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ARTICLE

"You deface my city, I deface you": the practice of defacing political posters[1]

"Você suja minha cidade, eu sujo sua cara": práticas de escrita urbana sobre a propaganda eleitoral

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Abstract *This study discusses the practice of everyday people defacing political material. We analyzed photographic records of these counterpropaganda interventions in the form of text and/or images published on the Facebook profile "Sujo sua cara" (I deface you) and the reconstructed meaning in the new discourse produced. Observing the posters and meaning shared in these visual interactions invites reflection on the non-partisan nature of the phenomenon and (dis)belief in political propaganda, representative democracy, and the political class in general.*

Key-words: *Discourse analysis; Belief; Visual communication; Urban interventions; Propaganda*

Resumo *Discutimos algumas práticas de escrita urbana realizadas por sujeitos comuns sobre peças de propaganda eleitoral. Analisamos registros fotográficos dessas intervenções de contrapropaganda, sob a forma de texto e/ou de imagem,*

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publicados no perfil "Sujo sua cara" no Facebook e a reconstrução de sentido nos novos discursos produzidos. A observação das peças e dos sentidos compartilhados nessas interações visuais suscita reflexões sobre o caráter apartidário do fenômeno e sobre a (des)crença na propaganda eleitoral, na democracia representativa e na classe política de modo geral.

Palavras-chave: *Análise do discurso; Crença; Comunicação visual; Intervenções urbanas; Propaganda*

Introduction

During election periods, an astounding amount of political material accumulates on the streets. From flyers containing the faces and numbers of candidates running for public office to easels left on sidewalks, a plethora of verbal and visual discourse is scattered around cities in different shapes, formats and colors. This material placed on surfaces and in spaces with constant pedestrian and commuter traffic infringes on large cities in different ways, often breaking the law.

A phenomenon related to this electoral material caught our attention. In 2010, a group of three inhabitants of Porto Alegre in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), outraged by the indiscriminate and often illegal use of campaign material, decided to deface illegal posters and easels in the city displaying the images of candidates. Their justification for scribbling moustaches, horns and other images on the material, aimed at subverting the official discourse imposed on passersby, is based on the fact that it hampers the circulation of the public.

The intervention, called "*Sujo sua cara*" (I deface you) was a response to the annoyance caused by the material illegally displayed on the streets. Intended as "payback" for candidates aspiring to public office who indiscriminately plaster their image across cities, the group approached *Tumblr*[4] to lend greater online visibility to action carried out/collected by their followers in an attempt to gain sympathizers. On the first day the website went live, 20 pictures of defaced easels were published. On August 18, 2012, the Facebook page "*Sujo a sua cara*"[5] (I deface you) was launched, featuring news, claims and pictures of political material defaced by people in different Brazilian cities.

As reported by Chapola (2012), the leaders of the "I deface you" movement have stated that, more than simply defacing the material on display, the goal was to secure a significant reduction in the amount of political propaganda on the streets. Given the scenario previously described, this statement leads us to question the beliefs of individuals

[4] Available at: <http://sujosuacara.tumblr.com/>. Accessed on Jan 21, 2014.
[5] Available at: https://www.facebook.com/sujosuacara. Accessed on Jan 21, 2014.

within the political systems, politicians and, more precisely, the belief in electoral political discourse. This possible disbelief can trigger actions aimed at causing destabilization and tension in interactions between official political discourse, which includes propaganda, and the subjects it addresses.

In this respect, we aim to reflect on the collaborative practices and manifestations involving the defacing of electoral material and dissemination of these interventions, referring to so-called culture jamming. We feel it is important to address photographic images of the face as a means of manifesting hegemonic discourse based on their performative power of persuasion, as well as the meaning of their subversion. We propose a review of propagandist advertising and political discourse as forms of persuasion and belief, in addition to analyzing 18 images from the "*Sujo sua cara*" Facebook profile, in an attempt to understand other possible meanings attributed to contemporary politics and politicians.

Propagandist political discourse

This section addresses what we call *propagandist political discourse*. First, it is important to understand that *advertising* and *politics*, according to linguist and author Charaudeau (2010), are characterized as genres of propagandist discourse. In this respect, our interest lies in understanding the discursive dimension of politics, specifically in terms of propaganda. As proposed by the linguist, the discursive operation of propaganda materializes through these genres, which vary according to: a) the legitimacy of the speaking subject; b) the nature of the object of the speech (or quest) that constitutes the belief system; c) the place attributed to the subject influenced.

