Memes on the agenda: a discourse analysis of media appropriations of humor[1]

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Abstract

This paper presents a study on the penetration of public discussion political memes in the hegemonic media based on the repercussion of memes about the arrest of former Brazilian President Lula on the websites El País (Brazilian Edition) and Estadão. The research aims to analyze the presence of memes in the media agenda and the appropriations of their discourses related to the political crisis in Brazil. For this, we take as a theoretical reference the concept of semiosphere, by Iuri Lótman; the notion of Homo Narrans developed by Alain Rabatel; and yet, the political functions of internet memes as proposed by Limor Shifman. The methodology consists of a discourse analysis of memes reproduced in the two websites mentioned. The result of this research is the reflection on the use of internet memes not only as mere entertainment, but as instruments of political activism and informative discourse.

Keywords: Discourse. Memes. Mainstream media. Politics.

Introduction

The use of humor in counterhegemonic discourses in times of crisis in Brazil is not a new phenomenon. We may find an emblematic example in the case of the 1970s newspaper O Pasquim, which materialized its criticisms of the Military Regime through irony and ridicule regarding the government members – despite the initial proposal of being a weekly humor newspaper of modest circulation, it kept being published for 22 years, resisting constant repressive attacks, and has become a major phenomenon in the history of alternative media in the country. The use of humor as a counter-hegemonic instrument in Brazil is so significant that this practice has been the target of successive attacks by politicians in times of crisis

and elections. Among the recent episodes, there was an electoral law enacted during the 2010 presidential elections, which prohibited humorists from using candidates as the target of jokes. The Supreme Federal Court, however, suspended the law in August of the same year, at the request of the Brazilian Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters (Abert).

In the Digital Age, with the participation of users in the production of content, a discursive model calls our attention: internet memes. Shifman (2014) has defined public discussion memes of as those of amateur origins, crossed by humor/irony and with a critical purpose. The visibility that political memes have gained in Brazil since the 2014 presidential elections has transformed this instrument – which in principle was best suited for entertainment – into a tool of political activism in the public sphere. We believe that the use of humor, initially designed to attract web clicks, encourages the sharing of posts, which are resignified by each user and take the form of political positioning in individual profiles and in the press, once again influencing political decisions such as the 2018 attempt by the federal government to control the use of official photographs of the then President Michel Temer in the production of memes on social media profiles specialized in comedy.

In *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, Castells (2013) has discussed the expansion of social effects caused by the media as a result of the accelerated development of systems and technologies that allow the breaking of geographical and cultural boundaries and enable the distribution of content at a low cost and in real time. As it is a contemporary creation and given the relevant influence of memes in the daily lives of Brazilians, especially in the midst of the political crisis that is going through the country, we consider as relevant the investigation on how this manifestation has penetrated the mainstream media agenda and consequently the political debate in the country. It also justifies expanding the investigation on the appropriation and possible resignification of these discourses in traditional media outlets.

In this context, we choose to analyze the coverage of the prison of former President Lula on April 7, 2018, which was featured in public discussion memes that were reproduced by several news websites, such as *El País, Estadão, Istoé, iG, Terra, Uol, O Estado de Minas* etc. According to Souza (2019), the arrest of ex-President Lula appears among the main themes covered by the media from the perspective of memes between July 2018 and January 2019.

We believe that the choice of memes reproduced by each website follows a biased editorial line and we intend to demonstrate, through discourse analysis, this trend in three posts by two websites: *El País* and *Estadão,* given the scope and supposed editorial duality of the two news companies. To this end, we will work with Alain Rabatel's proposal of decentralizing narratives as a way of asserting the choices of the narrators in question.

Memetics and internet memes

In 1976, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the word that would give rise to a multidisciplinary field of study: memetic science. The initial concept of meme proposed

by Dawkins in 1976 in the book "The Selfish Gene" sought to understand the phenomenon of replication of genetic characteristics among organisms, as well as the other cultural events that repeated this process of sharing information between individuals.

The word "meme" is understood in the common sense as something that spreads quickly on the internet or that is widely imitated in a humorous way. Originally, as an abbreviation of the Greek word mimeses (imitation), according to the author it could be applied to:

> tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain (DAWKINS, 2007, p. 122).

