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A Double-Edged Sword: a theoretical analysis of participation in the anti-democratic movement of January 8, 2023

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Abstract

This article proposes an analysis of the limits of participation and its eventual political instrumentalization in a democratic environment. The thoughts of Arnstein (1969), Carpentier (2018), Sharp (2017), and Melo et al. (2019) form the basis of the literature review. The research adopts an empirical approach and presents a descriptive case study focused on users' participation in X denouncing the coup attempt on January 8 in Brasília. While the results of the literature review point out that the variety of historical, social, and political conjunctures is an obstacle to a unique understanding of participation and its relationship with the media, the case study suggests that the participation of Brazilian citizens on X is complex, presenting traits of interaction, power sharing, and negative participation.

Keywords

Participation; Democracy; X; Code Book.

Introduction

The theory of participation is a complex concept studied and debated across various academic fields. At its core, it examines the ways in which individuals and groups engage themselves with their communities, institutions, and political systems, as well as explores the role that participation plays in shaping governance, decision-making, and the development of social norms.

One of the primary debates in the context of participation theory revolves around defining "participation." Some researchers argue that participation should be expanded to include formal engagement arrangements, such as voting or attending public meetings, and informal forms of engagement, such as online activism, blogging, and community organizing (Cornwall, 2007; Hyman & Tohill, 2017). Others argue that participation should be limited to a formal engagement framework defined by the government and other institutions (Pateman, 1970; Dahl, 1989).

A critical discussion surrounding participation theory is the relationship between participation and power. The ideas that increased participation can lead to greater democratization in marginalized communities and that there are forms of participation that can reproduce existing power structures and reinforce the status quo are equally debated (Foucault, 1991; Putnam, 2000; Almond & Verba, 1965).

Martins (2002), regarding the issue of participation, views this process "not only as a place where the opportunity for participation is ensured but one that promotes it in every sense, because it invests its vitality in it" (p.53). New arrangements, such as online activism (Gerbaudo, 2021), allow for the expansion of participatory practices but also present analytical challenges for the field of Communication. According to Gerbaudo (2021), the internet is still considered a porous arena, open to new discourses, with little identification of the organizational dynamics facilitated/intensified by online dynamics. The involvement of individuals and groups with posts denouncing the anti-democratic acts of January 8, 2023, in Brazil is related to the state of inclusion of those involved in an online-offline continuum (Miller & Slater, 2020; Leitão & Gomes, 2018) of everyday life in the processes of strengthening democracy, to correct the weakened power that this group holds in society—often due to the inherent logic of the fragility of networked protest (Tufekci, 2017). With the promotion of participation under these new formats on digital platforms like X, a movement to adjust these imbalances among various powers can be observed. However, we understand that the outcomes of participatory processes inevitably depend on personal self-esteem, confidence, knowledge, skills, status, social involvement, and levels of happiness or justice, as highlighted by Huesca's (2008) study.

As crucial as this conceptual debate is the recognition of the significant implications that such approaches present for various academic fields, including Political Science, Sociology, and Philosophy. Political scientists have studied the relationship between participation and political efficacy, that is, the extent to which individuals believe they can affect political outcomes. Sociologists have examined the impact of participation on social norms and identity formation. Philosophers have explored the ethical implications of participation, particularly in democratic decision-making. However, in this research, our focus is on the concepts and approaches to participation adopted in Brazil after January 8, 2023, when supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro invaded the Supreme Federal Court, the Congress building, and surrounded the presidential palace in Brasília. On that occasion, they called for military intervention in the Brazilian government, and artworks, furniture, and part of the infrastructure of the site were destroyed.

It is essential to highlight that, in 2023, Brazil celebrated 35 years of the Federal Constitution (CF), commonly known as the Citizen Constitution. It was enacted after decades of military dictatorship in the country. Currently, more than 120 amendments to the CF can be identified, and some political and social rights that had previously been approved have been removed. Recent political changes in the country only threaten to increase levels of violence and racism further. The four years of government led by Jair Bolsonaro were marked by a reduction in press freedom, access to public information, and especially in

forms of participation.

Thus, the objective of this investigation is to analyze the limits of the concept of participation and its political instrumentalization in a democratic environment, using as a case study the participation in the actions denouncing the coup attempt on January 8 in Brasília. This is a relevant topic and object of study for the field of Communication, which has a significant history of studies on participation in Political Communication, Communication Policies, and Culture, and, to a lesser extent, in the Political Economy of Communication. However, sometimes, some approaches still understand participation only from a procedural standpoint and not as a constitutive element of democracy itself, which justifies a broader view of the topic.