The first point made by Charaudeau (2010) refers to the legitimacy of the speaking subjects, that is, who or what they speak for. In this respect, the political class should represent the electorate, and speak for it. In these case of these representatives, legitimacy lies in the fact they were chosen by citizens in a democratic electoral system, despite the criticism this system might receive because of how it operates, is financed, and

put into practice. However, legitimacy is not enough, because as the linguist points out, it does not guarantee satisfaction. As such, credibility is also needed to attract the attention of interlocutors through discursive strategies.

We understand discourse as a system that enables both the production of a set of texts and the set itself, as proposed by Maingueneau (2005). Making discourse credible and constructing a subject worthy of being heard or read, as well as worthy of speaking, requires considering audience being addressed. When speaking to audiences or circulating propagandist political discourse through different media, such as easel-based political campaigns, it is important to consider that stating something creates a description of the world that one intends to suggest or impose on others. The *principle of alterity* (otherness) is present in interactional and dialogical processes, since there is no *I* in *you*. Speech is always directed at somebody.

Although Charaudeau (2010) does not explain what situations and circumstances he takes into account when considering propagandist discourse, we feel that these go beyond face-to-face interactions in situations involving politicians addressing an audience. It is our understanding that infocommunications acts as a mediator among several interlocutors, positioning different discursive instances that it also participates in. Based on this perspective, it is important to underscore that model presented by Charaudeau (2010) extends to the understanding and analysis of images.

As such, political material creates a relationship between the electorate and those running for political office, seeking to negotiate meanings that involve and constitute *official discourse*. The proposal presented here is similar to the *mainstream discourse* discussed by Atem (2009), referring to cohesive, coherent and self-congratulatory discourse on the current status quo, namely capitalist and consumerist society.

We believe that the discourse embodied by advertising and political material becomes official in that less care is taken about what is said (enunciated) than how it is said (enunciation), and that what is said operates based on its effectiveness, its *performative persuasive power*. Thus,

seducing and winning over the audience necessarily involves speaking with the intention of doing, speech that operates as a slogan, as an order and regiment to be aspired to and followed. However, in the material analyzed here, ordinary subjects confront *official discourse* through different interventions that cause tension and call the veracity and authority of speech into question (AUSTIN, 1990), whether attributed or imposed.

Electoral propaganda is an attempt to establish a system that regulates how citizens should behave, though not limited exclusively to this. Given this purpose, propagandist political discourse appeals to rational and persuasive arguments to try and convince the electorate to vote for certain people rather than others, fully believing in the representative system. In this regard, we note that this effort to convince is a combination between politics and politicians, guided by the *incitement to do* something with the ultimate purpose of a collective instance (you, us, them), as part of a propagation device.

As previously mentioned, propagandist political discourse is exercised through belief. We believe in what is said (enunciated), although not entirely, because we are told what we want to hear when something is promised. The almost messiah-like speeches and images of candidates espouse a future based on public administration that will benefit the city, state or country, providing for the well-being of citizens.

The proliferation of faces and reinterpretation of propaganda

The faces of men and women running for public office inundate urban areas in the weeks prior to elections. Whether known or not, these faces vie for the attention of pedestrians and motorists on the streets in a dispute for visibility. With the prohibition of using different surfaces as supports for campaign material, easels have become the primary form advertising candidates.

Limited by the space and time of a poster or a few seconds on television, propagandist political discourse relies on the image of the candidate

as a resource of appeal and identification. The face depicted emerges in the foreground with the strategic function of: inviting the public to visually interact with the images. On easels, posters and flyers distributed on the street, the eyes, smile, colors and all the significant elements of the material are put together in such a way as to attract the attention of passersby. Other elements (such as the name, candidate number, political party and slogan) are less important than the face in the visual hierarchy of printed material. According to Agamben (2000, p. 97, our own translation), "[...] the face is not something that transcends the visage: it is the exposition of the visage in all its nudity, it is a victory over character – it is word". Thus, the photographed face, printed and naked, is exposed in the street not only to view, but to the action of groups and individuals.

