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ARTICLE

Election fraud, editorial scam, and accusations of censorship against non-existent books: analysis of the scam against Bolsonaro supporters waiting for "The Truth Never Revealed/Told"

Fraude eleitoral, farsa editorial e acusações de censura contra livros inexistentes: análise do golpe contra apoiadores de Bolsonaro que aguardam "A Verdade Nunca Revelada/Contada"

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ABSTRACT: *In 2023, advertisements on social media promoted the books* Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed *and* Jair Bolsonaro: The Untold Truth. *Complaints from aggrieved consumers who had purchased the books but did not receive them attracted the attention of fact-checking agencies, who discovered that these non-existent books were part of a digital scam. This article assesses the coverage of fact-checkers on this unusual case, highlighting how a false threat of judicial censorship against the book—which was never even published—was used to attract unsuspecting consumers and encourage impulsive purchases before supposedly being taken off the market. This case shows how the distrust that Bolsonaro supporters have in traditional media and their credulity in online conspiracy theories exposes them to scams that exploit their gullibility.*

Keywords: *disinformation; fact-checking; fraud; censorship; bolsonarism.*

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RESUMO: *Anúncios em redes sociais promoviam em 2023 os livros* Jair Bolsonaro: A Verdade Nunca Revelada *e* Jair Bolsonaro: A Verdade Nunca Contada. *Reclamações de consumidores lesados, que compraram os livros, mas não os receberam, atraíram a atenção de agências de checagem de fatos, que identificaram que os livros inexistentes faziam parte de um golpe digital. O artigo avalia a cobertura de verificadores de fatos sobre o caso insólito, destacando como uma falsa ameaça de censura judicial contra o livro — que sequer foi publicado — foi utilizada como* chamariz *para atrair consumidores incautos, incentivando a compra impulsiva antes da retirada do mercado. O caso revela como a desconfiança de bolsonaristas na mídia tradicional e sua credulidade em teorias da conspiração* online *expõe o grupo a fraudes que explorem sua ingenuidade.*

Palavras-chave: *desinformação; checagem; fraude; censura; bolsonarismo.*

Introduction: context, justification, and methodology of a case study on the risk of fraud for a public susceptible to electoral disinformation

In 2023, advertisements from the Brasil de Amor profile promoted two books on Facebook and Instagram, published by Meta, titled *Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed* and *Jair Bolsonaro: The Untold Truth*[1].

The first book claimed there was evidence of electoral fraud in the 2022 election, an accusation widely spread by Bolsonaro's leaders and activists (MACHADO, 2024). However, these unfounded accusations have already proven to be false, and the Bolsonaro congresspersons who questioned the fairness of the Brazilian electoral process ended up being punished for electoral crimes. One such punishment was handed out to the Paraná state congressman Fernando Francischini, whose mandate was revoked by the electoral court (FERREIRA, 2023), and even to former president Jair Bolsonaro, who was declared ineligible by the electoral court due to his attacks against the Brazilian electoral process in a meeting with foreign ambassadors before the 2022 presidential campaign (TSE, 2023).

The second book advertised on social media was presented as an official biography of the former president. The two books were available for purchase at a cost of R$ 22.22. The numbers 2222 were also the electoral registration number of the Liberal Party (PL), which housed the Bolsonaro supporters at the time (SOARES, 2023).

Both advertisements claimed that the books would only be available for a limited time due to a court order being issued to remove them from the market, and therefore, encouraged the public to purchase them without delay. The advertisement for the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Untold Truth* warned: "'Notice' [*sic*] Get your OFFICIAL book before it is removed from the shelves" (Figure 1).

1 This article expands and updates a preliminary version of this analysis presented at the 47th Brazilian Congress of Communication Sciences (Intecom) — I extend my appreciation to the members of the Communication, Media and Freedom of Expression Working Group for their comments and suggestions, with a very special thanks to the coordinator, Nara Lya Cabral Scabin (PUC-Minas).

Figure 1 – Advertisement for the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Untold Truth* on Facebook, promoted by the Brasil de Amor profile, revealed by the Lupa agency



Source: Soares (2023).

