

A person with curly hair is seen from the back, holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a green WhatsApp icon. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a train station.

**WhatsApp** as a Tool for News:

Lessons from

**Brazil's 2018 Election**

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Photo: rawpixel on Unsplash

# Lessons from Brazil's 2018 election on WhatsApp as a tool for news

Report by Sérgio Spagnuolo, journalist and ICFJ TruthBuzz Fellow\*

## Summary

In the middle of political campaigns leading to Brazil's general election in 2018, the analysis on the use of WhatsApp in the country exposed how difficult it is for news organizations to use the messaging platform for broadcasting their content. Spam, rumors and false information spread widely, while news outlets were severely limited in their ability to share credible information directly through that channel. This ability is important, as WhatsApp has evolved from a personal messaging platform to an important source for news for one-quarter of Brazilian internet users. WhatsApp has developed some tools to support businesses that want to use the platform, but these do not serve the needs of news outlets and their audiences. I call for more collaboration between WhatsApp and journalists to make it easier to distribute news from reliable news outlets. I think this can improve the quality of conversations on the platforms, shifting attention from spam, rumors and misinformation to facts and credible information.

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## **Brazil 2018: An imbalance between information and misinformation on WhatsApp**

WhatsApp played an important part in the recent national elections in Brazil, becoming [almost as big a story](#) as the election results themselves.

*Roughly 66 percent of the Brazilian population is online, and about 90 percent of them use WhatsApp, giving any campaign a huge digital audience. Brazil's digital environment, however, has also created fertile ground for innovative strategies to spread polarizing content with the intent of manipulating public debate.<sup>1</sup>*

As WhatsApp has grown to become the predominant messaging app in Brazil, it also has become a black hole of information sharing, meaning that people simply don't know what happens within this platform. (In contrast, it is possible to know what happens in most of Facebook<sup>2</sup>, Twitter or Instagram.) Disinformation is widespread on WhatsApp, especially in groups. It spreads quickly through spontaneous sharing -- that is, people willingly sharing information, not bots or other automated means. This might happen because of political bias, lack of knowledge, malice or simply because the false information sounds interesting or fun. Serious news headlines often find it hard to compete.

While false information was spreading through personal and family networks on WhatsApp during the elections, news outlets had only limited ability to counter that information with credible news and information. These limits are understandable given the platform's design as a personal messaging tool, but this lack of access resulted in an imbalance between misinformation and information. The platform design has created unintended consequences, much like Facebook, which first started<sup>3</sup> as a social network resource for Harvard students and grew to be much, much more.

### **WhatsApp is no longer just a messaging platform, but an important platform for news for many people in Brazil.**

- The survey<sup>4</sup> of 6,030 Brazilians before the election found:

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cfr.org/blog/whatsapps-influence-brazilian-election-and-how-it-helped-jair-bolsonaro-win](http://www.cfr.org/blog/whatsapps-influence-brazilian-election-and-how-it-helped-jair-bolsonaro-win)

<sup>2</sup> Facebook closed groups can also be hard to track and analyze.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Facebook>

<sup>4</sup> <https://ijnet.org/en/story/brazil-1-4-internet-users-regularly-get-news-whatsapp>

- One in four internet users in Brazil use WhatsApp weekly as a source of news, but 84% of them said they do not trust the news from the platform most of the time.<sup>5</sup>
- The analysis of 331 open WhatsApp groups showed how Brazilians use WhatsApp to discuss political news:<sup>6</sup>
  - The most active 20 groups generated two-thirds of the messages, with an average of 6,042 messages per group (median 4,688 messages). I classified these 20 groups as discussion groups. Most were related to politics. These groups were hot pockets of political debate.
  - Users of WhatsApp also share news-related links. The research identified that, from the 11,455 unique links shared in the sample groups during the analyzed period, half of those links (5,704) directed users to content from media outlets, on the outlet websites and social media posts.
  - WhatsApp is also an important vector for misinformation, rumors and spam content.

The research identified that, from the 11,455 unique links shared in the sample groups during the analyzed period, a sizeable portion (around 50%) of those links were spam URLs, such as invitations to download an app or purchase a product; a small percentage (less than 1%) were from websites unrelated to media<sup>7</sup>, such as the website for Brazil’s election court.

**WhatsApp has developed some tools to support businesses that want to use the platform, but these do not serve the needs of news outlets and their audiences.**

WhatsApp does not currently have any tools designed for the needs of news outlets wishing to deliver credible news and information through the platform to large audiences. News outlets use the same tools available to other commercial enterprises, including the WhatsApp Business platform. WhatsApp Business was built for small businesses, as WhatsApp describes on its website:

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<sup>5</sup> The survey was funded by ICFJ’s TruthBuzz program, and conducted shortly before the 2018 Brazilian elections, in October.

