

Insights About Radicalism on the Digital Era: A Sociological Approach

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Abstract. The pervasiveness of new information flows and integration models stemming from the platformization of social life, which has been driven by the widespread adoption of novel communication technologies and digital social networks, has facilitated collective actions in terms of mobilization, reach, organization, and the emergence of new communication tools. Alongside the centrality of the internet in the dynamics of social life, extremist movements, which were already present in society, have gained new means to perpetuate and organize themselves. Telegram, as a digital platform with content moderation policies that are lenient compared to others, has become an open stage for the concentration of extremist users and groups. In view of this, the platform in question has also become a research object for studies on online radicalization, making it possible to monitor radical ideologies and the social consequences observed in the promotion of violence and hate speech. Seeking to identify the immaterial bases and social dynamics that compose extremist groups in Brazil, an analysis of data extracted from Telegram between May 1st, 2023, and August 30th, 2023, was conducted. For this purpose, a hybrid approach was adopted, combining big data techniques and sociological analyses. The results of this work shed light on how the opinions encouraged and expressed in radical digital communities contribute to the promotion of violence outside digital media platforms.

Keywords: Radicalism · Platformization · Social Networks

1 Introduction

Understanding people's opinions and feelings has been of interest to both public and private institutions [24]. This interest is evidenced by these organizations' need to comprehend whether the actions they take will be well-received by the target audience they seek to reach.

In today's context, starting from the year 2004, it is possible to assert that the world is experiencing the era of the internet known as "Web 2.0" [23], in which social media play a crucial role in expressing opinions and sentiments within communities [24], capable of directly influencing the opinions of other users on

the social network. The fact that social networks have become a central tool in individuals' lives has made the digital public sphere a relevant space for debates on matters of public interest, capable of [...] convincing others, starting wars, invoking love and peace, overthrowing a government, destroying reputations, sharing emotions and opinions. Ideas, thoughts, ideologies, feelings, and failures can be expressed [28]. Thus, in contemporary times, the interest lies in determining whether people adopt the views expressed through social media as an indication of the general public's thinking, but also in identifying the behavioral consequences of these perceptions [7].

Communication mediated by digital platforms has gained significant importance in the analysis of the contemporary world, alongside its characteristics and the updates of cultural flows that intersect within the social sphere [10]. The expansion of the role of these digital platforms and their implications in certain social dynamics is precisely what characterizes the so-called "platformization" [25].

With a view to the insertion of messaging platforms and applications into everyday interpersonal communication, the study by [27] sought to analyze the dynamics of interaction between groups and communities, defining as a starting point the Covid-19 pandemic and the disinformation network observed during the period. The emergence of conspiracist and extremist communities during the global health crisis demonstrated the power of group organization, especially when observing that the anti-vaccine positions expressed by members of these groups unfolded into clear demonstrations of political alignment located at the far-right pole, at the same time in which the "constant promotion of aggressive behavior and violent public demonstrations" was noted [27].

The updating of current political agendas, especially considering the rise of identity discussions and social movements that fight for the achievement of universal rights, has created the emergence of an updated extreme right [1], bringing new approaches to the political debate. respect for themes different from those called "classic" in political science literature. If, until then, politics had the economy and the welfare state as its central principle, what could be observed internationally was a shift in voters' concern with moral issues and values, such as abortion, adoption of children by gay couples, decriminalization of drugs, racial quotas, etc. [1]

Faced with the growth of violence and extremist behavior, fueled and encouraged through the use of digital communication platforms, [27] says that "[...] public pressure on social media companies is growing to decrease the influence and reach of extremist actors. Social media companies responded to these developments by deleting videos and accounts of alleged extremist protest groups".

Movements and actions combatting manifestations of violence on the networks, designed to stop the advancement of concrete manifestations of violence in social life, have unfolded into new policy parameters for use on most digital platforms. Since the United States election period, specifically in 2016, a series of studies have been carried out to observe the power of misinformation on social media. "[...] Apple's CEO Tim Cook call for a Public Service Announcement

about dis-information, new labels to identify different types of content on social platforms, systematic programs for taking down bot accounts, the integration of critical media literacy programs in schools and best practices for making fact-checks and debunks shareable [...] Facebook and Google have announced methods for preventing fabricated sites from making money through their advertising platforms” [31].