The advertisement for the second book adds that "Moraes states that [*sic*] in 24 hours the Bolsonaro books: 'The Truth Never Revealed' will be DESTROYED" (Figure 2).

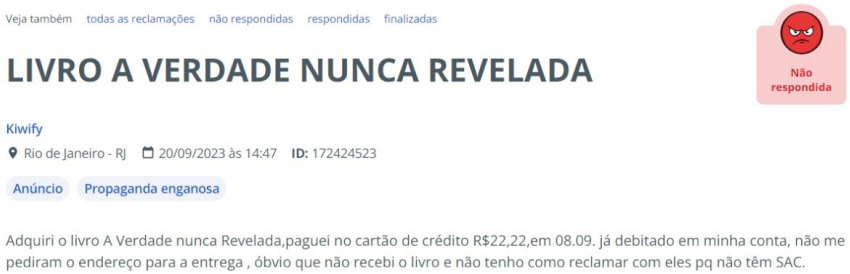
Figure 2 – Advertisement for the book "Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed" on Facebook, promoted by the Brasil de Amor profile, revealed by the Lupa agency



Source: Soares (2023).

The ad says, "Minister BLOCKS the sale of Bolsonaro's books, which report fraud in the lastest elections. The left is outraged by the book's release". The advertisement concludes with an urgent call to action: "BUY THE BOOK BEFORE THE SUPREME COURT TAKES IT AWAY" (Figure 2). Those who responded to the call and purchased the book were frustrated as they never received it; the reason not being because the book had been banned or taken off the market, but because it had never been written in the first place. Embittered consumers began to criticize and complain about the company and its misleading advertisements, despite suspicious signs that arose during purchasing, such as the fact that the company did not have a customer support system nor did it request a delivery address (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Complaint on Reclame Aqui (Brazilian consumer complaint website) from frustrated buyer who purchased the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed*, revealed by Lupa



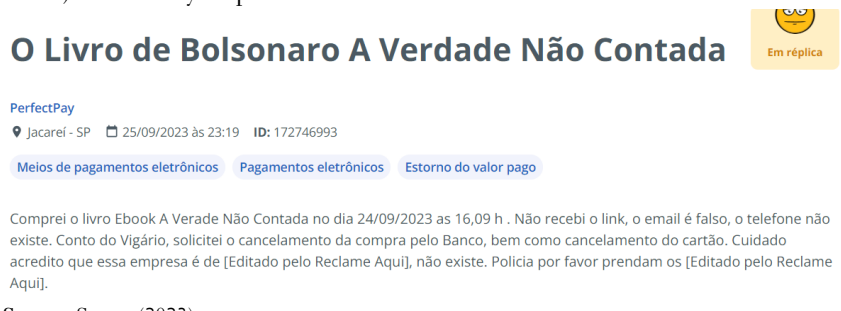
Source: Soares (2023).

An investigation performed by the fact-checking agency Lupa (SOARES, 2023) confirmed that the non-existent book was part of a scam geared toward Bolsonaro supporters who believed in conspiracy theories about electoral fraud.

Frustrated consumers reported their failed purchases on consumer complaint sites such as Reclame Aqui. There was not even an eBook version of the book made available, and customers who felt wronged by

the ruse (SOARES, 2023) tried to stop their payments, demanding that the fraudsters be arrested (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Complaint on Reclame Aqui (a Brazilian consumer complaint website) from frustrated buyer who purchased the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Untold Truth*, revealed by Lupa



Source: Soares (2023).

There is an ironic and unusual situation on display here: supporters of a coup who believed in a false electoral fraud ended up being the target of a scam in which they acquired the fake books *Jair Bolsonaro: The Untold Truth* and *Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed*, that were never written. This involves multiple layers of deception, misinformation, and accusations of fraud and, therefore, is a unique opportunity to analyze the risks of online disinformation for conspiracy groups. This article presents a case study (DUARTE, 2012) about this event, an absurdly unusual event, but, even so, it exhibits key elements of Bolsonaro conspiracy theories. Like any case study, this is "not an 'example' but is *exemplary* in the sense that it is representative" (MARTINO, 2018, p. 152); it seeks to identify and overcome the specific elements of this event, signaling more general trends and phenomena of which it is a part. Similar to specific case studies in the field of communication indicated by Braga (2008), the unique elements of this exceptional situation are highlighted, as they allow the inference of general trends and theoretically relevant abstractions. Following the tradition of the "indicative" paradigm (GINZBURG, 1989) in the field of communication,

it is possible to find significant elements in the unusual details of this case to reveal new issues in contemporary communication processes.

