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## Algorithmic Resistance as political disengagement

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# Algorithmic resistance as political disengagement

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## Abstract

This article suggests that algorithmic resistance might involve a particular and rarely considered kind of evasion—political disengagement. Based on interviews with ordinary Brazilian users of Facebook, it argues that some people may stop acting politically on social media platforms as a way of avoiding an algorithmic visibility regime that is felt as demeaning their civic voices. Three reasons given by users to explain their disengagement are discussed: the assumption that, by creating bubbles, algorithms render their citizenship useless; the understanding that being seen on Facebook entails unacceptable sacrifices to their values and well-being; and the distress caused by successfully attaining political visibility but being unable to fully control it. The article explores the normative ambiguities of this type of algorithmic resistance, contextualizing it in Brazil's auto-cratization process.

## Keywords

citizenship, political disengagement, algorithms, social media, Brazil, authoritarianism

## Introduction

In contrast to early depictions of algorithmic power as an unfathomable force (Lash, 2007), it is now clear that ordinary people often perceive, reflect on, and purposively respond to corporate platforms' machine learning and dataveillance systems. That is, end users can exert some form of agency towards these datafication systems, and such relative agency is in fact integral to how datafication relates to social life (see e.g. Bucher, 2018; Couldry et al., 2016; Livingstone, 2019; Magalhães, 2018; Ziewitz, 2019). For, not unlike previous forms of social quantification, datafication is a productive process. In trying to render the world computable, platforms' inevitably expose users to objects, events, and logics which are *somehow* knowable—even when invisible to the naked eye. “Imaginaries” and “theories” of algorithmic power abound (Bucher, 2017; Eslami et al., 2015). Regardless of how inaccurate, incomplete, and precarious these ideas might be,

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they help users “orient themselves” by informing their actions and assumptions about themselves and others (Kennedy et al., 2015: 1). In turn, such practices and beliefs change what can be datafied, shaping therefore the grounds on which algorithms decide (Bucher, 2017).

The relevance of individuals’ understandings and intentional actions toward datafication systems transcends such co-constitutive loop, though. Virtually all modern accounts of agency are nested within normative assumptions about freedom (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 964). Once we assume that end users can perceive datafied control structures that are designed to remain imperceptible, we must also contemplate the possibility that these actors (and not only governments and markets) might be able to disobey and contradict such structures. Put another way, resistance to algorithmic power—*algorithmic resistance*—might well take ordinary forms. This prospect may provide a welcome challenge to some of the simplistic assumptions about social control that underlie all-encompassing theories about data-driven hegemony (e.g. Zuboff, 2019). But, as this article will demonstrate, it also raises a set of difficult questions around the political nature and efficacy of this type of resistance.

These issues are evident in the literature on how end users appropriate algorithmic systems. Consider social media influencers’ attempts to manipulate these systems to avoid the risk of their own invisibilization (Bishop, 2018). These individuals are reflecting on and confronting the disciplinary nature of algorithmic visibility rules (Cotter, 2019). But they are not necessarily interested in using the attention they receive to denounce injustices or counter platform’s power. Resistance, in this context, seems to be less about righting wrongs than bending structures for personal and economic gains. The appropriation of datafication mechanisms might also be openly political, as when activists work to counter platforms’ unfair visibility logics or trick them into highlighting social justice issues (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2015; Treré, 2019; Velkova and Kaun, 2019). However common these new forms of political action may have become, they remain inherently ambiguous. Platform activism can exacerbate “the centrality of the subjective and private experience of the individual”, undermining “internal solidarity, commitment and responsibility towards fellow activists” (Milan, 2015: 896), and will remain subjugated to firms’ ultimate control over their own technologies (Youmans and York, 2012). Furthermore, it seems impossible to steer platforms’ logics without providing them with more training data and, paradoxically, more avenues for the exploitation of users.

