ALTO
INTELLIGENCE

Violent Breach of Government Buildings in Brazil

How key actors, narratives, sources and anomalies in the digital sphere were mapped in real-time to understand the impact of disinformation and hybrid-threats

2023 | Strategic Intelligence Briefing

Strategic Intelligence Briefing:
Violent Breach of Government Buildings in Brazil

Period of Analysis:
Jan. 7th to Jan. 9th, 2023

Language:
Portuguese

Geographies:
Brazil

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Introduction and Context

Well ahead of January's attacks on Brazil's Congress and other government buildings, early signals on multiple social networks and alternative media sites indicated the potential for violence and unrest by backers of former President Jair Bolsonaro, or "Bolsonoristas". The narratives propagated in support and justification of the attacks bear numerous similarities with the January 6th assault on the U.S. Capitol two years ago.

As mentioned in previously published Alto research both in Brazil and in other geographies, the relevance of end-to-end encrypted communications channels like WhatsApp and Telegram groups are critical to understand. Although massive volumes of different groups proliferate the debate, they share critical intersections, often serving as vehicles for the dissemination of false and polarizing domains and narratives. With illegal funding behind mass message amplification on targeted platforms like WhatsApp identified by reporting in previous election cycles, Brazil is not new to tactics engendering distortion of the public digital debate. Ahead of key social and political events, malign influence for political and geopolitical objectives can constitute a critical dimension of hybrid threats and produce serious disruption to individuals, institutions, businesses and social groups, extending beyond discord and resulting in hostilities and violence, as documented by Amnesty International in Brazil during the 2022 election cycle.

Although Brazil's government has made efforts to address the proliferation of unsubstantiated false election claims, posts on social networks and the diffusion of false information on private channels circulate quickly across platforms, creating a series of major challenges for any one company to address. Brazilian analysts have long warned of the growing risks of an incident similar to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. In the months and weeks leading up to Brazil's presidential election, social media channels were flooded with disinformation and even calls for a military coup. Further, geopolitical experts and analysts have continued to raise alarms about the prevalence of coordinated malign influence operations and the increased exploitation of the digital information ecosystem as a vehicle for the execution of targeted, strategic hybrid threats. These can include carefully orchestrated campaigns to amplify false narratives, inflame existing sociopolitical tensions, and leverage the digital sphere to exploit diverse vulnerabilities with real-world dependencies and outcomes. Immediately pertinent examples include the proliferation and consequential nature of false information and targeted attacks within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine.

As outlined in multiple reports, in the case of Brazil these risks materialized, resulting in violence towards journalists, social unrest, direct physical attacks on government buildings, and an undermining of democratic norms and processes.

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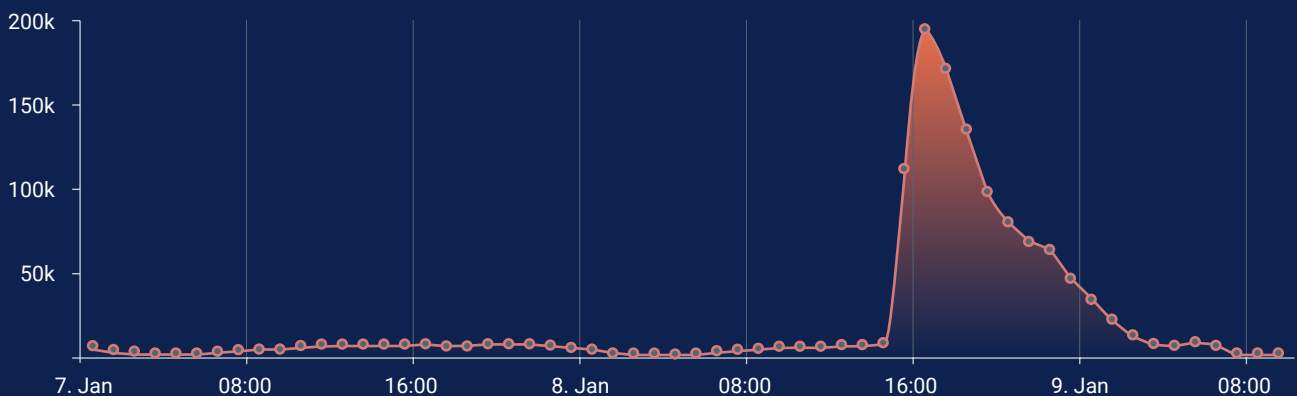
Scope and General Metrics

The following analysis of the digital public sphere includes results from social media, news media, blogs, forums, and other digital sources captured in real-time during the assault on government buildings in Brasil, enabling a richer understanding of the principal narratives, actors, communities, and digital sources driving the development of these events.

