Verdade e hegemonia nas estratégias jornalísticas de combate à desinformação

Truth and hegemony in the journalistic strategies to deter disinformation

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Resumo: *O artigo examina a pauta de enfrentamento à desinformação proposta pela grande imprensa e pelas agências de fact-checking. Por meio da análise crítica dos discursos institucionais dessas iniciativas, argumenta que eles promovem a despolitização do dissenso democrático apelando a uma concepção autoritária da verdade, dicotomizando fatos e valores e ratificando acriticamente as instituições hegemônicas. Em contraponto a essa formação discursiva, o artigo reivindica uma abordagem pluralista da verdade apta a reconhecer valores normativos discrepantes nas disputas sociais em curso nas democracias ocidentais. Sugere-se, por fim, que as medidas elaboradas para aprimorar as competências críticas dos cidadãos deveriam endereçar as axiologias conflitantes presentes nas peças de desinformação e fomentar uma leitura crítica das práticas jornalísticas.*
Palavras-chave: *verdade; hegemonia; jornalismo; fact-checking; desinformação.*

Abstract: *The article examines the fight against disinformation agenda proposed by mainstream media and fact-checking agencies. By critically analyzing the institutional discourses of those initiatives, it argues that they promote the depoliticization of the democratic dissent by appealing to an authoritarian concept of truth, dichotomizing facts and values, and uncritically endorsing hegemonic institutions. As a counterpoint to that discursive formation, the article claims a pluralist approach to truth, acknowledging discrepant normative values in ongoing social disputes in Western democracies. Finally, it is suggested that the measures designed to improve citizens' critical skills should address conflicting*

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axiologies present in disinformation pieces and encourage a critical reading of journalistic practices.

Keywords: *truth; hegemony; journalism; fact-checking; disinformation.*

Introduction

There is growing unrest in public opinion and academic literature with the alleged harmful effects of disinformation on Western democracies since 2016 (FARKAS; SCHOU, 2019; TENOVE, 2020). The authoritarian populists' election in diverse countries, digital platforms' monetization of false content, and the feeling that citizens are ever more suspicious of epistemic institutions (for example, science and journalism) (FARKAS; SCHOU, 2019) motivated the elaboration of wider diagnoses about the present situation. Terms such as "post-truth" and "infodemic", though not coined in the heat of recent events[2,] are being used by commentators from various areas as metaphors (SIMON; CAMARGO, 2021) capable of synthesizing the "spirit of the time."

The evocation of these metaphors in public debate usually comes with the conviction that people have become insensitive to the truth, especially when that truth challenges deep-rooted beliefs (ANDERSON, 2020). Particularly between 2016 and 2019, the reference to "post-truth" focused on the party-political domain and aligned with a sense of perplexity arising from unexpected electoral results (for example, the Brexit referendum, Donald Trump's election in the United States). From 2020 onward, the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated critics' concerns, especially when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared on February 15 of that year (UN NEWS, 2020) that combating SARS-CoV-2 required containing the circulation of misinformation about the new virus. In other words, the consequences of this apparent generalized disdain for the truth would not only have motivated catastrophic political decisions but also exacerbated sanitary risks.

Though this pessimistic diagnosis about the epistemic health of democracies is the object of dispute in the scholarly literature (especially for social epistemology and political communication studies), the fact is that public opinion has convinced itself of the supposed threats of

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2   The term "post-truth" was coined in 1992 to refer to lies told by President George Bush in the context of the Iran-Contra affair (KRASNI, 2020). The notion of "infodemic" was coined by Rothkopf in 2003 to refer to the abundance of false information on the gravity of the SARS epidemic (SIMON; CAMARGO, 2021).

entering a "post-truth" and "infodemic" era[3]. Accordingly, there was an increasing demand for a set of measures to contain the spread of untruths in the public sphere. Such measures would strive to clean up the information ecosystem and encourage respect for the truth and the institutions that express it (WAISBORD, 2018). The present article intends to focus on two[4] propositions of journalistic strategies for confronting disinformation: the factual coverage of the mainstream media and fact-checking.

