Attack in the Form of Defense? Populist Anti-media Tactics to Avoid Being Blamed*

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between blame and populism by analyzing the defensive communication strategies employed by right-wing populist leaders in their attacks on the media. The study focuses on Jair Bolsonaro and concludes that he used various strategies to avoid taking responsibility for adverse outcomes while blaming the media as one of his favorite targets. The explorative study draws on qualitative discourse analysis of the presidential narratives to shed light on the paradoxical nature of these defensive strategies. Bolsonaro's political style involved preemptively neutralizing the media's critical performance and reacting negatively to any critical coverage that contradicted his version of events and undermined his authority.

Keywords

Right-wing populist political communication; blame-avoidance; anticipative and reactive defensive discursive strategies; anti-elitism; attacks against the press.

¿El ataque como defensa? Tácticas populistas contra los medios para evitar la culpa

Resumen

En el presente artículo, se explora la relación entre la culpa y el populismo mediante el análisis de las estrategias de comunicación defensivas que emplean los líderes populistas de derecha en sus ataques contra los medios. El estudio se enfoca en Jair Bolsonaro y concluye que el expresidente hizo uso de diferentes estrategias para evadir su responsabilidad por los resultados negativos, a la vez que culpaba a los medios como uno de sus blancos favoritos. El estudio exploratorio se basa en el análisis cualitativo del discurso de las narrativas presidenciales a fin de arrojar luz sobre la naturaleza paradójica de estas estrategias defensivas. Los resultados demuestran que el estilo político de Bolsonaro implicaba la neutralización preventiva de las críticas de los medios y la reacción negativa ante cualquier cubrimiento que contradijera su versión de los hechos y socavara su autoridad.

Palabras clave

Comunicación política populista de derechas; evasión de culpas; estrategias discursivas defensivas anticipativas y reactivas; antielitismo; ataques contra la prensa.

Ataque como defesa? Táticas populistas contra a mídia para evitar a culpa*

Resumo

Neste artigo, explora-se a relação entre culpa e populismo, a partir da análise das estratégias de comunicação defensiva empregadas por líderes populistas de direita em seus ataques contra a mídia. O estudo se concentra em Jair Bolsonaro e conclui que o ex-presidente do Brasil fez uso de diferentes estratégias para fugir da responsabilidade por resultados negativos, enquanto culpava a mídia como um de seus alvos favoritos. O estudo exploratório baseia-se na análise qualitativa do discurso das narrativas presidenciais para esclarecer a natureza paradoxal dessas estratégias defensivas. Os resultados mostram que o estilo político de Bolsonaro envolvia a neutralização preventiva das críticas da mídia e a reação negativa a qualquer cobertura que contradissesse sua versão dos eventos e debilitasse sua autoridade.

Palavras-chave

Comunicação política populista de direita; evitação de culpa; estratégias discursivas defensivas antecipatórias e reativas; antielitismo; ataques contra a imprensa.

Introduction

Despite the growing literature examining populist upsurges worldwide, the complex usage of blame communicative devices while in power remains to be explored. Although a documented facet of populists acting in opposition is to blame the ruling elite, if and how they employ blame avoidance while in positions of power is less known. Populists can benefit from negative news coverage when striving for legitimacy in the political establishment; however, questions remain on whether the same can be said when holding responsibility in office. Some studies within the "communication-centered" research of populism have documented the conflicts between the media and populists, but very few have analyzed it through the lens of their blame-related defensive rhetoric tactics to embarrass the media as part of the corrupt elites. Furthermore, extant scholarship often focuses on Western countries and neglects case studies in Latin America and elsewhere.

In short, a fine-grained picture of the blame-avoidance defensive narratives employed by right-wing populists of the Global South while in government for strategically attacking the press is yet to be conducted. We contribute toward filling this gap by unpacking Jair Bolsonaro's patterns of reactive and anticipative blame avoidance vis-à-vis the media during the honeymoon period of his presidential mandate in Brazil. Through a qualitative discourse analysis that explores how authoritarian state actors articulate anti-media in their (un)mediated political communication, our study also sheds light on the paradox of resorting to defense communicative narratives in the attacks to censure or silence journalists by converting blame-avoidance discursive strategies into attacking blame-attribution.

