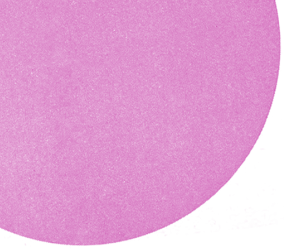# Platforms, political polarization and gender-based political violence
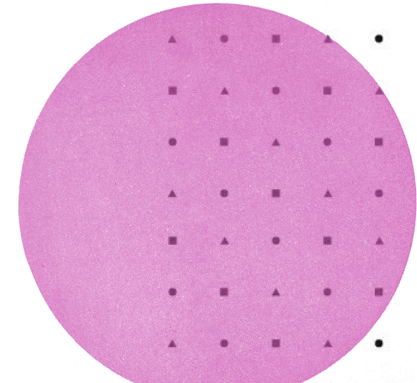
InternetLab

Clarice Tavares
Catharina Vilela

INTERNETLAB is an **independent think tank** that promotes academic debate and knowledge production in the fields of law and technology, with a particular focus on the Internet.

Conversation flow

1) **Setting the scene:** political debate and polarization on social media in Brazil;

2) **How this debate affects women**: insights from our monitoring of gender-based political violence online; and

3) **Q&A.**

Disinformation, political communication and the role of platforms

Social media platforms (or internet application providers) are **true infrastructures of public debate**. On the one hand, they host a large share of conversations among citizens on matters of civic interest; on the other, they also raise concerns related to disinformation, polarization, and political violence. This scenario, therefore, prompts questions about how the companies responsible for these platforms design and shape expression in the digital environment—that is, how they moderate content within their digital spaces.

Disinformation and polarization are not new or exclusive to the digital era — both have long existed through media control, extremism, and political violence — but digital platforms introduce new dynamics and challenges to political debate.
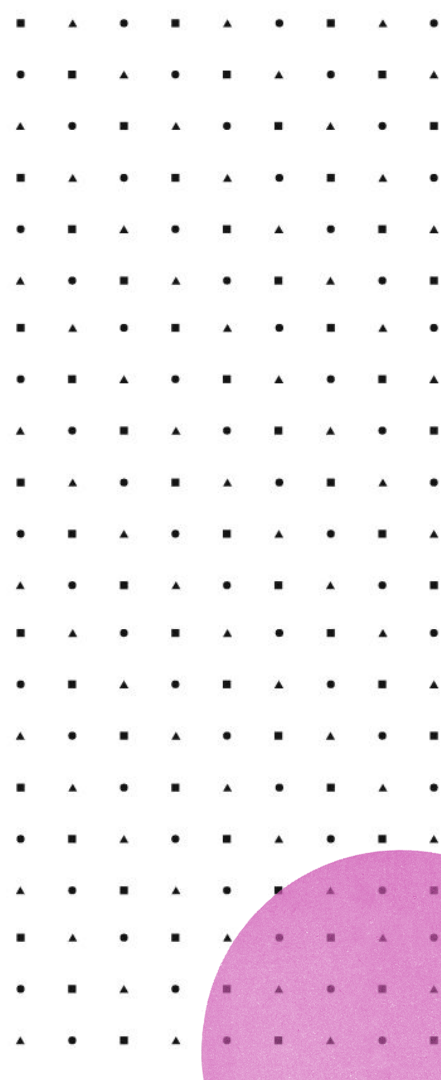
The Brazilian context

President Lula, a historic left-wing leader and former labor movement figure, took office after highly violent and polarized elections against far-right president Bolsonaro.

Shortly after Lula's inauguration, on January 8, Brazil faced coup-driven attacks on key government buildings — the Supreme Court, Congress, and the Presidential Palace.

The attacks were organized by far-right extremists and coordinated mainly through social media.

The movement was strongly inspired by the U.S. Capitol attack.

Extreme-right on Telegram

Analysis of extremist groups on Telegram showed that the platform served as a key space for organizing narratives and materials later distributed across other social networks.

In these groups, links to YouTube and TikTok circulate frequently.

Narratives are tested and refined within the groups before being amplified in other spaces.

A small number of highly active users play a central role in setting the tone and direction of these narratives.

DEMOCRACIA DIGITAL

análise dos ecossistemas de desinformação no Telegram durante o processo eleitoral brasileiro de 2022

Monitoring of Telegram groups revealed their coordination to invade Brazil's capital and destroy public buildings.