Yet ordinary algorithmic resistance need not involve appropriation—it can take the form of disconnection, the sort of practice this article discusses. One of the fundamental “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985), avoidance is sometimes depicted as the most effective way of countering the social power of platforms (Lanier, 2018). For every step towards disconnection can, in theory, deprive datafication companies of the material their neo-colonial enterprise feeds on (Couldry and Mejias, 2019) and of the personal connections that make their services attractive in the first place. If evading platforms sidesteps some of the difficulties involved in appropriating their technologies, it brings about other ones. As long as this kind of insubordination remains a piecemeal and individualized “consumption choice” of some privileged few (Portwood-Stacer, 2013: 1041), it will almost certainly fail to pose a serious threat to corporate datafication. Moreover, tech companies have started to commodify discourses and practices around disconnection. Firms like Apple and Google reacted to criticisms about the allegedly addictive nature of their products by pro-actively embedding “digital detox” functionalities into their devices, for instance (Gartenberg, 2018). Their goal is not of course preventing their products from being used but arguably providing a temporary relief, a “lubricant” (Light and Cassidy, 2014) that may in fact enable individuals to *keep* using such products. In this way, “the emancipatory potential of disconnection ... is often deactivated and subsumed by the dynamics of digital capitalism under the innocuous

facade of ... authenticity, mindfulness, and nostalgia” (Natale and Treré, 2020; see also Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019; cf. Karppi et al., 2021).

The link between disconnection and algorithmic resistance might appear clear in the academic literature, particularly in theoretical discussions about the normative consequences of technology avoidance. But do users themselves describe their disconnecting from digital spaces as a way of *resisting datafication*? Surely, there is some evidence that individuals have indeed left or at least diminished their use of e.g., social media after scandals linked with datafication, such as the Facebook’s Cambridge Analytica case (Whitehead, 2020). However, the extent to which these deletions and avoidances can be indeed characterized as an explicit political resistance to the norms embedded in algorithmic systems remains understudied.

This article addresses this problem, arguing that algorithmic resistance might indeed involve a particular and rarely considered kind of (*partial*) digital disconnection—political disengagement. Based on interviews with ordinary Brazilian users of Facebook, the article suggests that some people may not delete their social media accounts but stop acting politically on this platform as a way of explicitly avoiding an algorithmic visibility game that is felt as demeaning their political dignity. Participants pointed to three main reasons when explaining their disconnection: the assumption that, by creating bubbles, algorithms render their political actions useless; the understanding that being seen entails unacceptable sacrifices to their values and emotional well-being; and the distress caused by successfully attaining political visibility but being unable to fully control it. Common to these three experiences seems to be the sensation that their voices were ultimately rendered *inadequate* to a space of participation where being heard is mediated by an algorithmic logic of being seen—a particularly relevant conclusion against the backdrop of Brazil’s decaying democracy, as explained in more detail below.

In developing these insights, the article helps connect discussions on ordinary agency towards datafication with debates on the consequences of datafied social media platforms for democracy, and in particular for political participation. These spaces might allow individuals to continually engage in an unprecedented gradient of civic actions, making politics a much more present element of everyday life (Dennis, 2019). But such dramatic expansion of the political experience hinges on authoritarian sociomaterial structures. Mass surveillance is not an abstract democratic abomination—it has been found to produce “chilling effects”, “spirals of silence” and “social conformity” (Dencik and Cable, 2017; Fox and Holt, 2018; Kwon et al., 2015; Penney, 2021). The use of machine learning systems to make editorial decisions has been (controversially) associated with informational homophily, polarization and even physical violence (e.g. Müller and Schwarz, 2021). These conclusions are used as evidence that datafication is fundamentally detrimental to users’ civic autonomy. But they also tend to underplay users’ ability to reflect on and respond to the structures that are supposedly eroding democratic culture.

The phenomenon this article presents and discusses—algorithmic resistance as political disengagement—suggests that, when such agency is considered, a much murkier picture can emerge. Disengagement can be individually and socially harmful. Nonetheless, it might also be a way of consciously refusing an (algorithmic) order that is felt as painfully disrespectful. The sort of resistance discussed here is therefore both clear evidence of users’ agency towards datafication systems and a sign of how limited such agency is—an expression of political freedom that inevitably undercuts political freedom.

