose as the target of their attacks intellectuals, scientists, teachers, and journalists in order to reframe society's attitude towards these previously authorized sources of information and knowledge and to construct their new "tribal epistemology" (Gomes, Dourado 2019, 37)<sup>5</sup>, with harmful consequences towards public debate and democracy.

Both the reframing of attitudes and the construction of tribal epistemologies are relevant aspects of the discussion, since disinformation seems to be tied to the

"economics of emotion", a concept developed by Bakir and McStay (2017). To these authors, in fake news, "emotions are leveraged to generate attention and viewing time, which converts to advertising revenue" (Bakir and McStay 2017, 155) and – we would add – to incite passionate adherence to political agendas. In terms of social and democratic consequences, the authors argue that fake news produce wrongly informed citizens, who tend to stay disinformed due to echo chambers (or ideological bubbles) and to feel antagonized and outraged due to the affective nature of the texts – as it will be seen in the corpus –, in a process that hampers debate and undermines democratic health.

This affective nature may be tied to another factor that seems central in explaining a set of current viral fake news – moral panic. According to Critcher (2017), moral panics involve overreactions to forms of "deviance" considered to be threatening the moral order of a certain society. By drawing on extensive research on the topic, the author argues that they seem to be endemic to capitalist societies and tend to be fed by conservatives, since they are oriented towards maintaining hegemonic moral values. Exaggeration and distortion of what is said and done, fabrication of content, prediction of negative consequences of inaction, and the semiotic construal of an enemy group whose behavior and values are radically opposed to the referential group are strategies that characterize the social and discursive development of moral panics, which politicians often exploit to favor their candidacies and/or to gather support for public policies within the legislative power. This paper argues that certain types of fake news, such as the ones analyzed in this study, are part of a discursive strategy to induce and preserve politically oriented moral panics.

Hence, it is important to consider how fake news has become a recent problem in Brazilian society.

## 2. THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT: SOCIAL MEDIA, DISTRUST, POLARIZATION AND MORAL PANIC

The 2018 elections in Brazil were highly influenced by the circulation of fake news stories, which played a significant – albeit not necessarily decisive – role in the election of Jair Bolsonaro, the current president. There were several factors responsible for the success of this strategy. The current bibliography on the topic in Brazil highlights the following reasons, to be detailed below: (i) the use of WhatsApp for textual distribution; (ii) the use of YouTube as a source of multimodal texts supporting disinformation and misinformation; (iii) Brazilians' lack of trust in political and communication institutions; and (iv) the political polarization and its consequent biases against both political actors and fact-checking agencies.

4 Sometimes, fabricated content praises a political social actor for fake achievements, in order to harm the competition/opposition.

5 In Section 3, the concept of "tribal epistemology" will be reframed through a CDA perspective, by drawing on the relation between discourses and identities, realized by the process of inculcation (Fairclough 2003).

Unlike the American context, the leading digital platform used to distribute fake news in Brazil was WhatsApp. According to Baptista et al. (2019), the way connections are built around WhatsApp favors interpreting the messages as trustworthy, since they tend to come from friends, family or professional colleagues, i.e., from people with tighter social ties. Besides that, although many fake news stories circulated through large groups, WhatsApp communications tend to be restricted to conversations between a few people whose trust may have been built for years. This particularity is important, since studies such as Piccinin et al. (2019, 11) show that Brazilian people place more trust on information whose source is a family member, a neighbor or a friend rather than a political or communication institution. Thus, communication through WhatsApp may have reduced skepticism and critical stance toward the distributed texts.

The use of YouTube was also relevant, since many links shared through WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter redirected users to Google's video platform. Mont'Alverne and Mitozo (2019) investigated 213 active public WhatsApp groups during the presidential election. They concluded that the 15 most shared links in WhatsApp connected users more often to YouTube than to the sum of the other main platforms<sup>6</sup>. This result is important for the discussion developed here, since it shows that videos – and their inherent multimodality – may play an essential role in reducing people's skepticism toward informative content.

