

Fucking right-wing: MBL's personal frames and ultraliberal agenda¹

Direita transante: enquadramentos pessoais e agenda ultraliberal do MBL

■ JOÃO GUILHERME BASTOS DOS SANTOS^a

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Graduate Program in Communication. Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil

VIKTOR CHAGAS^b

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Graduate Program in Communication. Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses MBL's (Free Brazil Movement) internet campaigning strategies, based on dialogs with members, online data quantitative analysis and a review of postings related to that theme. For such, we elaborated a dual investigative plan, associating the selection and analysis of a representative sample of images posted on social network sites with ethnographic investigations. We hypothesise that the movement uses meme language to make constant appeals to average citizens, using direct communication channels and fostering personal narratives about politics and reflecting a liberal/libertarian positive agenda.

Keywords: Internet and politics, connective action, MBL

RESUMO

Neste trabalho, analisam-se as estratégias do Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) na internet, com base em diálogo com membros filiados, análise quantitativa de dados on-line e revisão de publicações sobre o tema. Para tanto, foi construída uma dupla linha de investigação, associando extração e análise de uma amostra representativa do conteúdo imagético publicado em redes sociais a diálogo e investigações de vertente etnográfica. Levantamos as hipóteses de que o movimento utiliza a linguagem de memes para fazer apelos constantes aos cidadãos na rede, apostando em canais de comunicação direta, incentivando narrativas pessoais sobre a política e refletindo uma agenda liberal/libertária positiva.

Palavras-chave: Internet e política, ação conectiva, MBL

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^a PhD student and Master in Communication by the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4430-8985>. E-mail: gui_bsantos@hotmail.com

^b Professor and researcher of the Graduate Program in Communication of the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). PhD in History, Politics and Cultural Assets (Cpdoc/FGV). Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1806-6062>. E-mail: viktor@midia.uff.br

FROM OLAVETES TO THE *DIREITA TRANSANTE*

ALITTLE OVER TEN years ago the emergence of political blogs has promoted radicalized and militant articulated groups to the status of *analysts*, (Aldé, Chagas, Escobar, 2007). Among them were the *olavetes*, faithful followers of the philosopher Olavo de Carvalho, who, together, formed a cohesive network of conservative and ultraliberal orientation.

The popularization of social networks in Brazil, starting with Orkut, reinforced the movement that the right-wing blogosphere had initiated, and made it possible to consolidate what in practice constitutes a politically ultraliberal and conservative youth movement in customs, an active participant in forums of discussion and social media. Often supported by foreign funding from libertarian and conservative think tanks (Rocha, 2017), such as Atlas Network and Cato, ultra-liberal networks gained consistency between 2005 and 2007; then they divided into different institutes – *Mises Brasil*, *Ordem Livre*, *Liberal do Nordeste*, *Mercado Popular* – and interest groups – *Estudantes pela Liberdade* (EPL), *Dragão do Mar* etc.

This proliferation of institutes and youth groups is compatible with a change in the strategy of think tank-funded agencies, documented in works such as Lewis Powell’s (1971) confidential memo and Richard Fink’s *The Structure of Social Change* (2012). Overcoming the duality of “corporate interest versus public interest” (in which corporations lose their legitimacy in the face of public opinion), a new one is proposed: “freedom vs. interventionism,” in which any threat to unlimited financial operations is considered authoritarian to individual civil liberty.

As argued in the Powell memo, the key pieces in these proposals are actors and organizations funded by groups of interested companies who would enter into disputes by publicly defending their corporations’ central points of view without losing their anonymity. It would be necessary to invest in seemingly spontaneous movements, as well as in the insertion of experts in universities through financial incentives to these institutions, ensuring these experts’ credibility as neutral spokespeople and legitimizing their choice as news sources for the media.

One of the most widely known groups to occupy the scene since then, the *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL), is the direct descendant of this first generation of incubators. Conceived to act politically in the demonstrations of June of 2013 - although officially the movement affirms that it was created in November of 2014 – the MBL was founded as a splinter group from EPL, which had originated in 2010². Differing from the position of the *Movimento Passe Livre* (MPL), which was organized around the defense of public transport, MBL activists

²Barcelos (2017).

began to co-opt the actions and drew the attention of the media to their own causes. Among its cadres, names formed in the ranks of the EPL, such as Kim Kataguiri, appeared as influential young leaders.

In this article, we discuss the online rhetoric and the strategies of MBL, investigating in depth how the group establishes relationships with its followers, articulates its recruitment campaigns and positions itself politically on the internet. The MBL is notably a spreader of satirical messages, political provocations and opinion pieces that target citizens in the internet (Aldé, 2011); and it translates the substantive political debate into slogans. But how do this produced content act as a constituent element of the actions that the organization promotes? Which are the communication strategies that this content point to and how does the MBL deal with the media and discursively construct a way of acting?

Starting with the central issues mentioned above, a double line of research was undertaken, combining qualitative research with content analysis of the group's postings in social media. The article is divided into three topics and one discussion. In the first one, there is a brief review about the main categories used by the literature that deals with collective action theory and political culture on the internet. Then, as contextualization, some considerations are presented from observation of and data collection from social networking sites. Next, quantitative data is presented, resulting from content analysis based on a codebook previously elaborated with sixteen variables, and conducted on a sample of about six hundred images and videos published by the group on Instagram since 2015.

THE “MBL RECIPE”

One of the leaders of the MBL, the singer of Bonde do Rolê, a band from Curitiba, Pedro Ferreira, interviewed by the newspaper Folha de S.Paulo on October 7, 2016, coined the epithet *direita transante* (literally: the Right that have sex) to designate the movement that intended to revolutionize liberal right's aesthetics in Brazil (Reverbel, 2016). Ferreira explained that the MBL was trying to fill a gap in the national political scene, which had a romanticized and militant Left, but an aging and conservative Right. The MBL has, since 2014, occupied the stage as the protagonist of the national political scene, above all in articulating support for the impeachment in street demonstrations. But what exactly defines a *direita transante*?