Although the fields of Political Communication and Political Science have developed significantly in recent years, with various theoretical efforts to understand participation in the Brazilian context, we chose to focus our analysis on the instrumentalization of participation in a specific democratic environment. We recognize that more recent approaches, as discussed by Albuquerque (2019), Miguel (2014), Dantas (2002), and Santos et al. (2020), offer valuable insights into digital activism, political mobilization, and network formation. However, we chose not to directly integrate these discussions into this study, as we believe that Participation Theory already provides a solid foundation for understanding the limits and potential of the concept in the investigated context. This decision was made to focus on the specific empirical analysis and the political instrumentalization of participation without diverting attention to broader theoretical debates.

Finally, a brief literature review on the topic is presented to achieve the proposed objective. Next, the anti-democratic movement (the political-social phenomenon that constitutes the research object) is detailed, the results of the first part of the content analysis are presented, and finally, the relationship between the results achieved so far and the observed and characterized mechanisms of active population participation in identifying individuals and groups involved in the acts of January 8, 2023, are analytically described.

One Word, Many Meanings

The Theory of Participation refers to the active involvement of individuals in decision-making processes and has gained significant attention in the field of Communication in recent years. It highlights the democratic potential of communication and how participation can empower individuals and promote social change. In this research, we discuss the works of three authors who have significantly contributed to the development of participation theory: Arnstein (1969), Carpentier (2018), and Sharp (2017).

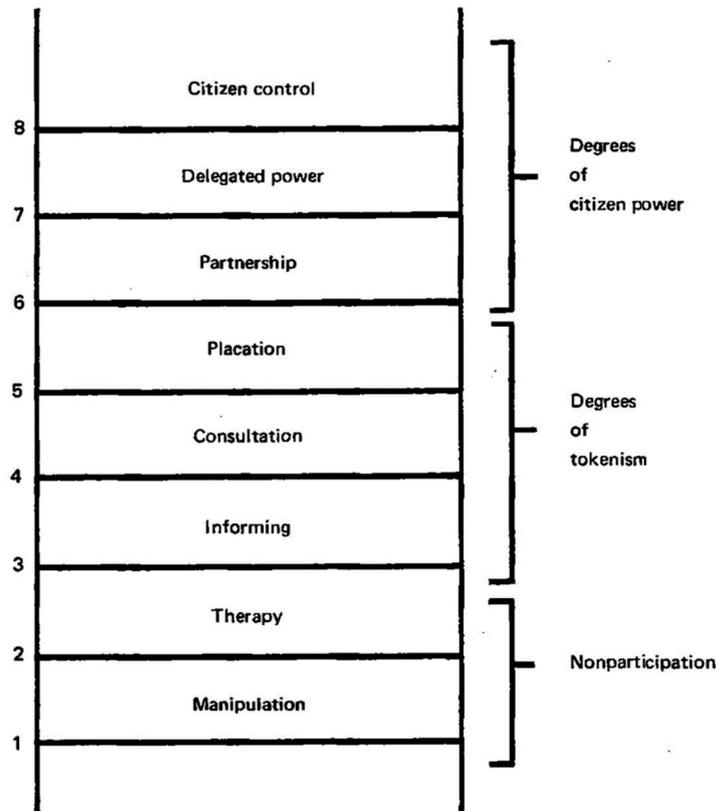
Proposed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969, the Ladder of Citizen Participation is one of the most widely referenced and influential models in the field of democratic public participation. For local leaders, organizers, and facilitators who wish to understand fundamental theories of public engagement and participation and how empowered institutions and public authorities deny power to citizens, Arnstein's research is often a reference.

Arnstein begins her article (1969, p. 214) with a central question: "What is citizen participation, and what is its relationship to the social imperatives of our time?" She then provides a detailed answer:

"(...) citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables excluded citizens, currently excluded from political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the excluded join together to determine how information is shared, goals and policies are set, fiscal resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are distributed. In short, it is how they can induce significant social reform that allows them to share in the benefits of a prosperous society... participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless."

Arnstein's typology of citizen participation (1995) is presented as a metaphorical "ladder" (Illustration 1), where each ascending rung represents increasing levels of agency, control, and citizen power. In addition to the eight levels of participation, Arnstein includes a descriptive continuum of participatory power, ranging from non-participation (no power) to degrees of tokenism (false power) and finally to degrees of citizen participation (real power).

