

Internet, the press and Brazilian elections: agenda-setting on real time¹

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ABSTRACT

This research paper broaches the relations between the electoral campaigns of the main presidential candidates to the 2002 Brazilian elections and the Internet, by analyzing the coverage of political agenda originated by the campaign official websites on the digital and paper versions of the national daily newspapers *Jornal do Brasil* and *O Globo*. This particular campaign was the first Brazilian electoral occasion in which Internet played a significant role as an efficient media; our analysis reveals a good example of the strategic use of the web to provoke real-time news, which ended up amplified by printed media, strengthening attacks which would otherwise not gain such a space or repercussion.

Keywords: Internet and elections, Digital news media, Electoral journalism, Electoral communication strategies.

1. ELECTORAL BACKGROUND

It was only in last year's general elections that the Internet gained strength in Brazil as a politically relevant factor, especially for the presidential contest. This was partly due to the high level of competition of this particular election. Since the beginning of the year, polls showed four candidates who had real chance of making it to the second round, and therefore a much unforeseeable result. Quite a different scenario if compared to the past two elections, won by former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso without much surprise, already on the first round. The undefined situation raised the tone of dispute to levels that weren't seen, in Brazil, since the 1989 election, when ideological polarization and the peculiar political moment of the country's history – which experienced its first direct election for president

after 21 years of military dictatorship – contributed to competitiveness.

In 2002, the results of eight years of very orthodox economical policy granted the country the control of inflation, but at the cost of very low growth rates. The unemployment problem took over the public agenda, and government popularity had worn out. Of the viable candidates, three presented themselves as opposition alternatives. Thus, if in the 1998 campaign change was treated as an instability factor, a theme to be associated to risks and threats to the country, in the election under study change seemed to be the main orientation sought by voters and, thus, by political discourse. All candidates, even the situation one, proposed, at least rhetorically, a direction change. The competition was uncompromising and attacks between candidates were frequent.

Another change in comparison to our last two elections was the participation of news media, which helped give the contest unprecedented visibility [1]. Most analysts agree that it was the election in recent years which mobilized media coverage the most; the news agents, however, did not show, unlike other occasions, explicit preference for any of the candidates.

Although *Jornal do Brasil (JB)* and *O Globo* were the first Brazilian newspapers to publish on-line versions, on 1995 and 1996 respectively, this was the first election in which the electoral coverage by digital news media was politically significant. The role played by the online coverage of the electoral process can also be ascribed to the maturation and sophistication of the national digital news media, which showed more autonomy when compared to their paper versions. The candidates, on their turn,

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were ready to profit from this phenomenon, using their campaign sites as a resource to provoke news on the digital media. In their campaign homepages, Lula, José Serra, Ciro Gomes and Garotinho displayed all kinds of information, turning the web into an important reference not only to voters, but also to the press.

Different candidates and only one claim: to change

Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, the Workers Party (PT) candidate, was backed by more than twenty years of steady opposition, as well as his known biography as labour union leader. Thanks to a very professional communication strategy, which included hiring Brazilian most known electoral marketing advertiser, Duda Mendonça, his campaign managed to overcome some historically important rejection factors which had always hindered his presidential project: mainly, the lack of a formal education and of prior administrative experience. His victory, in the October elections, was therefore coherent to the context, since he was a natural alternative for change.

José Serra, the situation candidate of President Cardoso's PSDB (Brazilian Social Democrat Party), had already been a Congressman and occupied two Ministries, those of Health and of Economic planning. He chose, however, to emphasize his differences from his antecessor, and drove a campaign which relied less on the achievements of the federal government during the current and past mandates, than on the slogan "mudança com segurança" (change with confidence). During the six weeks of free television time, for example, Cardoso appeared in only one of Serra's propaganda programs. By many analysts, this was seen as a major strategic mistake, since voters would hardly see the situation candidate as the best choice to promote significant change. As Almeida puts it, Serra was out of his natural "speech place" [2].