On December 31, 2015, the article “O grande inimigo da atualidade – e como lutar contra ele” (“the great enemy of the present – and how to fight against it.” Rothbard, 2015), published on the website *Mises Brasil*, advocated the need for

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a charismatic movement, “exciting, dynamic, tenacious and confrontational,” a new face for the Right able to boldly combat and confront social democracy. This new profile is defined as “liberal populism”.

Sent to its own members by the MBL as a mandatory reading, Mises’s book *As seis lições* (Economic Policy, 1979) was translated by the *Instituto Liberal* and edited by the *Instituto Von Mises Brasil*. This line of thought follows a Manichean approach to politics and policy, according to which any government that goes beyond “maintaining order” can be characterized as interventionist; there is no middle ground between socialism and capitalism, and every time a government interferes, it is progressively leading to socialism (Mises, 2009: 56).

The irreverence commonly associated with internet memes and the often polarized debate that marks online political discussions in Brazil have prepared the environment for the marriage between liberal populism and social networks. The emergence of movements that flirt with liberal populism and their appropriations of the internet are diverse. Before proceeding with our analysis, it is fitting to conduct a brief review of collective action and internet studies.

Van Laer and Van Aelst (2009) establish an important difference between internet-supported actions and internet-based actions. This distinction is the focus of much of the literature on the “slack-tivism” (Klang, Madison, 2016). However, rather than performing purely online actions, such as the “*vomitação*” (“big vomit;” Chagas, Santos, 2017), the MBL sees itself as a movement that uses digital media to promote its demonstrations. To do this, it seeks to develop a language to extend the reach of its political positions, generally summarizing the information as much as possible and making it attractive and catchy to citizens in the internet. Thus, it aligns with the phenomenon identified by most scholars since the episodes mentioned earlier.

Castells (2007) calls mass self-communication the scenario that accompanies the emergence of new social movements and individual rebellions. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) and Highfield (2016) address similar circumstances to propose the concept of connective action, which, according to the authors, is fundamentally based on “personal action-frames”. Similarly, Juris (2012) argues for a distinction between what can be conceived as “logic of networking” and “logic of aggregation”. The logic of networking, he argues, is a cultural framework based on collective actors that interact and coordinate their actions, whereas the logic of aggregation presupposes “the assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces” (Juris, 2012: 260).

The literature has highlighted innumerable keys to the understanding of this same phenomenon. Lopes (2016: 340-342) lists four main topics for interpreting what he calls “new social movements”: 1) the transnational character, 2)

the new labor cultures, 3) the hybrid public space, and 4) the emotional aspect of these movements.

In fact, a first important line of studies has investigated the transnational character of some movements and organizations (Bennett; Toft, 2010; Santos, 2015). These studies have drawn attention to the sub-cultural capital of some broadly constructed causes that facilitate the adhesion of different interest groups. Investigations into labor and capital in the digital environment have been the main focus of researchers such as Fuchs (2014). Another approach explored by researchers is regarding social spaces in virtual environments as hybrids. Chadwick (2013) draws attention to the fact that mediality and convergence are usually the starting points when it comes to address hybrid media systems, but the power relations in the political economy of these systems and the ambiguity between what is a public space and what is private are decisive in arguing that these media operate under their own logic. Take for example a platform like Facebook, which, although having more than 2.2 billion active users worldwide, sees itself as private and is highly restricted in its policies of content moderation and transparency.

The fourth issue raised as an inflection point is what Papacharissi (2014) designates as the constitution of affective publics in politics. The affective turn (Barnes, 2018; Papacharissi, 2014) provided a kind of epistemological revision of political theory in favor of prioritizing the role of emotions in group formation.

There are still other possible approaches to these movements' interpretation. One of them concerns the character of political jokes (Bennett, 1979; Chagas, 2017), by which political manifestations, usually serious and grave performances, are transformed into a playful representation, staged in a ludic and ironic manner. In this respect, it is worth highlighting the role of internet memes in the MBL's communication strategy. In recent years, studies on memes have gained momentum: Chagas (2018), Chagas et al. (2017), Milner (2016), Miltner (2011), Shifman (2014) and others. Much of this impulse goes back to the epistemological turn of the concept, a result of its appropriation by internet users, who gave it a new meaning, different from the one originally developed by Richard Dawkins (1976) and further elaborated by authors such as Blackmore (1999) and Dennett (1995). Over the last fifteen years, internet memes have come to be read as a media genre (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007) and have been associated with online dissemination of user-generated content (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013, Shifman, 2016). According to this reading, memes can be understood as technical resources, but also as repertoires of collective action (Santos, Chagas, 2017) for interest groups and emerging social movements, such as Occupy, *Indignados* and the others.

In general, however, the first batch of studies on these movements remained enthusiastic about the subversive and progressive character of some of the actions due to their criticism of the oppressions of contemporary democratic (and those not that democratic) regimes.

A close observation of the phenomenon, however, has recently led some researchers (Nagle, 2017) to note the emergence of extreme right-wing movements that have been using a very similar approach. In Brazil, the rise of networks linking webpages in support of police actions in which *bandits* are killed and the valorization of the military and the support for politicians such as Jair Bolsonaro (Santos, Cunha, 2014) confirm the relevance of this perspective.

Ingredients such as the affective character of the campaigns, the inventive use of public space and social media for expressing demands, the political narcissism and even the transnational bias, expressed by the fact that many of these groups have foreign financiers and counterparts in other countries, are present in articulated groups of liberal populist tendency, like MBL. Moreover, the organizational model that relies on an institution without fixed headquarters and with only a small professional staff is also the same.