As it can be inferred, the issue of trust and skepticism seems to be worthy of attention in the whole discussion. In the next section, a sociosemiotic hypothesis regarding the interpretation and the evaluation of fake news will be presented, based largely on CDA literature. For now, a political explanation is emphasized, since the political culture in Brazil is commonly considered a relevant factor in the current research on the topic. According to Piccinin et al. (2019), one of the reasons for the success of fake news in Brazil lies in the low trust in political institutions. They justify this distrust as follows:

The cultural politics of Brazilians may be characterized as a hybrid, for 'citizens simultaneously consider democracy as the best form of government, but do not feel satisfied with the performance of the democratic political institutions' (Baquero, Castro and Ranincheski, 2016: 10). [...] This kind of political culture results from a still inertial democracy, typical of countries where the asymmetries between economic and political developments make political mediation institutions incapable of effectively transmitting and

translating social demands into satisfactory public policies for citizens (Piccinin et al., 2019, 8, translated by the author).

This distrust is then reinforced and consolidated in interpersonal relations on digital media and becomes widely shared across space and time<sup>7</sup>. That is one of the reasons, besides all the computational factors, such as bots and algorithms (Bakir, McStay, 2017), that seem to be fundamental for the success of disinformation. Obviously, the focus of distrust is not always the same, since the demands from social actors from different classes, genders, races, and professions are varied. Thus, different virtual communities may form around political stances and ideologies, in a process that gives rise to and maintains the so-called bubbles. In this context, fabricated and manipulated narratives about politicians whose discursive affiliations are incompatible with the group's values and beliefs may find a fertile terrain for acceptance, as distrust is already a part of the group's attitude and the country's political culture.

Therefore, in this line of thought, the role polarization plays, with its consequent biases, is to reinforce distrust, discourage dialogue, and inhibit the consolidation of collective agendas. Lelo (2019) shows, in a preliminary study about the reception of fake news and fact-checking in Brazil, that not only the credibility of fabricated and manipulated content is influenced by political stances in a polarized society, but also the access to certain narratives, since textual distribution seems to be deeply grounded on discursive affiliations, in such a way that some groups may even ignore that a certain fake news story is being consumed or even that a story is being labeled as fake by an oppositional group. As a result, there are fewer opportunities for debate and dissension, a process that contributes to the maintenance of deeply rooted beliefs. In addition to that, the research shows that political stances also influence the acceptance of fact-checking. There is more resistance to accepting that information is false if the story echoes a consolidated belief about a political actor. Confirmation bias seems therefore to be an important element of the fake news interpretation process, as Gelfert (2018) rightfully stresses.

### 3. FAKE NEWS AND MORAL PANIC THROUGH CDA LENSES

As presented in the introduction, the three fake news stories under analysis enact a conservative perspective on children's gender and sexuality development, and attack the progressive agenda regarding these subjects. This attack draws on the moral panic that a leftist

6 For a means of comparison, the number of links directing to YouTube was 40,000, whereas to Facebook, the second place in the ranking, was less than 10,000 (Mont'Alverne and Mitozo, 2019).

7 Consequently, it may be said that internet has become a new space – and perhaps a highly relevant space – for political socialization; therefore, its role in people's political literacy and awareness should not be ignored and should be further investigated.



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government would interfere in children's development in order to stimulate non-hegemonic gender roles and sexual orientations.

The first story (transcribed below) is a highly distributed and accessed video in which an unidentified man accuses the 2018 left-wing presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad (PT)<sup>8</sup>, of proposing, as part of his future public policies, the distribution of "erotic baby bottles"<sup>9</sup> to five and six-year-old children at schools. According to the Brazilian newspaper *Estado de S. Paulo*, in only three days (from September 25 to September 27, 2018), this specific piece of fake news was viewed by more than 2,4 million people and shared by more than 70,000 people in Brazil<sup>10</sup>.

The second one is a verbo-pictorial composition that falsely attributes to Fernando Haddad a declaration that, in his government, five-year-old children would become the property of the state, which would then decide on each child's "proper" gender.

The third one, produced and distributed after the election in 2019, cautions parents about a Disney movie which would show a kiss between two princesses in a supposed attempt to, once again, interfere in the children's "natural" sexuality development.

