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The transmedia dynamics of fake news by the pragmatic conception of truth

A dinâmica transmídia de fake news conforme a concepção pragmática de verdade

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ABSTRACT

The spreading of fake news about the trial of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on January, 2018 is analyzed here according to the pragmatic conception of truth proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Through collecting in online social networks, the collective effort to establish competing beliefs was observed, according to Peircean methods of tenacity and authority. The analyzed communicational process, characterized as transmedia activism, was driven by the mediation of hashtags that referred to political polarization and posts attributed to celebrities. It is concluded that the dispute for the semiotic value of truth fostered the transmedia expansion of fake content and, paradoxically, verified news.

Keywords: Transmedia, semiosis, fake news

RESUMO

A propagação de notícias falsas sobre o julgamento do ex-presidente Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, em janeiro de 2018, é aqui examinada conforme a concepção pragmática de verdade proposta por Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Por meio de coleta em redes sociais on-line, observou-se esforço coletivo para fixação de crenças concorrentes, conforme os métodos peirceanos de tenacidade e autoridade. O processo comunicacional analisado, caracterizado como ativismo transmídia, foi impulsionado pela mediação de *hashtags* que remetiam à polarização política e pelos *posts* atribuídos a celebridades. Conclui-se que a disputa pelo valor semiótico da verdade fomentou a expansão transmídia de conteúdos falsos e, paradoxalmente, de notícias verificadas.

Palavras-chave: Transmídia, semiose, notícias falsas

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INTRODUCTION

FAKE NEWS WAS deemed the expression of 2017 according to the British publisher Collins. According to information from the publisher, there was an increased in citations of the term to 365% in 2017 (The Guardian, 2017). A survey conducted by the North American company of digital media BuzzFeed points out that the fifty fake news that most generated engagement on Facebook in 2017 reached 23.5 million of reactions (such as using emojis, comments, and shares), about 2 million more than in 2016. The survey also shows that the main themes related to fake news are crimes, politics, and health. In addition, it corroborates Facebook as the media environment for the circulation of fake news (Silverman, Lytvynenko, & Pham, 2017).

But, after all, what *fake news* are and why they generate such engagement? Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as news that are verifiable and intentionally fake, although able to deceive readers. According to the authors, the increase in the engagement in online social networks, associated with the decline of confidence in traditional information vehicles, explains the rapid growth of the spread of fake news. They point out, however, that the circulation of this type of content is not new, and present several ancient examples of fake news, such as is the case of the North American newspaper *New York Sun*, which in 1835 published a series of stories about the discovery of life on the moon. Conspiracy theories with political implications permeate, according to them, the long history of *fake news* in the United States of America.

According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), “fake news” inappropriately describes the complex phenomenon of information pollution, or information disorder, in addition to being appropriated by politicians worldwide for designating news unpleasant to them. Therefore, authors choose the term *misinformation* to describe the phenomenon, which is not restricted to the press, based on seven classifications: false connection (subtitles that do not correspond to the content), false context, context manipulation, satire or parody (without explicit intentionality), misleading content (misuse of data), deceiving content (use of false sources), and made-up content (with the intention of manipulating public opinion and harming).

In Brazil, this is a subject of great concern. According to a report produced in 2017 by the Canadian company of public opinion research, *GlobeScan* for BBC, Brazil is the country most concerned with fake news in the world (BBC, 2017). However, such concern does not prevent the spread of this types of news. About 12 million of Brazilians broadcast fake or distorted news content about politics in online social networks, according to a survey of the Research Group on Public Policies of Access to Information (*Grupo de Pesquisa em Políticas*

Públicas para o Acesso à Informação – GPOPAI) of the University of São Paulo (USP). Held in June 2017, from the monitoring of fake or distorted political content in 500 digital pages, the report highlights the colossal reach of these news, considering an average of 200 followers per user (Martins, 2017).

The dynamics of the circulation of such publications, strongly supported in sharing actions, is here investigated within the framework of the Peircean pragmatism, also called *pragmaticism* (Peirce Edition Project, 1998). This theoretical strand, proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce at the end of the 19th century, analyzes the formation of habits in relation to the fixation of beliefs and the ideal of truth, aspects very relevant to the understanding of social engagement that drives the contemporary circulation of fake or distorted news. The process is here characterized as transmedia activism. Based on the solid system of beliefs that delineates action habits on online/off-line connections, transmedia activism aims at the shaping of certain opinion as a practical effect of the disseminated information.

PRAGMATIC CONCEPTION OF TRUTH

It is belief that outlines the shaping of opinion, and not the truth. Such conception, of pragmatic bias, shows that truth is not a required attribute of news. This understanding permeates studies on news for a long time, and is of great importance for understanding the contemporary phenomenon of fake news. In the mid-19th century, the French writer Honoré de Balzac already stated, as one of the axioms of his *Monograph of the Parisian Press*, that “for journalists, whatever is deemed likely is true” (Balzac, 1991, p. 164). From Balzac’s perspective, the press appreciates the belief, not the truth.

In *Public Opinion*, released in 1922, Walter Lippmann warns that news and truth must be clearly distinguished, stating that the function of news is signaling an event, and the function of truth is to shed light on the hidden facts, to relate them. He proposes the concept of “pseudo-environment” to describe representations of reality, such as in the case of news, to which the human behavior responds. The pseudo-environment is organized around beliefs, not truths, because “what we believe to be a true image, we perceive as if it was the very environment” (Lippmann, 2008, p. 22) [free translation]. Lippmann places a pragmatic value on pseudo-environment, in which there are stereotypical images of reality, because the beliefs brought about by such delineate “our feelings, thoughts, and actions” (p. 37). That is, the pragmatic value of pseudo-environment is related to the practical effect of the beliefs that it evokes.