Based on this case, this article poses the following question: why did the advertisements for the fake books specifically target individuals with an interest in the alleged "electoral fraud" in order to lure them into an "editorial farce"? In this regard, the objective of this article is to assess the fact-checking agency Lupa and its coverage of the case, revealing the verification and media literacy processes present in the text. This coverage is justified not only because it was the first journalistic platform to cover this case, but also because it is a fact-checking agency, and is viewed with distrust by conspiracy theorists and Bolsonaro supporters (TARDÁGUILA, 2021) who criticize traditional news outlets (CESARINO, 2019; AGGIO; CASTRO, 2020) and resist rebuttals published by their fact-checkers. This study aims to discuss the difficulty of protecting from fraud a particular group of people who distrusts fact-checkers and has a tendency to believe in clearly false information.

To this end, a communication analysis of legal and judicial conflicts with regards to media disputes (PAGANOTTI, 2021) was adopted, evaluating the journalistic repercussions in a fact-checking agency with regards to the allegations about the fake books and their connections to the unsubstantiated electoral fraud claims. This study also considers the social psychology processes (NOBRE *et al.*, 2023) exploited by the fraudsters, which explain how Bolsonaro supporters became so susceptible to this scam. In particular, it is discussed how the false threat of judicial censorship was a tool used to lend credibility to the advertisement among this social group and ultimately encourage impulse purchases, and how this was expedited by the supposed imminent risk of the books being removed, which left readers little time for reflection about their purchases—a common mechanism used by fraudsters to overcome rational distrust through urgent emotional appeals.

This methodology is part of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which seeks to analyze how social tensions can be revealed and problematized through textual conflicts and fissures in discursive disputes about the

conditions of production of communication (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003). For the case presented in this article, the scam targeting Bolsonaro groups reveals the credulity of far-right groups, who uncritically seek information that matches their preconceived notions about the legitimacy of the electoral process. At the same time, these groups distrust traditional news sources, like fact-checkers, who warn about and seek to prevent the dangers of false information that leads to unfounded beliefs and harmful actions. Prior studies have demonstrated that pro-Bolsonaro conspiracy groups present a high risk of unsafe actions, such as low vaccination rates and exposure to contagion during the COVID-19 pandemic (PEIXOTO; LEAL; MARQUES, 2023). However, it is important to note that this vulnerability also leads to a high risk of exposure to financial fraud, which many news reports have warned about (RATIER, 2022). This article also argues that criminals may actually prefer to target this kind of audience due to their selective online criticism and credulity in discredited information, such as accusations of electoral fraud.

Analysis: scammers SCAMMED and (dis)trust in sources

The case of the fake books was reported by journalist and fact-checker Gabriela Soares (2023) from the Lupa agency, who contacted Bolsonaro's press office to determine whether the books came from the president or not:

> Although some publications suggest that the books were published by the former president or had his collaboration, Bolsonaro's press office informed Lupa in a WhatsApp message [*link to screenshot of message exchange between reporter and Bolsonaro's press office*] that the books are fake. He has no connection whatsoever with the titles. "All these books are apocryphal, and the only books that are published are authorized by Carlos [Bolsonaro] and the Bolsonaro family", the message reads.
>
> There are other signs that confirm this is a scam. The first warning sign is that none of the books have an author's name on the cover—meaning it is impossible to verify who wrote them. The description of the content in the alleged publications is also vague. No synopsis was found on the websites mentioned in Facebook and Instagram posts (SOARES, 2023).

