

72 hours later

Underground Media and meaning-making collectives in Brazil¹

72 horas después

Medios Underground y colectivos de producción de sentido en Brasil

72 horas depois

Mídias Underground e coletivos de produção de sentido no Brasil

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18861/ic.2025.20.1.3939>

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HOW TO CITE: 72 hours later. Underground Media and meaning-making collectives in Brazil (2025). *In Mediaciones de la Comunicación*, 20(1). DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18861/ic.2025.20.1.3939>

Submission date: December 10, 2024

Acceptance date: May 8, 2025

ABSTRACT

The article reflects on and proposes a theoretical discussion about the concept of Underground, one of the media systems operating in contemporary society, as observed by Carlón (2022). In order to reflect on the theoretical and epistemological foundations of this concept, the discussion focuses on the aspects related to the coup events of January 8, 2023, in Brazil. The communicational complexities of this context are critically analyzed through the lens of mediatization, hyper-mediatization and the structural dimensions of media systems. This analysis allows for inferences about the impact of these communicative dynamics on meaning-making collectives.

KEYWORDS: *mediatization, media systems, Underground, contemporary society, critically analyzed.*

¹ This work was carried out with the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), Ministry of Education, Brazil.

RESUMEN

El artículo presenta una reflexión y una propuesta de discusión teórica sobre el Underground, uno de los sistemas mediáticos que operan en la contemporaneidad (Carlón, 2022). Para explorar las bases teóricas y epistémicas del concepto Underground, esta discusión abordará aspectos relativos a los actos golpistas del 8 de enero de 2023 en Brasil. Las complejidades comunicacionales serán sometidas a un análisis crítico a través del análisis de los procesos de mediatización, hipermediatización y las dimensiones estructurales de los sistemas mediáticos. De este modo, es posible inferir sobre el impacto de estas dinámicas comunicativas en los colectivos creadores de sentido.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *mediatización, sistemas mediáticos, Underground, contemporaneidad, análisis crítico.*

RESUMO

O artigo reflete e propõe uma discussão teórica sobre o Underground, um dos sistemas midiáticos em funcionamento na contemporaneidade, como observado por Carlón (2022). Para refletir sobre as bases teóricas e epistêmicas do conceito de Underground, aborda-se aspectos relativos aos atos golpistas de 8 de janeiro de 2023, no Brasil. Problematisa-se as complexidades comunicacionais a partir de discussões sobre processualidades da midiatização, da hipermidiatização, dos sistemas midiáticos e suas dimensões estruturantes. Assim, faz-se inferências sobre alguns efeitos dessas dinâmicas comunicacionais em coletivos de produção de sentidos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *midiatização, sistemas midiáticos, Underground, contemporaneidade, análise crítica.*

1. WHAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT - A SHORT INTRODUCTION

On October 31st, 2022, the day after Jair Bolsonaro's defeat in Brazil's presidential election, a police officer from Itajaí in the state of Santa Catarina, approached a group of Bolsonaro supporters engaged in a protest against Lula da Silva's narrow victory over the right-wing candidate. The officer asked the protesters to "resist for just 72 hours"², indicating that the local police department was aligned with their cause and that this amount of time was needed for Bolsonaro, who was still in office, to take the necessary steps to overturn his defeat. In a matter of a few hours, the message was spread throughout the country via WhatsApp and Telegram. On the same day, thousands of Bolsonaro supporters started to gather and camp in front of the headquarters of the Brazilian Armed Forces, demanding a military intervention and refusing to recognize the election results. However, 72 hours passed without any action being taken, and the same was true for the subsequent period.

Two and a half months later, on January 8th, 2023, a week after the inauguration of Lula da Silva for his third term as President, thousands of Bolsonaro supporters continued to maintain encampments throughout the country, including Brasília, the capital city of Brazil, despite the efforts of the newly elected government to demobilize them. That Sunday afternoon, a group of individuals departed from the main encampment situated in front of the Army's national headquarters in Brasília and proceeded towards Praça dos Três Poderes³, the political heart of Brazil. The protesters attacked, vandalized, and destroyed government buildings with minimal intervention from law enforcement agencies.

It seems unlikely that the 72-hour period had ended for these individuals, even if it had started more than two months earlier. Time, in this case, did not follow chronological patterns, but represented an opportunity for action identified by those rioters (Ruedell, 2024), who were still waiting for Bolsonaro to reverse the election results. That may be true especially for many of those who are now incarcerated after having been found guilty by the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF) of attempting to undermine democracy and plotting a coup *d'état*.

Nevertheless, a considerable number of individuals continued to disseminate fake news regarding the electoral results and other matters of public interest from different locations nationwide. These individuals, who are subject to criminal prosecution in Brazil for the production and circulation of fake news, primarily operate using WhatsApp and Telegram, the kind of media that falls under the umbrella term Underground Media (Carlón, 2020) –the same

² This episode was widely reported in the mass media, i.e., Estado de S. Paulo, one of Brazil's largest daily newspapers. Available at: <<https://www.estadao.com.br/politica/em-sc-policia-diz-que-populacao-deve-resistir-72-horas-para-presidente-tomar-uma-atitude-veja/>>. Access: January 14, 2023.