However, Dawkins maintains that the replicating potential of memes is embedded in them based on three fundamental characteristics: longevity, fertility and fidelity.

With the popularization of internet memes, the investigation of the phenomenon of replicability takes over the field of Communication and the idea of these three keys proposed by Dawkins is questioned by Chagas e Toth (2016), for example, who believes that they limit the analysis of memes to how the message propagates, ignoring what the message is and why it is propagated. The author understands memes as cultural constructions that are articulated and disseminated by human agents and/or organized groups – and, as we will observe, the component of humor will not always be present.

> That is, there is no "mysterious" power of memes per se – as Blackmore (2000) supposed – that drives the processes of cultural diffusion, but instead webs of meaning constructed by the people around them. Above all, we support Shifman's (2014) understanding of the need to evaluate memes not as separately apprehensible units of content, but as a semantic set, a collection, without which it is not possible to reach their meaning (CHAGAS, 2017, p. 184).

In Communication research, there is also a noteworthy effort in proposing taxonomies that facilitate investigations on these replicators. Among the known classification proposals for internet memes, we are interested in this work by Israeli journalist and researcher Shifman (2014), cited by Chagas, who proposes a purpose for memes as a form of political participation. According to her, such memes may be classified as (1) persuasive memes; (2) collective action memes; and (3) public discussion memes. Persuasive memes are those

produced and shared by personalities or political organizations in order to propagate an idea or event. In general, they feature professional design and users are responsible for sharing them without interfering with the content. In this category, humor is expendable. Likewise, collective action memes are massively reproduced by users in their original form, however they are not necessarily orchestrated by political organizations, nor are they conditioned to humorous appropriation, and can also be materialized in actions such as the ice bucket challenge[2].

Public discussion memes are those that are born exclusively from network users, reinforcing the participatory model of 2.0 web. In this model, the pieces are usually amateurish and can be composed in the format of verbal text, still image, animated gif, video and/or the combination of two or more of these forms. Political criticism and the provocation of laughter are indispensable elements in memes for public discussion and the sharing of the pieces relies on the interference of each user in their content.

Although Shifman (2014) focuses her taxonomic proposal on the form and content of memes for Chagas (2017), there is a potential in this functional classification that goes beyond the organization proposed by Shifman (2014). In a study on the uses and appropriations of political-electoral memes in circulation during the 2014 presidential debates, Chagas proposed subcategories to each of the functions proposed by the Israeli author that consider rhetoric and its appeal; the dynamics of collective action in social media and as behavioral influencers; and the type of message presented, qualifying the contents according to the object of the mood.

Since only public discussion memes are the object of this work, we will continue with the proposal of the subcategories related to them. They are: (1) Political clichés: content that presents comments about the electoral race like war, the fight against communism, politicians as corrupt people etc.; (2) Literary or cultural allusions: content that mentions cultural products (TV series, films, etc.) or popular culture in general, including references to famous characters and so on; (3) Jokes about political characters: content that presents comments about specific characters in the political scene; (4) Situational jokes: content that presents comments about reactions, facial, gestural or body expressions of candidates in certain situations.

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2   The Ice Bucket Challenge was launched in 2014 by the ALS Association to raise money for research on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Each person who donated to the campaign should record a video overturning a bucket of cold water on their heads and challenging three friends to do the same. The adhesion of celebrities such as Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg Taylor Swift, Neymar, Gisele Bündchen and Ivete Sangalo to the challenge was essential for the success of the campaign, which soon went viral on the networks and raised more than 100 million dollars. Source: Veja Magazine

Table 1 – Examples of memes classified by their political function, based on Shifman (2014)

Figure 1 – Persuasion Meme produced and shared by MBL	**Figure 2** – "Vomiting" - Meme of collective action	**Figure 3** – Public discussion meme is ironic towards the anti-corruption speech with Lula's arrest
Source: Facebook.	Source: Facebook.	Source: Twitter.

Appropriation by the media

As we have noted, the success of internet memes can also be seen in their appropriation by journalistic and advertising speeches. Cases already analyzed by scholarly research are still repeated to this day, such as the fan page of the Curitiba City Hall on Facebook that took advantage of the potential of memes for their institutional communication on social networks, at the beginning of the decade. The movies and TV series streaming service, Netflix has also appropriated this new language: in Brazil, memetic characters such as Inês Brasil, Gretchen and Xuxa were the protagonists of promotional videos of three of their recent productions: *Orange Is the New Black*, *Glow* and *Stranger Things*, respectively.