To arrive at these conclusions, the article approaches political participation from a peculiar theoretical perspective. I am concerned not with isolated actions of participation but with how these actions, when taken within Facebook’s automated architecture of interaction, shape processes of civic becoming, that is to say, the constitution of political subjectivities. This view draws on two

main concepts. Building on recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) and critical studies of citizenship (Isin, 2008), I approach political participation as *civic voice*, a social practice of civic self-representation whereby individuals are mis/recognized by others and constitute themselves as citizens (Magalhães, 2019). Civic voice can be conceived as the normative intersection of civic expressions (any action whereby individuals represent themselves politically) and self-understandings (how individuals comprehend themselves qua citizens). Relatedly, political disengagement is primarily understood as not only a quantifiable decrease in discrete participatory acts but as the subjective erosion of the very of value of exerting one's citizenship, i.e., of one's civic voice. This erosion is associated with a sense of "distrust, powerlessness, cynicism, and ... meaninglessness" (Dahlgren, 2016: 3) that typically stems from misrecognition—when voices are silenced, forgotten, abused and invisibilised. Secondly, Facebook is defined as structured by an *algorithmic visibility regime* (Magalhães and Yu, forthcoming). In this regime, how users are automatically read by Facebook informs the definition of what they can view on Facebook; this delimits what users can act upon, hence defining how they can be made readable, and so on. Such entanglement between surveillance and recommendation systems is not unidirectional or fully automated and thus should not be taken as determining the entirety of the visibility phenomenon on platforms. The way users understand and respond to the decisions of the regime are constitutive elements of the regime's functioning.

The rest of the article unfolds as follows. After explaining the empirical context in which the interviews were conducted, and the methodological choices and procedures that informed them, I detail the three ways in which political disengagement might be seen as a form of algorithmic resistance. The conclusion further elucidates what I mean by *inadequate civic voices*.

## Empirical context and methodology

This article is based on a research project about how Facebook's algorithmic visibility regime shaped everyday processes of civic becoming in Brazil—i.e., the ways in which *ordinary* Brazilians have, since 2013, experienced a political coming of age of sorts on and through the platform. These new political actors were not necessarily part of Brazil's long and violently excluded black and poorer majority. Nonetheless, in a young democracy marked by a stark elitism, their appearance represented a remarkable and de-stabilizing novelty, and, as such, a key element of Brazil's democratic crisis (Nobre, 2013).

The term "crisis" is key. After almost 25 years of relative institutional stability, Brazil has experienced a rapid autocratization in the last decade (Alizada et al., 2021). In 2013, massive street protests demanding better state services shook the country. Initially celebrated as a sign of an invigorated civic culture, those demonstrations helped trigger a multi-faceted turmoil that, fueled by economic decline and corruption scandals, culminated in the election in 2018 of the former Army Captain Jair Bolsonaro (Anderson, 2019). A previously irrelevant Congressman known for his blatant support of political violence against "leftists", Bolsonaro used mainly social media to portray himself as a boorish hardliner bent on wiping out an incorrigibly parasitic political elite. With Bolsonaro, several other extremist figures were elected that year, in what has been described as an unprecedented far-right "tsunami" (Nicolau, 2018).

The interviews this article examines were conducted at an important moment of this process, namely, early 2017. Then, Brazil appeared to be still reeling from the dubious and opportunistic impeachment of the center-left president Dilma Rousseff; few seemed to believe that far-right politicians as Bolsonaro were electorally viable. Meanwhile, his supporters and sympathizers roamed freely on social media, frantically laying the groundwork for the 2018 campaign. Underpinning all

these moments, were dozens of millions of ordinary people who have found on the Internet, and particularly social media a space to express themselves politically (Pew Research Centre, 2018).

Of those social media, Facebook was the perhaps central one.<sup>1</sup> The accelerated growth of this platform in Brazil coincided with the development of the crisis. In 2012, immediately before the eruption of the turmoil, Facebook had 36 million users, for the first time overtaking Google's Orkut to become the most visited social network by Brazilians (Comscore, 2012). In 2018, the number of users had increased by 250% and reached 127 million, or 65% of the country's non-infant population (Oliveira, 2018). While any data from Facebook regarding users should be taken with a grain of salt, there is little question that it was the largest social media platform in Brazil at the time of the research (We Are Social, 2019).