With content production teams for social media, specialized audiovisual professionals and financial support of entrepreneurs and party machines, campaigns conducted by groups such as MBL are in reality far from nonpartisan actions based on popular sentiment and from the “MBL formula” as described by Kim Kataguri, according to which the movement is only the result of the coming together of a *funkeiro* (a funk artist), a filmmaker, a programmer, a political articulator and *meme-makers* (Albuquerque, 2017). To avoid this kind of criticism, the MBL, which originally defined itself as “*apartidário*” (non-partisan) and without financial connection with political organizations, came to be described as *suprapartidário* (above parties), insisting in the discourse that it is a popular movement³. The *direita transante*, therefore, is also a transiting right: it appropriates organizational models of collective action and practices that have characterized emerging social movements to rekindle a liberal and conservative populist ideology. But how does this happens from an empirical point of view?

To better understand the performance of MBL in networks, we tested the following research hypotheses:

- (H1) The MBL bases its organizational model on a constant appeal to citizens’ engagement in the network, adopting a cynical view of politics. This view antagonizes politicians in general, placing the movement itself as the sole holder of the truth.
- (H2) The MBL focuses on channels of direct interaction with its supporters, in the face of a critical media and its portrayal of the movement.

³ Lopes e Segalla (2016).

- (H3) The content produced and shared by MBL in its social media channels - notably in Instagram - seek to encourage personal and personalized narratives about politics (“I overthrew the PT”), what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call “personal action frames”, one of the most often used strategies in connective actions.
- (H4) This content reflects a positive liberal agenda in the sense of Isaiah Berlin (2002), that is, it emphasizes the freedom of self-determination of the individual and values the action of organized civil society through interest groups endeavoring to influence the State.
- (H5) Finally, MBL’s communication strategy is more evident in Instagram than in other social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, due to the platform’s affordances and the established discursive coherence. In Instagram, the MBL appropriates typical elements of the internet memes language and its parts modulate different functions attributed to political memes, notably the public discussion memes (Chagas, 2016; Chagas et al., 2017), which are characterized by inconsequential humor and by constant references to pop culture and the entertainment world, to the detriment of an in-depth political message.

With H3 and H4, we also sought to evaluate the place occupied by MBL in the spectrum of collective actions conducted within the internet. The two variables (political action narrative and political agenda) make up a model of analysis that aims to identify the discursive and strategic positioning of these actors and establish possible comparisons with other groups of interest acting politically in social media. Understanding where MBL is situated in this context is, therefore, the first step to recognize the role played by movements with a similar ideological point of view and/or political action in the internet.

“DON’T BE A COUCH HATER”⁴

While its action strategies have made it notable in recent months, MBL’s organizational and funding models remain reasonably opaque to the eyes of the public. Even to its members, funders of the movement, little information is given, except as a reward for donations through gifts and access to exclusive forums.

The following considerations include data collected between the first half of 2016 and the first half of 2018 by undergraduate researchers affiliated with the MBL for academic purposes. The information obtained by these researchers, whose identity is deliberately preserved here, is fundamentally derived from non-participant observation in exclusive discussion forums for associate members, debates held in online groups and tracking of blog postings, YouTube

⁴The quote was taken from a video screened at the 3rd MBL Congress, which asked for financial support. More detail in the news report of Carla Castellotti (2017).



videos and private conversations in Whatsapp. The analysis is also collated with information obtained from journalistic reports on MBL by different traditional media vehicles. For ease of understanding, this contextualization was divided into three different sections: a historical contextualization of the movement, a discussion of its organizational-economic model and an analytical mapping of its associative-organizational model.

a) History

MBL was being developed in social media, although with an inexpressive reach, since mid-2013. First employed as a trial balloon, the page of the movement on Facebook was discontinued after the first series of protests and was resumed only in the election campaign's final stretch, during the second round between Dilma Rousseff and Aécio Neves. The institutional origin of the movement, however, goes back to November 2014, in the heat of the demonstrations against the re-election of Rousseff.

Juliano Torres, executive director of *Estudantes pela Liberdade*, says that the MBL functions as a sort of "trade name" for members to participate in protests (Amaral, 2015). EPL's alliance with MBL is motivated by foreign financing rules, following US law, that forbid beneficiaries from participating in political demonstrations.

The EPL is an organization created in 2010 and allegedly has no formal ties with the US non-governmental organization Students for Liberty (SFL), funded by the Charles Koch Institute and the Atlas Network. At the impeachment rallies in March 2015, however, Atlas Network president Alejandro Chafuen was received by MBL members to commemorate "the success of Atlas partners in Brazil," posting photos with Fábio Ostermann on social networks (Amaral, 2015). SFL has a Brazilian branch, Students for Liberty Brasil since 2012, but declares not having any ties with the EPL. MBL also includes members of the Renova Vinhedo group, aimed at promoting debates "inspired by libertarian ideas."

At that time MBL's militancy failed in its efforts to launch the ultraliberal party *Líber* and began to invest massively in a model of campaigns and political actions conducted in the internet, with emphasis on aesthetic elements of the language of games and memes, anonymous forums (chans), op pieces with a corrosive humor and coarse montages associated with pop culture references – such as images and video clips of state Rep. Paulo Batista (PRP-SP), which showed the candidate as a superhero, throwing privatizing lightning bolts by the eyes. The movement gains importance for its support for Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, promoting street demonstrations in São Paulo with thousands

of people, and for the March for Freedom, which culminated in a meeting with the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, a key player in conducting the impeachment proceedings.