This work aims not so much to dispute the efficacy of these measures considering the increasing influence of digital platforms in the information ecosystem (SMYRNAIOS; REBILLARD, 2019) but to critically examine the discourse they mobilize when describing their actions and justifying their relevance. In a nutshell, the piece argues the two propositions, despite their specificities, compete to reproduce an understanding of truth as an expression of hegemony with theoretical and political implications. This article alerts to the indispensability of critical thought as a key to a pluralist understanding of truth (VOGELMANN, 2018; FALOMI, 2019; KUUSELA, 2019) to counterpoint such discursive formation. From this perspective, the paper takes into account historical continuities and normative divergences that permeate shared life. That is, instead of lamenting the silting up of truth in public discussion, the article warns that the authority of facts does not always resolve disagreements that characterize democracy.

Though I develop the main argument of this work theoretically, two sources of documents empirically inform the study: 20 editorials published by the three wider circulated newspapers in Brazil (*O Globo*, *Estadão*, and *Folha de S. Paulo*) and 30 institutional articles from three Brazilian fact-checking agencies signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (*Aos Fatos*, *Lupa*, and *Estadão Verifica*).

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3   On Google Trends, mentions to the terms "post-truth" and "infodemic" began rising in November 2016 and March 2020, respectively.

4   Though focusing on two measures, the scholarly literature approaches others, like media literacy campaigns, science information literacy, regulation of digital platforms, and legislative projects on the theme of disinformation (TENOVE, 2020).

Such publications are understood here as a meta-journalistic discourse (CARLSON, 2015) in which journalists explicitly engage in delimiting their practices and the normative principles that inspire them.

The sample includes documents published between 2016 and 2021, a period in which discussions about the adverse effects of "post-truth" and "infodemic" heated in the public sphere. Data was collected through manual research on search engines (via keyword intersections) and the websites of the selected initiatives. Through the critical analysis of discourse (FARKAS; SCHOU, 2019), I look to understand the meanings evoked in these institutional publications, recognizing their symbolic and material inscription in the public agenda. I submit the research corpus to a qualitative textual exam aiming to identify recurrent tendencies between the selected propositions to face disinformation, taking into account their ways of addressing the problem and claiming epistemic authority.

The factual coverage of the mainstream press

In recent years, a parcel of journalism studies started operating as the sounding board of a eulogy to the mainstream media as the truth-arbiter in response to the disinformation issue. It is the case of the extensively cited paper in which Waisbord (2018) laments the collapse of modernity's disciplinary project due to the public sphere fragmentation in digital platforms and the instrumentalization of media's criticism by authoritarian politicians. Facing this situation, the journalism competence to build communities of meaning and to inspect public power would be at stake (WAISBORD, 2018). Notwithstanding, the acritical legitimation of corporate media in times of "epistemic crisis" (BLAKE-TURNER, 2020) emerges in works that affirm the truth disseminated by the field as an indispensable reaction before the escalating disinformation (CREECH; ROESSNER, 2019; CAPILLA, 2021). Many of these studies even slip into Manichaeism, opposing the accuracy of facts reported by the traditional press to lies and deception.

For the media conglomerates, the supposed entry into a "post-truth" and "infodemic" era served as artifice to reinforce their conventional practices now glossed over by the task of fighting disinformation. As an example, in an editorial published by Estadão on April 24, 2017, under the title "The fight for truth," the news outlet reasserts its institutional role amidst the alleged epistemic crisis haunting Western democracies: "The epidemic of so-called 'fake news,' nurtured, above all, by social media, is forcing newspapers and other traditional media outlets around the world to mobilize themselves to defend the most precious value in journalism: the truth of facts." (ESTADÃO, 2017, author's italics).

In chorus with the discursive ethos mobilized by this appeal, Folha de S. Paulo's editorial director, Sérgio Dávila, signs a column on October 15, 2016, in which he expresses his publication's commitment to the correctness of facts in a moment of supposed underappreciation for the truth. Entitled "The importance of professional journalism in a 'post-truth' world," the text unleashes the same litany of complaints against the "enemies of the truth" to reiterate the place occupied by *Folha de S. Paulo* in this dispute:

> In an era defined by the "The Economist" magazine as that of the "post-truth," in which politicians from all over the world say what they want without worrying about reality and in which censorship no longer takes place in the traditional way, by the suppression of content, but by the meticulous publication of lies on social media, it is up to professional journalists to help separate fact from rumor. (DÁVILA, 2016, author's italics)

It should be added that the article launching Folha de S. Paulo's new editorial project, published in March 2017, reinforces the background of the epistemic crisis since its suggestive title: "Professional journalism is the antidote to fake news and intolerance."