In Brazil, Telegram has been increasingly used as an important communication tool. The mobile data analysis company, App Annie, conducted a survey on the proportion of Telegram usage in Brazil, finding that in January 2022, the platform amassed approximately 42 million active users in the country [13]. The conveniences of Telegram lie in offering various engagement options, including individual or group conversations, in private and public spaces controlled by administrators. Thus, the platform has become a subject of research in the quest to understand online radicalization behavior, through the identification of communities and content advocating ideologies and discourse of hatred and violence.

Thinking about the contemporary world, especially in the reality of Brazil, episodes of violence motivated by issues of extremist ideology can be seen, such as attacks on schools, which from 2002 to October 2023, totaled 36 attempts, according to a report published by the Federal Government’s Ministry of Education in 2023 [3]. The data from the report highlight two key points: “extremism is the central element of the attacks” and “the attackers, in 100% of cases, were male and motivated by hate speech and/or online communities of extreme violence”. Also, the report states that “the recruitment of these adolescents occurs primarily through virtual interactions, whose strategies include humor, aesthetics, and violent language, especially misogynistic, sexist, and racist, on Internet platforms used by extremist groups to organize communities of hate and mobilize attacks, resulting in impunity due to anonymity”.

Considering discursive toxicity and its connection with dehumanization, the highlighted issues in the excerpt demonstrate the direction of these extremist communities toward attacking minority social groups. Not coincidentally, when filtering the dataset for narratives that exhibit toxicity, the same issues were found to be central to the messages circulated within Telegram extremist communities. Therefore, two analysis topics will be developed based on the data found, as a way to understand the communication methods used within these channels in the consolidation and diffusion of extremist ideologies.

2 Methods

From a methodological standpoint, this work was divided into three main stages, described in the following sections.

2.1 Data collection

The first stage involved constructing an initial set of groups and channels on Telegram, whose thematic basis of communities demonstrated fidelity to the

bias under analysis. This initial set comprised 8 channels and groups manually selected by the authors through platform searches.

Subsequently, the expansion of the channel network was carried out using the snowball technique [8], which entails leveraging references and mentions to other communities within the interactions of the groups and channels comprising the initial set. Thus, the technique relies on adding these references to the collection, thereby deepening the network expansion.

The dataset was extracted from Telegram using its official API with the assistance of the Telegram Observatory [8], a tool designed for structured collection and storage of Telegram communities from an initial set of channels and groups representing them. The tool allows to configure a time period for collection, that is, choose a start and end date. Given the objective and scope of this study, a four-month period was chosen, specifically from May 1st to August 30th, 2023.

After the collection process, the final dataset comprised 116 channels and groups, which shared a total of 1,630,870 messages during the specified period.

2.2 Data pre-processing

The obtained data was submitted to the Perspective API [20], a well-known toxicity detection machine learning model, in order to obtain, for each message on the dataset, a score that indicates the toxicity level of its content.

Our target when performing the toxicity identification and filtering to delimit the degree of toxicity that deserved to be analyzed within this article was directly induced by the perception brought by [30] about the damage caused by these discourses in social life. The ability to affect individuals and entire communities in the face of the reinforcement of pre-determinisms historically postulated in Westernized everyday life is consolidated by episodes of violence and the development of extremist movements, which will be addressed and highlighted throughout the body of this article.

After the classification process, the dataset underwent two filtering stages to obtain filtered datasets without noise and more representative of the conversational patterns observed in the community. In the first stage, all URLs and emojis were removed, followed by the elimination of all empty messages. In the second stage, messages with significant toxicity (considering a score of 0.8) were separated from those with lower toxicity. The final result yielded two filtered datasets, labeled as toxic and non-toxic, respectively.

2.3 Analysis

The third stage involved producing visualizations of the analyzed data, focusing on demonstrating the key terms used by members of these communities during group interactions and indicating the messages that represent the main themes discussed in the group for qualitative analysis. This was achieved through the creation of a word co-occurrence network, based on the methodology proposed by [21] and generating a visualization using Gephi [2], a tool for manipulating complex networks. The visualization of terms aims to showcase the communicative

specificities inherent to the analyzed groups, in addition to the main narrative focuses circulated within the community.

In parallel with the data analysis, the final stage included a literature review on extremism in Brazil, directing the discussion towards a reflection on the social ramifications of the phenomenon in question and the role of digital media in representing public opinion and its social implications outside the virtual environment.

3 Results and Discussion

This section presents the results obtained after the data processing and visualization generation stages, developing an extensive qualitative analysis of the content and making a historical parallel with the literature on radicalism, especially in the Brazilian context.