Two other candidates challenged Lula's hopes of winning already in the first turn, both running with opposition parties and criticizing the situation. Ciro Gomes, former governor of Ceará, running for the small PPS (Popular Socialist Party, our former Communist Party), seemed at start a promising alternative. Without much media coverage during the first months of 2002, he became newsworthy after his party's first television program, on June 13th. From then on, his vote intention grew significantly, and some projections divulged by the press showed he had real chance of even beating Lula on the second round. His campaign structure, however, less professional than those of Lula and Serra, was not prepared to cope with pressure from the media and from his opponents. He maintained high visibility on the papers for several weeks, but reports shifted from good news on his vote intention to a number of small scandals and negative associations which, fueled by adversaries, gained major space on most newspapers, traditional as well as digital.

The fourth candidate analyzed, Anthony Garotinho, had as his major accomplishment the governance of Rio de Janeiro, which he left to run for President. Exploring a populist and, at times, religious discourse, he was well voted in his home state, and surprised most analysts arriving in third at the presidential contest.

2. INTERNET AS A CAMPAIGN TOOL

In terms of communication strategy, the 2002 elections brought an innovation, with the Internet used as a dynamic campaign tool, aimed at strengthening and publicizing each candidate's agenda, giving visibility to political speeches and supporting all kinds of attacks through the use of their personal websites.

Although Internet had already been used in the 1998 election, the anticipated feeling of victory transmitted then by government to the campaign brought it down to a mere accessory of the candidates, used mainly as a place for providing electors with information, publishing campaign material, government programs and candidate agenda.

In 2002, on the other hand, the growing importance of Internet as a mean of communication, allied to its greater diffusion throughout the country, inspired the presidential candidates to use it more actively. The interchange among media has become, as we see in the election under study, one of the traits of Brazilian electoral communication. The paper, televised and online news talk to one another, reproducing pieces and quotations. One of the easier sources, accessible to every reporter even in the remotest of the country, is now the internet, in which a variety of information about every political actor can be picked up and followed by the media.

As much as commercial consultants, "spin doctors" try all the time to find newsworthy events that involve positively the candidate they assist. They are usually trained professionals from the commercial media system, and they play with the necessity the media have of news – good stories, good images, dramatic developments, crisis, scandals and accusations. In this context, the web becomes the perfect place for publishing news according to each player's point of view, hoping to seize the journalistic interest. Internet was also used directly, as a powerful tool to reach the Brazilian voters placed in the upper levels of income and education, seen as opinion leaders, not very different from those identified by Lazarsfeld on his study about the two step flow of communication [3].

In a context of highly competitive campaigning, granting favorable space in the mass media becomes even more important to the candidate. In this sense, Internet was creatively used by the campaign communication strategists as a way of establishing news agenda and expanding the limits of information published on the web to other vehicles, especially news media, either paper or digital. The candidate pages on the web made use of resources as publishing attack jingles, raising accusations and making criticisms to other candidates, as well as reverberating news from open media, either traditional or on the web. The media, on their turn, resorted significantly to the candidate pages as information source. We found examples where the newspapers even reproduced actual facsimiles of the sites, giving much more visibility to the materials, praising or scandalous, initiated by the candidates.

Way before the election, information from political sites was already used by newsmakers. On May 5th, for example, *O Globo* reported a survey conducted by the PPS website about the presence of actress Patrícia Pillar, a novela star who had married the already divorced Ciro Gomes. During the first months of 2002, she recovered from a breast cancer, and Ciro slowed down his campaign rhythm to follow closely her convalescence. According to the site, said the paper, 53% saw with satisfaction her participation in the campaign. The piece managed to say that, while the PPS leaders were against her exposition, the PTB, another party of the Workers Front, coligation which supported Ciro, approved her presence. As we can see, the sites could offer information which, if considered newsworthy, would be amplified by the media.

Internet sites and attack visibility on the press

The best example of this point is the use candidates made of negative propaganda on the web, which was expressive. The official sites of both Serra and Ciro were the core of defamation campaigns which could not take place on the free time granted on nationwide radio and television for all candidates, due to stricter rules and legal surveillance, with the possibility of direct intervention by the electoral tribunals.