From January 7th at 00:00h to January 9th at 10:00h (Brasilia Standard Time), 2023, Alto's intelligence team captured 1,190,018 public comments and 29,602 pieces of unique content produced by 351,449 digital profiles interacting in the digital public sphere in Portuguese.

The digital conversation reached its peak on January 8th between 16:00h and 17:00h, driven by viral comments in opposition to actions by government and security forces during the protests. The majority of these comments claim that public safety officials and forces did not do enough to prevent violence and control protesters.

Tweet

Gleisi Hoffmann @gleisi

Governo do DF foi irresponsável frente à invasão de Brasília e do Congresso Nacional. É um crime anunciado contra a democracia, contra a vontade das urnas e por outros interesses. Governador e seu secretário de segurança, bolsonarista, são responsáveis pelo que acontecer

Traducir Tweet

7:40 p. m. · 8 ene. 2023 desde Brasilia, Brasil · **2,1 M** Reproducciones

10,1 mil Retweets   **778** Tweets citados   **73,4 mil** Me gusta

Tweet

Ana Flor @Ana_Flor

Policiais militares do DF tiram foto e batem papo com manifestantes enquanto vândalos invadem Congresso Nacional. Reparem a conversa sobre invadir o #STF #brasilia

Traducir Tweet

0:05 | 4,7 M reproducciones

7:54 p. m. · 8 ene. 2023 · **4,8 M** Reproducciones

14 mil Retweets   **5.413** Tweets citados   **55,9 mil** Me gusta

TIMELINE OF DIGITAL ACTIVITY FROM 1/7 TO 1/9

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Key Insights

1 ↓

Gettr.com is emerging as a new conservative network and is gaining relevance in Brazil, exhibiting direct influence in the protests analyzed. This new platform, launched in 2021 by members of former president Donald Trump's inner circle, is known for its lack of content moderation policies or measures, particularly regarding extremist content. Consistent with geopolitical experts' predictions ahead of the events, Alto's team detected coordination signals and calls to action in the days before January 8th on public Telegram groups and Gettr.com. These sources require special attention, as messages directly calling for the assault can be identified days before the unrest. Further, calls to demonstrate were still being published on the site days after the assault.

2 ↓

112 profiles from the community in favor of the protests show anomalous behavior not typical of humans, such as posting several times in a single second or repeating the exact same reaction time. Also, 1,891 profiles with statistically high activity (when compared to the average levels of activity within the network) have been located in the community supporting the attacks. These high activity profiles generated around a quarter of all comments from this community, contributing to the mobilization of targeted audiences due to:

A. the specific narratives these profiles focus on
B. the amplification of their messages and content due to their elevated activity and abnormal patterns of content dissemination.

3 ↓

Unsubstantiated claims first popularized in the U.S. after the January 6th assault on the Capitol are effectively mimicked in the Brazilian context. This analysis explains how the following three lines of argumentation are widely disseminated:

A. **The emphasis of the peaceful and patriotic character of the demonstrations**
B. **Justification and legitimization of public disorder by leveraging politically-motivated arguments against specific figures (in this case, Lula da Silva)**
C. **Accusations against left-wing groups of infiltrating previously peaceful protests and inciting disorder.**

Specifically, the "far-left infiltrator" narrative—including claims that disorderly leftist activists infiltrated allegedly peaceful protests in order to accuse pro-Bolsonaro protesters of being violent—is supported by alternative media domains defending the protests and emphasizing a duality between "freedom" or "liberty" and socialism or communism.