In the journalistic field, the digital platforms traditional outlets of are also attentive to the agenda of memes: *El País*, *BBC*, *Estadão* and *The New York Times* are examples of websites that have already guided the "spree" of Brazilians on the internet. On the subject, in 2017, we have suggested an understanding of this appropriation of hegemonic media by internet memes based on the concept of Semiosphere by Lótman (1996). The work titled "Memes and counterculture: the reconfiguration of hegemonic narratives in the semiosphere" (SOUZA, 2017) analyzes the resistance movement of meme producers who reconfigure media discourses on social networks and return them to traditional outlets in humorous manners.

The Semiosphere, which includes all forms of culture, is made up of sign systems composed of nuclei and peripheries. "The culture located at the core of a system represents the one with the greatest influence and control over other manifestations, while the peripheral culture develops on the margins of the system, but always in contact with the hegemonic center" (SOUZA, 2017, p. 59). Thus, we have proposed the location of memes on the periphery of the semiosphere, where they appropriate news and concepts based on

the traditional discourses of the media and political institutions, turning them into scorn, contracting and ridiculing the dominant voices.

In this way, we highlight the contesting character behind memes of public discussion to the historically configured dominant forces and their ability to penetrate privileged spaces of speech. Accordingly, Chagas (2017) believes that the understanding of the meme phenomenon as "useless culture" or "bullshit" is mistaken and attributes that mistake, in part, to the absence of studies that focus on the polysemic universe of memes and the appropriations of these productions in recognized political contexts.

In this context, Milner (2017) believes that, despite the limitations of access to technology, our "public conversations" are more resonant than ever.

> By amplifying these voices, memetic means show the creativity and contribution that further distance us from the simple "top-down" understandings of the media's influence. The world of participatory media is created brought into existence and sustained through confusing memetic interrelationships. It exists in the space between individual texts and broader conversations, between individual citizens and broader cultural discourses (MILNER, 2016, on-line).

However, by appropriating the polyphonic discourses of the digital environment, these voices are reconfigured by the hegemonic media and outline a movement to resume vertical influence. Our aim with this proposition is not to contest the assured participation of memes in the public debate, but to investigate what use traditional media companies have made of the popularity and discursive plurality of memes and the instrumentalization of their subversive tactics in the semiosphere.

Discourse appropriation

> Discourse is also dialogical because when we speak or write, we establish a dialogue with other discourses, bringing the discourse of the other to our discourse. This is done explicitly using, for example, direct, indirect, indirect free speech or by putting words, statements (of the other) in quotes or italics (BRANDÃO, s/d).

In order to contemplate an anthropological dimension and in a way engaged in the activity of narrating, we also base this research on the concept of *Homo narrans* that Rabatel (2016, p. 15) proposes as an alternative to an essentially structuralist narratology giving way to "passions, emotions and sensations, through attention given to the intersecting issues of voices and points of view, values and aesthetics", with a focus on the choices that the writer operates. Therefore, we have the theoretical decentralization of focus from the narrative *per se* to the narrator.

In this context, the hypothesis that meme choices should be justified in the editorial profile of each outlet is proven as we will see in the analyzes that follow. The position veiled by entertainment is manifested in voices that are appropriated by the vehicles and become the object of engagement.

For the execution of this examination, we propose an analysis protocol with the directions described in the table below:

Table 2 – Analysis Protocol

Joke focus	Common places in politics; Jokes about political characters; Literary or cultural allusions; Situational jokes.
Image of former President Lula	Image position in the story
	Expressions/gestures of the ex-president
	Scenery/Occasion
Other characters	Fictional characters
	Political opponents of the ex-president: what is the treatment given to them?
Mood type	Spiritual or satirical?

Source: the authors.

The protocol emerged from an early analysis of the memes replicated by the websites. These are the most evident characteristics given to the different characters and situations and, once related, they seek to highlight the discursive trends of each outlet.