Among the four main presidential candidates, José Serra was the one who relied the most on this resources, taking advantage of Internet as an active and strategic campaign agency. He had a very complete website, which supplied all the possible information about his campaign, including a real-time follow-up of all his activities, constantly updated during the day. Lula's campaign, as well, assembled a very professional page, similar to Serra's, which furthermore allowed the voter to buy campaign products such as shirts and caps, and make online donations. Ciro Gomes and Garotinho had less sophisticated homepages, but equally dynamic. All candidates explored Internet as an important tool of their communication strategy; Serra's, however, was the one

that showed best results, according to his markedly aggressive campaign strategy.

José Serra's candidacy appears in third place in vote intention around the month of July. Ahead of him were Lula, who kept favorite during the whole electoral period, and Ciro, who benefited from his party's free time on television, aired on June 13th. Even before the beginning of the electoral televised propaganda, aired nationwide on all open channels from August 20th to election day, Serra had already took the offensive, attacking Ciro Gomes' candidacy and trying to disqualify it. Several tactics were employed in the course of succeeding campaign events, and the tone of aggressions raised with the responses from Ciro.

One of the tactics was to associate Ciro's image to that of the very unpopular ex-President Fernando Collor de Mello, who renounced in 1992 before his mandate was impeached by the Congress, who had voted massively for his repeal. On July 11th, the online version of *O Globo* gave room to Serra's accusations against Ciro, comparing him to Collor and quoting a declaration of a third candidate, Garotinho, who accused Ciro of proposing the confiscation of popular savings through the elongation of public debt. At 12h24 the same day, another piece about the electoral attacks was published; in spite of his declarations that he would not comment the accusations, Ciro answered Serra, calling him dishonest and rendering the comparison to Collor de Mello.

The virtual struggle kept feeding the news, as much in the traditional papers as in their online versions. Every movement of the sites, especially when reacting to media's negative coverage, were followed by the news. On July 16th, *O Globo* published that Ciro compared Serra to a nazi in his site, and that Serra, on his turn, said Ciro was the "candidate of insult", comparing him once more to Collor. On July 17th, *JB* published on its paper version that Ciro's homepage was removing the text that compared Serra's tactics to nazi methods. We were also told that Serra's site published a piece criticizing Ciro's "insult marketing". On the same day, *O Globo* published the following headline: "PSDB's site says Ciro has Collor's DNA". The report content brought the description of a radio interview in which Serra criticized Ciro.

On July 23rd, at the height of his preference climb, 13 points ahead of Serra, one of the informations reported by *O Globo* was that Ciro had proposed in his site the adoption of a parliamentary system in Brazil.

On July 25th, *JB* (paper) offered news of all the four candidate sites. About Serra's, we were informed that it mocked Ciro's accomplishments as governor of Ceará, denying positive figures published by his opponent; another piece praised Lula's site, saying it proposed creative campaign resources, such as printing banners and stickers at home from Internet materials; Ciro's site, on its turn, was reported to accuse PSDB to support Collor, although his own party, PPS, was still a member of the ex-president's colligation in his home state, Alagoas. By this moment, the press had already "bought" the stereotype built by Serra about Ciro Gomes, and framed the news accordingly.

The open hostility with which Ciro Gomes answered attacks was explored by Serra, who strove to characterize his opponent as an aggressive and unruly man, without enough emotional control to become the nation's President. Some weeks later, Serra used his website to contest some other assertions by Ciro. Talking about education during a television debate on August 6th, Ciro stated he had always studied in public schools. Serra found out and published that he had actually gone also to private schools in his home state. In the same debate, Ciro also said that, when he was Treasury Minister (during Itamar Franco's government), the minimum wage was equivalent to US\$ 100,00; Serra, once more, accused him of lying, since by the exchange rate of the time, it would be no more than US\$ 82,00. Serra kept marking Ciro as a liar, dishonest and false candidate.

On August 15th, *O Globo* online reported that Serra's homepage had removed a jingle against Ciro. The news piece, nevertheless, described the lyrics of "You lie too much", a parody of a popular Brazilian song of the period. The jingle was aired for little more than 24 hours. Besides disqualifying his opponent, Serra wanted to attract the spotlights to his own campaign, and therefore worked for the publication of unfavorable news for his direct opponent on the fight for second on the polls. Another advertisement piece was removed that same day from Serra's site, and the fact was once more reported by the media. The PSDB homepage had published a list of Ciro's supposed lies, entitled "Ciro said it, but it's not true".