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Community Detection and Network Analysis

MESSAGE PROPAGATION: COMMUNITY NETWORK ANALYSIS

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1,190,018 public comments produced by 351,449 digital profiles
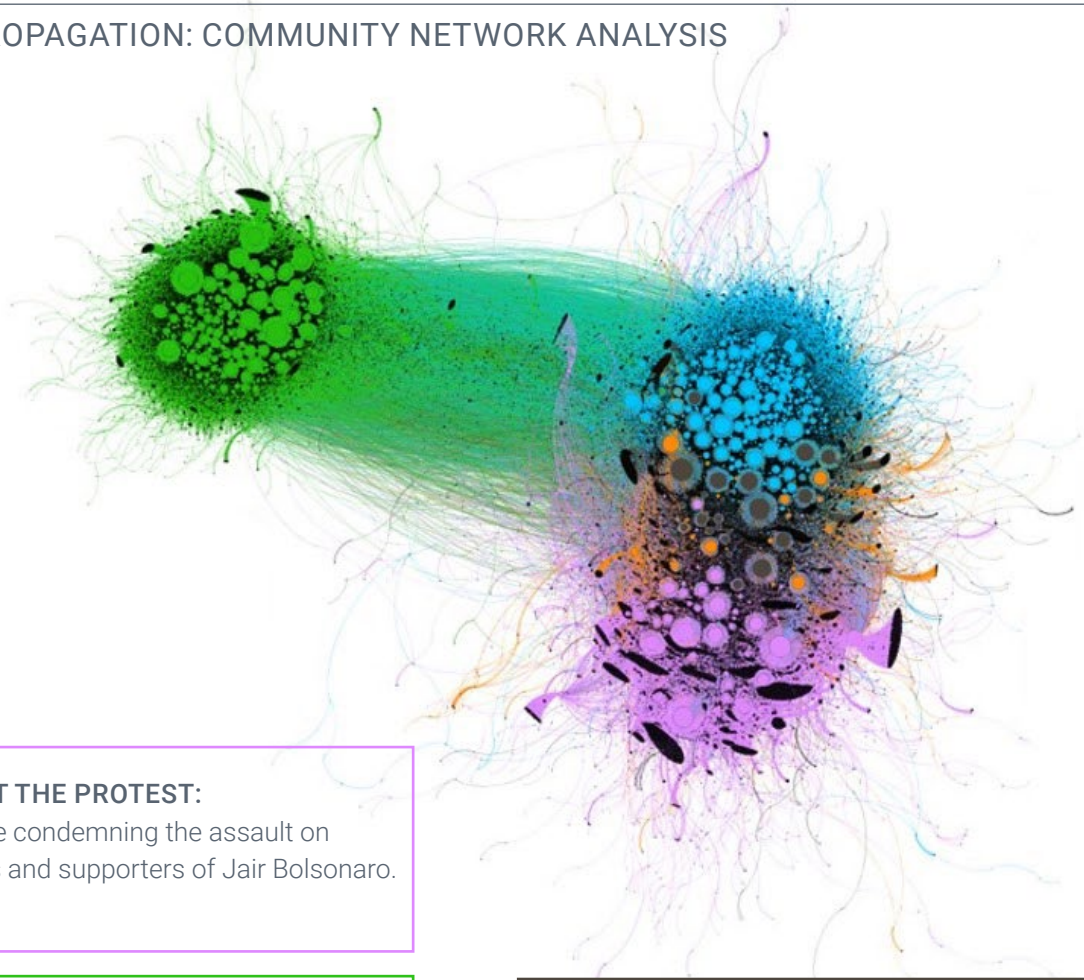
#1 AGAINST THE PROTEST:
Discourse condemning the assault on Congress and supporters of Jair Bolsonaro.
26.8%

#2 PRO-PROTEST COMMUNITY:
Claims related to the peaceful nature of the protests, emphasizing its patriotic nature.
25.3%

#3 CRITICS OF THE MILITARY POLICE AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FEDERAL DISTRICT:
Criticisms and accusations for the security system for being inactive against demonstrators. Users in this community reject the protests.
22.3%

#4 DETRACTORS OF THE PROTESTS AND THE POLICE:
Users frame the assault on Congress as an attack on democracy, pointing to the violent attitudes of demonstrators.
16.5%