These narratives circulated on Telegram but also spread to mainstream platforms like Facebook, prompting limited action from Meta.

On January 3, 2023, a Facebook video calling to "besiege" Congress and showing images of fires in public buildings gained over 18,000 views.

Despite multiple reports for violating Meta's policies on violence and incitement, moderators repeatedly ruled that the content did not breach the rules—highlighting serious gaps in content moderation during a moment of escalating political tension in Brazil.
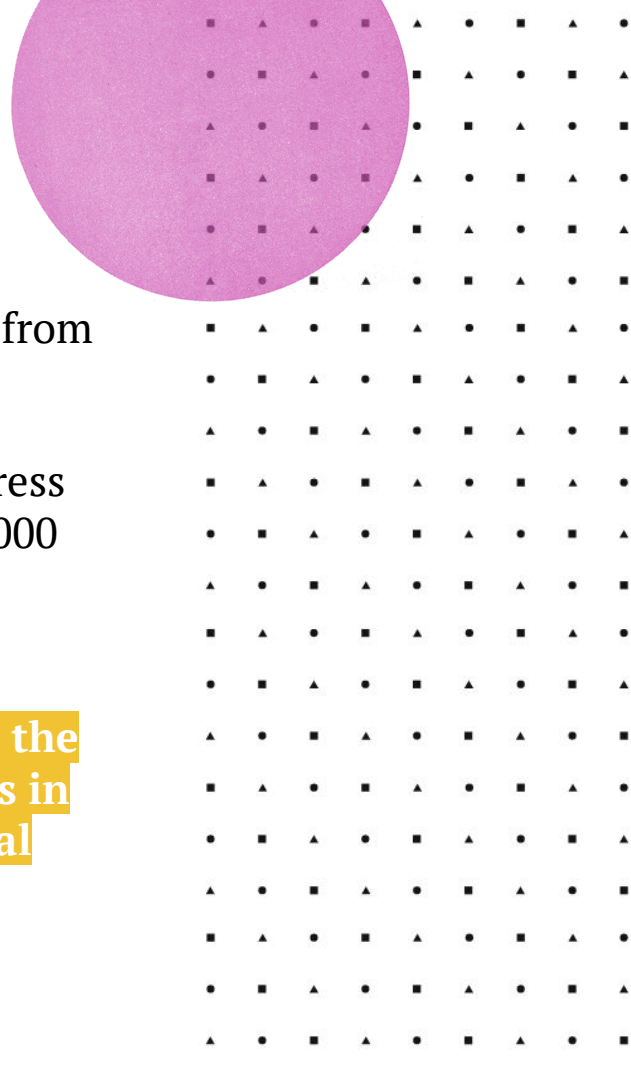
Content moderation and elections

This raises a key question: what is the minimum level of responsibility that companies must assume in their content moderation practices to protect public debate?