The following statement heads the list of editorial principles the publication takes on: "Producers of quality content and historical record such as Folha have the challenge of *making the values of professional journalism prevail amid the digital environment's cacophony* that tends

to confuse information and entertainment, reality and rumor, and news and 'fake news' and that expresses almost everything with equal stridency and disconnected from the original context." (FOLHA DE S. PAULO, 2019, author's italics).

As a counterpoint to this alarming observation, Folha lists its normative commitments with the truth as its guide. Several passages of the new editorial project celebrate the company's journalistic practice for its inclination to the facts: "Time-honored reporting and writing procedures extend critical distancing and *make event descriptions as accurate as possible.*" (*FOLHA DE S. PAULO*, 2019, author's italics); "*professional journalists check the veracity of facts*, show connections between them, and establish a news hierarchy." (*FOLHA DE S. PAULO*, 2019, author's italics).

The occasion of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates the spirit of defending the mainstream media as an "antidote" to informational disorder. *O Globo*'s editorial on July 29, 2021, aligns its work to the one of science as a way of containing the "infodemic." Under the eye-catching title "Journalism: the fight against denialism and disinformation guides press coverage in the pandemic" the text celebrates the conglomerate's diligence in confronting through its "continuous effort in clarifying facts." (*O GLOBO*, 2021). Then, the editorial completes referring once more to the issue of truth: "O GLOBO had the *search for the truth*, denying false and potentially harmful narratives to public health, as one of the pillars for its pandemic's coverage." (*O GLOBO*, 2021, author's italics).

During a campaign carried out by the principal news outlets in Brazil on March 23, 2020 (which consisted in reproducing the same cover on all print editions with the slogan "Together we will defeat the virus"), *Estadão* published an editorial exalting its professional fact-checking amid the "infodemic" disseminated by social media and demagogue politicians. Defending what they call "informational hygiene," the text closes with yet another truth-exaltation device: "*It is said the first war victim is the truth. In this war, truth can be the last* if society, scholars, authorities,

and journalist are united – as Brazilian newspaper covers said in unison last Monday – for information and responsibility." (*ESTADÃO*, 2020, author's italics).

Fact-checking organizations

Exhorting truth is also a characteristic of the work developed by fact--checking agencies. Fact-checking, as an editorial subgenre, is generally presented as a movement of "professional reform" (DOBBS, 2012; GRAVES, 2018) that responds to deficiencies in the "fair and balanced" approach of US journalism, particularly in political coverage. For that reason, the first initiatives dedicated to fact-checking in the United States launched in the 2000s, focusing on political discourse (e.g., *FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, The Washington Post Fact Checker*) under a normative ideology of the search for truth and democratic accountability (DOBBS, 2012; GRAVES, 2018; DOURADO, 2019).

The vulgarization of metaphors that allude to an era of discredit for the truth coincides with a period of global popularization and institutionalization of fact-checking, which the International Fact-Checking Network formalized in 2015 (GRAVES, 2018). The international expansion of this editorial genre also served as an opportunity for the mainstream media to inaugurate their own fact-checking units, seeking to legitimize their conventional practices under the flag of rigorous investigation, which is central to "verification journalism" (LELO; PACHI FILHO, 2021). This validation of press work is patent in the text launching *Estadão Verifica*, the fact-checking service of Grupo Estadão.

> "*For 143 years, we have guaranteed the seriousness and quality of the content we produce,*" said João Caminoto, director of Journalism of *Grupo Estadão*. But that is no longer enough. We must also monitor and expose the flow of fake news that infest online networks and can cause damage to society. *Verifica* will be another service to our audiences in these times in which fake news move and grow quickly on the Internet." (BRAMATTI, 2018, author's italics)

In recent years, researchers and opinion leaders have been praising fact-checking as a crucial agent in the "battle" against disinformation (SPINELLI; SANTOS, 2018; DOURADO, 2019). The activity started acquiring public prestige and establishing important partnerships (SPINELLI; SANTOS, 2018; DOURADO, 2019). As an example, since 2016, platform companies have been hiring several initiatives to verify potentially false messages on social media (GRAVES; ANDERSON, 2020). In parallel, fact-checkers themselves started claiming their centrality in the public agenda. Besides partnerships with "big techs," State authorities have also been inviting fact-checking organizations to mediate the informational ecosystem and participate in the legislative debate. In Brazil, this participation happens predominantly through the interlocution with the judiciary system (for example, Superior Electoral Court) and in parliamentary hearings (for example, fake news parliamentary commission of inquiry).