In all the electoral campaign material analyzed for this article, the images (unaltered originals) of candidates were exclusively photographic, with little variation in layout. For instance, none of the candidates are depicted using other forms of iconography, such as drawings, caricatures or painted portraits. It seems there is a desire for plausibility, to make the person depicted correspond to 'reality', despite the use of makeup and airbrushing. It is as if the believable icon corresponds to an ideal of spontaneity and even honesty.

In *Fotogenia eleitoral* (Photography and Electoral Appeal), Barthes (2006, p. 162) identifies the communicational dimension of electoral images: "[...] the effigy of a candidate establishes a personal link between him and the voters; the candidate does not only offer a program for judgment, he suggests a physical climate, a set of daily choices expressed in a morphology, a way of dressing, a posture." The author continues with a sharp analysis of the possible meanings of electoral photographs: A full-face photograph underlines the realistic outlook of the candidate [...]. Everything there expresses penetration, gravity, frankness: the future deputy is looking squarely at the enemy, the obstacle, the 'problem'. (BARTHES, 2006, p. 164).

Benjamin Picado (2009) revisits Barthes' idea of political photographs as a strategy that goes beyond defending reflection on "assimilating the

politician's face", considering the political portrait as a conversational genre since it encourages reciprocal eye contact and direct interaction between the candidate and the voter. The researcher also states that the candidate's look functions as a kind of *vocation*, an element that appeals to participation and the establishment of conversation. As such, the image should be a balance between seriousness and establishing empathy through interaction. In the "I deface you" phenomenon, this interactive contract is broken since the propaganda material, particularly the photograph of the face, gains additional destabilizing elements and, therefore, new meaning.

The "I deface you" initiative can be considered culture jamming, that is, an anti-propaganda and anti-advertising tactic aimed at disrupting the official discourse. As a form of subversion, jammers alter the official versions of material circulated by corporations or governments. According to Nomai (2011), by introducing their own version these activists, whose primary target is excessive consumerism, call into question the values and ideals presented by mainstream discourse. The goal of these subversive acts, which involve parody, criticism and humor, is to change people's thinking and behavior when faced with the imperatives implicit in mainstream discourse and consumption, and produce statements that confront what is advertised.

As such, we consider that propagandist political discourse is also criticized and questioned by jamming practices. The destabilization of official discourse occurs by distorting the "original message" and through the possibility of operating in urban spaces in a dialogue-based and polyphonic relationship.

As argued by Diniz (2008), culture jamming is a form of activism that uses resources and methods in a counter-hegemonic reaction to the media domination of brands. It is a tactical initiative aimed at combatting the dominance of advertising and propaganda-like messages considered invasive by those who see and hear them, and official by those who produce and finance them. The author emphasizes the fact that the internet is used as an ally in jamming, which is evident in the "I

deface you" phenomenon. In this regard, social media is used to invite people to express their outrage against official discourse. Followers are encouraged to photograph the results and post them online, as seen in the notice posted on *Tumblr*:

> From now on, any candidate with an easel on the street is also a candidate for a moustache, horns, a unibrow, scar and toothless smile. Let's be fair: if you can deface my city, I can deface you. Want to participate? Send your contribution to sujosuacara@gmail.com. (TUMBLR, 2014).

"I deface you"

The specific analysis of defaced political material used in the present study is part of a broader investigation denominated "The city and its brands: writing practices on the official speech", financed by Fapemig and dedicated to analyzing defacing interventions on advertising, propaganda and signs in four Brazilian capitals. The discovery of the intriguing "I deface you" profiles on Facebook and Tumblr in 2012 raised the possibility of analyzing a seasonal theme: the practice of defacing political propaganda.

Figure 1. One of the groups of images produced in the appropriation and organization process
Source: Research data / Prepared by the authors

Based on a universe of around 300 images of defaced posters and easels on the "I deface you" profile, photographs were selected according to criteria on technical quality, legibility, and representativeness. In order to better visualize these interventions, the pre-selected images were printed, cut out and arranged on a surface for analysis. This provided an empirical overview in order to test the construction of groups for analysis (FIG. 1). This methodological procedure enabled classification possibilities, grouping and empirical analysis to be tried and assessed[6]. Finally, 18 images were grouped and analyzed based on regularities and similarities in the type of interference and the issues that they raise, which are presented below.