In a similar perspective, Alsina (2005) states that the notion of truth is not implied in the concept of news, being truth a matter of faith or ideology.



¹ Peirce is considered the forerunner of pragmatism, philosophical movement that investigates the relationship between thought and action.

The movement emerged in early 1870s, in Cambridge (United States of America), from a small group of scholars of philosophy, among them Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. At that time, Peirce coined the pragmatic maxim, according to which the meaning of any concept is the total sum of its conceivable practical consequences. The diversity of interpretations about this maxim led Peirce to appoint, around 1905, *pragmaticism* as his pragmatic perspective aiming at differentiate it from the others.

Among the differentiating aspects, we highlight the emphasis on meaning and not on truth, on the habit (social) and not on experience (individual), on fallibilism and not on continuous self-correction. On the subject, see Ketner and Kloeser (1986).

² According to the Peircean cartography of sciences, the three normative sciences – aesthetics, ethics, and logic (or semiotics) – configure a division of philosophy, which, for its turn, is based on phenomenology, a pre-normative science which merely covers the phenomena. On the subject, see De Waal (2007).

³ The relationship between abduction, induction, and deduction, as well as the entire theoretical references of Peirce, is founded on the logical articulation of their three phenomenological categories: firstness (quality, monad, instance of chance); secondness (relation/reaction, dyad, instance of action); and thirdness (representation/mediation, triad, instance of becoming). The three categories are dynamic, interdependent, and universal. On the subject, see Santaella (1992).

⁴ It is noteworthy that Alsina (2005) discusses the specialized professional practice of news.

“The veracity of news is absolutely questionable” (p. 296). He points out there is no universal concept of news and mentions, among others, the concept proposed by Abraham Moles: “News consists in the narration of an event, of a part of an individual or collective life, of something true or faked, proved or not (rumor)” (Moles, 1975, p. 495, quoted by Alsina, 2005, p. 296). From a pragmatic perspective, Alsina situates the credibility of news within the context of ethics and emanates its mechanisms of signification at the expense of the canon of truth. Both Lippman (2008) and Alsina (2005) resume, in their considerations of the notion of truth in journalism, the Peircean perspective of pragmatism.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) conceived pragmatism, or *pragmaticism*,¹ as a special application of ethics. This normative science investigates the nature of actions in accordance with beliefs that delineate them. However, since ethics presupposes the distinction between what is and what is not admirable, Peirce based it on aesthetics, normative science that investigates the admirability manifested in qualities of feelings, and such is the foundation of action. Beliefs, therefore, are based on feelings and spread through habits of action, which are examined within the context of logic, or semiotics, normative science that investigates language and its processes of signification².

Abduction (hypothetical inference), induction (synthetic inference), and deduction (analytical inference) correspond to types of reasoning that shape, according to Peirce, the logic of the argumentation. This is paramount in his pragmatism, since it is related to the action of thought, the logic instance of language³. For Peirce (Peirce Edition Project, 1998), pragmatism is a logic of abduction because, according to him, abductive reasoning is a creative reasoning, and possibilities of action derive from such. Peirce exposes the pragmatic maxim as follows: “pragmatism is the doctrine that every conception is a conception of conceivable practical effects” (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 196), and adds that any conception “[...] allows any flight of imagination, provided this imagination ultimately alights upon a possible practical effect” (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 196). The pragmatic maxim is normative because “it tells us how we should define our terms in such a way they have meaning” (De Wall, 2007, p. 137) [free translation].

Based on theoretical assumptions of the Peircean pragmatism, Alsina (2005) takes abductive inference, responsible for the formation of hypotheses, as the creative element that triggers the meaning of news. He considers that, before an event, the journalist⁴ proposes an explanatory hypothesis based on certain interpretation proposition, and then searches for data that enable verifying it.

According to Peirce (quoted by Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 145), abduction, or explanatory hypothesis, will be deemed good if it can be checked. In this

case, it will strengthen the belief that delineates it, and it will be manifested in the action habit – and this habit, in its regularity, consists in the meaning of belief. But, paradoxically, the regularity of the action habit, which corroborates a relatively enduring opinion, tends to refute mechanisms of verifiability, because “[...] as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be false or true” (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 375).

According to this perspective, news can be understood as a process of signification that is configured in relation to the creative act that triggered it, whose practical effect will be a belief shared as an opinion. The practical effect of news, therefore, is not the social recognition of truth, but the nature of the belief that it triggers, which is always able to be revised according to the deepening of the verification processes emerging from doubts that eventually reflect on the meaning of news. “Your problems would be greatly simplified, if, instead of saying that you want to know the ‘Truth,’ you were simply to say that you want to attain a state of belief unassailable by doubt”. (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 416).

Recognizing news as fake, through the emergence of doubts that drive its verification, can compete for the improvement of the processes of signification that news engendered in a broader way, whether it is product of the professional practice of journalism or not. Consequently, the collective effort to check news, motivated by the dispute regarding competing beliefs, fosters the improvement of the signification process of the news. The notion of truth, in this pragmatic approach, is an ideal never fully achievable, normatively acting in the improvement of beliefs when these are subjected to the scrutiny of doubt. It is, therefore, a signification process based on a system of beliefs that is able to be improved, towards an ideal of truth, if shaken by the incidence of doubts.

In the Peircean approach, the pragmatic conception of truth is related to the pragmatic conception of semiosis, a logical process of continuous improvement of signification. In this approach, sign is a triadic entity that is established as a reference to the object that determines it aiming at producing an effect, its interpretant, which have the nature of another sign. The interpretant represents the object by the mediation of the sign (representamen), associated with adjacent signs by collateral experiences, i.e., prior familiarity with the object denoted by the sign.

