

WhatsApp can stop fake news poisoning

Ahead of a critical election, the messaging app has become a sea of toxic misinformation, but



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WhatsApp, the Facebook-owned messaging app, is one of the main tools that Brazilians use to keep in touch with friends and family, and do business. Increasingly, it is also a part of politics. A recent poll found that 44 per cent of voters in Brazil use WhatsApp to read political and electoral information. Unfortunately, in the lead-up to the first round of the presidential election on Oct 7, the app was used to spread alarming amounts of misinformation, rumours and false news.

With just a few weeks before the runoff vote on Oct 28 between the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro and his left-wing opponent Fernando Haddad, there is still time for WhatsApp to make temporary changes to the platform to reduce the poisoning of Brazilian political life. The company must be decisive before it is too late.

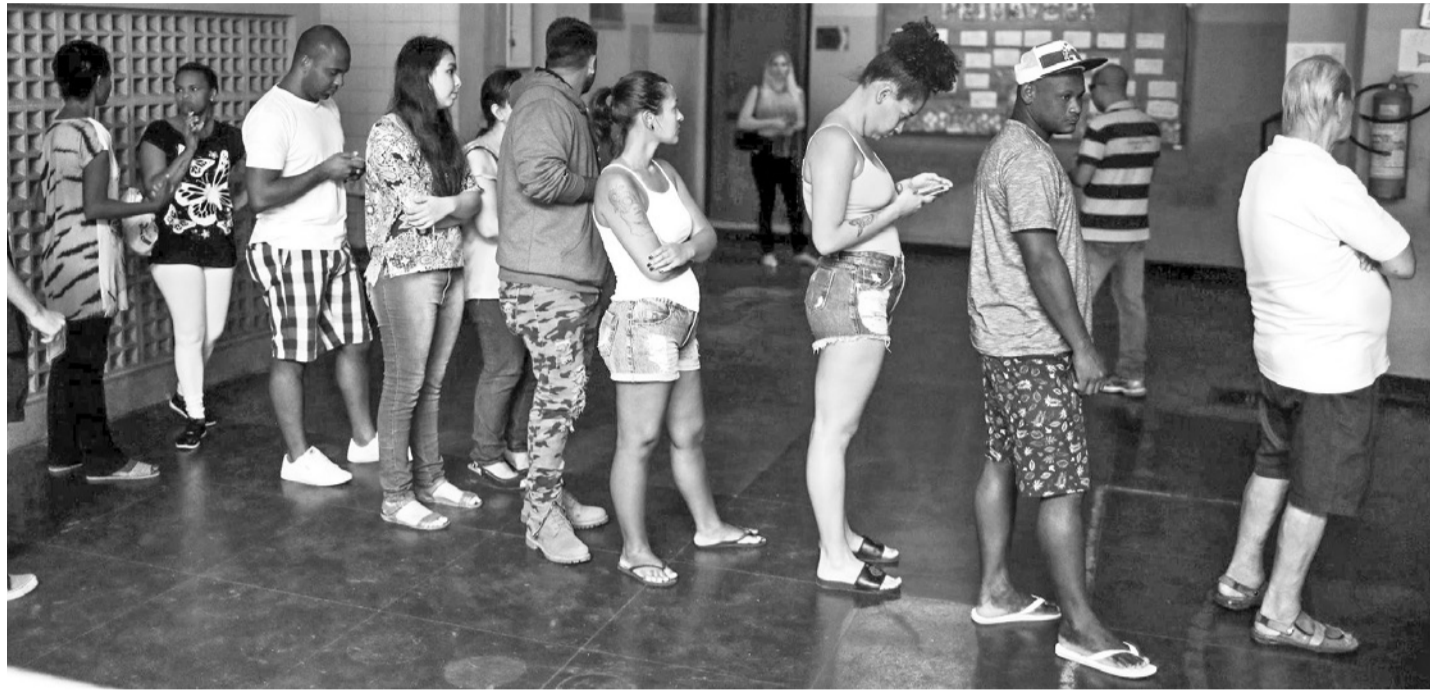
There have been positive developments in the fight against false news in Brazil. Ours is one of 17 countries where Facebook has third-party fact-checkers trying to weed out misinforma-

tion from the platform's news feed. Facebook and Google have also collaborated on an initiative called Comprova, gathering 24 Brazilian newsrooms to debunk misleading links, videos and images.

But these efforts seem to have pushed dirty campaigns elsewhere, in particular to WhatsApp, where activity consists of encrypted personal conversations and chat groups involving up to 256 people. Such chat groups are much harder to monitor than the Facebook news feed or Google's search results.

From Aug 16 to Oct 7, we collected and analysed posts in 347 chat groups that are open to the public and focused on Brazilian politics. This is just a small sample of the estimated hundreds of thousands of chat groups that millions of Brazilians use every day to gather information. Our study, which was conducted as a joint project by the Federal University of Minas Gerais, the University of São Paulo and the fact-checking platform Agência Lupa, revealed how misinformation spreads.