Illustration 1 – Detail of the Ladder of Citizen Participation Model



Source: Arnstein (1995)

Although it is a valuable tool for analyzing levels of participation in decision-making processes, it has some negative aspects. First, it simplifies the notion of participation by presenting it as a linear progression, moving from non-participation to citizen control. In reality, participation is more complex and dynamic, with individuals and groups often moving between different levels of participation depending on the issue at hand.

Secondly, Arnstein's ladder (1995) can be criticized for its limited focus on formal participation, neglecting the importance of informal participation, which does not necessarily follow a linear progression. Informal participation can take many forms, such as social media activism, community organizing, and protests, and can sometimes have a more significant impact than formal involvement.

Finally, the ladder can be seen as prescriptive, placing undue emphasis on individual participation and ignoring the role of institutional and structural factors in enabling or restricting participation. It can also convey the false impression that citizen participation is always desirable and necessary without recognizing the potential for participation to reproduce power imbalances, exclude marginalized groups, or perpetuate injustices.

On the other hand, Carpentier argues that participation is a crucial element of democracy to be achieved, as it allows diverse voices to be heard. In his words, "participation is not something given, nor an inherent good. On the contrary, it is a field of struggle for power, representation, and voice, and is always

embedded in a specific ideological context that shapes and limits its potential outcomes" (Carpentier, 2018, p. 2).

The author also notes that participation theory is a complex concept. On the contrary, it is marked by theoretical complexity and contestation, shaped by social, political, and cultural factors. Carpentier emphasizes the importance of understanding the ideological context in which participation occurs and how power and representation are negotiated through participatory processes.

Continuing with Carpentier's perspective, we find his view on the relationship between media and participation. "The media plays a crucial role in facilitating the democratic potential of participation. This is because it offers accessible platforms to diverse audiences, develops public deliberation, and enables collective action" (Carpentier, 2011, p. 75). At first glance, this is a relatively positive and generalist approach, as the concept of media adopted by the author is broad and reinforces the understanding that effective participation is a democratic aid, regardless of the type of media used. However, in more recent publications (Carpentier & Mylonas, 2020; Carpentier & Jenkins, 2022), the researcher focuses on observing the different potentials that each type of media presents and emphasizes the importance of analyzing power relations in the media and participatory processes.

Sharp's (2017) concept of participation is multifaceted and seeks to understand how people engage with various aspects of society and culture. At its core, participation is about how people are involved in the creation, production, and reception of media and other cultural artefacts, as well as how they exercise agency and influence in various domains of life.

Sharp (2017) argues that participation should be studied as an embedded practice that is situated within specific contexts and social structures. She emphasizes the importance of understanding participation as a dynamic phenomenon that is related to power relations, social hierarchies, and inequalities. This means that, for the author, the concept of participation is not just about individuals' involvement with media or culture in isolation but rather how they do so within broader social and cultural contexts. Her approach highlights the ways in which participation can empower or disempower, as well as challenge dominant cultural norms and values. Ultimately, her theoretical proposition offers a framework for understanding the diverse ways in which people engage with media, culture, and society and the implications of these engagements for social change and transformation.

It is possible to identify some imprecision in the author's definition, as there is no precise specification of the role or how the participants in the communication process are engaged. She defines participation as "people acting together to achieve a common interest or goal" (Sharp, 2017, p.35). However, she does not elaborate on the specific level of involvement or influence that participants have in shaping the outcome of the shared interest or goal. It is still being determined whether those participating are active agents driving the realization of the shared interest or goal, or if they are merely passive supporters contributing to the effort through their mere presence. Furthermore, Sharp's (2017) definition does not consider the power dynamics that may exist within a group of participants, which can significantly impact the level and effectiveness of participation.

This theoretical gap becomes even more evident when we consider the role of digital influencers in the current landscape of political participation. Influencers often act as mobilization agents in political issues and can transcend passive participation by activating their audiences around specific causes. In Brazil, influencers such as Felipe Moura Brasil and George Marques, or even Felipe Neto and Luisa Sonza, exemplify this phenomenon by using their platforms to engage their followers actively in political debates and social mobilizations.

Contrary to Sharp's definition, digital influencers invariably play a clear and active role in shaping political outcomes, guiding participation, and shaping discourse and collective actions. In the Brazilian context, authors like Martino (2023) and his reinterpretation of the concept of opinion leaders and political polarization; Estela (2019) and her analysis of the impact of digital influencers in the 2018 elections; and

Aguiar and Lycarião (2023) and their discussion around the influencers of Bolsonaroism highlight how these individuals use their influence to amplify political discussions and, in many cases, lead social movements. The ability of influencers to transform followers into active participants in political causes demonstrates a more complex and significant power dynamic than that observed in traditional forms of participation.