The notion of collateral experience is of particular importance in understanding the social engagement that drives the transmedia dynamics of fake or distorted news, since it describes the way in which the sign associations focus on the development of semiosis. According to Bergman (2010), this notion becomes preponderant in the mature phase of the Peircean theory, when

the concepts of semiosis and pragmatism are approached, because the more the habits of action improve, the more sophisticated the collateral experience becomes and, therefore, the more accurate semiosis will be.

Reality (dynamic object) and truth (end interpretant) are ideals that guide the pragmatic development of semiosis, a sign process that is permanently in the stage of incompleteness⁵. If it were possible to fully attain the edges of the semiosis, reality and truth would be equivalent. That is the promise, never fulfilled, of the Theory of the Mirror⁶, according to which news would truly correspond to the reality it portrays. It is a conception that camouflages the process of signification resulting from the production and circulation of news. However, such inaccuracy shall not be understood as contempt for the deontological values of journalism⁷, because “recognizing the absolute value of true does not mean having to give up on the responsibility for seeking it” (Santaella, 1992, p. 156).

Thus, paradoxically, semiosis of fake news favors the pragmatic improvement of news, in a broader way, in its normative search for truth. The more adherence the fake or distorted news content engenders in the form of engaging in online social networks, verifiable in actions such as emoji reactions, comments, and shares, the more capacity it has to manage competing beliefs, which drives its verification by inserting doubts into its semiotic dynamics.

Overall, processes for news verification seek evidence that proves or refute the supposedly fake news. Evidences establish with their objects an existential or reference relationship (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 283), in such a way they are more easily verifiable, since they operate, in a semiotic way, as traces of its objects. But, since the phenomenon of disinformation is complex (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and involves various semiotic forms, not always such content can be verifiable from evidence-based traces. Even though finding evidences of falsehood, it is not always enough to revise the belief that delineates some news, because the belief is supported in ingrained habits of action. These have a symbolic nature, i.e., they are based on social conventions related to enduring beliefs. The representative quality of the symbol consists in a rule that shall be interpreted as such by force of habit (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 292). Thus, fake or distorted news, even when refuted after verification, tends to continue provoking engagement through customary association with news based on similar beliefs. The process is exacerbated in transmedia dynamics, in which related positions are associated with online/off-line connections to continually broaden news towards a common belief, despite opposed evidence. The pragmatic nature of such dynamics, however, tends to act in the progressive improvement of mechanisms for signifying news.

⁵ Dynamic object is the one that determines the sign, but is located outside it, in a nonstop digression, and the immediate object is the form by which the dynamic object manifests itself in the sign. The interpretive potential of the sign is within the very sign as immediate interpretant, but the effect actually produced is the dynamic interpretant, whereas interpretant refers to the normative ideal of sign completeness that guides the development of semiosis. On the subject, see Alzamora (2017).

⁶ Theory of Mirror emerged in the late 19th century in contrast to the ideological and partisan journalism at the time. I was based on the belief that news would be the mirror of reality. On the subject, see Traquina (2005).

⁷ The founding principles of journalistic morality, which guide the rules of professional conduct, have normative and prescriptive quality. The main values are the search for truth, impartiality, fairness, and honesty. On the subject, see Camponez (2009).

PEIRCEAN COSMOLOGY AND TRANSMEDIA

In the last years of his life, when deepening his studies on pragmatism, Peirce devoted himself to develop an evolutionary cosmology, regarding the way by which organisms and their environments mutually change, in increasing levels of interaction. The Peircean pragmatism may be understood as a version of the evolutionary reasoning of Darwin, which had published *The origin of species* in 1859 (Fisch, quoted by Ketner & Kloesel, 1986)⁸. According to Colapietro (2004), under influence of Darwin's evolutionism, the Peircean pragmatism started emphasizing, from 1903, the logical improvement of meaning, which presupposes the progressive improvement of beliefs and habits of action that such involve.

Peirce's evolutionary cosmology is based on the idea that habits can gradually change, favoring each other in an increasingly sophisticated and coherent way. This is because habits are the meanings of beliefs, and these are prone to continuous improvement through the emergence of doubt. "If a new belief produces effective actions, human beings live happy in the environment. If a new belief produces ineffective actions, they are taunted on the environment" (Shook, 2002, p. 83). It is what we observe when news extensively circulating in digital connections are checked and proven as fake, becoming the target of hostilities. In this case, related positions synchronously act in order to reveal the inconsistency of the news report in question by the insertion of doubt and subsequent verification. Fact checking agencies⁹, specialized in checking news content that extensively circulate on the Internet, are very relevant in this process. On the other hand, opposed positions invest in the intense sharing of the said news, regardless of whether it has been checked as fake, driven by a common belief.

Competing beliefs, mediated by the circulation of fake or distorted news content, seek to achieve dominant propagability in actions that integrate the algorithmic mind and the human mind in digital connections. In a digital environment, algorithms interfere in interactional processes, for example, through recommendation systems, as well as robots act in the propagation of certain hashtags, which, in turn, drives the circulation of news related to them. While the algorithmic mind predominantly acts in recurrent evidence-based relations, such as the *Trending Topics* of Twitter, the human mind relies on beliefs that are manifested in remarkably symbolic action habits, because they are founded on social conventions culturally established (Alzamora & Andrade, 2016).

The action of sharing news that reverberates a common belief is typical of action habits based on culturally-established social conventions, although the repetitive effort responsible for integrating algorithmic and human actions in the

⁸ This evolutionary conception deeply marked both Peirce's *pragmaticism* and other pragmatic strands that emerged from discussions at the Metaphysical Club, in Cambridge, in the early years of the 1870s. Later, in the second half of the 20th century, studies on the so-called *ecosemiotics* emerged, field dealing with the study on semiotic relationships between organisms and their environments. On the subject, see Nöth (1996) and De Waal (2007).