Although the MBL is certainly part of a dynamic that transcends national boundaries, its guidelines have been realigned after Dilma Rousseff and the Workers' Party were no longer in power. From that moment on, the movement has no longer prioritized fighting corruption and, given the low public support for the privatization agenda, it started focusing on issues related to minorities' representation, education and moral values, aligning itself with the *Escola sem Partido* (Non-Partisan School) program and other conservative groups that stand against the feminist and LGBTQ movements. The provocative style and the jovial and popular language of the movement are crucial in MBL's communication strategies and are also reflected in the group's organizational and economic sustainability model.

b) Economic-organizational model

MBL is a self-proclaimed non-partisan movement, having no registration as a legal entity. It is legally represented by another entity, the *Movimento Renovação Liberal* (Liberal Renewal Movement), a non-profit civil association registered by four partners, three of them siblings of the Santos family - among them Renan Santos, one of the MBL's main leaders. In an institutional response to the newspaper *El País*, MBL stated that "the *Movimento Renovação Liberal* provides formal support to MBL, for example in relation to event promotion, having even registered in the INPI and ceded the use of the MBL brand."⁵

⁵ *El País Brasil* (Renovação..., 2017).

What has been confirmed so far is that the organization conduct fundraising campaigns not only among its affiliates, but also with partners, among which are foreign entities and Brazilian political parties or their affiliated organizations, such as the *Democratas* and the *Juventude PSDB* (PSDB Youth). Some of its members have received training and financial support from institutions such as the Atlas Network through the Atlas Leadership Academy program, which supports EPL⁶.

⁶ Atlas Network (Students..., 2015).

Little or almost nothing, however, is known about the amount raised and how resources are used. The MBL states that "as a private entity, we do not disclose our financial statement, respecting the privacy and integrity of our employees, members and donors" (Renovação..., 2017).

Piauí magazine found out that, between August and September 2017, the MBL received 37 credit card donations just in one WhatsApp group, reaching a monthly figure of R\$ 8,500 (Abbud, 2017). Moreover, the same group raised

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mileage program donations, which in just one day surpassed 400,000 miles, equivalent to approximately R\$ 28,000 as priced at the time. Extemporaneous donations are also recorded, sometimes reaching more than R\$ 15,000 from a single donor.

The group has also conducted crowdfunding campaigns. In 2015, in order to defray the expenses of a series of demonstrations that became known as the March for Freedom, Kim Kataguri created a profile on the *Kickante* platform, setting a goal of raising R\$ 20,000. At the end of the campaign, more than R\$ 59,000 was donated by 437 supporters⁷.

The organization has different membership and monthly contribution levels, associated to different exclusivity levels within its ranks, which is similar to models of incentives typical of traditional collective actions. By joining the most basic level, the contribution of R\$ 30 a month grants the member access to “exclusive content” of the group and the nickname “CIA agent.” With R\$ 100 a month, in addition to the exclusive content, participation in the MBL annual congress is ensured, and the partner ascends to the “Koch brothers” stage – an ironical allusion to accusations that it is funded by the Koch family, oil industry entrepreneurs interested in the Brazilian pre-salt oil. The next level is the “invisible hand”, obtained with a contribution of R\$ 250 per month, which rewards the partner with an “MBL annual product kit,” in addition to other benefits⁸. The upper levels are the “exterminator of *pelegos* (bootlickers)” (R\$ 500/month), the “steamroller” (R\$ 1,000/month), “privatize all of it” (R\$ 5,000/month) and “I am the 1%” (R\$ 10,000/month) complete the scale, which uses an ironic language, appropriating accusations regarding the origin of its financing.

The exclusive content are videos uploaded to WhatsApp private channels, news summaries and comments sent to an affiliate mailing list and access to online forums, most of these, such as the *Comunidade MBL*, are not very popular, by the way. Several topics – such as “global warming: hoax or big problem?”, “elections for president and deputies” and “Doria or Bolsonaro?” – are internally discussed among militants separately from debates around public postings on social networks, such as Facebook. But participation in public access channels, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, is evidently more intense. In WhatsApp, the group chose to establish a more distant relationship with the majority of its members, using it as a news channel only. Known sources of revenue include the sale of T-shirts, books and various items (socks, towels, mugs and *pixuleco* toys), with prices between R\$ 25 and R\$ 69. Slogans stamped on them, such as “I defeated the PT” and “*isentão* [impartial] are the others” reinforce personal action frames and function as modular speeches, adaptable to each individual supporter’s context. The soundbites allow the homogenization

⁷ Campaign data is available at *Kickante*: <<http://bit.ly/2CIBVoW>>. Access on: February 26, 2018.

⁸ The rewards are constantly updated. MBL has already offered membership cards and even an associate’s dinner with its leadership. Monthly payments are made via PayPal.

of interpretations of everyday facts and are made for being appropriated by the militancy.

MBL's communication and organization raise various questions about *political action in social networks*, with new modes of internet-supported collective action and political organization – according to the category introduced by Van Laer and Van Aelst (2009) – and *political expression in social networks* – despite the emphasis on models of connective action and personal action and self-expression frames, from the sharing of personal and personalized narratives by followers. In this perspective, the movement seems to be more interested in identity construction than in articulating collective interests. The actions promoted by the MBL, while being a hybrid mix of traditional collective action and connective action, remain anchored in the group's institutional voice, using its agendas to guide its followers' desires. An evidence of this is the way the movement organizes itself as a network of social network militancy.

c) Associative-organizational model

Present in 24 Brazilian states and 170 municipalities, the MBL, during 2016's elections, helped elect seven city councilors and six deputy-councilors in various cities. Fernando Holiday, affiliated to the *Democratas* (DEM), was the youngest councilman elected in the city of São Paulo, having received 48,055 votes. The numbers reflect the entry of the movement in the political-institutional scenario after its actions during the impeachment proceedings; but this accomplishment is not homogeneously distributed throughout Brazil. And in the internet, it is no different.