**Table 3.** The erotic baby bottle (first fake news story)<sup>11</sup>

<p>Olha aqui, vocês que votam no PT. Essa aqui é a mamadeira distribuída na creche. Olha a marca aqui! Está vendo? Distribuída na creche para seu filho, com a desculpa de combater a homofobia. Olha o bico como é. Está vendo? O PT e o Haddad pregam isso para o seu filho. Seu filho de 5, 6 anos de idade vai beber mamadeira na creche com isso aqui para combater a homofobia. Tem que votar em Bolsonaro, rapaz! Bolsonaro, que é para fazer o filho da gente homem e mulher. O PT e Haddad, Lula, Dilma só querem isso aqui [a mamadeira erótica] para os nossos filhos. Isso faz parte do kit gay. Invenção de Haddad, viu!?</p>	<p>Look, those of you who vote for PT. This is the baby bottle distributed in daycare centers. Look at the brand here! Do you see it? Distributed in daycare centers to your child, as an excuse to fight against homophobia. Look at how the nipple is. Do you see it? PT and Haddad preach this to your child. Your five or six-year-old child will drink from this baby bottle in their daycare center in order to fight homophobia. You must vote for Bolsonaro, man, to make our children men and women. PT, Haddad, Lula, and Dilma only want this [the erotic baby bottle] for our kids. This is part of the gay kit. Haddad's invention, you see?</p>
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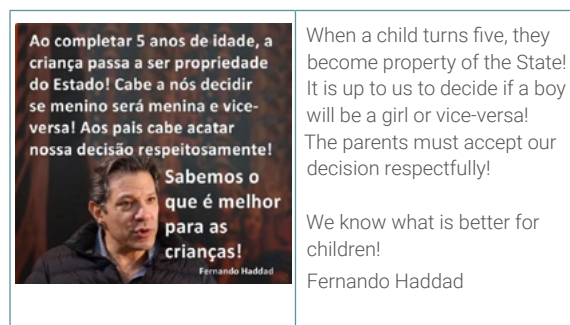


Figure 1. Children as property of the state (second fake news story)<sup>12</sup>

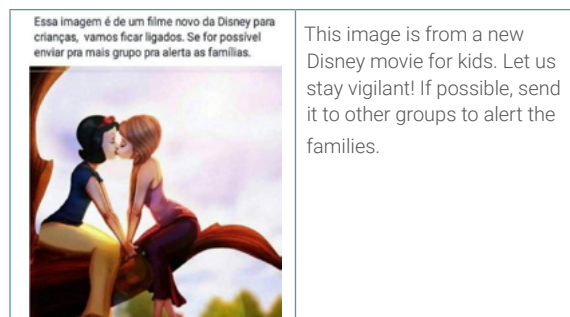


Figure 2. The lesbian princesses (third fake news story)<sup>13</sup>

A sociosemiotic perspective, grounded on CDA, considers that meaning-making is constrained by interdiscursive patterns (Fairclough 2003; Reisigl, Wodak 2009). These patterns emerge from the integration and interaction of social actors in different social practices, which are ultimately tied to particular fields of activity (Volóchinov 2017) and institutions. Therefore, they are associated with the reproduction of practices. According to Fairclough (2003), there are three dialectically organized interdiscursive patterns which give rise to orders of discourse: **discourses** (sociosemiotic ways of representing), **genres** (sociosemiotic ways of acting and interacting) and **styles** (sociosemiotic ways of being). These three dimensions of structuring are interrelated, since discourses can be inculcated in styles and enacted in genres, in such a way that actions, identities and representations become, to a lesser or greater degree, coherent with each other. This does not preclude, however, the existence of contradictions, since there are social struggles and resistance within each field or institution. Thus, alternativity is inherent to

8 PT stands for *Partido dos Trabalhadores*; Worker's Party, in English.

9 The so-called "erotic baby bottle" is a baby bottle whose nipple has the shape of a penis.

10 Source: Estadão Verifica. September 28th, 2018. *'Mamadeiras eróticas' não foram distribuídas em creches pelo PT*. Estadão [online]. [Accessed: August 28, 2022], available at: < <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/estadao-verifica/mamadeiras-eroticas-nao-foram-distribuidas-em-creches-pelo-pt/> >.