⁹ According to Uscinski and Butler (2013), methodological practices of for checking news on politics share the tacit assumption that the facts are unmistakable. Similarly, we defend that checking procedures are suitable for the verification of evidence-based signs, but limited to other sign-related constructions.

media ecosystem has an evidence-based nature. On the other hand, the creative impulse that triggers the expansion of this ecosystem has an iconic nature, because it is based on qualitative relations of similarity and analogy. Icons refer to their objects due to some quality and, therefore, may refer to anything they resemble (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 276). Moreover, these actions outline a kind of evolutionary cosmology of the media ecosystem and the interactions that such provides in digital connections. It is a markedly transmedia process, as we will further demonstrate.

Peirce called “agapism” the capacity of mutual synchronization and cooperation between minds and the environment; “synechism,” the continuous flow from an object to another; and “tychism,” spontaneous and contingent deviations, approaching the idea of mutation. “The Peircean cosmological principle of synechism alleges that everything that exists may have some sort of continuity with something else, and that everything that exists in the universe is somehow indirectly gathered with other things” (Shook, 2002, p. 81) [free translation]. To some extent, this perspective refers to the idea of transmedia, according to which contemporary media texts are propagated at the intersection of the means, although each textual configuration presents semiotic autonomy and is continually expandable by the integrated action of producers, consumers, and algorithms. Transmedia dynamics presupposes the propagation of information through mutual cooperation between human and algorithmic minds in media environments (agapism), configuring the continuous flow of information in digital connections (synequism) based on creative extensions (tychism). Circulation of fake or distorted news content is transmedia because it operates at the intersection of means, configuring a textual web that broadens into sharing actions that involve the intertwining of human and algorithmic minds in favor of a common belief.

The term “transmedia,” popularized by Henry Jenkins from the publication of his book *Convergence culture* (2006), was coined in 1991 by Marsha Kinder (1991) to describe the transmedia intertextuality in media-related products such as movies, toys, fanfics etc. According to Jenkins (2008)¹⁰, transmedia is based on participation, which is shaped by social and cultural protocols. The transmedia circulation of fake or distorted news is based on participation, whose social and cultural protocols are linked to the cosmological interaction between media environments through integrated actions of human and algorithmic minds in digital connections. Dissemination of fake or distorted news content occurs in line with the convergence culture, according to which “consumers are encouraged to seek new information and make connections among dispersed contents” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 28), as well as they are inserted in the connection culture, related to

¹⁰ We used the Brazilian translation of *Convergence Culture* (2006), published in 2008.

a hybrid model and emerging circulation in which a mix of forces from top to bottom and from bottom to top determines how a material is shared, through culture, and between them, in a much more participatory (and disorganized) way. (Jenkins, Green, & Ford, 2014, p. 11) [free translation]

More recently, Jenkins (2017) adopted the name *transmedia reasoning* to designate the interaction sought between consumers, producers, and texts within digital connections. The transmedia reasoning is founded on the principles of transmedia narrative (Jenkins, 2009; 2010): share/depth potential; continuity/multiplicity; immersion/extraction; creation of universes; seriality; subjectivity; and performance. These principles can be understood as semiotic modes of acting in a transmedia way in the digital environment. For instance, the idea of sign continuity, or synequism, applies to the transmedia dynamics based on the idea of mediation, a continuously transforming action of the sign, or semiosis. Hence, we adopt the Peircean definition of reasoning (or semiotics) to describe transmedia reasoning as a dynamic (semiosis) that incorporates deviations resulting from associations (collateral experience) with the reference (object) to continuously broaden meanings (interpretant).

According to Jenkins (2010), the media industry often broaches “continuity” in terms of information accepted as part of the definitive version of a particular story. On the other hand, “multiplicity” refers to the various alternative versions of the canonical story. According to the pragmatic perspective of semiosis, multiplicity is not opposed to continuity, because it can be understood as the associative capacity (collateral experience) of the sign representation, which guarantees the creative component required for the sign mediation to operate by a logical continuity. Thus, the circulation of news on online social networking connections operates by a sign continuity, which can both endorse news content and question it due to prior familiarity (collateral experience) with what is denoted by the news content. From this perspective, multiplicity of meanings (interpretants) competes for transmedia expansion (semiosis) of the news report.

Other authors also recognize the potential of semiotics to understand the transmedia reasoning. Bertetti (2014), for example, discusses that textual semiotics provides relevant resources for the understanding of transmedia reasoning and, long ago, Scolari (2009) had already affirmed that semiotics studies objects (texts) to understand processes, which makes it useful for describing instruments that produce meaning in the transmedia narrative. In a study on transmedia based on the Peircean semiotics, Elleström (2014) evokes iconic, evidence-based, and symbolic relations to explain the processes of representation related to transmission mechanisms of media characteristics from one mean to the other.

From the pragmatic point of view of the Peircean semiosis, transmedia dynamics is a sign process in continuous reticular expansion, involving a varied proliferation of interpretants. From this perspective, the productive incompleteness of the interpretant is taken as a conceptual parameter to understand the way in which media consumption habits confer specificities to the transmedia dynamics by sign associations based on collateral experiences (Alzamora & Gambarato, 2014). The interpretive potential of the sign (immediate interpretant) can be understood in transmedia semiosis as a kind of invitation to participation, which only becomes a new sign (dynamic interpretant) by the sign associative action (collateral experience) (Alzamora, 2018).

Therefore, the more meanings a fake or distorted news content evokes in interactions it manages, the more connections it tends to achieve from a media environment to another. In transmedia dynamics, fake or distorted news content are continuously disseminated from one media environment to another, through multiplicity of actions they manage within digital connection connections. In this context, the dispute about competing beliefs mediated by fake or distorted news content assumes the shape of transmedia activism.