#5 ANTI-BOLSONARO COMMUNITY:
Attacks on the former president's supporters for the demonstration, criticizing their participation in public disorder, including the roadblocks after the presidential elections.
6.6%

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Alto's data scientists applied clustering algorithms, similar to the Louvain Method for community detection, to determine the different digital communities and visually represent the resulting network of interactions. Alto's unbiased, non-human-assisted algorithms identified five key communities producing conversations related to the attacks on official government buildings in Brazil. 4 communities distributed messages opposing the protests, accounting for 72.8% of total users and 64.7% of total comments. One community supported the protests and Jair Bolsonaro, consisting of over a quarter (25.3%) of all users and generating 34.2% of the comments,

- 1 community is in favor of Jair Bolsonaro and the demonstration.
- 4 communities are opposed to the demonstration.

Photo Credit: Uriel sc

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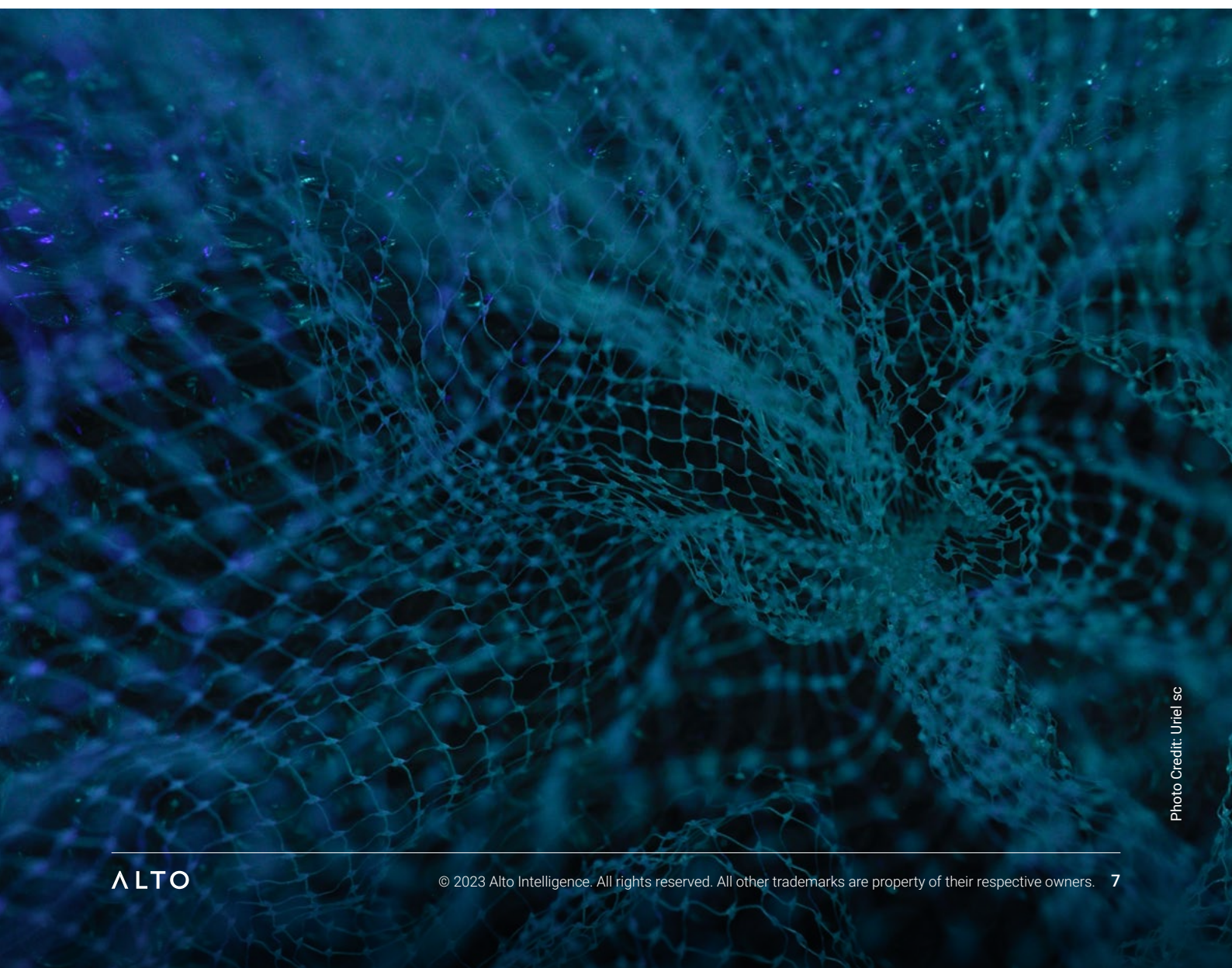
Principal Narratives Driving the Debate