³ Praça dos Três Poderes is a public plaza in Brasília, the capital city of Brazil, where are located the main buildings of the Federal Government: the Planalto Palace, from the executive branch; the National Congress Palace, from the legislative branch; and the Brazilian Supreme Court Palace, from the judiciary branch.

Underground Media that played a pivotal role in the genesis of the Planalto Riots (Caffagni et al., 2024), as mentioned above.

The question, therefore, arises as to how this can be addressed theoretically: what distinguishes Underground Media from other media systems, and what are the further implications for Brazilian democracy and its political landscape? To address this matter, a theoretical framework will be employed based on the insights gleaned from observations conducted before, during and after the Planalto Riots.

In order to achieve this objective, the text is divided into three sections. The first one explores the complexities related to the dynamics of mediatization and hypermediatization. The second section defines what is understood as Underground Media, as well as how it enhances the emergence of new meaning-making collectives. Finally, the inferential section presents our final comments. It is important to clarify that this text is neither a case study nor the outcome of exploratory research. Instead, it constitutes a theoretical and essayistic attempt to understand the interfaces between the use of certain digital media and politics through an empirical example. Therefore, we will not dedicate a chapter to methodological considerations. Also, the Underground Media presents new dynamics that have not yet been well understood, and there are few theoretical attempts to address this topic. At the same time, this work represents a step forward in a research endeavor started in 2020, during which we have been examining online interactions and mediatization dynamics in various right-wing movements, and it brings together many of the theoretical discussions that have taken place since then.

2. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY MEDIATIZATION?

In recent years, Bolsonaro's communication team, as well as his closest and main supporters, have made use of social media platforms, like WhatsApp and Telegram groups and channels, to mobilize supporters nationwide – in some cases counting with the former president himself as a member. The groups, which have been the subject of scrutiny by researchers and journalists for many years, have become an important tool for the construction of a movement aligned with a “Bolsonarista ideology”, particularly during the period of the global COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023)⁴. This movement has been unified in its opposition to vaccination and preventive measures regarding the coronavirus, and in its support for treatments without scientific evidence, which were endorsed by Bolsonaro. They function as an intricate and efficient network for sharing content, whereby a message disseminated in one group could quickly propagate to others throughout Brazil, reaching thousands of individuals in a short period of time.

⁴ Dates used by the World Health Organization. For further information: <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136367>>.

This was no different when Bolsonaro lost the 2022 general election and the police officer asked his supporters to resist for another 72 hours. It is not possible to state for sure that the encampments from which rioters organized themselves to attack Brasília on January 8th, 2023, were formed as a result of the police officer's statement. Nevertheless, the suggestion of a 72-hour wait became a rallying cry among Bolsonaro supporters and was employed for different purposes over the following months, indicating that it resonated beyond the immediate context in which it originated.

This distinctive scenario and particular appropriation of media was identified and documented by media and communication researchers several years prior, prompting the collection of data from social media platforms, along with WhatsApp and Telegram groups. This trend reached a crescendo during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the evidence suggests that the events preceding the Planalto Riots were significantly shaped by the circulation of meanings employed as a media strategy (Borelli, Dalmolin & Kroth, 2023; Corbellini, 2019; Dal Piva, 2022).

However, this complex machinery is not only constituted by strategies and the circulation of content; it is also intrinsically linked to what Argentine semiotician Mario Carlón (2022) calls hypermediatization. This concept is derived from the notion of mediatization as related to the interpenetration of media and society (Verón, 2013). Despite our understanding of mediatization through the lens of Verón, we also perceive it as a meta-process that pervades human societies, affecting diverse social spheres (Tudor & Bratosin, 2020) and mediating the construction of reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

For some scholars engaged in mediatization research, our approach may appear eclectic or fragmented, from diverse traditions. Even so, we believe that good results can be achieved through the coming together of these different "schools," which promises a fruitful avenue for the examination of objects exemplified in this text and for a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary media communication landscape. What enriches this confluence is precisely the different epistemological roots of both traditions, making it possible to gain greater insight by encouraging an intertwined exchange.

In this regard, our approach is based on two distinct dimensions of mediatization. On the one hand, there is an increasing reliance on and necessity for the use of digital media for ordinary activities (Hepp, 2019). On the other hand, given the importance of discursive construction activities in our daily lives, it is vital to consider the conditions under which meanings are produced and recognized (Verón, 2013).

As posited by Verón (2014), the concept of mediatization is intrinsically linked to semiosis, which encompasses the process of signification –the relation or action of a sign, in which it interacts with an object and an interpretant to convey meaning (Peirce, 1998). However, the author considers a wider

dimension of this process, conceptualizing it within the framework of social semiosis, recognizing the integral role of individuals in human societies as contributors to meaning-making processes (Verón, 1993). This perspective enables a connection between mediatization and communication. Indeed, Verón (2014) himself understands the mental signification process as a communication process.