In their institutional articles, fact-checkers understand their commitment to truth as a form of sanitizing public debate. Initiatives themselves publish editorials that reflect such posture, as expressed once more by *Estadão Verifica*: "the press no longer just reports and analyzes facts but also denies and contains the dissemination of false content potentially harmful to society." (BRAMATTI, 2018). Analogously, in its letter celebrating six years of existence, *Aos Fatos* states that "showing what is fake and what is not as well as investigating coordinated networks of disinformation is a powerful way of contributing to public debate." (NALON, 2021). The "infodemic" generated because of the Covid-19 pandemic only reinforced the discourse on the centrality of fact-checking in the fight against disinformation. In an article republished in diverse newspapers on April 8, 2020 (and signed by six representatives of Brazilian fact-checking enterprises), a narrative permeated by bellicose allegories and exalting the work of fact-checkers amid the "infodemic" stands out:

> Brazil is going through two battles at the same time: one, in the field of medicine, against the spread of the coronavirus, and another against the disinformation it produces. *While the frontline of the former has thousands*

of brave health professionals, the army of the second is made of a dedicated but still reduced group of fact-checkers. Without the authorities' explicit support and commitment to the truth, the country is at risk of losing the war against rumors about Covid-19. (LEAL et al., 2020, author's italics)

It is crucial to indicate that the definition of truth that fact-checking initiatives adopt, as exemplarily described in a publication by *Aos Fatos*, refers to an assertion that corresponds to facts verifiable through "documents, law, a methodologically rigorous study, statistics, previous records." (NALON, 2020). *Lupa* adopted this definition as well: "Fact-checking thus constitutes the discourse of verification of public agents and political actors. This means checking *if what people say is true or false* based on public data." (EQUIPE LUPA, 2019, author's italics). In this sense, the conviction that "the more information people have, the greater their decision-making power and the more qualified and transparent the public debate becomes" guides fact-checking (EQUIPE LUPA, 2019). That is, fact-checking would configure as an instrument for enlightening the citizen, aiming at the improvement of democratic processes.

Truth as the expression of hegemony

Without losing sight of journalism's historical relevance in the modern democracies' foundation (DEWEY, 2004), it is important to consider the role that fact-checking and mainstream media have played in consolidating authoritarian truth-affirmation policy. A field of critical studies has been addressing this issue underlying the agenda to deter disinformation, also called the "Ministry of Corporate Truth" (ALBUQUERQUE, 2021), "domination through reason" (KUUSELA, 2019; FALOMI, 2019), or even "the sovereign conception of truth" (VOGELMANN, 2018). In short, the common denominator of this scholarly literature is the questioning of the subsumption of truth to the authority of the institutions that produce it. Citizens' inability to recognize facts and their notorious disregard for the truth would justify the guardianship

of experts as a way of orienting preferences according to the available evidence in place of preexisting beliefs (MARRES, 2018; FARKAS; SCHOU, 2019).

Based on the post-Marxist thought of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Farkas and Schou (2019) argue that disputes around the notions of "truth" and "falsehood" that set the agenda of the current context do not aim solely to establish empirical categories capable of determining the accurateness of information that circulates in the public sphere. Such disputes would also be political in so far as they seek to hegemonize the normative bases of social reality, stabilizing the available meanings. For that reason, authors argue the concept of factuality is at the center of clashes for the current hegemony, considering that different institutions (including journalism) legitimize certain discourses to the detriment of others (FARKAS; SCHOU, 2019).