Narrative Mimicry Thrives in the "Pro-Protest Community"

In support of the protests, principal themes of conversation were driven by the dissemination of images of the exterior and interior of the Congress building. Reminiscent of instances within the recent U.S. political context, fixation on crowd sizes involved in demonstrations alongside claims of the peaceful and patriotic nature of the protests are emphasized. Posts justifying and legitimizing the assault are also spread while, to a lesser extent, users in this community mention the presence of infiltrators affiliated with left-wing parties and recall the occupation of the roof of Congress in 2013.

Again, these efforts to counter mainstream narratives leverage three key lines of argumentation, all previously seen in the U.S. (and other national contexts to lesser degrees). These include:

A. Emphasizing the peaceful and patriotic character of the demonstrations

B. Justifying and legitimizing public disorder by leveraging politically-motivated arguments

C. Accusing left-wing groups of infiltrating previously peaceful protests and inciting disorder. In the U.S. this was popularized by unsubstantiated claims from alt-media and some mainstream media of the alleged role of left-wing group Antifa in the January 6th insurrection in addition to other protests.

These include:

PRO-PROTEST COMMUNITY NARRATIVE 1: DISSEMINATION OF IMAGES OF THE EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR OF THE CONGRESS

Several users disseminate photographs and videos of Congress to demonstrate the size of the protests. In these messages, there are numerous patriotic symbols exchanged amidst claims of the pacific nature of the demonstrations.

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PRO-PROTEST COMMUNITY NARRATIVE 2: JUSTIFICATION OF THE ASSAULT

Some users legitimize social protest as a natural response when institutions such as the Superior Electoral Court, the Federal Supreme Court, and the Senate fail. Users also justify the assault on Congress as a protest measure against the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

PRO-PROTEST COMMUNITY NARRATIVE 3: DENOUNCEMENT OF THE PRESENCE OF INFILTRATORS RELATED TO LEFTIST PARTIES

Conservative profiles spread claims that official security forces identified left-wing sympathizers who infiltrated the group of pro-Bolsonaro demonstrators and created the disruptions.

PRO-PROTEST COMMUNITY NARRATIVE 4: REMEMBRANCE OF THE OCCUPATION OF THE ROOF OF CONGRESS IN 2013

Some publications recall what occurred in Congress in 2013, either by emphasizing that PT and PSOL deputies called for the release of the detainees (insinuating the legality and legitimacy of those protests) or by pointing out that ten years later, there are new mass protests once again.

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Calls for Protest Legitimize Violence

Calls for Protest Emphasize Retaking Control of the Brazilian Government

The profiles that produced and propagated messages calling for participation in the protests were overwhelmingly conservative and patriotic, actively exhibiting nationalist sentiment and often proclaiming in their profile bios to be either explicitly pro-Bolsonaro or anti-socialist. The reinforcement of the left-right/capitalist-socialist dichotomy has emerged in multiple contexts as a valuable tool to amplify the reach of messages within a polarized sociopolitical digital ecosystem, including the United States and several European states. The importance of this messaging exemplifies the vulnerabilities of fragmentation upon which populist political discourse thrives within the digital sphere.

How do online appeals to "patriotism" materialize into physical movements and threats on public institutions?

- In the case of Brazil, calls to participate in the demonstration were led by self-proclaimed patriotic and conservative profiles. These profiles generally had low or moderate audiences focused on promoting the protest as a massive event to regain control of the government and remove Lula. Videos and images of the participants on their way to Brasilia accompanied these narratives.

- Before the protest, an appeal was made to "patriots" across the country, asking them to join the call. There were also messages asking for the intervention of the military to "regain power" from the government.