The relationship between participation and the work of these influencers in political issues also challenges traditional notions of engagement by allowing mobilization to occur in a decentralized and large-scale manner. Recuero and Bastos (2023) discuss that digital platforms enable participation to be both broad and meaningful, and political influencers play a crucial role in this ecosystem, articulating and directing activism toward concrete goals.

In the case of the denunciations of the attempted coup on January 8, influencers sought to channel popular indignation and transform it into denunciation actions, revealing how social media activities on the internet can materialize into practical forms of political participation. This role of influencers, therefore, underscores the need for a deeper analysis of the power dynamics involved in digital participation, something that more traditional theoretical definitions, like Sharp's, may only partially capture.

The Coup Attempt on January 8

Although Luís Inácio Lula da Silva took office for his third term in Brazil on January 1, 2023, the peak of these political changes occurred a week later, when Bolsonaro's supporters invaded the country's Supreme Federal Court, the Congress building, and surrounded the presidential palace in Brasília. While they called for military intervention in the Brazilian government, artworks, furniture, and part of the site's infrastructure were destroyed. It is also important to highlight the large number of videos and photos produced by the invaders during the attempted occupation. Immediately, the media, justice bodies, and third-sector entities created reporting channels for the population to help authorities identify those responsible for the destruction and the leaders of the movement. The result was the creation of social media pages, telephone hotlines, and emails, as well as the involvement of digital influencers, which led to the identification of over 1,100 individuals.

The attack on the Brazilian government buildings in Brasília was not an entirely unpredictable event. After the 2022 presidential elections, with Lula da Silva's victory in the electronic voting machines, the voters and followers of then-President Jair Bolsonaro set up camps in various cities across Brazil. The camps were established in front of the Army barracks, where people celebrated their close relationship with the ideological perspective of the defeated politician and with ideas of military intervention. They claimed that the election had been rigged and, therefore, the presidential election should be annulled.

It was from these camps, especially those in the Federal District, that supporters marched to the Esplanade of Ministries on January 8, 2023, and carried out coup attempts by vandalizing the headquarters of the Three Powers. Bolsonaro supporters first invaded the National Congress, then the other headquarters. Rooms were destroyed, artworks looted and vandalized, furniture thrown against windows, police officers injured, journalists assaulted, and over 200 people were caught and arrested in the act.

The tension surrounding the idea of a coup had always lingered during the four years of Bolsonaro's government. We highlight this idea of the coup "looming over" his government because, as Batista (2021, p. 129) explains, the President of the Republic of Brazil, as well as his political group, are "enthusiastic supporters of revisionism and denialism regarding the dictatorship." According to the author, Bolsonaroism is structured around a nostalgic revisionism (a way of reinterpreting history) that glorifies torture, military repression, and the torturers who used state violence and anti-communism to assert themselves in power for over 20 years. One example of this revisionism occurred during Bolsonaro's term, with the authorization for the Armed Forces to commemorate the anniversary of the Civil-Military Coup of

March 31, 1964, by holding ceremonies in barracks, extolling the event and its aftermath.

As of the writing of this article, the attack events in Brasília are linked to intelligence reports in the possession of the Brazilian government, which indicated that 100 buses carrying 3,900 people arrived in Brasília with the intent of resuming street protests against President Lula's election on Sunday, January 8; but also, to the investigations being conducted by the Federal Police (PF) of Brazil. According to the PF, the invasion had been prepared by extremists loyal to former President Bolsonaro since January 3, 2023, when radicals began to intensively spread messages on apps like Telegram and WhatsApp to bring protesters from all over the country to the federal capital, with all expenses paid.

On May 25, 2023, a Joint Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPMI) was established, and its activities concluded in October of the same year. The final report, presented by Senator Eliziane Gama, recommended indicting 61 people, including former President Jair Bolsonaro. Among the accusations were criminal association, political violence, violent abolition of the Democratic Rule of Law, and attempted coup d'état. The document argues that Jair Bolsonaro was the mastermind behind the anti-democratic acts, based on evidence obtained through bank, telephone, and telematic secrecy breaches and financial intelligence reports. Additionally, there is a recommendation for the indictment of several politicians and military personnel, pointing out failures and omissions in handling security forces during the events of January 8. However, there were criticisms of the report from the opposition, which claimed a lack of concrete evidence for some indictments and accused the rapporteur of protecting political figures and distorting the investigation's purpose. The opposition presented a separate vote, questioning the legality of the proposed indictments and suggesting the need for further investigations.