11 The original publication has been removed due to a court order. Nonetheless, it can still be found in some YouTube channels, such as <https://bit.ly/2wUcJhP> (accessed on February 28th, 2020).

12 Source: Becker, Clara. September 27th, 2018. *Vetada pelo TSE, declaração falsa atribuída a Haddad segue 'viva' nas redes sociais*. Lupa [online]. [Accessed: August 28th, 2022], available at: < <https://lupa.uol.com.br/jornalismo/2018/09/27/verificamos-haddad-criancas/> >.

13 Source: Afonso, Nathália. May 16th, 2019. *#Verificamos: Imagem que mostra personagens se beijando não*

orders of discourse despite the hegemonic patterns that may have emerged (Gonçalves-Segundo 2011, 2018).

Thus, textual production and interpretation is not conceived as a purely strategic endeavor, since every social actor is coerced by the relevant multimodal patterns of semiotic composition, by the pre-legitimated concepts and relations between concepts that each discourse structures, and by the expectations of semiotic behavior that enables the producer's or the interpreter's identification with a relevant role in a sociodiscursive practice. That does not mean, though, that a social actor cannot simulate other interdiscursive patterns; on the contrary, simulation is part of the political struggle that can be observed in fake news stories, since the other group's ideologies and stances will be textually inscribed or evoked, in order to draw attention and to elicit emotive responses towards their implications.

Hence, a discursive interpretation and explanation of fake news should consider these three social dimensions of structuring – representations, actions and identities – with their respective semiotic counterparts – discourses, genres and styles. Besides that, the study must account for the discursive practice that grounds these texts, i.e., how they are produced, distributed, accessed, and interpreted. The objective of this paper is not, however, to deal with all these parameters, especially production and access, since there are already many papers discussing them with far better tools drawn from computer sciences and statistics<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the focus will be: (i) on the process of inculcation and its relation to the struggle between bias and critical thinking in fake news interpretation; (ii) on the role of composition patterns in the evaluation of fake news; (iii) on the patterns of fake news distribution and their role in building trust and group cohesion; and (iv) on the interpretation and evaluation of fake news along a scale from absurd to evident.

As Gomes and Dourado (2019) highlighted, the emergence of fake news in Brazil – and perhaps around the world – is correlated with the rise of a neoconservative movement which had to create an alternative media ecology to change the sources of authority and credibility in society and to raise the visibility of their values and proposals. In this process, we contend that the construction of texts that strategically draw on moral panics is a useful resource for generating social cohesion and ideological bubbles oriented to reduce the space for dissension and the quality of public debate by producing followers instead of critical arguers.

In fact, the strategy seems to rely on idiosyncrasies of contemporary conservative discourses, which, in Brazil, tend to conflate political, economic and religious elements, namely: (i) their rejection of alternativity and the adherence to religiously biased identification processes

oriented towards the maintenance of hegemonic styles or performances regarding gender and sexuality – and sometimes even class and race; (ii) their reliance on religious authorities and representations for conceiving reality, in a process that seems to correlate with the rejection of science; (iii) the idea that family is the cornerstone of socialization and the basis of moral values, a discourse that, ultimately, leads to interventions in education.

A discourse with these characteristics will probably favor, through inculcation, radicalized identities with strict behavior patterns in terms of talking/writing, dressing, feeling, and acting. A possible consequence of this process is the reduction of the social actors' disposition to entertain different perspectives and accept – or at least, tolerate – different performances and styles. Thus, polarization may intensify, leading to a strong 'us vs. them' dichotomization (van Dijk 2003) that attributes to the other a set of values that is diametrically different from the endogroup's, no matter the degree of generalization and/or absurdity behind it.