To construct my interviewee sample, I operationalized the notion of "ordinary people" as individuals who had never participated in a political organization, including a social movement or a political party; did not identify him or herself as an "activist"; and, while participating intensively in political activities on Facebook, had little or no previous experience of expressing themselves politically in a sustained manner before the onset of the Brazilian crisis. While not representative of Brazil's population,<sup>2</sup> the sample was designed to be as varied as possible (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 79) in relation to four individual circumstances which are likely to influence how people participate politically: income, race, gender, and ideological leaning. Recruitment was made via Facebook ads and snowballing, and ultimately enabled me to interview 47 individuals, from São Paulo and neighboring cities.<sup>3</sup>

Interviews were in-person and lasted on average 90 min. Participants were asked about how they acted politically online, what they did (or did not) to increase and decrease their visibility on the platform, their understandings about Facebook algorithmic visibility regime and how they come to develop these understandings. The resulting data was examined through thematic analysis, understood here as a method of "pattern recognition ... where emerging themes become the categories for analysis" (Fereday and Cochrane, 2006: 82). It is worth noting that the qualitative and non-representative nature of this research invites caution about the prevalence of its findings.

The next three sections present a selection of quotes that illustrate some key themes my analysis identified.

## **Imagined bubbles and the uselessness of voice**

The supposition that social media platforms create "filter bubbles" by exposing users to content that their datafied behavior suggests they already want to see (Pariser, 2011) might have been multiply contradicted by empirical studies (e.g. Bright et al., 2020). But the assumption that these bubbles exist has become widespread—and, as I learnt during my fieldwork, could be involved in concrete consequences to civic voice.

All interviewees apparently believed that Facebook's visibility regime engender some form of sameness. These imagined bubbles were often described as discovered by participants themselves, during their use the platform, and commonly talked about in negative terms. A typical complaint was that Facebook's bubbles hindered participants' reach, preventing their civic voices from being exposed to and transforming the people who interviewees believed should have heard what they had to say. Feeling that their actions were structurally unable to engender even minimal changes undermined their desire to speak, they said.

Consider Pedro,<sup>4</sup> who worked in a publishing company. He told me that the 2013 protests awakened him for politics—but, we spoke, that initial enthusiasm was wearing off. Largely because his

posts would stay within “a niche of thoughts that are very similar to mine” and would not “really trespass” the limits of this “niche”—one of the words he used to describe Facebook’s “bubbles” and a recurrent theme in our conversation. Despite Pedro’s attempts to “understand the facts, to find a solution, to find a way to change [others’ views], to participate”, he did not “feel” that he could “reach the people who should reflect [about their own views]”. “I have no idea how to do it, I resent not being able to reach these folks. I’m kind of giving up.”

Gael, a graphic artist who demonstrated a remarkably accurate knowledge of Facebook’s algorithmic visibility regime, conveyed a similar sense of disappointment and resignation about the reach of his voice. “I’m cutting myself out of it [Facebook]. I kind of accepted that the fascism is coming. The level of hatred is so high that it has become like a sewer that must spill over. Facebook doesn’t cause it, but it amplifies it, you know? The bubble exacerbates it.” I then asked if he felt that he was heard on the platform, to which he replied:

Oh, no, no way. I don’t think it causes any real change. In my personal profile it’s 60 ‘likes’, five ‘shares,’ max. [And] those who hear me are the people who already agree with me. It’s kind of impossible when you think about it. It’s easier to be heard in-person, [when he attends] neighbourhood meetings, as it’s a geographic community, there’re people from all sides, and you’re like sitting at the square’s benches, and then you have some cool discussions. You can talk to people, look at their eyeball. Now, if I say that death penalty is an absurd [on Facebook], I’ll be heard by those who already think like me. The revengeful folks [who approve of death penalty], they won’t [listen].

Similar to Pedro, what apparently drove Gael’s disengagement was an informed fatalism: “fascism” was “coming” and there was nothing he could do about it. Surely, his own “bubble”, those who “already agree with him”, would sometimes “hear” what he said—but this did not amount to being *really* heard. Being recognized as a citizen would involve bringing about some kind of political change, which would require his modifying the opinion of those outside his “bubble”—“the revengeful folks” who did not think like him, Gael said. The significance of Facebook’s visibility regime was clear in his comparison between the platform and a different political space—a group of neighbors he occasionally met at a public square. In these in-person interactions, guided by a “geographical” not algorithmic logic, it was much easier to see and be seen and, thus, to convince others of his point of view, Gael seemingly believed.

Therefore, contrary to common assumptions about filter bubbles, political sameness is not necessarily comforting. Individuals like Pedro and Gael might withdraw politically in space like Facebook not because the platform allows unpleasant others to see and contradict them. Instead, the algorithmic visibility regime may be perceived as creating an unsurmountable *distance* from these others, rendering users’ voices useless.