TRANSMEDIA ACTIVISM REGARDING #FAKENEWS

The transmedia dynamics comprises different strands, such as transmedia storytelling, transmedia branding, transmedia performance, transmedia learning, among other variations (Jenkins, 2010). In the field of sociopolitical mobilizations, Jenkins (2016) refers to the notion of “transmedia activism,” a term coined by Lina Srivastava (2009) to designate collective and creative processes that coordinate a cultural narrative in media expansion, defining social changes as a result of systemic solutions. The term refers to the reticular production of content aiming at raising awareness, engagement, and action for the structuring changes. This is a transmedia dynamics, because this form of activism is based on the multiplication of network actors, able to create varying points of entry into the socially constructed narrative of questions and solutions related to the theme, using multiple platforms and languages.

Soriano (2016) points out that this kind of transmedia dynamics involves radical intertextuality strategies and multimodality to address heterogeneous network audiences. The first strategy concerns the collective narrative movement by textual fragments spread across several platforms. On the other hand, the second one corresponds to the logical possibilities provided by these texts, whose transmedia organization favors social engagement. The synergy between various parts of the media system contributes to the development of subthemes, maximizing points of contact with various niches of audiences.

Vieira (2013) discusses the need for classifying the social predisposition for different practical effects in order to generate engagement. The author synthesizes three basic ways under integrated development: adherence, mobilization, and activism. The first would be the lowest degree of commitment, prevailing a mere thematic identification with the event. According to the Peircean pragmatism, it is at this stage that semiosis can be redirected by the insertion of doubt into the sign process. On the other hand, mobilization would be an intermediate form, when triggering actions for network dissemination. It is, according to the Peircean pragmatism, within a semiotic domain, in which actions are propagated based on shared beliefs. The third level would be the accomplishment of the previous strategies aimed at the full involvement, concentrating forces and systematically acting in favor of the visibility of the cause. According to the Peircean pragmatism, this stage is shaped by ingrained habits of action, whose continued repetition reflects on the entrenchment of the beliefs that sustain them and the qualities of feelings that drive them towards action. These processes are connected and provide feedback, thus consisting in a network of increasingly dense and multifaceted meanings.

For this bias, the circulation of fake or distorted news content derives from relations between types of engagement that these news trigger based on beliefs manifested in certain political positions. This process favors the development of points of contact between related actions, stimulating the passage from the adherence engagement to the activist engagement, by the mediation of the mobilization engagement.

In the online social networking connections, dissemination of fake or distorted news content is conditioned by the architecture of the platforms, the mediating instance that defines modes of interaction through the actions that it technically provides such as sharing, commenting, and reacting through emojis. Thus, the circulation of fake or distorted news is also mediated by a sociotechnical instance, because “omnipresent sharing features stimulate users to spread and repeat breaking news” (Poell & van Dijck, 2015, p. 530). This enables the propagation of actions aimed at transmedia activism, instituting provisional action habits, which compete to consolidate a common belief in large-scale sharing. For instance, it is the case of certain news part of the “trends”¹¹ of online platforms through actions of transmedia activism that integrate human and algorithmic minds in these media environments.

According to Igarza (2010), rearrangements of the public in digital environments are consolidated by the processes of approaching and recommending contents, established within each friendship circle. Consent increases through the sense of credibility, in accordance with the immediacy and the dynamism of

¹¹ Resource that shows the relevance of certain subjects through the volume generated by conversations on the network in a short period of time (Groshek & Groshek, 2013).



the system. This process stimulates proximity due to related interests, opening room for exchanging values, gaining trust, and producing knowledge. This is a “rumor dynamics,” according to Sarlo (2011).

Conversation between the peers marks the dissemination and strengthening of political positions in cross-platform connections. According to Dahlgren (2013), engagement is conditioned to rational and affective aspects of mental dynamics, incorporating modes of cultural expression that are mediated by the media. Since online social networks consist in relationship spaces par excellence (Sarlo, 2011), they become a privileged space for sharing beliefs through social engagement. At the same time, they are media environments that contribute to the emergence of doubts, since they provide the contiguity between competing beliefs, thereby favoring the process of checking news due to the scrutiny of doubts.

To illustrate this process, we can mention the “#fakenews” hashtag, whose purpose is to denounce alleged fake news. This hashtag has been used on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram with such purpose in several languages, including in Brazilian posts. To understand its potential for propagation, we automatically collect this hashtag on Twitter, from January 27 to 28, 2018, in order to measure the repercussion in this media environment of the trial in second instance of the former President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, held on January 24, 2018. In 24 hours, we collected 109,272 tweets with the aid of the Tags¹² tool, which comprises the research Application Programming Interface (API), focused on the relevance of published and shared tweets. Of Brazilian publications collected with this hashtag, most have focused on news about the former President Lula. On Instagram, we mapped 476,622 posts related to this hashtag using the counting tool of the very platform, comprising the dissemination of memes and political allegories. On the other hand, on Facebook, through manual collection between January 27 and 28, we monitored 100 posts from pages and public profiles that mentioned this hashtag.

The collected data showed that using this hashtag mostly includes counterstatements without evidences, passionately pointing to untruths based on competing belief systems. The hashtag was not always associated with journalistic news, since the expression “fake news,” within the context of online social networks, has a broader sense of news, referring to any published content, regardless of the source. Its practical effect, therefore, is not the social recognition of truth, but the attempt to consolidate common beliefs mediated by this symbolic device. The hashtag emerges, then, as a symbol of the political position established in habits of action derived from pre-established beliefs. According to the Peircean approach, symbol is “a sign that refers to the object denoted by it because of a law, usually a combination of general ideas, which

¹² Retrieved from
<http://tags.hawksey.info>.

operates in order to be interpreted as referring to that object” (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 283) [free translation]. The perspective of transmedia activism that emerges from the social use this hashtag specially acts to promote the fixation of a belief shared by symbolic association of ideas. The process of fixation of beliefs, however, varies according to employed methods.