In addition to the subcategories of public discussion memes presented by Chagas (2017) to guide the focus given to memes, we also resort to the aesthetic resource of humor. We have used the diagram proposed by the French esthete Étienne Soria with 24 aesthetic categories as presented by Silva (2010, p. 90):

> The aesthetic categories result from a joint effort around the presence of recurring traits, genre conventions, stylistic-formal data and configurations of affective relationships between objects and the public. They are organized combinatorics, a relatively coherent system of requirements for a certain artistic or extra-artistic composition to reach a particular genre.

In Souriau's proposal, six aesthetic categories correspond to stimuli that provoke laughter (humor): spiritual, satirical, comic, ironic, caricature-likely and grotesque. In the corpus raised for this investigation, the humor quality is sometimes spiritual, sometimes satirical. The spiritual category corresponds to a contained laugh, through mild criticism. For Silva (2010, p. 101), "the object is treated in such a way that it does not completely

disappear in the face of devaluation; doing so, as soon as some attraction or sympathy for it is preserved (...) and with it we establish a certain affinity, complicity". In satirical humor, the object is reduced to its nullity, until all sympathy for it is lost. The laugh provoked is devoid of tenderness and comes from indignation.

Results

The *El País* reportage published on April 7 with the title "Lula preso, memes à solta" ["Lula arrested, memes on the loose"[3] features as the first meme from its selection an evident case of a situational joke, a montage of ex-president Lula in testimony to judge Sérgio Moro wearing the shirt of the São Paulo soccer team (Figure 4). Since the former president has already publicly expressed his support for the opposing team, Corinthians, and that São Paulo has not won a national title in 10 years, the montage refers to an alleged attempt by the former president to prove to judge Sérgio Moro that "For 10 years you haven't won anything". However, the paragraph in the article that refers to this meme says that the fasting of national titles by the São Paulo team "was used to mock the arrest warrant issued by judge Sérgio Moro". The meme that already shifted the criticism to the São Paulo team, receives a reinforcement of the vehicle in the diversion of its target and instead aims for the person responsible for Lula's arrest. In addition, the privileged and repeated position – the image is highlighted and the first illustration of the report – of a meme that does not directly criticize the figure of the ex-president, but of the football team and/or judge Sérgio Moro sets the tone of a critical piece of criticism of Lula and a possible tendency to expose his executioner, criticizing the prison and not the prisoner.

Table 3 – A selection of memes reproduced in El País

Figure 4 – Meme about Lula's arrest makes football team joke	**Figure 5** – Memes about Lula's arrest satirize political opponents and judge Sérgio Moro
Source: *El País*.	Source: *El País*.

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3   Available at: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/04/06/politica/1523046165_909738.html. Accessed on: Jun. 4, 2018.

The second image in the list of memes presented by *El País* is a compilation of four memes that also divert criticism from the figure of Lula, alternating between the subcategories of public discussion memes of situational jokes and literary allusions. In the first meme, a customary allusion to the Australian time zone anticipates Lula's arrest and, below it, the tombstone of the meme "Lula Preso Amanhã" that was born from several wrong predictions of the website *O Antagonista* that used to disclose an alleged "breaking news" of the arrest of the former president the following day – a mild, measured mood that does not compromise sympathy for the main character. In the subsequent column, the caption of the meme "we're in line!" it complements the sense of the image of Michel Temer, Renan Calheiros and Aécio Neves, all denounced and investigated by Operação Lava Jato, sitting supposedly awaiting their arrest warrants. The meme below it, however, shows that the wait is in vain, since the intimacy portrayed in the controversial photo of Judge Sérgio Moro with a funny expression and in intimate conversation with Aécio Neves received the caption "Stay calm, toucans are only trapped in the zoo", implying the judge's protection to the PSDB party and that Lula's arrest is more related to political persecution than to the smooth functioning of judicial bodies in the country.

Given the curatorial tone of the first two memes, *El País* then brings three more pieces that omit visual images of political characters, however, two refer to Lula – the first is ironic towards his alleged addiction to alcohol, and is the only meme of the post focusing on a joke about political characters; the second shows only the eponymous *SpongeBob* character Squidward Tentacles [Lula Molusco, in Brazil] being arrested, with no caption or interpretive paragraph, concluding the piece with yet another cultural allusion and with a slightly accentuated spiritual mood of criticism.