Just in Facebook, there are 199 pages related to the name “MBL,” which are both national and regional. Even when subtracting the roughly ten pages that involve parodies – such as *Movimento Brasil Livre do MBL* (Brazil free of MBL movement) and *MBL – Movimento Bandidos Livres* (MBL – free bandits movement) – and others unrelated to the group, the network associated with the movement is quite consistent. The data extracted from the software Facepager shows that the extension of this network goes well beyond the 199 initial pages. In addition to the nodes that have MBL in their name, such as *MBL - Movimento Brasil Livre*, *MBL – São Paulo*, *Movimento Brasil Livre – Paraná* and *MBL Movimento Brasil Livre – Minas Gerais*, among others, there are other dozens of pages related to their main leaders: Kim Kataguirí (MBL co-founder and coordinator and a *Democratas*-SP elected federal deputy), Fernando Holiday (MBL national coordinator and councilman in São Paulo), Marcel van Hattem (MBL co-founder and Progressive Party (PP-RS) state deputy), Paulo Eduardo



Martins (MBL member and Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB-PR) federal deputy), Fábio Ostermann (MBL member and PSL-RS candidate for mayor of Porto Alegre), *Mamãe Falei* (Arthur do Val's YouTube channel, a MBL member and *Democratas* (DEM-SP) state deputy elected) etc.

Among those that have MBL in their name, 166 pages are related to MBL's state or municipal branches, indicating that practically all the local sections have their institutional channel. São Paulo (59), Rio de Janeiro (17), Paraná (14), Minas Gerais (12) and Bahia (10) are the states with the largest number of fan pages, with an expressive concentration in the Southeast region (91 pages in total), followed by the South (32), Northeast (20), North (12) and Central-west (11) regions.

To understand the relative power of the actors within this network of pages, however, it is necessary to identify how they relate with each other. We identified 700 connections (pages *following* other pages), and 229 of those connections involve MBL fan pages following each other. The largest hubs are *MBL – Movimento Brasil Livre* (followed by 52 pages), *MBL – São Paulo* (followed by 12) and *Movimento Brasil Livre – Paraná* (8). Of the 104 MBL pages that have followers among other pages of the group, 71 have only one follower, pointing to a strong concentration around a few central pages.

The city and the state of São Paulo clearly are the main hub of the movement, in social media and beyond. The national headquarters and the annual congresses, always in November, are held in the state. Since 2017, the MBL state sections have been organizing local conferences, but it is at national meetings that the organization usually reinforces its agenda. The 3rd Congress, in 2017, gathered 800 participants and about 50 speakers (Castellotti, 2017).

On these occasions, the group establishes its programmatic guidelines for areas such as economics, health, education, transportation and justice, and its proposals for political reform⁹. The existence of a set of proposals approved in plenary contrasts with the model based on personal action frames as the main strategy for grassroots debate. MBL is, therefore, essentially a hybrid collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), even though it portrays itself as an emergent and connective movement by its most engaged militants.

“I DEFEATED PT”

MBL has about 671,000 followers on Instagram, 330,000 on Twitter and 1.3 million subscribers to its YouTube channel. Not much compared to more than 3.2 million Facebook followers, among militants and sympathizers of the movement and the merely curious, eager for information on the group's actions

⁹The proposals may be read at <http://bit.ly/2osiYlQ>. Access on: Feb. 26, 2018.

and campaigns. It is not only the numerical disparity in the audiences of each of these platforms – naturally proportional to their user base in each country – but, above all, their affordances that allow us to see the its Facebook institutional fanpage as a loose information space that fluctuates between disseminating content produced by MBL or its followers and the sharing of links deemed to be of interest to their supporters. The links usually are for vehicles accredited by MBL itself, such as blogs like *Ceticismo Político* (Political Skepticism), *Diário Nacional* (National Diary) and *O Reacionário* (The Reactionary), and include as an appendix a brief comment reinforcing programmatic positions or making an ironic statement about the subject of their criticisms. A similar strategy has been adopted on Twitter. It is on Instagram and YouTube that the content produced by MBL's own communication team is more prominent.

Instagram is usually used for image publishing and has been notable for three features: first, the ease of sharing images from mobile devices, such as smartphones, has helped disseminate popular genres of user-generated content; secondly, Instagram's audience is seen as more qualified, since a number of celebrities and opinion makers have migrated their portfolios and fan interaction from Facebook and Twitter to Instagram; finally, part of this expectation is also based on platform affordances, since by focusing on image-sharing Instagram reduces the exchange of arguments, generating the false impression that the audience is less polarized or radicalized there. In addition to this, the requirement that the image or audiovisual content must be the main focus of the post leads to the development of a language specific to the platform, in which, on many occasions, text comments on events are inserted into photos or videos, making them, more often than not, self-sufficient content.

Therefore, evaluating the MBL postings on Instagram means to get in direct contact with the group's imagery and audiovisual rhetoric, which, in turn, enables a clear assessment of not only its ideology, but, in particular, its social media communication strategies. Understanding how the MBL acts and builds its narratives, how it deals with the media and how it relates to the various political-partisan groups is a fundamental step to better comprehend what the movement intends to be and how it wishes to be seen.

Content analysis is an important tool for our investigation. More than a semiological interpretation of the images or an appreciation of their formal aspects, such as analyzing cuts and camera plane and angle, as suggested by multimodal framework (Rizzotto, Prudêncio, Sampaio, Wosniak, Lück, Wessler, 2014), in the hope of overcoming the limitations of the discursive model of framework analysis, we sought to delineate, using categorical variables defined after previous contact with the corpus, questions concerning



the group's organizational model, based on what the literature has been calling connective action.