This article starts by reviewing the literature on the anti-elitism facet of the populist right and communicative blame-avoidance strategies before setting out the explorative research question. Then, outlining the method and data precedes the empirical analysis of Jair Bolsonaro's blame-avoidance behavior through strategic anti-media assaults, the discussion of the findings, and the identification of areas for further research.

Literature Review—The 'Enemy Above': Anti-elitism as a Defining Feature of Populism

Notwithstanding the difficult enterprise in defining the disputed concept of populism, a conceptual core attribute associated with populism is the (moral) distinction or divide between the "pure people" and the dominant "corrupt elite" (Canovan, 1999; Katsambekis, 2022; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Novais, 2023; Novais & Araújo, 2022; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). The antagonistic pitting of the elite is a symbolic discursive process central to populism (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Ostiguy, 2017).

Furthermore, elite conceptualizations of populism are often portrayed as negativism, whether as a discursive political logic or a political style (Laclau, 2005; Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). "Anti-elitism" and "anti-establishment" refer to an "enemy above" of small and illegitimately existing power-holder groups perceived as betraying and conspiring against or not satisfying the needs and demands of the powerless people (De Cleen, 2019; Mudde, 2004). Besides legitimizing populist power, anti-elitism is also often rhetorically employed to delegitimize their opponents. Interestingly, situating this divisive distinction on moral grounds allows populists to maintain an anti-establishment discourse even when in office as a paradoxical "elitist anti-elitism" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Lastly, the moral dimension is reflected in the populists' blaming discourses constitutive of and constituted by their antagonistic depiction of the elite (Olivas Osuna, 2021; Vasilopoulou et al., 2014). The elite banner lumps together different foes besides the political government or the opposition and those associated with them, such as state and supra-national institutions, non-governmental organizations, business people, intellectuals, and the media (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2007; Novais, 2023; Novais & Araújo, 2022). In fact, media is a consistent target of right-wing populists aiming at silencing critical voices and undermining the individual and institutional legitimacy of the press (Aalberg et al., 2016; Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Carlson et al., 2021; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2019; Macaraig & Hameleers, 2022; Novais, 2023; Novais & Araújo, 2022; Sarikakis et al., 2023; van Dalen, 2021).

The antagonistic construction of the media as a salient outgroup threat in right-wing populist communication closely relates to their behavior vis-à-vis critical press reporting that needs further consideration, reasoned from the blame-avoidance framework.

Blame (avoiding) games with the media

Although criticizing opponents is a customary established part of contemporary politics, attributing blame—or ascribing "something bad or wrong"—presupposes a degree of "culpability" or "responsibility" and a "moral sanction" that detracts from the ability "to continue to act in the public interest" (Hood, 2011; Leong & Howlett, 2017, p. 600). However, politicians are often susceptible to being blamed for problems that arise during their time in office. This is because voters tend to focus more on losses than gains, whether actual or potential. As a result, politicians are often loss-averse and very cautious when avoiding blame. This concept is known as "blame avoidance" and was first introduced by Kent Weaver nearly forty years ago to describe elite behavior to handle blame in such a way that prevents losses, perceived or actual, imposed or acquiesced (Bache et al., 2015; Hinterleitner, 2017, 2020; Hood, 2011; Schlipphak et al., 2023; Weaver, 1986). Politicians use a variety of tactics to avoid being blamed, including minimizing their responsibility and passing blame to others (Hinterleitner, 2017; Hood, 2011; Weaver, 2018, p. 260). These tactics are known as defensive blame-avoidance mechanisms and are commonly used by officeholders to protect their reputations.

Accordingly, blame avoidance constitutes a rational "imperative" and prevalent central concern for officeholders' behavior, whether populists or not, to reduce perceptions of harm and of responsibility during routinary course of events or after crises and failures (Boin et al., 2009; Bovens et al., 1999; Hinterleitner, 2017; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015; Hood, 2011; Hood et al., 2009; Hood et al., 2016; Kuipers & Brändström, 2020; Mortensen, 2012; Vis, 2016; Weaver, 1986). Out of their authoritarian disposition, right-wing populists are predominantly averse to critical press reporting when in executive contexts (Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Krämer, 2018; Koliska et al., 2020; Macaraig & Hameleers, 2022; Meeks, 2020; Novais & Araújo, 2022; Panievsky, 2021).