The following sections draw from analytical procedures employed by Farkas and Schou (2019) to decompose the gears of the discourse acclaiming the mainstream media and fact-checking organizations as truth-producing institutions. According to them, discourse analysis "offers a problem-driven research strategy centered on understanding and unpacking specific political and social issues" (FARKAS; SCHOU, 2019, p. 43). In this sense, inferences extracted from examined editorials and institutional publications by the mainstream media and fact-checking agencies allow us to point out four central elements in these organizations' discourse: i) the understanding of truth as correspondence; ii) the dichotomy between facts and values; iii) the acritical ratification of truth-producing institutions; and iv) the circumscription of democratic dissent to the judgment of facts.

Truth as correspondence

The discursive regime proposed by journalistic strategies to face disinformation understands truth as "a relationship between a proposition and the world – a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact in the world." (BRAHMS, 2020, p. 6). The philosophical heritage

anchoring that definition is the correspondence theory, associated with the thought developed by the Vienna Circle in the early twentieth century (MARRES, 2018). According to that framework, reality and facts are external to human consciousness and, therefore, independent of it.

Throughout history, several epistemological doctrines have relied on this characterization of truth as correspondence, such as the mythology of journalism as a mirror of reality (SCHUDSON, 2005). However, though the press continues to profess faith in the objectivity of facts in most Western democracies (CAPILLA, 2021), studies on news-making (TUCHMAN, 1978) have questioned this premise since the 1970s, understanding the reality portrayed by journalism as a construction, not a reflection.

Therefore, the return to correspondence theories as a response to "post-truth" and the "infodemic" represents a historical setback covered by a discourse that praises the truth. Supposedly exogenous to the opinion disputes between ordinary citizens, journalists and fact-checkers would be responsible for "transmitting" the truth in a way that is understandable to them. Here lies a constitutive asymmetry between those who possess the truth and the audience of fact-checking initiatives. As something external to subjects' perceptions, truth becomes a type of coercion to enlightenment (KUUSELA, 2019).

Dichotomy between facts and values

The return of correspondence theories in the discourse of journalistic strategies to face disinformation often comes with echoes of Arendt's thought about truth, especially the split the author promotes between that and the domain of opinions (proper to politics) (VOGELMANN, 2018). The despotic character of truth, which Arendt made positive in the context of the rise of totalitarian ideologies in the 20th century, was understood as a means of limiting the power of tyrants to rewrite history at will (ARENDT, 1967). Currently, this coercive approach to truth has turned into submission to the facts as a panacea for the supposed epistemic crisis experienced by Western democracies.

Arendt (1967, p. 13) indicates that "facts are beyond agreement and consent, and all talk about them – all exchanges of opinion based on correct information – will contribute nothing to their establishment." That account sets a normative demarcation between voices that enunciate the truth (for example, journalists, fact-checkers) and those incapable of doing it, whether of naiveté, incompetence, or maliciousness. If the truth about contested facts is just one, and the disagreement over it results from an incomprehension about reality, then what journalistic initiatives to deter disinformation are normatively claiming is the suppression of values from the public sphere. Consequently, discrepant axiologies about the ways of existing in common are concealed by appeals to enlightenment and reason (JASANOFF; SIMMET, 2017; MARRES, 2018). According to Backström (2019), the problematic reverse of the dichotomization between facts and values in public opinion is their reification as equally immune to questioning, seen as they would express in words the subject's "inner truth," conferring them the supposed right to pronounce intolerant value judgements about others and the world supported by the "freedom of expression" prerogative. What this tug of war between irreconcilable truths expresses is less a disdain for the truth and more a claim for hegemony in the public sphere, either among those who establish fidelity to evidence as a prerequisite for effective political participation or among those who claim subjection to their values (regardless of the harm they cause to others) as an inalienable right to individuality.

The unrestricted legitimation of journalistic practices

As a consequence of that split between facts and values in the context of "post-truth" and "infodemic," the press and fact-checking are uncritically ratified in public opinion as truth-producing institutions. Throughout history, it is important to remember that journalism not only contributed to the promotion of democratic ideas but also, on several occasions, to the legitimation of political and economic power and the reproduction of inequalities (JASANOFF; SIMMET, 2017;

FENTON; FREEDMAN, 2018; FALOMI, 2019; ALBUQUERQUE, 2021).