The contents analyzed were collected from Instagram on January 25, 2018, one day after the second-instance trial of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva by the Federal Regional Court of the 4th Region (TRF-4), so that the set could include MBL activists' postings about the episode. The integral corpus includes 1,377 pieces of content, among images and videos, posted between July 2015, when the account was created, and January 2018. There are, therefore, two and a half years of postings on the platform, covering the whole impeachment period of the president Dilma Rousseff, the municipal elections of João Doria Jr. in São Paulo and various demonstrations, such as those against the "Queermuseu" exhibition at Santander Cultural and the Senate voting of the draft bill regulating transport apps.

Next, in order to carry out a more detailed analysis of each audiovisual product, we chose a sampling with 95% confidence level and 3% margin of error. Random sampling allows a longitudinal understanding of the movement's posting history, without obscuring the impeachment's historical conjuncture. The final corpus resulted in 602 images and video clips randomly selected using the Stata software's sample command. The contents were coded with sixteen categorical variables, described in the codebook adopted for this research¹⁰. All variables were tested for reliability by randomly selecting about one tenth of the content items for categorization by two coders. In all cases, agreement percentages were higher than 88%, with Cohen's kappa and Krippendorff's alpha coefficients above 0.703 and 0.705, respectively.

¹⁰ Available at <<https://bit.ly/2z9UEgt>>. Access on: Nov. 29, 2018.

a) Political action variables

The political action variables included (I) the political action narrative and (II) the political agenda expressed by the images posted by the MBL in Instagram. The goal with (I) was to measure whether the content reflects or encourages a personal experience or narrative or whether it reflects or encourages a collective or public narrative or experience. Images or subtitles that emphasized a single political actor as responsible for a scenario or who worked on a second-person advertising language (you...) were classified as personal narratives, as opposed to content that emphasized public authorities' decisions (Government, Chamber of Deputies, Federal Supreme Court...).

The variable (II) sought to measure whether the content stimulates a positive agenda emphasizing individual self-determination and a political agenda that favors the individual and civil society over the state or, alternatively, stimulates

a negative, regulatory agenda favoring the State over the individual. In some cases, as with images containing only the MBL logo and the like, it was not possible to identify a narrative or agenda, which is why we chose to mark both variables as neutral.

The results were as follows:

TABLE 1 – Political action narrative

Political action narrative	Frequency	Percentage
Private or personal narrative	397	65.8%
Colective or public narrative	157	26.1%
Not applicable	49	8.1%

Source: The authors

TABLE 2 – Political agenda

Political agenda	Frequency	Percentage
Negative agenda	308	51.2%
Positive agenda	245	40.7%
Not applicable	49	8.1%

Source: The authors

In terms of co-occurrences, there is a clear focus on private narratives related to negative agendas (for example, judicial decisions against Lula, Dilma's impeachment vote), followed by private narratives related to positive agendas (eg, MBL initiatives by Kataguiri or Holiday, mentions to João Dória Jr.). Table 3 presents these results.

TABLE 3 – Co-occurrence of narratives and political agendas

	Negative agenda	Positive agenda
Personal narrative	216	180
Colective narrative	92	65

Source: The authors

b) Campaign and metacampaign variables

The next step was to try to identify rhetoric aspects of the postings. The variables were all dummies and evaluated if the content presented: (III) the organization's programmatic proposals or guidelines; (IV) external scenes of street demonstrations, protests or actions; (V) backstage scenes or photographs of the MBL team; (VI) screenshots of image or audiovisual editing software, showing graphic content in the production phase; (VII) explicit appeal to engagement,



request for vote and call for demonstration; (VIII) explicit appeal to interaction with the user and request to like, share, comment or subscribe content or channels indicated by the organization; and (IX) dissemination of the agenda of demonstrations, debates and congresses or simply publicizing of candidates supported by the organization.

Naturally, (IV), (V) and (VI) were included after initial contact with the corpus. Although the results are not expressive, the sum of these percentages shows that the MBLs communication strategy recurrently exhibits daily engagement activities such as the team working in the office, the production of social media content or MBL members in street scenes together with other demonstrators.

Contrary to our initial expectations, among the images posted in Instagram by MBL there are relatively few calls to interaction – proportionately, half of the content appeals to user engagement. There is also, as expected, little incidence of effective dissemination of programmatic proposals by the group. Most of the time, these proposals appear in the form of a list of MBL guidelines or an excessively didactic video arguing, for example, for privatization. The rest is what could be treated as episodic political framing.

TABLE 4 – Campaign and metacampaign

	Proposals		Demonstration scene		Backstage		Screen capture		Appeal to engagement		Appeal to interaction		Dissemination of agenda	
Yes	51	8.5%	45	7.5%	41	6.8%	8	1.3%	70	11.6%	40	6.6%	65	10.8%
No	551	91.5%	557	92.5%	561	93.2%	594	98.7%	532	88.4%	562	93.4%	537	89.2%

Source: The authors

We can also observe that 48.8% (N = 20) of the items showing backstage images and 87.5% (N = 7) of those showing screen captures appear in the first sixth of the sample, that is, correspond to the first postings on the organization’s account. It is an indication that the language used has been adapted over time. In fact, a qualitative evaluation of the images points to a professionalization of post production between 2015 and 2018.

c) Content and language variables

The following variables seek to identify formats, framings and languages of the content posted by MBL in Instagram. First, we identified that videos are 15% (N = 90) of the posted content. Although images are prevalent in three quarters of the items, small video clips are common, especially considering

that the audiovisual materials required vignettes, subtitles, transition effects and soundtrack.