This approach allows us to consider mediatization as a long-term process, a perspective that is supported by different scholars (Verón, 2014, 2013; Krotz, 2014, 2022; Couldry & Hepp, 2016). From the Paleolithic period, which is marked by the creation of the first chipped stone tools, to present days, when official presidential discourses are delivered via X, Instagram, or even TikTok, circulating through Telegram or WhatsApp, mediatization has spanned throughout human history, affecting time and space (Verón, 2014). Even though Verón (ibidem) placed significant emphasis on the notion that the chronological period between the development of different social-communication devices would tend to diminish, we also argue that our own perception of time can be affected by mediatization –including a 72-hour period of time being perceived differently by different people: for some, it is just a chronological period of time, while for others, it represents the opportunity to act (Ruedell, 2024). In other words, mediatization can even reshape *kairós*⁵.

Emergence, specific appropriations and institutionalization of different media in various societies have led to important transformations in different social spheres. And even though mediatization may not be the primary catalyst for certain social and political developments, it is nevertheless possible to discern its subtle influence on such events. To illustrate, let's consider the case of Hochdeutsch, or High German, which constitutes a significant branch of the standard German language. This variant has been considerably influenced by Martin Luther's translation of the Bible. The establishment of a standard German language cannot be fully attributed to Luther's work alone. However, the appropriation of a particular medium (writing) and a specific technological device (the book) makes what Verón (2014) calls a social-communication device, which specific use in a specific time and context by a given society, and its subsequent institutionalization as a model, are processes that can be understood as mediatization.

Verón posits that mediatization also engenders radial effects across different social spheres. As an example, we may consider Luther's famous Theses, which played a key role in triggering a series of political and religious transformations. In 1517, the date of its publication, the pamphlet may be regarded as a device, the writing as a medium, collectively institutionalized within a specific

⁵ From the Greek, *kairós* refers to the "right moment". It is a subjective quality of time, opposed to the notion of *chrónos*, which refers to chronological time. *Kairós* is the time that is not only lived, but also felt as special, opportune for something.

context marked by this kind of publication. This provides valuable insights into the conditions of production and recognition, as well as circulation, within a specific medium (Carlón, 2020).

How could a pamphlet cause such political disturbances as Luther's Theses did? And why was it chosen as the vehicle for dissemination in the first place? We may argue that, at the time, Luther maintained a dual relationship with the pamphlet –simultaneously trusting in its communicative efficacy and depending on it as a tool for engagement. This type of relationship between historical actors and media devices remains prevalent in contemporary societies, albeit involving different technologies and sociocommunicational dynamics. The trust and dependence on media are important characteristics of mediatization, particularly in contexts where a large number of daily activities are mediated (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). As previously stated, the important thing is how media is used in certain situations, at certain times, and in certain societies. While there is no direct line of causation linking Luther's Theses to the Bolsonaroistas' Telegram groups and channels, it is evident that media technologies have developed in successive "waves" each accompanied by processes of institutionalization. It could be argued that the messages disseminated in these groups and channels represent a contemporary iteration of the pamphlet. But this statement would simplify things too much, since it doesn't take into account the details and complexities of the comparison. Furthermore, it is also important to consider how reality is constructed and the social worlds structured.

According to Couldry and Hepp (2016), the social world can be conceptualized as a communicative construct. In their analysis of the contemporary social landscape, the authors argue that this construct is also shaped by the pervasive influence of media communication. Our argument is based on the premise that a society in which the social world is structured by and within media presents far more complex social scenarios than a society in which the social world is structured outside of media. Nevertheless, it is impossible to avoid this process of mediation, as our everyday activities are continually mediated by platforms, television, radio, and even mobile apps. This suggests that the social world cannot be conceptualized as a mere aggregation of disparate elements –ranging from new technologies to media and devices– but rather as a complex network of interconnections and relations that manifest across multiple levels and scales.

Indeed, the social world can be defined as the result of the communicative social construction of reality. This process is characterized by its intersubjectivity and its close relation to everyday reality (in opposition to the idea that it is somehow "pure" and not mediated), and it is structured in domains sustained by media, which differentiate them and enable intercommunication between them (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). In other words, the social world is constructed through the processes of meaning-making, which work making it recognizable to society.

It may sound redundant at this point, but it is important to recognize that neither the social world nor reality can be regarded as fixed entities –instead, they are the result of intricate human interactions (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). They reflect the power dynamics, inequalities, social processes that drive social change, as well as the institutions and institutional fields that shape these processes. Moreover, media organizations are no longer the only agents of meaning-making in media communication, with non-institutional actors also playing a significant role.

It can be argued that communication is the primary means by which meaning is created in the social world, since it is an operation related to social semiosis (Verón, 1993), resulting from the selections made at its core (Borelli & Graf, 2024). This process is a driving force in the social construction of reality, and in contemporary times it can be heavily influenced by media and its associated infrastructures. In light of these observations, we highlight four inflection points, or complexification products of this process, that have emerged over the past decades (Couldry & Hepp, 2016): (1) an increasing mediation of communication as a means of supporting social relations, (2) the existence of seamless flows of communication that traverse both the present and the past, (3) the continuous availability of media, and (4) the full integration of these three complexities in our communication habits.