That is one of the possible grounds for the political exploitation of moral panics. In the three selected texts (Table 3 and Figures 1 and 2), one can see an attack oriented toward gender and sexuality movements and agendas, instantiated by a shift in the debate from adulthood to childhood. This process feeds the conservative moral panic according to which people are willing and able to convert kids to homosexuality, alter the "correct" gender performance patterns or even decide on the child's gender identification. As Balieiro (2018) puts it, the strategy lies in representing children as being under constant threat. In this recent paper, the author discusses how this specific moral panic has been exploited to attack schools, teachers, teaching materials, education curricula, and art and to categorize them as promoters of "deviant" gender and sexual behavior and activities. There is even a term to express this "deviant" progressive stance – "gender ideology". Consequently, progressive teachers and politicians are labeled as militant and indoctrinators, and schools are accused of not fulfilling their real role ("to improve mathematical and language skills"), for teachers are too busy brainwashing children. Such an exaggeration – which can be seen as a sort of manipulation or fabrication of content – is often reproduced in fake news stories.

Thus, one can infer that behind the shift of the gender and sexuality discussion from adulthood to childhood lies:

- on the one hand, a rhetoric that represents a political party (the Worker's Party – PT) and a certain political stance – the left-wing – as the enemies, since they are conceptualized as agents

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*é de novo filme da Disney*. Yahoo!Notícias [online] [Accessed: August 28th, 2022], available at: < <https://br.noticias.yahoo.com/verificamos-imagem-que-mostra-personagens-se-beijando-nao-e-de-novo-filme-da-disney-152201822.html> >.

14 For a systematic review, see Kim et al. (2021).

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- willing to experiment on children and intervene in their development; and
- on the other hand, a rhetoric that distorts the discussion on non-hegemonic gender and sexual(ity) identity dynamics, hindering the necessary debates on the rights and the concrete material and symbolic struggles of both women and non-heterosexual people in contemporary Brazilian society. By removing the debate from adulthood to a group almost consensually seen as in need of protection, the advancement of a progressive agenda on the issue as a whole can be contested.

But to what degree do these effects, probably envisaged by the fake news industry, actually affect readers and viewers?<sup>15</sup> Would there be other reasons behind this sort of production that draws on moral panics? The following paragraphs will focus on both these questions.

From a critical discursive point of view, the answer to the first question lies in a series of correlated factors, although the discursive inculcations discussed above, especially in terms of the conservative discourse's tendency towards the rejection of alternativity and its correlated internalization in strict identity performances, play a central role. Despite that, such a perspective does not preclude social actors' resistance and their capacity for critical thinking overcoming bias. Hence, it is important to consider other factors that could enhance belief in this kind of fabricated content.

An element that seems relevant is multimodality. All three selected texts have some kind of pictorial component. The third text uses an image as evidence to prove that Disney is "really" producing a movie with a lesbian relationship. The second text reproduces the face of the presidential candidate Haddad, suggesting that he is responsible for the utterances portrayed in the post. The first one is a video that directs the viewer's attention to the "erotic baby bottle".

It seems that the use of pictorial elements fulfills two functions. The first is to emulate common discursive practices on social media, which are prototypically constructed by verbo-pictorial relations – the composition patterns emulate the typical posts we find on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. It seems to be a strategy oriented toward enhancing the endogroup's belief in the spontaneity of the post and inducing the interpretation that the producer is an engaged member of that community ("a concerned citizen"). Therefore, these texts seem to function as warnings, as a means of directing constant attention to the "threat" represented by the exogroup.

The second function is to improve content credibility. The act of showing may be a way of overcoming possible skepticism toward the content. This is probably some sort of anticipation strategy aimed either at

those members of the endogroup who do not completely identify with the core values of that ideology and are still open to alternativity, or at those who are aware of the fake news reality and are more skeptical about content distributed through the internet. Behind this usage lies a sort of experience-based reasoning schema ("I see it; therefore, it is true") (Reboul 2004).

Another relevant element seems to be the methods of textual distribution. As we discussed in section 2, Brazilian people seem to place more trust in the content of texts produced and/or distributed by their network of close relations than in content generated by the media or political institutions. Thus, WhatsApp seems to be a productive means for suspension of disbelief.