Two strands of extant research on blame-avoidance game dynamics of right-wing populist defensive behavior while attacking the press are of interest: the rationalities at work in blame avoidance and their specific strategies. Regarding the rationale, blame avoidance refers to integrity-protecting activities in the face of potentially blame-attracting events that prevent officeholders from achieving their policy agenda goals, career advancement, and re-election or even destroy their reputation and legacy (Béland, 2007; Boin et al., 2009; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003; Hinterleitner, 2017; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015; Hinterleitner et al., 2022; Hood, 2011; Moynihan, 2012).

As for the strategies of blame-avoidance actors, a distinction exists between "anticipative" or "pro-active" and "reactive" types of blame avoidance (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015, 2017; Hood et al., 2009; Hood et al., 2016; Mortensen, 2012; Weaver, 1986). In the case of the former, officeholders seek to stop the expected blame a priori (Hansson, 2017; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017; Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006). Although anticipative blame avoidance occurs less visibly and interactively by mostly making "predominant use of policy and agency strategies" (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017, p. 14; Hood, 2011), we argue that it can still be operationalized in performative discursive acts of "idealizing" or "mystifying." Indeed, while presenting a coherent "idealized" version of themselves and their actions regarding the press, right-wing populist powerholders maintain a distance from the media as members of the corrupt elite to "mystify" themselves (Goffman, 2002; Hansson, 2018).

When unable to prevent exposure to blame attacks, actors rely on different blame-management strategies as an ex-post-public confrontation (Bovens et al., 1999; Brändström et al., 2008; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017; Hood, 2011). Amongst the detailed descriptions and categorizations of possible reactive blame-management strategies, we believe only a few stand out as suited to the sui generis pattern of blame-avoidance behavior characterizing right-wing populists' hostility toward the media (Hansson, 2015; Hood, 2011).

Despite concentrating the responsibility on more authoritarian leadership and limiting their blame-shifting opportunities (Anderson, 2007; Bache

et al., 2015; Dowding, 2020; Hansson, 2017; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zang, 2020; Hood, 2011; Mortensen, 2016), a distinctive facet of right-wing populists is to shift the blame for their hardships and adverse outcomes to the press as causally responsible scapegoats or credible elite outgroups (Entman, 1993; Hameleers et al., 2017, 2018). They strategically use blame avoidance to shield against criticisms and use critical reporting or media-initiated blame attributions to foster their victim role (Béland & Waddan, 2021, p. 97; Iyengar, 1994; Krämer, 2018; Novais & Araújo, 2022; Panievsky, 2021). To dissect the complex discursive practices that right-wing populists adopt in government-related reactive blame games, the focus, then, needs to be on the "forged pathways" of denying through arguing in counter-attacks (Boin et al., 2009; Hansson, 2015; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017; Hood, 2011).

Three defensive narratives stick out amongst standard rhetorical persuasive strategies employed by officeholders to ward off (potential) blame publicly put forward by the media (Hood, 2011; Lakoff, 2008): first, through framing or representing oneself metaphorically as a "victim" to escape being assigned the role of the villain in a blameworthy event or outcome (Hansson, 2018; Vis, 2016). In addition to victimization, powerholders also resort to "scapegoating" and "role-reversal" persuasive argumentation schemes as other "stronger forms of denial" or inverting the account of the blame maker's original accusation and further presenting the accuser as the villain (Van Dijk, 1992). Scapegoating consists of rejecting and deflecting the blame or shifting responsibility to other parties, also known as *trajectio in alium* (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Mortensen, 2012; Vis, 2016).

Moreover, they also "turn the tables" or turn blame into credit by role reversal from blame takers to blame makers who voice accusations (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Hood, 2011, p. 18; Wodak, 2006). It is achieved by distorting the original blame-related claims through evading the burden of proof ("straw man" argumentative fallacy), rewriting history, or ad hominem attacking an opponent's character—incompetence, lack of qualifications or experience, hypocrisy, dishonesty, or inconsistency, to name a few potential accusations—and portraying it as possessing stereotypically negative attributes (van Leeuwen, 2008). Lastly, blame-shifting also en-

compasses detracting blame-takers from their ability to act in the "public interest" (Leong & Howlett, 2017, p. 600).