The excerpt above illustrates two traditional fact-checking strategies. The first is the reference to official sources (TARDÁGUILA, 2021), with the citation of the dialogue with Bolsonaro's press advisor, accompanied by an image that corroborates his denial. The second is the effort to demonstrate, in a didactic way, how the content should be perceived as suspicious (SPINELLI; SANTOS, 2020), pointing out "warning signs", such as the absence of an author's name on the book covers and the vague description of their content. The pedagogical purpose of fact-checking (PAGANOTTI, 2024) can also be understood as an effort by fact-checking agencies to protect the public in advance. These initiatives not only justify the fact-checker's reasoning by demonstrating that contested content is false, but also seek to inoculate readers with some of the basic skills and knowledge used by journalists, which should likewise be adopted by the general public. In the following excerpts, the fact-checker also warns of another classic strategy of fake news: the mimicking of news formats (ALLCOTT; GENTZKOW, 2017; TANDOC JR.; LIM; LING, 2018) that are deemed trustworthy by the public: "One of the advertisements, adopting the G1 portal layout and Bolsonaro's fake audio, says, for example, that the book would reveal the 'truth about the second round'" (SOARES, 2023), including a link to the advertisement that looks like it is from Globo's news portal.

The Lupa report also pointed to the threat of censorship as an attempt by scammers to deceive Bolsonaro followers, including false audio recordings with impersonators of the former president:

> To convince potential buyers, a profile identified as "Daniel Lombardo" released an audio recording of the former president supposedly encouraging people to purchase the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed*. Bolsonaro's press office, via WhatsApp, denied that the message was recorded by the former president. The scammers also use a false narrative about censorship to boost sales. The audio recording that imitates the former president, published by Lombardo, claims that the Federal Supreme Court (STF) could censor the book at any moment and, therefore, people should buy it as soon as possible. This is also highlighted in the image of the post, which was linked to 21 advertisements on the same

> profile. Altogether, there were approximately 28,000 impressions, at a cost of around R$ 1,900. In total, the "Daniel Lombardo" profile has published 610 ads promoting this scam since September 8, 2023. Combined, the content had more than 458,000 impressions (SOARES, 2023).

The Lupa agency report, which exposed the sale of fake books to Bolsonaro supporters, states that the scam relied on individuals' personal trust in Bolsonaro and urged them to purchase the books immediately to avoid imminent judicial censorship. This strategy was used to prevent buyers from thinking twice about the offer, including feedback from supposed readers expressing their allegedly positive reviews of the book: "I've garanteed mine! My perspective changed after reading this book, and I respect the Captain even more! Get yours before it's censored" (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Report by the fact-checking agency Lupa on the fake book scam



Posts com anúncios de supostos livros sobre Jair Bolsonaro (PL) estão sendo promovidos no Facebook e no Instagram para aplicar golpes com base em informações falsas. Ao menos dois títulos são usados no esquema: *Jair Bolsonaro: A Verdade Nunca Revelada*, que comprovaria fraude nas eleições de 2022, e *Jair Bolsonaro: A Verdade Nunca Contada*, descrito como livro oficial do ex-presidente. Ambos são vendidos por R$ 22,22, numa referência ao número usado pelo PL nas urnas. As obras, contudo, não existem.

Source: Soares (2023).

The case analysis echoes digital fraud processes in which scammers attempt to impersonate a credible entity within a social group (ABBASI *et al.*, 2010). Since Bolsonaro's name is trusted by his supporters, many victims of the scam may have lowered their guard and thus trusted the book purchase process. It would be plausible to believe that Bolsonaro would sell books like these, since the theme is connected to his movement and the Bolsonaro family has recently looked for direct funding from its followers by requesting monetary donations to help pay for legal expenses (JORDÃO, 2023), or indirect funding from selling perfume (GOUVEIA, 2024).

Also of note is that the perfume-selling business, backed by Bolsonaro, was exploited by scammers who created fake websites claiming to be from the former first lady's inner circle. The large number of complaints about undelivered perfumes made it impossible for the Bolsonaro family to sell this product. Even though the perfumes really existed and were backed by the Bolsonaros, consumers made purchases on fake websites that did not sell them, and thus the endeavor was compromised by the scam (GOUVEIA, 2024).