By way of illustration, we know media conglomerates for decades have promoted the naturalization of neoliberal capitalism, concealing its inconvenient truths (for example, growing income concentration, intensification of labor precarity, loss of rights, and the persecution of minority groups) (FENTON; FREEDMAN, 2018; BACKSTRÖM, 2019; ALBUQUERQUE, 2021). The nostalgia that emerges from this desire to return to facts, therefore, obscures a latent truth that journalism was never separated from society's moral disputes (JASANOFF; SIMMET, 2017; FENTON; FRIEDMAN, 2018; VOGELMANN, 2018).

When the press and fact-checking situate their interventions in public debate as immune to questioning, the demand is, in other words, for their exemption from responsibility for the present state of affairs.[5] This attitude reflects in the reformist accent of the current measures to combat disinformation, which focus, as Hab-good-Coote (2018) argues, on individual accountability, moral education, and the defense of institutions. Incentives to critical citizen participation comprising demands for the regulation of media conglomerates, public taxation of platform companies, breaking down monopolies, and stimulus to healthy skepticism towards institutions are frequently left aside – especially when they work to normalize forms of "domination by reason" (FALOMI, 2019; KUUSELA, 2019).

Circumscribing democratic dissent

Finally, the circumscription of democratic dissent to the facts' judgement has, as a problematic consequence, the depoliticization of the public sphere. As Jasanoff and Simmet (2017, p. 763) argue, "to say

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5   Cases in which the press favored of disinformation stand out, such as the normalization of authoritarian populists' presidency candidacies as if they were legitimate democrats (ARAÚJO; PRIOR, 2021) and the tolerance of hate speech under the seal of "freedom of expression." (COSTA; MAIA, 2021).

that facts speak for themselves is to live in a 'post-value' world that ignores contention and questioning as the very stuff of a democracy that has always connected public facts with public values." In other words, Western democracies should be discussing today not the authoritarian subsumption of the misinformed to rationality (FALOMI, 2019) but the acknowledgement of the existence of discrepant images of social reality emanating from false and deceitful messages (ANDERSEN; SOE, 2019; CABAÑES, 2020).

Truth is not just correspondence to facts but situationally established according to a discussion context that demands clarification (KUUSELA, 2019). For this reason, a pluralist approach to the truth (BRAHMS, 2020) does not presuppose an information deficit in citizens to be corrected by the arsenal of countermeasures offered by journalism. More modestly, a pluralist approach identifies in the discrepant claims about truth dissimilar normative judgments about regarding shared life that need to be properly understood and elucidated in the circumstances in which they emerge.

Final remarks

Acknowledging the pluralism of truth is not the same as embracing the relativism that all opinions about facts have the same value. Likewise, this acknowledgement does not entail agreeing with intolerant and life-threatening worldviews (for example, climate and health denialism, prejudice against social minorities) and even less the disregard for the disinformation role in the promotion of undemocratic values and the impairment of health campaigns in the context of a health crisis. The argument is in favor of an apprehension of the truth that is not confined from the start by the ongoing disputes for hegemony and capable of understanding them less because of the generalized disregard for enlightenment and more as a consequence of the profusion of discrepant imaginaries about democracy. Such imaginaries underlie the messages we share with each other (regardless of their factual accuracy) and refer

to sometimes dissimilar normative values about how collective existence should or should not be managed (ANDERSEN; SOE, 2019).

Inserted in the terrain of political dissent, measures designed to improve citizens' critical abilities should exercise a careful understanding of which axiology a given false message triggers rather than presupposing different degrees of susceptibility to deception. There are already proposals of the sort in the specialized literature that demand from the press, for example, the exercise of its critical judgment in coverages that involve conflicting values from a citizen perspective (CARLSON, 2018).

The same applies to fact-checking, which claims to go beyond the verification of empirical correspondences towards "the contextualization and clarification of the different normative contents of political statements." (YARROW, 2021, p. 6). Fears evoked by imprecise metaphors such as "post-truth" and "infodemic" have aroused an uncritical adherence to liberal journalism, disregarding the relevance of healthy skepticism also in relation to it. In this sense, the task of those committed to the vitality of democratic citizenship is less of authoritatively clarifying facts but rather raising awareness to the importance of critical thinking (SCHINDLER, 2020) as an instrument for understanding reality and dissident normative values that permeate the public sphere.

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