



WhatsApp's Paradox Reality: Disinformation Tactics during the 2022 Brazilian Elections

The aim of [Disinfo Radar's](#) Rapid Response Briefs is to identify new and noteworthy disinformation technologies, tactics and narratives. Such cases may include the identification of a new technology that may have harmful uses.

Background

Since 2018, Brazil has seen the development of a true disinformation ecosystem, characterised by powerful actors, mass messaging, and the production and dissemination of falsified content. This disinformation ecosystem has been – and continues to be – responsible for an avalanche of false information that confuses the population and impacts institutions.

Brazilian awareness of disinformation and digital platforms has grown, and electoral institutions have adopted measures to tackle the issue. The Superior Electoral Court of Brazil (TSE) developed several initiatives designed to prevent the spread of disinformation and raise digital literacy in Brazil. One example is a WhatsApp chatbot that works as a virtual assistant, answering questions about the electoral process. Almost 20 million messages have been exchanged with citizens to date.

Disinformation online has a particularly large impact on Brazilian elections, due to the high number of Brazilians who receive their information and news from social media platforms. The most popular social media platform in Brazil is WhatsApp, being present on 99 per cent of all mobile phones. A recent report from Reuters Institute revealed that [53 per cent of Brazilians](#) trust news disseminated on WhatsApp

The YouTube-to-WhatsApp Pipeline

Access to the internet in Brazil is expensive, forcing disinformation actors to use workarounds to effectively disseminate disinformation. WhatsApp became the perfect solution, since the company deals with many phone providers to offer free data via the app.

Malicious actors often share snippets of YouTube videos on WhatsApp, allowing users to watch and share the videos for free. WhatsApp disinformation is often sourced from viral videos on YouTube, therefore extending the reach and effect of YouTube's algorithm on messaging disinformation.

During the 2022 Brazilian elections, YouTube released an updated version of its [Elections guidelines](#). Over the first two months of campaign, however, YouTube removed only [4.4 per cent of videos](#) providing mis/disinformation about electoral processes and electronic voting security.

This YouTube-to-WhatsApp pipeline is an effective tactic to spread disinformation; WhatsApp users often share the video clips with their contacts. But again, because open internet access is expensive and given high levels media illiteracy, recipients often don't fact check the videos' veracity or seek out alternative points of view after watching them.

Although there is no recent research on the number of videos shared via WhatsApp during the 2022 election period, a study from 2019 reveals that, in most Brazilian WhatsApp groups, [one video is uploaded for every 14 text messages](#). Yet, the research reveals that "WhatsApp users linked to YouTube more than any other site — 10 times as frequently as they linked to Facebook", thus bolstering the YouTube-to-WhatsApp pipeline.

WhatsApp Status

Another common tactic on WhatsApp is the "Status" feature. The WhatsApp Status feature is a tool similar to Instagram Stories, with photos, videos, gifs, and texts that are visible for 24 hours in a vertical format. The publications are available to all of the user's contacts.

Many people viewed Status as an overlooked and underutilised tool during political campaigns because it has the capability to reach an audience outside of the user's typical social media echo chamber, as compared to other platforms. Consequently, people linked to parties and activists' groups encouraged voters to use WhatsApp Status to boost the reach of their candidate's campaigns

The use of WhatsApp Status demonstrates a maturation of tactics. This new tactic relies on occupying the spaces that platforms make available and playing with the available structure, with the specific aim of influencing voters and shaping the information they received before the elections.



What's the Threat?

- Cross-platform tactics increase the spread of mis/disinformation and inhibit users' ability to detect the source.
- Encrypted messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, facilitate undetectable disinformation dissemination.
- Videos shared on WhatsApp are often snippets of the original versions, removing narratives from their original context.
- Content moderation is not possible in encrypted messaging applications like WhatsApp, allowing viral disinformation to spread unhindered.

Recommendations

- Social media platforms that allow for cross-information sharing should increase their collaboration, to detect and characterise disinformation.
- The Brazilian government should boost efforts to increase media literacy among the public, so they can more safely consume online information.
- WhatsApp must ensure that the platform's [Best Practices and Community Standards](#) are met, and civil society organisations should work to audit the platform to see how well they are currently met.
- The Brazilian government should continue to ensure, through regulation, that WhatsApp is held accountable for the impact of disinformation campaigns carried out via the messages in the app.

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