It is important to point out that mediation is not mediatization, nor a product of it –in fact, they are often misidentified, with the first being used in the place of the latter in communication research, with mediatization being understood merely as media coverage (Tudor & Bratosin, 2021). Furthermore, it is not possible to provide a single, definitive definition of mediation, “as it represents a broad understanding of phenomena and a vast set of experiences” (p. 24). However, mediation can be understood as a micro process that operates at the level of relationships between actors, such as individuals and institutions, and their interactions with the media. On the other hand, mediatization refers to long-term transformations driven by historical transformations produced by mediation (p. 30). Thus, even though one is not a product of the other, mediation and mediatization are structurally related in a circular process of mutual influence, in which the historical changes generated by mediation contribute to the constitution of mediatization, producing new complexities that impact both processes, in a kind of perpetual motion.

Also, the aforementioned flows of communication are not necessarily a product of mediatization, but their diachronic behavior is –by one side due to the media availability, and by another due to the mediation-mediatization relationship. As a result, in contemporaneity, communication actions are crossed by different media, even those that are face-to-face: i.e. when a group of friends is chatting and someone uses their smartphone to show something that was posted on Instagram; or when a message from Instagram is shared on

WhatsApp, containing a hyperlink that leads to a news portal article, which can later become the subject of a face-to-face conversation.

This understanding of mediatization is closely aligned with the concept of hypermediatization as described by Carlón (2018). As the author notes (*ibidem*), when Verón conducted the majority of his theoretical work, mainstream media organizations had control over meaning-making processes, in what Carlón (2022) calls the “Mass Media System” (MMS)⁶. However, with the rise and proliferation of the Internet and new possibilities of interaction, including the first social media websites and platforms, new media began to emerge, such as those related to the “Individual Media System” (IMS) (*ibidem*), formed precisely by social media platforms, such as Facebook and X, as well as the websites of news media and YouTube channels, among others. An important characteristic of the IMS is the substantial presence of amateurs, who are also involved in meaning-making processes. In this new communication scenario, voices that would not have been heard when the MMS dominated the field have gained relevance.

Nevertheless, more recently, a third main media system, the Underground (Carlón, 2022), has become part of the contemporary communication landscape. However, it is important to note that as with the IMS, the Underground is not solely populated by amateur users; it also includes individuals who have previously been excluded even from the IMS. Concurrently, it exhibits distinctive power dimensions and a specific governance status, and the observed media-related social changes are “radically private and intimate” (Carlón, p. 256). Notable examples of Underground media include message apps and platforms, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as communication platforms like Zoom.

As a result of this media “ecosystem”, the circulation of meanings began to exhibit “transversal” characteristics (Carlón, 2018): i.e., a discourse from a private Facebook profile or shared on Telegram, could be echoed in the MMS, “rising” from the IMS or the Underground. This has the potential to spark reactions in different social spheres. Also, a discourse from the MMS can “goes down” to the IMS or the Underground, generating discussions and stimulating social action.

The coexistence of media systems operating together can be linked to the web of complexities and interrelationships identified by Couldry and Hepp (2016). This scenario is characterized by individuals having access to and making use of a diverse range of media and devices. Hepp (2019) also identifies an increase in trust and need for media use in everyday activities as part of this

⁶ We chose to keep the expression “media systems” as originally used by Carlón (2018). However, we find it important to note that, due to our epistemological alignment with Luhmann’s (2012) notion of social systems, we have, at times, opted to replace the expression “systems” with “clusters” when referring to IMS, MMS, and the Underground. Nevertheless, as one of the aims of this text is to highlight Mário Carlón’s contributions to mediatization research, we have chosen to preserve the original terminology as conceived by him.

process, in a more sociological perspective he calls deep mediatization. From a semiotic perspective, Carlón (2020) posits that this coexistence implies a change on communication operating logics, wherein the new media (IMS and Underground) are perpetually intertwined with the MMS.

In practical terms, there has been a shift from a media-centered society, in which the media served as a reflection of social occurrences, albeit with some distortion, representing the reality of what was taking place in society, to a mediatized society, where social events are increasingly shaped by the presence of the media (Verón, 1993). The phenomenon of hypermediatization is characterized by the coexistence of amateur-generated discourses together with professional and institutional ones, which have the potential to influence different social spheres.

The media actions of Bolsonarista movements can be understood as a necessity (Hepp, 2019) and as a deliberate strategy, driven by the circulation and the potential for social impact, given the characteristics of the Underground media within the context of hypermediatization (Carlón, 2020). While there may be some differences between the two perspectives, it is not necessary to eliminate one in favor of the other. Indeed, we are convinced that a meticulous integration of these perspectives can ease a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, elucidating the mechanisms through which meanings are produced, acknowledged and set in circulation (Carlón, 2020). This, in turn, sheds light on the intricate processes by which reality is constructed (Couldry & Hepp, 2016), particularly in relation to a media environment characterized by a multifaceted and dynamic ecosystem.