Against this background, of particular interest to this work is to what extent the attitudinal anti-media, as a manifestation of anti-elitism of right-wing populism, translates to performative discursive acts of defensive blame. Although blame avoidance to build a positive self-presentation and embarrass the ruling elite is a building block of populist narratives in opposition (Béland & Waddan, 2021; Hameleers et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004), exactly how right-wing powerholders resort or combine anticipative and reactive communicative blame-avoidance discourses while attacking the media needs a more sophisticated understanding.

Accordingly, this explorative study aims to answer the following research question: What blame-avoidance defensive strategies did Bolsonaro employ in his official political communication to discursively construct anti-media at the early stages of his presidential mandate?

Methods and Data

This study draws on qualitative methodology to scrutinize the paradoxical usage of blame-avoidance defensive narratives by right-wing populists in assaulting the media while in office. Hence, it called for an explorative case study approach examined in its "real-world setting" (Yin, 2014, p. 16).

In that respect, the choice of Brazil as a key player in Latin America and the world stage and the first year of Jair Bolsonaro's administration—less studied than other Western right-wing populist powerholders—seemed adequate given that his arrival to the presidency in 2019 "significantly affected freedom of the press in Brazil" (Federação Nacional dos Jornalistas [FENAJ], 2020, p. 4). The former army captain made his political career out of "attacking liberal ideas about tolerance, human rights and conservation, and the elites who espouse them" and has held firm on his hardline ideology into the presidency (Abdalla, 2020; The Economist, 2020). By the end of his inaugural year in power, Bolsonaro steered Brazil toward more illiberal and authoritarian rule, which had implications for the worsening of the country's ranking in the World Press Freedom Index.

Although the first year in office is often a honeymoon period characterized by cordial relationships and fewer criticisms (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011), Bolsonaro "legitimized anti-press discourse" and "blessed the attacks" against journalists by directly endorsing or refraining from intervening to avoid them (Ozawa et al., 2023, p. 15). Unsurprisingly, the number of cases of attacks on news titles and journalists "reached 208"—"an increase of 54 % compared to the previous year"—and he perpetrated the majority of them (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 4–5).

A discourse analysis of populist narratives also seemed appropriate given that discursive strategies—like the "otherization" of the press—play a role in defining and categorizing different groups and establishing and reinforcing power relations (Mayring, 2019; Wodak, 2021). Populist political communication demands contrasting a positive self-presentation or blameless in-group with a negative other-presentation of a culprit outgroup through blame avoidance and responsibility attribution (Canovan, 1999; Hansson, 2015; Mudde, 2004; Wodak, 2006). Being an approach to studying language or communication in context as a social practice that provides a framework for problem-oriented research, discourse analysis focuses on understanding how language constructs meaning, shapes social reality, and influences power relations, identities, and social structures (Sankar, 2022).

The several steps involved in conducting a discourse analysis were observed throughout the research (Hartmann, 1980; Rogers, 2023). More concretely, we obtained the data by manually searching the yearbook authored by the Brazilian National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ), also used in prior scientific studies and reports (Lubianco, 2020; Ozawa et al., 2023). Beyond establishing the rules that organize the journalistic profession in the country, FENAJ also serves as a monitoring platform for the violence against journalists and press freedom in the country.

Although officeholders may opt not to mention possibly blameworthy issues at all, Bolsonaro's blame-avoidance performative discursive acts against the media were the central source of data. The unit of analysis was any single verbal attack against the press. The focus was on the 114 cases

of generic assaults to discredit news media and individual journalists documented in the 2019 yearbook. A section of the yearbook was useful for including full transcripts from speeches of the then-president of Brazil in various public contexts, interviews, and publications on the social media platform Twitter throughout the initial year of his first term in office.