A third element is the interdiscursive relations that cement a certain discursive perspective among all those texts. Even though the election is already over, texts like the one exposed in Figure 2 are still produced and reproduced in Brazil. This apparently silly text fulfills important discursive and political roles: to keep the candle of moral panic burning, to ascertain that the ideological group constituted during the last years does not dissolve and to reinforce the concept of family as the cornerstone of Brazilian society (and, thus, as an institution that needs protection). Each text that joins this discursive network helps ensure that this perspective on gender and sexuality is always worthy of people's attention. Consequently, this moral panic can be invoked every time neoconservative groups – and, in Brazil's case, the federal government – need to divert public attention from other sensitive themes. And in this strategy lies the answer to the second proposed question ("would there be other reasons behind fabricated content that draws on moral panics?").

These 'smoke screen' tactics seem to be oriented towards the exogroup; in this case, toward social actors affiliated with progressive discourses and agendas. It is likely that, to this group, all the above fake news pieces would sound absurd – perhaps the last one could induce a Google search to verify its falsehood. Therefore, the political use of moral panics must have another reason. The hypothesis we advance here is that it aims to reorient public debate towards this question, whereas other relevant political, economic, cultural, and social themes are left behind, backgrounded by this affective topic. Before explaining this strategy, however, we shall discuss why at least the first two texts would enable reading of absurdity.

Suppose the first video is carefully watched, and attention is paid to its composition. In this case, one can easily notice that its construction points to deception, since there are many indicators of fabrication. Readers and viewers affiliated with progressive discourses would probably detect them more easily due to their bias against conservative discourse in a polarized context. Nonetheless, other social actors would also notice them. We list a few of these markers of absurdity in the sequence.

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15 It is not intended, in this paper, to embark on a quantitative analysis about gullibility or belief in fake news.

The first one has a normative character. It would be overwhelmingly hard to approve a public policy instituting such a pattern of baby bottles throughout the country, considering both the fact that pre-schooling in Brazil is mainly a municipal responsibility and that people from most discursive affiliations would certainly resist this proposal. The second one has a behavioral nature, related to the fact that five and six-year-old children do not prototypically consume liquids in baby bottles. The third one is a discursive absurdity, as progressive politicians would never propose adopting such a baby bottle, which simulates oral sex, since the progressive discourse fiercely combats any sort of child sexualization<sup>16</sup>. The fourth one has a compositional nature: the authorial voice does not show his face, and there is no document supporting what is said<sup>17</sup>.

The second text (Figure 1) is more subtle in this regard. The indicator of absurdity is mainly discursive, as progressive social actors in Brazil, although usually associated with the defense of a strong welfare state, would never propose extending the state's intervention to a matter of personal identification<sup>18</sup>.

Considering these indicators, it seems that these fake news stories are simply not oriented towards changing the exogroup's belief. They are not about revising beliefs. They are about reinforcing the endogroup's cohesion and values, independently of the level of facticity, and about drawing the exogroup's attention towards the moral panic, feeding on the polarization and on their already established image of "moral enemies", so that public debate is not only distorted, but also diverted from other issues which may be more relevant and/or more sensitive and harmful to the endogroup. The success of the strategy, as Gelfert (2018) wisely claims, lies in the fact that both the endogroup and the exogroup distribute these texts and turn their content into a public issue, worthy of debate.

Thus, one may say that these fake news stories that draw on moral panics can be conceived as points of tension between discourses, in a process that is oriented towards promoting – although not guaranteeing, since endogroup members can detect the fabrication – dichotomous readings:

- on the one hand, an interpretation that the content is not fabricated, and, thus not only true, but evident, since it is compatible with the endogroup's vision on the issue that drives the moral panic; and

- on the other hand, an interpretation that the content is undoubtedly fabricated, as it is not only false, but absurd, as it promotes different sorts of manipulation to distort the exogroup's perspective on reality.

This is why it can be argued that this kind of fake news stories constructs a tension between the evident and the absurd.