These particularities will be explored in greater depth in the following section, which will discuss Underground and the emergence of new meaning-making collectives, addressing the matter of the media systems and their defining characteristics. Finally, the last section will return to the case of the Planalto Riots to examine how Underground media are being used to manipulate the circulation of meaning as a political communication strategy, providing insights and broader inferences regarding the general aspects of the shifting political scenario in Brazil.

3. WHAT ABOUT THE MEDIA SYSTEMS?

The era of the Mass Media (MMS) was defined by the proliferation of communication flows from social institutional devices to collectives of individual actors (Carlón, 2020). This configuration was marked by mass media organizations and social institutions operating in tandem, with the former engaged in the generation and reinforcement of social collectives (Verón, 2013). Consequently, much of the meaning-making processes were conducted by professional actors, while the primary social actors were effectively institutions. These

institutions presented three essential characteristics that were crucial in this context: the capacity to (1) manage resources and (2) establish rules (Giddens, 1984), and the capacity to (3) generate their own collectives (Verón, 2013). Thus, the media as institutions and organizations were the primary agents *in production*, in other words, the entities capable of generating meaning and establishing new collectives. As a result of the proliferation of the Internet and social media platforms, a great number of collectives and other actors have gained the ability to establish an online presence through blogs and social media pages.

This movement represented not only a shift in the hegemony over meaning-making processes but also opened up the possibility for amateurs to actively participate in them. The increasing use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, along with blogs, enabled individuals to act as their own enunciators, challenging the dominance of professional and institutional enunciators in the media landscape. Furthermore, the circulation of meanings has undergone a significant transformation: in the MMS era, meanings typically circulated following a unidirectional pattern, from the (mass) media to the general public, or occasionally between organizations or institutions. The possibility for individuals to influence this process was limited. In this new configuration defined by the IMS, meanings can circulate horizontally among amateurs and even upward (Carlón, 2020) from “the people” to “the media”, generating significant social effects.

It is interesting to consider the remarkable diversity of media, devices and individuals involved in communication processes within the IMS. In certain instances, these entities possess the capacity to manage resources, establish rules and generate and reinforce collectives, exhibiting characteristics similar to those of institutions. Conversely, there are those who are simply amateurs, lacking the aforementioned capabilities, yet still influencing various social spheres. Nevertheless, in both instances, there has been a shift in the landscape of participation, whereby individuals (including amateurs) and collectives, who have traditionally been involved in processes *in recognition*, have also assumed roles *in production* and as collective generators.

According to Carlón (2022), the rise of digital technologies has led to the emergence of Underground Media, a phenomenon that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just like the IMS, the Underground is characterized by the presence of diverse actors, including amateur content creators, but it also offers a space for individuals who have previously been excluded even from the IMS to express themselves. This is an interesting difference from the traditional model of media production, where the vast majority of content was created by professionals. In this context, discourses are appropriated from other sources, reinterpreted and set in circulation at a considerably faster pace than in other systems, with little to no accountability for the dissemination of fake news or hate speeches.

It is important to consider that the Underground is not solely defined by anonymous actions, which had already been occurring long before its emergence through the creation of anonymous profiles on platforms such as Twitter and 4Chan, and even on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram through aliases. The importance of the Underground in this context lies in its structure, which facilitates such practices, operating through more decentralized forms of power, governance, and access compared to other media systems. In other words, even though there were possibilities for amateurs to act anonymously, the Underground enables them to engage more freely in such actions, since the structure of the platforms that comprises it complicate mechanisms of accountability.

In the context of the Underground, the circulation of anonymous messages is facilitated through the use of groups and channels on messaging apps. These communication methods can aid the circulation of such content into the IMS and even the MMS, with the potential to generate contentious actions by specific groups, such as the Planalto Riots. The possibility that a message from an amateur, devoid of institutional or political weight, can be embraced by thousands of individuals without fact-checking and spark a range of social actions represents the driving force that Bolsonaro and his communication team, known as the “Hate Office”, have leveraged in recent years. However, due to the particular characteristics of the current media environment and the formation of a consensus over time, the “Hate Office” is no longer required to actively engage in the spreading of such messages, as Bolsonaro’s supporters, including those who remain anonymous, are effectively creating and setting in circulation their own discourses.

To comprehend the distinctions between the Underground, the IMS and the MMS, it is important to examine the four structural dimensions of media systems: power, regulation, access, and social construction of public, intimate and private spaces (Carlón, 2020). The first relates to the effective exercise of power within media, manifesting in the creation and circulation of meanings –i.e., in the MMS institutions and organizations hold a considerable degree of influence over these processes. The engagement in/of the media to exercise power is not a new phenomenon, and it is well known that the actors holding power in the MMS represent the establishment or its interests. In contrast, the IMS is characterized by the presence of both institutions and organizations, as well as amateur actors. These individuals hold considerable agency and capability of influence and mobilization, leading to the emergence of new collectives oriented towards meaning-making processes, and which we call “meaning-making collectives”.

To quantify this disparity in influence, let’s consider a television campaign that employs content deemed unpopular by the general public. During the MMS era, members of the public could send letters to the editorial staff, who

could simply disregard them. With the advent of the IMS, the influence of amateurs increased, enabling them to be publicly heard and to mobilize a meaning-making collective to act against that TV campaign, with the potential to dismantle it.