Then, to familiarize ourselves with the data, we conducted an initial deductive outlining of the anticipative and reactive communicative types of blame avoidance. Bolsonaro's tweet on July 20, for instance, offered an illustrative example of the former when claiming: "I have always upheld the freedom of the press," whereas his reaction to the press criticism of one of his sons' nomination for the United States Embassy as "a sign that he is the right person" is a good indication of the later (FENAJ, 2020, p. 30). However, out of the initial 114 occurrences, 23 were unclear expressions or did not fit the categories of the communicative types of blame avoidance adopted in the study. The remaining 91 occurrences between January and December 2019 constituted the corpus of the qualitative study. They ranged from 46 tweets, 32 speeches in various contexts, and 13 media interviews.

In the following readings, we also created a further coding scheme based on topics or themes observed in the data (Hartmann, 1980) by identifying one anticipative blame-avoidance category—"idealization" or "mystifying"—alongside three other reactive ones—"victimization," "scapegoating," and "role reversal"—for systematic analysis. Aware of the challenges involved in extracting anticipatory blame avoidance from examining actor verbal behavior (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017), we still categorized "idealizing" or "mystifying" discursive acts as such. Bolsonaro claiming that "no other president had received so many journalists in Planalto" or acknowledging that the press had "an exceptional role to play in helping change Brazil" were coded as idealizing or mystifying (FENAJ, 2020, p. 30).

As for the remaining reactive coding categories, Bolsonaro's denial of his responsibility while making the press accountable for the "chaos" in the country, for instance, counted as scapegoating, and his efforts to convert the media as the blame takers of providing "fake news and misin-

formation" as role reversal (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 26, 34). The press's unfair portrayal of him as prejudiced regarding the populations of the northeastern region of Brazil or foreigners, at last, was coded as victimization (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 29, 33).

Moreover, we traced the reactive blame-avoidance efforts backward to the anticipative ones for considering them consecutive or in a continuum of blame-avoidance (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). Finally, besides re-checking the material for reliability and validity purposes, we considered the influence of contextual factors in accounting for the rationalities at work in Bolsonaro's blame-avoidance behavior (Leong & Howlett, 2017). We analyzed the data in the original Portuguese language and also did the translations of the material used in the analysis. Being both native speakers and one of the authors familiar with the Brazilian context allowed for capturing the original meanings of the vernacular expressions employed by Bolsonaro.

Results

A preliminary finding of the analysis revealed that Bolsonaro employed different blame-avoidance strategies to perpetrate anti-media assaults during the honeymoon period of his term. Notwithstanding the overall qualitative orientation of the study, a discernible pattern in his blame-avoidance behavior consisted of mostly reactive defensive narratives to the detriment of anticipative ones. Indeed, he occasionally mystified national news outlets by revealing his conception of the press-presidential relationship or his idealized expectations regarding the media. Then, in response to press critical reporting, the former president usually turned the tables or framed himself as a victim and resorted to scapegoating to deflect blame.

Idealizing as anticipative blame avoidance

While proposing a coherent version of himself and his actions as president, Bolsonaro also mystified the Brazilian press. He presented himself as the "champion of press freedom" by assuring the media "is important for the future of Brazil" and that he would "continue to defend such freedom at any cost," unlike some of his predecessors "who wanted social control of the media at all costs" (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 30, 34). He further aspired to have

the national press "selling the truth to the Brazilian people" and cooperating with the authorities in "breaking obstacles that prevent Brazil from occupying a prominent place in the world" (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 30, 34).

Nevertheless, in lieu of tolerating and accepting the social role and performance of the press, he viewed press criticisms as contradictory to his version of the events and detrimental to his legitimate sovereignty. He further mystified the press by assuring his "commitment with the Brazilian people"—different from the press—and that the country and his government were "succeeding despite the press" (FENAJ, 2020, p. 35).

In practical terms, Bolsonaro went from accusing news outlets of unduly profiting from public funds to cutting subsidies to the press through a provisional measure signed in August as a payback to the media attacks (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 27, 32). Furthermore, not only did he make it public that he had stopped subscribing to Folha de São Paulo newspaper—"I don't want to read Folha anymore, and that's the end of it (…) I don't buy any product advertised in it"—but he persuaded all businessmen to stop placing publicity in the critical press (FENAJ, 2020, p. 37). No doubt, his rhetoric and actions toward the media conveyed an ideal scenario of an opposing press being out of business.