## Unbearable visibility games

Another recurrent assumption amongst participants was that, on Facebook, attaining visibility—and being able to be politically heard—is a function of how much interaction a given post or comment receives. Interactions were not understood as a given, though: they had to be earned. And generating “likes”, “shares” and comments demanded acting in ways that could be somehow harmful to their values, participants said. In these cases, they described their political disengagement as a principled or desperate response to a visibility game that, at some point, became morally and emotionally unbearable.

Some participants talked about a harm to their civic self-understanding. Theo is a lawyer who, despite accepting my invite to talk about how he participated politically on Facebook, quickly into

the interview told me how he had *not* been really keen on talking about politics on Facebook lately. The reason was that he was not willing to “post anything that is radical just to generate [the] discussion” needed for his voice to be seen and potentially recognized. “To be heard I would have to rebut the comments, sometimes nasty comments”, he said, and this is not what made him “happy”:

What I have to share, I will share. My Facebook is what I think. I’m not going to defend someone who I think should not be defended, I’m not going to play these social games in social media, post something to please someone.

Theo’s narrative is typical of what other interviewees told me: trying to expand the reach of their civic voice expressions on Facebook could be imagined as entailing certain ethical dispositions which they did not appear to possess—and did not *want* to possess. This is not (just) about users’ negotiation of the authenticity and uniqueness of their selves, as “context collapse” theory tends to assume (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Essentially, it is about what users might see as the *right* way of participating politically, a form of ordinary politics that ought not involve becoming “radical” simply to provoke a “discussion”, as Theo put it.

He seemed to assume, as other participants did, that Facebook’s visibility regime imposed an ethical trade off: should he sacrifice his values to be seen by more people and possibly enhance his chances of being heard? Some appeared inclined to go along with the regime’s imagined rules, even if grudgingly; for others, like Theo, the very possibility of compromise seemed to profoundly contradict their subjective sense of civic dignity.

Theo’s depiction suggests that ethical decisions on self-representations are inevitable imbued with emotional states. The affective costs of Facebook’s visibility game were even clearer in Amanda’s story. A freelance video producer, she told me that doing politics on Facebook could be understood as an “insane” “addiction”, and that resisting it required forceful measures:

You log in to see one thing, suddenly you are seeing something else. It’s a bit ... I think that this what the algorithm is for. Because you see something, and below there’s something else about the same topic, and then you start to click on lots of links. When you realize, you’ve lost half hour. On Facebook, I can’t stop talking about politics, it’s like an addiction. It’s insane. If you’re on it, it seems as if you want to remain there, more and more, like an endless thing. It’s because I can’t help but feel outraged by things, so I want to fight. Sometimes I feel intoxicated on Facebook, then I get out of São Paulo, to disconnect. To disconnect I need to either be outside of my house or out of São Paulo. My mobile phone is prepaid, so I rarely have credits, [her data plan] ends up rather quickly, then I have to do something else, go to the beach, have a real life.

For Amanda, it was not enough (or possible) to merely filter out politics from her Facebook activities: the addictiveness of political participation on the platform prompted her to “disconnect” totally (even if temporarily). This might entail purposefully leaving São Paulo or her home. On these occasions, the limited connectivity of her prepaid mobile phone prevented her from accessing Facebook. The drastic nature of this attitude was described by her as a proportional response to the “intoxication” caused by an “algorithm” that continually exposed her to content that made her feel “outraged” and willing to “fight” “more and more”.

In the previous section, I described how Pedro and Gael’s assumptions on Facebook’s “bubbles” led them to experience their civic voices as powerless. Amanda’s description also surfaces a feeling of impotency—but regarding her self-control and linked with the understanding that Facebook visibility regime is designed to show her outrageous content, not create bubbles of pleasant sameness. Unlike Theo, while her story is unequivocally linked with an understanding of how she ought to express herself, Amanda underscored the consequences of Facebook’s “algorithm” to her mental



health and well-being. Disconnecting and having a “real life” appeared to give her some time to recharge and get back to the sort of political “fight” she regarded as necessary.

## The perils of visibility

The copywriter Humberto is a transgender man who became involved with politics in 2013. At the onset of the Brazilian political crisis, he identified as a gay woman. Over time, Humberto came to understand himself as a man. Then, the two processes—the wider Brazilian turmoil and his individual gender transition—became fused in his Facebook actions, he told me. When I asked him how he participated politically on the platform during the crisis, Humberto said: “My biggest [act of] political participation was that I transitioned online, in the social network, publicly”. This process involved posting texts about his own experience and transgender politics, communicating with other transgender men and, crucially, exposing his new physical self through pictures.