<sup>6</sup> See “Methodology” section on page 8

<sup>7</sup> I considered shortened URL, such as from Bitly, to be media links

*WhatsApp Business is an Android app which is free to download and was built with the small business owner in mind. With the app, businesses can interact with customers easily by using tools to automate, sort, and quickly respond to messages.*<sup>8</sup>

The WhatsApp Business platform does provide some tools for publishing updates to groups of users, but it has severe limitations as a tool for mass distribution of news and information. News outlets can invite WhatsApp users to subscribe to updates, but there are no automated tools to support adding subscribers at scale. Publishers must add users one by one. While this may work for small businesses reaching out to a limited number of customers or clients, it does not support the needs of news outlets. The free version of WhatsApp Business, despite some features it provides, such as tags for transmission lists and automated first answers, is not very different from using the basic version of WhatsApp.

I spoke with three news organizations that have used the free WhatsApp Business to push news to app users: a large newspaper with a popular site (Folha de S.Paulo), a mid-sized regional newspaper (Jornal do Comercio) and a small, online-only news website (Aos Fatos). In all three cases, there was general exasperation among the journalists, especially with how labor-intensive it is to send news using this tool and the limited reach of their efforts.

The three publications were at times exposed to and targeted with "flooding" by using WhatsApp Business. This means that there were so many people sending messages to a publication's mobile phone at the same time that the WhatsApp Business app crashed, making it impossible to publish into transmission lists, sometimes for days. During the 2018 election, Folha's app crashed several times, sometimes for a week at a time, until journalists were able to forcibly clear the app's cache. This flood, or spamming of the publication's phone, was possible because WhatsApp does not have mechanisms in place to limit or pace the messages that users can send on the app. Not even a computer emulator was able to circumvent this issue.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.whatsapp.com/business/>

## How might news outlets and WhatsApp work together to improve users' access to credible news and information?

WhatsApp acknowledges that its business platform<sup>9</sup> tools were designed primarily for small businesses to help them respond effectively to customers. They were not designed for mass distribution of news and information.

*WhatsApp was built for private messages... Instead of encouraging users to build an audience and share widely, WhatsApp is designed to help people share with others they know or get helpful information from a business. To protect the privacy and security of our users, WhatsApp provides end-to-end encryption by default, which means only the sender and recipient can see the content of messages.*

*Our service is not a broadcast platform. We place limits on group sizes and how users send messages. Approximately 90% of the messages sent on WhatsApp are from one person to another, and the majority of groups have fewer than ten people.*

However, the company's approach is that even though WhatsApp Business is not meant for news distribution, that was the only tool available for news during Brazil's 2018 election. WhatsApp was aware of multiple initiatives in Brazil using the Business app to push news to their audiences.

The company also has the WhatsApp API<sup>10</sup>, a paid product that allows better management of messages received from users. The product is built for larger companies, which need to handle a higher number of incoming messages. That being said, it is most useful for receiving messages and is not intended to be a broadcast platform.

The API product was used by the media consortium Comprova<sup>11</sup> during the 2018 election. The reason WhatsApp did not make it more widely available was that it was a new product. The API was launched in August 2018 and required direct support from WhatsApp to function. The API is not a turnkey solution, so companies need to work with the

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.whatsapp.com/safety/WA\\_StoppingAbuse\\_Whitepaper\\_020418\\_Update.pdf](https://www.whatsapp.com/safety/WA_StoppingAbuse_Whitepaper_020418_Update.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Product was introduced in August, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Comprova is a fact-checking consortium, with over 20 news organizations, and was the first ever news initiative to use the Whatsapp Business API. <https://firstdraftnews.org/comprova-publishes/>

WhatsApp team to install it, which can be a time-consuming process. For the election, WhatsApp did not have time to onboard many organizations.

In any case, the use of the API by Comprova only provided more evidence that WhatsApp products are really made only for receiving messages from users, not for broadcasting news. The tool worked for Comprova as a way to organize all the content it received from users (like tips of misinformation and videos and pictures for fact-checking<sup>12</sup>), especially because the consortium used a product called Zendesk<sup>13</sup>, which provides a visual interface to the WhatsApp API. However, there was no simpler, automated way of using the API to push content into users WhatsApp accounts<sup>14</sup>.

### **Recommendations and next steps for shifting attention from rumors and misinformation to facts and credible information**

Existing WhatsApp features and tools – in their current form – do not facilitate the sharing of verified information by news organizations, as detailed above. WhatsApp has indicated several times that creating news media transmission lists – where users can opt in to receive messages and headlines from a news organization – would generate spam for users, something the company wants to avoid. So long as users must opt in, and can opt out, this concern can be mitigated. Ultimately, developing ways for users to sign up to receive verified, fact-checked information from reliable sources would serve an important purpose of countering misinformation on WhatsApp.

#### **How WhatsApp can help news organizations:**

- Facilitate the registration of new users in transmission lists with WhatsApp Business. Specifically, it would be useful for news organizations to have a way to automatically register names and phone numbers of people who opt in to receive news through their WhatsApp or WhatsApp Business channels.
- Provide publishers with at least basic engagement analytics, such as click rates and link sharing data;
- Create verified accounts for news organizations;

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<sup>12</sup> Comprova received over 200,000 messages from 67,000 people during Brazil's election period. <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticias/2018/10/30/projeto-comprova-desmentiu-135-boatos-vinculados-a-eleicao-presidencial.htm>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.zendesk.com/>

<sup>14</sup> I contacted a sales representative of Zendesk, and they confirmed to us that their service is meant primarily to receive and aggregate messages from users, not to push content to them.