On Empirical Research – Codebook, Forms, and Themes

To achieve the results of the first part of the content analysis, we defined the research questions and hypotheses that guided the methodological design of the study. We then outlined the unit of analysis (texts of posts denouncing the anti-democratic acts in Brazil on January 8 on X) and the sampling unit (the denunciations of the anti-democratic acts in Brazil on January 8 that circulated on X). Data extraction was carried out using the X Scraper tool based on the criteria of date (January 8, 2023), time (00:00 to 23:59), and keyword (coup OR denunciation). We developed a codebook to identify and determine the class of tweets (or posts) of denunciation based on the concept of participation and to characterize them in terms of their mechanism, as well as their narrative and agenda. The codebook is a tool that we consider significant for identifying content trends and revealing the focus of attention in the analyzed posts. In this regard, for this codebook, we created nominal and ordinal qualitative categories and variables (Sampaio & Lycarião, 2021), considering the object of study in question.

Thus, we generated form and thematic variables based on the confirmation that the content presents or references the active involvement of individuals in decision-making processes. The distinction between content circulating on social media and content that effectively references or uses the sense of participation in the denunciation actions of the January 8, 2023 events is made based on the participation variable. Once a positive relationship in the first variable was identified, we indicated the predominant form of participation according to the predefined categories (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Variables and Categories of Content Analysis in the Codebook

Variable	Description and Categories	
Participation	Whether the content presents or references the active involvement of individuals in decision-making processes.	No Yes Doubt/Ambiguity
Form of Participation	Whether the content adopts any new form of participation.	Post (POST) Comment (COM) Hashtags (HAS) Keyword (KEYW) Direct Message (DM) Mentions (ME) Conversations (CONV)
Theme of Participation	Whether the content presents or references any theme associated with the active involvement of individuals in decision-making processes.	Democracy (DEM) Identity (IDE) Political Efficacy (EPO) Political Power (POP) Freedom of Expression (LIB) Censorship (CEN) Military Intervention (INT) Impunity (IMP) Anti-Democratic (ANT) Election Fraud (FRAU)

Source: Produced by the authors

Regarding the methodological choices, the categories presented here encompass various types of participation, not just those intended for denunciations, such as the categories of censorship and anti-democratic. In fact, they are equally evident in posts where people make denunciations—cases like the use of the term "coup" and criticisms of the forms of denunciation themselves. However, we clarify that although the categories account for a broader analysis, the sampling unit consists of posts that involve denunciations.

The thematic variable was developed from an initial reading of the posts' texts denouncing the acts of January 8, which were collected from X. In the process of categorical content analysis, it was vital to describe the type of content associated with a theme that should be observed (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Thematic Categories and Content Description of the Codebook

Description and Thematic Categories	
If the content refers to the defence of democracy, democratic institutions, and democratic practices at all levels.	Democracy (DEM)
If the content refers to the defence and exaltation of gender, racial, and specific group identities in the posts.	Identity (IDE)
If the content refers to the belief in the punishment of those involved in anti-democratic acts through denunciations made via social networks and official reporting platforms (such as government and justice bodies).	Political Efficacy (EPO)
Suppose the content refers to empowerment in the context of online activism. In addition to the statements (through various forms of participation), people understand that the online environment has the magnitude to allow for this empowerment and the expansion of participation with new arrangements. Thus, participants gain the right to political speech.	Political Power (POP)
If the content refers to the defence of anti-democratic acts under the justification of freedom of expression.	Freedom of Expression (LIB)
If the content refers to the rejection of denunciations of anti-democratic posts, emphasizing the practice of censorship.	Censorship (CEN)
If the content refers to posts that emphasize military intervention as a prominent element in the anti-democratic practices of military institutions, or even in the demonstrations held before January 8, and in the anti-democratic acts.	Military Intervention (INT)
If the content refers to posts highlighting that denunciations are useless because justice institutions practice dereliction of duty and consequently contribute to impunity. On the other hand, they may also scorn denunciations because they believe in impunity regarding criminal practices on digital and online networks.	Impunity (IMP)
If the content refers to posts that defend anti-democratic acts in all spheres (down with the STF, the Federal Police, and judicial decisions), especially those of January 8.	Anti-Democratic (ANT)
If the content refers to posts that highlight and defend that the Brazilian elections were rigged, justifying the anti-democratic acts carried out.	Election Fraud (FRAU)

Source: Produced by the authors

Until the final format of the codebook, we conducted tests and adjustments. Two people performed the coding using a coding form developed in Excel. One of the team members, who was experienced in conducting this type of method, trained the second coder and verified the results. After the material classification process using the content analysis method, we began the description and analysis phase of the obtained results.