- Users spread videos of people traveling to Brasilia to gather for the protest, referred to as the "Festa da Selma," promoting and announcing that it will be gigantic, claiming support continues to grow, and asking others to invite as many people as possible to participate.

- Slogans focused on calling for people to occupy the streets to demand Lula's impeachment. The messages were accompanied by hashtags supporting Bolsonaro, asking Lula to leave, and accusing him of stealing the election.

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Analysis of Profiles with Anomalous Activity

Within the network, Alto's intelligence analysts detected 5,017 profiles interacting with statistically high levels of engagement. These profiles represent 1.7% of the total and generated 23.4% of the total activity (259,931 comments) in two days.

Over half (53.3%) belong to community 3, which is critical of the assaults. Over a third (37.7%) belong to community 2, which supports the assailants.

The 1,891 community profiles in support of the attacks generated 24.8% of the total activity produced by that community.

- These profiles promote the most relevant hashtags in favor of the mobilization and against Lula #selma, #lulavaicair, #lulanacadeia, #brazilianspring, #brasilnasruas, and #grevegeral.

- These profiles also call for mobilization against Lula, follow the protests and bus caravans, and later spread a false narrative claiming that there are leftist infiltrators in the protests while criticizing the armed forces for not mobilizing.
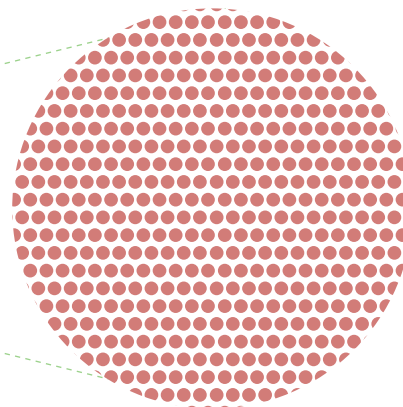
Of these 1,891 profiles, 112 exhibit anomalous activity patterns beyond elevated activity rates. These patterns suggest the use of synthetic or AI-assisted amplification techniques, including:

- Repeatedly posting more than one comment in the same second.

- Repetition of the exact same reaction time.

→

5,017
profiles producing

259,931
comments

5,017
profiles
(1.7% of total profiles)

3,230,641
results
(23.4% of total results)

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Domains Distribution Analysis

Among the 20 most distributed domains in the communities favorable to Bolsonaro, 13 media outlets are detected with an informative tone, such as terrabrasilnoticias.com, antenapoliticabr.com.br, and gazetabrasil.com.br. These domains mostly spread news covering the tensions between protesters and the National Force and the security measures taken by the government.

Five domains stood out for criticisms of Lula, disseminating the opinion of conservative journalists like Rodrigo Constantino, and criticizing justice issues such as the arrests of the protesters and the authorization by the Federal Supreme Court of a breach of secrecy against Bolsonaro and his administration.

two outlets that spread explicit disinformation were identified: jornaldacidadeonline.com.br and portalnovonorte.com.br, the latter proclaiming that "Conservative and independent journalism is the last barrier against communism in Brazil." These outlets reported on the manifestation positively, claiming that it represented the expression of the majority, referred to as "the people." These outlets also spread that an alleged leftist activist infiltrated the manifestation and that he was presumably armed with elements to make a Molotov bomb to be able to accuse the pro-Bolsonaro protesters of being violent. Again, this narrative directly echoes the claims made against alleged Antifa infiltrators within the January 6th insurrection in the U.S.

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Alternative Digital Sources and Networks Drive Discord

Public Telegram Groups

Although after the assault, many groups have changed their names or blocked their content to avoid identification, four groups have been detected that may be of interest for further investigation due to their support and instigation of the assault and continued antagonistic discourse.

- **"A queda da bailonia"** 31.2k subscribers.
- **B70Millones** 4.5 k subscribers.
- **"Vamos para Brasilia"** 2.9k subscribers.
- **"DESMAGNETIZADO"** 11.6k subscribers.