FIXATION OF BELIEFS AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

In one of the first texts he published about pragmatism, the *Fixation of beliefs* (1877), Peirce proposed four methods to fix a belief – referring to “[...] the way of arriving at ideas that settle own in the mind of people as habits, customs, tradition” (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 375): tenacity, authority, a priori, and scientific. For Peirce, the belief is manifested in the establishment of certain action habit (Hartshorne & Weiss, 1974, p. 53) whose regularity outlines a common position in the form of a shared opinion. The four methods enable us understanding how the process of forming opinion articulates differentiated manifestations of belief, impacting, as we defend here, specific processes of social engagement with the allegedly fake news.

In the *tenacity method*, opinions are established simply because someone is obstinately rooted in their own beliefs. “We tenaciously pay attention not only to believe, but to believe exactly in what we believe” (Peirce, quoted by De Waal, 2007, p. 31). Social engagement based on the tenacity method tends to ignore opposed evidence and to disregard divergent opinions, characterizing the most common form of social engagement concerning fake or distorted news content. This method results in the formation of *filter bubbles*¹³ within a context of political polarization.

A person could choose to actively avoid interaction with people with different opinions, or could develop the habit of immediately despising and rejecting anything that challenged their own beliefs. Conspiracy theorists often think that way. They completely adopt all the evidence in favor of their visions [...] and reject or “reinterpret” everything that gathers against them. (De Waal, 2007, p. 33)

In the *authority method*, fixation of belief is coerced by an institution. Opposed evidences are here purposely isolated by a regulatory institution, such as the press and the Government, for example. The recognition of mechanisms of action of this method propels, for instance, citizens’ complaints against fake or distorted news content that are institutionally produced in order to manipulate opinions. It is also manifested in citizens’ posts in online social networks, which

¹³ In an interview given to BBC, published on February 17, 2017, the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, said that fake news, polarization of opinions, and the “filter bubbles” would be damaging the understanding between people and threatening the original project of Facebook, focused on personal interactions (Ahmed, 2017).



¹⁴ From the second half of the 20th century, the press came to be understood as a kind of fourth power, or counterpower, regarding the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. The fourth estate, or fourth power, is characterized by watching over the other three powers on behalf of civilian interests represented by the press. But the gradual approximation of media groups with political and economic interests of the powers they should watch over culminated in the so-called press crisis, or crisis of the fourth power. Ramonet (2013) suggests that media observatories and activists in online social networks constitute a kind of fifth power, which is characterized by the citizen surveillance of the press, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary.

seek to give visibility to news purposely ignored by traditional media vehicles. The social engagement delimited by the authority method is manifested in transmedia interactions that emphasize the so-called “press crisis” associated with the *fourth estate*¹⁴, characterizing a typical example of transmedia activism.

In the *a priori method*, belief is fixed by seeking beliefs consistent with reason. According to De Waal (2007), this method not only drives us to believe, such as the other two, but also defines what should be believable according to what is logically plausible. On the other hand, the *scientific method* differs from the previous three, because in this method ideas are not fixed because of what we want to believe, but “because something about what our thought has no effect at all” (Peirce, quoted by De Waal, 2007, p. 35), such as in the case of the laws of physics, for example.

Associations of ideas (collateral experience) differently affect semiosis according to the employed methods of fixation of beliefs. Interactional practices, typical of transmedia activism, are primarily founded on the methods of tenacity and authority to fix beliefs related to the dissemination of fake or true news content. In both, social engagement, manifested in integrated actions – reacting by emojis, commenting, and sharing news – has the purpose of generating a broad interaction concerning a common belief. The other two methods are also triggered to establish or refute supposedly fake news, although on a smaller scale, because such trigger more specific mechanisms of prior familiarity (collateral experience) with the object that the sign denotes.

INTERACTIONAL PRACTICES CONCERNING THE TRIAL OF THE FORMER PRESIDENT LULA

On July 12, 2017, the former President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva was convicted, in first instance, to nine years and six months in prison for money laundering and passive corruption, accused of receiving bribes from the construction company OAS in exchange for favoring the contractor in contracts with Petrobras. The presented evidence was the supposed acquisition and refurbishment of a triplex apartment in the city of Guarujá in São Paulo, in the amount of R\$3.7 million (BRL). With the conviction, the defense requested a revision in second instance of the Justice, appealing to the Federal Regional Court of the 4th region (*Tribunal Regional Federal da 4ª Região* – TRF4) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, against the decision of the judge Sérgio Moro. The hearing took place on January 24, 2018 and kept the conviction, by increasing the penalty for twelve years in prison.

At the end of the trial period, there was a significant increase in the circulation of fake or distorted news content on the subject in online social networks.

According to data presented by the *Monitor do Debate Político no Meio Digital* [Surveillance of Political Debate on Digital Media] (Facebook, 2018) – project conducted by GPOPAI/USP to map, measure, and analyze the ecosystem of online political debate –, of the ten political news most shared on Facebook in Brazil, nine referred to the testimony of the former president at the TRF4. In addition to the traditional press, several links of the alternative press also circulated, marked by strong ideological bias, highlighting even more the political polarization concerning competing beliefs. To verify the veracity of the shared information, the Agência Lupa company, specialized in fact-checking, evaluated the main disseminated news about it on online social networks (Lupa, 2018).