On the *Estadão* website, the subject yielded two posts on April 8: an image gallery in the politics section entitled "See the memes after Lula's arrest" ["Veja memes após a prisão de Lula "][4]; and another on the Fausto Macedo Blog, also in the political section, entitled "Lula arrested in the meme" ["Lula preso no meme"][5].
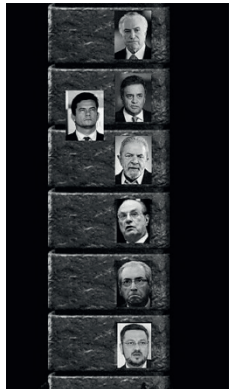
In the gallery, the first four memes listed gesture the image of the ex-president – the first of them (Figure 8) simultaneously ironizes the prison and the fact that the ex-president did not attend college: "I was approved for the Federal University of Paraná. I'm moving there...", locating the meme in the subcategory of jokes about political characters. The gallery's second meme, which is repeated in the Fausto Macedo's blog post, features an image of a serious-faced Lula in the Federal Police car between two agents – despite the relaxed caption "when I'm going on a travel and they won't let me sit at the window", a situational joke, the image shows a Lula who feels uncomfortable, serious and contrasting with the one who, hours before, was cheered by leftist militants in São Bernardo do Campo. The third meme shows Lula on a balcony, similar to that of the ABC Metalworkers Union – where he had been in the two days before his arrest – speaking on the phone, with the following caption: "Hello? Is it

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4   Available at: http://politica.estadao.com.br/galleries/general,see-memes-after-the-prison-of-squid,36426. Accessed on: Jun. 4, 2018.
5   Available at: http://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/fausto-macedo/lula-preso-no-meme/. Accessed on: Jun. 4, 2018.

Odebrecht? Can you make a tunnel?". The countenance of concern, the similarity of scenery and the captions imply a possible acknowledgment of defeat and a last attempt to escape from prison, in addition to the recurring joke about political figures that suggests the former president's low level of formal education. The fourth meme in this first part of the gallery is a playlist from the Spotify app titled "Lula Preso" with the following tracks: Diário de um Detento [Diary of a Prisoner], Folsom Prison Blues, Prisão particular [Private Prison] and Jailhouse Rock. Lula's photo in the playlist is grotesque, in that the position of his hand on his face gives the impression that his amputated finger is completely inserted into his nose. The composition, as well as the sharing of this meme, reveals a pleasure resulting from the former president's vulnerability. The second part of the gallery does not feature an image of Lula, but insists on the satire, which exposes the negative and vulnerable side of the character, typical of the jokes about political characters described by Chagas (2017), in addition to extolling the performance of Judge Sérgio Moro in a meme that makes reference to the Mortal Kombat game, suggesting a confrontation between the judge and politicians investigated in Lava Jato, determining that Moro comes out as the winner in all the clashes.

Table 4 – Memes of the Estadão gallery

Figure 6 – Meme praises the performance of judge Sérgio Moro	**Figure 7** – Meme replicated by the Fausto Macedo blog post	**Figure 8** – First meme in the gallery
Source: Estadão.	Source: Estadão.	Source: Estadão.

On the Fausto Macedo Blog, the selection of memes mixes pieces of support and disapproval of the former president's arrest, however, in a proportion biased towards supporting the arrest. Of the eight memes selected, two bring Lula's photo among the ABC protesters hours before surrendering to the Federal Police, with captions that refer to a controversial slide presented by the public prosecutor Deltan Dellagnol to explain the denouncing against Lula; and three other memes portray Lula in prison – in the first, a montage exposes the former president in a situation of total vulnerability, suggesting failure,

defeat. Lula appears imprisoned in a small cell with an open bathroom, a toilet flush with the floor and a photo on the wall with his late wife Marisa Letícia (Figure 9). The caption refers to Rede Globo's Big Brother Brasil reality show, media coverage of his arrest and the Workers' Party represented by the number 13. The representation of an imprisoned Lula is repeated in three other images – in one of them, the juxtaposition of photos of his prison in April 1980 and April 2018 with a watermark of the Direita São Paulo group.