Regarding framing issues, we sought to assess MBL’s position on the media and politicians. We observed that the organization is usually critical of politicians, especially Dilma, Lula, Gleisi Hoffmann, Nicolás Maduro and, to a lesser extent, Guilherme Boulos and Ciro Gomes. Except for Trump, MBL support is provided only to allied candidates or members of the organization itself. Among the former, we highlight the case of João Dória Jr., who was firstly framed as a candidate supported by the movement, but came to be considered an adversary from the moment he diverged from the position of the MBL on the project of regulating applications such as Uber.

With regard to the media, the MBL, surprisingly, more replicates than it contests its news stories. This is due to the use, in the corpus, of press headlines that support the organization’s positions. The adversarial tone in relation to the media, however, when identified, is more explicit and incisive.

It was also curious to realize that, in these occasions, the MBL often seeks to take the place of news source. There are several postings in which the images are subtitled like a journalistic scoop (“Urgent!”). These cases have been documented and stimulate reflection on how the organization positions itself before its followers as a group that has the latest and most reliable information.

TABLE 5 – Frames

	Relation with politicians		Relation with the media	
Critical/adversarial	166	27.6%	18	3.0%
Support/alliance	46	7.6%	25	4.2%
Not applicable	378	62.8%	577	92.5%
Ambiguous	12	2.0%	2	0.3%

Source: The authors

TABLE 6 – MBL as a news source

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	55	9.1%
No	547	90.9%

Source: The authors

In order to evaluate the MBL appropriation of the language of internet memes in its Instagram postings, we used three other variables. The first one tried to measure whether the content made any reference to a specific meme,

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meme character or soundbite. In 10.8% of the cases (N = 65), the images shared by MBL make reference to specific meme characters or meme families (see table of images below). There are an impressive number of images containing a recurring artifact in *chans*, the dark glasses known as *deal with it* or *turn down for what*. The dark glasses are a piece that characterizes, ironically, that certain actor has prevailed over someone. The MBL repeatedly uses the glasses as an award given to their idols - among them, for example, Sergio Moro, Eduardo Bolsonaro, Ives Gandra Filho, João Doria Jr. and Kim Kataguiri.

In addition to the references to known internet memes, there is a constant appropriation of specific formats. The main formats found included image macros (7.3%, N = 44), exploitables (7.0%, N = 42) and reaction faces (3.2%, N = 19). Macros are images with overlapping subtitles, a rather recurrent internet meme format, betting on the suspense between the images' top and bottom captions, with expectations contradicted by non-verbal representation in the background. Exploitables are montages that superimpose one image to another, often modifying the face of characters or adding certain elements (such as the *turn down for what* glasses). Reaction faces are images of characters or actors, usually taken from movie frames or television shows, showing specific reactions – laughing, crying... – to a particular statement.

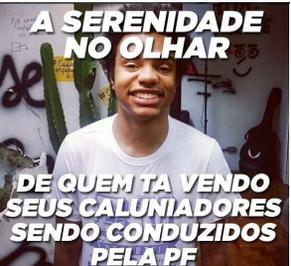
		
<p>Online political poster</p>	<p>Macro</p>	<p>Shop advertising</p>

FIGURE 1 – Persuasive memes

Source: The authors

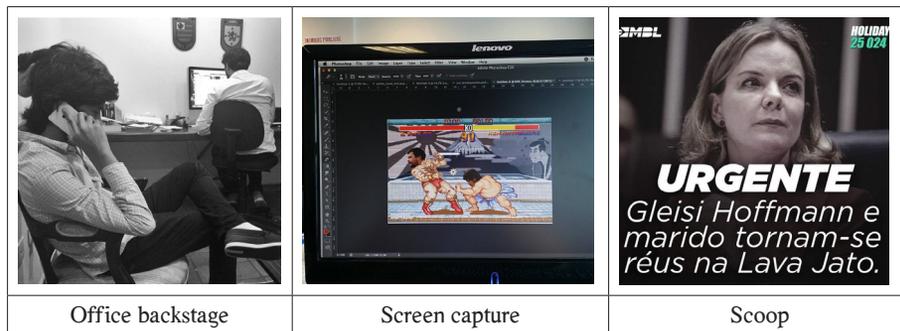


FIGURE 2 – Grassroots action memes

Source: The authors

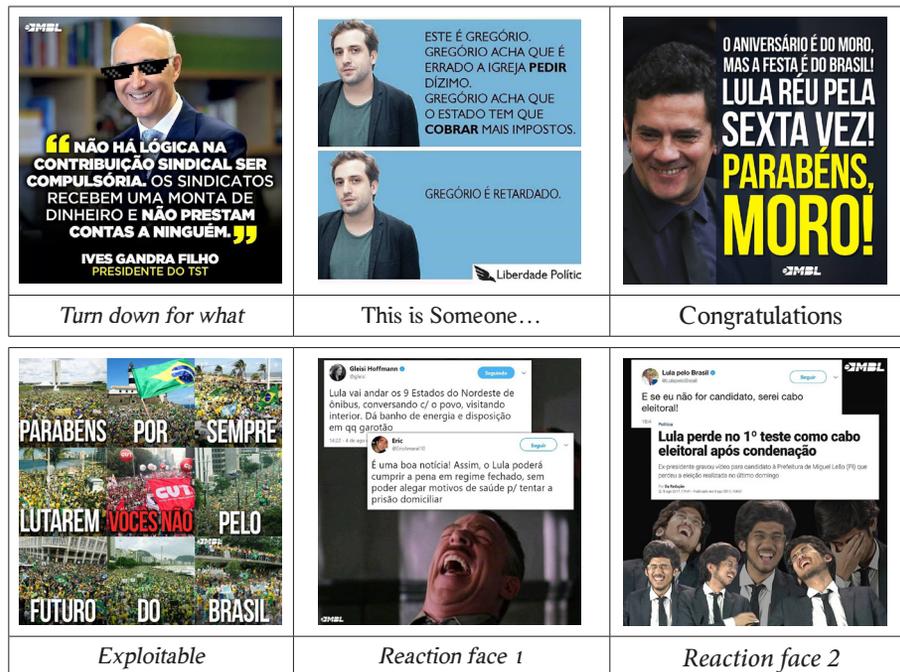


FIGURE 3 – Public discussion memes

Source: The authors

Finally, to test the hypothesis that the meme language is often appropriated by MBL, we decided to find out what functions the group's postings have in its communication strategy. Adopting the categories created by Shifman (2014) and developed by Chagas et al. (2017), which divide the memes in persuasive, grassroots action and public discussion, a strong predominance of the first type