Nevertheless, the use of judicial threats as a tool to generate impulse buying is quite intriguing with regard to research in the field of judicial censorship (PAGANOTTI, 2021). This type of judicial threat is not improbable, as the courts have ordered certain media content to be removed from the Bolsonaro camp in the past, one example being a documentary about the 2016 elections (ESTADÃO CONTEÚDO, 2022).

The pressure of limited time is also a common tactic that scams use: there is no time to delay as it is a limited-time offer and you do not want to miss out (due to the supposed threat of the justice system "banning" the book). This tactic is used to prevent potential victims of the scam from thinking about the purchase, forcing them into impulsive buying, which, by definition, is less critical or rational (NOBRE *et al.*, 2023). For the scam to work, the threat needs to be plausible, and the widespread feeling among Bolsonaro supporters that their leader would be persecuted by the justice system confirms to them that this book is legitimate.

This type of scam mirrors a technique previously used by traditional media outlets, which present lawsuits and attempts at intimidation and censorship as "seals of credibility" that would "guarantee the independence of a media outlet" by proving how inconvenient and provocative their reporters are (PAGANOTTI, 2021, p. 83). Publicizing legal action against media also becomes a mark of quality because the banned content is particularly appealing; it is like a "vacuum effect" (PAGANOTTI, 2021, p. 107), which compels what has been banned or removed, the attraction driven by the threat of censorship:

> For better conceptualization, it would be possible to classify this phenomenon as the vacuum efect: the very act of deleting content often creates, as a reaction, a force that attracts increasingly large groups of individuals who value policing attempts to restrict the network by denouncing and spreading this information, thus making visible what was intended to be hidden. In other words, the removal of content due to external pressure is contested by users who habitually resist attempts to control expression on these channels. This creates a counterreaction that gives visibility to the denunciation of the attempted removal, drawing ever more public attention to the issue, which becomes increasingly irresistible (due to the proliferation of comments about it) and impossible to control (PAGANOTTI, 2021, p. 107-108).

This situation also highlights a tactic typically used by online scammers: identifying potential victims by exploiting gullible groups. The logic is exploited from the "Nigerian Prince" scam (OKOSUN; ILO, 2023). In this scheme, emails sent to potential victims promised an unbelievable million-dollar reward that would be sent to anyone who provided financial assistance to a stranger online. This individual claimed to be an heir to African royalty and requested a small amount of money as prior assistance (NOBRE *et al.*, 2023).

The proposal is absurd not because of the scammers' incompetence, since scams like this tend to relate unusual or elaborate stories in the hopes of convincing their victims, usually credulous or gullible individuals, that these most unbelievable stories are true. The unusual and

conspiratorial tone of the scam acts like a kind of elimination process: only the individuals gullible enough to believe the offer take the bait, while other more skeptical individuals (who most likely would not be fooled by the scam) do not even consider the possibility that the story is real.

As we can see, the absurdity of proposals like the "Nigerian Prince" scam—or the book by the former Brazilian president—is not a flaw in the scammers' strategy, but rather a central part of the process of filtering potential victims and finding the most gullible ones. This allows the scammers to focus more of their time and attention on individuals who have the highest chance of being fooled. Okosun and Ilo (2023) also highlights that this type of online scam thrives due to the difficulties involved in combating it. Scammers rely on the lack of preparation or interest of public security authorities and digital service providers—such as digital marketplace platforms or email servers—to address small-value fraud dispersed across numerous victims and perpetrated by large groups of fraudsters, who can easily replicate the scam without the need for coordination among their members. In Smith's (2009) analysis, scams like the "Nigerian Prince" also exploit the prejudices and gullibility of victims who are often unaware of the complex realities outside of their own daily lives, but are interested in conspiracy theories and improbable get-rich-quick schemes, a byproduct of their widespread distrust of hierarchical processes that concentrate power and economic resources in public institutions and authorities. Fonseca (2021) highlights that some of the victims of these scams are vulnerable groups with limited education about the risks and rights with regards to new technologies, but tend to make use of digital platforms frequently, including online purchases, looking for deals/sales, or making impulsive purchases.