International law already recognizes that companies have human rights responsibilities and must consider the risks their business models pose to these rights.
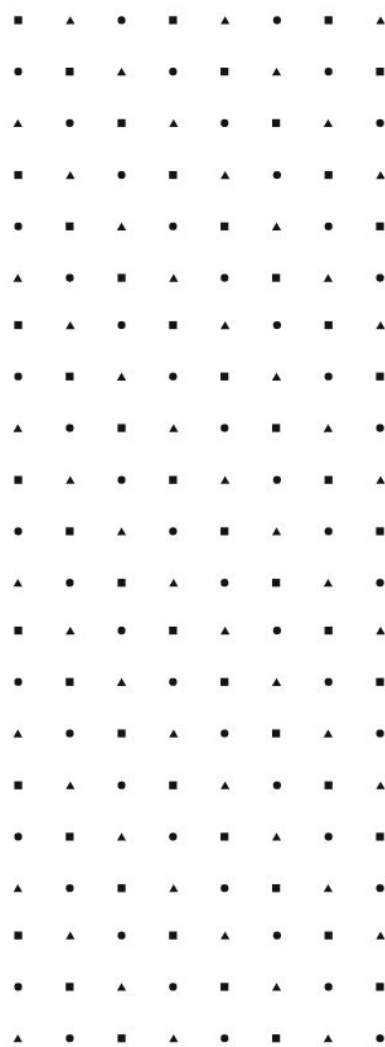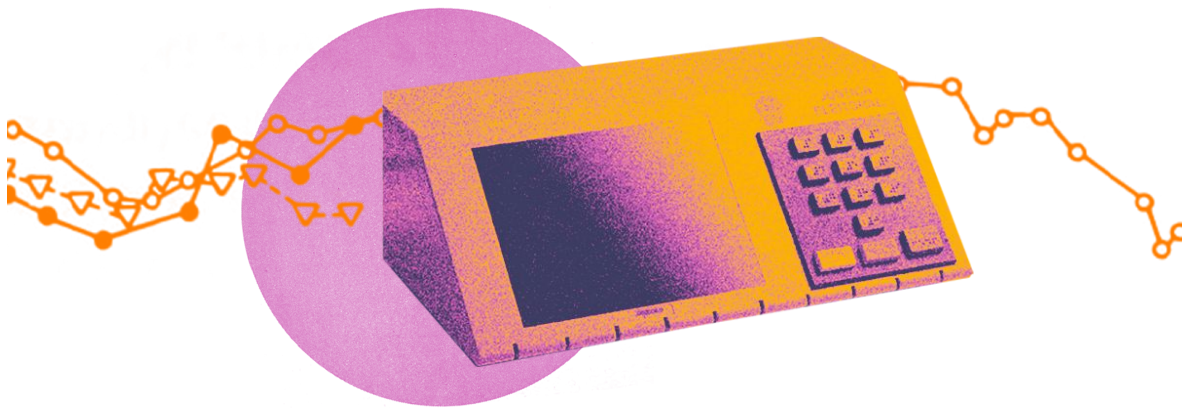
Much of the content threatening democratic debate is still regulated by overly generic parameters — there is room to demand stronger commitments to civic and electoral integrity.

Good rules on paper are not enough; they must be enforced with transparency and accountability.

A truly effective content moderation system requires clear metrics, accessible policies, and continuous monitoring of their implementation.

COMPROMISSO COM A DEMOCRACIA

Integridade eleitoral e o Estado Democrático de Direito nas políticas de plataformas digitais

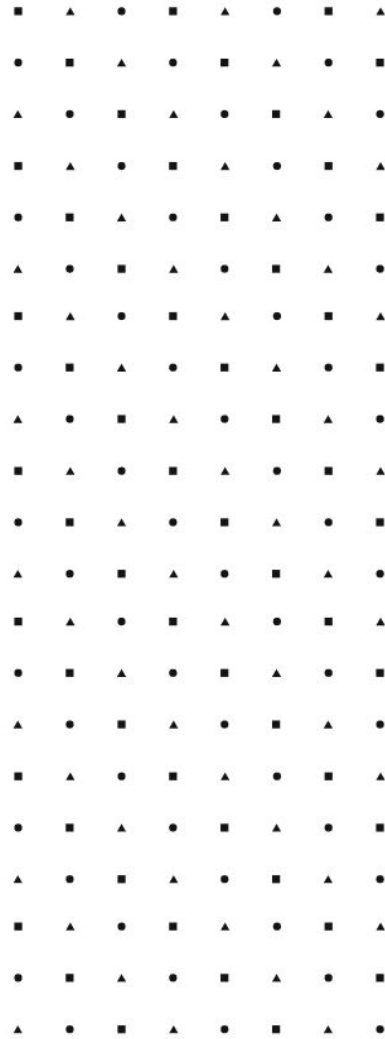Diagnósticos e recomendações nº 10
Julho 2023

MonitorA

What is MonitorA?

An observatory on political violence against candidates online

Context:

- Rise of digital campaigns
- COVID-19 shifting political debates online
- Persistent misogyny in politics
- Lack of data on online gender-based political violence

MonitorA

| Methodological Steps |
| --- |
| 1. Selection of platforms to be monitored |
| 2. Selection of candidacies and channels/accounts to be monitored |
| 3. Development of a lexicon of potentially offensive terms |
| 4. Creation of a data visualization platform |
| 5. Data analysis |
| 6. Publication of journalistic articles |
| 7. Monitoring the enforcement of the Brazilian Gender-Based Political Violence Law (2021) |