In doing so, the fake news industry seems to achieve two tasks at the same time: (i) it promotes social cohesion and ideological bubbles aimed at reducing the quality of public debate, favoring polarized elections and extremist candidates by manipulating emotions (particularly, indignation) and attitudes (especially, antagonism), and (ii) it distorts public debate, by keeping moral panics under the spotlight, whereas other relevant political, economic, social, and cultural issues are backgrounded or reframed through the neoconservative perspective. The struggle for hegemony in discourse appears to have new instruments.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to discuss, based on the framework provided by Critical Discourse Analysis, the effects and the motivations behind the strategic production and distribution of fabricated content that draws on and cements moral panics in contemporary Brazilian society, which is characterized by intense political polarization, devaluation of science and traditional media, and the consolidation of a (neo)conservative discourse.

The analysis indicates that this kind of fake news story constitutes a point of tension between opposing discourses. Therefore, their construction seems to be oriented towards promoting readings that categorize the content of these texts as absurd – the exogroup's preferable reading – or evident – the endogroup's preferable reading.

To support this conceptualization, four relevant factors related to the sociosemiotic nature of these fake news in Brazil were discussed: the role of discursive inculcation of identities and styles, the multimodal composition of texts, the distribution pattern enabled by WhatsApp, and the interdiscursive relations between networks of texts that reiterate similar ideological perspectives. These factors were employed to explain:

16 One should not mistake progressive stances in favor of sexual education at schools with endorsement of sexualization of children, a strawman usually constructed by neoconservative groups.

17 The low quality of the video is an ambiguous marker. Probably, the exogroup would read it as a sign of fabrication and absurdity – a video anyone could make to attack Haddad's candidacy. The readings of the endogroup may clearly vary, but a possible hypothesis is that the "home-made" nature of the video would point to an engaged citizen preoccupied with what would be "really" happening at schools. The low quality would, then, be a sign of credibility.

18 On the other hand, the fact that the left, in Brazil, tends to defend a strong state may raise this piece's credibility to members of the neoconservative endogroup. The strategy in this fake news is, thus, to blend a moral panic with a known property of the Brazilian leftist discourse.



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- how readings that interpret the fake news content as evident emerge in the endogroup and hypothesize their main sociodiscursive function regarding this group, namely the maintenance of social cohesion, by keeping moral panics under constant attention;
- how the exogroup would be more sensitive to indicators of content fabrication and, thus, more prone to evaluate the story as absurd, followed by a discussion on the possible implications of this sensitivity. The main hypothesis derived from this reasoning is that one of the objectives of these fake news is to divert the exogroup's attention towards both the combat of moral panics and the reframing of relevant social issues, which the endogroup had already distorted. Through this strategy, the public debate on relevant social, political, economic and cultural issues and policies may be temporarily halted.

Although these reflections and findings seem coherent in the Brazilian context, it is still necessary to check the potential for generalization of these conclusions and to understand the argumentative and rhetorical role of fake news stories in public debate, an issue of serious concern among many researchers cited here – and we include ourselves in this group. Therefore, it seems important to present some avenues of research that may be productive for future development.

The first regards the study of interactional dynamics, in open and closed groups, in virtual or physical spaces, which takes fake news content as a discursive topic. The main interest would be in how these texts are utilized in epistemic and practical argumentation and how they are connected to the processes of belief formation, revision and maintenance (Niño, Marrero 2015; Gonçalves-Segundo 2020b).

The second involves rethinking the analytical categories employed by Text Linguistics, (Critical) Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotics in terms of the study of textual chains on the internet. Fake news should not only be studied in terms of its materiality, but also in terms of its framing along the chain of texts produced by social actors who distribute and comment on them.

The third regards a necessary effort to understand the complex relations between hate speech, moral panic, the economics of emotion, ideology, bias, inculcation, critical thinking, and digital literacy. This should be done not only for achieving a more precise theoretical and analytical endeavor, but also for promoting educational programs aimed at improving awareness of information disorder, since technological advancements will only increase social actors' capacity to produce and distribute fake news. People must be more and more prepared to distinguish what is fabricated from what is not and to understand the discursive strategies behind this kind of digital narrative.

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