Humberto’s communications skills, and his precise understanding of how Facebook’s visibility regime works, helped him gather considerable attention, he said. During our talk, Humberto was obviously proud of being able to be seen—and largely heard—by thousands of people on Facebook. Thus, it was a bit surprising when he said that he was trying to stop “using social media just for the sake of using it” and wanted to employ it only to organize in-person events. He then elaborated:

I’m learning how to deal more intelligently with social media, [with] more autonomy in relation to how I expose myself. Be smarter with my image, my security. I’m very vulnerable on social media, because there’re these people, these right-wingers ... Today, I’m marked on social media. Anything I publish gets me blocked for 30 days. One of my posts, it had no image, but I was blocked for ‘nudity’. I’m persecuted. My page was taken down because of hackers’ attacks. Since my pictures have circulated many times, in the same day Facebook finds it and blocks [he]. It’s not about *me* [original emphasis], but somehow, I feel much more monitored. Social media are very hostile to me. I can’t show myself as I like, as I see myself, as I want to show myself to friends. Facebook is not an egalitarian experience, in particular to transgender bodies. Going to the beach, to the swimming pool—it’s hard work for me. And then, when I do go, I want to take a picture, I want to post it on Face[book], and I can’t. Any small thing attracts lots of haters, so it’s a hostile place. I can’t, my identity is not complete. It’s a halved experience.

Humberto’s narrative exemplified another link between algorithmic resistance and political disengagement. As other participants told me, being highly visible on social media might feel empowering—but could also become a trap. The more visible one becomes, the higher is the likelihood that they will be attacked and persecuted. As Humberto’s quote suggests, Facebook visibility comes with perils, which even savvy users are unable to autonomously dodge or overcome.

The immediate peril Humberto talks about is his inability to even express his civic voice. He assumes that “right-wingers” and “hackers” constantly flag up pictures in which he appears with his torso nude, leading Facebook to take these photos down. Moreover, Facebook’s automated content moderation system, he thinks, has learned to “find”, and read his queer body as a necessary breach of the platform’s community standards (“I feel much more monitored”). Consequently, the platform unilaterally and automatically took down his posts, penalties that could lead his account to be suspended for 30 days, as he said.

The underlying risk Humberto talked about regarded his utter inability to be subjectively recognized *on and by* Facebook as the *male* citizen he is. Since the affirmation of his gender is the most important political expression of Humberto’s civic voice, taking his pictures down and suspending his account represented a profound and deeply felt symbolic violence. The way he repeatedly

associated Facebook with distress (e.g. “I’m very vulnerable”, “persecuted”, “hostile place”, “not an egalitarian experience”, “halved experience”) attests to this. By being incapable of controlling how he is seen and read on the platform, Humberto appeared to have had lost the power to be heard in a way that is minimally respectful to his self. This sense of inherent disrespect can be understood as linked with the platform’s failure to consider transgender people’s specificities, which cannot be disentangled from the acute level of prejudice individuals like Humberto suffer in all instances of their lives, particularly in Brazil. His story also suggests that assumptions of Facebook’s visibility regime might leave users feeling hopelessly unprotected against both malicious actors and the multiple flaws of algorithmic content moderation.

## Conclusion

Drawing on interviews with 47 Brazilian Facebook users, this article argued that resistance to algorithmic power might take the form of political disengagement. By that I mean the process whereby platforms’ ordinary users somehow stop expressing themselves politically as a way of refusing an algorithmic visibility regime that is felt as disrespectful to their civic voice. Evading social media is certainly not a new phenomenon. Yet this kind of resistance carries peculiar traits. It is not a collective effort against social injustice and algorithmic biases, or an individual act driven by moral principles, as the examples examined in the literature on users’ agency towards datafication, but a self-defence against the “moral injuries” (Honneth, 1995) that algorithmic visibility is perceived as inflicting. When citizenship is understood as useless, costly, and harmful, disengagement is hardly a surprise.