According to Agência Lupa, one of the first supposedly fake news on the matter was published by the website *Revista Fórum* (Forum, 2018), which claimed to be the largest demonstration in the history of Porto Alegre on behalf of Lula. The news was disseminated on Facebook one day before the trial and reached 11,000 interactions (reactions with emojis, shares, and comments), according to *BuzzSumo*¹⁵ data, a tool for monitoring social networks online. But, according to data published by Agência Lupa company, the biggest street protest in Porto Alegre took place on March 13, 2016, in favor of the impeachment of the then-President Dilma Rousseff, which attracted 100,000 people, according to data from Porto Alegre's police, and about 140,000, according to data from organizers of the event. To corroborate the diagnosis of support to Lula, a private profile posted on Facebook an aerial photograph in order to show the grandeur of the mobilization, reaching 33,000 shares. However, according to the checking procedure carried out by Agência Lupa, the image was a reproduction of a protest that took place in Venezuela, in 2010.

¹⁵ Retrieved from <http://buzzsumo.com/>

In this context, dissonant beliefs were mobilized in a collective effort to raise doubts about news that referred to opposing political positions. It is the case of the news propagated by the website *Papo TV* (Rodrigues, 2018) questioning an appeal in favor of the former president to TRF4. In the original document, there was a request for the prescription of the crimes singled out by the sentence imposed by the judge Sérgio Moro in first instance. However, according to the news published by *Papo TV*, the defense would have admitted Lula's guilt in the case of the triplex apartment, which has been checked as fake by Agência Lupa company.

The aforementioned examples emphasize the search for evidence in the checking process. However, this is not always enough to revise beliefs related to the sharing of fake or distorted news, because such beliefs are based on ingrained habits of action that resist the evidences to the contrary. In the case of the alleged text written by the Brazilian actress Marieta Severo describing

her disappointment in relation to former President Lula, which has achieved a wide circulation within the transmedia dynamics of news related to the second instance trial of the former President. The actress is known for supporting left-wing movements and voting for Lula. On the day of the trial, the federal deputy Jandira Feghali (Communist Party of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro – PCdoB/RJ), considered the leader of the opposition to the Government of Michel Temer in the Chamber of Deputies, published in her Facebook page a photograph of Marieta Severo in support of Lula. Signed by the Unified Worker's Central (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores* – CUT), this publication, shared by Marieta Severo, claimed the participation of the former president in the 2018 elections, under the hashtag #EleiçãoSemLulaÉFraude [Elections without Lula are a fraud].

The post reached 551 shares and, of the 4,400 reactions in the form of emojis, 3,900 were positive reactions in the form of thumbs; 420, heart-shaped; 41 were negative reactions in the form of sarcasm; 17, in the form of rage; 8, in the form of surprise; and 2, in the form of sadness. Then, it is postulated that the post resulted in reactions through emojis mainly positive. The field of comments covered positive and negative reactions that fostered the clash of arguments concerning competing beliefs.

The following day, the text entitled *Os erros de Luís*¹⁶ [Lula's mistakes], assigned to Marieta Severo, began to be shared on online social networks. The text mentioned a series of mistakes made by the former president, which culminated in the decree of his arrest. The content was welcomed with mistrust by readers favorable towards the former president, but it was largely shared by those who mobilized on online social networks motivated by opposed beliefs. The dissemination of opinion texts attributed to celebrities is a recurring strategy to propagate fake news in a digital environments, because its iconic foundation enhances shares in transmedia dynamics. This is an iconic foundation, because this type of sign construction qualitatively works by seduction and, hence, fosters feelings of adherence to the text, resulting in sharing actions.

On January 26, the website *Boatos.Org* conducted the verification of news and found that it was fake (Matsuki, 2018). One of the procedures for checking was a reverse search to track down evidence of Marieta Severo's behavior that could confirm the shared content. However, the last online action performed by the actress was her signature to a petition for Lula to run for presidency in 2018, being aligned with the publication held earlier by the deputy Jandira Feghali. The hashtag “#fakenews” was used on Twitter as a way to challenge the news content, which confers an attempt to symbolic revise the provisionally-established belief concerning the referenced text.

On Facebook, by the manual collection of the title *Os erros de Luís*, we identified that the private profile with higher number of interactions regarding

¹⁶ One of the reasons that prompted the suspicion about the veracity of the text was the mistake in the spelling of the name of the former President, since he writes Luiz with “z.”

that news reached 108,000 likes, 83,668 shares, and only 13 comments. Of the reactions, 89,000 were reactions in the form of thumbs; 12,000, heart-shaped; 5,500, in form of surprise; 655, in the form of sarcasm; 169, in form of anger; and 116, in the form of sadness. Even after refuting the truthfulness of the information by the website *Boatos.Org*, this post continued to receive comments endorsing the content of the text on Facebook, although the authorship was fake. We observed that the aforementioned post continued to be shared until May at least, therefore, after Lula's arrest, on April 7. This demonstrates how the tenacity method operates in a transmedia way in the fixation of beliefs disseminated by fake news, regardless of evidences to the contrary¹⁷.

The use of hashtags on online social networks, covering different political positions by association with related news, drives the transmedia dynamics of this type of content. On January 24, two opposed hashtags mobilized the trends of digital platforms. Users favorable to the former president used the hashtag *#cadêaprova* [where is the evidence] to defend that Lula had been sentenced without the presentation of evidences. On the other hand, users contrary to the president used the hashtag *#molusconacadeia*, a variation of *#lulanacadeia* [Lula in jail], which is in force since 2016 in online mobilizations. We perceived the concomitant use of both hashtags on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, linked to posts based on competing beliefs, which demonstrates the symbolic potential of these hashtags to gather political-related positions.