- Make it easier to use WhatsApp Business through a desktop client, not only from phone apps;
- Make it possible not to download all users' messages and "Status" stories, which demand too much of a mobile device and tend to crash the app;
- Create a "Channel" publishing system for news companies, where publications can only push content and not receive messages from users, which might overload the system. (users can still reach out through other means, but not within the channel).



## Methodology

This report is based on data collected from 331 open WhatsApp groups, randomly select from web pages that have public links to groups, from September 17 to October 29, 2018. The data was compiled by [ÉNois Agência de Jornalismo](#), a nonprofit based in Brazil. ICFJ commissioned Énois Agência de Jornalismo to extract the data so I could run this analysis in order to better inform ICFJ's media partners in Brazil as they work to counter misinformation spread through messaging apps. Énois Agência de Jornalismo downloaded the data using the "export chat" button available within the WhatsApp app.

While closed WhatsApp groups require an administrator to add new members, users can join open WhatsApp groups simply by clicking on a shareable link (no admin approval is required). Such groups are open to whoever has the link, up to the 256-person limit imposed by WhatsApp. WhatsApp addresses [such groups](#) on its FAQ page:

*"Any WhatsApp user you share an invite link with can join the group, so only use this feature with trusted individuals. It's possible for someone to forward the link to other people. If so, those other people can also join the group and the group admin won't be asked to approve those other people before they join."*

While open groups are generally understood to operate as public forums, I opted to omit phone numbers and select conversations from my analysis in order to maintain the anonymity of group members and only extracted strategic, quantitative information regarding link sharing – the focus of my research.

Additionally, no audio, images or video files were collected. All raw data was aggregated for analysis, further preserving the identities and phone numbers of group members.

## Results

### Total links shared

The research compiled more than 190,000 messages sent over a 43-day period, spanning the weeks leading up to the first round of Brazil's general election on October 7 through the day after the

second round of the election on October 28. Since each group's data was downloaded on different dates, I measured link sharing across the full block of information collected and did not include a time series analysis.<sup>15</sup>

Ten percent of total messages contained one or more links. In all, approximately 30,430 links were shared in the open groups during the 43-day period. A total of 11,455 unique URLs were shared.

### **Links shared by type of group**

Some of the WhatsApp groups<sup>16</sup> were significantly more active than others. Several had almost no messages at all — probably the groups were created for specific purposes and are now not active. However, of the 331 groups, more than 120 groups had at least 10 messages.

The average group had 32 messages for the analyzed 43-day period (median was 579 messages). The research included less active groups into analysis to examine link sharing behavior across open WhatsApp groups overall.

The most active 20 groups generated two-thirds of the messages, with an average of 6,042 messages per group (median was 4,688 messages). The research classified these 20 groups as *hot pockets*. Most were related to politics. These groups were heated with political debate, but link sharing was not any more common in these groups. Messages with links represented nine percent of total messages (10,953 links shared in 120,843 total messages). This was in line with the frequency of link sharing in open WhatsApp groups overall, including in less active groups. This leads us to believe that the 10 percent proportion of link sharing across total messages is a representative number of the sample as a whole, possibly applicable to other open groups as well.

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<sup>15</sup> This means that the data is not comparable for day-to-day volume. For instance, political discussion groups tend to have more messages in the few days leading to an election, so I cannot compare the amount of messages sent two weeks from voting day against one day before voting.

<sup>16</sup> The groups were selected by ÉNois Agência de Jornalismo for a project of their own, in which they would report about conversations happening in open groups. According to Énois Agência de Jornalismo, the groups were randomly selected from websites that showcase open group URLs, that anyone can click and join.

## Links shared from media organizations

The research identified that, from the 11,455 unique links shared in the sample groups during the analyzed period, half of those links (5,704) directed users to content produced by media organizations, including to news organizations' social media posts. A sizeable portion of total links were spam URLs, such as invitations to download an app or purchase a product, or from websites unrelated to media, such as the website for Brazil's election court.

One key difference between the general sample and the *hot pockets* is that the latter tended to share more media-related links than average. While 49.7 percent of the general sample links were from media companies, in more active groups this ratio was 62.0 percent.

Overall, social media pages and posts were the most common links shared, mainly from YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Links to YouTube were most frequently shared, with some 2,000 links shared — that is, 35 percent of all unique URLs shared across all WhatsApp groups analyzed. YouTube was followed by Facebook and Bitly.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of news content, Globo's G1 was the most common source of links shared in the WhatsApp sample groups. The combined number of links to UOL and Folha de S.Paulo<sup>18</sup> slightly surpassed G1's.

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<sup>17</sup> Bitly links are shortened, randomly-made versions of normal URLs, and for this survey they were considered to be media links.

<sup>18</sup> UOL and Folha de S.Paulo are news outlets owned by the same company.