It is difficult to establish to what extent these misinformation campaigns are affiliated with political parties or candidates, but their tactics are clear: They rely on a combined pyramid and network strategy in which producers create ma-



Brazilians stand in queue to vote in their national elections on Oct 7.

licious content and broadcast it to regional and local activists, who then spread the messages widely to public and private groups. From there, the messages travel even further as they are forwarded on by believing individuals to their own contacts.

From a sample of more than 100,000 political images that circulated in those 347 groups, we selected the 50 most widely shared. They were reviewed by Agência Lupa, which is Brazil's

leading fact-checking platform. Eight of those 50 photos and images were considered completely false; 16 were real pictures but used out of their original context or related to distorted data; four were unsubstantiated claims, not based on a trustworthy public source. This means that 56pc of the most-shared images were misleading. Only 8pc of the 50 most widely shared images were considered fully truthful.

The problem of false news in

Brazil transcends ideological divides.

Bolsonaro's supporters shared several images describing politicians — including those from the center right — as “communists.” The most widely shared image from our sample was a black-and-white photo of Fidel Castro and a young woman. The description accompanying the picture claims the woman is former President Dilma Rousseff, and the text accompanying it

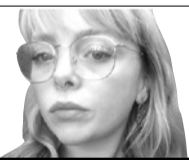
suggests Rousseff was Castro's pupil, a “socialist student.” The young woman in the photo, however, is not Rousseff. The picture was taken in the United States in April 1959, when Rousseff was only 11. Yet such images are effective in smearing Rousseff and the Workers' Party — of which Haddad is a member — in a country where there is much antipathy to communism among the middle class.

The false news spread by

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I didn't hate the English — 1



MEGAN NOLAN

In which an Irish woman discovers how little the people who shaped her country's fate know or care

Last month, some video footage went viral in Ireland of a group of English men verbally abusing young women at a Dublin housing crisis protest. The men, it turned out, were part of a bachelor party who had come from Bristol and seemed to be dressed intentionally to look like a cartoon of landed gentry, in tweeds and the loudly colored trousers widely beloved by braying men of a certain kind.

It would have been a strange incident in any case, these English men who look like relics of the landlord class shouting at young Irish people rendered desperate because of skyrocketing rents, but it was to become more absurd still. After calling the women “scroungers” and demanding to know whether they had jobs, one of the men took the decapitated head of a pigeon out of his pocket and threw it at them.

That particular fact won't

make any more sense the longer you look at it, and yet it goes on being true. I watched the video footage over and over, looked at earnest news headlines that simply read, “The footage shows a man verbally abusing protesters, before the head of a decapitated pigeon is thrown,” but no explanation was forthcoming. Why did the man throw a pigeon head at the protesters? More important, why was he carrying one in his pocket, ready, seemingly, to be launched as soon as a worthy adversary appeared?

But stranger still — or perhaps, upon reflection, not strange at all — was the gap between the English and the Irish when it came to interpreting the Pigeon Incident. While Irish people complained on Twitter about these brash bird-head-wielding English tourists coming to our country and performing their odd little colonial pantomime, sensitive Britons were eager to ask why it mattered that the men were English. They're just louts, they said. Why does it matter where they're from? After all, all that occupation business was so long ago.

There was a time once, or so the fantasy went, when “The Irish Question” — as the real

landed gentry of two centuries ago liked to refer to the problem of, well, us — seemed more or less resolved. Sure, there were occasional moments of idiocy, like when I made a mistake at work and a colleague responded by putting on a comic Irish accent and doing a bumbling-peasant impression. Sure, the English still loved to make the occasional potato joke. (You know the one: Ha-ha, you guys love potatoes — remember, the things that all rotted before a million of you died of starvation?) And yes, it was consistently surprising how many English people were shocked and offended to discover that an Irish person might feel some animosity toward their country.

But there was an idea not so long ago, even among many Irish, that it was time to move on. We were all going to be European together forever, after all, and we ought to at least try to smooth over our differences.

Post-Brexit, however, this relatively recent sense of equanimity is being put to the test.

The extent to which many English people are ignorant about Ireland has become painfully clear. Crucial questions about how to avoid a hard bor-



der between Northern Ireland and the Republic — a border abolished in the Good Friday Agreement, the reintroduction of which would be inextricably associated with the preceding decades of violence and unrest — remain unresolved, months before Brexit is slated to become official. (Perhaps that's in part because they were being dismissed as “this Irish stuff” by the likes of the former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith as late as last winter, even as people on both sides of the border pleaded for a solution.) The secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Ka-

ren Bradley, recently admitted with startling candor that she didn't know basic facts about the politics of the region where she is in charge: that nationalists — those who seek a united Ireland — won't vote for unionist parties, and vice versa. Jacob Rees-Mogg, the arcane member of Parliament who looks as though he has been extracted from the nightmare of a Victorian child, has suggested bringing back border checks “as we had during the Troubles.”

In the midst of all this, I've noticed a tonal shift in the way I and other Irish people speak about the English. Our anger is

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