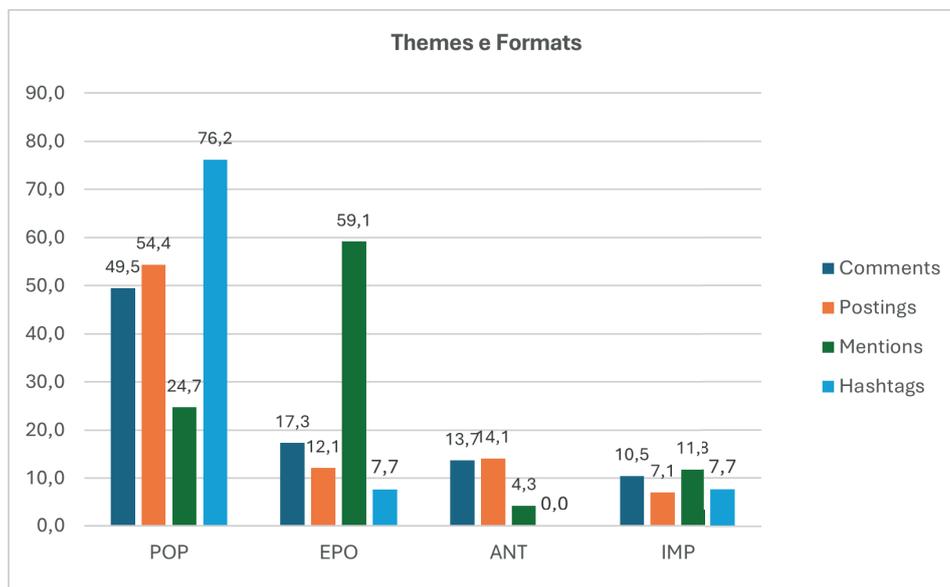
Description and analysis of results

For this study, out of more than 1500 collected tweets, 710 (47.20%) constitute our analysis corpus, those which we identified as new participation arrangements within the context of online activism in Brazil. Before starting the analysis phase of the collected material, a data cleaning process was conducted, in which emojis, links, and interjections were removed. In an initial exploratory phase, we listed the most recurring terms in the corpus to gain a broader understanding of the object of study. The words denúncia (denunciation), Lula, STF (Supreme Federal Court), crime, and você (you) were the five most cited.

of broad consensuses more difficult. Figueiredo (2017, p. 2) points out that "social media presents an extremely more pervasive mode of colonization of everyday life than mass media." The surveillance and control exercised by platforms and governments, as evidenced by mass surveillance scandals, also pose a significant risk to individuals' privacy and freedom of expression.

Commenting on X can be understood as an act of participation. Whether by expressing an opinion on a particular discussion topic, clarifying ideas, spreading information, or denouncing acts that people consider a risk, even to their form of online participation. Studies such as Tufekci's (2017), for example, have examined the transformations brought about by digital technologies in the trajectories of social movements and the public sphere and placed this analysis within the context of specific possibilities of giant software platforms like Facebook, X, and Google, which have become central to the organization of social movements worldwide. For the author, X is a hub of mechanisms operating in the public sphere that impact the trajectories and dynamics of networked social movements. Although posts (POST) have reached second place in this classification, we understand they can be considered starting points or nodes. In the rise of network theory applied to society, as Abbott (2004) highlights, some social dynamics are observed from the connections between individuals (nodes) and their interactions (ties). The dynamic of Preferential Attachment (nodes with a higher number of connections are more likely to receive more connections), as presented in the results exposed. It is also necessary to highlight that content analysis indicates that engagement on the network is linked to an idea of political power (POP) acquired and exercised by internet inhabitants. In this sense, this dimension is strongly present in comments, in first place (49.5%), and in posts, in second place (54.4%), considering that the sample of comments is 410 and posts 198, respectively (see Graph 2).