Reactive blame-avoidance strategies

Bolsonaro extensively portrayed the media as possessing the stereotypically negative attributes connected to the left as evidence of turning blame into credit through a role-reversal strategy. Besides charging the press with displaying a positive bias toward left-wing politicians (FENAJ, 2020, p. 37), he claimed that "It's hard to find a journalist from the mainstream press without a leftist bias, and it seems that they don't want to see it or have been too indoctrinated" (FENAJ, 2020, p. 26). Similarly, Bolsonaro frequently associated the media with the defamed Labour Party (Partido Trabalhista) that had formerly ruled the country for a decade (FENAJ, 2020, p. 30); the stigmatized previous presidents involved in corruption scandals—Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (FENAJ, 2020, p. 32); and dictatorial countries like Cuba (FENAJ, 2020, p. 30).

Assuming the press as a foe to "fight" and "destroy" immediately prior to entering office did not prevent Bolsonaro from turning the tables on the matter (Novais & Araújo, 2022;). For instance, he declared on Twitter in July: "It does no good for the press to paint me as their enemy. No president has received as many journalists in Planalto as I have, even if they only used that goodwill to distort my words" (FENAJ, 2020, p. 30). Bolsonaro reinforced the point two months later when referring to sectors of the press as the "enemy" (FENAJ, 2020, p. 34).

Correspondingly, he was also able to convert a typical accusation directed against right-populists and him—of being a threat to democratic institutions—into a role-reversal narrative against those who voiced the allegations. Amongst plenty of examples to choose from, he argued that the press was "not free" and if Brazilians were to "depend upon the press," they would be "charged" without committing any crime and "lose fundamental rights" such as to defend against false or unproven accusations. Bolsonaro added that the media "will not leave us alone" and it "will be the end of us" if we "believe in the press" (FENAJ, 2020, p. 34). In fact, he showed no qualms in engaging in ad hominem attacks against journalists and the critical sectors of the media. The spectrum of Bolsonaro's criticisms and insults included "ignorant," "negligent," "incompetent," "coward," "idiot," "biased," "discredited," "disgusting," "malicious," "manipulative," "scoundrel," and "a rotten band" (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 25–26, 30–31, 33, 36).

On top of that, despite being publicly denounced as one of the principal providers of fake news and misinformation (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 35–36), he reverted the label by blaming the main Brazilian news titles who voiced accusations against him—Folha de São Paulo and Globo—as the "champions of fake news and misinformation"(FENAJ, 2020, p. 34).

As a further manifestation of role reversal, Bolsonaro used critical reporting to detract the Brazilian media from their ability to act in the public interest. To illustrate the point, he considered the press criticisms of his speech at the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) as a "signing that he had performed well," given that the Brazilian media were al-

ways "censuring him no matter what he said or did" and upholding foreign interests (FENAJ, 2020, p. 34). Faced with another intense critical scrutiny by the press, Bolsonaro considered it to be performing a "disservice to the country" by "undermining the national sovereignty" and blocking him from pursuing his project (FENAJ, 2020, p. 34). In the extreme, he accused the Brazilian media of "acting like an oppositional political party" and conspiring for the ruling President "to give up power" and "abdicate for others to take over" (FENAJ, 2020, p. 31).

Sensing that the popular support was evaporating, Bolsonaro further utilized the media as a scapegoat to deflect the blame and reduce the public perceptions of responsibility during the inaugural year of his presidency. By highlighting the press attempts to "create chaos" and "destabilize" his executive, Bolsonaro deflected the blame on the "blunders" and "chaos within his own government, where competing factions, including the military, right-wing ideologues, and his own sons, are jostling for influence over policy" (Agence France Press, 2019; FENAJ, 2020, p. 27).

Bolsonaro decried in confrontational terms the continuous persecuting behavior by the press of insisting on "digging up" his past and his family members in search of scandal and polemics ranging from "mistreatment" and "harassment" to "massacre," "*esculachado*" (or ridiculed) and "hounding" (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 26–28, 33–34). This culminated in the press allegations of his involvement in the March 2018 murder of the local councilwoman critical of police violence, Marielle Frank, responsible for overseeing the deployment of federal security forces into Rio de Janeiro's deprived favelas (FENAJ, 2020, p. 36).