Serra's campaign succeeded in marking his opponent as a liar, an unruly, violent and dishonest candidate. These images were basically originated by Serra's Internet site, and spread from there to the rest of the press. If we follow the rate of appearance of Ciro Gomes in the main Brazilian newspapers, and compare it to the vote intention polls, it is easy to see that he had benefited, in a first moment, of his party's propaganda aired on television, which granted him both voter interest and news coverage. Then, visibility keeping high but most news being negative, he started to fall, a tendency that was made irreversible by a poorly used television time, including programs and ads.

Not only the candidate personal homepages were cited on the newspapers. One of the main characteristics of the web, its openness to plurality, was very clearly exemplified by the proliferation of semi-official and popular sites². This could benefit or hurt candidacies, depending on their relative cohesion and support. The disorganization of Ciro's campaign shows clearly with the example of September 12th, when *O Globo* published an extended report, illustrated by facsimiles of the PPS website, whose headlines "deturpated", according to the paper, the interview given by Ciro to the paper the day before – an invitation that had been extended to all candidates. "Later on, Freire [PPS' President] had the report removed from the site. Ciro Gomes' official campaign homepage, on the other hand, reproduced integrally the interview and the version published yesterday in *O Globo*". The interviewee of the day was Garotinho, but Ciro earned a column note he would have prefer not to: "Ciro shows 'machismo' in interview to *O Globo*".

On August 29th, *O Globo* informed that Serra's site promoted him to a technical tie with Ciro for the second place, which was not true to the numbers of voter intention surveys, in which Ciro still appeared in second, and that the PSDB candidate claimed "the right to answer" to Ciro's aggressions on television³. One of the headlines was: "Serra's site lies".

Even before the second round, also Lula was already under fire by Serra's Internet materials. The workers candidate was spared until then because of his franc favoritism; actually, the prior struggle was over the second place, which meant the possibility of facing Lula – together with his historical rejection by Brazilian electorate – on a twosome basis. Both candidates hoped to build a moderate, centered position that functioned as an alternative to radicalism. Lula himself, however, had shifted towards a more liberal model on what respects economy; what we saw, on the second round, was a more personalistic dispute, in which a political image, constructed generically, was more persuasive of factual economic programs.

On September 21st, for example, *O Globo* reported a note published by Serra's site associating the "threat" of Lula's victory to the raise of American dollar, stating that "the dollar had dropped a little because Lula had diminished his leadership".

² Many other webpages, pro and against candidates, were published, and several of those were cited by newspapers, at federal as well as at state level.

³ The "direito de resposta" on television depends on appreciation by the proper electoral tribunal.

Lula made a great effort to keep out of the firing-line, above disputes. As for his campaign disposition, Lula managed to earn the nickname “peace and love”, for his light humor and low aggressiveness during the electoral contest. His site followed the same orientation, avoiding attacks and squabbles with other candidates. Therefore, when reproduced by newsmedia, it almost always worked as positively evaluated visibility; papers reported creative campaign efforts, interviews with public personalities and other agenda for the candidate.

Ciro Gomes, on his turn, showed a poor and unprofessional communication strategy during the whole period. His difficulty to manage the press was recognized by the candidate himself, once the election was over. He was straightforward and had little patience with journalists and electors. He made jokes that reverberated far beyond his intention. One of the emblematic episodes amplified by media and by the candidate’s lack of communication skills happened by the end of August, when he answered with irritation to a journalist who inquired about his wife, actress Patrícia Pillar, and her role in the campaign – since he had been criticized for over-exposing her. *Ciro* stated that her role in the campaign was to sleep with him, and the unhappy declaration became a theme for many commentaries and excuses from all sides. The episode lasted much longer than was healthy for *Ciro*’s campaign.