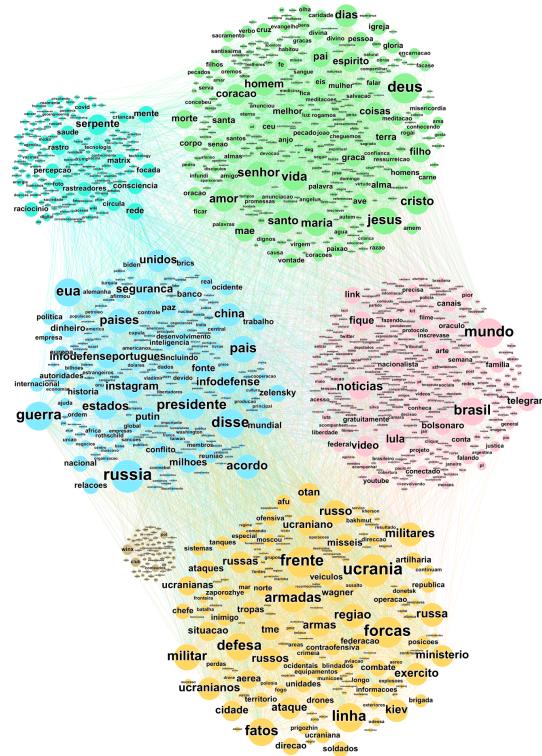


Fig. 1. Non-toxic topics

Within the non-toxic topics, shown in Figure 1, it is possible to observe six main clusters, whose central subjects focus on four thematic fronts: the green

cluster brings subjects of a Christian religious nature; the pink cluster deals with themes about Brazilian politics; the blue and yellow clusters represent a strong circulation of topics about armed conflicts and wars, mainly the Ukrainian War; the sea green and beige clusters contain conspiracy themes.

In relation to toxic topics, shown in Figure 2, the graph highlights eleven clusters containing discursive toxicity. Most clusters have political agendas focused on social issues. Considering the proposed focus of analysis, four of these clusters will be worked on in a qualitative approach related to extremist phenomena evident in everyday life in Brazil. The clusters that will be worked on represent themes related to racism (dark orange), anti-Semitism (blue) and misogyny (green and light orange).

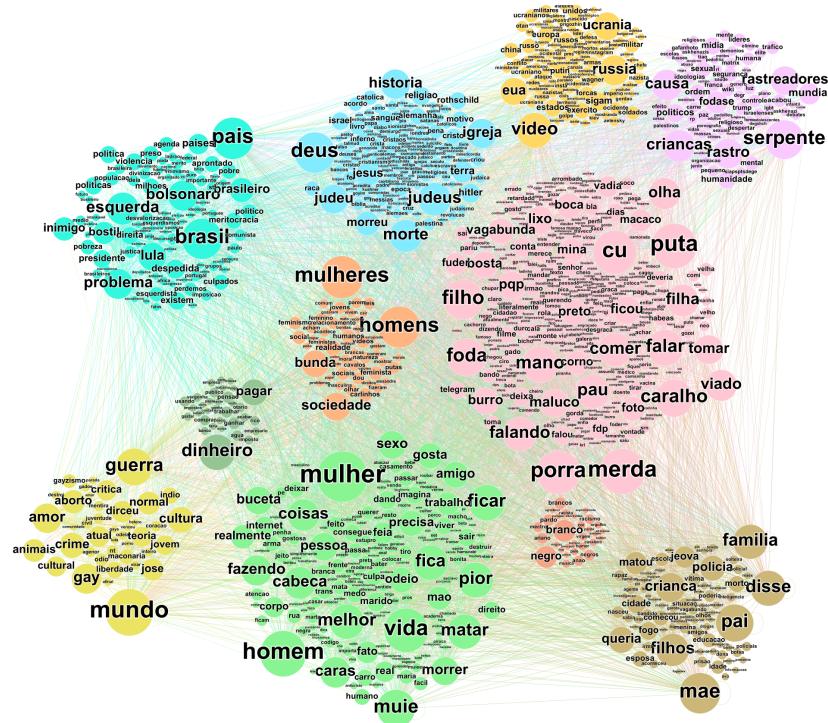


Fig. 2. Toxic topics.

3.1 Speech, Toxicity, and Dehumanization

The new mode of informational and conversational flow “facilitated collective action in terms of mobilization, expansion, global organization, and generation of new channels” [7] and jointly created, alongside the democratization of information, new ways of exerting power.