The Squidward character appears again in two of the three publications, softening the tone of the joke. The reference to the cartoon brings us back to the second subcategory of memes for public discussion proposed by Viktor Chagas: literary or cultural allusions. The exception is the gallery of the *Estadão* politics section which, in general, presents a most accentuated criticism. Another striking subcategory in publications is that of jokes about political figures that, as we have seen, highlight the figures of Lula, Sérgio Moro, Michel Temer, Aécio Neves and other personalities investigated for corruption.

Table 5 – Memes of Fausto Macedo Blog/Estadão

Figure 9 – First meme of the post: montage shows the former president incarcerated	**Figure 10** – Meme with image of Lula in Federal Police custody in route to Curitiba	**Figure 11** – Last meme in the story shows Lula arrested once again
Source: Blog Fausto Macedo/ Estadão.	Source: Blog Fausto Macedo/ Estadão.	Source: Blog Fausto Macedo/ Estadão.

Conclusions

The presence of the media in the process of replicating public discussion memes reinforces the assessment of both Habermas (2003) and Rawls (1999) about a public sphere with an "impure" agenda circulation, based on the visibility provided by the media and not for a "natural selection" of matters pertaining to the proper functioning of political institutions and social welfare. The subjects meticulously selected and treated by the media invade the public sphere with clear objectives, as we have seen in the biased publications under the cover of neutrality of humor and entertainment of memes.

We have then that the proven penetration of memes in the public agenda reconfiguring hegemonic discourses in society, which we initially thought of as a source of resistance, is finally proven as an initial force of resistance, but is consolidated as an instrument of social mobilization – for good or for the bad. As much as one aspires to disqualify politicians and policies in the production of a meme, it is its potential for replicability that determines its success and causes political instances to be reached.

In this sense, we could infer that meme producers are not alone in this mobilization since, as we have seen, mainstream media also makes use of memetic tactics when promoting the curation of a set of productions that replicates, and in this way positions itself and strengthens its performance in the public sphere, giving visibility to the agenda that suits it best, although sometimes there is the inclusion of memes with a critical position contrary to the editorial line of the vehicles, in a simulacrum of impartiality. For this reason, too, we cannot speak simply of resistance, as memes go through a process of transgression, but also of co-option until they reach the necessary visibility for the formation of a Public Opinion.

It is important to point out that, through the methodology used, we were unable to assess the degree of debate that these memes, as well as the news about them, are capable of promoting. Although this was not our objective at any time, we consider it relevant to reinforce that the formation of Public Opinion, as advocated by Habermas (2003) in his ideal of deliberative democracy, could not be measured here and, therefore, we cannot infer that the memes' performance in this process is capable of moving the two necessary steps for making democratically ideal institutional decisions – public sphere with visibility, and public opinion with arguability.

It is worrying to note that, in times of serious political crisis, in the country, our Public Opinion is built with so little rigor and is guided lightly by the massive circulation of information with high power of replicability. It is worrying, especially when we observe that this criterion may influence public deliberations of social interest. We envision a risky scenario of governance that is vulnerable to Public Opinion – which would be commendable under ideal conditions of debate – formed by quantity at the expense of content and reflection. As we conclude this work, essential public policies are discussed based on the "will of the people" fostered by fake news contents produced anonymously without any transparent criteria of reliability.

While in the 1970s the humor of resistance served Brazilians to form a critical conscience and denounce the arbitrariness of the military regime, perhaps the new technological possibilities for content production by users in the Digital Age will take us to a different path in that democracy is ironically threatened by the free and equal circulation of thoughts in this public sphere of so much visibility and yet to be measured.

The present investigation in no way negates our previous proposal for an understanding of the process of media contamination by memes through the Semiotics of Culture. On the contrary: it reinforces the premise of the semiotic continuum and the constant dialectical construction that is established in the areas of tension between nuclei and peripheries of

the semiosphere. Nor are we exhausted here by analyzing the conditions of production, the symbols and meanings of our corpus, as well as the intentions of the narrator who reframes the discourses built on social networks and exposes them in a new context, directing his senses. This is a proposal for reflection that we consider essential for understanding the ecology of contemporary media, the scope of this immeasurable production in cyberspace and its possibilities for co-option and influence – conscious or not, in the political debate of a Brazil in crisis.

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