Gettr.com

Gettr.com is emerging as a new conservative network gaining relevance in Brazil. Among the supporters of the mobilization, numerous links have been shared to the conservative social network created in 2021 Gettr.com, where content calling for mobilization and calls for a general strike continue to be found. The splintering of social media platforms amidst public debates about freedom of expression online has galvanized notable audiences to engage via platforms including Gab, Parler, Truth Social, and Rumble. Alto has conducted previous analyses demonstrating the influence of Gab ahead of the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections. This trend appears slated to continue, with Gettr proving its ability to influence the sociopolitical debate, generally tending towards alt-right users and narratives given the lack of content moderation on Gettr and similar digital communities.

Conclusion

This case demonstrates the value of real-time monitoring and digital public sphere analysis capable of capturing digital activity, including actors, interactions, content, and sources at scale during critical moments of social unrest. While these types of real-time analyses leveraging open-source intelligence are pivotal for understanding the depth and nuance of complex sociopolitical and geopolitical debates, an even richer picture of the digital conversation can be achieved by monitoring how harmful false narratives emerge and are entrenched within the debate by key influencers across different media sources. Analyses that aim to anticipate irregularities in the digital public sphere can also actively detect false content and narratives and anomalies in its production and distribution, enabling discernment of the role of malign influence operations in the evolution of hybrid threats. Within the Brazilian context, this research surfaces two key areas follow up on:

1. **This research has established how trends emerging from the online conversation travel across different sociopolitical contexts. Mimicry of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) used to amplify vulnerable or false narratives must be investigated and documented further.** The integration of global communities and networks of users is facilitated by the instantaneous and low-cost (if not free) generation and distribution of multilanguage content to large yet targeted audiences in both national and diaspora contexts. As such, the OSINT community has a critical role to play in understanding the geographical and language-related flows of narratives/ lines of argumentation, content types, and domain trends, among other dimensions, that constitute the entrenchment of hybrid threats within digital discourse.

2. **As debates surrounding freedom of expression on online platforms maintain their intensity, digital discourse and public safety will continue to witness the consequences of the unregulated and unmoderated proliferation of pernicious narratives and content.** Both within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, the presence and influence of distinct alternative channels have been demonstrated thoroughly. Systematically mapping the impact of alternative communities in the production of mainstream discourse in addition to their influence in moments of unrest and crisis, should be a top agenda priority for public institutions leveraging open-source intelligence to better understand complex geopolitical and sociopolitical contexts. Further, uncovering connections between other, less visible digital spaces, such as deep and dark web forums or black markets, can aid in the potential attribution of complex monetization networks and coordination of both state and non-state actors.

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Real-time AI for risk, threat, and cyber intelligence proactive damage prevention

A global leader in investigative analytics, Alto Intelligence uses advanced algorithms and AI to analyze billions of real-time data points across surface, deep & dark web, heightening situational and operational awareness. With over a decade of development, Alto Intelligence's premium cyber intelligence toolbox swiftly detects early signals of high-impact events: know critical information first and respond confidently with our cutting-edge technology, employing generative AI and other unique proprietary analytical techniques.

From disinformation and deepfakes to hacktivism or social unrest, the line between online and real-world threats has vanished. At Alto Intelligence, we safeguard against reputational damage, geopolitical risks, hybrid threats, and security incidents in both domains.

Reach out to us for a demo to learn how Alto's approach can help your organization map, monitor, anticipate, and mitigate increasingly complex interconnected hybrid risks emerging from the digital sphere.

Why Alto

DATA ACQUISITION EXCELLENCE
Our extensive historical and real-time data lake enables our technologies and analysts to process billions of data points across a vast array of sources and formats. From breached data to news media, infostealers and more, our customers confidently identify and connect every piece of relevant data across the surface, deep, and dark web.

WORLD-CLASS ANALYST TEAM
Our dedicated interdisciplinary team of international data experts with diverse backgrounds in mathematics, data science, journalism, business, and cyber intelligence ensure consultancy-level insights by delivering best-in-class intelligence from an unmatched range of public, deep and dark web sources.

PROPRIETARY ALGORITHMS FROM EXPERTS IN GENERATIVE AI
Our unique technology empowers advanced analysis across the entire risk surface for superior anticipation, protecting organizations, their employees, and their critical assets. Because, the best way to overcome future digital threats is by facing them today.