For its part, the Underground is characterized by the actions of individuals who, despite their efforts, were unable to secure a position even within the IMS (Carlón, 2022). Indeed, representatives of different institutions and organizations are also present in the Underground, alongside the collectives themselves. However, the individuals who comprise the Underground are, for the most part, amateurs. But it is important to note that these individuals are not the “IMS amateurs”, who many times seek public exposure and recognition. Rather, the Underground amateurs are driven by a desire to have the opportunity to speak freely, preferably without holding responsibility for what they say. This is directly pertinent to the second dimension of media systems: the regulation.

In discussing regulation, we are directly referencing the publishing protocols observed in media (Carlón, 2022). However, we understand that this dimension is also pertinent to other forms of regulation that are established both at the level of the observed media systems as a whole and in specific spaces within that system. In examining the MMS, it is clear that there are robust publishing protocols in place, which are set forth by the media organizations and the institutions that are part of it. For instance, a TV campaign must adhere to specific editorial conditions in order to be aired, including considerations related to format and use of language. Concurrently, it is anticipated that the campaign will obey a comprehensive set of regulations established by the social institutions represented in the media organization in which it is scheduled for broadcast. Non-compliance with these regulations may result in a range of consequences. It is also important to take into account the fact that the MMS is subject to a greater degree of exposure to local and federal legislation. Consequently, content broadcast on these media must also comply with protocols that address the expectations and regulations of different government levels. In the case of Brazil, for instance, TV and radio are subject to federal concession and must therefore comply with specific legislation governing their operations.

This is not the case, however, for the IMS and the Underground. Notwithstanding the fact that particular legislation pertaining to the internet is currently under discussion and is now in effect in a number of countries, this is not the case in Brazil. Moreover, even in countries where such legislation is already in place, the regulatory framework remains comparatively less robust with regard to media other than the MMS.

In the case of the IMS, for example, amateurs engaged in social media platforms, as well as organizations and institutions that manage pages on those platforms, are subject to less stringent publishing protocols. These protocols allow them to address different actors more freely and to utilize a more colloquial

language. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for individuals to utter insults or other forms of abusive language against other actors without facing any consequences. This is due to the fact that the regulations pertaining to perjury and the circulation of fake news are significantly less rigorous when compared to those that are applied to the MMS. And even when a specific legislative framework exists to address instances of fake news or defamation, as is the case in Brazil, monitoring and enforcement of these cases can be challenging due to the limitations imposed by the platforms themselves. These limitations are frequently manifested in the form of terms and conditions of use, which may not provide sufficient clarity or guidance on how to address and solve disputes.

Similarly, the Underground media are subject to fewer regulatory measures, even when compared to the IMS. Furthermore, the large number of communication platforms that form the Underground, as well as the technological diversity they represent, presents a significant challenge for monitoring and penalizing illegal or criminal actions. This is due to the fact that, i.e., in the case of Telegram and WhatsApp, encryption is employed to safeguard the users of these platforms, and in the case of Zoom, the content may only be transient or even time-limited, making it difficult to obtain any content created or shared.

That latter issue is directly related to the dimension of access, which, akin to the possibilities of effective access to and apprehension of meanings and discourses created and set in circulation in different contexts via different media systems, is a significant challenge. It is important to consider that the MMS provides limited but public access to meanings and discourses that align with their regulatory framework and respect power dynamics. However, as Verón (2013) observed, a significant shift occurred in the context of access, driven by the advent of the internet and the opportunities it created for individuals to engage with media discourses in new ways.

This phenomenon is one of the roots of the IMS and the Underground, as the core of these media is constituted by the new conditions of production and circulation of meanings (Carlón, 2022). The distinguishing factor between them and the MMS is the restricted access to discourses and circulation, which is typically limited to individuals engaged in a particular social media page or message app group. Despite the apparent reach of the content, we can say that the mobilization of the camps and the Planalto Riots on a nationwide scale would not have been possible without some degree of access to the general public.

However, if the Planalto Riots are to be examined through the lens of access, it is also necessary to consider the social construction of social, intimate, and private spaces as a further and final dimension. The issue is that during the MMS era, the social construction of living time (Carlón, 2022) or the social construction of reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2016) manifested as a national phenomenon. However, as a result of the access revolution, the IMS enabled

the social construction of the intimate and private dimensions of the lives of those involved in meaning-making processes, making the social construction of reality almost entirely intimate and private (Carlón, 2022). Here we refer to private as meaning the experiences and/or aspects of life that are not publicly shared, and intimate as an even deeper level of closeness: i.e., the first can address the experiences shared by a family member, while the second may refer to something particular of one individual or shared between a couple or small group of people. By one hand, the IMS and the Underground media enabled the possibility of giving more visibility to the private and intimate dimensions of amateurs lives through their shared contents, and by the other gave other people as well as institutions and organizations easier access to these dimensions in a deeper cognitive level via communication - the easier it got to communicate to people, the easier it got to affect them in deeper, particular ways.