Bolsonaro repeatedly framed himself as the victim as a form of reactive defense against unfavorable or critical press coverage. Firstly, he pointed his finger at the media for accusing him of being "homophobic," "fascist," "racist," and a "dictator," all associated with the far-right populism conservative views on masculinity, authority, and nationalism or nativism that should be praised instead of criticized (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 27, 37). Moreover, although less frequently, the former president still pre-

sented himself as an unwitting victim of an accusing press that insisted on portraying him as "prejudiced" toward his fellow countrymen of the northeastern region of Brazil or as an enemy of China (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 29, 33).

Likewise, the media's sensationalist charges of climate crimes against him—such as the deforesting or burning of the Amazon and filling the sea with oil (Deutsch & Fletcher, 2022; FENAJ, 2020, p. 37)—should be understood within the framework of yet another controversial facet of populists regarding scientific denialism. Bolsonaro seized the opportunity at the UNGA to publicly expose the "lies propagated by the media," even if this meant clashing with international leaders Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel or with independent reports documenting that "deforestation under Bolsonaro's watch has risen almost 30 percent to its worst level in 11 years" or his "assault on the country's environmental protections" which "stripped away the rights of its Indigenous Peoples"—such as the temporary measure to put Indigenous lands under the jurisdiction of the agriculture ministry that paved the way for cattle ranching and soy interests to accelerate their sweep through the world's largest tropical forest (Abdalla, 2020; Fern, 2019).

Another common victimization found concerned the repeated denouncements of nepotism. Criticisms of his son's appointment to the US embassy or the nomination of a close friend, Victor Nagen, for the board of the state-owned Brazilian Petroleum Corporation (Petróleo Brasileiro S.A. – Petrobras) featured in news reports alongside the disclosure that over 140 people from his family entered government (FENAJ, 2020, pp. 25, 32).

Discussion and Conclusions

With this study, we contribute to the literature on blame avoidance and populist communication, often researched separately. While exploring the paradox of the defensive communicative narratives encompassed in right-wing populist powerholders' anti-media attacks, we show the importance of previously overlooked aspects, such as combining distinct discursive anticipative with reactive blame-avoidance strategies or tracing the latter back to the former in a continuum of blame-avoidance strategies and incorpo-

rating contextual factors into unpacking the rationale behind Bolsonaro's blame-avoidance behavior and specific strategies employed. In addition, we further help to overcome another pitfall in the extant literature by advancing a holistic solution to extract anticipatory blame avoidance from the actors' behavior via identifying evidence of idealization or mystification in their discursive acts.

The findings permitted us to answer the research question by confirming that Bolsonaro recurrently employed defensive blame-avoidance discursive strategies as a form of attack against the press during his inaugural year in the Brazilian presidency. Less frequently than not, he resorted to preventive blame avoidance in anticipation of any crises to justify in advance not achieving his government's policy goals and not compromise possible re-election. Pushing his Manichean worldview, he established a set of binaries between him and the press. Indeed, he started by contrasting an 'idealized' version of himself (and of his government performance) with that of the media to mystify the press and to distance himself from the journalists as members of the corrupt elite. Then, as a last resort, he voiced threats of governmental subsidy cuts to discipline the press and prevent blame before it started or to stop continuing to be exposed to critical reporting on potential future transgression. In short, invoking a stark contrast between the press agenda and reporting and his own version of what it ought to be was one powerful discursive strategy for Bolsonaro to affect the credibility and legitimacy of the press.

Incapable of thwarting negative coverage, he privileged reactive communicative narratives to reduce perceptions of responsibility for potentially blame-attracting events that could further damage his presidential reputation and legacy. Besides scapegoating and role reversal, he also framed himself as a victim to escape the villain label by the press. Moreover, he continuously zigzagged the blamed arguments adapted to political circumstances, usually in reaction to press reporting.