was identified, indicating that MBL prefers to communicate using an advertising approach, with content produced specifically for social media. They are mostly *online political posters* (OPP), that is, “political images that are designed to be shared over digital social networks. They are widely used by a diverse range of political organizations including minor and mainstream political parties in many countries.” (Lee, Campbell, 2016: 314).

Table 7 – Genres and functions of memes

Persuasive memes		Grassroots action memes		Public discussion memes		Other	
356	59.1%	109	18.1%	117	19.4%	20	3.4%

Source: The authors

Many of the posters relate to a system of alliances that the MBL tries to gather around itself. These are images that show direct quotations from politicians and businessmen – such as Flávio Rocha, owner of the Riachuelo chain of department stores – comments on decisions of judges or explicit statements of support for initiatives of individual deputies and senators – such as Ronaldo Caiado (DEM-GO) and Rogério Marinho (PSDB-RN). Usually showing greetings such as *Congratulations!* or *Thank you!*, these pieces reinforce the personalized character of the MBL’s political narrative. It is worth noting the recurrence of images congratulating Michel Temer’s administration and, when critical, they include members of other parties, in order to mitigate their gravity. The exceptions are postings that compare the liberal sphere of São Paulo to the federal sphere.

Next, we intend to discuss the results obtained from the hypotheses established for this step of the research.

¹¹“Goodbye, darling” (Adeus, querida) was a popular slogan in rallies favorable to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff.

“GOODBYE, DARLING”¹¹

Returning to the hypotheses presented in the introduction of this article, we observe that some of the data collected corroborate the initial perception. However, there are also hypotheses only partially confirmed or rejected by the results as presented.

With respect to H1, for example, the MBL in fact bases its organizational model on an appeal to citizens’ engagement in the network. This appeal, however, is usually made not directly and explicitly through the posting of audiovisual pieces – of which only 11.6% ask for the support and contribution of supporters – but mostly relate to the management and sustainability model of the group, which relies on spontaneous contributions and, based on them, defines a system of rewards for supporters. The language permeated by references to internet

memes and pop culture elements also helps in this dialogue. And, no doubt, whenever it comments on the political scene, the MBL reinforces a cynical and adversarial position (Table 5), even using as a slogan the motto “against everything and against everyone”.

Regarding H2, the data are not conclusive enough. We expected to find a greater appeal to interactions (Table 4) with the followers of the group. It is possible that MBL is taking advantage of other channels to reinforce this interaction, such as Facebook, which gathers the largest audience. What is certain is that the group maintains a position, in most cases, of alliance of convenience with the press, referring to the news whenever necessary to corroborate its arguments and criticizing it only in cases in which it is directly criticized or when journalists stand explicitly against the *anti-petista* (anti-Worker’s Party) and pro-impeachment crusade conducted by the group. The vehicles most often mentioned include newspapers such as *Folha* and *Estadão*. But it is also possible to observe qualitatively that, from a certain moment, the criticism of the group led to a repositioning. From then on, the MBL began to fight fake news and alternate between moments in which it acts like commentator and camera of resonance of certain events and those in which it acts like a news source.

With regard to H3 and H4, we can observe that, in fact, the movement uses a narrative that favors personal action frames (Table 1); but the liberal agenda pursued by the group is, in most cases, regulatory, insisting that the State should punish Workers’ Party members. Contrary to what we supposed, the MBL does not give any prominence to the role of civil society or accountability issues. Its position is, in reality, that of a privileged spectator, publicly cheering its idols’ victories.

In the case of H5, also unlike what we supposed, MBL does not invest so emphatically in internet meme humor. In fact, a good part of its postings are more sober than playful, although always jovial. This is evident when one observes that most of the images have characteristics of persuasive memes and online political posters (59.1%, see Table 7), and not specifically of public discussion memes, which, according to Chagas et al. al. (2017), are more interested in comic effect. Still, it cannot be denied that the use of irony and satire remains constant, even when the pieces do not resort to nonsense humor or breach of expectations.

The use of standard meme formats and specific elements of meme language attest to the group’s political affinities. Who is treated as an idol getting the *turned down for what* glasses and why? Considering the recurrence of captions and quotation, who are the actors who have a voice and what do they say? Because



we are dealing with a predominantly imagistic or audiovisual logic, content analysis with directed categories is not always able to assess, with the necessary nuances, the strategies adopted by a given actor. Here, however, an ethnographic approach was able ensure greater accuracy in our analysis.

One of the main results of this step of our research is finding that the MBL occupies a quadrant perhaps diametrically opposed to the collective action model usually adopted by social movements. Instead of a collectivist discourse and reinforcement of trust in institutions, we observe an emphasis on the role of the individual as the protagonist of politics. Still, instead of an agenda centered on civil society pressuring the state, there is an appeal for the State to play a regulatory and watchdog role. An assessment of this framework needs to be further developed in order to understand what effectively defines a *direita transante*. ■

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