Figure 2. Defaced political propaganda material – 2012
Source: "I deface you" Facebook profile, 2014

All the interventions shown in Figure 2 were carried out on campaign material for the same candidate, with the same original layout and

[6] Some of the methodological procedures cited for empirical assessment are similar to those applied in previous studies, described in the article. Check: Corrêa (2011) and Corrêa (2013).

likely by the same people. The images were published on the Facebook page and identified as contributions to the "goat crew" (*turma do bode*). Common characteristics include: completely or partially covering the candidate's face and covering/changing the name, playing with the semantics of the words and image. This interference eradicates the easel's informative and propaganda-based functions and makes a joke using art and media culture references. Three of the interventions are based on television and film personalities, and one displays the name and visual references of a surrealist artist. On all of the easels, only the face has been altered, while the candidate remains formal and respectably dressed in a suit and tie, reinforcing its strangeness and the derisive and humorous effect created by changing the material. It gives the impression that Animal the muppet, Hannibal the cannibal, an avatar, and Magritte's the son of man could run for public office.

Figure 3. Defaced political propaganda material – 2012
Source: "I deface you" Facebook profile, 2014

Figure 3 shows other images collected on the same website under a similar theme: references to groups, songs and popular singers, as well as well-known artists and their work. The tools used for interventions in this group varied from paint and paintbrush, spray paint, stenciling, pens and similar items. The range of techniques, materials and skills visible in this group of defaced material shows it was carried out by different people, altering not only the image, but the names and candidate numbers too. The straight and serious sans serif font of the easels and posters is overlaid with a handwritten caricature-like font, revealing both a desire for proximity with the reference (such as The Beatles) and divestment in the sprayed lines.

Figure 4. Defaced political propaganda material – 2012
Source: "I deface you" Facebook profile, 2014

A common form of defacing candidates' easels is the suggestion of changing their gender (FIG. 4). Pictures of male candidates are adorned with elements and accessories typically identified with women, such as long hair, makeup and jewelry. while women's photographs are given moustaches and beards to make them look male. Other interventions related to the gender of candidates can also be observed. Vulgar references to the female gender and transgenderism are visible in the text and images added to the photographs, with negative connotations intended to insult. This interference criticizes the political class while at the same time reinforcing entrenched gender stereotypes and prejudices based on heteronormativity.

Figure 5. Defaced political propaganda material – 2012
Source: "I deface you" Facebook profile, 2014

One of the most common references in the interventions is the idea that it is common knowledge that all politicians are corrupt. A number of the messages and pictures suggest that candidates' main interest and actions involve accumulating and appropriating public funds. Words such as "thief" (*ladrão*) and drawings of horns are the most forms of defacing electoral material (FIG. 5).

The organizers of the internet accounts make the non-partisan nature of the defacing practices clear: the criterion used to deface the easel is not the party or candidate in question, but its alleged illegal placement in the urban space. For example, many of the easels are defaced with the word VOID (*nulo*) partially or completely covering the candidate's name and/or number. This interference negates the intended functional and informative nature of this communication product, turning the propaganda into a joke and a form of protest.

Double (dis)belief: in propaganda and politics

The urban setting is understood here as an arena for discursive negotiation and conflicts between interacting individuals. It is important to underscore the intentional nature of the communication which, as opposed to a unilateral process, is characterized by the exchange of dialogue, whether synchronic or diachronic, verbal or visual, face-to-face or not. The emphasis on the relationship between the different agents in discourse is also reflected in the work of Eliseo Verón. According to the author, enunciation – manners of speaking – determines the

contract of interpretation, which connects the agents and "creates a link between the support and its reader" (VERÓN, 2005, p. 219), or *contract of communication* (CHARAUDEAU, 2007). This connection is based on expectations of the discursive exchange, the suggestion of place to a recipient, triggered by this contract.

In the case of propagandist political discourse, the recipient is the citizen/voter who believes there is one or more person(s) to whom they can confer the power to represent them. The basis of this contract is the belief in representative democracy as a legitimate political system. However, propagandist discourse is also primarily based on its performative dimension.

In a contemporary discussion of the phenomena involved in belief, Žižek (2004) critically analyzes what he calls "decaffeinated belief": belief without involvement, risk or commitment. It represents adherence to ways of living and thinking based on moderation and regulation, a type of restrained hedonism. Western subjects can adhere to religions, behaviors and products without the need for truth or an "active ingredient".