Although somewhat unusual in the honeymoon period of a presidential mandate, given that the political capital of officeholders tends to wane slower and they are 'backed into a corner' at a later stage (Hood et

al., 2016), the findings on the overall behavior of Bolsonaro toward the press were hardly surprising and that was the case for several reasons. Firstly, it came as no surprise that he emulated the typical right-wing populist strategy of undermining the epistemic legitimacy of journalism and associating it with the corrupt elite. In line with previous findings in the literature review, he confirmed blame avoidance as an essential building block of populist narratives to build a positive self-presentation and attribution for embarrassing the media.

Secondly, it constitutes an illustrative example of right-wing populists in positions of power getting a good deal of "bad press" as a consequence of having used delegitimizing strategies to undermine the authority of the critical press. Bolsonaro's antagonism and hostility toward some Brazilian media sectors preceded his arrival at the presidential office, and they were already perceptible from the tumultuous 2018 campaign. Having marked a critical juncture in terms of what a press-president relationship used and ought to be, it would have been difficult for Bolsonaro to change his rapport with the mainstream press given such a recent record of delegitimizing rhetoric. More so, the polarized circumstances prevailing in Brazil at the time made it even more unlikely for officeholders to admit responsibility for an event or alleged failures. Still, he exhausted anticipative blame-avoidance discursive strategies ahead of receiving blame for the increasing evidence of his executive missing the target to stop blame before it started.

Thirdly, his frequent reactive blame-avoidance narratives revealed the conviction that any press criticism, instead of being good publicity, was inconvenient for putting him in a critical light. That said, his management strategies during reactive blame games were often a circular discourse consisting of little more than accusing the accuser or arousing suspicion about its motives without providing much or no evidence that the accuser was guilty.

The blame taker offering an inverted account of the blame maker's original accusation by tautologically attributing blame to the press could potentially accomplish a couple of purposes that are not mutually exclusive. It could aim at effectively diminishing his culpability and increasing

the blame of the target. Indeed, besides fitting the populist communicative behavior of denying and counter-attacking, Bolsonaro's assaults and negative portrayal of the media may have alleviated the threat of the press by devaluing the outgroup that posed the threat. In the alternative, changing the focus of the public debate from the subject of the coverage to the motivations and credibility of the reporting would also have toned down the press criticisms. Lastly, media-initiated blame attributions through critical reporting could have constituted a perfect alibi for his self-victimization drive, let alone with the benefit of reducing his perceived responsibility for any inconvenient outcomes.

In sum, it revealed a Latin American populist power holder's rational effort to (preventively) deactivate the critical performance of the press and to (reactively) flout any propagated negative image in contradiction with his version of the events and detrimental to his authority. Bolsonaro rhetorically shifted blame for his leadership and government hardships away from himself toward the media as a culpable outgroup. Such reactive blame-avoidance defensive strategies amounted to negative blame-generating messaging on the opposing press's legitimacy, credibility, and other attributes.

This work suffers from the limitations of an exploratory case study. Further research is needed on the relationships between anticipatory and reactive blame-avoidance strategies by officeholders. Future studies should test, for instance, whether similar defensive blame-avoidance discursive strategies are activated in anti-media attacks elsewhere in other international democratic settings or, ideally, in a comparative light. A further possibility would be to validate if Bolsonaro displayed a similar pattern of othering alternative in-groups of the elite banner or pointed to specific discursive choices that may not fit under any of the proposed categories of this work.

Another caveat of our study was the limited time span of Brazil's first year of the presidential mandate. Hence, there is also room for alternative works across the entire term in office or, once again, by comparing it with previous officeholders in the country. A final limitation and future avenue for research was the different consequences produced by these types of blame avoidance not accounted for.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this work presented an overall innovative and timely contribution to the literature on blame avoidance and populism that could interest political communication, socio-political psychology, and press safety. The systematic look at the distinct situations that triggered Bolsonaro's blame-avoidance behavior and the rationalities and dynamics behind the applied strategies advanced a more realistic understanding of how right-wing populist officeholders play the blame game through strategic anti-media attacks. It also dealt with the paradox of defense mechanisms encompassed in the anti-media assaults by converting defensive blame-avoidance discursive strategies into attacking blame-attribution narratives. As part of the performative style of his political persona, the former president profusely used distinct defense mechanisms to effectively decrease his culpability and responsibility—of the accuser—and increase the blame of the press as one of his favorite elite targets.

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