The cases of IMS and Underground illustrate the mobilization of emotions and solidarity among different actors (Melucci, 1989) involved in meaning-making processes. While the MMS facilitated the formation of a national discourse on a range of complex social issues, we can say that the possibility of affecting the intimate and private dimensions of amateurs' lives has led to an increase in the number of instances of different identity recognition. This can be understood as a consequence of the ease with which individuals can now find and communicate with others who share similar thoughts and emotions. Consequently, issues that were previously not considered pertinent, potentially due to their representation within the population being relatively insignificant, are now starting to mobilize subjects who identify with them. New collectives are frequently constituted, often with exclusive dedication to the process of meaning-making, a phenomenon that has the potential to contribute to the proliferation of fake news.

It is noteworthy that a distinctive phenomenon is unfolding in the context of these collectives emerging within the framework of the IMS and the Underground: the complexities of power and regulation have increased⁷, as the dimensions of the systems themselves when coupled with the characteristics of power within the collectives contribute to a more intricate landscape. With regard to the power dimension, a collective may exhibit a clear power structure, dominated by an actor who operates in other media systems, not necessarily as a fully deviant amateur. On the other hand, the opposite may also be true, with a completely anonymous person serving as the primary source of power within that collective. In addition, power may be exercised by a group of individuals, or it may be absent altogether, with all decisions being made through direct participation. It is important to consider the general dimension of power within

7 The works of José van Dijk (2020) also coauthored by Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal (2018) address these issues, albeit from slightly different perspectives than ours. However, there are interesting possibilities for dialogue between the approaches.

a specific media system, but also to provide a detailed account of the specific characteristics of any collective, in order to gain a nuanced understanding of its power dynamics. In addition, the regulation dimension is characterized by a distinct set of attributes. As previously noted, the IMS and the Underground tend to exhibit a relatively milder approach to regulation compared to the MMS. However, in certain collective contexts, the regulatory environment may assume a more stringent stance, with platform protocols and terms and conditions being complemented with specific rules determining the type of content to be shared, and even penalties for those who disobey them –in some instances, references to the collective's opposition figures, or to actors that mobilize different worldviews are prohibited. But the same regulations may be less rigorous when regarding the dissemination of fake news, with no penalties imposed for it. This also facilitates the cohesion of a group on a social media platform or in a messaging app.

This cohesion, coupled with clearly defined objectives and the identification of a shared problem, serves to mobilize these individuals as meaning-making collectives. In some cases, these collectives can be analyzed through the typologies of collective action processes proposed by Diani and Bison (2010). This approach enables the understanding of some of these collectives as consensus organizations or coalitions, or, in less common cases, as consensus movements. Nevertheless, case studies would be required to gain a deeper understanding of the informal networks and network identities of these groups (Montevecchi, 2021).

However, beyond the potential for maintaining cohesion based on dimensions of power and regulation, the Underground media present other compelling factors for the formation of these collectives. Given that numerous actions undertaken by these groups are regarded as criminal acts in different jurisdictions, including Brazil, it is intriguing to consider the potential benefits of utilizing platforms that facilitate the encryption of content generated and disseminated on them. Furthermore, in the case of Telegram, a large number of political and legal disputes have plagued the Underground, though with minimal or no success at all, as evidenced by events preceding the 2022 general elections⁸.

The “equation” that we are concerned with considers the scenario in which the companies behind Underground Media operate in such a way as to circumvent even legal apparatuses. This, combined with the four dimensions of

⁸ In 2022, the Brazilian legal authorities, including the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF) and the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court (TSE), enacted a series of measures with the objective of exerting control over the content produced and shared on the Underground Media and IMS. In February of that year, Alexandre de Moraes, a minister of the STF, ordered Telegram to ban certain profiles, threatening to block the app for 48 hours in Brazil and setting a fine of 100,000 Brazilian reais per day for each profile. On the subsequent day, the platform removed three accounts that were linked to Allan dos Santos, a blogger who supports Jair Bolsonaro. As indicated in the STF memorandum, dos Santos was identified as “one of those under investigation for suspected involvement in a digital militia financing scheme in Brazil.”

media systems, the potential for user aggregation⁹, and the capacity to amplify the circulation of meanings within these parameters, gives rise to media landscapes that are challenging to delineate, while simultaneously presenting significant political dilemmas.

4. A FEW INFERENCES

The phenomenon of collectives emerging and organizing themselves in the Underground has been observed in Brazil for at least a decade, and the prevalence, popularity, complexity, and influence of these collectives are on the rise. Moreover, some of them have been institutionalized within branches of the government, furthering the advancement of their agendas and addressing contentious issues. As a result of the characteristics inherent to the Underground and the aforementioned scenario, these collectives are causing disturbances in Brazilian politics through the strategic use of media, directly influencing the democratic process and promoting consensus in favor of political agendas and figures active in Brazil's conservative sphere.