This explains why Brazil is also a breeding ground for the spread of online fraud, due to its massive population with uneven access to education and low digital literacy, but with a strong interest in connectivity. The country is among those with the highest frequency of online

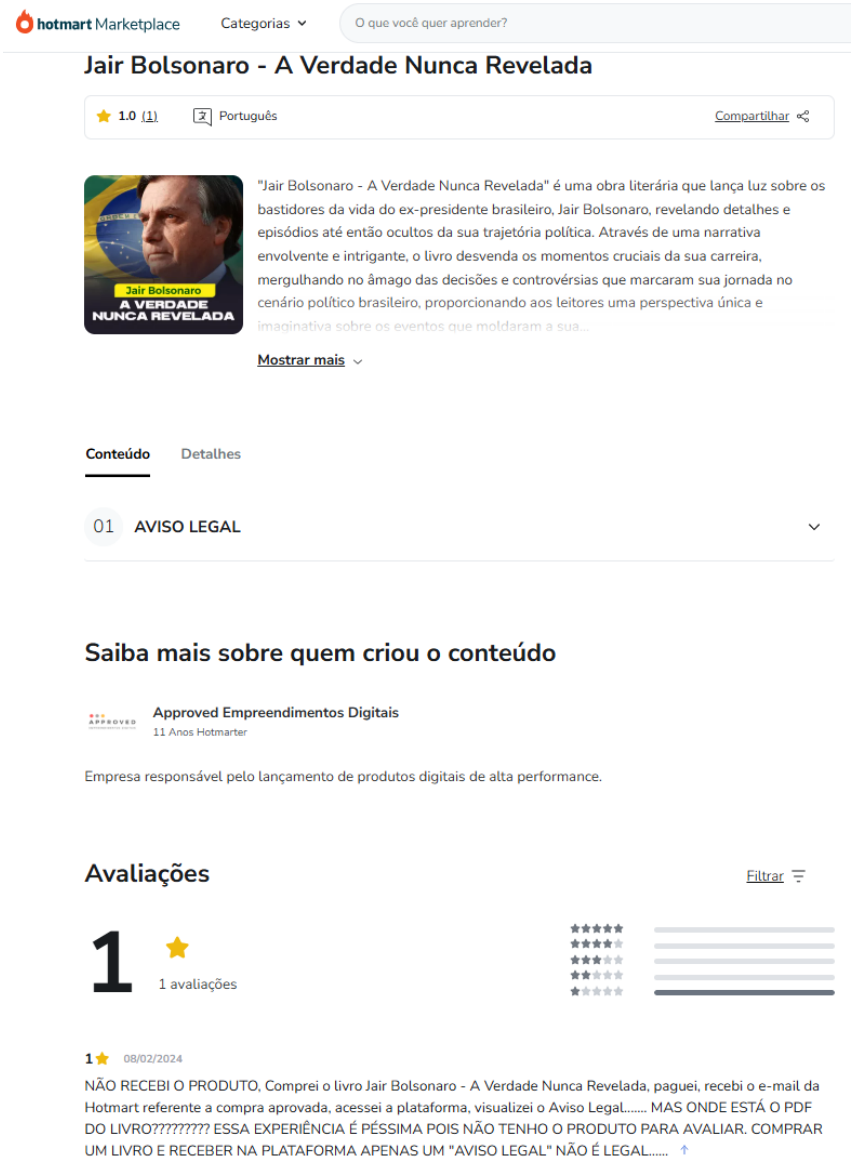
access and great facility for online purchases. Payment methods such as Pix expand this access by reaching groups traditionally excluded from credit card payment systems. At the same time, many consumers are unaware of their rights in online purchases, even though the country has comprehensive legislation and robust mechanisms for reporting and monitoring abuse in digital commerce (TEIXEIRA NETO; SANTOS JÚNIOR, 2025). Even events with a high volume of online sales, such as Black Friday clearance sales that kick off the Christmas shopping season, have aroused distrust among some of the public due to the risk of online fraud, leading many to refer to this retail phenomenon as "Black Fraud" (SOARES; MODESTO, 2022). Even still, this does not really stop these seasonal promotions and e-commerce from growing, especially after the recent leap in digitization in Brazilian sales following the arrival of transnational e-commerce companies and the effects of the platformization of consumption after the pandemic in 2020 (REQUEZA; ALMEIDA; XAVIER, 2025).