MonitorA
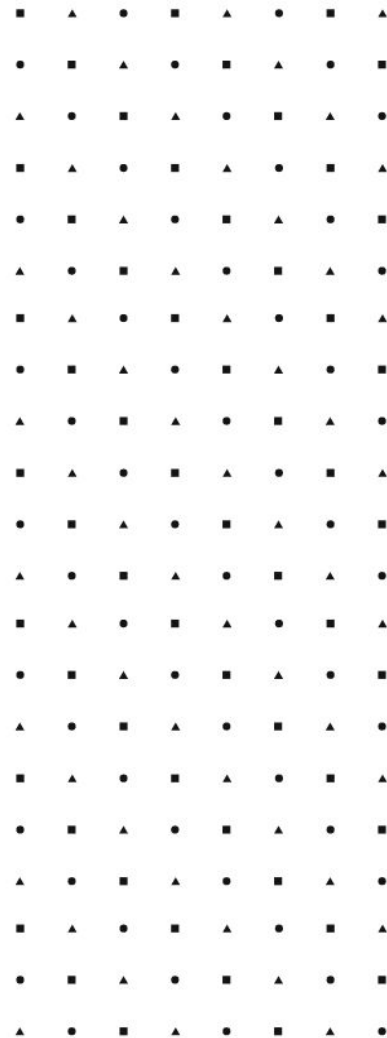
# Project overview

2020

2022

2024
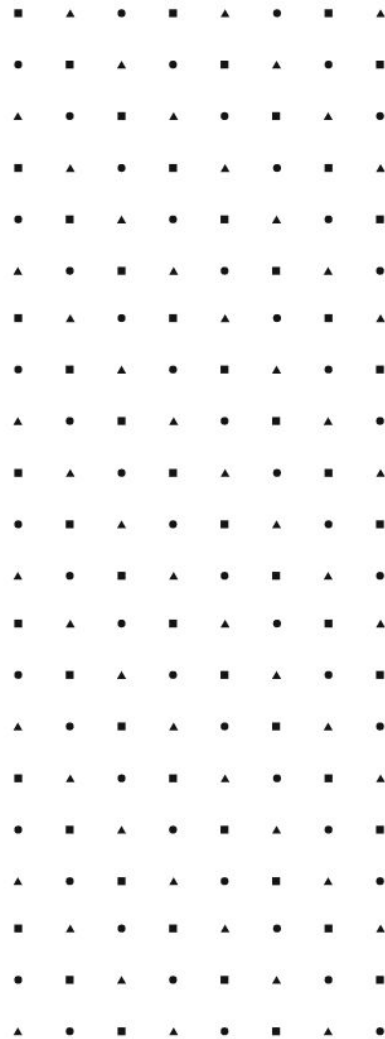
Main narratives

- Political violence is primarily and repeatedly directed at female profiles, often in reference to their bodies, intellect, and moral aspects. Moral offenses, fatphobia, and discredit are some of the most recurrent forms of violence aimed at candidates

- The attacks and offenses are not exclusive to the candidates but also extend to their family members and supporters

- Men – with the exception of gay, elderly, or transgender individuals – are mostly attacked by users who consider them poor managers or ideologically misguided. What is challenged is their political stance, not their bodies, in contrast to what happens with female candidates

- Transphobia was also present through discourses that denied gender identity and reinforced the biologization of the bodies of candidates

MonitorA
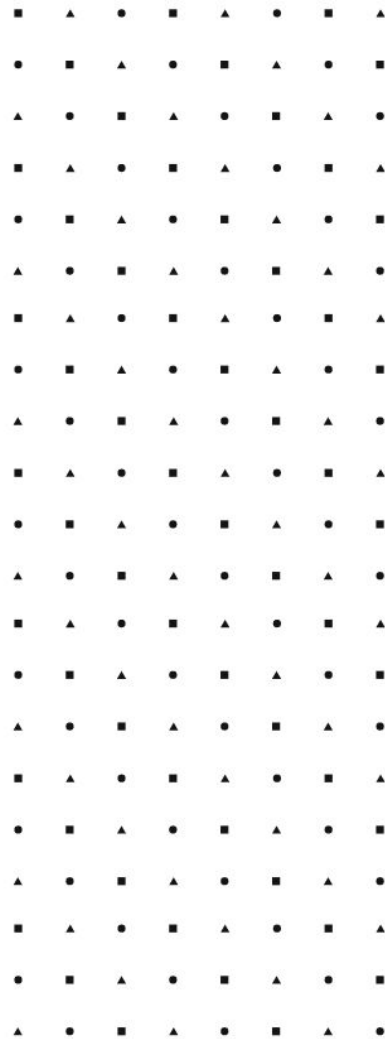
Tabata Amaral (candidate for mayor of São Paulo)

"Tabata is so beautiful, such an angelic face. A real babe… But she looks prettier when she's quiet."