The relationship between power and discourse is present in literature from political science and philosophy, which treat the two subjects as inseparable factors in a relationship of coexistence. In light of Foucault's ideas, discourse can be defined as a set of thoughts arising from power relations, thus capable of ideologically legitimizing political life. Discourse is considered a historical document that produces interpretive effects among the groups that make up the same society [17]. Mastery of language use and the reproduction of discourse cause the ability to shape individuals through repetition, making the discursive wave mechanized and unconscious [30]. However, observing discourse as a political tool is not sufficient if we only focus on isolated expressions without understanding their real meaning, as they are shaped according to the historical and social contexts in which they arise.

The meaning attributed to language throughout history has been responsible for episodes both of conciliation and of the promotion of violence, capable of invoking both war and peace in their proper uses. Considering discursive language in a platformized society does not diverge from its power to impact the formation of public opinion and, consequently, the ways in which opinion transforms into social behavior [9], given that platformization has facilitated narrative flows beyond the barriers of orality [10]

This influence of speech is evident both in the individuality of the subject and collectively, as identification and belonging are the determining factors for the formation of collectivity – the sense of group [29]. [26] understand that “belonging has always been extremely important for the human race as a species, and this is due to instincts of social grouping, not being different with social media”. The theory of social identity, initially formulated by [29], seeks to understand the intergroup dynamics that cause members of a community to create bonds of identification with the group they are part of. This means that the feeling of belonging to a group is a source of pride and self-esteem for its members, leading to a process of social categorization, known as *in-group* (or us) and *out-group* (or them, the others) [22]. It is from this categorization that the tendency of group members to find negative aspects of an individual outside the group to which they belong appears.

It is based on group categorization and social segregation that toxicity is inserted into discursive power. Beyond an affective character in the polarization of political life, the creation of the collective imaginary about the Other is responsible for the unfolding of the process of demonizing those considered enemies [5]. Toxicity cannot (and should not) be reduced to the conception that it is merely a rude approach to something or some social group [4]. Toxicity often carries a biological determinism that disregards social and historical issues regarding the diversity of actors that make up society. The diffusion of negativity is precisely the striking characteristic of toxic discourse, and it is through it that the Other is deprived of their humanity, being seen as an individual who lacks the mental capacities of a human being [19].

At this moment, the concept of dehumanization cannot be overlooked when analyzing human history and its episodes of violence. Dehumanization has been,

and continues to be, a widely used tool in favor of legitimizing violent processes, as a way to reduce moral concern for the individuals who make up the groups targeted by violence [19].

Examples of this usage are temporally close to us, especially if we consider the last century: the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, racial segregation in the United States and South Africa, the conflicts between the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda until the end of the 20th century, and other conflicts present in microcosmic realities belonging to the world we live in.

3.2 Racism and Racialism

The racist nature of the messages is consolidated with the presentation of pseudoscientific articles and materials by the actors. Such behavior resembles the racial anthropology of the 19th century, which justified white domination and persecution over other ethnicities based on a “science of races” and determined behaviors assigned to individuals as mere genetic factors inherent to their racial identities [12].



Fig. 3. Cluster of racism-related terms.

Within this context, the statements shown, as shown in Figure 4 align with organic presuppositions, exposing as qualifications the supposed “science” that links black people to characteristics of violence and insanity in comparison to white people.

Message 178461-1747293502

What precedes culture? Race. It's not culture that determines IQ. It's a damn mental gymnastics to justify the inferiority of Black people (both aesthetically and intellectually) that is downright shameful.

Fig. 4. Message based on racialism theory.

The postulates of racial anthropology, which sought to classify human beings according to differentiated hierarchies and analyze human races as superior or inferior [12], were carried out without the slightest scientific rigor, gradually leading to the abolition of this genre of study from anthropology, as well as from other areas of knowledge, due to its unsustainable theoretical nature.

3.3 Antisemitism

Such “racial science,” which emerged as a tool to support and justify the slave systems of Europe and America in the 19th century, was well received by Western academics and maintained its notoriety until the mid-20th century. Arthur de Gobineau, considered the “father of racism,” was read and admired by various enthusiasts of the theory of racial inequality and very likely served as literary basis for the formulation of Nazi ideology during the Third Reich [12].