Yet more than documenting the links between datafication, agency and political withdraw, the article explored the ways in which these associations influence the constitution of users’ civic voices. In this way, resistance to Facebook’s datafication mechanisms can be highly productive. Participants’ heartfelt disappointment with the platform’s visibility regime, and their resulting decision to stop talking about politics on it, led them to reflect on and make decisions on who they are and aspire to be as citizens. In some instances, thinking critically about algorithmic power led them to consider what they would not say (Theo) and why they talked about politics after all (Amanda); in others, interviewees became much more aware of the crippling consequences of Facebook for their political agency, and how they should position themselves regarding the platform’s power (Humberto, Pedro, Gael).

One element that arguably unifies these agential processes is a sense of unrepairable inadequacy. Underpinning the stories of individuals like Pedro, Gael, Theo, Amanda, and Humberto appears to be a mismatch between how they understand themselves as citizens and the political participation rules that Facebook’s visibility regime imposes on them. However, inadequacy was not described in identical terms—users like Amanda, for instance, might feel that it was still possible to somehow “fight” politically on Facebook, as she said. Yet no-one appeared to be able to change or appropriate a regime that they neither designed nor controlled, and whose embedded values conflicted with unnegotiable political goals: their desire to provoke change, however small; their refusal to attack others or be manipulated; their right to express themselves fully.

The inadequate civic voices I heard about in my fieldwork originated from three kinds of misrecognition. Pedro’s description illustrates a form of forced *invisibilization*. As he said, he did not know how to make his voice “really trespass”, that is, cross the divide (“the bubble”) imposed by the algorithmic visibility regime between him and the conservative individuals he expected to “change”. Theo, in turn, appeared to have rejected the *distortion* of his voice that being seen on Facebook apparently demanded; acting like a hothead is simply not who he is. Finally,

Humberto experienced multiple instances of *disrespect*. As he said, Facebook is a “hostile place” for him, suggesting that people like him, who do not conform to cisnormativity, might well be worthless on the platform. In qualifying their voices as inadequate, the very idea of civic self-representation may become uninviting.

This sort of resistance remains normatively ambiguous, though. Participant’s experiences went beyond disempowerment. Their exit was also an expression of autonomy against the invisibilizations, distortions and disrespects that, they felt, Facebook’s visibility regime created and demanded (Baker, 1997; Hirschman, 1970). Moreover, inadequacy is not a barren feeling. It may lead people to seek and favor other, more fitting forms of engagement. Think of Gael’s neighborhood meetings, and Humberto’s attempts to organized in-person events. At the same time, by leaving Facebook, or simply slowing down their political action on the platform, individuals like Pedro, Gael, Theo, Amanda, and Humberto effectively refrained from a central political arena during a critical moment of Brazil’s political crisis. In so doing, they also opted to abstain from a much-needed struggle against the online authoritarian voices which were proliferating at the time of the interviews.

In fact, Facebook’s algorithmic visibility regime appeared to unwittingly select *some* kinds of citizens. In my sample of participants, those who decided to disengage from political talk on the platform were also those who directly or implicitly described themselves as democrats—individuals who valued diversity, balked at personal aggression, and seemed to care about truthfulness. On the other hand, interviewees who thrived on Facebook’s visibility regime (and whose stories this article does not examine) appeared to delight in casual hate speech and strategic manipulation of their peers. This bottom-up filtering process, in which democratic users might pull themselves out of social media platforms without being forced to, suggests that the relationship between algorithmic visibility and authoritarian culture might be less unidirectional than it is usually assumed.

How the blossoming of Bolsonarism is linked with this insight is hard to assess, based only in the qualitative interviews this article analyzed. Further research can utilize representative surveys to investigate this question. But Facebook’s importance during the Brazilian crisis indicates that these findings should be understood as likely factors of the broader context that made the 2018 far-right electoral landslide—and its catastrophic consequences—possible.

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### Notes

1. WhatsApp, hugely popular in Brazil, might have been quite important. But that platform is neither a typical social media nor it is underpinned by the sort of algorithmic visibility regime my research was concerned with.
2. Most of interviewees were male (59%), white (71%), progressive (77%), and middle class (73%).

3. São Paulo was chosen due to its centrality during Brazil's political crisis (most large demonstrations occurred in that city, for instance) and practical convenience (having relatives in São Paulo, it was easier for me to finance my stay in Brazil during the fieldwork).
4. Some biographical details of participants, including their names, were changed due to privacy concerns.

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