Graph 2 – Distribution of Themes in Participation Texts on X on 08/01/2023



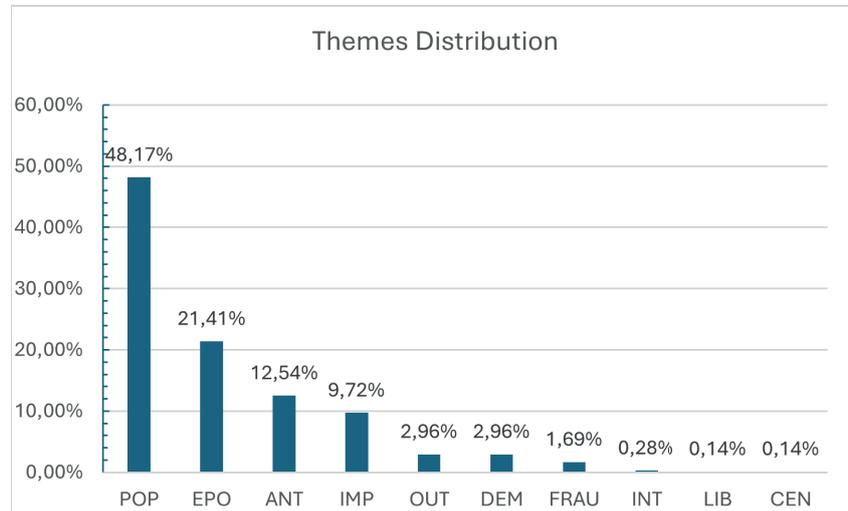
Source: Produced by the authors

48.17% (POP) of the practices are related to political empowerment (see Graph 3), which is further reinforced by the number of participatory practices that consider the denunciations made on X as part of an efficient political process, representing 21.41% (EPO). Moreover, 69.58% of the content in the sample converges on the understanding that political decision-making is part of the participatory practices of users on this social network.

In the context of using X as a form of civil society expression during an attempted coup d'état, the

posts varied widely in content and purpose. An initial analysis revealed that a significant portion of users utilized the platform to express their opinions and defend their personal beliefs. These users expressed their perspectives and political positions, highlighting their convictions and appealing for the engagement of other users in their causes, which can be understood as mere social interaction.

Graph 3 – Distribution of themes in the content texts on X on January 8, 2023



Source: Produced by the authors

In the context of using X as a form of civil society expression during an attempted coup d'état, the posts varied widely in content and purpose. An initial analysis revealed that a significant portion of users utilized the platform to express their opinions and defend their personal beliefs. These users expressed their perspectives and political positions, highlighting their convictions and appealing for other users' engagement in their causes, which can be understood as mere social interaction.

Screenshot 1 – Post Mentioning Official Accounts on X



Source: Post from the collected sample

On the other hand, it was also possible to identify a group of users who, although they wanted to denounce the events related to the coup, needed clarification about how to do so effectively. These users

demonstrated a genuine willingness to contribute to awareness and dissemination but faced practical challenges in carrying out their denunciations and requested that government bodies provide reporting channels.

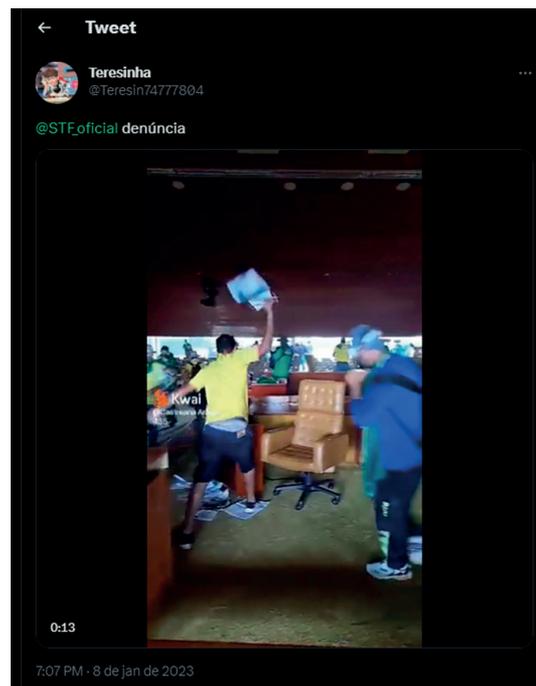
Screenshot 2 – Post from a user unsure of where to report on X



Source: Post from the collected sample

Additionally, many users were observed demanding official positions and actions from politicians and public entities, such as the state Public Ministries. These users sought concrete answers, demanding transparency and accountability from the competent authorities in light of the developing political situation. In this regard, the number of mentions (ME), 13.4%, demonstrates this practice by mentioning official accounts of institutions such as the Federal Police, Public Ministry, and the Attorney General's Office, as well as the accounts of the Minister of Justice and Public Security, Flávio Dino, federal deputies like André Janones, President Lula, and also the Supreme Federal Court (STF).