The alleged inequality between races is not the only postulate that links the extremist communities comprising the studied network to Nazi ideology. Within issues that are part of ethnic and cultural dynamics, it was also possible to identify anti-Semitic narratives in the exchanges of messages among the members of these communities, as shown in Figure 5. Direct hate speech towards individuals of Jewish origin or who simply follow Judaism unfolds in debates about phenomena that are supposedly caused by Jews. All are linked to demonstrations of disgust by the actors in these networks.

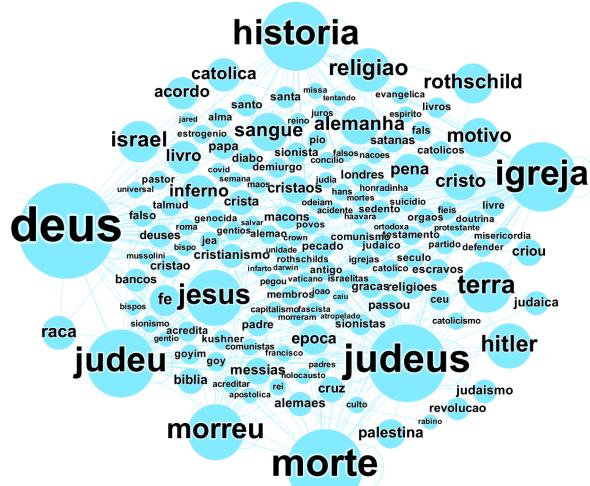


Fig. 5. Cluster of anti-Semitic related terms.

Anti-Semitism primarily appears in speculations about what is called the “New World Order” - a conspiracy theory that predicts that some governments,

in partnership with certain political elites, work together to implement a totalitarian global government. For the actors of these discourses, people of Jewish origin are the main financiers of the alleged political scheme of world domination, and the collective imagination revolving around the idea that Jewish people hold endless financial resources is not a recent phenomenon. Figure 6 illustrates these theories.

Message 42737-1534437377

Jewish mafia has always been present in all major world events. This elite serves Jewish and satanic interests, pedophilia, diseases, deaths, wars, crises, vaccines, adrenochrome etc.. The true root of evil in this world are the Jewish-Zionist-Kabbalists. They have been expelled from over 100 countries over time, they are the owners of large companies. Master Jesus Christ warned about these vipers, he fought against them, the sword that Christ used was the Word.

Fig. 6. Message containing anti-Semitic conspiracy theory.

Regarding the representation of Jews as financiers and entrepreneurs by Brazilian intellectuals, it is worth mentioning the chronicle published by Humberto de Campos, a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, at the time of the rise of Nazism, titled “In Favor of Israel” [...]: the whole world rises up, at this moment, in favor of Israel, threatened in Germany by Hitler’s anti-Semitism” [6]. Among his arguments in defense of Jews, however, we find the following highlight: “He does not offer his money to the Christian. The Christian is the one who asks for it on loan, submitting to the interest rates that Israel establishes, but does not impose. With these interest rates, Israel prospers, enriches, secretly dominates the world. The Jew never penetrated the palaces of Spain or Portugal asking the princes and nobles of the royal entourage to keep his sequins: princes and nobles were the ones who called for him and negotiated with him. And when they found themselves insolvent, they attributed to him all sorts of witchcraft and calamities” [6].

3.4 Misogyny

In addition to the perspectives of biological determinism based on ethnic attributes, a strong gender narrative was observed when analyzing the discourses circulated in the groups.

Misogyny, according to the Portuguese language dictionary, Michaelis, is the manifestation of “antipathy or morbid aversion to women”. Taking this definition as a starting point, its presence in the communications of the groups studied becomes clear.

When observing the graph of words contained in Figure 2, paying specific attention to the green and light orange clusters, it is possible to identify lexical

clusters that, together, transform into violent manifestations of incitement to rape and the intellectual inferiority of women.

Observing the history of labor relations makes evident the categorization of the female role in society as reduced to social reproduction and servitude to men. The supposed lack of control over women's emotions makes it impossible for them to detach themselves from their luxuries, having to necessarily always be under male control [11]. The thought linked to primitive accumulation on the female body and its role of subservience to the male can be exemplified by the message shown in Figure 7.

Message 185010-1092183763

THE ARIAN ALPHA MALE MANUAL

Women are just extras, preventing crime is more important, but considering the possibilities we have, first we have the white woman. The white, virgin woman is the woman you will take seriously. This is the woman you will date, marry and have children with. The dirty brown woman is the woman you will just use, and then discard like an object, always being very careful not to get pregnant. And finally, we have the black woman. This is only for work and must be kept away from the white man.