The collection held on Twitter through the Tags tool resulted in 24,772 tweets with *#cadêaprova* and 91,586 tweets with *#molusconacadeia*. On Facebook, the first five posts referring to the two hashtags were manually collected, since they were the publications with greatest interaction in the period (likes, comments, and shares). On Instagram, through the 4K Stogram¹⁸ tool, 1,204 posts were collected with *#cadêaprova* and 1,338 with *#molusconacadeia*. In all investigated platforms, both hashtags showed strong connection with the expression "fake news," demonstrating the semiotic value of truth concerning this symbology.

We observed, therefore, that these hashtags drove the transmedia dynamics on the subject, emphasizing the dissemination of news content, either fake or true, aiming at consolidating a certain belief regarding the transmedia environment by sign association (collateral experience). However, the more a news content, founded on competing belief, expands in a transmedia manner, the more it is subjected to the scrutiny of doubt. The symbolic designation "fake news," which emphasizes news verification processes, was, then, widely shared in the form of hashtags in order to revise beliefs and, consequently, change opinions about the reported theme.

For instance, we can mention the strategies created by activist groups to raise visibility to their common beliefs. To boost their ranking, the Workers' Party

¹⁷ Other factors are also critical in the propagation of competing beliefs such as the use of robots to increase the media visibility of the content. However, for the purposes of our study, we did not measure the non-human mediation during analysis.

¹⁸ Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2GuALTa>

(*Partido dos Trabalhadores* – PT) page on Facebook posted a text summoning their activists to a Twitter manifestation on the day of the trial. The hashtags, originally used as an evidence-based resource for digital surveillance, became, in this case, symbols of a common position, creating various connections within cross-platform sign contexts (Alzamora & Andrade, 2016). Thus, the objective of the collective action on Facebook was to reinforce a political positioning with the intersection of posts mediated by the same hashtag. At the same time, when the hashtag takes part of the trends, its influence is increased in the public agenda. According to Groshek and Groshek (2013), this assumes the emergence of a *Trending Agenda*, which broadens the transmedia scope of such action.

Poell and van Dijck (2015) state that trends identify the latest novelties and scale trending topics per region, city, or country. However, although the ranking results from social engagement, the authors warn that trends may not directly translate the interests of users, since they are also mediated by algorithmic processes¹⁹. They are those which order the relevance of certain information, which may include or exclude particular signs. Trending topics are not always determined by the number of tweets, because the algorithm is adapted according to the changing speed of the keywords.

The authors also highlight similarities in the relationship between algorithms and the news feed (FB)²⁰ of Facebook and other online social networks used by activists. According to Poell and van Dijck (2015), these platforms permeate the daily personal communication, providing opportunity for sharing social, cultural, and political causes. However, the interests that binds dispersed users in these online social networks generate momentary interactions and brief moments of togetherness. This binding, inevitably, is dissolved when users are algorithmically connected to the next trending topic. The continuous presentation of new topics is what keeps platforms active, stimulating access and interaction in order to generate continuous action.

In this sense, fixation of beliefs within the analyzed context presupposes the conformation of a transmedia dynamics that points to the strategic use of digital platforms. In this scenario, the dispute between competing beliefs operates by association (collateral experience) of arguments, true or fake, intending to resignify dominant beliefs and, thus, change the course of the meaning of the news (semiosis). This is a pragmatic dynamics typical of transmedia activism because it seeks to conform collective actions outlined by adherence (inserting doubt in competing beliefs), mobilization (seeking the fixation of similar beliefs), and activism (by collective habits of action founded on tenacious beliefs) on digital connections. Paradoxically, the large-scale circulation of allegedly fake contents

¹⁹ For Tarleton Gillespie (2014), the word “algorithm” refers to a mathematical formula, codes, or software that recognizes information and generates another in for replacing it. This configures an input/output action. Each media platform is endowed with a series of algorithms that are responsible for the relevance of the shared information. Gillespie calls this type as “public relevance algorithms,” which is essential to create the selection of data that we see and spread every day.

²⁰ The news feed was created in 2006 and works as a network for presenting contents, listing information determined as relevant by the algorithms (Sanghvi, 2006).

favors the collective scrutiny of doubt and, consequently, the development of verification processes that pragmatically act in the improvement of news and in its deontological search for the truth, in a broader way.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The transmedia dynamics of fake or distorted news content is founded on sophisticated processes of social engagement, which are significantly broadened by collateral experience, a sense operation that adds information to semiosis based on prior familiarity with the object that the sign denotes. News is understood as a process of signification that seeks to recursively attain reality through the normative ideal of truth, whose practical effect will be a shared belief in the form of opinion.

The pragmatic conception of truth is a normative ideal that delimits the development of semiosis, not an attribute of news. Falsehood and truthfulness are, therefore, meaning operations that permeate the semiosis of news. They culminate in effects (interpretant) that represent the relationship established by the news (sign) with its references (object) to mediate the formation of certain opinions (interpretant). Doubt (iconic nature) seeks to revise an established belief or to fix a competing belief through verification (evidence-based nature), aiming at producing a belief able to achieve the status of social convention, although arbitrary and relatively provisional, in the form of the symbolic designation of *fake* or *true*. Semiosis of news is developed in a transmedia way, and the broader its range, the stronger the belief that delineates it.

Contexts of political polarization favor the transmedia circulation of fake or distorted news, which was the reason we sought to observe the issue within the context of the second instance trial of the former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, held in January 24, 2018. Interactions recorded on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram regarding news related to this theme were observed through procedures of manual and automatic collection. Our results showed that social engagement in the investigated scenario was driven by sing components, such as association with celebrities and use of hashtags with political-polarization connotation, in order to fix beliefs by opinions shared in the form of large-scale sharing in digital connections. With this study, we demonstrate the regulating capacity of the allegedly fake news in social contexts marked by strong political polarization, despite evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, we show that the transmedia dynamics of fake or distorted news content stimulates content checking, contributing to the improvement of the processes of signification of news in a broader way. ■

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