Establishing a connection between Žižek's (2004) idea of decaffeinated belief and the logic of advertising, Rocha (2007) argues that belief in advertising is not based on truth, but rather sharing. It appears that disbelief in the product is based on the premise that advertisers are only interested in profit (whether by selling a product/service or achieving the power, salary and benefits of public office). Disbelief in the legitimacy of the product is compensated by the shared belief in consumption as a path to happiness and ownership.

In the case of political advertising, there must be a shared belief in the population's well-being, which would result from the functioning of the electoral system as a whole. The representative system assumes that the votes will delegate power to the political class in a relationship of trust. If this does not occur, the *performative persuasive power* of the discourse is weakened, that is, it becomes ineffective.

Brazilian voters have witnessed centuries of accusations and evidence of embezzlement of public funds in different political sectors and

parties. In this respect, disbelief in each individual candidate combines with a certain distrust of the political class as a whole. The tendency to believe in the general and indiscriminate dishonesty of the class and political practices points to the increasing negative values attributed not to an individual, but to anyone involved in Brazilian politics. The interventions express the feeling of a broken promise, of breaking the *contract of communication* established between candidates and voters. When this interaction is discredited, the public can react by ignoring or even destabilizing the devices and symbols involved in the symbolic exchange relationship, as in the "I deface you" phenomenon.

The respectability of those asking for votes is questioned by these derisive manifestations. The name given to the movement evokes a type of "voodoo" effect, as if the marks on the picture were an attack on the person themself. Although the material is a series of printed photographs, there is no doubt that its defacement also sullies the candidate's rehearsed pose and measured smile.

In this regard, it is important to underscore the name given to the account that collects and publishes photographic records of defaced political propaganda on the streets: "You deface my city, I deface you". The words *you* and *I* binomial pair indicate and reciprocal relationship, of a reaction to something done by someone else. The possessive pronouns also take part in the dialogical relationship: The city is *mine* and *I* must protect it because *you* have defaced it with the propagation of *your* face.

Final Considerations

It can be said that the "I deface you" movement is ambiguous: as an intervention, it showcases a way of doing politics outside the constraints of institutional politics, distancing itself from the logic of representative democracy by proposing a form of direct action that reveals boldness and creativity in the appropriation of the public space. People take action against the discourse of candidates by using humor as a tool to disarm and generate empathy. At first glance, the act of defacing electoral

propaganda generates laughter and sympathy by mocking those in power, or those who desire it.

The discourse that sustains the movement is legalistic and originates from people who are outraged and defend their rights by ensuring the law is followed in their own way. The profile does not question the electoral system, but rather suggests the contract has been breached when material is displayed illegally. These intervention practices and their mediatized discourse indicate a wish to physically and symbolically cleanse the city: their statements defend a form of urban cleaning that seems to view politics (and not just propaganda) as something dirty. This reasoning does not consider the city as an essentially polyphonic place, as a visible arena for democratic struggle.

Moreover, the idea suggested in the profiles, and by the nature of the defacement, that everyone in the political class is the same and "no good", reveals a certain withdrawal from politics and shows similarities to a right-wing conservative stance, which aims more at maintaining power structures as opposed to transforming them. An example of this is the creation, two years after the launch of the "I deface you" profile, of an almost eponymous[7] account focusing less on defacing initiatives and more on underdeveloped criticism of political figures.

It is important to note that the defacement of electoral material occurred on the streets, but the "I deface you" phenomenon was strengthened and gained meaning as a form of protest by organizing and sharing the images and the repercussion on social media. A single defaced easel on the street holds less meaning than when it is photographed and included alongside several others on social media accounts that give names and meaning to this phenomenon that, at first glance, appears to be a simple joke. The objective of this study was not to analyze the debate that forms around the images through comments and posts on these sites, but these do hold potential as an object of research to understand this type of phenomenon.

[7] Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Voc%C3%AA-Suja-Minha-Cidade-Eu-Sujo-Sua-Cara/1788888222459 18>. Accessed on Sep 8, 2014.

In conclusion, this type of direct action that combines signs of disbelief in representative democracy with contemporary discursive practices in urban interactions shows a connection to the significant wave of protests underway at the time, which culminated in the June 2013 demonstrations in Brazilian cities. As such, although their magnitude was surprising, the demonstrations that spread across the urban space did not emerge suddenly, but formed gradually through small protests such as "I deface you", like small streams of discontent of varying types and complexities that, although contradictory, merged together into huge rivers through the streets.

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