Fig. 7. Message containing misogyny.

In addition to the reductionist thought and incitement to the sexual, marital and subjugated role of servitude attributed to women, the message brings with it a thought that encompasses an even deeper racial issue, which has been widely disseminated in the Brazilian scientific scene for many years, until the end of the 20th century. As in the text, Gilberto Freyre in his book *Casa Grande & Senzala* (1933), considered his *magnum opus*, when analyzing gender relations in Brazilian colonial society, makes the following observation:

"In relation to Brazil, let the saying go: 'White to marry, mulatta to f..., black to work'; a saying that is felt, alongside the social conventionalism of the superiority of white women and the inferiority of black women, the sexual preference for the mulatta. In fact, our loving lyricism reveals no other tendency than the glorification of the mulatto, the *cabocla*, the brunette celebrated for the beauty of her eyes, the whiteness of her teeth, her *dengues*, *quindins* and prettiness, much more than that, than the 'pale virgins' and the 'blonde maidens'" [14].

Despite the context of romanticization of Brazilian miscegenation that Freyre suggests within the functionalities of race and gender, it is possible to identify the contradiction in the appropriation of this thought by the members of these groups, who call themselves "Aryans".

[16] understands that it is essential to deal with race, class, and gender in an intersection that determines what is today the Brazilian social scenario. The reproduction of misogynistic discourse meets racist discourse in an inseparable way, and its layers overlap in the consolidation of new prejudices promoted by hate speech.

3.5 Social Damages

Considering the large circulation of toxic narratives in the virtual environment of *Telegram*, the attempt to understand the developments of extremist content outside the virtual environment is necessary in view of the observation of news about the scenario of violence in Brazil in recent years.

When we think about racism, many questions arise in relation to the marks left by Brazil's slavery past, such as the glaring social inequality among black people (black and brown), who represent 71% of the population below the line of poverty, against the social situation of white people in the country [18]. However, not just covering structural conditions, racism manifests itself in violent ways in Brazil. According to a report carried out by [15], around 78% of the murders committed in Brazil in 2021 were against black people. In the same period, more than 20 thousand cases of racial insults and racism were recorded in Brazil.

Transposing the discussion to the intersection between race and gender, the report published by the Brazilian Public Security Forum in 2022 showed that more than 75 thousand rapes of girls and women were recorded in the country. Among these numbers, around 58.6% of the victims were black.

In addition to providing justifications for pre-existing violence through the use of digital media platforms, extremist groups also use communities as a means of organization.

As mentioned in the introduction, the number of attacks on schools has grown exponentially in the last five years, accumulating 24 of the 36 total records made by the Federal Government since 2002. Among the attacks, it was found in the report published by the Ministry of Education of the Federal Government of Brazil that "extremist groups recruit based on emotional resentments and reactionary values" [3]. The report also points out that "the lack of control over hate speech and practices, which spread even more easily through digital means" and "the exacerbation of extremism in Brazilian society" are considered causes of these episodes of violence.

4 Final Remarks

In light of the growth of extremist movements in Brazil and the pivotal role played by *Telegram* as a potential platform for orchestrating these groups, the objective of gathering recent data, alongside delineating the linguistic patterns adopted by community members and elucidating the pseudoscientific methodologies employed by actors to bolster toxic rhetoric and dehumanization, constitutes a vital initiative aimed at monitoring political discourse across digital platforms.

Social media platforms possess the capacity to provide real-time data, as well as other relevant information for potential mapping [32] and the continuity of studies on extremism. Updating these studies is constantly necessary, especially when considering the excessive dissemination of hate speech on digital platforms, which points to concrete episodes of violence and discrimination in Brazilian society.

This study offers a comprehensive sociological analysis, enriching our comprehension of the social and conversational dynamics of extremist communities in the digital environment, revealing how discourses continue to be based on hatred, discrimination, supremacy, and dehumanization of those who are considered, by them, to be different.

Drawing a historical parallel between contemporary discourse patterns in the digital age and those documented in existing literature, we demonstrate that, despite differences in medium, the same narratives prevalent in previous decades persist, underscoring the exigency for a more profound understanding of strategies aimed at curbing and mitigating the proliferation of these ideologies within digital spheres.

In this way, we hope that this study will catalyze further research in the realm of online radicalism, serving as a foundational framework for institutions and governments to formulate efficacious policies to counter radicalism, especially in the digital sphere, which continues to afford unparalleled dissemination avenues for the most different types of content.

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