Using this logic of fraud based on social engineering that focuses on exploiting the weakest links in the consumer chain, the scammers needed to present inconceivable elements when offering books about Bolsonaro so as not to attract individuals not gullible enough to fall victim to the scam. In this case of the non-existent Bolsonaro books, the scammers exploited the credulity of his followers—who were willing to believe in conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated stories of electoral fraud, and were even encouraged to transfer money or purchase products endorsed by their leader—as an indication that there would be a considerable potential for victims susceptible to the editorial fraud scam.

It is important to note that advertisements for these books are still available online (APPROVED EMPREENDIMENTOS DIGITAIS, 2024) at the time this research was completed (February 2026), more than two years after the complaint from the Lupa agency, including a new complaint from a user who had purchased the book online but never received it (Figure 6).

Lastly, at a time when books are now being produced by artificial

Figure 6 – Advertisement for the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed*, available in 2025



Source: Approved Empreendimentos Digitais (2024).

intelligence, it is already possible to find PDFs available online claiming to be the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed* (Figure 7), even though the introduction to the 92-page book has a different title, *Jair Bolsonaro: Trajectory and Vision* (GUIMARÃES, 2026, p. 2).

The book only offers a generic and extremely flattering summary of Bolsonaro's trajectory, focusing on his presidential administration, without addressing the end of his tenure as head of the federal government, the tumultuous period after leaving office, and his convictions in recent years. Despite being made available for free on the Scribd platform by a user who identifies as Bruno Guimarães (Figure 7), the PDF of the alleged book generated little activity, with only 290 views as of February 2026, when this research was completed.

Figure 7 – Available PDF of the book *Jair Bolsonaro: The Truth Never Revealed*



Source: Guimarães (2026).

Final Considerations

This occurrence offers an important opportunity to reflect on the importance of fact-checking (SPINELLI; SANTOS, 2018; OLIVEIRA; ASSIS, 2020), media literacy (HARVEY; PALESE, 2018), and discussions about the limits of freedom of expression (PAGANOTTI, 2020; PAGANOTTI; SCABIN; SANCHES, 2024) at a time when even Bolsonaro supporters, generally resistant to all these issues, found themselves as victims of a scam.

If the victims had followed the recommendations of fact-checkers and media literacy and identified traditional warning signs of fake content as indicated in the Lupa report (SOARES, 2023)—such as excessive use of capital letters, grammatical errors, content without clear author identification (SPAGNUOLO, 2016)—they might have recognized the scam and taken the necessary precautions to avoid making the purchase. However, since this aesthetic of amateur content (PAGANOTTI; SAKAMOTO; RATIER, 2019; SERELLE; SOARES, 2021) and conspiratorial themes are frequently shared among Bolsonaro supporters (BRAINER, 2023), the scam was easily hidden among the myriad of other posts consumed in these media landscapes.

It cannot be disregarded that supporters of an attempted military coup were victims of a financial scam—just as it cannot be disregarded that, by seeking out unfounded evidence of a non-existent electoral fraud, they ended up being victims of an *editorial scam* by acquiring a book that was never published.

At this point, those who did purchase the non-existent book may have no choice but to take legal action to try and recoup what they lost; in doing so, they would effectively be appealing to the same legal system that they previously feared would ban the books. Among the many reasons for *schadenfreude*[2], one could argue that the advertising was not misleading since the titles "*The Truth Never Revealed*" and "*The Untold Truth*"

2 "Schadenfreude" is a German expression that describes the "*pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune*" (SMITH *et al.*, 2009, p. 530).

effectively indicated promises that the advertisers actually upheld, given that the expected book was never revealed to the deceived consumers, and neither the story nor the lost money can ultimately be accounted for.

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