"Tabata is such a joke, an annoying little feminist. Who can stand her? It's not enough to be ugly, she's also annoying."

"Tabata: when she's done with school, she can try running for mayor again."

"Go to OnlyFans! women are no good for politics."

• Men's voices and bodies seen as neutral; women's as out of place

• Comments reduce Tabata to her appearance

• Infantilization and sexualization used to discredit her

Duda Salabert (candidate for mayor of Belo Horizonte)

"That's a man pretending to be a woman."

"Would you let your daughter share a bathroom with Duda?."

*"What an ugly thing a man dressed as a woman."*

"God save us from this Duda crap! Using the claim of being a woman to get votes from fools and take advantage of women's benefits."

- Greater visibility, but also more exposure to online violence
- Most attacks linked to gender identity and transphobia
- Frequent misgendering and moral panic narratives (threat to women and children)
- Reflects systemic exclusion and denial of trans political legitimacy

IIIMonitorA

Access to data and challenges

- Restricted data access across major platforms

- Global inequality in research access

  - Global South faces strongest barriers (funding, infrastructure, API limits)

- Data access = transparency + accountability

- **Continuing MonitorA is a political act to defend the right to research and democracy**
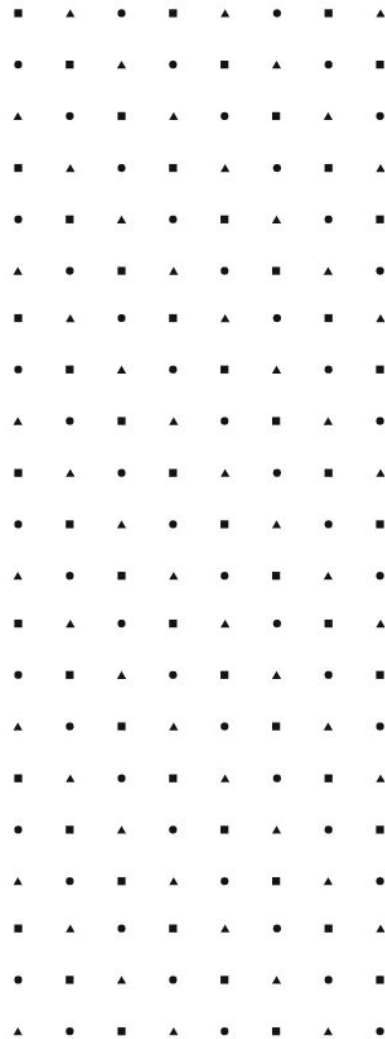
MonitorA

Positive outcomes

- In the approval of the Law on Gender Political Violence in Brazil, MonitorA was mentioned in the justification, particularly as one of the reasons for including an aggravating factor for cases that occur online.

- Impact on platform policies: The project has influenced platforms to consider actions aimed at addressing political violence.

- Use of MonitorA data for legal action: The data collected by MonitorA has been used in lawsuits filed by candidates who are victims of political violence
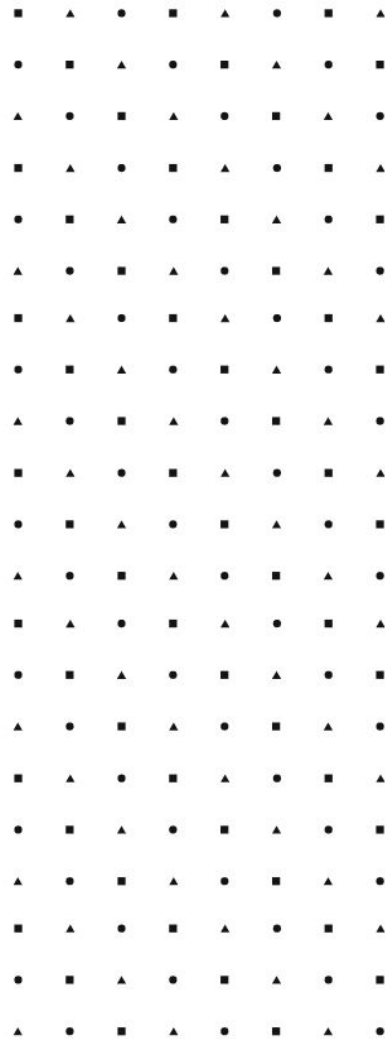
Thank you!

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