Garotinho, in spite of his much claimed lack of resources, being himself a former radio and media man, had a marginal but efficient use of communication strategies. Although his main resources are traditional media, mainly radio, his television programs were well evaluated by viewers and his site was efficient in its effort to bring the candidate close to the main debates. In these efforts to make through the news with a favorable agenda, the online political coverage offers a more flexible decision structure, in which political actors of less expression may succeed in giving visibility to small campaign events and scandals.

Some of the distinguishing marks of digital media also contributed to these campaign innovations, and a more agile and aggressive use of Internet. The online versions of the papers published news and attacks ignored by the traditional media, with its space limitations and stricter editorial control. Comparing both versions, we see the number of cases when the news reverberated candidate attacks and agenda was much more significant on the online papers than on traditional media.

Some headlines published on the *O Globo* digital version illustrate this tendency, such as on September 3rd (“*Ciro* continues to attack *Serra* through the Internet” and “*Ciro* and *Serra* back to attack in their Internet sites”), September 12th (“In his site, *Garotinho* accuses *PT* for the crisis at *Bangu I* [state prison]” and “*Serra*’s homepage fuels controversy with *Lula* about jobs”), September 19th

(“News piece from *Ciro*’s site tries to link *Serra* to *Jader Barbalho* [corrupt ex-senator]”).

This can be attributed also to one of the main characteristics of digital newsmaking, which is the “publicability”, that molds the level and structure of appearance of each candidate. The cost of publishing news on digital media being almost none, and associated to the need of being as up-to-date as possible, gives fluidity and a certain degree of fortuity to the volume of news published on the Internet newspapers we analyzed. News are published according to the journalistic return they can grant to the paper by exploring a given campaign event. A spicy fact, which “pays off”, corresponds to more (or larger) news on real-time about it, regardless of journalistic efforts to check or listen to second or third parties.

Exploring this “publicability” allowed candidates to raise the tone of attacks and provocations, going way beyond Brazilian tradition of non-aggressive electoral marketing.

3. CONCLUSION

The presidential campaign of 2002 was the first Brazilian electoral happening in which Internet played a significant role as an efficient media. It turned up as fit to enhance political marketing resources – amplifying the target audience e diminishing campaign costs – and, at the same time, enabled candidates do avoid the direct reaction of electoral justice, another important player in our electoral contests, which has been more watchful of traditional media such as radio and television. Their sites published parodies, negative jingles and slanderous jokes against their adversaries, generating some of the stereotypes and associations which ran through the whole electoral period.

The strategic use of the “publicability” factor by the official presidential candidates websites, with the inclusion and even creation of newsworthy facts, had direct impact on how the on-line versions of the two renowned dailies we studied covered the electoral contest. They answered the demand of following on real-time the campaign events, therefore amplifying the negative campaign moved by the candidates, particularly *José Serra* and *Ciro Gomes*, who engaged in a true battle over the second place and the opportunity of facing *Luís Inácio Lula da Silva* on second round. The print versions of *O Globo* and *Jornal do Brasil*, on the other hand, in spite of space limitations, also propagated some of the websites agenda, such as accusations and negative political associations of the candidates.

Our already traditional free television time, object of much study and Brazil and abroad, has no doubt been crucial to the election results. The candidates TV propaganda marks clearly all campaigns, and its relevance shows up as much on the vote intention surveys curves as in qualitative research [5]. Nevertheless, a prior “climate of opinion” [6] is built up with the contribution of party militancy, surveys, newsmidia and even by entertainment shows such as telenovelas. Internet played a part in the dispositions of electorate towards each candidate. Ciro Gomes, for example, payed the cost of the campaign against him, which took place from TV and radio short ads to the less perceptible denounces on his adversaries’ websites. The dynamic follow-up of attacks, always published and removed rapidly, created small campaign facts, increasing the tension among Ciro, his crew and supporters who, answering the provocations, favored exactly José Serra’s strategy.

The 2002 Brazilian presidential campaign, thus, brought a new degree of strategic use of Internet to provoke real-time news, which ended up amplified by printed media, strengthening attacks which would otherwise not gain such a space or repercussion. The electronic news media studies, on the other hand, granted ample space to these attacks, web-originated themselves. This is because digital media need to answer the demand for a fast journalistic coverage, and have little constraints of space for the publication of news they consider attractive for their audience.

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