There is nothing new in the interconnection between media, politics, and democracy, and its deployment as a strategic instrument has been extensively documented. In his classic essay "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare", Umberto Eco (1986) provides a meticulous delineation of this phenomenon. In examining the case of Pravda and Izvestia, the two main newspapers during the Soviet Union, Eco posits that those who control the media also control power, arguing that coups d'état involving tanks are confined to "backward countries." Therefore, the appropriation of the media for the purpose of maintaining or challenging existing power structures may be regarded as a form of semiological guerrilla warfare. In other words, it is the strategic use of the media to discredit the opposition while enhancing one's own image. It can thus be argued that the media can be employed as a weapon against democracy, at least in societies that are considered to be "developed."

Brazil may be perceived by some as a "backward" country, especially when compared to other nations. However, when its democracy faced its most significant challenge in 38 years since the end of the military dictatorship (1964-1985), it did not resort to the use of tanks, as might have been expected. It is important to note that Eco's essay was originally written in the 1960s, a time when the study of media, democracy, and politics required very different analytical models than those used today. During that period, mass media held hegemony over the processes of meaning-making. In contemporary times, however, this hegemony is shared among a variety of social actors, ranging from institutional and professional to amateur –each capable of employing or developing media strategies.

⁹ Telegram, for example, allows the creation of groups of up to 200,000 people and channels distributing information to an indefinite number of users. WhatsApp, on the other hand, makes it possible to build communities of up to 5,000 users.

This was the context preceding, during, and following the Planalto Riots on January 8th, 2023 (Caffagni et al., 2024)¹⁰. The Bolsonarista movements were articulated in hundreds, if not thousands, of Telegram and WhatsApp groups¹¹, as well as other Underground Media. This articulation had been anticipated, given the increasing complexity of media phenomena described by the theoretical frameworks of mediatization (Verón, 2013) and deep mediatization (Hepp, 2019). These groups employed the circulation of meaning, and its associated potential, as a semiological guerrilla strategy with the objective of overthrowing the elected Brazilian government and vandalizing and destroying its buildings in Brazil's capital city.

In the aftermath of the riots, thousands of individuals who had been waiting for those 72 hours were arrested. This occurred nearly three months after the conclusion of the general elections which saw the defeat of Bolsonaro –and three months after that police officer urged Bolsonaro's supporters to resist. For many people, the attempted coup seemed to have been successfully contained, and the situation appeared to be solved. Many of Bolsonaro's supporters who had engaged in looting and destruction in Brasília had been incarcerated and were awaiting trial. However, this did not conclude the situation.

The mobilization that originated in the Underground Media, which established encampments and coordinated the assault on Brasília, reverted to the Underground. There, an unidentified number of amateurs and other social actors mobilized a considerable number of people, many of whom previously lacked a platform where they could express themselves freely. These individuals perceive themselves as well as political figures like Bolsonaro as capable of confronting "what is there"¹².

It is difficult to determine whether events such as the Planalto Riots will occur again. Nevertheless, it is clear that Underground Media remains as one of the main driving forces behind these collective actions. A considerable number of these groups are already at an advanced stage of collectivization, organizing political confrontations to the point of establishing themselves as right-wing movements (Montevechi, 2021). By contrast, other actors continue to prioritize consensus-building actions while simultaneously engaging in electoral campaigns at the local level in municipal elections and promoting agendas of people aligned with Bolsonaro. Furthermore, they are investing resources to counter the political agendas of the opposition.

As a consequence of the riots, the judiciary branch of the Brazilian federal government intensified its vigilance over these groups and their organized

¹⁰ This event was observed through the contributions of different authors in this work, presenting a collection of texts that examine the January 8, 2022 riots from a variety of perspectives.

¹¹ This was reported by different media portals, such as G1, one of the largest in Brazil. Available at: <<https://g1.globo.com/fato-ou-fake/eleicoes/noticia/2022/11/07/e-fake-que-51-mihoes-de-votos-foram-roubados-de-bolsonaro.ghtml>>.

¹² This motto is employed by Bolsonaro to denote the issues he perceives as adversely affecting Brazilian politics.

actions, as well as the companies that provide the platforms and apps they use. However, the efficacy of the judiciary's actions to combat harmful practices by groups and collectives in the Underground is not always effective due to the structural characteristics of media systems, as well as the lobbying and *de facto* power of the companies behind those platforms.

In practice, the removal of a group or channel from a platform or app, or the imposition of sanctions on the company that owns the platform, does not necessarily lead to the dissolution of the collective around these media. Instead, it often results in the creation of new spaces for interaction and the production and circulation of meanings. This is due to the permeable nature of media systems. Consequently, once formed, these collectives can continue to operate, producing and disseminating fake news, which in turn mobilizes individuals towards political confrontation or consensus.

Many of the individuals implicated in the Planalto Riots have been incarcerated, and numerous collectives have been dissolved. However, it is likely that many of the collectives established during that period may continue to carry out their activities from alternative spaces within the Underground – as if those 72 hours never truly ended.

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* Contribution: The conception of the article, research design, data collection, interpretation and analysis, and writing of the manuscript was done in equal parts. All authors reviewed and approved the final content of the manuscript.

* Note: The Academic Committee of the journal approved the publication of the article.

* The data set supporting the results of this study is not available for public use. Research data will be made available to reviewers upon request.



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