Screenshot 3 – Post mentioning the Supreme Federal Court's account



Source: Post from the collected sample

Finally, one last important point about the content of the posts concerns the role of digital influencers. In the context described here, they have significant potential in political activism and collecting denunciations. Through their large follower base and reach on digital social networks, these influencers can raise public awareness about ongoing events, highlight democratic violations, and mobilize support for the defence of democracy. Additionally, their ability to collect denunciations through direct interactions with users and to share evidence, such as photos and videos, contributes to the exposure of illicit acts and the pursuit of transparency and justice. Digital influencers like Felipe Neto (Screenshot 5) can act as bridges between ordinary users and competent authorities, pressing for concrete actions and accountability of those involved.

It is also worth noting that a significant portion of X users took advantage of the platform to denounce the ongoing events. They used different strategies, including posting photos and videos that captured crucial moments of the event. This "gathering of denunciations" aimed to highlight accountability and demand the punishment of those involved in actions that threatened democracy. Users sought to amplify awareness and pressure the competent authorities to act according to democratic principles, using X as a means to mobilize support and draw attention to the violations that occurred. These posts, loaded with evidence and specific mentions, were fundamental to the search for transparency and justice during the political crisis.

The tweet from Choquei's informational profile also stands out. Firstly, the visually contrasting image of the police officers smiling while an anti-democratic act of invasion of the Supreme Federal Court was taking place likely shocked users, highlighting an apparent omission or lack of action by the authorities responsible for security. This discrepancy between the gravity of the situation and the relaxed attitude of the police officers sparked indignation and outrage among users. Furthermore, the tweet was significant because it raised questions about the role of security forces and their responsibility to protect democratic institutions. The combination of impactful visual elements, the direct reference to the invasion of the STF, and the exposure of the apparently relaxed attitude of the police created a context that allowed the post

to go viral and provoke a broad discussion about the conduct of the authorities in the face of an event of political relevance.

Screenshot 4 – Post by Choquei denouncing the Federal District Military Police



Source: Post from the collected sample

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Screenshot 5 – Post by Felipe Neto organizing users' denunciations and forwarding them to the Minister of Justice



Source: Post from the collected sample

Final Considerations

One of our research questions aimed to determine whether the participation of internet users on site X in denouncing the anti-democratic acts of January 8 is a form of sharing power. The results described and analyzed indicate that it is. This identified participation as a balanced power relationship can be considered ethical because, according to Melo et al. (2019), it allows individuals to obtain and maintain control, to a certain extent, over their daily lives, according to autonomous modes of sharing common space.

The relationship between participation and power is a complex and multifaceted topic that has been studied in various fields of knowledge. In the political context, participation can be seen as a way of sharing power, allowing individuals to obtain and maintain control over their daily lives. However, this relationship is not simple and can be marked by nuances of negative participation (Lutz, 2017; Ilany, 2016; Quandt, 2022), which can be exemplified by the "lack of trust in citizens' ability to engage in democratic practices, (...) a thought that calibrates the relationship between the people and their elites" (Carpentier et al., p. 19, 2019).

Arnstein (1969), in her Ladder of Citizen Participation, emphasizes that effective participation must go beyond tokenism and provide real power to citizens. In the case of the denunciations made on X, we observed that participation was not merely symbolic but a form of real influence in political processes, reflecting higher levels on Arnstein's ladder, where citizens have decision-making power and control over outcomes.

The analysis of the collected data showed that the reporting channels opened by government agencies were significantly used by the population, reflecting a genuine demand for an effective means of active participation. This institutional response aligns with Sharp's (2017) view, which emphasizes the

importance of participation as an embedded practice in specific contexts. The use of X for denunciations demonstrates how social networks can serve as platforms for civic mobilization, allowing citizens to exercise agency and influence in contexts of political crisis.

Another issue observed during our research was how the population used the reporting channels. Since the beginning of the events on January 8, various institutions, including legislative, executive, and judicial bodies, opened channels for the public to report the anti-democratic acts. This institutional response reflects society's demand for an effective means of active participation, highlighting the crucial role of media and social networks in facilitating this process. The analyzed data indicated that there was an organic, non-capillary response, at least in the first eight hours of content circulation, involved in identifying and denouncing people in anti-democratic acts via social networks on the internet. The opening of these channels was a demand from society, often required by users on X during their monitoring and tracking of the events of invasion and vandalism at the headquarters of Brazil's Three Powers.

Finally, it is possible to affirm that all the content presented refers to different views of participation. Considering Mouffe's (2013, p. 185) thought, when she says that "the specificity of modern democracy requires the recognition and legitimization of conflict; in democratic societies, conflict can never and should never be eradicated," we understand that X was the scenario of participation as a tool for promoting different voices (even in a situation of potential confrontation) and for seeking accountability of the anti-democratic actors.

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